

June 2004 | FREE

the Rake

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ARE THEY HIDING FROM THE WORLD?
OR REDEEMING IT?

THE MONKS OF ST. JOHN'S

*An exclusive peek
inside one of the
Church's most important
and influential abbeys.*



Drug Testing at School • What Home Tours Are REALLY About • Dog Poop!

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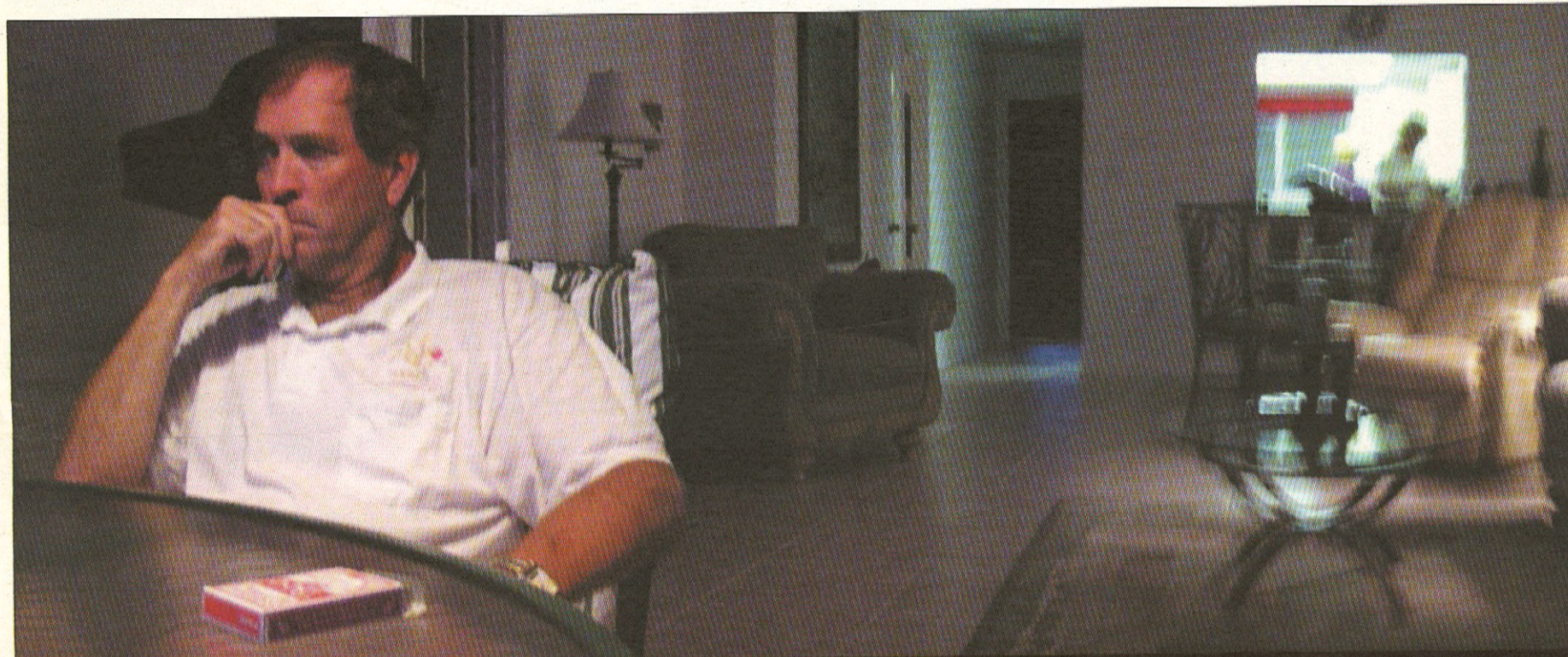
(Photo by Larry Marcus):

The Benedictine monks at St. John's Abbey are a gentle lot, but when it came to choosing an architect to design their church, they went with a Brutalist par excellence, Marcel Breuer. Four decades after Breuer made his robust statement in concrete, the monks are due to grace their campus with another build-

ing by a world-renowned figure: Tadao Ando has designed a chapel and guest wing, to be built in the near future.

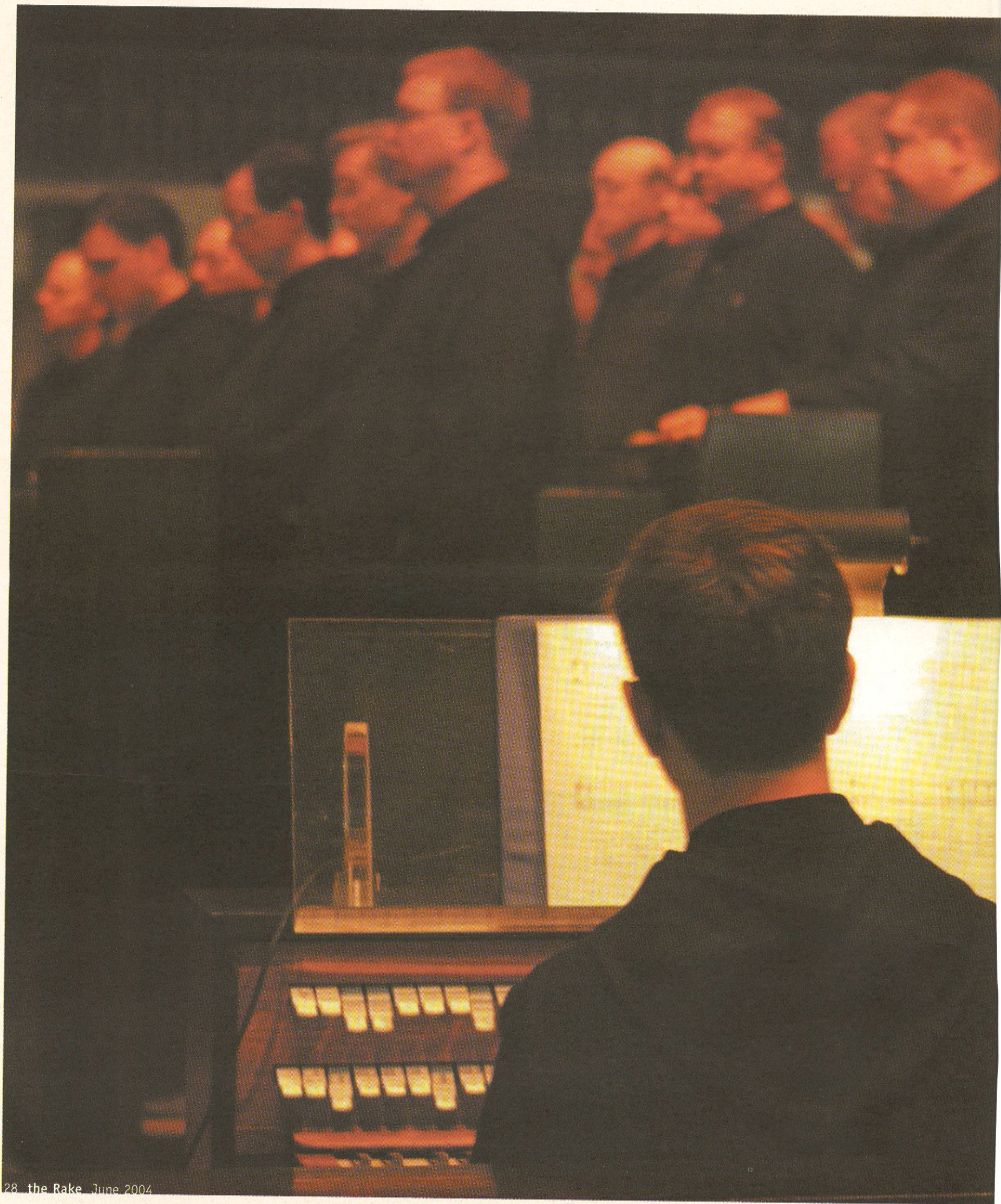
IT'S JUNE—WHY NOT HAVE A CONTEST?

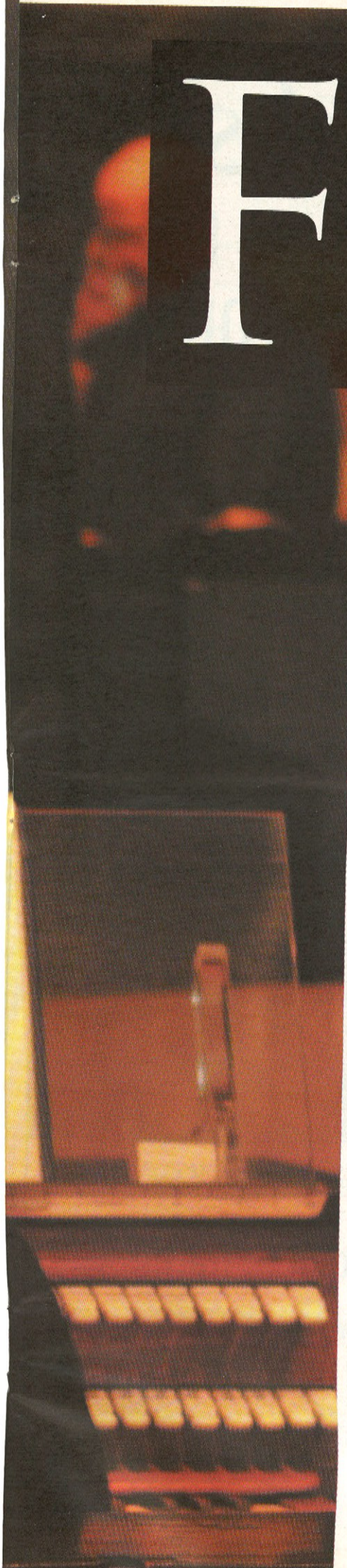
We just can't get enough of our fun-loving vice president. And we wanted to share that spirit of fun with you, our readers. The first person to find all of the references to Dick Cheney in this issue (there are five, we think) will receive a sought-after *Rake* T-shirt. Send answers to letters@rakemag.com. Good luck tracking down Dick!



OPENING SHOT Dad's Day Off PHOTO BY RUSS SCHNEIDER

Saturday, May 15, 6:30 p.m. Our A.D.'s Dear Old Dad tries his hand at photography (unpaid), while a fellow father relaxes.





FORCE

OF HABIT

THE CHURCH HAS NEVER FACED BIGGER QUESTIONS. BUT THE ANSWERS MAY COME FROM A SMALL MINNESOTA MONASTERY. *THE RAKE* GOES INSIDE **ST. JOHN'S ABBEY**, CATHOLICISM'S LAST BEST HOPE FOR REDEMPTION.

By Adam Minter ♦ Photos by Larry Marcus

The bells have been ringing for thirty minutes, but it is the sound of a cane rattling through the empty, cavernous church that suggests prayer. It is held by an old man, his stooped body covered in the flowing black habit of a Benedictine monk. He enters from the sacristy, clicking, clacking, up a barely perceptible incline. When he reaches the altar, he pauses and bows, then turns to the left and clicks and clacks his way upward to a lonely seat in the dark wooden choir.

The early morning light is meager, cast from a stained-glass skylight above, through clear windows that run the length of the nave, and from the massive stained glass abstraction that dominates the back of the church at St. John's Abbey. Other men in habits arrive, bow, and then take seats in the austere straight-backed choir slots. They arrange prayer books and hymnals on the stands in front of them and wait, casting their eyes on the simple wooden crucifix that hangs from the levitating white baldachin. At seven a.m. sharp, a white-haired monk rises from his seat in the choir. "Lord open my lips..."

"And my mouth shall proclaim your praise," follow the accumulated voices of the Benedictine monks, a soft morning thunder rolling out from the choir over the empty pews.

A single note echoes from the pipe organ. The monks on the choir's left side sing a verse from Psalms, their voices resonant and nearly undivided. After a pause, the monks on the right side sing a verse. The song continues, shifting back and forth across the choir in a sort of divine stereophonic effect, brothers singing to brothers singing, occasionally joining together on a verse, offering their voices to each other and to God.

When the psalm ends, after the last organ note fades into an ethereal echo, there is a full minute of silence, a contemplation of the prayer just sung, the moment interrupted only by a sneeze, or the occasionally audible grumbling of a stomach. Then the psalms continue, the canticle comes, the responsorial rumbles. Morning Prayer lasts for roughly thirty minutes, depending on the day's demands, before the monks shuffle silently from the church.

They walk from the sacristy into the cloister, and then turn right into a wide hallway with tile floors and mostly bare walls, passing a lounge where several copies of the day's *Star Tribune* have already been pulled apart. The procession continues, still silent, down a flight of stairs, into a darker hallway, past more lounges, past a massive floor-to-ceiling bulletin board covered with sign-up sheets for prayers, readings, haircuts, and kitchen duties, and then through two wooden doors into the abbey dining room. Pastel-colored religious paintings and stained-glass images of foliage hang from the wood-paneled walls. A beautifully carved wood podium stands ceremoniously in the middle of the space; a massive china cabinet dominates a far wall. Eggs, sausages and other dishes are served in chafing dishes on stout wooden tables. It is a very much an old room in style, and yet certain details—the harsh lights, the plastic dishes and trays, the Wheaties and other boxed cereals—suggest that practical updates and conveniences have been integrated. The brothers eat breakfast in silence.

This has more or less been the morning routine since 1856, when a group of Benedictine monks from Pennsylvania arrived in St. Cloud to tend to the German Catholic population. In the 150 years since its establishment, St. John's Abbey, located ►

► on 2,500 acres in Collegeville, ninety miles north of the Twin Cities, has exerted a profound influence on both the Catholic Church and the history of Minnesota. The liturgical reform movement responsible for English and other non-Latin masses received some of its most influential and eloquent support from monks at St. John's, which is also home to a university and prep school. Minnesota Public Radio was launched within the Abbey's cloisters (and Garrison Keillor's first radio performances took place here). The abbey's Liturgical Press remains one of the most important religious publishing houses in the world, printing journals and books that continue to influence both the scholarly and popular understanding of religion and spirituality. The community has counted among its ranks prominent historians, theologians, liturgists, artists, and philosophers.

Nevertheless, St. John's Abbey is undergoing the most dramatic changes in its history. For decades, it was the world's largest Benedictine monastery, with more than four hundred monks living there at its peak in 1963. Today, it has 175, and their average age is sixty-five. The abbey's traditional role as a provider of parish priests to Minnesota's churches has become largely obsolete, its monks neither youthful enough nor sufficient in numbers to do the job. The large central Minnesota farm families that once provided the abbey with its most plentiful source of novitiates have been lost to changing rural demographics, leaving the abbey to compete with the temptations of big cities and non-religious careers. Most serious, the sexual-abuse scandals that erupted in America's parishes also shook St. John's, altering its culture, its image, and its relationship to Minnesota. Yet even through its darkest hour, the abbey has continued to find novices and retain members, who in turn find relevance in a Minnesota prayer community based on the writings of a sixth-century monk.

◆
We read that monks should not drink wine at all, but since the monks of our day cannot be convinced of this, let us at least agree to drink moderately, and not to the point of excess.

—Rule of St. Benedict 40:6

Born around the year 480 in Norcia, a village in Italy's Umbria province, the young Benedict rejected the noble Roman lifestyle of his family, retreating instead to a cave for a hermit's life of prayer. Yet the cave could not shelter him from those impressed by his holy example. Among the visitors were monks from a nearby monastery in need of a new abbot. Benedict tried to refuse the job, warning them that his strict approach to monasticism would not harmonize with theirs. It was an accurate prophecy. As the new abbot, Benedict "watched carefully over the religious spirit of his

monks and would not tolerate any of their previous disobedience," recounts his hagiographer. The monks chafed at this rigidity and, shortly after installing Benedict as their abbot, tried to kill him. With the help of a minor miracle, Benedict survived the attempt on his life. His *Rule*, a diminutive book of less than a hundred pages in English translation, bears the hard lessons of that experience.

The Benedictine abbot, for example, is a model of managerial flexibility, expected to delegate and consult even though he is "believed to hold the place of Christ in the monastery." Like it or not, he must call together the entire community for counsel when "anything important is to be done in the monastery." A monk's most human needs are also recognized explicitly. So, in order to satisfy all appetites, the *Rule* requires a choice of hot entrees at meals. For comfort's sake, evening prayers in the summer are interrupted to "give the monks opportunity to care for nature's needs." As for the liturgy, Benedict urges "that if anyone finds this distribution of psalms unsatisfactory, he should arrange whatever he judges better."

Still, for all of its humane flexibility, the *Rule* has its

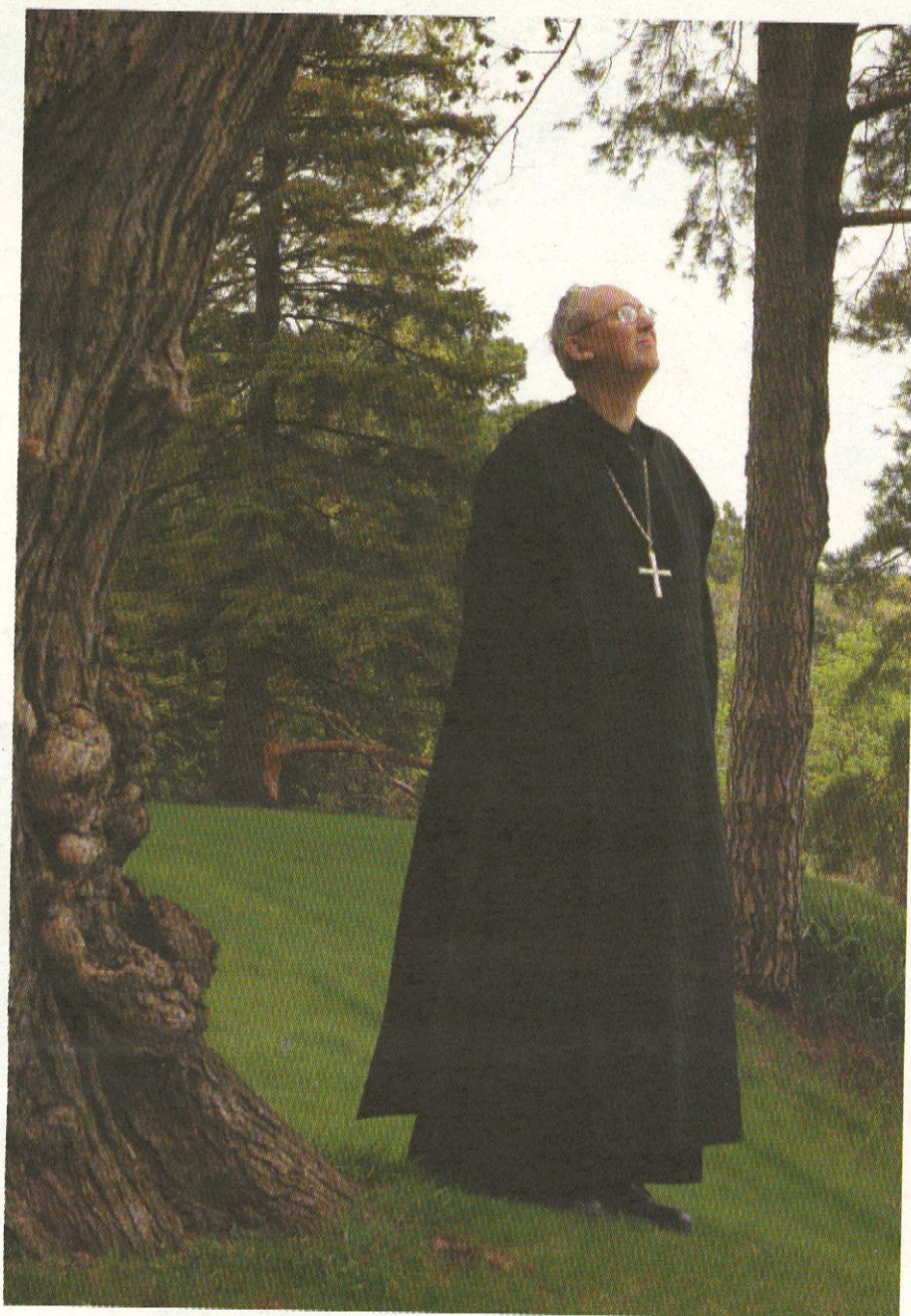
rules, and they can be specific: Monks are to sleep in dorms lit by a single lantern that burns all night; they are to sleep in their habits, girded with belts ("but they should remove their knives, lest they accidentally cut themselves in their sleep"). Most important, the *Rule* sets out a particular cycle of prayer—or divine office—requiring eight communal sessions per day. Yet St. John's, like other American Benedictine monasteries, has consolidated the cycle. According to Father Columba Stewart, a monk at St. John's and an internationally renowned historian of monasticism, "virtually nobody follows the *Rule* exactly." Other departures include private rooms for monks, and the absence of lanterns. Thus, the Benedictines at St. John's have been accused of worldliness—continuing a tradition nearly as old as the Benedictine order itself. Indeed, the Cistercian order was created to reform the Benedictines, and the Trappists were formed to reform the Cistercians. In both reformed orders, life is far more regimented, prayer is more frequent, and silence is more common.

Timothy Kelly, the seventy-year-old abbot president of the organization representing the twenty-one North American Benedictine monasteries, has no patience for worldly criticisms. "We apply the *Rule* to what is practical today," he says, reflecting on his eight years as abbot of St. John's. "Someone asking, 'Would Jesus have had a computer?' is just silly. This whole idea of flight from the world is not found in Benedictine life."

Instead, what is found is the ordinary and the routine, performed and lived in moderation and community. At St. John's, prayer occurs each weekday at seven a.m., noon, and seven p.m. A mass is held at five p.m. During the day, some members take the time to engage in *lectio divina*—holy reading—a practice recommended by Bene-

dict whereby a monk spends a portion of the day in deep, prayerful reading of a text. In between, some work at jobs in and out of St. John's University and prep school (unless they are retired); others attend universities elsewhere or serve in positions around the country and the globe. No matter where they might be living, all monks remain connected to their home community at St. John's by order, communication, and love; they return when called by their abbot, upon retirement, or when the difficulty of being away from home simply draws them back. Obviously, a layman outside of the abbey can live with many of these trappings. But doing so within a community, led by an abbot, is what makes monastic life distinctive.

Abbot John Klassen has a wood-paneled office with large windows that look out on the gardens surrounding the abbey's church. A visitor will most often find him working at his desk, his lanky, six-foot body bent in a tight angle as he concentrates. Once interrupted, however, he unwinds and relaxes to the point where his adjustable chair threatens to tumble backwards. The *Rule* devotes a considerable amount of space to detailing the abbot's responsibilities. None is more ►►



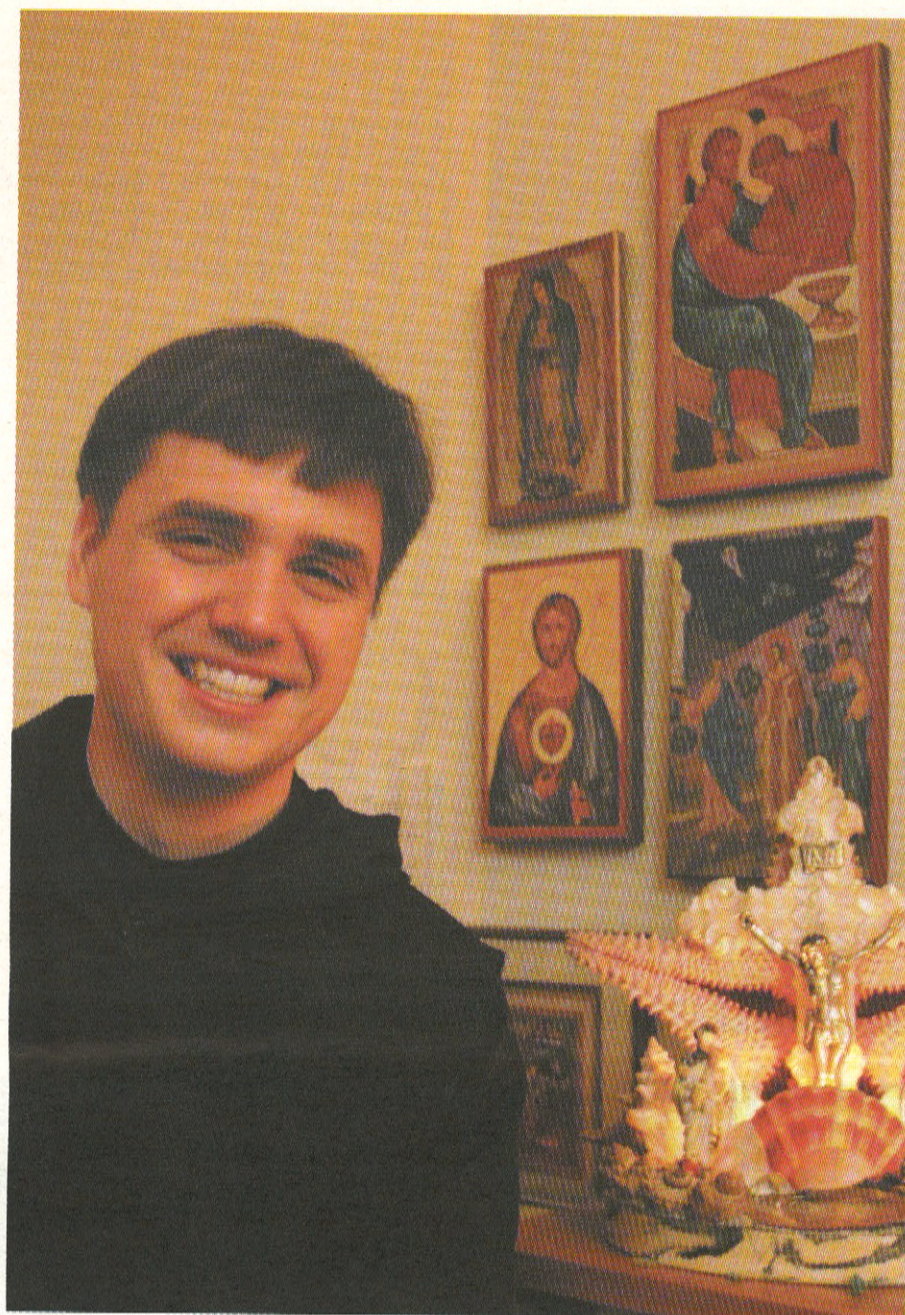
ABBOT JOHN'S GREGARIOUSNESS AND HONESTY HAVE GUIDED THE MONASTERY THROUGH DIFFICULT TIMES.

» chilling than the blunt reminder that “Whatever the number of brothers he has in his care, let him realize that on Judgment Day he will surely have to submit a reckoning to the Lord for all their souls—and his own as well.” When I asked Abbot John whether, in fact, he believed that he had that awesome responsibility, he answered, “There’s no ducking it.” He leans forward when he speaks, his voice deep and full of wide central-Minnesota vowels, his manner one of pure enthusiasm. Father J.P. Earls, Abbot John’s freshman English teacher, says, “I wouldn’t have picked him as a future abbot. He always struck me as just a big German farm kid.” But the truth is that Abbot John, at fifty-five, is an intellectually intense man, an organic chemist with a Ph.D., and a teacher of renown. Elected by his brothers in 2000, his gregariousness and honesty have not only guided the monastery through difficult times, but also caused concern that he will be tapped for a leadership position outside of St. John’s Abbey.

“You do it in fear and trembling,” Abbot John says of his job. “But you do it in faith as well.” He presides over a complicated and unruly place. “You are an order without order,” was one of the more notorious complaints leveled at the abbey in its history. Yet St. John’s is not unique in frustrating traditional church authority. Like most monastic orders, it does not answer to the traditional diocesan church hierarchy except in particular circumstances, the most important being liturgy. It is, in fact, outside of that hierarchy, and instead answers to federations and authorities in Rome.

“At one time we were a monastery that took in students,” explains one of the monks. “Now we are an abbey in a university.” St. John’s, in fact, is the largest private university in Minnesota, an operating division of the Order of St. Benedict, Inc., run by the abbot—legally, the university’s CEO. In a sense, the university and prep school are mature family businesses in which members of the abbey own an interest and work, some as academics, and some as support staff. However, the abbot’s worldly enterprises don’t end there. They also include the Liturgical Press publishing house; a sustainably managed forest that feeds the abbey’s carpentry shop; a bakery that produces thousands of loaves of branded St. John’s bread per week; and the demands of a rapidly aging population of monks. “At the end of the day, you turn it over to God and say, ‘It’s yours for the next seven hours,’” sighs St. John’s implacable abbot.

Father Columba Stewart is forty-six years old and wears faded black jeans and a faded purple sweatshirt torn at the collarbone. His manner is intellectually confident, but softened by an easy smile and a knack for patient explanation. He looks and acts like the academic he is—a well-regarded historian—but he is first and foremost a member of the St. John’s community, and he speaks of it in the same way a man would speak of a



BROTHER MATTHEW LUFT.

“I CONSIDER MYSELF PART OF THE STAR WARS GENERATION. IT’S ABOUT THE BATTLE BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL.”

stable marriage. “Like any intimate relationship, it changes you. It forces you to ground yourself,” he says, relaxing in a chair in the abbot’s lounge, a small window-lit room that contains books, a medieval image of Benedict and his sister Scholastica silk-screened onto the wall, and a cookie jar. “I’ve never thought of it as giving something up. I’ve always thought of it as gaining.” Stewart’s is a uniquely contemporary approach to entering monastic life, based on a choice that he made after having already begun a career while a graduate student at Yale. “I’d met some monks from St. John’s,” he says by way of explanation, with a simple shrug.

In decades past, the abbey did not recruit so much as receive eager novitiates in their teens and twenties, who were often sent to St. John’s Prep School by large farm families. The notion of “marriage” to a prayer community—especially as a choice to be made from among other careers or paths—was foreign to most of them; the monastery was their sole option, arranged by their families.

Father William Skudlarek, born in Holdingford, Minnesota (“the true Lake Wobegon”), is a dashing

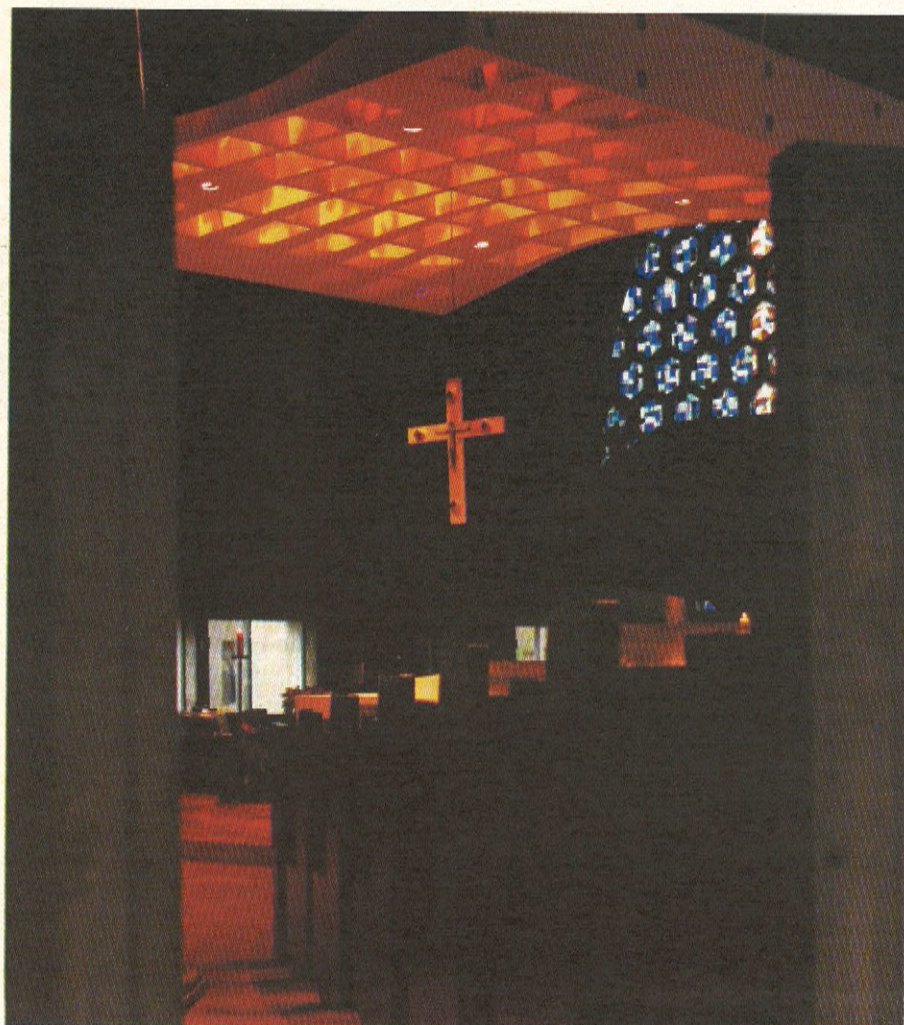
sixty-five-year-old man of extraordinary erudition who looks like he should have a tan, but doesn’t. One of eight farm children, Skudlarek arrived at St. John’s Prep School at age twelve, spent two years at the university (before attending Catholic University in Washington, D.C., for a year), and entered the novitiate at nineteen. “I ate better in Collegeville than I did on the farm,” he says, laughing. “And really, it’s been a wonderful life. I’ve experienced more than I could have ever predicted or expected in Holdingford.”

In forty-five years as a member of the community, Skudlarek has acquired two advanced degrees, lived for extended periods in France, Japan, and Brazil, served as a university professor, acquired a penchant for Zen, and become a fine cello player. Currently he leads an international organization devoted to promoting dialogues between monastics of different religious traditions; he also serves as a faculty resident at St. John’s, where he has a two-room studio in a college dormitory. “Someone young can still come to the monastery and have a rich life like mine,” he says on a Friday night, over the sound of speed metal shrieking from the room of one of his students. “But what’s different are the early years. There just aren’t the big classes of novitiates anymore. You’re pretty much on your own.”

On Saturday morning, his habit whispers across the floor of a corridor on the second floor of the abbey’s residence. He passes a lounge that once served as an overflow dormitory for young novitiates. “There used to be ninety of us in our twenties on this floor,” he says, then turns right, into another lounge now dominated by a television. Passing through it into a long, empty room filled with tables and chairs, Skudlarek stops. “This is the old rec room. Used to be, we would line up outside for bridge in the evenings.” He glances out the window at Lake Sagatagan, the silence of the room enveloping his warm voice.

Father Skudlarek is old enough to have experienced life in the monastery before the reforms of Vatican II in the sixties. “It was much different, much more difficult,” he recalls. It was also much more hierarchical. “Oh yes, novitiates used to serve monks at dinner. Tables were reserved by *statio*, as was one’s place in the church.” Nevertheless, Skudlarek looks back upon those days with a tolerant smile, his real interest being the possibilities that monastic life offered, and continues to offer. “I love community life,” he says. “I really do.”

For many senior monks, the lure of monasticism is not so easily discerned. Sitting in the abbot’s lounge, his legs crossed, Father Simeon Thole is sixty-nine, but looks twenty years younger. It’s easy to tell from his long, austere face that he smiles rarely, yet his hands are so soft that his tight handshake seems loose. Among his brothers, Thole has a formidable intellectual reputation, as well as a conservative one. “In the tradition of Christian asceticism, I probably had it too easy,” he says. Still, he admits that his life—like Skud-



lerek's, a life that started on the farm—was enriched beyond reasonable expectation by monasticism. "A lot of things happened to me that wouldn't have happened if I hadn't joined." Over the years, Thole has been a preacher, a teacher, and a chaplain to a convent. "I would never say I was unhappy. I had a rich, satisfactory life." He begins to laugh. "Maybe I had low expectations."

Thole arrived at St. John's when he was fourteen. "I didn't own anything. I hadn't even finished my education," he recalls. "Now young people have so many more choices, there are just so many more things that life *supposedly* has to offer." He pauses. "The modern monk has to keep on making up his mind, saying yes. The system doesn't pull him along anymore."

On Saturdays, evening prayers are different from the rest of the week. Monks enter the church in pairs, stop at the altar, bow to the crucifix, then turn away from each other and take seats on opposite sides of the choir. As the first hymn is sung, a monk spoons incense into a bowl placed in front of the altar. It begins to burn and the smoke rises in a curl around the white crucifix. The monks, so accustomed to focusing on the crucifix during the silent interval

between prayers, now trace the path of the smoke. As they sing to one another, and then to God, the smoke unfurls across the baldachin.

The psalms and canticles continue and the smoke spreads through the church, defining the shafts of light cast from recessed bulbs in the ceiling. The voices in the choir seem more forceful than usual, perhaps inspired by the additional majesty conjured from light and smoke. Yet it is only at the end of the session, after Father Thole has read from the Bible, after psalms, canticles, hymns, and several intervals of silence, that the sweetness of the incense, having risen, descends on the monks.

The monastery and the circus actually have quite a lot in common," explains Brother Paul-Vincent Niebauer, the fifty-two-year-old monk charged with bringing candidates into the community. "Both are counter-cultural," he says in his rich singer's voice. "In both, we depend upon each other. In both, we have to get along." He relaxes in a straight-backed chair in his office overlooking Lake Sagatagan, crossing his legs beneath his habit. "And in both institutions, there is a defining issue. At the circus, it's the show. At the monastery, it's the mercy of God." Like many of St. John's monks, this self-

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described "black sheep" from northern Wisconsin felt an early calling to the priesthood, but unlike the others, he delayed it "because I yearned for the circus, still." And so, in 1974, Niebauer borrowed his brother's car and actually joined a circus. "I did magic, fire-eating, puppets, snakes, clowning." Eventually, Niebauer became a ringmaster, and it was a good life. "Then my fortieth birthday was coming around the hill," he recalls. "And I spoke to a friend of mine, a Dominican monk, who suggested I go on a ten-day Trappist retreat."

It's an identifiable pattern: Today, Niebauer himself receives an inquiry from an aspiring monk approximately every thirty-six hours; the seekers range "from high school kids to the incarcerated." Those who appear serious and suitable, and who are between the ages of twenty-three and forty, are invited to spend short intervals over a period of two years visiting the abbey. "It's not for everybody," Niebauer cautions with a wry smile, but those who like the life apply for a three-month candidacy during which they live, work, and pray at the monastery. The abbey is as careful as many employers about who will be invited to spend his life in the community. Before the candidacy, aspiring monks submit to state and federal background checks and a credit check. During the candidacy their physical and psycholog-

ical health is evaluated. Those who pass the checks, complete the candidacy, and wish to continue apply for a one-year novitiate. It has become a select group: The 2003 "class" comprised two men.

"We're not looking for spiritual giants," Niebauer says. "In fact, they may not do well here." Instead, he emphasizes the need for a good sense of humor and some fairly significant life experience. "I want them to have fallen in love at least once," he says. "Because if you haven't fallen in love, you will. And if you've never been through that, it's going to be rough on you... and us, your brothers."

If after a year both the novice and the abbey choose to continue the process, the novice takes first vows and begins a three-to-eight-year period as a junior monk, at the end of which the community votes on his acceptance. The next and final step is solemn vows that commit the monk to a life in the community. Only forty percent of candidates end up taking solemn vows. When asked why the others don't make it, Niebauer smiles. "Yeah. Self-knowledge."

Two floors above Niebauer's office are the living quarters of Brother Matthew Luft, which look like those of any Midwestern graduate student. Currently pursuing an MA in Liturgical Studies in St. John's School of Theology,

Luft is a boyishly handsome thirty-one. He is a junior monk. His single high-ceilinged room is dominated by overstuffed bookcases (containing, among many other volumes, several Anne Rice novels, *Catcher in the Rye*, and *The Wookiee Cookie Cookbook*). There's also a single bed and a computer with a flat-panel monitor. On the whiteboard posted next to his door is written, "Have you prayed today? Have you done *lectio*?" Cardboard boxes are stacked on top of his wardrobe, as if waiting for the end of the school year. Luft, dressed collegiately in topsiders, faded jeans, and a black T-shirt, grabs an empty box with an Old Dutch potato chip logo on it. "This is *the* box," he smiles. "I've packed it before. But I've never moved it." Father Skudlarek, standing beside him, asks to hold the box and chuckles at the younger monk, for whom he—and the other brothers of St. John's—has obvious affection. "It is true, though. You are always free to leave, and that's important to remember." Luft adds, "I met a sister recently who's spent forty-five years in her community and she told me that every day she prays for strength to continue her vocation." He sighs. "And that was just so great to hear."

On April 27 the monks of St. John's voted to admit Brother Matthew as a permanent member. On July 11, he will

take solemn vows in the abbey church. It is a radical lifestyle choice, and yet, prior to entering St. John's, Luft lived a life much like his generational peers, for whom the vast majority a monastic vocation would seem as alien as entering a retirement home. "I consider myself a part of the *Star Wars* generation," he says, pointing to one of several R2-D2 models on a shelf, positioned between family photos and Byzantine icons. "It's about the battle between good and evil, that we each have a dark and light side. In *Jedi*, Luke had to come to terms with himself. That's one of my operating stories."

Luft, a Des Moines native, came to St. John's as a college student. "Last year I received a Christmas card from my college girlfriend and her husband," he smiles. "That was weird. I thought, man, I'm thirty years old. There was this realization that she was the last person that I would know." According to Luft, the two-year relationship ended amicably with both parties headed in different career directions. She was interested in management and corporate life; he in teaching and the seminary. There wasn't much middle ground.

However, before entering St. John's, Luft would first spend an extended period in Arizona, teaching third-graders. "I had my own apartment, a car, a salary, insurance," he recalls. "I belonged to a

On June 16th the Revolution begins.

Les Misérables

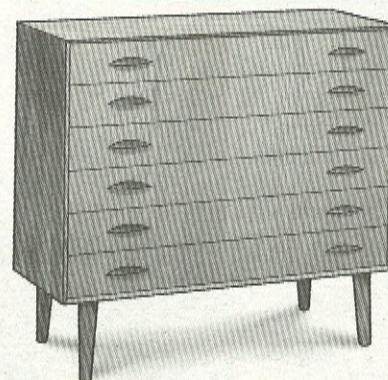


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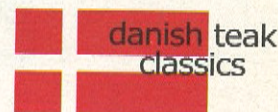
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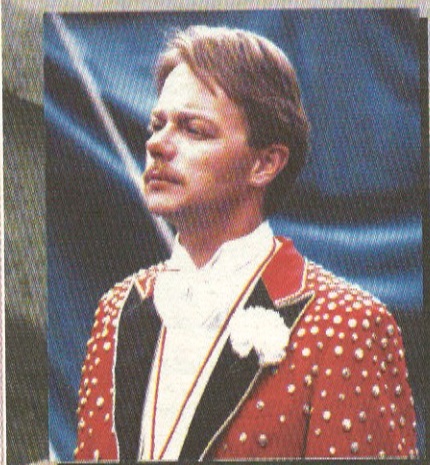
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"THE MONASTERY AND THE CIRCUS
HAVE QUITE A LOT IN COMMON,"
SAYS BROTHER PAUL VINCENT,
A FORMER RINGMASTER.



church, but something was missing. I would go home at night, and nobody was there." He began his candidacy in 2000, "feeling that I could get through it. It's a summer, there's a light at the end of the tunnel," he says. "And then you discover that you like this."

Luft describes the brothers of the abbey as his family. "I wouldn't necessarily choose all these guys. You've got your 'Uncle Joes' at the Thanksgiving table," he laughs. "But Thanksgiving is one of the best times at the abbey. You sit around and talk about all the characters. It's family."

Like any family, the brothers of St. John's have dealt with tragedy. In 2002, the abbey acknowledged that over the past forty years, twelve members of the monastic community, including a former abbot, had been accused of sexually abusing children and vulnerable adults. Unlike other segments of the American Church, St. John's came to a fast settlement of the claims against it, cooperated with all law enforcement, and followed the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in removing the accused from active ministry. Abbot John, elected on the verge of the crisis, has been widely praised for his willingness to meet victims of the abuse "and listen to their voices."

Yet as the scandal progressed, there was still the question of what to do with accused members of the community who wanted to remain at St. John's. "People were saying, 'You've got to throw these guys out,'" Abbot John recalls. "But we felt that we needed to find meaningful work and lives for those who wanted to stay." So monks or priests who chose to remain were placed on restriction in the abbey, prohibited from associating with staff and students of the university and prep school, and prevented from using almost all public facilities at St. John's.

It was a controversial decision outside of the abbey, and an immensely difficult one to make within it. For Abbot John, keeping the accused monks in community was the deeply Christian and obvious choice. "We believe in conversion and redemption," he says, his hands spread wide. "How could we ever be faithful to the gospel, Christ's forgiveness, and the *Rule* if we don't follow through on that? Because the men themselves—their sorrow and commitment to change was important and evident. They are part of our family." Within the abbey, monks acknowledge lingering anger and disappointment at the accused monks, yet they do not shun them. When I ask Brother Paul-Vincent about the scandal, he explains, "It's like dad's in jail. Am I mad at dad? You bet I am. Do I still love him? Yes." Niebauer briefly lowers his gaze. "They are still my brothers," he says in a softer tone. "I took a vow to love them."

Matthew Luft was a junior monk

when the crisis erupted, and he admits that it gave him doubts. "I asked myself, 'Do I want to be a part of this place?'" But ultimately the process of watching the community deal with the crisis—the therapy sessions, the grieving, and the forgiveness—strengthened his faith in the vocation. Today, his doubts are based on more prosaic concerns, and are not so different from his non-monastic peers who occasionally doubt their career choices. "Some days I wake up and think it'd be nice to go back to sleep and not go to prayer." He pauses. "But then I'd go through the day feeling like I'd missed something."

Everybody always says they wish they had my job," says Father Timothy Backous, St. John's athletic director. "Except for the Benedictine part." He laughs, his eyes narrowing into a nearly wrinkle-free squint. He wears a polo shirt and neatly pressed khakis. The walls of his office, just down the hall from that of John Gagliardi, St. John's legendary football coach, are covered with photos of athletes, sporting events, and award certificates. Scattered among them are a simple wooden crucifix, icons, and a Ph.D. diploma in Moral Theology earned in Rome.

Backous, who is known as "Tim-O" to the brothers, did not intend to remain a monk when he entered in the mid-1970s. "One of the things that appealed to me about monastic life was that you could try it out for four years," he says. "I thought it would be neat to tell people later in life that I'd been a monk for a while." He smiles at the irony. "Then I sort of fell in love with the community."

The speakerphone on Backous's desk buzzes, and a secretary asks what should be done with seven thousand dollars left over from a prior year's budget. "You know, this is not my dream job," he says, waving at the office. "My dream is to ▶▶

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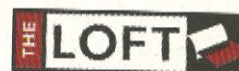
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► get St. John's re-involved in the Twin Cities." And so, on the weekends, Backous says mass at inner-city churches in Minneapolis. "My dream is for us to find a place in Minneapolis where I could work in those parishes and where other monks could go."

"A MONASTERY EXISTS TO PRAY, TO HAVE SOLITUDE AND SILENCE, AND TO SERVE AS A WITNESS THAT THESE THINGS ARE AN IMPORTANT PART OF THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE."

Backous's vision is not merely personal. It is actually a part of a larger discussion as to what, in fact, the role of the abbey will be in the coming years. Its original purpose—filling central Minnesota churches with parish priests—is no longer realistic in an era of declining monastic populations. So the abbey aims to take on projects and roles that emphasize its spiritual significance to the outside world. The drive to build a new guest wing (designed by the esteemed architect Tadao Ando), for example, is a

project of the first priority, since hospitality is one of the key tenets of the Benedictine rule. Educating priests and nuns from the rapidly growing Chinese Catholic Church is another. "We can't do everything we used to do," says Abbot John after I mention Backous' vision to him. "We still imagine ourselves as a big monastery. We have to imagine ourselves as a smaller monastery. We don't have a class of monks coming up like we used to. Matthew Luft is on his own." For Abbot John, the future of the monastery is intimately tied up in its role as a spiritual institution. "What's the relevance?" he asks with characteristic enthusiasm. "Our society and culture are so busy, so hyper-extended. So a monastery exists to pray, to have solitude and silence, and to serve as a witness that these things are an important part of the human experience."

Sitting in the abbot's lounge, Father Stewart, the impassive monastic historian, smiles when asked about the future of the abbey. "The Benedictines are in it for the long haul," he says. Like his abbot in the office across the hall, Stewart recognizes the important symbolic role that the abbey plays, though he is careful to temper the enthusiasm with Benedictine humility. "It's not, 'Oh, look at this shining light on the hill,'" he says with a wave of his hand. "It's showing that this kind of life is a possibility."

One of the great mysteries of monastic life is its ability to confer youth upon its practitioners. At St. John's, most brothers appear ten to twenty years younger than their ages recorded in the abbey's register. Yet as the aged know, youth is not only a matter of appearances. At the abbey, careers often remain active, fruitful, and vital into the eighth decade of life.

Opinions vary as to the reasons for this phenomenon. Some cite the stress-free routine of monastic life, its lack of mortgage payments, car payments, and job pressures. Yet others, particularly brothers who have academic careers, scoff at the notion that a cycle of prayer and meals is enough to keep life stress-free. While many brothers cite the lack of family pressures, it's just as easy to find those who reject that explanation and note that cohabiting with roughly two hundred "guys" can be rough.

Late on a Saturday afternoon, Father Angelo Zankl, the abbey's oldest member, is seated in his wheelchair in the retirement wing, home to twenty members of the community. His 103-year-old face is thin, but his wide eyes are clear and bright, and his delicate, almost feminine lips are raised in a perpetual smile. He is good-humored, whip-smart, and not shy about teasing Father Skudlarek,

who sits beside him, or the two nurses at the reception desk. Nevertheless, Father Zankl is a private man, and he is unwilling to comment for publication on the circumstances of his life at St. John's. It can only be noted that he arrived at the abbey at age eleven in a horse and buggy, and that he spent most of his monastic career ministering to a Duluth parish.

"Angelo," Father Skudlarek prods him. "Why is it that everyone remains so young at the abbey?"

Father Zankl glances at the younger, sixty-five-year-old monk with a dismissive, nearly contemptuous glare. "They're awfully slow bringing me my food this afternoon."

"Slow, are they?"

"That's right," Father Zankl says, his tone flat enough to suggest that he is only half joking.

Father Skudlarek gently pats Father Zankl's bony hands. "But why is it that monks live so long at St. John's?"

Father Zankl sighs impatiently. He opens his mouth, closes it, then smiles. "Why do they live so long?" He asks, raising his hands slightly. "Don't ask me."

Father Skudlarek bursts out laughing and places one hand on his brother's shoulder, lovingly assuring him, "Lunch is on the way, Angelo. Don't worry about a thing." ☞

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