



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



WHAT DOES THE PRIOR DO IN A BENEDICTINE MONASTERY?

by Father Paul Kidner, OSB

[As Father Paul says, Saint Benedict is wary of priors, just as he is of priests. He had evidently had experience of the prior being appointed by the same bishop and abbots as appointed the abbot, which did not work. He therefore insists that the abbot must himself appoint the prior, as now happens. Father Paul was prior of our monastery from 1989-2005: he therefore writes out of long experience. Ed]

You will not find a job description for the prior in the Rule of Benedict. In fact, St. Benedict doesn't seem to like priors very much. He would prefer that in a small monastery the administration should be in the hands of the abbot while in a larger monastery there should be deans in charge of groups of ten. "If the community is rather large, some brothers chosen for their good repute and holy life should be made deans (*decani*). They will take care of their groups of ten, managing all affairs according to the commandments of God and the orders of their abbot." (RB 21:1,2) "But if local conditions call for it, or the community makes a reasonable and humble request, and the abbot judges it best, then let him, with the advice of God-fearing brothers, choose the man he wants and himself make him his prior." (RB 65:14,15) The prior is not an elected official. He is not a "second abbot." (RB 65:2) He is appointed by the abbot and can be removed by him at any time; there is no fixed term of office.

The prior is the abbot's deputy and presides over the community in the absence of the abbot. He should support the abbot's decisions but he is not a "yes" man and may appropriately present an alternative position on a question or problem when consulted by the abbot. But when the abbot has decided, he should be an example of obedience for the rest of the community. "The decision is... the abbot's to make, so that when he has determined what is more prudent, all may obey." (RB 3:5) "The prior for his part is to carry out respectfully what his abbot assigns to him, and do nothing contrary to the abbot's wishes or arrangements..." (RB 65:16) So, in a nutshell, his job description is to do whatever the abbot wants him to do.

In practice this involves the daily running of the house, the practical details of scheduling, assigning work and seeing that it is done. He coordinates the work of other officials such as the kitchen master, guest master and infirmarian. He has a disciplinary role in giving permissions and correcting minor infractions. He may have a role in the formation of the younger monks but this is the primary responsibility of the postulant master, novice master, junior master and master of studies.

The abbot may delegate to the prior parts of the administration with which he is less comfortable or to which he does not have time to devote full attention, so that the work of the prior complements that of the abbot. Several monasteries of the twenty-first century have placed the management of the temporalities in the hands of a lay administrator, variously called the Procurator, Bursar, Treasurer or Director of Finance, instead of a monastic Cellarer whose responsibilities are described in detail in chapter 31 of the Rule. In this situation it is important that at least one monk be familiar with what is going on and oversee the work of the lay administrators. At present at Saint Louis Abbey the prior is delegated to oversee the finances and facilities, reviewing monthly and



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quarterly reports, being involved in the budgeting process, and aware of the condition of the monastery's property, buildings and investments.

Depending on what the abbot assigns him to do, the prior's responsibilities may not constitute a full time job. In many Benedictine monasteries which run a school or university, the prior is a part time teacher, as is the case at Saint Louis Priory School.

The abbot endeavors to utilize the prior's talents most effectively and a new prior with different skills and capabilities may be given different assignments. But in all cases the prior strives "to carry out respectfully what his abbot assigns to him, and do nothing contrary to the abbot's wishes or arrangements."