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Mount Michael Abbey marks 50th anniversary

By **LISA SCHULTE**
The Catholic Voice

For the past 50 years, Mount Michael Benedictine Abbey in Elkhorn has been a fixture in the Archdiocese of Omaha. Thousands of young men have been educated by the monks and some of them went on to serve as priests and brothers in the archdiocese.

This year the abbey is marking the 50th anniversary of its status being raised to “priory” and the opening of St. John’s Seminary, the minor seminary that became Mount Michael Benedictine High School in 1970.

The jubilee celebration, which will end next summer with the school’s 50th class reunion, began with a gathering of Mount Michael monks and monks from Conception Abbey, the founding abbey of Mount Michael. The day included Mass, a picnic, a memorial service for founding monks and vespers. The groundbreaking for a new wing of the monastery is set for Sept. 24.

For Mount Michael Abbot Theodore Wolff, the jubilee celebration is a sign of God’s blessing on the abbey and school, on the work of the Benedictine monks and on the church of the Archdiocese of Omaha.



Archbishop Elden Francis Curtiss, left, celebrates Mount Michael Abbey’s jubilee with Abbot Theodore Wolff at a gathering of archdiocesan priests and Benedictine monks earlier this summer. *Photo by Lisa Schulte*

“My hope for the future is that Benedictine spirituality will spread out from the abbey to more and more of the faithful, helping them realize the importance of prayer and work as a sure way to live a balanced life,” he said. “A balanced life of prayer, work and uplifting leisure keeps the mind and body healthy.”

From farm to abbey

In 1952, Abbot Stephen Schappler of Conception Abbey in Conception, Mo., began looking for a place to relocate Conception’s minor seminary. He looked at Omaha, which had a large Catholic population, and sent two monks there to find a suitable site. While in Omaha, they met an Omaha businessman, Rex Olson, who owned Journey’s End Farm near Elkhorn and donated the land to the monks.

Monks first arrived at Mount Michael, named after St. Michael the Archangel, in 1953. In 1956, the monastery was raised to the status of “priory,” and classes began at St. John’s Seminary. In 1964, the monastic community was vibrant enough to become an independent abbey and Father Raphael Walsh was appointed the first abbot of Mount Michael. By 1970, there were no longer enough students to continue the seminary, so the monks started Mount Michael Benedictine High School, a residential boys’ preparatory school.

Abbot Walsh retired in 1989 as abbot and Abbot Wolff was elected to the position.

Today there are 23 monks and three in temporary vows living at the abbey.

Although many changes have taken place over the past 50 years, Abbot Walsh said the monks’ mission has always remained the same – that in all things, God may be glorified.

“This celebration is a wonderful opportunity to bring our community together and it’s an opportunity for us to express our gratitude to the people who support us,” he said. “Without the support of the people and our friends, we simply couldn’t make it. High schools are non-profitable and you have to have the support of people. We’ve had that and we’re very grateful for it.”

A strong relationship

The abbey has always had a good relationship with the archdiocese, Abbot Walsh said, noting that back in 1956 the priests of the archdiocese gave \$200,000 to build the abbey’s chapel.

“I thank the Lord that there has always been a wonderful relationship beginning with Archbishop (Gerald) Bergan and Archbishop (Daniel) Sheehan and certainly continuing with Archbishop (Elden Francis) Curtiss. There’s been a wonderful support from them and I think, in turn, we’ve been able to be a real asset to the archdiocese in the sense that so many of our priests help out on weekends and during summer vacations and things of that nature,” he said. “It’s been a very harmonious, fraternal relationship.”

Archbishop Elden Francis Curtiss said the abbey has been a great blessing to the people of Northeast Nebraska.

“It’s like an oasis. Here they’re living and praying together and running the high school and then the priests are involved all the time helping us out,” the archbishop said. “They are very much involved in the life of the archdiocese so it’s a great asset to have them here.”

Currently, 10 Mount Michael priests regularly serve the archdiocese, including Father Eugene McReynolds, who serves at Girls and Boys Town.

Mount Michael Abbey provides its campus for Camp St. Francis, a summer camp with an emphasis on vocations operated by the archdiocese for boys, grades 5-8.

The Benedictines at Mount Michael have educated 35 priests who serve or served the archdiocese as priests, including Bishop Blasé Cupich, bishop of Rapid City, S.D., and Bishop William J. Dendinger, bishop of Grand Island. Two other bishops – Bishop Ronald Gilmore of Dodge City, Kan., and Bishop Jerome Hanus, OSB, of Dubuque, Iowa – were also educated at Mount Michael.

A 1991 graduate of Mount Michael, Father Ryan Lewis, vice chancellor of the archdiocese, said the fact that so many archdiocesan priests are graduates of Mount Michael shows that the school, even though it’s now not a seminary, is still a very fertile ground for young men to become priests.

“It’s a joy for me to celebrate with the Benedictines having been educated by them and now serving the archdiocese,” he said. “Hopefully the priests and alumni of Mount Michael who are archdiocesan priests give witness to the fact that that relationship is strong and it continues today.”

WEB SITE: www.mountmichael.org

**CURRENT MEMBERS OF MOUNT
MICHAEL BENEDICTINE ABBEY:**

- Abbot Theodore Wolff
- Abbot Raphael Walsh
- Brother Jerome Kmiecik
- Father Michael Liebl
- Father Benedict Dohle
- Father Adrian Laible
- Brother Andrew Sorensen
- Brother Franci Schmitz
- Brother Mark Bern
- Father Nathanael Foshage
- Father Eugene McReynolds
- Brother Matthew Manning
- Father Richard Thell
- Father John Hagemann
- Brother James Pope
- Father Daniel Lenz
- Brother Mel Tichota
- Brother Luke Clinton
- Father Louis Sojka
- Father Stephen Plank
- Brother Joseph Dugick
- Brother William Dokulil
- Brother Robert Faulhaber
- Brother Gregory Congote
- Brother August Schaefer
- Brother Rick Varner

The Benedictines at Mount Michael have educated 35 priests who serve or served the Archdiocese of Omaha as priests, including:

- -Father Dan Andrews, 1989
- -Father Frank Baumert, 1970
- -Father James Buschelman (deceased), 1958
- -Father Donald Cleary, 1963
- -Bishop Blasé Cupich
- -Bishop William Dendinger, 1957
- -Father R. Michael Fitzpatrick, 1964
- -Father Lloyd Gnirk, 1970
- -Father Gerald Gonderinger, 1966
- -Father Michael Gutschell, 1966
- -Father Dennis Hanneman, 1964
- -Father Norman Hunke, 1965
- -Father Dan Kampschneider, 1971
- -Father Owen Korte, 1972
- -Father James Kramper
- -Father Gerald Leise, 1966
- -Father Ryan Lewis, 1991
- -Father David Liewer, 1966
- -Father Frank Lordemann, 1964
- -Father Michael Malloy, 19968
- -Father James McCluskey
- -Father Melvin Merwald
- -Father Joseph Miksch, 1958
- -Father Gerald Millenkamp (deceased), 1957
- -Father Paul Ortmeier
- -Father Gary Ostrander, 1963
- -Father Frank Partusch
- -Father Kenneth Potts (deceased)
- -Father Carl Salanitro
- -Father Wayne Schlautman, 1957
- -Father Dan Soltys
- -Father Wilfred Spenner (deceased), 1964
- -Father Jim Tieg
- -Father Ron Wasikowski
- -Father Joseph Wray, 1980