

Brother Patrick stops a moment in the library to select Christmas cards.

## Celebration

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you as a spouse and mother realize that you have this inner solitude where you are most yourself and no one can disturb you.

"Realizing that those we love the most also have that inner depth gives us a tremendous respect for the other, and tells us even loneliness is OK," he continued.

This loneliness stirs up our need for God, he said, quoting one of my favorite passages from St. Augustine: "Our hearts are made for You, and they are restless until they rest in You." If married people could realize that, the monk commented, they would not be so disappointed when human love fails — after all, a spouse is only human and can never fulfill our need for God.

"The celibate will experience God in his or her loneliness, and should not be afraid of that loneliness," he said. "The married person will experience God in human love, and should not deny that."

Smilingly, he explained that — at the age of 18 — he had entered the monastery because he saw monks as the "Green Berets" of the Church and wanted to go to heroic lengths to find God. "Now, especially after spending years as guest master here and dealing with people from all walks of life, I've come to realize the beauty of marriage and the exquisite goodness of it.

"The same thing can be said by someone like yourself," he told me. "You can see the beauty and necessity of the celibate life but recognize it's not for you."

Throughout my conversation with the guest master, I had related his words to my own life, especially to a conversation I had had with my husband the night before my journey to the monastery.

Looking back on the way we had celebrated Christmas in the eight-year honeymoon before the birth of our first child, I had feared that family rituals might crowd out the religious celebration of Christ's birth.

Before the children were born, my husband and I savored Christmas midnight Masses followed by a drive through Durand Eastman Park. In my memory, it always snowed as we left the church, gently mocking everyone's

fear that this would be a green Christmas.

One Christmas, great big flakes were coming down as we drove through the park in silence. Rounding a bend, we pulled over to the side of the road, turned off the headlights and listened to the hush of the Christmas night. That evening, years ago, taught me exactly what Brother Anthony meant when he spoke of the communion deeper than words which he enjoys with his brother monks.

But now, our one-year-old daughter and four-old-son can barely refrain from squirming out of their skins at a 5 p.m. Christmas Eve family liturgy, so midnight Mass is out of the question. "Why, oh why, don't baby-sitters work on Christmas Eve?" I had lamented to my husband. "I'd be willing to pay time and a half."

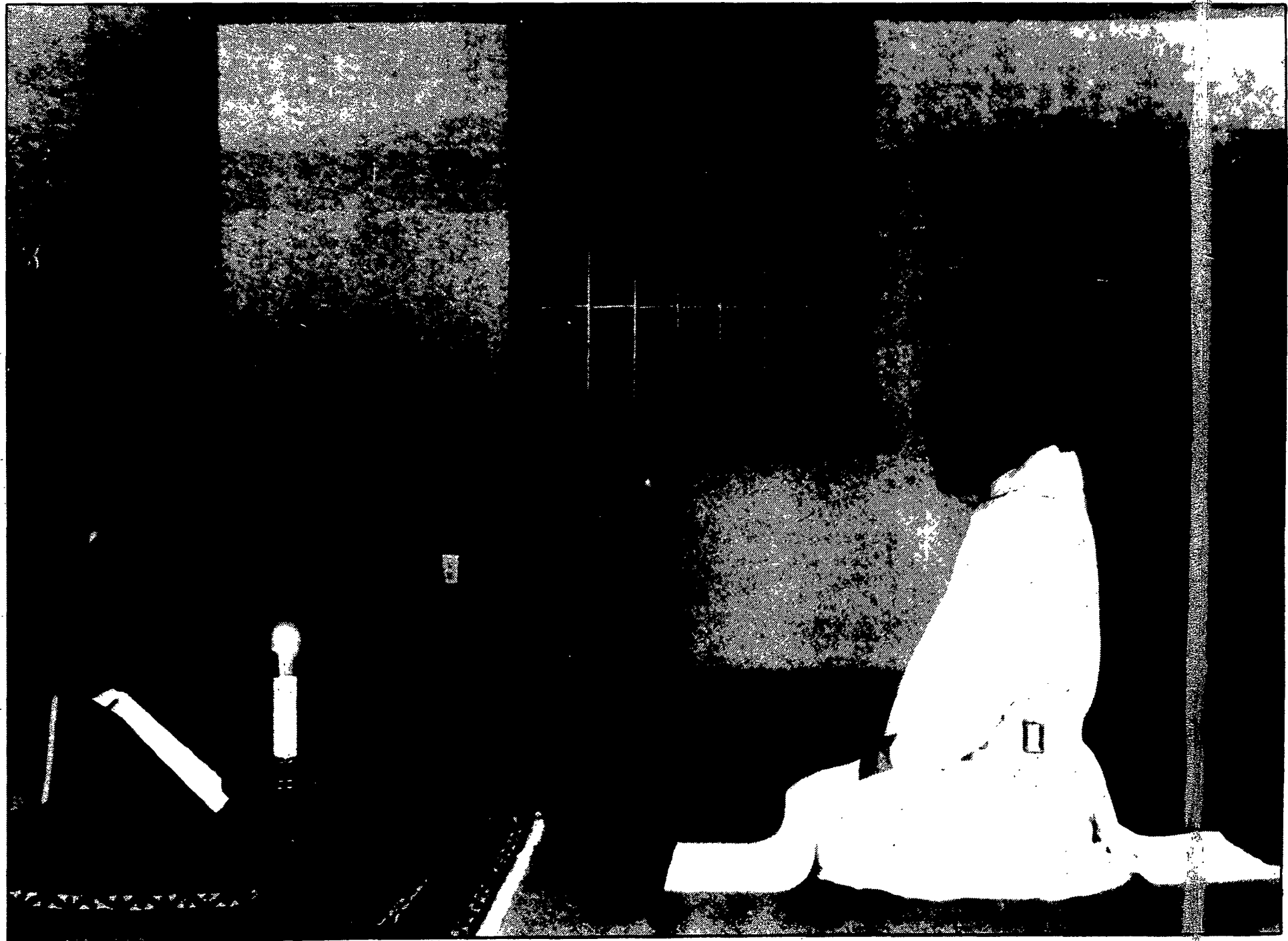
Before we said goodbye, Brother Anthony ushered me into the abbey's stone-and-timber chapel for a service of the liturgy of the hours. When we chanted Psalm 131:2 — "Enough for me to keep my soul tranquil and quiet like a child in its mother's arms" — I knew that the strength and joy I had experienced that morning would carry me through the remaining days of Christmas shopping, baking and packing for a trip to visit grandparents in Pennsylvania.

Promising to treat myself to Advent meditation again soon, I walked our doors into a mild December afternoon. The warmth of the day evoked memories of the sacred moments around the family fire last Christmas Eve, our baby daughter's fascination with the flames, and our preschooler's delight at finally lighting all four candles on the Advent wreath.

The gentle quiet of that night was not all that different from our drives on Christmas Eve, I suddenly realized, except that it was shared by four people instead of two.

The excitement of Christmas morning, the warm embrace of grandparents, the beauty of a tiny girl in her first red dress, the early gift proffered by a child in thanks "for all the nice things you do for me" — all these are the return we receive for many acts of love throughout the year — from tying shoelaces to baking for family feasts to getting up in the middle of the night when a small voice calls.

All our seasons are sacred before God, and at blessed times like Christmas God wraps them up so we can recognize what a gift they really are.



Father Lawrence Oh meditates before a painting of Our Lady of Perpetual Help.