



# Tidings

BENEDICTINE SISTERS OF ANNUNCIATION MONASTERY

FALL/WINTER 2020

www.annunciationmonastery.org



## *Back to School with Sister Marena and Sister Maria*

Since her first visit to Annunciation Monastery as a Benedictine volunteer in March 2017, Marena Hoogland has not only grown to love the Benedictine way of life and the Sisters of Annunciation Monastery, but also the University of Mary, which the sisters sponsor. Little did she know at the time that she would become a sister herself and follow in the footsteps of the pioneering sisters who started schools in Dakota Territory back in 1878. Now, Sister Marena is pursuing a degree in math education from the University of Mary.

Sister Marena was among the countless students affected by the pandemic last spring. She participated in online classes last spring and summer. She appreciates being in the classroom again and interacting with other students and her professors. She says, “Even though we are distanced and wear masks, it is great to be together in person. I hardly even notice my mask anymore. It doesn’t feel like a burden; it just feels like the right thing to do.”

A gifted student, Sister Marena thinks she might best be able to serve in the field of math, a field, she says that sometimes gets a bad rap for negating belief in God. “I really enjoy learning from people of faith who show how God and mathematical concepts are interconnected,” she explains. “My professors show how faith and reason can be in a symbiotic relationship.” Sister Marena believes in the importance of women entering STEM fields. “I have a mathematical

*Story continues on page 3*



MESSAGE FROM THE

# Prioress

I have always enjoyed walking the monastery grounds and the surrounding area, and during the current pandemic, I've walked more often. I can never get enough of the beautiful scenery God has created around us — sunrises, sunsets, wildflowers, and autumn leaves just to name a few. This photo of our bell banner as the sun rests for the day was taken by me on an October evening.

Our bell banner has always intrigued me. It is an imposing structure, standing 100 feet high. I'm told it also goes 100 feet into the ground, though I've been unable to confirm that. It is our community's symbol. You can find it on the ring we receive at final profession. As I fly from the Bismarck airport, I always try to catch a glimpse of the bell banner, saying goodbye to the community as I depart and waiting for it to welcome me home.

The bell banner speaks to our promise of stability. Benedictine Sisters have been present in this area for 142 years. We serve the needs of the people of this area. Our stability is as much, or more so, to each other in community as it is to a physical place. We embrace our life in community, accepting the periods of waiting and of growth, the times of joy and the times of challenges. We promise to love the community members as we find them. All this time together has made our promise more real for each of us. We have certainly experienced challenges — the isolation of the pandemic and the deaths of Sister Thomas and Sister Claire — but we have also experienced joy — the beautiful summer, good health, and a community retreat on hope.



During the past seven months of the pandemic, so much has changed in our lives. The one stable part of our day has been our prayer schedule. The bells of the bell banner ring morning, noon and evening, calling us to chapel to pray for the needs of the world. Your intentions are always included in our prayers. We are grateful for our relationship with each and every one of you. We certainly have missed welcoming you to our home and look forward to the day when we can all be together again.

*Sister Nicole Kunze*

mind, so if I can someday teach students in ways that are understandable and ‘not so scary,’ it’s my responsibility to use that God-given gift to help others,” she says. “Teaching feels like it fits into my life as a monastic, and certainly follows in the teaching tradition of the sisters.”

At 24 years old, Sister Marena is young, but older than most of her classmates. She feels grateful to get to know them on a personal level so they can see that sisters are real people, who do regular things like study, watch movies, exercise, and go out with friends, while also living a life devoted to God and the monastic community. When people find out she is a sister, they are sometimes surprised and unsure of how to relate to her. Sister Marena puts them at ease with her easygoing personality, and sense of humor. “It’s a wonderful opportunity to get to know my classmates, have conversations about faith and what it means to be a Sister of Annunciation Monastery, and be a witness for students on campus,” she states. She regularly attends Chapel of the Word and Mass at the university, while balancing her prayer schedule at the monastery with the sisters.

Students often ask her if they should call her Marena or Sister Marena. She quickly tells them they can call her either, she won’t be offended, but “Sister Marena” is a more accurate description of who she is and who she represents. “If someone forgets my name, they can just call me ‘Sister’ and they will be right,” she says with a smile.

Sister Marena feels supported by the sisters who frequently ask her about her studies and how things are going. They pray for her and offer to take care of some of her monastery charges, like washing dishes, if they know she has a lot of homework or a test the next day.

Sister Marena is also supported through her friendship with Sister Maria Nhu Dang, a sister from the Sisters Adorers of the Holy Cross, in Portland, OR. Sister Maria, 30, is from a Vietnamese community and resides at Annunciation Monastery while going to school at the University of Mary.

In Vietnam, Sister Maria attended a boarding school that was run by sisters. She says she was so impressed with their devotion to God and others that she also became a sister and lived in the motherhouse in Vietnam. She moved from Vietnam to Portland five years ago. Sister Maria was asked by her religious community to pursue a degree in Theology. “I had never heard of that before,” she admits, “but our vow of obedience calls us to serve in ways we may have never imagined for ourselves.”

Last year was her first year at the University of Mary. She said the language barrier can be a challenge, but having the support of the sisters, and new friends at school, has helped her on her path. “Living and studying here is the best environment for me to learn English and get my degree,” says Sister Maria. “My classes are difficult, but I know that if I open my heart and my mind, my spiritual and physical life will benefit.”

Sister Maria has a unique approach to her schoolwork. “I look at each assignment as if it is directly from God.” She adds, “I know God walks with me; I go to the chapel often and I know that if I do my best, I will do okay.”

Gratitude is the theme that is consistent with both Sister Marena and Sister Maria. They are grateful for their professors who make learning interesting and for the sisters who encourage and pray for them every day.

The hope is that both sisters will graduate at the same time in 2022.

# History and Hospitality

Breathtaking views. Hospitality. History. These are some of the things Sister Krista Ferrell loves about living in the monastic community of Annunciation Monastery and working in her ministry as an interpreter at Fort Abraham Lincoln State Park, located south of Mandan on the western edge of the Missouri River.

Two familiar sounds are music to Sister Krista's ears as she starts her day: the bells in the Annunciation Monastery bell tower that call the Benedictine sisters to prayer, and the sound of a bugle playing as she raises the flag at the park.

Sister Krista's past experience includes working as a park guide with the Army Corps of Engineers at the Missouri National Recreational River in Yankton, SD, and at the Oahe Dam in Pierre, SD. "It is fascinating to learn the historical and natural significance of certain areas, and certainly there is a lot to learn about the sites within the Fort Abraham Lincoln State Park," says Sister Krista.

She and other staff members worked in various locations throughout the park. When assigned to the Custer House, she opened the barracks and the Custer House, and raised the flag at Cavalry Square. Her work also took her to the Visitor Center or to the infantry fort at Fort McKeen where the block houses are located. The Mandan On A Slant village is another fascinating tourist stop where visitors can enter the earth lodges and watch historical presentations and reenactments.

Sister Krista loves extending hospitality to others. "I really enjoy working at the Custer House because there are many opportunities to interact with people." She says that since COVID-19, state and national parks are more popular than ever. "It seems like we had more out-of-state visitors than we have in the past," she says. Tourists can safely hike and explore outdoors. Indoor tours are limited to a small number of guests to allow for social distancing.

Since the tourist season has ended, Sister Krista is creating her own history as a library aide at Cathedral grade school. She serves students and staff in a spirit of respect and hospitality. She hopes to work in the school during the school year and at Fort Abraham Lincoln State Park in the summer.



*Sister Krista Ferrell welcomes visitors to the historic Custer House at Fort Abraham Lincoln State Park.*



# In Loving Memory



**Sister Claire Schmitt, OSB**

**Born: May 31, 1923**

**Professed: July 1, 1948**

**Died: August 28, 2020**

A Benedictine Sister for 72 years, Sister Claire had a heart for God, her family, her monastic community, and anyone in need.

She was generous with her time and talent as she taught in Catholic schools in North Dakota, also serving in religious education, in parishes, and in pastoral care and home care.

Sister Claire tutored many students, including sisters from Taiwan and Vietnam who came to study at the University of Mary. She enjoyed time serving on the Cheyenne and Tule River Reservations, and teaching English to sisters in Tanzania.

A storyteller and dedicated letter writer, Sister Claire kept in contact with family and friends and was a pen pal to incarcerated individuals. She was a gifted seamstress and cared for her sisters in the monastic community. She had genuine concern for others and often gave people religious books and items to enrich their faith.

We pray that Sister Claire is rejoicing in the love and peace of God's presence.

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## Monastery Chapel Closed for Public Masses



Due to COVID-19, Eucharistic Liturgy and prayer are not open to the public until further notice. We hope and pray that by this time next year, we can safely open our doors to the public again for Mass, retreats and visits. We miss you and want to assure you of our prayers. Please feel free to submit personal prayer requests via the monastery website: [www.annunciationmonastery.org](http://www.annunciationmonastery.org) or Facebook page, or call 701-255-1520.

## WILLIAM AND PATRICIA CLAIMONT

# *Leave Gift to Ministry on the Margins*

**A**n impactful donation was gifted to Ministry on the Margins from the late William and Patricia Clairmont. This generous gift was presented to Sister Kathleen Atkinson, founder of Ministry on the Margins, and Sister Nicole Kunze, prioress of Annunciation Monastery, by the Clairmont family: Steve Clairmont, Julie Clairmont-Shide, Cindy Clairmont-Schmidt, and Nancy Clairmont Carr.

Bill Clairmont a visionary, entrepreneur and land developer, created a legacy in the construction and land development industry as founder/owner of William Clairmont, Inc, and Country West Real Estate. He was involved in the banking industry, where he owned and was Chairman of First Southwest Bank, Mandan ND, and Grant County State Bank, Carson City, ND. Bill supported numerous country, business and civic organizations throughout his career.

The Clairmonts valued and supported education and were very involved with the University of Mary. Bill served on the Board of Regents and he and Pat served on the Board of Trustees. Bill created The Clairmont Center for the Performing Arts at the University of Mary.

Pat was the operational support for Bill in his business, William Clairmont Inc. With a keen interest in others, she actively participated in leadership roles in the community.

“We, at Ministry on the Margins, and all of the Benedictine Sisters of Annunciation Monastery, have a great appreciation for the Clairmont family,” says Sister Kathleen Atkinson. “The influence of Bill and Pat will live on and improve the lives of so many for years to come. Their gift will be used to help individuals who live on the margins with daily necessities like food, clothing, programs, fellowship, and mentorship opportunities.” Atkinson explains, “We are currently in the process of scouting out a new location for Ministry on the Margins, as our lease is up in December 2020. We look forward to naming our food pantry the ‘Clairmont Food Pantry’ when we move to our new location.”



*Philanthropists William and Patricia Clairmont left a lasting gift to Ministry on the Margins.*

*Sister Nicole Kunze and Sister Kathleen Atkinson are pictured with the Clairmont family: Cindy Clairmont-Schmidt, Steve Clairmont, Nancy Clairmont Carr, and Julie Clairmont-Shide.*

*\*Photos used with permission from the Clairmont family*

Ministry on the Margins currently serves over 150 households a week through the food pantry.

Staff and volunteers at Ministry on the Margins collaborate with individuals and service agencies to coordinate assistance for housing, employment, vision screenings, prison to society, clothing and daily living needs.



Annunciation Monastery is also a grateful beneficiary of the generosity of William and Patricia Clairmont. Funds will further the mission and ministries of the sisters.

Daughter Julie Clairmont-Shide expressed, “We are happy to extend these gifts on behalf of our parents. They cared deeply about all of you.”

## A Dry Roof Over Our Heads

*Thank you!*

You helped us repair our roof! Because of your generous support, our roof work began in September and we are ready for a cozy fall and winter, without ceiling drips and water running down the walls. We are grateful for your donations of over \$76,000 to replace our roof. We can't thank you enough.



If you would like to contribute toward this project, please use the enclosed envelope or donate online via the monastery website: [www.annunciationmonastery.org](http://www.annunciationmonastery.org)

# TRIBUTES TO *Sister Thomas Welder*

## Heaven's Eyes

by Greg Nelson

On the passing of Sister Thomas Welder

**W**hen you met sister Thomas, you were struck by those bright piercing eyes, the slight slanting of her head, the punctuated affirming nods. As you talked to her, she was energetically curious, hyper focused, and your enthusiastic audience of one. She gave you the distinct feeling that what you said mattered to her. It was as if she was coming along side of you and figuratively putting her hand around your waist to help you on your way. I can't remember a conversation when she talked about herself. It was always about you... this is how she lived....this is who she was. She was no respecter of persons. The powerful, the timid, the affluent and the poor all enjoyed her appreciation. She remembered people and was invested in them. Her tone was gentle, firm and caring.

Her life is an example of constancy, discipline, sacrifice, dedication, hard work and perseverance in every area of life. Through it all, her abiding faith, her Benedictine devotion, her joy despite circumstance and continual encouragement to everyone she touched, is a lesson that can't be taught in a classroom. Her legacy sings loudly. She was a dynamic presence that inspired us, and one abandoned to a certain carpenter from Nazareth. Her life flowed from His heart. Hers was a heart that continued to be given away with no regret, and with the spiritual wisdom to



*Greg Nelson, music producer, songwriter*

understand the folly of holding on to possessions and gifts that were never hers in the first place.

Ultimately, her clear understanding of a greater presence in her life fueled every kind word, thought and act. She loved because she was loved, she forgave because she was forgiven and taught us what can be, and what must be...servants first...servants all. We're left to witness and be amazed by the transformed and motivated lives that have been blessed by the personal intersection and influence of Sister Thomas.

I am one of those grateful beneficiaries. I studied music with her, and she was a brilliant teacher. She became the President of the University of Mary and led it to greatness.... But far more, a witness to what is the love of Christ. She was one

of the greatest influences in my Christian life. Until a few years ago, we shared emails back and forth about what God was doing in our lives and how we could better serve others in need. This evangelical brother, and Catholic sister....no walls...only love and gratitude...She had heaven's eyes.

As in the Matthew 5:16 reference, Sister Thomas let her light shine and gave glory to her Father in heaven by reflecting His light. When I think of her, I remember this lyric. I thought of her while we recorded it in the studio.

A fervent prayer rose up to heaven,  
A fragile soul was losing ground  
And sorting through the earthly babble,  
Heaven heard the sound.  
This was a life of no distinction,  
No successes, only tries.  
Yet gazing down on this unlovely one,  
There was love in Heaven's Eyes.  
In Heaven's Eyes, there are no losers,  
In Heaven's Eyes, no hopeless cause.  
Only people like you, with feelings like me, amazed  
by the grace we can find  
In Heaven's Eyes.

In Heaven's Eyes  
Phill McHugh  
River Oaks Music (BMI)

*\*Used with permission from Greg Nelson*

*"We, as servant leaders, are always striving toward holiness, toward integrating heart, mind and spirit. Faith and work cannot be separated.*

*The ultimate service of the servant leader is to build community--to honor and respect each other, to reach across boundaries and differences, and see in our differences the strengths needed to restore peace and hope in a fragmented world."*

*~ Sister Thomas Welder*



Sister Thomas Welder  
April 27, 1940 - June 22, 2020

# TRIBUTES TO *Sister Thomas Welder*

## **It's the People Who Matter – A Tribute to Sister Thomas Welder**

by Judith Valente

**S**he wasn't the CEO of a large corporation. She never held elected office. She spent 59 years living in a monastery on a wind-swept ridge overlooking the Missouri River on North Dakota's prairie.

She was neither bombastic, nor physically imposing, but slender and self-effacing. Yet Sister Thomas Welder cast a monumental presence.

Sister Thomas died at the age of 80. To honor this remarkable woman, I spent time reviewing the many Internet videos in which she speaks on her signature subject: educating young people for leadership.

I got to know Sister Thomas last year when she invited me to speak at Bismarck's University of Mary on "Stirring the Ashes: Igniting a Sense of Hope in Our Work." Her life leaves an indelible handprint on the hearts of those of us lucky enough to have known her.

As our country moves toward the Presidential and Congressional elections in November, this Benedictine sister's vision speaks volumes about what it means to be a servant, a leader, a person of faith and an exemplary human being.

In 1978, Sister Thomas became president of the Mary College, then a small, liberal arts college on the Dakota prairie. She had a sweeping vision. It was to transform the Mary College into University of Mary, one of the country's premier institutions for educating future leaders.

The school's mission would not be to turn out your typical MBA, get-ahead, get-rich, seek-the-limelight-type of leaders. It would become a training ground for "servant leaders."

An early influence on her thinking was Robert K. Greenleaf's seminal 1970 essay, "The Servant as Leader."

Greenleaf was a former AT&T executive who concluded after his long tenure at the top that the authoritarian, command-and-control, pyramid-style leadership model was no longer serving the needs of our country, our corporations, or its workers.



*Judith Valente, author, poet,  
journalist, Benedictine oblate*

Sister Thomas advocated for a different pyramid-shaped model. She twinned “Service” with “Vision” on the sides of the triangle, and placed both those values firmly on a base of “Credibility.”

“People won’t listen to the message, if they can’t trust the messenger,” she was fond of saying. Effective leaders, she observed, don’t seek to influence by “force, coercion, control, or authority,” but by “respecting the needs of those in their service.” They aren’t big talkers. They are devoted listeners.

Here Sister Thomas didn’t need to turn for guidance to any of the latest books by management experts. As a Benedictine sister, she was intimately familiar with one of history’s most famous guides for living and leading with compassion: the monastic “Rule of St. Benedict.”

A 6th century text written expressly for monks might seem an odd guide to address our rapidly changing 21st century social, political, and business practices. But from its first sentence, “Listen...with the ear of your heart,” The Rule echoes guidance coming from many of today’s top organizational and management voices.

In his chapter on electing a monastery’s abbot or prioress, Benedict explores the character traits essential to good leadership. They prove remarkably similar to those historian Doris Kearns Goodwin cites in her 2018 book, “Leadership in Turbulent Times,” on the presidencies of Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin Roosevelt. Those character traits? Humility. That is, a willingness to learn from mistakes. Empathy. Resilience. Self-reflection.

St. Benedict says in his Rule, those who seek to lead must do so not by words, even soaring ones, but by “living example.” In one of his most memorable passages, he compares a leader to a physician whose objective is “the care of souls.”

Sister Thomas would often end her talks with a series of questions she called the “tests of true leadership:” Do those I serve grow as people because of my leadership? Do they become healthier, wiser, and more likely themselves to want to serve? What effect does my leadership have on the least privileged, most marginalized in society? And, does my leadership serve to build community? These seem apt questions to ask ourselves as we evaluate candidates this November, as well as our current business leaders.

Sister Thomas’ own path to leadership was a personal profile in courage. At the height of her career, she was struck with kidney disease, endured dialysis, and eventually received two separate transplants.

“She knew she was on borrowed time this side of the clouds,” her longtime friend, Sister Anne Shepard told me. “No one lived one day at a time more than she did. No one loved life and recognized the value of each day more than she did. What a model she was of what it means to be Christlike.”

Another of her favorite expressions was, “It’s the people who matter.”

Under Sister Thomas’ leadership, University of Mary tripled in size from 975 to 3,000 students, added a doctorate program, and established satellite learning programs across North Dakota and the country.

Anyone who spent time with her quickly realized she had an uncanny way of aiming the spotlight away from herself and making those she was with feel as though they were the most important people in her world at that moment.



*Sister Thomas Welder and Judith Valente enjoyed the chance to visit at last year's sponsorship formation event.*

Despite her pressing duties in recent years as president emerita and ambassador-at-large for the university, she still managed to sing with and conduct her monastery's choir and play the organ at daily community prayers. She had a master's degree in music from Northwestern University.

Sister Nicole Kunze, prioress of Annunciation Monastery, said Sister Thomas spent her final hours before succumbing to kidney cancer meeting individually with each sister in her community.

"It's the people who matter." I urge you to search her name on Google and treat yourself to watching one of the videos in which she talks passionately about servant leadership in her distinctive, plainspoken, self-deprecating, and humorous style.

She often included in her talks images of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. She would point out that before any management gurus seized on the idea, Jesus was the original "servant leader."

Sister Thomas was the epitome of servant leadership. May we be inspired every day to follow her example. It's the people that matter.

# A VOCATION MESSAGE

from Vocation Director Sister Idelle Badt



## Vocation Ministry in the Time of COVID-19

On the weekend of August 28-30, I joined forces with four other vocation directors from Benedictine monasteries in Illinois, Minnesota, and Indiana to host a virtual retreat. The retreat focused on the Benedictine values of prayer, community, vows, hospitality, and service and was geared for women under the age of 45 discerning a call to religious life.

Never having held a virtual retreat before, we were all uncertain how successful it would be. To our great surprise, it was a wonderful experience for both the retreatants and the directors! Luckily, two of the vocation directors are teachers by trade and are experienced Zoom facilitators. We advertised the retreat on our respective Facebook pages and reached out to our current discerners. We ended up having 12 women register and attend the entire weekend. That was the most participants for a discernment retreat that any of us have had!

The structure of the retreat was very similar to that of our in-house retreats. Friday evening commenced with an icebreaker session so we could get to know each other. This was followed by the first of five 30-minute talks on the Benedictine Values. At the end of each talk, the women were emailed reflection questions and given 30 minutes to formulate responses. We then came back together and spent about half an hour discussing our answers in small groups.

In addition to the Values talks, we also set time aside for the women to attend Mass, as well as virtually attend evening prayers with the Benedictine Sisters at Our Lady of Grace Monastery in Beech Grove, Indiana. Saturday evening consisted of a social hour where the women could ask the sisters questions about monastic life.

I am honestly shocked at how meaningful this experience was, considering it was held online. The retreatants got to participate without having to travel and sleep in an unfamiliar bed. The comfort of their surroundings contributed to a more trusting environment. People freely shared their thoughts and the weekend went by very quickly.

Because of the success of our first virtual retreat, we have decided to host another one during Advent. Updates will be made to the Annunciation Monastery Facebook and website regarding dates and times.



*These sisters serve on the vocation ministry team (Lt. to Rt., front row): Sisters Marena Hoogland, Agatha Muggli and Melissa Cote; (standing): Sisters Nicole Kunze, Krista Ferrell, JoAnn Krebsbach and Idelle Badt.*

# SNAPSHOTS



*We were blessed to see many wonderful faces (smiling eyes!), including those of Monsignor James Shea, president of the University of Mary, and Austin Holgard.*



*Traditionally, our sisters are a big part of welcome week at the University of Mary. To keep the tradition alive, we invited students, faculty and staff to an outdoor ice cream social.*

## Sisters Invite University of Mary Students, Faculty and Staff to Ice Cream Social



*Sister Nancy Miller and Sister Rita Miller enjoy ice cream by the bell banner sign. The bell banner is the landmark and trademark of the Benedictine Sisters of Annunciation Monastery.*



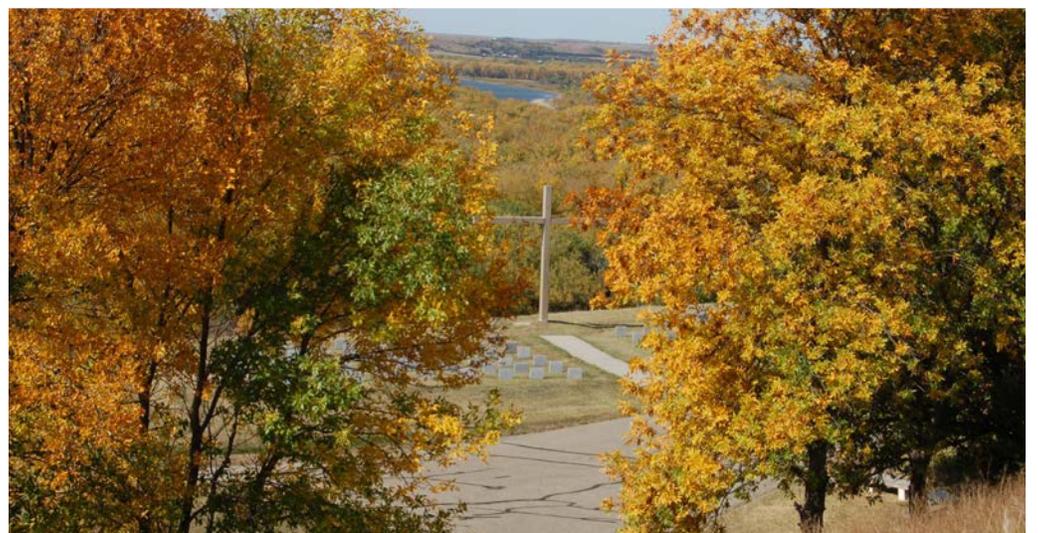


*Architects from CSNA Architects, Colorado Springs, CO, enjoyed a tour of Breuer architecture. (Lt. to rt.: Taylor Mueller and husband, Eric; Gregory Friesen, FAIA; Sister Nicole Kunze; Jeannine Saabye)*

## Architects Tour Breuer Architecture

In early August principal architect, Gregory Friesen and his associate, Taylor Mueller (with husband, Eric) traveled from Colorado Springs, CO, to Annunciation Monastery to tour Breuer Architecture. Friesen has been involved in the design and renovation of a variety of Breuer projects at Saint John's University campus. Special thanks to Jeannine Saabye, University of Mary, and Sister Nicole Kunze, prioress of Annunciation Monastery, for sharing the morning with them. The mutual sharing and learning was a gift to all of us.

*The sister's cemetery is surrounded by beauty in all seasons. The peaceful view of the valley is a prayer of thanksgiving.*



**Annunciation Monastery**  
**7520 University Drive**  
**Bismarck, ND 58504-9619**

[www.annunciationmonastery.org](http://www.annunciationmonastery.org)

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For more information, contact Jill Ackerman, director of mission advancement, (701) 355-8907 or: [jill@annunciationmonastery.org](mailto:jill@annunciationmonastery.org)

*"Listen to the gentle breeze,  
rustling leaves,  
flowing, rippling water,  
and see the leaf tumble  
to the ground.*

*Be still  
amidst the beauty of creation.*

*This is a holy time.*

*I've waited for you!*

*Taste my goodness...*

*Rest in my love."*

*by Sister Gemma Peters*

