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SUBMITTED

Members of the Community of Jesus enter the Church of the Transfiguration.

‘Jesus...put me here’

Cape community draws many on spiritual quest

BY GLORIA LABOUNTY
SUN CHRONICLE STAFF

ORLEANS

Janet Hill didn't pay much attention to her Congregational Protestant faith while growing up on Bank Street in Attleboro in the 1950s.

But by the time she graduated from college and took a job in Boston, she began wondering where God wanted her, and became interested in the

Bible-teaching ministry of a couple of Episcopal lay women in Orleans on Cape Cod.

She and some friends would drive to Monday night gatherings for what Hill called "down-to-earth teaching about Jesus and the Bible."

What she found there would change her life.

"This was the truth like I never heard it before," Hill said. "It struck a cord in my heart."

After a couple of years, she sensed a calling.

So, in 1970, she became one of a handful of members in the newly-established community.

"I felt very strongly that God wanted me to do this with my life," Hill said.

For the past 35 years, she has been known as Sister Susannah Hill in the Community of Jesus.

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Faith builds a community on Cape Cod

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It is an independent ecumenical body that now has more than 330 members and children.

The members include religious sisters or brothers, clergy or laity who are connected to a Benedictine abbey and committed to a monastic and communal way of life.

The community's complex of rambling white buildings face Rock Harbor on Cape Cod Bay, a setting that seems well suited to contemplation.

The approximately 100 sisters and brothers live in the convent or friary on the grounds, and other members, who may be married or single, live year-round in privately-owned homes surrounding the complex.

More than one family lives in each of the houses, which have been expanded and renovated to accommodate a



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The procession in June celebrated the fifth anniversary of the Church of the Transfiguration.

shared, yet simple, style of living.

All members are financially responsible for themselves, but also financially supportive of the community.

They come from various Christian traditions — Presbyterian, Episcopal, Congregational, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Pentecostal and Roman Catholic — to live according to the Rule of Benedict, written in the 6th century as a guide for daily work and prayer that is still followed today in many monasteries.

Variety of belief

Although usually associated with Catholicism, Benedictine communities today come in many varieties. Most are Catholic, but others may be Anglican, or ecumenical and independent. Some are community-based, while others are non-residential.

Some ecumenical groups, such as Community of Jesus, have clergy from various Christian backgrounds.

Although these communi-

ties share similarities, none are exactly like this community, said the Rev. Martin Shannon, an Episcopal priest.

He is one of the Community of Jesus' 10 ordained clergy from five Protestant denominations who are there with the permission of their bishops or church officials.

"My bishop sees this call as a valid call in the Episcopal Church," Shannon said.

He and his wife discovered the community in 1974, when they began attending clergy retreats there, then moved there permanently in 1987, and raised their family there. Now three of their four grown children are members.

All adult members take vows of obedience to God, conversion to Jesus, and stability in the community, with the intent of remaining there for life. Sisters and brothers also take vows of poverty and celibacy, and wear religious habits.

The community also has oblate members who do not live there, but who are com-

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'Our hope is that this church will be a place where people can come and meet God, and be renewed and refreshed.'

Blair Tingley, member of the Community of Jesus

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mitted to the life of prayer.

Members wear hooded robes to most of the daily worship and prayer services that are held at specific times based on the Liturgy of the Hours, Christianity's ancient order of prayer.

They gather in the Church of the Transfiguration on the community grounds, which was dedicated in June 2000 and is open to the public.

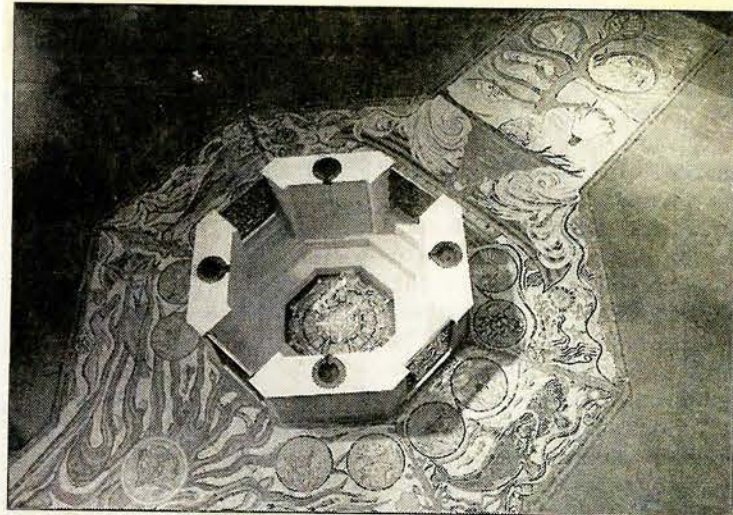
"Our hope is that this church will be a place where people can come and meet God, and be renewed and refreshed," said member Blair Tingley, who leads tours of the church as part of her volunteer work in the community.

Artwork tells story

Built in the design of a 4th century basilica, the church is simple on the outside, but adorned on the inside with mosaics, frescoes, icons and stained glass, including works created by artists in Italy and designed to tell the biblical story of salvation.

"Beauty and art are ways of nourishing parched souls," Shannon said. "We see it as part of our call to share the beauty of creativity."

Both the church and the community were built on the practices that existed before the Orthodox split of the Christian church in the 11th century, and long before the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century.



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The baptismal font at the Church of the Transfiguration.

► FAITH: Cape community a spiritual home for many

FROM PAGE A6

Although pews meant for the public face the front of the church, pews for community members face the center aisle, a design that enhances the praying of the Divine Office in Gregorian chant, a practice from early Christianity that is still followed in monastic communities worldwide.

The Holy Eucharist is celebrated daily as the center of the community's prayer life, and is seen in a liturgical sense as the real presence, the body and blood of Christ.

Besides participating in public worship, members also engage in daily personal prayer, meditative scripture reading called *Lectio Divina*, and Bible study.

While much of this may seem Catholic, most members are actually Protestant, and the community has Anglican elements.

It has no articulated theology, Shannon said, and its beliefs are centered on scripture based on an interpretation that is more conservative than liberal.

The emphasis, he said, is on the unity of the Christian church and on the common beliefs of its members, with the goal of appreciating each other's faith and finding strength in diversity.

Worship and liturgy are at the core of daily life, he said, "to discover who we are in light of the Rule of Benedict."

The Community of Jesus developed unintentionally.

It began in 1958 with two women doing Bible ministry, and eventually a group of other single women joined them. Several families soon followed, and some decided to stay.

Rule of Life

Formally established in 1970, the community gradually adopted a way of life that was Benedictine in nature, and eventually adopted its own Rule of Life and placed authority in a superior, a council of deans and ordained ministers, and a board of directors.

Most of the members are not clergy or religious sisters or brothers, yet they do not refer to themselves as laity.

"I don't think of myself as a lay person," said Tingley, who lives in the community with her husband and four children.

She virtually grew up there after her parents joined when she was 4 years old. After college she returned, and became a professed member.

"There's an intensity, a priority of worship of God," Tingley said of the reason for her return.

'This isn't Sunday church. It's every day church.'

Rev. Martin Shannon

but the community gets many more inquiries, and a number of people regularly attend services.

Outreach is an important element of its mission, and both the visual and performing arts are key.

The community has its own publishing house, Paraclete Press, and several arts groups, including a professional choir, a marching band, an orchestra, a theater company, a dance ensemble, and a variety of art guilds.

Members of the community also volunteer their time in town government and in charitable organizations.

But their priority is God, and their primary commitment is to the community and its daily life of prayer.

"This isn't Sunday church,"

Shannon said. "It's every day church."

"It's a life lived," Tingley said.

For Sister Susannah Hill, who is now studying stained glass art in Europe for three months, the community has brought her "a most fulfilling, happy, creative life."

"Jesus found me, and put me here," she said. "It turned out to be exactly right."

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And although living a common life with other families is challenging, she said, it is also rewarding.

Shannon said the communal lifestyle is based on the teaching of St. Basil, who believed that people could not learn to love one another if they did not live with one another. The lifestyle creates extended families, he said, and that in turn builds the community identity.

But it is hardly a utopia, he said.

Differences do arise, but when they do, people are encouraged to work through them with patience and understanding as taught by the founders, who emphasized the need for reconciliation.

Although members do not relinquish their personal possessions, those possessions are at the service of the community.

"We try to own as if we didn't own," and in a spirit of detachment, Shannon said.

Members can leave the community if they choose, he said, but their vows are taken seriously, and every effort is made to help them work through issues so they will not leave.

That kind of commitment and communal lifestyle may make the community seem like a cult, and Shannon said those kinds of suspicions did exist in the early days in the 1970s, but no longer.

Now, the community is well known and well established, he said, and has a good relationship with the town, and with religious institutions.

Despite the early misgivings, he said, "Here we are, fairly normal people."

The public is welcome to attend prayer services, church tours, festivals, workshops and retreats. No effort is made to recruit new members, and only a handful join each year,