



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



A Priory Legacy: Father Paul Kidner By Andrew Wilson '64

“I don’t believe in mathematics.”

Einstein

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, do be quiet!”

Father Paul

Father Paul’s math classes crackled with creative tension. It was the kind that arises when students think they can get away with murder. Never was a teacher more sorely tested upon the rack of his own good nature.

But Father Paul not only endured; he has indeed prevailed. No one ever succeeded in getting his goat. He never lost his sense of calm or composure. His grace under fire—or his imperturbability in the face of provocation—was amazing.

What’s more, he was astonishingly successful in getting students to master the complexities of algebra, trigonometry and calculus. Under his leadership, it became almost routine for Priory students to achieve near-perfect math SAT or ACT scores.

How did he do it?

Father Paul could be credited with being the first (at least at the Priory) to apply passive resistance as a pedagogic technique. If the class was noisy, he would simply stop teaching, and refuse to go on, until everyone was ready to pay attention.

Matthew Arnold must have had someone like Father Paul in mind when he wrote an essay entitled “Sweetness and Light.” As many a student who has tried to provoke him knows, his personality combines an unassailable modesty (unassailable because unfeigned) with a keen intellect and a true desire to serve.

He was born, John Michael Kidner, in Oswestry, a small town in the west Midlands of England, in 1931. His father, a dental surgeon, was a convert to Catholicism. His mother came from a Catholic family of ancient lineage. It produced a number of priests and religious, including the Blessed Thomas Pickering, martyred in 1679.

Like several other Priory monks (i.e. Columba, Luke and Timothy), Father Paul followed a path that led from Ampleforth to Oxford, and back again—the second time to pursue a vocation.

In a pamphlet distributed by the Saint Louis Abbey’s Director of Vocations, Father Paul wrote: “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.”

At Ampleforth College, he was an outstanding student—ranking first in math and physics, and second overall, in a class of about 80. As a result of his proficiency in math, he won a scholarship to Oxford, where he majored in civil engineering. He expected to pursue a career with an international construction company, with the idea of being able to indulge two passions at once—a continuing fascination with math and physics, and a love of travel. The latter came to the fore at Oxford. On a lark, he set the height record for a



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London taxi by driving it over the Mont Cenis pass in the Swiss Alps.

With graduation fast approaching, the time came to apply for engineering jobs... and he discovered a sinking feeling in his heart. He didn't want to do it. He hoped to sort things out in revisiting Ampleforth over the Easter break. And this is when he decided to become a monk.

“My initial reaction to the thought of the priesthood,” he recalls, “was ‘What, me?’—a feeling of unworthiness.” Abbot Herbert Byrne saw the rightness of his decision and told him not to worry too much about the nature of monastic life. “You will learn by living it,” he told him. Only after he announced his decision to his parents did Paul discover that his mother had been praying that God would call him to be a priest.

Immediately following ordination, Father Paul was assigned to the Saint Louis Priory. He was 27 years old, and he was headed to a foreign country and a new profession—teaching (something he had not done at Ampleforth). While Father Paul had his usual doubts about becoming an effective teacher, he was thrilled at the prospect of expatriate life. It was the chance he thought he would never get again to explore other places and people.

As day follows night, the brilliant but modest student turned into a humble but superlative teacher. He headed the Priory's mathematics department for almost two dozen years (1960-82), and taught not only math, but also physics, science, Latin, and religion, while also serving at various times as head coach of the tennis, track, cross country and swimming teams. Along the way, he was recognized as an Outstanding Educator of America in 1972 and Outstanding Teacher of Mathematics by the Mathematics Club of Greater Saint Louis in 1977.

A corporate-style resume would not fail to note that he has occupied “positions of increasing responsibility.” He succeeded Father Timothy as the Priory's second Headmaster, and served in that capacity from 1974 to 1983, a period of “consolidation,” as he describes it, or of building upon an excellent beginning, by extending the school's breadth and depth—in terms of students, faculty and recognition among the nation's leading colleges and universities.

From the start, he took to his adopted land with great enthusiasm. Heeding Horace Greeley's famous advice, he headed west in his first summer in the U.S.—after answering a local newspaper ad from someone wanting a car delivered to San Francisco. Since then, he has travelled extensively throughout the U.S., including three summers of studies at Stanford. He is also an avid canoeist on Missouri's streams and rivers. In 1993, Father Paul became an American citizen.