



A Little-Known Story: The Monastic Converse Brothers

August 2008

Dear Friends of Clear Creek Monastery,

They are the silent figures that fill the background of every monastic adventure, the humble laborers, who hoisted the stones upon the walls of the great Abbeys and tilled the fields of much of Europe. They are rare survivors of a Catholic Christian Christendom and a calmer age, the stuff of legends and of tall-tales — and yet, all in all, they are still today a very real part of the rich history of the religious life. We call them, unpretentiously enough, “the Brothers.” Rarely has their history been documented.

In the early days of the monastic life — in Egypt for example, in the fourth century — very few monks were Priests, very few did studies as we think of them today. Even in the monasteries of Saint Benedict, during the sixth century, most of the monks accomplished a great deal of manual labor and there was no clear distinction between those who came to the monastery with a classical education and those who were without letters.



Harvest time at Clear Creek Monastery.

It was around the year 1100 that a new group began to appear in most of the religious orders that had taken shape in Europe. Often referred to as *conversi* (“converse brothers”) or *barbati*, because they wore beards, these men began to live side by side with the Choir monks (who were increasingly absorbed by the liturgical life), accomplishing the more material tasks, but in an authentic monastic spirit. What emerged was a true *symbiosis*, a complementary life-style that considerably

enriched the monastic experience. As time went on, the converse brothers were allowed to make vows like the Choir monks and eventually gained full recognition among the members of the monastic community, only differing from the others in that they do not undertake ecclesiastical studies in view of the priesthood, nor do they have the obligation to recite the entire Divine Office, when outside duties require their attention.

Foundation for the Annunciation Monastery of Clear Creek

5804 West Monastery Road • Hulbert, OK 74441 • Phone: (918) 772-2454 • Fax: (918) 772-1044 • www.clearcreekmonks.org

The decline of the Brothers in almost all the religious orders of the Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council has led many to believe that the Church has somehow suppressed them. In fact, both the texts of the Council and of several discourses of Pope John Paul II



prove the contrary (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 10-15; *Allocutions of John Paul II*, 24 Jan. 86 and 22 Febr. 95). From the time of Blessed Pope Urban II (1088-1099) until the pontificate of Blessed John XXIII no less than sixteen Popes wrote encouraging words about the Converse Brothers. Here is what Blessed Urbain II had to say in 1091:

As for Us, We judge worthy of praise this life and this custom, which We have been able to see with Our own eyes; We esteem that this life is very worthy to continue to exist always, because it has the mark of the primitive Church. . . (P.L. 148, 1407)

“ . . . for then they are true monks if they live by the work of their hands.” (*Rule of St. Benedict*)

At Clear Creek the Brothers are still a living institution without which the monastic life could not continue to flourish. We happily receive those who would embrace the pure monastic ideal, but who do not feel a call to the priesthood. Choir monks and Brothers are two facets of a same vocation. Abbot Paul Delatte, in his *Commentary on the Rule*, has captured, perhaps better than anyone else, the essence of the vocation as a Brother:

Their life is humble, silent, hidden, and more severe in some respects than that of the Choir monks. . . Their laborious days may easily become one long colloquy with the Lord; and the spectacle of such glad and peaceful fidelity is the most valuable of all their services. (chapter 57)

A Monastic Short Story: Building for only Ten Years

Given the relatively large number of Postulants coming our way, we must provide for temporary housing, once again! Yes, our new residence is filling up very fast, and we cannot think of building another permanent lodging for the monks until we complete the church. Therefore we are back to the business of temporary housing. The following account, written by our Father Subprior, is meant to give our Friends some insight into the modest labors of the monks behind the scenes of the big building projects.

When the residence building was close to completion, a set of small metal buildings appeared by its side, forming a square with the fountain at its center.



The beginning of the modular building.

This enclosed square is the cloister around which the monastic buildings stand, according to the traditional Benedictine plan. The story of these little structures, which we call modules is a short story within the big construction project.



Modular building nearing completion.

Beautiful and well designed as it is, the residence does not cover all the needs of our monastic life. Beside the church, we need storage rooms, shops like book binding, and a cloister. The modules give a temporary solution until we can complete the monastery in bricks.

The goal to attain was to have temporary structures that would be easy to build, solid, well adapted to our needs, durable but fairly cheap, and, this was the main point — easily movable. Despite some secondary variations, the modules have a metal structure in square tubing. They

look like 12 ft by 12 ft boxes with a single slope roof. They have an arch shape which allows monks to walk through them without having to step over any bar. Like construction toys, they can be put together, and form a gallery or a large shed with a two slope roof. One monk can easily move any of these modules. To move one of them, we simply place bars at the bottom across the sides. A skid steer goes partly under the module and lifts it with the forks. On a slab, as this happened, we use a pallet mover.

Once in place, the modules received a deck, plywood flooring, and siding. They stood in place despite the high winds of this winter.

Simple as they are, the 38 modules required time and skill to build. We benefited from the help of friends and of a neighbor who is a professional welder. The process began during the Work Day in March 2007. I remember meeting the welders and showing them the scale model made with matches. Once the basic structures were welded, monks and volunteers painted them, placed the tin roof and the wooden siding. College students placed the deck of the modules for the cloister in only three days during Holy week. We had the joy to have the first procession in the cloister on Easter Day.

This project does not lack moral lessons. Monks would not have been able to achieve it by themselves.

It was a team work which involved neighbors and volunteers. Each one of these structures is simple. It looks odd when alone, but when placed along others it can create a large building of harmonious shape. It is conventual by nature. When laid to form a cloister, the modules receive, as it were, a new nobility, they share in the sacred character of a House of God.



A little rest after hard welding work.

We hope not to need the modules for one thousand years. When the construction of the other buildings starts, we will move them and use them as shops or storage rooms. They will have accomplished their humble service.

In Our Lord and Our Lady,

br. Philip Anderson, Prior

br. Philip Anderson, Prior

Briefly Noted:

In order to worthily celebrate the Year of Saint Paul we have asked permission to celebrate a special High Mass on January 25 of next year, during which we hope to gain the Plenary Indulgence attached to this special Jubilee. We also plan to bring distinguished speakers to the monastery to deliver lectures on the Holy Apostle.

Many consultations are currently being held with respect to the construction of a beautiful monastic church, beginning, we hope, in 2009. We hope to be more specific in our next letter.



Preparations . . . for a day's work under Oklahoma sunshine.