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 not 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, they are one in 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 counselors. However, if a 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: 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 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 presence of God.

Priests Help Priests

Physical - mental - spiritual - emotional: the areas in which a man can wear thin or break down are not, in any, exception. Because the man happens to be a priest. When the danger signs begin to show, or when a break has already occurred, a man instinctively seeks 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 Gerard 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."

This cannot be over-emphasized. 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 had 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, in an effort to re-evaluate and to renew themselves in the priesthood.

Ultimately it is a question of a confrontation: a man confronting himself and God. A priest might do that anywhere in ordinary circumstances, but given the tempo of modern life, given the attractiveness and allurements of a culture steeped in comfort, given the fact of human weakness and finite limitations; does it not happen that priests are often, in an atmosphere of spiritual retreat among their brother priests. In union with his Eucharistic Lord, the Servant asks himself; the Servant who knows that his priestly vocation is 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-splashed 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 arrest your gaze. The sign reads: VIA COELI MONASTERY - Saviors 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 is often not 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 far too narrow an explanation of its aims and goals 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 men new again; to make fresh and vigorous something that is worn or broken 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 blood, human beings, then indeed the existence of VIA COELI and its work should be kept a dark secret. If it is yet believed by some that priests, a special grace of ordination, are delivered from physical, mental, emotional and spiritual ills at the stock-in-trade of all human existence, then the existence of VIA COELI must surely offend some. But because priests are flesh and blood, human beings, because they too can fall heir to and all the ills that might befall a son of Adam, there is a VIA COELI. And it is to 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 cloistered life in which monks, traditionally, robed and vouched 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 man in civilian 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 goodbye 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. To make now, that it was God Who first called them to the priesthood; that it is God who is calling; that to that same eternal priesthood, as VIA COELI, they are seeking, within themselves, each in his own way, for the answer: that Divine Call. It is an answer which He alone can give, a response which only He can make.

The 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, reading and Communion round out the schedule of spiritual exercises. The stress is strong on the Sacred Liturgy, and within it, the Liturgy as 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-embarking 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 the 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 a generous amount of leisure time, which can be filled in a variety of ways, depending on the inclination of the individual. There is a 9-hole pitch and putt golf course on the ground, the monastery fields a softball team and basketball team in 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. Young men find hiking in the Jemez mountains both relaxing and recreational. Officers enjoy the challenge of the trout stream which runs through the monastery grounds.

For those not inclined to outdoor activities 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.