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.

Brother Nicholas Reddeliller called the bell amid the ruins of the Mt. Calvary Monastery, but no worshippers were there to hear it.

Down the mountainside, workers revved up their chainsaws as homeowners burned out by November's devastating Santa Barbara wildfires prepared to rebuild. But at the monastery on a promontory 1,200 feet above the sea, acres of rubble awaited the builders that were arrive this week.

The fire that swept through on the night of Nov. 8 melted the charcoal used for prayers, it incinerated the fencing white habits worn at services by the seven Episcopal monks who lived there. It rained through the kitchen that fed as many as 30 people, the gold dining room that looked out over the ocean, the gardens with its stonework and planted labyrinth, the deck where over the years thousands of visitors gazed upon mountainside and into themselves.

Whether the tiny Order of the Holy Cross — with only about 50 nave worldwide — will rebuild is unknown. The monastic 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 an open question — as is the presence of rebuilding in a spot that was so dramatically riven vulnerable to wildfires. These 56 acres remain dotted mostly of steep slopes that would be difficult to build on. It's high above one of the prettiest communities in America — "We look down our own at Montecito," joked Brother Nicholas, the monastery's prior — but the monks say they don't know its value became an appraisal has not been completed.

The order is now 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 49-year-old former parish priest. [See Monastery, Page B9]
Contemplating a monastery's next life

was untouched — along with vivid religious paintings by Brother Joseph Brown, elaborate calligraphy by Brother Roy Porter 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-read books — "Meditations with Meisterlin 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 attests that he planted it on his birthday 4 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 of not to monastic life — are helping out, and donations from former visitors have poured in. Among those in Montecito — a reading by spiritual author Kathleen Norris — is a $1,500 gift to the Sea Episcopal Church.

Meanwhile, the monks, like hundreds of other Southern Californians wiped out by last fall's fires, are attempting to move on — at least in spirit.

"One is not surprised," Brother Nicholas said, "to realize how little one needs."