

Monk journeyed from Hong Kong

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

PIFFARD — Cistercian Brother Gregory Chan Luen had to travel halfway around the world before he could finally settle in one place for the rest of his life.

Born in Canton, China, in 1946, Brother Chan moved to Hong Kong with his family when he was five because the communists had taken over the mainland.

"My grandfather was a rich man, and in those days a rich man was suppressed by the communists," Brother Chan said during an interview at the Abbey of the Genesee in Piffard, Livingston County. The monk is slated to make his final profession of vows to Cistercians of the Strict Observance on Ascension Thursday, May 29.

His parents were not religious before they moved to Hong Kong, he said, but there his father befriended a Jesuit priest from Ireland, and it was this friendship that began the Chan family's journey to conversion. Brother Chan remembered learning catechism from a nun and added that he and his sister became devout Catholics in no time.

"We were quite fervent — but I don't know why," he said. "Perhaps because we were children, and we wanted to do what our parents wanted."

Early in life, Brother Chan developed a devotion to Mary and served as an altar boy. As he got older, he also developed an interest in mathematics, science and the burgeoning computer industry. A self-confessed

workaholic, Brother Chan found he was ideally suited to the problem solving that was needed in the developing computer industry, and added that he was a trader as well. Helping to support his family, he never sought to marry. He said he does not regret this decision, joking that he loved math more than women.

Over time, however, another love began to stir in his heart, inspired by a vacation in Europe in the early 1980s. While touring France, he met a young man who told him about a place called Lourdes, site of a famous series of Marian apparitions to St. Bernadette in 1858.

"I said, 'Gee, I want to go there!'" Brother Chan recalled telling the young man. When he arrived in Lourdes, Brother Chan was struck by the prayerful atmosphere.

"I meet all kinds of people: Europeans, Asians, Africans," he said. "This impressed me very, very much."

What particularly impressed him was that they all were Catholics, and it brought home to him the universality of the faith in which he was raised. Lourdes also "set up a vision, a destination in my life," although Brother Chan said he wasn't quite sure what it was yet.

After returning to Hong Kong, the computer expert became interested in a group that met weekly for charismatic Catholic prayer devoted to Mary.

"I found there's a comfort, a peace there in a devotion to Our Lady," he said. "There is something deep in me,



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

Brother Gregory Chan stands on the grounds of the Abbey of the Genesee in Piffard May 8. He will make his final profession of vows May 29 as a Cistercian of the Strict Observance.

a connection to Our Lady, to God."

He added that he also found something else with the prayer group, which studied the Bible in addition to praying.

"I found with them how to find the Spirit within me," Brother Chan said. "This opened my eyes. I started asking: 'What is the meaning of my life?'"

As he grew more interested in the spiritual side of his life, he began exploring the vowed religious life, and became a Third Order Carmelite, or

lay person associated with the order, in the early 1990s. Brother Chan noted that his Carmelite spiritual director began talking to him about becoming a vowed religious, and he decided to explore various orders as well as the diocesan priesthood. After visiting a Cistercian monastery, he felt called to enter, realizing that he was "a thinker, a contemplative," and he joined the order in 1994.

Brother Chan also visited the Abbey of the Genesee in 1997. With his family scattered around the world now, he no longer had ties to Hong Kong and transferred permanently to Piffard in 2000. Currently, his duties are working in the abbey's accounting office, infirmary and bakery, and taking care of guest priests. He has also worked in the abbey's garden and on its land, clearing its forested area of vines. He noted that he would welcome being asked to become a priest, but pointed out that it is up to his community to call him.

Spending his days and nights at the abbey brings him both community and solitude, Brother Chan concluded, adding with an apparent sense of wonder at how he arrived there: "The whole process is pure grace."

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