



# SIMPLY ARTICULATE

*Pierre de Montaulieu*

*Photos by James F. Wilson*

**T**he church of Our Lady of Dallas, an abbey of the Cistercian Order in Irving, Texas, is a unique example of the contemporary use of load-bearing stonemasonry. In and of itself this structurally innovative building is a remarkable achievement. Its utter simplicity is utmost modernity. But it can also be seen in the context of a tradition a thousand years old.

Cistercian architecture, the structural expression of Cistercian spirituality is characteristically spare, unadorned and elemental. The order has its origins in the 9th and 10th centuries when a number of Benedictine monks established communities devoted to a more austere way of life and practice devoid of distraction. The elements of this architecture, stone, space and light, were articulated by generations of builders to create the well proportioned enclosures within which Cistercian life, a conscious balance of the liturgical and the practical, is engendered.

The order has proved as enduring as the stone of which the monasteries were built. Today there are hundreds of Cistercian

monasteries throughout Europe and the "New World." Each of these monasteries is distinct in form, but all share this traditional Cistercian simplicity. Sensuous beauty is absent by design. There are no representational paintings or sculpture and, though light has a significant importance in the design of the structures, there are no glorious colored glass windows to enhance it. Here too purity is of the essence.

Texas architect Gary Cunningham was given what he saw as the opportunity of a lifetime when he was asked to design a church at the Cistercian Abbey where he had attended boarding school as a child.

Stone was the material of choice but his vision was unresolved until, with the abbot of Our Lady of Dallas, he went to Europe and visited Cistercian monasteries in Italy, Austria and Hungary. This put him on the right path. "I needed to understand the purpose of the project better, the importance of the Cistercian community and culture . . . its longevity. Then, when the stone presented itself, I knew how to use it."

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