

A14

THE BOSTON GLOBE • WEDNESDAY, MARCH 24, 1999

## Two worlds at abbey entwine as monks ponder the Internet

MONKS

Continued from Page A1

culates on line to scores of other monks; and he answers e-mail from Rome asking him to find the best software for translating Italian documents.

Father Placid, who at 63 is the secretary to Abbot Damian Carr, is one of a dozen monks here who surf the Net as part of their work.

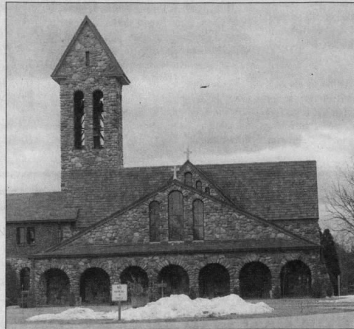
And they are not alone. For the past two or three years, hundreds of monasteries across the country have maintained colorful Web sites, used e-commerce to sell their wares, e-mailed one another, and bought and sold books. A monastery in New Mexico, called Christ in the Desert, supports itself by developing Web sites for companies.

Like many other monastic Web sites, St. Joseph's ([www.spencerabbey.org](http://www.spencerabbey.org)) offers a thumbnail sketch of its mission — to serve God and offer hospitality — as well as the daily schedule, the products it sells, the guest retreat, and guidelines for Catholic men who want to join.

There are other, somewhat less conventional, uses for the Internet as well. A few monks have been known to download Gregorian chants and the music of their favorite artists: folk singer Joan Baez (who met in the 1960s with the most influential of Trappist monks, Thomas Merton), the Beatles, and the rap group Public Enemy, popular for its social message.

Even supporters of cyberspace worry about its possible impact. "I could see myself getting lost on the Internet while discovering so much," said Father Placid, thumbing through his latest PC Connections catalog. "I don't want to spend a lot of time on it, but my experience is that it has been a big help to me. I don't see anything evil about it."

While few might call it evil, the technology's arrival in the monastery has its critics. "If a person elects to live a contemplative, solitary life in one community in silence,



Father Aquinas is one of a dozen monks at St. Joseph's Abbey (left) in Spencer who surf the Net as part of their work. Despite the availability of 25 terminals, most monks here shy away from cyberspace.

then I say let them shut up," said Father Harvey Egan, a Jesuit who teaches systematic and mystical theology at Boston College. "One of the reasons for silence is to still one's internal noise. I see e-mail as internal noise. It is communication . . . and distraction."

Neither is much in evidence at the abbey. There are no televisions or radios in Father Placid's world, and just one copy of the Worcester Telegram & Gazette for the entire community. There is a rule of silence within the monastic enclosure, where the monks live and work with little conversation, making jams and jellies, cheeses, fudge, and vestments by hand.

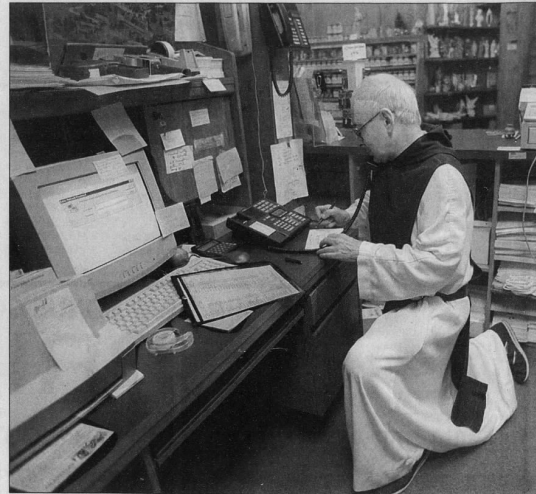
Father Placid calls the criticism an "obscure attitude. That is like saying if books are not made by hand, we should not read them. If you are using [the Internet] for entertainment, then it is out of place. We might as well have televisions

and radios. But it is a practical tool and, in itself, not evil."

The technology serves other needs as well. "It is not so much them getting a look out, as much as us getting a look in," said Erika Schluntz, a professor of religion and archeology at Stonehill College in Easton, who has spent time in Greek Orthodox monasteries in Jerusalem and Tiberias. "It is a new form of hospitality."

Writer and Web aficionado Jon Katz spent a year in a cabin on a mountain in New York grappling with solitude and simple living in his search for spirituality. He concluded that communicating with his family and friends via the Internet would not undermine his mission.

"There is nothing more spiritual than messages coming across space like that," said Katz, whose new book is called "Running to the Mountain: Journey of Faith and



Change."

Katz's book, based on the teachings of Merton, a writer and poet, is being hailed as an important work by some monasteries, which are selling it on their Web sites. Katz said in a recent interview that he is e-mailed daily by monks across the country. "To use it, you don't have to speak or violate the tenets of your cloister."

He added, "It doesn't work any more to say technology and spirituality are incompatible. You just have to think about how to do it."

St. Joseph's owns a mainframe computer and 25 terminals. About 15 of them are connected to the Internet and located in the accounting, treasury, and other offices, Father Placid said.

Despite their availability, most monks here shy away from cyberspace. "When you have 80 people, there are many who are technologically illiterate," Father Placid said.

"We even have to put a barrier on the copier, because they wreck things," he added with a laugh.

Monks who want Internet access must make a case to the abbot for it. "But he is fairly open-minded," Father Placid said.

Although some monasteries have booming e-commerce, Father Placid said the monks here do not want to sell their wares on the Internet because they fear that demand could outstrip production. Monks, who spend most of their day in prayer and contemplation, work no more than four hours a day and are not prepared to do more.

Father Robert Morhouse, who oversees St. Joseph's jam and jelly business known as Trappist Preserves, agrees that the Internet may not be suitable for the abbey's businesses. He also is conflicted about the role of technology in a cloistered society.

"Monks seal themselves off from the world to have a culture entirely dedicated to God, without having to apologize for it," he said. "As long as the entry and egress was a gate, that could be maintained." But television, radio, Internet, even newspapers, "are all contact with the outside world" and can shatter any sense of solitude.

The nuns at Mount St. Mary's Abbey in Wrentham are wrestling with similar questions. Should they, for example, use e-commerce to sell the chocolates, butternut munch, fudge, and caramel they make and now sell by fax and mail?

Sister Pamela Clinton, the librarian who also maintains St. Mary's Web site ([www.msnabbey.org](http://www.msnabbey.org)), said she surfs the Net for stories about the candy business and posts them where the sisters can read them. Still, she said, "I think we need to be prudent in [Internet] use, but not afraid of it."

Clipped By:



michellemciver  
Sat, Jul 25, 2020