



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



Fr. Timothy On His Call

I was born in Quetta in what was then India and is now Pakistan. Eighteen months later my mother brought me home to England and left me to be brought up for several years in a household that, except for visitors, was entirely feminine. My first contact with men in quantity and for an extended time came when I was sent to a boarding school at the age of nine - not that unusual in England. Unfortunately I did not particularly admire nor like them, which I expect was reciprocal.

While I was there, my parents returned from India and were divorced. I went to live with my mother, who was Catholic. That was my first significant encounter with the Church, though I had been baptized Catholic. Besides the example of her general goodness and involvement in church activities, she gave me what her Belgian Nuns had given her, a great love for the Mass and for the Bible and a very sane and non-scrupulous, non-fear-ridden religion.

Then, at the age of thirteen, I went to Ampleforth, a Benedictine boarding school in Yorkshire, England, and met a group of men whom I got to know well and to admire. Towards the end of my time at Ampleforth, I gave some thought to the idea of seeking to become a monk, but decided quite firmly that I wanted to go to Oxford on my own and as a layman, which I did. Then came World War II which took care of the next six years and did not leave much time for thinking about anything except war. I suppose monastic life was simmering at the back of my mind somewhere but it never received much overt attention, though I attended R.C. Church Parade quite faithfully.

At the end of the war I was in Burma and, though we were to occupy Thailand and, later, Malaysia and were quite busy with that, I did come to one conclusion: that after the war I wanted to do something that I wanted to do all day long, and not something from nine to five so that I could do in the rest of the time what I really wanted to do. That was a more significant decision than I recognized at the time.

While we were in Thailand an opportunity occurred to return to England for a rather high-level course in Combined Operations and to take some leave. Nobody else was keen to go so the general sent me off and I learnt more about how to mount a combined operation than I really needed, or cared, to know. More important than that I met Mary who was so attractive that we had to give a good deal of thought to our future. Time was rather short and we reached no firm conclusion. I had to return to Malaysia, whither the division had moved, but clearly would not be there for very long. When I got back there had been sweeping changes of both men and spirit. Most of my friends had left and peacetime soldiering with all its attendant spit and polish, was in full swing. That was not for me, and clearly there would be no combined operations to mount.



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It did not break my heart when the red-letter day came on which I received my demobilization papers, headed south from Ipoh, in the north of Malaysia, to Singapore and eventually boarded the ship for England. It did however precipitate the problem of Mary. We had reached no decision but it had become clear enough that if one asked, the other would say yes. Why then did I not leap at the opportunity? I think we had two main reasons. The first and less grand was that if I tried to be a monk and it did not work out I could always hope and pray that Mary would still be around. Vice versa would be problematic. But the compelling reason was that God's call preempts all others. I think it was not uncommon then for Catholic boys and girls to think that their first question when choosing what to do in life was "shall I be a monk or priest or sister?" Only after answering that did one ask, if necessary, "shall I be a zoologist or whatever?"

I was walking round the deck one evening as the sun was setting and the ship was somewhere in the Indian Ocean, and I realized that I had made my decision to ask the Abbot of Ampleforth if I could join his community. It was a very unspectacular moment, no tongues of fire, no rushing wind, but a quiet and deep conviction that this was it, as indeed it was.

This has been my experience at several turning points in my life, that after prayer and thought, and consultation, I have not so much proceeded to make a decision as come to recognize that I had already made it. This has sometimes happened quite suddenly, and in connection with some place that had significance for me. Consequently I can often remember the occasion with great clarity.

After that it remained only to write to the Abbot, which I did in an embarrassingly formal and military style. He replied graciously and said that he hoped I would be the only sort of monk it was worth being, a whole-hearted one. He also said that I should bring with me the rather numerous books that I had acquired at Oxford. I took this at the time to be a good omen, and still so take it.

I am startled at how little I then knew about the details of monastic life, but I was clear and correct about one thing: if this life could produce men like many of the Ampleforth monks I knew, it would be all right for me.