

ABBAYE DE BOULAU

By Victoria Estivalèzes, January 2024

FHS gives restoration grants to sites of religious heritage in France and the United States every year. In 2024, FHS's Northern California and Paris Chapters are supporting a \$30,000 grant to the Abbaye Sainte-Marie de Boulaur, in Gers. The abbey is led by a dynamic group of Cistercian nuns who have undertaken numerous projects to raise awareness about their community.



The Abbaye de Boulaur © Mathieu Devred

The rebirth of a 12th-century Cistercian abbey

This growing community, numbering 28 nuns, re-established itself at the Abbaye de Boulaur, which had stood abandoned for 50 years, in 1949. Despite the colossal work required, they knew that restoration of the site was critical to bringing life back to the abbey and opening it to the wider public. The sisters communicate about their daily life on social media with a sense of pedagogic humor, providing insights into everything from spiritual life to restoration work, working the land, and meeting with visitors. The abbey is open to visitors year-round, allowing them to

discover the architectural and cultural heritage of the site. It also welcomes visitors to join in the life of the community, whether through weekend work retreats for 18- to 35-year-olds, opportunities for high school and university students from the Gers region to work and pray with the sisters, workdays in the fields and vegetable garden, or tourist visits. These activities are a testament to the community's desire to make this heritage accessible to all while bringing tourism to the area.



The community of the Abbaye de Boulaur © Abbaye de Boulaur

The first major restoration work took place in the 1980s as an emergency response to the structural state of the buttresses and roofs of the church. Newer restoration and rehabilitation projects embody a broader vision for the site in line with the community's activities and interest in sharing their home with the public. A notable feature of the project involves increasing the size of the farm buildings to keep pace with the community's growth, both to meet the needs of the sisters and to provide commercial produce for the region. Nearly 30% of the farm expansion was financed by individual donors. The project brought together the sisters, local craftspeople, volunteers who came to make mud bricks, and high school students invited to take part in a stone-cutting course. The newly inaugurated ecotonal space, built during the work retreats, features educational areas that cover everything from principles of building with natural materials and artisanal production methods to the history of Gregorian chant and the sale of monastic products. The site has also been designed to host concerts, local music festivals, and farmers' markets.

Future projects, including the FHS-supported restoration of the 14th-century east wing, will also embrace the philosophy of sharing their communal and religious heritage with the region. Once restored, the east wing will host a new library, enabling visitors to access some of the 50,000 books the monastery owns. Library holdings include research conducted in recent years on the intangible heritage of Cistercian musicology, representing a collaborative effort between 10 Cistercian communities around the world.



Reconstruction of the well with volunteers
© Abbaye de Boulaur