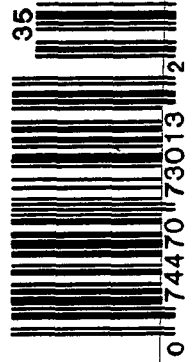


CATHOLIC COURIER

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Summer in the city

Bruce Clement, a deacon candidate from Churchville, spent part of his summer working and playing with youths from inner-city Rochester. Page 9.



Love of God inspires monastic spirituality

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

Imagine being totally in love with someone. Simply spending time with that person becomes an end that justifies itself.

Now imagine that the person you love so completely is God.

For Deacon Justin Sheehan, OCSO, that is the essence of the monastic life.

"(When you're in love), what you're concentrating on is the beloved," observed Deacon Sheehan, a member of the community at the Abbey of the Genesee in Piffard. "We're here because we love God."

Sister John, from the Carmelite Monastery of Our Lady and St. Joseph, located near Pittsford, echoed the deacon's sentiments.

"Our fundamental response to the love of God is the life that we're living here," Sister John said. "It's a life of pure love."

When thinking of monastic life, "love" is not a word that might occur to most people.

More likely, people speaking of monasteries would cite such words as austerity, harshness, fasting, or silence. And the monks and sisters who inhabit the monasteries are often labeled either spiritual supermen and women, or people who are out of touch with reality and who are running away from the world.

The men and women living in the four monastic institutions located in the Diocese of Rochester — the Abbey of the Genesee, the Carmelite monastery, Mount Savior Monastery in Pine City, and the Monastery of Mary the Queen in Elmira — contend that such notions don't hold up.

"You could not survive in a monastery if you are running away from society," noted Brother Anthony Weber, OCSO. "You are running away from society into a very close-knit society. It's a stressful life — we can't get away from one another."

"We're not better than anyone else," noted Sister David Marie, OP, prioress of the Monastery of Mary the Queen. "It's a calling, and we all have our calling. But in no way does that necessarily mean we are better."

The monastic calling in the Catholic Church traces its roots back into the church's Jewish heritage. The desert spirituality of Elia, Osee, and later John the Baptist all figured into the later development of monasticism.

In the early days of the church, a number of people ventured out into the desert to live as hermits

and to devote their lives to prayer. Gradually, communities of these hermits formed, and rules were written to guide their lives, including the rule of St. Benedict, which became the basis for much of Western monasticism.

Men and women in monasteries live under the directions of abbots or abbesses, and take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. They are also often subject to a rule of enclosure — not traveling away from the monastery except under special circumstances (such as doctor appointments or voting).

The members of the monastic community live apart from the world to varying degrees ranging from the almost total separation of the Carmelites to

"Within the context of the worldly philosophy, we don't make sense," Brother Weber acknowledged.

What then, would draw people to such a life?

"I just came across it unexpectedly," Sister John said. "I woke up and realized that this is what God wanted me to do with my life."

"There's an attraction to a life of complete prayer," she continued. "It's kind of a radical response to the being of God that would not make sense if God did not exist."

"My first visit to the monastery," Brother Weber recalled, "when I came home I told my mother, 'I'm never going back there again.'"

An Aquinas graduate who now serves as the abbey's vocation director, Brother Weber was nevertheless drawn back. "Something got inside me," he said. "I think what I discovered is those people (in the abbey) are happy in a very deep and abiding way."

Because of the lifestyle in the monasteries, people are free from some of the worldly distractions and can seek a greater union with God.

"In this life, I've grown in an awareness of the love of God, in a appreciation of him and an awareness of him in my life that would have been harder in other circumstances," Sister David Marie said.

Brother Weber compared the call to contemplation to a sliver in one's finger. "You can't just ignore it," he said.

Nor are those people living in the monasteries the only ones who feel the desire for a deeper prayer life.

"There's a deep contemplative dimension to most Americans," asserted

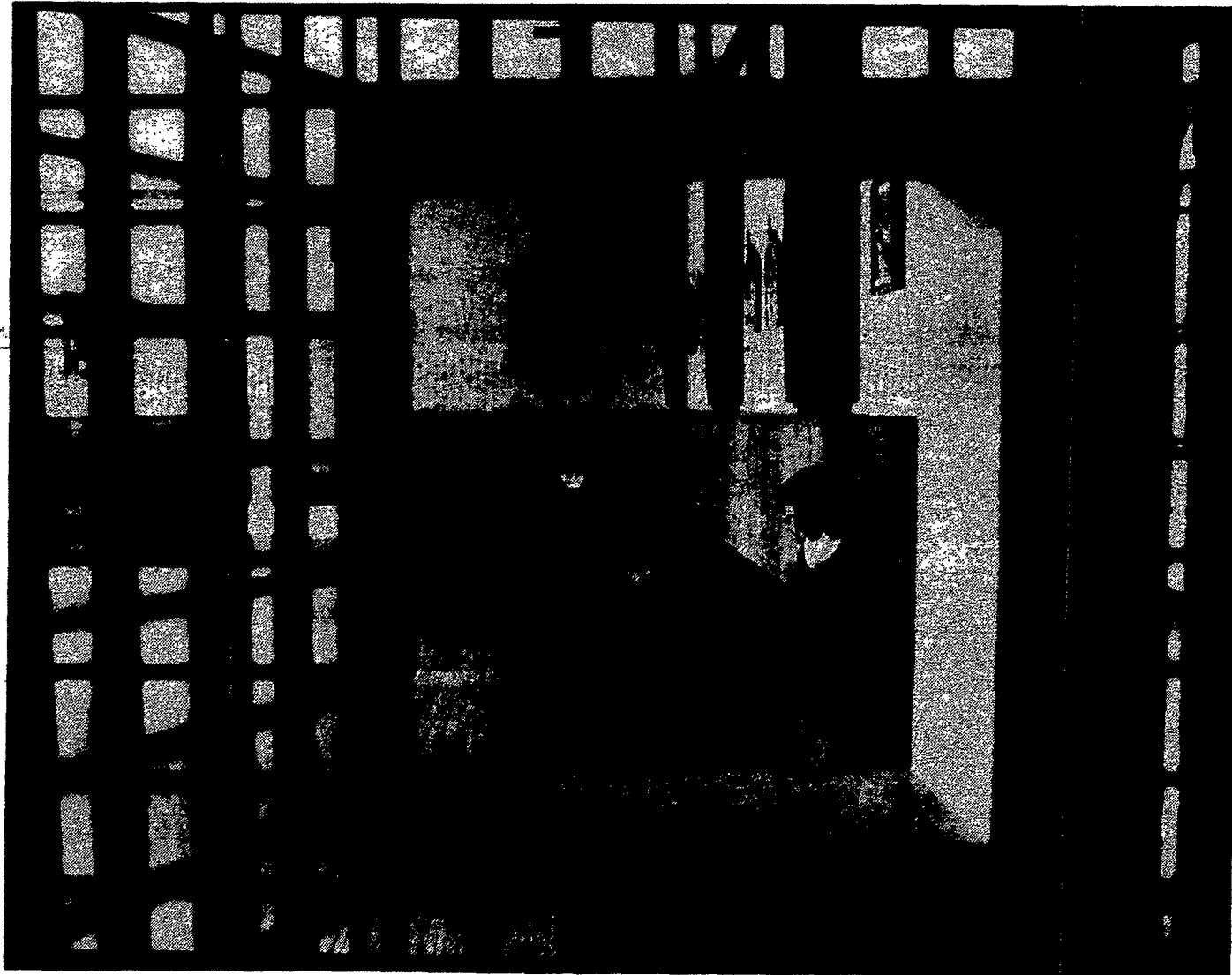
Father Martin Boler, OSB, prior of the Mount Savior Benedictine community. He noted that monasteries in the United States were founded with an awareness that "there's a deep spiritual quality to American people, that (Americans) are not just materialistic."

Thus religious book stores are well stocked with books on monasticism and prayer. Trappist monk Thomas Merton, who died 22 years ago, has become the focus of a virtual publishing industry, with his own books, literature about him, collections of letters and essays, and tapes of his lectures continuing to sell.

Meanwhile, people flock to the monasteries for daily Masses and prayers — and for retreats.

"There certainly is that search for God in their lives," Sister David Marie observed. "What they long for, I think they can see in us, and I think it

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With very few exceptions, sisters from the Carmelite Monastery of Our Lady and St. Joseph remain completely cloistered. Above, several praying sisters can be seen inside a chapel adjacent to the main church. While participating in the Mass — which is open to the public — the sisters receive communion through the iron gate in the foreground.

Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer

the more relaxed practice of the Benedictines at Mount Savior (where the monks occasionally interact with people on the outside world by preaching, teaching, and even joining organizations.) Such separation means that those living in monasteries are sometimes cut off from families and old friends, with contact coming through letters and occasional visits.

Monastic life includes a component of work. That work can sometimes produce tangible products — such as monk's bread from the Abbey of the Genesee or handcrafted items for sale at the Carmelite monastery. But more often, the work is the cleaning, cooking and repairing needed for the day-to-day operations of the monastery.

The bedrock of monasticism is prayer. The men and women in the monastic communities say the daily office of prayers, and set aside time each day for individual prayer, reflection and meditation.