

Arctic Contemplatives

Readers of Sigrid Undset's *Kristin Lavransdatter*, a trilogy of novels set within the very Catholic culture of 14th-century Norway, will especially appreciate what is something of a historical U-turn. Ten years ago the Cistercians, a Catholic contemplative order based on the Rule of St. Benedict, began to re-establish a Catholic presence in Norway not seen since the Reformation.

It started with a group of Trappistine nuns, mostly from the Mississippi Abbey in the United States, who envisioned a new community on the island of Tautra in the Trondheim Fjord. Centuries earlier, in 1207, a Cistercian community was founded there that ultimately grew to include 30 monks responsible for 170 small farms. The sisters bought land near the ruins of the old monastery, moved to the site and built a new cloister, workplace, guesthouse and chapel: Tautra Mariakloster.

Now the sisters have been joined in Norway by four monks from the French Abbey of Cîteaux, who dedicated their own new monastery, Munkeby Mariakloster, last September. Their mission is to offer to those who come seeking it "a quiet presence with the spiritual riches of liturgy, meditation, and *lectio divina*." The monks are rebuilding a monastery established in 1180. In addition to Cistercians, Dominicans and Poor Clares have also returned to Norway. Contemplative Benedictines live in Denmark and Sweden; Brigittines and Carmelites in Iceland.

Amid the world's frenetic rush, it is easy to forget that contemplatives quietly offer their prayer, manual labor and presence, befriending neighbors at the glacial pace that friendship requires even in the era of Facebook. The outreach of a handful of monks and nuns is a vital—though quiet and small—part of the church's ministry. As Pope Benedict XVI suggested, it provides "places where men and women...run to seek God and learn to recognize the signs of the presence of Christ, of his charity and of his mercy."

Article on p.4 in *America magazine* for March 1, 2010