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Abbey Nuns Slated to Begin Phase II of Renovations

by Jean Dunn | Posted: Wednesday, July 2, 2014 6:00 am

BETHLEHEM — Imagine having to carry heavy loads up four flights of stairs several times a day.

Now imagine that those stairways are narrow and winding, the kind where the treads all but disappear into tiny triangles.

Picture yourself in your 60s, 70s or older. It is midsummer, but there is no air conditioning. There is little light, little ventilation.

Now imagine that you are climbing those stairs while wearing the long and flowing habit of a nun.

Carved from an old brass polish factory on Flanders Road, the Abbey of Regina Laudis has seen few upgrades since its founding in 1947.

“This is how it’s been for 60 years,” said Mother Lucia Kuppens. “We’ve never had a chance to renovate.”

Launched in 2011, the New Horizons Renovation Project seeks to remedy the monastery’s serious safety issues, structural deterioration and space constraints.

With Phase I of New Horizons complete, the 37 women in residence now have safer ways to navigate the cloistered monastery — and some much needed breathing room.

A new elevator ensures that all four floors are accessible to all, including the elderly and infirm.

Two fire egress stairways, along with a new sprinkler system and fire alarms, bring the building up to fire code.

A previously unheated attic received new dormers, plumbing and electrical upgrades, insulation, heating and air conditioning, allowing the addition of four new cells (individual sleeping rooms)



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Phase I of the New Horizons Renovation Project at the Abbey of Regina Laudis included an elevator, two fire egress stairways and other safety provisions. Extensive attic upgrades allowed the addition of four monastic cells and two handicapped accessible bathrooms. Asked if the nuns ever had time to relax on the new balcony overlooking the abbey gardens, Mother Angèle Arbib replied, “No, but we know it’s there!”

and two handicapped-accessible bathrooms.

As monastic cellarer, responsible for all facilities and provisions of the monastery, Mother Lucia is project manager for the New Horizons Renovation Project, working closely with architect Paul Maggi of Boston and Verdi Construction of Bethel.

Work is expected to begin in spring 2015 on Phase II of the renovation, a project that will see the demolition and subsequent resurrection of the portion of the monastery known as St. Anthony's Barn.

"Our original factory building is a good, solid structure that we were able to renovate and upgrade," Mother Lucia told Voices. "The part of the building that we're addressing now is really an old barn that's not sound and stable enough to renovate. It really has to be taken down and started over.

"That's really a prime spot for us," she said. "Part of that building is our chapel. Part is living and workspace — our sewing room, our print shop, our bakery. But the structure is deteriorating. They all need a new home."

As with everything at the abbey, the decision to raze the building was reached after much thought, planning and prayer. The chapel is dear to the hearts of those in the monastic community, their guests, the people of Bethlehem and beyond.

"We're tearing it down because we have to," said Mother Lucia. "It's going to fall down if we don't. But we're asking the architect for the same atmosphere. We want the simplicity and the warmth that the old chapel has, in a newer, sturdier version. With more light and air!"

The Phase II renovation will include the creation of offices and small meeting spaces, places for conferences and private conversations, a larger refectory (dining area), the renovation of many existing cells and the addition of four more new ones.

Without these additions and renovations, the community would be unable to accommodate the growing number of women who have asked to enter the abbey as novitiates.

"That's a good problem to have," said Mother Angèle Arbib, who is assisting Mother Lucia with fundraising and publicity. "It's wonderful that we're growing.

"The people entering are young and vibrant, wanting to live out their vocations here. We're thrilled this is happening."

According to Mother Angèle, the current monastery is filled to capacity. Every square inch is occupied and designated for multiple uses.

"There's not a lot of breathing space," said Mother Lucia. "The corridors are narrow. There's a feeling of congestion."

“We’ve never had any space in the monastery that was air-conditioned,” said Mother Angèle. “It’s been difficult.”

As a working farm, the abbey necessitates lots of hats, coats and boots, as well as the need to change clothing to work in the snow or the pouring rain.

“We need mud rooms!” said Mother Lucia. “There’s no provision for that now. That might seem like a basic thing, but for us it’s a huge thing.”

Another difficulty with the present monastery is that there is no way to go from one end of the building to the other without going outside. For much of the year, that limits access for those with physical disabilities, as well as those concerned about slipping on ice and snow.

To remedy that, the architect has proposed a wheelchair accessible cloister walk.

“It will maximize use of the building,” said Mother Angèle. “Now, lots of decisions are made because of weather. Just like the elevator, the cloister walk is really going to make a difference.”

“All these things will improve our quality of life,” said Mother Lucia. “It will make our life much less stressful, more accessible. It will make it a lot simpler for us to be together.”

None of the work being done is extravagant, Mother Angèle confirmed.

“Nothing is over the top,” she said. “It’s basic and imperative. It’s all to make possible the life of this community, this monastery, into the future.”

Ensuring the future of the Abbey of Regina Laudis is surely on the minds of a West Hartford couple who left Paris by bicycle on Friday, June 20, for a journey of about 1,200 miles that will take them to Santiago de Compostela, a medieval town in northern Spain.

The couple is traveling along an ancient pilgrimage route called the Camino de Santiago — The Way of St. James. Following a path that dates to the ninth century, they expect to complete their ride by July 8, and they’re dedicating their pilgrimage to the New Horizons Renovation Project.

People often make the journey with some intention, Mother Lucia explained. Perhaps there’s a special person they’re praying for, a cause they’re supporting.

“One of the reasons they’re doing it now is because we’re beginning the final phase of New Horizons,” said Mother Angèle. “This friend is giving \$75,000 as a matching grant to encourage us to raise the matching \$75,000.”

In accordance with the donors’ specifications, the nuns of the abbey have until Labor Day to raise the \$75,000 that will release the amount promised.

“This gives us a real boost,” said Mother Lucia. “It’s a good start.”

While part of the Roman Catholic church, the Abbey of Regina Laudis is an autonomous,

self-sustaining entity. The monastic community does not rely on funds from the Diocese of Hartford, the Vatican or elsewhere.

“We are expected to be able to sustain ourselves and be independent,” Mother Lucia told Voices. “We have a farm, we provide hospitality. As much as possible, we’re trying to live by the work of our hands.”

“We’re definitely rolling up our sleeves and doing what’s necessary to raise the funds for New Horizons,” said Mother Angèle, who continues to pursue grants from public and private foundations.

Other fundraising activities at the abbey include theater productions, tag sales, proceeds of the Monastic Art Shop, including sales of pottery by Father Iain Highet, and sales of abbey products, including cheese, herbal products, iron work and more.

Sales of Mother Dolores Hart’s recent book, “The Ear of the Heart,” relating her journey from Hollywood starlet to cloistered nun, also aid the renovation project.

“There’s been a great response to that,” said Mother Lucia. “She’s been willing to go out ‘on the road,’ sign her book, speak to people and spread the word about New Horizons.

“Mother Angèle works with me closely in publicity and fundraising and keeping the momentum going,” she said. “We have a good team that absolutely works together.

“Everybody in the abbey has contributed to making this possible. Every person, from oldest to youngest, did what they could.

“It’s heart-warming,” said Mother Angèle. “There’s not a single person who doesn’t want this. Everyone has jumped in.”

The women had nothing but praise for the professionals associated with the design and execution of the abbey renovations.

“What the architect came up with is proportionate to our style of life, which is not extravagant, financially or aesthetically,” said Mother Angèle. “It would be easy to get carried away — or disenchanted. But he never lost his enthusiasm.”

“The builder is so great,” said Mother Lucia, noting that the workers have carried out their tasks with the utmost consideration and respect for the community.

“There’s still lots to be done,” said Mother Angèle. “But there’s lots of enthusiasm for Phase II.

“The huge success of Phase I has absolutely turned our lives around. These are undreamable changes!”

“We have faith that it will all work,” said Mother Lucia. “People have been so incredibly generous

to us so far. It's been like a miracle. We're just praying that this miracle will continue.

“We're really, really happy and so grateful to all the people who have helped us.”

An exhibit in the abbey Art Shop shows preliminary plans for Phase II of New Horizons. More detailed plans and progress on the renovations can be followed at abbeyofreginalaudis.org.

Those wishing to support New Horizons at the Abbey of Regina Laudis may contribute via Paypal at abbeyofreginalaudis.org, or mail a check to the Abbey of Regina Laudis, 273 Flanders Rd., Bethlehem 06751, attention New Horizons.

Those wishing to discuss a specific gift to New Horizons may call Mother Angèle Arbib at 203-266-5132 or write to her at the above address.