

Report from the Guesthouse

Review of

Making a Heart for God: A Week Inside a Catholic Monastery

By Dianne Aprile

Foreword by Patrick Hart, OCSO

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Reviewed by **Thomas Fogarty**

This book, in the author's words, "is the legacy of a week inside a monastery, a time spent in silence and solitude, observing a community of monks as each one goes about the business of making a heart for God." The monastery is the Abbey of Gethsemani, made famous by Thomas Merton's life and works. More Americans today are making retreats than there were ten years ago and the Gethsemani retreat rooms are often booked a year in advance. Since the 1980s women have been allowed to make retreats at this Trappist monastery, which formerly was a possibility only for males. Retreats offer a way for persons to step back from a fast-paced world in order to gain perspective and to worship the Lord in spirit and truth.

Eight brief chapters, corresponding to the days of the week on retreat, comprise the body of this lucidly written book. The Foreword is written by Thomas Merton's secretary Brother Patrick Hart and it nicely encapsulates what the author unfolds. There are two appendixes: one being a monk's daily schedule and the other a monastic genealogy. Also included are a helpful list of recommended reading on the history, theology, and practices of Christian monastic life and a directory of Catholic monasteries which offer retreats. A glossary of monastic terms is also provided.

Journalist Dianne Aprile, author of the widely praised *The Abbey of Gethsemani: Place of Peace and Paradox*, the officially commissioned volume commemorating the abbey's 150-year anniversary, artistically presents what one is to find at Gethsemani and looks into the lives of the monks and the retreatants to see why they appreciate Gethsemani so deeply. The author examines why men are called to be monks and delves into the life they lead once they have joined the community. She shows the operation of a monastery and why people are refreshed and renewed by their stay at one. The day begins for the inhabitants of Gethsemani at 3:00 a.m. and extends to 7:30 p.m. Time is occupied by prayer, work, meals and study. Naturally, not all retreatants follow this plan because they are not used to getting up so early in the morning. Retreatants are encouraged to participate in work and this deepens their insight into how a monk lives. The author explains the Rule of Saint Benedict which guides the monastery and the abbot's role in the scheme of things.

Anecdotes told by both monks and retreatants show why people react favorably to the monastery. One monk told how a tractor mired in the mud was for him an apt metaphor for why he liked

monasticism. He surrendered his autonomy and accepted his dependence on God. He had been bogged down and then rescued by God at Gethsemani. A retreatant said it was difficult to explain why the monastery is so well liked: “People who haven’t been there have a hard time grasping how special it is,” she said. In the words of the former psychiatric counselor at Gethsemani, a Baptist, “I have learned that Gethsemani is much more than a place in central Kentucky. It’s an inner attitude – a Weltanschauung – a way at looking at the world if you will, that becomes part of the seeking person, wherever he goes after being there.” Those seeking a glimpse within the sacred yet welcoming walls of a Cistercian abbey will find an informative and attractive guidebook in *Making a Heart for God*.