

Mount Angel Abbey's mountain climbing monks are pictured after summing Oregon's South Sister Mountain July 18, 2024. Pictured are Brother Gabriel Brands, Brother Ambrose Stewart, Brother Brandon Contreras and Father Michael Shrum. (OSV News/courtesy Brother Ambrose Stewart)

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In a summer of firsts, mountain-climbing Benedictine monks of Mount Angel Abbey took to the heights — their locally brewed beer tucked in backpacks — ascending renowned peaks in the Pacific Northwest during the season's brief window of opportunity.

The four monks — Brother Ambrose Stewart, Brother Gabriel Brands, Brother Brandon Contreras and Father Michael Shrum — whose monastery is perched on a butte in the heart of Oregon's Willamette Valley with a majestic view of Mount Hood towering in the distance — spent some of their precious vacation time capitalizing on the views, their abbey's brews, and even celebrated Mass atop a stratovolcano.

In three separate climbs — either with friends, family or each other — they summited Mount Hood, Mount St. Helens and South Sister, ascending to heights of nearly 11,250 feet above sea level. They told OSV News that at times they had to fend off mosquitos, navigate tricky boulder fields, maneuver through broken rock fragments called "scree," and safely overcome areas of slippery snow and ice to reach each frigid summit.

Friends Summit Mount Hood

In August 2023, Brother Ambrose hoped to summit Mount Hood with Benedictine Brother Cyril Drnjevic on the feast of the Transfiguration. Unfortunately, weather conditions did not cooperate, causing them to scrap their plans.

Not to be deterred, Brother Ambrose trained and waited out the year, and after a few fitful hours of sleep in their cars in the Timberline Lodge parking lot at the base of Mount Hood, he and friends Emily Brand and Seattle seminarian Jonathan Cheever set out in the wee hours of June 12 with only stars and headlamps to light their path as they climbed the 11,249 foot stratovolcano.

"Most people don't climb mountains in the middle of the night," Brother Ambrose said. "We were hiking at different places, taking photos, looking at the stars as we ascended. The longer we hiked the quieter we became. We got more tired as the elevation was gaining and the air got thinner, making conversation and breathing harder."

Brand, whose family has had a long connection to Mount Angel Abbey, sings in the Abbey Chamber Choir. An experienced climber, commercial airline pilot and veteran Air Force C17 cargo pilot, she brought invaluable climbing experience to the team during their ascent.

"In my travels overseas, I got to climb the Hindu Kush and Mount Kilimanjaro — where I spent seven days. It was just breathtaking. Then I climbed the Himalayas in Nepal," Brand said.

"You get your own kind of adventure and beauty as you ascend the mountain. I've developed a lot of spirituality from climbing too," Brand noted. "There's a special draw of the mountain when you look at it for the first time. Then, after I climb, there's a familiarity. It's like, 'I know this mountain.'"

Brand explained the summit is not the friendliest place. "It's exhilarating when you get there, because you've gone through a lot. But at the same time it's miserable, because it's cold and windy," she said.

"You understand that mountain can kill you any day. There's a lot of humility that goes with climbing mountains. They are God's creation; you can't conquer them," Brand added.

Cheever, who is studying for the priesthood for the Seattle Archdiocese at Mount Angel Seminary, has been an outdoor enthusiast his whole life. "I grew up hiking, skiing — anything to do with the outdoors. I learned how to ski, and that was the way I learned how to walk," he said.

Although he has discerned in and out of seminary over the past 13 years, one thing has remained constant — his passion for the great outdoors.

"It's a place of retreat and contemplation for me. I experience in a real way God's presence," Cheever said. "The beauty in creation is God's thumbprint and so when I see beauty, I see God. That is why I like getting out in nature; it is a peaceful

getaway for me."

It took the friends more than five hours to summit Mount Hood, stopping briefly to rest and eat in the crater known as Devil's Kitchen with its putrid smelling sulfur vents, before the final challenging push to the frigid summit.

"As soon as you crest the ridge you see the entire horizon," Brother Ambrose said. "There were no clouds. There was a steep drop, so you had to be careful. There was that sense of accomplishment when we got there."

Once atop the volcano they took out a bottle of the abbey's Benedictine brew for some photos, but kept the visit short due to frigid temps and high winds.

"The summit of a mountain is not the friendliest atmosphere. It's exhilarating; you've gone through a lot. You feel like you've accomplished your goal, but you are only halfway," Brand explained. "Your anxiety to get back down is more than going to the top. All you want to do is get back to the car and get warm. It always takes longer to get down than it seems."

Thankfully they found some glissading trails on the way back down where they could scoot on their backsides while using their ice axes as brakes. Once safely back to the base of Mount Hood, they rewarded themselves with burgers and brews in a warm lodge.

"The joy of helping Brother Ambrose achieve a goal he was desiring for such a long time, the joy of being up there with your friends and being able to share that with them, it never gets old," Cheever said. "Setting your sights on what's above, keeping your eyes on what's above that summit, it makes it all worth it."

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Father and Son Tackle Mount St. Helens

When Ed Brands watched in horror as Mount St. Helens erupted in May 1980, there was no way he could have known that one day he would climb the reconfigured summit with one of his sons who discerned a call to religious life at Mount Angel Abbey.

Brands — a father of six — had the opportunity July 1 to ascend Mount St. Helens with his 27-year-old son, Brother Gabriel, a junior monk at the monastery.

Brands, a Navy veteran and former Boy Scout leader from Vancouver, Washington, is no stranger to outdoor adventures.

"I'd been hiking there before it blew in 1980," he said. "It was so amazing to climb. It looked like Mount Fuji. Now it looks completely different."

As a troop leader, he realized many boys had never been out hiking, so he arranged backpacking trips. He also took his family on trips to explore the outdoors. "It was neat to see their eyes open up, to be amazed by nature, and to see how obvious it is that God made it all," Brands said.

All those trips with his dad made an impression on Brother Gabriel, who picked Mount St. Helens as his first real climb, desiring to have his dad as his guide when the opportunity finally arose this summer.

Brother Gabriel said they started their climb together at 6:30 a.m. Conditions were cool, and they took just a couple breaks during the four-and-a-half hour ascent up the mountain.

"It was pretty the whole way up, with no rain, just some misty clouds," he said.

The pair steadily made their way up through the woods, through patches of snow in the forest, they encountered exposed boulder fields among the large slopes of snow. At last they reached the rim, the summit at 8,363 feet.

"We stopped for lunch looking into the rim. We'd talk for a bit and also sit and listen to the wind. There was a 'tinkling' sound, as you heard rocks falling gently into the crater. It was a magical moment," Brother Gabriel said.

"It was a glorious day," Brands added. "We couldn't stand on the rim because there were huge snow cornices hanging over it and it was too dangerous. But there was one spot where there are lava rocks, and you can look down there. We took out our (Benedictine) beer and stuck it in the snow. The whole crater was fogged in, but you could still see Mount Rainier."

The two enjoyed a cool Benedictine brew before their challenging trek back down the mountain.

"I spent a lot of time thinking about how beautiful it is, us climbing together; that he got the time off and we could do this together," Brands said. "When he (Brother Gabriel) entered the monastery, I wasn't sure if he would be able to do anything like this. It was a gift from God that we could spend that time together."

Brother Gabriel agrees they experienced a profound connection with each other and with what God created. "Being at the top you get a different perspective. You see why in the Bible mountains are key points, like Mount Sinai where Moses received the tablets. In those moments, it's like seeing God face to face," Brother Gabriel said.

Brother monks take on South Sister

In a first for the monks of Mount Angel Abbey, Brother Ambrose, Father Michael, Brother Gabriel and Brother Brandon set out together July 18 to summit South Sister, the state's third tallest mountain at 10,358 feet.

"This is the first time I have climbed any mountain with other monks," Brother Ambrose said.

"For the last several years, we have scheduled a mandatory 'easy' hike for all the junior monks and an optional 'strenuous' hike for the more athletic among us," he said. "I decided to up the ante this year with a mountain summit."

South Sister is the tallest of the Three Sisters volcanoes which includes North Sister and Middle Sister in the High Cascades in Oregon. The climb is steep, gaining 4,900 feet along the rugged 5.5-mile trek.

"It was idyllic day as far as conditions go; a clear, crisp morning," Father Michael said. "The mosquitos were annoying at first, but once we were up in the trees it was gorgeous."

Father Michael hiked with fellow seminarians during his years at Mount Angel Seminary while he studied for the priesthood for the Seattle Archdiocese. He was ordained in 2008, then discerned a call to religious life and entered the monastery in 2021.

"As monks, our whole lives are prayer. That's just part of the experience, no matter where we are," Father Michael explained. "We know wherever we are, we're there by

his grace."

After a nearly five-hour climb, the monks reached the summit where they acknowledged their accomplishment by taking photos surrounded by the breathtaking vista.

"I made sure to bring along a bottle of barrel-aged Dark Night (beer) for obligatory promotional purposes," Brother Ambrose said, although they didn't consume any at the summit. Instead he carried it back down the mountain and delivered it to the owners of Monkless Belgian Ales in Bend, Oregon, at their newly opened location called The Abbey. "You could call this a 'holy moment!'" he joked.

Their true celebration took place just below the summit, as they celebrated a votive Mass of the Holy Angels on a little ledge just below the peak where the sun was shining and they were shielded from the wind.

"It was a beautiful way to celebrate the accomplishment of arriving at the peak, but even more the communion with God and with each other as brothers," Father Michael said.

Brother Gabriel said it was his "first outdoor Mass."

"As Father elevated the host, it aligned to the mountains in the north; it was breathtaking," he added.

Brother Brandon, originally from Guadalajara, Mexico, was raised in Salem, Oregon, where he enjoyed hiking with his family. He recalled a poignant excerpt from Father Michael's homily atop the mountain that resonated with his own spiritual journey: "The joy and rest you experience at the peak is made all the sweeter because of the pain of the climb."

Brother Ambrose revealed that these "sister" mountains also have in common the three theological virtues.

"There we were, monks of Mount Angel, standing on the peak of 'Charity' (the old name of South Sister). During the consecration, we looked past the elevated host and chalice to see 'Faith' and 'Hope' (the other two Sisters) on the horizon, along with our old friend Mount Hood in the distance," he recalled.

"All of this took place in a small alcove at the summit, open to the sun but perfectly protected from the wind," he explained. "It felt like we were meant to be there, rededicating the mountain to God, and rededicating ourselves to the fundamental virtues of the Christian life."

He then quoted St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians: "These three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."