

HOSPITALITY TODAY

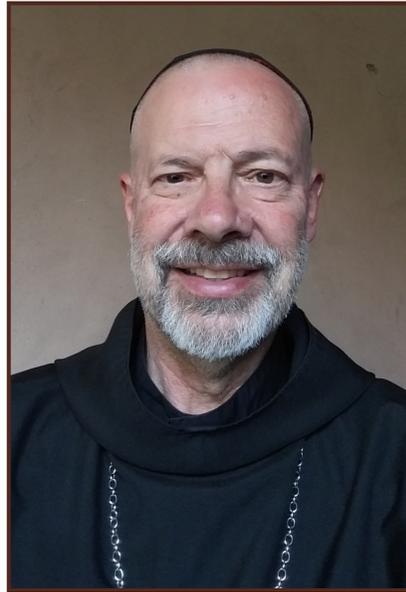
Is hospitality possible in a time of pandemic? Is it prudent and safe or simply foolish to extend a hand, literally or figuratively, in the present world crisis? I know these are questions on the minds of many people today, including monasteries around the world, which normally receive large numbers of pilgrims and guests for private or group retreats. That is certainly the case for me and my monks as well, asking ourselves: when can we safely open the Guesthouse and Giftshop again?

We have now been “closed” to day visitors and guests since March of this year, an unprecedented occurrence and something we share with hundreds of other monasteries at this time. When will we begin receiving guests and visitors again? The best answer I can give at present, feeble as it may sound, is that I do not know.

Our monastery is composed of about thirty-five monks, ranging in ages from twenty-three to ninety-three. One brother is eighty-nine years old, several are in their 70s (and I am quite near that age!), and my preoccupation for all of us, especially the seniors, is their good health and safety. We socially distance in our church and in the refectory for meals; we wear masks whenever we go out for doctors’ appointments or shopping; we have hand-sanitizer machines in many places in our buildings, such as where we enter the church, the refectory and in the corridors.

Do all our precautions guarantee that no one will get COVID-19? Certainly not, but we are doing our best to keep the possibility of illness as far away from us as possible. Fortunately, our part of New Mexico has not seen a huge number of cases thus far and our community has been spared the pandemic.

Our brothers who have been on trips out of state, either for family visits or studies, observe the required quarantine period for fourteen days when they return here. We have some hermitages that serve this purpose well. The



word “quarantine” more accurately indicates forty days, as in Lent, and certainly some brothers would welcome that many days of solitude and sleep-ins, but we keep it to fourteen! Once again, no one has yet come down with COVID-19 here. We are very grateful for this, as we know of other monasteries where monks and nuns have suffered illness and death over these past months.

Even amidst the stringent restrictions in place, we monks don’t consider the work of our Benedictine charism of hospitality has ended or even been curtailed. While we cannot welcome people onto the monastery property at present, we still try to reach our friends and families through our ongoing prayer in community and in private. We get numerous prayer requests via the internet and regular mail and these we try to honor in our daily prayers.

Every night at Vespers, the Evening Prayer of the Church, we pray aloud in a special way for the following intentions, adapted from a prayer by Pope Francis: “For those who have fallen ill, those who are vulnerable, those who have died, those charged with protecting the health and safety of others, those who are tending the sick and seeking a cure.” It is my job to offer this prayer at daily Vespers, and I am honored to do so. Of course, we can never know the efficacy of our prayers, but we offer them with fervor and hope to the God who loves us.

In addition to our prayers each day for the world, we are also reaching people through our website, with an encouraging quote for the day and an accompanying image. This too is part of my work, taking photos and finding quotes, and I am happy to do so. The response has been positive and I plan to continue with this project which has been going on for some months now.

More recently we have begun a series of short videos on our website relating to various aspects of our life. These videos have included a look at our flock of chickens, another one about our summer vegetable garden, as well as

a video about our sheep and guard-donkey and a video showing the wool from the first shearing of four of our sheep last summer. If people cannot come here for now, we want to bring what we have and who we are to the general public.

Our lives have changed for each and every one of us. No one can deny that. In the midst of it all, remaining optimistic and hopeful is a daily call and can be a challenge. The Lord has not and will not abandon us. In the Christmas season we are all reminded in a very concrete way that God has stooped down to us in Jesus Christ, true God and true man, in order to lift us up to God. That is our destiny as well as our joy.

May the Light of Christ never fade in our hearts, as we all strive to offer hospitality to others, in our thoughts, words and deeds. May you have a Blessed and Merry Christmas 2020, even when faced with hardship. ✠

Gratefully in the Lord,
Abbot Christian Leisy, OSB
Abbot Christian Leisy, OSB



I KNOW MY SHEEP. (JOHN 10:27)

BY FATHER COLUMBA

Within a month of acquiring of our first four Navajo-Churro ewes, I woke with a start in the night, two hours before our prayer office of Vigils, at about 2 am. The lonesome, chilling call of a pack of coyotes in the canyon I had of course heard before. But now with sheep on the land, acquired from the northeast corner of the state, and under my care, that call triggered a deep protective instinct in me. I was up and dressed and out of my cell in seconds, and into the moonlit night I went, flashlight in hand, straight for our sheep.

It turned out to be nothing. From where the sheep were in the Abbotsfield, the coyote call was clearly coming from across the river and away to the south. And from the way our new animals darted away in a clump of wool from me as I approached, they were no doubt more afraid of me than of the call of coyotes in the dark New Mexico night.

When we first decided we were going to raise sheep at Christ in the Desert, our initial concerns were of course for food and for safety.

Food. How would we feed these new sheep in the high desert of New Mexico? With such poor precipitation and low density of forage plants they would need, would we have to buy all our feed? Was there a way we might try to grow the forage we would need? How many sheep could be supported on our property? What would be the purposes and values of raising sheep at the monastery? How might they change our life?

Safety. How would we be able to protect our sheep from predators? Sheep have very little in the way of natural defenses against predators, and I knew we had potential predators in the Rio Chama canyon wilderness. Coyotes for sure, but also bears and mountain lions too live and hunt in the area. Would the solar-powered electric fencing we purchased be a good enough deterrent? Would we need to build a barn to enclose the sheep at night? The vulnerability of the sheep we had brought to our monastic home in the high desert wilderness was haunting. How safe could they be here? How inviting would a flock of sheep be to the known predators in the canyon? As our flock soon grew to twelve ewes, with the addition of a gift of eight more from the Chimayo area, these concerns only loomed larger. The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep (John 10: 17).

So, from a found little garden shed brothers had restored and refashioned as a feeding station for the sheep, which was immediately outgrown, those same

good brothers started to build a more substantial shelter, a small pole barn where we could feed the sheep, store hay and tools, and basically be a center for our sheep operations, a building Father Abbot aptly christened Good Shepherds Inn. We were already purchasing hay to supplement the horses' grazing of the land, so we had some on hand to feed the sheep as we began then to explore other foraging and grazing possibilities. The general area of the Abbotsfield was already enclosed at least, with the long adobe enclosure wall the boundary of nearly half of it, and a wire stockade fence holding the line along the other side. We were advised that the Navajo-Churro breed we had chosen – because of its cultural and historical associations with northern New Mexico and its value as a rare breed, classified as “threatened” by the Livestock Conservancy – was hardy and could forage on the available plants already growing at Christ in the Desert. So, while we were beginning to project and plan livestock fencing to enclose areas to grow pasture with the aid of irrigation, we started to train them to move in and out of the immediate area of the Good Shepherds Inn in the Abbotsfield at our command. Yet this is the most challenging thing about shepherding sheep: keeping the flock together and moving them from one space to another. It can take a while for a newly gathered flock to cohere and to respond obediently to the call of the shepherd.

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me (John 10: 27). Well, yes: just not right away, as any shepherd knows. The sheep first have to not just hear but also trust your voice, before they ever will follow you! It's been one of the greatest challenges in raising sheep here at the monastery. Since we tend not to specialize so much but rather try to share together in the work that needs to be done, there is a special



BR. SAVIO, FR. SERAPHIN, AND BR. CASSAIN
ENJOYING THE HORSES

challenge for us in herding sheep from one space to another, calling them back again, having them trained to follow the shepherd. And it has been one of the excellent spiritual lessons of herding sheep, because in doing so we are led more deeply, in an incarnate way, into the mystery of the Good Shepherd.

For in the process of training the sheep to follow, of learning how to lead them, we gain some insight, by analogy, into the ways in which we humans too, despite the fact that the Good Shepherd always leads us to green pastures, always moves us for our own good, always leads us to Life, yet how slow we are to follow, how fearfully, like sheep, we might run the other way at his approach, how long it can take us to trust in Him. Thanks be to God, the sheep do not take nearly so long in learning to trust our voice and follow from one pasture to another!

Time will tell how our sheep experience will unfold. Our hope is that the sheep become, as they already have been for many of us, a medium of grace and of community life for the monks, and a medium of community life and solidarity with the surrounding world. Already we have been collaborating with professional and seasoned shepherds, wool processors, weavers and others who have generously given of their time and love of sheep and sheep culture to help us get started. There are so many possibilities and opportunities opening up as we grow as shepherds of sheep in these days. As we learn new skills such as shearing and lambing and breeding, creative inspirations multiply. So we hope that in time, as brothers come to be called and attracted to the life that comes to us through these wonderful creatures, we may grow in our capacity to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd calling us to Life! ✠



FR. COLUMBA CELEBRANT
AT CONVENTUAL MASS

MONK'S CORNER

BROTHER ISIDORE



What is your name and age?

Br Isidore Bakanja, and I am 43 years old.

How long have you been a monk at MCD?

I have been a monk at the monastery for six years. I was born in Congo (now Democratic Republic of Congo) and began my religious life in 1999 with studies at St Augustine Pontifical University in Kinshasa. Shortly after completing my philosophical training in 2002, I left Congo primarily due to insecurity and instability in the country. I immigrated to South Africa in 2003. During my 12 year stay in South Africa, I had the opportunity to meet a monk at Polokwane Monastery through religious friends. He encouraged me to explore MCD as a place to fulfill my religious vocation.

What were some of your challenges as a monk at MCD during your time here?

Most people would probably guess, for me, it was the weather. Not really. The greater challenges were being cut off from people, especially being far away from my family and friends, adaptation to the English language, the learning of different cultures (not just American), different foods and Vigils (I was unaccustomed to rising at 3:30 am for prayers in my former religious life).

What changes have you witnessed during your time here at MCD?

I have observed the integration of new cultures over my six years here. There have been benefits and challenges associated with this introduction of new cultures.

Who is your favorite saint, and why?

Saint Mother Theresa of Calcutta is my favorite saint. Before I began my religious life in Kinshasa, my friend Áime Nkanda and I worked closely with Sr. Rebecaia, an East Indian, who was a superior of the Sisters of Charity in Kinshasa. Their charism, which I witnessed while working with the sick and poor with them, strengthened my bond to Saint Mother Theresa covered by both these saints.

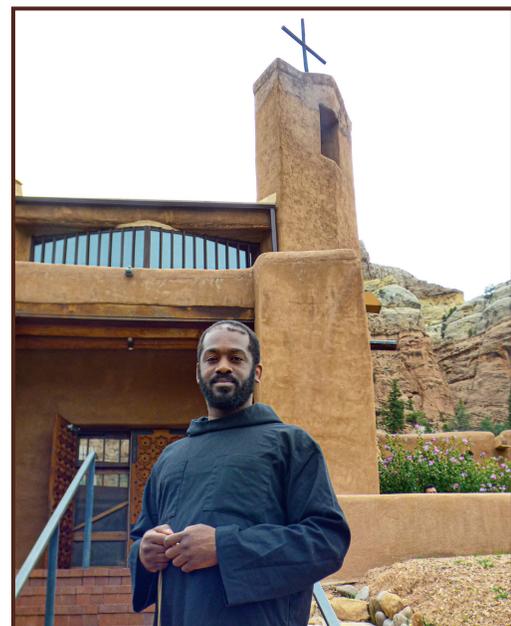
OUT OF HIS HEART SHALL FLOW RIVERS OF LIVING WATER (JOHN 7:38)

BY A JUNIOR PROFESSED MONK

Water is life.

We are so blessed here at Christ in the Desert that while we do live in a very dry high desert, with average annual precipitation of about 10 inches a year, the Chama River flows right through the property as an easily accessible source of life for our burgeoning garden and pastures, and so for our flock of Navajo-Churro sheep, Matty the donkey, our flock of free-range chickens, our five horses, and our colony of bees.

Easily accessible? The water is there, its flow regulated upstream by the El Vado Dam, and we have ample water rights, up to about 40 acre feet a year for irrigation. Yet, just how the river water has been made accessible so we could initiate the “agricultural renaissance” happening at Christ in the Desert was not exactly easy. Plenty of hard work, enthusiasm, co-operation, persistence, ingenuity, above all, grace – including the grace of discovering that we already had on the property, hidden and buried and scattered about, an irrigation system used years ago by the community – has made it possible for us to successfully irrigate about 3.5 acres, and to anticipate being able to expand to irrigate many more. Once guests and visitors return to experience the peace of Christ in the Desert, we hope many will be pleasantly surprised to find in the desert a garden: For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground (Isaiah 44:3).



BR. DAVID



WATER SYSTEM IN OPERATION

No doubt you have to see it to appreciate the pastoral peace of these newly watered mornings. As the light of the morning sun descends into the canyon, the horses are majestic, meandering down to the rich grasses by the river in their newly enclosed pasture. Fifteen Navajo-Churro sheep, white and black and an earthy brown, cross over in line from the shadows of the morning into the bright light of a green day. Some mornings they literally leap airborne in sheer animal joy before settling into grazing with heads down in the rich pasture meadows, with Matty their guardian-donkey trotting along ahead or running right through them, watchful and never far, munching away on the sown grasses and native forbs. Up toward the cloister, the chickens range in the Abbotsfield, freely enjoying the half acre of green surrounding the shining safety of their well-wrought chain-link coop. And in a moment, if you are attentive to it, you will hear the busy buzzing of the bees at ground level, among the white clover, globe-mallow, daisy and other flowering plants, humming the music to the intricate fabric of life being woven in the desert, thanks to the wonder of water daily poured out just after dawn.

The irrigation system itself is the warp and weft of this living fabric. After Mass we start the engine, letting it run for about an hour. It begins to pump from the river about 180 gallons a minute, into the network of pipes, hose, joints, valves and sprinklers. The sprinkler heads spin into life, spreading out from the 94 heads some 2.5 gallons a minute each. The scene is nothing so much as a kind of hydraulic ballet – 94 pirouettes of sparkling water dancing



FR. ZACHARY, BR. JUDE AND BR. ISIDORE
PLAYING BOCCI BALL IN THE CLOISTER

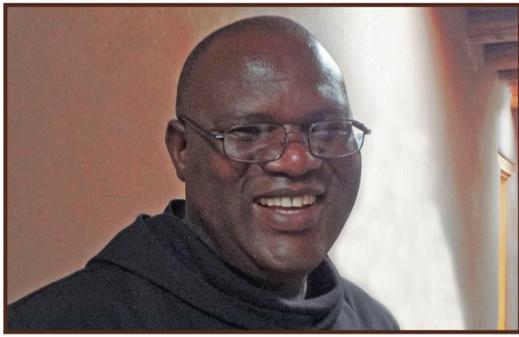
over the land, filling it with life, literally making of the desert a garden.

While the irrigation system is the work of many brothers, its design, operation, and ongoing maintenance would not be possible without the singular talents of Br. David. Brother's gifts as an engineer shine through in the way he put the whole network together. Beginning with the recalibration of the pump discovered in an outbuilding unused for some ten years or more, assembling the array of pipes and hoses – including reuse of old firehoses, garden hoses, whatever was at hand, up to some 3700 feet of hose and pipe! – and constantly monitoring and adjusting sprinkler heads and various fittings, Br. David has given us the structure, the warp and weft as noted, that has allowed us to begin to develop what's called a rotational grazing pattern for our animals, moving them from one pasture to another, or within the area of a single pasture. In this way, pasture regrowth and soil and root development can happen on this land in the desert which would, without the irrigation, turn to dust.

Perhaps the best thing about it is simply that it works! Yet among the other values of this small miracle is that it could be built with minimal expense, at a fraction of what it would have cost had we purchased a system outright. Also because of the found materials already here and the creative ingenuity and co-operation of many brothers, setting up and running the irrigation system has created bonds of community among us, and across time, bonds with those who have gone before us on this land. The life that has come to MCD through the watering of our land, thus goes beyond the scenic and agro-ecological wonder of grazing horses, sheep, chickens and bees on pastures that otherwise would not be there. It is the life among us, as a community of monks dedicated to God in this place, in this time, that is truly growing through the medium of these living waters. And you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail (Isaiah 58: 11). ☩



MONKS AT MAIN MEAL



DOM GABRIEL MKHABELA, OSB
ABBOT CHRISTIAN'S REFLECTION
AT THE REQUIEM MASS FOR
DOM GABRIEL MKHABELA, OSB
AUGUST 11, 2020, AT THE
MONASTERY OF CHRIST IN THE DESERT

As we pray today for the eternal repose of the soul of our Brother Gabriel, the last words of the Gospel passage today really ring true: "It is not the will of your heavenly Father that one of these little ones be lost."

Brother Gabriel put his trust in God, without a doubt, and always exhibited what Saint Paul taught: "God loves a cheerful giver." Yet we know Brother had a really rough go of it these last weeks of his life. When he learned that his mother Violet was near death in South Africa, he tried valiantly to be at her side in her final hours. Sadly, instead of being able to do that, he was confined to a hotel in Johannesburg for a quarantine of fourteen days, and thereby was forced from being with his mother at her death, and not able to attend her funeral either.

Finally, Brother Gabriel was able to leave quarantine, but no doubt a very sad son. Then, only days later, his own death occurred, having just turned 53 in June. The mysterious ways of God, which at times or often we do not understand at all! The death of our Brother Gabriel is just such an example.

Yet Brother Gabriel, and we also, have to cling to the Gospel words today, even in the face of unexpected death: "It is not the will of your heavenly Father that one of these little ones be lost."

Our loss with the passing of Brother Gabriel is God's gain—another faithful disciple is joined to his Lord in God's Kingdom. May Brother Gabriel enjoy the fruits of a life well-lived and be an example to us of joy, perseverance and generosity. In addition, may Brother Gabriel now intercede for us, who are still on the pilgrim path, even as we pray for him. Where Brother Gabriel has gone we hope to follow!

Another little phrase from Sacred Scripture, found in Psalm 125, part of the Office of the Dead which we are praying throughout this day, seems particularly apt in the case of Brother Gabriel: "He who sows in tears, will reap with great rejoicing," unto ages of ages. Amen. Requiescat in pace. ✠

Born: June 12, 1967

Professed Vows: March 21, 1995

Death: August 8, 2020

NO ROOM AT THE INN

BY BROTHER CHRYSOSTOM

Christmas time always brings back special memories for me. For some reason my memory has revived events from Christmases in 1973 and 1974. For these consecutive Christmases I was the second king in my church's children's Christmas pageant. As a third and fourth grader I had to sing the part of Caspar, the bearer of frankincense, wear a shiny red robe with faux ermine trim, and uncomfortably bear the stares and gazes of adoring parents and family, laughing peers, and task-minded Sunday School teachers. It was a small cross for a small boy to bear for two years at Christmas, but bear it I did, happy when it was all over and I could go home and concentrate on my Christmas presents and candies.

My other peers received more glamorous roles, like Mary or Joseph. The young girl playing Mary was generally cute (I had a serious crush on at least one Mary), and the boy chosen for Joseph was expectedly true to character: stoic, and most importantly, silent. What always disturbed me was this: how could this photo-worthy young couple (in this case, a couple of kids my age) be denied a room, even the worst one, at the inn? What type of person turns away nice people (a pregnant woman, no less) in the middle of the night?!

We all know the story of that glorious night when Jesus was born. But, have you ever paused to think about the person who served as an instrument in God's plan for the humble beginnings of the Savior of the world? I am referring to the innkeeper. How did he or she feel when the answer was 'no' to the inquiry of "Is there place for me and my pregnant wife, we've traveled very far from Nazareth?" Was the innkeeper mean-spirited and spiteful? Or, was the innkeeper in anguish over the act of refusal to such good and homely people? I would like to think the latter is more in line with the truth of the story. Maybe the innkeeper suggested the stable as a possible alternative, the best offer he or she could think of. He might have even provided fresh hay, cleaned up the stable a bit. Who knows? This is not biblical thinking,



but something perhaps to meditate upon during this Advent season.

What attracts me to the innkeeper who is such a peripheral player in the Nativity of Jesus? The attraction originates from a new job for me at the monastery. You know how it is: when you become a sanitation worker, you see trash everywhere, or when you become a teacher, everyone becomes a pupil. Abbot Christian asked me to be Guestmaster this summer, and now my perspective has expanded to see the people in the world as potential guests. The Rule of St. Benedict says this about the reception of guests:

“All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say: ‘I was a stranger and you welcomed me’ (Matt 25:35). Proper honor must be shown to all, especially to those who share our faith (Gal 6:10) and to pilgrims” (RB 53: 1-2).

This type of reception requires a deep humility and an attention to the needs, even the smallest ones, of our guests. Therefore, the Rule also suggests the type of monk who should be chosen as the Guestmaster:

“At the door of the monastery, place a sensible old man who knows how to take a message and deliver a reply, and whose age keeps him from roaming about. This porter will need a room near the entrance so that visitors will always find him there to answer them. As soon as anyone knocks, or a poor man calls out, he replies, ‘Thanks be to God’ or ‘Your blessing, please’; then, with all the gentleness that comes from the fear of God, he provides a prompt answer with the warmth of love. Let the porter be given one of the younger brothers if he needs help” (RB 66: 1-5).

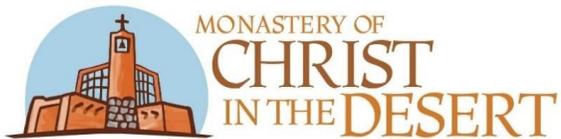
I suppose you never think of yourself as an ‘old man’ until your Abbot appoints you Guestmaster. Nonetheless, I welcome the new role and hope to serve you well on a visit to our monastery. The role, sadly, does not insulate you from the pain of having to refuse someone hospitality in our Guesthouse, our inn.

My first memory of refusal occurred when I was a young boy traveling with my mother on vacation in Los Angeles, CA. At an upscale restaurant that rotated atop a hotel tower (providing spectacular views of the Los Angeles city lights at night), a hired clown/magician refused to entertain my mother and me during our meal. I watched as the clown/magician delighted seemingly every other table of white patrons in the restaurant except ours. My mother, a dignified woman, waited for a respectable amount of time and then after the end of our meal, gently ushered me out of the restaurant. I wanted to wait some more, but my mother knew better. She was visibly upset, but did not want to ruin an otherwise wonderful mother/son vacation (my father sadly could not get away from work). I didn’t understand her response; this little black boy did not yet understand the biting teeth of racism. Refusal is hard to take, but it can be equally hard to give.

As Guestmaster I have had to turn hundreds of people away, almost daily. It doesn’t feel good to disappoint people who relish visiting our monastery regularly. It hurts to refuse a guest whether through email, telephone conversation, person to person (at a safe social distance, of course), or by letter. It is our charism to share our lives with you all through hospitality. Hospitality is not just a nice thing we do, like making wonderful felt sculptures or handmade rosaries. Hospitality is an integral part of our identity as religious, as Benedictine monks.

In the meantime, as we patiently and prayerfully wait for the denouement of this pandemic, I am taking an online course through Cornell University on Hospitality Management. I am excited to learn (and in some cases, re-learn) subjects such as Financial Statements, Building High-Performance Teams, Services Marketing Planning, Building Guest Loyalty, and Hotel Operations. I am doing my best to be a good steward of this downtime and to learn how we can make the monastery not into a fancy hotel, but an even more welcoming space for your silence, solitude, and prayer. We will still, after the “little Lent” of Advent, light farolitos, decorate the refectory and church, dress a huge Christmas tree and enjoy good food as in years past, but, sadly, without our guests. You will be greatly missed.

As we ponder the mystery of Christ’s virgin birth in a manger in a stable, outside of the inn, let us be mindful of how welcoming we are to others. To whom have we refused a space in the inn of our hearts? To whom should we welcome and find space, even when we think we are at full capacity? As the new Guestmaster, I will be thinking about this, too, and praying to see you all soon at the Guesthouse. ✠



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WITH GRATITUDE AT CHRISTMAS

The Virgin Mary is the epitome of hospitality for the faithful. It is she who receives the message of the angel (with some perturbation at first) and ultimately she is the one who receives the Creator of the Universe within her small body. She houses the Christ Child through gestation, and after birth protects, nourishes, and cares for Him with generosity and awe. We, who have strayed from God, needed Mary to say 'yes' to God the Father, the Holy Spirit, and Christ Jesus.

Similarly, you our friends, benefactors, and donors, have said 'yes' to our mission here in the desert by supporting us through this pandemic. We would not have survived without God's grace and mercy and your charity. Your financial support exceeded our expectations and again we thank you. Our prayers are for you and the whole world. Your donations and gifts affirm our contemplative lives. As we seek God, know that your support helps us greatly along our spiritual journey. You said 'yes' to helping us in our time of need. We are profoundly grateful. We wish you a healthy, happy, and safe Christmas. God bless. ✠