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OF THE  
MISSISSIPPI  
ABBAY

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*Sr Gail Fitzpatrick OCSO*

What a jubilee year this has been for us! August 23 was a grand day, as we celebrated THREE golden jubilees together: Sr Gail Fitzpatrick, Sr Carol Dvorak, and Sr Lillian Thomas Shank all celebrated the 50th anniversaries of their religious profession. And back in May we had the celebrations for the silver jubilees of Srs Kathleen and Louise, whom we wrote about in our last newsletter.

Sr. Gail Fitzpatrick needs no introduction for most of our readers, as she was our abbess 1982 -2006. Her calling to religious life goes back to her early childhood in Fairfield, Connecticut, where she was taught by the Sisters of Mercy. Their life of service to God and to peo-



*Sr Gail coating caramels in the 1970's.*

ple inspired her with a desire to give her own life to God. "Then I read St Therese and felt drawn to contemplative life," she says. "It seemed a very full way of loving God - nothing for oneself, but loving God with one's whole being."

At first she thought the Trappist way of life was perhaps too contemplative for her. But then her spiritual director invited her along on a trip to Mt St Mary Abbey in Wrentham, Massachusetts, when he was driving another girl up for an interview. Gail ended up being interviewed too, and on August 28, 1956, she entered Wrentham as a postulant. (The other girl did not enter, after all!) Like so



Br Colombo OSCO

*Sr Carol Dvorak*

many monasteries, Wrentham in those days was overflowing with new vocations, and when in 1964 the sisters founded Mississippi Abbey, Sr Gail was one of the 13 chosen for the new venture. She served as novice director from the time our novitiate began accepting candidates (in 1968) until she was elected our second abbess in 1982. Our community continued to grow under Sr Gail's leadership, and in 1999 we in our turn sent sisters to start a new monastery, Tautra Mariakloster, in Norway. This enterprise was dear to the heart of Sr Gail, who visited the community annually and remained technically their abbess until they gained autonomy in 2006.

Sr Gail's great gifts of pastoral wisdom were quickly recognized throughout our Order, and she served several times as a moderator at our General Chapters in Europe. After 24 years she decided it was time to step down, and she now serves as our guest mistress - while still much in demand for various services to our Order. This summer, for example, she gave our sisters in the Philippines their annual retreat; and then went on to India, where she made the Regular Visitation for our sisters at Ananda Matha Ashram. Visitation is a service done for each community in the



Mississippi Abbey archives

*Sr Carol, new Cistercian novice, 1972.*

Order, every other year, to help our houses stay faithful to the Cistercian vocation, to help deal with any difficult situations a community may be facing, and generally to encourage the superior and community in their monastic life. It is a key moment in a community's life, and we all feel honored that Sr Gail has been one of the first women in our Order to be a Visitor (it's only a few years since our Order was able to allow abbesses as well as abbots to perform this service).

Is it fair for a Golden Jubilarian still to have natural blond hair? We keep waiting for Sr Carol Dvorak, one of our four native Iowans (she hails from Cedar Rapids), to start looking her age, but that blond Czech hair still persists. Sr Carol began her religious life with the Cedar Rapids Sisters of Mercy, who had taught her from 4th through 12th grades. "I knew God wanted me to be a sister," she says, "so I thought I should enter there since they had given me so much." But even as a Mercy novice she felt drawn to a life of greater silence, solitude and more prayer.

After getting a Master's degree in French at the University of Laval in Quebec, Sr Carol taught at Mt

Mercy College. One day a student, Kathy Lyzotte, invited her along on a visit to Mississippi Abbey. “I fell in love with the place and the community and felt God was calling me to transfer,” Sr Carol says. Kathy became our first postulant to enter and persevere in the monastery, and a year later, in July 1971, Sr Carol followed her here. “My hopes and desires in transferring to the contemplative life have not been disappointed. Although there were difficult things about being a transfer sister, I never once thought that I should leave. I continue to feel drawn to even more silence and solitude in the life here as it nourishes my soul and draws me closer to God.”

At present Sr Carol is our prioress (second superior), a position she has occupied 3 or 4 times in the past as well. When Sr Gail was elected abbess, she appointed Sr Carol to succeed her as novice director, and for nearly twenty years she formed the next generation of Mississippi sisters. She is also our abbess’s secretary, another job she has done off and on (mostly on) throughout the past 25 years. As our Order is largely French in origin, and French remains one of the main languages (along with English and Spanish), Sr Carol’s training in French has been invaluable. This past spring she spent a month at our Generalate in Rome helping with a major translation project; and she has attended the General Chapter several times to assist with document translations. But she is always most happy to be home: “There is no place I would rather be on this earth than at Our Lady of the Mississippi Abbey!”

Like Sr Gail, Ohio native Sr Lillian Thomas Shank is also one of our founding sisters, and was our second superior 1964-1971. A registered nurse, she served for many years as our infirmarian. But in the monastery we often wear many hats, as there are more jobs than sisters. Sr Lillian was also our bookkeeper, no small job with our farm and candy business as well as the abbey books to tend. And as if that were not enough, she not only ran our candy business in the early days, but was one of the candy cooks, and always on call for the never-ending repairs of the caramel wrapper.

Sr Lillian’s love for God and for monastic life drew her to study Cistercian history, and in the late 1980’s she co-edited a 3-volume work with ground-breaking historical studies of the feminine side of Christian monasticism. For nearly 20 years she has been living in Florida, where she mentors a group of Cistercian associates, the Florida Lay Cistercians. In appreciation of her work with them, they gave our monastery a beautiful young maple tree!



Mississippi Abbey archives

*Sr Lillian at the caramel wrapper in the 1960’s. This shot was posed – we never worked at candy in our habits!*

For the first time in 30 years we are planning a major addition to our monastery - and as you can imagine, we are quite excited about it! Back 9-10 years ago, when we began our big capital campaign, the plan was to raise money for both Tautra and here, to work towards completing our own monastery. Thanks to the generosity of so many friends, we completed both Tautra’s new monastery and our own new candy house. This used up most of the funds we had collected, and we ran out of energy - and out of plans, too.

What with the constraints of the existing buildings and very hilly site, it has been hard for any architects to solve the challenges we face in order to complete our monastery and have it all accessible to our seniors. The original country home which our founders moved into in 1964 is four feet higher than the church, added on in 1968. And the major new addition built in 1979, which houses our dormitory, library/scriptorium, and refectory, is an additional three feet lower than the church. At that time we were still missing a senior generation, so the twisting corridors, steep ramps and narrow stairs which connect these parts did not seem to be a problem. But now at last we do have a few seniors, so



*The community processing from church to the Chapter room: Srs Rebecca and Columba.*

the time has come to provide for them in a way that will be of benefit to future generations too.

As Winston Churchill famously said, “We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us.” Nowhere is this more true than in the monastery. Centuries of living the monastic day, with its mix of liturgy and work, of praying and eating and sleeping, of hospitality to the world and of seclusion from it, have produced a standard model of the kinds of spaces and passages that foster prayerful silence and help a community live together in love. Many monastic visitors have remarked on how our monastery, begun as a private home in no way resembling a monastery and expanded 15 years later on a shoe-string budget, falls short of the monastic norm.

What is really exciting for us is that we now have the outlines of a master plan in keeping with our small scale and preserving the beauty of our monastery - and solving many of the challenges to make it a more monastic and senior-friendly space. One night an architectural consultant we are working with, who has a great deal of monastic background, woke up with a flash of inspiration which is the basis for our new plans. It was at the very hour we were rising for Vigils, and we feel sure this was the Holy Spirit at work! At this point we are implementing a major part of the plan, including a new senior wing, completely new access between the three different parts of the monastery,

and geothermal heating/cooling for the new wing and adjacent areas including our church (much cheaper and more ecological than using fossil fuels). If funds permit (and we are a good way along), we will break ground in early spring, God willing.

The biggest piece of other news we have concerns not only our monastery, but our Order, the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (“Trappists”). The supreme authority in our Order lies in the General Chapters of Abbots and of Abbesses, which meet jointly for three weeks once every third year. In between, pastoral oversight is exercised by our Abbot General (and at this point in our history it is still always an abbot, not yet an abbess!). For the last 18 years we have benefited from the far-sighted and generous ministry of our beloved Dom Bernardo Olivera, an Argentinian who was elected in 1990, the first year the Abbesses’ and Abbots’ Chapters met together. In 2005 Dom Bernardo informed the Order that he planned to hand in his resignation at the 2008 Chapter.

So when M.Nettie headed off to Assisi, Italy for the Chapter (accompanied by Sr Carol), we waited with baited breath for election results. To our joy, a good friend of our community was elected the new Abbot General: Dom Eamon Fitzgerald, abbot of Mt.Melleray Abbey in Ireland, which founded our brother house of New Melleray in 1849. As Father Immediate of New Melleray Dom Eamon



*Sr Paula Henderson OSCO*

has come to Iowa frequently since 1990, always visiting us for a day or two, and preaching our community retreat in 1991. One of the principal jobs of the Abbot General is to visit all the houses of the Order, scattered on all the continents. So we expect we will continue to see a good deal of Dom Eamon. Meanwhile, we ask you to join us in praying for our new Abbot General, and also for his brothers at Mt. Melleray as they elect his successor.

Thanks be to God, we are all well, although we did have a scare with Sr. Columba in the spring. She had major surgery to remove a malignant tumor, but she has been declared cancer-free, and she recovered so quickly from the surgery that we almost forget she had it. She is a real trooper anyway, bearing valiantly with the various afflictions of age. But as we watch her and some of our other seniors coping daily with the present tortuous route from the church to the chapter room, we can't help but count the days til the new wing is ready.



*With not only St Lillian, but also Sr Genevieve home for the jubilee celebration, we got a rare photo of the seven founders who are still members of our community. Front: Srs Mary Ann and Joan. Back: Srs Regina, Gen, Lillian, Gail and Columba. Two others are in Norway, and our senior founder, Sr Augustine, has gone home to God.*



*The community at Chapter: Srs Myra, Ciaran, and Rebecca.*

David Peterson

In July Sr Suzanne went to stay with our sisters in Redwoods, California. After a good number of years looking after our computers (she was a computer consultant before entering the monastery), and running our candy sales department and web site (not to speak of several other jobs), she was in much need of a rest. We all miss her a good deal, but know she is in good hands. Sr Suz is a California native, and most of her family is there, so this is an added bonus to her sojourn there.

And we have a new novice! Sr Paula Henderson, a native of Hawaii, received the Cistercian habit on the feast of St Bernard, August 20. The clothing ceremony is held in the Chapter room; the abbess questions the postulant, "What do you ask?" and the postulant rises and says "The mercy of God and of the Order." Then the abbess gives a spiritual talk, before summoning the postulant to come before her to receive her new habit. It is a joy for us to welcome our new novice into the ranks!



Remember when we were involved in that big TV program in 2006, that never was aired? In August we were delighted to have the first return visit of one of the five women who were part of the program. Sheila Dickson of California stayed with us for several days, and spoke to us in Chapter about her current work as a therapist in a high-security prison. She is a courageous and dedicated woman who, like the other participants and the crew members, became very dear to us during our weeks together.

And we are happy to tell you that the DVD's of our series should soon be available via our website. One of our Associates recently conducted a quite effective retreat using the DVD's; the supplementary discussion materials from this retreat will also be put on our website. Check [mississippiabbey.org/DVDs](http://mississippiabbey.org/DVDs) for news!

May God bless you and all your loved ones!

*The sisters of Mississippi Abbey*



## **ANNUAL DINNER**

Now that the Year of Jubilees is over, we plan to hold our annual fundraising dinner again in 2009, probably in the spring or early summer. When we have the date we'll put it in our next newsletter and on our website.