

## Frequently Asked Questions

These are questions people often ask about our community but which are probably useful for anyone thinking about Benedictine monastic life. If you are discerning a vocation and wish to ask something about becoming a nun here at Howton Grove Priory that is not on the list, or are not clear about our answer, [please ask the Novice Mistress](#). The directives given in 'Cor Orans', published in May 2018, take immediate effect, so we shall be revising what we say here in the light of its requirements. Please note in particular that the formation period now required is nine years and may be extended to twelve.

If you want help with something like a school project, or more general information, please use the general contact form. As we said on the previous page, for a Benedictine, a vocation is always to a specific community.

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### **What are the requirements for becoming a nun?**

**1. You must be Roman Catholic and a woman.**

**2. You must be single or widowed.** (If you are divorced, you will generally need to petition for annulment before you can become a nun.)

**3. You must not have any dependent children.** (If you do, your first duty is to them. If they are grown up and able to lead independent lives, there is no problem.)

**4. You must not have any debts.** (If you have a Student Loan or something like that, we'll need to discuss it. You will, of course, be doing your best to pay off anything you owe, won't you?)

**5. You must be physically and psychologically healthy.** (Monastic life is demanding; so although you do not need to be an Olympic athlete, you do need to be able to cope with an austere mode of living.)

It helps if you have some work experience/professional training after you complete your formal education. Oh, and of course, **you must have a vocation**, but that is something that both you and the community will be trying to discern together.

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### **What advice would you give someone thinking of becoming a nun?**

First of all, keep praying and be faithful to Mass and the Sacraments. You need to keep in touch with the Holy Spirit and allow him to lead you. Try to find out whatever you can about the spirituality of different Orders and different communities. Get to know some at first hand. Think about what attracts you, what you might find difficult. Talk things over with your confessor or someone else who knows you really well. Make contact with the monastery you are drawn to and get to know the community.

Don't try to live as a nun in the world, but try to live a good life where you are and wait upon God. In time, God will show you what he wants. If you are called to be a nun then, provided you don't put up any obstacle, you can be quite sure that the Lord will lead you where you are meant to be. If, after all your searching, you find that you are not called to be a nun, thank God for the gift of the vocation that you are and ask him to lead you in the way of holiness. It may be that you are called to be an Associate or Oblate, rather than a nun. There are many ways of living the spirituality of St Benedict.

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### **Are there any 'spiritual practices' you would recommend to someone who is discerning?**

This is a question which should really be answered in individual terms. Generally speaking, we would not advocate the adoption of any specific 'practices'. The important thing is to grow in love of the Lord and of other people. Prayer is essential. Try to cultivate a habit of prayer: regularity is more important than the amount of time you give to it. But without prayer, without trying to listen to the Holy Spirit, you may find that you are confusing your own will with God's. There is no substitute for Mass and the Sacraments, or for reading the Scriptures. If you can say some of the Liturgy of the Hours each day, you may find that a great help; but don't neglect your other duties in order to pray the Liturgy. Whatever you do, don't spend your time reading books about prayer instead of trying to pray! It is all too easy to do that.

The question of spiritual direction is difficult. In our community tradition, there has always been a certain wariness of spiritual directors. Bad directors can do much harm, as can those who have no sympathy with the spirituality of the community or Order you are thinking of joining. If you have a good spiritual director, with real insight, stick with him/her. If you do not have a spiritual director, remember the importance of the Sacrament of Penance and recognize that God has his own ideas about how to lead you.

As to reading, it is better to ask the novice mistress what she would recommend for you rather than embark on an ambitious project which never gets beyond the 'reading list' stage. There are some excellent resources on the web, but they need to be used critically as not all are of equal

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worth (or even orthodoxy). Perhaps the main thing is just to keep doing the best you can. Keep in touch with the community you are thinking of joining and try to see whether its spirituality is one that attracts and inspires you.

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#### What vows do you take and when?

It takes a minimum of five and a half years' training or "formation" before you can make final or lifelong vows as a nun. There are three distinct stages, all of which are meant to lead to a deeper appreciation of what monastic life is, the demands it makes, and whether an individual is called to it or not.

First comes **postulancy**, which lasts at least six months, during which the postulant lives with the community and follows the monastic timetable but without all the obligations of the Rule. Next comes **novitiate** which usually lasts two years — the first year is the canonical novitiate. The novice receives the monastic habit at Clothing and follows a more intense course of formation. At the end of the novitiate, vows are made for for three years of **juniorate**. The Benedictine vows are

- **stability**, which binds one to a specific community (Benedictines are not an Order in the generally accepted sense of the term. Each monastery is autonomous although most are grouped into Federations or Congregations. We do not belong to any Congregation but come directly under the bishop of the diocese);
- **conversatio morum**, usually translated as conversion, which means to live monastic life as it should be lived (Benedictines do not make vows of chastity or poverty, but to live monastic life properly one must certainly be chaste. The Benedictine understanding of religious poverty is quite radical: it means more than living frugally, there can be absolutely no private ownership of anything, although, of course, the community as a whole must own things — and we are not required to share our toothbrushes!);
- **obedience**, which is intended to insert us into the obedience of Christ "who came not to do his own will but the will of his Father."

Only after at least three years' experience of living these vows can you make vows for life. Sometimes a little longer as a junior may be beneficial (e.g. if you have had a major illness as a junior or are doubtful about a lifelong commitment). In that case the juniorate may be extended.

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#### Do you have Monastic Week-Ends or Discernment Days?

Unfortunately, we don't have enough guest rooms to be able to offer Monastic Week-Ends as such, but we are planning a series of Discernment Days and some online Discernment Conferences. They will be an opportunity for small groups of people to spend a day at the monastery with some input from us and plenty of time for discussion/experiencing something of how monastic life is lived here. Although the main focus of the Discernment Days will be on contemplative Benedictine life for women, we hope that the days will be useful to those considering other forms of consecrated life. We'll post details nearer the time. The Online Conferences will offer an opportunity for people to consider the wider question of vocation, and the monastic response to it.

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#### What is the process for joining your community?

As you will have gathered from our Vocations page and what is said in these FAQ, the process of joining the community takes a while.

First of all, we have to get to know one another and see whether there is a likelihood of your having a vocation to this community. In the first instance, we invite you to write or email and tell us something about yourself. This FAQ should give you an idea of the kind of information that would be helpful. Next, either the prioress or the novice mistress will be in touch with you. We ask everyone who is exploring a vocation with us to take part in video conversations using Skype. That enables more spontaneous interchange than is possible by email alone. At some point, if we think that you might have a vocation to this community, you will be invited to spend a

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few weeks living with the community as a pre-postulant. That will give you a chance to see something of our life from the inside and experience something of its demands. It will also allow us to get to know you at a deeper level than is possible by email or occasional visits (real or virtual). If all goes well and you ask to join, we will begin the formal process of admission to the novitiate. We have to satisfy the requirements of both Canon and civil law so that means some paperwork has to be completed. To give you an idea of what is involved, you will be asked to

1. Fill in a questionnaire which gives some basic information about yourself, e.g. where you were born, your education, job, etc. This also contains a declaration that you have no debts/dependent children and are free to undertake the obligations of monastic life.
2. Provide certificates of Baptism and Confirmation (also certificates of Reception into Full Communion/Annulment of Marriage, as appropriate). If you have not yet been confirmed, we would normally expect you to receive the sacrament before becoming a postulant.
3. Give the names and addresses of at least two referees to whom we can write. One should normally be your confessor or spiritual director if you have one, or at any rate someone who can speak with real knowledge of your spiritual development, seriousness of purpose, etc.
4. Have a medical.
5. Provide a copy of your Birth certificate if you are a British national; fulfil the requirements of civil law regarding visas, etc if you are not.

This may sound a bit daunting, but it is just something we have to work through. Please take it as a general guide rather than a detailed account of a process which is, after all, intended to help you become the person God wants you to be, in the place He wants you to be.

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#### **Do you have any upper/lower age limits for admission to the community?**

We prefer to treat each person as an individual so there are no upper or lower age limits as such, except those set by Canon Law. You cannot reduce a monastic vocation to a tick-list but experience has shown that older candidates often have difficulty in adapting. In practice, that means that if someone is over 45, we will want to be satisfied that she has sufficient health and steadfastness of purpose to be able to make a good trial of the life. Our concern is always, is this person truly seeking God, is she zealous for the Work of God, for obedience and for things that humble her (see RB 58.7). We'll want to be reasonably confident that she has a good chance of being happy and "growing" in our community. Sometimes we encourage people to try another community where we think they might be happier. For example, one or two people have indicated that they are more drawn to a community which has Extern Sisters, and in one case, we thought the call was more to Carmel than to Benedictine monasticism.

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#### **Do you have any educational requirements for admission to the community?**

Again, we prefer to treat each person as an individual. In practice, most enquirers seem to have university degrees or professional qualifications but that is probably just a reflection of the average age of people thinking about monastic life. What we are primarily interested in is whether someone is called to be a nun **here**; and God (happily) makes some surprising choices, as we ourselves know.

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#### **Do you accept formerly married women, i.e. divorced or widowed?**

Provided she does not have dependent children, there is no reason why a widow should not apply to the community. In the case of divorce, the situation is more complex and an annulment is generally required.

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#### **Do you accept women from overseas?**

On a practical level, we have to observe the requirements of civil law as regards entry visas, residence permits and so on, which can be very expensive; and in the light of the uncertainty

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following the British Referendum on membership of the European Union, we would suggest that overseas candidates should look elsewhere. We cannot take anyone without the assurance that she has sufficient funds to return home if the monastery proves to be not for her. We would also have to examine such things as medical care/social security, etc, as we are not in a position to fund private healthcare for any of our community members. On a more personal level, it can be difficult for an overseas candidate to settle into an English community because of the cultural differences. It is hard enough getting used to monastic life without having to cope with a foreign language and different ways of doing things in addition. The Scot in community says that even coming south of the border has its problems.

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#### **Do you have Extern Sisters?**

No, the nuns in our community are what is known as "choir nuns". However, because we have monastic enclosure rather than papal enclosure, we take turns to do things like the shopping. A choir nun cannot be forced to go outside the enclosure, but we have always emphasized shared responsibility for the various tasks needed to keep the monastery going and in practice no one has ever refused to do whatever is necessary. If we grow in numbers so that to have Extern Sisters would be a real possibility, of course, we would consider it; at present we are too few.

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#### **How does your move affect the novitiate?**

Our move to Hereford means that the novitiate is now formally open. Our first postulant has returned home, but she has become a dear friend of the community and is positive about her time here.

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#### **Do you enjoy life?**

Yes! A monastic vocation is an immense privilege and never-ending source of joy.

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#### **What's the hardest thing about being a nun?**

That differs from person to person and probably changes according to one's age, state of health, and which side of bed one got out of this morning.

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#### **How enclosed/cloistered are you?**

We have monastic enclosure as defined in our Constitutions. Although we normally live and work within the monastery (we go out for obvious things like medical/dental care), the prioress can admit guests to areas which in another monastery might be out of bounds, so to say. Here at Howton Grove there is separate accommodation for visitors although they may use the library (good for wi-fi as well as books!), oratory and dining-room, also the garden. Fortunately, our garden is large by modern standards and very private. However, it is not the size of the enclosure which matters but the fidelity and generosity with which it is lived. For some people a big enclosure would never be big enough, for others a small enclosure would never be too small: it is primarily a way of focusing mind and heart on the search for God.

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#### **Do you have Mass and other services in Latin?**

We sometimes have Mass in Latin (depends on the priest), or at the very least, use the Gradual chants when Mass is celebrated in our oratory. Vespers is always in Latin and we use the Latin versions of the Marian anthems.

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#### **How traditional are you?**

This is one of the hardest of all questions to answer because the person asking it usually has her own ideas about what "traditional" means. We are very traditional inasmuch as we are Benedictines and live our lives according to a rule written in the sixth century, one which has accumulated a vast amount of wisdom and experience around it. We are also traditional in our way of prayer which has been shaped and formed by the Bakerite contemplative tradition leading straight back to what is often called, a little inaccurately, the medieval English mystical

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tradition. We wear a traditional habit, are loyal to the Magisterium, use Latin as easily as English in our liturgy, take learning seriously, and so on and so forth. However, we do not have a "narrow" take on what "traditional" means. So, for example, we are quite happy to have Mass in the Ordinary or the Extraordinary Form — or any other rite approved by the Holy See. The altar in our oratory is at the East end, but if a priest wishes to celebrate facing the people, we are quite happy to move the altar forward. What matters to us is reverence and fidelity to the mind of the Church.

Where we are not so traditional is in our use of modern media for spiritual outreach. For us, the internet has become an online guest and retreat centre, somewhere people can experience something of monastic life without physically journeying here.

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#### **Do you have to give up everything?**

The short answer is "yes". St Benedict regarded private ownership as a vice (see RB 33) and wanted his followers to depend on the monastery for everything. We make solemn vows, which means we can own absolutely nothing. All gifts and presents have to be shown to the superior who will decide whether something can be accepted or not (RB 33.5). This is to ensure that we keep our hearts fixed on heaven rather than on earthly treasure. It also ensures that we cannot look to our possessions for status or anything like that.

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#### **How do you earn your living?**

We run a small design agency which undertakes print and web projects for clients, lay, clerical and commercial. We also make things for sale. We have had to give up our jam and marmalade ventures because current Health and Safety legislation makes it difficult for us to sell them; but we have some other ideas "in the pipeline", including developing our online shop, and perhaps someone will join us with a talent for something we have not yet explored.

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#### **Do you wear the habit all the time?**

Ordinarily, yes. For work we have the option of wearing jeans, a black fisherman's smock and grey veil (always with wimple and fillet) because climbing ladders and that sort of thing is a bit risky in a flowing habit. We don't have any maintenance staff, so if the gutters need clearing or a ceiling needs painting, we do it ourselves.

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#### **Do you come from religious families?**

Some do; some don't. Not all nuns are 'cradle Catholics' — some became Catholics as adults. Even those from Catholic families often encounter a lot of opposition when they wish to enter a monastery.

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#### **Do your older nuns live with you or do they go to a home?**

This question has not yet arisen for us. Our oldest nun died in February 2010 at the age of 79. Although she had been in failing health for some years, we were happy to care for her at home in the monastery except when she needed hospital treatment. We believe that members of the community should continue with the community for as long as possible. Except in some rare cases, that will mean caring for someone until death. St Benedict explicitly says that care of the sick should come before everything else (RB 36.1). Why should we not be glad to look after those to whom we owe so much?

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#### **How good is your library?**

For a young community with a very spare budget, our library is good and has always been one of our priorities. Our biggest problem at the moment is that we have nowhere to put all the books we have acquired over the past few years. Some are currently stored in the garage, which is not satisfactory.

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**Do you have pets?**

We have a dog, Touri, known on Twitter as @BroDyfrigBFdeB, who is a good watch-dog but welcoming to visitors.

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**Do you wash in cold water?**

Not unless the boiler is not working.

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**What is the food like?**

We grow as much of our own food as we can and try to eat sensibly, with plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables. Meat can be eaten on some days of the week, and St Benedict is quite straightforward about allowing for individual needs (as distinct from preferences). One thing some people find difficult is the fact that we don't snack or eat between meals: breakfast, lunch and supper (the main meal) are the order of the day. We fast on Fridays from 14 September until Easter, and every day during Lent except Sundays (which are not part of Lent). Everyone takes a turn at cooking, so meals are sometimes a delight and sometimes a disaster.

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**Do you have to have a good sense of humour to become a nun?**

It certainly helps. Monastic life is not an escape. In fact, it is likely to confront you with aspects of yourself you'd rather not know about. Take God seriously, take other people seriously, but not yourself.

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**Do you keep silence at all times?**

The monastery is usually quiet, with talking restricted to what is necessary, except when we have guests or during periods of recreation and relaxation.

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**What does 'Dame' mean?**

'Dame' is the traditional title for a Benedictine nun and comes from the Latin 'Domna'. It is the equivalent of the monk's 'Dom'. In community we are more likely to address one another as 'Sister'.

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**Do you keep your own names or are you given one?**

If no one in the community already has your name, you can either keep the one you were given at birth or take a new one at clothing. We might have a few difficulties with something unusual like "Railroad" or "Peachblossom", but we'll deal with that when we come to it.

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**How much time do you spend in prayer?**

Each of us gives at least two half-hours daily to personal, contemplative prayer (more on Sundays and feast-days) and a minimum of one half-hour a day to lectio divina. In practice, we probably all give more unless the demands of work or visitors make it impossible. In choir the amount of time varies according to the nature of the celebration (solemnity, feast, feria), day of the week and so on. It probably averages out somewhere around three or four hours a day, not counting Mass.

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**When do you get up? go to bed?**

We have to be up by 5.00 a.m. No one is SUPPOSED to be up before 4.00 a.m. Once a week we are allowed to rest until 6.30 a.m. We are free to go to bed after Compline, which usually finishes about 8.45 p.m. Lights out is at 11.00 p.m. From time to time, we have a "relaxed timetable", to allow people more sleep or just some more free time. That usually occurs when the prioress decides the "community peakiness factor" is above eight. Of course, there are always exceptions for individuals. We have a disciplined lifestyle but it isn't meant to place

insupportable burdens on people.

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### **Do you have any special devotions?**

The Divine Office is the warp and woof, so to say, of our life so we tend not to have many devotions. We have Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament regularly but for the rest, people are free to follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

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### **How much do you fast?**

From 14 September until Easter, we fast every Friday; and every day during Lent except Sundays (which, of course, are not part of Lent). On Fridays throughout the year, whether fast days or non-fast-days, the main meal usually consists of soup and bread and cheese or bread and cheese and salad.

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### **Do you have to be able to sing to join your community?**

No, but you'll learn!

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### **Do you use email?**

All the professed have access to email, it is cheaper and quicker than sending letters. For those in formation (novices and juniors) different rules would apply because it is important to learn detachment and restraint. We do not text very much because we rarely use mobiles (cell phones).

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### **Do you listen to radio/watch TV?**

We do not have TV. Each nun is allowed to listen to a radio news bulletin every day because we do not take a daily newspaper. We keep an eye on Twitter which often alerts us to situations or events for which we ought to pray; and our Prayerline is always full of requests which keep us in touch with what is going on outside the monastery.

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### **Do you use the internet?**

Yes, with qualifications. An important part of our spiritual outreach is web-based, as you can tell from reading our site. The professed also use the internet for such things as work, study (e.g. the Latin Library for texts we do not have) and shopping. Each nun is trusted to act responsibly and use the internet only for what is necessary or helpful. We do not have time or inclination for anything more. Those in formation would not normally have unrestricted access to the internet because it is important to learn detachment. So, if you are addicted to Facebook or Twitter, now is the time to start weaning yourself off.

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### **How often do you see your families?**

That rather depends on individual needs. We do not usually go to visit our families except in cases of grave illness but instead welcome them to the monastery. Visits are limited in number and duration, especially at the beginning when there is so much to learn, but we are well aware that a monastic vocation is much "harder" on the family than some other life-choices. All nuns are encouraged to write home, whether by letter or email, once a week.

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### **What happens when parents become old and/or ill?**

That is probably one of the most pressing questions facing both communities and individuals. In the past nuns very rarely went home for any reason, but today, with smaller families and people living longer, it no longer makes sense, if it ever did, to say that nuns may not help their aged parents in any way. However, it is for the superior to decide what would be appropriate. It is never easy to balance the needs of community and family. Every effort will be made to meet genuine need with compassion and generosity, but please don't expect any "care clauses" in



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your terms of engagement! That isn't how a monastery operates.

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**Do you have any free time?**

Yes, although we never seem to have very much because our days are full. We are encouraged to develop interests and hobbies in the monastery and do our best to maintain a healthy level of exercise, etc. Currently, we have nuns who are keen on gardening, wine-making, and writing. We live in a very beautiful part of the country (the Golden Valley), and as our enclosure is not huge by classical standards, we are allowed to go for walks in the surrounding farmland

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**Do you have holidays?**

Ordinarily speaking, no. There are some days in the year when we try to keep work and commitments to a minimum and allow more time for rest and relaxation, but the prayer of the community is unceasing and at certain times (which others might think of as "holiday time") we are busier than ever with the liturgy. If someone is unwell or overtired, the prioress will always try to ensure she has a proper rest and/or a break. What we aim at is a healthy, balanced life; but it is important not to let any luxury creep in. There are millions of people in the world who never have a chance of a holiday.

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**Do you vote in elections?**

Yes, everyone is free to perform her civic duties. We have never yet had any community member who declined to do so, possibly because the opportunity of a walk through the village is not to be lightly passed over.

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