A Service of EWTN

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Making altar bread is a labor of love, including for the sisters at the Benedictine Monastery of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration and the Monastery of the Sacred Passion. (Courtesy of the orders)

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The Bread of Heaven: Where Do Communion Hosts Come From?

These sisters bake altar bread — the Communion hosts that will be consecrated at Masses every day.

Joseph Pronechen

When the sisters at the Monastery of the Sacred Passion in Erlanger, Kentucky, walk into their bakery several days a week, they are going to work at one of the most important physical labors in the Church. The cloistered sisters more than 745 miles north in Westfield, Vermont, and those 542 miles west in Clyde, Missouri, and others in a handful of monasteries from Brooklyn to Arizona will do the same.

These sisters are going to bake altar bread — the Communion hosts that will be consecrated at Masses every day.

The sisters make the hosts with love and much diligence, knowing what these simple wafers of unleavened bread will become in the hands of priests.

The work "fits perfectly with our contemplative lifestyle," explained Passionist Sister Mary Angela in the Kentucky monastery (ErlangerPassionists.org). "All the baking is manual work. Once we're on to it, our minds are free so we can be praying and talking to Jesus about who's receiving these." Sister Mary Angela first learned to bake the altar breads 50 years ago, when she entered the monastery. As she works she "might pray the Divine Mercy Chaplet; other times talk to Jesus. It's a wonderful time to live with Jesus and remember what he did for us," Sister Mary Angela said.

Similarly, at the Benedictine Monastery of the Immaculate Heart of Mary near the Canadian border in Westfield, Vermont, the sisters enjoy the same spiritual experiences as they work. Explained Mother Benedict, the prioress, "When we work anywhere in the monastery, we work in silence, so when our hands are busy are hearts are free to be speaking to God and hear what he has to say to us — especially in the altar bread department."

When baking, Sister Mary Angela and her helpers swap their black habits for light blue ones — due to the huge amounts of flour being used.

Then the baking routine begins.

Sister Mary Angela described to the Register how the finest flour the sisters can obtain — they use 50 pounds a day — is mixed with water only.

The right consistency produces what looks like "a thick cream."

More than one flour is used. White hosts are a mix of pastry and cake flour. As Sister Mary Angela explained, "The pastry is heavier and the cake flour much finer and bleached. This mix prevents hosts breaking and falling apart. All-pastry flour would make the host look yellow, too. It needs both kinds." White hosts should look white, but whole-wheat hosts are not white. Still, the whole wheat is mixed with some white flour because two different flours are always necessary to prevent hosts from breaking and falling apart.

Mother Benedict also pointeds out the necessity of the different flour mixes, such as cake and whole wheat, for taste and a consistency that is not too dense. For its three different recipes her monastery uses different combinations by weight. (Whole wheat is kept out of the white hosts.)

> The different monasteries produce both white and whole-wheat hosts of the "unleavened, purely of wheat and, and recently made" altar breads called for in *Redemptionis Sacramentum* (Certain Matters to Be Observed or to Be Avoided Regarding the Most Holy Eucharist) from the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments.

Next, the mixture is ladled and baked on one of the six stoves that look like a round griddle or waffle iron. As the lid is closed, the excess squeezed out of the sides gets trimmed off with a cutter attached to the stove.

Each individual bread baked this way is approximately 14 inches in diameter. They're stacked up, separated by onion skin paper to prevent sticking, dampened and stored overnight. The next day, hosts of various sizes are cut from the stacks.

The same process goes on at the Monastery of the Immaculate Heart on similar stoves, although the sisters are hoping and looking to be able to update their equipment.

For cutting out the small hosts, the basic equipment used looks like a large drill press, which the sisters work with their feet while their hands turn the stack. The cylindrical press easily cuts through the stacks of 70-72 layers at a time, turning out hosts that vary in size: normally 1 1/8 inch or 1 3/8 inch and, for priests, 2 3/4 inches to larger than 5 inches.

Next comes sorting and inspection, "to make sure each host is perfect," said Mother Benedict.

The older sisters assist with this task, as the younger ones focus on the more laborious parts of the host-making process. The monastery's 19 sisters range from the youngest postulant, at age 19, to the oldest nun, who is 87.

The last step is packing, sealing and shipping the hosts to fill orders from parishes and churches.

To put the process in perspective, Sister Mary Angela said about 4,500 hosts are cut from one stack of bread, making about 25,000 hosts per cutting day or up to 100,000 a week (the bread is not cut every day). Most of the monastery's orders go to Alabama, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Florida.

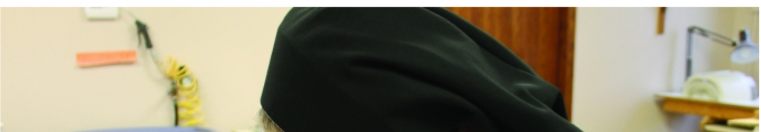
The Vermont monastery (IHMWestfield.com/altar_bread) produced roughly 3 million communicant hosts last year and about 70,000 priest's hosts, with an additional number to other religious communities, bringing the total priest's hosts to 135,000.

Their clients are located all over the United States and in Canada, as well as in the Bahamas.

What about hosts for people with celiac disease or who are allergic in some way to wheat?

Church teaching stipulates that bread to be transformed into the Eucharist must include a certain amount of gluten.

The Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in Clyde, Missouri (AltarBreadsbspa.com), have solved the problem: They were the first to make low-gluten hosts approved by the Church.



In the last fiscal year, they produced more than 88,000 individual low-gluten hosts per month as well as an average of 5,867,125 regular hosts per month, sold statewide and internationally. They sell not only to their own clients but also package for wholesale to other religious communities. They use commercial equipment that is computerized.

The sisters conferred with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops before developing the special low-gluten host. It took 10 years of trial and error "to create a bread that could satisfy Church doctrine and that also could be baked," explained Kelley Baldwin, director of communications for the sisters.

In 2004 this type of low-gluten host was approved by the USCCB, and then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger gave the permission for its use.

These hosts are sold in batches of 200 and "made in a separate facility so there is no contamination of the flour," said Baldwin.

Although some commercial bakers produce hosts, nuns in these monasteries rely on such baking for their livelihood: The hosts bring in their income and means to support the monastery and their order. And the baking work also helps the local communities by hiring local residents to help them fill the orders the monasteries receive.

Sister Mary Angela explained that knowing the hosts are going to become the Body of Jesus helps the sisters remember this is a beautiful "sacred work." While making the hosts, the sisters ask Jesus to bless their community and each person who will receive him when these hosts are consecrated.

"All our hosts are made with prayer," affirmed Mother Benedict. "We blend prayer with the baking of the bread."

She explained how the sisters love to work in the altar-bread bakery "because it's the core of our life — the Eucharist, to know what we're doing is going to be used in parishes throughout the world and affecting peoples' lives."

To make this clear, she shared the time years ago, when the sisters "had a huge order from the military" requesting a particular size — 2-3/4-inch priest's hosts — that would fit in the canisters the Army was using to transport the hosts that would fit in the canisters the military used to transport the hosts.

"It was a special experience," Mother Benedict reminisced. The sisters had to supply 60,000 hosts for the Army and Marines, all in 10 days and, ship them to Tennessee, where they were put in canisters which had been prepared at the time of the Gulf War and thus were able to be preserved well. "It was a good occasion for us to pray for our soldiers."

Everyone receives prayer. She added that while the sisters do not specifically solicit prayer intentions from their altar-bread customers, they keep all of the parishes and their needs in their prayers. It's really beautiful, too, for the sisters when they often hear parishes asking for specific intentions when ordering by email or phone or sometimes include a request when paying their invoices.

"With our contemplative life, it's very rare we know the result of our prayer, but our faith tells us it is having an effect," she concluded.

"We know in some way our prayers are going to help those receiving the Lord."

Joseph Pronechen is a Register staff writer.