



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



Fr. Ralph On His Call

I was seventeen or so when I first thought of the priesthood as a way of life. In a sense it was a categorized way of thinking. There were two categories: What do I see as the great needs of the world? What gifts do I have that could respond to those needs? I somewhat naively simplified it into those two categories. So, instead of going into the family business, I considered something more directly involved with spreading the Gospel.

Earlier, in my second year at Ampleforth, I changed from Greek and Latin to math and science. I changed because my father, a mining engineer, was very keen on it. There were four boys and members of family had been in the company for five generations, since 1790. My older brother, from the age of 13, had said he wanted to be a monk. I was the second son and felt engineering might not be a bad idea; I, at least, wanted to give it a try. I was totally out of my depth in the chemistry, calculus and coordinate geometry classes so fled back to classics.

The course change put me behind my contemporaries. I was partly panic-stricken, trying desperately to catch up. I met and got along famously with a teacher, Philip Smiley. Mr. Smiley taught Greek, Latin and Greek history but once a week we had, for pure relief and nothing more, an English class. During these times he exposed us to Eliot, Hopkins, Dylan Thomas, Wilfred Owen (in the Faber Book of Modern Verse), and something quite different happened. I suddenly found myself fascinated by Eliot - what a contrast; a term earlier all poetry had seemed repellent. Shortly after that I remember writing my first poem.

When reflecting, I think that the life we had at Ampleforth with daily Mass required, except for Thursdays when you could sleep in and just get there for Communion, played a part in my decision to become a monk. When I was about 16 I noticed that while home on vacation I had developed the *desire* for the Mass, that is, I felt the lack when I didn't go and it was surprising to me. I suddenly *noticed* the desire, that the day wasn't quite complete without Mass.

I was thinking of the diocesan priesthood but after two years in the army (I was one of the last to be drafted), when I was in Malaya (Kota-Tinngi), I wrote to Abbot Herbert applying to join the novitiate in September 1959, when my service was completed.

The reasons I decided to try my vocation as a monk at Ampleforth were: first, I had noticed that temperamentally I seemed to operate better in some kind of structured or ordered way of living; secondly, a brief experience in teaching third-class education to the members of my platoon had showed me that I enjoyed teaching; thirdly, in going to Ampleforth the decision about whether I'd teach in some classroom or be involved in one of the parishes was in the abbot's hands -



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that is, in God's hands. I think the close friendship I had with several of the Ampleforth monks, who had been a great inspiration to me during my time at Ampleforth, was a significant factor in my believing that I could be happy as a member of that community.

A month after writing to Abbot Herbert I wrote to him saying I could not envisage myself following a monastic schedule. I was comparing the life I was leading as a second lieutenant in the army with what I envisaged the life of a monk to be and I thought: "I'll never cope with it." Abbot Herbert wrote telling me to expect some doubts and to brush them off. But, if they became serious and persisted, to let him know and he would withdraw my name from the list of postulants he would put before his council. They did not persist.

When I joined I experienced a complete peace and calm and real happiness, and this has remained constant despite the ups and downs that one expects. I took my simple profession in 1960 and my solemn vows in 1964. Other pivotal moments were: St. Benet's Hall to read Greats from 1962-1966; Fribourg under obedience to study theology 1966-1970; St. Louis in 1970 initially under obedience then deciding gladly in 1973 to become a permanent member of the newly independent St. Louis Priory (now Abbey). All the pivotal times have been totally straightforward decisions with none of the heartache of indecision that so many experience. And that has been a great grace. This is not to say that the life has not been very difficult and demanding at times.

My writing of poetry continues. I have this little black diary with a stub of a pen in my back pocket. During Matins occasionally I get an idea, sometimes a line, sometimes a whole poem. And if I don't get it nailed down it's gone. I write under my cowl; no one sees me; there's no distraction to anyone. There was a distinct moment when I became aware that my poetry was of value to others. It was, I think, through Father Austin. (I had seen it as a release, a catharsis for myself.) Here for the first time was somebody whose judgment I trusted and who was enthusiastic about my work. That was back in 1970. The rapidity of my life is just extraordinary to me. It certainly means the style of monastic life we live here involves never a dull moment - moments of great frustration, moments of calm and peace, moments of joy and conviviality, but dull - not yet anyway!