

## A Life That Makes Sense

Review of  
*Trappist*

WTVI - Charlotte Public Television and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Communications, 1997

1 hour - color documentary / \$24.95.

*Trappist: Living in the Land of Desire*

by Michael Downey, photographs by Michael Mauney

Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1997

176 pages / \$35.00 hardbound

Reviewed by **Paul Wilkes**

Some of the more important contributions to the understanding of Cistercian life are being made these days by showing not how heroic or different it is, but by lifting up its very ordinariness. As any of us know who have spent some time around Trappist monasteries, the men and women who have chosen (or are discerning if they should choose) this life mirror our society: altruistic and holy, achingly human and even at times venal. They come to monastery gates not on angel's wings, but more often on their hands and knees, trying to find a way come closer to God and to live a life that makes sense in our overheated era.

Yet the physical and spiritual template within which they live their lives has a transforming power that is anything but ordinary. Benedict was right: monastic life in its simplicity and focus does have the potential to recast mere mortals into - if not angels - quite extraordinary individuals.

A new film and companion book that concentrate on Our Lady of Mepkin, a monastery of some two dozen Trappists, a daughter house of Thomas Merton's Gethsemani, located forty miles west of Charleston, South Carolina, offer powerful - and complementary - testimony to St. Bernard's way of living the Benedictine charism, as it is incarnated in late twentieth-century America.

Other films have been done on American monastic life; the one which perhaps had the widest audience, as it was shown on ABC some twenty years ago, sent chills through Trappist communities. Studying the Trappists at Spencer, Massachusetts the documentary seemed to delight in the aberrant and weird, giving little time to the progression through the various stages that monks inevitably must pass and little consideration to the building blocks of monastic spirituality.

Now, happily, with *Trappist*, we have a film we can proudly show friends, families, prospective candidates, and even those who look warily, even suspiciously, upon monastic life. For here is an hour-long exposition of Trappist life that succinctly deals with the dailiness, even the tediousness, of monastic life and triumphantly proclaims what can result through the modern practice of the Rule.

If one of the three monastic vows (obedience, conversion of manners, stability) is portrayed brilliantly in the documentary as key to life in a monastery (and, incidentally, in the world, as well) it is stability. For in *Trappist*, stability becomes not imprisonment or denial, but the profound entrance into the reality and potential of a place, one place. By

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remaining in one place, with companions of vastly different and differing abilities, natures, and spiritual paths, monks find themselves no longer skimming the surface of life, but penetrating its secrets and discovering its mysteries in ways they never could have imagined. For monasticism believes, as did Karl Rahner, in the “mysticism of everyday life,” that God is as present in the elegant abbey church as he is in one of the odoriferous Mepkin henhouses. While we in the world pass along the smorgasbord of delights and places, we may find ourselves still unsatisfied and hungry. Trappist life asks that we stop such frenetic searching, rest in the presence of a God Thomas Merton saw as “mercy within mercy within mercy,” and lower our gaze from the fabulous sunset on the far-off horizon to the kitchen in which we cook, the office in which we work, the stores in which we shop. And yes, the church in which we pray.

We receive the distinct impression in the film that the Trappist life is not for doe-eyed dreamers. The crucible of community life mitigates against the idea that human foibles will be stripped away as easily as the postulant sheds civilian clothes to take on those of a monk. Those seeking the Great Moment will find instead a life that seeks to wean the seeker from mere and occasional emotional experiences so that the very presence of God can infuse all that they do.

In the companion volume, *Trappist: Living in the Land of Desire*, Michael Mauney’s aesthetic photographs and Michael Downey’s affectionate text combine to go beneath the surface of a life that is difficult to depict completely on film. The book offers a more contemplative approach, which the reader can absorb over a period of time.

Here we see and read of the daily external life of modern-day Trappists, but probe as well why it is they have come to seek God in a monastery and what they hope to achieve. What comes through remarkably well is that while each monk’s path is individual, community support is a crucial factor. To rise at 3 a.m. is made easier by seeing others also on their way to church at that hour. Facing *acedia* or physical exhaustion, monks know that they are not alone in striving for the high ideal that Cistercian life represents.

The film and book not only provide revealing insights into Trappist life, but send a message beyond the cloister to the world at large: monastic values are both common-sense and transcendent values that can inform the life of any seeker. After all, the “school for the Lord’s service” that Benedict codified in his Rule was initially designed for laypeople. With the numbers of men and women in monasteries declining, but the numbers of men and women who desire the wisdom and structure of monastic spirituality growing dramatically, it is obvious that Trappist life is undergoing a dramatic period of change. It must somehow, some way enter into the secular world in new ways in the decades ahead.

The few hundred male and female Trappists spread across America in seventeen houses serve as calm voices in a cacophonous time. Stability and chastity, constant self-conversion, prayer, a sense of vocation, detachment, discernment are essential in every considered life that seeks union with God. These Trappist explorers on the outer edges of human consciousness, in the quiet way they have chosen, have much to teach us.

As a frequent visitor to Mepkin, I can also attest to the accuracy and balance in both documentary and book. It was refreshing to see that Mepkin life was not slurried into some pietistic gruel. No, this is the way it is. This is a film that should be shown in parishes and at home, in high schools and college campuses where young people are searching for something worthwhile to which they can dedicate their lives. Let eyes wander over the pictures and text in the book and know that monasticism is as fresh as today, as proven and venerable as its rich history.