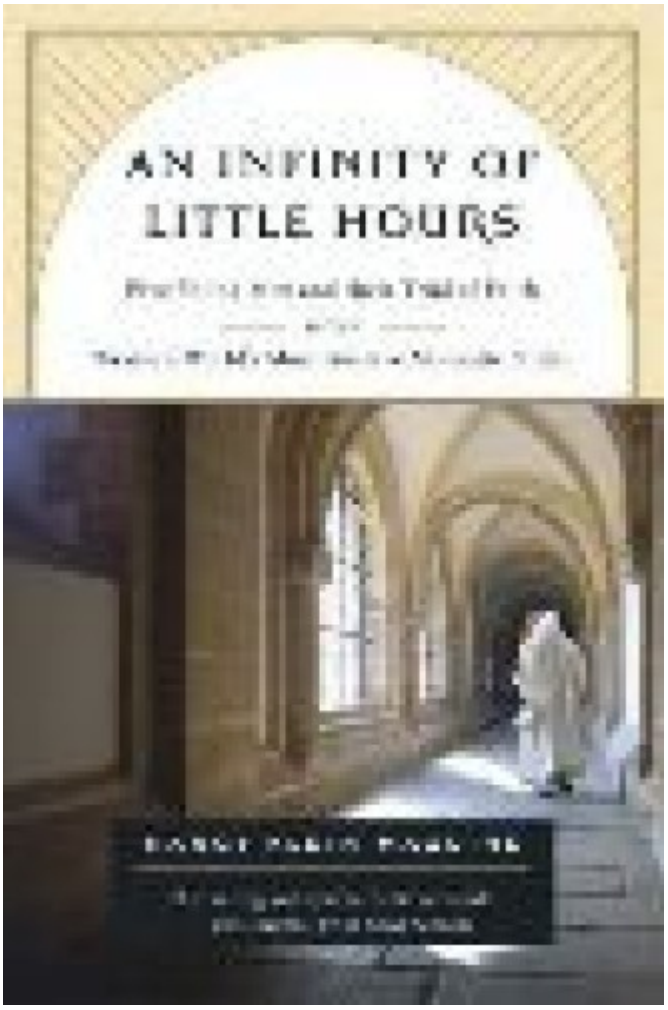
Monastic boot camp

By W. Paul Jones in the April 3, 2007 issue

In Review



An Infinity of Little Hours: Five Young Men and Their Trial of Faith in the Western World's Most Austere Monastic Order

Nancy Klein Maguire
PublicAffairs

In our noisy and technologically correct secular society, mystery and silence are as absent as they are secretly craved. Two of the most austere Western monastic orders to distill this countercultural craving are the Carthusians and Trappists. They share the three vows of obedience, stability of place and conversion of life. The Carthusians are the focus of Nancy Maguire's book. I myself belong to the Trappist tradition.

Maguire's accomplishment in description is all the more impressive because she is a woman plumbing a severely masculine domain. She brings to this work not theological training but scholarly expertise in theater (she has been a scholar-in-residence at the Folger Shakespeare Library since 1983). Through her marriage to an ex-Carthusian, she was able to locate five men who from 1960 to 1965 experienced the rigorous formation in the virtually closed Carthusian world of the Parkminster Charterhouse in West Sussex, England. Maguire teases us throughout to guess which of the five men is the one who takes the lifelong vows of solemn profession. I guessed wrong.

Her research included 6,000 pages of e-mail communication, a considerable number of faxes, and extensive use of letters, pictures, books, journals and telephone conversations, culminating in a face-to-face reunion of the five, who had retired and were in their 70s.

The five men, all of whom entered the monastery while in their 20s, are interestingly diverse. One, whose well-to-do family had fled East Germany, was Jesuit trained and had entered a missionary order and was working in Africa when a contemplative spark was ignited in him by Thomas Merton's *Seven Storey Mountain*. Merton's writings stimulated another of the postulants, a New Yorker of Irish descent. Ponderings on the beach led this son of a Philadelphia doctor to be drawn to monasticism—about which he knew almost nothing. One of the men, an only child from Chicago, was talented in everything he tried—from academics to golf. Another was an all-or-nothing type with an entrepreneurial streak, known for his attraction to sports and girls, who was brought face to face with his soul-hollowness in the solitude of recovering from a broken leg.

Those who left the monastery did so for various reasons: "nervous and spiritual deterioration" (likely caused by a need for companionship and agony over possible homosexual tendencies); the disturbing dilemma of having fallen in love with a

woman while on the ocean voyage to the monastery; meticulousness to such an extreme that the person “disciplined himself into a nervous breakdown”; and the “dark force” of relentless sameness, experienced by an intellectual and multitalented young man who saw his talents “going no place.”

While one of the five made solemn vows and never left after he appeared at the Carthusian door, the other four moved on to secular careers: one became a physician in Germany, one a librarian, one the founder of an alternative school for troubled teenagers in France, and one the CEO of a small consulting firm following 20 years as a banker. It is the lives and spiritual journeys of these men that Maguire probes.

Although Maguire was clearly intrigued by her explorations, one senses also the sadness of her mission. The heroic Carthusian spirituality remained virtually unchanged for almost a thousand years before the Vatican II reforms of 1962-1965, but now the Carthusians are on the verge of becoming “the equivalent of a lost tribe [that] will disappear from recorded history.”

Maguire feels duty-bound to rummage among the fading memories of the few who remember what a Carthusian “boot camp” was like. Although time-mellowed, the documentation she gleans is sufficient to justify her description of this formation as the training of “spiritual athletes” to conquer their own Mount Everests so as to qualify as “Catholicism’s green berets.”

The Carthusian Order emerged slowly after St. Bruno, at the peak of his social and intellectual career in 1084, vowed to leave the world. With six friends, he climbed into a place of forested solitude above Grenoble, France. There the seven built separate hermitages which enabled them to brave the severities of the French Alps and pursue their calling: supporting each other as “Christ’s poor” through practices of poverty and penance. Having no intention of forming a new order, they had no rule. Nevertheless, in time the customs of the group were articulated and written down. From that point, the customs were held to with such tenacity that the order boasted that it had “no need for reform for we have never become deformed.”

In time, lay brothers assumed the physical labor of providing for the needs of the ordained hermits, who lived in the isolation of separate, four-room, two-story cells within the monastic complex. Each cell had a main room containing a work table, a stove and a bed with straw mattress, complemented by a prayer room, a workroom,

a small toilet, and a storage room for wood and coal—1,200 square feet in all, plus an enclosed garden.

There is no unique Carthusian spirituality. Each hermit develops his own solitary regimen with the goal of “seeing the face of God.” This intense aloneness is tempered by masses, three daily corporate offices (chanted services in Latin, centered in the psalms), weekly chapter meetings, Sunday meals together, Monday walks and a yearly picnic. But there is no corporate work. Whereas Trappist spirituality involves near-total silence amid constant togetherness, Carthusian spirituality is defined by extensive isolation with limited interaction.

Maguire is at her best when describing the ascetic tedium and the privations of daily isolation in a grueling environment with little heat, no electricity and primitive plumbing. She captures well the ambiguity of purpose, the bewilderment over goals, and the deep personal insecurities made particularly painful by the interruption of sleep for the long midnight office and by the Friday fasts extending beyond Lent. Maguire’s style resembles that of a good novelist. She interweaves personal vignettes with imaginative hunches concerning the postulants’ inner thoughts and feelings.

Yet there are some disappointments about the book. First, Maguire’s descriptions of the postulants’ departures are too short, leaving largely unexplored the conundrum that puzzles every novice master—Why do far more candidates leave than stay? From her portraits, one could just as well make a case for each man staying as for his leaving. It is too facile for her to say that a person departs because he has a nervous breakdown or is told to leave. Only in the final summary does she allude to the complexities involved.

Second, it’s disappointing for the reader, after looking forward to hearing about the reunion of the group after 40 years, to learn that only five hours of conversation occurred, consisting largely of reminiscences. An opportunity was missed to give a perspective and depth to the men’s struggles. Most intriguing to me is not the one who “made it” but those who could not, would not and should not have—and what that says about the rest of us.

Third, one wonders whether there is more to be said about how five years of intense formation shaped the lives of those who left—other than that they “try to hide in the Cloud of Unknowing for five or ten minutes daily.”

Finally, the significant changes effected by Vatican II are relegated to one page, leaving unclear the present and the future of both the Carthusian order in particular and Christian monasticism in general. Put another way, Maguire is superb at describing what was, but insufficiently interested in the therefores.

The therefores are the questions that her book triggers for me. Recently the General Chapter of the Trappist order determined that over three-quarters of monasteries worldwide are “precarious” because of the aging of their members and the paucity of candidates. While Maguire casts a fond eye on a soon-to-be forgotten era, I find none of my elderly professed brothers lamenting the radical changes forced by Vatican II, no matter how difficult the transition was. They acknowledge that previous monasticism was homophobic in forbidding friendships, wounding in its weekly accusations in the Chapter of Faults, and near-Jansenist in its disdain for the body (with compulsory flagellation and the wearing of hair shirts); that it nurtured a two-tiered spirituality, took an exile-like perspective toward God’s creation, exercised an unhealthy repression of sexuality, and emphasized works-righteousness rather than the free gift of transforming grace.

Creative changes have occurred, and for that we can be grateful. Still, a major issue remains for both monasticism and the larger church—that of motivation. Maguire is unclear about the motivations inspiring the candidates of her study, but if, as Vatican II asserts, the rewards of being Christian are as accessible to the married garage mechanic as to the most self-afflicted celibate monk, why would anyone ever choose to undergo the deprivations classically characteristic of monasticism? Yet can Christianity in our time be more than an accommodation to the status quo, nestling a religious slice of life in between the kids’ Sunday morning cheerleading practice and an afternoon of professional football?

I am convinced of the indispensability of monasticism. The monastery is an invitation to deeper living; it is capable of awakening even a short-term visitor to the gnawing emptiness of having only one’s self as roommate. On a societal level, we need a monasticism that is self-consciously subversive—a version in our time of the prophetic ulcer it has been in the stomachs of countless governments in their rise and fall throughout the centuries. Radically juxtaposed to the seductive motivations of power, possession and prestige that empower modern capitalist society, the monastery is a surrogate world on the hill that quietly nurtures communal ownership, a cooperative lifestyle, stewardship of resources, work as art and disciplined being as the center of doing—all enfolded in a rehearsal of the rhythmic

seasons and a savoring of the joy of each moment, formed daily by a gracious eucharistic gesture.

By substituting an intrinsic motivation for our society’s instrumental postponement of living, monasticism can provide a countercultural space in which the self-authenticating nature of Christian life may be experienced as the “road less taken.” Monasteries once functioned as sane repositories for outlasting the Dark Ages. Perhaps as we face the ominous and relentless consequences of our ravenous system, a refurbished monasticism can harbor a remnant hope.