

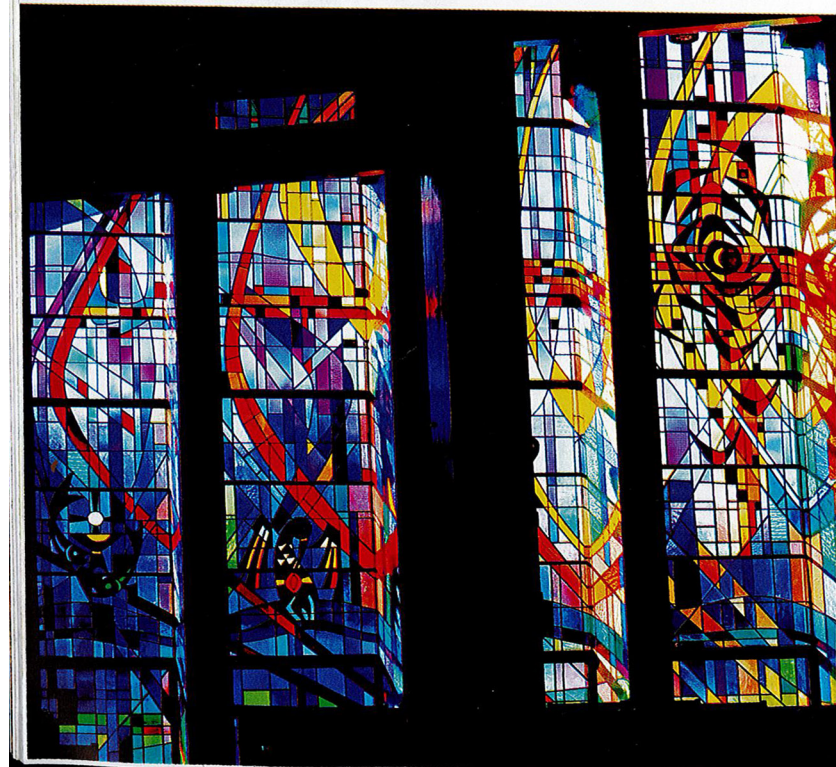


LINDA ROMEY

(clockwise from top) The sisters gather in the monastery for a liturgical celebration at Mount St. Benedict Monastery in Harborcreek Township, Erie County. A wooden cross stands on the edge of the snow-covered woods behind the monastery and is easily visible from the monastery's community rooms. Stained glass windows line both sides of the chapel and are intended to bring into sharp focus the unifying center of Benedictine community life.



JO CLARKE



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Sanctuary Serenity

Restore, reconnect and refresh at these Pennsylvania retreats

by Trill Dreistadt

PENNSYLVANIA HAS A NUMBER of sanctuaries where guests can go to find refuge and an escape from the pressures of contemporary life. On recent visits to two such havens in the western part of the state, I was greeted with warm hospitality and the opportunity to experience the monastic life of those who call these retreats home.

BENEDICTINE SISTERS OF ERIE

Situated on 100 acres on the banks of Lake Erie in Harborcreek Township, Erie County, **Mount St. Benedict Monastery** is home to 73 Benedictine sisters ranging in age from 31 to 106. The sisters can trace their origins to the Benedictine nuns at St. Walburg Abbey in Eichstatt, Bavaria, which was founded in 1035.



A contingency of nuns arrived in St. Marys in Elk County in 1852 to educate the children of newly arrived immigrants. In 1856, Mother Benedicta Riepp and five sisters from St. Marys journeyed to Erie to establish the first Benedictine community of women, which was located on East Ninth Street between Parade and German streets.

A newly constructed monastery opened its doors to the sisterhood and welcomed visitors from all walks of life. Today, this monastery continues to be a beacon of spirituality, hospitality and renewal for the region and the world.

“Our guests return time and again to experience restoration in their lives,” says Sister Linda Romey, coordinator of the Communications and Development Office for the monastery. “People need to periodically reclaim qualities or values they may have lost,

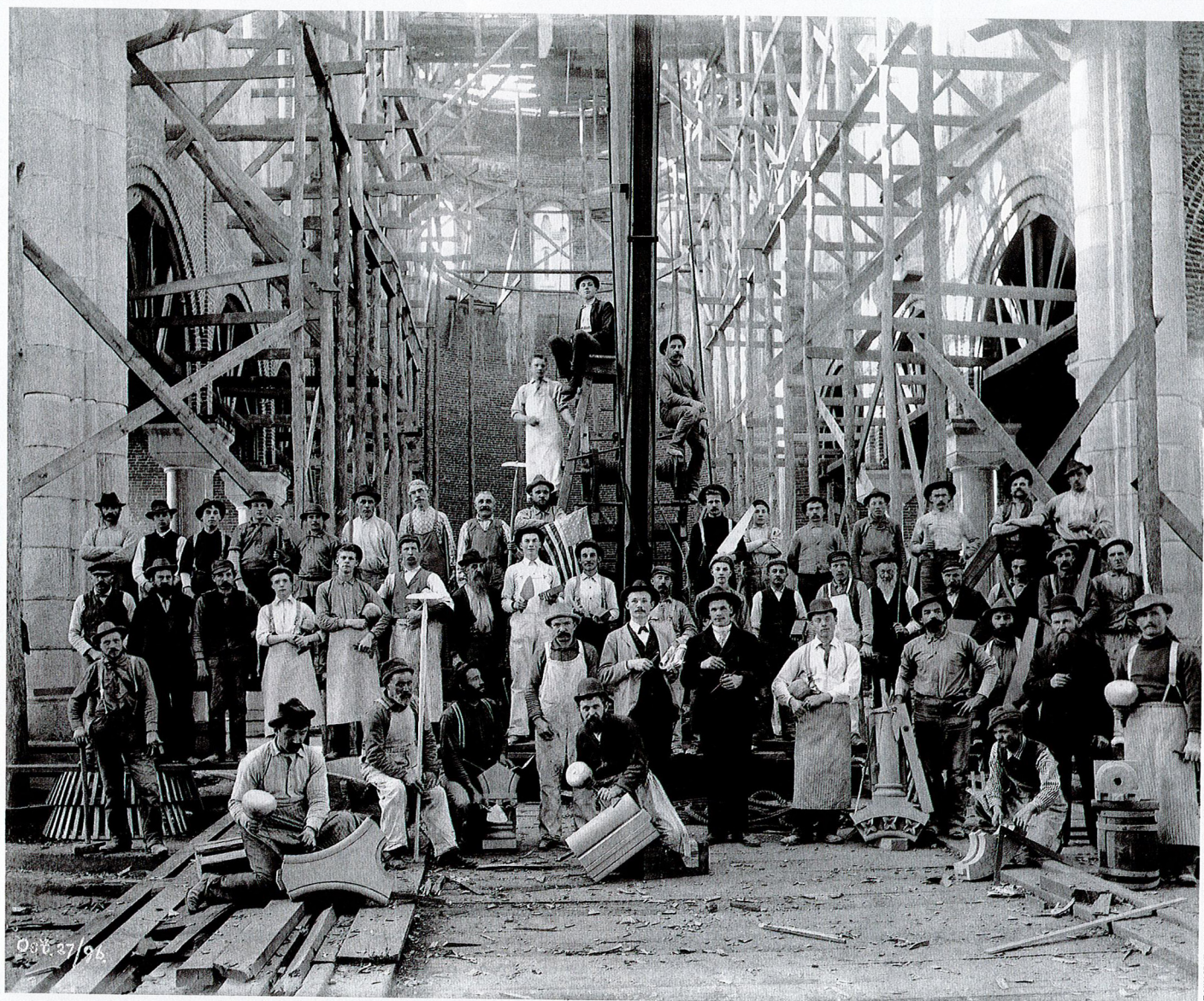
and we embrace the opportunity to share our home.”

Warm Hospitality

THE MONASTERY, FONDLY CALLED “the Mount,” was built in 1969. To raise funds for the building, a musical group called “Sisters ’66” was formed in 1966; they became so popular that they appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show in 1967.

Archivist Sister Theresa Zoky remembers Sullivan well. “Ed was nice and precise,” she says. “He insisted on exact timing to ensure the show ran smoothly.”

Fifteen guestrooms situated in one wing of the monastery attest to the sisters’ commitment to the tenet of St. Benedict extending hospitality to visitors as a cornerstone of their mission: A monastery is a place where guests are cherished and respected, where hearts overflow “with the inexpressible delight of love.”



ST. VINCENT ARCHABBEY ARCHIVES, CIRCA 1897

The workmen who built the Basilica represented a wide swath of nationalities and worked alongside Brother Wolfgang Traxler, O.S.B (Order of Saint Benedict). They had to abide by a set of rules governing their behavior. This rulebook was published in German, English, Polish and Slovak. In this image, workmen are holding tools associated with each of their trades.

The sisters truly believe that their community grows and is enriched because of the visitors among them. In 2023, the Mount welcomed 460 overnight guests from the tri-state area who came seeking a reprieve from the burdens of life.

“People come here to seek respite from their busy lives, find peace, relax their minds and have a fresh look at their lives,” Sister Karen Kosin, director of hospitality,

says. “We honor our code of hospitality and extend warm welcomes to visitors of all religious faiths from across the country and around the world.”

Though the average stay is two or three nights, many private retreat groups will stay for a week or two, enjoying the solitude and rhythm of a silent, peaceful place to recharge and refocus.

Guests seeking a more intensive opportunity for silence, solitude and privacy can reserve one of three hermitages nestled in the adjoining woods a five-minute walk from the monastery. With no TV, wi-fi, radio or cell service, the cottages provide guests the opportunity to listen to their inner voice and reflect.

“Our hermitages, which can accommodate one to four people, are very popular

and filled most of the time,” Sister Karen says. “Each has a fully equipped kitchen, heat and wooden decks that offer spectacular views of the surrounding woods. Guests have the option of fixing their own meals or joining the sisters for meals in the monastery dining hall.”

Also available to visitors is an apartment at Casita at Camp Glinodo, which is situated on the lakeside property across the road from the Mount. Since its opening in 1930, it has hosted many private retreats. Guests can walk the grounds through the woods along Seven-Mile Creek and down the boardwalk to the shores of Lake Erie.

Inside the Monastery

GUESTS ARE INVITED TO experience the daily life of the monastic community by

attending shared meals or participating in multiple prayer services held daily. The gardens, grounds, woods, the Garden of Memories and nearby Lake Erie offer further opportunity to relax within the wonders of nature.

Visitors are also free to enter the monestery chapel with its exquisite stained-glass windows, designed by Sister Mary Bernard Niebling. A library houses an eclectic display of fiction and non-fiction, a Franklin Library collection and space dedicated to select books, writings and journals of world-renowned author and lecturer Sister Joan Chittister.

The Chapter 57 gift shop, which was named for Chapter 57 of the Rule of Benedict governing the behavior of artisans, features exquisite original art of various media, including tiles, photography, mugs and clothing.

Visitors are often awed by the dazzling display of work by Brother Thomas Bezanson, a Benedictine monk known for his porcelain pottery created with complex glazes and purity of form. For 23 years, he was the artist-in-residence with the Benedictine Sisters of Erie. Upon his death in 2007, he left the monastery more than 100 pieces of his exquisite pottery.

The monastery's sewing room contains age-old wall holders for multiple spools of thread and classic Singer sewing machines, which the sisters continue to use today.

In the entryway, a journal resting on a side table is filled with notes written by thankful guests. "Thank you for your warm hospitality, your friendly welcome and acceptance, and sharing your amazing community with me," a guest named Ruth writes. "You have reminded me to be mindful, observing and delighting in nature—flowers, geese and gorgeous sunshine."

During my trip to the Mount, I met Marge and Neil Humber, longtime visitors to the monastery, who first came seeking retreat from the chaos of contemporary life.

"We felt drained by the demands of our lives and needed to recharge our batteries and find grounding," Neil says.

"The sisters' hospitality is an ongoing magnet for us," explains Marge. "We visit often and each time are welcomed enthusiastically. We feel like we have come home."

These visits have become so vital to the centeredness of their lives that the Humber have dedicated their time and energy to becoming oblates, a status within the monastic community that invites them to live as the sisters in accordance with monastic tenets. When they return home to Youngsville, Warren County, the couple carries on the work of St. Benedict by engaging in good works in their community.

Giving Back to the Community

SISTER LINDA EXPLAINS HOW the sisters have dedicated their lives to the "rule of hospitality" as codified by St. Benedict in the sixth century. "Essential to our code of hospitality is inclusion," she says. "We welcome all guests as friends; each enriches our community just by being with us."

Michelle Scully and Michelle Basista, who work with Sister Linda in the Communications and Development Office, credit much of the monastery's financial stability to the credo of hospitality that is integral to the sisters' belief that all guests are to be honored and welcomed.

"We have more than 2,000 benefactors representing gifts from almost all 50 states on a regular basis," Basista says. Many of these people were so inspired by their visits to the Mount that they continue to connect in meaningful ways.

The sisters also reach out to the Erie community. Last August, the monastery hosted the Goat Fest, which drew some 250 people for an afternoon of outdoor fun, including games and walking the trail through the lakeside grounds while watching goats clear the woods of invasive species. Jen Zeitler, goatherd and owner of Let's Goat Buffalo, provided presentations on earth-friendly methods of land preservation.

"We feel that events like this engage the community and help cultivate warm and meaningful relationships that connect people to the monastery's mission of hospitality," Scully explains.

Sister Carolyn Gorney-Kopkowski also seeks ways to take the Benedictines' commitment of hospitality to the city. She was the first director of Emmaus Soup Kitchen, a 50-year-old ministry in Erie that serves 200 meals a day six days

a week to people ranging in age from infants to seniors.

"All who come are offered nourishment for the body and care for the spirit," she says.

Another ministry of the Benedictine sisters is the Inner-City Neighborhood Art House, which provides free instruction in the performing, visual and literary arts to Erie children ages 7 to 18 through after-school and summer art activities. A nourishing lunch is available to these students at Sister Gus's Café.

ST. VINCENT ARCHABBEY

On the site of a 1790 Catholic parish in Westmoreland County, Boniface Wimmer of Bavaria founded St. Vincent Archabbey, College and Seminary in 1846. The first institution in the United States established by the monks of the Order of Saint Benedict, it is currently one of the largest Benedictine monasteries in the world. St. Vincent College, incorporated in 1870 by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, provides graduate and undergraduate curricula in the sciences and liberal arts.

A visit to this historic abbey combines education, history, hospitality and serenity. Situated on 1,000 acres overlooking the city of Latrobe, this spectacular complex comprises St. Vincent College (with an enrollment of 1,375 undergraduates and 170 graduate students), a monastery (designed by world-renowned architect Tasso J. Katselas), which houses more than 150 monks, and the Archabbey Basilica.

Brother Xavier O'Mara, a graduate student at St. Vincent College, captures the essence of hospitality offered onsite. "Our community of monks works together to create a welcoming community for all," he says. "Our serenity is our activity. It is through this work that we extend hospitality to the world around us."

Finding Sanctuary and Peace

BROTHER BRUNO HEISEY, THE Archabbey archivist, explains how the abbey offers peace to both the monks who live there and the guests whom they welcome.

"Our monks take a vow of stability, which means that St. Vincent Archabbey is our home no matter where our personal mission may direct us," he says.

OTHER PA SANCTUARIES TO VISIT

Pendle Hill

SITUATED ON 24 ACRES in a suburban neighborhood near Philadelphia, this Quaker center provides overnight accommodations for individuals or groups to spend time in contemplative silence reconnecting with their inner selves.

The grounds are open to the public daily, and guests are welcome to stroll the mile-long, wood-chipped trail that winds around sparkling ponds and 140 species of trees and shrubs. If time permits, stay for lunch or dinner featuring produce from the center's sustainable, organic garden. Bread, yogurt, granola and salad dressings are made from scratch daily.

Founded in 1930 by the Religious Society of Friends, the center embraces four tenets: equal opportunity, a simple environment, inward and outward harmony and the interdependence of individuals and the spirit within the community.

338 Plush Mill Road, Wallingford, Delaware County; 610-566-4507; pendlehill.org

Daylesford Abbey

THIS ABBEY IN THE CHESTER COUNTY countryside offers an oasis of peace for folks seeking spiritual renewal. The three-story annex contains large meeting rooms and comfortable guest rooms. Simply furnished spaces and delicious meals are ideal for personal retreat.

Guests are welcome to stroll the spacious grounds, which contain wildlife ponds, lush gardens, a springhouse chapel and the two-mile Fox Hollow trail. An extensive collection of spiritual books is available in the Abbot Killeen Library.

As part of its mission, the Archabbey serves 25 local parishes, runs a high school in Savannah, Ga., and sponsors mission priorities in Brazil and Taiwan.

"These assignments may take us far away," Brother Bruno says, "but the vow of stability anchors us to this place, our home for life, and brings us peace that we share with others."

Guests who come to the property are given the opportunity to rest and reconnect while staying in graciously appointed guest rooms that overlook splendid gardens, walkways and fountains.

The magnificent St. Vincent Archabbey Basilica, constructed between 1892 and 1905, dominates the campus. The building features 27 stained-glass windows that evoke spiritual meditation, two 55-foot spires and a trio of bells that ring regularly to herald the monks' gratitude for blessings and the commitment to serve. Eighteen columns of rose-colored granite support the massive roof structure and

The Catholic priests in this Norbertine community live a shared life in active service to the local community through teaching, parish work and retreat ministry.

220 S. Valley Road, Paoli, Chester County; 610-647-2530; daylesford.org

St. Raphaela Center

LOCATED IN A BEAUTIFUL Main Line stone mansion in Delaware County, this center offers private and shared bedrooms on three floors with single-, double- and triple-occupancy accommodations. The House of Hope, which can accommodate 15 guests, overlooks a labyrinth with stunning gardens, fountains and pathways. A sun porch provides views of the spacious backyard, which features greenery, a cascading waterfall and a swimming pool. Guests can visit the octagonal-shaped, glass-walled chapel, which provides breathtaking views of the outdoors. In the art studio, visitors may bring their own art materials or use those provided to create their own works.

The St. Raphaela Center was founded in 1957 with a mission to welcome people from all walks of life, all faiths and all ages who seek a place to rest, reflect and grow. The Roman Catholic women who reside there form an international community that believes their congregation should be universal. Since 1926, the center's handmaids have lived intercultural community lives.

616 Coopertown Road, Haverford, Delaware County; 610-642-5715; straphaelacenter.org

an arched ceiling that rises 68 feet.

Guests are invited to enter this place of contemplative silence to rest, restore and share in the daily prayer services with the monastic community.

The stillness of the Rare Book Gallery in the art gallery of the college library provides a look at the written word before Gutenberg invented the printing press around 1436. The Book of Kings, which was copied in Latin by monks in Gothic book hand in 1150 A.D. on vellum, is a breathtaking reminder that ancient history survives.

The historiated initial on the first leaf of the text displays St. Benedict handing his "rule of St Benedict," written in Italian in the 14th century, to a kneeling monk. Also on display in the gallery is Wimmer's notebook in which he recorded notes while attending the Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich in 1830.

Guests to the monastery can enjoy a tranquil stroll across the grounds of St.

Vincent Cemetery to visit the Mausoleum Chapel at the entrance, which provides a quiet space for meditation and contemplation.

The 50-acre Winnie Palmer Nature Reserve, named in honor of golfing legend Arnold Palmer's first wife, is located on the St. Vincent Archabbey campus. Visitors may explore woods, meadows, tall grass, wetlands and orchards along more than two miles of crushed limestone trails. The dog-friendly paths are open to the public every day from dawn to dusk. Picnic tables throughout the reserve invite visitors to pause, refresh and reflect on the wonder of the natural world.

Within the reserve, the Learning Center Barn, a spectacular wood-beamed structure dating back to 1879, has been relocated and reconstructed using 99% of the original barn materials. It houses a multitude of stuffed mounts, including turkey, coyote, bear and pheasant, alongside a cornucopia of other natural phenomena. In the Barn Owl gift shop, products from local artisans, nature discovery items, jewelry, field equipment and books are for sale.

The historic 1790 Lochry Blockhouse, which is located down a tranquil pathway from the Learning Center Barn, is the site of the annual Fall Fest, which focuses on military and homestead life during the 18th century. In August, the Sunset at the Barn event features cocktails, hors d'oeuvres and musical selections by saxophonist James Boggs.

Engaging Guests and Community

THE MONKS OFFER A variety of programs for guests to enjoy. Just a short walk from campus is the historic St. Vincent Gristmill, which has been in continuous operation since it was built by Benedictine monks in 1854. It includes a general store, museum and environmental education classroom for the college's Building Excellence Through Skills Training program.

In the viewing room, visitors can watch miller Brother Anselm and his helpers grind flour to make bread, which is served at each meal at the Archabbey and used in the St. Vincent baking ministry.

"During the Great Depression, the gristmill produced 8-pound loaves at a

(right) LED lights were recently installed in arches in the Basilica, giving the space a more dramatic appearance. (below) Brother Anselm Zhang, O.S.B., a Benedictine monk of the Archabbey, is the present-day miller at the St. Vincent Gristmill. He continues a tradition that dates back to 1854, when founder Boniface Wimmer and his fellow monks constructed the mill.

reasonable cost for community families who were struggling economically,” Brother Xavier says.

The gristmill store sells loaves of bread as well as an assortment of stone-ground flour, monk-made crafts, jams, local honey and coffee beans. Also for sale are nutritional artisanal bread, pastries and pies crafted by the monks using quality ingredients and time-honored techniques. Selections, which are gluten-free with no preservatives, include cinnamon raisin bread, buckwheat pancake mix and five-grain sourdough bread.

When Archabbot Wimmer founded the abbey in 1846, he encouraged the appreciation of drama as a vehicle for building self-confidence. This tradition continued, and in 1969, Father Tom Devereux founded the St. Vincent Summer Theater to have an impact on the artistic life of students and the surrounding community. Nationally recognized and local performers entertain guests and community enthusiasts with stage-stomping, energy-pumping fun for the whole family.

Following each performance, everyone is invited to a cabaret for refreshments and spirited conversation. The 2024 season includes such star attractions as *Cheek to Cheek: Irving Berlin in Hollywood* and the *Marvelous Wonderettes*, a jukebox musical comedy featuring pop songs from the 1950s and '60s.

Sports also have a place at the monastery and college. Rooney Hall, one of the residence halls, is named in honor of the late Arthur J. Rooney Sr., who was the founder of the Pittsburgh Steelers. Each summer since 1966, this hall becomes home to the Steelers during their summer training camp. Fans flock to the St. Vincent Archabbey and gather in the 1,000-seat stadium at Chuck Noll Field (named for the legendary Steelers coach) to watch and cheer on their favorite football players. ❖

—Trill Dreistadt lives in Erie.



SETH HARBAGH, SAINT VINCENT ARCHABBEY



KIM METZGAR, SAINT VINCENT ARCHABBEY

WHEN YOU GO

Mount St. Benedictine is located at 6101 E. Lake Road in Harborcreek Township, 13 miles east of Erie, Erie County. Overnight reservations can be made online or by calling 814-899-0614. eriebenedictines.org

St. Vincent Archabbey is located at 300 Fraser Purchase Road in Latrobe, Westmoreland County. Overnight accommodations can be made at info@saintvincentarchabbey.org or by calling 724-806-2139. saintvincentarchabbey.org
The worship service schedule for **St. Vincent Basilica**

Parish is available at basilicaparishstv.org. More information about the **Winnie Palmer Nature Preserve**, which is located on the St. Vincent Archabbey campus, can be found at wptr.org. For details about **Sunset at the Barn**, go to saintvincentarchabbey.org or call 724-805-2607. To purchase products from the **St. Vincent Gristmill** or learn of special dates for bake sales held throughout the year, visit saintvincentgristmill.com. A schedule for **St. Vincent Summer Theater** is available at stvincent.edu/summertheatre.