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Faith and values

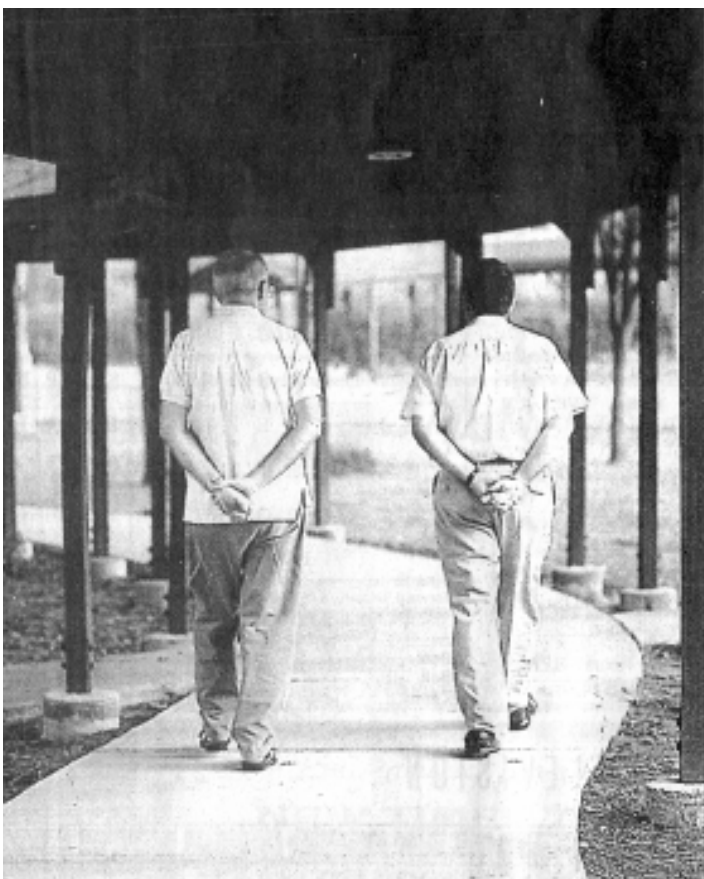


Photos by Pete Churilton/The Enterprise

Brother Michael Gallagher, second from left, and Father Peter Funk, third from left, participate in morning prayers.

The monastic life

Beaumont's Holy Cross Monastery now is a community of only two. But the monks' Benedictine way of life means their door is always open to like-minded people seeking God.



Father Peter Funk and Brother Michael Gallagher stroll the grounds at Holy Cross Monastery after morning prayers.

By JANE McBRIDE
THE ENTERPRISE

Beaumont has a monastery. It's not a place of ancient stone and ivy-covered walls that surround silent men wearing hooded robes tied with cords. It's not a structure at all.

Although the average person's idea of a monastery — and the strict dictionary definition — is a building, two Beaumont monks say a monastery is not a place, but a community of like-minded people seeking God.

Peter C. Funk and Michael Gallagher are Benedictine monks who formed Holy Cross Monastery this past August. Their monastic community is housed in a brick, five-bedroom house located on the grounds of the Holy Family Retreat Center on North Major Drive.

For now, Father Funk and Brother Gallagher are the only two members, but their home has room for three or four. If more than that wish to join the monastery, the monks say they will gladly make room.

"I'd love to have the problem of needing a larger place — lack of space," Funk says.

One of the basic practices of the Benedictine way of life, established in the 6th century and based on the teaching and beliefs of

St. Benedict of Italy, is hospitality. In the early days, that meant never shutting a door on anyone who entered. Today, it means the presence of rooms that always are open to receive guests for an indefinite period.

Anyone is welcome. The only stipulation is that the visitor participate in both work and worship.

One of the first things Funk and Gallagher did when they formed the monastery was to establish morning and evening prayers, the cornerstones of the day, Gallagher says they hope that as more people learn about the prayer services, the numbers will increase.

The prayers are open to all. They last about 20 minutes and follow a pattern of psalms, scripture readings and Biblical prayer." The prayer is relatively uncomplicated. It contains a period of silence, which is important to the monastic life. If the room is full, we move from the chapel, which holds 20, to the big one, which holds 100."

Morning prayer is at 7 a.m. on Monday through Saturday. Evening prayer is at 5 p.m. on Sunday and 6 p.m. on Tuesday, Thursday and Friday. Mass is

MONASTERY: 'We seek a deeper relationship with God and human beings through the everyday routine of life'

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celebrated at 9 a.m. on Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. Everyone is welcome.

The monastic life is a rich, full one, the monks say, but not a markedly unusual one. "I think a lot of people would use different words to describe the same thing, but ultimately, for me, it boils down to finding the meaning of life through a deeper relationship with God and with other people. That needs time and reflection and prayer,"

Gallagher says.

"We seek a deeper relationship with God and human beings through the everyday routine of life. There is nothing extraordinary here." Gallagher says. "St.

Benedict had an interesting philosophy. He would emphasize to his monks back in the 6th century that it wasn't seeking extraordinary things or extra means to achieve this balance of relationships, but rather being mindful of everything that is ordinary in everyday life and being present in that moment in everything you do." Monks don't have a specific set of goals in the usual sense, Funk says. Living the life is the goal — and there is no particular work or ministry required. Some monks run schools or are missionaries. Some are priests in a diocese. Others spend time predominantly in reflection, singing the praises of God in song, and in private, prayerful reading of the scriptures. The ideal, the monks say, is reaching a balance. The unofficial motto or creed of the Benedictines is "Ora et labora" — prayer and work.

"The emphasis has to be on the purpose of the life, which is the seeking of God, and the balance of prayer with work and social life." Gallagher says.

The men came to Beaumont by very different routes. Funk, 62, was born in Philadelphia, the eldest of six in what he says was a lower middle-class family. He entered the seminary immediately after high school, was ordained and stayed there 10 years. He served in a variety of ministries, as a diocesan priest and a prison chaplain. He worked on the marriage tribunal (the legal office of the diocese), taught high school and was a campus minister at two Catholic girls colleges before deciding to pursue the monastic life.

Gallagher, 45, was one of



Photos by Pete Churilton/The Enterprise

Brother Michael Gallagher, above, plays the piano willed to him by his former teacher, noted concert pianist Agi Jambor. Father Peter Funk, right, prays during a period of silence during morning prayers.

four children born to an upper middle class family in Massachusetts. He earned an undergraduate degree in music from the University of Pennsylvania and his graduate degree in law from Villanova. He practiced international corporate law for 10 years, drawing on his ability to speak several languages, including German, French, Italian, Persian and "a smattering of others much less well known."

Gallagher, who grew up in a religious family, says he eventually decided there had to be more meaning to life than just being a corporate lawyer. A trip to a European monastery with a friend was his first exposure to the monastic life. Ever after, he says, he thought about it.

Gallagher and Funk both ended up at the same Benedictine monastery, Mount Savior, in Elmira, New York. They arrived within a month of each other.

Becoming a monk begins with staying at a monastery, continues with study, prayer and work and ends with the taking of permanent vows.

"You're investigating the monastic life and the monastery is investigating you, watching," Funk says. "It's a long period, three or four

years, before you can make any kind of permanent commitment."

After a time, Funk and Gallagher, independently of each other, decided Mount Savior was not the monastery for them. They began looking together, for a place that would allow them to find the balance between work and worship. "We tried for many years to establish such a house in Philadelphia, but never secured permission from the local authority. Peter called the bishop here in Beaumont and said, 'Do you know any bishops who would be interested in letting a group of men start such a monastery?' and he said, 'Yes, I would. Why don't you come to Beaumont?'" Gallagher says. They first visited in March



of 1997 and moved to Beaumont this past August.

The Most Rev. Joseph A. Galante, bishop of the diocese of Beaumont, says it is important for a diocese to have the charism or religious spirit found in religious communities like the Benedictines.

Their presence is a spiritual haven for the people of our diocese. They are dedicated to communal prayer and work and to hospitality," Galante says.

Monks, as in the case with Gallagher, do not have to be a priest. Galante says. "Monastic communities are

made up of some priests and some non-clerical members, or brothers. Often, there may be more of the non-clerics than priests. The requirements are a monk must be Catholic, must have a serious desire to deepen one's relationship with Jesus and to live a life of commitment, chastity, poverty and obedience. Anyone who meets those criteria can pursue the monastic life." Although Holy Cross is a monastery for men, monasteries for women also exist. Funk says there are dozens of orders of monks. The Benedictines came to the United States in the 1840s and now have, he estimates, well over a hundred monasteries.

Galante says the Holy Cross Monastery might be new to Beaumont, but the life is ancient.

"Beaumont has not had a monastery here, as far as I am aware. This is a new resource, a new way for people to experience commitment — for our diocese — but it's a very old way."

Gallagher, whose work is as music director of St. Francis of Assisi in Orange, continues to keep up with his music. He often can be heard playing the piano that was a gift from a former music teacher, Agi Jambor. He will showcase his musical talent when he performs at Carnegie Hall on March 14.

Funk's work is as director of the Holy Family Retreat Center. Although the monastery is

on the center's grounds, his work with groups who come to the center for spiritual retreats or secular workshops is his job and separate from his life as a monk.

Funk says he and Gallagher feel blessed to have found what they consider the perfect location for a monastery. The Holy Family Retreat Center sits in a quiet, peaceful, heavily forested tract of land off Major Drive.

"The retreat center is an optimum situation. It's not like having a parish or a school where there is a constant demand for your ministry. Your retreatants come and go. The location is quiet. There are monasteries in the middle of inner cities. I'm sure people go there for reflection and quiet, but you'd probably have to get it inside the house. This setting is very conducive."

Both monks say they want the monastery to be a source of spiritual growth and a place of welcome and reflection.

"Our goal, of course, is to attract others to this way of life. To establish a fuller community and to be a resource for other people who might want to come here and pray with us or who might just need time and space away from their daily routines."