

# **'BENEDICTINE SPIRITUALITY AND PARISH LIFE'**

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## ***Introduction***

Twenty-four years ago the writers of Consider Your Call called for a renewal in the E.B.C parochial apostolate, and challenged the Congregation

*to develop a form of parochial apostolate which is pastorally more effective and in closer harmony with the fundamental values and structure of the monastic life. A greater measure of common life and prayer is a way forward, and clearly a variety of experiments is needed, account being taken both of the changing conditions and needs of the present time...if it is provide an authentic witness to monastic values in the contemporary world, this renewal must be both pastoral and monastic in character.<sup>1</sup>*

Over the last quarter-of-a-century the Congregation has responded to this challenge in a number of ways:

1. There have been a variety of experiments which have sought to marry monastic and pastoral priorities. Some of these experiments have endured, others not. An early experiment was undertaken by the monks of Worth by St.Peter's Monastery in Dulwich in the 1980s, a community which was also ecumenical in character; Ampleforth for a time ran a Pastoral Centre in York attached to a small monastic community, established a priory at Osmotherley, and then in 1999 opened St.Benedict's Monastery at Brownedge in Lancashire, enabling the monks live in the monastery and go out each day to their parishes. Douai Abbey has centred its pastoral activity in three areas – around the monastery itself, and in the two other main areas of pastoral activity, Lancashire and the South Midlands there is a greater emphasis on community life, prayer and mutual support, albeit in a less formalised way than at Brownedge.
2. Since the 1970s more of our monks have been involved in serving diocesan parishes, some of them closer geographically to the monasteries than the incorporated parishes which are often further afield. This has enabled us to have a closer working relationship with bishops and diocesan clergy
3. There seems to be a closer relationship between the Benedictine parishes and the monasteries that serve them – there is better communication, more regular abbatial visits, greater interchange between monks resident in the monasteries and those on the parishes.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Rees and others (ed), Consider Your Call: A Theology of Monastic Life Today (London 1978), p.314

Parishioners have come to value their connection with our monasteries more than ever and take a greater interest in them.

An important factor underpinning all these developments has been an increasing popular interest in Benedictine Spirituality, which began with the 1980 celebrations for the anniversary of St. Benedict's birth. What is striking about this, is that much of the literature being written about Benedictine spirituality has been written by laypeople such as Esther de Waal and Norvene Vest, who have succeeded in making the Rule of Benedict more accessible to people of all walks of life.

All the more reason, then for us to reflect on the contribution we as Benedictines can make in parish life, whether that is in our traditional Benedictine parishes, or in the diocesan parishes we serve.

This paper will focus on 'Benedictine spirituality and parish life,' which for me began as a purely personal and theoretical issue, even for a while after arriving in the parish seven years ago. How was I to live as a monk on a parish 200 miles away from the monastery? The Douai community has a strong mission tradition, with which for some years I felt uncomfortable. I questioned the value of serving parishes far away from the monastery, when the monks serving them only returned once or twice a year, or in some cases once every eight years for an abbatial election. There were characters one heard about but never saw, legendary stories of monks who swapped parishes with each other without informing the Abbot. It seemed so easy to forget that the essence of the monastic vocation is a call to life in common, not ordination. It seemed to me that in some cases our traditional Benedictine parishes came to replicate diocesan parish life rather than bringing to these parishes the spirit of Benedictine life. But on the other side were those whom I regarded as heroes, monks who were able to live the conventual life and be good missionaries on the parishes. There was always the impressive example set by Fathers who had spent many years on parishes, and were then able to settle back contentedly in to conventual life in the monastery.

But this topic of Benedictine spirituality and parish life began to take on a new dimension for me some four years ago, when shortly after being appointed a Parish Priest, I went to see our bishop - Archbishop Patrick Kelly of Liverpool. He is concerned religious working in parishes should offer something distinctive to their ministry, something of their charism. This prompted me to sketch some thoughts which I later shared with our parishioners and which bore fruit in a document 'A Benedictine Vision' later published in the Benedictine Yearbook. This vision suggests five areas where Benedictine spirituality and tradition can shape our pastoral work in parishes. Some of these areas are obvious, others less so.

**1      *The Search for God through personal prayer and Lectio Divina.***  
***'Listen readily to holy reading and devote yourself often to prayer' (RB***  
***4)***

The greatest service we can do is to help others to pray. In my limited experience, people are hungry to learn how to pray, but take time to be persuaded that there is no 'right' or 'wrong' method. Instead, it is important to encourage them to find their own method most suited to them, for surely Benedict throughout the rule stresses that the spiritual life is a process of

exploration; it cannot be defined in a few simple lines or neatly packaged in a few simple prescriptions. We have an important witness to make amidst the plethora of devotions in the church today, some of which are overly dogmatic and regimented. The Benedictine virtues and balance and moderation can be an important corrective here. There are many ways to God – so important to have variety of devotions in the parish – the traditional and the new. Of particular importance is the encouragement of silence and recollection, and opportunities for quiet Meditation. There is a helpful article on this subject by Dom Laurence Freeman in this month's Priests and People.

The Benedictine emphasis on *Lectio Divina* can also be commended to people, and we have a lot to offer in helping people to practice this, both as individuals and groups. The Bible is still unexplored territory for many Catholics today, so caution and care is needed in preparing the ground. A starting point may be to establish a 'gospel sharing' group where the Sunday readings can be pondered and explored. In some places this has been a great help not just to parishioners, but to the clergy as well, in helping to prepare homilies. The liturgy itself is an important and surprisingly untapped starting point for prayer.

**1      *The Centrality of the Liturgy.***  
***'Nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God' (RB ch. 43)***

As Benedictines, the Church looks to us to give a lead in this area, for our monasteries have long been recognised as places where attention is given to the careful execution of the liturgy. We have an important role to play in teaching sound liturgical principles. Our emphasis on community living and sharing can be a great witness in parishes today, where, to quote one recent author "many experience oppression rather than liberation, <sup>1</sup>" *because of the increasing phenomenon of the 'personality cult,' where parish communities are more and more at the mercy of those who preside at the liturgy. Our rootedness in the common life and our Benedictine concern for balance and order should help us in celebrating liturgies that are reverent and prayerful, clearly focussed on the Glory of God shared in community rather than on the celebrant's manner or idiosyncracies. That's the theory anyway!*

*If we truly believe that "nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God,"<sup>2</sup> then it follows that daily celebration of the key elements of The Divine Office, Morning and Evening Prayer, should be celebrated in our parishes, although the needs of individual parishes should be borne in mind. Parishioners need to be encouraged and trained to lead. Compline can provide a fitting conclusion to evening meetings in the parish. A varied, good quality musical tradition is also a desirable feature in Benedictine parishes. In our dioceses we have a great contribution to make by serving on diocesan liturgical commissions.*

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Irwin, 'On Monastic Priesthood,' *American Benedictine Review*, Vol 41:3,( September 1990), p. 259

<sup>2</sup> *Rule of Benedict, ch. 43*

1 ***Developing sense of community – the good of the individual and the common good. “Let them serve one another in love” (RB ch.35).***

One of our charisms as Benedictines is community. A wise monk counselled me when I became a Parish Priest “help them to appreciate what community means.” I found this extremely daunting. Certain strategies were obvious - encouraging parishioners to take part in the ministry of hospitality and welcoming at Mass, which is so helpful in creating a welcoming atmosphere. I soon discovered that a Parish Pastoral Council can also be an effective instrument of community building, where the members of the Council work with the parish clergy and share, where possible, some of the responsibility for the day-to-day running of the parish. I value in our parish in Ormskirk the responsibility members of the Pastoral Council take in being contact persons with the various groups and societies, they are also remarkably adept at having a finger on the pulse of all that goes on. I was delighted when, without any prompting from me our Pastoral Council took as their motto a line from chapter 35 of the Rule: “Let them serve one another in love.” Another Benedictine trait which can inform our work on our parishes is the valuing not only of the common good, but the good of the individual, especially in encouraging individual parishioners to use their gifts in service of others. It must always be remembered, of course, that one of the problems one often finds in parish life is the attitude of ‘empire building’ where Mr or Mrs X has absolute control over a particular area of parish activity – when this happens I am tempted to quote what St Benedict says in chapter 57 about artisans in the monastery who get “puffed up” about their skills and their value to the monastery.

Community life as Benedict envisages it is very human and realistic. This too is an important witness. So many people idealise ‘church’ as a gathering of like-minded individuals. Our experience of monastic community life can be an important witness in parishes, helping our people to see that to live as a Christian parish community is about standing shoulder to shoulder with people of diverse backgrounds and characters, where all share a common worship, a common bread, and offer mutual forgiveness so as to bridge our differences and become a common heart.

In our parish in Ormskirk – a large parish of over 800 Massgoers – I am struck how a greater sense of community has come by having a parish project – in our case a project to refurbish and develop the church building. Fundraising has brought together people from all sections of the parish – it has bonded people together, and has demonstrated that hard work can also be a lot of fun when people pull together.

The Rule’s emphasis on Justice and on Peace<sup>3</sup> are also key principles which can inform our parish activities, especially in encouraging activities which promote a global vision and a greater sense of inclusivity. In our parish calendar we now have the custom of highlighting a particular issue, be it fair

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<sup>3</sup> Rule of Benedict , Prol.25, 4:25-33, 72:4,7.

*trading or the promotion of 'one world week' and we do this through the Sunday liturgy so that as many people as possible can be involved and have a role in the celebration.*

**1. *The promotion of ongoing formation: "The Love of Learning and the Desire for God."***

Monasteries have always had the reputation for being centres of learning. Scholarship and running schools have been traditional EBC apostolates, but one significant development over the past 25 years has been the development in many of our monasteries of pastoral programmes, and a greater involvement in tertiary and adult education. One development at Douai has been the Abbot's encouragement to monks on the parishes to take their share in leading day and weekend courses at the monastery. Whilst these courses attract people from our parishes to the monastery, I think these days we need to make provision on the parishes themselves for ongoing formation. In Ormskirk a group has now been formed, bringing together catechists and those with particular skills to design a regular programme for the parish. This of course is not just the preserve of Benedictine parishes - parishes who are not staffed by monks have also begun this practice. But we can make a distinctive contribution as Benedictines by offering courses of liturgical formation: not just courses for readers and eucharistic ministers but also offering courses which explain the meaning of the liturgy – for instance a series of talks on the the liturgy of Holy Week and the Easter Triduum.

**1. *Vision of Church - 'may he bring us altogether.'* (RB ch 72)**

We live in interesting times. I think we as Benedictines have a lot to contribute to helping to develop a fuller Vision of Church in several ways:

- (i) We are involved in a wider, not just diocesan church. Here in England and Wales we transcend dioceses – Douai 9 parishes in 4 dioceses, Ampleforth 12 parishes in 5 dioceses, Belmont 8 parishes in 3 dioceses. This allows us to put our parishioners in touch with both national and international trends. The Abbots of our Congregation met recently to discuss the question of parish apostolate with fewer priests – our contribution is valued by the dioceses we serve.
- (ii) We have a contribution to make to the theology of ministry – the monk-priest a strong feature of our English Benedictine tradition, but we need to remember that the original Benedictine community was not a fundamentally priestly one. If one of our principal Benedictine charisms is community, then we must make this a primary aim in ministry. The Rule's emphasis on common life & mutual service surely should characterise our approach to ministry, where ministry is not seen in terms of power, but in terms of service. The late Cardinal Hume's Benedictine background shines through his definition of ministry: "Ministry by its very definition is concerned with service. Collaborative ministry then is the fruit of that conversion which involves death to

assertiveness and a letting go of self-interest.<sup>1</sup> “ *The Cardinal continued:*

*“The way the ordained ministry is carried out reflects a developing theology in the church. No longer is it appropriate for the priestly ministry to be exercised in splendid isolation and with a semblance of sanctified autocracy. The sharing of the whole people of God in Christ’s mission and ministry calls for consultation, collaboration and sharing.”<sup>2</sup> In England and Wales we are facing a future with fewer priests. Increasingly more and more of our parishes will be ‘priestless.’ I believe we have an important contribution to make here by providing support through courses in our monasteries, especially in training lay people to preside at the liturgy and equipping them theologically for ministry in the future.*

- (i) *Ecumenical and inter-faith dialogue – St. Benedict acknowledges that there can be unity in diversity.<sup>3</sup> Popes Leo XIII and Paul VI called on us as Benedictines to be involved in ecumenism. It has been suggested that we are ideally suited for this work in these islands because of the dominant place our Benedictine spirituality has had in the development of our national spirituality. These days there is also greater need for inter-faith dialogue – especially after the horrors of September 11<sup>th</sup>. There has already been a great involvement of Benedictine nuns and monks in the work of inter-monastic dialogue – an activity that needs to be spread into the parishes. I understand a monk of Ampleforth on one of their parishes has been charged by the Abbot to explore ways of greater inter-faith dialogue locally. This is an important initiative and needs to be extended.*

## **Conclusion**

Much of what has been addressed in this paper is nothing new, but I hope I have been able to demonstrate that over the past 25 years much progress has been made in responding to the challenge set down in Consider Your Call, and also, that as Benedictines we still have much to offer the Church. The EBC has long been recognised for its sense of realism and balance. These qualities are needed now, more than ever, in a Church which is changing very fast. Community and Prayer are charisms we must continue to share in our parochial work, a mission that is both pastoral and monastic. I believe we will be faithful to both these elements of our tradition as long as we remember, in the words of the late Cardinal Hume, that “the art of being an EBC monk is to know how to be safe in the market place by being at home in the desert.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Basil Hume OSB, Towards a Civilisation of Love: Being Church in Today’s World (London 1988) p.58

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p.56

<sup>3</sup> *Rule of Benedict*, 40.1

<sup>4</sup> Basil Hume OSB, Searching for God (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, London 1979) p.30