

Monk seeks hard work and heaven

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

As a teenager, Stephen Muller was torn between becoming a priest and becoming a farmer. At age 40, he's decided to be both.

Born near Porterville, Calif., Brother Muller has spent almost as much time in monasteries as out of them on a journey that eventually led him to enter the Abbey of the Genesee in Piffard. His travels in the wider world now ended, the brother will take his solemn vows on Dec. 26, the feast day of St. Stephen, and spend the rest of his days at the monastery as a Cistercian of the Strict Observance, or Trappist.

"My path here was kind of windy, but I really think that each place was where God wanted me at the time," Brother Muller said. "They weren't wrong turns."

Among his duties at the abbey, Brother Muller works on the monastery's farm, logs its woods, serves as master of ceremonies for liturgies, and works as assistant manager of the famed bakery, which produces Monks' Bread. Brother Muller has lived at the abbey since June of 1999, and said he may be ordained a priest within two years. However, he emphasized that he will remain a monk regardless of whether his order eventually chooses him for priestly service.

"The main focus, at first, is to be a monk, and priesthood is the icing on the cake," Brother Muller said.

Brother Muller grew up the youngest of 10 children in a farming family he described as religious.

"Every night, my dad would kneel down and lead us in the rosary," he said. He added that his parents stocked their home with books on the saints and other spiritual topics, and that his father always spoke highly of the religious and ordained life. By the time he got out of high school, he knew he wanted to be a priest, though he added that he also loves hard, manual labor, and strug-



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

Brother Stephen Muller will take his solemn vows at the Abbey of the Genesee Dec. 26.

gled with leaving farm life behind. He first studied to be a priest for the Diocese of Fresno, Calif., where he fulfilled his urge for manual labor by fixing other seminarians' cars.

"One of the priests on the faculty said I had a black thumb," he recalled.

Toward the end of his fifth year in seminary, Brother Muller said he felt God calling him to the monastic life. He noted that monasteries attracted him because they are places where one is encouraged to totally focus on God.

"I found myself kind of weak in the face of temptations outside," he said. "I felt I was easily influenced. It's almost like I needed to be inside a monastery for my salvation. It's not because I'm stronger than other people, it's because I'm weaker than other people."

He entered a Trappist monastery in Utah, where he spent five years working in the fields, tending its cows, hens, cattle and also his own soul. He eventually left the monastery in search of an even stricter life, and entered a Carthusian monastery in Vermont. There, he went in a completely different direction than the one he had taken in

Utah, serving as a "choir monk" who focused on study and prayer.

"I liked the life very much, and when it came time for my solemn profession, I was looking forward to it with all my heart," he said. But the community thought he needed to grow more, and voted against accepting him as a permanent member, he said, noting the shock broke his heart. Although he realized that he and the Carthusian community were "not the right fit," it nevertheless was "like a real painful divorce."

He said he received a "double whammy" when the abbot at his former monastery in Utah refused to take him back, and then he felt like a "real loser." But he recovered from his discouragement with the support of family and friends. He decided to open himself up to whatever the future held, including marriage if that was God's will.

"I began traveling all over the place, visiting family members, friends and monasteries I had heard of," he said.

In a pickup truck, he drove through almost all 48 contiguous states, Mexico and Canada. During his sojourn, he stayed at the Abbey of the Genesee, and realized he had found, at last, his monastic home. However, before he permanently joined the monastery, he decided to see as much of the world as he could, and visited 24 countries. He traveled to such sites of reported Marian apparitions as Knock, Ireland; Fatima, Portugal; and Medjugorje, Bosnia-Herzegovina. He also rode a camel by the pyramids in Egypt and journeyed to his ancestral hometowns in Scotland and Germany.

In Germany, he saw the baptismal font used by his ancestors, and said he was touched to realize that their faith had been passed down to him. He also retained fond memories of meeting on the West Bank in 1999 a Palestinian man who introduced him to his pool-playing friends. They were at first suspicious of the American tourist, but eventually warmed up to him.

Brother Muller said he takes comfort in knowing that his long journey to his spiritual and physical home echoes those of many figures in church history.

"When you read the lives of the saints, a lot of them were screw-ups," he said. "But they made it through admitting their weaknesses and coming to realize how much they needed God. It's OK not to be a big success at everything you do because somehow God is going to supply (what you need). He's infinite."

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