



Nuns dedicated to silent prayer at picturesque setting here

by Doris Litscher Gasser

Midst the picturesque setting of the green grass and fertile soil of Sumpter, at the foot of a small hill, rests a community of Cistercian Nuns dedicated in silence to pray for mankind.

The 112 acres of land on Yanke Drive, where the Cistercian Monastery stands, was first claimed by William Johnson in 1839. "Uncle Billy Johnson" as he was lovingly nicknamed, had courage, zest for life and versatility to create a farm which became a hub of activity and influence in the Town of Sumpter. The farm was sold in 1907 to A.J. Dallman and was subsequently sold to several different owners until 1920 when it was sold to the "Rags to Riches" Governor Phillips.

The farm was a center of Splendor and attraction. In 1948 the farm was sold to Wilbur Grant, who founded a firm of certified public accountants and it continued to thrive as a place of grandeur.

After Wilbur Grant's death the farm was purchased by the Monastery of Frauenthal in Switzerland. It isn't hard to understand why this beautiful Little Switzerland setting was chosen to house St. Ida's Convent, as it was known at the time. The six Cistercian Nuns, members of the Cistercian Order, came from Switzerland and lived a life of seclusion and made farming their livelihood. The doors of St. Ida's were opened to admit young American women, who chose a monastic way of life, into their community.

It was in 1960 that a young lady, Genevieve Hannah, who came from Belle Fourche, S.D., the middle child in a family of nine, arrived at the simple austere monastery bewildered when she was greeted by a German speaker Sister, Mother Magdeline. Thirty-three years later Sister Paula, Genevieve Hannah, is still living in silence and serenity and now serves as Mother

Prioress in the cloistered community of 14 Sisters.

Mother Prioress greets outsiders in a special little room on the west side of the building facing the hillside. The greeting room is square with a high ceiling, oak frame finished doors and windows and a long table with a divider between the guests and Mother Prioress. A plate of homemade chocolate chip cookies and a pot of coffee await the guests. A large, simple wooden cross hangs behind the table on the plain cream colored wall.

Mother Paula was gracious and soft spoken and reviewed, "When I entered St. Ida's in 1960 the six founders from Switzerland and two novices from the United States made up the community. One of the novices, Sister Benedicta is still with us. She is our oldest member and I am the third oldest. Mother Roberts, the founding Prioress from Switzerland in 1957 went back in 1979. During the seventies, two by two, the founders returned to Switzerland. Three of them are still living in Frauenthal.

"This was a Convent named after St. Ida of Toggenburg, Switzerland. Then, in America, places where sisters lived were called convents. There were two things unsuitable about the name. Our monasteries in the Cistercian Order are always named after the Blessed Virgin and are not called convents.

"We are called monasteries because this is where sisters live a monastic life according to the Rule of St. Benedict. We were a non-profit organization named, Our Lady of New Frauenthal. Bishop O'Connor of the Diocese of Madison thought we shouldn't have a German name. In 1965, when a new building was constructed by Kraemer Brothers of Plain, we changed the name of the Monastery and of the corporation to 'Valley of Our Lady,' a loose translation of 'Frauenthal.'

"By the time I came, the Swiss sisters had already auctioned off the cattle and that's when we started making altar breads for a living. We make about 8,000,000 of the small wafers each year. They are made of flour and water. Unleavened bread was served at Our Lord's Last Supper and from a practical standpoint it doesn't get stale. The batter is put into large waffle-like irons. When they are finished the sisters take out the sheets which are brittle and fragile. They are put into a humidifier and softened so they can be put through the cutter. The orders are filled, put into plastic bags and into boxes for shipping via UPS to various churches throughout the state.

"Our order is international and we have our headquarters in Rome. The order has subdivisions called congregations. In 1982 we joined the congregation to which Frauenthal, our founding house, belongs. It's German speaking.

"We have directories of religious communities in the United States. If a young woman is looking for a community to join she goes through these books and if she feels attracted to Valley of Our Lady, she writes and I send her a brochure. If she is interested she writes again and I write and ask her to tell us more about herself. If she is still interested she will make a few days' visit and talk with me and the Sisters. The next step is to become a postulant.

"No, we don't have visitors very often. We finally established some norm for newcomers. We didn't have norms because distance usually took care of that. We had sisters from Switzerland, New York, and California. But, when we began to receive Sisters from nearer areas like Illinois, families naturally would ask, 'How often may we visit?' By the nature of our lives that shouldn't be too often. A young woman, as a postulant, may receive visitors twice a year. We

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figure it takes about one year to make the initial adjustment and to learn to live in the community and learn the work that they are assigned to do. They begin to read and understand Latin because our choir prayer is sung in Latin. They have to learn the history of the order. If the young woman asks to continue in this life we have council members who vote on her. If she is accepted we have a ceremony in our chapter room. We give her a habit. That is when I give her a new name. She is dressed all in white.

"She then begins a year of more intensive training. Sister Bernarda directs the newcomers. The Novice learns about the vows that she is preparing to make and continues the studies she has started. During this year she doesn't receive any visitors at all and she doesn't even come to the parlor if we have a community guest. At the end of the year, if she asks to make first vows, the solemnly professed members of the community vote. She then makes vows for three years. After these three years, she

may take her solemn vows and that's the only ceremony to which we invite people - the only ceremony done during the mass.

"During the time of postulancy and Novitiate the persons may leave at any time. Sometimes we have to ask them to leave, which we don't like to do."

Silent, serene, secluded, the monastery is inspiring to spirituality. A new day starts with the rising bell at twenty minutes to four. The sisters are ready for their daily duties which they carry out in a meditative spirit of inner joy. By 4 a.m. they are in the chapel singing psalms of praises. Then, there is a free period during which time the sisters can get their rooms in order.

Each Sister has her own simple room without frills to distract them. There is a single bed, a desk, closet and small sink. Free time is for individual reading, praying or a stroll outside. Each sister goes to the kitchen in silence to prepare her own breakfast, which is comprised of toast or cold cereal and

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Shown with big smiles at the Monastery of the Valley of Our Lady are, left to right: Jana Huff, postulant; Mother Paula; and Sister Stephanie (in her work garb). Photo by Doris Litscher Gasser

Busy schedule

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coffee. The next hour is devoted to study, reading and prayer.

At 7:45 the bell rings and the sisters gather together again for a brief prayer and then mass. Father Joseph Henry, a retired priest from Baraboo, comes to offer mass every morning. Following that, Mother Prioress makes the announcements for the day. She explained, "We also pray for our deceased benefactors who have helped us. We pray for them not only when they are alive but after they have gone into eternity."

At 9 a.m. the sisters begin work or classes. The novice mistress is in charge of instruction for newcomers. Sister Paula, as people outside of the community know her, is now teaching classes on sacraments and the vows. There are many areas to study, history of the church, the order, liturgy, theology, scripture, all of which help the sisters to have a better monastic life.

Twelve noon is dinner time. Mother Paula explained, "We don't

eat meat on Wednesdays, Saturday, Fridays, and not at all during Lent and Advent. Our dinners consist of meat, cheese or eggs, potatoes and vegetables. I change the cook every January." After dinner some of the sisters wash dishes, some are busy in the bakery and some have time for prayer and study. Mother Paula takes care of the mail.

The prayer time bell rings at 3:15, followed by singing practice. Then, there is a half an hour of recreation time. This is a time the sisters are together and can converse with one another while they take care of their gardens, rake the leaves or shovel snow. At 4:15 the sisters are back at their duties, which includes cleaning the bakery.

At twenty to six the bell rings for Vespers. Six o'clock is supper time. Supper includes food like bread, butter and jelly or maybe a piece of pie. Some sisters are assigned to take care of the dishes while there is free time for others. Mother Paula enjoys going for a walk.

At 7:00 the bell rings for the final group prayer of the day known as Compline. By 7:30 the day is



over and the sisters are free for private prayers and study and retire to their rooms for a peaceful night of sleep to prepare for another glorious day.

Mother Paula explained: "This life isn't for everyone. We have to have a calling. We do as little as possible on Sunday. The prayers are a little longer. We keep it as quiet as we can. We are happy to get some quiet time on Sunday."

The fact that enthusiasm for the spiritual quiet life at the Monastery of the Valley of Our Lady is growing is reflected in the need to build an addition to the monastery.

Mother Paula pulled back the curtain on the window of the north side of the room and explained, "We are making an addition with eight new rooms. Construction is just started. It has been like mud village out there. Sister Roberta is in charge of communicating with people to inform them of the necessity for the addition and that they are welcome to help with prayers or financially, if they desire.

"We are just about doubling the length of our present newest building. The downstairs section of the

addition heading northward is just one story and it is the area totally designed for the making of altar breads. We are getting some new and updated equipment. We will have a computer room because the business of making our altar breads is all done on computers. A section of the building where we excavated some of the hillside away will include two larger than ordinary sleeping rooms for sick or elderly sisters to be cared for. There will be a room for attendants and a little supply room. We hope we won't have to use those rooms for quite a while.

In conclusion, Mother Paula kindly shared some thoughts: "The few times it is necessary for me to go out for medical or other purposes, every place I go there is this loud noise that is supposed to be music. I don't know how people can stand it. If people could teach their children to get some quiet in their lives and have time for reflection, time for prayer and thoughtful reading, they would find it enriching. I know that is difficult. We are organized so we can pray. But, God is always there and we can always talk to God in our hearts as we go about our duties. A lot of things can be accomplished only by prayer. If there were more prayer we could work toward resolving our country's problems and our world's problems. That would be wonderful."

Valley of Our Lady Monastery membership includes:

Solemnly Professed: Mother Paula Hannah, Belle Fourche, S.D., prioress; Sr. M. Bernarda, Kansas, City, Mo., sub-prioress; Sr. M. Benedicta, Brooklyn, N.Y., host cutting; Sr. M. Josepha, Watkins, Minn., altar-bread baking correspondence; Sr. M. Dolores, Brooklyn, N.Y., treasurer, seamstress; Sr. Margaret Mary, Bloomington, Ill., batter maker, altar-baker and care of bakery; Sr. M. Roberta, Toledo, Ohio, guest mistress and fundraising; Sr. M. Gertrude, Franklin Park, Ill., cook; Sr. M. Stephanie, Richardton, N.D., altar-bread packing; Sr. Marie Gabriel, S. Pasadena, Calif., battermaker and refectorian; and Sr. Anne Marie, Mendota, Ill., sacristan and altar-bread baker..

Simply Professed: Sr. M. Juliana, Lancaster, Mass., laundress, and altar-bread packing.

Postulants: Jana Huff, Denton, Tex., priest host, cutting, lawn mowing, etc.; Sue Guyette, Fullerton, Calif., altar-bread packing.

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