This resolve from the psalms, taken from the sixth century rule of St Benedict, means that Benedictine nuns such as those at St Cecilia’s Abbey on the Isle of Wight need good lighting in church. Bursar Sr Eustochium explains, “Our church was built in 1907 and we still relied on gas lighting until the 1950’s. The original electric lights were apparently OK if you were fortunate enough to sit directly below them, and the fluorescent tubes installed in the 1970’s were seen as a great improvement. The strip lights lit up the nuns’ choir stalls but anyone declaiming the Word in the centre of choir had to struggle to see the text. Meanwhile the sanctuary was lit by spotlights which provided glare and dark shadows in equal measure. The wiring for the lighting and the sound system had been tacked onto the walls in a very untidy manner at various times down the years, with any redundant wiring just left in place.”

Sr Eustochium continues: “We had talked about a change of lighting for a number of years and when we were told in 2012 that we would soon be unable to get replacements for these particular types of tubes we knew we had to act. We discovered A J Smith by googling ‘beautiful church lighting’ and upon completion of the works it was clear that the search terms were justified.”

In a letter of thanks to Anthony J Smith(Glos)Ltd the sacristan, Sr Scholastica, wrote: “Your overall scheme has received nothing but praise, with special mention usually given to the transformation of the sanctuary both lit and un-lit (no more wires showing or ugly spotlights in our sight lines).” Comments from sisters and outside visitors include: “stunning, what a fantastic difference, splendid, a real success, superb, I never saw that before……the sisters are deeply thankful to Dave and Adam who have worked extremely hard to bring us this beautiful result.”

Neil Blake of Anthony J Smith(Glos)Ltd adds: “The nuns’ praying day starts at 5.15am and ends with compline at 8pm, there are a total of eight services totalling about four and a half hours of Gregorian chant, and scheduling the works was rather tricky as was the extraordinary switching flexibility required by the Sisters. With some thought and discussion however it was agreed that just three short services per day would have to be moved to the chapter house. All the main services could still be held in church at their normal times. During those
times we were able to carry out upgrade works to the sound systems within the other parts of the abbey so with careful planning no time was wasted.

The Sisters have a strict regime of not wasting electricity or money so energy efficiency with extended lamp lives ensured that just enough light was provided in only the required area at any particular time of the day. When Anthony and myself visited, the thing that first struck us about the interior of the church was the ugly visual effect of all of the existing cabling and we were really glad that we were asked to install new wiring for both the new lighting and for upgrades to the sound system. Obviously where LED was the most ideal choice of lighting outlet they were installed and as per normal only the best quality luminaires were specified and installed.

“The main lighting is provided by wall bracketed pendants which sit comfortably within the simple architecture of the building even when not in use which was a pre-requisite of the needs. Sisters confided to me that they had never grown used to the previous system which was based around unsightly and unsympathetic linear fluorescents.

“The icons, altar, tabernacle and crucifix are now all illuminated individually through the use of LED units and allow the sisters to light for effect when the occasion arises.”

Sr Eustochium adds: “We were particularly impressed at the planning stage when Anthony Smith asked us what lighting we would need for the service of Benediction, and where we would position the altar of repose on Maundy Thursday. These are very special occasions for Catholics and it is wonderful that they will now be properly lit.”

Neil Blake continued “We were very happy with the results as were the Sisters, whose comments included ‘The light looks softer, and yet it is brighter’ and ‘The wiring has gone from the walls – it is like a tree with the ivy cleared away.’ One of the greatest joys, Sr Eustochium told me, was that the Sisters now have the flexibility of lighting to have compline – the nuns’ final prayer of the day – in semi-darkness. “Our previous ‘dim’ lights were actually very glaring and directly in line of sight when we faced the altar. The new system has spotlights shining on the ceiling at a level of dimness such that there is just a gentle glow – enough to allow a latecomer to find a seat in safety, while we sing the psalms by heart. On special occasions we have one spotlight shining on the icon of Our Lady in the apse, but the spotlight is so discreet that it looks as if the icon itself is glowing.”

The whole lighting project was completed just in time for the solemn profession (perpetual vows) of one of the young nuns, Sr Mary Thomas Brown, presided over by Bishop Philip Egan of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Portsmouth.