

Hesed was founded in 1981 by Sr. Barbara Hazzard, OSB. For 30 years, it has remained in a house in the suburbs of Oakland, California, USA. As a participant a Christian Meditation Center by the WCCM, the Hesed Community is unique as a non-resident community among Benedictine monasteries: a practicing 'monastery without walls' with about sixty community members which include Benedictine Oblates, Family Sisters and Brothers, and other guests. The community is made up of both interdenominational and interfaith seekers, but its community and schedule is based on Rule of St. Benedict--its primary calling is the teaching and practice of meditation. Sr. Barbara was interviewed by Kevin Lucid, an oblate of the Hesed Community, at the Hesed community house in 2010.

Q: First I want to thank you for sharing the story of the Hesed community with the World Community for Christian Meditation. The Hesed community has been in Oakland for thirty years, but for those who don't know about the community or how it started, could you tell us about it and how you came to John Main's teaching of meditation?

Sr. Barbara: What we now know as Hesed started with three other sisters and I renting a house in Oakland as I worked as a teacher of CCD, as a Holy Names Sister, at Newman Hall in Berkeley, California. At that time, even before we rented the house in 1981, I was seeking a contemplative community that would nourish me and the people I knew, but I didn't know what that would look like.

That year, I had come across the book, *Letters from the Heart*, by John Main. Fr. John had the idea of the renewal of the monastic life, and told a story about opening a monastery near McGill University at the request of the Bishop of Montreal. He had found himself in a similar situation to our environment in Berkeley where we saw many college students going to practice meditation with the Hare Krishnas and the Moonies, so I knew too... here is a need in my own neighborhood. Fr. John's story meant a lot to me, and the way that he moved to Montreal was similar to what we four sisters had done in Berkeley: moving into a small house and starting a community.

Q: Fr. John's book inspired you, but reading a book seems like a long step from founding a meditation community... what made the turning point for you?

Sr. Barbara: I wrote to Fr. John in 1982, and received a letter from Fr. Laurence Freeman telling me that Fr. John had just recently died. But before he died, he asked Fr. Laurence to encourage me to come out to Montreal. It wasn't soon after that that my late aunt passed away, leaving me the funds to go, and my community had its mother house in Montreal, so it wasn't hard to take the trip. For a month in 1982, I went to see what they were doing. It was during this time that I happened to meet a guest, Fr. Jean LeClerc: a respected Benedictine monk, elder, scholar, and as it happened, he also knew Thomas Merton. In his short visit I had asked for a chance to speak with him. I told him what was on my mind about monastic community. He sat there quietly, and when I finished, he said, 'You know Sister, if God wills it, it will happen, so give it a try.'

Sr. Barbara: I thought, 'well, that's about the closest I can get to God,' so when I arrived home, I posted a schedule for meditation at the house. The sisters that I had been living with had gradually gone back to their communities, but thankfully as I worked at a local Catholic parish, I could afford to stay. In that first year, I had a few people come by, but gradually I saw that a lot of Catholic as well as many other Christians were interested in this and started to come to the house.

Q: Keeping the practice of meditation is difficult enough, but you were leading people into community, and working. It sounds challenging to say the least.

Sr. Barbara: Let me first say that I was guided, but didn't realize it at the time: step by step I saw a path for this opening in front of me. During a sabbatical of a Jesuit priest who was my spiritual director that I had seen for many years, I was taking classes from Fr. Robert Hale, OSB, on spirituality, and I asked him to direct me that summer. During one of those meetings he asked me, "Have you ever thought about the Benedictine tradition?" Well, it was like putting on the right coat! I had read a lot of Merton, and loved what he had said. I also liked the idea that there are both men and women in the order too: it gives a good balance. At the time, Fr. Basil Depinto, who had been at Gethsemani monastery with Fr. Merton, also happened to be at my local Newman Center church too, so I invited him to give talks at Hesed, and he did. God just happened to put the right people in the right place at the right time.

Q: So you took Benedictine vows after that?

Sr. Barbara: Yes, but, I will tell you, if you were to say that I would leave the Sisters of the Holy Names after 25 years, and be doing this for the next 30 years, I would have called you crazy. I was very committed to my life as a Holy Names Sister, and teaching, but I was finding that the community that I first entered was changing a lot. In the 1960s, the direction that came from the Vatican II council led our community to orient towards service, and the community I had entered years before attracted me because it emphasized the prayer life--the contemplative life. So, I knew I wanted something like a monastic community, but I didn't want to enter a traditional monastery because it was too regimented. I wanted something that people in their daily lives could benefit from also. I think many people don't want all those rules and regulations: they want spirituality. So, church on Sunday is not nourishing for everybody, and that is what I saw. I saw a way to bring others and myself to something different at Hesed. I gradually took private vows to the Order of St. Benedict with the approval our bishop, Bishop John Cummings, and from then on, I was following my path through the Rule of St. Benedict.

Q: The name of the community is interesting, how did you name the community, and what does it mean?

Sr. Barbara: In the 1970s, I was teaching young children about the Hebrew scriptures. The word Hesed appeared at the end of the scriptures, and when I looked up what word meant, the translation was 'God's faithful love', or 'God's loving kindness'. I thought to myself that would be a great name for a community. Many, many years later, when I was first starting the community, someone asked me, what will you call the meditation center? I said 'the Hesed Community.' My life from what I had been seeking was as a contemplative, and this is where I was led, and that word had been in the back of my mind ready for me to speak it just then.

Q: It sounds like you are talking about serving people living their daily lives. Is this the idea of a renewal, or an urban monastery?

Sr. Barbara: Yes, but that's not to take away something from a traditional monastery: monastic people are very active people living deeply religious lives. But back to this idea of the urban monastery at Hesed. We tried creating a resident community in this small

house, and it didn't work so easily because it needs to be a bigger space: people need space and privacy! Still, now-a-days there are a lot of religious living in threes in apartments, so in the future, I would like to see Hesed as a resident community, but only if it allowed people to have their private space. Another thing about the urban monastery that is different: most monasteries are not in the city, but they are especially placed away from the city. There are some, like the Camaldolese House of study in Berkeley, but what we are doing is not something a lot of communities do. This community is in the city with lay people who take private obligations and others that just come to be nourished. They join us after work, or on the weekends. You know, just plain quiet is something missing in a lot of urban centers. In Oakland, I know of children who live in such large families and who are so busy that they don't know what quiet is. Can you imagine that?

Q: I know it can be difficult to find quiet in the city, but what about for you: How has meditation and quiet nourished you?

Sr. Barbara: Meditation made me a lot more comfortable with myself, it helped me just be me, not to be perfect all the time, but to accept myself. I know it's deepened my relationship with God, and especially experience God in a way that I hadn't ever before. I mean in gentle ways: I don't have ecstasies or visions, but it is a contemplative life.

Q: The Hesed community is preparing for your retirement in 2012, and there are a lot of questions about its future. Is there something that you learned from starting the community that we also could learn from? Or at least, what would you say to a person who is thinking about starting a group for meditators or a community?

Sr. Barbara: When I first started, I was the only one here at times, and that was hard. But I would get up in the morning, sit in the livingroom, open the door, and no one would come in. It was like that. It was hard at first. But after a while because I kept the schedule, and kept it the same, people started coming. I also had people in my life that I saw every day at work: I was active, and still in community, I think that helped a lot.

The great thing about the schedule is that for people who used to work in this area in the 1980s, they can come in and the schedule hasn't changed. Prayer is at 5:30pm on Wednesdays. We have lectio and meditation at 7:30pm on Mondays, and the rest is the same too. When people come here, some of them say, 'there is something different about this place, are you a church or something?'. I have to laugh, but it is true. We created a holy space over the years.

For a couple of years now, we have started our Board meetings with a prayer from Thomas Merton. It helps us to hear his words.

Sr. Barbara handed me the prayer and then also read it slowly. After this, I thanked Sr. Barbara again for her words. Here is the prayer she read:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. There I

will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Thomas Merton

(excerpt from Thoughts on Solitude)

Sr. Barbara will retire in January 2012. Hesed is looking for an interim director. If you are interested, please e-mail Tom Lehmkuhl at wisefox70@yahoo.com

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