



THE BENEDICTINE EVOLUTIONARY TREE

by Linda Romey, OSB

The Benedictine Peacemakers program is an experiment in seeing the evolution of Benedictine life as biologists see the evolution and growth of all life. Our Benedictine evolutionary tree, like the biologist's tree, is a "succession of ramifications," to borrow from Jesuit theologian and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. This ramification, the growth of new branches, reflects a "continual expansion and deepening of consciousness" because life seeks meaning and purpose rather than superficial change.

Our 1,500-year-old Benedictine tree is rooted in God—and at the outset Benedict tells us his teaching will bring us back to God—and it is this rootedness that pulls us forward and fulfills our purpose. The Benedictine wisdom tradition is the trunk of a great, ancient tree that nourishes human reflection, thinking, and understanding and opens us to God. While our twenty-first century lives bear little resemblance to sixth century living, the core of Benedict's teaching continues to guide seekers today.

The purpose of Benedictine life is more profound than sharing spirituality and values. It's more than maintaining a monastery where sisters live and guests come. It's even more than sponsoring important ministries and doing good works. Yes, these all grow out of seeking God in community, but they are not the reasons this tree has continued to flourish for more than fifteen centuries.

Benedictine life is about individuals choosing to grow into God alongside other individuals who want to do the same, guided by this tradition. It is about seeing how this desire for God, implanted deep in human hearts since the beginning of time, is what informs our being and guides our thinking and acting.



Emily Brandt, Erin Falk, Melissa Pfeifer, and Benedictine Peacemakers program director, Michelle Scully.

Monastic life is about supporting each other as we persevere on our own journey of *conversatio*, of becoming more Christ-like in our being, our relating, in our daily living, and in our response to the needs around us. Vowed monastics have formally committed their lives to this pursuit. Many others also make this commitment to follow Benedict's way to God without taking canonical vows, oblates for example (see page 22), living in their own homes rather than a monastery. Benedictine Peacemakers is an invitation, specifically for young women, to spend a year growing into God with a monastic community. It is a new branch growing on this ancient Benedictine tree.



Erin oversaw Pay-What-You-Can farmer's market stands through the summer in her ministry with Groundwork Erie.

The Peacemakers Branch

The evolutionary and spiritual growth questions are: What does the world need now? What is missing? What needs addressing now to support the good of humankind and the earth? At one point in our history, it was education for the children of German immigrants. It was an academy for young women on Erie's east side. It was founding a soup kitchen and an art house. It continues to be working for peace and justice and women's equality. The list goes on. But what might God's creation need today?

For 120 years the sisters at St. Benedict Academy (SBA) formed young women who, to this day, witness the impact of Benedictine education. The SBA experience supported the full human value of women and stressed the importance of creating strong community along with a commitment to the greater good. But SBA closed in 1988 as the ways of the world changed. The

sisters changed, too, but they also stayed the same, rooted in the Benedictine tradition.

We asked ourselves, “How do we actively introduce young people to that tradition in ways that are relevant now?” We thought about the resources we have to offer. Well, there are extra bedrooms in the monastery. There are sisters with whom to pray and live in community. There are those who can offer formation in Benedictine spirituality and there is a monastery with many spaces for quiet reflection. There are ministries that need to be done, and peace and justice for which to work. How could we put those resources to work to offer support and space in new ways for new generations who seek God now?

The pieces began to fall into place and in June three young women moved into the monastery. Thus began their yearlong journey of seeking God immersed in the monastic community as part of the Benedictine Peacemakers program. Next May, the community will bless them and send them off, hopefully more grounded in their spiritual seeking and knowing that the monastic community will continue to uphold them in prayer and welcome them back to the monastery to visit at any time.

The Experience

The women in the Peacemakers program live in the monastery. They join sisters and guests in chapel to pray the daily Liturgy of the Hours, and they take their meals in the dining room. These times together are central to the monastic life to which they have committed for this year. They may be asked to read Scripture at prayer, and they are on a dish team—it takes a team to do dinner dishes for fifty or sixty people each evening.

A weekly reflection day is part of the program. It’s a day for formation classes (see page 12 for curriculum), personal reflection, and some extra silence. Three retreat weekends, focused time away, are scheduled throughout the year.



Woodturner Sister Audrey Steff teaches Melissa her craft as part of an art-as-meditation experience.



Erin, Sister Lucia Surmik, and Emily at a rally in Erie.

The women spend four days a week in their ministry. Additionally, they are active in local efforts promoting peace and justice, including climate justice. They network with other non-profits in Erie and go out with new friends. They make a conscious effort to create community among themselves and contribute to the good of the monastic household. Outside of their basic living needs—food and shelter—that are met by the monastic community, they live on a small monthly stipend, the same as the sisters do. And they socialize and have fun with each other and with sisters and guests.

Melissa Pfeifer is from Hays, Kansas, and splits her time between Emmaus Ministries and the Erie Spiritual Coalition, ministries that serve vulnerable populations; Erin Falk is from Buffalo, New York, and works with Groundwork Erie where she coordinates the Pay-What-You-Can farm stands; Emily Brandt is from Newton, Kansas, and has used her skills as a social worker at the Inner-City Neighborhood Art House.

Michelle Scully, coordinator of the Peacemakers program, and I recently had a conversation with Melissa, Erin, and Emily about their experience in the program. Their wisdom follows.

Intergenerational Living

It’s hard to imagine living with more than fifty women with a median age of eighty-one until you do it. The youngest sisters who live at the monastery are in their thirties, the oldest in their nineties. Emily, Erin, and Melissa are in their twenties.

There are many gifts to intergenerational living, a way of life that used to be much more common. Today, living near grandparents is no longer a given, let alone living with them. “Aging helps us see what’s important,” Melissa said. “God is always trying to draw near. The lock is on our side. Each sister has her cross to carry [with aging]. It’s a reminder that this could happen to me, too, if I live long enough. It’s touching for me to see one sister taking another sister’s walker to her after prayer.”

Erin also spoke about the sisters’ care for each other. She admitted that she didn’t have a lot of experience with older people, and “had a little nervousness” before moving in, wondered if they were going to judge her. “But they truly don’t judge, and they have care in their heart that extends to me. I feel like we are all one



After shared *lectio*, sisters and women in the Peacemakers program offer a blessing for Mariela, Sister Linda Romey's goddaughter from Colombia, South America, who was returning home.

family, and I think that is beautiful.”

“It’s such a funny balance between being a kind of sibling sisters, like the dynamic of friends, because they sometimes get annoyed with each other like siblings would. I find it refreshing,” added Emily. “It’s just fun to chat with them and I see a kind of sassy, playful side sometimes.”

Spirituality

The conversation shifted to spirituality, a topic important to each of the young women even though their experiences of the spiritual life and their religious practices vary. While they are expected to participate in the prayer life of the community during their year at the monastery, the purpose of the program is not to impress on them any one experience of the Divine. It is to allow them space, give them time, and provide resources so they can wrestle with these deep questions of God and meaning in a supportive environment.

“I think many young people do seek some sort of spirituality or greater meaning in life, but a big part of what deters people [from mainline religious traditions] are systemic aspects of religion that implant shame and guilt and a lot of limitations,” said Emily. “It’s hard to trust when you’ve been hurt or betrayed or told that your existence is wrong. Having more of these spaces [like the monastery] is good as long as it’s about love and seeking good and God, and actually accepting others and opening your arms to whoever.”

Erin explained that for her, “the difference between spirituality and religion is spirituality is a relationship with the Divine. And I think people are looking for some type of connection with the Divine.” Like Emily, she noted that spaces like religious institutions, “come with order and structure and rules that don’t work for everyone.” She added, too, that “if there were more third spaces, and that’s kind of how I felt about this program, where you come in and work on your relationship with the

Divine and go from there with monasticism as a base, that has been helpful. I think God is always there and you just have to find what works for you.”

“Interior freedom transcends everything,” Melissa reminded us. “‘God alone suffices,’ as Saint Teresa of Avila says. I mean, Sister Michelle just has my heart when she says, ‘I don’t regret a single minute of it. I came here right after high school.’ It’s the best thing ever to have that kind of inner peace.”

“And I think that kind of choosing is radical,” added Emily.

Living the Rule

A key piece of the Peacemakers curriculum is study of the Rule of Benedict, the sixth century rule that structures the life of Benedictine monastics around the world. Michelle picked up on the comments about frustration with rules and structure in organized religion, pointing out that, “there is also order and structure and rules here in the monastery. So, what feels different to you?”

“You are accepted here no matter what,” began Erin. “It’s like, this is our way of life that we think is beneficial. But even in the Rule, it says, if this isn’t working for you, change it up a bit, so there’s openness. It’s kind of like a guideline as opposed to a rule; you have this structure and then do what works for you based off the structure.”

“This structure feels more like a daily routine and rhythm, it’s like an encouraging guideline of how to live out and seek God instead of like, rules and limitations that lead to guilt or shame,” added Emily.

“It’s common to hear someone is spiritual but not religious,” said Melissa. “But I don’t think you can really separate them. I like religion defined as what we owe to God. It’s like a relationship, like a friendship, not a one-way street. It’s not like, yeah, it’s nice to have your companionship. I’ll take all the benefits. But if you



A group of friends—(back) Starla, Sister Linda, Emily, Erin, Mariela, Rachel, Michelle and (front) Sister Anne, Tori, Melissa, and Michelle—helped Melissa celebrate her birthday with line dancing at a local venue.

need something, no, I'm not here for it. I think it is relational, and rules exist to protect relationships. And I think that's what religion gives us.

"In a relationship I want to know what you expect from me. Clarity is a gift, and I feel like that's what having a religion is. Catholicism clarifies my relationship with Christ."

In previous eras, monastic life meant strict adherence to a predetermined norm lived in complete, uncontested obedience. There were few allowances for differences of thought, behavior, diet, or dress.

New generations, including the women in the Peacemakers program, are often at the forefront of embracing new thinking. Emily brought this awareness to our conversation as she explored more deeply her experience as a teen and young adult who was sometimes shamed for not completing tasks or managing time well. "But, as someone with ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder) it's like the motivation doesn't exist," she said. As an adult and with advances in neuroscience, she has recognized that everyone's brain works differently. "There are so many reasons why someone may not be able to complete a task. I wasn't just choosing to sit there and not comply."

Which took us to deeper conversation about each one's unique relationship with God, the need for guides that are not absolute and blind rules, interior freedom, and the mental and spiritual strength it takes to know oneself and to feel comfortable being oneself in a world that still has a strong idea of what "normal" is.

Michelle offered a summary: "I wonder if there's frustration when the institutional guardrails say who is good or not, right? There is nuance in everything that comes together to create a representation of truth. And then there's the totally individualistic attitude and I think there's something in between. We need good communal discernment of truth grounded in rich histories within religion but maybe we are frustrated by who gets left out of those conversations."

"We do need guides, life can be confusing," said Melissa. "And we need honor and respect and kindness," Erin added. "Then we can coexist because we know everyone comes from different experiences."

"I'm just going to get curious about why someone said what they did instead of judging them," suggested Melissa. "And I think you can also assume a shared goal if everybody is showing up here in community, committed for a year or committed for a life," said Michelle.

On Work

"I really appreciate how much this community as a whole kind of spreads throughout the greater Erie community building-relationships and learning more about the world around us," said Emily. "It's more about living the life instead of just speaking the life in terms of monasticism and the Benedictine way of life. It's also like being the hands and feet of Jesus."

"I feel a connection with humans and the Earth, like we are one organism," Erin added. "And I think the work that I'm doing

really highlights that because we are planting trees and growing food and feeding people. The trees create canopy coverage so that it's not so hot and they are improving air quality. I'm really seeing the connection, I guess, between the earth and human life and viewing the earth as sacred."

"Work is sanctifying. We see in work where our hangups are and how we really don't want to do a lot of things. There's what we do and why we do it and how we do it. Every job can be sanctifying, just cutting a carrot or vacuuming the floor," mused Melissa. "It's humbling after some years in the work force to be like an intern again, coming into a place, not knowing the history or the relationships. I see the value of staying in the same place, like the Benedictines have, for such a long time. You become



Emily, far right, high-fives students at the Neighborhood Art House as they prepare to go on stage for their performance at the annual Taste of the Arts fundraiser.

intimate and see better how things are related. You can make more prudent decisions with this kind of perspective."

But work doesn't only happen in the broader community, it happens at the monastery in myriad ways day in and day out. "Many sisters work in the monastery," noted Emily. "Like Sister Marcia or Sister Peggy, who engage in their projects and in art, still creating and doing fulfilling things."

"The essence of community is sisters doing stuff around the monastery that's needed," said Erin, "like, Sister Mary Ellen Cummings organizing the cups to make it easier for others to find what they need even when they come to get something to drink during the night."

"I guess the larger vision of [work] is trusting that I am where God wants me to be right now. How can I use that to glorify God?" concluded Melissa.

Ongoing Benedictine Tradition

Words are important in shaping not only how we think but also how the world thinks. "Pax," peace, is the de facto Benedictine motto carved on the massive stone entrances of monasteries across centuries. This new program, and the women who choose to become a part of it, remind us of our heritage and call us to be who we say we are. They are also the living evidence



Benedictine Peacemakers program director Michelle Scully and Emily, Erin, and Melissa share their Peacemaker experience with sisters and oblates at the October Community Weekend.

that there is still value in the ancient Benedictine tree of life.

“The being who is the object of their own reflection, in consequence of that very doubling back upon themselves, becomes in a flash able to raise themselves into a new sphere,” Teilhard de Chardin writes. The course of history makes clear that new spheres will always arise. But it also assures us that we will go on, too. It is both the past and the present that make the future possible. We are the fortunate ones, those who have an experience of God and can reflect on who we are and what gives our life meaning and purpose in light of that experience. And then, trusting in the God who calls us forward to wholeness, we can witness the ongoing life of the Benedictine tradition as it unfolds and continues to offer its gifts to new generations.



Components of the Peacemakers program

Spiritual and personal formation are integral to monastic life and therefore are key components of a year spent in the Benedictine Peacemakers program. The curriculum for the 2025-26 cohort includes:

- Ongoing study of the Rule of Benedict. One facet of this study is a monthly session on one of the twelve steps of humility from Chapter 7 of the Rule.
- Presentations and discussions on topics related to faith, theology, liturgy, and spirituality presented by sisters and other members of the wider Benedictine community.
- Opportunities to learn about issues of peace and justice, including climate justice, and community organizing.
- Gatherings for faith sharing, book discussions, creative expression, and exploration of women’s issues.
- An initial orientation week, a week of closure at the end of the program, and three off-site weekend retreats during the year.

Parts of the curriculum are exclusively for the women in the program. Some gatherings are for the young women and the sisters, and other events are open to the public. This offers the program participants a chance for personal deepening and growth in and with an immediate community and a larger local community.

While broad conversations brought us to the initiation of the program, an advisory committee has continued working with Michelle Scully, Benedictine Peacemakers program director. Team members are hospice chaplain Sister Mary Ellen Plumb, Monasteries of the Heart coordinator Katie Gordon, counselor Sister Ann Muczynski, and Sister Linda Romey, coordinator of Communications and Development.

More information and applications for the 2026-27 cohort are on the website of the

Benedictine Sisters of Erie,
eriebenedictines.org/benedictine-peacemakers or scan the QR code.
 Please help us spread the word!



Centering Prayer workshop part of Benedictine Peacemakers curriculum shared with larger Erie community

Mary Dwyer (standing front) and Juan Larena offered a workshop and practice in Centering Prayer in the monastery chapel. Mary, a longtime student of the American Trappist monk Thomas Keating, gave a brief introduction to the prayer form. Mary’s husband Juan is a commissioned Centering Prayer facilitator and he led those gathered in a twenty-minute prayer session after Mary’s presentation.