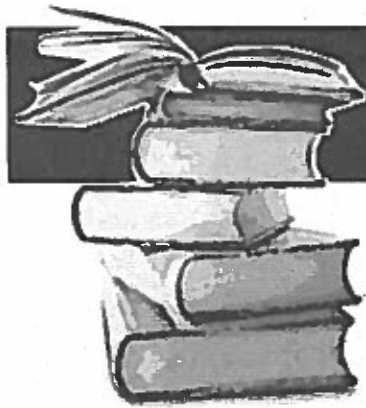


## Labor of Love



# Book Review

**The Artist Remembers:  
Mother Placid and the  
Stations of the Cross**  
*By George Atwell Krimsky  
with Photographs by Patrick  
de Warren*

Abbey of Regina Laudis  
Bethlehem, Connecticut,  
2017  
\$45.00 62 pp.

Reviewed by Jane M. Bailey

*Let all that you do be done in love.*  
— 1 Corinthians 16:14  
(NRSV-CE)

It is fitting that the launch of *The Artist Remembers: Mother Placid and the Stations of the Cross* took place on First Passion Sunday. This beautiful, meditative book is a work of art that gives voice to the Benedictine nun and artist Mother Placid Dempsey's magnificent carved Stations of the Cross housed at the Abbey of Regina Laudis in Bethlehem, Connecticut.

Before Mother Placid died in 2012, renowned journalist George Krimsky captured her in conversation in a series of interviews held between 2008 and 2011. Krimsky breathed life into her memory, recording not only her words but also the emotion and love behind them. These interviews form the *basis of the text, allowing readers to walk with Mother Placid and to hear her voice echo into the future.* Patrick de Warren's stunning photographs of each station provide a backdrop for Mother Placid's inspirational words as she guides the reader through the fourteen Stations of the Cross.

The nuns of Regina Laudis hosted a reception for the book launch on April 7 at the Judy Black Memorial Park and Gardens in Washington, Connecticut. There was an overflow crowd celebrating Mother Placid's artistic work and the book that now allows the public to share these carved reliefs and have the meditations of their creator as a spiritual guide for Passiontide and beyond.

A warm, spring-like day allowed the reception area to be fully opened to the outside. The Hickory Stick Bookshop and The Pantry, both of Washington Depot, co-sponsored the reception. The new books on display could be purchased and then signed by Mother Dolores Hart and Patrick de Warren.

People came from far and wide to remember with joy and thanks both Mother Placid, who died in 2012, and journalist and author George Krimsky, who died in 2017. Their spirits were evident in the love that permeated the reception, as noted by Mother Subprioress Margaret Georgina Patton, O.S.B.,

in her welcoming remarks.

The highlight of the reception was a reading of Mother Placid's words for each of the fourteen Stations of the Cross as the book's photographs were projected on a large screen. There was a hush in the room when former Hollywood actress Mother Dolores Hart, O.S.B., gave voice to Mother Placid.

As the photographs of the wood carvings gently moved across the screen, the handwork of the carver became clear. Each picture of the stunning Station tableaus that Mother Placid had carved inch by inch carried the audience deep into the Passion of Christ. According to Krimsky, Mother Placid referred to herself as an interpreter: "I didn't do them. God did. I'm not-trying to be humble, but they are touched by something more than me."

Upon entering Regina Laudis as a postulant in 1949, Patricia Ann Dempsey was the first American member of the new Benedictine monastery. She was an extrovert who gave life to one of Saint Benedict's principles as articulated in the 53rd chapter of his Rule: "Let

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all guests that come be received like Christ, for he will say: 'I was a stranger and ye took me in.'"

Conversations about Mother Placid overheard during the book launch reception revealed that she gave comfort and joy to friends and strangers throughout her life. She sprinkled inspiration throughout the Abbey. Mother Placid was, and still is, beloved.

Early in her monastic life, as her artistic endeavors flourished, Mother Placid was introduced to children's illustrator Tomie dePaola, who was considering becoming a Benedictine monk. At the behest of his parish priest, he came to visit the Benedictine nuns. Although dePaola did not become a monk after all, he and Mother Placid became good

friends who nurtured each other's artistic souls.

Slowly, even tentatively, in the mid-1960s Mother Placid began to carve the Stations of the Cross. Krimsky tells the story of how she set aside her work. It was not until newly professed nun Mother Dolores Hart insistently asked her mentor about a trap door beneath her desk that Mother Placid shared hidden artistic work, including a hand-carved Station of Mary holding Jesus. Fortunately, Reverend Mother

Benedict Duss, O.S.B., the Abbey's foundress, encouraged Mother Placid to complete the Stations of the Cross carving project.

Just as Mother Dolores Hart had rescued the Station carving project from the floorboards, it was Mother Abbess David Serna, O.S.B., who had the vision for a book. According to Mother Subprioress Margaret Georgina Patton, "Abbess David was the one who said there should be a book, that people would be helped so much if they could take away the Stations and pray them elsewhere, not just in our chapel."

The seed of this vision for a meditative book on the Stations of the Cross grew organically as author George Krimsky's friendship with Mother Placid deepened. Their friendship was an unlikely one. George's career as a global correspondent spanned more than 40

years and took him from the World News desk at AP headquarters in New York to the Soviet Union and later the Middle East. In 1978 he was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. Soon thereafter he became editor of AP's World News Services. In 2009 the Academy of New England Journalists awarded him its highest honor, the Yankee Quill Award, for his body of professional work. Having returned to his hometown of Washington, Connecticut, George ended his journalism career as the community journalist he was at the beginning, unearthing small-town stories he loved.

But it was a 2005 article he wrote about Regina Laudis for the *Waterbury Republican-American* that captivated this global corre-

spondent. According to his wife, Paula, George was enchanted by this group of Benedictine nuns who lived their contemplative life through prayer and manual labor. Their praise of God within the earthy realities of farm and craft work astounded George. He made repeat visits to the Abbey, using his favorite phrase, "Now let me get this straight . . .," as this humanitarian journalist came to know these Benedictine nuns as friends.

Mother Placid had a way of giving to others so that they were learning from her while she herself learned from them. The project of capturing the heart of Mother Placid in words for posterity was a labor of love for George. It would be his last journalistic project before he died in 2017. His bond with Mother Placid had been so special that he was asked to be a pallbearer at her funeral.

Internationally known photographer Patrick de Warren has used his award-winning professional skills to translate Mother Placid's magnificent three-dimensional wood carvings into photographs just as beautiful as the sculptures themselves. De Warren is the grandnephew of Mother Mary Aline Trilles de Warren, O.S.B., who was co-foundress of the Abbey of Regina Laudis. His photography of the Stations of the Cross complements the text to create a book that is a gift of love and a testament to the creative work of Mother Placid.

The Abbey of Regina Laudis is in the final phase of its major New Horizons Renovation Project, for which they are still actively raising funds. Due to structural deterioration, the original chapel which housed Mother Placid's Stations of the Cross had to be razed. A new chapel will ensure that Mother Placid's labor of love has a home far into the future. In the meantime, *The Artist Remembers: Mother Placid and the Stations of the Cross* is available through mail order or in person at the Hickory Stick Bookshop [(860) 868-0525] so that all can "take away the Stations and pray them elsewhere," just as Abbess David hoped.

*Jane M. Bailey is a freelance writer who lives in Litchfield, Connecticut. She is the retired provost of Post University. Further information about The Artist Remembers, the New Horizons Renovation Project, and other items related to the Abbey of Regina Laudis is available at the abbey's website at <http://www.abbeyofreginalaudis.org>.*