News
Religious Life



Sister Emmanuel, in her 80s, loves her job in the chocolate factory of the Cistercian sisters at Notre Dame de la Paix. (Elisabeth Auvillain)



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"The nice thing about making chocolate is that it is a process that can be interrupted to go to the chapel and pray. You just have to make sure the chocolate is simmering at 30 degrees Celsius," Sister Marie-Bernadette explained.

And so it goes.

At Notre Dame de la Paix, an abbey in Castagniers, a small village in the mountains north of Nice, France, Cistercian sisters manage a chocolate factory, which brings them a reliable income.

"It is [a] product that makes people happy," explained Sister Marie-Bernadette, who is in charge of the fabrication, while cutting a large flat board of dry chocolate into small squares.

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Eleven of the 12 sisters of the congregation live in the monastery. The eldest, 97-years-old, now stays in a retirement home in Nice. The congregation is happy to have one novice in her 40s, who joined one year ago. The abbess, Mother Aline-Marie, was elected 12 years ago.

The Cistercian nuns are one of several branches of the Benedictine community. They are cloistered and nuns do not talk to visitors or outsiders, alternating work and regular prayers that give the day its rhythm. They eat their meals in silence, sometimes with music, or while listening to a reading. The first service vigil is at 4:45 am. Then, the sisters spend about an hour alone reading and meditating on a *Lectio Divina* from the Scriptures or a religious text. *Laudes* is at 7:15 am.

Mass is celebrated at 8:30 a.m. by a monk who left his Benedictine community in Solesmes, in the Loire region, to come to Castagniers, where he celebrates the Eucharist for the sisters every day. He occasionally helps other monasteries in the region.



Mother Aline-Marie, the abbess of Notre Dame de la Paix. (Elisabeth Auvillain)

All 11 sisters living in Castagniers attend Mass, but not all can be present for every prayer. Some of them, in their 90s, are too old to get up at 4 a.m. and instead stay late at night. Compline, the last office of the day, welcomes the night at 8 p.m., where Mother Aline-Marie plays the zither to accompany the singing.

But why chocolate?

In the 1950s, the Cistercian sisters in Castagniers had to choose a type of manual work to make a living, following St. Benedict's "pray and work" rule. A chocolate maker offered to teach them his art.

Seventy years later, their chocolate is well known in the region, and they are sometimes referred to as the "chocolate sisters."

However, their future is not secure: the price of cocoa has tripled on the world market. Will the sisters be able to continue making these delicious products that

many homes in France eat at Christmas? Nobody knows.



Sisters Marie-Bernadette and Emmanuel working in the chocolate factory. (Elisabeth Auvillain)

Sister Emmanuel, who is in her 80s, does not want to quit her job, pouring chocolate into molds and then the extra amount to make space for the filling. Once the second coat is dry, the molds are filled with praliné, a mixture of nuts, almonds and sugar.

Four sisters work in the factory and are helped by two lay women. The other sisters help with tasks like packing chocolate bars or putting chocolate in tiny paper bags that were given to the children of the local school for Christmas.

Over 400 massive centuries-old olive trees grow on the sisters' property. Volunteers come from villages in the region to help collect the olives, which are then sent to a nearby mill where olive oil and paste are made.

The little shop at the monastery entrance sells chocolate and jam made from the fruit in their garden, as well as beauty items like essential oils.

Every Cistercian monastery sells its products, and more and more are now making and selling cleaning products. Customers want quality items for their homes, and this trend is developing fast.



An aerial view of Notre Dame de la Paix. (Courtesy of the Cistercian sisters)

Like other congregations, the sisters of Notre Dame de la Paix go to St. Moritz every September in the south of Switzerland, where an immense monastic market is held. About 20 monasteries from many European countries are present.

The sisters sell their chocolate at higher prices in Switzerland, a country not part of the European Union and has kept its currency, the Swiss franc.

"We have to live off our work, so it is important to us to sell our products, even though we are normally cloistered," said Sister Odile, who is in charge of the shop

and welcomes guests at the abbey.

"We fill a car with our chocolate and come back with an empty one," Sister Odile added.

They are also present in some of the numerous Christmas markets in Provence. Their chocolate sells well in this region, where many people can afford it.



Chocolates made for Christmas by the Cistercian sisters at Notre Dame de la Paix. (Elisabeth Auvillain)

Do the sisters occasionally eat some of their chocolate? Sister Odile said they are allowed one bar per month.

When COVID-19 hit, and everyone stayed home for several weeks, nobody could come to the shop. The sisters modernized their business with the help of a new company, "Divine Box," which gathers products from monasteries and sends them all over Europe.

The Cistercian congregations are autonomous, and unlike most congregations in France, they do not depend on Rome or a diocese.

When asked about the challenges of the French church hit by recent revelations of abuses and scandals, Mother Aline-Marie insisted: "We have to love the church despite its flaws and with its qualities because the church is our mother, who has given us Christ."

Mother Aline-Marie would like more young women to join the congregation. A novena is said monthly to pray for vocations.

"I'd like to tell young people not to be afraid of a commitment," she said.