



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



Aim High and I

by Brother Maximilian Toczylowski, '00.

[Brother Maximilian has been involved in Aim High for five years. After a description of the program itself, he describes his own part in it. Ed]

Aim High is a summer program for fifth through eighth grade students from public schools in low-income neighborhoods in Saint Louis. It provides a comprehensive curriculum, which is designed to inspire and challenge them to 'aim higher' and, specifically, to wish to learn, to stay in school, and, in due course, to become responsible members of the Greater Saint Louis Community. The program takes place partly on our campus and partly on that of John Burroughs School. It is now in its fifteenth year, and its eleventh at Priory. Over three hundred students who have demonstrated academic potential currently benefit from this four-year, tuition-free program.

The students enter the first, intensive five-week summer program after completing their fifth grade and attend for four consecutive summers. They are offered a rigorous academic schedule, character education, opportunities for cultural enrichment, and athletics, while also enjoying a variety of interesting and challenging elective courses. The program continues during the school year with monthly sessions on Saturday mornings. These sessions include field trips, special presentations on possible careers, training for standardized tests, and opportunities for the students to take part in cultural performances. Many of our faculty, alumni, and present students are on the faculty, and I am one of those.

My involvement with Aim High began in the summer of 2000, just after I graduated from the Priory School. For three summers I was a Teaching Assistant, helping out in a variety of roles, from classroom instruction to grading and evaluation and to administrative tasks. During those three summers, I met many dedicated and passionate teachers and was impressed by the enthusiasm of the students, which frequently surpassed even that of the teachers. Great teachers and students who are eager to learn even during the summer are, for a program such as this, ingredients for success. The role of the Teaching Assistant gives our students and young alumni a great introduction into the life of a school "from the other side of the desk," from the perspective of a teacher or administrator. Through close interaction with outstanding teachers, Aim High opens up the possibility for the Teaching Assistant to consider a career in teaching or working with the young and/or underprivileged. For those with inclinations towards these fields, the program certainly fosters the sense of these careers as true vocations, a call to conform one's life to that of Christ in some unique way that fulfills his God-granted and grace-achieved potential. This was certainly true in regards to myself: my summers working at Aim High were also times of my most fervent activity in the process of discerning a vocation to this particular community. I already felt a strong inclination to a vocation within the Church, and of course I was already very familiar with Saint Louis Abbey. As I grew more comfortable in the role of educator and mentor, I became more aware of teaching and working with the young as a vocation centered on the life of Christ. I felt that, should I under obedience be called into these roles, I would be able to embrace them all the more fully.



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



After I finished my third summer in the program, I began my Novitiate at Saint Louis Abbey, and so I was unable to participate the following summer. The next year (2004), I was delighted when Mr. Bernard Kilcullen, the Saint Louis Priory Site Director for Aim High and faculty member at the Priory School, invited me to teach History to the incoming sixth graders at Aim High. I was somewhat shocked when he asked a twenty-one year old with virtually no qualification to take on his own class, but both he and Father Abbot were convinced of the importance of a monastic presence in the program. I suppose that during the summer holidays, a junior monk with the shortest vacation time was an easy target. My first summer teaching, while not without its difficulties, can still be qualified as a success, and I was again invited to teach History, this time to incoming seventh graders. A young teacher, whether monastic or lay, could not ask for a better program to become comfortable in the classroom, and gifted students looking to dedicate their summer vacation to sharpening their skills could not hope to find a more perfect match than Aim High.