

# Abbatial Blessing of Mother Benedict McLaughlin

More than 500 people attended the Abbatial Blessing at St. Mary Star of the Sea Church in Newport of Mother Benedict McLaughlin, OSB, first abbess of Immaculate Heart of Mary Abbey in Westfield.

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

With 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 Nov. 11 Mass was celebrated by Right Rev. Dom Geoffroy Kemlin, OSB, abbot president of the Solesmes Congregation from France.

"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 McLaughlin told *Vermont Catholic*.

During the Litany of Saints, she prostrated herself

in the sanctuary. Later the abbot president blessed her and presented the abbess with the Rule of St. Benedict and the abbatial insignia — a ring and a crozier.

Among those at the Mass was Sister Laurence Couture, OSB, 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, Pennsylvania

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 in a large Washington, D.C., 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 wrote. "However, there can be a temptation for nuns to think that because their life is hidden with God that they are forgotten by people. 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."

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 Father Gabriel O'Donnell, a professor of Spiritual Theology at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, D.C., 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."

VTC • Cori Fugere Urban

1. Mother Benedict McLaughlin, OSB, is the first abbess of Immaculate Heart of Mary Abbey in Westfield. 2. Right Rev. Dom Geoffroy Kemlin, OSB, abbot president of the Solesmes Congregation from France, presents the abbess with the abbatial ring. 3. More than 500 people attend the Abbatial Blessing at St. Mary Star of the Sea Church in Newport. 4. Mother Benedict grasps the hands of Benedictine Sister Laurence Couture, former prioress of the monastery that was elevated to the status of abbey earlier this year. Pushing the wheelchair is a postulant with the order, Theresa Caulfield from Erie, Penn. 5. The abbess greets one of the nuns in attendance at the Abbatial Blessing.

— Cori Fugere Urban photos



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