Mt. Angel Abbey

Mount Angel Abbey, in the town of St. Benedict, Oregon, is a community of monks in the Catholic Benedictine tradition. They live in a peaceful environment, amid inspiring scenery atop the only butte in the mid-Willamette Valley. Benedictine monks follow the Rule of Saint Benedict, written in 520, which describes the monastic life as a balance of prayer and work in a community, under a rule and an elected abbot. Mount Angel was the first Catholic seminary in the western United States to educate candidates for the priesthood.

On October 30, 1882, six monks from the Benedictine Abbey of Engelberg, Switzerland, started a community in Gervais. An associated group of Swiss Benedictine women began a community in Gervais on the same day. In 1884, the men and, in 1887, the women moved to the nearby town of Fillmore, soon renamed Mt. Angel. These communities would mature into Mount Angel Abbey for the men and Queen of Angels Monastery for the women.

Given the pastoral needs and the small number of priests in the Archdiocese of Portland, which encompassed all of Oregon, Archbishop William Gross invited the monks to begin a high school in 1887 and a seminary in 1889. During the 1890s, the monks experienced severe trials, including a fire in 1892 that burned the monastery complex. As a result, in late 1903 the monks and their schools moved to the top of the butte, near what would become the town of St. Benedict.

In 1904, the community was declared an abbey, which meant that it became independent from its motherhouse in Switzerland. The monks in Oregon focused on their secular college and in 1920 began retreats for lay people. The community thrived until September 1926, when a fire burned the monastery and schools. Within two years, the community reestablished itself on the butte in a new and stoutly constructed three-story building. Among the seven schools established by the monks in their history, two have continued as Mount Angel Seminary, which is a liberal arts college and a graduate school of theology.

The monks of Mount Angel Abbey have established three communities, called daughterhouses, to extend the Benedictine tradition. The first is Westminster Abbey, which began in 1939 near Vancouver, British Columbia. The second, begun in 1965, is the Monastery of the Ascension, near Twin Falls, Idaho. The third, Our Lady of the Angels Monastery, began in 1966 near Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico.

On the Abbey butte at Mount Angel, the monks built a new retreat house in 1959 to serve the spiritual needs of lay people and to continue the ancient monastic tradition of hospitality. In 1970, the monks opened Mount Angel Abbey Library, designed by Finnish architect Alvar Aalto and primarily financed by Portland philanthropists Howard and Jean Vollum. A year later, the monks established a highly successful annual Bach Festival.

From the six original Swiss monks, the population of the Abbey community grew to its historic high of 125 monks in the early 1970s, making it one of the largest male Benedictine communities in the United States. In 1964, the monks turned over their preparatory school to the parish in the town of Mt. Angel, and in 1979 they closed the Seminary High School. Since the 1980s, a separate Oblate program (for women and men spiritual associates) has expanded to include over 500 lay people.

In the mid-1980s, nearly all of the Seminary’s 90 students were English speakers from North America. By 2009, the student population had grown to 185 students, with 64 percent of them non-native English speakers. The shift reflects the growing diversity of the Catholic Church in the Western Hemisphere and illustrates how the vision of the Abbey

and Seminary has adapted to meet contemporary needs.

In 2006, a new Seminary building received a Best Sustainable Award for Oregon and Washington. To commemorate its 125th anniversary in 2007, the Abbey erected a bell tower symbolizing the Benedictine vocation to prayer, and inviting people to benefit from the monks' hospitality.

Written by Brother Cyril Drnjevic

Further Reading:

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