



Mother Alma Egger (left), Mother Abbess Lucia Kuppens, Mother Telchilde Hinckley and Mother Angele Arbib are leading the New Horizons Project at the Abbey of Regina Laudis in Bethlehem, including major renovations to the former factory building that has housed the monastery since shortly after its founding in 1947. When Phase II of the project begins in September, the Abbey's beloved chapel, which has welcomed guests and pilgrims for 70 years, will be demolished and rebuilt. Area residents who feel a connection to the chapel are invited to visit one more time between now and Sunday, August 27. Mother Alma built a scale model of the new chapel, which will feature dormers to let in natural light. (Dunn photo)

Abbey Plans to Start New Horizons

Phase II Renovation

by Jean Dunn

BETHLEHEM — Things are about to get messy at the Abbey of Regina Laudis.

In about six weeks, members of the monastic community will begin Phase II of their New Horizons Project, completing renovations of the humble factory building that has been their home for nearly 70 years.

In 2013, Phase I of the New Horizons Project addressed a number of serious safety issues within the main building and increased handicapped accessibility. It added four new cells (individual sleeping rooms), a new bathroom, a new heating and air conditioning system and refurbished existing cells and office space.

Phase II of the renovation will include turning an existing dormitory into an infirmary and making much needed improvements to the nuns' living quarters, workshops, offices and spaces to meet with guests.

But the heart of the 18-month project is the demolition and rebuilding of the Abbey chapel, an intimate worship space sacred not only to those within the monastic community, but to others who for generations have sought it out as a place of prayer and spiritual peace.

According to Rev. Mother Lucia Kuppens, Abbess of Regina Laudis since 2015, the community is ready for the inevitable upheaval that a project of this magnitude will bring.

“We want to get the excavation and foundation done before winter comes,” she said. “It’s going to be very dramatic. We plan to be living here all through it.”

“We have great faith in our builders, Verdi Construction in Bethel.”

But before the work begins, Mother Abbess is inviting local residents who feel a connection to the chapel to visit it one last time.

“The chapel will be accessible until the 27th of August,” she said. “After that, we have to close it to take down the artwork and other things we want to save and get it all to a safe place so that by mid-September, we’ll be ready to roll with construction.

“We’re trying to get the word out to people who love the chapel — local people especially who have prayed here, cried here, rejoiced here — who might want to experience the beauty of it one more time.”

Voices met last week with Mother Abbess, along with Mother Telchilde Hinckley, Mother Alma Egger and Mother Angele Arbib, who together are leading the New Horizons Project.

The chapel dates to the late 1940s, they said, shortly after Mother Benedict Duss and Mother Mary Aline Trilles de Warren arrived from France to establish a new monastery in Bethlehem.

The founders established their monastery in an unused factory built by Bethlehem resident Robert Leather, a Waterbury industrialist. They built their chapel over a concrete slab that was the factory’s loading dock, an ingenious design that linked an existing barn structure to the main factory building.

“It was an efficient use of space,” said Mother Abbess, “using the least amount of money and materials possible. We think they did a marvelous job with it.”

Mother Telchilde said Mother Mary Aline’s design for the original chapel reflected her appreciation for beauty and her great love for Roman architecture.

On touring the region with Lauren Ford, an early friend of the Abbey, Mother Mary Aline saw many arched barn structures, which reminded her of Roman temples. She decided to incorporate arches in her design for the chapel.

“Structurally, it worked, and it gave an inspirational feeling as well,” said Mother Telchilde. “Mother Mary Aline wanted to lift people’s spirits. The vernacular of barns was something that was familiar to the local people.”

The chapel was built by master carpenter Walter Duda, who had earlier converted the adjacent barn into temporary living quarters.

“There was hardly any money,” said Mother Abbess. “They had a lot of volunteers and they did a lot of work themselves. It was quite a testament to making something out of nothing.”

Mother Benedict and Mother Mary Aline wanted the chapel to be both beautiful and functional, explained Mother Telchilde.

“That’s something that has really been a hallmark of the community ever since then,” she said. “Even in simple places, to have functionality and beauty at the same time.”

While the little chapel has retained a certain beauty, it’s clear that it is past the stage of functionality.

Mother Alma said the community has outgrown the portion of the chapel called the choir, the enclosed area behind a wooden screen where the nuns sit. The choir is cramped, narrow and nonsymmetrical; boiling hot in the summer and quite cold in the winter.

There are mold issues as well.

“We can see the deterioration before our eyes,” said Mother Abbess. “Because it was built before energy efficiency or fire codes, it’s gotten to a point where it can’t be shored up. We have to start over. It was a very hard decision for the community to make.”

It is the shared wish of the community that the new chapel have the same spirit of beauty and simplicity as the old one.

The new chapel will be just “a few feet wider, a few feet longer, a few feet higher,” than the original, said Mother Alma, showing a scale model she constructed of the new space.

“We really wanted to maintain the intimacy of our chapel, as opposed to our church, which has an openness to the environment,” she said.

Like its predecessor, the design for the new chapel is based on the idea of a New England barn. Exposed scissor truss beams will support the vaulted ceiling and a series of dormers will admit abundant natural light.

“There will be a lot of wooden elements, and colored glass elements in tall windows,” said Mother Alma. “The stained glass window of Our Lady at the front entry of the greenhouse will be preserved and reinstalled in the east wall of the new chapel. One of the principles behind having the new chapel aligned east-west is to have the rising sun shine through that window.”

The Stations of the Cross, handcarved by the late Mother Placid Dempsey from local cherry wood, will hang in the new chapel; the statue of St. Benedict and other artistic items will find a new home there as well.

The side reserved for the congregation will have room for about 32 guests.

“It’s possible to keep the congregation side small and intimate because we have our church on the hill for ceremonies, Christmas and various feast days,” said Mother Abbess. “But people know and love this chapel. It has offered consolation to people for years.

“A place for private prayer and meditation is the strongest thing we offer to our guests.”

“The new chapel will also offer a little more room for our community, which is growing,” said Mother Angele, noting that the fact that the community is growing is a huge aspect of the entire New Horizons project.

“It’s clear we’re not going to go gently into the night,” she said. “We’re getting new, young people all the time. This will give us the strength and the wherewithal to continue to bring this spirituality forward after us.

“It’s for the future.”

Access to the new chapel will be through a corridor off a new main entrance. Also off that corridor will be parlors where the nuns can meet with guests, as well as a new home for the Abbey’s much-loved Monastic Art Shop.

“We’re trying to keep the guest activity in one area of the house,” said Mother Alma.

“It should make it a little easier for people to know where to go, to find what they’re looking for,” said Mother Abbess. “We’re hoping it will be more peaceful for everyone.”

The public is invited to visit the old chapel from 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and 6 to 8 p.m. daily through Sunday, August 27.

Some may wish to plan their visit for Saturday, August 19, when the nuns will have a barn sale.

The Art Shop will be open that day as well, closing soon thereafter for the duration of construction. The Abbey’s annual Christmas Sale, featuring gifts and products made at or exclusively for the Abbey, will take place in another location, Mother Angele advised.

“We want to thank people for the tremendous outpouring of generosity we’ve experienced,” said Mother Abbess.

“Starting back in 2010 when we started thinking about and planning for Phase I, we could not have done it without the people who helped us.

“But we’re not entirely finished,” she said. “We still need to keep raising money.”

Currently, the nuns have raised \$6.5 million towards the total of \$9.5 million for Phase II. An additional \$3 million is needed.

“We feel we have raised enough to get started,” said Mother Telchilde. “The longer you wait, the more expensive things become.”

Meanwhile, the buildings continue to deteriorate. The nuns shared stories of ceiling tiles that crash to the floor, of water pipes that freeze and burst every winter.

“None of this is ‘fluff,’” said Mother Abbess. “The renovations are necessary.”

“We’re doing it for future generations, the people we’re looking forward to welcoming into the life of the community,” said Mother Alma.

Some may be surprised to learn that although the Abbey of Regina Laudis is part of the Roman Catholic Church, it receives no financial support from the church.

“A monastery is independent from the Diocese, independent from the Bishop,” said Mother Abbess. “They do not contribute to us financially. We really have to be as sustainable as we can in all areas. We’re trying to do things through our land and crafts and art shop as much as we can.”

The Benedictine motto is ‘Ora et Labora’ — ‘Pray and Work.’ At Regina Laudis, that work is very much tied to the land.

“Some people come and help us in that work,” said Mother Abbess. “But we are cloistered. If we have a need, we can’t go out and take a few extra jobs. We have to work with what we have.”

“We’re reusing the old wooden chairs, at least for now,” said Mother Angele. “That practice will be applied in a number of areas until we have the money to buy new. We’re prepared to go without once the exterior structure is complete.”

The nuns acknowledged many gifts of “very generous endowments” from people who wish to support the work they do and the life they are living, through estate planning.

“We take the stewardship of those gifts very seriously,” said Mother Telchilde, “but we don’t know in advance when they will come.

“We’re grateful for all those who are dedicated to our land, dedicated to sustainable agriculture. Now is the time in the cycle where our centering building has to grow.

“We put a great deal of effort and energy and emphasis on the exterior, on our wonderful land. Now, that has to come back and strengthen the center.

“To be strong, we need both.”

During the 18-month construction period, the public is welcome to attend services at the Abbey church, Jesu Fili Mariae, on Robert Leather Road.

Vespers takes place at 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday and 4:30 p.m. Sunday. Mass is celebrated at 8 a.m. daily.

Those wishing to make a donation towards the New Horizons building project may mail a check to Abbey of Regina Laudis, 273 Flanders Rd., Bethlehem 06751, attn: New Horizons; or donate online at abbeyofreginalaudis.org.