

## Why it's St. Benedict's Lodge instead of St. Dominic's

"Millionaire becomes monk: History of McKenzie Bridge" was the title of retired Baker Bishop Francis Leipzig's article on St. Benedict Lodge that ran in the Catholic Sentinel in 1978.

In that article and others, the Catholic Sentinel recorded how Kenyon Reynolds, a Californian oil engineer and Catholic convert, bought the "North Bank Farm" in 1938, paying \$5,000 for its 40 acres.

Kenyon and Patricia Reynolds thought their new Oregon property's shortcoming lay in the fact that St. Mary Church in Eugene was too far to go for daily Mass.

Reynolds reached out to the Benedictines at Mount Angel Abbey, and they agreed to send a priest if Reynolds would build a chapel and a residence for him.

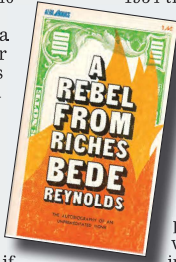
In 1941 the Catholic Sentinel reported: "Situated on the beautiful McKenzie river, we find St. Benedict's Lodge, a chapel and home where the Rev. Father Charles, OSB, former assistant here, says his Mass daily on weekdays at 7:30 and Sundays at 8 o'clock. This establishment was made possible and is maintained by Mr. and Mrs. Kenyon Reynolds of Pasadena, Calif. They make this oasis of beauty their home during the summer months."

In 1945 Patricia Reynolds died of cancer.

After her funeral Mass at St. Benedict Lodge, Mount Angel Abbot Thomas Meier suggested to the grief-stricken, 53-year-old Reynolds



FR. BEDE REYNOLDS, OSB



that he study for the priesthood.

Kenyon Reynolds became Benedictine Father Bede Reynolds of Westminster Abbey, Mission City, British Columbia — but first he gave his assets to a variety of church recipients. In 1946 he turned over the deed for St. Benedict Lodge to the Franciscans, who hoped to build a monastery there.

The Franciscans struggled to maintain the property, and in 1954 they sold it (for a reported \$1) to the Dominicans, who immediately built A-frame structures and began scheduling Dominican seminarians to spend their summer retreats on the McKenzie over the coming decades. The Dominicans oversaw the building of the larger chapel. A 2005 capital campaign upgraded the chapel with new roofing, windows, insulation, kitchen and sanctuary improvements.

The property is now also larger: 70 acres instead of 40. As for Father Bede, in his book "A Rebel from Riches," he wrote, "I am now living out my life as one of God's 'hired men.' God has paid me in advance a thousand years' wages. It is my cue to tend to His business as well as I can until He is ready to cancel the remainder of the service which I owe.

"I would not trade places with anyone in the world, not because I am well pleased with myself but because I am trying to do the job that has been chosen for me by God. I would rather offer one Mass or live one day the life of a Religious than own all the treasures of the world."

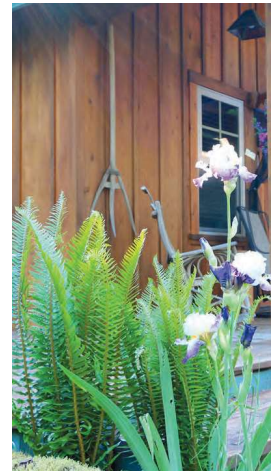
Father Bede died in 1991.



Jesuit High students Dominic Ricci and Grace Denny soak in sunshine on the deck at St. Benedict Lodge during their Junior Encounter Retreat. (Courtesy Jesuit High School)



A statue of St. Dominic greets retreatants. It was carved from cedar by chainsaw artist Bill Tower and dedicated August 2005. (Kristen Hannum/Catholic Sentinel)



St. Benedict Lodge's guest houses (Kristen Hannum/Catholic Sentinel)

# St. Benedict Lodge: 'Like a

The Dominican retreat center offers a place to reconsider the world on God's time

By Kristen Hannum  
OF THE CATHOLIC SENTINEL

St. Benedict Lodge, about an hour east of Eugene, might as well be in Avalon, it feels so isolated and idyllic.

There are sun-shafted forests and meadows punctuated with Stations of the Cross. But mostly there is the sparkling river. "Where these waters flow they refresh; everything lives where the river goes" (Ezek. 47:9).

This is what draws groups here — from Alcoholics Anonymous to high schools, from spiritual retreats to family reunions — to fill its rooms.

"We are purposefully putting our students in a place of natural beauty," said Don Clarke, director of campus ministry at Jesuit High School in Portland. He said that's been especially important for the past 10 years or so. In those years ecological issues have become ever more central to understanding faith, especially for young people.

Jesuit did not send students in 2020 be-

cause of the pandemic, but made up for that in 2021, sending not only juniors but also seniors on a version of the Junior Encounter.

Clarke remembers one young woman who got off the bus and exclaimed, "I can't believe I'm at St. Benedict!"

Those 2021 retreats came on the heels of the Labor Day fires of 2020. The Holiday Farm Fire, which burned more than 173,000 acres and destroyed hundreds of homes, came within a couple miles of St. Benedict Lodge, which is near the settlement of McKenzie Bridge. Many families who attend Mass at St. Benedict Chapel lost their homes in the wildfire.

"The town of Blue River was gone, except for a single house," Clarke said.

The destruction underlines the sanctity — and fragility — of the retreat on the McKenzie River.

Jesuit sends seven Junior Encounter student retreats to St. Benedict annually, plus a faculty retreat and a parent retreat. They've been doing so for 27 years.

"Our history is attached to it," Clarke said. "When students sit in the chairs there they know their fathers, mothers, aunts and uncles sat there too."

Marist High School in Eugene has been sending students on retreat at St. Benedict even longer.

Rick Martin, longtime director of cam-



RICK MARTIN

pus ministry and formation at Marist, said St. Benedict's massive stone fireplace and the sight of the river, tumbling and racing by outside the windows, are most iconic for him.

In a 2018 essay for Marist Magazine, Martin wrote that St. Benedict had hosted Marist Encounters for most of the last 44 years, "amounting to nearly 5,000 members of the Marist community sitting in these chairs, before this fireplace, sharing the view and the sound of the river outside, and finding a miraculous encounter with self, others and God."

Martin shared eloquent statements of faith from students who wrote about their Encounter retreat.

"I remember being in a bad place mentally during that part of the year," one student shared. "I was depressed and did not feel loved or like I truly mattered. The encounter changed that. I saw the truth, that I was truly loved."

"Whenever I think about my faith, the McKenzie automatically comes to mind," wrote another.

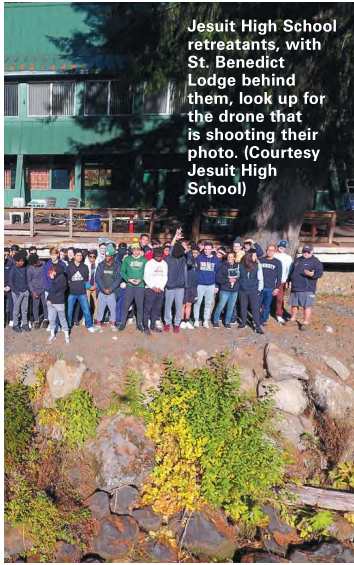
Yet another student wrote how the forest that surrounds St. Benedict and the overhead clouds create a sense of encl-



sure. "This felt like an embrace from the Lord Himself."

More recently Martin described the lodge as having a rustic, yet warm and comfortable feeling. "There's a striking sense of withdrawing from the world," he said. "You immediately acclimate to the spiritual pace there, and the experience of kairos, God's sense of time, where everyday time passing is suspended."

If this were a hotel, there would be doz-



Jesuit High School retreatants, with St. Benedict Lodge behind them, look up for the drone that is shooting their photo. (Courtesy Jesuit High School)



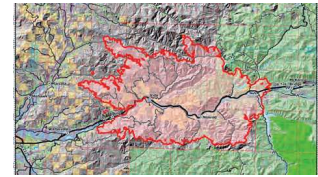
uses are for those taking personal retreats. (inel)



Brian Ellsworth and Britt Attack took part in the 1985–86 Marist High School retreat at St. Benedict Lodge. Marist, Jesuit and other organizations have a long and treasured tradition of retreats at the lodge. (Courtesy Marist Brother James Halliday)



Neighbors as well as retreatants worship at St. Benedict Chapel. (Kristen Hannum/Catholic Sentinel)



The Holiday Farm Fire of 2020, which decimated the industrial tree plantations west of St. Benedict Lodge, came within a couple miles of the retreat center. (Screen grab/Inciweb)



Dominican Brother Lupe Gonzalez and Dominican Fr. Kieran Healy clear trees from the roads. A March 2019 snow storm felled more than 30 trees around the property. Roads were closed for some time. (St. Benedict Lodge Facebook grab)

# an embrace from the Lord'



Stacey Baker, assistant principal and junior women's encounter moderator at Marist High School, speaks to a group of students, the massive fire-place behind her and the sound of the river a muted roar in the background. (Courtesy Marist High School)

lodge for many years and had first come to St. Benedict as a Dominican novice.

The retreat center works because the groups who come do their share of work to pass along the good spirit to the next group. This is a place of simplicity and retreat, not a place to be pampered. And the price is right.

If your group can get in, that is.

St. Benedict Lodge's typical retreatants are repeat customers who return annually. And it's not only Catholic groups who come.

Linda Finley, a minister with the Center for Spiritual Living in Eugene, said her group comes for the river: "The accommodations are simple, there is adequate room for meetings, but the primary reason we come is for the river," she said. "It feels like the most sacred place in the world. You can't help but feel God wherever you are on the grounds."

Finley said Dominican Father Thomas DeMan, the lodge's former chaplain, may have expressed it best. "He always said he had never delivered or heard a sermon

### Learn more

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St. Benedict Lodge is available for both group and personal retreats. It is used by only one group at a time and can accommodate up to 82. Daily Mass is offered if a priest is on site, with confession, counseling and spiritual direction similarly available.

as good as the one that the river delivers every day of the week and every week of the year," she remembered.

Each retreat group or individual cooks for themselves with food they bring. They clean the big kitchen, so that the next retreatants will walk into a clean space to prep and cook.

Clarke has enjoyed working with the Dominicans at the lodge over the years. Jesuit's retreats take place on eight or nine weekends every year, and "use every inch" of space the lodge has to offer, typically bringing 80 retreatants each time.

Clarke, like Martin and Finley, loves the river. He always tells students it's the rocks that make the river noisy — and how faith



The St. Benedict Chapel got a new roof, windows, insulation and other improvements in 2005. (Kristen Hannum/Catholic Sentinel)

is like that too, with the Holy Spirit surrounding us when the living waters of God are made noisy by the rocks in our lives.

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ens of employees to care for all the rooms, the kitchen, the library, and the 70 acres surrounding its buildings.  
Amazingly, that work is mostly done by two Dominicans, one fulltime employee, a secretary, volunteers and the groups themselves.  
"We take care of it with glue and masking tape," joked Dominican Father David Geib a few years ago. Father David, now in Oakland, California, was on staff at the