Opinion

Guest Voices



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by Mike O'Brien

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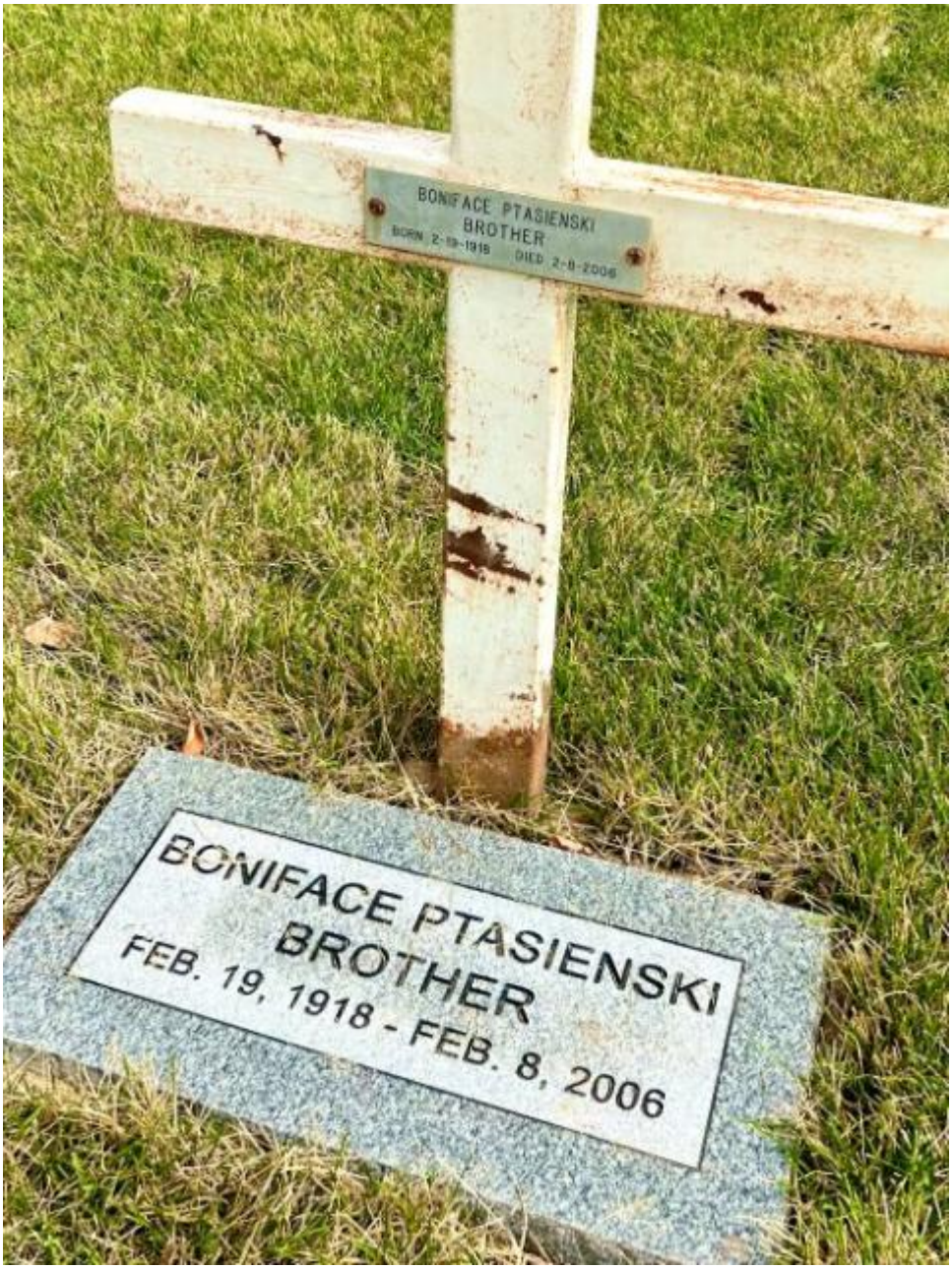
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This Halloween, my favorite Catholic cemetery, off the beaten path in rural Northern Utah, has transfigured into a much happier haunt.

Pioneer monks from Kentucky's Gethsemani Abbey, where Thomas Merton lived and wrote, traveled west in 1947 and started a new monastery near the small town of Huntsville. For the next seven decades, Trappists worked and prayed at Utah's Holy Trinity Abbey, where the monks set aside a small plot of land north of their Quonset hut church to bury their confrères who "graduated" to heaven. The Trappists marked each monastic grave with a plain white metal cross.

One particular cross honors a tall, thin transplanted New Yorker with angelic blue eyes who lived at the Utah abbey for 60 years. In my youth, I spent many happy hours with him: my old friend and mentor Br. Boniface Ptasienski.



The gravesite of Trappist monk Br. Boniface Ptasienski at Holy Trinity Abbey's cemetery (Mike O'Brien)

After I married, started my legal career and had three children, our time together was limited. When he died in 2006, the monks had buried Boniface before I even knew he was gone.

Before the burial, they held an all-night vigil beside his body, praying and saying goodbye. After a similar vigil, Merton — whom Boniface knew from their time together at Gethsemani — once wrote, "[A]s you walk through the dark echoing

cloister you are no longer afraid of death or of dead bodies, but you see them as they are — sad, inevitable things whose sorrow is not without an infinitely merciful remedy."

When the Utah monks interred Brother Boniface in the distinctive Trappist manner the next morning, donned in his worn white monk robes with face hooded, he was laid directly into the ground with no coffin.

Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust.

Again, Merton explains, "[T]his simplicity and poverty have something about them that is immensely clean in comparison with the nightmare of fake luxury and flowers with which the world tries to disguise the fact of death."

Although I missed his funeral, I still visit Boniface when I can.

The old Holy Trinity Abbey cemetery is a lovely place. The chant of birdsong serenades the resting monks within a cathedral of surrounding mountains and trees. Elk, sandhill cranes, owls, bobcats and herds of wild turkeys often stop by the peaceful site.

When the Utah monastery closed in 2017, the Trappists had buried 29 monks there. Six more, who had moved to a Salt Lake City retirement home, have joined them over the last eight years.

Bill White, the new property owner, has placed the monastery land under a conservation easement and preserves what he can. He could not, however, save the old abbey's Quonset hut building, which was packed with asbestos and long past its expiration date.

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White takes care of the cemetery, too. He mows and waters the lawn, pulls the weeds, and tries to minimize damage caused by foraging wildlife. He even restored one of the monastery's beautiful old statues of Mary, and set her on a small plaza to watch over the monks. Yet despite Bill's best efforts, the aging white crosses have rusted and deteriorated.

Boniface's cross is weathered after two decades outside in the hot summers and frigid winters of the surrounding Ogden Valley. With the monks and their church gone, I've sometimes worried and wondered whether the old cemetery might disappear, too.

Thankfully, the answer now seems to be no. Within the past few months, White and Gethsemani abbot Fr. Elias Dietz have taken significant steps to preserve it, too.

Dietz has been a compassionate and attentive pastor for the surviving Utah monks, who became Gethsemani monks again when the Huntsville monastery closed. He supports them generously and visits as often as he can. Dietz and White also recently purchased new, more permanent markers for the graves of the Huntsville monks. Each new granite marker notes the name, vocation and life dates of these devoted men.



The author enjoys taking his grandsons to the abbey cemetery of his own childhood, helping them pick a pumpkin and introducing them to the benevolent spirits that

haunt the grounds. (Mike O'Brien)

White and Dietz hope to install a decorative chain fence supported by bollards around the sacred site. White saved the old abbey bells and plans to build a base or tower near the cemetery from which they might ring out again.

The monks asked White to preserve their agricultural legacy as well, so he asked the MacFarland family — local sixth-generation Latter-day Saint family farmers — to manage the land. They call it the Historic Monastery Farm and, among other things, planted a large pumpkin patch near the abbey gates.

All this wonderful reanimation means that this Halloween, I can take my two grandsons to a place I loved as a boy, help them pick a pumpkin from a field where I chased a wayward calf, and introduce them to the benevolent spirits that haunt the abbey cemetery.

One of them is my old friend Brother Boniface.