

Abbot Victor Farwell: The Impact of Vatican II on EBC Spirituality

**By
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INTRODUCTION

Abbot Victor Farwell (1913 – 1988) was a monk of Downside who became the first Conventual Prior of Worth 1957 – 1965, first Abbot of Worth 1965 - 1988 and President of the EBC from 1967 to 1985. He was President during the years immediately after Vatican II (1962 to 1965) and so the EBC Theology Commission thought that it might offer a valuable but by no means exclusive insight into the Council's impact on the EBC if a paper was written on how Victor's own spirituality was affected by the Council. This paper fulfils that mandate but I am acutely aware that the members of my own community who knew and loved Victor might see it differently. That will be all to the good, as in that way the paper will stimulate not only a symposium discussion but Worth community discussions for some time to come.

SOURCES

The archive of Abbot Victor's papers was carefully organised by his secretary Dom Benedict Sankey before Victor's death and they have formed the basis for this paper's research. I also draw on personal memories of Victor as my first abbot and on some of the communal legends that rightly surround the man who was superior here for over 30 years.

FORMATION

To understand how Victor was affected by Vatican II we must begin by looking at his formation as a monk. In the first half of the twentieth century, Downside was one of the strong centres of English Catholic intellectual life. Between the abbacies of Cuthbert Butler and Christopher Butler there came a procession of distinguished scholars creating intellectual opportunities for those monks who had the aptitude for study. Victor Farwell was not among their number.

Victor was not a scholar nor was he a university graduate; his theological formation was the minimal neo-scholasticism required for his priestly ordination in 1939. Yet from the first he showed a vigorous pastoral instinct, exemplified by the story he enjoyed telling against himself. After he had preached his first sermon, one of the Downside brethren told him: 'Victor, that sermon was a triumph of grace over nature'.

His monastic formation as a novice was not a happy experience for him. He expressed it as follows: I entered the novitiate aged 19 and I left it aged 16. The whole weight of the Downside experience for the young Victor as a non-graduate school leaver was a heavy and oppressive one. In his later years he saw the Council as the opportunity to throw off such attitudes to monastic formation.

While his intellectual formation was minimal and his monastic formation was infantilising, his formation in the spiritual life had a profound effect. The principal tradition of prayer at Downside was the teaching of Augustine Baker, as presented in the summary of his work entitled '*Sancta Sophia*'. This tradition promotes the apophatic tradition of prayer, that speechlessness before God described most notably in '*The Cloud of Unknowing*'.

At this point, we need to distinguish three aspects of the Baker tradition: Baker's actual teaching, such as described in Fr Mark's paper; the teaching of *Sancta Sophia*; the daily practice or prayer at Downside at this time. The connection between these three is not easy to unravel but for the sake of this paper I call the tradition of prayer at early twentieth century Downside 'Bakerite.' The justification for this label is that Cuthbert Butler, the Second Abbot of Downside, read *Sancta Sophia* every Lent and promoted its teaching on prayer in early twentieth century Downside.

This method of prayer doesn't like systems in prayer but does suggest beginning with systematic meditation. This is only the starter motor, however, and for Baker it leads into natural expressions of love directed towards God; these acts and expressions of love may be punctuated by moments of passive contemplation when God is known to be all in all. This Bakerite way is the affective path by which the will is united with God in love; it is an act of the will not of the mind, a willing submission to God's will out of love. Along this path, Baker is ambivalent about using spiritual directors, unless they prove useful in the light of the person's own experience. This spirituality is notable for its directness and for its freedom of spirit, especially when contrasted with some of the more systematic and militant spiritualities that had emerged during the counter-reformation.

This tradition is symbolised in modern times by 'the second half hour', this practice being very dear to Victor's heart and adhered to by him with absolute regularity. Victor certainly read *Sancta Sophia* as a novice and the Baker tradition was in the mind of his superiors at Downside, but to what extent Victor explicitly followed Baker is not clear. What is clear is that long and deep personal prayer conducted in freedom of spirit without texts or directors was at the heart of Victor's spirituality throughout his life. To that extent, his is a Bakerite spirituality.

Within the Bakerite tradition there lie other seeds that formed the young Victor, most especially the writings of Teresa of Avila. He enjoyed her down to earth approach combined with the ambitious scope of her religious reform.

Another strand of Victor's formation was the teaching of Dom John Chapman, the Abbot who clothed Victor in 1932. While not directly schooled in the Baker tradition, Chapman's teaching was also one of great freedom, as summarised in his famous phrase 'pray as you can not as you can't.' Furthermore, Chapman was good at practical advice on prayer, as seen in his celebrated Spiritual Letters.

Teresa - Baker - Chapman: these are the formative influences in Victor's monastic life, not forgetting of course the Rule itself and the constitutional practices of the early 20th Century EBC.

PRIOR OF WORTH

The first textual access we have to Victor's own thinking before Vatican II is found in the talks he gave to the monastic community as the first conventual Prior of Worth following independence in 1957. These are community conferences, perseverance talks, homilies and so on. What strikes the reader is how much of a piece they are with the Spiritual Letters of John Chapman. Here is practical advice for the spiritual journey, dealing broadly speaking with two areas: helps and obstacles along the path

of spiritual growth and the necessity of prayer, both personal and communal. This is humane and sound psycho-spiritual advice.

Nearly all these talks were typed out by Dom Benedict with marginal amendments and the date pencilled in by Victor. I should say dates rather than date because the indication of multiple dates on which a talk was given is telling data for the purposes of this paper.

The collection of perseverance talks is particularly telling in this regard. There is a perseverance talk given in Dec '59, given again in July '62 and finally in Sept '69. This talk spans the pre- and post-conciliar eras, with no change to the text. Amazingly, it is then retyped and given again in 1973. So no change there. From the perspective of discerning a post-conciliar shift in Victor's spirituality, a more fruitful text is the perseverance talk dated Jan 1970 which begins with the sentence: 'I think there are to remarkable things about the Vatican Council's treatment of religious life in the Constitutions (sic) on the church...' These are that 'it does not define religious life in term's of the work we do...and it sets itself firmly against the idea of a state of perfection...that a sort of holiness demanded from a monk is different from what is demanded of the laity...it defines religious life as a witness of the breaking in of the Kingdom of Christ into the world...a monk's vocation is God's gift to each of us, enabling us to show forth clearly to members of the church who are not monks the power and the value of the kingdom of Christ which is their task to bring to bear on the world in which they are involved and in which we, to a large extent, are not.'

In this theological statement Victor sees Vatican II as saying three things about religious life:

1. religious life is not about work
2. the call to holiness is universal not just for religious
3. religious life is a witness, for the benefit of laity, to the power of the kingdom

What is striking here is that these points are all about monastic life 'ad extra' and say nothing about monastic life 'ad intra.' Perhaps it's not surprising that he continues: 'this is a very striking and theological picture of what monastic life essentially is, and I think it is well worth considering. But needless to say there are other essential characteristics of monastic life which are of the greatest importance.' He then returns more or less to the content found in the earlier perseverance talks, the exception being that he refers to 'all that we have done by way of experiment in novitiate training' without enumerating it. This was the reaction against his own formation coming through. From other sources we know that this involved a less rigorous separation of novices from the community, a reduction of practices seen as unacceptable by modern standards (eg begging pardon from the novice master on your knees) and a broader education in theology.

ABBOT VICTOR ON POST-CONCILIAR MONASTICISM

A further source of information about Victor's attitude to Vatican II is an article he wrote for the Catholic Herald just before his death in 1988, entitled in the original manuscript 'Monastic Life Since Vatican II. A Personal View'. In it, he does not describe monastic life in general; he says a little about the Council and then a lot about the evolution of Worth. From this we can derive the following perception of Vatican II's impact on monastic life;

1. monastic fuga mundi was to be replaced by the monastery in the world; ‘the Church was in the modern world, so, inevitably, was any monastery’.
2. the monastery provides the wider church with an illustration of how some aspects of VII can work in practice
3. he then describes some of these aspects in detail: the mission to Peru, , the Worth Conferences, the Lay Community, Dulwich and finally Worth Abbey Church as a venue for people other than monks.

He rebuts a charge that this might add up to activism by asserting that he wants a balance between prayer and ‘life in the market place’. He then quotes without comment Knowles’ description of the English pre-reformation monasteries as ‘hulks embedded in the mud’, continues with a long list of social needs and concludes by hoping that monks will meet these great needs.

This article is consistent with the 1970 perseverance talk and indeed with the earlier talks. The basic view of post-Vatican II monastic spirituality that emerges is:

1. the interior life of the monk is still that described by Baker/Chapman and in the light of the Constitution on the Church it can now be offered widely.
2. the external observances of liturgy and some aspects of the monastic life (e.g. initial formation) have been modernised
3. the real impact of Vatican II on monasteries is the *Constitution on the Church in the World of Today (Gaudium et Spes)*.

It is worth considering each of these points in more detail:

- 1. the interior life of the monk is still that described by Baker/Chapman and in the light of the *Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)* it can now be offered widely.**

It never seems to have occurred to Victor that *Lumen Gentium* might be a call to a new kind of spirituality for everybody, lay and monastic. This was how certain, perhaps most, apostolic congregations saw the Council. The abbots of the EBC led by their President clearly did not see it that way. The interior, Bakerite life of the monk was to remain stable and, in a time of flux, this stability was even more perceived as the jewel in the crown of the EBC tradition.

The impact of *Lumen Gentium* for Victor was all about the laity being called to the kind of holiness previously considered the preserve of religious. For him, this meant offering monastic spirituality to lay people and the Worth Abbey Lay Community was his principal way of doing this. It struck a very positive chord with hundreds possibly thousands of lay people during the 70’s and 80’s, people whose lives were changed profoundly by their participation in this Benedictine spirituality. There was, however, a lack of clarity among all concerned about whether the Worth Abbey Lay Community was an opportunity for lay people to participate in monastic spirituality, a lay person’s window into the monastic life so to speak, or whether the Lay Community was an opportunity for monks to help people develop a lay spirituality derived from the monastic, to develop a lay person’s own life. Victor never clarified this. The latter emerged as the mission of the Lay Community only after a difficult transition in the 1990’s.

2. the external observances of liturgy and some aspects of the monastic life have been modernised

The great symbol of this is the Abbey Church at Worth, arguably Victor's most significant legacy. Working with a young architect and with a design process spanning the years of the Council, the Church displays a great deal of courage on Victor's part. He was not an innovative thinker, but he was an innovator in practice. He knew intuitively that change was needed and he was prepared to go with bold solutions on a large scale. Given that in the popular mind Vatican II was most obviously about liturgy, Worth Abbey Church is a confident acceptance of the *Constitution on the Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium)*. Under Victor, Worth was the first EBC monastery to celebrate the entire office in the vernacular and Dom Philip Gaisford of Worth one of the first to write new music for the office in English.

Opened for use in 1973, exactly ten years after the proclamation of the Constitution, the Abbey Church represents many of the strengths of liturgical reform to date. For example, the involvement of the whole people of God in the assembly is achieved magnificently, the noble simplicity of the liturgy is shown in the whole structure and the altar takes pride of place. Yet there are problems: the physical positioning of clergy, monks and laity is not easy to get right, reflecting ambivalence in roles; the lack of a worthy ambo shows a lack of awareness of the central role of the Word of God in the reformed liturgy and the plainness of the decoration can seem to downplay the sacred nature of the building. So the Abbey Church symbolises the best of the Council as well as some of its problems but it is certainly a worthy monument to Victor's openness to new liturgical forms, an openness which has characterised the community's approach to liturgy.

As regards modernising other aspects of monastic life, the Council's *Decree on the Sensitive Renewal of the Religious Life (Perfectae Caritatis)* led to a review of community life and the humanising of many conventions. Thus, community activities became more informal, community discussions became more frequent, the atmosphere fostered was more intimate. Yet at another level nothing changed: for example, the community recreation times were still seen as a duty, more akin to asceticism than human support.

Victor's style of leadership was still that of the *paterfamilias* so beloved of Cuthbert Butler in *Benedictine Monachism*, drawing on the model of family to which Victor repeatedly referred. This was a paternalistic style, though he never attempted to be the spiritual director of individual monks; spiritual freedom was maintained. Furthermore, he said privately that he knew that he was the last of a certain style of abbot and that his successors would be more consultative. On the one hand, he refused to follow the style of leadership that he saw emerging in certain women's congregations and on the other hand he knew that his style would not last.

3. the real impact of Vatican II on monasteries is the *Constitution on the Church in the World of Today (Gaudium et Spes)*.

'New adventures' abounded during Victor's time as abbot. Peru and Dulwich were clearly inspired by a *Gaudium et Spes* approach to the service of the poor and marginalised. These two foundations but especially Peru took great courage and cost

both him and the Worth community a great deal of personal suffering, as well as untold rewards. There is no question that this attitude of Victor inspired many people, inspiring some such as myself to join the Worth community as novices. During the 1970's, the numbers coming to join the Worth novitiate were significantly greater than those joining elsewhere, especially if taken as a ratio of the numbers in each community.

'Justice and Peace' was the very post-Vatican II banner under which Victor set out to find new expressions of the monastic life. Yet the implications of this sometimes eluded his grasp. Victor recognised the need for *metanoia* in the spiritual life but he did not see how that *metanoia* in the life of a monk might be changed by Vatican II other than by undertaking new works in the light of *Gaudium et Spes*. This led to a certain schizophrenia by which, when he was in Peru mode, Victor sounded like Gustavo Gutierrez but then when he returned to his spiritual home, he never quite knew how that squared with Bakerite spirituality and life back at comfortable Worth.

This dichotomy is seen again in his approach to the school at Worth; in 1958, he took a brave and unpopular decision to close Worth Prep School and start a Senior School. Yet once the senior school was up and running by the mid-seventies he saw it as a place of monastic work rather than of monastic development, akin to the mission in the traditional sense of the EBC mission, necessary but not where the energy was to be found. The energy he found in the new works.

4. A Summary of the Council's impact on Victor and Worth

In summary we can see that in the 1960's Abbot Victor set about responding very directly to some of the core aspects of the Council. The new liturgy, the new Abbey Church, the mission to Peru and a simpler observance of the daily life of the monastery: these together were a very broad response to the Council. The arrival of the Lay Community then provided a window into this new approach to monastic life and this led to a strongly positive response from many people outside the monastery, attracting some to join as novices. I would characterise the whole approach as follows: a Bakerite interior life with modernised externals and a new mission. The living out of these three simultaneously by the Worth community was Victor's spiritual legacy.

5. What's missing?

This represents an enormous achievement by Abbot Victor so it seems ungracious to point out its shortcomings. But with the benefit of hindsight, we can see those elements of the Council that were absent from this vision. The Council promulgated four Constitutions which together with the Decree on Ecumenism constitute the main teaching of the Council. As we have seen Abbot Victor responded directly to three of the four constitutions (those on the Church, the Liturgy and the Church in the World of Today). There is not space here to enumerate his response to the ecumenical movement which was very positive (as witnessed by the ecumenical dimension of St Peter's Dulwich) but the most notable gap in Victor's achievement is the almost complete absence of response to the *Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)*. In his papers, there are frequent references to the Letters of Paul but he shows no real awareness of scripture. Victor was by no means alone in this; in my view, most of the Church failed to see that *Dei Verbum* is the foundation of the Council. Like Victor, many people fell into the trap of believing that Vatican II was a pastoral council and

so they missed the implications of *Dei Verbum*. For monastics, the principal implication was that it provided the soil in which the *lectio divina* revival could happen, a revival of which Victor gives no hint. Alongside this, I would also place a lack of awareness of the implications of the new wave of monastic studies led by de Vogue and Leclercq, Merton and Veilleux.

Having said that, Victor did give EBC scholars their head and we must acknowledge the contribution of *Consider Your Call* to the post Vatican II spirituality of the EBC. This book is a more developed theology of the monastic life than is found in Victor's own papers or in his own informal reflections. As President of the EBC he commissioned this book, convened meetings to hammer out controversial issues and nurtured it to publication in 1978. Alongside this must be placed *A Touch of God* published in 1982. This too was Victor's idea. The fact is that *Consider Your Call* turned out to be a heavier book than he had expected so now he commissioned a more popular text, a book of personal testimonies of several EBC monks and nuns. Strangely, this may prove to be the more enduring text as personal testimonies are expected to be dated whereas a theology book becomes dated.

VICTOR'S VIEW of the EBC

This leads into how Victor saw the impact of the Council on the EBC and on monasteries in general. Let's go back to his telling use of the Knowles image of the pre-reformation monasteries as 'hulks embedded in the mud'. The full quote used by Victor is 'the monasteries, like hulks embedded in the mud far up among the meadows of a creek..., whither the spring tides had borne them so long ago, saw the ebb falling past them without a thought that they were losing any hope they might have had of riding the flood across the bar and out to sea.' Victor does not comment on this quotation but leaves it hanging. It is at least a warning to the EBC and possibly a parting indictment of the failure of the EBC to take seriously the urgency of the moment.

While the Dulwich foundation can be seen as a response to *Gaudium et Spes*, it was also quite explicitly for Victor an experimental house looking for new ways of living out the monastic life. The idea was that monks had to leave the large institutional setting that has come to characterise EBC monasteries and seek new modes of monastic living. Dulwich was part of that search. Victor did not believe that he had found the answer to the future of the EBC but he knew that we had to be searching for it. We see here the paradox of Victor's time as Abbot. He was rooted in this very fixed, deeply personal spirituality and was at the same time casting about looking for new ways forward for his own monastery and for the congregation, including the nuns. At one stage, he urged one of our convents to send nuns to live alongside the monks at Worth, a project the nuns called 'our little Worth'.

This whole approach was consistent with the approach he adopted as President of the Congregation when undertaking Visitations; he is reported by several monks and nuns as exhorting their community to 'do something foolish for God' which always meant starting some new pastoral work. At the time, this attitude of traditional interior spirit combined with new outreach was hugely admired, which partly explains his repeated election as President.

Some questions.

As I look back at a monk and abbot to whom I and others still owe so much, I am left with a nagging question. The search for new external expressions of monastic life was a perfectly legitimate response to Vatican II but should this have been complemented by searching for new internal expressions of monastic life? In other words, is there something in Vatican II that challenges the Bakerite spirituality upon which Victor's whole life was founded? Challenge in the sense of destroy, no; but there is much in Vatican II that calls upon monks to develop their internal spirituality. All the constitutions of Vatican II are doctrinal and spiritual, they are not simply pastoral; they cut into the heart of the Christian faith. For example, the first chapter of *Lumen Gentium* on the Mystery of the Church is a profound meditation on the nature of Christian community and has much to say about the nature of monastic *koinonia*. Equally, the introduction to *Gaudium et Spes* describes the condition of humanity in today's world, which has implications for the kinds of people presenting themselves as monks and nuns and how monasteries should form them in the monastic life. Similarly, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* is about more than modernising the liturgy; it's about giving a new place to the liturgy in the lives of Christians, including monastics.

I believe that these deeper implications of the Council are still being absorbed by mainstream monastics in Britain, although there is evidence to suggest that the new movements and new monastic groups are absorbing them more quickly. To say that Abbot Victor did not absorb them is an observation rather than a criticism. Victor set before Worth and the EBC the challenge of change in response to Vatican II; he began what he knew was an iterative process not a linear development.

In 1990, the Worth monks in Dulwich and Peru returned to Worth. Was that an admission that Victor's vision had failed? No. We have as a community been indelibly affected by the experience, just as the whole EBC has been marked by the experience of the traditional English mission whether actually running parishes or not. The experience of our away houses is a vital part of our life that illuminates our way forward as a community. The question that we continue to face is how to integrate all the different elements of Victor's vision into a sustainable whole for the present day, combining it with other dimensions of the Council, of monastic life and of contemporary society that have come to the fore in the last twenty years.

As a monastic community, we have expressed this challenge to ourselves as follows: in response to the call of Christ, we live *koinonia*, we create sanctuary and we offer evangelisation. If I run that past you again you might see how we have absorbed the heart of Vatican II into that statement: in response to the call of Christ as described in *Dei Verbum*, we live *koinonia* as described in *Lumen Gentium*, we create sanctuary as described in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, we offer evangelisation as described in *Gaudium et Spes*.

I hope that Abbot Victor would see the contemporary expression of his legacy in that vision.