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Mother Cecilia, center, prioress of the Benedictines of Mary, Queen of Apostles in Gower, Mo., and her sisters listen to the playback of her recording session for "Christ the King at Ephesus," inside the monastery in September 2021. This is the nuns' first album in three years. (CNS/Karen Pulfer Focht)

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GOWER, Mo. — November 2, 2021

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Breaking the silence, the sisters breathed deeply. Then with ever so much control, they started singing in perfect unison.

Without a word being spoken, the sisters intuitively knew what Mother Cecilia, their prioress, was calling forth from them.

Sweet harmonies filled the church as these Benedictine nuns recorded their latest album. The hand-painted arches of their church resonated with the sound so beautifully that it fell gently on a listener's ears.

These are not just any singing nuns. These nuns are recording artists. These are chart-topping nuns, and it's been more than three years since their last album. The new CD, which is their 10th, was released Oct. 26.

They have had four albums that topped the charts so far, said Sister Scholastica -- "Advent," "Angels and Saints," "Lent" and "Easter." We were also the first nuns to win Billboard's Classical Artist of the Year Award in 2013."

Every sister at the Abbey of Our Lady of Ephesus learns to sing. It is an integral part of life for the Benedictines of Mary, Queen of Apostles, a cloistered order of nuns living by the ancient Rule of St. Benedict in Gower in rural Missouri.

The lifestyle here may date from medieval times, but young women are flocking to this monastery. Candidates seeking a life of union with God, in prayer, are between 17 and 30 and they come from all over America. Foreign candidates have been unable to obtain their visas.

They leave behind a world driven by pop culture and enter a world guided by the wisdom of St. Benedict.

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It also is a humble life. These young girls spend time in a lovely orchard -- filled with fruits and nuts. They milk cows by hand, gather eggs, make cheese and pull potatoes from the dirt. Self-sustainability is an ideal passed down from St. Benedict.

They believe farm work keeps you dependent on God and that such work is conducive to simple prayer.

Sister Scholastica added that as the grounds they work become more cultivated and civilized, they are literally working out their salvation. "We hope the ground of our own soul also becomes more cultivated and something beautiful for God."

The chanting and the musical life inside the monastery are a large draw. The monastery has grown so fast that they've had to split up and expand. "When the family grows large enough that we begin to lose sense of the family, it is time for some "repotting," transferring portions to new soil, Sister Scholastica explained.

So, some of the sisters have moved and have established another community in Ava, Missouri, where they have purchased 350 acres. Catholic families wanting to live near the monastery have already purchased property from the sisters.

Next spring, the Benedictines of Mary plan to break ground on a new large monastery and a church.



Mother Cecilia, prioress of the Benedictines of Mary, Queen of Apostles in Gower, Missouri, listens to the playback of the community's 10th album, "Christ the King at Ephesus" inside the monastery in September. (CNS/Karen Pulfer Focht)

Eleven young women are new to the Gower abbey, hailing from Minnesota, Wisconsin, Texas, Idaho, New Jersey, Georgia, Ohio, Indiana, South Carolina, Kansas and Missouri.

Two of the young women already have blood sisters at the abbey, which will bring them up to six sets of sister-sisters. The three who are entering at Ava are from Vermont, Kentucky, and Minnesota. They will bring their numbers up to 60 total in both houses.

A few "pre-postulants," have been visiting recently and are now studying their life more closely with the possibility of staying.

If, after further observation, the community decides they are a good fit, they become postulants, take on the black dress and short veil, and then they address them as "Sister."

The two groups of nuns have missed each other terribly, not just in day-to-day life but in song. Their separation prevented them from putting out another album. They tried to recreate their sound with some of the new sisters, but it just didn't work.

Mother Cecilia asked the superior of the Ava house if she could spare three sisters for a short time so that they could reunite at the abbey and record together again. When the sisters from Ava showed up, they arrived in time for night prayers and snuck into the choir stalls so that when the rest of the sisters processed into the church, it was a huge surprise.

It was a family reunion. "Once the Ava sisters were here, we were back in our recording element. It was like old times" said Sister Scholastica.

In mid-September the veterans of recording from both houses, along with a few new voices, came together to form something of a "Dream Team."

It has been a tradition for Mother Cecilia to write at least one original song for each CD. In hopes to put out an album this fall, she quietly waited for an idea.

Just the day before the recording was to start, she was divinely inspired and composed original music, setting it to a poem written by Sister Mary Wilhelmina, their late foundress, who was African American. She died at age 95 in 2019. The sisters quickly learned their parts for the new song, "Hymn to Christ the King," to record it live in the church.

For two days, with afternoon sun streaming into the church, the sisters stood in a circle beneath a statue of Mary singing their hearts out until sunset.