



CISTERCIAN ABBEY OF OUR LADY OF THE HOLY CROSS

BERRYVILLE, VIRGINIA

Trappist monks like Father Edward McCorkell, 75, strive to erase “individuality,” only to be set more distinctly apart by the manner in which their vocations test them. Contemplative prayer deepens the gaze, and expands patience; opens the ear to the whisper of the heart and measures one’s stride as he walks with strangers; it shreds one’s pride and clothes one with dignity.

TRAPPISTS CHERISH ANCIENT TRADITION OF SELF SUPPORT

As members of the Cistercian Order have done for more than 900 years, Holy Cross Abbey’s 23 monks, whose ages range from 44 to 82, fill their days with prayer, work, study, and sacred contemplation. Though 13 of the monks are past 70, none is ill or requires nursing care. Each monk helps support the monastery. Each makes his way daily—to Vigils, Lauds, Mid-day Prayer, Vespers, and Compline in the simple, spacious chapel on the upper level; across the breezy cloister and down a narrow flight of stairs to the refectory; to one of six libraries, some with limitless views of the Blue Ridge Mountains; and to work.

Nevertheless, Abbot Robert Barnes realizes that the community must prepare and plan for the day that infirmity afflicts one or more of the monks, whose monastery has only two large dormitory-style bathrooms, one in each wing. “We don’t have the resources for 24-hour care,” says Abbot Robert. He has consulted with facilities in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area 60 miles distant for resident care, though the departure of a monk for care elsewhere would conflict profoundly with Trappist ways.

“In our tradition, you die in your monastery, very simply,” says Brother Benedict Simmonds, 63, who entered the monastery in 1983 after pursuing careers in horticulture and publishing. But the challenges of aging and infirmity can’t be ignored.

The brothers who founded Holy Cross in 1950 made a deliberate choice to live in poverty and simplicity; they constructed dormitories of unfaced cement block, and soon added a chapel and libraries. They relied on farming and baking for economic support and, with the help of benefactors, they paid off the mortgage in 25 years. In the 1970s, the monastery was enlarged, with wings added for a modern kitchen, refectory, and living quarters that give each monk a private room that holds bed, desk, night table and chair. “From one perspective, we weren’t really poor. Our spiritual training was that God takes care of things,” Brother Benedict says. There was no “retirement” plan.

As the number of monks grew fewer and uncertainty surrounded the economics of small-scale farming, much of the community’s 1200 acres were leased and the bakery became the primary means of support. In 1986, the community borrowed to build a Monastery Guest House, but found itself awash in a million-dollar debt. “We applied to foundations, borrowed from other monasteries, and were ‘adopted’ by generous benefactors,” says Abbot Robert. Concerned about future needs, Abbot Robert contacted the National Religious Retirement Office, which has provided several grants for feasibility studies at the monastery and a \$150,000 grant to seed a retirement fund. “It stretched us to work with NRRO,” Abbot Robert says. “But it was fruitful.” In 1993, with financial help from four other abbeys, Holy Cross entered the Social Security system.

In 1999, elevators were installed near the chapel and the infirmary, but the monastery still doesn’t have a “master plan” for caring for frail, elderly monks, nor is it user-friendly for the monk who might be restricted to a wheel chair. “For humanitarian reasons, facilities for the older brothers must be upgraded,” says Brother Benedict.

But it’s late in the day and another tradition calls. Brother Benedict retreats to the lush butterfly garden that overlooks the cloister. At the appointed hour, he returns to the wardrobe and exchanges boots for sandals. In the sacristy, he retrieves his cowl from a row of pegs and slips into the chapel.

Does he find peace in this simple life, with its inescapable poverty and certain insecurity? Brother Benedict smiles. “If we’re fully committed to the search for God, it’s transforming. That reads like peace sometimes.”



Members	Median Age	Members Past Age 70	Annual Retirement Costs	Average Individual Cost of Care	Individual Social Security Benefit	Supplemental RFR Grants	Basic RFR Grant
23	69	13 (56%)	\$216,755	\$19,705	\$2,381	\$181,000	\$14,456

The bakery is the central industry that supports Holy Cross Abbey. Twice a week from January through September, monks prepare 450 fruitcakes. The recipe calls for two gallons of sherry, five bottles of brandy, 44 pounds of eggs, 100 pounds of nuts, 550 pounds of fruit, 20 pounds of butter, 40 pounds of dates and 80 pounds of flour. Soaking the fruits in sherry, mixing and baking the batter, and packaging takes three days. Preparing fruitcakes are Brother Joseph Vantu, 64 (left front), Father James Orthmann, 51 (standing), Brother Christopher Harmon, 49, and two guests of the monastery (right rear).

“Spirituality is exuding from everything. We retain that understanding on such a short term basis that we must constantly renew.”

Brother Stephen Maguire



“We were in bed in the third floor dorm when the fire started on the second floor. I grabbed a crucifix that the abbot had just that day blessed for me for a ‘happy death.’ The heat in the stairwell was incredibly intense. I hung out a window and dropped 15 feet to the snow.”

Brother Edward McLean, 80, remembering March 21, 1950, when fire destroyed his Rhode Island monastery

“Fascinating trifles keep young people from the Lord.”

Brother Gerald Giblin, 79

ORIGINS

Cistercian Trappists are members of an enduring order and descendants of Saint Benedict, who lived in the sixth century and whose Rule for Monasteries shaped Western monasticism. For five centuries there were accretions and elaborations in monastic life. In 1098, a group of Benedictines returned to the simpler life described in the Rule. In the wake of the French Revolution when all religious institutes were suppressed, 20 monks set sail for North America. Most returned to Europe after Napoleon’s defeat; one remained and established a foundation in Halifax that grew to embrace 45 monks. Fire destroyed the monastery and devastated the community; and in 1900, the 12 remaining monks resettled in Rhode Island, where they constructed a new monastery from granite quarried on their land. By 1948, their community had grown to 137 members; but another fire left the community homeless.

The Rhode Island community would be re-established at St. Joseph’s Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts; however, 30 monks left Rhode Island for Berryville, Virginia. They founded Holy Cross Abbey in a fieldstone house that had been built with slave



“The bakery was prayerful work. Here, the intellectual challenge is so great, you have a hard time letting go,” says Brother Barnabas Brownsey, 67, who manages the computer system database that tracks bakery orders and allows for direct mail to 43,000. “Part of your mind continues to churn away. When the solution comes, it breaks through to the conscious, usually during Vespers, and your prayer is ruined. I’m told ‘It’s your cross.’”

labor 160 years earlier on land that was later bloodied by a Civil War battle.

Holy Cross Abbey is one of 12 Cistercian (Trappist) abbeys of men in the United States. Eight of these were founded after the Second World War. The Trappist vows of obedience, fidelity to monastic life (including poverty and chastity), and stability, link a monk with one monastery until his death.



Benefactors underwrote the publication of a portfolio of original photographs and interviews, says Brother Benedict Simmonds (above). Each copy is housed in a handmade box covered and lined with natural cotton and linen. Sale of *Conversatio* for \$1,000 a copy helped reduce the debt the community incurred when it built a guest house.



“It is for others to serve God, but for you to cleave to Him; it is for others to believe in God, to know, to love, to fear Him; but for you to taste, to understand, to apprehend, to enjoy Him.”

William of St. Thierry quoted in *Hidden with Christ: the vocation of the Cistercian monk.*



The chapel is always open at the 16-room Monastery Guest House, which is normally full to capacity. “I try to cultivate a spirit of quiet recollection,” says Guest Master Brother Stephen Maguire, 72, who welcomes guests, does routine maintenance, and carries out the monastic practice of spiritual reading at dinner.



“We don’t have the resources for 24-hour care. It stretched us to work with NRRO, but it was fruitful.”

Abbot Robert Barnes



In the monastery’s gift shop and information center, Brother James Sommers, 79 (above), a Civil War historian, works six days a week. Each year, more than 5,000 visitors come to the shop and purchase books and tapes, icons and rosaries, Trappist preserves, cheeses, chocolates, arts and crafts. Brother Gerald Giblin, 79 (page 6), enjoys a quiet moment in one of the abbey’s six libraries.

