



## SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



### **Monks and the Church in the World**

by Father Finbarr Dowling, OSB

*[The life of monks of the English Benedictine Congregation has always been a blend of the contemplative life with the active. The challenge for each successive generation has been to adjust the proportions. Father Finbarr, who has been serving the parish of Saint Ignatius, Concord Hill since 1996, wonders whether, how far, and how monks are called today to face the extensive changes in the world outside the monastery.*

*We have continually and recently reaffirmed our dedication to the contemplative part of the blend, and to the school, the parish, and hospitality as our principal activities, and we seem to be fully occupied with them. But qui facit per alium facit per se (what you do through another, you do yourself). Could we do more through our students, our parishioners, our oblates, or through some other group? Father Finbarr reminds us of these questions. Ed.]*

Some years ago my parents celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary in a parish church near where they lived in Dublin, Ireland. They both had most of their siblings alive and in attendance, with the Best Man and Maid of Honor at their side as they renewed their commitment to each other. All that was similar to their Wedding Day. The changed world was very evident in everything else, however. The Mass was in English, the grandchildren read the Scriptures, family members distributed Communion in both kinds, cars galore filled the parking lots, and cell phones tingled as soon as folks left the church building. My parents were delighted with the feeling of prayerful, familial togetherness of the Liturgy.

The title given for this piece is accurate when the reader pauses after “Church” and not after “Monks.” There is a great temptation for monks to believe that they are living a “separated life” from the world around them yet from which they gain their livelihood. Many writings exist in Monastic libraries which attest to the detachment of true eremitical monks whose lives are led truly at a distance from the secular society. The Saint Louis Abbey monks, however, thrive in the midst of an educated and affluent sector of a major metropolitan area. The life of the Church and the life of the Monastery go hand in hand in the same World.

The monks arriving fifty years ago lived in a Church which was at once highly regulated and yet strongly individualistic. The men chosen in England each had a special expertise and built his department accordingly. The “Church” was expected to remain the same. The spirituality was tried and true. Individual altars, for the “private” mass of each of the priest-monks, still adorn the window alcoves of the Monastery Church. Few dreamed that, as Basil Hume remarked, the priest who was trained for anonymity at the altar would one day be called to preside with the fullness of his personality evident to all. Few dreamed that the number of priests available to serve the Church in the neighborhoods of St. Louis would be so small as to put considerable moral pressure on the monk-priests to follow the example of their founding monastery and assume off-campus pastoral ministry on a regular basis. On the day when the St. Louis Arch was being topped out, the St. Louis Globe-Democrat carried a heading “massive changes decreed in Catholicism’s Structure.” It underlined the opening relationship with the Jews and the other World Religions, and the freedom of the individual in matters of faith. Pope



## SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



Paul VI referred to the entire process sparked by the Vatican Council as “this astonishing phenomenon.”

Few thought the culture in which the ministry of ordained monks would be carried out would be so unlike the old. Society was becoming individualistic and secular. In St. Louis even baseball moved into the era of individual statistics and analyses, the beginning of players’ rights and the demise of loyalty to organizations. The Church in our World is still being rocked by the developments which have occurred in society in the last fifty years. The normal human reactions were lived out across the church. Even today, in the face of the pedophilia crisis, the temptation to be secretive and autonomous is very great for church officials. Many nations are seeing the ripples from non-consultative and self-preserving forms of governance in inner Church circles. The growing authoritarianism evident in Media Politics is finding its way into religious communities. For some this is a great relief, a freeing from growing into deeper responsibilities. Somebody else will deal with the poor and the homeless, the huge numbers in American prisons, the prevalent militarism and the exploding foreign debt which will forfeit our children’s world to the whims of foreign lenders. There will be no protests at snubbing the United Nations and at preaching an independent nationalism at great cost to both ourselves and to the nations dependent on the common wealth that God has entrusted to us.

The Voice of the Gospel must echo in such a world. The monks are faced with a wonderful opportunity to use their extensive education and travels for the articulation, in the public forum, of the true nature of the interdependent community which lies at the heart of true peace for the Church in our World.

My parents were very open to the developments which the Vatican Council opened for the Church. They were practical and their door was always open. Community was wherever people gathered. The monks of today have a privileged opportunity to address the need for a deeper sense of interdependence and of mutual trust. Privileged to live a little aside, very comfortably yet in cell-phone contact with the embedded Catholics, they can call together the committed and competent Catholics and other Christians who are called to a Benedictine awareness of Work and Prayer in the twenty-first Century. The temptation to do so in a purely Catholic mode should be resisted and the wisdom of the Council to work earnestly for the Visible Unity of Christians should be accepted courageously. The building of trust around the common heritage of Christian prayer is a task for which monks could be uniquely qualified and gifted by the church at large. The charism of genuine hospitality might become, once again, the leading characteristic of a Benedictine monastery in the new century and provide a setting in which neo-monastic lay movements could be nourished for the benefit of the whole Church, the monastery included. Fifty years from now the Church, and the World in which it evangelizes, might be blessed with a renewed sense of true community among the diverse people of a more integrated St. Louis.