



# Benedictine Balance

## Creates PLACE OF PEACE for All People

by JANE MCBRIDE

**M**onasteries are ancient buildings filled with somber monks wearing heavy, hooded robes as they move silently through the day, praying and spending time in penance before retiring to a small, bare room with an uncomfortable bed.

For Benedictines, that image couldn't be further from the truth. It's one of many misconceptions people often have about the monastic life. Others are that the monks are cloistered, take a vow of silence, don't get to see family or friends and do nothing but pray. The monastic way of life isn't morbid or penitential, but uplifting and joyous when lived well, says Father Peter Funk, who lives at Holy Cross Monastery in Beaumont, along with Brother Michael Gallagher.

A monastery is, at its simplest, a community of like-minded people who live together in a common life in search of God. Life at Holy Cross is full, rich and engaged with others, with time for reading for pleasure and study, enjoying hobbies and sharing meaningful conversations. The monastery has rooms open to receive guests who commit to participating in work and worship.

There are dozens of religious orders; Brother Michael and Father Peter are Benedictines.

"Other orders were founded for a specific life," Brother Michael says. "For Jesuits, it's teaching; for Dominicans it's preaching, and the Franciscans were mendicants who begged for their supper and for their keep. They didn't own anything, living a life of radical poverty."

Benedictines follow the Rule of St. Benedict established in the sixth century, based on the teaching and beliefs of the Italian saint to live a life of prayer, work, study and leisure, keeping those things in balance.

Father Peter, the eldest of six in a lower middle-class Philadelphia family, became a priest just out of high school and served for 10 years, as diocesan priest and prison chaplain. He worked on the

marriage tribunal, taught high school and ministered at two Catholic girl colleges.

Michael Gallagher was born to an upper-middle-class Massachusetts family. His undergraduate degree is in music from the University of Pennsylvania, and his graduate degree is in law from Villanova. He speaks German, French, Italian, Persian and more and practiced international corporate law for 10 years. He's a classically trained pianist who has played at Carnegie Hall. A trip to a European monastery with a friend was his first exposure to the monastic life, and it intrigued him.

Gallagher and Funk both ended up at Mount Savior, in Elmira, N.Y. Independently, each decided to find a monastery more suited to his calling. They came to Beaumont at the request of the Most Rev. Joseph A. Galante, then bishop of the Diocese of Beaumont.

It wasn't a decision they took lightly.

"As Benedictines, we take a vow of stability, which means when you join a monastery, that's where you stay for the rest of your life. That's why Peter and I thought long and hard. It keeps you rooted in community, where with other orders you might not get as close to the local community," Brother Michael says.

The monks run the Retreat House for the Diocese of Beaumont, but being director and assistant director there isn't part of their identity as a monk; it's their work.

"We are monks by vocation," Father Peter explains. "The retreat center is our ministry. Too often the monastery and the retreat center are confused as if they were one entity."

"As Americans, we are so imbued with work ethic that we derive our identity and even self-worth from what we do, but it's not a very Christian outlook," Brother Michael says. "I think it's why so many of us are sick in our souls."

Living that life of balance initially didn't come easily to him. He railed those first months against what seemed at the time disruptive and rigid.

"I have discovered that rhythm and pattern are important in my



spiritual life for establishing balance in the Benedictine tradition: prayer, work, study, leisure. That was a hard one. When I first got

to the monastery, we prayed at all different times of day. When the bell rings you have to drop everything, sometimes for 10-minute prayers. I had this inner conflict with how I would get things done if I had to stop for those prayers. It took a year to realize that prayer was my work, and my work was prayer. There was no difference between washing dishes or cataloguing books in the library or praying in the chapel. I wouldn't have come to that if I hadn't followed the Benedictine Rule. There was a certain amount of discipline and rhythm needed to come to those hard-earned truths."

While Benedictines are Catholic, their ministry is to all people who come to them with a need.

"We give spiritual direction, directed individual retreats, as well as have group retreats to which many non-Catholics come," Father Peter says.

Accompanying people outside the monastery, including offering support and guidance through difficult times, is rewarding, Brother Michael says. "Sometimes when you visit people in the hospital you discover they've fallen through the healthcare cracks, and you become their medical advocates. I can't tell you how many people I've walked through M.D. Anderson. It's a privilege and an honor for me to be there. And when someone they love dies, they ask us to be there at the deathbed, or visit with family later when they know everyone else has gone."

People often seek ways to deepen their spiritual life, he says, but he never gives advice. Instead, he "asks questions in ways to help them see things about themselves they haven't seen before. It's a risky thing to put your soul on the line and tell

people what your deepest beliefs and deepest fears are. If you're a monastic or even a good listener, number one is to not be judgmental, but to be an open, listening presence."

Being with good people who are living their lives as devoted Christians is both edifying and encouraging to be faithful to their calling, Father Peter says.

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. We are open to any Catholic men who would like to live the monastic lifestyle. Like a family, the monastery keeps going when you get new members," Brother Michael says.

"A few have come and discovered that the monastic life was not for them. That was not a loss; it was a gain, both for them and us. We prayed together and spent time together, and it gave them insight into how they wanted to live out their Christian life. We are always hoping and praying that God will lead some men to join our community," Father Peter adds.

## HOLY FAMILY RETREAT CENTER

In addition to living at Holy Family Monastery, Father Peter and Brother Michael work as Director and Assistant Director of Holy Family Retreat Center, owned by the Diocese of Beaumont.

Everyone is welcome; one need not be a Catholic. Prayer services last 45 minutes and include singing psalms, scripture readings, 20 minutes of silent meditation, responsorial sung verse, a canticle, petitions, the Lord's Prayer and a closing prayer. Booklets are provided to assist in following the service.

The grounds offer meditative settings, including a small labyrinth and a lovely Way of the Cross that winds through the woods, with places to stop and pray. Spiritual counseling is available on a limited basis. Call to make an appointment.

9920 N. Major Drive | 409.899.3554  
www.holycrossmonks.org

### SCHEDULE

**Monday, Tuesday,  
Wednesday and Friday:**

Morning Prayer: 7 a.m.  
Eucharist: 11:30 a.m.  
Evening Prayer: 6 p.m.

**Saturday and Sunday:**

Morning Prayer: 9 a.m.  
Eucharist: 11:30 a.m.  
Evening Prayer: 6 p.m.

