

Benedictine Monks living and serving in our Parishes

It sometimes puzzles people that monks can live miles away from their monasteries. The priests in St Anne's and St Elizabeth are used to being asked about this. The English Benedictine Monks have a very long tradition of monks evangelizing miles from home. Christianity, in fact, was brought to England in 597 by 30 monks accompanying St Augustine of Canterbury when Pope St Gregory the Great despatched them to bring the Gospel to the Anglo Saxons. After the English Reformation in the early 17th century three monasteries of English monks were established in France and within a short time monk/priests came back home to minister to the Catholic community. Many of the monks were put to death simply because they were priests.



Monks living in parishes usually regard themselves as working away from home, their real home being their monastery - in our case, Douai Abbey in Berkshire. They aim to bring some of those central characteristics of Benedictine life, nurtured during their years in the monastery, into parish life. St Benedict (480-547) wrote a Rule for monks to help them find fulness of life and come close to God in their monastic calling, and that rule still inspires thousands of men and women around the world today. A Benedictine parish tries to nurture some of the qualities St Benedict mentions and adapt the wisdom of the Rule to the lives of parishioners. For example:

- A wise monk is appointed to look after the new monks *to ascertain whether or not they truly seek God*. The role of clergy and all parishioners is to help members of the parish community to find God and grow in their relationship with the Lord. We are all weak and we need one another to grow in God's love. One of the wonderful things about a Catholic parish is that everyone is at a different stage in his or her faith journey, so respect and understanding, never criticism, should be the hallmarks of a parish. There is a close contact between our parishes and our Catholic schools, for between us we try to support the faith of our young people.
- *First of all, every time you begin a good work, **you must pray** to Him most earnestly to bring it to perfection... Nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God ...* Prayer and the celebration of the liturgy are at the heart of a parish community. The celebration of Mass and the Liturgy are the focal points of our personal prayer and parish activities.
- **Benedictine Hospitality** is another of the essentials of monastic life. St Benedict says: *All guests who present themselves are **to be welcomed as Christ**, for he himself will say, 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me'*. Our parish community consists of people from diverse backgrounds and our aim is that everyone will find a home with us. Pope Francis sums up what we hope is the nature of a Benedictine parish: 'May the church be the place of God's mercy and love where everyone can feel themselves welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live according to the good life of the Gospel. And in order to make others feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged, the church must have open doors so that all might enter. And we must go out of those doors and proclaim the Gospel'.
- In recent years many lay women and men have adapted the Rule of St Benedict to their own particular circumstances. Some of our parishioners who wish to have a particular link with the life and prayer of Douai Abbey belong to the Oblates of the abbey. They commit themselves to daily prayer and *Lectio Divina* (Sacred Reading) which is a monastic way of reading, pondering and praying the Scriptures.

- It should be evident to people entering our two churches that they have come into a Benedictine place of worship. The stained-glass window of St Benedict in St Elizabeth's and the statues and chapel dedicated to St Benedict in St Anne's speak clearly of our proud heritage and the vibrant life of our parish communities.

St Benedict quotes *Psalm 33* to encourage his monks: *Is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days?* May our parishes enable us all to find that true life which God alone can give.