



# Work and Prayer

Sisters embrace rural life at  
Colorado monastery

By Kara Storey

**N**estled in a valley in northern Colorado is the Abbey of St. Walburga, a community of 23 Benedictine contemplative nuns with the average age of 53. The abbey sits on ranchland, surrounded by hills and rock formations that create a natural border to their grounds and allow the nuns to maintain a peaceful atmosphere.

The abbey was originally founded in a rural area outside of Boulder, Colorado, in March of 1935. Three sisters had been sent to America by the abbess of St. Walburg in Eichstatt, Germany, to establish a place of refuge for the community should Nazi Germany become too unfriendly toward monasteries. As Boulder expanded, it became more challenging for the community to live out authentic monasticism, and so in 1997 it moved to its current location near Virginia Dale, Colorado, located 30 miles south of Laramie, Wyoming.

“The rural setting encourages us to more fully seek God, cultivating an atmosphere of silence

and peace,” said Sister Elizabeth Baumgartner, 51. “Life tends to be more simple in the country, away from the constant motion of being in an urban area and allows one to focus on what is truly important in life, striving for the eternal, the things that will last forever.”

## Joy in a new calling

Growing up in Denver, Sister Elizabeth did not have much experience with rural life. So it came as quite a surprise when God took her on a long and winding path to the community that began in the 1990s while she was a commissioned officer in the U.S. Navy. However, it wasn’t until 2007 that she finally left her successful military career to pursue discernment full time. She entered the secluded Abbey of St. Walburga in 2008.

Although now the monastery’s business manager and guesthouse manager, her first few years as a sister were spent working the ranch by harvesting hay, maintaining the tractors, milking cows, cleaning the chicken coop and ensuring barbed-wire fences

were in working order. While the work was hard and she had much to learn, Sister Elizabeth said she had much satisfaction seeing a full hay shed ready for the winter months or helping during calving season.

“It is always a joy to watch a cow care for her calf by licking it to clean it, and then watch the calf stand up and begin to walk around a short time after being born,” she said.

## Rule of life

The community lives by the Benedictine charism of “ora et labora”—prayer and work.

“As Benedictine nuns, we seek God in prayer through Mass, the Divine Office, lectio divina and our work,” Sister Elizabeth said. “St. Benedict stresses moderation, so we have a balance and daily rhythm of prayer and work throughout the day.”

This work includes operating a guesthouse for visitors, selling beef to private customers, distributing altar bread to parishes, and running a small gift shop that includes books and other items



written and made by the sisters. They also must maintain a working ranch, which includes planting and harvesting several large hay fields that they use to feed their stock in the winter.

“Each year we raise two pigs for the community,” she added. “Chickens give us a steady supply of eggs, and a milk cow and a water buffalo provide milk, as well as allow us to make cheese, kefir and yogurt.”

A summer garden provides fresh vegetables throughout the season and a greenhouse allows the nuns to grow a limited amount of vegetables throughout the year.

### Love thy neighbor

Sister Elizabeth said that since their monastery is naturally secluded, as well as surrounded by other cattle ranches, they do not have much interaction with the surrounding community. However, neighbors are grateful for and respectful of their presence. Families do come regularly for Mass or to pray the Liturgy of the Hours, and the sisters are able to offer them a place of quiet where they can reverence God.

The community also finds solidarity with their neighboring cattle ranchers by understanding the joys and difficulties of raising cattle.

“We help each other as good neighbors do, by finding lost cattle that made their way through a

broken fence line, assisting with machinery repairs, sharing bales of hay or plowing roads after a snowstorm,” Sister Elizabeth said.

She recalled a time when two of the community’s tractors became stuck in water following a flash flood. A neighbor and his brother, using a Vietnam-era Army vehicle, pulled the tractors out free of charge, saving the sisters thousands of dollars that would have been spent hiring a towing company.

In turn, the sisters are Christian witnesses to their neighbors in how they honor God through their treatment of the land and animals, Sister Elizabeth said. It gives their neighbors a chuckle, she added, but each year prior to calving season the sisters come up with possible names for the new cattle based on themes, such as

trees and shrubs, flowers, candies and chocolates, and gems and precious metals.

“It may be a simple gesture, but it does demonstrate that we care about our animals and treat them humanely – they are grass-fed, as God created them to be, and never given hormones or steroids,” she said.

Just like the earliest monks and nuns who retreated to the desert to pray, and St. Benedict who fled Rome for the rural areas of first Subiaco and then Monte Cassino, the remote setting of the Abbey of St. Walburga allows the community to fulfill their desire to seek God through monastic life, the nun said. True to the Benedictine spiritual pillar of hospitality, the abbey’s setting also allows them to offer a place of refuge to others.

“Our rural setting offers guests and visitors an opportunity to escape the busyness of life and be still, slow down, and truly listen to God,” she said. “They can pray in a place of reverence, as well as enjoy the beauty of God’s creation in our quiet valley without being bombarded with distractions.”

