

## Easter reflections

Continued from Page 12

**A** dairy farm from its inception, Mt. Saviour began to feel the strain of having fewer hands, and the prior objected on moral grounds to the fact that milk had become "a surplus product on the market of a starving world," as Father Martin expressed it in the Summer, 1981, edition of the Mount Saviour Chronicle, a biannual newsletter published for friends of the community. Moreover, milking the cows had become a tyranny, causing the balance between worship and work to shift dramatically in favor of the latter.

"On Tuesday of Holy Week we finalized the decision to move the farm from dairy cows to sheep," Father Martin wrote. The resulting "death of our way and our will" became for the community "a very real paradigm of the Paschal Mystery, the dying and rising of Christ, that we were about to celebrate."

Approximately six years later, on a sunny April morning a week or so before Easter, I venture out from Brother Luke's studio into the large, horseshoe-shaped barn that frames the pens in which Guest-master Brother James Cronen, Brother Bruno Lane and Brother Pierre Pratte, Mt. Saviour's "good shepherds," are preparing to round up the farm's approximately 400 pregnant ewes, in time for lambing shortly after Easter. Beyond the barns are terraced hillsides planted with various grasses used for grazing and hay; the farm also includes Father Placid's orchard, which produces apples, plums, grapes and pears.

Although the symbolic significance of new life in the spring is "wonderfully effective in this setting," as Father Martin points out, no one in the sheep pen on this particular morning is expending much thought on symbolism. Father Martin and Paul, a young visitor from England, help the shepherds separate the "gimmers" (yearling ewes) from the expectant mothers, herding the flock through a corrugated metal race, the entryway to which occasionally becomes blocked by two frantic ewes attempting simultaneous egress from the barn behind them.

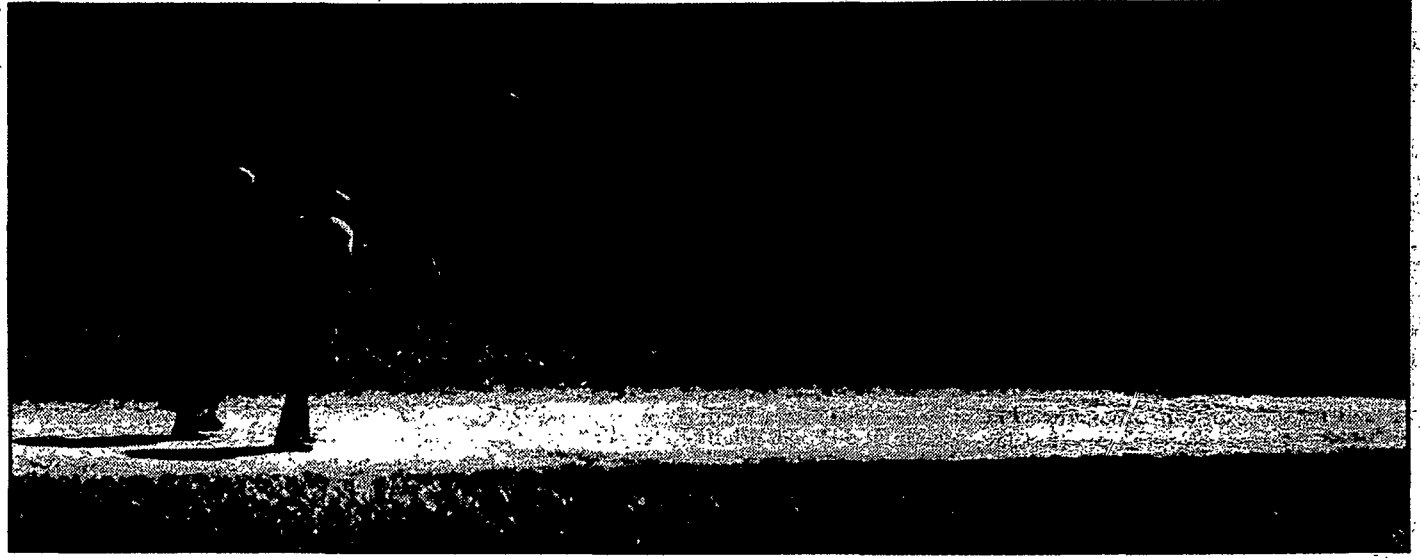
"From the point of view of the individual lambs, rams and ewes, there is no such thing as a good shepherd," Aldous Huxley was quoted in the Summer, 1982, edition of the Chronicle. Father Martin is even more explicit this Thursday morning, as we watch the good brothers try to head off a determined collection of stubborn strays. This contingent presents a united front, aligned to protest being herded for even a brief period into the claustrophobic enclosure in which they are to be inoculated, sprayed and "drenched," to give their unborn offspring immunity to various diseases and ward off parasites.

"This is why they call sheep 'dumb animals,'" he quips, "because they won't do what you want 'em to do — a species that has survived for thousands of years with no arms, no bombs — and they can outwit us, day after day," he mused.

In the unseasonably brilliant sunlight, it's easy to become immersed in the task at hand and almost forget the perpetual call to return to the primary focus of monastic life — until the chapel bell rings for Sext. Observed at noon, the sixth hour of the day, Sext is one of the "little offices," taking up only about 15 minutes before the midday meal. This noon, however, the shepherds go on with their work, since time is of the essence. The monks at Mt. Saviour have been known to pause briefly in mid-labor to say the office, whenever they're so far away from the chapel that they'd arrive at prayers after the brief service has ended. Today, I am so hungry from watching them work that I don't stay long enough to see them at it, if indeed they are able to take their eyes off the sheep long enough to do so.

### Sext

At dinner, the main meal of the day, no dessert is served during Lent, and the food is passed from the center of each L-shaped set of tables exactly twice. This Thursday's meal is consumed, as usual, in strictly observed silence, as the monks and their guests listen to Father Martin reading the conclusion of an article in *Cistercian Studies*. The quarterly journal on monas-



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

Father Martin accompanies a guest on a walk. Hospitality is an important facet of the Rule of St. Benedict.

tic spirituality is one of some 90 journals and periodicals to which the monastery subscribes, covering a wide spectrum of topics ranging from politics to questions of theology and spirituality, history, biography and current events.

The silence observed during meals and after the last office of the day is not intended to enforce blind obedience, but rather to provide time for the type of reflection the monastic life calls for. Being "silent as a sheep before her shearers" (Isaiah 53:7) is the sure pathway to salvation, Father Martin quotes from scripture.

Just before the meal is finished, I hear him read a passage from T.S. Eliot's poem, *Choruses from the Rock*: "The endless cycle of idea and action, / endless invention, endless experiment, / brings knowledge of motion, but not stillness; / knowledge of speech, but not silence; / knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word. / Where is the life we have lost in living? / Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? / Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?"

### None

I set off up the hill to St. Gertrude's, in search of some measure of each. On the way, I pass Brother Nathan Munsch, Brother Daniel Magni and Bruce Krag, a guest of the monastery since last December. Ever the prisoner of technology, I honk the horn of my Toyota at them, wave and drive on, to do some *lectio* of my own. After an hour or so, I emerge from my room, to find the trio of hikers standing in Madeleva's kitchen, invited in for tea after scouring the hillsides to cut mountain laurel for the Palm Sunday procession.

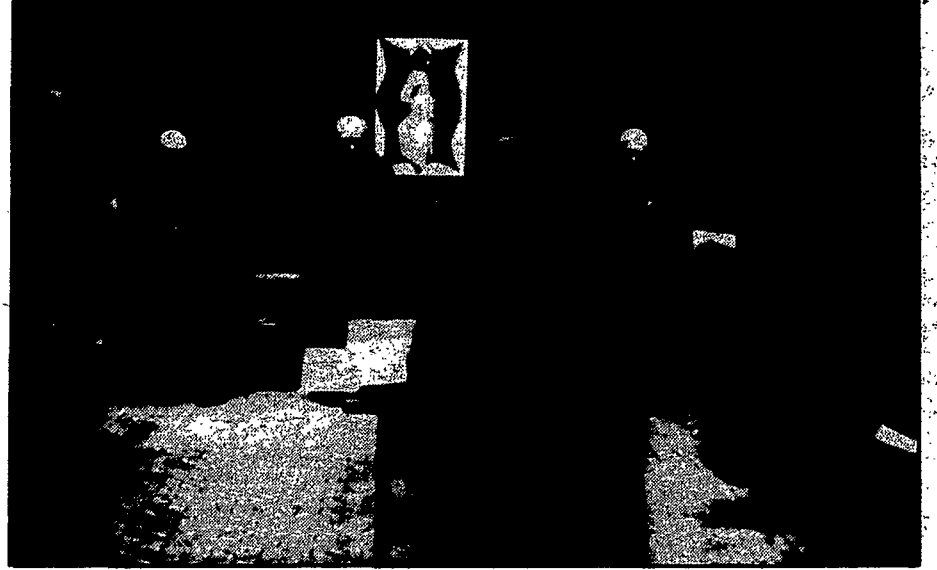
Brother Daniel, 47, formerly a priest in the Archdiocese of Boston, became a novice at Mt. Saviour only last September. "I've gone from the pastoral care of souls to doing the laundry for a monastic community," he tells me succinctly during tea.

Although he misses his former calling and has found adjustment to monastic life a considerable struggle, Brother Daniel is certainly not alone in his tribulations. As Father Martin has told me, the novitiate represents "a certain liminal or marginal phase that enables us to restructure our priorities and re-enter on a different level. For somebody to come in here out of a very active life, it's a real culture shock," he observes. "The period of adaptation is a necessary transition, but it can be a very painful one."

"Each life has its own set of challenges," says Brother Daniel, who hardly regrets his decision. "I think the inner challenge is the most difficult one. I had a hard time deciding whether it was my sense of the poetic that was luring me," observes this former teacher of English literature. "You can't sustain the (initial) sense of fascination. It simply means you're moving to a different level of discovery. What you're really experiencing is a call within a call — to go deeper."

Brother Daniel approached his monastic calling gradually, after having spent time at Mt. Saviour and various European monasteries, including one in Subiaco, Italy, where he was once invited to say Mass in the grotto in which St. Benedict is said to have lived as a hermit during the sixth century.

"I see a monastery as the leaven in the lump of dough," he concludes. "Here's the



During Vigils, Brother Pierre Pratte reads a biblical passage.

thing that makes it all rise: it's this powerful sense of the awareness of God — whereas in everyday life, you're so taken up with the coming and going and the doing that you're not so fully aware of it."

Just before entering Mt. Saviour, Brother Daniel asked Father Placid, the community's oldest member, to name the most trying thing he'd had to face during his 50 years as a monk. "He said just dealing with the relentless routine has been, for him, the greatest challenge," Brother Daniel recalls. "He's 83, and still seems to be able to live in the spirit of it. He's kept focused. And it gave me quite a lot of courage."

Entering a monastery that counts older men among its population, says Brother Daniel, can be inspiring. "They've remained faithful over the long haul," he concludes.

### Vespers

We've both missed None, the 3 p.m. office that takes place at the ninth hour. I watch Brother Daniel head off down the hill, and then I return to my reading. At 5:30, Madeleva brings me "a little repast" on the sunporch — and I find I'm perfectly content to do what I've always loved: to eat alone and read shamelessly. It's the closest thing I've felt to serenity in as long as I can remember — solitude without loneliness. There's always the community to return to, at regular intervals.

I walk down the hill in the gloriously fading sunlight, in time for Vespers, the 6:30 p.m. office. On the way back up to St. Gertrude's, I tread as silently as possible, watching for the pair of deer I've often frightened off at the bend of the hill. Suddenly, a black-clad figure approaches on the path — Brother Gereon Reuter, who's just come upon a grouse's nest during his evening constitutional. It's the monks' period for recreation, and Brother Gereon often walks in the hills and woods that constitute the bulk of the property.

The deer I'm looking for can frequently be seen right outside the monks' windows first thing in the morning, he tells me. From the summit of the hill, he points out the Chemung Valley, the village of Big Flats and Harris Hill, where people came from miles around to soar in sailplanes and hang-gliders.

I ask Brother Gereon whether he will be responsible for feeding the orphaned lambs again this spring, as he did last year. No, he answers; the monastery is in the process of questioning whether playing nursemaid to lambs rejected by their mothers is a profitable occupation for a monastery. I sense that his connotation of "profitable" means something quite a bit less commercial than would be indicated by the mercenary yardstick the "real world" uses to measure such things.

But there's no time to ask the question, as Brother Gereon is off within moments to join his brothers.

### Compline

At 8:15 in early April, it's just become dark when the bells of Compline, the last or "complete" hour, ring out the day. Brother Pierre accompanies the evening hymns and prayers on a harp he learned to play 10 years ago at Mt. Saviour; the mellow chords in the candlelit twilight of the octagonal chapel recall St. Augustine's dictum: "To sing is to pray twice."

After the psalms are finished and prayers concluded, the congregation follows the procession of monks downstairs into the crypt to be blessed by Father Martin. We stand in the flickering light of votive candles placed at the feet of a 14th-century statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary, listening as Brother Daniel rings the last bells of the day from the chapel above us. After Compline, the monks will retire to their quarters, observing the grand silence that serves, ironically, to reinforce St. Benedict's opening word in the prologue to the Rule: *Listen*.

"That's how God speaks to us," Father Martin has told me. "We listen to history, to the cosmos, to the signs of our times, to ourselves, to the people who come here. We listen to Christ, and respond," he concludes. "If you don't respond, you have only yourself, writ large."

Tonight, at the summit of the hill, every star in the universe is shining. But as Brother Gereon observes, walking with Brother Daniel the next morning, you can hardly see the stars for the brilliance of the moon, illuminated from beyond our human horizons by a far more brilliant sun.