

Members of Something More

THE MONKS OF NEW MELLERAY ABBEY

By Fr. Mark Scott, OCSO

CRRL is about community. Community, friendship and collaboration are primary values of rural America. Catholic Social Teaching (CST) includes these three values under the rubric “common good.” We Cistercian monks of New Melleray Abbey in eastern Iowa know all about collaboration and the common good as both receivers and givers. In the months and even years subsequent to the pioneer Irish monks’ arrival in eastern Iowa in 1849, New Melleray needed and received support from Bishop Loras, from the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, their neighbors who had arrived a decade earlier, and from the farming families already established in the area. Our collaboration, friendship and mutual support continue today on various fronts, both material and spiritual. Our closest neighbors regularly attend Mass in the Abbey church on Sundays and often during the week, enjoying one another’s company

over coffee afterwards. Our rural neighbors support the monks in times of joy, for instance, an ordination or solemn profession, and in times of grief, through their attendance at the funeral and burial of a monk. Historically the monks have counted on the assistance and expertise of friends and neighbors in the management

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of abbey farm and forest lands and the manufacture of simple wooden caskets and burial urns at Trappist Caskets. Prized among our monastic practices is generous and open hospitality. Our monastery guesthouse is blessed with attentive and dedicated employees and volunteers who assist us in serving the pilgrims and re-

treatants that are never lacking to a monastery.

It is only natural for New Melleray Abbey to be members of the CRL family. CRL is “dedicated to the vitality of the American countryside.” Even more, CRL is dedicated to keeping rural families and small communities connected with one another. New Melleray Abbey is pleased to support the CRL membership of the local family farmers who lease our farmland and of some of our collaborators at Trappist Caskets who also manage small family farm operations. Through its excellent magazine, CRL brings the rich CST out of the realm of theory and shows how rural families and communities can express it in their day-to-day choices and through seasonal celebrations. CRL gives rural Catholics an experience of hopeful solidarity in a world that can be cold, harsh, and unsupportive of the values of community, collaboration, and self-sacrifice. As recent issues of

CRL Magazine have shown, the aesthetic realm of the arts, in particular music and painting, is also part of CST. Beauty is an integral part of Catholic sensibility and a fundamental impetus for responsible and creative “care of our common home.”

Together on the Road

The Cistercians of New Melleray Abbey are Catholic monks. Monastic tradition like Catholicism itself is about being connected. Like all our Catholic brothers and sisters, we connect most visibly when we gather on Sunday for Mass. Together we hear the Word of God. Together we eat and drink the Lord’s Body and Blood in the Eucharistic species of bread and wine, fruit of the earth and work of human hands. We pray that we “be gathered into one by the Holy Spirit” (Eucharistic Prayer II). As monks we connect with our fellow Catholics in this sacramental way. In addition, through our preference for a local economy based on the respectful and nurturing use of the land, we live connected to God’s creation and to the folks in our rural locality who similarly live and work on the farm land, prairies, and forests of eastern Iowa. If you visit New Melleray you will quickly notice that, like all Cistercian monks, the monks are lovers of the place. You will see how we love our land and our buildings, how we love the change of seasons and the trees and wildlife. You will find we see things from God’s point of view, who “looked at everything he had made, and found it very good.” We hope that what God has given us is in even better condition after

passing through our hands. We maintain organic apple orchards and an organic garden near the monastery. We are vigilant over the use of our rich farm land. The sustainable management of our woods respects God’s creatures who live there, preserves a beautiful place for the monks and retreatants to walk in, and supplements the needs of Trappist Caskets. If you have read Pope Francis’s encyclical letter *Laudato Si’* we think you will recognize our own aspirations in Pope Francis’s praise of monastic work: monastic work “makes us more protective and respectful of the environment; it imbues our relationship to the world with a healthy sobriety.” Finally, our monastic practice of hospitality connects us with pilgrims and seekers who know they will find at the monastery a welcome that asks no questions, wholesome home-cooked meals, and both silence and holy conversation that revive the soul.

Sharing Values

Community, friendship and collaboration are values that we rural dwellers embrace but sometimes take for granted. They become part of daily life for rural folks. Rural folk know about vulnerability, too, and the humility that necessarily accompanies the awareness of one’s contingency and dependence on neighbor and on God. I write this in mid-October when farmers in eastern Iowa want to be harvesting their soybeans and corn right now but the heavy rains and the strong winds of the last weeks have prevented them. The beans are





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more and more flattened to the soaked earth and the dry corn sways too easily in the wind. Our U. S. culture as a whole, and indeed world culture, has become a complex of virtual realities where personal connection is reduced to what can be had through digital technology. In this context the precious values and experiences of community, friendship, and collaboration enjoyed and practiced by rural dwellers need to be preserved with care but also boldly put out there and shared as alternative ways of being human. Pope Francis remarks that "a consumerist vision of human beings . . . has a leveling effect on cultures, diminishing the immense variety which is the heritage of all humanity" (*Laudato Si'* 144). What he goes on to say about in-

digenous cultures in the context of a globalized ecology applies, I think, equally to the rural cultures of the U. S.: Our "communities and cultural traditions . . . should be principle dialogue partners" in decisions that affect the use of land and resources, including human resource. For us, says Pope Francis, "land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God" and from our forebearers who are buried in our church cemeteries. Our land as well as our cultural heritage of community, collaboration and friendship are sacred and necessary if we are to maintain our identity (*LS* 146). Rural folk know by experience of the land and also through their music and art that collaboration, not competition, is the major player in their survival and flourishing.

Collaboration, not competition, is what best expresses the bedrock of rural culture.

A Common Place

It is true that New Melleray Abbey is rural and has a 170 year farming tradition. Nevertheless, most of the people who have joined the abbey in the last fifty years are from urban environments. Often they have academic backgrounds and work-experience in fields such as business and technology. Membership in CRL, and especially the CRL Magazine, help us introduce our new members to the rural values of our monastic founders and of our rural neighbors who are also lovers of the place.