

## LIFE AT THE ABBEY

The Abbey of Our Lady of the Genesee founded in 1949 when 580 acres was donated to the Gethsemane Abbey for a new community. In 1951, 21 monks and 16 lay brothers came to this farm and began the work. The first project was to turn a house which had become a large chicken coop into their first monastery called Bethlehem House. The upstairs was large dormitory with cloth partitions which provided space for 35 monks. Fr. Gerald was appointed the first superior and on May 26, 1951, he planted a cross on this property inscribed: "Foundation of the Monastery of the Blessed Virgin Mary of the Genesee...May God be glorified in all things. Serve the Lord with gladness."

The original intent was to support the new foundation through dairy farming like the monks of Gethsemane, Kentucky. The original monks had brought dairy cows with them and a large milking barn was among their first building projects. One of the brothers however was a very good baker and often his bread was given to volunteers who helped the community with special projects. Soon people began to ask if they could by extra 2 pound loaves and by 1953 a separate bakery was set up and Monk's Bread made its commercial debut. The bakery grew to the point that a new one was built in 1956 and for a time, the brother's recipe was franchised to other commercial bakeries until the bread was sold nation-wide. (There are no more franchises, so Monk's Bread is only sold commercially from Cleveland to New York City.)

The year 1953 was significant because at that point the monastery had grown to the point that it became an abbey, independent of Gethsemane. The numbers of monks and brothers grew and several adjoining farms had been donated or sold to the new abbey, significantly increasing their land. It also meant that the growing number of monks and brothers were scattered over different houses, all of which had been designed to house farming families, not monks. The herds were also increased as were the crops needed to feed them. In the meantime, the bakery grew.

In 1955, Dom Gerald, the first abbot died and Dom Walter was elected. The community continued to grow and by 1960, the cow herd was sold off and the abbey depended solely on its bread for financial support. The first abbot had asked the students of the Architectural School of Catholic University to create a design for the new abbey

The mid 1960's were difficult for the abbey. The changes of the Second Vatican Council were very hard for the abbot to accept, so he was removed in 1964 and Dom Jerome was elected in his place. His task was to combine the monks and brothers who previously had been almost two separate groups: the monks and the brothers. The monks (most of whom were also priests) celebrated Masses, sang the Liturgy of the Hours 7 times a day in Latin, spent time in study and worked only in between these other obligations. The brothers (who were not priests) attended daily Mass and only some of the significant times of prayer so that they could devote themselves to the work that supported the rest of the community.

As a result of the reforms after the council, monks and brothers were combined into a single community each with similar roles of work, study and prayer (all in English). Many found the changes difficult and between 1963 and 1970, the community shrunk from 70 to 29; most decided to leave, but a few had also died. In 1971, Dom Jerome retired and Dom John Etude was elected. The abbey adopted a monastery in Nigeria in 1981 which has since become an independent Trappist Abbey and helped found another monastery in 1988 in Brazil. That community is now the Abbey of Novo Mundo.

Today, the community consists of 34 (15 are priests, 19 are not) and 24 are buried in their abbey cemetery since the community was founded in 1951.

Traditionally, monasteries of monks and cloistered nuns gather to pray at seven different times each day. (Psalm 119:164 says: Seven times a day I praise you...) They begin their prayer sometime during the

night, so that if Christ returns they are ready and watching as He had commanded. Prime or the first hour is anywhere between midnight & 3 am. Lauds or Morning Prayer is at 5am around dawn. Terce – the third hour of the day (9am); Sext – the sixth hour (noon); and None – the ninth hour (3 pm) are times of prayer during the day. Vespers or Evening Prayer is at 5 pm, usually around sunset and Night Prayer or Compline is around 7 pm ending the day. The prayerbook for all these times of prayer is the Psalter or Book of Psalms. During the course of the week and the different hours or times of prayer, all 150 psalms are prayed. Because this house bakes bread to support itself, another community and different charities, they have only five hours or times of prayer. The monks gather for: Vigils at 2 am; Lauds at 6 am; Sext at 11:15; Vespers at 4 or 4:30 pm and Night Prayer at 6:40 pm. All 150 psalms are prayed over the course of the week.

Bethlehem Retreat House, where I am staying, is an old, converted farm house with floors that tend to slightly wobble at anyone who walks over them. It was the original monastery, first used by the brothers when they came to found the new community. There is a communal bathroom on the first floor along with other guest rooms and a chapel. On the second floor there are 10 more rooms and a single bathroom. All the rooms are small, monastic like cells with sloping ceiling that rise from about 4.5 feet to 7.5 feet, with a small window. Each room has two fans, a desk fan and a ceiling fan which kind of makes me glad I did not come in August when it was warmer. The bed is a mattress on a 3x6.5 foot board.