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New Neighbors Arrive in Canyon

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The newest neighbors in Canyon are intent on living a quiet life. Guests of the McCosker ranch, they are vegetarians who make their bedding from handmade straw and ticking, wear simple garb and sandals, and rely on donations to meet their everyday needs. They don't teach, or nurse or work with the poor. Instead they hope to help everyone through a life of contemplation and prayer.

Lamorinda's newest neighbors are Sisters of the Carmel of Jesus, Mary and Joseph of Canyon, relocating from Valparaiso, Nebraska to accommodate their expanding population.

By their own rules, a Carmelite community may not number more than 21 members. The Nebraska population had swelled to 37. "We love it here," said Mother Agnes, of their new surrounds. "Right now it's just the 'shock troops,'" she said, with a smile in her voice and sounding decidedly secular. The first group of five sisters, ranging in age from 27 to 72, arrived in late July. A second group of younger sisters, all in their late-teens to mid-20s, are scheduled to arrive late September.

The establishment of the new temporary monastery falls on the 450th anniversary of the order's formation in the 16th century. The order has ties to the San Francisco area dating back to Spanish occupation. Eventually a permanent monastery will be built within the Diocese of Oakland, which extends from Fremont to Vallejo and east to Livermore.

As new neighbors, the sisters have registered for a post office box, and are encountering wildlife in Canyon, including a mountain lion sighted on their grounds.

"Everybody's been so welcoming," Mother Agnes said. Although she politely declined to have the sisters faces photographed or even named, she said members come from as far away as Seattle and Australia.

Outsiders may consider cloistered religious to be "tight lipped and frowning." Not so, says Mother Agnes. The sisters are "joyful and full of life...a reminder God is there for them, and hope for our sometimes poor, sad world."

Reflecting on her own 36 years of cloistered life, she said simply, "It's a wonderful life."

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