

Monastic

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encourages them to seek it out in their own lives."

People in the world lead such busy lives, Sister David Marie speculated, "that perhaps they are not giving themselves time to develop and satisfy the other part of their lives. Eventually, the desire for the deeper part of ourselves begins to make itself known. There is this desire for something deeper in life. St. Augustine once said, 'Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee, Oh Lord.'"

The Abbey of the Genesee receives 5,000-6,000 visitors each year, and has several houses on its grounds set aside for retreatants.

"We're all called to be contemplatives," Brother Weber said. "People who are in touch with this need find they can respond by coming to retreats at monasteries."

"This is part of the human drive," Brother Weber added. "Some people are responding to the drive by going down blind alleys." Those alleys, he said, include drugs, sex and workaholicism. Others respond by seeking contemplation in their lives.

"I find people in general come here when they can't find solitude and reflection in a busy world," observed Father George Hill, who is part of the small community that helps manage the retreat houses at the Abbey of the Genesee.

"People are coming for a deeper, reflective relationship with God," noted Father Dan O'Shea, another member of that



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer
Sister John, a member of the Carmelite community in Rochester, responds to questions through a grill separating the 'speak room' and the cloistered part of the monastery.

community. "They are seeking a deeper union with God, seeking a deeper meaning in their life. I would suggest the solitude and aloneness with God calls for a deeper union with the world."

In fact, Fathers O'Shea and Hill are also seeking a more contemplative dimension in their lives. The two priests, along with Brothers Andrew Pollard and Lloyd

Friedrich, are currently seeking permission to form a new order called the Little Brothers of Nazareth. That order will manage the abbey's retreat center, as well as engage in such social ministries as working with farm laborers and prison inmates.

"(The order) will be a bridge between the contemplative milieu of the abbey and the more external pastoral ministries," Brother Pollard said.

"I think we all kind of sense that our world is so active today, and to live reflectively is very difficult outside some kind of community of support," Father Hill said.

Father O'Shea pointed out that monasteries are in a sense counter-cultural because they promote a vision of reality that opposes the prevailing vision in society. "The Trappist (tradition) and Catholicism call us to be something over and against the mainstream," he noted. "Monasticism looks at the mainstream culture and critiques it."

Father Boler, however, preferred to emphasize the affirming rather than the critical aspects of the monastic life.

"A Christian has to be both culture affirming and culture critical," he asserted. "Both of those elements have to be there."

The lifestyle of the monks and sisters is, in itself, a way of preaching how to live, Father Boler suggested.

"I think that's what a monastery is," Father Boler said. "It shows something of the way that people can live. We're not trying to be examples. We're trying to seek God and to help one another."

"What we're doing," Father Boler continued, "is we're preaching the Gospel, teaching in a way that's subtle. It's like the teaching that goes on with an apprentice."

You learn by doing."

Despite the seemingly wide-scale attraction of monastic life, however, the charge is sometimes raised that monastic congregations and orders are not contributing to society in the way that active orders do through such means as teaching, social work and nursing.

Sister David Marie countered such arguments by citing St. Paul's image of the mystical body. "We are all the same body, but we are all different parts," she explained. "One part influences the other parts. Living this life does affect people, if you have faith."

Deacon Sheehan observed that "If we just be good monks, respond to the vocation that God gives us, in some mystical way, as part of the mystical Body of Christ, God is able to utilize our lives in ways we can't see, but that can affect people."

He pointed to the changing political situation in Eastern Europe as a possible result of the power of prayer. "They (Eastern Europeans) had been praying," he said. "Perhaps God used their prayers, perhaps our prayers, to do something that can't be explained."

But the results are not the primary focus, Sister John observed. "Whether we see the results or not, that's a testament to our faith," she said. "We are here for God, and that's the reality."

Ultimately, the value of monastic life may not be the results brought about by prayer, Sister John acknowledged.

"It's just a witness to the reality of God," Sister John said. "If it's nothing else, that's our service to the world."

Carmelites celebrate 200 years in the United States

By Father Robert F. McNamara
Guest contributor

The year 1989-90 marks three notable American Catholic bicentennials. On Nov. 6, 1789, Pope Pius VI established the Diocese of Baltimore, the first Catholic diocese in the original 13 states. On Aug. 15, 1790, Father John Carroll was consecrated the first bishop of that see. Meanwhile, on July 21, 1790, the first convent of nuns in the new republic began to function in southern Maryland.

The American bishops honored our "mother diocese" last fall. This month the present successor of Bishop Carroll, Archbishop William H. Keeler, will preside at a commemorative service in the little chapel at Lulworth Castle, England, where John Carroll was consecrated. Let us take a longer look at the establishment of the "Teresian" monastery at Port Tobacco in Charles Country, and what came of it.

Since 1790 many religious orders of women have been introduced into the United States. A good number of the foundresses were citizens of other nations (for instance, St. Rose Philippine Duchesne of the French Religious of the Sacred Heart; or Mother Xavier Warde, of the Irish Sisters of Mercy; or St. Frances Cabrini, of the Italian Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart). Although the founders of Port Tobacco also came from abroad, three of the four were Maryland-born.

American Catholic colonials entering European convents? Where else could these British subjects go when neither Britain nor its colonies would tolerate monasteries on their soil? The records show that between 1721 and 1786 some 37 Catholic women from Maryland took the veil in French or Belgian religious houses. Twelve of these favored the "Order of St. Teresa" or Teresians, better known to us as the Discalced (i.e. "sandaled") Carmelites. What made the Carmelites more popular was the fact that the three convents at Antwerp-Hopland (1619), Lierre (1648) and Hoogstraet (1678) were

for English-speaking women.

Before the French Revolution, monasteries were havens of peace. After the outbreak of that revolution, they were no longer such. Meanwhile, the United States adopted a policy of religious toleration, and England, too, became more hospitable. Eventually, therefore, the three Anglo monasteries moved to England some time after the Marylanders departed for port Tobacco.

When all the arrangements had been completed, the four Carmelite foundresses had left Hoogstraet for America on April 15, 1790. The three Marylanders were of the Hoogstraet Carmel, Mother Bernardina of St. Joseph (Ann Matthews), until then prioress at Hoogstraet, was to be prioress of the new foundation. The other two were her nieces, Sister Mary Aloysia (Ann Theresa Matthews) and Sister Mary Eleanora (Susanna Matthews). The fourth nun was Sister Clare Joseph Dickinson, an Englishwoman from the monastery of Antwerp-Hopland.

All wore secular dress during the trip. Accompanying them was Marylander Father Charles Neale, who had lately been confessor at Hoogstraet. After a difficult, two-month crossing, they reached New York on July 2, passing England-bound Bishop-elect Carroll somewhere along the route. On reaching Port Tobacco, they inaugurated the convent in temporary quarters on July 21. Their permanent monastery, a group of simple frame buildings, was initiated at the blessing of its chapel on the feast of St. Teresa, Oct. 15, 1790.

Two years later, Bishop Carroll, writing to Rome, spoke well of this little rural foundation: "Four nuns came here, and others have since been admitted to probation. They are a salutary example to the people of the vicinity, and their singular piety has moved even non-Catholics to admiration."

It is true that the bishop fervently hoped these Carmelites would come to his aid in

educational matters by undertaking to teach young girls. But the nuns chose to maintain their strictly contemplative tradition. Thus, in a new nation that would subsequently welcome scores of "active" religious orders, it was a cloistered community that led the way. One Carmelite nun who was especially proud of this was Bishop Carroll's niece, Sister Ann Louis Teresa (Anna Louisa Hill), who remained at Hoogstraet. In a letter to the bishop in early August, 1790, she wrote, "I am glad our Holy Order is the first!"

During their stay at Port Tobacco from 1790 to 1831, the Teresians received 31 women into their community. Then, in 1831, at the request of Archbishop James Whitfield, they moved to Baltimore in northern Maryland. Years of struggle followed, but the very pains seem to have strengthened them in the true spirit of St. Teresa. (After the nuns' departure from southern Maryland, the Port Tobacco Monastic buildings gradually fell into decay. In the mid-1930s, however, an interested group named the Restorers of Mount Carmel promoted the rehabilitation of this landmark. Then in 1976 a new Carmel called the Carmel of St. Joseph was set up there. It was formally established on May 28, 1989.)

Carmelites spread their order by founding "daughter" monasteries. Of the more than 60 Carmelite monasteries in America today, more than two-thirds of the communities trace their origin to Port Tobacco-Baltimore. One of them is Rochester's Monastery of Our Lady and St. Joseph. The Rochester Carmel is this year observing not only the order's bicentennial but its own 60th birthday.

The devout third bishop of Rochester, John F. O'Hern, invited the Philadelphia Carmel to make the foundation. At present its address is 2931 Jefferson Road in the town of Pittsford. However, the original convent, into which the nuns moved on June 19, 1930, was at 151 Saratoga Ave. in downtown Rochester.

All five of the founding Carmelites came from the Philadelphia monastery. They were fortunate in having as their first prioress venerable Mother Beatrix of the Holy Ghost (Camilla Josephine Magers,

1845-1839). Mother Beatrix was not only a capable and experienced administrator — she entered the convent at Baltimore in 1868, and became associated with nuns of the second American generation — but she also came deeply imbued with the Teresian customs brought over from Hoogstraet. Even in subsequent years of change, the Rochester Carmelites have taken pains to preserve these traditions. On June 18 of this year, Bishop Matthew H. Clark presided at the convent's celebration of both its American bicentennial and its own 60th anniversary of foundation.

St. Teresa ruled that monasteries of her nuns have no more than 21 members. The vocation is a difficult one, so it is important to maintain a "family" spirit. The Pittsford Carmel has had as many as 19 sisters; today there are 14.

Some people, even Catholics, ask cloistered nuns, "What do you do all day?" St. Teresa would have replied that in our turbulent world, somebody must be delegated just to do penance and pray. Cloistered nuns are like Moses, praying with raised hands on the mountain top while the battle rages in the valley below. Today's cloistered nuns can say, with that other contemplative, St. Therese of Lisieux, "In the heart of the Church I will be love."

However secluded from the world, contemplative monasteries are spiritual powerhouses. Ambrose Marechal, the third archbishop of Baltimore, implied as much when he wrote of the pioneers of Port Tobacco, "They lead such holy lives, these virgins of St. Teresa, that I can scarcely believe there exists in the whole Catholic world a house of their Order where piety and monastic discipline are better observed."

Rochester's Carmel rejoices, then, in prayerful service that the Discalced Carmelite nuns have rendered both locally and nationally over the past many years. As for the future, Mother Mary of the Holy Ghost, prioress of the Rochester monastery, says, "We beg of God to help us continue our hidden life of unceasing prayer for all the needs of our diocese and for the whole world."

To that I respond, Amen.

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