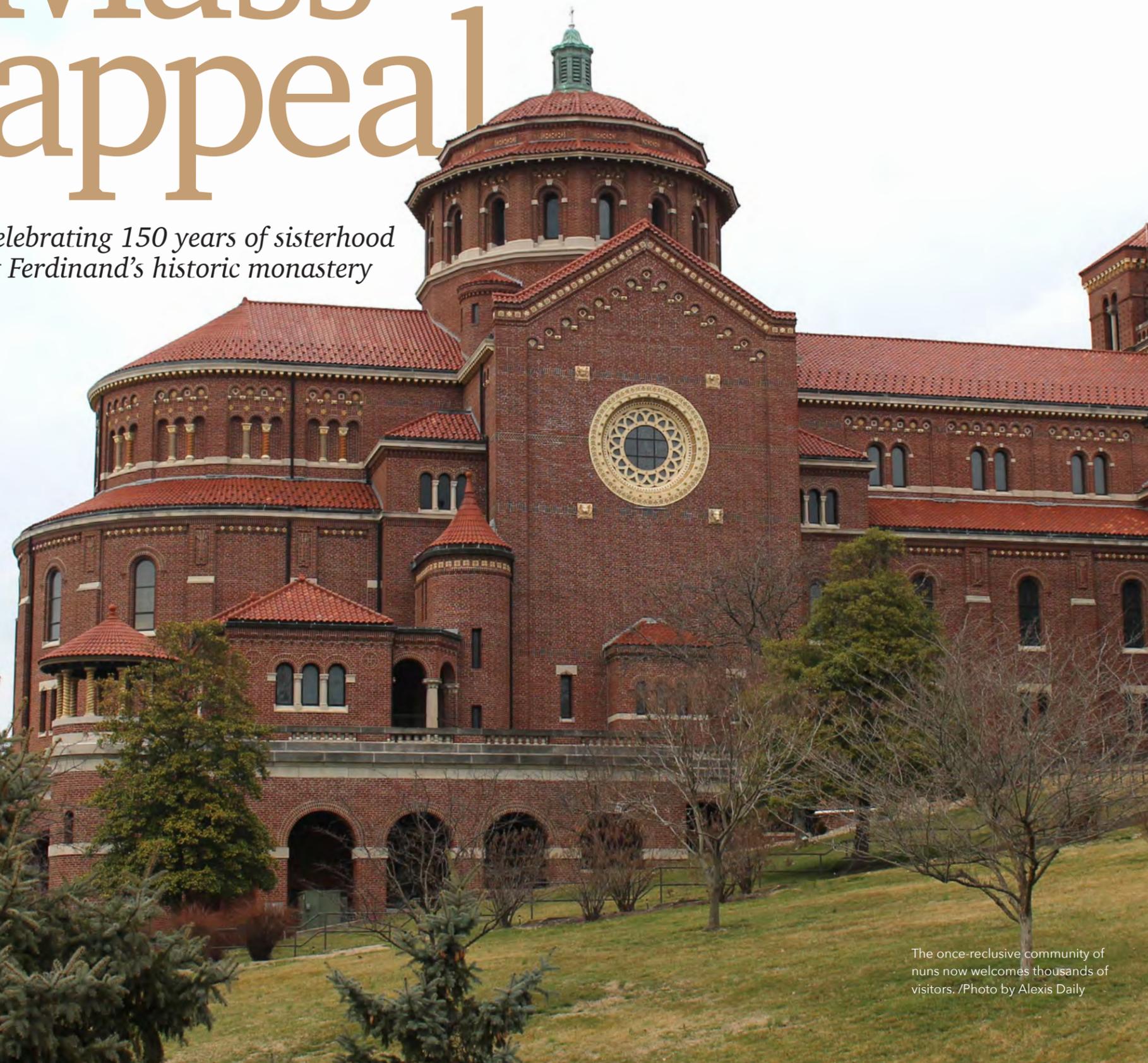


Mass appeal

Celebrating 150 years of sisterhood at Ferdinand's historic monastery



The once-reclusive community of nuns now welcomes thousands of visitors. /Photo by Alexis Daily

By Kaitlyn Chamberlin and Alexis Daily

The Monastery Immaculate Conception sits atop a large hill overlooking the small town of Ferdinand. A narrow, red-brick pathway leads up the hill to the entrance.

The monastery resembles a castle from a storybook. Surrounded by acres of green grass and trees, it is silent other than the far-off “caw” of the crows and the gentle billow of the wind. Taking a deep breath, we walk through the towering archways and open the carved wooden doors.

A small, silver-haired woman wearing a navy sweatshirt with a giant Italian flag and “Italia” embroidered across the front greets us with a smile. Kelly Clarkson’s “Since U Been Gone” plays in the background. *Maybe she’s a volunteer who helps out in the main office, we think.*

She asks the purpose of our visit and assures us the communications specialist will be out shortly. About five minutes later, a woman in her 40s, wearing blue jeans, a pink shirt and a black fleece jacket, introduces herself as Sister Briana. *Yet another surprise.*

Where we expected no-nonsense nuns dressed in habits or sensible clothing we find a group of women both welcoming and fun. With almost 150 members, this Benedictine community of sisters is one of the largest monasteries in the country and will celebrate its 150th anniversary in October. Some traditions, like their dedication to prayer, have remained the same. But their once-strict and silent lifestyles have changed dramatically as social and economic forces from the outside world reached the monastery on the hill.

Today’s Benedictine sisters bake, play instruments and work in the monastery’s beauty parlor. In their free time, they might play euchre, pickleball or cornhole or even sled down the snow-covered hill.

This formerly reclusive group now annually hosts around 12,000 visitors of all faiths, ages and races. The monastery’s Kordes Center offers lodging for all types of guests, even those making the nine-mile drive to Holiday World in Santa Claus.

“It’s a Benedictine value that you’re supposed to treat every person like it’s Christ, so it doesn’t matter who or what sex you are,” Sister Michelle Mohr says. “We administer help to whoever is in need.”

That commitment has prompted the nuns to adapt some of their older buildings for new purposes. Benet Hall, a former

dormitory, is undergoing renovations to become affordable senior housing. The 15 two-bedroom apartments will open in November, and all faiths are welcome.

The monastery follows St. Benedict’s advice to listen to all members in the community, youngest to oldest, because everyone has a special piece of wisdom. The sisters have what they call “Stable Tables,” a randomly assigned group of sisters, to decide the monastery’s long-term projects. During meetings, each sister sits with her group to discuss personal views. The tables remain in place for the year so the sisters can get to know one another on a deeper level.

“What’s really nice, too, is I have friends that are older, my age and younger, so it’s not like the age groups stay together,” Sister Mary Philip Berger says. “We’re all together. Society doesn’t always think of relationships like that.”

“The roles of women were changing, and the world was changing, too.”

This strong sense of sisterhood is deeply rooted in the past, to a day 150 years ago when four young women left the safety of their home in Kentucky to create a new monastery in Southern Indiana.

It was 1867, two years after the end of the Civil War, when the four Benedictine sisters traveled by boat, train, and horse and buggy to Ferdinand, where the local pastor needed German-speaking nuns to teach the children of German immigrants. With very little knowledge of their new home but a lot of faith, the sisters, aged 19 to 33, set out to establish the Monastery Immaculate Conception.

Farmers gave them produce and meat products. The sisters lived simple lives and wore floor-length habits. “When they came, they started out in a little house, which was at the foot of the hill,” says Sister Mary Andre, the monastery’s historian. “It wasn’t long before women started wanting to enter, and so rather than keep adding on to that house, they got land up here on the hill and built what we call the Quadrangle.”

In October 1870, the Quadrangle became the Academy of Immaculate Conception, a boarding school. Enrollment eventually reached 200 students of all faiths from places like the United States, Japan, Mexico and Guatemala.

Prior to receiving electricity in 1910, the sisters prayed by candlelight or restricted prayer to hours with sufficient daylight. "We got up when it was light and went to bed when it was dark," Sister Mary Andre says of her predecessors' daily lives. "And in between, we prayed."

The monastery structure remained the same until 1914, when Mother Serafine was elected prioress. She oversaw the building of a chapel that served as a monument to God.

Twenty-one-year-old architect Victor Klutho drew the blueprints in just one month. Construction began in 1915, but a shortage of funds and workers during World War I delayed the completion until 1924. "There was a lot of blood, sweat and tears put into the church," Sister Mary Andre says.

Artisans in Germany hand-carved the pews. Eighty-six angels in marble and stained glass adorned the church's 90-foot-high dome. "Mother Serafine loved angels, so she wanted to make sure there's enough of them, so we can sing and praise God with the angels," Sister Mary Andre says.

During the 1950s, the monastery had its largest community, with more than 500 sisters who taught in over 75 schools in 12 states and five countries. The growth was mostly due to the Sister Formation Movement, which encouraged sisters to pursue formal education. They could take on more prestigious roles, such as doctors, and interact with the outside world.

However, the Vatican II reforms in the 1960s altered religious expectations for Catholics. The church urged nuns to update and modernize their look, so the habit was abandoned. The reforms gave women a more active role in the church, ultimately leading to a decline of nuns joining the monastery. Some say women realized they no longer had to be nuns to have a relationship with God and the church.

"Before the reforms, there were few career options for women, and many saw being a nun as one of those options," Sister Briana says.

The declining number of nuns across the country led many monasteries to close, and the Monastery Immaculate Conception faced dwindling numbers, too. "People were leaving left and right because of the expectations and rules," Sister Briana says. "The roles of women were changing, and the world was just changing a lot, too."

THEN VS. NOW

The life of a nun at Monastery Immaculate Conception has changed dramatically in the last 150 years.

1867

- Sisters wore floor-length cotton and wool habits with woolen belts, rosaries, large sleeves and a scapular over their belts.

- Group prayer was seven times a day.

- Sisters lived a life of solitude. Visitors were rarely allowed, and sisters were not permitted to leave the monastery grounds.

- Sisters served mainly as teachers or nurses.

- Talking was not permitted in the hallways or during meals.

- Girls as young as 12 joined the convent.

- If sisters did something wrong, they had to "kneel out," or sit on their knees and pray for forgiveness.



Kitchen work past and present. /Photos courtesy of Monastery Immaculate Conception and by Kaitlyn Chamberlin

The 20 groups of 10 sisters for stable tables transformed into nine groups of seven or eight sisters. Classes of postulates dropped from 20 to around five.

Though the community is smaller today, the monastery remains true to its values. "Community life is still sustaining," Sister Briana says. "The day to day is just different."

Today, only 110 of the 147 sisters live within the monastery's walls, but those who don't still feel the connection. "This is home," Sister Briana says. "Some of us just happen to be living elsewhere."

At the entrance to the chapel, the original concrete floor dips at the threshold,

TODAY

- Sisters wear sweatshirts, sweaters, jeans, pants - really, whatever they want.

- Group prayer is three times a day.

- Sisters speak to one another and spend time playing games, like euchre, and helping with projects, like quilting, around the church.

- Sisters can be lawyers, psychologists and doctors as well as teachers and nurses.

- Meals occasionally are eaten in silence for certain events, but sisters speak with one another during the day and at other meals.

- The monastery prefers women who have college degrees or comparable life experience.

- When sisters make mistakes, they apologize directly to the person or people they have wronged.



a physical reminder of all the sisters who have passed through the chapel doors.

Adjacent to the chapel is the Blessed Virgin room. When new women enter the community, they are welcomed into this room. Here, too, the bodies of nuns who die are laid so sisters can pay their respects. "It's the beginning and ending of our lives," Sister Mary Andre says.

Hear what the sisters have to say about friendship, cats and Justin Bieber at www.812magazine.com

GET TO KNOW THE NUNS

Barbara Lynn Schmitz, 61
Prioress

Age when entered: 26

Why I entered: I was working for an interior design firm in Memphis, had an apartment, car and was dating a wonderful man. By most standards, I had a great life, but there was a desire to grow in my faith life. I came to Ferdinand and knew God was calling me to be a member of the community and serve the church in the Benedictine way of life. It gives me the balance I need to grow personally and to support others in their vocation in life.

How my family reacted: It always seems like the last people to know you're interested are your family and your boyfriend. My boyfriend had a fit. The people I worked with thought I had lost my mind. My parents were stunned. They didn't really know what to say. I come from Memphis, and it's not a really Catholic area. No one I ever knew

Michelle Mohr, 80
Music minister

Age when entered: 17

Why I entered: The reason I went to the monastery was not because I felt like, 'Oh, I really have this calling.' The truth was I couldn't get it out of my mind, and so I knew the only way to get it out of my mind was to come.

How my family reacted: I came here after my junior year in high school, which, at that time, was not unusual. I came home from church one Sunday, and I walked in the kitchen and I said, 'I'm going to the convent.' My dad said he thought I would only last two weeks. When we were driving up the hill to the monastery, my dad said, "Connie has her castle now," because when I was younger, I said I wanted to live in a castle. Con-



became a nun.

Favorite thing about living here: We don't look at birth certificates, and we administer help to whoever is in need. You don't have to be a nurse or a teacher, and I'm glad because I have terrible handwriting. I have a degree in business and worked in administration for a long time. It's whatever your talents are. We all have different backgrounds.

What I do for fun: If it snows, we go sled-riding. There's lots of walking around the grounds, too. We're very involved with the town and the community, which is fun for us. We play a lot of card games, like Egyptian rummy, bridge, sheep's head and euchre. We also play corn hole every once in a while.



nie is my given name.

Favorite thing about living here: I like the flow of life. I played clarinet in my high school band, and we played solos for the sisters. Even then as a visitor, there was a peace, and I don't know if I could have said it when I was 17, but there was a longing to be part of that.

What I do for fun: I follow the Cardinals in baseball. I also follow Peyton Manning. I watched every game that I could for him. I listen to the Pacers and IU basketball, too. I also like sewing and making things.

Mary Philip Berger, 74
Archive assistant, volunteer director, sacristy & tour guide

Age when entered: 19

Why I entered: I felt a calling to religious life. It's hard to explain the reason. I just wanted to live a life dedicated to serving God and others in a special way.

How my family reacted: My mother was delighted that I chose the monastery. My father tried to talk me out of it, and he tried in every way to prevent me. However, as soon as I received the veil, he was overjoyed and took me around

Briana Craddock, 43
Communications specialist & bakery manager assistant

Age when entered: 23

Why I entered: I became a sister because I felt God was calling me to religious life. I felt at home here from the first time I visited, even though I had never met any of the women before.

How my family reacted: My family was not too pleased that I chose to enter a community in Indiana since I was living with them in Southern California at the time. My mother was angry. My sister is over 10 years younger than I am, so she missed me a lot.

Theresa Gunter, 49
Vocation director

Age when entered: 25

Why I entered: I became a religious because I wanted to see what it was about, because it was different. I wanted to get it out of my system.

How my family reacted: They were supportive. Some of them thought I was a little crazy. They all had questions, and a lot of them knew a long time ago that I was going to end up doing something like that.

Favorite thing about living here: Being surrounded by



to introduce me to all of his buddies.

Favorite thing about living here: I can be present to all the sisters and participate in the daily prayer schedule of the monastery.

What I do for fun: I enjoy playing cards - bridge, canasta, sheephead and Egyptian rummy.



Favorite thing about living here: We have beautiful grounds and wild animals such as deer, foxes, opossums, groundhogs and raccoons. Additionally, our community has drawn out talents I didn't know I had.

What I do for fun: I like to draw, sew, paint, garden, walk and read. I also enjoy playing pickleball, and I like to sing with others.



people who love me. I love the peace that I feel. I love exploring all the different places, and I love that my life is different, and I'm doing what I think I'm supposed to be doing.

What I do for fun: Hike, watch movies, play music, build bonfires, laugh, hang out with friends, play games, do things that you like to do for fun.

NUNS BY THE NUMBERS

120

Minutes in prayer each weekday

0

Average number of habits owned

500

Their largest monastic community

4

Their smallest monastic community

26

Age of youngest nun

99

Age of oldest nun

53.5

Bowls of popcorn eaten a week

243

Bibles owned

Reaching out to the world

Sisters of all ages work together in various church projects. On a recent day at the monastery's Simply Divine Bakery, Sister Jean Marie Ballard, 61, demonstrates to Sister Lynn Marie Falcony, a 29-year-old postulant, how to make the sticky pecan rolls for after Sunday's Mass. She weighs the dough prior to rolling it out, then adds a generous sprinkling of cinnamon before cutting a strip of dough, twisting it and laying it atop a sugar-pecan mixture.

The sisters also bake nine different types of cookies to be sold in their gift shop and to other companies. But their Springerle cookies are their specialty. Originally made by the sisters for Ferdinand's Christkindlmarkt 19 years ago, the cookies tasting of black licorice are stamped with nature or Christmas scenes on molds brought from Germany.

The monastery also hosts quilting socials with other religious groups in Southern Indiana and Kentucky. Permanent callouses mark Sister Leona Schlachter's fingers from not using a thimble as she quilts. "I love it because you can be as creative as you want to be," she says.

Using her mother's old wooden stencils, Sister Leona meticulously maps each



Sister Jean Marie Ballard prepares pecan rolls. /Photo by Kaitlyn Chamberlin

quilt's stitching pattern. She's planning a quilting social with other nearby parishes and hopes to have 30 new quilts to sell for the sesquicentennial in October.

Their spiritual enrichment programs are another part of the sisters' outreach. Workshops range from four-hour sessions to weeklong retreats covering topics such as "Forgiving What You Cannot Forget."

Sister Jane Will has master degrees in education and Christian spirituality, as well as a doctoral degree in psychology. She leads the programs with help from other sisters. "Each year, we try something new," Sister Jane says.

People of all age and faiths are invited. "We're always happy to have them," Sister Jane says. "And I think that when people get here and see the campus and have a chance to experience it, they find it very peaceful."

The sisters also have a giant prayer board where people can add their prayers. Each day, all of the sisters gather and pray, their way of repairing a hurting world. For Sister Jane, this starts with believing in the mercy of the individual and of God. "I think that we can change the world if we're really that way and if it starts with each one of us," Sister Jane says.

The ladies of the night

At night, the monastery's grotto shines by candlelight, and a feeling of peace lies in the air. Inside, three women from Winamac paint a lower-level floor a deep red. They are St. Benedict's "Ladies of the Night."

When farmer Diane Kolish, 53, saw a flyer from the monastery asking for volunteers, she shared it with friends Linda Webb, 52, a nurse, and Julie Chapman, 55, a pharmacist. They decided to make the journey to Ferdinand for a weeklong visit during the summer of 2014. "What we thought was our getaway ended up being a blessing for all of us," Webb says.

Tasked with painting the archive's floor, the women began working in the night so to not disturb the sisters. They painted from dinnertime until around 10 p.m.,

earning their nickname.

"Immediately we were impressed by how welcoming and friendly the ladies, and even the staff, was," Webb says. "They were all so nice and funny."

During the days, volunteer coordinator Sister Mary Philip has small projects to keep them busy, like cataloging paintings. Sister Mary Philip taught them to play the card game dirty canasta, which the women now call "canasta the Benedict way."

"It doesn't feel like you're doing service," Webb says. "You feel guilty because you're having such a wonderful time."

They already have the dates picked out for their third trip. The pamphlet calls the monastery a sacred treasure, Kolish says. "But surely those sisters are the real treasure."



Volunteer Diane Kolish works at the monastery. /Photo courtesy of Linda Webb