

By Katharine Bird  
NC News Service

Recently, a permanent deacon from Missouri wrote to Trappist Father Basil Pennington, asking how to develop support structures among the deacons in his home community. He wondered if the Rule of St. Benedict for monasteries might help.

The monk, who lives at St. Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, Mass., responded with some suggestions and an offer to meet the deacon to explore the possibilities.

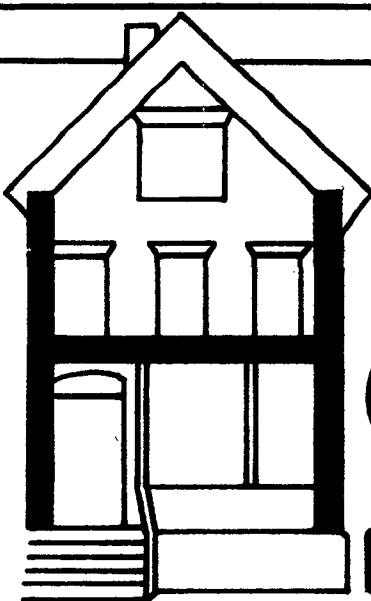
The request came as no surprise, Father Pennington explained. Over the last 15 years, he's noticed a steady increase in people coming to St. Joseph's for advice to take home and use.

Why does this happen? Father Pennington said many people come hoping "to touch base with a spiritual force." Monasteries today offer much "spiritual hospitality."

Some people come "in search of a spiritual mother or father," someone they can talk things over with in a peaceful atmosphere, the priest added. Sometimes these are young people alienated from their families.

Father Pennington also pointed to the tensions of modern life: "People realize that a good job and money in the bank don't give security today. The world is extremely vulnerable — it could be wiped out, so people are looking for deeper meaning."

A monastery brings lay people



# HOME renovation:

## tips from the monastic artisan

into contact with a way of life that often is perceived as "mysterious and challenging." Part of the fascination of the monastery stems from the perception of it as a special "place apart."

The trick for lay persons, Father Pennington thinks, is to find their own way of going apart; a way that fits into their own lives.

In his book titled "A Place Apart," Father Pennington suggests that lay people locate a quiet place in their homes or nearby, somewhere to pray and reflect. This special place reminds people "to make the time," he writes; people need this to renew their perspective on life.

Family life and life in a monastery bear a number of resemblances, the monk observed. Monks "are a family. We try to share life very deeply."

Like family members, monks are encouraged to "support each other" in their vision for life — to sit down together and talk things over. The support structures among the monks are more than an incidental feature of their life.

Benedictine Sister Henry Marie Zimmermann finds that people come to her convent because of an interest in deepening their prayer life. She is assistant prioress at St. Benedict's Convent in Bristol, Va.

She told of a couple who ap-

proached her convent several years ago for instruction in praying the Liturgy of the Hours — the official church prayers for special times during the day. The couple continued to visit the monastery and gradually others joined them. Today a convent "oblates" program includes 25 lay men and women, mostly married couples.

What are some points of connection between monastic life and the lives of lay people at home? Sister Zimmermann thinks even the vows taken in religious orders are pertinent for the laity.

Obedience, for instance. The word "obedience" is derived from Latin roots which mean "to listen to." It calls for learning to "listen to God and what he is saying to you," explained Sister Zimmermann. For lay people, this is likely to mean listening for God's voice as it is heard through the other people, as well as the events, in their lives.

Poverty is another of the vows. Sister Zimmermann thinks poverty has to do not merely with "what people have, but how they use it. Do they share what they have with others?"

The Benedictine sister recalled St. Benedict's advice centuries ago: "Treat everything as sacred vessels of the altar." That, she thinks, is useful advice that can help anyone develop a useful perspective on possessions.

(Ms. Bird is associate editor of Faith Today.)

## Of course prayer is easy for priests...isn't it

By Father Robert Sherry  
NC News Service

"Come on in, Jerry. Grab a chair. I'll be finished with this phone call in a minute."

Father Jerry Dover and his friend, Father Miguel Solle, had been getting together for late Sunday night shop-talks for three years.

Just as Father Dover settled comfortably into a chair, Father Solle finished his phone call. "How's your week been, Jerry?" he asked.

"My homily at the Saturday evening Mass was a bummer," Father Dover replied. "I forgot half of it. I guess I was upset from the wedding I had at 3:30 that afternoon. The couple looked unconcerned through the whole service. The few people present acted like it was the first time they had been in church for years. It really frustrates me to try to lead a congregation in prayer when they act like they don't want to be there."

"I know what you mean," Father Solle responded. He wondered whether the couple

should have had a church wedding. "No faith, no ceremony" is my motto," he said. But he recounted his experience with three baptisms that day.

"It was like the whole congregation wanted to be god-parents for the three children. The people were so enthusiastic! I felt super."

"That's great! By the way, are you still praying with your Wednesday night group?" Father Dover asked.

"Yes," Father Solle answered. "I'm at the point now where I really need to pray sometimes without being the one in charge."

"I admire you for your adaptability," Father Dover responded. "The only times I sense a genuine feeling of prayer is when I'm at the altar praying and preaching, or when I go off on retreat to some solitude."

"We each have our own prayer ways," his friend commented. "Even at the retreat house I need a group to pray with."

"Remember last week when we were talking about the breviary? Since I've been reading the Bible

more, the Scripture in the breviary is starting to come alive for me. Especially if I let myself listen to the feelings reflected in the Psalms. The prayer group helps me on this, too."

"The Psalms never get me in touch with feelings," Father Dover interjected. "The only feeling I get is historical, like I'm reading about some ancient problem."

"That's how I felt at first. But when I forced myself to think of real people writing and praying these words, a whole new world of human feelings opened up for me. The Psalms are the cries of real people offering their daily concerns to their God," Father Solle responded.

"I used to think all the feelings and actions and problems I faced all day could count for prayer. They do count, but for me it wasn't enough," Father Dover explained. "After a few years I felt dried up. I have to have private reflection time regularly."

"You should have had plenty of quiet time while you were away for two months at school last summer," Father Solle said.

