KANSAS MONKS

Ship of the Prairie

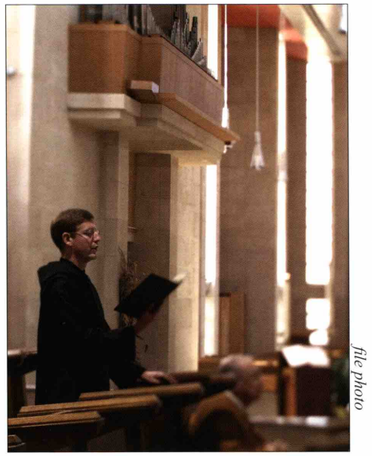
A reflection on the Abbey Church

Wheat-field yellow during the day but now awash in floodlights, the high limestone walls of the Abbey Church appear as silver as the stars above in the predawn sky. Inside the front doors, met by darkness, a visitor softly pads through a set of double doors into the vastness of the nave of the church. Reaching out across the darkened pews is the distant bloom of warm light from the choir. The silence of the church is embracing rather than daunting. One by one, monks wordlessly emerge from the monastery to their assigned stalls where they await the bell signaling the utterance of the first sacred words of Vigils and Morning Prayer, the beginning of another day of prayer and work at St. Benedict's Abbey.

From behind, Abbot Owen Purcell approaches the visitor, inviting him to join the monks in the choir. As the guest reaches the stalls, he has no time to feel apprehensive as Brother Joseph Ryan strides forward, smiling, to greet him and show him to a seat. Crouching at

his side, Brother Joseph opens a psalmody and a hymnal and kindly shows him the order of prayer for the morning.

A bell rings, and Prior James Albers recites the first words of a long night's silence, "O Lord open my lips." The monks make the sign of the cross upon their lips, and respond, "And my mouth shall declare your praise. To the king of all ages, the immortal, invisible and only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen." Vigils have begun.



file photo

Brother Joseph Ryan is the first reader during midday prayer in the Abbey Church choir.

The silence of the church is rich and the words do not disrupt. Instead they seem to soak into it, as the vivid paints long ago soaked into the wet plaster of the fresco glowing in the light on the wall above the choir.

The morning hymn is carried by swells of organ and men's voices beyond the light into the darkened corners of the church:

"Lord, God, your light which dims the stars
Awakes all things
And all that springs to life in you
Your glory sings…"

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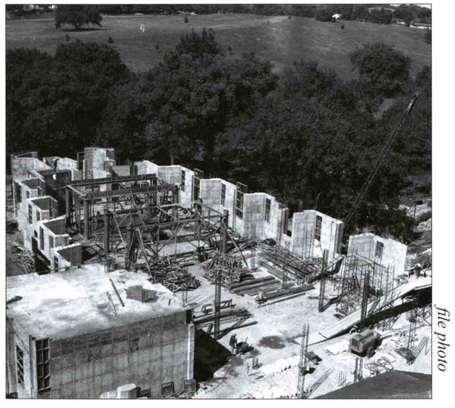
When the monks completed the church in 1957, the Abbey's centennial year, they wrote: "Here in the abbey church the monks can be found at worship many times daily. Benedictine spirituality through 1,400 years has centered itself in the daily chanting of God's praises in the Divine Office and the united offerings of the Holy Sacrifices of the Mass with full splendor of music and ritual." The monks reminded those celebrating the dedication of their new church that the monk "dedicates himself body and soul to the worship of God. He gives up his rights to private property, to the joys of marriage, and to personal freedom in order to make a sacrifice of his whole being to God's glory… It is no wonder then, that every Benedictine community strives to build as splendid a monastic church as lies within its power in order to form a fitting place for divine worship, and to glorify God in brick and stone as well as with hearts and hands."



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The monks' plans for a new Abbey Church, in the Gothic style, were progressing when they moved into a new monastery high atop the Missouri River bluff in 1929, but the Great Depression halted work after only part of the foundation had been laid. In 1934 Abbot Martin Veth lamented, "We wanted a church so badly, but we are burdened with an immense debt without hope of moving a hand." For nearly three decades the community waited patiently to invite the public to share in their daily prayer. In the meantime, they celebrated the Eucharist and Liturgy of the Hours within their cloister, in a spacious second-floor chapel that today is the Chapter Room where the community gathers to make major decisions. That room is directly behind the massive fresco at the east end of Abbey Church.

In 1955 construction resumed. A new architect, Barry Byrne, of Chicago, a student of Frank Lloyd Wright, was commissioned. He wanted to tear up the foundation that had been laid earlier, but the monks resisted. Thus, his more contemporary "prairie style" church, which incorporated landscape, was built atop the Gothic remnants, which can be viewed in the crypt of today's church.

In 1957, in time for the centennial of St. Benedict's Abbey, "at long last, the entire monastic family—the monks, their students, alumni, oblates of the abbey, and numberless friends" had a "common spiritual center from which to draw inspiration, strength and unity."

There were many long discussions in chapter meetings, and no doubt between individual monks in secluded hallways, about what this dream church would be. What would the center of monastic prayer look and feel like?

The Chapter Room was once the place for daily prayer in the Abbey.

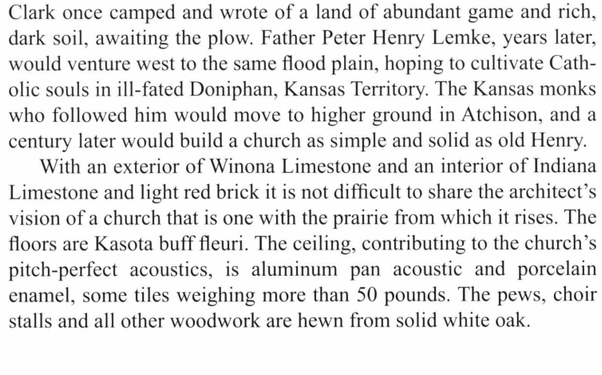
To be sure in those earliest of discussions, the indispensible furnishing of the yet-to-be built church was the altar.

Father Denis Meade reflects on the "monumental-sized altar" that dominates the church like a marble heart:

"The self gift of Jesus' life gives us life. Upon the altar, Jesus' passage through death to life is re-presented. It is the spot where the one sacrifice of the Lord is brought anew into our midst at every Mass. Simultaneously it is the table upon which the banquet of life is served to those who come forward to share in Communion. Together, these members of one body say, 'Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again!'

"It is interesting to note that at least four years before the selection of a church design or even an architect the church committee was already discussing the altar. They wanted to get it right. In their first meetings of 1949 the committee decided that they wanted to embody classic ideals of a monastic church. This meant the altar was the space where the Eucharistic sacrifice would come to be. The Blessed Sacrament would be reserved in an adjoining chapel built for that purpose.

"The altar was to be located between the monks' choir and the nave of the church and constructed in such a way that Mass could be celebrated either toward the monks in choir or the people in the nave. With their thoughts of simplicity and freedom of vision the monks originally proposed that the altar be a mensa, a simple stone table upon four supporting legs. Barry Byrne, the architect, however, insisted that such an altar would be lost in the vast space of the sanctuary and persuaded them to adopt the concept of a more substantial altar; thus the large altar of Carrara marble from Italy. The brick support in the center goes down through the crypt to anchor the altar to the earth below. This was a requirement of the pre-Vatican II solemn rite of church dedication. The architect and committee were agreed that eventually this brick support would be adorned with a mosaic of bright colors, a concept as yet unrealized.



The altar is made of marble imported from Italy.

"When the church was built, public opinion among those interested in church design favored simplicity of interior decoration. Hence it was decided that the main altar would be the only altar in the principal part of the church. Instead of the traditional side altars dedicated to Mary and Joseph, two chapels in the crypt were dedicated to our Lady of Guadalupe and Saint Joseph, the Worker.

"Gathering the whole Benedictine community around one altar was a dream of the community. For a number of years the Abbey's daily conventual Mass was celebrated at noon with the full participation of the monks and students offering and singing the Mass together."

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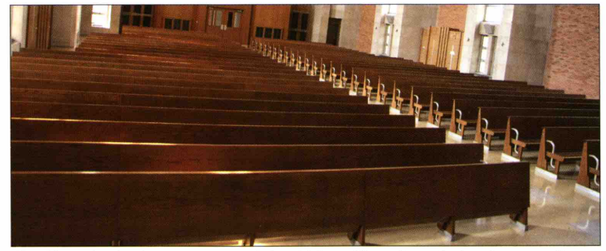
St. Benedict's is a sturdy church, built not only to withstand but to deter the harsh elements of the Kansas plains. Like a massive ship upon a wave it rides the swell of the bluffs above the Missouri River, overlooking the floodplain where Meriwether Lewis and William Clark once camped and wrote of a land of abundant game and rich, dark soil, awaiting the plow. Father Peter Henry Lemke, years later, would venture west to the same flood plain, hoping to cultivate Catholic souls in ill-fated Doniphan, Kansas Territory. The Kansas monks who followed him would move to higher ground in Atchison, and a century later would build a church as simple and solid as old Henry.

With an exterior of Winona Limestone and an interior of Indiana Limestone and light red brick it is not difficult to share the architect's vision of a church that is one with the prairie from which it rises. The floors are Kasota buff fleuri. The ceiling, contributing to the church's pitch-perfect acoustics, is aluminum pan acoustic and porcelain enamel, some tiles weighing more than 50 pounds. The pews, choir stalls and all other woodwork are hewn from solid white oak.



The Nave is the longest part of the Abbey Church and also houses the confession booths.

Originally, high, slender windows of clear glass were installed in the church with the intention of later replacing them with stained glass. However, in time the stained glass was abandoned as the monks recognized that the flood of natural light enhanced the natural radiance of the nave where on festive occasions hundreds of guests sit comfortably beneath the colorful ceiling soaring 44-feet overhead.

And a well lit and comfortable nave is significant, for as Father Brendan Rolling notes, those who fill it are precious cargo:

"The nave is the longest part of a church's architecture. Inside, it can often look like a keel, the longest part of a ship. Due to this, the word is actually taken from the Medieval Latin word, "navis," meaning ship. St. Benedict's Abbey Church is built to look like a ship. The fresco area is the stern (back) and the entrance is the stem (front). The tower is the mast. The pews in the nave are like planks built for sailors who row for Jesus Christ.

"From the high altar cross, we can hear Jesus say, 'I thirst.' –John 19:28 These two words show us what he desires most. Souls. Jesus thirsts for souls. For this reason the nave is the largest part of our church. It is built to cradle what God desires most. In the Holy Rule, St. Benedict instructs his monks to generously serve God's desire by always welcoming pilgrims. Pilgrim-souls demonstrate their love for God by imitating Jesus who traveled to mountain tops to pray. Monastery churches make this practice practical and therefore are living icons of Christ's Transfiguration.

"The nave of our Abbey Church, like the nave of Monte Cassino's Church, the church of St. Benedict's first Abbey, is built to welcome and hold God's most prized possession, His people. Millions travel to Monte Cassino's nave while thousands travel to St. Benedict's Abbey Church to pray each year. You are always welcome."

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In the Abbey Church the eye of most people as they enter the nave is immediately drawn to 610-square-foot fresco at the east end, and the Jean Charlot masterpiece, which captures the colors from the length of the ceiling to draw the eye deep into the heart of the glorified Christ certainly does its part to mesmerize. But, as in a monastic community, a church is a whole consisting of unified parts. On the way to the fresco, "The Trinity and Episodes of Benedictine Life," there are quiet and simple parts of the church to be noted and reflected upon.

First, how does one arrive inside such a church? Most people and indeed all before 2007 entered the building by climbing stairs. Such was the way of church design in 1957.

With a nod to the words of St. Benedict, "All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ," Abbot Barnabas Senecal says it became a priority of the monastic community to change that:

"While acclaimed for its design, our church was not friendly to the handicapped person due to the various elevations of the land and the building, and the restricted space dedicated to restrooms.

We hired Treanor Architects to design modifications to our church

WHAT WAS OLD IS NEW

Monk's reestablish Abbey-student mass in response to burgeoning attendance

-by Fr. Brendan Rolling photo by Alzbeta Voboril

The Second Vatican Council boldly stated, "Eucharistic sacrifice is the source and summit of the Christian life." -Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Chapter II: The People of God

Our founder, St. Benedict, believed this over 1,500 years ago. His first act upon arriving at the top of Monte Cassino was to establish a church where his monks could celebrate the Liturgy of the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours (Pope Gregory's Dialogues, Chapter 8). He next built a monastery, library, school, and farm. The community of St. Benedict's Abbey has demonstrated the spirit of our founder throughout our 150 year history. Our monks have built many churches. In 1957 we built the Abbey Church at the highest point, the summit, of the ground we call home. Beneath the high cross is a tower; beneath that tower is a tabernacle where we find Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. He is the source and summit of our monastic community and college.

During this year's summer retreat, our priests and brothers voted to re-establish the Abbey-Student Mass. It was historic. Sunday Eucharist is the high point of a monk's week. The decision to fully involve students in the monastic community's Sunday Mass reclaimed something old and established something new. Most importantly each monk personally reaffirmed the Liturgy of the Eucharist as the source and summit of Christian life for him and for our apostolate, Benedictine College.

Something old. The Abbey-Student Mass was a custom for monks and students that started the day we founded St. Benedict's College in 1858. Daily and Sunday Mass were a priority in the community calendar. For 100 years the Abbey-Student Mass was celebrated in chapels and the parish church that today serves the people of Atchison at the southern edge of our land. The construction of the Abbey Church marked a milestone in the history of our community. Abbot Cuthbert McDonald set the cornerstone of the church during the community's centennial celebration in 1957. For the first time in our 100 years the full monastic choir could worship in a church completely dedicated to that purpose and the student body had a spiritual home distinct from that of the local parishes.

Something happened. In 1957, the Abbey Church, like churches across America, was full. Then our church, like churches across America, experienced a plunge in attendance that has lasted more than 40 years. The Abbey-Student Mass disappeared along with our memories of a full church. A study done this year said, "No other major faith in the U.S. has experienced greater net losses than the Catholic Church" (Pew Forum, Religious Landscape Survey 2008).

Today, something new and positive is happening. Benedictine College chaplains report students are attending Masses in record numbers and fighting the tide of negative national trends. Only a few years ago, there were only 10 students at daily Mass. Today, we estimate between 300 and 400. At one time, there was one daily Mass for students. Today there are four. A while back, there was no adoration. Today, there is twenty-four hour adoration and as many as 15 students can be found in the chapel at a time. Over the last 20 years, Benedictine College produced about 40 vocations to the priesthood and religious life. Last year alone 26 students and alumni announced their intent to enter discernment. Only a few years ago there was plenty of pew space in our chapels and churches. Last year, there were times when there was standing room only. This is what 85 percent enrollment growth feels like! Over the years, Mass times and locations have been added, but these did not keep pace with the growing faith-life of our student body. While many colleges experienced short-falls in enrollment, Benedictine reported its largest freshmen class in history. What began as a small trend just 10 years ago is now an impressive statistic that Benedictine chaplains brought to everyone's attention last year. We now estimate that over 50 percent of our student body regularly attends Sunday Mass. More than 700 students at Sunday Mass!

To celebrate the first 100 years of St. Benedict's Abbey, priests, brothers, and alumni combined forces to build a church. To celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Abbey and College, the community of St. Benedict's Abbey voted to fill the church we built by re-establishing the Abbey-Student Mass. More than 50 years after it was built, the church is full again with hundreds of students who are returning to the Mass. They now have a church, a common spiritual home, where they can worship together under the pastoral care of their Benedictine Fathers.

The Prophet Isaiah says, "Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn" (Isa 51:1). This Scripture says to us, "Remember where you came from." We did. We built what St. Benedict built and now the Holy Spirit is filling it. The young are responding to Pope John Paul's call for a new evangelization and to Pope Benedict's recent call for a New Pentecost. At this summer's World Youth Day Pope Benedict called down the Holy Spirit and asked for a "new generation of apostles." By re-establishing the Abbey-Student Mass at the top of this hill, the community of St. Benedict's Abbey joins Pope Benedict and all the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council in saying, "Eucharistic sacrifice is the source and summit of the Christian life." U.I.O.G.D.