

## GOOGLING THE NUNS

An enclosed order of nuns embraces the internet age

*(The Spectator, 2001)*

There cannot be many people who felt starved of political coverage during the general election, but Sister Eustochium was one of them. ‘I find politics utterly absorbing and fascinating,’ she says. ‘Andrew Marr is my hero. I miss all of that – but there you go, you can’t have everything.’

Sister Eustochium is one of 32 Benedictine nuns who live at St Cecilia’s Abbey, in Ryde on the Isle of Wight. Theirs is an enclosed order, which means that they never normally leave the cloister – or, indeed, listen to the *Today* programme. If you go to talk to them, you must do so from the other side of a steel grille.

It is possible, however, to explore their world by visiting their website, [www.stceciliasabbey.org.uk](http://www.stceciliasabbey.org.uk). The Gothic menu offers a virtual-reality tour of the abbey, and by clicking on to the ground plan you can survey 360-degree images of half a dozen different areas (Chapter Garden, Typical Cell, Altar Bread Department, etc). You will also find a monthly homily, a page for questions and prayer requests, and a recording of a Gregorian chant.

Although such high-techery is not what you would expect from a body of women whose life is in many respects mediaeval, the Catholic Church has been quick to take advantage of the World Wide Web. ‘Ours is a hidden life,’ observes Sister Mary David, one of the website’s instigators, ‘and I think we have a duty to make its insights and values accessible to our contemporaries in a format they can understand.’

What she likes about the site is that it conveys not merely information, but an atmosphere: 'It's almost as if one was to turn aside from a busy marketplace and into a church. With everything else going on on the Internet, we wanted to convey the mystery and the beauty and the joy of a life totally given to Christ.'

Although the nuns have received e-mails from all over the world, they make a point of not counting the number of hits. 'We don't need to,' says sister Mary David, 'just as we don't need to know the effect our prayers are having on the world. It's enough to let people know we're here and that this kind of life is still going after fifteen centuries, and that we're holding their needs, their desires, their lives before God.'

On arrival at Ryde, it struck me that if you were going to renounce the world, this would be a good place to do it, because you could not feel that you were missing out on very much. At 8.30 on a Saturday night, the town was quiet but for a few tattooed and sunburnt holidaymakers; the lounge of the Royal Esplanade Hotel was occupied by residents playing bingo, while the nearby fish-and-chip shop was down to its last portion of cod. But as I sat on the seafront and watched the setting sun shrink to a molten ingot, while ferries pushed through the pink haze, and a train rattled along the pier, and a jet left a pin-scratch trail across an expanse of yellow sky, I realised how supremely difficult it would be to take the vow of stability, and shut off all those possibilities of other places until your dying day.

The abbey is a ten-minute walk from the town centre, past a boating lake where ducklings share waterspace with swan-shaped pedalos. It lies in a quiet residential street: at the end of a topiary-lined drive, a series of low buildings in sand-coloured brick lead to an elegant church with a high tower, beside which a small statue of the Virgin sits on a tree stump. Inside, the church is airy and simple, with a handful of wooden statues,

modern bronze Stations of the Cross, and pink, geometric stained-glass windows. Mass is said by the visiting priest in Latin, but there are English prayers, including one for politicians to set aside their personal ambitions ('a bit naïve,' Sister Mary David admits afterwards). The nuns sing their Gregorian chants exquisitely, hidden around the corner of the L-shaped building, behind gates which they unlock at the beginning of the service, and lock again at the end.

I had expected to feel sorry for the abbey's inmates, hiding from the world in something between a boarding-school and a prison. But, on a bright summer's day, there was none of the sense of gloom that one associates with old institutional buildings. Nor was there anything forbidding about Sisters Mary David and Eustochium when we sat down together after Mass: indeed, the pair brimmed with enthusiasm and merriment.

We met in a large room, cut in two by a table from which the symbolic grille rose to the ceiling. My side was furnished like a Seventies sitting-room, with coal-effect fires and an anglepoise lamp; theirs was more austere, with bare floorboards, pews and kitchen chairs. The grille itself was disappointingly unobtrusive, with the thin bars set far enough apart for a determined child to wriggle through them.

Sister Mary David, one of three Americans at St Cecilia's, is in her early forties, and enjoyed a distinguished academic career before she entered the convent in 1985. She had been drawn to the religious life since the age of 16, 'but then I went to university and had a wonderful social life and nearly married'. She was the first woman postgraduate to study at Christ Church, 'and I lived Oxford to the hilt – but still this was tugging away. I was thinking of an active teaching order, but then I came here for the weekend, and it corresponded to everything I always wanted, without my being able to articulate why.'

Sister Eustochium comes from a strongly Catholic family – one of her sisters is a nun in an active order – and also felt the call as a teenager. She too studied at Oxford in the early Eighties, before going on to work as a tax accountant. She has just taken her final vows, and explains that her entry into the abbey was delayed for three years because she had negative equity on her flat. It is a strange notion, saving up to be a nun, but postulants cannot be accepted if they are in debt.

There is a sense among some lay people that the purpose of enclosure is in part to protect the nuns from the wickedness of the outside world. My interviewees greet this suggestion with hilarity.

‘That’s something that the world might see,’ says Sister Mary David, ‘but it’s not a motive. Enclosure is primarily about a special concentration on God: it’s a very radical sign of total self-giving.’

It is also, says Sister Eustochium, about creating a special environment. ‘If you’re going to the opera, you want a special auditorium – you don’t want lots of pictures on the wall, because you’re focussing on the stage.’

Neither found the enclosed life easy to adapt to. ‘You can’t say, “I’ve had a rotten day, I’m going off for a drink, or I’m going to ring up my friends,’ says Sister Eustochium. ‘You’ve really got to face up to what’s going on. Every difficulty in the life of a Christian that you meet out there, you will find in here, from the existence of God down to getting on with the people you live with – and you meet them in a much starker form, because you can’t block them out with a whole lot of clutter. You’ve got to be able to battle with all those things – but it’s a life of great joy and fun.’

Surprisingly, contemplative orders are currently enjoying more success in attracting new members than active ones. Sister Mary David attributes this to a desire among young people for ‘something more

demanding and undiluted'. Not that St Cecilia's is in danger of overcrowding: in the past 25 years only a dozen women have taken their final vows there. The abbey considers itself lucky always to have had at least one novice in training (there are two at present), but by no means all of them have stayed the course.

Although the website was not intended as a recruiting tool, Sister Eustochium agrees that new vocations might be 'a happy by-product'. 'I think God still calls people,' she says, 'but they have less information and fewer opportunities. I went to convent schools, whereas many people now have no contact with nuns as they're growing up; so if they can find out about our life through the website, that's magnificent.'

Asked what qualities an aspiring nun requires, the two mention willpower, guts and generosity, and quote their Abbess: 'In this life you need faith and a sense of humour, so that if one fails, you can fall back on the other.'

Their separation from the world is not absolute. In cases of necessity, such as a medical operation or a dental treatment, the nuns may leave the abbey; and Sister Mary David was much surprised to find herself sent to stay at another convent in France, when she contributed to a study of enclosure which was being published there. There are also two 'sisters at the door', who act as intermediaries with the outside world. Sister Eustochium admits that she enjoys her occasional excursions: 'I love the bookshop windows – there are three bookshops between here and the dentist. And I love seeing all the people – I make up little stories about them. But I'm always delighted to come back; I'm not thinking, "Gosh, I want to be out there".'

The nuns take a daily newspaper, but do not read it in its entirety: instead, one of the sisters goes through it and cuts out the important stories for the others to read. They have no radio, though they were lent a

television so that they could watch the Pope's visit to the Holy Land. Each nun, the abbey's introductory leaflet explains, must decide 'where, for her, is the line between being well-informed and filling her head with gossip which will interfere with prayer.'

The nuns' time is divided between prayer, study (the abbey has a strong intellectual tradition) and work; the latter consists of cooking and cleaning and tending their orchard, as well as specialised activities such as calligraphy and manufacturing altar bread, which create revenue for the abbey. The only time that the nuns talk is during two periods of recreation, totalling an hour a day.

Does this unchanging routine ever become wearisome? Sister Eustochium says not. 'It's like when you're going out with someone: at first you might go to lots of interesting things, but then you find yourself going back to the same restaurant time and again, because all you want to do is gaze into each other's eyes. You begin to cherish the routine here, because it's a springboard to something else that's always changing: the bells are ringing at the same time every day, but there are resonances that you didn't hear yesterday.'

While there are things that they miss, says Sister Mary David, it's more amazing how satisfying the life can be. There may be a lot of superficial desires, but there's a deeper desire that kicks in. And paradoxically, withdrawal from the world gives you a depth and compassion, and an intensity about creation and the good things in life.' Sister Eustochium concurs: 'if someone sends you a postcard, the beauty overwhelms you much more than if you've got the Sunday Times colour supplement.'

They have approached the Internet in the same spirit: rather than surfing, it, they use it simply to service their website, and for business. 'The Internet raises this feverish desire for information for its own sake,'

says Sister Mary David, ‘whereas our tradition emphasises devotion to the truth and savouring what we learn. We hope our cautious attitude to it might say something to our contemporaries about using these things without being enslaved by them.’

Apart from the website, the only major change at St Cecilia’s in recent years has been the introduction of a steamer for cooking vegetables, which is cautious by anyone’s standards. But the nuns believe that an important part of their role is to filter innovations and remind the world that there have been other ways of doing things.

‘Tradition can help us focus on what is essential and enduring in the midst of passing fashions,’ says Sister Mary David. ‘I feel that the best thing we can do for the Church in our time is to remain true to that ancient Christian tradition. We can get too involved in modern life and forget that there are centuries of insight and experiences.’

Before leaving St Cecilia’s, I attended the lunchtime office, Sext. Sitting alone on the public side of the church, I could not imagine anything more beautiful than the singing of the 32 women hidden from my sight, and felt profoundly grateful that they would be here today and tomorrow and the days after that, praying for the sins of the world. As they left, I caught a glimpse of straight, black backs filing out in pairs; and at the end of the procession, as if deliberate allegory, an elderly figure seated in a wheelchair, being gently pushed by a white-hooded novice.