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Two worlds entwine at abbey

Monks debating computers' role in a cloistered society

By Jordana Hart
GLOBE STAFF

SPENCER – Like the other 80 Trappist monks who live in the Gothic-style monastery here, Father Placid McSweeney rises promptly each morning at 3:15. In his world, where God and silence reign, the routine rarely varies: He prays and reads contemplatively until his breakfast of cereal, coffee, and toast at 6:45. After the meal, he prays again and sings the Eucharistic Liturgy with his brethren in the stone chapel.

Then, at 8:30, Father Placid logs on.

With little fanfare, the Internet has entered the tranquil and resplendent world of St. Joseph's Abbey, which sits atop a windswept hill 10 miles west of Worcester amid 2,000 acres of pasture, meadows, and forest. And the abbey, some say, may never be the same.

The cyber-revolution within monastic walls has some theologians, writers, and monks grappling with the seeming contradiction between spirituality and technology: How can an order that shuns almost every vestige of modern society defend using a technology that opens up the world in a split-second?

For his part, Father Placid spends 20 minutes or so at his Dell computer answering dozens of e-mails – from high school students studying monasticism, to families asking the monks to pray for sick relatives, to friends sending personal greetings.

Other days, he browses the Vatican home page for the latest news and bulletins; he downloads articles he receives for the quarterly newsletter he cir-

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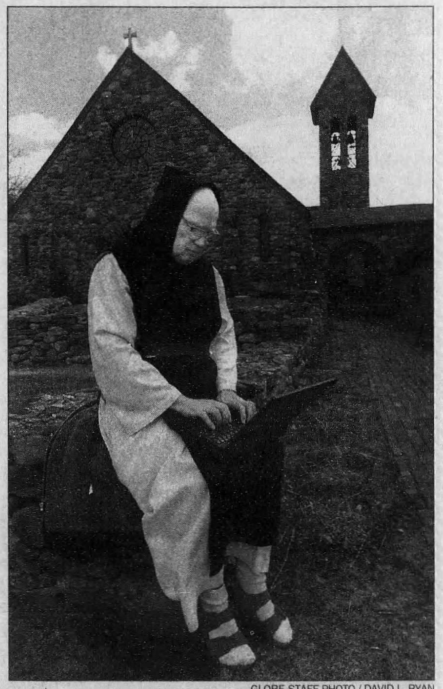

GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / DAVID L. RYAN

Father Placid McSweeney using his laptop computer yesterday on the grounds of St. Joseph's Abbey.

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Sat, Jul 25, 2020

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