

A 'contemplative season' for monastic celebration

By Jeanne Gehret

As I drove up into the hills of Piffard toward the Abbey of the Genesee, not far from Geneseo, I took in the starkly beautiful scenery surrounding the monastery. Much of the abbey's 2,200 acres

looked like a national reserve with untouched forests of evergreen. From the road, I could see only the roof of the abbey, rising behind fields of corn and thistle. The spruce trees in the rock garden surrounding the church were unadorned, creating a sharp contrast in my mind's eye with the garlanded Christmas trees I had seen in the mall the night before.

I arrived at my destination on quiet-soled feet, respectful of the monks' life, and within moments I was drawn into the deep, freeing silence of the Trappist monastery where 45 monks — both priests and brothers — pray, farm, bake Monks' Bread and live simply in God's presence.

The monks of the abbey follow the rule of St. Benedict, according to the 17th century reform by the abbot of La Grande Trappe — hence the name Trappists. Taking seriously St. Benedict's admonition, "incline the ear of your heart and listen to the words of the master," they reserve speech for certain special places and times.

"We live a desert spirituality of silence and solitude," said Brother Anthony Weber, the abbey's guest master, who came to the abbey in 1956 after graduating from Aquinas Institute.

For a man who prefers silence, Brother Anthony seemed very comfortable during our hour-long conversation. He greeted me with a warm handshake, and his words flowed easily, as if he shared personal reflections with strangers every day.

"I am reminded of a text in Hosea, where God says, 'I will lure her into the desert and there speak to her heart.' The silence helps us grow more aware of God's presence and call," Brother Anthony explained. "When we listen, God communicates a challenge, a correction or, perhaps, an invitation that requires us to act."

Advent and Christmas intensify what a monk should be about the whole year through, he said. "We play the part of John the Baptist, saying, 'Look, there is the Lamb of God! As people in the outside world build up the human city, we remind them that we're all just passing through. Our ultimate reality is beyond time and place!'"

I had been impressed by the scenery as I drove to the abbey, and I wondered what role winter's natural beauty played in the monks' Advent contemplation. According to Brother Anthony, winter is "the contemplative season of silence" and sets the stage for this holy season. "Nature is so quiet this time of year — the animals hibernate in the womb of the earth, and the trees gather strength in the roots of the spring burst," he said. "Nature lends itself to our Advent focus on spiritual attentiveness, preparation, searching and listening."

I had come to the monastery to learn how the monks' celebration of Christmas differed from those of typical families like mine. The distinction became quickly obvious when Brother Anthony told me about the way the monks approach the birth of Christ.

"Our emphasis is on interiorizing the meaning of the feast, just letting it seep in that God became human and letting it boggle the mind," he said. "To receive the gift of that realization, one must be empty and quiet," he added.

Such emptiness is exemplified by the fact that the monks don't decorate the abbey until one or two days before Christmas. Only then do they put up a Christmas tree and crib, and decorate the church.

"We don't exchange gifts because we own nothing," Brother Anthony added. "Each monk receives two fruitcakes from the abbot to give to whomever he wants. Our relatives, families know that, so they don't expect a gift. Similarly, any gift that we receive from home is shared with the community."

While a part of him misses the giving and receiving of gifts, Brother Anthony told me, it's worth the sacrifice to experience the real meaning of Christmas.

The abbey's Christmas Eve begins with caroling, followed by Mass at 1 a.m. "For me, the highlight of the Christmas season comes when I stand apart from the carolers in the semi-darkened church," Brother Anthony



Brother Gerard, a novice, reads a book in solitude by the window.

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said, "It's such an experience of quiet, gentleness and real peace!"

Following Mass, he told me, the monks proceed solemnly to the fireplace, where the lighting of the Christmas crib is accompanied by readings and meditation. Then, still in silence, they go to the dining room for the lighting and blessing of the Christmas tree.

"That's the other high point of Christmas for me," the monk reflected. "We celebrate Christmas Eve in silent communion with one another and — like Peter on Mount Tabor — I want to say 'Lord, it's so good for us to be here. Let's stay forever!'"

After blessing the tree, the monks break their customary silence for five minutes or so to wish each other a merry Christmas and to offer a hug or handshake.

Afterward, at about 4 a.m., the monks sit down to a feast-day breakfast. "We eat in silence," the guest master said, "but there's music in the background instead of the customary reading. It's the only time all year when we eat breakfast together."

"I like to stay there as long as possible. Like a parent or spouse sharing time with a loved one, I wish I could freeze that special moment forever."

Because they focus their Christmas celebrations on Christ Himself, rather than on frenzied material preparations, the monks are unfamiliar with the post-holiday letdown many of us in the outside world experience. "Here we celebrate the whole Christmas octave, nine days of rejoicing. We try to imitate Mary at Bethlehem, fully in communion with Christ as only His mother could be — loving Him and being loved by Him."

While many of us may feel that seemingly endless social obligations leave us no time for ourselves during the holidays, the monks reserve the social aspects of Christmas to after the holy day itself. "One night between Christmas and New Year's, we watch a film together and have a Christmas supper at which we talk."

Yet even the rarity of social occasions holds little attraction for the abbey's residents. "I tire of the conversation after about 15 minutes," Brother Anthony admitted. "When you've grown into silence, it's almost a necessity after awhile. When you're silent with people you know well, you develop a sixth sense about them, and words are unnecessary."

Moreover, Brother Anthony believes that silence is an essential component of all Christians' lives. Each of us, he said, is called to make the time for silence, prayer and meditation. He hastened to add, however, that not all Christians are called to carry out that call in isolation from the everyday world.

"It's a lot harder to do (that) in the world than in the monastery," he admitted, "though



This sculpture of St. Benedict, author of the rule by which the monks regulate their lives, was created by Brother Benedict in 1975.

even in our contemplative environment, life continues to break in. We can set up the nicest schedule, but we have to let it go when life calls."

I wondered how much he would be distracted from meditation by a preschooler's flirting with flames during Advent prayers. But the monk's next example reminded me that parents are not alone in the search for solitude.

"Our model for contemplation is Jesus Himself, who frequently stole away to the mountains and desert; to pray alone, sometimes all night," Brother Anthony said. "His disciples would seek Him out, and He would tend to their needs, then return to prayer. When life broke in on Him with others' needs, He was right there."

"The big benefit of contemplation is discernment," he continued, "Knowing what to do when?"

"Ultimately, each of us stands alone before God, don't we?" I mused aloud.

"Exactly; we're solitary," he replied. "There is a deep inner place where nobody can come. It's a moment of freedom and maturing when

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Brother Basil solemnly reads the Psalms prior to the start of sext, the noon service.