As Work Continues, Abbey Gives Thanks

by Jean Dunn

BETHLEHEM — People think of the Abbey of Regina Laudis as an oasis of calm, a place of prayer and contemplation nestled in the hills of Bethlehem. In actuality, the past 10 months at the Abbey have been anything but peaceful.

Phase II of the New Horizons Project, a major renovation of the factory building that has served the monastery community since its founding more than 70 years ago, began last fall with all the earth-moving, hammering and ear-splitting activity inherent in a job of that magnitude.

“We’re in the midst of framing right now,” said Mother Alma Egger, project manager. “It’s going very well. Verdi Construction has given us May 1, 2019, as a finished date.”

“Our main setback has been the weather,” said the Rev. Mother Lucia Ruppus, Abbess of Regina Laudis since 2015. “In the winter we had a lot of snow. Now we’ve had a week of rain. But on the whole, we’ve been pretty lucky.”

“When they told us they’d be finished by May 1, we were delighted,” she said. “We’ll still have to move back in, but the structure should be finished by then.”

Mother Abbas, Mother Alma, Mother Telchilde Hinckley and Mother Angèle Arbib are together leading the New Horizons Project, which began with Phase I in 2013. The four expressed a deep gratitude to all those who have supported the New Horizons Project, which tends to hover at close to 40 members, currently numbers 37, including six novices and one postulant.

“Many similar groups,” whose numbers dwindle as older members pass away, Regina Laudis remains a vibrant, strong community with young women continuing to join.

“Our main setback has been the weather,” said Mother Lucia. “It’s disrupted everything,” said Mother Egger. “Our gratitude is endless,” said Mother Angèle. “The young ones are so excited about this building,” said Mother Abbas. “They’ve been very much a part of it. They feel so hopeful that they have a future here.”

“The on-site crew has been a really friendly, personable group,” said Mother Alma. “They told us, ‘if you have to get somewhere where we’re working, let us know. We’ll figure out a way for you to get there and be safe.’”

“If the construction team is doing such a really masterful job,” said Mother Abbas. “From the very beginning, everything has been done sequentially so that we can keep doing what we do until the last possible moment. They make sure there’s always someplace to move into.”

“In the completed building, visitors will have easy access to the chapel, the parlors [partitioned rooms where members of the public may speak with a nun], and the new Monastic Art Shop, directly off the new forecourt.”

“We wanted to preserve the warm, intimate feeling of the old chapel that was accessible to so many people over the years,” she said. “Although the new chapel will be different — there will be much more light — it will still be a place where people can come and have a chance to rest and pray and feel some peace during their visit.”

Many of the artistic features of the old chapel, including the stations of the cross, hand-carved by the late Mother Placid Densmore, survive and will be installed in the new chapel.

“The colorful stained glass image of Our Lady by Mother Praxedis Baxter that marked the former entrance to the building will be preserved and will be installed in the chapel’s east wall to catch the rays of the rising sun.”

In addition to the new chapel and art shop, renovations will yield a new refectory, a new library, a slightly enlarged kitchen and a new bakery, print shop, sewing rooms and music rooms.

“The center of the new building will be a large, open atrium that will rise from the ground to the ceiling,” said Mother Telchilde, noting that some of that light will fall into the chapel.

Another major objective of Phase II is the provision of the old living quarters into a full-scale infirmary, combining art and artist space with three larger ones, with space for a nun’s room, a bathroom, and the chapel.

“The chapel will be more welcoming, with easier access for the community and visitors. It’s a place of prayer and spiritual peace. We’ve worked very hard to have it open as soon as we can. We definitely plan to have it open by the end of May.”

“In addition to the excellence of the project itself,” said Mother Telchilde, “it’s important for people to realize that we are a center of hospitality, a place where where we’re working, let us know. We’ll figure out a way for you to get there and be safe.”

“The on-site crew has been a really friendly, personable group,” said Mother Alma. “They told us, ‘if you have to get somewhere where we’re working, let us know. We’ll figure out a way for you to get there and be safe.’”

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