

EULOGY
DOM LAURENCE KELLY
(1928 – 2009)



*Given by Dom Aidan Bellenger, Abbot of Downside at the Abbey Church of St. Pope
Gregory the Great on Thursday 10th September 2009*

St. Gregory the Great's life of St. Benedict is full of miracle stories but has few great set pieces of Benedict's own life. An exception is his deathbed where he breathes his last surrounded by his community. Dom Laurence when he died on 1 September did not die alone but was supported by his fellow monks and by the wonderful care shown to him by Sister Rose and her team of nurses. Thank you. A monk's life is a preparation for the moment of death and the eternal life promised by the Lord and, however hard the struggle of the last days may be, and Father Laurence's was not easy, the peace which follows the patient waiting on the Lord is one which we can all hope for.

Father Laurence's life was dominated by his involvement with Downside. Born Patrick Kelly on 24 April 1928 in Madras, he was the only son of Leo Kelly and Brigit his wife (nee Lyons). He was a son of the Raj and of the Irish diaspora.

His younger sister Molly (with her husband Christopher and their family here today, and to them many condolences) were brought up mainly in Bournemouth. Early education, too, was on the south coast, with the Benedictines at Ramsgate (tougher than here, Patrick received a boxing medal named after Abbot Egan) although the Indian connection lingered; a Madras curry was his dish of choice at his most recent jubilee. He entered Downside and Barlow, under Dom Benet Innes, at the same time as Dom Gervase. He was bright enough to receive six credits at School Certificate but it was as a Rugby player that he excelled; he made the 1st XV and was remembered as an exceptionally fast runner and hard tackler. He was among those present at the Air Crash in May 1943.



He entered the monastery, as was the custom then, very young; he was not yet eighteen when he was clothed by Abbot Trafford on 17 February 1946 taking the name Laurence. He had the Westminster succession and it was perhaps appropriate that Trafford's last novice should be under the same patronage as our sister house at Ampleforth where his future brother-in-law was educated. The novitiate was tough in those days, grim might be a better word, and made tougher by the Novice Master, Dom Alban Brooks, who had the Cistercians (in their most

Trappist guise) as his model. The senior novice was John Roberts, recently liberated from his POW camp, a good preparation for the Downside monastery top floor, an army officer and a Cambridge graduate, who Brother Laurence looked up to as a father figure. His kindness (continued later as abbot) helped him to survive. Also clothed with him, Martin Salmon (Royal Navy); Fabian Glencross (a fellow member of the First XV who went to Worth and died young); and Eric Phillips, (in the second of his three attempts to join the community). In his final (and successful) period of formation, in the late 70s, Father Laurence acted as his mentor and guide. Laurence himself made his solemn vows before Abbot Christopher Butler.

He went up to Cambridge, resident at Benet House, after his solemn Profession and read Classics as an undergraduate at Christ's College. He had a good sense of language and retained a love of Latin and later enriched his cultural life by learning German; this fed his love of opera and particularly of Wagner. He was a deacon (ordained in 1951) for most of his time at Cambridge and was ordained priest on 11 July 1954 by Archbishop Grimshaw of Birmingham.

Teaching in the school, Classics and what was then called Religious Instruction, followed graduation. In 1959 he became the first of the three housemasters of Ramsay, fifty years ago this year. He created the ethos of the house, difficult to describe but familiar to all who know it: informal, loving and principled. Many of his old boys, several here today, have written to me saying how much they were influenced by his great example of humility and cheerful giving. He was Master of Ceremonies in the abbey church for some years. He remained housemaster (under the headmasterships of Passmore, Watkin and Appleby) until 1977. He then embarked, on Dom Raphael's initiative, into the uncharted waters of school chaplaincy (he was the first to hold the title) which he retained (under the headships of Jebb, Sutch and myself) until 1997. He made the link between Downside and Rathmore in Northern Ireland an important part of school life in partnership with the redoubtable Sister Joan.

He compiled the 1984 Downside Prayer Book. He encouraged retreats and organised numerous visits to Bindon in Dorset, then leased by Downside, aided by the junior monks of the time including those from Prinknash. He started the *Downside School Community Service*, pupils let loose in the village to the alarm as well as the benefit of the local inhabitants. He was in charge of archery for many years. The last was rather alarming as Father Laurence's eyesight, never good, was by then deteriorating badly. With God's help there were no fatalities.



His coping with his loss of sight was heroic. His magnifying glass was an essential part of his kit. He mastered Braille. He preached with clarity, lucidity and a crystal clear voice (as loud as his wonderful laugh) from notes with gigantic letters; he may not have seen them, but everybody else did. He remained determined, some would say stubborn, in his will to continue doing good even when mobility problems were added to his burden. His suffering and the way he dealt with it were inspirational. In those last years, from his retirement from the school until his last months, he remained active. He was novice master from 1997 – 2000 and oblate master for ten years from 1999. He continued, as a resident holy man, to act as confessor to many of the monks and to be friend to many. His devoted friendship to Sandy Walford was particularly important to him.

The words addressed to the memory of a dead monk by the abbot cannot be answered by the deceased – at least not in this life and I hope I have avoided both

canonisation and defamation. We are here to remember Father Laurence but above all else we are here to pray for him and that is what he would have wanted. I was with him when he died, very peacefully, but a week before he renewed his vows to me and I found that very moving – I am his (Trafford, Butler, Passmore, Roberts, Fitzgerald - Lombard, Yeo) seventh abbot.

At the beginning I mentioned St. Gregory's *Dialogues*. The most striking story is probably the one about St. Benedict seeing all things in a beam of light. Monks are called by Benedict to listen. They are also called to see. Dom Laurence's hearing – he could identify any kind of birdsong – remained acute but his sight long failed him. Months of darkness and frustration and pain preceded his death. Years of blindness came before that. We all pass at death from darkness to light, from the shadow lands of this earth to the glory of Heaven.

May Father Laurence see with new eyes the vision of the invisible God.