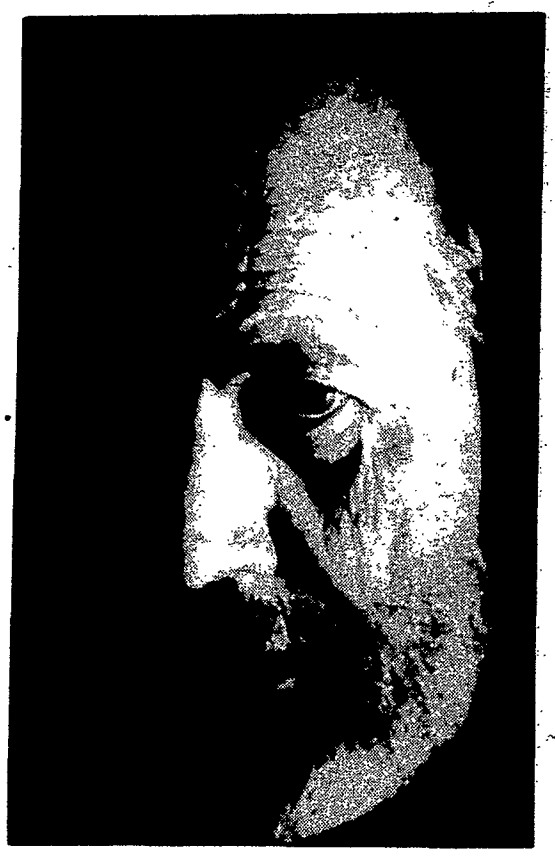
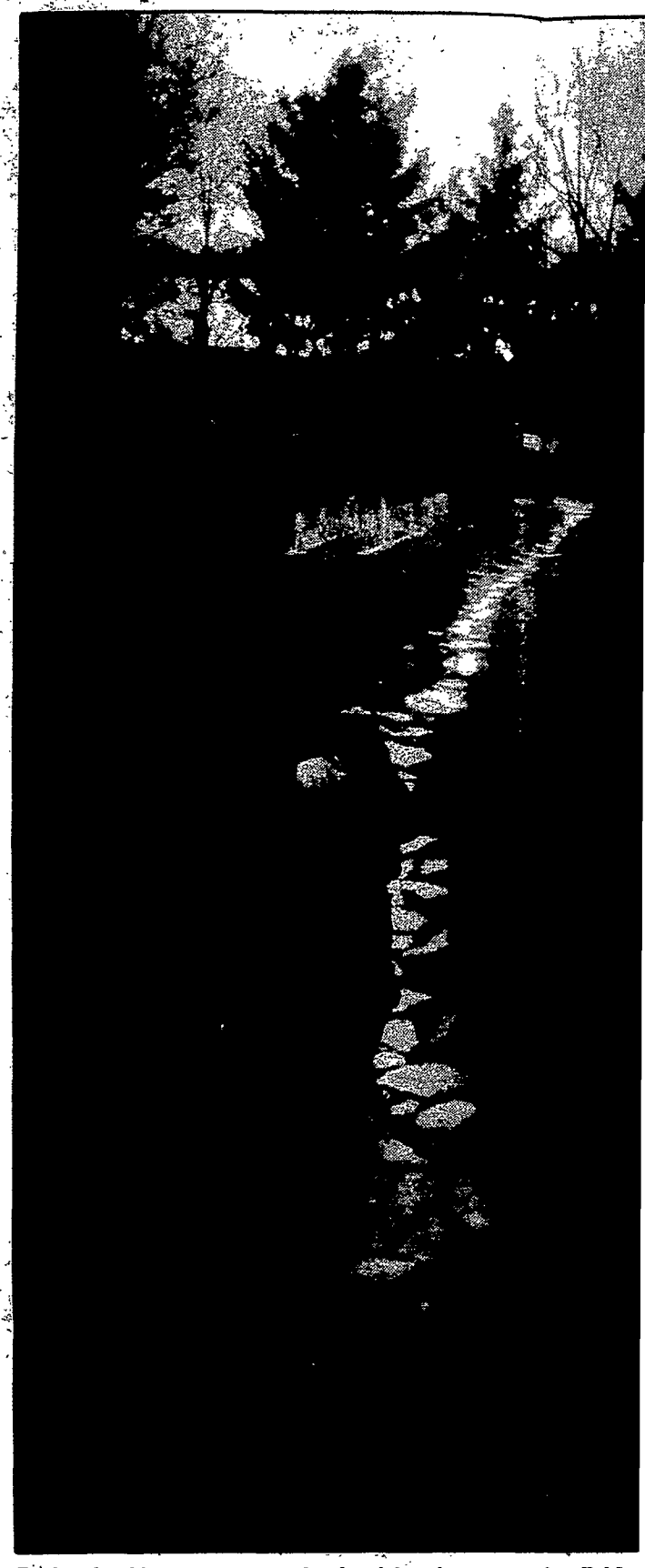
'This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.'

Psalm 118:24



Father Martin Boler, a licensed physician, became prior of Mt. Saviour Monastery in 1969.

Brother Gereon Reuter takes a turn at reading from a selected journal during the noontime meal.



During lambing season, a shepherd heads out to the fields morning light.

Easter-season 'vigil' at Mount Saviour Monastery offers reflections on a long

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Visitors from the outside world are a perennial "fourth wall," even at this unspeakably early hour. At the isolated Benedictine monastery, a working 1,000-acre sheep farm in the hills outside Elmira, guests are no more unusual than the predictable rhythm of rising to greet the daylight. The monastery's prior, Father Martin Boler, says he could count on the fingers of one hand the number of days in its 36-year history that Mt. Saviour has had no outside visitors at all.

Hospitality, as Father Martin has told me, is part of the Rule of St. Benedict, the slim volume that has served as the spiritual guidebook for monastic life in much of the Western world for the past 1,500 years. "All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ . . ." reads Chapter 53 of a modern English translation of the Rule, presented to me by Brother Luke Pape, who has done his part to humbly receive retreatants and other travelers — some 2,000 each year — since his simple profession of vows in 1954.

The hospitality extended to me here has certainly been gracious. Up the hill at St. Gertrude's, the guesthouse for women and couples, I've slept well, eaten simple, wholesome meals, and been left, as theologian Henri Nouwen expressed it in his definitive essay on hospitality, with the freedom to come and go on my own terms. Madeleva Roarke, who takes care of St. Gertrude's for the monks, is truly one of those unsuspicious souls whom Nouwen describes as being "at home in their own houses, who have found the center of their lives in their own hearts, can invite others in and share with them the rest and silence which they have found for themselves."

This particular Thursday morning before daybreak, I've already come downstairs to find a pot of unbrewed coffee mercifully waiting to be plugged in. Driving along the deeply rutted dirt road that winds its way down from St. Gertrude's to the chapel at the very heart of the monastery grounds, I've looked in vain for stars in the dark, overcast sky — the same stars I saw the previous morning, a fixed number, according to Psalm 146, sung *a capella* by the gathered company of monks at Lauds the day after I arrived here.

Vigils, the first of the seven Divine Offices observed by the community each day, begins in the symbolic, subterranean darkness of the crypt. The diffused light in the Vigils antechamber is gentle, and knees callused by years of Lenten prayer on the upstairs chapel's stone floor are buffered first thing in the morning by the welcoming softness of a red Persian carpet. I find my eyes drawn again and again to its repetitive pattern, as the monks sing the Psalms and canticles in the rhythmic plainsong unison of Joseph Gelineau's psalmody, the few weaker voices carried along by the example of Choirmaster Pierre Pratte's resonant tenor.

"We begin Vigils in the dark, at night, and end up with the dawn and sunrise," explains Father Martin, a licensed physician who joined the community 32 years ago and has been prior since the monastery's founding prior, the late Father Damasus Winzen, retired in 1969. "Being in a rural atmosphere, where the symbolism of nature is so strong, (Vigils) is a powerful symbol of the element of darkness, waiting for the rising of the sun."

Lauds

Lauds, the second office, celebrated at Mt. Saviour at 7 a.m., is the sunrise prayer, representative of Christ's resurrection, while Vespers, observed at 6:30 p.m., is the sunset office, symbolic of Christ's death. "There's a rhythm between darkness and light, which moves around the *Son*," says Father Martin, noting the word's homophonous correspondence with *sun*. "The resurrection is the light of a new day. At night, we finish Compline in the crypt. These things are built into the architecture; they become imperceptibly imprinted on our consciousness," Father Martin observes. "We begin to see salvation as a cosmic event, not simply an individual thing."

The core of monastic life is the Paschal Mystery of Christ's death, resurrection and ascension into heaven, both re-enacted and lived out on a daily basis. "As monks, we have access to the experience of God that Jesus in his humanity is *now* having. *This* is Christianity — a union with a person, and through that person, with the person who is God. The presumption always is that Easter is the focal point of our life; our work and prayer both change in relationship with Easter." Even the timing of the birth of new lambs in the spring is planned to coincide with the period following Holy Week, when a larger number of guests than usual flocks to the monastery for Easter services.

The human tendency to historicize, Father Martin continues, has in effect separated the story of salvation into periods of time. "There's actually *one* incarnation, death and resurrection, and ascension, which is still going on. The Paschal Mystery is one reality, not a historical sequence."

While the ongoing miracle of Christ's resurrection is lived out symbolically during the daily cycle of monastic life, the monk's day itself is compartmentalized by the seven liturgical offices. The three primary activities prescribed by Benedict's Rule — prayer, *lectio divina* (private reading and scripture study) and manual labor — are practiced at certain specified times throughout the day. "By setting limits to those times, we are able to use them and not be limited by them," says Father Martin. "We're learning in s
tance of certain limits will se
Obedience to the varied rh
life — rhythms of prayer and
of seasonal change, of languag
discipline and balance, as well
ple might not welcome: the f
state of grace toward which t
ing. "There's a difference betw
ingness to go along with God
— to be one with them, in a
Martin.

After Vigils, for example, t
ly to their private quarters to
I imagine, might doze or day
doing as I wait for the appoi
what for me is insufficient sle
self a morning person. The ap
monastic life might well mirr
the "real world," I reflect. F
after all, are free of the temp
and family.

Terc

Later, after breakfast and
as Terce — the third hour), I
tery to speak with Brother Lu
minding the monastery's boo
to show me the studio where
up to two days a week workin
color landscapes and occasion
subjects. Brother Luke, 77, a
his vocation relatively late in
art and interior design, servin
Medical Corps during World