

Sister Sally and the Benedictine Way

Monastic life is one path among many by which Christians may feel called to live. In the Benedictine tradition this life is marked by drawing up a formal document and commitment to a vowed life of stability, conversion of life and obedience. Such was the path chosen by Sister Sally Paley who professed her Solemn Vows at Mucknell Abbey on Tuesday 12 May.

Many of you will know Sister Sally Paley, who worshipped at St Martin's for many years in a very prayerful way. So prayerful, that Fr Simon once could not attract her attention when she was serving as she was in a prayerful trance. Awaking from one such trance Sally found herself tied to a chair by the cord of her alb. Sweet revenge perhaps? This was only one event in the life of Sally mentioned by Fr Simon in his splendid homily. Another was reference to the placement of Sally's garden pond, which Fr Simon fell into at a party, receiving no sympathy at

all. Sister Sally responded to this after the service, saying that she *had* been sympathetic by dropping into his house some water wings and a book on how to swim the next morning.

Sally was surrounded by family, friends, clergy and the religious community, which made it a truly joyful and memorable day. At times emotions ran high, especially when Sally recalled that her 'profession' ring had been gifted to her by her close friend and confidant for many years, Fr Ken Toovey, once vicar of St Martin's. Time flew by as we enjoyed the well-known Benedictine hospitality and it was soon time to say good-bye and return to St Martin's, our spiritual home whose roots go back to the 12th Century Benedictine presence in Ruislip.

The occasion reminded me of some gems of Benedictine spirituality: stability, obedience, prayer and how it is a "school for beginners".



Sister Sally with (clockwise) Fr Simon, David Hudson, Linda Hudson and Maureen Tinsey

Stability reminds us of our need to put down roots in order to grow – and not be 'rolling stones that gather no moss'. In a stable community we learn to love God and, hard though it sometimes is, to love not only others in our community, but to reach out into the world and show forth God's love and, like the Benedictines, welcome people into our community 'as if they were Christ'.

Obedience, in the Benedictine sense, means being respectful of the rules and especially the abbot's guidance; but much more, an attitude of listening, especially to the word of God contained in scripture (from *ob-audire*, obedience to listening). For Benedict, listening was a key virtue: "*Listen carefully, my child, to the guidance of your teacher, with the ear of your heart*". Of course this deep listening to inner spiritual movements needs silence, stillness and



Sister Sally after her Solemn Vows, with Fr Simon

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Prayer, the heart of Benedictine life, the Divine Office six times a day, the *opus Dei*, 'the work of God'. Interspersed between these periods of communal prayer are times for private reading and manual work. Words received by carefully listening to the Office, or from private reading can be taken into life and reflected upon – ruminating, or chewing over, the words that have 'touched' them. In this way of life, prayer was work, the work of God, and work became prayer – 'prayer running through the day like a subterranean stream' as Esther de Waal once put it. Why not try morning or evening prayer sometime?

The 'school for beginners' that Benedict refers to reminds us that growing as Christians is a life-long journey. We may think we are some way along the road but then realize how little we really know. Benedict urges his fellow monks to 'prefer nothing whatever to Christ' and ends his rule by encouraging them (and us) to:

'keep this little rule that we have written for beginners. After that, you can set out for loftier summits of teaching and virtues, and under God's protection you will reach them.'

David Hudson



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