

Continuous Prayer, Productive Work

Text and Photos
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The walls enclosing the cloistered Dominican Monastery in Elmira are gradually being permeated by the fast paced, complex life the 1960's and 70's have left the rest of us to deal with.

And of course, allowing 13 vivacious college girls, a very enthusiastic theater director plus a curious and inquisitive reporter inside those walls for 24 hours, doesn't do much to preserve the sheltered, silent, contemplative life.

Three cars packed with sleeping bags and Fredonia State's dungaree clad music students pulled into the Monastery of Mary the Queen at 5 on a recent Saturday evening for an overnight stay.

Their interest in the cloistered Dominican sisters was purely academic and not vocational; most of the girls were not Catholic. They were the cast of an upcoming performance of Puccini's *Sister Angelica*, an opera set in a 16th century monastery, and they wanted to see the life they will be acting.

The nuns greeted the girls excitedly through the parlor grille, a lattice of wrought iron strips that separates the sisters from all visitors. No one goes behind the grille into the cloistered living quarters except a doctor or maybe a reporter.

The girls did a quick change into long skirts and went to the chapel at 5:30 for Vespers, part of the Liturgy of the Hours which begins, with the 6 a.m. Lauds. Since most of the praying consists of chants, the Fredonia students began learning immediately, and they were happy in this place filled with music.

But the nuns were shy singing in front of the pros, so after the girls finished their abundant dinner of spaghetti, salad, Italian bread, brownies and ice cream — the community of 16 nuns came into their half of the parlor and the music majors sang a few of the songs from the opera.

The sisters and the students spent the evening singing and talking together and the girls were feeling more and more at ease, in fact, very much at home. About 10:30, however Sister Claire, one of the eight sisters

who came from Buffalo in 1944 to establish this monastery, and the sub-prioress, Sister Margaret, began talking up the idea of sleep.

The community's bedtime is usually 9 p.m. with each sister taking her hour praying the rosary throughout the night. The Dominican nuns are an order of the perpetual rosary, and someone is praying the rosary every hour, day and night.

Well, sleep was a foolish thought.

The girls were so excited by the singing and conversations that left few questions about the cloistered life unasked, that they talked almost until the 5:30 rising bells woke them for Lauds, the first prayers of the day.

The students got up gladly, appreciative of being welcome.

That was the tone of the 24-hour stay. A real bond was set up. It's not yet known if the monastery got any recruits out of it, but the girls were envious of and moved by the simple life of prayer and singing they witnessed through the grilles.

But monastic life is not as simple as it used to be. Vatican II is responsible for a lot of changes in the cloistered life of prayer.

The grating that separates the nuns from all visitors can be taken down or modified somehow, Vatican II said. The abundance of cloth and the design of the floor-length, white habits and black veils can also be modified. The sisters can exercise their civic rights, which means going out and voting, and they can now go out for medical treatment.

New rules also state that the sisters "should continue an alertness to the Church undertakings and aims in matters biblical, liturgical, social and ecumenical" and keep informed "adequately concerning the social conditions of the times and needs of God's people." For this particular monastery, this meant getting involved when Elmira was hit by tropical storm Agnes last summer, as well as watching television newscasts.

Each monastery is autonomous. This one has been taking changes slowly working from within. Each sister is working on renewal of herself before any alterations in dress will occur.



The choir sisters chant the English Liturgy of the Hours adapted from the Latin Divine Office by Sister Catherine, at the piano. Others in the picture (l-r) Sisters Margaret, Marion, Dominic and Mary Paul.

The exterior changes involve group discussions that decide everything democratically.

"It's the first time we found out what is in each other's mind," said the Prioress, Mother Terence McNulty. "Prior to that the only talk was at recreation time."

Mother Terence thinks these discussions will stop soon, explaining very simply that "after you know everyone's mind there is nothing left to say."

Besides the effect of Vatican II there is a stronger force subtly, yet decisively, changing the life of prayer and contemplation.

The nuns have to support themselves. The days when monasteries were supported by benefactors are long gone.

They have run a small print shop in the basement for three years, doing church bulletins and other commissioned work, and still make priests' vestments, their more traditional line.

As can be imagined, a conflict arises between leading a life of prayer and doing productive labor. "Work causes pressures, you get a bulletin and it must be done," says Mother Terence, sounding more like someone you might meet in the elevator of your office building than a cloistered nun.

"Life seems to be so fast all of a sudden. Now what the sisters need more of is silence," she continued, and happily reported that the 16 sisters under her supervision want to spend more time in contemplation.

"We have to find a happy medium, but at least the trend is to contemplation. Even the young sisters are rejecting the fast pace that seems to be rising."

They feel they are doing more when they are praying than when they are working anyway. Sister Margaret, the sub-prioress and the person who made the visits possible explained it this way:

"We feel we are making more of a contribution than if we were

active. There would never be enough teachers, and a spiritual force is more of a force than the active apostolate."

The sisters know that people want their help and believe in prayer because their phone rings 24 hours a day with petitions for prayers.

"Here," Sister Margaret continued, calm yet positive, "ours is a pure life of faith, and it is making a dent in what happens outside."



Sister Claire, one of the founders of Monastery of Mary the Queen, reaches through the parlor grille to assist Janet Meyer, who plays the lead Sister Angelica, with her veil as Joan Estrup, also in costume, looks on.



At the counter that separates the sisters from the rest of the chapel, Sister Elizabeth takes wine from the chalice and Prioress, Mother Terence receives the Eucharist.