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Photographs by BRIAN YARBER BRNO / Los Angeles Times
A HAVEN LOST: Brother Nicholas Rademiller examines the charred remnants of Mt. Calvary Monastery. The 25-acre site, established in 1947, was swept by flames in November as the Tea fire raged through Montecito.

Contemplating a ruined monastery's next life

Montecito's Mt. Calvary burned last year. Its Episcopal monks, members of a tiny order, face a host of hurdles if they rebuild.

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 REPORTING FROM
 MONTECITO, CALIF.

Brother Nicholas Rademiller tolled the bell amid the ruins of the Mt. Calvary Monastery, but no worshipers were there to hear it.

Down the mountainside, workers revved up their chain saws as homeowners burned out by November's devastating Santa Barbara wildfires prepared to rebuild. But at the monastery on a promontory 1,250 feet above the sea, acres of rubble awaited the bulldozers that are to arrive this week.

The fire that swept through on the night of Nov. 13 melted the chalices used for prayer. It incinerated the flowing white habits worn at services by the seven Episcopal monks who lived there. It roared through the kitchen that fed as many as 35 guests, the long dining room that looked out over the canyons, the garden with its stonework and planted labyrinth, the deck where over the years thousands of seekers gazed upon mountains and into themselves.

Whether the tiny Order of the Holy Cross — with only about 50 monks worldwide — will rebuild is unknown. The monks of Montecito are in the same uncomfortable limbo as many a California homeowner whose dreams have been terminated by natural disaster. Whether insurance and donations would cover the cost of construction is



RESPIRE: Brothers of the Order of the Holy Cross and others share tea and cakes at St. Mary's Retreat House in Santa Barbara.

an open question — as is the prudence of rebuilding in a spot that was so dramatically proved vulnerable to wildfire.

Their 25-acre haven consists mostly of steep slopes that would be difficult to build on. It's high above one of the priciest communities in America — "We look down our noses at Montecito," joked Brother Nicholas, the monastery's prior — but the monks say they don't know

its value because an appraisal has not been completed.

The order is also grappling with its future. Monasteries are not a growth industry, even in beautiful spots with drop-dead views.

"We're considering the age of members of the order," said Brother Nicholas, a 69-year-old former parish priest. [See Monastery, Page B5]

[Monastery, from Page B1]

"Younger men are coming in, but not at the rate they once did."

Leaders of the 125-year-old order met in Santa Barbara this week to weigh their next step. A decision will not be made until June, when a larger conclave gathers from the order's other monasteries, in West Park, N.Y.; Grahamstown, South Africa; and Toronto.

What is clear is the sense of loss that extends far beyond Episcopal monasteries, who opened Mt. Calvary to overnight visitors when it was established in 1947.

"It was a place where people could step out of their routine," said Brother Nicholas, who lived at the monastery for 18 years. "They could think and reflect. They could take a fresh look at their lives."

Last week, Brother Nicholas, a 69-year-old former parish priest, went back up to his old home for just the third time since the fire.

For the time being, he and some of the other brothers who resided there are staying at a Santa Barbara retreat house run by the Sisters of the Holy Nativity, an order of Episcopal nuns.

At the monastery, Brother Nicholas slowly walked past the half-destroyed entryway, with its blackened frescoes of the Virgin Mary and St. John. He surveyed a tangle of charred timbers and smashed tiles, a fallen wall crushing what had been the chapel, an airy room with windows that looked toward the sea.

Nearby, a stylized, 20-foot wrought-iron cross poked through the ashes of what had been a garden. A couple of graceful Romanesque arches were, inexplicably, left standing, supporting nothing.

"This was our sun porch," Brother Nicholas said, his voice low. "People stayed out here all the time and read and drank coffee and watched the sunsets."

Prayer and Benedictine tradition lay at the heart of the monastery but were never pushed on the 3,000 or so people who stayed the night each year. Visitors came for the tranquility. They came to make decisions about their careers, their marriages, their paths in life. If they wanted to join the brothers in prayer when they gathered four times daily, they were welcome.

"You could take part in it or not, depending on your mood," said Sallie Reynolds, a retired private school administrator who lives in Ojai. "Just hearing them chant the Psalms was quite wonderful and transformative in itself."

On the night of the fire, 30 leaders of local nonprofits were holding a retreat at the sprawling, hacienda-style monastery. As winds of 70 mph whipped flames over nearby ridges, the monks escorted their guests out, threw a few things in overnight bags for themselves and grabbed what valuables they could. Brother Nicholas said he toted out two late Renaissance paintings "because they were small enough to carry and happened to be in my line of sight."

Within minutes, it was all over.

Antique furniture was reduced to cinders, along with guest rooms that had been recently redone in a \$300,000 renovation. Miraculously, a tiny building housing an art studio



BRIAN VANDER BRUG Los Angeles Times

TOLL: Brother Nicholas Radelmiller rings the charred bell, which was used to call monks to prayer. Whether the tiny Order of the Holy Cross will rebuild is unknown. A decision will not be made until a conclave in June.

Contemplating a monastery's next life

was untouched — along with vivid religious paintings by Brother Joseph Brown, elaborate calligraphy by Brother Roy Parker and a cello played by Brother Nicholas.

But the things that remained also served as reminders of those that were lost.

A pile of half-ruined books — "Meditations with Mechtild of Magdeburg," "Seven Pre-Reformation Eucharistic Liturgies" — lay in the parking lot. Still, the monastery's 15,000-volume library was gone. The bell that called people to prayer withstood the flames, but an ornate, gilded altarpiece from 18th-century South America did not.

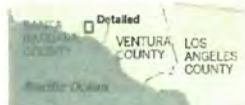
In the garden, Brother Nicholas paused by a shriveled, brown Australian tea tree. A plaque on a nearby boulder at-

tests that he planted it on his birthday four years ago "in thanksgiving for 65 years of life."

These days, he is not planting trees but trading calls with lawyers and insurance companies. Mt. Calvary was insured but "not adequately," he said. Without revenue from guests or the sale of Monk's Blend coffee, the brothers' accounts are dwindling.

But the order's associates — members drawn to its philosophy if not to monastic life — are helping out, and donations from former visitors have poured in. A fundraiser in Montecito — a reading by spiritual author Kathleen Norris — is set for Jan. 26 at All Saints by the Sea Episcopal Church.

Meanwhile, the monks, like hundreds of other Southern



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Californians wiped out by last fall's fires, are attempting to move on — at least in spirit.

"One is little surprised," Brother Nicholas said, "to realize how little one needs."

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