

A Land of Promise!

- brother Peter

THE ARCHBISHOP, WORRIED ABOUT A GROWING SHORT-
age of priests, was quite unhappy to see me go. For me, this was a turning point in my life of faith and I was determined to see it through. A major storm and flooding in Vermont at the end of June 1973 delayed my arrival by more than a week. I had to drive through the now-passable West River where the bridge had washed away on VT Route 100 halfway from Weston village to Weston Priory. The clutch of my Toyota Corona burnt out and the car made a dead stop at the Cross-Garden at the top of Priory Hill Road just in sight of the priory. The brothers were surprised to see me, having forgotten about my coming in the confusion of the storm's aftermath and the rescheduled date. They quickly found a place for me in the storage area of the upper sacristy where I stayed for a week while they arranged for a rental house where I could stay across Route 100 from the property where the Extension Community would eventually locate. Looking beyond all this, I was so happy at the Eucharist that evening of my first day, sensing I had finally come home. I felt as if I had crossed the Red Sea into a land of promise.

In the early 70's Weston Priory numbered fourteen monks. With eight young men expressing interest in joining the community, the brothers felt they could not absorb more and yet maintain the familial monastic brotherhood they had become. Wanting to be open to new life in the community, after much deliberation, the brothers proposed to the eight of us to come together with them to form an "Extension Community" that would be nurtured and guided by them and eventually grow into a second house of Weston Priory. After a few meetings



l to r, brothers Claude (Peter), Ronald (Mark), Harry (Philip) and Luke, Extension Community, 1977

to discuss the plan, only Harry Fronckiewicz (later brother Philip) and I, Claude Anctil (later brother Peter), remained interested. I arrived in early July of 1973. Harry arrived at the beginning of September. Living in the rented house, we set to work along with some brothers and the Randall Company of Rutland, VT, in converting the old barn on the Route 100 property into the dwelling where we would live for the next eight years. Thus we began a journey that called on all of us to trust in each other and the promise of an open future.

I first noticed mention of Weston Priory in Liturgical Arts Magazine in a late 60's chronicle of the editor, Maurice Lavanoux, describing the simplicity of the Weston Priory monastic chapel and the beauty and warmth of the liturgy celebrated by the twelve brothers around the rustic altar. The author was delighted even more by the familial brotherhood of the community than by the architecture. Then there was the photo essay in Vermont Life Magazine (1972) by the Time/Life photographers, Angelo Lomeo and Sonia Bulaty. I was disillusioned in my experience of parish life and the pace of implementation of the spirit of Vatican II. Talk of parish family, team ministry, lay participation, Gospel community and collaboration, while encouraging, did not easily translate into the change of heart and practice I was seeking. Here in this community appeared people who tried seriously to live fully these values in a renewed and contemporary monastic life.

After several visits and spending my retreat times with the community, I learned more about Weston Priory. Brother Leo, the founder, had a vision of brothers living together as equals, viewing Benedict's Rule as



Extension Community House (East Family House), 1977

it could be lived in our own time and place, embedded in our culture. Brother John, as prior, further invited the brothers to live consensually, assuring honest communication with daily chapter meetings, monthly retreat days together and paying attention to human growth and maturity. The brothers were encouraged to balance work and creativity, to value persons and personal experience and to grow into communion and unity in living a simple lifestyle. Their monastic prayer was an authentic expression of their experience of brotherhood. I longed for all this in my life.

In the Extension Community, brother Harry and I spent the day at the priory with the brothers for prayer, work and meals; and we lived in and maintained the renovated barn house on Route 100. We had our own daily chapter meetings with a group of the priory brothers, and we had our own retreat days, he and I together, each month. We assured continuity of prayer and work during the priory brothers retreat days. Those interested in joining the community spent time with us and followed our daily schedule with the priory brothers. In 1977, Ronald Nicolosi (later brother Mark) and Bob Gambone (brother Luke) came and joined us, making a community of four. By then we were called the East Family, following the tradition of the Shakers whom we had come to know at Sabbath Day Lake, Maine. By 1982, three of us, having made our monastic professions as brother Philip, brother Peter and brother Mark, moved into the main priory community and are now, with all the brothers, simply the one community of Weston Priory.

The experience of brotherhood, the deep commitment to live the Gospel and the Rule of Benedict in the spirit of Vatican II, and the joy of community life drew me to begin this journey. Openness to change and to risk new directions has brought us to the present moment. We know each other more fully. We know how these values have been embodied in our history. Yet we have not reached the Promised Land. Gratefully, we still live in a land of promise. ■