

## **Touching our Past and Facing our Future:**

### **Some introductory thoughts<sup>1</sup>**

**A paper for the EBC Monastic Theology Symposium, 11 April 2007**

**Wulstan Peterburs OSB**

When Fr Mark, Sr Agnes, Fr Francis and I first met as the EBC monastic theology commission in January 2006 we were agreed that it would be better to take some time to consider the direction that our work should take over the course of the lifetime of the commission, which we took to be four years, rather than try to organise immediately a theology symposium for Easter week, which was just a few months away. Hence, whilst we were at the symposia held at Downside last Easter and have shared some interesting and helpful discussions with members of the liturgy commission over the course of the last fifteen months (as you will remember, the two commissions have at times worked together closely), it is only now that we are ready to begin the public aspect of our work; and in this we would very much welcome your comments and contributions. Indeed, if the work of theological reflection within our congregation is to be of real benefit, it cannot be the preserve of the four members of the monastic theology commission, whose own learning, experience, perspectives – and not to say time - are necessarily limited.

I should perhaps start by saying something about the title of this symposium: ‘Touching our Past and Facing our Future’. In choosing this title, we have tried to capture something of what this stage of our work is about, namely looking into the past history of our congregation with an eye to how its spirituality is embodied in the lives of certain, we hope representative - or at least distinctive - figures, so as to see what lessons can be learnt for the future flourishing of the monastic life in the English Benedictine Congregation. This we would envisage as the first part of a project that seeks to reflect theologically upon the spirituality of the EBC, spirituality understood here in a broad sense as a set of beliefs and a series of specific practices, which amount to the distinctive way of living that characterises the EBC, with the aim of

---

<sup>1</sup> I am particularly grateful to Dame Agnes Wilkins of Stanbrook Abbey for her assistance in the preparation of this paper.

shedding a little light upon some of the contemporary issues that face our congregation.

Fresh in our minds when we met in January of last year were the papers on 'the re- invigoration of monastic life' offered to the congregation, for consideration by its members, by the ninety-fifth General Chapter of the EBC, which met at Buckfast Abbey in July 2005. Under the theme of 're- invigoration', General Chapter considered a number of the challenges, and also opportunities, facing our monasteries at the moment. Whilst it is not our intention to paint a picture of 'doom and gloom' – and I realise that I perhaps come a little close to that at times - it is clear from these papers and from our own experience, that the threats and opportunities facing our houses are many and various; and it is suggested by the members of the monastic theology commission that some theological reflection upon these issues from the perspective of EBC spirituality would help us to address them.

Among the material threats and challenges mentioned by General Chapter that we face are a decline in the numbers of monks and nuns in our monasteries; aging communities; overwork, but also underemployment; the question of the appropriateness and the appropriate use of our buildings; and a lack of financial resources. These challenges force us to think again about how we live the monastic life: to put it at its starkest, we might ask why we seem, compared to the (more recent) past, to have so few vocations and why our monastic life seems to be under such threat. Thus the material challenges which we face force us, it would seem, to ask the more demanding and searching questions about our spirituality and how we live out our monastic calling – not that we should expect any easy answers or 'quick fixes'; or put another way, a renewed theology of monastic life would help us to address contemporary concerns as we attempt, if I might express it this way, to 're-consider our call'.

But before moving on to a consideration of this theme, I would at this point like to say something about the debt of gratitude that we owe to Dom Daniel Rees who died earlier this year. Fr Daniel chaired the monastic theology commission for eight years, culminating in 1978 in the publication of *Consider Your Call*, which provided for the EBC and a wider audience a careful and wide-ranging theology of monastic life. As I

hope will become clear, our intention is not to repeat or to try to update this endeavour, but we acknowledge its landmark significance for our work, and it is a study to which we will undoubtedly return frequently; as indeed will be the *Downside Review*, a journal which Fr Daniel edited for over thirty years.

The various material challenges which face us, then, should certainly encourage us to think again about how we live the monastic life, and mindful of Abbot Christopher Jamison's comment that 'the starting place for a hopeful future is a realistic assessment of the present,'<sup>2</sup> it might perhaps be helpful to try to sketch something of the broader perspective.

First of all, it is clearly important not to be fooled into 'playing the numbers game', as the numerical size of a community is not of itself necessarily an indication of its spiritual vitality or its ability to flourish in the future. For what it is worth, however, some figures might be of interest and help to illustrate the point. My own community of Ampleforth which had just over 100 monks ten years ago has now dropped to just over 80. In the late 1960s, there were at one point 167 monks in the community, but the most common number during the past two hundred years is just over 60, and in fact when the community arrived in Ampleforth in 1802 there were just four monks. Given the age profile of the community, I would imagine that we can expect to see a further decrease in size over the coming years, but that this would not necessarily mean that we are in terminal decline. I think that it would be fair to say, however, that this should give us something to think about.

A second factor to take into account when considering the numbers of monks and nuns in our monasteries is the growth of new religious movements and communities, perhaps encouraged by the Second Vatican Council's stress on the 'universal call to holiness,'<sup>3</sup> which are attractive to the young and seem to draw their attention more than established forms of religious life, including Benedictine monasticism: among these would be Youth 2000, the Faith Movement, the Community of St John, and arguably the more established Focolare Movement and *Opus Dei*. In his address last

---

<sup>2</sup> C Jamison, 'The Future of Religious Life in Britain: A talk given to the Conference of Religious in England and Wales' on 21 September 2006, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> *Lumen Gentium* 3.

September to the Conference of Religious in England and Wales, Abbot Christopher referred to some of these new movements, arguing that the established religious orders need to replace their ‘traditional model of Catholic formation... [with] a completely new model based on evangelisation,’<sup>4</sup> so as better to address the needs of the young who feel themselves called by God to a particular living out of their Christian faith. And in this context, it might also be worth considering whether our situation is similar to those periods in the life of the Church which saw the growth of new religious orders (such as, the Dominicans, Franciscans, and Jesuits) and which saw a dip in the number of men and women entering Benedictine life, but which decline in numbers did not call into question its continued existence.

Whatever the importance of declining numbers in the long term might be, in the short and medium term it is clear that it has a direct, and even costly, impact on the workloads of many monks and nuns. It is clear that Benedict expected monks (and we should add ‘nuns’) to work so as to earn their own keep, but it is equally clear that overwork is both detrimental to individuals and communities, and unattractive to those considering a call to the monastic life. And paradoxically, as communities age and workloads increase, it can be the case that there are a number for whom it appears that there is no longer suitable work to do or who ‘opt out’ feeling that the pace of work is no longer sustainable. This would seem to be an area in need of some review, remembering too that Benedictines are not defined by their work. As Timothy Radcliffe wrote: ‘You farm, but you are not farmers. You teach, but you are not teachers. You have missions, but you are not missionaries.’<sup>5</sup>

A further general consideration is that raised by Archbishop Rowan Williams in his talk at Sant’Anselmo last November. When speaking about ‘Benedict and the Future of Europe’, Williams asked the question, ‘Does the Holy Rule still provide a beacon for common life?’, his answer to which is one that is encouraging to us:

I want to argue that it does: the Rule, after all, is not an archaeological document but something that is being continually reinterpreted in the life of the communities that are based on it.... And it has long been recognised that

---

<sup>4</sup> Jamison, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> T Radcliffe, *I Call you Friends* (London 2001), p.???

what the Rule proposes for the common life of monks and nuns is a structure that can be adapted to the needs of Christian community more widely.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, Williams is drawing attention to the longevity of the Rule and the way of life based upon it, and its adaptability to new and changed circumstance. The threat of external, material and even spiritual challenge is nothing new, and the need to adapt the way in which the core values of the Rule are lived out is one that has been met in the past, and presumably can be met again in the future too. But the meeting of such a challenge involves a return to the sources of the Christian and monastic life, a return to the inspiration of Benedict, rather than a rootless attempted adaptation to our contemporary world; and it is in this sense that we can understand and make our own the dictum of John Henry Newman in his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, that ‘In a higher world it is otherwise, but here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.’<sup>7</sup> Thus it is, that we see merit in our notion of ‘touching our past’ so that we might ‘face our future’ with confidence.

In this symposium, then, we begin our theological consideration of monastic life in the EBC with an historical overview of the spirituality of distinctive figures within our congregation: Dom Augustine Baker, whose teaching on mental prayer has exercised an important influence on what is arguably the key distinctive feature of our spirituality; Dame Margaret Gascoigne who gives testimony to the transforming power of Baker’s way of prayer; Dame Gertrude Brown, whose life spans the period from the second world war through Vatican II to the present, showing how our life has adapted to many changes up to modern times; and Abbot Victor Farwell, noted for his attempts to maintain the tradition of the EBC whilst adapting to changed circumstance and the impact of Vatican II.

A second stage of this project, which we would like to present this time next year, would be a theological examination of some of our key monastic practices: especially celibacy; obedience and responsibility; the spirituality of the office; and work. Whilst

---

<sup>6</sup> Rowan Williams, ‘Benedict and the Future of Europe’. A speech given at Sant’Anselmo on 21 November 2006. [http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org:80/sermons\\_speeches/061121.htm](http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org:80/sermons_speeches/061121.htm)

<sup>7</sup> J.H. Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Longmans, Green & Co: London 1891), p. 40.

not wishing to pre-judge this discussion, the following issues would seem to be among those which require consideration.

With regard to celibacy, an important issue would seem to be its value as a witness to Gospel and monastic values in contemporary society. In terms of authority, it could be asked whether we see our superiors as monarchs or servants; how much we expect from them, and how much we *should* expect from them. We might ask whether we are truly obedient, rather than subservient or disobedient; whether we accept our responsibility as individuals and as members of a community; and examine the consequences of this for community decision-making. As far as our prayer is concerned, it could be considered whether prayer and the search for God are our life-blood; whether we are truly faithful to the *opus dei*, private prayer; *lectio divina* and/or spiritual reading – we would very much hope for, and expect, positive answers to these questions. And regarding work, we might expect an examination of its place in monastic life; the problems of overwork and underemployment; a discussion of how ‘idleness’ might be best avoided; and a questioning of whether all work in our communities is equally valued or whether there is a ‘hierarchy of esteem’, with some works seen as more important than others.

A treatment of these issues would go some of the way towards enabling a theological evaluation of how we currently live our life from the perspective of the *Rule*, established monastic sources and Church teaching, Scripture, and the questions posed to us by contemporary needs, in the language of Vatican II, the ‘signs of the times.’<sup>8</sup> In all this there would be a need to seek to draw on the best of recent monastic scholarship, both in Europe and the United States.

This is clearly a wide-ranging project, and given that many other issues could be added, careful selection will be needed as will a variety of contributors if the project is to succeed.

---

<sup>8</sup> *Gaudium et Spes* 4.