Praise for MONASTERY MORNINGS

"In July 1847, Mormon pioneers famously arrived in Utah. A century later in July 1947, some Catholic pioneers followed in their footsteps: Trappist monks bent on creating a contemplative monastery, Holy Trinity Abbey, in the unlikely soil of Mormon country. In this affectionate, winning memoir, Michael O'Brien captures the expansive spirit of late twentieth-century Catholicism in America and the loving warmth of the monks who befriended him."

—**Jana Riess**, author of *Flunking Sainthood* and *The Next Mormons*

"The author of this charming volume combines his life's story with that of the famous Utah Trappist monks. A consummate storyteller, O'Brien shares his remarkable journey by weaving the tale of the Abbey of the Holy Trinity monks with his own search for a life of belonging and meaning. The final result is as entertaining as it is enlightening. An extraordinary contribution and achievement."

—**Br. Columban Weber, OCSO**, Abbey of Gethsemani

"*Monastery Mornings* is as much a memoir about a sensitive Irish American boy's journey into manhood as it is an unabashed love letter to Huntsville, Utah's beloved Trappist monastery. O'Brien's detailed history of the monastery and endearing portraits of the monks who helped raise him provide a compelling backdrop to a compassionate, brave personal narrative that both amuses and inspires."

—**Jennifer Napier-Pearce**, former executive editor, *The Salt Lake Tribune*

"Michael Patrick O'Brien writes, 'For me, one of the light's most recognizable garments is the simple black and white robe of a monk, and the light's ever soothing embrace is the sweet memory of my monastic mornings.' In that sentence, he sums up his decades-long adventure with the spirited monks of Holy Trinity Abbey, a Catholic oasis in the middle of Utah's Mormon country. He was fortunate to come of age under the tutelage of Trappist monks, and to enjoy close relationships with men who choose the search for God over the more mundane lures of the world. O'Brien began visiting Holy Trinity in 1972 at the age of 11 at his mother's urging following his parents' divorce. The abbey remained a constant in his life until its closure in 2017. This beautiful memoir portrays his monastic friends as both exceptional and ordinary, holy and altogether human. In doing so, O'Brien reminds those of us who have been hanging on by our fingertips to why we still love the Catholic Church and what it is called to be: a place of service and mercy. A place where, like Holy Trinity Abbey, the core message is love."

—**Judith Valente**, co-author of *How to Be: A Monk and a Journalist Reflect on Living and Dying, Purpose and Prayer, Forgiveness and Friendship*

"Since their 1947 arrival in Huntsville, the Trappist monks have had a profound impact on the Utah community. Their lives of prayer, simplicity, hard work, and hospitality brought their monastic traditions to the people of our state and made a great difference in so many lives. In this thoughtful memoir, Michael Patrick O'Brien makes sure the legacy of the Trappists will remain, despite the closure of their monastery in 2017. His experience living with the monks as they prayed and sang the Divine Office, worked in the fields or their small gift shop had an impact that supported him emotionally and spiritually in difficult times. This is a tribute to Utah's Trappist monks and a reminder of their positive influence on Michael O'Brien and numerous others during their presence here."

—**The Most Reverend Oscar A. Solis, DD,** Bishop of Salt Lake City

MONASTERY MORNINGS

My Unusual Boyhood
Among the Saints and Monks

MICHAEL PATRICK O'BRIEN

PARACLETE PRESS
Brewster, Massachusetts

With love to my mother, to my wife, Vicki,
to my children, and to the rest of my family
(immediate, extended, chosen, and monastic).

2021 First Printing

Monastery Mornings: My Unusual Boyhood Among the Saints and Monks

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CONTENTS

MONASTERY MORNINGS

PROLOGUE

Two Hugs

The child ran up the aisle, launched herself at the burly man in front of her, knocking him off-balance, and hugging him joyfully. I watched quietly from just a few yards away.

At another place at some other time and with different people, such a demonstration of affection would be charming, but not unusual. This time, however, the man was a Catholic priest, the place was Sunday morning mass at St. Thomas More Church in Cottonwood Heights, Utah, and the time was the first depressing tidal wave of child-abuse revelations that rocked the United States Catholic Church in the early years of the twenty-first century. All this made the event both extraordinary and profound, at least for me.

My mind rushed back to another morning, several decades earlier, when I was a child visiting a different church. I was at the chapel of the Abbey of Our Lady of the Holy Trinity, a small and isolated Cistercian or "Trappist" monastery in rural Huntsville, Utah. The surrounding Ogden Valley (and indeed, my home state) was populated mostly by members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, formerly called the Mormons and now commonly called the Saints, many of whom were good friends with the monks. This valley of monks and saints was a beautiful place, but one with very few Catholics.

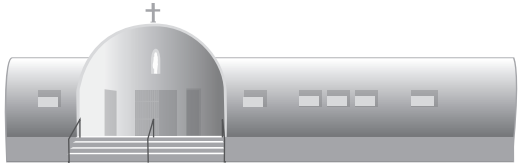
The monks celebrated Mass each morning at 6:20 a.m., a daunting time of day for a night owl like me, but a spiritual appointment my Irish-Catholic mother had strongly recommended I keep during a troubled time in our family life. My parents had just divorced, my mother was worried about the impact on me, and she had started visiting the

monastery, hoping I might develop a friendship with the good monks. So, although it still was dark outside, I forced myself out of bed early on that day when Mom beckoned. I fell back asleep during the 45-minute drive to the abbey. I woke up again as our car stopped in the small parking lot near the monastery building, surrounded by the monks' farm, both nestled in the middle of rolling hills and imposing mountains.

We attended Mass together, sitting in the back of the church. As a young male, I was allowed to gather with the monks around the altar at the front of their chapel for part of the liturgical service. It was an honor, but an intimidating one. I was the only non-monk there, and I also stood out for my lack of height—two rather unappealing circumstances for a self-conscious preteen. Because I thought that monking was a rather serious business, I also did not know if the Trappists really wanted a little kid on the altar with them.

My worst fears seemed confirmed on the day in question. An old monk I barely knew by name glanced down and scowled as I stepped up to stand around the altar beside him. Time seemed frozen. I agonized about whether to slip away quietly and return to the back of the church where children like me belonged. Just a few moments later, and before I could retreat, the presiding priest announced the moment of the Mass called the sign of peace. The old monk turned and shuffled over, his scowl replaced by a broad smile. He gave me a gentle hug. Looking directly into my eyes, he said, "Peace be with you!"

As he did, the sun rose over his shoulder, and bright red, blue, gold, and green streams burst forth from the chapel's large stained glass window. The light mesmerized me. The colors seemed to dance around and embrace us. It was the dawn of my monastery mornings.



CHAPTER 1

Still Point

A Trappist monastery in a quiet, isolated, and rural corner of one of the least populated of the United States is not the typical hangout for a preteen American boy. Yet, there I was.

Not only was I at the monastery, but one morning I was also talking to someone the monks had described as a well-known theologian, scholar, and writer. I wish I could remember his name. It was the 1970s. He was visiting there to lead a multiday retreat for the abbey's three dozen monks. I was there visiting the abbey with my family.

Perhaps just to be polite, the famous theologian struck up a conversation with me. As we chatted, we stood on the carefully tended lawn just outside the large green rounded-top Quonset hut that served as the monastery's main chapel. The conversation was mainly casual small talk. The theologian noted the abbey's beauty. Set on 1,800 acres of lush mountain farmland and hills in the rural Ogden Valley under the watchful eye of Mount Ogden, the monastery indeed was a lovely place.

I was a good conversationalist for a preteen, perhaps because of my Irish heritage, genetic blarney implanted in my DNA. I also was a voracious reader, arming me with a ready arsenal of surprisingly clever things to say that one might not ordinarily expect to hear from someone my age. A few weeks earlier, I had read a promotional pamphlet about the abbey in the monastery bookstore. A phrase it used to describe the abbey caught my attention.

I did not know exactly how to respond when the theologian commented on the magnificent setting for our casual conversation. So, I simply repeated the descriptive comment I had read in the monastery

pamphlet, to remarkable effect. The conversation stopped suddenly. The theologian paused and looked at me with an odd expression on his bearded face. He seemed surprised and a little impressed.

Or maybe he just thought I was a shameless plagiarist, because he asked me, politely, if I knew that the words I had just mindlessly repeated like a parrot were from a famous poem written by a well-known poet. Of course, I had no idea about either the poem or the poet. I just liked the words and the phrase. I had assumed that T. S. Eliot was just some guy like me who had visited Holy Trinity Abbey and been fortunate enough to get his name and clever comment reprinted in the monastery's brochure.

Looking back at my conversation now, many decades later, my preteen self deserves more credit for insight—accidental as it was—than I gave him then. That young man somehow recognized, perhaps subconsciously, that he actually was standing at "the still point of the turning world."[1]