Contemporary Architectural Witness to the Lived Cistercian Ideal: The Abbey Churches of Gethsemani and Conyers

Dewey Weiss Kramer

Introduction

Two mid-twentieth century churches stand as proof of the vitality of the Cistercian ideal being lived today: the church of the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, renovated in the mid-1900's, and that of the Abbey of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit near Conyers, Georgia, the first daughter house of Gethsemani, constructed between 1954 and 1960. While the two projects proceeded nearly simultaneously and there was clearly extensive and regular contact between founding and daughter houses, the two communities worked rather independently on their churches. However, although the resulting sacred spaces differed from each other, both turned out to be profound expressions of the Cistercian charism. Both churches are strikingly contemporary, yet both echo the twelfth and thirteenth centuries as well. Neither a staid nor merely academic influence, the Cistercian medieval heritage as it was re-examined and rediscovered during the twentieth century constitutes a development in the Order's self-identity. Through its focus on the architecture of two Cistercian communities and the changes made in it, this paper shows the increasing significance of the original Cistercian ideals as a workable basis for monastic life in the contemporary world. The "medieval" element exists in lively interaction with the modern, so much so, that as will be seen in the example of the glass work at Conyers, the life of the mid-twentieth Cistercians spontaneously produced an artistic expression which combined the spirit and goals of both the founding and the current era.[1]

Cistercian Spirituality

The Cistercian order was a reform movement which reacted particularly against the wealthy and comfortable Cluniac Benedictinism of the late eleventh century. Citeaux's founders were

determined to restore and to live St. Benedict's *Rule* in its original and pure form. To do so, they created a spiritual and physical environment conducive to their goals, ramifications of which profoundly affected the spirituality, the architecture, and the art of Europe for at least two centuries.

Cistercian spirituality was centered in the reality of divine love, a love that could and would lead the monk to his ultimate aim of the union of the soul with God. Contemplative prayer was the monk's main task, and his physical environment, especially the monastery church, should further this task. It should be a workshop where meditation could proceed unhampered. The key to such an environment was simplicity. St. Bernard's famous attack on the Cluniac style and his refusal to have it part of the Cistercian environment, rather than being a puritanical aversion to the aesthetic realm, affirmed his aesthetic sense and his recognition of the power of art to affect persons.[2] Imagery was necessary for common folk, but it was both unnecessary and counterproductive for monastic spirituality. In the monastery, the threshold of the spiritual vision, he found all images wanting. Thus the architecture was to be clean, stripped of unnecessary distractions, including figurative stained glass. Instead, the carefully proportioned spaces were decorated with simple, meaningful forms which stressed the orderliness of transcendental truths, and produced an atmosphere of calmness. One of the main functions of Cistercian art and architecture seems to have been to discourage emotional, irrational reactions, and to encourage a sense of composure, necessary predisposition to contemplative prayer.[3]

From its earliest appearance in the Egyptian deserts of the third century, monasticism had recognized the necessity of creating an environment to further the life. By choosing deliberately a form of life apart, monks were free of the constraints of society to some extent and thus were able consciously to form their surroundings. This aspect of the conscious creation of one's environment in order to further a particular life style and thus to attain an ideal mode of existence, makes the monk the precursor of modern urban planners. Throughout history, no other group of people has exercised to such an extent as monastics rational choice in the creation of their environment, realizing—perhaps not always consciously—that the environment one creates and shapes around oneself also shapes and forms one in return. And of all monastic orders, probably no group was more successful than the Cistercians in this regard.

This aspect of the conscious choice of life-style and environment is germane to an examination of the Gethsemane and Conyers abbey churches.

The Nineteenth Century Monastic Revival

The Cistercian order underwent various declines and reforms after its thirteenth century florescence. The best known of the reforms was that initiated in the late seventeenth century by Armand de Rancé at the abbey of La Trappe in France. De Rancé's concept of the Order's charism was that of penance, reparation, austerity, suffering, not the emphasis of the twelfth century founders. Yet he and those who followed his reform down into the nineteenth century believed they were returning to the original spirit, and they saw themselves as an island of medieval life and spirit within the modern world, an interpretation cultivated especially in the nineteenth century monastic revival and which continued well into the twentieth century, perhaps even up to the Second Vatican Council. The rigid adherence to the external trappings of the middle ages, anachronistic as they appear today, was really another manifestation of that basic need for the nurturing environment. And the conscious choice of the externals of a past style reinforced the conscious choice to persevere in that life which they believed had produced such externals and which they were convinced was still valid.

Perhaps the whole nineteenth century Romantic Movement was a necessary step in rediscovering the medieval contribution to the modern era, after this contribution had been denigrated by the renaissance with its emphasis on classical antiquity and by the enlightenment with its dream of infinite perfectibility and a secular paradise. For the restored monastic orders of the nineteenth century, aspects of medieval style and thought, even in their misinterpretations, helped raise in monastics the awareness both of their otherness and of the value of the monastic heritage as vital part of the continuum of European history. Thus the nineteenth (and twentieth) century monastics constituted in their very selves a bridge between history and modernity.

The Gethsemani Church

The Gethsemani pioneers came to the Bardstown area of Kentucky in 1848, a colony of monks from a France threatened by revolution and by virtue of its militant secularism inimical to their life. Ken-

tucky was the end of a long arduous journey into the wilderness. Yet harsh geographically as it was, it was an area of Catholic settlement, including several religious communities, from one of which they purchased their land.

They built their monastery during the Civil War years, thick brick walls, hand-hewn timber roof supports, a church largely rectangular, based on the ground plan of the thirteenth century Abbey of Melleray in France. But within that rectangular brick and wood space they also constructed the interior shell of a neo-gothic building out of laths and plaster. Later on, neo-gothic windows were also introduced into the large rectangular window areas of the original building. They also constructed an imposing steeple above it all, visible for miles around.

Now this building was an admirable reflection of the community's life style, a witness to and support of their ideals. First, it looked like what the nineteenth century thought Catholic churches had "always" looked like. Thus it was a statement that this community stood in the continuity of unchanging (as they then thought) centuries. Second, the church would have been awesome to the inhabitants of the rural Kentucky environment. So it helped to impart to those who worshipped in it a sense of the mystery of their life. Its otherness was a forceful statement of the otherness of their existence in the United States of "manifest destiny" and expansionism. Further, since most of the founders—as well as subsequent arrivals during the next decades when native U.S. vocations were scarce—came from Alsace, it transmitted a sense both of home and of their essential unity with the mystical body. Third, the fact that this church in its neo-gothicized form differed from the other buildings of the monastery built among the Kentucky knolls emphasized the spiritual orientation of their life. Though the specifically "Trappist" interpretation of Cistercian spirituality over-stressed penance, the purpose of each man's being there was still spiritual. And the awesome church served well as sign thereof. It also served as sign of the type of prayer stressed. The original Cistercian balance of contemplative / private prayer with communal prayer of the Divine Office had shifted toward reliance on the latter. The *Opus Dei* had also gradually taken on extraneous details, not unlike those plaster excrescences of the neo-gothic shell. Finally, the complexity and ornateness of the church also reflected that awareness of the need for and the validity of beauty which has always characterized all forms of cenobitical

monasticism. And amid tremendous changes in American life, this church remained essentially unchanged for almost one hundred years.

The Monastery of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit in Conyers

A century after its own founding, Gethsemani established its first daughter-house in rural Georgia. Several aspects of the Conyers foundation fit the Cistercian tradition very precisely. For example, Cistercian monasteries historically had followed the same ground plan while allowing for adaptation to the specific geography, and had established links to the surrounding countryside. The Conyers foundation was planned to reproduce the Gethsemani plan exactly. And the subsequent sixty years have shown that the Community has been most receptive to its surroundings.[4]

Holy Spirit's founding abbot, Frederic Dunne, had clear notions of what he wanted done there, and these were essentially those of nineteenth century Gethsemani. But Abbot Frederic, for all his conservatism, was also the abbot who admitted to his monks at Gethsemani that after him the Trappist life was bound to change. And in Georgia it began to change. Some of the changes were common to the order as whole, in part as response to Vatican II, and these paralleled those at Gethsemani. Others were the result of the Georgia environment and the need to be **not** Gethsemani. In keeping with this paper's thesis, these changes gained visible expression in a building—this one now of poured concrete and modern stained glass. The physical plan of the monastery evolved in interaction with the development of the monastic community and its evolving sense of identity.[5]

The Conyers pioneers started with almost no physical facilities. An existent barn was converted into a tiny monastery, with dormitory, scriptorium, chapel. And the life was led in the traditional manner. But the lack of a large physical plant as at Gethsemani, the rigorous labor required in building, the radical change in geographical locale, all this produced a sense of a new beginning and furthered a closer sense of community. Inevitably, the regimen deviated from the strict **ordo** of the mother house. As the community developed on its own, it came to value its difference, so that eventually recourse to "That's the way it's done at Gethsemani" would prove counter-productive in getting something approved. This community was also more dependent on the non-monastic populace than was Gethsemani, and the open-

ness that came with such necessity was very early recognized as a positive aspect of the monastery's mission, serving the diocesan priests for retreats and counsel, then gradually all religious faiths. Holy Spirit's means of livelihood—bread, plants, glass, etc. spread its presence into the area. The final form of the monastery as a whole even reflects this mission, for Conyers has the largest guest house in the Order. The present guest house had started out as a novitiate. The change in plans resulted in part from the decline in the great post-war influx of novices. But an equally important consideration was the increased need for hospitality, acceptance and affirmation of a mission thrust on the Community from their unique situation.

The Abbey Church at Conyers

The abbey church planned by Dom Frederic for the new community was to be a copy of Gethsemani's, same floor plan, also of brick. But at first the war effort precluded construction of "non-essential" buildings. Then brick was unavailable. Then funds were unavailable. And when some years later construction on a church was again feasible, the Conyers community would make its own plans. A copy of Gethsemani was no longer the plan. However, the plan adopted in the early 1950's was still in the traditional mold. An Atlanta architect famous for tudor gothic churches was retained, and the plan proposed was to have a grandiose statement of Catholicism in rural Georgia, not unlike Gethsemani's statement for rural Kentucky a century earlier.

Radical modifications developed during the building process, modifications which reflected the character of **this** particular community of monks. Concerned that the architect did not know their life (which the designer of the later Gethsemani renovation **did**), the community worked to affect changes that would reflect their life style. They managed to avoid the intricate gothic detail-work of the blueprints by recourse to the fact that such intricate work required trained artisans, not available from within the monastery. More importantly, of course, the resultant clean lines **did** express the Cistercian ideal as the architect's vision could not have. The enormous height could be shown to be too dangerous for the monks to cope with. But the ostentation which would have been part of such impressiveness would have misrepresented the religious witness being lived by this community, "the poor men of Citeaux."

Modifications were further determined by the make-up of the growing community. Conyers had among its members gifted men who had studied art history, architecture and sculpture. Thus the final product was truly the result of the **community's** work and was an expression of its values.

Gethsemani

While Conyers was expressing its developing identity in the poured concrete and stained glass of its twentieth century, yet quintessential Cistercian church, Gethsemani was going through a similar process of discovering the best way to express its evolving identity. Dom Frederic's prediction of changes to come after his time (He died in 1948.) came true. The great influx of vocations after World War II had brought new views into the monastery. James Fox's abbacy, 1948–1968, encouraged new emphases and approaches, so that when Vatican II (1965–68) called on all religious orders to reexamine their life, purpose, style, and original charism, these monks had already begun that process. A thorough-going renovation of monastery buildings and church, necessitated by their one hundred years of constant use, would provide that community a challenge to self-exploration and self-expression similar to that faced by their Georgia daughter house.

The work of general renovation undertaken in the early sixties and carried out over several years gave them a chance to express a different spirit that was already in evidence. In their planning they consciously aimed at changes which would reflect their life as well as be suitable for the functions they needed.[6] For example, a crucial question centered on the extent to which guests might participate in the liturgy. The question was finally decided in terms of the local tradition and the past attitude of aloofness toward the guests: separation was maintained, and thus the guests' gallery was kept apart from the monks' church. Not a "modern" or popular decision, the decision was nonetheless an honest expression of identity of **this** particular community and accordingly took visible form in the arrangement of the church. In comparison, the Conyers guest area was less distinct and more accessible to the main church, in keeping with that community's mission.

The overall impression of the renovated Gethsemani church is one of simplicity and strength. The steeple is gone. Twelfth century Cistercian statutes had proscribed steeples along with stained glass, elaborate decoration, etc., and this twentieth compliance with

the statutes has resulted in greater integrity for the building. Natural materials are in evidence—the plain brick is painted white, the choir stalls in light oak are hung scapular-fashion over concrete slabs. The overhead supporting beams have been exposed, recalling thereby the monastic ties to nature. Further, the act of uncovering these beams hewn from Kentucky timber by the Gethsemani founders emphasizes the community's ties to their founders, their Kentucky home, and as well to those first Cistercian fathers of the forests of twelfth century Citeaux. Such a detail manifests Gethsemani's participation in Cistercian tradition, U.S. life, its geographical environment, and ultimately in the mystical body of Christ. As mentioned above, the abbey church was originally constructed according to the floor plan of the French Abbey of Melleray. In its renovated form the church's affinity to the Cistercian structures of Citeaux's founding generations is unmistakable.

In the several decades following the completion of both church projects, however, both monastic communities have grown increasingly aware of their call to witness beyond cloister walls and this stance finds expression in the churches as well. Gethsemani today seems far more welcoming than just after the renovation. Guests are encouraged to come into the sanctuary on Sundays. Similarly, at Conyers aspects of the church have been modified to open it up. Extra altars and the high abbatial choir stall have been removed and guests are invited to stand with the monks at all Offices and during Mass.

The Stained Glass

The treatment of the windows in both Conyers and Gethsemani is an intriguing instance of how the monastic life manifests itself visually. The similarity of both abbey churches' windows to Cistercian glass of the thirteenth century would seem to offer artistic proof that the Cistercian monastic life being led in contemporary America has definitely recovered the essence of the Order's founding generations.

Possibly as early as 1134 and certainly by 1151 there were statutes proscribing the use of stained glass in Cistercian churches. In place of the figural, colored windows of the then current gothic era, the White Monks developed Cistercian *grisaille*, clear or white or grey-tinted glass with strictly geometric or stylized floral designs.[7] The prohibition was not primarily an economy measure, to insure poverty, as once was thought. Rather, it tied in with the

attempt to create a physical environment in accord with, and capable of furthering, the Order's spiritual goal—contemplation. Instead of distracting the mind with images (as Bernard observed the romanesque grotesques tend to do, for instance), the Cistercian imageless patterns would free the mind from obstacles to contemplation. Today one might say that the *grisaille* windows function somewhat as *mandalas*.[8]

Gethsemani

The original Gethsemani windows were full of colorful figures, nineteenth century interpretations of fourteenth to sixteenth century European stained glass. No doubt awe-inspiring, they inspired devotion, perhaps, but not apophatic prayer. The contemplative ideal which had required and called forth the early Cistercian *grisaille* had been replaced by the **Trappist** commitment to a life of utmost penance, reparation, and suffering, "the hardest life in the Catholic Church."[9]

The return to the sources responsible for the form the renovation took at Gethsemani demanded new treatment of the windows. As noted above in regard to the decision to maintain space between guests and the monastic community, retention of stained glass was deemed essential.[10] In keeping with a return to the unadorned raw materials of the church edifice and the resultant affirmation of the community's natural environment, and with the Cistercian commitment to simplicity, the restored church now has windows composed of large geometric abstract designs in earth tones.

Conyers

The Conyers community inherited no glass, of course. As in the case of the church itself, the community was able to find its own way. Also as in the case of the church architecture, the monks were thrown on their own resources—financially, artistically, and spiritually—so that the resultant glass program clearly reflected the community's life.[11]

The financial situation required that if there was to be stained glass, the monks would have to make it themselves. One of their number learned the craft and taught the technique to his fellow monks. A basic plan was developed which was simple enough for non-artists to produce, so that several members of the community could become involved. Each window had a set number of pieces of each color, but the specific arrangement of the pieces was

decided by the individual monk responsible for it, working a few hours a day over a period of weeks. In this way individual personalities found expression within a communal effort. And each window **does** have its own character, a fact that becomes ever clearer the more one gazes on them. Due to this mode of construction, the windows shared in the unique Conyers experience of community, for the character of this monastic family is due in great part to the experience of building the whole complex from scratch with their own labor.

The visible results of the glass project suggest this monastery's grounding in the wider complex of Cistercian life through the centuries. For although the design of the windows appears to the casual visitor as "modern," and no doubt does reflect the taste of the nineteen-fifties, the affinity to the thirteenth century Cistercian *grisaille* windows is striking. The reliance here on geometric patterns, on a tightly restricted number of patterns repeated again and again throughout the church, produces the same effect as that intended by the *grisaille*—the windows are non-distracting, they calm, they predispose to contemplation.

Blues predominate in the nave, recalling the European cathedrals of the high middle ages and thus Conyers' participation in the continuity of the faith. The sanctuary, by contrast, is flooded with golden light due to the use there of exclusively white and yellow glass, albeit again with the same forms. The contrast focuses attention on the Real Presence in the Eucharist and on the celebration of the Mass as the central act of worship.

The Lady Window

The windows manifest the charism of the monastic community in yet another way. The dominant motif of the clearstory windows is a trapezoidal figure repeated over and over again in various shades of blue and rose. The source of this motif is found in the Lady Window above the main altar, a work executed for the community by an outside artist. This window, an icon of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit, can therefore be seen as the artistic generator (or generatrix, to speak in theological terms) of the major stained glass program of the church. Further, the color scheme of the whole church relates to this window-icon as well. As the worshiper's eyes are drawn toward it, so too do the colors in the church progress toward it. Starting in the back, the eastern rose window shares its luminosity with its gems of red, the blues in the nave reflect it, the high narrow windows of the transepts join their reds and yellows to

it, and the yellows and oranges are then added in full array in the sanctuary.

Such repetition of basic, simple motifs stands firmly in the Cistercian artistic tradition. In this case, though, artistic practice proclaims a spiritual truth, namely the central role of the Mother of God in Cistercian spirituality. Just as the Lady Window motif expands throughout the whole building, so too does the spiritual reality imaged there of the Mother of God, the Contemplator *par excellence*, permeate the life being lived in the community.

Since Cistercian art is subtractive, i.e., less is preferred, what elements remain should serve significant aesthetic and iconographic purposes. The window of itself could proclaim the centrality of the Virgin, constituting as it does the sole figurative art in the church, aside from the crucifix. But through its interaction with the windows, a physical relationship—which comes to light gradually through hours of meditation in their presence—makes the spiritual reality the more tangible.

Mary and Citeaux

The centrality of Mary receives artistic expression also in the renovated church at Gethsemani where, again, the sole figural artistic piece beside the crucifix is an icon of the Virgin and Child. Why is it that both the Gethsemani and the Conyers communities chose iconic representations of Mary?

Several reasons suggest themselves. First, iconic art has been rediscovered in the modern era. Collectors pay high prices for originals. Reproductions are popular, both in secular and religious art stores. Modern artists feel drawn to the style, perhaps because the icon's externally simple two-dimensionality is capable simultaneously of revealing many more dimensions. In any case, the style is part of the artistic milieu of the men whose lives find expression in these two churches.

Second, and more important, the icon represents a kind of religious art which corresponds well to Cistercian spirituality with its search for the direct experience of God. As art, the icon is neither primarily decorative nor didactic, but is rather a window into the world of the sacred. Just as Jesus Christ in the flesh imaged God in eternity, so the icon as "matter" permits a glimpse into the timeless world of religious mystery. One stands before the icon and speaks through its image to the reality behind it. Cistercian life has recovered its contemplative dimension, and the icon is essentially contemplative art.

Finally, the icon is affirmation of the rich heritage of eastern spirituality. It is the glory of Christian Orthodoxy, and so these images represent artistically the return of these Cistercian communities to the very origins of monasticism, to the wisdom of the desert fathers. Beyond this Christian context, the icon recalls the profound contemplative life of the Hindu and Buddhist traditions which have enriched both Christian and non-Christian spirituality mid-twentieth century American and continue to do so today.

How foreign such images would have seemed to the nineteenth century Gethsemani monk worshipping in his neo-gothic abbey church. To his twenty-first century counterpart, that image witnesses to the reality of a way of life that was valid in the fourth century, in the twelfth, and remains valid today. As such, it supports him in his commitment to a life-style which in a time of hecticity and materialism still focuses on "God alone."

Conclusion

The striking aesthetic simplicity which resonates from both these abbey churches calls forth in both visitor and worshipper an awareness of the presence of God. The visitor has probably consciously sought out a "Catholic" church, even more consciously, perhaps, a "monastic" church. And yet both these labels lose their significance once the person is immersed in this Presence. Such was the intent of the earliest Cistercian reformers, to help seekers **experience** God profoundly. This ideal continues to enliven the Cistercians of the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. This paper originated in work involved with the Oral Histories of Thomas Merton and Holy Spirit (Conyers, GA) conducted in the early 1980's (both published, 1985). The information led to my historical guide to the Conyers' monastery, *Open to the Spirit* (Conyers: Holy Spirit Monastery, 1st ed. 1986, 2nd ed. 1996).

2. Bernard, in his *Apologia to William of St. Thierry* in Bernard of Clairvaux, *Treatises I*, Cistercian Fathers Series Vol. I (1970), pp. 3-69.

3. See Emero Stiegman, "Saint Bernard: The Aesthetics of Authenticity," in *Studies in Cistercian Art and Architecture*, Vol. 2, ed. M.P. Lillich (Cistercian Studies Series: No. 65, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1984), pp. 1-13.

4. This information on the early development of Holy Spirit Monastery is based on interviews conducted and recorded in the published Conyers *Oral History*.

5. The two-part interview of Father Methodius included in this volume of *The Merton Annual* constitutes a valuable complement to this paper, both as background and expansion of aesthetic and communal points being made.

6. Articles by some of those involved in Gethsemani's renovation project are collected in the August 1968 issue of *Liturgical Arts* (Vol. 36, August 1968, No. 4) the journal published by The Liturgical Arts Society: pieces by the architect, William Schickel; monks Thomas Merton and Matthew Kelty; designer Martin T. Gilligan are included.

7. There is copious scholarship on Cistercian *grisaille*. Foremost scholars include Meridith Lillich, editor of *Cistercian Art and Architecture*, Vol. 65, cited above. A helpful guide with illustrations is that by Helen Jackson Zakin, *French Cistercian Grisaille Glass* (New York: Garland, 1979).

8. The *mandala*, an arrangement of patterns, pictures, circles, squares, or rectangles representing the cosmos or wholeness has been central to Hindu and Buddhist practice for millenia. In the early twentieth century C. J. Jung recognized the healing potential of the mandala as well as its religious universality (present in early and medieval Christianity, both East and West, in native American religion, etc.). Since the mid-twentieth century the mandala as a valid means of approach to the Divine has become well established. For more information see: Giuseppe Tucci, *The Theory and Practice of the Mandala* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1969); Judith Cornell, *Mandala: Luminous Symbols for Healing* (Wheaton, IL: Quest, 1994); C.G. Jung, *Man and His Symbols* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964) and C.G. Jung, *Mandala Symbolism* (Princeton: Princeton, 1973).

9. Fr. Francis X. Kavanagh interview in Conyers *Oral History*, p. 201–202.

10. An interesting parallel can be seen between the renovation of the church of the Gethsemani community and that of the neighboring Sisters of Loretto. When the sisters replaced their traditional stained glass windows, they opted for large wood framed ones of clear glass, symbols of their renewed openness to the world beyond the monastery. The monks chose to reaffirm their Cistercian heritage of a life lived "far apart from the haunts of men," thus commissioned windows which offer no views of the outside. The patterns and color scheme do, however, evoke the world of nature. This stance has been considerably modified during the recent decade.

11. See the Abbot General's recommendation that the church have colored glass in Methodius Telnack's interview, p. 84.