

Regina Laudis in Bethlehem

As Work Continues, Abbey Gives Thanks

by Jean Dunn

BETHLEHEM — People think of the Abbey of Regina Laudis as an oasis of calm, a place of prayer and contemplation nestled in the hills of Bethlehem.

In actuality, the past 10 months at the Abbey have been anything but peaceful.

Phase II of the New Horizons Project, a major renovation of the factory building that has served the monastic community since its founding more than 70 years ago, began last fall, with all the earth-moving, hammering and ear-splitting activity inherent in a job of that magnitude.

"We're in the midst of framing right now," said Mother Alma Egger, project manager. "It's going very well. Verdi Construction has given us May 1, 2019, as a finish date."

"Our main setback has been the weather," said the Rev. Mother Lucia Kuppens, Abbess of Regina Laudis since 2015. "In the winter we had a lot of snow. Now we've had a week of rain. But on the whole, we've been pretty lucky."

"When they told us they'd be finished by May 1, we were delighted," she said. "We'll still have to move back in, but the structure should be finished by then."

Mother Abbess, Mother Alma, Mother Telchilde Hinckley and Mother Angèle Arbib are together leading the New Horizons Project, which began with Phase I in 2013. The four gathered recently to reflect on what they agreed has been a positive experience so far.

"It's disrupted everything," said Mother Angèle, "but joyfully!"

Phase I of the project addressed

a number of safety issues, including increased handicapped accessibility and a new HVAC system; added four new sleeping cells and renovated others.

New Horizons Phase II has been decidedly more dramatic, involving not only continued renovations, but the demolition and rebuilding of major areas of the monastery.

Among the areas demolished was the Abbey's beloved chapel, an intimate worship space used daily by those within the monastic community and countless others who sought it out over the years as a place of prayer and spiritual peace.

According to Mother Telchilde, the new chapel is coming along well, with the post-and-beam ceiling installed and the cupola in place.

"We wanted to preserve the warm, intimate feeling of the old chapel that was accessible to so many people over the years," she said. "Although the new chapel will be different — there will be much more light — it will still be a place where people can come and have a chance to rest and pray and feel some peace during their visit."

Many of the artistic features of the old chapel, including the stations of the cross, handcarved by the late Mother Placid Dempsey from local cherry wood, will find a home in the new one.

The colorful stained glass image of Our Lady by Mother Praxedes Baxter that marked the former entrance to the building has been preserved and will be installed in the chapel's east wall to catch the rays of the rising sun.

Mother Alma is in the process of designing a window for the west



Verdi Construction Company continues work on Phase II of the New Horizons Project at the Abbey of Regina Laudis in Bethlehem, including the demolition and rebuilding of much of the original factory building that has served the monastery since its founding more than 70 years ago. At the project's half-way point, members of the Abbey's coordinating team report that work is on track towards a May 1, 2019 completion date.

wall which will incorporate some stained glass from the old chapel.

In the completed building, visitors will have easy access to the chapel, the parlors [partitioned rooms where members of the public may speak with nuns] and the new Monastic Art Shop, directly from the new entryway.

"Many people still stop by wanting to go to the Art Shop," said Mother Telchilde. "They're looking for crafts and cheese and medals. We're looking forward to having the new Art Shop open as soon as we can. We definitely plan to have it come back and be even better than before."

In addition to the new chapel and art shop, renovations will yield a new refectory, a new library, a slightly enlarged kitchen and a new bakery, print shop, sewing rooms and music rooms.

"The center of the new building will be a large, open atrium that will draw light into the center of the building," said Mother Telchilde, noting that some of that light will fall into the chapel.

Another major objective of Phase II is to turn a portion of the old living quarters into a full-scale infirmary, combining six small, individual rooms into three larger ones, with space for a nurse's station and laundry.

"To have a real infirmary, we need hospital beds, reclining chairs, rolling tables to bring meals, room for a doctor or a priest to come in," said Mother Angèle.

"We're trying to establish a space where people who are sick will feel peaceful," she said. "We don't want them to think somebody will have to run out and rent a bed for them if they get sick. A certain feeling of safety comes with knowing we are equipped for what befalls us."

"When we look at the concept drawings that we started with, and then look at the building going up, it's remarkably similar to what we imagined it would be," said Mother Abbess. "It's kind of startling to see that vision actually realized, before your eyes!"

"We've seen the two-dimensional plans become life-sized, three-dimensional spaces," said Mother Alma. "Each new room is a new revelation. It's no longer just a plan on paper — we're seeing our plans realized. That part to me is a real miracle."

Despite the noise and commotion of the construction project, the nuns have continued to live their motto: 'Ora et Labora' —

'Pray and Work.'

"The on-site crew has been a really friendly, personable group," said Mother Alma. "They told us, 'if you have to get somewhere where we're working, let us know. We'll figure out a way for you to get there and be safe.'"

"Our construction team is doing a really masterful job," said Mother Abbess. "From the very beginning, everything has been done sequentially so that we can keep doing what we do until the last possible moment. They make sure there's always someplace to move into."

The entire project is designed to address long-standing problems and enhance safety and accessibility for both residents and guests.

"Now we have a nicer approach to the abbey, a wider driveway, marked with signs," said Mother Abbess. "Parking should be more accessible. The entrance to the abbey will be more welcoming, beautifully lit."

"Benedictines are very devoted to the mission of hospitality," said Mother Angèle. "A lot of the spaces were designed with our guests in mind: the guest refectory, the chapel very much so, the art shop very much so."

"It's important for people to realize that we are a center of prayer, but we're not isolated," she said. "For all the people who have been so kind during this project, we hope we will be able to share it with them in the ways we can. We're a cloistered community but our guest houses are filled all the time. It's a focus that's very important to us."

The four expressed a deep gratitude to all those who have supported the New Horizons Project over the years.

"People have been incredibly generous," said Mother Abbess. "It's overwhelming. It's been a blessing to see how many people want to have a center of prayer here and they depend on it being here. People gave and gave."

"Our gratitude is endless," said Mother Angèle. "One day a month, we have a Mass for the donors. We never forget that it's because of them that this project has been possible."

"Once the building is complete, we're going to need furniture and furnishings for the chapel, the refectory, lots of things like that," said Mother Telchilde. "That will all have to be designed. But that's a future project, the next phase."

As development director, Mother Angèle noted that about \$1.5

million is needed to complete the entire project, including all the furnishings for the new building. The chapel alone will need choir stalls for the monastic community, the grille, construction and installation of stained glass windows and seating for the congregation.

The Abbey of Regina Laudis, which tends to hover at close to 40 members, currently numbers 37, including six novices and one postulant.

Unlike many similar groups, whose numbers dwindle as older members pass away, Regina Laudis remains a vibrant, strong community with young women continuing to join.

"The young ones are so excited about this building," said Mother Abbess. "They've been very much a part of it. They feel so hopeful that they have a future here."

"We're doing it for them," said Mother Alma. "They'll take it into the future."

The nuns also expressed the community's thanks to architect Paul Maggi and Verdi Construction.

"Paul Maggi was so considerate of our particular life," said Mother Alma. "He spent quite a bit of time with us before designing the plans."

"In addition to the excellence of their work, everyone at Verdi Construction is so aware of making us be able to continue our work," said Mother Angèle. "They're almost constantly going out of their way to help us."

"Between Verdi Construction and Paul Maggi, we've been very, very blessed."

The entire community is looking forward to the day when they can welcome guests into the completed building.

"I think people will still recognize the Abbey," said Mother Abbess. "The arches, the dormers, the materials, the art — it will be new but also familiar."

"At some point we'll have an open house and blessing with an opportunity for people to see the building, but that's still a little while in the distance. We still have some adventures ahead."

"Right now, we want people to know that we're on our way. It really is happening, and it's beautiful!"

Those wishing to help support the New Horizons Project may mail a check to Abbey of Regina Laudis, 273 Flanders Rd., Bethlehem 06751, attn: New Horizons; or donate online at abbeyofreginalaudis.org.



A rear view of the monastery building construction at the Abbey of Regina Laudis shows the new chapel rising in the foreground. In photo below, Mother Alma Egger (left), monastic site construction director; Reverend Mother Abbess Lucia Kuppens and Mother Angèle Arbib, development director, review specifications in the new chapel construction.

