

House in the country

A community of Discalced Carmelite nuns left a noisy home in Prague for a building project in the country. **Alex Mayhew-Smith** spoke to them.

Can you tell us about your order? Are there many monasteries around the world? Our Order of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel is a Catholic religious order, founded in the 12th century in the Holy Land. At that time, a group of hermits settled on Mount Carmel, where they lived based on the prophetic legacy of the prophet Elijah. In the 13th century, the order moved to Europe.

In the 16th century, the order was reformed in Spain by St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross, who were later both declared Doctors of the Church.

This reformed branch later separated from the original order and so we currently have the Order of the original Observance and the Order of Discalced Carmelites. "Discalced" does not mean that we walk without shoes, but it is a synonym for reformed monks/nuns.

From Spain, our order has spread throughout Europe and later throughout the world.

Currently, our Discalced Carmelite brothers have around 620 communities in 81 countries of the world, having around 4,000 monks in them. The Discalced Carmelite Sisters have over 860 communities in 97 countries of the world and there are over 11,000 nuns in them.

Our brothers are contemplative-active; they live in the world having specific activity as their mission, they devote a lot of time to spiritual guidance and to accompanying others. We, the Discalced Carmelite sisters, are a contemplative order, in contrast to the so-called active orders. We live in a so-called cloister (a limited space which we usually do not leave, only when, for example, seeing a doctor, for elections or legal acts) and we do not have an external activity, our main activity is mental and intercessory prayer.

Our order also includes various communities of congregational (active) Carmelite sisters who live in the world, and lay people who join our order and form the so-called third or secular Carmelite order.

You moved out of your old home in Prague a few years ago. How long did your order live in that building? I imagine it is a very different situation in Drasty.

Our community was founded in 1656 by the Servant of God, Mother Maria Electa, whose intact body we still have in our community.

Originally, our monastery was in the Lesser Town of Prague, and was surrounded by a large garden. Under Emperor Joseph II, who abolished many Orders, the community was forced into exile (in 1782), which lasted for 10 years. When they returned to Prague, their monastery was already occupied, and so, in exchange, they were given a monastery with the church of St Benedict on Hradčanské náměstí (Prague Castle Square) in Prague, which originally belonged to the Barnabites.

The sisters have been there since 1792, gradually repairing the monastery for their purposes. Hradčanské náměstí is close to Prague Castle, where the monarch (the now president) and the Prague Archbishop reside, so it is a very important place. Unfortunately, the monastery only has a very small garden and is surrounded by the square and streets where many tourists go, so there is a lot of traffic and noise.

In 1950, the sisters were forced into exile for the second time, when the communist regime took over our country in 1948. During that time, the monastery was converted into a prominent communist hotel for important state visits.

After the Velvet Revolution in 1989, the sisters got their monastery back in 1991 in the first wave of Church restitution and were able to return to Prague.

The operation of the old buildings of the monastery cost a lot of money (repairs, heating), the noise from the surroundings was also increasing, and the younger generation of sisters could no longer manage to live on such a small plot of land. We suffered from back pain and the mental relaxation that life in nature gives was not possible.

After 1989, we had a lot of new vocations (sisters were forbidden to accept new candidates during communism, therefore, only five old sisters still lived in the community), so at the end of the 90s we decided to found a second community of Discalced Carmelites in Dačice in Moravia. The sisters settled in the former Franciscan monastery there, which also had a much larger garden than in Prague. Eleven sisters from Prague moved to Dačice and founded the Carmel of the Mother of God (we in Prague are the Carmel of St Joseph).

In 2005, the sisters in Prague also decided to move due to the above-mentioned difficulties. The search for suitable ground took 11 long years (until 2016), and after two years dedicated to the project development and negotiating contracts, in 2018, we purchased a former farm in Drasty.

We did not have the funds to buy and reconstruct the damaged and destroyed structures, so we had to sell our former monastery. We decided to sell it non-commercially to our Discalced Carmelite brothers, who were able to buy it thanks to a benefactor, even though we knew that this would mean that we would not have enough funds to restore the entire courtyard in Drasty.

The brothers turned the monastery into a spiritual centre where they organise various events for many people.

For more information see www.fortna.eu/en-fortna

How many of you are there in Drasty? Are the numbers of you in your monastery stable or possibly rising? Are you all Czech in your monastery?

Currently we are nine sisters. We are a young community (27-53 years). Currently, two new women would like to join us. The maximum number of sisters in the community can be 21; St Theresa wanted the community to have a family character.

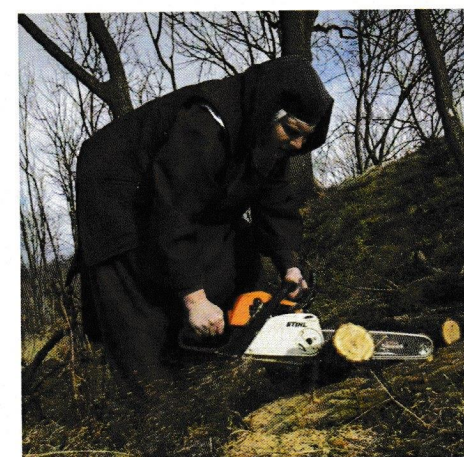
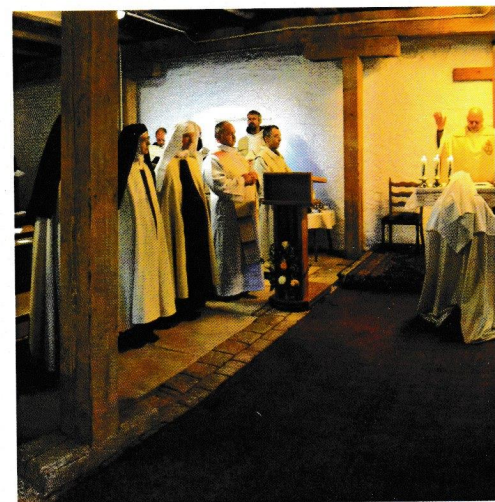
We are all Czech, only one sister is from Slovakia.

Each Carmel is independent, i.e. sisters always belong to the community in which they take their vows.

Together with our sisters in Dačice and our brothers in the Czech Republic, our community belongs to the province of Genoa (Italy). Two years ago, we also joined the Krakow Federation of Sisters (Poland). We sometimes travel to both countries to attend formation events.

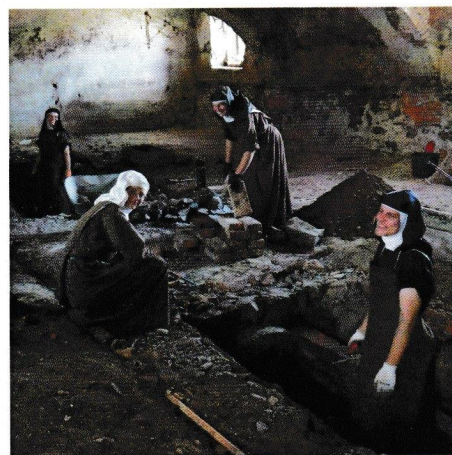
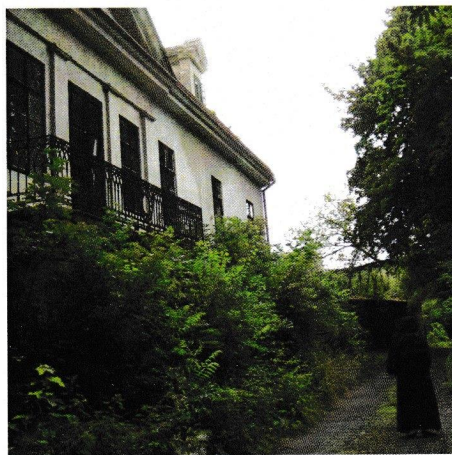
I also wanted to ask about your building work at Drasty. I understand it is an old farm that you are renovating. How much longer will it take to complete the work? Are you doing building work every day? And how do you fit in your regular hours for worship and prayer around the building work? Have you raised enough funds to complete the work?

We had been looking for a suitable ground for 11 long years. We saw dozens of plots. Initially, we wanted to buy a vacant "green-



Jan Mihalíček





If you wish to support the Discalced Carmelite Sisters at Drasty you can contribute to their building fund:
 EUR: 115-6957630217/0100
 IBAN:CZ22 0100 0001 1569 5763 0217
 BIC/SWIFT:KOMBCZPPXXX

Account Name: KARMEL SV. JOSEFA
 Bank: Komerční banka a.s.
 Na Příkopě 33
 114 07 Praha 1
 Czech Republic

● For videos in English visit:
<https://karmeldrasty.eu/en/>

field" plot and build a new, modern, ecological monastery. This proved to be unrealistic.

Finally, we bought the former agricultural farm in Drasty in Prague East District, which was returned within the so-called second wave of Church restitution to the Vysehrad Chapter (a group of priests-canonists at the church in Vysehrad in Prague, see <https://vysehradskakapitula.kkvys.cz>).

After many years of the communist era, and a long period of waiting for the start of Church restitutions, the courtyard was in a poor condition, even though it was declared a cultural monument in 1954.

We divided the entire restoration into three stages. The first stage (2018-2020) consisted of the reconstruction of two buildings, the manor house, the future house for guests (the visitation house), to which we moved from Prague in 2020, so it is now our temporary housing before we finish building the monastery.

Then we reconstructed the building of the former stables and turned it into an apartment building with 11 apartments, where some friends of the community now live. It is our restitution project. Each religious community receives a restitution contribution from the state for a period of 30 years (until 2042), and the Church wants us to invest it in a project that will earn our living in future. We decided to invest it in housing.

Currently, the second stage (2021-2023) is ongoing, consisting of the construction of the monastery and the chapel of St Teresa of Avila, which will also be open to the public. The monastery, the so-called monastery quadrature, consists of the reconstruction of the former granary and the construction of new wings.

Then, provided we have the necessary funds, the 3rd stage will begin and the smaller houses on the site will be renovated.

Between 2018 and 2020, we travelled to Drasty from Prague regularly and were doing cleaning work, at first by ourselves, later we started organising larger work groups and inviting various helpful people to them. The area, which is about seven hectares, was full of landfill and dump and invasive plants, so we had to remove all that first.

In the second stage, we had already moved to Drasty. We wanted to be present during the construction of the monastery, continue to cultivate the land and get to know the surroundings.

We have a firm daily schedule that we follow as a community. We get up at 5am, we go to bed at 10pm. Every day we have about seven hours of "spiritual acts" (Holy Mass, two hours of meditation – one hour in the morning and one hour in the evening –, one hour of spiritual readings, Liturgy of Hours, breviary prayer, rosary, etc.) and about five and a half hours are intended for work.

We work for a living with our own hands. Our community makes art objects: ceramics, we decorate candles, we paint silk scarves and produce gift items. Now, due to work on the land, we temporarily had to adapt the daily schedule a bit and we spend more hours working.

From the very beginning, we were aware that we would not have enough funds for the reconstruction of the entire area, which is why we decided to do as much work as possible ourselves. Due to the covid pandemic, and now the war in Ukraine, prices of building materials and energy have increased significantly, so we could not afford to conclude a contract with the building company for the construction of the entire monastery and church. We still need about 31 million CZK (1.25 million EUR) to complete the interior of the church and the area with the gatehouse and workshops.

What is the plan for when you have completed the building work? Is there space for gardens? Will people be able to visit or stay?

Next year we should move from temporary housing to the monastery. This will free up the guest house adjacent to the public forest park we have also created.

Individuals, families and groups will be able to come here for vacations and spiritual revival. The guest house has 25-30 beds in single, double and triple rooms with private bathroom facilities. The married couples who live with us in Drasty would like to organise various spiritual events here both for the people coming and for the residents.

The area will be divided into a monastery – for us sisters – and a public part for visitors.

After we move [to the monastery area], there will still be a lot of work: renovation of small houses, work on the land (in our monastery there is a forest, a meadow, a growing and operating garden and a park), and in the public part there is the above-mentioned forest park.

All these need regular maintenance. We will also continue to produce art objects and sell them via the e-shop (<https://galerie.karmeldrasty.eu>), and in our small shop next to the monastery gate.

I read that you had learned some building skills while you have been working on your new monastery. Do you all know how to drive diggers or are you each specialising in a skill? I hope there haven't been any accidents.

Due to our frequent trips between Prague and Drasty, some sisters had to renew their driver's licence. Then they could easily learn to drive a tractor or bobcat. Some have learned how to work with a chainsaw or a brush cutter. We also learned how to lay bricks and block, e.g. for underground sewers and do other auxiliary construction work.

After the time in Prague, when we only had a very small plot of land, in 2018 we were doing all the work on the plot with enthusiasm. Now, after five years, signs of fatigue are already showing. However, it makes us happy when we see how the whole area is changing. Thanks to God, there has been no accident so far. Every day we pray to God to protect us, helpers, part-timers, and workers on the construction site.

How much emphasis does your order place on your interior spiritual lives? I studied early monastic movements many years ago and their lives seemed quite harsh. Presumably (I hope) it is a less severe experience for the modern nun?

Our main mission is prayer, therefore, the emphasis on spiritual life, life in God's presence is essential for us. In the community, the role of the novice master is important, as she oversees spiritual accompaniment and lectures for the sisters who are under formation (from entering the monastery to taking eternal vows – the formation period lasts about nine years). The prioress, who leads the community, presides over the community meetings of sisters, leads personal face-to-face conversations with them. In addition, each of the sisters has her confessor, who can also be a spiritual leader for her. We invite various priests and other people (psychologists, etc) to the community for lectures.

Nowadays, the life of we nuns is probably quite different from the life of the monks at the beginning of the Christian era. Back then, great emphasis was placed on asceticism, mortification, etc. We now see here that life itself provides enough stimuli – suggestions for asceticism and self-denial – there is no need to invent anything else. Spiritual life – striving for life in God's presence, union with God, intercessory prayer for others – this has remained the same for centuries.