

The Role of Service

Much of the work in and around the monastery is done by the guest-priests themselves. Cooking, helping with the dishes, chapel and sacristy work, minor maintenance and repair, lawn and garden care etc. help many to find a useful way to spend leisure hours. A man is never pressured to take on such a job. But by the same token an effort at priestly renewal that was singularly self-centered would be doomed from the start. By joining in the various tasks and chores necessary to keep each of the guest-houses in order, the individual guest-priest shows a willingness to serve that is basic to priestly renewal.

Ability to relate to his fellow priests, an effort to meet with them and to mix with them socially and informally as well as at common periods of prayer, all of these are indicators of a true desire for a renewed priestly life. It is principally for this reason that a conscious effort is made to sustain a "family" or "community" atmosphere in each of the guest houses. If priests cannot live as brothers with their fellow priests there is scant hope for their renewal in the priesthood.

Community life has its obvious inconveniences, but at Via Coeli it is seen as a fertile testing ground for the practice of that active charity without which priestly renewal is impossible.

The Paraclete Vocation

Against this background the role and work of the Servants of the Paraclete emerges as evident. The Servants live the same life, follow the same daily order, share the same tasks, in a word, are one and the same community with the guest-priests whom they are privileged to serve. The principal contribution which any Servant can make to a fellow priest's effort at renewal is the serene and happy living of his own priesthood. Confidences are not forced. Servants are not specially trained as professional counsellors. However, if a guest-priest wants to talk with a fellow priest a servant is disposed to listen. The underlying premise of this approach is that somewhere within himself a man has the answer to his own problem. At Via Coeli four avenues are open to him in finding those answers: informal talks with a servant; formal sessions with a professional therapist; meditative prayer before the Blessed Sacrament; living in active charity with and for his

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brother priests. A guest-priest is free to choose any one or all such avenues. Hopefully he will choose those willed for his greatest good in the Providence of God.

Priests Help Priests

Physical — mental — spiritual — emotional: the areas in which a man can wear thin or break down admit no exception merely because that man happens to be a priest. When the danger signs begin to show, or when a break has already occurred, a man instinctively looks for help. When that man is a priest he instinctively looks for help in terms of the priesthood he shares with others. Perhaps that is why Father Gerald Fitzgerald, S.P., founder of Via Coeli and present General of the Servants of the Paraclete, sums up the philosophy of Via Coeli in three words: "Priests help priests."

It cannot be over-emphasized that for the most part efforts at priestly renewal remain intensely personal. Via Coeli as an institution has never claimed to renew priestly life. But it has offered the opportunity and the occasion for many hundreds of priests to withdraw from the pressures and tensions of the world outside them and within them in order to re-evaluate and to renew themselves in the priesthood.

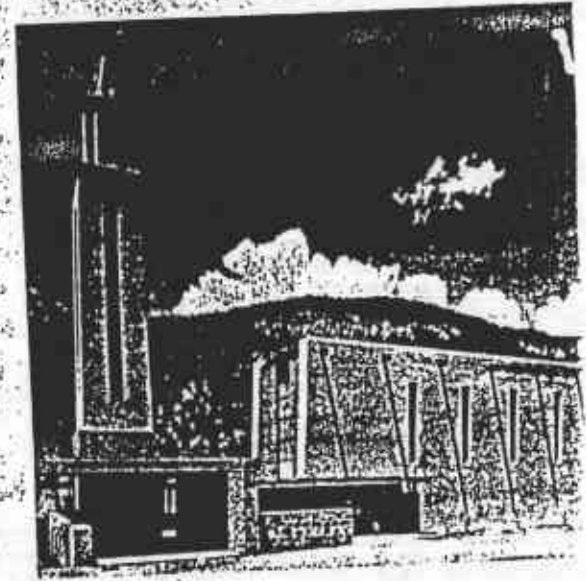
Ultimately it is a question of confrontation, a man confronting himself and his God. A priest might do that anywhere, under any set of circumstances; but given the tempo of modern life, given the attractions and allurements of a culture steeped in creature comforts, given the fact of human weakness and finite limitation, he does it best in an atmosphere of spiritual retreat among his brother priests, in union with his Eucharistic Lord.

The fact that he has the opportunity to do it at all makes those of us who share the Paraclete vocation most grateful that there is a Via Coeli Monastery.

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Retreat For Renewal



The WHAT

and WHY of

VIA COELI MONASTERY



Heading north and west from Albuquerque, N.M., along some 62 miles of winding road, you find yourself in "Jemez Country."

You first pass through the sleeping village of San Ysidro, then skirt the pueblo which is the home of the Jemez Indians.

You are in a canyon now, flanked on either side by the color-slashed walls of the Jemez mountains. The tiny village of Jemez Springs appears around a curve in the road. Another curve, and a cream-colored cluster of buildings in the Spanish style arrests your gaze. The sign reads: VIA COELI MONASTERY — Servants of the Paraclete.

Via Coeli Monastery — the name is unknown to the majority of American Catholics. Even for those to whom the name is familiar, the purpose of the monastery often remains clouded or vague. Recently it was headlined in a national secular weekly as a "refuge for fallen priests." It is emphatically not that! It has been referred to by the daily press as "a rest home for alcoholic and mentally disturbed priests." That is far too narrow an explanation of its aims and goals. It has been written off by random critics as "the end of the line" in the Roman Catholic priesthood. The 600-plus alumni of Via Coeli, actively engaged in priestly work throughout the United States, give the lie to such generalization.

What Is It?

What is Via Coeli? Hopefully, and at its best, it is a place of priestly renewal. Renewal, indeed, is the key word in understanding Via Coeli Monastery: its purpose, its work, its place in the Church. Renewal — to make new again; to make fresh and vigorous something that is worn or broken or in some way, any way, impaired. The purpose of Via Coeli then is to be an instrument in, an occasion for, the renewal of priestly lives.

If it is yet a scandal to American Catholics that men ordained to the priesthood are flesh and good human beings, then indeed the existence of a Coeli and its work should be kept a dark secret. If it is yet believed by some that priests, by a special grace of ordination, are delivered from the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual ills that are the stock-in-trade of all human existence, then the existence of Via Coeli must surely offend a few. But because priests are flesh and blood human beings, because they too can fall heir to any and all the ills that might befall a son of

Adam, there is a Via Coeli. And to it come those priests of God, some worn, some aged, some infirm, who seek to renew themselves in the priesthood they share with Jesus Christ.

Voluntary Regimen

Via Coeli, as a monastery, is an extraordinary experiment. One ordinarily thinks of a monastery as a quiet place of cool cloisters in which monks, traditionally robed and vowed to stability, move silently from one common exercise to the next. At Via Coeli the guest-priests are required to wear their cassocks only for chapel exercises. Meals and recreation find the men in informal attire. Attendance at spiritual exercises is voluntary, encouraged but not enforced. There is no imposed rule of silence. There is no evening bell announcing a time to retire. More significantly, perhaps, there are no gates locked, no doors barred. Each man is free to bid goodby to Via Coeli whenever he might so choose.

The monastery does not insist on a rigid set of rules because it is not a rule or a regimen that the guest-priests are seeking. It is God Himself. They know that it was God Who first called them to the priesthood; that it is God yet calling, ever calling, to that same eternal priesthood. And at Via Coeli they search within themselves, each in his own way, for the answer to that Divine Call. It is an answer which is theirs alone to give, a response which only they can make.

Spiritual Program

A program of spiritual renewal is offered them here. The day begins with morning prayer, meditation and Mass. A community high Mass is also sung each day in the four separate guest-houses in the Canyon. Every man is invited to make a private Holy Hour each day before the Blessed Sacrament. Ninety-five per cent of them do so voluntarily.

Rosary, Benediction, spiritual reading and Compline round out the schedule of spiritual exercises. The stress is strong on the Sacred Liturgy, and within the Liturgy it is fixed on the center and source of all priestly renewal — the Eucharistic Christ. If a priest neglects the Christ of the Eucharist he is neglecting his priesthood. Often, in re-embracing that Christ, he discovers it anew.

Physical and Medical Program

The program of physical renewal is well implemented, thanks to the generous efforts of the Handmaids of the Precious Blood, whose mother house is only a few hundred yards from the monastery. The gracious Handmaids, under the direction of a staff physician, maintain a clinic and dispensary for the physical well-being of the guest-priests. A provisional infirmary, serviced by these same sisters, houses those men whose physical ills preclude their living in one of the other more active communities. The infirmary is provisional only because lack of funds has delayed completion of a new, modern unit with private facilities for 22 guest-priests.

Each newly-arrived guest-priest, usually within two weeks of his coming, is sent into Nazareth hospital for a complete physical check up. In some instances psychiatric and psychological evaluations may also be sought. A staff psychologist and counsellor is at the monastery weekly, and his professional services are available to all. Three Albuquerque psychiatrists have working relationships with men from the monastery who have asked for such professional help.

A local chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous meets weekly in the Canyon. Recovery, Inc., self-help, group therapy program, is also active at the monastery, meeting two nights a week.

Recreational Program

The over-all program at Via Coeli allows for generous amount of leisure time, which can be filled in a variety of ways, depending on the inclination of the individual. There is a fine 9-hole pitch and putt golf course on the ground. The monastery fields a softball team and basketball team in due season, taking on local competition. There is a swimming pool and tennis court. A recreational center, with ping pong and pool tables, is also popular. Some men find hiking in the Jemez mountains both relaxing and recreational. Others enjoy the challenge of the trout stream which runs through the monastery grounds.

For those not inclined to outdoor activity there is a library running to some 6000 volumes. A record library (music) complements this and growing in size and popularity. Theology seminars begun during Vatican II and well attended, have become a permanent part of the program.