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St. Augustine Campus
Faculty of Humanities and Education
Caribbean Studies Project
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Title of Thesis:

A History of the Mount St. Benedict Abbey in Trinidad

Word count: 8,000

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the developments, attractions, and contributions of the Mount Benedict Abbey. From its inception when the monks under the leadership of Abbot Dom Mayeul who came from Brazil seeking refuge from religious persecution to the service it currently provides to the public, both spiritually and recreationally. The Abbey is managed by the Benedictine monks who follow a specific Benedictine Order. Their motto is work and prayer. Through dedication and perseverance, the monks developed most of the Abbey. Throughout the years, the monks continued to establish the area. Soon after, it became an admired and acclaimed site. The main attraction of the Abbey, however, is its location. This peaceful and calm site, chosen by the founder, has become the most popular tourist attraction, both internationally and locally. Over the years, the monks in the Abbey have originated from across the globe. Surprisingly, even World War 2 veterans who later became monks from European countries found solace in this secluded Abbey. This research was mainly done using primary sources such as newspapers and interviews due to a limited amount of secondary sources written on the Mount. Nonetheless, the main aim of this study is to fill the historical gaps of the Mount St. Benedict Abbey by recognizing and acknowledging various developments and their creators.

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INTRODUCTION

Thesis Statement

The process by which the Mount St Benedict Abbey in Trinidad has been constructed, the relevance of its location and the contributions of those involved in its development have not been but ought to be historicized.

The Parameters of the Study

This study will focus mainly on the history of the Mount St. Benedict Abbey, and the target group will be the monks and priests who have lived there. The timeline of this study is 1912, which was its inception, to the present 2022. This study will be limited only to the north Trinidad since the Abbey is located upon the Northern Mountain Range of Trinidad. Also, other churches would not be a part of this study due to the fact that Mount St. Benedict is the only Abbey in Trinidad.

The Objectives of the Study

The central aim of this study is to discover why this monastery was built, why it is located on a hill, why it was made into an Abbey, and why it is the only Abbey in Trinidad. By conducting research into this subject, a greater understanding of the operations of Roman Catholicism in Trinidad will be revealed.

Chapter Outlines

In this study there will be three main chapters in the body. In the first chapter, the focus would be primarily on the monastery's inception and how the monastery has evolved from 1912 to the present 2022. The proposed title for this chapter is 'A Time Line History of the Abbey'. In the second chapter, the focus will be on its location in the Northern Mountain Range. The proposed

title of this chapter is ‘Upon a Far Hill’. The third chapter will focus on and recognize those who have lived and continue to live in the Abbey and how they have impacted the monastery in one way or another. The proposed title of this chapter is ‘The Untold Stories of the Abbey’.

Description of Methodology

The method of qualitative research would be used to analyze the information gathered for this study. Interviews will be conducted since there are people willing and able to provide insight on the history of Mount St. Benedict. Primary sources such as original documents providing information on the early history of the monastery will also be examined and secondary sources will be interrogated for the information they provide on the establishment of the Mount St Benedict Abbey in St Augustine, Trinidad.

CHAPTER ONE

Conceptual Framework

This study is part of a larger and broader research in terms of the religious groups in Trinidad. Trinidad is made up of different multi-ethnic religious groups. There are Roman Catholicism, Hinduism, Anglicanism, Methodist, Presbyterian, Spiritual Baptist and Islam. The Abbey is part of the larger framework of Christian churches in Trinidad. To narrow this even further, the Abbey is specifically part of the Roman Catholic fraternity in Trinidad. Roman Catholicism was introduced to the Caribbean, specifically Trinidad, by the Spanish as they colonized the island and other parts of the Caribbean from the late 15th century. This settlement signified the Spanish influence on development in Trinidad which automatically led to the erection of Roman Catholic churches. In Trinidad mainly, according to Dr. Bernard Tappin, the first church was built in 1592 by Antonio De Berrio in St. Joseph and it became known as the Church of St. Joseph (Tappin 2021).

By 1781, with reference to Bridget Brereton, the National Archives and the National Trust of Trinidad and Tobago, the first Roman Catholic Church was erected in the capital of Port of Spain by the Spanish Governor Martin De Salaverria which later became known as the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. In 1784, when Don Jose Maria Chacon was assigned the governorship of Trinidad by the Spanish Government, under the Cedula of Population, his main aim was not so much social and economic development of the colony but the promotion of the word of God through the Roman Catholic religion. In 1786, he established the Parish of San Fernando and it was in this town that the growth of the Roman Catholic faith flourished even further. Under his leadership, a wooden church, a presbytery, and a rest house for travelers were established. The

town, however, was met with an unfortunate demise due to a devastating fire. Nevertheless, this religion continued to flourish.

Although Spain lost the territory of Trinidad in 1797 to Britain, the Articles of Capitulation assured continuation of the Catholic religion which manifested in the establishment of additional Roman Catholic churches. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Cathedral of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Christ the King Roman Catholic Church, Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Our Lady of Montserrat Roman Catholic Church, St. Paul's Roman Catholic Church, St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church and, of course, the Mount St. Benedict Abbey in St. Augustine were all constructed (Jubilee Magazine 2012). These are just to name a few of the Roman Catholic churches that have developed over time in Trinidad. It is important to note also that in 1979, when the St. Andrew Kaggwa Roman Catholic Church was established, the incorporation of African drumming was incorporated in the Liturgy. This marked the fusion of African or Caribbean culture into a once completely submerged colonial institution. Overtime, many churches integrated the Caribbean style of culture into the Roman Catholic Liturgy (Jubilee Magazine 2012). This assimilation helped to strengthen the Roman Catholic fraternity in Trinidad. Hence it remains a firm organization to this day.

Literature Review

In Eric John Murray's *Religions in Trinidad and Tobago*, there is a chapter dedicated to Roman Catholic Churches in Trinidad and Tobago. The author describes how the first church was erected in Port of Spain, Trinidad. He states that in 1781, the church was first a wooden structure until 1816 when the decision was made to replace the wooden structure with a more permanent and larger concrete structure. By 1836, the church was finally completed and in 1851

it was consecrated by the Archbishop Patrick Smith. Murray explains that the church, now raised to the stature of a Cathedral, was dedicated to the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In the 1850s, the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception was raised to its highest peak when Pope Pius IX decreed it would be elevated to the status of a minor basilica, giving it special spiritual privileges. Murray also identifies another church which has become important to the Roman Catholic fraternity and is popularly known as the Sacred Heart Church. He explains that this Church is considered to be the oldest centre of devotion to the Sacred Heart in the archdiocese. In 1880, Archbishop Louis Joachim Gonin, O.P laid the foundation of the church. It was built in an English Gothic design and was solemnly blessed by the Archbishop in 1882 when it was completed. However, in 1874, plans to erect a more solid and profound structure was considered. Therefore, in 1950, a new church with French architectural styling's was erected and it was consecrated by Archbishop Finbar Ryan. Murray states that "other churches built to honor the Sacred Heart since this time are located in La Brea, South Trinidad and in Delaford, Tobago" (Murray 1998, 185). Murray also lists in chronological order, the various Roman Catholic parishes that followed. He delineates the full operations of the church and deals with several controversial issues. In terms of the full operations of the church, the author explains in detail the various sacraments such as the Eucharist which is the breaking of bread and the sharing of wine; and the numerous feast and holy days such as Easter, Christmas, the Solemnity of Mary Mother of God and the Solemnity of Pentecost. Murray also raised in his publications troubling questions such as whether the Catholic Church was the true church and whether Catholics subscribe to the separation of church and state. Although Murray examines the various Roman Catholic churches and their beliefs in this publication, he does not present any information on the Mount St. Benedict Abbey.

Another publication on the Catholic Church in Trinidad was released by Mark Tierney Filip Vandebussche who wrote a book entitled “Longing to Belong- The Life of Dom Mayeul De Caigny”. He focused specifically on the Abbey from its inception in 1912. He was particularly interested in the founder of this glorious place. As Tierney explains, Peter De Caigny better known as Dom Mayeul De Caigny, was the founder of the first Benedictine Monastery in Central America and the Caribbean. Before arriving in Trinidad, he had already converted from a priest to a Benedictine monk at the Abbey of Maredsous which is in the municipality of Anhee, Wallonia, Belgium, and was given the name Mayeul. He left for Brazil on a German steamer on the 23rd November, 1897 due to a crisis situation with the Brazilian Benedictines. Although this publication examines the early history of the Abbey and its inception, it ends in 1947 when the monastery was raised to the status of an Abbey. Since this time, the Abbey experienced many developments. Also, the book alludes to the voice of the monks as those who live or have lived in the Abbey is silenced. Therefore, this research is aimed at expanding documentation on the Abbey.

In another book titled, *An insider's account of the state of grace in the Roman Catholic Parishes in Trinidad and Tobago* by Sr. Marie-Therese OP, a specific chapter is dedicated to Mount Saint Benedict and is entitled “Parish Beat”. In this chapter, the nun describes in detail her experience when she visited the Abbey. The author illustrates the various activities she was involved in as well as those she encountered during her stay. She states that the best time to visit the Abbey is during the Easter weekend since it is during this time that there are various religious festivities that are practiced in which a person may thoroughly learn about Roman Catholicism. During this time also, most pilgrims’ journey to the Abbey as they describe the Mount as a peaceful and serene place where they feel closer to God. Sr. Marie-Therese OP states that there

are Retreat Houses where pilgrims can stay throughout the weekend and she captures the friendly hospitality offered by the manageress. She also mentions the teaching sessions held by the Benedictine monks through which they extensively convey and explain biblical lessons. In terms of background on the Abbey, Sr. Marie-Therese OP gives a brief history on how the Abbey was instituted. In contrast to Mark Tierney Filip Vandebussche who thoroughly explained the life of the founder which led to the institution of the Abbey in 1947, Sr. Marie-Therese OP gives insight into the development of the Abbey from the second half of the twentieth century. She explains that since the monastery was raised to the status of an Abbey, monks were given the right to elect an abbot who would be responsible for the daily needs of the church until death. The first abbot elected was Dom Adelbert Van Duin on June 16th 1947. He was in charge for 25 years until his resignation in 1972 when Rev. Fr. Bernard Vlaar was appointed abbot and due to the Canon Law reform, his reign would only last 8 years. Sr. Marie-Therese OP went on to describe the initiation service of Rev. Fr. Bernard Vlaar. The service happened on Monday April 7th 1975 over which Archbishop Anthony Pantin presided and in attendance was the then President of Trinidad and Tobago Sir Ellis Clarke and his wife. While Sr. Marie-Therese records much of the infrastructural and social advancements of the Abbey which unfolded from the second half of the nineteenth century, her publication leaves a gap in further developments taking place by the dawn of the new millennium.

In an article uploaded by *CatholicTT*, brief information is published on the Mount St. Benedict Abbey. Similar to the information obtained from the scholars previously mentioned, this article also relays the history of the Abbey. Included is a summary of Trinidad's history, since its re-discovery by Christopher Columbus, colonization and the various immigration schemes. There is also a brief mention of the various religions practiced in the island. Most

importantly, however, this particular publication delineates the establishment of Roman Catholicism in Trinidad which gave way to the development of Roman Catholic churches and eventually the Mount St. Benedict Abbey. In the article, there is a paragraph dedicated to the Abbey's inception. The article delineates how the Abbey was established. As the article explains, monks from Sao Bento in Bahia, came to Trinidad due to religious persecution. Upon their arrival, they settled on the land in Tunapuna under the astute leadership of Dom Hugh van der Sanden and Dom Mayeul de Caigny. They dedicated the land to 'Our Lady of Exile' and the monastery of Mount St. Benedict flourished. It soon became part of the spiritual landscape of Trinidad and the wider Caribbean. With reference to the article, it was recorded that "Today a small band of ten monks continues faithfully the work begun by their forefathers one hundred and four years ago" (*CatholicTT*, 2016). They observed a round of daily prayer and their main task was delivering the Liturgical Ministry to the pilgrims. Many patrons visit the Mount to seek spiritual guidance and prayer as well as meet with monks to request the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The article delineates other activities on the Mount such as poultry farming, wood working and kitchen gardening. Mention is also made of the 'Pax Abbey Shop' on the grounds of the Abbey and the 'Pax' yogurt which is a product of the Abbey and is sold in all major supermarkets within the twin islands of Trinidad and Tobago. The article closes by stating that the Abbey is a place where people of faith and no faith are welcome and where the Way of St. Benedict is lived and offered to all who visit. As the article states, "The Abbey of Our Lady of Exile, Mount St Benedict, Trinidad, is the home of the Benedictine monks who live and work in Trinidad and Tobago" (*CatholicTT*, 2016). This article is more contemporary in its coverage than those previously surveyed in this literature review. Nevertheless, it is very concise in the amount of information it provides.

In general, the information available on the Mount St. Benedict Abbey is limited. The research gathered in this literature review focused mainly on why the Abbey was established. How it was erected, the relevance of its location as well as those who were closely involved with its development, however, were not given in depth consideration by the scholars mentioned. There is still much to know about this glorious place. Therefore, it is the intention of the researcher of this study to bring to light these specific unknown details about the majestic Mount St. Benedict Abbey.

CHAPTER TWO

A Timeline History of the Abbey

In 1913, after the monastery was established, the first church was built upon this uninhabited mountain top. After time, the monks began developing the land further. They had completed a fully operational engine shop and the main road to the monastery. Soon enough, the Mount became an attractive site for many, especially pilgrims, who were of the Catholic religious persuasion. In 1923, Mount St. Benedict had made great developments as a new church was erected, the monastery was expanded, and there were 36 monks residing within the grounds. Mark Tierney states that by 1937, the monastery should have been raised to the status of an Abbey. However, Archbishop Dowling prevented this as he “made it clear he would never tolerate another prelate in his diocese” (Vandenbussche 2012, 368). The monastery had to wait until after his death. Thus, in 1947, under Archbishop Dowling’s successor Archbishop Finbar Ryan, the monastery was raised to the status of an Abbey. Unfortunately, Dom Mayeul De Caigny died in 1939 and was unable to see his beloved monastery become an Abbey.



Picture 1- Top shot of the Mount.

Youtube March 2014.



Picture 2- Hill shot of the Mount.

Wikipedia 2022.

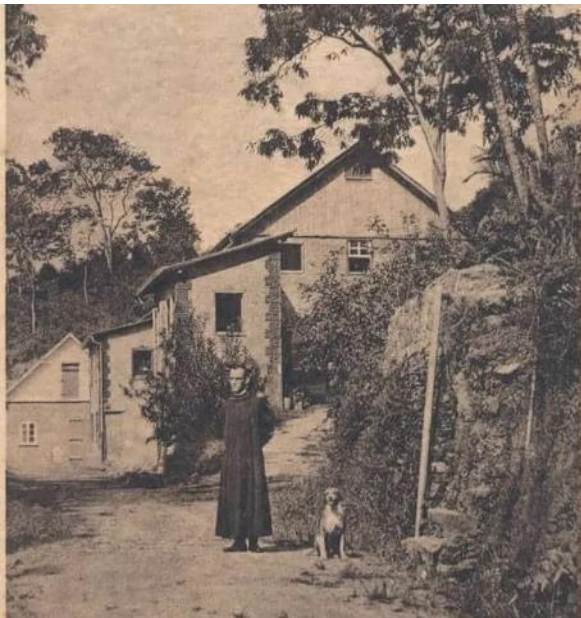
After establishing their home, the monks were mainly responsible for their livelihood. Their motto was work and prayer. The monks maintained a strict diet with only three meals a day, breakfast, lunch and dinner. Living high in the mountains meant they had to grow or live off the land by accepting what the hills had to offer. This then led to the making of honey and yogurt which became successful and popular throughout the years. In 1914, just two years after the monks settled on the mountain, Brother Camillus began harvesting honey from the trees nearby. He soon became the apiarist for the monastery. An apiary was soon built near the bee hives and Brother Camillus, along with a few other monks worked together to harvest the honey. In an interview, Father John Pereira stated that this honey was considered to be the best honey in the country. He explained that this honey generated a capital for the Abbey as it was sold in supermarkets throughout Trinidad and Tobago. Unfortunately, after a huge misfortune of losing the apiary in 1995, the making of honey ceased on the grounds of the Abbey. Stores across Trinidad and Tobago were not receiving the honey again. Considering the hives were still in existence, Father Perreira stated that they hired a contractor to harvest the honey. He would then

take the honey back to his apiary to be packaged. The selling of honey restarted in the later part of 2020, however, in limited amounts and its previous name Pax honey was renamed Fruit of the Spirit. The honey is located at the Mount where it can be purchased. It is still considered the best honey in the country and what makes it exquisite is its rareness.

The Abbey continued to be developed mainly because it became a popular religious site for pilgrims. As Sr. Marie-Therese OP states “ in 1943 the monks were very much involved in the erection of the local seminary built on their grounds and that the community of monks assumed the charge of teaching the Seminary in the early years of the foundation” (Therese, 1976, 148). She asserts that the first rector was the first Abbot, Dom Mayeul. It was the determination and persistence of the monks that caused mass development to the site. Upon this hill, there was no access to a consistent supply of fresh water and access to the monastery to the village below was impossible as there were no proper roads. The monks worked hard to change this situation of almost complete isolation. As Matroo posits, “the monks did most of the work, digging into the hills themselves, paving the way for worshipers to travel along St. John’s Road, the archway to the Mount” (Matroo 2012, 1B).



Picture 3- First monastery of the monks.
Mount 2020.



Picture 4- First seminary of the monks.
Mount 2020.

Sr. Marie-Therese OP delineates other developmental events such as the construction of the greater part of the living quarters of the monks and the new Abbey church which were completed in 1952. In 1954, the Rest House for pilgrims and the Guest rooms for the monastery were constructed.



Picture 5- Our Lady of Exile Church
Marissa Rodriguez Publishers June 2012.



Picture 6- Pax Guest House.
Tripadvisor 2022.

The auditorium and the library, the refectory of the Abbey school and kitchen, and the shop for the sale of religious objects were completed in 1961. The year 1961 saw many other developments at Mount St. Benedict, specifically and most importantly the establishment of The Abbey School. Although the school was built in the late thirties and opened in 1941, the year

1961 is mostly recognized as the foundation year because it was the year the schedule changed to the fiscal year of September to June, which is the standard school year used throughout Trinidad and Tobago. From 1941 to 1961, the school was mostly a boarding school for boys and it followed a British education system. It was also centered on Catholic education and way of life. The teachers and administrators were primarily monks from the monastery. By 1961, however, non-monks and lay teachers increased. Sport and physical activities were a major part of the curriculum, hence, an Olympic size pool and refectory were established. This Olympic size pool was the main attraction of the school. Swimming was to become a perquisite for all students. “It was constructed in 1956 and was to be inaugurated for the new full term” (Jordan 2022). However, many difficulties were encountered such as filling the pool to capacity, symmetrical imbalances and the floor. The pool was commissioned to open in September, but it was delayed due to these issues. After an additional two months of construction, extensions and modifications, the pool was inaugurated with a competition before December. The sportsmaster at this time, 1956, was Brother Vincent, and with additional advancements, he asked for an assistant. After his request was granted by the then Abbot Adelbert Van Duin, Brother Rupert Alexis, a monk who was interviewed and is briefly mentioned further in this thesis, was appointed assistant sportsmaster.



Picture 7- The Abbey School.

Circular No 79 May 2003.

Under Brother Rupert's leadership, the first four Aqua Lads had made the National swim team in 1967. It is important to note, that Brother Rupert was influential in including girls into the boys swim team. The idea was brought forward to him while on tour in 1970. In an article entitled *Swimming Again at the Mount* written by Kaelanne Jordon it was recorded that, "while on a swim tour to Venezuela, the Venezuelan coach was astounded that there were no girls in the club and told Br Rupert it was the norm to have swim teams of both boys and girls" (Jordan 2022). During this time, the expansion was impossible as the Abbey was off limits to girls. However, Brother Rupert was always open and ready to support change. Therefore, he got the headmaster, the late Father Bernard Vlaar, to agree. Brother Rupert began his journey to source girls from St. Joseph's Convent. "A survey of the school by the principal produced 45 girls to the 12 Abbey boys, so great was the interest. And that's how the club became Aqua Lads and Lasses" (Jordan 2022). From that moment, Brother Rupert became a dedicated swim coach. He states in Jordan's article that it was "obedience, a word never popular, moreso today, but I obeyed the sportsmaster, gave up cricket and tennis and concentrated on swimming" (Jordan

2022). From 1974-1986, Brother Rupert led his Aqua swim team to Miami Springs Swim Meets and other meets in the United States. In 1987, they attained victory at a meet in Pennsylvania. Brother Rupert said it was the best swim team that they had gotten out of all the age groups. The proud and accomplished coach exited his tenure shortly after this prestigious achievement.



Picture 8- The swimming pool at the Mount.
Kaelanne Jordan March 2022.

By 1964, work on the Abbey towers began and it was completed in 1976. The road in 1965 which led to the monastery was resurfaced. In 1967, the large playing field and St. Bede's Technical School was constructed. St. Bede's Technical School, is the oldest vocational school in Trinidad and Tobago. According to the history of Mount St. Benedict, however, although the school was officially opened in 1967, technical education has been offered on the Mount since 1913. This is according to Dom Odo Van de Heijdt, O. S. D, the archivist of the monastery since 1937. The school has accepted children from ages 12 and up, both boys and girls. St. Bede's often facilitates "students who could not meet the requirements for National Technical School" (Araujo 1988, 20). For the first year, students undergo general training, and for the next two years they specialize in a trade of their choosing. This includes woodworking, machine shop,

plumbing, welding, and bookbinding. “The students at St. Bede’s come from all over the country, with different backgrounds and various degrees of education, and the school tries to give them each a level of skill sufficient to enter the world of work” (Araujo 1988, 20). The school has been privately run by the monks in the Abbey. They have undertaken the role of teachers, principals, and other administrators. The school still exists today and continues to be under Abbey leadership and several past students have returned as teachers.

CHAPTER THREE

Upon a Far Hill

It was in the month of October, year 1911, that Monk Dom Mayeul made the decision to flee Brazil due to the persecutions of Catholics. An account of the history states that, “after being put in charge of the oldest and most prestigious Benedictine Abbey in Brazil in 1907, Mayeul’s years of running the monastery were peaceful ones, until the period 1911 to 1912, clericalism spread from France into Portugal and finally into Latin America” (Matroo 2012, 1B). In an attempt to escape the country in pursuit of freedom from religious persecution, Dom Mayeul decided to write a letter to the then Archbishop of Port of Spain, Most Rev. John Pius Dowling, OP. The letter is considered to be a permission of entry as Dom Mayeul requested authorization from the Archbishop to establish a home for his monks in Trinidad. In his letter, he explains the religious persecution that is occurring in Brazil and the dangers they face on a daily basis. Mayeul explains that Trinidad is close in geographical range as the island can be reached via a direct line of steamers. He also states that “the climate is similar, and so is the language of Brazil to the island of Trinidad” (Matroo 2012, 1B). Mayeul acknowledges in his letter that the island is under benevolent British rule and the ecclesiastical or churchly administrations are entrusted to the Dominican Fathers. He then offers a proposal to the Archbishop in his letter. As Mayeul states, “I wish, therefore, to place my plans as soon as possible before you. My intention is to buy a house in a healthy locality, somewhere in the mountains, that would serve as a refuge for my monks in the case of expulsion from Brazil. In the meantime, the house could be rented out, and part of the revenue I offer to your church, unless, perhaps, one of my monks should come to reside there and dedicate himself to apostolic labors under your jurisdiction. I am equally prepared to accept a mission station in the mountain” (Matroo 2012, 1B). The letter then goes on

to state that if the Archbishop agrees to his proposal, arrangements would be made for Mayeul to visit Trinidad and meet with the Archbishop to discuss the matter further. He ended his letter by noting that he was the Abbot of the Monastery in Brazil, humbly asking for permission to take refuge on his jurisdiction. It is important to note that this letter by Dom Mayeul was originally written in another language and not English.

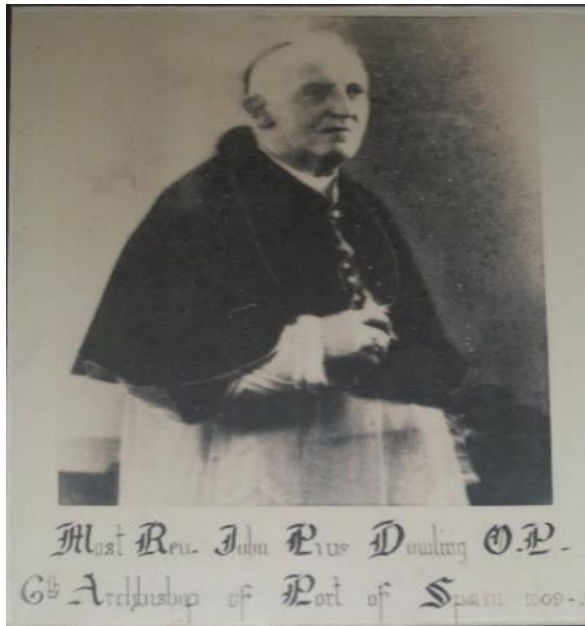


Picture 9- Abbot Dom Mayeul de Caigny.

Mount 2020.

The letter was received by Archbishop Dowling on the 16th October 1911. In response to Dom Mayeul, Archbishop Dowling expressed condolences for the inflicting oppression and hardships the monks were enduring in Brazil. Archbishop Dowling explains that he assumed the issues in Brazil were under control and that the civil authorities were cooperating with the clergy and His Holiness in order to ensure prosperity among the people. Nevertheless, Archbishop Dowling stated in his letter that, “with regards to the Archdiocese of Port of Spain, I can assure you that I shall only be too glad to have you in the Archdiocese, or in Trinidad. Come than, and you can judge for yourself what locality is best suited” (Matroo 2012, 1B). Although the letter

was brief, it serves as proof that Archbishop Dowling accepted Abbot Mayeul's letter and granted permission to the monks of Brazil thereby opening Trinidad to seek refuge. Upon receiving the letter, arrangements were made for Abbot Dom Mayeul to visit Trinidad.



Picture 10- Most Rev. John Puis Dowling O.P.,
then Archbishop of Port of Spain.

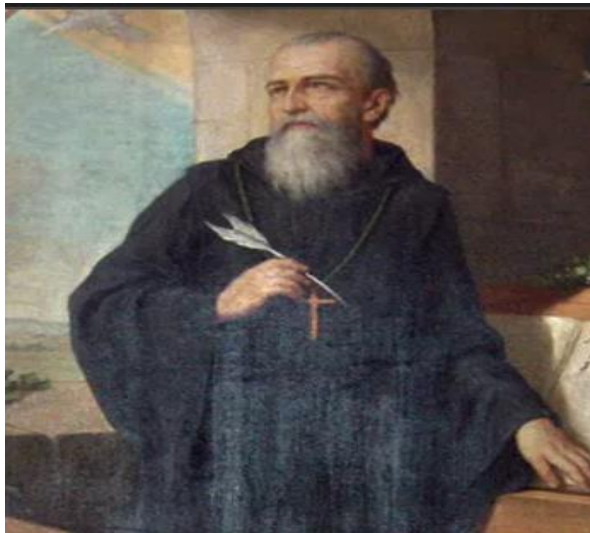
Reverend Bernard Tappin October 2011.

On December 27th 1911, Abbot Dom Mayeul, made his first visit to Trinidad and gave an account of the beautiful mountain site where he proposed his plans for a monastery. Hence, by early October 1912, he returned to Trinidad from Brazil with a few of his monks and his main aim was not only to find a home for them but also to convert the non-Christians to the true faith of Christianity. Archbishop Dowling welcomed the monks personally and offered to help procure the location in which the monks would establish their home. With the rumors circulating the Catholic fraternity that Brazilian monks were in search of a place to set up their new home, Mr. Andrew Victoriano Gomez, a gentleman of Spanish decent, volunteered his service. Mr.

Gomez was the “proprietor of a small estate in the hills above St Joseph” (*Trinidad Guardian* 2013). He was introduced to the abbot Dom Mayeul. When Dom Mayeul asked to visit the site, Mr. Gomez agreed and from there the journey to the hill began. The trek was steep therefore the journey had to be made on foot. When they reached the site, Mayeul was most impressed with the solitude and the view. Therefore, “he purchased the 60 acre estate for 4,000 pounds” (Matroo 2012, 1B). It was here that a temporary wooden house and chapel were constructed for the monks. The site was perfect as it was secluded and it had a constant flow of running water coming from the streams in the mountains. When the first set of monks arrived from Bahia in 1912 after the location was procured, the mission was called Our Blessed Lady of Exile. Therefore, while thinking about a suitable name for this foundation, Dom Mayeul decided to call it ‘The Monastery of Our Lady of Exile’ and the hill which it was situated became known as Mount St. Benedict’s Hill. “The name Mount St Benedict was adopted by the monks on the suggestion of Archbishop Dowling” (*Trinidad Guardian* 2013). Nonetheless, the name Mount St. Benedict has been traditionally and popularly accepted by society.

“The Abbey of Our Lady of Exile” is snugly nestled in the hills of the lush flora and fauna of Trinidad’s northern range six hundred and sixty feet above sea level” (*CatholicTT* 2016). As the history is told, this mountain became the ideal home for the Benedictine monks because it was similar to the way in which St. Benedict, the father of the Benedictine way of life, shaped his solemn values. Benedict de Norcia was born in Italy in 480. He was sent to Rome by his parents to study law at the age of 16. However, upon his arrival to the city, the atmosphere shocked him and he was plunged into a depression. Before attaining the age of 20, Benedict decided to leave law school to join a group of young men who called themselves monks who did not follow a fixed set of rules. Benedict made the decision to live his life as a hermit. “He found a narrow

cave in a place called Subiaco, and lived there for three years in solitude and prayer” (Matroo 2012, 1B). Benedict was often met with opposition by some of the monks in the community because he tried to introduce a stable community life and regular observance. When they tried to poison him, he returned to his cave and eventually succeeded in gathering a number of men from the village who were prepared to follow his lead. However, trouble followed him again. Benedict and his follows were forced to move, this time to the plains in Campagna to a place called Monte Cassino which is a rocky hill in the southeast of Rome. “It was here that he wrote his famous rule book for monks entitled *Rules of St. Benedict*, which was 73 chapters, and has never been changed through the years” (Matroo 2012, 1B). Soon after, the Benedictine Order was established and comprised of men who lived a simple and secluded life of prayer in coherence with the rules initiated. It is, therefore, no surprise that since Monte Cassino was the first house of the Benedictine monks, the rocky mountainous terrain of the Northern Range in Trinidad has proven to be the ideal venue for the Brazilian Benedictine monks.



Picture 11- Saint Benedict, the founder of the Benedictine order.

Michael David Knowles January 2021.

The location of the Mount has attracted many people since it has developed a proper transportation service and infrastructure to the road. The attraction is mainly due to the peaceful and majestic scenery that radiates from the mountain. In an interview conducted with Dr. Ronald Noel, who is a history lecturer at the University of the West Indies which is also located in the vicinity of St. Augustine, it was noted that he has visited the Abbey as a child with his mother in the early 1960s. He describes the journey and the scenery of the Abbey during this time. He states that “the journey would be to take the taxi or the bus via St. John’s road. Back then, the Bank of Nova Scotia on the right did not exist and on the left were old houses. St. John’s road was an archery that took you up to the Mount”. Dr Noel recalled that when as a child he ascended the hill, he took in the beautiful scenery. He declares “the further you went, the fewer people you saw, the density of the space, and the fruiting trees. There were mango trees and cashew trees, blossoming and fruiting. Specifically, by the school, there were a lot of cashews and just a further up, lots of mango trees which are not seen today” Dr. Noel explains that while ascending to the Mount, many neglect to realize the height of the mountain. It is mainly due to the aura of nature that is beginning to surround the environment. He further compares this ascension to a plane lifting off to take flight. In the courtyard of the Abbey, he remembers seeing the lookout and recounts the view as panoramic. Specifically, he recalls seeing Piarco airport, mainly watching the aircrafts ascending and descending, and on a clear day the Aranguuez Savannah and the Caroni Plains were also visible. The lookout still exists today and attracts many tourist and locals throughout Trinidad and Tobago.



Picture 12- The lookout at the Mount.

Marissa Rodriguez Publishers June 2012.



Picture 13- The view from the look out.

Marissa Rodriguez Publishers June 2012.

Although most people journey to the Mount for spiritual purposes such as getting spiritual guidance from the monks or priests and spiritual devotion at the church, others visit the Mount for recreational purposes. As Dr. Noel explains, his mother journeyed to the Mount in search of

spiritual guidance and protection from supernatural forces. It has been said that many like her have visited the Abbey due to similar issues. However, others such as Dr. Noel journey to the Abbey to indulge in recreational activities. Considering the Abbey has ownership to much of the mountain, the Abbey became a destination to engage in regular morning runs. Dr. Noel began this activity in the 1980s and over the years he has encouraged his colleagues to participate. As Dr. Noel states, “I run the entire hill from 4 am, passed the Abbey, the seminary, and the retreat house”. Continuing another 60 meters, he came across St. Benet’s Hall, which was used for functions. Further on, he would come across a wood working shop. This wood working shop indicated that his run was complete as it was where the road ended. On rare occasions, however, his physical running activity ventured further into the mountains. At the end of this road, he indicates that there is a trek that leads into a place known as The Pines. A further 10 minutes into the area, the tripod station could be spotted. This particular run, Dr. Noel compares to Mount Everest as it is a difficult and careful run. Continuing out of this area, another small run needed to be accomplished which led to, as Dr. Noel expressed, “a spectacular view” of the Maracas St. Joseph Valley. At this point, he rested while partaking in the glorious view of the valley. This was the final destination, and following the way he came, returns to the starting point. Unfortunately, in 2016, approximately after 36 years of conducting these physical runs, Dr. Noel has ceased this activity.

Although the location of the Mount attracts many due to its majestic scenery, the hill often encounters issues, mainly natural disasters. As mentioned earlier in the interview, Dr. Noel recalls passing the tripod station. A tripod station is mainly installed to track natural disasters, and considering the island is prone to heat waves and the mountain is lush with trees, bush fires are a constant threat. In an article written by Kristy Ramnarine entitled “Mount St. Benedict

Saved”, a bush fire started the week before May 18th of 2007 in the pine forest which later spread to Mount St. Benedict. The fire threatened the Monastic building and the church. However, the fire was controlled with the fast response of the Trinidad and Tobago Fire Service. “Firemen were able to prevent Benet Hall- Top of the Mount, The hermitage and the Astronomical Society Observatory, from being damaged” (Ramnarine, 2007, 7). Mount St. Benedict is always on their guard with regards to bush fires as they can cause mass destruction. With the help of the tripod station, however, the Mount is always prepared.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Untold Stories of the Abbey

The monastery has continued to develop over the years especially with the help of the monks and the initiatives they undertook. Although the main task of monks is to commit to prayer five times a day, they are also committed to helping those with deficiencies whether physical or emotional. They are also responsible for the daily operations of the Abbey. In an interview with an elderly monk at the monastery, Brother Marius Williams, age 82, it is noted that he was an accountant for the Abbey. This meant he was responsible for the business aspect of the Abbey which he had joined in 1964. Brother Williams has lived in the Abbey for 58 years, and in that time, he witnessed many developments. Although he is not able to remember in full detail all that he experienced, Brother Williams briefly recollects the reasons why different initiatives were embraced from time to time. For instance, the Pax Yogurt or the Peace Yogurt, as the word Pax means Peace in Latin, was invented in 1997 by Father Cuthbert van de Sande, who was not only a priest but a monk in the Abbey. The yogurt was simply made to supplement the diet of the monks in the monastery. As Brother Williams explains, the monks were responsible for maintaining themselves. They each worked together too sufficiently and efficiently sustain their well-being. The yogurt soon became a trend when Father Cuthbert began to share it with visitors and friends. In an article written by *Catholic TT*, which further corroborates Brother Williams's testimony, the authentic and unique taste of the yogurt created capital as people started to place orders. Therefore, in 2003, the Pax Yogurt Company was established, shipping the product, in a variety of flavors, to supermarkets and even hotels throughout Trinidad and Tobago.



Picture 14- Father Cuthbert van de Sande.

Founder of Pax yogurt, deceased. Raymond

Syms August 2018.



Picture 15- Pax yogurt and its many flavors.

Marissa Rodriguez Publishers June 2012.

Besides maintaining the kitchen, maintenance in the Abbey, taking charge of the accounts department, and counselling visitors on a daily basis within the Abbey, the monks often set out on missionary work. Apart from preaching Christianity and helping people nationally, they travelled to various parts of the region to continue their missionary service. Brother Williams testifies, “I travelled to Bartica in Guyana and stayed there for 5 years to administer my missionary duty”. The monks often journey to Guyana where a monastery is located and it is considered a significant base for the Benedictine monks. Williams explains that the reason they pursue missionary work is to not only preach the word of God, but to also influence young men into joining the monastic life; that is becoming monks and giving their life to God. Brother Williams explains that this has become a crucial and important factor for the existing monks because they are continuing to decrease in number as the younger generation is not interested. He states that when he first arrived at the Abbey, there were 30 monks, but as time passed, they gradually reduced. There are currently 10 monks, all of whom are elderly, who reside in the monastery and with limited interest in the monastic life by the current generation, the monastery will soon fail to exist. With reference to Carol Glatz from the *Catholic News Service*, in accordance with Brother Williams’s testimony, “since 2010, the Vatican released the statement that the total number of priests — diocesan and religious order — around the world decreased, going from 414,969 in 2016 to 414,582 in 2017. Ordinations of diocesan priests continued to decline slowly from 6,577 in 2012 to 5,815 in 2017”. To address the shortage in Trinidad, the cluster system has been initiated. One priest shares the responsibility of two parishes due to a limited number of priests in the country.

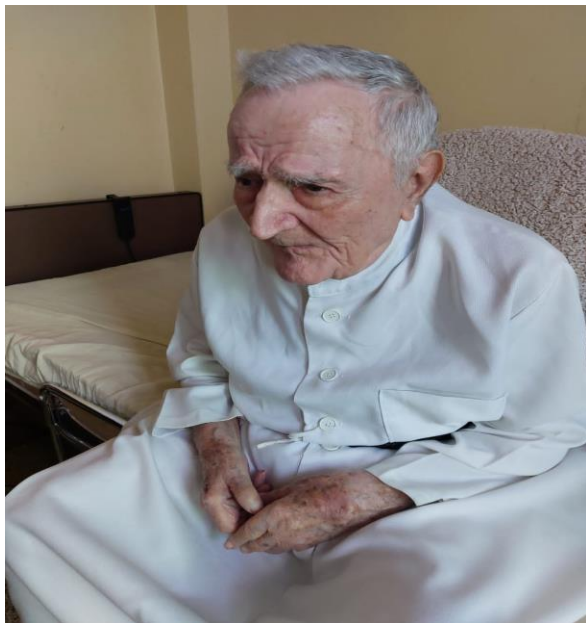


Picture 16- Brother Marius Williams, 84.

Ashley Sinanan May 2022.

The Abbey has seen a diversity of ethnic monks from across the globe since its inception. In an interview with another elderly monk, Father Augustine, age 98, it was noted that he came from the Netherlands to pursue the monastic life in Trinidad. His birth name was Petrus Schreus. However, he changed his name upon induction into the monastery due to religious significance and because it was an easier name to pronounce since he was to become a part of an English speaking nation. Father Augustine was influenced to become a monk and a priest precisely after the end of World War 2. In a shocking revelation, he revealed that he participated in the war. Unfortunately, Father Augustine could not remember which side he supported due to his age, but he did recall working in a hospital treating those who were wounded in battle. Shortly after the war, he stated that he heard the calling of God and decided to dedicate his life to the monastery. This 98 year old World War 2 veteran was looking for a secluded place to engage in this monastic life and interestingly, he came across the Mount St. Benedict Abbey in Trinidad. It was a hidden and remote spot away from the destructive ruins of war making it for him the ideal

place. Although the war was over, the casualties remained within his mind and soul. Considering also that Father Augustine is versed in five languages; English, French, Spanish, German, and Dutch, he felt that he could contribute more to the monastery in terms of crossing language barriers and missionary work in other islands in the Caribbean region. Therefore, in 1948, just three years after the war and a year after Mount St. Benedict became an Abbey, Father Augustine arrived in Trinidad and started his monastery life.



Picture 17- Father Augustine, 98.

Ashley Sinanan May 2022.

The secluded area of this Abbey caught the attention of many international monks who were pursuing the monastic life. Further discussions with Brother Williams revealed that one of the monk's, Brother Gerard, who is now deceased, migrated from South Africa to Mount St. Benedict because of its location. Brother Gerard correlated his migration to scriptures, that is just as Jesus travelled to the hills to pray, while he was alive, Brother Gerard did the same. Another international monk who lived at the monastery that Brother Williams recalled was Father Dom Hugo van der Sanden from the Netherlands. According to Brother Williams, Father Dom Hugo

was the first Prior of the Abbey. As Prabhat explains in his article, *The Difference between Abbey and Priory*, the Prior is second in command after the abbot in an abbey. The Prior can be chosen in two ways. “One way is that the inmates themselves choose their leader and the other way is that the prior or the prioress is subject to the will of the abbot” (Prabhat, 2010). Brother Williams remembers electing Father Dom Hugo. However, he was unable to remember the year of the election. With reference to *Catholic TT*, in accordance with Brother Williams’s testimony, before Father Dom Hugo was elected the Prior of the Abbey, he was instrumental in initiating the application to the Vatican in Rome for the monastery to be raised to the status of an Abbey. His request was granted and the monastery received Abbey status in 1947. Throughout his tenure at the monastery, Brother Williams stated that he encountered and worked alongside monks from Spain and currently there are 3 monks from Africa who reside in the monastery. The Mount St Benedict Abbey has welcomed a number of international monks who have contributed to giving the institution its diverse character.

Most monks enter the monastic life based on what they refer to as “a calling from God”. Many embrace the call as an escape from the traumas of worldly living. This was exactly the thinking which influenced Father Augustine to join the Abbey. When asked why he joined the monastic life, Brother Williams stated that he was influenced by family members. When he was a young boy, Brother Williams was an altar server at his church. Then his sister decided to become a Carmelite nun which further influenced his decision. According to an Encyclopaedia, the Carmelite sisters are an order of nuns who share the hill with the Abbey. They are located just below the monastery and live a monastic life like the monks in the Abbey. It should be noted that the first order of Carmelites were monks who established themselves at Mount Carmel in northeastern Israel. They can be traced back to the middle ages and lived a similar life to the

Benedictine monks. Due to the Palestine armies, however, Mount Carmel became unsafe and the monks were forced to migrate. They eventually established their order in England, Sicily, France and Syprus in 1240. The Carmelites became popular in these European countries. It is recorded that “the first institution of Carmelite nuns was founded in 1452” (Britanica, 2017). The Carmelite nuns soon became the most important in the Carmelite order. They have been known to live similar lives to the Benedictine monks as they engage in missionary work, prayer and seclusion. Brother Williams understood and embraced the duties and responsibilities of his sister. Therefore, at the age of 24, in 1964, he started his monastic training and in 1969, he was inducted as a monk and became part of the brotherhood at Mount St. Benedict. Another monk who joined the monastic life due to the influence of others is Brother Rupert Alexis. He is 87 years old and a retired swim coach. Brother Rupert has dedicated his life to helping the younger generation achieve athletic goals. He believed it was his celibate duty to guide and help young children into making decisions and teaching them that there are numerous positive possibilities to choose in life.



Picture 18- Brother Rupert Alexis, 87.

Ashley Sinanan May 2022.

CONCLUSION

The Abbey originally started as a monastery for the monks who came from Brazil seeking refuge in 1912. It is through hard work and dedication; the monks developed the site by establishing proper infrastructure. Over time, the monastery became a popular and significant site which ultimately led to it being raised to the stature of an Abbey in 1947. The monks established themselves specifically upon the hill because the first Benedictine monastery, founded by St. Benedict, was established in the Monte Cassino hills in Italy. Considering the motto of the monks is work and prayer, they were self-sufficient and relied on the environment for food. This led to the extraction of honey by Brother Camillus in 1914, which generated a capital, just not on a large scale, and the creation of a delicious yogurt by Father Cuthbert van de Sande in 1997, which continues to generate capital for the Abbey. Although these men are deceased, their legacy continues through their products. Additional information was also conveyed when the monks were interviewed. The Abbey is profoundly and has since comprised of international monks, one of which is a surviving World War 2 veteran. Nonetheless, the Abbey is a peaceful and serene Roman Catholic establishment that offers recreational activities and spiritual accommodating services to those of different religions and ethnicities.

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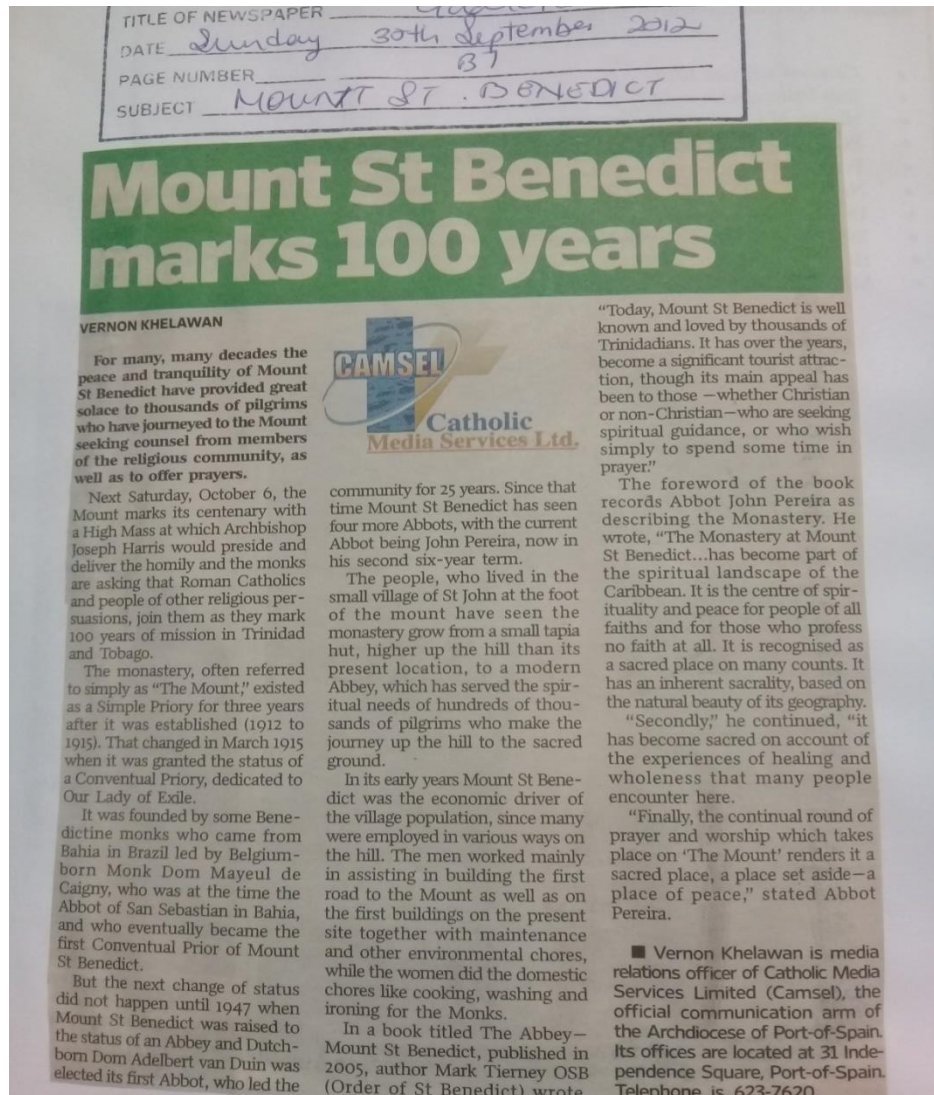
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APPENDIX A



Appx 1- This photo is taken from the Trinidad Guardian, exact date unknown, describing the visitation of Cuban Revolutionary leader Fidel Castro. In the year 1959, Fidel Castro and Ernesto “Che” Guevara was proceeding to Rio de Janeiro, when they made a quick stop to Trinidad. Upon arrival, Castro saw the majestic monastery in the hills which automatically captivated him. He demanded to be taken to the place because the distance of the hills reminded him of the hills from which he led his insurgence during the revolt. In this photo, Castro was greeted by the prior, Dom Hugh van der Sande. The monks greeted and accepted him and they took him for an extensive visit of the monastery. This proves that the location of the Abbey is one of its main attractions.

APPENDIX B



Appx 2- This document is taken from the Trinidad Guardian, written on the 30th of September 2012 by Vernon Khelawan. It describes the service the Abbey provided since its inception in 1912 by the Benedictine monks who came from Brazil. The Abbey is currently 110 years old and it continues to provide a spiritual and active service to the public under the leadership of Abbott John Perreira. The years of existence proves that the Abbey did not faultier and due its location again, the Abbey has proven to be the most attractive location for pilgrims who seek peaceful tranquility.