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## NEWS

# Pageantry and liturgy mirror religious Community's values

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The religious group unveiled its plans in 1991 for a big, stone church, retreat center and rehearsal hall on its 10-acre site overlooking the small fishing port on Cape Cod Bay.

The size and setting of the original project, dubbed "the cathedral," launched a conflict that lasted for years.

Nine years later, the fighting is over.

Yesterday the communities, church and town, mingled at the dedication of a smaller stone church, the Church of the Transfiguration, a symbol itself of both permanence and change.

"Once you start building a stone church, you're not a transient community anymore, and then you have to ask, 'Who are we?'" said Ron Minor, the Community's subprior and second in command. "We're grateful to the town for stopping us. The process of answering such questions has made the new church explain more about who we are."

Former critics were among the guests invited to the celebration.

"I think there's been a very marked mellowing of the relationship between the Community and the towns," said Selectman Richard Philbrick, among the early persistent critics. "You don't hear any more the vicious reaction from people who had separated from the Community. I would assume that there's no basis for it anymore."

He hasn't heard much, if any, reaction lately to the new church, redesigned "so that it doesn't seem to have the overpowering posture" over scenic Rock Harbor, he said. "It was a considerable improvement."

Not everybody is at peace.

"It just goes from bad to worse," said neighbor Reid Kolman, comparing the new church to "a three-story chicken brooder" because of a blue glow from its windows.

But she agreed there is little talk about the church, "because I think people have given up."

In the beginning

The religious group had been pretty much a mystery since founders Cay Anderson and Judy Sorenson turned the Andersons' guest house at Rock Harbor into a retreat center in the mid-1960s.

Monastic community? Short-lived cult? Upper-class retreat? Place of worship? There was no shortage of rumors as the founders' prayer groups, faith healing and evangelizing tours of New England through the 1970s attracted worshipers who came to visit or live in Orleans.

Members brought their money, business expertise and talents to contribute to a Christian community where worship would be a part of their daily lives.

They wanted help to solve problems in their lives, with their marriages and their kids. Many bought or built houses in Rock Harbor, shared by more than one family for financial and religious reasons. The group's religious brothers and sisters live in dormitories near the church.

"You could be who you were, get help with what was going on," said Minor, once an assistant minister at a Presbyterian church in Cambridge. "The majority have stayed."

The Community now counts about 325 members.

The people who left were the larger community's major source of information about the Community of Jesus. Many complained about alleged physical and mental abuse, always denied by Community leaders.

"Is Cape Cod's Community of Jesus a benign religious retreat? Or an upper-class Episcopalian Jonestown?" asked a Boston Magazine article in 1981. In 1983 and 1985, the Cape Cod Times had its own series about claims of alienated members.

Supporters, in turn, described the group's religious counseling and discipline as reality therapy by a group willing to tackle difficult modern problems and help people in need.

"The Community has paid the price of taking that risk, over 20 years in the press," Kanaga said during a 1991 hearing.

To the larger community, the group was known for its marching band, for years the only band available for Orleans' July Fourth parade its July Fourth fireworks, discontinued this year, and its globe-trotting choir, Gloria Dei Cantores.

Both town and church got to know each other a lot better in the 1990s.

The agon the ecstasy

In early 1991, the Community unveiled its proposal for its new church and pretty much amazed everyone in town.

Its original Gothic granite building was 165 feet long, 65 feet high with 104-foot towers and the 165-foot-long building. The 540-seat granite church looked very different from the group's existing 260-seat church, which matched the village's wood buildings with white clapboards and shutters.

To critics, the building was too close to wetlands, too high and too big for its setting near historic and scenic Rock Harbor.

The Community badly needed a larger church, its attorneys said. The group needed more room for worshipers, but also the space for better acoustics for the religious group's worship and sacred music. They don't just worship on Sundays, but perform the divine offices in Gregorian chants in Latin every three hours, 24 hours a day.

Orleans boards and committees rejected the initial design. Neither Orleans or Eastham, across the harbor, had voted to create the Cape Cod Commission in 1990, but both towns referred the massive project to the 3-year-old regional commission for review. The commission eventually rejected a scaled-down compromise that showed a 55-foot-tall church and an 89-foot tower.

The project split the town more than life on a desert island is splitting the cast of "Survivor." More than 1,700 people, pro and con, attended local hearings on the project. In 1991, a grass-roots group called for a boycott of Community members' businesses and Community events.

Most townspeople agreed that there should be limits on church buildings, judging from a 1992 town meeting vote. More than two-thirds of voters adopted height limits that would rule out churches and steeples that tall.

The Community sued, claiming the denial of its plans had violated its constitutional right to religious freedom, another unresolved theme during the years of controversy.

"This congregation can't express its beliefs or accommodate its liturgy in a building the size and shape of a house," said lawyer Christopher Kanaga, also a church member. "If you dictate that churches henceforth must be of clapboard, or be the size of the house next door, you are dictating the type of religion practice and not just the type of buildings to be built."

No such issue was at stake, opponents argued.

"We don't look at this at all as a constitutional issue," said then-Eastham Selectman David Humphry. "It's an abutter wishing to locate a structure that would have an undesirable effect on the neighborhood."

Changing hearts, designsThe court suit ended in a negotiated settlement in 1993, with a design for a 55-foot-tall church and 75-foot tower. The building was moved inland, away from the harbor, with plans to use other buildings as a partial screen.

Townpeople waited for the Community to start building. The official word was that the group was researching the church's interior design. But actually the group "had run into a dead-end," spokesman Blair Tingley said during a recent interview. "There was an engineering and logistical problem in making it happen. It wasn't working."

The group looked outside for advice. It was a huge step for the Community, after the years, more emotions invested in the existing project.

Boston architect Bill Rawn developed the current design after asking the group to define its goals and identity. The result was a revelation for the group, Kanaga said.

Rawn's design, based on the Roman basilica shape and 3rd-century Christian usage, dovetailed with the group's ecumenical approach, expressed in its Gregorian chant and other traditions that predate the breakup of the Western Christian church.

The building committee specifically didn't want the design to derive from or suggest any specific later Christian denomination. White clapboards, for instance, would denote the New England Protestant tradition.

Unlike the first design, looming over the harbor, the new one centered around an inner courtyard in the heart of the Community compound. A bell tower, rehearsal hall and retreat center will complete the square in the future.

The 1995 design raced through local boards. Construction began in late 1997.

Cost, mission still raise questions

Some of the questions haven't gone away. The church's cost still raises eyebrows. The group expects to spend \$9 million to \$12 million, an estimate that covers some of the unusual artwork, such as frescoes, mosaics and stonework, that will take years to complete.

"We've had good friends of the clergy saying, 'what are you doing, spending all this money on a church when you could be running a soup kitchen?" Minor said.

The question goes to the heart of the community's existence.

"Any church," Minor said, "should be a place where you can step out of the routine of life and experience God. The hope is that the larger community also will come and worship with us and step into a little taste of heaven."

Minor said the questioning clergyman came back to him recently, after seeing the new church, and said he now understood.

The Community of Jesus is now led by Prioress Betty Pugsley who, using her maiden name, Elizabeth Patterson, also leads the Gloria Dei Cantores. She is elected by the group's 325 members, who still share about 36 nearby homes or live, as religious brothers and sisters, in dormitory housing near the new church.

"We grew fastest in the 1970s and plateaued recently," Minor said. He leads the new-members class, which has seven people, all but one from within the church community.

"We're not growing from the outside. I think that will change with the new church," Minor said.

