



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



Fr. Paul On His Call

"People were a stronger influence on my vocation than books."

It is difficult to pin down a precise age at which the idea of a monastic or priestly vocation first came to me. In my last term at Ampleforth I had a strong feeling that I would return, but my first reaction to the thought of the priesthood was "What, me?" - a feeling of unworthiness.

My mother came from an old Catholic family in the north of England which had produced priests and religious down the ages. (Blessed Thomas Pickering, one of our EBC martyrs, a lay brother, is a distant relative.) On visits to my grandparents, Father Austin Pickering, a colorful cousin of my grandfather who had officiated at my parents' wedding (and later my sister's), was often present.

People were a stronger influence on my vocation than books, especially the monks at Ampleforth who had taught me for six years and whom I liked and respected. The variety of characteristics and talents struck me; they were not all of the same mold.

While studying engineering at Oxford University I led a normal social life but the pleasures which delighted some of my friends seemed shallow to me. Although not a daily Mass participant I did go to weekday Mass frequently and chose my "digs" one block away from a church in my third (and final) year. I kept in touch with Fr. Gerard Sitwell at St. Benet's Hall and joined a LOCK discussion group (League of Christ the King). When the time came to interview for engineering jobs during my last half year at Oxford I realized that my heart wasn't in it and I felt drawn back to Ampleforth. At Easter I visited Ampleforth and asked Fr. Bernard Boyan, who had taught me during five of my years in the school, to arrange for me to see the Abbot. He accepted me for the novitiate the following September (1952).

Measured from my last year in the school at Ampleforth, this was a three-year process.

The influence of Ampleforth monks was much stronger than any theoretical understanding of the nature of the monastic life. I was rather vague about the theory. Abbot Herbert Byrne had told me not to come with preconceived notions about what the monastic life should be - "You will learn by living it."

Besides the monks, my mother must have been a stronger influence than I realized at the time. She later told me that she had prayed every day that God would call me to be a priest, but she had never thrust this upon me. I had not discussed my still vague thoughts with my parents before visiting Ampleforth that Easter; it was a total surprise to my father. About the same time that I decided to



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try my vocation at Ampleforth one of my closest friends at Oxford (who had been at a Jesuit school) decided to go to the diocesan seminary. Our decisions were made independently, but I guess that we were a support to each other.

When September came I was convinced that I would be back home within two weeks and I was casual about putting together the things I was supposed to take - not my usual practice. Yet I went. There were six novices and five of us were professed at the end of the year.

I cannot say that teaching attracted me; I didn't know whether I would be effective in the classroom. The conviction grew that the way God wanted me to serve him and his people was as a monk and a priest. There was a balance between the fraternal support of community life and the room for privacy. Although the life was regulated I did not find that it stifled initiative. These qualities of service, mutual support and individual initiative are still present in the monastic life of Saint Louis Abbey.