



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



A Priory Legacy: Abbot Luke Rigby By Andrew Wilson '64

“YEA,
though I walk through the valley
of the shadow of debt,
I will fear no evil.”

A prayer for Father Luke

Back in 1955, Abbot Byrne of Ampleforth made not one, but three brilliant choices in selecting the first three monks to found a school and a monastery in Saint Louis.

First, he chose Father Columba Cary-Elwes, 52, to be the Prior, or spiritual leader.

Next, he chose Father Timothy Horner, 35, to be the Headmaster.

Last, he chose Father Jerome Luke Rigby, 32, to be the Procurator, or, in plain English, the Business Manager.

By his own admission, Father Luke, who studied Literature at Oxford (B.A. and M.A. degrees), knew nothing of balance sheets and income statements or of managing a complex enterprise. Nevertheless, he succeeded so well that he made the jump from Business Manager to Prior (and then Abbot) without even pausing to become Headmaster.

Abbot Byrne may have been impressed by the fact that Father Luke had banker's blood in his veins—being the son of an officer at the old Dominion, Colonial and Overseas Bank. More probably, the Abbot recognized an acute and highly pragmatic intelligence, combined with an unflappable disposition and an unusual dexterity in dealing with people.

From the first footfall in Saint Louis, Father Columba and Father Timothy were secure in one way: Each knew exactly what he wanted. Father Columba wanted a monastery centered on a church (and not just, as the sponsoring group of laymen had supposed, a small chapel). Father Timothy wanted a school, with all the trimmings in the way of a physical plant. It was up to Father Luke to attend to the “materialities.”

Where is Father Luke? Oh, dear me, where is Father Luke?

That runs as a kind of refrain through Father Timothy's amusing written account of D Day Minus I, the final day before opening for classes. It is a scene of general pandemonium, with trucks converging upon the Priory from every direction. Where is all the stuff to go? Father Luke, it seems, is downtown doing some final shopping, and Timothy and Father Ian are, well, almost clueless. Fortunately, Father Luke is back by supper-time, and everything is pulled together in time for next morning's school bell.

Similarly, the Priory Church, now established as a Saint Louis landmark, looked for a time as though it might be unbuildable and unfinanceable. In his reminiscences, Father Columba gave credit to Father Luke for making it happen. “Father Luke was carrying this huge undertaking on his shoulders while he was grappling with all



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the endless complications of running the finances, the catering and the maintenance of the whole establishment,” the first Prior wrote.

Thrown in the deep end of the pool in running the business side of a monastery/school complex, Father Luke not only learned to swim, but to enjoy it. “I found it fascinating,” Father Luke recalls. “I did it by seeking guidance from the (lay) founders, by studying finance and accounting on my own and by going off (to Marquette University) to take one or two courses for school business managers.” In the process, Father Luke discovered an unexpected affinity with some of the teachings of Saint Benedict, who founded the order before the year 520. While devoting their lives to praising God, Saint Benedict did not want his followers to be a burden upon the larger community. He taught that they should earn a living, be useful to others and put bread upon their own table. Under the guidance of a leader who was practical as well as inspirational, the religious group should be self-sufficient.

After 12 years as Business Manager, Father Luke was appointed Prior in 1967, then elected to the same office when the Priory became an autonomous monastery in 1973. At that point, knowing his bones would be laid to rest in this land, Father Luke applied for American citizenship, which he was granted the following year. The monastery was then raised to the status of Abbey in 1989, and he was elected Abbot. He retired as Abbot in 1995.

“The child,” Wordsworth intoned, “is father of the Man.” That may be interpreted to mean that the firsthand experiences of youth provide the best preparation for the larger responsibilities of later life. That is close to the way Father Luke views his own development. He does not hesitate to draw certain analogies between running a business and running a religious community.

First, says Father Luke, the leader must have “a grasp of finance,” or, if he should choose to delegate, absolute confidence and trust in someone else who does. Otherwise, the group is sure to founder.

Second, the leader must unite the group behind a common vision. “You cannot have a lot of sub-groups simply doing their own thing, with Sales, for instance, acting in opposition to Production. The job of the monastic superior is to help the monks arrive at a common vision of what their life’s work should be... or, if you like, what their product is.”

Third, the leader is deeply concerned about the future. Like Father Columba before him, Father Luke has always seen the monastery as the real key to the future... for the entire enterprise, including both the church and the school.

Part of his genius, then (and this part stems from the pastoral as opposed to the business side of his personality), has been to involve “the greater Abbey family,” as he calls it, in the ongoing development of the Abbey in its entirety. For many Priory alumni and their wives and families, the ties that bind are not just academic or nostalgic but deeply personal and religious.