

The Life of the Trappists

At New Melleray to-day are found the two classes of monks that have characterized Cistercian abbeys since the earliest days of the Order. The choir brothers are men who have been well educated and have a careful knowledge of the Latin tongue. They are the priests of the community and those studying for Holy Orders. Their dress in choir consists of a long white woollen tunic with flowing sleeves, with a capoch or hood attached. When at work they wear a white woollen habit, a black scapular with a hood, and a leather girdle.

The lay brothers on the other hand — among whom are many representatives of distinguished families who prefer the humbler rank — are usually men of less educational preparation than the choir brothers. They do the farm work, the cooking, the baking, the tailoring, the laundry work, and the more menial tasks about the monastery, thereby giving the choir brothers more time to devote to the Divine Office. At religious devotions the lay brothers wear a long brown robe with a hood, and at work their dress is a dark brown habit and a leather girdle. Their hair is close cropped and they wear beards.

The novices or postulants are admitted to the monastery for a probationary period to try their strength and desire to continue the life. If, after a trial of two years, they wish to persevere, they are admitted by a vote of the community and the first vows are taken. From three to six years later the final vows are made which seclude them from the world. During the novitiate period the choir brothers wear a white robe with a scapular and hood of white, and a girdle of wool instead of leather. Since the use of linen is forbidden to the monks all wear next to the body a light-weight undergarment of wool.

The idea that fasts and abstinences at New Melleray or at other Cistercian abbeys are perpetual hardships is largely erroneous. True, all in good health must abstain from flesh meat and fish at all times, but those who are weak or ill may have meat in the infirmary to repair their strength. Young men under twenty-one in the Order are not obliged to fast. The Trappists now partake of a light breakfast, a full meal at mid-day, and only meager refreshments in the evening. The food consists of vegetables, cereals, fresh bread and butter, milk, and cheese. Eggs are used in cooking and as a supplementary dish for those who have a special need. Fruit, too, forms an important part of the diet, and tea, coffee, and cocoa are used.

To an outsider the practice of perpetual silence

seems harsh and austere, a means of penance and mortification of extreme difficulty. In practice, however, observance of the rule becomes relatively easy, for a number of conventional signs are used to fulfill the common needs of communication. There are also certain exceptions. Any monk may always speak with his Superior. Others such as the Guest Brother, the Procurator, the farm boss, or those whose positions throw them in contact with outsiders have permission to speak. If necessary other members of the Order may obtain permission to talk. Nevertheless the monks feel that the practice is not a hardship but a blessing, believing with St. Ephrem that, "When there is silence in the mind, when the heart rests, when the hush of the world has breathed over the spirit, when the mind self-left, feels its loneliness, then comes the sweet and sacred communication with heaven."

Manual labor at New Melleray, both by the choir monks and the lay brethren, is one of the occupations of the community, but the amount is not excessive. Three to four hours daily by the choir brothers and twice as much by their brown-clad companions, equally divided between morning and afternoon, is the usual time spent at the various tasks of the Order. The distinction in the time allotted for labor is due to the fact that the lay brothers do not recite the Divine Office, although they share in the spiritual benefits derived

therefrom and repeat privately a short Office of their own.

For several years the Abbey of Our Lady of New Melleray gave promise of becoming a flourishing community of the Cistercian Order, but of late years the postulants and novices have been so few that the progress which characterizes the houses of the Order abroad has not been maintained. From fifty-four members in 1892 the number of monks has dwindled to twenty-four in 1922. When the visitor sees the extensive and well improved lands of the estate, the vacant cells in the large dormitory, and the empty stalls in the choir he wonders if this settlement of the Trappists in the Mississippi Valley will repeat the story of Citeaux. Will New Melleray Abbey, which now seems to languish, wax vigorous in the future, spreading its influence afar and contributing to a revival of monasticism?

Certainly the five young monks from Ireland who have added their strength to the community within the past year and an awakened interest on the part of some young Americans in the Order furnish a hopeful portent to the able Superior, Father Bruno, and to the aged monks who have held to the ideals of the Cistercians so persistently during the past quarter of a century.