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## **Journey to Inner Peace** Laith Agaha

The contemplative life routine up on the hill for the 19 monks who reside at the New Camaldoli Hermitage. Just south of Lucia and 50 miles of Carmel, the Hermitage is a two mile drive up the mountain from Highway 1. As one approaches the complex, benches on either side of the road offer breathtaking views of the Pacific Ocean and the Big Sur coastline.

As one might imagine, the Hermitage is a peaceful, quiet place. From the monks who live there permanently to the visitors who spend just a few hours on retreat, the focus is the spiritual inner-journey. "The life isn't that hard, but you have to be cut out for it," said Brother Michael Harrington. But it's not completely void of social life, and they're totally cut off from the outside world. "We're hermits, but it's not as strict as some orders," said the Rev. Raniero Hoffman, the Hermitage's resident prior. "There's a certain amount of community. We zero in on the contemplative, solitude life, but we try to be hospitable and interactive. You go to some deeper inner places, so you don't need rigidity. You need flexibility when you're on that journey." Part of that flexibility for the monks is casual dress. Jeans, shorts and T-shirts are part of the uniform. Hoffman wore Birkenstocks.

The Herald spent a day at the Hermitage last week, attending services, spending the night in a Hermitage "cell" and experiencing the solitude of a monk's life. By definition, a monastery houses all of its monks under one roof, while in a hermitage each monk lives in an individual dwelling. The degree of isolation varies between orders.

The Camaldolese are a branch of Benedictine Catholics that originated in Italy's Tuscan region, where the order's "mother house" is still located. The 1,000 year-old order first arrived on the Big Sur coast in 1958, when the Rev. Augustine Modotti and Brother Pedro Rebelo traveled to the United States from Italy to establish a new hermitage. Their search brought them to the California coast, where they found an 800 acre dude ranch overlooking the Pacific Ocean at an elevation of 1,300 feet.

Among the 19 monks at the Hermitage are men from South Africa, Ireland, and Gibraltar, the British outpost on the Iberian peninsula. A Chinese monk recently relocated from the Big Sur hermitage to a hermitage in Italy. Only 15 brothers reside at the Hermitage. Four are on leave for various personal reasons. One is taking care of his mother, who has cancer.

The monks spend much of their days isolated in their cells – hexagon shaped living quarters, each with a small yard – pursuing their personal relationships with God, mostly through meditation. But they also read, study, tend to their yard, exercise, and surf the Internet. The complex is set up with Wi-Fi, which some monks take advantage of with computers in their cells.

The complex has a weight room, a barber chair, a pool they hope to refurbish one day, and a library. Trips into town are not uncommon, either. Each monk usually heads to Monterey or San Luis Obispo once or twice a month for doctor appointments or other engagements.

Plenty of opportunity for interaction exists, but no more so than during four daily services at the chapel. The chapel hardly resembles a typical neighborhood church. Sectioned into two parts, each of the day's four prayer services begin in the front room, or choir. Instead of benches facing the front where the priest would usually lead prayer, two rows of 10 chairs on either side. The benches are for visitors, or "retreatants." The back room is a rotunda, a spacious octagon to which monks and guests migrate after singing hymns and reading prayers in the choir. A two foot cross is suspended from the ceiling in the center of the rotunda just above the stone table where Hoffman conducts communion.

Before the wine and wafers, the monks arrange themselves in a circle around the stone table and the guests make an outer circle, while Hoffman reads the daily homily. Bedtime and rise time vary slightly for each brother, but they generally arise for Vigils, the first service, which begins at 5:30 am.

Brother Harrington awakens at 2 am to do karate, which he follows with meditation before heading to the chapel for the first service. Like many of the monks, Harrington did not seek the monastic lifestyle at a young age. Originally from Michigan, he worked for 20 years as a mechanical engineer. He and his wife had a daughter, who is now a dance in New York. But after her and his wife divorced, and she later died, Harrington re-evaluated his life.

Some monks shave their heads, but it's hardly a requirement. Unless nature has uncovered their domes, most sport crew-cuts. For the beginning of a service, they wander into the chapel one by one covered by white robes. When the final prayer is uttered they file out very orderly and abruptly. One moment the choir is brimming with song, the next moment it is completely silent and empty.

Once the first service ends, only an hour passes before Lauds begins at 7 am. Eucharist, the day's most involved service, begins at 11:30 am. After Eucharist, the brothers gather in the dining room for the only shared meal of the day. Breakfast and dinner are solo experiences. The final service Vespers, at 6 pm, Sundays, Christmas, and Easter have slightly different schedules.

After the final prayer, the monks head to the rotunda again, where they dive into “sitting meditation time.” Harrington goes to bed immediately afterward.

Twelve monks are priests, and thus rotate as presiding priest during the services. As strict as the individual monk’s discipline is in regard to faith, the order is somewhat flexible with its approach to spirituality. The monks are free – even encouraged – to study the teachings of other faiths and integrate them into their own lives. The Hermitage periodically holds conferences with counterparts from other faiths, such as Buddhists, Taoists, Jews, and Hindus. They have been in contact with an Islamic professor in hope of arranging a conference to “learn about and understand” the world’s second most popular faith.

A book, “Purity of Heart and Contemplation: A Monastic Dialogue Between Christian and Asian Traditions,” resulted from the collaborative effort of the Hermitage and some Buddhist monks. “It comes from a desire to realize that we’re all on a spiritual search, to find what in the different faiths bonds us,” said Hoffman. “We recognize differences in practices and faith, but we’re coming together because we recognize that we’re all seeking the divine.”

“We call (the conferences) inter-religious dialogue, but really we’ve already gone beyond the dialogue. It feels more to me like inter-religious experience. We would stop doing the academic presentation and the philosophical discussions, and just say, ‘let’s sit in quiet together.’ We might be approaching the divine differently, but we’re sharing in the experience together.”

For his personal contemplative journey, Harrington integrates Zen meditation and Sufism – a mystical order of Islam – along with his practice of karate, a Japanese discipline. “It’s very healthy,” said Harrington, “to not be in this defensive posture, but to be open to other religions.”

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