

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

Building a Cathedral in the Dark

Periodically, I get newsletters from far-flung places: little bulletins that remind me that God is, indeed, at work—sometimes where you least expect.

I get notes from the Czech Republic. There, a group of Trappist monks transformed an ancient farm into a modern monastery called *Novy Dvur*. It is the first monastery built in the country since before the communist era. A famous architect designed the chapel and sleeping quarters—austere, simple places that are nevertheless, like so many Trappist monasteries, profoundly beautiful. In keeping with the charism of the order, there is nothing unnecessary, nothing frivolous. It's as plain as a Shaker village. So far, there are only a handful of monks living there, but more are arriving every year.

In the wilds of middle Europe, in the desert left behind by the Soviets, faith somehow is flowering.

And further north, another group of Trappists—this one, nuns—established a foundation on an island amid the wintry waters of central Norway. The place has been dubbed *Tautra Mariakloster*, which I believe means “Mary’s Cloister in Tautra.” There, with the Northern Lights and twenty-hour-long nights, seven nuns and their builders erected a quiet temple to God. The sisters, excited at the prospect of a new home, wrote:

“An archeologist’s theory is that the early Cistercians (Trappists) preferred plain architecture so that they could use God’s light as decoration. That was all that was needed. We can’t wait to sit in our new church and just watch the light and shadow move across the simple walls with an elegance no work of art could match.”

It is a mystery to me why God has chosen to do His work in these unpredictable settings. Why not send the Spirit to turn over the earth and begin a foundation in, say, Bensonhurst? Why not Rego Park? Why Tautra and the Czech Republic?

One of the sisters in Tautra meditated on the miraculous way in which their foundation took shape in a place that is, for so much of the time, without light. In the words of Sister GilChrist, they were building a cathedral in the dark. But they liked it that way. She wrote:

“Many things grow in the dark: flower bulbs, a child in the womb, dough raising to become bread, a bird still in the egg. So many beautiful things come out of darkness. Perhaps our own lives grow in darkness. We usually do not see it ourselves. Often enough, it’s those around us who notice the growth, and we are perhaps unaware that we are changing. Perhaps we have become more compassionate, a bit softer or more flexible, wiser in some hidden way.”

This Sunday is Pentecost, and we remember how the Church came to be. We remember again how a group of people who were hidden in the dark were suddenly lit by a flame—and how they were moved to fling open the doors of their darkness and spill out into the street, and begin to tell the story, our story, and to preach at last The Word.

The Spirit was there then. It is here now, working in ways we can’t quite understand or see. Perhaps that’s just how God prefers to do things—incredibly, even imperceptibly, building cathedrals in the dark.

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