

**on the MOVE**

# MERCY GIRLS MEET THE MONKS



Brother Augustine Jackson, OCSO, talks to students from Our Lady of Mercy High School at the Genesee Abbey in Livingston County May 3.

Needless to say, it's not every day that 25 eighth-grade girls cross paths with more than 40 monks.

Arriving at the Abbey of the Genesee on May 3, a theology class from Our La-

dy of Mercy High School laughed and chattered in the parking lot before entering the Livingston County monastery for their nearly three-hour visit.

Once inside, the students were quiet and respectful for their tour guide, Brother Augustine Jackson, of the Order of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance. He conducted a slide show documenting the abbey's 50-year history, and then led a spirited question-and-answer session.

When one of the students asked Brother Jackson what he misses most about life outside the abbey, he quipped, "Let's see. Maybe my grandma's cheesecake? Or my old girlfriends ... they're probably glad I'm here."

Brother Jackson offered a simple response on what influenced his decision to become a monk. He smiled, pointed skyward, lifted his head and said, "God."

Following the slide show, the Mercy girls attended 4 p.m. Mass in the monastery chapel, where they sat across from the other Trappist monks who reside at Abbey of the Genesee. After Mass, the girls met some of the 42 monks in the monastery's main corridor.

That's where they also made numerous purchases of the famous Monk's Bread.

"I thought they'd be quiet and not talk very much," Kristin Garbarino, 13, a parishioner at Holy Spirit in Penfield, said of the monks.

"I always pictured them as being very serious," said Sara LaFauci, 14, from St. Mary's Parish in Rochester.

In truth, only designated monks such as Brother Jackson are allowed to speak at length with the public. For the most part, the students learned, Abbey of the Genesee monks adhere to a strict lifestyle:

They pray at regular intervals, several times per day. Their conversation among themselves is limited. They may only leave the abbey's grounds for doctor's visits or emergencies. Their families are only permitted to visit a few days each year. They go to bed in the early evening and begin working as early as midnight in the abbey's bakery. Their free time is devoted

to reading and prayer. Television, radio, movies and other forms of entertainment are not permitted.

Abbey of the Genesee is among several cloistered, or secluded, communities in the United States that follow a Benedictine spirituality. Some of these monasteries are made up exclusively of women; for instance, in May 2000 the *Catholic Courier* profiled a young woman from Spencerport, Sister Myra Hill, OSB, who had taken up residence at a monastery in New Mexico.

The Mercy students concluded that monastic communities are intriguing, but that they'd struggle adapting to that lifestyle. Though struck by the abbey's peacefulness, Sara admitted, "I think I'd miss the outside world."

"You don't meet new people," added Tara Zempel, 14, who also said she'd find it especially hard to be separated from her family.

Joelle Cort, 14, knows what she'd miss most about living a cloistered life: "Boys."

"It might be nice to live like that, but just for a little while," added Joelle, from St. Joseph's Parish in Penfield.

Lauren Garbarino, Kristin's twin sister, said she "couldn't be cut off from the world." However, she has great respect for the men who have made this commitment.

"It was their calling, they were called to this. There has to be a sign (from God)," Lauren said.

"They seem like they really love what they're doing," remarked Tara, from Perinton's Church of the Resurrection.

Sara said she wouldn't mind spending an entire day at Abbey of the Genesee "just to see how they live." However, asked if she'd be willing to get up to begin bakery duty in the middle of the night, Sara hesitated and said, "Not really. Maybe just around breakfast time?"

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