

## New Melleray—1922-1960

In his story, "The Life of the Trappists," written and published in 1922, the author asked the question — "Will New Melleray Abbey, which now seems to languish, wax vigorous in the future, spreading its influence afar and contribute to a revival of monasticism?"

This question now reads like a fortuitous prophecy. Today, the community at New Melleray Abbey numbers approximately 150, a daughter monastery, Our Lady of the Assumption, has been founded in the Ozark hills of southwestern Missouri with a population of some thirty-five monks; three members of the New Melleray community are in Rome on special missions; two priests have gone to teach at a Trappist Abbey, Our Lady of the Cheerful Marsh, in Indonesia; and seven priests and three lay brothers have been loaned to the Abbey of Our Lady of the Prairies at St. Norbert, Manitoba, Canada. Indeed, as this sketch is being written in the spring of 1961, the Abbey of Our Lady of New Melleray is in a flourishing condition — both physically and spiritually.

The upturn in the fortunes of New Melleray Abbey began in the late 1920's under the leader-

ship of Father Bruno Ryan who had been elected Superior following the death of Abbot Alberic in 1917. Father Bruno faced a formidable task. Vocations had fallen off, and in 1920 the Abbey had a population of only seventeen. Part of a large debt, created by over expansion and unwise investments in the late seventies and early eighties, remained to be paid. Dom Bruno appealed for recruits from the houses in Ireland. Among the small group of priests and lay brothers who volunteered to come to New Melleray were Father Albert Beston of Mount Melleray and Father Eugene Martin of Mount Saint Joseph. With the close cooperation of these two able men as Prior and Sub Prior, and with the whole-hearted efforts of each member of his small community, Dom Bruno was able to inaugurate many improvements. Thus, he shortly introduced electric lighting and central heating for the monastery. Next, in 1921, he purchased the first automobile for necessary trips of community officials.

The community slowly increased in numbers, and the debt was completely paid. In 1927 work on a new, modern, fireproof guest house was begun and completed in 1928. The purpose of this guest house was to provide accommodations for men, both priests and laymen, where they might spend a few days in retirement and seclusion away from home, business, and social duties for a renewal of faith and spiritual fervor. Today

from thirty to forty men use the facilities of the guest house each weekend; and an addition, which will accommodate as many more retreatments, is nearly completed.

Along with this project, a more capacious abbey church was installed on the second floor of the north wing of the quadrangle running almost its entire length east and west. A screen divides it into two unequal sections, the larger part for the community chapel, the smaller part with altars, confessionals, and pews for the laity. These and other necessary improvements left a debt of some \$30,000; but, under the careful management of Father Bruno, this was paid off during the next few years despite the severe depression of 1929.

In 1935, Father Bruno was elected Abbot of New Melleray and progress continued. By 1938 the community had increased to fifty-one and by 1941 it numbered fifty-four. Further improvements in the monastery buildings and on the farm lands were inaugurated. New equipment was added and special courses in theological training for priests and candidates were introduced.

Then came World War II. The drafting of all available young men into the armed forces temporarily stopped the flow of postulants and novices into the monastery. Two of the younger monks obtained dispensations to serve as army chaplains, and three were granted leaves to help various bishops by replacing other priests who

had volunteered as chaplains. The community was deeply grieved when, on August 2, 1944, Abbot Bruno Ryan died.

Abbot Bruno was succeeded by Prior Albert (John Beston) on December 12, 1944. A graduate of the National University of Ireland, Prior Albert had been a choir monk and priest, a professor in the Seminary, and Sub Prior of Mount Melleray Abbey before coming to Iowa in 1920. At New Melleray he had served as master of novices, professor of theology, and Prior under Abbot Bruno. Although Abbot Albert's term of office lasted less than two years, they were crowded with achievements. The war was drawing to a close and novices began to seek admission. When he was installed as Abbot in December, 1944, the community numbered fifty-one; at his death on September 5, 1946, it had grown to sixty-seven.

Realizing that the end of the war would bring an increase in vocations, and knowing that the unfinished abbey could not possibly accommodate the anticipated growth, Dom Albert inaugurated an extensive building program. His plans called for a completion of the quadrangle by the erection of the south wing with proposed extensions. Basically, the additions would follow the Gothic designs of the architect, Augustus Welby Pugin, and his disciple, John Mullaney of Dubuque, who built the first sections of the abbey; but such

changes as available material made necessary would be incorporated.

Necessary permissions were obtained from the General Chapter of Cistercians and the Holy See, plans were completed, and contracts were let. The monks set to work on the project eagerly. Land was cleared, basements were excavated, and stone was secured from the abbey quarries about a mile distant. Contractors estimated the cost of the new addition as \$2,500,000, but the expected labor of the monks themselves cut this estimate to \$1,000,000, still a formidable sum for the Society to undertake.

Following the death of Abbot Albert, Prior Vincent Daly acted as Provisional Superior until the election of Father Eugene (John Joseph Martin) as Abbot in October, 1946. He, like Dom Albert, was one of the monks who had come from Ireland in response to Dom Bruno's appeal for recruits in the early 1920's. Under his two predecessors at New Melleray he had served as Sub Prior and Procurator.

Abbot Eugene continued the building program successfully and saw the post-war invasion of New Melleray by postulants and novices begin. It was headed by young men still in uniform. In 1946, New Melleray had sixty-seven members; in 1948 the number had increased to eighty-four; and in 1949, the centennial year, the number was 108. The new members came from all walks of

life, some college and university graduates, some with meager schooling. Included in the group was a Negro from Chicago and a Filipino from the West, the first non-Caucasians ever to enter the Iowa monastery. Anyone was admitted who met the physical, mental, and educational standards required of all.

What could be done to accommodate this increased membership? While Abbot Eugene was in Europe during the summer of 1950 to attend a meeting of the General Chapter at Citeaux Abbey in France, a momentous event occurred back home. One day in July, Joseph B. Pierson of Springfield, Missouri, a retired foreign correspondent for the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, called at New Melleray Abbey and offered Prior Vincent a thirty-six hundred acre ranch in the foothills of the southwest Missouri Ozarks as a home for a daughter house. Although not a Catholic, Mr. Pierson had great admiration for the Church and especially the Trappists.

The property was a widespread estate, most of it in virgin forests. It included a large main building of stone and concrete, a garage, barns, and other buildings. It was indeed a magnificent gift and the offer was accepted gratefully.

Upon his return from Europe, Dom Eugene sent a group of eleven monks to Missouri to take charge of the project and recruits from New Melleray continued to join the new arrivals. The

buildings were rearranged to comply with the requirements of a Trappist community, and the garage and adjoining workshop were converted into a chapel.

This monastery was named Our Lady of the Assumption; and, on October 2, 1956, the new filiation, by Papal Rescript, was made an independent house with the rank of Abbey. Father Bruno Payant was elected Abbot. It had a population of thirty-five in 1960; and plans have been made to build a new monastery of eight contemporary ranch-style wings which will radiate from an octagonal monastic garden in the center.

Meanwhile, Dom Eugene, who was never a man of robust health, suffered a series of strokes in the early 1950's, and on Saint Martin's Eve, November 10, 1952, he died, just as the community was chanting the office of Vespers in choir.

On November 26, 1952, the chapter elected Prior Vincent Daly to succeed Dom Eugene. He was the first American born Abbot to head New Melleray. He set about with enthusiasm to complete the projects begun by his predecessors; but he was given less than two years to serve. Only forty-three years of age, he was found to be suffering from a malignant brain tumor, and on May 10, 1954, he died.

On July 19, 1954, the community assembled to elect a new Abbot. The choice fell upon Father M. Philip O'Connor, who had served as Prior

under Dom Vincent and Sub Prior under Dom Eugene. Born in 1916 in Galesburg, Illinois, he attended the parochial elementary and secondary schools there, and completed his collegiate studies at St. Ambrose College in Davenport. He entered Our Lady of New Melleray Abbey as a novitiate in the autumn of 1941, was professed in 1944, and ordained as a priest in 1947. Shortly thereafter he was appointed Sub Prior and later Prior.

In 1956, monks at New Melleray served as members of the Ground Observation Corps and manned one of the more than 15,000 observation posts in Operation Skywatch, a joint Air Force and Civil Defense program to help guard against surprise air attack. From a high vantage point on a roof of a new section of the Abbey, observers scanned the sky for identification of aircraft. They were in direct telephone connection with the Air Force Filter Center in Des Moines, and were permitted to talk with officials there by Abbot Philip. This public service was abandoned when radar replaced man-operated observation posts.

Dom Philip has continued to follow the plans of his predecessors for the expansion and improvement of New Melleray Abbey. As each new part of the building is completed, it is put into immediate use. With new dormitories, refectory, cloisters, and scriptorium (study hall) in use, the mon-

astery is not as crowded as heretofore. Although much remains to be done, each day the monks see substantial progress being made toward completion of the undertaking begun some fifteen years ago. With their hopes and dreams becoming a reality, choir brothers and lay brothers alike pursue their respective tasks with renewed zeal and enthusiasm, working together as a well-drilled team.

Recalling the sad and humiliating financial experience of the monastery's early history, Dom Philip and his associates have carried on this tremendous building project and will see its completion without going into debt — a magnificent accomplishment.

#### STATISTICAL PERSONNEL OF NEW MELLERAY ABBEY

Year	Choir Brothers			Lay Brothers			Total	Priests
	Professed	Novices	Oblates and Postulants	Professed	Novices	Oblates and Postulants		
1920	8	1	1	13	2		25	7
1930	7	8	1	15	2	5	38	4
1941	19	6	2	21	3	3	54	16
1950	45	28	3	27	15	17	135	24
1960	74	12	11	35	5	5	142	44

(The records for 1961 will show a total of approximately 150 Choir Brothers and Lay Brothers.)