

By Joe Link

Faithful farmers

These nuns find a higher meaning in their work on the land

On a farm in the hills of Connecticut's Litchfield County, the first bell of the day tolls at a quarter to six. Deep and reassuring, the sound moves through the dark woods of autumn to rest on nearby pastures, crops, and livestock. In the sparse light of dawn, another mystical day begins.

The church bell is telling the residents here that "Lauds" will start in 30 minutes. The 32 women who live here emerge from their small, simple rooms and walk to chapel. Clothed in black and white, they kneel and begin chanting in Latin: "*Deus in adiutorium meum intende.*" Oh God, come to my assistance.

Lauds is the first morning prayer and soon it will be followed by another "Divine Office," then another and another—among them Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers and others—at set hours of the day and

►**Right:** Postulant Gwyneth Owen gets ready to throw hay on the truck during the abbey's last cutting of the year. ►**Below:** Although the sisters sell some of their Bethlehem cheese to the public, most of what the dairy produces is for the abbey's own consumption.





►**Above:** In her formal nun's habit, Sister Kateri Tekakwitha surveys the farm's beef herd.

deep into night. Including daily Mass, a nun at The Abbey of Regina Laudis will devote six hours of each day in formal prayer.

And then there is the farming itself. It, too, is a form of worship. "It's part of our spirituality to have land we work," says Mother Augusta Collins, who oversees the abbey's beef cattle, hay fields, and pastures. "This is a way of getting to know God's creation. It's a way for people to get to understand themselves."

The nuns are followers of fifth century monastic Saint Benedict. "It's part of Benedictine spirituality to live by the work of your hands," she says. Although the nuns do sell some of what they produce, such as their cheeses and grass-fed beef, most of their food is for themselves and their guests. Making money is not



their goal; finding purpose in this life is.

The Abbey of Regina Laudis began when Mother Benedict Duss, an American nun hiding from the Nazis in France, watched from her abbey's bell tower as tanks from Gen. George S. Patton's Third Army liberated her small town. She knew then that she was meant to give something back to America.

Built on a hill. In 1947, she and another nun sailed to the U.S. with only \$20. Once here they met industrialist Robert Leather, who owned some land in Bethlehem, a small town in Connecticut. Leather believed one hill on his land had a purpose, so he gave it to them. On this hill, the nuns built their church.

Today the abbey covers 450 acres, but the farming is relatively small compared with

modern farms. The beef herd is only 32 head; the dairy just five cows. Behind the monastery, fruit trees and vineyards border enormous vegetable gardens that honey bees keep pollinated. All nuns stay busy, farming, cutting wood, or making crafts from tanned cowhides or wool from a small flock of sheep.

Every field and plot of ground on the farm honors a saint, and on a September afternoon the sun shines brightly on St. Genevieve's, one of the abbey's 11 hay fields. This is the last cutting of the year, and because today's work is critical—bales *have* to be hauled—this will be one of the rare days when some of the nuns will miss their afternoon prayers.

One of them is Sister Kateri Tekakwitha. Having changed from her formal habit to one

made of lightweight denim, she climbs onto a tractor with a square baler and starts her work. Farming is still new to her. As a child, she often visited her uncle's farm in Illinois, but she was a "rebellious young woman" then, she says, determined to study art in New York. "The last thing I would be doing is farming."

"It's life." Then she saw a film about Mother Noella Marcellino, who uses a centuries-old method to make cheese. The story intrigued a young artist named Stephanie Cassidy, so she came to the abbey in 2011 as an intern. She was clothed as a novice two years later with a new name: Sister Kateri Tekakwitha.

"This is the family that you cannot deny, the mystery," explains the 35-year-old. "I think I always wanted this. It's not work. It's life. If

►**Above:** Nuns, interns, and volunteers from the community work together to haul hay. Last year the nuns baled 8,778 bales from their 11 hay fields.



►**Above:** The abbey's beef cattle used to be mostly a mix of Shorthorn crosses. Years after a gift of a Belted Galloway bull and heifer, the herd now is entirely black and white.
 ►**Left:** Mother Prioress Dolores Hart has one of the best loved—and most unique—stories from Hollywood.

you're going to be passionate about something, you want to have it with you all the time."

Although the farm might seem small and old-fashioned, its methods have purpose. Mother Augusta describes work on the farm as "part of our own personal becoming."

"Sometimes we choose to do something a particular way because there's a value in the experience," explains Mother Telchilde Hinkley, who oversees the dairy. An example of that would be hand milking, which gives young interns and novices meaningful rela-

tionships with the animals. "Someone from the outside might say, 'Why do you do that?' You could just get a milking machine and be finished. At the same time, we're not against machinery, we're not against technology."

Science of farming. Think the nuns are behind the times? Mother Telchilde has a Ph.D. in animal science and reproductive physiology. Mother Augusta, who oversees pastures and the beef herd, earned her Ph.D. in plant science and agronomy. (Her research: "Nitrogen mineralization in perennial grasslands as a predictive tool in assessing nitrogen needs in management practices.") Mother Noella, known worldwide for her expertise in artisan cheeses, has her Ph.D. in microbiology.

The abbey has many good stories, such as that of Dolores Hart, an up-and-coming star

in Hollywood during the 1950s. She was a fine actress, but she also had a startling beauty. The media focused on the glossier aspects of her career, like acting with George Hamilton and even a young Elvis Presley. Hart gained notoriety by giving Elvis his first movie kiss.

Just when her stardom was skyrocketing, she shocked the world by entering this abbey. You can read about it in her just-published memoir, "The Ear of the Heart." After a long book tour across the country last year, she has returned and resumed her duties as Mother Prioress, second in charge at the abbey.

Mother Margaret Georgina, who oversees the abbey's vegetable garden, also has a telling story. "I never gardened at all until I came here," she says. She helps guests and interns find suitable jobs, well aware that the peace,

►**Above:** Mother Augusta Collins, left, helps Mother Abbess David Serna harvest from their vineyard.



►Above: The nuns at Abbey of Regina Laudis are cloistered and remain separate from the outside world. During Mass, they receive communion through a metal grille.



►Above: Postulant Sue Erickson cares for a young calf near the dairy.

solitude, and sense of purpose on the farm, offer something much needed today, especially among young people searching for meaning.

"There is a lot of cynicism out there," she says. "The impression I get is that you've seen it all by the age of 14. You have to go back and learn there's such a thing as wonder."

Mother Margaret Georgina knows the feeling well. She began visiting The Abbey of Regina Laudis in the early 1970s as a young woman disillusioned by the Vietnam War. The time was especially difficult for her because her father was one of the war's generals—George S. Patton IV, son of the man who liberated Mother Benedict in France. "Then I came here and found this place," she says. "We have a lot of guests who come who are at

that point in their lives. It's a grace for us too."

All are welcome here, and visitors come for a day, a week, a month. Some even a lifetime. Guests work on the farm, but they also receive care and attention. As welcoming as the nuns are, this is not the place for idle conversation, but rather a place for prayer and reflection. Silence is revered. The nuns are cloistered, sheltered from the outside world, so most of the abbey grounds are closed to visitors unless accompanied by a community member. During Mass each day, the nuns remain separated from others in the church by a metal grill.

Place of prayer. But once used to the abbey's rhythm, a visitor would have a hard time imagining life here any other way. The abbey life nurtures contemplation, which can lead a person to something deep within.

One such searcher is Rob Schumann, who began visiting the abbey on weekends to help the nuns with their work. Then he felt a need for something more, so he asked his boss for a year's sabbatical to become an intern here. For the past year he's worked—and prayed—every day at the abbey. "Here I just feel very comfortable," he says. "All of the nuns just put me at ease. I hope I'm doing things for them, but really they're doing a lot for me." ■

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