

# CANDLE-MAKING NUNS KNOW THEIR BEESWAX

TIMES SNOHOMISH COUNTY BUREAU ~ WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2006

By [Diane Wright](#)

On a chilly December afternoon, a vat of molten beeswax heated inside a water-jacketed tank stands, smelling slightly of honey, while candles on trays are ready to be packed in boxes.

In the next room, there is a stock of work from more than 60 vendors: candles, raw and creamed honey, holiday plates, lanterns, Christmas ornaments, Egyptian alabaster jars, carved wooden toys from Russia and tapes and CDs of carols.

Orthodox Christian nuns from The Convent of the Meeting of the Lord make a living here at Quiet Light Candles near Stanwood.

Sent out from their mother house, the Holy Nativity Convent in Brookline, Mass., they've brought clean-burning light — and pilgrims — for nearly five years now to rural Stanwood. Dressed in black habits, they live a contemplative, semi-cloistered life. No newspapers, no radio, no television, no distractions — on purpose.

Orthodox Christian belief is based on the early Church, the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, the epistles of Saint Paul and a very rich history.

But don't think for a moment that Mother Thecla, Mother Evdokia or Mother Mary are recluses. They are deeply connected to their community.

Their foray into commerce came in a roundabout way, when a lavender farm asked if they would want to manufacture lavender-scented paraffin candles.

It almost killed them — breathing toxins from the paraffin, a petroleum product, combined with the anesthetizing agents in the lavender was like breathing diesel exhaust, one doctor told them.

They quickly halted production — but they had all that equipment.

What to do?

They turned to bees.

"We only make 100% pure beeswax candles," said Mother Evdokia, "and the reason being is that beeswax is a natural product. It's made by the bees--60 pounds of honey are produced for one pound of beeswax--and it's the 'jar' in which the bees stored their honey. In olden times, it was reserved for royalty, and you could also tithe to the church in beeswax."

The Brookline convent had made hand-dipped tapered candles for many years, in addition to vestments and other items. But the nuns had been told there were no wicks manufactured to accommodate beeswax tea lights and votives.

"We went through six months of wick experiments to find the right wick to burn just the right way," said Mother Thecla.

Using pure cotton wicks and doing everything by hand, they produced a form of votive candle that would burn for up to 18 hours. The wax is poured into a votive cup, and the wicks have to be stood up and centered in the hot wax before it firms up.

"The neat thing about beeswax, which we didn't know before we actually started all this, is that beeswax produces negative ions when it burns, which cleans the air," said Mother Evdokia.

They converted an old dog run that had a lean-to into a production shop, then started going to gift shows, local lapidaries and artisans for other products.

The mission was to be self-sustaining, part of the Orthodox tradition of labor and prayer. "All of our communities have that," said Mother Thecla. "So we try to do handicrafts, because our main goal is to try and stay centered on prayer all day. We tried to pick a handicraft that's conducive to that and is quiet."

Hence, the Quiet Light name.

"Yes, it just evolved," said Mother Thecla. "We prayed about that for a long time."

During the years since moving from Brookline's Holy Nativity Convent, the nuns have been putting out small signs off Interstate 5's exit 215, leading people to their shop on selected days.

Quiet Light Candles is usually open from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. every Saturday, and this Saturday is the final day of their Christmas Festival. The signs are themselves a little pilgrimage, and more than one person has stopped out of curiosity and renewed his or her faith here.

"It's a very special thing when a person dedicates their whole life to God," said Mother Thecla. "This is a lifetime vow. We believe that it's a consecration, and that consecration is actually a blessing for everyone — for the person, for the community, for their family, for everyone. Mankind is one, right? So if a part of mankind consecrates themselves, that's a blessing."

While the transfer from East to West Coast was a big change, "I loved it right away," said Mother Mary. "The scenery, the trees, art, a nice quiet place, the woods here. The mountains and trees were so different, and all the people around here dare to speak of God."

There are three permanent members of the convent, with one rotating member from Brookline. People express surprise that there's a convent in Stanwood. "They ask, 'How did they pick Stanwood?' " said Mother Thecla, adding, "The house was chosen by a committee from St. Nectarios Church, and it was passed through their authorities. But later we read in the History of Stanwood that the wife of the man who founded Stanwood was actually from Brookline. Her house still stands, not far from the Convent we are from."

Balancing worship and household duties with candle manufacturing and shipping is given a helping hand by friends and neighbors.

"Picture that we could be 20 people and we're only four, with two volunteers," said Mother Thecla. "So what happens is, you just keep taking care of the most immediate situation."

To call the candle factory a hive of activity is not only a pun, it's apt. "Actually, in some of the literature of the church, they do compare a convent with a beehive," said Mother Thecla. "The whole idea of order and activity, and they create something sweet."