



## SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



### **A Priory Legacy: Father Gregory Mohrman By Andrew Wilson '64**

Of all Priory monks, past and present, Father Gregory Mohrman may have been called at the earliest age. According to family legend, the first Prior, Father Columba Cary-Elwes, a frequent and favorite guest at the Mohrman household, “put a hex on him” before he was even a year old.

This is a story that makes perfect sense to anyone who knew the late Father Columba, a man who exuded a sense of wisdom, calm and—there is no escaping the word—saintliness. No less a giant among men than the great Arnold Toynbee once wrote to Father Columba, saying, “Feeling you are one of my closest and dearest friends, I also feel you are my most direct door to God.”

To say that Gregory’s parents (Henry, now deceased, and Mavis) were early enthusiasts of the Priory is an understatement. Moments after his birth—on October 20, 1957—Henry Mohrman called Columba to break the news—and to enroll the newborn in the Priory School.

Gregory entered the Junior House in 1970. Though following in the footsteps of an older brother, it was not hard on his heels, but along a trail greatly obscured if not totally obliterated by the passage of time. Joe Mohrman, the older brother by ten years, is now an attorney in Saint Louis. His chief advice to Gregory upon entering the School: “Don’t be a bully.” This was meant as more of a warning against the presence of such villainy than an admonition against his enlisting in its ranks.

Strange to say, even further back in time, big Joe and little Gregory became infatuated with the same girl. It ended happily, however, when Joe married Gregory’s favorite baby sitter. To this day, this excellent woman (the former Mary Beth Goralnik) remains attached to each of the brothers.

As a student at the Priory, Gregory excelled in English and science. He graduated in 1976. Without telling his classmates, he had already decided in his junior year to enter the priesthood. But as his father wished, he went on to college first, enrolling at the University of Pennsylvania, with a major in English literature. He raced through in three years. Then, returning to the scene of his recent childhood, he entered the novitiate at the Saint Louis Abbey. His teaching career at the Priory began in 1980. He spent four years (1982-86) at Saint John’s University in Minnesota, earning a masters in Theology. He was ordained in 1986, and joined the School’s English and Religion Departments in the same year. He holds the dual distinctions of being the first alumnus-monk and, with his appointment as Headmaster in September 1995 at the age of 38, the first alumnus-headmaster.

It would be hard to pick a better example of the metamorphosis of a team player into a team leader. From the start of his career, he has been noted for pitching in and making himself useful in a wide variety of projects at the School and the Monastery.

While deeply versed in English literature, he is almost as proficient as an engineer or an architect in reading blueprints. This is a skill he picked up in succeeding Father Luke as the ex officio point man inside the community in dealing with improvements or additions to the physical plant.



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About a dozen years ago, one of the star athletes at Priory—a too great friend and admirer—had him in a headlock and was endeavoring to stuff his head into a mailbox. As if to prove the law that everything that can go wrong will go wrong, Father Finbarr, the then Headmaster, chanced upon the scene at that very moment.

Physically speaking, the Gregory of today would be more of a match for the wrestler. No longer is he the scrawniest of prelates. Today he is fairly rippling with muscles, having taken up weight-lifting as a hobby. For the record, it may be noted that he can bench-press 200 pounds—or 15 pounds more than his own weight. More to the point, however, something else has been added to the demeanor of this most open, informal and fun-loving of priests. That is, an unobtrusive but unmistakable air of authority and purpose. Rarely invoked, it is the kind of thing that can pin an opponent to the mat without violence or any visible expenditure of effort.

Will the Saint Louis Abbey become a self-regenerating institution or will it wither and die from a lack of vocations? Father Gregory represents a good beginning. In attracting vocations, he notes, it is crucial that students encounter a goodly mix of “fully formed monks they can admire and identify with.” Now that the Abbey is buzzing if not swarming with monks and religious (20 in all, including 15 Americans), he is confident that more students will return to pursue vocations.

As Headmaster, he has set about the task of creating “a kinder, gentler” Priory than the one he knew as a student. This has involved “a real change in focus” at the School. In his words, “The School is very committed to trying to meet the needs of students as opposed to having students simply meet its demands... Now we’re more sensitive and more sensitized to the times we live in and the emotional stress the kids are under. Today we try to develop the whole person.”

His overarching goal is to run the School, not as a monastery, but as a place of learning that fully reflects the spirit and values of Benedictine community life. In the words of Saint Benedict, this means a place where people “listen with the ear of the heart”; where teachers strive “to be loved rather than feared”; and where teachers “demonstrate God’s instructions to the stubborn and the dull by a living example.”

Is there any danger, in all this, that the School may become any less competitive or rigorous academically? The very question causes his eyes to bulge with indignation. “By any benchmark,” he avers, “it’s as competitive today as it’s ever been... and more so. You can look at the AP scores, National Merit scores, college admissions, anything.”