

SISTER STEPHANIE MESSMER - REST IN PEACE

Sr. Stephanie (Ramona Messmer) was a wiry little woman of high energy and many talents. She was the eldest child in a large farming family in North Dakota. Immediately after high school she joined the Benedictine Sisters of the Sacred Heart Monastery in Yankton, South Dakota. As a young sister she was chosen for the group that would found and establish Mother of God Monastery in Watertown, South Dakota. During these years she completed her education, becoming a registered nurse, a calligrapher, a math teacher, and an accomplished seamstress. After 32 years as an active Benedictine sister, desiring a more contemplative life, she joined our community in 1984.

Sr. Stephanie put much of her previous knowledge and skills into practice while serving our monastery in various assignments: infirmarian, guest mistress, oblate mistress, seamstress, procurator, correspondence mistress, and cellarer. As guest mistress she was voted best in that office by our local workmen, and many guests praised her caring and delightful presence. Sr. Stephanie starred at correspondence. Not only did she write memorable answers to the many letters and prayer requests sent to us, but she did it with artistic flair. Using bright markers, she would make flower or liturgical designs to fit the season on both letter paper and envelope.



Sr. Stephanie was known for her fervent faith, her deep gratitude for even the smallest things, and a commitment to on-going conversion. She was attuned to the sacredness of each moment, each task, each assignment, and especially the daily praying the Divine Office. She could turn folding laundry into an act of worship and union with God in prayer. Slowly but surely, her fidelity to our monastic life of prayer and conversion transformed her. The last years of Sr. Stephanie's life were marked with the suffering of cancer and dementia. With great love for her Beloved Lord, she accepted this trial and allowed it to deepen her union with God. We were honored to care for Sister ourselves, and were edified during her long illness by her deep faith and cheerful acceptance. We did not know if she would live to move into our new monastery in Hollandale, but she live to see it, making the transition with us. During those final months of her life, she loved watching the helmeted landscapers and construction workers with their fluorescent shirts and dirt moving and digging machines out of our windows. When the end finally came, Monsignor Bartylla, Vicar General of our diocese at the time, administered the Anointing of the Sick and Viaticum with the Precious Blood, since she could no longer swallow solids. We prayed the solemn prayers for the dying around her bed. Next morning, during Lauds, the Lord came to take her home. Sr. Stephanie died in peace and greatness of soul on July 31, 2024 at the age of 88 in the 36th year of her monastic profession, after nearly 70 years of religious life. We pray for her and trust in her prayers for us.

*“In paradisum deducant te angeli; in tuo adventu suscipiant te martyres, et perducant te in civitatem sanctam Jerusalem.
Chorus angelorum te suscipiat, et cum Lazaro quondam paupere aeternam habeas requiem.”*
*May the angels lead you into paradise; may the martyrs receive you at your arrival and lead you to the holy city Jerusalem.
May choirs of angels receive you and with Lazarus, once a poor man, may you have eternal rest.*
Antiphon for the Office of the Dead



VALLEY OF OUR LADY MONASTERY
AUTUMN 2025



Cover: *The Last Judgment* detail by Fra Angelico

In paradisum

Valley of Our Lady Monastery
7320 Urness Road
Hollandale, WI 53544



LET US DARE TO TEST GOD'S RESOURCES

By Mother Anne Marie Joerger, O.Cist. - a condensed version of her address at the Dedication reception
We are together today to celebrate the glory of our God who willed that there be a Valley of Our Lady Monastery; who willed that six brave and deeply trusting Cistercian nuns from the Abbey of Frauenthal (translated, that is Valley of Our Lady) make the journey to found our community in 1957 to do what must have seemed to them something impossible. Monsignor Wirtz, secretary to Bishop O'Connor at the time of our foundation, said years later when he was himself the Auxiliary Bishop: "this monastery should never have made it." Over 20 years ago our community perceived God's call to relocate and build a monastery that would be able to accommodate more nuns and where He would continue to dwell among us. Did this seem to us to be something impossible? It most certainly did. Turning to God in prayer we asked: Are you really asking this of us? Is this Your will for us? Yes, God was asking us to step out in faith: to believe that this was His will and to believe that He would bring it about, not without us, but working His miracle in and with us. St. Bernard attests:

"Faith will sometimes gain what prayer hardly dares to ask."

After months of planning and preparing to undertake the actual work of building a new monastery, the professionals asked to meet with me. Their message was simple and straightforward: "Sister, we are sorry, but there is no project." The economy in our country was in a serious state, there were concerns with labor and supplies, and they felt obligated to break this news to me. I told them that canceling the project was not an option. I agreed that, for them and for us, this was impossible, but I reminded them that we would be building God's house; it was His project. In our journey of life there are those places in the road where what is asked is the courage to be willing to march into hell for a heavenly cause, contending not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, powers and spiritual hosts of wickedness (cf Eph 6:12). Relocating and building this new monastery was such a place in the life of our community. Back now to that meeting with the professionals: Having somehow received a hint about why they wanted to meet, I had prepared a little card to give to each of them. A few years earlier I had made the acquaintance of a new friend, Liliias Trotter. She was born in 1853 and, as a very young woman, her artistic talent was already so pronounced that a famous artist in London offered her the possibility of studying under him. At the time of this offer, having heard some homilies on the Gospel, Jesus won her heart and she walked away from the possibility of becoming a famous artist to go as a lay missionary to Algeria. In her life and work of bringing Jesus to the people, she too had to have the courage to march into hell for a heavenly cause and contend with the principalities, powers and hosts of wickedness. From her we have these words:

“Let us dare to test God's resources... Let us ask Him to kindle in us and keep aflame that passion for the impossible that shall make us delight in it with Him, till the day when we shall see it transformed into a fact.”

On the day of the meeting with the professionals, I gave each of them this quote along with the one mentioned above from St. Bernard, as a reminder that *unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build* (Ps 127:1).

We are here today to give thanks to God for keeping aflame in us that passion for the impossible that allows us, taking delight in it with Him, to see it transformed into the fact of this new monastery. We thank God for all of you and for the part each of you had in making this journey with us. The journey is not over. God willing, we will continue making this journey together, in prayer and in the love of Christ Jesus, knowing that He is preparing a place for us in heaven.



(Left:) The celebrants process into the front doors of the oratory.

(Below:) After the introductory rites, Bishop Hying sprinkles the walls of the oratory with holy water.

BLESSING & SPRINKLING WITH HOLY WATER



LITANY OF THE SAINTS

(Below:) Following the Liturgy of the Word, all present kneel and face the sanctuary for the Litany of the Saints; all the celestial court is present for the dedication of this house of prayer.



CHRISMATION OF THE ALTAR AND WALLS

(Below Left:) After Litany and the Prayer of Dedication, Bishop Hying anoints the top of the altar with sacred chrism.

(Below Right:) Abbot Wohlwend anoints one of the twelve chrismation tiles mounted on the walls throughout the oratory.



“My house shall be called a house of prayer,” says the Lord.”

Is. 56:7

CHAPEL DEDICATION

Our last newsletter described the various stages of the beautiful Rite of Dedication of a church; on Sunday, August 24th, all present in our chapel were able to see these rites unfold before our eyes. Bishop Hying was the main celebrant, assisted by Abbot Vinzenz Wohlwend, our Father Immediate and Abbot of Mehrerau Abbey in Austria. Also concelebrating were two more Cistercian abbots, two Cistercian monks, and several members of the diocesan clergy. The guest nave was packed with friends who were able to join us for this momentous and grace-filled occasion. The ceremony was peaceful and reverent. We are grateful to God for His mercy towards us and to all our friends and benefactors who helped us in this endeavor. Among God’s mercies was some exceptionally clement weather, which made the luncheon reception following the ceremony especially enjoyable.

Please find a short video and more photographs of the Dedication Mass on our website’s news page: build.valleyofourlady.org/news

*“How awesome is this place!
This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.”*

Genesis 28:17

INCENSATION OF THE ALTAR & THE CHURCH

(Right and Below:) Following the chrismation, Bishop Hying incenses the altar, after which Abbot Wohlwend incenses the rest of the church.



“And the smoke of the incense of the prayers of the saints ascended up before God from the hand of the angel.”

Revelation 8:3-4



LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST

(Above:) Bishop Hying and concelebrants preside over the first Eucharist on the new altar. It is the presence of Christ that truly consecrates the altar, making the Eucharistic sacrifice the principal part of the whole rite and the foremost end for which the church was built and the altar erected.

CLEANING AND DRESSING OF THE ALTAR



(Left and below:) After the incensation, the sisters prepare the altar for the liturgy of the Eucharist. First two sisters remove the excess oil from the mensa with towels; next, sisters place the altar cloths, candles, and Missal. While this all takes place, Mother Bede Berg, Abbess of Frauenthal Abbey, plays three versions of the Ave Maria on the violin, making a fitting accompaniment to the reverent process.



AFTER THE CEREMONY



(Above:) Mother Anne Marie poses between Bishop Hying and Abbot Wohlwend in front of the newly consecrated sanctuary.

(Below Left:) Guests congregate on the monastery grounds for a celebratory and convivial meal homecooked by generous friends and benefactors.

(Below Right:) Mother Anne Marie addresses the gathering.



*“I rejoiced when I heard them say,
‘Let us go into the house of the Lord.’”*

Psalms 122:2

LIGHTING OF THE ALTAR & THE CHURCH

(Right and below:) Having received the flame from Bishop Hying’s taper, Mother Anne Marie lights the altar candles. The acolytes then proceed to light the twelve candles mounted on the walls in front of the chrismation tiles.



NOVEMBER: SOLIDARITY WITH THE SOULS IN PURGATORY

“My soul has waited for the Lord, my soul has hoped in the Lord.” Psalm 130:5

Our monastic life, experienced as the continuous contemplation of God away from the distractions of the world, is a sharing in the “eternal now” of the beatific vision. For this reason, the contemplative life is sometimes called the “angelic life.” By seeking God alone, the nun glimpses Heaven through the latticework of Scripture, liturgical prayer, daily life, and communion with her sisters. The recent Rite of Dedication of our monastic oratory was both a sacramental of our life of constant vigil and a foretaste of the heavenly glory. The Word of God resounding on the walls, the chant filling the vaulted ceilings, the incense and scent of sacred chrism wafting about us, and finally the illumination of the oratory, recalled how our bodies also will one day enjoy the glory of heaven.

But monastic life might perhaps be better likened to purgatory. We look forward in hope to a complete union with the Lord, but we are faced daily with the reality that we are not yet perfected. Our life is characterized by a constant waiting, by continually trimming our lamps in expectation of the coming of the Bridegroom. Our Holy Father St. Bernard speaks of monastic profession as a second baptism. Like the souls in purgatory, the nun is “buried in the likeness of Christ’s death” (cf. Romans 6:4), and she is continually renewed until the day when, in His full light, she will be like Him, for she will see Him as He is (cf. 1 John 3:2). Both we and the holy souls can say with Job, “I will see him for myself; my own eyes, not another’s, will behold Him: my inmost being is consumed with longing” (Job 19:27).

While the souls in purgatory cannot merit any longer, Cistercian nuns are in solidarity with them by receiving grace on their behalf: we remember these souls daily in the Divine Office, we offer monthly Masses for them, and we make special suffrages in autumn, when all creation reminds us of our own death. Through these practices, we contribute to the relief of those who can no longer pray for themselves.

Our sense of communion with the holy souls deepened recently as we accompanied our own Sr. Stephanie through her final stretch of waiting. A prayer of hers to the Holy Spirit was found after her death: “Fire me through!” May our hearts be fully fired through by the Holy Spirit, set aflame and kept burning, waiting for our Bridegroom’s arrival to claim us each as His own because of His merciful love and His faithfulness which endure forever.

“There is no joy except that of paradise to be compared with the joy of the souls in purgatory.

*There, God so transforms the soul in Himself that it knows nothing other than God,
and He will not cease until He has brought the soul to its perfection.*

*The soul, then, seeks to cast off all impediments so as to be lifted up to Him,
and these impediments are the cause of its sufferings.*

It becomes like gold, becoming purer the more it is fired.

*The last stage of love is that which does its work without human doing. It brings the soul to the pure, intense love of God alone.
This overwhelming love gives the soul a joy beyond words. In purgatory great joy and great suffering do not exclude one another.”*

St. Catherine of Genoa