

## A Rich Panorama of Monastic Life

Review of  
*The Abbey of Gethsemani: Place of Peace and Paradox*

By Dianne Aprile  
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Reviewed by **Frank X. Tuoti**

Vatican archivist Msgr. Charles Burns recently commented: “An institution that does not have a memory does not have a future.” It seems safe to say, in view of the 150-year “memory” compiled and composed by award-winning journalist Dianne Aprile, that Gethsemani Abbey has a secure future! This beautifully produced and sensitively written anniversary chronicle of the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani will be appreciatively read by religious scholars and academicians. It will be enjoyed by the many thousands who have made retreats at Gethsemani over the years, and will certainly be avidly read by those who are devotees of the writings of her most famous son, Thomas Merton.

Above all, however, it will be treasured and revered by those of us who once walked – and those who still walk – her mosaic corridors, who have been fed by her psalmody, nourished by her liturgy, made clean by tilling her sacred fields, and brought to new life by the “seeds of contemplation” which were secretly planted there, deep in our inner ground.

As I read this history of Gethsemani, organized into chapters corresponding to each of its eight abbots, I sought to find and isolate those sections that contain the highlights of her century and a half of ongoing life. I soon discovered that *almost everything* was a highlight! Realizing that no review could possibly synopsise the richness and delights of this chronicle, I shall attempt only a few brief comments.

The author is generous with her quotations of Thomas Merton, and appropriately so, for it was this exuberant, joyful, talented minister of the word who made Gethsemani the most famous monastery in the modern world. The narrative itself is seamless, weaving a living tradition of monastic life over its many years with its many trials and difficulties, yet at the same time enfolded constantly in the relentless pursuit of God.

Not to be overlooked are the magnificent photos, tintypes and woodcuts which illuminate virtually every page. The author also provides a continuous “time line” of events that took place in America and in the world concurrent with the span of years the chapters cover.

Noteworthy is the insight shown by the author at the very outset in rooting the Gethsemani experience in the tradition of the Desert Fathers. Very much like them, the monks of the first years of

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**Frank X. Tuoti**, a member of the Abbey of Gethsemani during the 1950s, is the author of *Why Not Be a Mystic?* and *The Dawn of the Mystical Age*. He gives contemplative retreats and contemplative prayer workshops around the country. He lives with his artist wife, Gale, in the high desert of northeast Tucson, Arizona.

Gethsemani lived a harsh life of penance, radical fidelity and poverty, and reflected the hidden life of their protectress, the Mother of God. During the first half century, from the journey of the founding monks from France, through the tenuous and at times hapless decades under Gethsemani's first three abbots, the monks were often sustained only by their faith. These early years were uncompromising in their penitential austerities. Indeed, until this century, for many in the world, the mere mention of the word "Trappist" could send chills up and down one's spine!

Pivotal and fruitful in the Order is the seventeenth-century reform of Abbé De Rancé at the Abbey of La Grande Trappe, France, from whence the name "Trappist" has come. (An absolutely marvelous woodcut of La Trappe fills most of page 35.) Dom Edmond Obrecht, the fourth abbot of Gethsemani (1898-1935), appears in some ways to be the reincarnation of De Rancé. He ruled with an iron hand and had a penchant for publicly humiliating his monks. At the same time, as the author points out, he was loved and revered by the community. It was the "fierce" Dom Obrecht who would become the saviour of Gethsemani (30 pages are devoted to his Abbatial rule). Dom Obrecht looms larger than life in Gethsemani's history, a man with a reputation for "getting things done." He built up the monastery, renovated extensively, tore buildings down. In time, the names "Obrecht" and "Gethsemani" became synonymous.

Gethsemani got her first American Abbot with the election in 1935 of Dom Frederic Dunne, who had long served as Dom Edmond's prior. Under his guidance, foundations were undertaken in Georgia and Utah. Providence apparently decreed that Thomas Merton's first Abbot would come from a printer's background – a man with a great love of books, and with a keen desire to make the Trappists better known. What better way than with books? Though Merton first wanted to "sacrifice" his writing talents and serve the Lord as a simple monk, Dom Frederic had other ideas when he discovered one of his novices was a talented writer! The world knows the rest of the story.

The "modern" period began in 1948 with the election as abbot of Dom James Fox, a Harvard Business School graduate, a complicated man and a pragmatic man, a shrewd administrator. He would set his stamp upon Gethsemani for 20 years, during which more foundations would be made, many innovations introduced, physical austerities moderated, the monastery's commercial enterprises expanded and building projects developed from blueprints (much to the disapproval of Merton at times). The picture of an early Gethsemani cheese label reminded me of the time when Merton, by way of comment, tacked a sign on the door of the cheese factory, which read: CHEESES FOR JESUS!

It was during these years that the monastery began bursting at the seams with postulants, novices and young monks. During the year I entered, 1952, we were approaching 300 white- and brown-robed Trappists. That year, Dom James had a huge tent erected in the quadrangle and asked for volunteers to sleep there (a two-year excursion!). One day in chapter, following a particularly cold night, Dom James remarked: "Well, many are cold – but few are frozen!" After his resignation as Abbot in 1967 (two years after finally granting Merton's plea to become a hermit) Dom James himself opted for the eremitical life. He died on Good Friday, 1987.

In 1966, with Dom James' blessing, future Abbot Flavian Burns "took to the hills" and became a hermit. Denied his quest for a simple eremitical life, he was elected abbot in 1968. He resigned in 1973 and headed back to his hermitage. During his five years as Abbot, he induced a deep contemplative dimension to Gethsemani, along with many innovations, including separate rooms for the monks. In 1980 he was a superior again, this time chosen by the community of Berryville, Virginia, where he would serve for about five years – then back to the hermitage at Gethsemani once more, and

then, a year and a half later, temporary superior in Ava, Missouri. After eighteen months in Ava, he was again elected abbot, at Berryville, where he would serve another six years. He resigned in 1996 and became chaplain of the Trappistines at Crozet, Virginia. He once remarked, with a smile on his face, "I've stopped planning my future." After all, if we want to make God laugh, tell him our plans for the future!

For more than twenty-five years, Fr. Timothy Kelly has held the Abbot's crozier at Gethsemani. The contemplative vision of his predecessor for the community continues under his abbacy. He is revered as an accessible, modest man, a good listener, democratic and an instinctual fine leader. As Aprile shows, he can also be tough, having removed three Abbots from Gethsemani foundations over the years. Intelligent and aesthetic renovations and prudent innovations in the life under his leadership continue to mark Gethsemani as a living, dynamic place of "peace and paradox" – and may I add, prayer.

The words of Jesus are apt regarding today's Trappists: "I sent you to reap a harvest you had not worked for. Others worked for it; and you have come into the rewards of their trouble" (John 4:38). By way of concluding this incomplete review of a very rich and complete panorama, in word and picture, of America's oldest Cistercian monastery, I can only strongly suggest heeding the words once spoken to St. Augustine: "Take, and read!"