

Monastic community on a trial basis

Must we lose monastic communities before we realize how profound their presence is in our lives?

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The April 4 issue of the *Century* offers [Ruth Burrows's witness](#) to her life as a contemplative Carmelite; it also includes [an homage](#) to a community of students shaped by their experience with Trappist monks, which in turn shaped [Faith Matters](#) writer Stephanie Paulsell in her faith and thinking.

Yet Carmelite, Benedictine, Trappist and other monastic communities find themselves in a precarious place these days, with many of them closed or closing. Must we lose these Catholic (and Protestant) communities before we realize that they are a profound presence to those of us out wandering in the world?

In the midst of declining numbers, Holy Wisdom Monastery in Middleton, Wisconsin, dares to pursue a vision for *growing* an ecumenical Benedictine monastery. Its sisters envision a community that welcomes Christian women *of any denomination* who seek to live a reflective life in community. Accordingly, Holy Wisdom has kept its affiliation with Benedictine monasteries, but after years of prayerful deliberation, it cut formal ties with the Roman Catholic Church in 2006.

Now the monastery is inviting single women with no dependents to "try out" community life by becoming a [Benedictine Sojourner](#) for six months or more. The community provides room, board and a monthly stipend in exchange for participation in the community's tasks.

Is there still a place for contemplative communities? That depends on whether all of us Christians value these places where, [as William Skudlarek says](#), "members are

dedicated to the work of spiritual growth and who together fashion an environment in which each can engage in that inner work with a minimum of distractions." As Christians, do enough of us share this vision? Will there be more or fewer "places set apart"?