



The Eagle

Eastertide 2026

Greetings to the Associates, Oblates and Friends of the Sisterhood of St. John the Divine!



Sister Elizabeth Ann

We began January with a number of sisters heading down to St. James' Cathedral for the installation of Sr. Elizabeth Rolfe-Thomas as a lay Canon. We remember our other Sisters who have been made Canons over the years, including Sr. Frances Joyce, Sr. Constance, and Sr. Connie.

We also attended a celebration of 90 years of the Sisterhood's ministry at St. John's Rehab, giving thanks for our time there and beginning a new phase in our relationship with Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre.

During the week of prayer for Christian Unity, we hosted the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius for Orthodox Vespers and an evening program, hearing from the voices of Armenian and Syrian Christians.

January and into February also saw us busily resetting the Guest House as furniture arrived and it was directed to its place by an able cadre of sisters and other helpers. Work was still being completed on the Guest House as we found deficiencies upon deficiencies, including with the newly installed heating system! Sr. Connie is faithfully overseeing the resolution of these deficiencies with the construction company and architects.

Our first in-house retreat, a Zentangle Retreat with Nancy Houghton, a certified teacher of Zentangle, was February 6 – 8, and it was fabulous for all who attended.

Of course, on February 14th we had an incredible celebration of the grand re-opening of the Home for the Heart Guest House with over 150 people in attendance! Bishop Andrew Asbil led the winding procession through the Guest House to prayers and readings while we sang a refrain, blessing the space with "Love, love, love"!



Bishop Andrew Asbil

And in St. Margaret's Chapel, the Blessed Sacrament was placed, and we sang, "O Good Shepherd. O Good Friend. Slow me down, slow me down." These words capture what we want for each guest – to slow down and attend to God's presence and love in their lives.

On Sunday March 1st, two sisters attended a service at St. Matthias' Bellwoods to mark the beginning of a 5-year sabbath rest for the parish while work is undertaken on the buildings. This was the only church which welcomed the sisters in our beginnings in Toronto, so it was important for us to be there with this warm and welcoming community.

We are in the midst of Lent and already planning and looking forward to our Holy Week and Easter celebrations. Archbishop Linda Nicholls will be our presider and preacher for these liturgies. In the meantime, we are hosting many retreats including some Ignatian style 5- and 8-day silent retreats. Several sisters will be leading the Holy Week retreat this year.

Coming up on our calendars we will host the Primate, Archbishop Shane Parker, for Eucharist and an evening visit with the sisters. This gives us an opportunity to speak with the Primate and to hear from him his joys and concerns to inform our prayers for him. We are looking forward to the 50th Profession Anniversary of Sr. Jocelyn on May 1st, her golden anniversary. This celebration will be followed by the Triennial gathering of our Oblates for a week of meeting together, retreat, time with the sisters, and of course, celebrating with us on our Patronal festival May 6th, the feast of St. John in Eastertide.

We wish you a blessed joy in Eastertide.

**Sister Elizabeth Ann, SSJD
Reverend Mother**

Monasticism

In the monastic tradition, hospitality and peacemaking have long been cellmates. Back in the sixth century, St. Benedict specified in his Rule, seminal to Christian monasticism, that “as soon as a guest is announced, let the Superior or the brethren meet him (sic) with all charitable service. And first of all let them pray together and then exchange the kiss of peace.” Welcome, prayer, peace: the paradigmatic Benedictine progression.

History credits monasteries for carrying classical thought, art and culture through the violent, chaotic years following the collapse of the Roman Empire. Internally ordered and disciplined, these communities of scholars, craftspeople and scribes reproduced ancient texts, preserving them in Europe’s largest libraries. Without these committed centres of learning, an irreparable rupture in the inheritance of knowledge would have left the West intellectually impoverished, perhaps permanently.

Universities eventually replaced abbeys as bastions of scholarship, education and archival activity. Monasteries went on to shrink in number, influence and strength. Irish monks may well have saved civilization in the early Middle Ages, as scholar Thomas Cahill argued in his 1995 book, but no one’s writing books to contend that they’re still doing so.

I offer not yet a book, but this article in support of that idea. I’ve come to think that monasteries, and their contemporary offshoots, retreat houses, in fact are working on a civilizational scale—not in the traffic of the intellect, but rather in the realm of spiritual experience. As places that preserve silence, reflection, patience and compassion – all essential ingredients for peace – they may well, anonymously, be pulling us through these latter-day Dark Ages.

Iconic modern monastic Thomas Merton hints at this when he writes, “St. Benedict’s true contribution to European civilization is not that his monks were pioneers and builders and scholars and guardians of the classical tradition. These were only insignificant by-products.” More importantly, Benedictine monasteries “kept alive the central warmth of peace and unity among men (sic)

in a world that seemed to be wrestling with the ice of death.”¹

Even with the steady rise in global temperatures (2024 was the first year to reach the notorious average of 1.5 °C warmer than pre-industrial levels – bad news, say climatologists), our world seems very much to be “wrestling with the ice of death.” This makes the warmth of peace all the more crucial to our social survival. For those with eyes to see and skin to feel, pockets of such warmth can be found in activist circles, artistic communities, charitable organizations, churches.

They are perhaps most consciously tended in monasteries and retreat houses.

“As places that preserve silence, reflection, patience and compassion – they may well, anonymously, be pulling us through these latter-day Dark Ages.”

As intentional repositories of welcome, prayer and peace, these places safeguard the conditions

for genuine spiritual experience. People here enter spaciousness and silence to explore who they are and what they truly believe. Of course, the sacred concentrates itself no more in these areas than elsewhere; they do, however, make it their explicit work to offer hospitality to the searching, thirsty, yearning parts of us that intuit livelier solid ground beneath the deadening daily grind.

For a decade in a renowned retreat house, I gave spiritual direction to scores of retreatants from seemingly opposite ends of the religious spectrum. Parishioners faithful to their congregation’s liturgical worship would supplement this communal form of prayer with annual retreats conducted in stillness and interiority. On the other hand, many people stultified by institutional religion’s constraints would retreat to the nakedness of presence alive in a group of strangers knit together by a shared, open solitude stronger than creeds and dogmas. Both sets of guests, the classic Christian and the recovering Christian (plus a multitude outside either camp), found welcome and comfort at the retreat house.

Scions of Benedictine hospitality, retreat centres grew out of the monastic ministry of keeping guest houses accessible to lay people. Not called to perpetual reclusion, guests would benefit from inhabiting briefly the irenic pace and prayerfulness endemic to the monastery. Daunted, if not downtrodden, by the unique mod-

ern blend of corrosives – alienation from nature; social isolation; addictive technology; political polarization; widening economic inequality, to name a few – people need the refuge of retreat houses today just as much as scholars needed monastery libraries in the Middle Ages.

At the very same time, in direct opposition to this need, Christian retreat houses continue to be shuttered. This gives mutuality to the necessity. We all, albeit unbeknownst to most, would greatly benefit from retreating into the fostered quiet of monasteries and retreat houses. The latter, for their part, can't survive

without retreatants. The tranquility these places cultivate lives in the community, even if ephemeral, of seekers who welcome each other into an uncommon communion constructed out of practiced prayerfulness, not to be confused with stiff piety. Please consider going on retreat for the sake of lasting peace.

☞ Thomas Merton, *The Waters of Siloe*, Garden City Books, 1951, p. 6

Greg Kennedy, reprinted from *The Anglican*, February 2026, with permission.

Home for the Heart celebration



On February 14 excitement filled the convent as we awaited the blessing and official re-opening of the renovated Guest House on the grounds of St. John the Divine Convent in North York.

At the beginning of the Order of Service bulletin for the Guest House re-opening, Abp Fred Hiltz, co-chair of the Home for the Heart committee, wrote: “After years of closure of the Guest House through the COVID-19 global pandemic, and then the Sisters’ Spirit-led vision of renovating and refurbishing it for the enhanced comfort and safety of their guests, it is now ready for a joyful Re-Opening and Re-Dedication. This is a day of much thanksgiving for very generous donors, for architects and engineers, for demolition and construction crews...”

Sr. Elizabeth Ann, Reverend Mother, wrote: “Gratitude. Our hearts are full of gratitude. We are so grateful to God for all that has been accomplished in the renovations of the Guest House, our Home for the Heart. Our hearts are filled with gratitude to our many, many donors who have helped to make this re-opening possible.”

The service was conducted by Bp Andrew Asbil, our Diocesan Bishop. The opening hymn was “Now thank we all our God.” Bp Andrew prayed for the Guest House and all who will visit there.

The incense was blessed. Then the procession began – Crucifer, Thurifer, Blessed Sacrament, Bishop, Sisters and Guests. There were 12 representative ‘stations’ where the procession stopped and Bp Andrew blessed and censed the space. The first station was the link, which joins the Guest House to the convent. We wound our way through the first-floor corridor, singing “Love, love, love,” blessing a spiritual direction room, the Welcome Centre, a bathroom, a bedroom, and the Lunch-and-Art room. We continued up the stairs, blessing a sitting room and pantry, another bedroom, the library, the family suite, and then headed down into St. Margaret’s Chapel which was the final station. Here the Bishop blessed and censed the Blessed Sacrament before we all returned to the convent.

We ended in the Refectory for great refreshments, speeches, and presents for everyone. Sr. Elizabeth Ann thanked the donors for their generosity, the Home for the Heart committee members for their tireless work, and all guests for coming to celebrate this happy occasion with us. Because of over-runs in construction and refitting of the Guest House we still have \$800,000 to raise. We trust we will soon raise this amount.

Sr. Helen Claire, SSJD

See pages 4 & 5 for photos of the celebration

Home for the Heart celebration



Photos this page:
Sister Elizabeth
Bottom right:
Michael Hudson



Photos this page
by
Michael Hudson

Upcoming Retreats for 2026

Date	Type	Retreat Leaders	Topic
March 20 – 22	Retreat	Sr. Connie	Rule of Life
April 1 -5	Holy Week Retreat	SSJD Sisters	“Entering into the Bright Darkness, the Loud Silence of the Triduum”
April 24 – 26	Workshop	Dr. Wanda Malcolm	Grief Workshop
May 15 – 17	Retreat	Tatiana Saliba	Mindfulness Retreat
June 6	Quiet Day	Sr. Dorothy	Labyrinth Quiet Day
June 9 – 17	Retreat	Greg Kennedy	Silent Ignatian Retreat
June 13	Quiet Day	TBD	Garden Quiet Day
June 25	Day Retreat	Celia McBride	Sacred Silliness: Playing is Praying
July 11	Quiet Day	TBD	Garden Quiet Day
July 30 – August 7	Retreat	Greg Kennedy	Silent Directed Retreat
August 8	Quiet Day	TBD	Garden Quiet Day
September 15 – 17	Retreat	Ralph Benmergui	From Ageing to Saging
September 26	Quiet Day	TBD	Garden Quiet Day
October 8 – 16	Retreat	Greg Kennedy	Silent Directed Retreat
November 13 – 15	Retreat	Michael Higgins	On Thomas Merton
November 27 – 30	Retreat	TBD	Enter Advent Quietly
December 5	Quiet Day	TBD	Advent Quiet Day
December 23 – 26	Retreat	Sr. Connie	Christmas Retreat
December 31 – January 1, 2027	Retreat	Sr. Elizabeth	New Year’s Retreat



Companions retreat and reunion



Elizabeth Walker, Kate McKertcher, Magdalena Jennings, Judith Milne
(Dawn Pretty missing from photo)

“Stepping through the doors was like stepping into peace.” That was Judith’s description of coming back to the SSJD convent to stay in the newly renovated guest house. Five of us had gathered for a reunion of our Companions group and a Lenten retreat. One companion (who will remain nameless!) suggested the new guest house was “like meeting the resurrected Christ” – transformed and full of new energy, yet ultimately still recognizable! Elizabeth described it as “plainer – in a good way.” I thought it had a restful simplicity and quietness. Everything from the thoughtful cubbies for storing our shoes at the guest house door to the spacious washrooms seems designed with care for the comfort of guests. What remains unchanged is the warmth and kindness of the sisters’ welcome.

We timed our reunion to coincide with Sister Elizabeth’s Lenten Quiet Day, “Called to Serve.” It was good to take time in Lent to focus on her themes – learning to be present with God now, learning to be open to the transformative effects of our encounter with God. The importance of being present, really paying attention, seemed to keep coming up during our stay at the convent. Dawn, one of our group, organized a winter photo challenge for us one morning – a list of often overlooked treasures to search for in the grounds around the convent (e.g., patterns on tree bark, animal prints in snow, winter flowers). I found it made me

CORRECTION

In the 2025 Advent/Christmas issue of The Eagle, we mistakenly identified the Ven Ralph Leavitt as Rev Frank Leavitt. We apologize for the error.

slow down and really look, really see the tiny glories of creation – “enjoy the world aright” as Thomas Traherne would say.

As we came to the end of our retreat, we spoke a little about how time does strange things at the convent – at times it seemed to slow down, although it seemed to have gone by all too quickly on our last day. I have heard it said that following the news cycle in our society is a bit like trying to tell the time by looking at the second hand of a clock – accurate, but exhausting. Spending time on retreat is more like looking at the hour hand – just as accurate, just as much now, but



Guest House bedroom

with a greater depth of meaning, a longer perspective for reading the signs of the times.

The rhythm of the chapel services, the quiet at meals – which, as Sister Elizabeth pointed out, lets you actually notice what you are eating! – the loveliness of the land in every season, the pause between the half verse of psalms, the time for contemplation, and yes, the peace of the “resurrected” guest house, all offer opportunities for being present with God now, and being changed.

As we go our different ways, I hope it is with a renewed attentiveness and openness to the presence of God in our work, studies, and volunteering. I would recommend a retreat at SSJD to anyone who is looking for such renewal – come, “incline the ear of your heart”, as St Benedict says, spend time with God now, experience the ancient and ever-new gift of monastic hospitality.

Kate McKertcher, Companion

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

to help at the Convent reception desk. Experience the Sisterhood’s rhythm of work and prayer. If interested, contact Communications Coordinator at communications@ssjd.ca or at 416-226-2201 ext. 304.

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