



Trappist monks exiled from France setting out for Oregon from Louisville, Kentucky

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Trappists recall the monastery that was

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JORDAN - A century ago, a group of silent exiled monks from France had a go at starting a monastery on a ridge between the Willamette Valley and the Cascade foothills.

Financial ruin, and the hard life of farming and logging, quashed the attempt after six years. That despite an enthusiastic welcome from local Catholics.

Members of Our Lady of Lourdes Parish gathered Sunday to recall the Cistercian, or Trappist, monks of their past and extend a new welcome to Trappists from the current Oregon monastery, which was founded in the 1950s and has shown staying-power.

'One hundred years ago, the Trappists were wonderfully received by your predecessors and forbears,' said Father Martinus Cawley, a Trappist historian from the current abbey in Lafayette.

The priest says history has perhaps been too rash in judging the monks of Jordan township as failures.

'There was a great deal of the work of the Holy Spirit in those men,' he told the congregation at morning Mass.

With the help of archivists and leaders of Our Lady of Lourdes Parish here, Father Martinus has excavated the story.

In late summer and fall of 1904, a half-dozen Trappists arrived in Oregon from the Abbey of Fontgombault in France. A 1901 secularist-driven French law had given the government control over non-profit associations and threatened the existence of monasteries.

The Oregon monks began setting up accommodations for more exiles. A dozen more men arrived during 1905.

The Trappists acquired about 400 acres, much of it farmed and other wooded. On the river nearby, they built a steam saw-mill.

'Here the Oregon fir trees, which attain immense heights, are converted into lumber for the needs of the community and for commerce,' says a Catholic Encyclopedia from the era. 'The future of this Cistercian community to a great extent rests upon this industry.'

The monastery of Our Lady of Jordan was solemnly dedicated in 1907, with Archbishop Alexander Christie of Oregon City officiating, 'in the presence of a large assembly of the laity, among whom were many non-Catholics,' says the encyclopedia report.

Over the next six years, as many as 35 American men tried to join the monks but, says Father Martinus, they 'found conditions too primitive or precarious, and all but one abandoned the idea.'

Despite the language barrier and a 'severe lack of business experience,' the monks struggled on. They had high hopes. But superiors did not tell the monks of the dire financial straits.

'Through the history of the Trappists of Jordan, there were a variety of agendas that did not fit together too well,' Father Martinus said.

Upon hearing initial rumors of closure by Trappist superiors in Kentucky, one monk - Father George - started an all-out campaign to keep the foundation afloat. When the Kentucky abbot visited Jordan, Father George 'almost made the roof lift off yelling out his anger,' Father Martinus reports.

When a letter from Trappist superiors in Rome arrived and explained the reasons, Father George calmed down and wrote a letter of submission.

He later became a well-loved assistant superior in Kentucky.

On display during Mass was an aged and unique folding key that had been forged by the Jordan monastery's saintly blacksmith, Brother Louis de Gonzague. There was also a wooden crosier that had been carried by the Trappist abbots of Fontgombault and Jordan.

Father Martinus recalled the much-loved Brother Stephen, who cared selflessly for sick Trappists in Jordan and also won Linn County Fair prizes for his garden vegetables.

Father Martinus says the Trappists have a lot of people to thank for kindnesses almost a century old.

The Archdiocese of Oregon City, which later became the Archdiocese of Portland, took on the monks' debts for a time.

Then the Benedictines of Mount Angel stepped in and resolved the finances.

When the Trappists' abbot contracted tuberculosis because of the intense worry, the Providence Sisters in Portland took him into the hospital and cared for him for a year free of charge. Then a group of Benedictine women in Idaho took over and cared for the abbot until the end of his life.

Benedictine Brother Joseph-Marie Owen was a guest of honor for the centenary. A native of St. Paul in the Willamette Valley, he as a young man became fascinated with the Abbey of Fontgombault, which has been used by Benedictines since 1948.

Brother Joseph-Marie, trained in agriculture, has been sent out to help start monasteries in Italy and France. He is now one of the founding members of Our Lady of the Annunciation of Clear Creek Abbey in eastern Oklahoma.

Also on hand were the Shim family of Corvallis. Immigrants from Korea, they credit the Trappists for praying the father, Jay, into an engineering job. Jeong-Bo Shim, the teen-aged son, captivated the congregation by playing Ave Maria on the violin after Communion.

A choir led by Bev Ratajak, Elaine Owen and Carol Anderson sang and chanted in English and Latin from the choir loft.

After Mass, worshipers and monks moved to the parish hall, hosted by the pastor, Oblate Father Kevin O'Conor.

There, they saw displays, heard a history presentation and snacked on the celebrated fruitcake made by the current Trappists in Lafayette.



Jordan, Oregon 1946
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