



Work and Prayer

Monk answers a higher calling and finds his dream life in the cattle business.

Story & photos by **Morgan Marley**, communications intern

The smell of coffee brewing wafts across the room at 4:30 every morning. Once the first mug is poured, Father Patrick Boland begins his private prayer time. He spends the first hour of every day in private prayer, diving into Scripture or the latest spiritual book.

Soon it's time for the Morning Prayer, which includes *lectio divina*, better known as holy reading. After the 6:45 a.m. mass, Father Patrick and the other 41 monks at the monastery enjoy a hearty breakfast before setting out to work at various jobs on the premises.

So begins another day at the Subiaco Abbey.

Father Patrick has been a monk at the Abbey in Subiaco, Ark., for 12 years. Following monastic tradition, he and the other monks maintain a schedule that is strictly divided so both prayer and work are allotted adequate devotion throughout the day. In fact, the Benedictine motto is *ora et labora*, which, in Latin, means “prayer and work.”

Each monk keeps his own daily routine,

but they all share the same daily schedule.

Monks are often envisioned as quaint men clothed in habits — the traditional monk outfit of black robes — with their heads bowed and their hands at their hearts in prayer. At the Subiaco Abbey, this time of reflection is coupled with hours of hard work, including time spent caring for its herd of 250 registered Angus cows. The monks engage in a variety of work activities on the premises where their traditional habits can be left in their rooms and old, worn-out jeans, a faded t-shirt and a ball cap can be worn instead.

“I fell in love with the Benedictine way of life when I was 40, and three years later entered,” Father Patrick says. “What attracted me to the Benedictines was their balance of work and prayer. We have a cycle throughout the day where we pray together, either privately or in community, and in between prayer times we perform various work. One of my assignments is on the farm, but I also work in the vocations office, and I teach in

the school, as well.”

The monks' days are strategically broken up to have four to five hours of prayer, and seven to eight hours of work throughout the day. After breakfast they work for a few hours before cleaning up for Adoration and the Midday Prayer. They have a quick nap after lunch — if it's preferred — to gear up for an afternoon of work. The day wraps up after Vespers, the last prayer of the day, at 7:05 every evening.

“It's a nice balance in that human beings are body and soul,” Father Patrick says. “We take care of our bodies, but we take care of our souls, as well. And there's a nice balance of each throughout the day.”

Lucky for Father Patrick, he has always liked to be outdoors, so he was more than happy to be allotted tasks to complete on the farm operation as part of his work assignment.

“I'm a laborer,” he says. “I'm the guy who picks up the sticks, fixes the fence, feeds the cattle and helps move them. I enjoy that kind



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Seeing Father Patrick around the Abbey, it's a wonder where he gets his energy. He always has a hint of a joke on the corner of his mouth to match the glint in his eyes.

"I know I laugh at work every day," he says with a smile. "I'm sure it gets on some of the other monks' nerves."

Cattle call

Even before Father Patrick entered the monastic life at the Subiaco Abbey, he had dreamt of owning and operating a cattle farm.

"As strange as this sounds, long before I ever had a call to religious life, when I was living in Florida, I was actually looking for land," he says. "I was in the life insurance business then; now I'm kind of in the spiritual life insurance. At that time, I was actually planning to manage a herd of beef cattle."

When his dreams of owning cattle didn't work out, he assumed God didn't include managing cattle in His plan for Father Patrick.

He visited the Subiaco Abbey on a private retreat with no idea he would later call it home or that it managed its own herd of Angus cattle. While visiting, he quickly fell in love with the scheduled lifestyle Subiaco

offered its monks, and soon after found himself packing his bags and moving to Arkansas. It wasn't until he officially joined the Abbey that he realized they owned the herd of cattle at the bottom of the hill.

"God works in mysterious ways," he says. "I ended up being in the cattle business, without even trying to be in it."

With the Abbey on the hill peeking over trees from the cattle pastures below, Father Patrick can't help but laugh.

"I like to think that we're the Angus on the hill," he chuckles. "The two-legged kind."

Back to the beginning

In 1878 when the Subiaco Abbey was founded, German immigrants were building railroads west across the country. The railroad agent for the Little Rock-Fort Smith Railroad Co. recognized the need for a church and school to recruit enough German workers to the Arkansas River Valley. The railroad company partnered with the St. Meinrad Abbey in Indiana to found a church and a school. Since the first three monks arrived almost 140 years ago, it has been consistently growing and evolving.

The Abbey is an international boarding school for boys in grades 7-12 and educates about 200 young men each year. Most of the monks, including Father Patrick, teach at the Academy as part of their work assignments.

It's always made sense for the monastery to have a strong presence in agriculture. After all, it is nestled in a rural part of Arkansas where agriculture is the main focus for the community.

Originally, monks managed the entire Abbey and all of its operations from the farm, water plant and quarry. Their idea was that, as they worked the land, the monks would become more prayerful because they were dependent on God's love for their own welfare.

"When the monks first came here out of mere practicality in the late 19th century, the Abbey had a farm for sustenance," Father Patrick says. "As time grew on and the Academy was built and more and more people came here, they became more dependent on financial donations. But the farm has remained a big part of the Abbey's operation."

Originally, what was a row-crop farm

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transformed into a dairy to provide milk, butter and cheese to the monks and the students at the Academy. Later, in the mid-1960s the dairy cattle were dispersed and a commercial beef herd was introduced. At the end of the 1990s, the Abbey adopted a registered Angus seedstock operation with the help of friends in the area who also raised Angus cattle.

“As far as the Abbey goes, it’s a relatively new Angus cattle operation, but it’s been very successful and it gets an incredible amount of support from our alumni,” he says. “They’re supporting us, and they want to help us be successful.”

Until about 20 years ago, monks managed the entire farming operation. As fewer monks entered the monastery with agricultural backgrounds, the Abbey has hired managers for the cattle operation. When they first made the transition to bring in Angus cattle, it was the first time they hired an outside manager to look after the herd.

Butch Geels was the first outside manager in charge of overseeing the Angus herd. He had a background in the dairy business and was known in the area for utilizing artificial insemination (AI).

“Father Abbot Jerome called me and asked if they decided to get rid of all their commercial cattle and start in the Angus business, if I would take the job of managing the farm and taking care of the cattle,” Geels says. “I thought about it a couple of weeks and decided I would try it.”

Geels started working at the Abbey in 1999 and worked for 10 years until he was 70 years old. As his age began to catch up with him, Geels said he could tell it was harder keeping up with all the tasks on the farm, so the Abbey hired their current herd manager. Still, it’s a common sight to find him in the pasture or in the barn tending to the cattle.

Several of the monks play an active role on the farm, like Father Patrick. Another monk oversees the data and recordkeeping for the Angus herd.

Brother Joseph Koehler has been a monk for more than 50 years. He’s in his 70s now, but has served in various positions at the Abbey. He’s easy to spot at the Abbey — just look for the man driving the green Gator in his overalls with a small, beagle-looking dog riding on a box behind him. For the last 14 years, Brother Joseph has been in charge of registering and maintaining the books for the Abbey’s Angus herd.

“I haven’t always worked in the cattle business,” said Brother Joseph. “I’m a retired teacher, coach, counselor, and I’m not a computer wiz. I like the outdoors so I was



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assigned down here to help them with the cattle and just mainly take care of the data, so I had to learn the program on how to do that.”

Registered operation

It isn’t easy entering a new market, but the monks at the Subiaco Abbey seem to adjust and keep up with the best Angus producers in the business. Luckily for Brother Joseph, local Angus producers offered guidance to help with the transition from a commercial herd to purebred Angus.

“When we introduced the Angus program in 1999, they asked me to try and work out the data side,” Brother Joseph said. “I was able to contact a local guy that had the AIMS

(Angus Information Management Software). He helped me out. I also got a lot of help from the Angus Association. For 14 years, if I have any trouble I call up and the Angus staff are very accommodating.”

People who enter the purebred cattle business quickly realize the importance of numbers, but they must also be open to the constantly evolving technologies available. This concept is no different at the Abbey, and it was seen with the acquisition of the Angus herd.

David McMahon (now deceased) played an instrumental role in acquiring the Abbey’s starting herd of Angus cows. In 1999 he organized the first 38 head of Angus cows to be donated from Circle A Ranch in Iberia,

Mo. Another three cows came from Nichols Farms in Iowa. The three cows from Nichols were flushed for embryos at Trans Ova, from which the Abbey received 51 recipient cows and began to grow its herd.

Since they first received Angus cows at the Abbey in 1999, the monks have used AI to achieve the best expected progeny differences (EPDs) in their bulls and replacement heifers. By adapting proven methods of cattle breeding and pasture management, they are able to optimize productivity on the farm.

“People buy bulls by the numbers,” Brother Joseph says. “It’s just a matter of keeping the data up on all of our cattle.”

With the lack of agriculturally minded monks entering the monastic community in Subiaco, it is easy to question why the Abbey remains in the cattle business. Although the town has developed substantially in previous years, Subiaco is still a rural community where many families in the area are involved in agriculture.

Cattle producers in the region are able to utilize the Abbey’s seedstock operation to buy high-quality Angus bulls for their commercial herds without having to travel long distances. The Abbey sells bulls to cattle producers across Arkansas, but also has clients in parts of Texas and Oklahoma.

“Everyone around us has farms, so that keeps us connected to the community,”

Father Patrick says. “It’s hard to describe how intimately connected we are to the entire community through the farm operation, even though very few monks today work on the farm. It’s still a big priority for the Abbey to maintain and keep it operational.”

A higher calling

Both the monastic and agricultural lifestyles are principally focused on tradition. Both are age-long traditions people have played roles in for centuries.

Although the idea of a monk’s life may seem distant and novel, the monks at Subiaco Abbey are much like most farmers and ranchers.

“We want to move forward, while also keeping our traditions and history alive,” Father Patrick says.

Any time a monk makes the commitment to enter into the monastic life, he agrees to give up his material possessions. Unsurprisingly, the monastery in Subiaco was made possible by the countless donations and gifts from other people.

“It’s good that we are good stewards of not just our time, but our resources and our land,” says Father Patrick. “I am really appreciative of that. We learn to be frugal, but not impractical.”

As with any job, there are challenges. The challenges at the Subiaco Abbey aren’t all

that different than challenges everyone faces daily.

“As a farmer, a challenge is always the weather — planning to do things on a certain day and hoping the weather cooperates with you,” Father Patrick says. “Challenges of monastic life? We have a vow of obedience and a vow of simplicity, so you give up possessions, and the power to make your own choice. ‘What am I going to do today?’ ‘Where am I going to work today?’ You sacrifice that, but it’s an easy sacrifice for me.”

It’s similar to the personal commitment farmers and ranchers make to their livestock when they decide to become their caregivers. It’s a silent agreement you make with yourself and your family that is understood when you can’t make it to your daughter’s recital because your first-calf heifer is having trouble calving.

Just as it is easy for Father Patrick to sacrifice his material possessions and freedom to make decisions, it is easy for cattle producers to sacrifice their time to be there for their livestock.

One thing is certain: Father Patrick knows that no matter what challenge the day holds, he will pray about it, and he won’t be alone. Forty-one monks will stand beside him and, together, they will work through it.

Tomorrow is another day.



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