

"Walled Up Nuns"

in the Racially Disturbed South

By JOHN M. HAFFERT

On Mason Road, outside of Durham, North Carolina, there is a monastery of cloistered nuns which was founded here on July 2, 1956. The nuns, called "Carmelites", lead a "walled-in" life, not unlike that of the hermits of the Old Testament who lived in contemplative prayer on Mount Carmel in Palestine.

Eighteen Hours

These nuns have an eighteen hour day (which, by simple arithmetic, means that they sleep only six hours), every hour of which is lived according to a rule.

Eight of those eighteen hours are spent in prayer in their chapel.

Prayer is their principal work. And when we exclaimed in surprise on hearing that these women spent eight hours on their knees during a day, a peal of cheerful laughter came through the cloister curtain and we were quickly reassured that eight hours is just a normal "working day".

Origin of Carmelites

The Carmelite Order is said to have been founded by the Prophet Elias, a great contemplative of the Old Testament, and they were originally known as "Essenes". The famous Dead Sea Scrolls were found in the ruins of one of their monasteries which spread south along the Palestinian coast from Mount Carmel, where the Prophet Elias had his "headquarters" in one of the many caves.

During the Middle Ages, the strict rule of the Carmelites was mitigated following the decimation of monasteries by the Black Plague. But in 1562 the strict discipline was re-established in a monastery founded by Teresa of Avila. Similar strict monasteries began to spread through the world. The Convent in Durham is one of them. There is another in

Mobile, Alabama. And there is a wonderful Community of cloistered Dominicans in Marbury, Alabama.

Bars on Windows

The nuns sleep on very narrow boards, covered only with straw mattresses. In addition to their eighteen hours of regimented life, they never eat meat. They never go outside. Yet many who join are college graduates from every possible walk of life. And what may be strangest to understand: The walls of the monastery are not to keep the nuns in (because they are there of their own volition), but to keep the world out. And even stranger, it is difficult for a young woman to join. Of the many who apply, only a few are accepted. And the time of probation lasts several years.

Once the daughter of a prominent family entered a Carmelite Monastery right from college, and a friend of the girl's father asked:

"How was it possible for such a vivacious, intelligent girl, with a wonderful life in front of her, to shut herself up in such a living death?"

The father answered: "She believes Christ, Who said that he who loses his life, finds it. And she does this because she loves Christ and wants to do something spiritual to help the world.

One of Few

"Many imitate Christ," he continued, "in the family and workshop of Nazareth. Many imitate Him during the three years of His public ministry. Many even imitate Him along the way of the Cross. But there are very few who are willing to imitate Him during those three hours . . . cloistered with three nails . . . when He sealed the salvation of the world with His Blood.

"I am so proud that my daughter is one of those few."

The three principal Orders of cloistered nuns are the Carmelites (whose foundation we described above), the Dominicans, and the Poor Clares (who were founded by St. Francis of Assisi and Saint Clare.) We can summarize the purpose of their life as: Prayer and sacrifice for the souls of men, all men.

Integrated

The Dominican Sisters in Marbury, Alabama, told us:

"We need hardly tell you how much we pray about this terrible racial unrest throughout our land. We have been a completely "integrated" group from the beginning—and a happier family could hardly be found anywhere." Once when Mr. Eddie Doherty visited us he seemed 'charmed' by the Sisters' laughter and in his poetic way he commented: 'Stars Behind Bars'.

Why Not In Return?

Isn't it comforting to all of us to know that such cloisters are multiplying in this materialistic age? What a debt each of us owes to these Sisters!

Why not pause a moment, thinking of these dedicated women who, like St. Clare, St. Catherine and St. Therese, spend their lives praying for us, to say a prayer for them?

You may write to the Mother Prioress:

Dominican Sisters,
Marbury, Alabama

Carmelite Sisters,
R.D. 2, Mason Rd.,
Durham, N. C.

Poor Clare Monastery,
201 Crosswicks St.,
Bordentown, N. J.