

## Miami's Medieval Wonder

Written by Erik Bojnansky, BT Senior Writer; Photos by Silvia Ros  
July 2019

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**The Ancient Spanish Monastery is starting to get noticed**  
**It may have taken 878 years, but the Ancient Spanish Monastery is finally getting the respect it deserves**



ather Gregory Mansfield has been assigned to many places during his 33-year service as an Episcopal priest. “I’ve been in west Missouri, been in New York, Massachusetts, Indiana,” he says.

But the most striking place he’s been is his current post at the Ancient Spanish Monastery in North Miami Beach. When Mansfield first came here in 2010, he was overwhelmed with the beauty and the history of this place. Nearly nine years later, he is still awestruck.

“Every time I walk through the gardens,” he says, “early in the morning, there’s butterflies and the sound of birds, and late at night, foxes running around. There’s just no place like it.”

Indeed, there aren’t many places in South Florida that can claim to have been built in the year 1141 during the High Middle Ages. For centuries, most of the stone blocks, statues, arches, window portals, and iron gates that make up the monastery were located in Spain. Then, in the

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1920s, under the direction of the eccentric American millionaire publisher William Randolph Hearst, it was taken apart piece by piece, shipped to the United States, stored in crates for a couple of decades, and reassembled in 1954 on a plot of land by a pair of real estate developers and history buffs at 16711 W. Dixie Hwy. in North Miami Beach.

By 1964 the Spanish Monastery, also known as St. Bernard de Clairvaux Church, was purchased by the Episcopal Church.



That's the short version of the 878-year history of the Ancient Spanish Monastery, a cultural tourist attraction, place of worship, museum, event venue, and backdrop for movies, television shows, and music videos.

The complete history of this monastery is complicated, involving tales of bankruptcy, double dealing, and a suicide. At various times in the 1960s and 1970s, it wasn't clear if the property was going to be taken over by the City of North Miami Beach or become a private development project.

More recently, the church has gone through some changes. On the negative side, the 12th-century stone statue of Alfonso VII, king of Galicia, Castile, and Leon, no longer has a head. In June 2016, a 33-year-old named Jorge Arizamendoza beheaded the statue with a sledgehammer, and then ran off. He returned a few days later to interrupt a church service and announce that he'd be back with a gun to kill Father Mansfield and the congregation.

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This time, as Arizamendoza left the chapel, he was tackled by North Miami Beach police officers. In February 2018, he was convicted on six felony counts and a misdemeanor, put on probation for three years, and fined \$1327. The probation started retroactively in December 2017 and ends in December 2020. Court records also show that he has been paying his fine in small installments.

But on the positive side, the monastery's staff and volunteers have added new roofs and flooring. They've revamped the dining area, installed new lighting and wiring, and planted a new garden. The gift shop, which also acts as a museum for pieces from Hearst's art collection, as well as letters and miscellaneous personal items, now has labels that explain the items on view.

Janie Greenleaf, who has attended services at the monastery since 1986 and currently serves as president of the Ancient Monastery Foundation, credits Mansfield's leadership for the improvements. "We needed a lot of repairs and upkeep," she tells the *BT*.

Mansfield says many of these improvements were due to work and in-kind donations given by volunteers and trustees (more on that later). However, an ancient monastery needs money, too, and lots of it. So under Mansfield's direction, the monastery enhanced its exposure by partnering with local organizations and the Greater Miami Convention and Visitors Bureau. With the monastery's increased publicity came more weddings, birthday parties, video shoots, tours, and even celebrity visits.

By Mansfield's estimate, 70,000 people now visit the Ancient Spanish Monastery every year. "Those people who are looking for cultural activities would, of course, go to Vizcaya, the Venetian Pool, the Deering Estate, Fairchild Tropical Gardens, and us," he says.

Mansfield won't say how much the monastery takes in each year with donations, wedding fees, and admission costs, although the website lists admission at ten dollars for adults, five dollars for students and seniors. Wedding fees start in the \$1500 range, and photo shoots are just a few hundred dollars. Maintaining and improving the property is a constant challenge, he adds.

The insurance alone is \$160,000 a year, Mansfield notes, while salaries of the handful of part- and full-time employees (including his own) is \$178,000 per year. "We're just scraping by the best we can," he says.

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The increased exposure isn't just about the facility's upkeep -- it's also about letting the community know there's an ancient monastery in their midst. Toward that end, besides three Sunday services, the monastery hosts concerts (jazz, classical, or "new world" spiritual), art fairs, food tastings, and family movie nights. About 2000 school kids also attend field trips to the monastery each year.

"Kids grew up here in Miami, and the oldest building in the Western Hemisphere is here," Mansfield says, "and they didn't know this was here."



Actually, there are buildings older than the Ancient Spanish Monastery in the Western Hemisphere. Carbon dating indicates that the ruins of the prehistoric settlement of Sechin Bajo in northern Peru was built around 3500 BC. The circular pyramid of Cuicuilco in a southern section of Mexico City was built sometime between 400 and 500 BC. Some of the buildings in Taos Pueblo, New Mexico, the oldest continually occupied settlement in the United States, are thought to have been built as early as 1000 AD. And there are remnants of Pre-Columbian Pueblo villages in the Southwest United States that are more than 1000 years old.

But the Ancient Spanish Monastery in North Miami Beach is slightly older than the *other* ancient Spanish monastery William Randolph Hearst bought -- Santa Maria de Óvila in Vina, California, about 100 miles north of Sacramento.

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Santa Maria was completed in 1167 and, like its North Miami Beach counterpart, was located in Spain until Hearst bought it and had it shipped in pieces back to the United States.

Alan Sokol, an historian of northeast Miami-Dade and board member of the Ancient Spanish Monastery Foundation, says Hearst had a tendency to buy things like art, temples, and monasteries when he felt bad. "He got the collecting bug from his mother," Sokol says.

King Alfonso VII, who fancied himself Emperor of Spain during a time when Spain was in fact split among various Christian and Muslim kingdoms, had another habit: He sponsored the construction of Cistercian monasteries (a Catholic religious order) on territory he controlled. Work on the monastery and cloisters of St. Bernard de Clairvaux in Sacramenia began in 1133 and was substantially completed in 1141. Assisting in its construction were Christian, Jewish, and Muslim masonry guilds, the marks of which can still be found on the stones that make up the Ancient Spanish Monastery. Its architecture is Romanesque early Gothic.

By 1492, Granada, the last Moorish kingdom, fell and most of Spain was united under a single Christian monarchy headed by King Ferdinand II of Aragon and Queen Isabella I, a descendant of King Alfonso VII. Besides bankrolling Christopher Columbus's voyage to the Western Hemisphere, this new monarchy also supported measures to force Jews and Muslims either to convert or leave Spain during the late 1490s and early 1500s.

As Spain went through changes, so did the monastery. Sometime in the latter half of the 12th century, St. Bernard received another statue, this one of King Alfonso VII's grandson, King Alfonso VIII, who had given the monks the rights to nearby salt mines during his reign as ruler of Castile and Leon. (Unlike the life-size statue of King Alfonso VII, the King Alfonso VIII statue still retains its head.) Other upgrades that occurred over the course of the next 600 years included wooden roofs being replaced by stone arches, as well as a second-story addition.

The decline of the monastery coincided with the decline of the Spanish Empire during the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815). During the 1830s, while Spain was mired in internal conflict, St. Bernard de Clairvaux was seized by the Spanish government and sold to private owners, who converted the monastery into a stable and granary.

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Almost a century later, St. Bernard de Clairvaux was discovered by Arthur Byrne, an architect who acted as an art agent for William Randolph Hearst, the newspaper tycoon whose sensational “yellow” journalism is said to have helped spark the Spanish-American War in 1898. Byrne sent photographs and reports of St. Bernard to Hearst, who had already transplanted an ancient Roman temple from Italy to the pool area of his Hearst Castle estate in San Simeon, California.



Figuring that St. Bernard would complete the motif of his gigantic Neptune pool, Hearst in 1925 wired \$500,000 to buy the former monastery. Hearst then paid tens of thousands of dollars to take the medieval structure apart, build a railroad to transport the pieces to the coast, and bribe Spanish officials to allow those pieces to be sent to the United States.

Then in 1930, Hearst bought the second monastery, Santa Maria de Óvila, in Trillo, in the Spanish province of Guadalajara. It was reportedly slated for another castle Hearst planned to build in northern California. Local historian Sokol says he's seen records that indicate Hearst may have purchased a third Spanish monastery called Alcantara, though details on that purchase remains elusive.

If Alcantara was purchased and taken apart, it is likely in crates somewhere, just like St.

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Bernard and Santa Maria were before they were reassembled. But Hearst was heading into bankruptcy and forced to sell off much of his art collection by the late 1930s, and hardly anyone wanted a Spanish monastery that required assembly.

Hearst ended up giving Santa Maria to San Francisco, whose city leaders planned to reassemble it in Golden Gate Park as part of a modern art museum. But that project stalled and the stones remained in crates inside the park, which caught fire twice. In 1994, a Cistercian order of monks in Vina (population 237) persuaded the City of San Francisco to give them the crates. After raising \$7 million in donations, and with the assistance of Sierra Nevada Brewing Company, the monks finally reassembled Santa Maria's chapter house -- a monastery's main meeting area -- at New Clairvaux Monastery in 2012.

St. Bernard, on the other hand, was destined to head to South Florida, though a deal wasn't brokered overnight.



The common historical narrative, as reported in local newspapers, is that real estate developers E. Raymond Moss and William Edgemon paid Hearst's estate \$19,000 for around 36,000 stones in 10,751 crates in 1952, as well as various Hearst art items and memorabilia, a year after Hearst had died. Moss even told the *Miami Herald* in January 1954 that he'd negotiated with Hearst for a decade, but that Hearst was reluctant to see his "greatest art treasure" carted off to the Sunshine State. According to Moss, Hearst told him: "What would the people of California think of me if I let it go to Florida?"

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However, a couple of 1946 *Miami Herald* articles reported that an Orlando-based business networking group called the Florida State Bureau of Publicity, headed by real estate broker L.A. Schroeder Sr., paid \$10,000 for the monastery and sought investors willing to contribute the \$150,000 Schroeder insisted was needed to transport those pieces to Florida and put them together for a lucrative tourist attraction.

In the summer of 1946, Schroeder asked the City of Miami for the money so the structure could be rebuilt on land the municipality owned in North Miami that was reserved for a proposed permanent world's fair that would later be known as Interama.

Besides his Interama pitch, Schroeder took out at least one ad in the *Herald* soliciting investors, and he wrote a series of letters to Moss asking for a \$100,000 investment. "We believe this, the oldest structure in the Western Hemisphere, will be the largest and most appealing attraction in Florida," Schroeder wrote in a March 1946 letter to Moss. "We estimate a minimum of 100,000 visitors a year. At \$1 per adult, children free, it wouldn't take long to clean the slate of debts."

Schroeder died in his sleep in October 1952 at the age of 67, just four months after the *Herald* reported that Moss and Edgemon were shipping an "811-year-old Spanish castle" to "North Miami." Actually, the site was a 20-acre palm tree nursery on West Dixie Highway in North Miami Beach that Moss and Edgemon purchased. (The monastery campus, which is just south of the city-owned Arthur I. Snyder Tennis Center, is now six acres in size. Exactly when the property shrank and why could not be ascertained by deadline.)

Why build a monastery in a bedroom community like North Miami Beach? Alan Sokol thinks it's because it was in close proximity to the 1700-acre Interama site near Biscayne Boulevard and 151st Street. Interama was expected to attract thousands of tourists, and Sokol is sure that Moss and Edgemon were hoping to attract some of those visitors. When Interama looked like it was going to implode in June 1956, Moss loaned the Inter-American Center Authority \$25,000 to keep it afloat. A month later, in July 1956, he and Edgemon sold 411 acres of land across the street from Interama for \$2.3 million.

But putting the monastery back together turned out to be much harder than flipping real estate.

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Unbeknownst to Moss and Edgemon, there was a hoof-and-mouth disease epidemic in the Spanish province of Segovia in 1925. So when the monastery shipments arrived, U.S. Customs made Hearst's operatives open up all the crates, burn the hay that had been used as packing material, and wash the stones with diluted disinfectant. In the process, detailed assembly instructions and labels were erased.

Using Byrne's photographs as a guide, it took 19 months and \$1.5 million to solve what the *Herald* called "the world's biggest jigsaw puzzle." Adding to the challenge was the fact that Hearst didn't bring the *entire* monastery to America. While the chapter house was transported in its entirety, a two-story addition was left behind, and only chunks of the chapel and cloister were sent to the United States. As a result, Moss and Edgemon used limestone rock quarried from local rock mines to complete the monastery.

"This is sort of like a Franken-building," explains historian Sokol during a recent visit to St. Bernard. "Most of this stuff is old, but some [parts] they had to fill."

There were decent crowds when the Ancient Spanish Monastery opened, but it never attracted the 100,000 visitors Schroeder predicted. In short, the monastery was losing money from the start.

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Less than six years after opening the monastery, 67-year-old Moss was found dead in his Miami Shores home after overdosing on barbiturates. His death was ruled a suicide. Sokol says that Moss was frequently treated for depression. According to the *Herald*, Moss was worried about his physical health and stressed about his finances. He reportedly owed the IRS \$400,000.

His business partner, Edgemon, wasn't on secure financial footing, either. He owed lenders hundreds of thousands of dollars, and offered his ownership of the monastery to two different creditors as collateral in an action that a 1975 appellate court later called fraudulent. When he sold the monastery to the Episcopal Diocese of South Florida in December 1964, the church paid his creditors around \$400,000.



After the deal closed, the chapel, which was previously used as a museum and gift shop, was turned back into a church. And the museum pieces were moved into the office, built in the 1950s, on West Dixie Highway.

Just four years later, the Episcopal Diocese of South Florida split into three groups, due to the

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increase in Episcopal and Anglican worshipers in the area, and the new Tri-Diocesan Council wanted to sell the monastery.

“You can’t split the building into three,” Sokol explains. “The only thing you can do is sell it and divide the money.”

An internal analysis conducted by the church in the late 1960s also showed that the monastery was a financial liability. “You have the property, you have a moral obligation to maintain it, and that’s expensive,” Sokol remembers the report’s conclusion, “and to try and operate it as a tourist attraction didn’t work before.”

Nevertheless, the church did get offers in the early 1970s. Dade Christian School in Hialeah expressed an interest in building a second private school on monastery grounds. Another real estate developer proposed a retirement facility. And prolific Canadian developer Louis Schreiber of Sherdak Developers Corp. offered \$500,000 for the monastery property in order to build a 300-unit residential building.

In spite of *Miami Herald* reports that ominously warned of the monastery being demolished, Schreiber stated he wanted to give St. Bernard to the city, free of charge, in exchange for the zoning to build 300 apartments on the “residual land.” But the City of North Miami Beach didn’t grant any rezoning for the property. Instead it worked with the county to obtain a state grant to buy it. That grant never came through.

Upon hearing that the diocese intended to sell the monastery, wealthy philanthropist Robert Pentland is reported to have uttered, “I don’t believe this property shall pass from the hands of the Lord.” Pentland offered the diocese a \$400,000 donation, but only if it promised never to sell the land to another entity. Also, Sokol says, he demanded that the land be controlled directly by the congregation of St. Bernard.

In September 1973, the church accepted Pentland’s gift. Pentland died about six years later at the age of 79. As for Edgemon, he moved to Tucson, bought several mines, and spent his last years hunting for the final resting place of the Apache warrior Geronimo, according to an April 2010 article on the Christian website *Assist News Service*. The article was written by the grandson of the woman Edgemon dated in Tucson. He died in 1978.

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esides pending land deals and a last-minute save, something else happened during the 1970s. The monastery was once again home to a small band of Cistercian monks who were living in a nearby house. Those monks became known as the salad monks because they made and sold salad dressing. Their stay at the monastery ended when their salad dressing operation was scrutinized by code enforcement.

Mother Ann Goraczko, associate rector at St. Bernard, never really noticed the salad monks in 1979. Back then, Goraczko wasn't a pastor, but a Sunday school teacher and regular parishioner focused on keeping an eye on her toddler son. But Goraczko found out she had met one of the monks before.

"I lived in Gainesville," she says, "and one of the monks was someone I knew in Gainesville."

Goraczko had visited the monks' house once in the 1980s, when it was used as a residence for St. Bernard's priest, Father Bruce Bailey. That house isn't around anymore. "Father Bailey was attacked in the house by burglars," she remembers, "so the congregation decided it wasn't a safe building and had it torn down."

Janie Greenleaf, a retired college administrator, says she fell in love with St. Bernard when she

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first attended church services at the monastery 33 years ago.

"I love it here. I got married here," she says. But Greenleaf soon realized that the monastery's largest donors were dying off.

"I was concerned that the few people who were economically able to support the monastery were no longer here," Greenleaf recalls. "So there was a need to extend our offerings and tours in order to sustain this legacy. It's a gift from the past and very expensive to maintain."

Goraczko says Greenleaf was instrumental from the start in raising funds for needed repairs. "She wrote a grant request and got a grant to fix the roof," Goraczko recalls, "and it wasn't the last time."

Father Mansfield says when he first arrived nine years ago, the staff, parishioners, and trustees were doing the best they could with what they had to work with. But in 2010, Florida was still reeling from the Great Recession and money was scarce. "People had lost their life savings, their homes, and there was no extra money to help the church," Mansfield recalls. At the same time, the monastery had critical problems that needed to be addressed. The electrical wiring, for example, hadn't been updated since 1953, and the aged cloth sleeves that surrounded the wirings were potential fire hazards.

In response "we did what any church or nonprofit group does -- you call forth your best ideas." Mansfield held meetings with the trustees to develop plans and goals. "Where do we want to be in five years? Ten years? What is our mission, and how do we get there? We began to reimagine how to do things at the monastery."

Among the priorities was to partner with local organizations. "As soon as I became the rector, I got us involved with the Aventura Marketing Council and the North Miami Beach Chamber of Commerce. We hosted events for the City of North Miami Beach," Mansfield says. The North Miami Police Department was invited to do its pre-shift roll-call briefings in the monastery's gardens, and the Aventura Police Department trained their K9 units at night.

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For the first time, the monastery became a member of the Greater Miami Convention and Visitors Bureau, and through that membership, Mansfield was able to promote the monastery as a local attraction to cruise ships docking at PortMiami and Port Everglades.

“Rather than take them to Aventura Mall, this would be an interesting alternative,” he recalls.

GMCVB members also gave Mansfield alerts about producers scouting out local film locations. This was how Mansfield was able to find out that the Travel Channel's *Booze Traveler* was looking to do an episode in Miami. After learning how monks made mead out of harvested beehive honey, Mansfield pitched the idea to

*Booze Traveler*

. “Jack Maxwell, [

*Booze Traveler*

's host] loved the idea.”



That exposure led to additional film shoots at the monastery, which led to more wedding and quinceañeras bookings. When pop star Britney Spears was maid of honor for one of her dancers at a wedding held at the Spanish Monastery, her photograph was promoted on Instagram.

“It's been very exciting that younger artists and musicians have been captivated by the history of the monastery, its architecture, and gardens,” Mansfield says, adding that music entrepreneur Rick Ross, Tiger Woods, Gloria Estefan, and Mexican pop star Cristian Castro have all been visitors to the Ancient Spanish Monastery.

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The increase in visitors, special events, and film shoots has helped pay for many of the improvements at the monastery. More, however, needs to be done, including replacing a chain-link fence along Snake Creek canal, resurfacing the parking lot, installing more LED lights, and replacing a lawn sprinkler system that hasn't worked in 15 years. "There are so many things we'd like to do, but frankly we [still] just don't have the money," Mansfield laments.

At the same time, he stresses that a lot of what has already been done at the monastery was in large part the result of donations from all segments of the surrounding community. For instance, much of the vegetation that was recently planted on the grounds, including a primitive labyrinth, was donated by Aventura property manager Denis Rudnev. The garden layout was designed pro bono by NMB city planner Carlos Rivero. A curriculum on the monastery's history for educational field trips was designed by Nova Southeastern adjunct professor Daniel Markarian. And a 100-year-old bell from Haiti that adorns the monastery's entrance was donated by the Haitian community.

And that's just some of the volunteerism at the monastery, which includes toy and book drives, drives for eyeglasses, volunteer guides, event planners, and even historians from people of all faiths, Mansfield says.

"From time to time people credit me with the changes that have been made, but that's simply not true," he adds. "Anybody who has been involved with us knows that this kind of work takes the whole tribe, the whole village, to truly make a difference and bring about change."

*Feedback: [letters@biscaynetimes.com](mailto:letters@biscaynetimes.com)*