News



Dom Geoffroy Kemlin, abbot president of the Benedictines' Solesmes Congregation in France, places a ring on the finger of Benedictine Mother Benedict McLaughlin, abbess of Immaculate Heart of Mary Abbey in Westfield, Vermont, during her Nov. 11 abbatial blessing. (OSV News/Vermont Catholic magazine/Cori Fugere Urban)

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The abbot president of the Benedictines' Solesmes Congregation in France came to Vermont to give the abbatial blessing to the first abbess of the newly designated Immaculate Heart of Mary Abbey in Westfield.

More than 500 people attended the blessing Nov. 11 at St. Mary Star of the Sea Church in Newport of Mother Benedict McLaughlin.

More than 40 years after the first American cloistered monastery of the Benedictine Congregation of Solesmes officially was dedicated in Westfield, it was raised to the status of an abbey in June, and Mother Benedict was elected the first abbess.

Before an international congregation of nuns, abbesses, abbots and priests as well as family members and friends of Mother Benedict, Vermont Catholics and others eager to witness the once-in-a-lifetime event, the Mass was celebrated by Dom Geoffroy Kemlin, abbot president of the Solesmes Congregation.

"I feel a deep sense of gratitude to our foundresses for bringing the Solesmes tradition of Benedictine contemplative life to the United States and an awareness of the responsibility to hand on the heritage that it has been a privilege to receive," Mother Benedict told Vermont Catholic, the official publication of the statewide Diocese of Burlington.

During the rituals, the abbot president also presented her with the Rule of St. Benedict and the abbatial insignia — a ring and a crozier.

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Among those at the Mass was Benedictine Sr. Laurence Couture, the first prioress of the Westfield monastery. "I am very happy; this is a great day," she said, adding that Mother Benedict "will be very good" as abbess. "She is a good nun and very bright."

Mother Benedict, 62, was born in Pittsburgh and earned a bachelor's degree in foreign service from Georgetown University. "I wanted to be a missionary, which is why I studied foreign service, but the Lord had a different idea," she said.

"My discernment visit to the (Westfield) monastery coincided with Holy and Easter weeks, and I was captivated by the beauty and power of the liturgy, solemnly celebrated with Gregorian chant and deeply rooted in history," said the former legal secretary who worked at a large Washington law firm. "But it was the singing of the psalms — using God's own word to speak to God — that ultimately drew me to enter."

She made her final profession in 1995.

"The contemplative life is, by its very nature, a hidden life, so that the nuns can be totally available for God, who loves us and who deserves to be loved above all else in return," she told Vermont Catholic.

"However, there can be a temptation for nuns to think that because their life is hidden with God that they are forgotten by people," she continued. "The outpouring of kindness and generosity on the part of the diocese, our neighbors, and friends since the announcement of our becoming an abbey, has proven that this is far from the truth. We are immensely grateful."



Mother Benedict McLaughlin, first abbess of the Benedictines' Immaculate Heart of Mary Abbey in Westfield, Vermont, greets a nun during her abbatial blessing Nov. 11 at St. Mary Star of the Sea Church in Newport, Vermont. (OSV News/Vermont Catholic magazine/Cori Fugere Urban)

Josh Perry, director of the Office of Worship for the Diocese of Burlington, said the work of the abbey goes unseen by most Catholics in the diocese, but the lives of the nuns in the community are a living witness to St. Paul's command to "pray without ceasing" and St. Benedict's call to the "work of God" — "ora et labora" (prayer and work).

"The presence of the abbey in Vermont has become an integral part of the identity and mission of our local church," he said. "The nuns of the community support and hold us up in our evangelizing work through their constant and dedicated prayer. The prayer of the contemplative communities in the church sustains the church in its ministry to the world."

In his homily at the Mass, Dominican Fr. Gabriel O'Donnell, a professor of spiritual theology at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, said the blessing of an abbess sets her apart from the other nuns as one who must inspire and encourage as well as correct and call to account: "It would be an impossible task were it not for the grace of Christ which makes all things possible when undertaken in his name and for the good of his flock."

He encouraged Mother Benedict to "cling to Christ" and let him love her and let that love give her confidence that he will guide her at every moment.

Msgr. John McDermott, apostolic administrator of the Diocese of Burlington, read an apostolic blessing from Pope Francis and offered his own congratulations, best wishes and prayers at the end of the Mass. "It's a great day for the Abbey of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (and) a wonderful and beautiful day for the Diocese of Burlington," he said.