

As I drove south towards Geneseo through an early morning snow storm last Wednesday, my thoughts roamed over what little I knew of the Trappist monks. The mind called up images of a stern group of cowed men, bound to a life of manual labor and silence by their strict discipline.

What reception would these monks give to a photographer-reporter, I wondered, accustomed as they were to seclusion and isolation on their farm in Piffard? And more. What changes had taken place in the order during the years since Vatican II?

There's no easy answer to the second question, but I am better qualified to talk about the way the Trappists welcomed me. As agreed over the phone, Brother Alberic, OCSO (Order of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance), met me at the gatehouse, and during the day has been a constant and willing guide.

The Trappists at Our Lady of the Genesee Abbey are about 30 in number, 10 of them priests, according to Brother Alberic. Two live separately from the main community in a small hermitages in the woods, coming in daily to work and on Sundays for the Mass. The main income of the abbey comes from a bakery which makes Monk's Bread, and the farm which Brother Alberic runs.

The Genesee Abbey is one of 12 Trappist monasteries in the U.S., and was founded in 1951 as a daughter-house of the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. Its newly installed abbot, Father John Eudes Bamberger, is also secretary-general of the world-wide order. (Bishop Joseph L. Hogan will be at the abbey on Jan. 26 to bless the new abbot in his work.)

The abbey is almost entirely self-sufficient, with monks doing all maintenance and labor on their own.

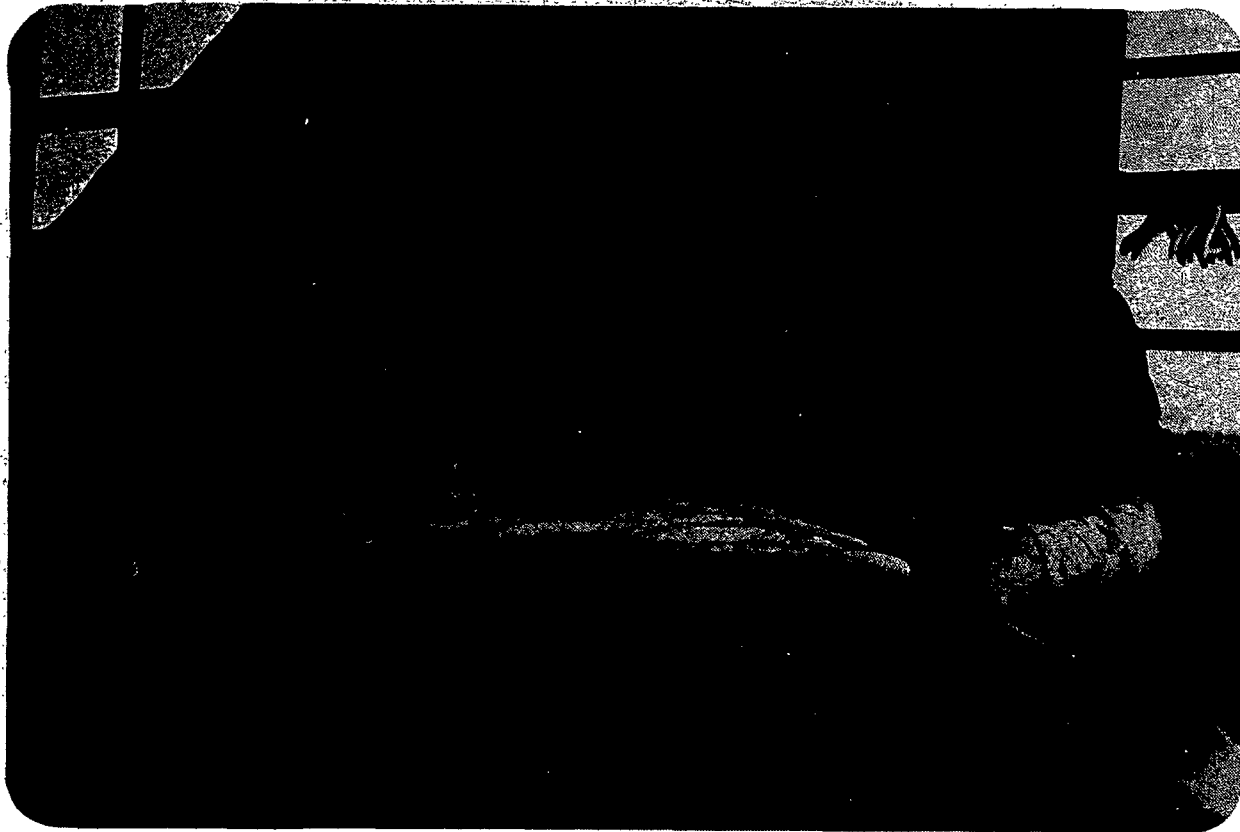
Brother Alberic was prepared for my questions on changes since Vatican II. The rule of silence, "has been mitigated, not done away with. Talking has been limited to certain places for short and necessary communications to facilitate the life. We still place great value on silence," said a little note he had prepared. And during the day he said in response to a question that long conversations held no appeal for him or the other monks. "Silence appeals to us."

Some of the external changes since Vatican II include private cells for members of the order, who formerly slept in dormitories; English for the chanting of the divine office; and the inclusion of brothers in the office.

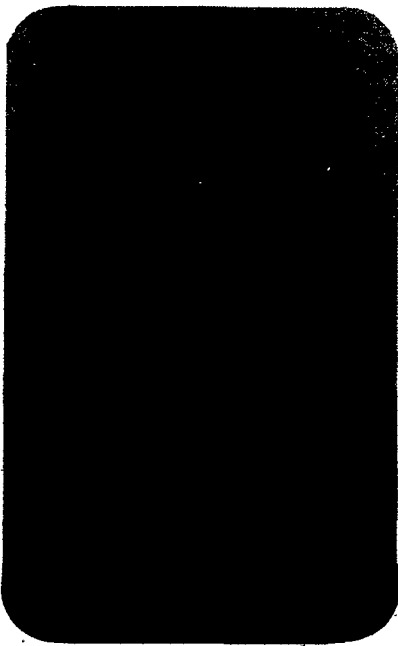
Much of the discipline has not changed. Trappists still rise at 2:15 in the morning to chant the vigils, still eat only vegetables, and still are cloistered.

The monks have a curious and, to me, baffling mixture of very real freedom and strict discipline. But the discipline is not one imposed on them from the outside; and their silence is something each has chosen for himself. As one of the priests remarked, "It's a different world, a different culture here."

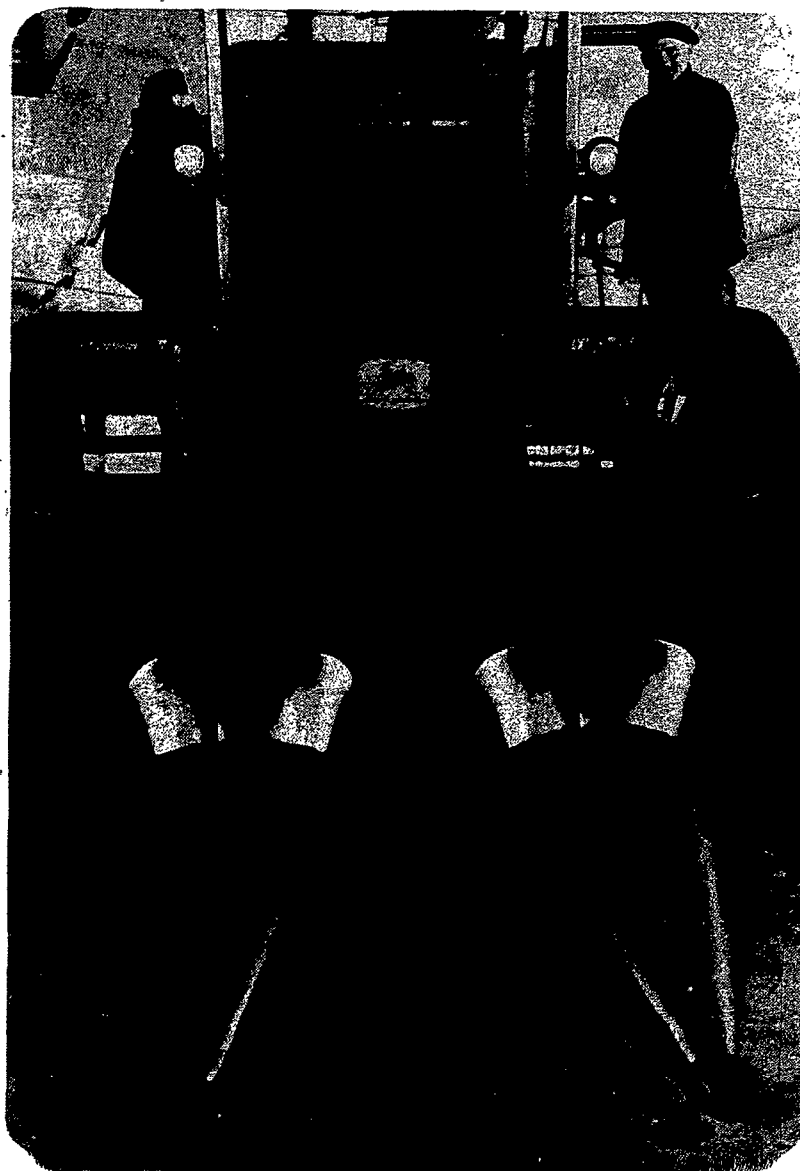
While none of the Trappists sought me out, tried to get me to take down their opinions, neither were any of them too reserved to clarify a point or to engage in friendly conversation when introduced. They are, as the same priest put it, "their own men."



Brother Simon irons vestments in Trappist laundry as part of daily labor.



Father John Eudes Bamberger, above, the new abbot at Genesee, recently returned from a pilgrimage to Mt. Athos in Greece. To right, a large, modern combine for harvesting corn is one way in which the Trappists have modernized.



Brother Barnabus feeds the herd of Black Angus kept by monks for cash income.