


VERMONT CATHOLIC

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Helping
bring Jesus
to souls
'Ora et Labora'

Benedictine nuns prepare altar bread hosts for consecration at Mass

It's generally quiet in the Altar Bread Department at the Monastery of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Westfield as Benedictine nuns belonging to the Congregation of Solesmes in their full habits covered with smocks produce thousands of hosts to be consecrated and distributed to the faithful in the Sacrament of the Eucharist.

In keeping with their contemplative lifestyle, there is little talking, and when Sister Marie Anges Martel does her work at the cutting machine by the window, the dominant sound is the hiss and clunk of the machine cutting through layers of whole wheat

wafers, which resemble thin pizza crusts.

It is important work, for as Sister Claire-Joseph Desmarais, altar bread official, said, "We help Jesus bring Himself to souls by making altar bread hosts. Through the priest Jesus brings Himself to the people."

She and the two other sisters who work in the department — Sister Marie Anges and Sister Theresa Margaret Hagen — enjoy

their work "helping bring Jesus to souls, the real, true bread of life."

It's a process the sisters and their Benedictine Oblate baker and sorter have down pat: Weigh the flour, mix the batter, bake the wafers on five bakers that resemble tortilla presses, sort and store the baked wafers, add flexibility to the crisp discs in the humidity room, cut them into hosts, lay larger ones on blotters to flatten, sort and dry them, weigh and bag them, store them and finally send them to customers in about 16 states — mostly in New England but as far away as California and Texas.

But at a time where there is more and more of an emphasis on "buying local," the Benedictine altar bread is more than a local product.

"I can get altar bread from a lot of different (secular) companies. They send me a bill but don't pray for my parish," said Msgr. Richard G. Lavalley, pastor of St. Francis Xavier Parish in Winooski, which uses about 1,000 communicants' hosts a week. "These nuns are



(Photos by Cori Fugere Urban)

Sister Marie Agnes Martel cuts hosts with a special machine the Altar Bread Department at the Monastery of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Westfield.



Sister Claire-Joseph Desmarais cuts hosts on a special cutter. The Benedictine nuns began making altar bread in 1990.



Sister Claire-Joseph Desmarais sets hosts out to dry.

She remembers cutting the larger priests' hosts, elevated at the consecration, one by one. Now she can cut 14 at a time with updated equipment.

She cuts 45-84 communicants' hosts on a different cutter in one cut depending on their thickness.

Baking usually takes place three days a week for a total of six batches a week. One batch produces 160 large round wafers; each wafer yields about 74 communicants' hosts or 14-19 priests' hosts.

Out of about 6,000 hosts, about 5,500 are sellable.

Imperfect hosts and the cuttings (the sections of the wafers left after the hosts are cut from them) go to local farmers for pigs and chickens; some of the cuttings are packaged, labeled as "Monastery Manna" and sold in the monastery gift shop for \$1 a bag.



Sister Theresa Margaret Hagen stacks trays of hosts to be packaged.

had filled in for Sister Marie Anges three times before assuming responsibilities as altar bread official. "Working on the altar bread is providing for my family."

The ideal is for the workers in the Altar Bread Department to work in as much silence as possible; any talk
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praying for us. I want to keep them in Vermont. They are praying for our diocese and our parishes. We have to do everything we can to support them."

He appreciates the fine quality of the hosts and gets the thickest ones because "I want them to look like bread, to taste like bread, to feel like bread."

The Benedictine nuns began making altar bread in 1990 when the Daughters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Newport discontinued their operation and gave them their equipment, including one small baker unit.

In 1991 the nuns replaced that with four larger de Bakker bakers; they added a fifth unit three or four years later.

Some of the bakers have etching on them to imprint crosses on the hosts.

Sister Marie Anges served as altar bread official from 1990-2015 but still helps in the Altar Bread Department at the monastery. At first she worked alone in the department with sorting help from women in the novitiate.



Sister Claire-Joseph Desmarais shows baked wafers stacked near the baking machines.

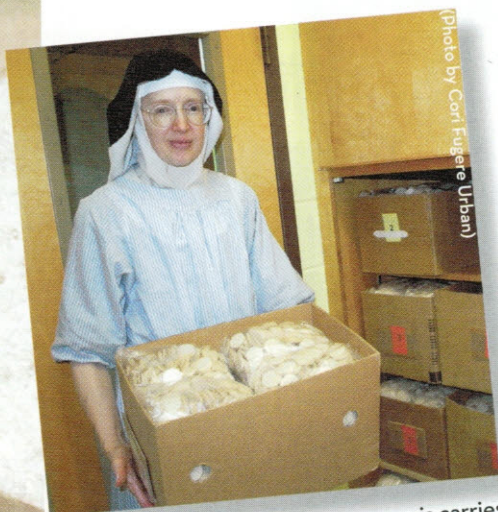
The nuns produce about 3 million communicants' and priests' hosts a year. They range in diameter from 1.125 to 5.5 inches.

The sole ingredients are wheat flour and water; the monastery does not produce gluten-free hosts.

Once they are packaged and ready to mail, the monastery chaplain takes the packages to the post office.

Income from the altar bread is used for expenses at the monastery, home to 16 nuns.

"I came here to live life and love God and praise His name," said Sister Claire-Joseph who entered the monastery in 2001. She



Sister Claire-Joseph Desmarais carries altar bread hosts to storage area.

Benedictine nuns prepare altar bread

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should be related to the work.

A former security clerk, she said putting her organizational skills to work in the Altar Bread Department is enjoyable.

Before Sister Claire-Joseph computerized the department, Sister Marie Anges used a manual typewriter for labels and billing.

With Jesus as her spouse, Sister Claire-Joseph says she is “living my spousal relationship on a daily basis” and helping to bring Jesus to her extended family in the Church.

The nuns’ life is based on “ora et labora” — prayer and work. “When we are not praying or engaged in divine reading we are working,” she explained.

“We are not idle,” Sister Marie Anges said. “It’s beautiful because we work for the Lord. We’re close to the Lord in this kind of work.”

Sister Claire-Joseph said that as the altar bread production increases, the nuns plan to include other Benedictine Oblates to help as necessary “to keep everything in the Benedictine community.”

Without the Oblates’ help, “there would be too much baking and we would miss the Office” prayers, she explained.

Msgr. Lavalley has built a relationship with the nuns and enlists their prayers. They have a “real investment in Vermont,” he said.

*Article written by Cori Fugere Urban,
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