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Reinventing tradition

Abbey with 79 years of history will break up to set stage for monks to mix entrepreneurial with spiritual

By Eric Gorski The Gazette

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Priests and brothers at the Holy Cross Abbey in Cañon City last month said they will disband in the next five to 10 years. Father Bernard Gervais, a monk at the abbey, participates Friday in the noon prayer in the abbey's chapel.

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CAÑON CITY - One by one, the monks enter the chapel through a stained-glass door.

The church bells ring out, signaling the start of midday prayer.

At one time, more than 90 monks crowded the wooden pews flanking the altar. Now fewer than 10 come most days.

That's not enough to keep Holy Cross Abbey's 79-year-old monastic tradition alive - at least not in its current form.

In an unusual move, the aging Benedictine priests and brothers agreed last month to disband in the next five to 10 years to make way for a new generation of monks.

The hope is the next group will be open to blending the entrepreneurial with the spiritual to keep the landmark red-brick abbey in the hands of a religious community.

The foundation is in place.

A year ago, the abbey opened a winery that's starting to draw Royal Gorge tourists.

Last month, the monks signed a 20-year contract with the state Department of Corrections, which will run a training academy on the abbey grounds.

Other Catholic monasteries and abbeys with dwindling numbers took similar steps and found success, including a Trappist monastery in Iowa that makes caskets.

Holy Cross also is hoping to capitalize on a modest wave of interest in monastic life.

Many abbeys and monasteries closed in recent years as Catholic vocations plunged.

But several have been reborn, filled with young men attracted to the simple life of silent prayer, manual labor and community, absent the pressures of parish life.

At Holy Cross, the painful sacrifice to attempt such a makeover involves the 14 monks who remain.

Photo by Tim Tadder The Gazette >
The Holy Cross Abbey has set a foundation for the future.
The abbey opened a winery last year and in July signed
a 20-year contract with the Department of Corrections,
which will run an academy.



The oldest is 93. Several are in their 80s. Two live in nursing homes, three serve in Colorado parishes. The remaining nine live at the abbey.

Their futures are uncertain

Those at parishes may remain there. Ideally, the elderly n there, said the Rev. Gregory Legge.

The 53-year-old Legge, the second youngest resident monk and a catalyst for the business moves, hopes to be among two or three monks forming the nucleus of a new community.

If that doesn't work, the abbey will recruit an existing monastic group to relocate to Cañon City, Legge said.

The monks have considered selling some or all of their 210 acres to subdivision developers.

A Montana company held an option on the property in the 1980s, but its plans to develop a corporate center with an 18-hole golf course and health and exercise club fell apart.

The vote to disband, which required two-thirds approval of the monks, went through in July.

At the same time, Abbot Kenneth Hein resigned after 10 years as abbey superior.

A handful of men studying to become monks at the abbey have moved, or will soon move, to other communities.

The Minnesota-based American Cassinese Congregation of Benedictine Abbeys, an association of 21 abbeys in North America, will name an administrator to take over.

"The closing down of a community doesn't mean failure," said the Rev. Timothy Kelly, president of the association. "They've made a tremendous contribution and have good men now. But you have to have some new blood coming in."

Legge said breaking up the community was necessary. He said it's difficult to convince young monks to join an older group that's set in its ways.

Some monks opposed the winery and other recent changes, he said.

Only five men chose to be monks at the abbey in the past 40 years.

"It's been difficult," said Legge, a widower who was an accountant before being ordained two years ago. "There comes a time to plant and close it down, so spring can awaken. The Lord has something wondrous in mind."

Benedictine monks from Latrobe, Pa., founded the community in Cañon City in 1923 and finished building the Gothic-Tudor abbey in 1925 on a former orchard.

Early on, the monks supported themselves selling apples and vinegar. Keeping with the Benedictine emphasis on education, the monks ran a boarding school, high school and even a small college.

The high school, the backbone of the abbey for decades, closed in 1985 because of declining enrollment and the cost of hiring lay people to teach when monks retired or died.

In the 1990s, a consultant told the monks it would be cheaper to build elsewhere than to maintain the abbey.

So the monks sold 12 acres on the west end of the property for \$1.9 million and bought a 900-acre ranch outside Westcliffe.

That option, though, was abandoned, in part because of cost concerns and in part because of a desire to stay put. The ranch now is home to a small retreat house.

One of the first steps in the abbey's rebirth took place 31/2 years ago with the renovation of the former high school cafeteria into an events center. It's regularly booked for weddings, yoga classes and nonprofit meetings. An RV convention will arrive this month.

At the urging of one of the younger monks, the abbey recruited a California winemaker, Matt Cookson, to start a vineyard last year on the grape-friendly grounds.

The goal was to give the 800,000 tourists who pass through town a reason to stop someplace other than the Royal Gorge.

The formula has worked elsewhere.

A riverfront abbey in Moncks Corner, S.C., draws 15,000 tourists a year who come to pray, meditate and buy eggs and garden compost from the abbey farm. The result: A community that nearly closed a decade ago began an \$8.5 million building project.

Right now, the Holy Cross winery is shipping in merlot, riesling and chardonnay from Utah and the Western Slope and bottling it in Cañon City on its label.

In September, the winery will crush its own chardonnay grapes for production.

The winery hopes to stage tasting events, seminars on winemaking and a harvest festival, said Melodi Tezak, manager of a tasting room that opened last month.

The abbey's relationship with the Department of Corrections should provide a long-term money source, Legge said.

For several years, the department paid the abbey to feed and house employees attending its academy, located between a McDonald's and Pizza Hut in town

Now, the abbey has agreed to pay for a new, \$1 million academy on the abbey grounds that it will lease to the department for 20 years. The academy trains between 700 and 1,000 corrections officers, nurses, teachers and food services workers a year, director Cherrie Greco said.

The arrangement will allow trainees to walk to their dorms and cafeteria - and earn the abbey a \$2 million profit, Legge said.

While Legge spins plans for the future in his first-floor office, the Rev. William Thompson spends his days tending a small American Indian museum in the basement of the abbey.

Thompson came to the abbey boarding school when he was 13.

He never left. He's 84.

With a corn cob pipe dangling from his lips, Thompson explained on a recent afternoon how he's accepted the changes at the abbey as necessary to pay the bills.

A former social studies teacher at the abbey school, Thompson said he isn't sure what will happen to him when his community is no longer.

He's more concerned about finding museums to take his collection of spearheads, yellowed photos and artifacts.

Thompson said he thought he'd be depressed when the news of the community's numbered days sunk in. But he hasn't.

"I hope there's a miracle and I can stay, but that isn't likely," Thompson said. "Maybe it's time to turn it over to the Lord. Whatever he does will be all right with me."

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by artist Jan A Loeffler of Colorado Springs



Model at Studio Fairway Village, Exhibits, at Holy Cross Abbey
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