

A Visit to Huntsville's Monastery

By Harlow Clark



Chapel for Our Lady of the Holy Trinity

Perhaps you remember visiting the Abbey of Our Lady of the Holy Trinity, also known as the Huntsville monastery, as a child. Maybe you got bread or honey there, or something else from the gift shop. My father bought a copy of Flannery O'Connor's book *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. He got a few sentences into one story, "Revelation," and said it was the best thing O'Connor had written. He liked it so much he included it in a textbook he was writing, *About Language*.

I don't remember much else from that visit except the impression of the monastery as a timeless place of contemplation and prayer, far removed from any urban setting.

I've often wondered where Huntsville is, then one day, a few years ago, driving to Morgan for my father's family reunion I saw a sign to Huntsville and Fountain Green. On the way back we turned off. It was not the small road up the canyon, Fountain Green being houses on either side, I remembered from 40 years ago, but a highway cut diagonally across the face of the hills, up and over the pass and diagonally down the other side with a lot of cutting and filling like in Provo Canyon.

The monastery was easy to find, with signs along the road, and the setting as beautiful as I remembered, but the church, the dormitories, and gift shop all looked like quonset huts--no steel ribbing visible,

but quonset huts nonetheless. I think I was expecting something more like the southwest adobe style of St. Francis of Assisi church in Provo, now torn down. (It saddens me to see a consecrated building demolished.)

But it was after 5 PM and the gift shop was closed. I returned recently and mentioned the quonset hut feel to Fr. Leander Dosch in the gift shop, where the monks take their turns and selling books and creamed honey, CDs, religious items, fine woodwork (clocks, crucifixes, boxes) from Fr. Nicholas, and talking to people.

“It *is* a quonset hut,” he said. The monastery was founded in 1947 and the huts were common. Remembering a story I had reported about some Lions and veterans moving a barracks from Hillfield to Lindon I asked if it was war surplus.

But it was only a surplus style. Fr. Leander said there was a war surplus barracks the first year, but the monastery was designed by an architect continuing the kind of work he had done during the war.



Fr. Leander Dosch in the gift shop.

Abbott David Altman, 68, opens a video tour, the only kind the monks offer, with a comment that the monastery was built as a temporary quarters in 1947, “So I guess we’ve been temporary for 50 years now.”

Temporary, not timeless, and subject to time. Fr. David says the cross on top of the church was painted black but the birds are painting it white, which probably explains the plastic pigeon spikes on the lintel above

the church door, and on the arms of the cross above the lintel.

Fr. David includes a short meditation on history. “The monk who died seven monks ago, did you catch that, seven *monks* ago, was Thomas Edison’s office boy,” and we learned from his stories that history is more complicated, and different, than we often think.

Indeed, much has changed since the video was made. “He’s dead,” Fr. Leander said, pointing to a monk, “and he died.”

Fr. David says the monks are vegetarian by choice, getting protein from fish and milk—except on founder’s day. The abbey is descended from an abbey in Kentucky called Gethsemani, so on founder’s day a monk goes down to Ogden and buys 100 pieces of Kentucky Fried Chicken. And these vegetarians by choice run 100 head of cattle to sell to meat markets.



Outbuildings largely unused now.

But that was at least a dozen years ago. The cattle using the monastery’s 1800 acres now belong to a neighbor, who leases the land. Another neighbor leases the crop land. “We used to run the farm ourselves but there aren’t enough of us able-bodied left to run it. Our average age is 81,” Fr. Leander said. “There isn’t much we can do but take care of things around the monastery.”

What do they do, then? “The first thing we do is pray, seven times a day. And we have retreat facilities.”

Prayer and silence, I remember my father talking with the monk in the gift shop about silence. “If you want a life of prayer you have to have silence,” Fr. David says in the video. The monks don’t take a vow of silence, “but we respect each others’ needs for silence.”

And it may not be many years before the monastery falls silent. Fr. Leander said he thinks the last time a monk took final vows was about 21 years ago. But wouldn’t the Trappist-Cistercian Order send replacements?

“It’s not a centralized order like the Jesuits,” but “a loose association of monasteries,” Fr. Leander said. “We make a vow of stability to a particular monastery, so if this one ceased I wouldn’t be bound to go to a [Trappist] monastery.” At 84 Fr. Leander is old enough to have been one of the original monks, but is not. He came to Huntsville 34 years ago from a Benedictine order which ran a boarding school, because he felt life at Our Lady was more contemplative.

The contemplative orders that are not the only ones shrinking. “The other monasteries in this country are also reduced,” Fr. Leander said.

Why the reduction? “There’s some dissenters who don’t accept what the church teaches, and families separating and divorcing, or cohabiting,” Fr. Leander said. “So out of families like that you’re not likely to get someone interested in the religious life.”

What will happen if no new monks come to replace this generation? “I don’t know. I suppose it will be sold and the proceeds used to support the surviving monks—or sold to another order, or a developer,” Fr. Leander said.

Fr. David graduated college as an accountant, began practicing and looking for a wife, but kept feeling the call of monastic life. Not as many people feel that

call now, but the monastery welcomes those who do, who want to find if the call comes from God or somewhere else, and offers retreats and long-term residency programs for practicing Catholic men who want a break from hectic urban life, or who want to try monastic life.

More information is available at <http://holytrinityabbey.org>, as well as a reflection from Pope Benedict XVI on the shortage of monks and nuns, and the recipe for that bread you may remember, which they no longer bake. But they still package up the honey, Fr. Malachi Flaherty said

when I called the gift shop a few days later. The honey comes from beehives in Cache Valley. "We used to tend them all, but we've become too infirm." The beekeeper brings the hives down in the spring, takes them up in the fall. "They feed on the alfalfa we grow."

And bees are not the only ones who come back to the beauty in spring. "Was that a sandhill crane?" a woman named Pat asked the monk in the gift shop. "I didn't have my hearing aid turned up quite enough." Yes. It was a sandhill crane.

IF YOU GO

Abbey of the Holy Trinity
1250 South 9500 East
Huntsville, Utah 84317
Telephone: (801) 745-3784
Fax: (801) 745-6430
E-mail: hta@xmission.com.
<http://holytrinityabbey.org>

Mass daily 6:20 AM,
Latin Mass Sunday 8 AM
Chants 7:45, 12:15, 2:15, 5:30

STORE HOURS: 10:00 – 12:00 and 1:15 – 5:00 every day except Sunday. The church is open all day every day.

From I-84 take UT-167 over the mountain and into Huntsville. Follow the signs to the monastery.

From Ogden take UT-39 up the canyon and around the south side of the reservoir into Huntsville. Follow the signs to the monastery.



Guest house for the monks' visiting family members.