Meet the monks who spend their lives praying for Ireland's priests

By Kevin Jones

Prayer, reparation, and praising God are the focus of a new Benedictine priory in Ireland, which focuses especially on reparation for the sins of priests.

“It was never our predetermined plan to come to Ireland,” said Silverstream Priory’s Father Benedict Andersen, O.S.B., “But we believe that, through circumstances that we could never have foreseen, Divine Providence placed us here to play some sort of role, however modest, in the life of the Irish Church.”

Silverstream Priory is the home of the Benedictine Monks of Perpetual Adoration of the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar.

The priory is a former residence of the Visitation Sisters in Stamullen, a village about 22 miles north of Dublin. It is believed to be the first monastery established in Ireland’s County Meath since King Henry VIII suppressed them.

“The Reformation, which was ruthlessly enforced in Ireland, dealt a near fatal blow to the monastic life, and it almost seems as if certain contemporary forces and trends are conspiring to finish it off completely,” said Father Benedict, who hails from Colorado.

There are many Americans at the priory. The prior, Dom Mark Daniel Kirby, is from Connecticut. Tulsa, Okla. native Dom Elijah Carroll also comes from the U.S. The priory has a postulant from Toledo, Ohio and a priest from the Archdiocese of St. Louis. One member is from County Meath, while one novice is from Australia and another from Denmark.

According to Father Benedict, one of the glories of the Benedictine order is that their sole reason for existence is “the lifelong search for God in separation from the world, and the perpetual praise of God in the Sacred Liturgy.”

The monk himself was baptized Catholic as an infant in 1980. Both his parents came from very large Catholic families, but for various reasons they became estranged from the Church and began practicing an Evangelical, charismatic form of Christianity.

In his own words, Father Benedict “rebelled” against this upbringing by seeking the depths of ancient Christianity. He became an Orthodox Christian for his twenties and studied at an Orthodox seminary. He returned to full communion with the Church “as a positive desire to be in full communion with the principal Petrine See, ‘Old Rome’ (as the Orthodox call it), the Church of my baptism.”

Dom Kirby and Father Benedict moved to Ireland in 2012 as the only members of their Benedictine community, which began in Tulsa, Okla.

“I must say that we have been received very well, from the very beginning until now,” Father Benedict said. “While there are of course major differences, I feel very much at home.”

In Father Benedict’s eyes, contemporary Irish culture is heavily Americanized, “sometimes for good but increasingly, I’m afraid, for the worst.”

The monk sees an “immense cultural shift” following the unprecedented success of the Irish economy in the 1990s. He suggested this success “had the downside of greatly accelerating the decay of Irish Catholic faith and practice since the Second Vatican Council.”

The “horrors” of Ireland’s sexual abuse scandals by clergy gave an “incalculable blow” to the Church’s credibility, he added.

“This island was once dotted from east to west, north to south, with monasteries. The heartbeat of the Irish people was the heartbeat of the monastic round of prayer,” Father Benedict said.

Pope Benedict XVI’s 2010 Letter to the Catholics in Ireland noted the role of monasteries in promoting Eucharistic Adoration and their ability to revitalize priestly life through retreats.

“We have, as it were, our marching orders from the Holy See, and while we cannot physically leave the cloister, we are dedicated to an unseen, spiritual battle for the soul of this country, and specifically for its priests,” Father Benedict said.

The monks dedicate their time and energies to prayer, Mass and the eight hours of the Divine Office.

“Our approach to the faith and the spiritual life relies to a great extent on our study of the Scriptures (particularly the Psalter) and the Church Fathers, both Eastern and Western,” the monk explained. “Our monastic customs are thoroughly traditional, yet we are always aware of St. Benedict’s spirit of moderation and adaptation to various circumstances.”

The Benedictines of Silverstream Priory have adopted the charism of Mother Catherine-Mectilde de Bar, who founded the Benedictine Nuns of Perpetual Adoration in the 17th century.

“Mother Mectilde established her particular Benedictine family to adore the Blessed Eucharist in a spirit of reparation for offenses and abuses committed against the Sacrament of Christ’s love,” Father Benedict said. “As monks, however, we have a particular focus on reparation for the sins of priests which, especially of late, have so disfigured the Face of Christ in the eyes of the world.”

“Out of weakness and defeat, and yes, even sin and infidelity, can come power and victory,” he continued. “May God hold our country close once again to his Sacred Heart, beating in the Sacred Host.”

Bishop Michael Smith of Meath presided at the monastery’s canonical establishment earlier this year, saying he was “delighted to recognize the unique presence of this new monastery.”

“Through their prayer, study and hospitality, the monks are ‘speaking to the heart’ and their quiet witness is a reminder that the Lord continues to provide the Church with new gifts and grace,” the bishop said.

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