News
Religious Life

A painting of Our Lady of Sorrows is seen at the Benedictine Abbey in Staniatki, Poland, in an undated photo. The 13th-century monastery, home to one of the country's most important collections of religious and cultural treasures, is seeking support to complete a major heritage preservation project by Dec. 31, 2026. (OSV News/Courtesy of Benedictine Abbey in Staniatki)

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Warsaw, Poland — October 30, 2026
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A community of Benedictine nuns in southern Poland has launched an urgent appeal to raise $1 million to complete a heritage preservation project at their 800-year-old abbey by Dec. 31, warning that failure could force it to repay millions in European Union funding.

The oldest Benedictine abbey in the country is home to priceless cultural heritage pieces, such as the first music notes of Christmas carols ever recorded, but the sisters preserving the masterpieces lead a simple life — they grow tomatoes, make preserves, and welcome guests, doing "what they can" to earn a living and maintain the vast monastery entrusted to their care.

For centuries, generations of Benedictine nuns have kept this place alive. Now, the small community faces a challenge that years of hard work cannot resolve.

"Here, simply 'tightening our belts' and denying ourselves many things is not enough," Mother Stefania Polkowska, the abbess, told OSV News. "We cannot cope with this situation on our own. It truly is a crisis."

The Abbey of St. Adalbert in Staniatki, founded in the early 13th century, is Poland's oldest Benedictine convent, with a history stretching back eight centuries. Behind its walls are centuries-old manuscripts, sacred paintings, liturgical vestments and a remarkable collection of historical musical scores, including early Polish Christmas carols.

The monastery has survived foreign invasions, the partitions of Poland, two world wars and communist rule. Through it all, the Benedictine rhythm of prayer and work has continued.

Benedictine Heritage Cloisters project

In 2018, the sisters began an ambitious undertaking called "Benedictine Heritage Cloisters," intended to preserve their collections and make them accessible to the public. The project includes a museum, library, reading room and spaces for cultural and educational activities.

Many of the abbey's most valuable objects have remained largely out of public view because the sisters have lacked suitable facilities to display and preserve them. "The project gives us the opportunity to show this enormous spiritual, religious, historical and cultural heritage, which is currently hidden within the walls of the monastery," Polkowska said. "We want to show all of it."

When the project began, its estimated cost was approximately $2.8 million. Almost $1.8 million came from European Union funds, while the sisters raised the required contribution through donations and their own efforts. Then the problems began.

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"Already in the first stage of construction, problems arose, including water channels running through the construction site that had to be covered with special concrete structures," Polkowska said. "This meant additional work and increased costs. There were many more situations like this."

The unexpected complications forced changes to the construction plans and required additional approvals from the authorities. Before the sisters could overcome those setbacks, the COVID-19 pandemic struck, followed by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Construction materials and labor became dramatically more expensive.

At the same time, the monastery opened its doors to Ukrainian refugees, providing shelter to women and children fleeing the war, with the help of volunteers. Despite the rising costs, the sisters continued construction, raising money through donations, their own work and the support of volunteers. By October of this year, the total cost had climbed to nearly $7.1 million, more than two and a half times the original estimate.

Dramatic search for remaining funds

The project is now close to completion. Electrical and other installations are in place, walls have been plastered and some flooring has been laid. But finishing work, furniture, museum equipment and landscaping are still needed. The community had expected to have until February, and latest June 2027, to complete and settle the project. But an inspection in October revealed that the deadline was Dec. 31.

According to the abbey, there is no possibility of an extension. The consequences could be severe. The sisters say failure to complete the project on time would require repayment of the EU subsidy, a financial obligation they would struggle to meet.

Meanwhile, life inside the monastery must continue. The sisters are not only financing the new development. They are also maintaining a centuries-old complex that requires constant repairs. In recent years, they have restored the abbey's church and renovated much of the monastery roof. Heating the buildings, paying for electricity and providing medical care for elderly sisters create significant expenses.

"Construction of the Benedictine Heritage Cloisters is an enormous burden for our community," Polkowska told OSV News. "We have managed all this by obtaining external funds, but mainly through our own work," she said, describing the guesthouse, ecological tomato cultivation, fish farming and production of preserves that help sustain the monastery.

Mother Stefania Polkowska, abbess of the Benedictine Abbey in Staniatki, walks with the monastery dog on the abbey grounds in Staniatki, Poland, in an undated photo. (OSV News/Courtesy of Benedictine Abbey in Staniatki)

"Sister Boguslawa prepares meals for the sisters and their guests while also caring for the farm animals," Polkowska said. "Sister Zacharia looks after the church and library and guides visitors through the abbey. Sister Józefa makes devotional objects and helps with cleaning. Sister Benedicta attends to the monastery entrance." Polkowska oversees the community. They take care of the place that is both their home and one of Poland's most important religious monuments.

Treasures hidden in Staniatki

The abbey's 13th-century Gothic church is home to a revered image of Our Lady of Sorrows. Its collections include illuminated musical manuscripts, medieval religious art, and documents recording centuries of Polish history. In 2020, the Polish president designated the monastery a Monument of History, one of the country's

highest forms of recognition for its cultural heritage.

But Polkowska speaks of the abbey in terms that go beyond its historical significance. "This is all history and national heritage that we have cared for over the centuries and that we want to preserve for future generations," she told OSV News.

In an appeal published on their new fundraising page, the Benedictines put their situation in simple terms. "We are not asking for comfort," they wrote. "We are only asking for help to finish a work that, through our joint efforts, we have brought almost to completion."

The abbey launched an online fundraising campaign, https://zrzutka.pl/yc5cfp, allowing supporters to contribute directly to the project.

The sisters have already experienced the generosity of strangers.

During the pandemic, an online campaign organized by the Polish Center for Life and Family raised nearly half a million zlotys to support the monastery. This time, however, the amount needed is far greater, and the deadline much closer.

"What gives me hope is faith in human goodness and open hearts," Polkowska told OSV News. "Faith that there will be people who will want to help us."