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Monks

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Fifty years of devotion

To the general public, the monks in Livingston County are probably best known for their Monks' Bread — they produce 35,000 to 40,000 loaves each week for stores in New York and surrounding states. People who visit the abbey for retreats or day trips are struck by its peaceful spirituality.

Belonging to the worldwide Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, the monks are more commonly known as Trappists. Their influence stems from St. Benedict who, in the early sixth century, established a rule that was picked up by most monasteries in the Western Church.

The term "Cistercian" came about in the 11th century and symbolized Benedictine monks who value poverty, working to support themselves, a separation from worldly affairs, group and individual prayer, and reading. The term "Trappist" is derived from the monastery of la Trappe, France, which led a 17th-century reform to return to the ways of the early Cistercians.

In 1951, Trappists arrived in Piffard to form Christ the King Monastery as a daughter house of Abbey of Gethsemani, a Trappist monastery in Kentucky. Two years later, the rapidly growing community was elevated from the status of priory to abbey and given the new name Our Lady of the Genesee, later known as Abbey of the Genesee.

The abbey is one of 17 Trappist monasteries of monks and nuns in the United States — 12 for men and five for women. It's located on River Road, just off Route 63 near the hamlet of Piffard — about four miles north of Genesee and walking distance from the Genesee River's eastern bank. The 2,000-acre compound contains the chapel and gatehouse (reception area); bakery; monks' residence; retreat house; two houses for visitors; and considerable farmland. Save for the chirping of birds and an occasional car pulling up the driveway, the area is noticeably quiet.

Father Steger recalls a not-quite-so-serene setting when he arrived in Piffard on a blustery Oct. 31, 1951, shortly after the monastery had been established.

"It was a day right out of the apocalypse, the wind was blowing so strong. It looked like one of those bombed-out cities in the war," he said, describing the semi-constructed buildings.

The abbey's bakery began operation in 1955. Several other expansions have taken place over the years, including a new chapel and gatehouse in 1975. The chapel features a striking stone interior and a seating capacity for nearly 100 visitors, who sit across from the monks.

All monks dress in habits of white robes and black scapulars. Until the late 1960s, they were divided into choir monks, who dressed in white and were generally priests or en route to the priesthood; and lay working brothers, who dressed in brown or black robes and were designated for manual labor.

As many as 75 men have lived at the abbey at one time. That total had slipped to below 30 by the time Abbot Bamberger came in 1971 from Gethsemani. Currently 42 men strong, the community of monks and novices range in age from 25 to 95.

"The median age is 61 and has remained pretty stable," remarked Brother Augustine Jackson, OCSO, 50, the abbey's media representative. "We get a healthy number of younger candidates in a steady stream and



Abbot Bamberger presides over afternoon Mass at the abbey May 3.

Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

sometimes they persevere."

Only about one-quarter of the monks go on to the priesthood, Abbot Bamberger said. "Becoming a priest involves considerably more study, intellectual work, preaching, counseling, and teaching in addition to the manual labor," he explained. "You have to have, first of all, a call for that — and the ability for it."

Yet in the true spirit of community, Father Wentz said, there is no rift between priests and brothers. "I would see myself as a monk who is a priest, rather than a priest who is a monk," he remarked.

The Abbey of the Genesee's influence has spread to other countries: the abbey founded a daughter house in Brazil, in 1977; and in Nigeria, in 1981. Several monks from Piffard have gone to these countries for long-term assignments, helping native monks establish communities.

A global presence exists back in tiny Piffard as well. "This is a special pilgrimage site for some folks, especially from Far East countries. But they come from across the country as well," Brother Jackson said. He estimated that the abbey hosts 200 to 300 visitors per week.

The monastery is open daily from 2 a.m. to 7 p.m. The public is invited to join the monks in prayer and song during these hours, including daily Mass. The Masses are offered at 6 a.m. on Monday, Tuesday and Friday; and at 4 p.m. on the baking days of Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday. The lone Sunday Mass is at 9:45 a.m.

Visitors can also stroll the Abbey of the Genesee's spacious grounds, or relax in the library where they may sample a wide array of religious books that are sold along with religious tapes. The abbey's best-known product, Monks' Bread, is also available in the reception area.

There is no cashier for these purchases; buyers simply drop the appropriate amount of money through a slot.

A further connection between the abbey and the public began in 1992 when two lay programs were established. The Genesee Lay Contemplatives gather monthly in Piffard, and the Genesee Lay Contemplative Associates, a national coalition, meet once a year for retreat. Both programs are coordinated by Father Steger. These groups are devoted to ex-



Brother Augustine Jackson, OCSO, pauses near the graves of deceased monks who served at the abbey.

tensive prayer, meditation and reading in the Trappist tradition.

Despite these offerings, Father Steger cautioned that visitors should place limits on their ties to the abbey. "We don't want people to come here and avoid their own parish," he explained.

More about the abbey's history and activities can be found on its Web site at www.geneseeabbey.org. The site is maintained by Brother Anthony Weber, OCSO.

For a cloistered community, the Abbey of the Genesee maintains remarkably high contact with the public. This is due to the Benedictine emphasis on welcoming strangers, Abbot Bamberger noted.

"We like to share what we can without compromising our lifestyle," the abbot said.

Sacrifices, rewards

That lifestyle involves a rigorous schedule that may not be apparent from the outside. To begin with, the monks retire in early evening so they can arise beginning at midnight for their bread-baking and prayer schedule. They gather together for prayer nearly five hours each day, observing Mass and Liturgy of the Hours.

Liturgy of the Hours is a cycle of prayers that includes: *vigils*, at night; *lauds*, at daybreak; *terce*, at mid-morning; *sext*, near noontime; *none*, at mid-afternoon; *vespers*, in late afternoon; and *compline*, in early evening.

In addition, many monks throw themselves into farm work that includes maintenance of corn, peas, soybeans, wheat and sunflowers.

"We don't have the running around and ambition, and trying to get the other person's job to get ahead. But my goodness, there's a lot to do," Father Steger remarked.

As a cloistered order, the monks remain

on monastery grounds unless they have special permission, particularly for doctor visits. Their families may only visit a few days each year. Their free time is taken up not by television and VCRs, but instead by reading and individual prayer.

Though all the monks interviewed are quite articulate and were eager to discuss their vocation at length, Father Wentz said normal daily conversation is restricted.

"To escape from what we should be doing, that's what we try to avoid," he said. "There shouldn't be any chit-chat conversations. If you do talk, it's about work, spiritual life or somebody going through a hard time."

And there are indeed days when monks experience hard times, acknowledged Father John Denburger, OCSO.

"People put us up on a pedestal as if we're not human," remarked Father Denburger, 64, a former diocesan priest from Allentown, Pa., who came to Abbey of the Genesee in 1987.

Like any other group of people, Father Denburger said, the challenge of blending diverse personalities is ever present.

"It takes a lot of grace and will power. We're so different — we have PhDs, GEDs," said Father Denburger, who serves as the abbey's prior, or second-in-charge.

"People come in this place with their baggage and don't leave it at the gate," Father Wentz added. "There are days I don't want to get out of bed, don't want to pray, or I feel lousy. Or a brother is feeling lousy, and you start to feel lousy."

Yet it's at those times, Father Wentz said, when prayer provides the greatest benefits.

"That's when you meet God honestly," Father Wentz said. "What you can have is a better self-awareness because you have time for prayer and reflection. You get to see the divine. You learn to become very creative and learn, hopefully, to mature."

A common escape in society, Father Wentz said, might be to go to a bar or a movie. Yet he and Father Denburger said they no longer miss such outlets.

"It becomes kind of alien," Father Denburger said.

Father Wentz, citing the negative messages sent by mass media, said he's glad to be separated from these influences. "People are so bombarded. To constantly be told this negative stuff, 'You're a loser until you buy this,' it takes a long time to believe you are good enough," Father Wentz commented. "I don't miss that at all."

Monastic living, on the other hand, provides the opportunity "to acknowledge your self-worth, your holiness, your ability in God's eyes," Father Wentz said.

These objectives have seemingly been reached by Brother Daly during his 50-year commitment to the monastery.

"I feel greatly blessed to have been able to serve the church. That's carried me through, that I've been doing something worthwhile — whether it was baking the bread or singing in the choir," Brother Daly said.

Father Steger, meanwhile, doesn't feel his spiritual formation is complete even after a half-century in Piffard. "You're always on the way. I hope that where I am, in God's sight, is where he wants me to be."

The devotion expressed by Brother Daly and Father Steger is obvious to the abbey's visitors, Father Denburger observed.

"Someone said to me, 'When I look over at this group of men, I see a love for Jesus Christ.' And it's very touching to hear that," Father Denburger remarked. "If you need validation, well, there it is."

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