

Mother  
*to* Mother



# Mother *to* Mother

Spiritual and Practical Wisdom  
from the Cloister to the Home

Mary Elizabeth Cuff, PhD

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To my mother, whose selfless dedication to the vocation of motherhood was, is, and will continue to be my best inspiration.



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# Introduction

“O pure and virgin Lady, O spotless Theotokos:  
Rejoice, O unwedded Bride!

O Virgin Queen and Mother, O dewey fleece  
most sacred: Rejoice, O unwedded Bride!

O height transcending heaven above, O beam of  
light most radiant: Rejoice O unwedded Bride!

O joy of chaste and virgin maids, surpassing all  
the angels: Rejoice O unwedded Bride!”

—from the hymn “O Pure Virgin” by Nectarios of Aegina

**O**n a crisp autumn day, a bunch of women from my Catholic mothers’ group were standing around one of our favorite meet-up spots, chatting while our kids whizzed around in the excitement of imaginative play. Suddenly, into the midst of this very ordinary playdate, strolled a Capuchin nun. She was the sister-in-law of one of the moms, home for a brief visit. I had recently published an article about the ongoing crisis of monastic life in the Church, so the two of us fell to talking about various reasons why many female monastic communities struggle to attract vocations. We agreed that modern people, even many faithful Catholics, have difficulty

imagining the life of a contemplative nun. Because these nuns live a life hidden away, it is easy to slip into the idea that they are completely detached from the rest of us and really have nothing to do with the world at all.

This is a particular issue for a contemplative monastic. Everyone loves nuns from the active orders who teach in schools, visit prisoners, or work as nurses. We can see them in action, and we know how—at least on the visible level—they fit into the larger world that we also know and occupy. They, for all their differences, have something that looks a bit like a career, so we know what sort of rubrics by which we can imagine part of their lives.

Cloistered and contemplative nuns, on the other hand . . . well, so many of us have no idea what they get up to in those monasteries all day long. It is difficult to shake the idea that they must levitate or spend all hours in the chapel on their knees. They might as well be from the Middle Ages, or live on the moon, for all we know about their world. “But really,” the nun at the playground said with a laugh, looking at all of us, “contemplative nuns are the stay-at-home moms of the religious vocation!”

The parallel struck me like a thunderclap. Just like the life of a cloistered nun, there is so much ignorance, fear, and dismissiveness about the life of a stay-at-home mother. When a friend of mine joined a convent, well-meaning people, even in her own family, could not help voicing their worry that she was wasting her talents and education. This was about the same time that another

friend of mine “got married too young” by her own parents’ estimation. Her parents were distraught by her plan to have a large family. They had hoped she would focus on her promising career and “get established” before pausing for motherhood down the road.

And then there is the similarity in the outside world’s attitude about what it is we do all day. Contemplative nuns are not shut-ins who have fled from all the world’s problems, nor are they oppressed women who need reformers to liberate them from their rules and enclosed walls. In fact, if you look at the history of many old religious orders, it is the nuns themselves who fought for their veils, their cloisters, and their charisms. Many of them carry on that fight today, in the face of a world—and sometimes even a Church—that does not understand why they want it all.

Similarly, many moms do not spend the whole day “babysitting” our own children, sighing after better government programs to liberate us from the “burden of childcare.” Those of us blessed with the privilege to stay home with our children are not victims of the so-called patriarchy. The fact of the matter is: both nuns, contemplative or active, and mothers, stay-at-home or working, spend a good deal of time doing vitally important work that no dollar amount could replace and nobody else could do. In other words, both nuns and moms are called to that sacred task of *motherhood*.

In his magnificent analysis of the modern family and the Church, *Familiaris Consortio*, Pope Saint John Paul

II emphasized the deep harmony that exists between the religious and married vocations. While the world might look at a nun and a mom and see two women who have chosen opposite lives, the pope explains that “virginity or celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of God not only does not contradict the dignity of marriage but presupposes it and confirms it. Marriage and virginity or celibacy are two ways of expressing and living the one mystery of the covenant of God with His people.”<sup>1</sup>

In other words, the lay mother with her children and the mother superior with her religious daughters are all walking in the same direction, their eyes on the same prize and their hearts pulled by the same desire. It is not a coincidence that the Church calls both of them *mother* and enshrines their vocations by means of vows not meant to be broken.

Amazingly, such is God’s beautiful plan for his children that, at the end of the day, the two vocations mystically become the same. Pope Saint John Paul II explains it better than I ever could: “in spite of having renounced physical fecundity, the celibate person becomes spiritually fruitful, the father and mother of many, cooperating in the realization of the family according to God’s plan.”<sup>2</sup> The enduring reality of God’s covenant is that it is always about family. The hermit alone in the desert, the homeschool mom who

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<sup>1</sup> John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*. [https://www.vatican.va/f/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_19811122\\_familiaris-consortio.html](https://www.vatican.va/f/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio.html).

<sup>2</sup> John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*.

never manages to find a moment alone, and everyone in between are all part of this beautiful reality: that God wills all of us to be part of His family. And because of that, we are all called to be mothers or fathers, in imitation of God our father and Mary our mother.

And that is the other connection between the contemplative nun and the mother: both of us can look to Our Lady as the perfect model of our own particular vocation. Mary is both the virgin, pondering God in the quiet cloister of her heart, and the *Theotokos*: the literal, physical Mother of God. As the virgin, Mary is the original and best nun, wrapped in contemplation of the presence of God. As the *Theotokos*, she is also the greatest mother, raising her divine son according to the majestic plans of God. She shows all of us women how best to live out each ancient vocation which the Church has offered us: the religious life of a nun and the married life of a mother.

While mothers and nuns both have Our Lady as our perfect role model, most of us often seek out the perspective of others in our own respective vocations. I am sure that mothers have been asking other mothers for advice since Eve got a daughter-in-law, but these days, when being a Christian mother is often seen as being counter-cultural, the support and perspective of fellow mothers is even more essential for many of us. I know I have benefitted from the wisdom and knowledge of my own mother, my mother-in-law, and the mothers in my own community. But what about asking the mothers

in the other vocation for advice? After all, as religious mothers, they have a unique perspective on our common call to motherhood.

Father John Hardon, SJ, the founder of the Institute for Religious Life, commented that, while there are exceptions that prove the rule, successful religious vocations by and large come from strong Catholic families that have provided good soil for their children's budding vocations.<sup>3</sup> Most monastics, therefore, have directly benefited from the nurturing influence of the married vocation through their parents. But it is a rare Catholic laywoman who knows a contemplative nun and can benefit from her insights and wisdom. Therefore, this book offers lay mothers the chance to meet and learn from mother superiors and nuns from five different monastic communities. These religious women have graciously shared their perspectives on common struggles and situations that confront both contemplative nuns and lay mothers.

This book is not just for one type of mother or stage of motherhood. I am writing from the perspective of a stay-at-home homeschool mom, but in the past, I wore the hat of a working mom in academia. The topics I have gathered are inspired by conversations with moms of all stripes who jumped at the opportunity to hear the insight of a contemplative nun about a struggle or concern close

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<sup>3</sup> See Fr. John Harden, *The Catholic Family and Vocations*. [http://www.therealpresence.org/archives/Family/Family\\_014.htm](http://www.therealpresence.org/archives/Family/Family_014.htm).

to their heart. I hope that you find the nuns' reflections as moving and inspirational as I found them.

Therefore, the book is not necessarily best read from cover to cover (though you can do that, too!). Rather than large chapters that might require more time and focus than you can manage right now, the book is organized by small topics that contain several related questions and respective answered reflections by one or more of the nuns who helped me with the book. Feel free to jump around and pick sections that might be close to your heart at the moment. Each individual topic is short enough to allow for a relatively quick read if you, like me, read in the tiny fragments of time you find in the corners of your day.

There are five contemplative monasteries who graciously offered their insights for this book. I would like to take a few pages to introduce you to these delightful religious women and their monastic communities. Just like lay mothers, these religious are unique from each other, with different charisms, styles, and emphases based upon the distinctives of their orders. Yet they are also very similar: they take their vocational calling deeply seriously and seek to answer the summons to spiritual motherhood. They seek to model our Mother Mary in their lives for the sake of the Church. Pray for many vocations to their orders and to all faithful religious communities. They pray for all of us wives, mothers, and families.

Woman's destiny is love. When she is loved, she is most completely herself, able to expand and unfold the riches of her being as a flower opens its full beauty only in sunlight. When she loves, she is exercising her great mission in life. And if love is the life work of all women, it is the particular vocation of the contemplative religious woman.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Mother Mary Francis, *Strange Gods Before Me*, Poor Clare Monastery of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Republished via Blurb, Incorporated, 2021. 85.



## CHAPTER 1

# Monasteries

### The Poor Clare Monastery of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Roswell, New Mexico

**M**other Mary Angela is the abbess of the Poor Clare Monastery of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Roswell, New Mexico. There are currently twenty-five of Saint Francis's Poor Ladies in the Roswell community, which has graced the New Mexico desert since 1948, when a group of Poor Clares from Chicago settled into an old farmhouse at the invitation of the bishop—who worried over the spiritual well-being of his “least Catholic” city. God has smiled on the faithful nuns in Roswell, who have been blessed with so many vocations over the years that they have founded six daughter monasteries across the world.

The Roswell contemplative Poor Clares seek to live out their charism to be a scriptural people by many customs woven into their monastic life. These customs have been handed down through the centuries and find their origin in the Rule of Saint Francis: “to observe the holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, by living in obedience, without

anything of our own, and in chastity.”<sup>5</sup> As contemplative Poor Clares, the nuns practice radical poverty within the confines of papal enclosure, which is the strictest form of cloistered monastic life, and which characterized the traditional Poor Clare life since the beginning of the order. Their habits are cut in the exact style of their saintly foundress: a rough gray-brown habit in the shape of a cross, the hem of which they often kiss because it is a sign of their consecration to God.

As a scriptural people, the Poor Clares take seriously their call to fulfill Christ’s articulation of family: “For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother.”<sup>6</sup> The nuns call each other sister because they are called both to be Christ for each other and to seek out Christ in each other. They are thus sisters and mothers in Christ. Their saintly founder, Francis himself, commented on the concept of being Christ’s mother: “he tells us that receiving the word of God in our heart, we ‘through love and a pure and sincere conscience bring Christ forth by a holy manner of life which shines as an example to others.’” This motherhood, the nuns explain, is most explicit in the role of their mother abbess, because she “is entrusted in a profoundly specific way with begetting and nourishing Christ in the souls of the sisters. So, she is called ‘Mother.’”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Pope Honorius III, *Solet Annuere*, *On the Rules of the Friars Minor*. <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/hon03/regula-e.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Mt 12:50.

<sup>7</sup> Community documents and self-printed pamphlets provided by the Roswell Poor Clares.

There are two particular mothers, other than Our Lady of Guadalupe, whom the Roswell Poor Clares especially revere. The first is the saintly foundress of the Poor Clares, Saint Clare herself, and the second is Mother Mary Francis, one of the foundresses of the Roswell community. Mother Mary Francis (1921–2006) was a talented poet, witty writer, and charitable defender of the ancient and living customs of the Poor Clares. Her first book on monastic life, *A Right to be Merry*, was the bestseller of 1956 and utterly smashes any idea that a cloistered nun is out-of-touch, dour, oppressed, or inhuman. Another of her books, *Strange Gods Before Me*, is a marvelous (and funny) take-down of many modern mental vices that can plague religious and laity alike. Mother Mary Francis's windows into cloistered life reveal women who are so wonderfully relatable because they are real women. Mother Mary Francis assured us that, "what is the perfection of womanhood in a married woman or a single woman in the world will be the perfection of womanhood in a sister in a convent or a nun in a monastery."<sup>8</sup>

Mother Mary Francis was entrusted with the important task of writing the updated 1981 Constitutions of the Poor Clare nuns of the Federation of Mary Immaculate in the United States, as was required by the Vatican after the Second Vatican Council. In an era of upheaval, when

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<sup>8</sup> Mother Mary Francis, P.C.C., "All the Days of Her Life." Self-published pamphlet by the Poor Clare Monastery of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

many orders worried that their age-old customs, habits, and charisms were archaic and not suited for the modern world, Mother Mary Francis wisely saw through the chaos and confusion. She knew that the modern world cried out for a sign of contradiction, a visible mark of religion, and the steady presence of physical symbols that underscored fundamental realities. She wrote lovingly of the cloister, the grille, the habit, the veil. Her Poor Clares sing the praises of their traditional Franciscan way of life: “Are customs stifling? Not if we understand them. And understanding them, we love them. We cherish them. We want to hand them down, perhaps sometimes altered, in essential meaning the same.”<sup>9</sup>

As for holy Mother Saint Clare, well, Mother Mary Francis described her spiritual mother best:

Saint Clare was a woman who seemed born for nothing else but to be cherished by others. No eighteen-year-old ever had a more dazzling future spread out before her. But Clare was not satisfied. Her woman’s breast held a poet’s heart of such capacity that nothing so small as a world could hope to fill it. Fashioned for loving and nothing else, to be one man’s wife was not her fulfillment. So she became the bride of God Himself. To mother

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<sup>9</sup> Community documents and self-printed pamphlets provided by the Roswell Poor Clares.

one family of children was not enough. So Clare hid herself in a cloister to mother all the world.<sup>10</sup>

## The Benedictines of Mary, Queen of Apostles in Gower, Missouri

Dedicated to the Queen of the Apostles, Mother Cecilia and her fifty-three Benedictine sisters look to Our Lady's hidden life in Ephesus as their model for life. "We take Our Lady's hidden life at Ephesus as an inspiration for our own. We seek to be what she was for the early Church: a loving and prayerful support to the Apostles, the first priests, and daily offer prayer and sacrifice for the sake of her spiritual sons."<sup>11</sup>

If anyone knows anything about Benedictines, it is their motto: *ora et labora*, "pray and work." The greatest treasure in the nuns' daily prayer life is the traditional Latin liturgy. Additionally, following the original Benedictine rule, the nuns chant all one hundred and fifty hymns each week and pray the Latin Divine Office together eight times a day. In choosing Latin, the official language of the Church, the nuns seek to continue in the footsteps of fifteen hundred years of Benedictine prayer.

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<sup>10</sup> Mother Mary Francis, P.C.C., "The Poor Clare Life." Excerpted from *A Right to be Merry*. Reprinted via Blurb, Incorporated, 2021 by the Poor Clare Monastery of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

<sup>11</sup> "Obedience." Benedictines of Mary Queen of Apostles. <https://benedictinesofmary.org/monasticvocation/>.

When the nuns work, they not only busy themselves with the daily needs of their monastery, which includes housework and farm chores, but they also produce and sell art to benefit the Church and support the abbey. Drawing from their practice of sung prayer, the nuns make sacred sheet music for church choirs, as well as recorded performances of their monastic chant and hymns. Additionally, following in the tradition of many a monastic artist, they paint and produce original artwork for religiously themed greeting cards and, most impressively of all, craft exquisite handmade vestments for priests. In all their work, the nuns are deeply committed to restoring beauty and giving God the glory. Finally, the nuns carry out the famous Benedictine commitment to hospitality. Also, in keeping with their charism, they operate retreat quarters, which are intended primarily for priests.

As abbess, Mother Cecilia shepherds her community in living out their distinctive Benedictine vows: obedience, conversion of life, and stability. By obedience, the nuns attempt a generous and humble death to self for the sake of following the desires of God. Conversion of life, as described by Pope Gregory the Great, means a radical surrendering of the self as a gift to God: “to leave the world and to give up exterior possessions is perhaps something still easy; but for a man to give up himself, to immolate what is most precious to him by surrendering his entire liberty is much more arduous work: to forsake what one has is a small thing, to forsake what one is, that

is the supreme gift.”<sup>12</sup> This vow calls the Benedictine to fully surrender to vocation, holding nothing back.

Finally, the Benedictine vow of stability is, as the Benedictines of Mary put it, a recognition that “home is where the heart is.” As part of their way of life, Benedictines practice constitutional enclosure, which means that nuns may only leave the cloister for important business concerning the abbey. Contained within this vow is the call to create and foster a family within the confines of the monastery. Benedictines vow to live out their days within a particular monastery, rather than transfer from one to another as one would a job. As the Benedictines of Mary describe this life, “A child is brought up in the home where she will live. So too, the novice is brought up within the family she has chosen, or more properly, the family which God has lovingly chosen for her, from all eternity. The Benedictine of Mary remains and perseveres with her new family. She seeks no other.”<sup>13</sup> The nuns visually signify this life-long commitment to their monastery by wearing beautiful lace wedding dresses and veils to make their vows.

As Benedictines, Mother Cecilia and her sisters follow in the footsteps of Saint Benedict and his twin sister, Saint Scholastica. Saint Scholastica, who could be called the mother of western monasticism, was described by Saint Gregory the Great as, “she who could do more because

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<sup>12</sup> “Obedience.” <https://benedictinesofmary.org/monasticvocation/>.

<sup>13</sup> “Obedience.” <https://benedictinesofmary.org/monasticvocation/>.

she loved more.”<sup>14</sup> In his account of the life of Saint Benedict, Pope Gregory told this story to demonstrate just how much Scholastica could accomplish with her love. She and her brother, Benedict, only visited each other once a year. To do so, they would leave their monasteries and meet in the middle at a little farmhouse. Once, as Benedict was getting ready to leave, Scholastica begged her brother to stay longer, but he refused. Scholastica put her hands together in prayer and immediately, a great lightning storm arose. Shocked, Benedict asked, “What have you done, sister?” And she replied, “Since my brother refused, I asked my God.”<sup>15</sup> The siblings visited together for the rest of the night. Only a few days later, Scholastica passed away. God rewarded her great love, and women from across the world have flocked to become her spiritual daughters for over fifteen hundred years.

The Benedictines of Mary, Queen of Apostles, are blessed with another holy mother looking over their monastic family. In 2023, the nuns discovered that the body of their community’s foundress, Mother Wilhelmina (1924–2019) was inexplicably incorrupt. Sister Wilhelmina was born Mary Elizabeth Lancaster in Saint Louis, Missouri. The descendant of black slaves, the future Benedictine grew up in the landscape of Jim Crow. Her parents founded a Catholic school for black children

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<sup>14</sup> Pope Gregory the Great, *The Dialogues of St. Gregory the Great*. Edmund G. Gardner, editor. Philip Lee Warner Press, (London: 1911), 95.

<sup>15</sup> Pope Gregory the Great, *The Dialogues of St. Gregory the Great*, 95.



that was eventually folded into the diocesan school system during desegregation.

Sister Wilhelmina joined the Oblate Sisters of Providence—a historically black order in the United States—immediately after high school. Unfortunately, her order, like so many in the second half of the twentieth century, abandoned their traditional way of monastic life. For years, Sister Wilhelmina was the lone sister in a habit—which she made herself. Finally, in 1995, as an elderly woman, she founded the community that would quickly become the Benedictines of Mary, Queen of Apostles, aided by the Priestly Fraternity of Saint Peter.<sup>16</sup>

A faithful adherent to the ancient traditions of the Church, Mother Wilhelmina and her witness to Christian unity and charity is a treasure in the crown of American Catholicism. While the Church has, as of the writing of this book, not yet made an official pronouncement on what appears to be her miraculous incorruptibility, several people who have visited her body at the monastery have begun to testify to miracles worked through her intercession. God willing, in a few years, the Benedictines can witness the canonization of their own spiritual mother.

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<sup>16</sup> Kelsey Wicks, “Who was Sister Wilhelmina Lancaster, whose body is now the center of attention in Missouri?” Catholic News Agency, May 24, 2023. <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/254413/who-was-sister-wilhelmina-lancaster-the-african-american-whose-body-is-potentially-incorrupt>.

## Holy Annunciation Monastery of the Byzantine Discalced Carmelites in Sugarloaf, Pennsylvania

Nestled into Pennsylvania's Pocono Mountains is a monastery where the two lungs of the Church, East and West, breathe as one. Holy Annunciation Monastery of the Byzantine Discalced Carmelites is led by its Foundress, Hegumena (abbess) Mother Marija. In the 1970s, Mother Marija and two fellow Roman-rite Discalced Carmelites answered the invitation of Byzantine bishop Michael Dudick to bring the Carmelite tradition to his eparchy (diocese) and become the first ever Eastern-rite Carmel. The monastery has been blessed with growth over the years, attracting entrants from around the world.

As Carmelites, the sisters practice solitude within the structure of community, adhering to Saint Teresa of Ávila's admonition that nuns should pray without ceasing. As Eastern Christians in communion with Rome, they worship using the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom as well as live by Eastern monastic practices, such as their traditional eastern monastic garb and monastic structures. Thus, while they are a branch of the great tradition of the Carmelites, they follow their own Typicon (constitutions) in the tradition of Eastern monasticism, which is not organized into specific religious orders. Rather, each monastery is its own "order,"

and any daughter community would function under a different Typicon. The monastery is also still part of the Carmelite Federation, however.

Their chapel, graced with its distinctive golden onion domes, was largely built by their own hands when the funding fell through for contractors to finish its interior. The walls and ceiling were lovingly covered with magnificent iconography by the hand of an Orthodox iconographer, Constantine Youssis. Constantine is also renowned among both Byzantines and Orthodox faithful as the painter of a miraculous weeping icon of the *Theotokos*, housed in Chicago.

To harmonize their eastern and western influences, the monastery also follows the rule of Saint Benedict of Nursia. Saint Benedict was a pre-schism era saint, cherished both by the east and west as the Father of Western Monasticism, who was deeply inspired by the Eastern Desert Fathers. The Byzantine Carmelites also draw inspiration from the Trappistine order in their mission to be “the link with the Great Undivided Church, when monastics were friends—brothers and sisters to each other.”<sup>17</sup> The sisters’ charism highlights unity between East and West, and they pray especially for the end of divisions in the Church and between Christians.

Following the ancient practice of monastics supporting themselves by their own hands, the sisters carry out

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<sup>17</sup> “Our History.” Holy Annunciation Monastery, Ruthenian Catholic Nuns. <https://www.byzantinediscalcedcarmelites.com/page3.html>.

a robust tradition of manual labor. They produce baked goods, yogurt, and preserves to sell through their Monastery Pantry, selling items both locally and online—and as my children will attest, their apricot rolls are a foretaste of Heaven! They are especially busy at Christmas and Easter, specializing in Eastern European pastries and festal breads. Additionally, facilitated by the fact that their monastery is built on a former farm, the nuns also run the Carmelite Mini Corral, where they breed and sell internationally acclaimed miniature show horses and miniature jersey milk cows, boasting a truly jaw-dropping trophy collection.

Mother Marija told me that her path to becoming a foundress of such a unique monastery was a series of “divine landmines.” God allowed explosions to occur throughout her more than seventy years as a professed religious. These explosions redirected her steps from her charted course until she found herself answering this call that was as deeply dear to her heart as it was entirely unexpected. In the uproar of the 60s, she was bounced from one shuttering Carmel to another, trying to live her vocation faithfully in a world where fewer and fewer of her fellow religious seemed to care anymore. From this chaos of disunity, her vision for Holy Annunciation Monastery was one of divine unity and harmony. The establishment of the monastery has been a project of deep faith and trust in God and His watchful care.

## Valley of Our Lady Monastery of the Cistercian Nuns in Prairie du Sac, Wisconsin

Sister Anne Marie is the superior of the Cistercian Nuns of the Valley of Our Lady Monastery in Prairie du Sac, Wisconsin, in the Diocese of Madison; the only monastery of Cistercian nuns of the Ancient Observance in the United States. The monastery was founded in 1957 by Swiss Cistercian nuns from the 11th century Abbey of Frauenthal, which also means “Valley of Our Lady” in German.<sup>18</sup>

Cistercians are an ancient off-shoot of the Benedictine Order: in the eleventh century, French Benedictines at the Abbey of Citeaux decided that they wanted to follow the rule of Saint Benedict even more closely to the original and organized their life around the *Carta Caritatis*, or “Charter of Charity,” which emphasizes manual labor and a life of prayer and austerity. One of the great Doctors of the Church, St. Bernard of Clairvaux—also called the “Honeyed Doctor” and the “Marian Doctor” because of his beautiful writings—joined the newly formed Cistercians and was a huge influence upon the order.

Saint Bernard of Clairvaux instilled a deep devotion to Our Lady as mother into his order, which added nuns to

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<sup>18</sup> “Cistercian Nuns Our History.” <https://www.valleyofourlady.org/frauenthal.html>.

their rapidly expanding numbers in the year 1125. One of Saint Bernard's nicknames is "Mary's Troubadour," due to his beautiful poetry and hymns in honor of the Mother of God. He particularly loved calling Our Lady the "Star of the Sea" and giving homilies on the topic of the Annunciation and Nativity. Once, according to tradition, Saint Bernard was kneeling in prayer before a statue of the Madonna and Child. This was a special sort of statue—one that was fairly common in the Middle Ages, but which has sadly been neglected in modern times. It is called a "Nursing Madonna" because Our Lady is depicted nursing Baby Jesus. Kneeling before this image, St. Bernard exclaimed, "Show yourself a mother!" The image immediately projected milk at him! According to some versions of the story, the milk sprinkled upon his lips; in others, it went into his eye. In all versions of the story, Our Lady's miraculous milk gave St. Bernard spiritual clarity and wisdom to sing the praises of the Mother of God.<sup>19</sup>

At the Valley of Our Lady Monastery in Wisconsin, the twenty-three sisters walk in the footsteps of St. Bernard and a thousand years of Cistercian monks and nuns. Part of the reform that led to the creation of the Cistercian order was a re-emphasis upon manual labor to support the monastery. As the nuns carry out their daily work, they remind themselves that "every work is

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<sup>19</sup> James France, "The Heritage of Saint Bernard in Medieval Art." *A Companion to Bernard of Clairvaux*. Brian Patrick McGuire, editor. (Brill: 2011), 330.

equally valuable if done in the spirit of service, obedience, and the love of Christ.<sup>20</sup> Labor is, of course, married to prayer. The nuns' day has nine discrete times set apart for prayer, not counting daily Mass. The nuns pray the Liturgy of the Hours in Latin with Gregorian chant.

In the initial years of the monastery, the nuns were also dairy farmers, since their monastery occupies the historic farmstead once owned by a former governor of Wisconsin. Alas, in the 1960s, a fire destroyed the dairy barn, then the largest in the state. Since the loss of their dairy, the monastery shifted to support themselves by baking hundreds of communion wafers intended for consecration at Masses across twenty-seven states.

The nuns carefully attend to the historic buildings of their monastic farmstead but have found that they cannot keep ahead of the maintenance needed for those nineteenth century walls. Additionally, while the contemplative Cistercian charism is to seek stillness and solitude, modern developments are beginning to surround the monastery. Thus, the nuns are engaged in a bold effort to construct a new monastery, built to purpose on a different, extremely rural property that will allow them space for the many vocations with which they continue to be blessed.

The new monastery, the nuns say, is intended to "be a witness to every dimension of our Roman Catholic faith: witnessing to Truth, Goodness, and Beauty; and to be the

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<sup>20</sup> "Cistercian Nuns Work." <https://www.valleyofourlady.org/cistercianwork.html>.

spiritual and moral necessity of building in a responsible and theological way through traditional forms of architecture.”<sup>21</sup> The nuns’ aim is to build according to the style of early Cistercian architecture, with low reliance upon modern technology. Sketches of the proposed chapel, especially, are breathtaking, harnessing the traditional Cistercian love of raw stone and natural light in a liturgical style in which St. Bernard of Clairvaux himself would feel at home.

As their foundress, Mother Magdalen said, “The way is long, the way is far, but God is with us, so we are not afraid.”<sup>22</sup>

The Capuchin Sisters of Nazareth,  
Mother of God Convent in  
Tunkhannock, Pennsylvania,  
St. Joseph’s Convent, Jackson,  
PA, and Mother of the Eucharist  
Convent, Bastress, PA

Sisters Colette, Clare, Christina, and Joseph are all members of the Capuchin Sisters of Nazareth. According to their monastic constitutions, “The Eucharist is the beating heart of the convent where the brides are in union with their bridegroom and their prayers continually burn on the altar of their hearts. Here, the bride is made one

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<sup>21</sup> “Purpose.” For the Glory of God, Valley of Our Lady Monastery. <https://build.valleyofourlady.org/the-project/>.

<sup>22</sup> “Purpose.” <https://build.valleyofourlady.org/the-project/>.



with her spouse.”<sup>23</sup> At each of the Capuchin Sisters’ three convents in eastern Pennsylvania, these brides of Christ strive to embody the hidden, domestic life of the Holy Family at Nazareth. As their constitutions further state, “it was in Nazareth that Jesus lived his hidden life, where Our Lady received her call, and it was the place that Jesus was identified with on the Cross.”<sup>24</sup>

The Capuchin Sisters of Nazareth are both a new order and a very old one. As a new order, they trace their founding to 1995, when two biological sisters began a community, originally based in Massachusetts. As an old order, the sisters trace their religious lineage from the sixteenth century Capuchin reforms to the Franciscan order from the thirteenth century. These early Capuchin reformers sought a life that radically followed that of Saint Francis himself, re-emphasizing his original poverty and humility in ways that the main branch of the Franciscan order had adjusted in the intervening centuries.

As such, the Capuchin Sisters of Nazareth hold, as Saint Francis himself said, that poverty is “the mother and queen of all virtues.”<sup>25</sup> This means that the sisters limit their worldly possessions as much as possible and rely almost exclusively upon the charity of others,

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<sup>23</sup> “Prayer.” <https://www.capuchinfranciscansisters.com/franciscan-charism>.

<sup>24</sup> “Capuchin Sisters of Nazareth.” <https://www.capuchinfranciscansisters.com/>.

<sup>25</sup> Community informational documents.

even to the point of occasionally begging for alms. In exchange for the generosity of others, the sisters, like thousands of Capuchins and Franciscans before them, offer prayers of thanksgiving, “the gift that supersedes all others.”<sup>26</sup>

Unlike their fellow daughters of Saint Francis, the Poor Clares, the Capuchin sisters are contemplative but not cloistered. They describe themselves as “apostolic contemplatives,” which means that they foster a hidden, contemplative charism akin to the quiet life of Christ in Nazareth before his public ministry. The apostolic nature of their contemplative life asks the sisters to be more engaged with the world about them than is practiced by some other contemplative charisms.

As part of their Franciscan tradition of preaching, the sisters conduct parish missions and youth retreats. However, their major focus, as contemplatives, is to pray. In addition to the Liturgy of the Hours, for these Capuchins, prayer takes the form of Eucharistic adoration: the sisters attend daily Mass and two periods of Eucharistic adoration each day, once right after rising in the morning, the other right before dinner in the evening. Religious life lived faithfully, joyfully, and lovingly is their chief form of preaching: a quiet testimony to a world that is in desperate need of radical witness.

The Capuchin sisters also cherish their communal life in the convent. They cultivate the family of the convent,

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<sup>26</sup> Community informational documents.

“a true family where their joy, as Brides of Christ, witnesses to the world the good news of the Gospel.”<sup>27</sup> They emphasize that it is this communal, family life that allows them to remain faithful to their religious vows and charism: “the sisters would unanimously agree that without this common life, the sacrifices and disciplines of Religious Life would be extremely difficult. It is much easier, for example, to rise for the night vigil, to fast, to observe periods of silence, knowing that the community is doing the same.”<sup>28</sup> This communal life is an extremely important element of their Franciscan identity.

In addition to their life of prayer, contemplation, and radical poverty, the Capuchin Sisters of Nazareth raise cats and German shepherd dogs. They wear the humble yet beautiful Capuchin robes—their warm, earthy color is responsible for the name of cappuccino coffee, and where Capuchin monkeys get their name—although the sisters wear more feminine veils instead of the famous *capuch* hoods of their Capuchin brothers.

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<sup>27</sup> Community informational documents.

<sup>28</sup> Community informational documents.