



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



Abbot Thomas On His Call

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All roads to a monastic vocation are unique but Abbot Thomas is particularly striking. He was stricken with polio at age two, ten years before the vaccine, and nearly died. The polio left him partially paralyzed and he began living a life that would never be normal. "By hindsight, it's surprising how different I was from other people, but I must say I had a happy childhood. I don't think, thank God, there was ever a reaction of bitterness."

At thirteen, his affliction led him to his first encounter with religion, seeking from God an answer to why he was handicapped. Thus began his search for spiritual fulfillment.

Thomas entered Harvard in 1962, majoring in chemistry, with the intention of becoming a doctor, but he became increasingly interested in classical philosophy and theology. He switched his major to philosophy his sophomore year. "It was no great courage on my part; I was just coming to find that I couldn't be happy if this search for God wasn't the central thing in my life. The thing that affected me most was science. I felt that any form of religious faith that couldn't stack up to science was simply not acceptable."

By graduation he considered himself agnostic. The following fall he was on his way to Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar. He decided to get his doctorate and teach philosophy at the college level, and planned to continue his search without having to commit to any faith. His eight years in England were spent getting his doctorate and a master's in theology. "I was so much enjoying and profiting from the experience of having a long period to just reflect on my own as deep as I could, I really didn't want it to come to an end."

It was also during this time that he became a Catholic. Still not convinced of the existence of God, he had come across the writings of Simone Weil, a French philosopher and mystic. "When I put the book down, I was convinced that God existed; I was really aware of Him; I had a sense of presence."

He also realized that most of his closest friends, fellow graduate students and several monks, were Catholic, and he discovered his own spiritual leanings had most in common with the Catholic tradition. He was able to reconcile religion with science. "That was a great intellectual revolution for me. I had some kind of experience of the presence of Christ, making it clear to me what I was supposed to do. I'm not given to this kind of thing, and I hesitate to even mention it, because people think you're nuts, but they were very vivid experiences. They were based on a passage from Mark, about the healing of Bartimaeus, who was



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a blind man. The final realization, if one was needed, came on a family vacation in the Tetons that summer. We were taking a float trip down the Snake River, and I looked up and saw the clouds over the mountains, and I looked at that, and I don't know what that has to do with religion, but I suddenly realized when I got back to England, I'd go to the Catholic chaplain at the University and say I wanted to become a Catholic. But I don't want to overemphasize the odd part of it."

Thomas took his doctorate to Notre Dame in 1974 and began teaching. By the end of the 1979 school year, nearly 35, he let his desire for God run to its logical end and away from Notre Dame to try Priory, now Abbey. "If there is some way to directly experience God in this life, if that can somehow be a continuing dimension, then that seems to me to be the most wonderful life that I can imagine." He took the safety net of a year's leave of absence from Notre Dame that summer. "Far be it from me to leave my nets in the boat and follow the Lord." The following January he notified the school that he would not be returning.

What sustains this monk is that inner glow. Polio could have embittered him, religious despair could have extinguished his spirit; instead, what he gained in the process was life. Abbot Thomas is an undeniably, unbelievably happy man. Watching him teach, watching him motor around campus in his modified golf cart, there is the immediate impression that he is exactly where he wants to be.

On July 12, 1995, the community elected him as their Abbot.

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