

Seminar: Some insights towards applying the vision of Vatican II into monastic life

I was surprised to be asked to give a paper during the Abbots' Congress on the question of applying the vision of the Second Vatican Council to monastic life today – but after some consideration I thought that I should at least try! I am not an academic, I am a simple abbot who is trying to understand what is happening in the community committed to his care – so please do not expect a thoroughly researched paper: these are some reflections based in my experience as an abbot for the last eleven years. In these reflections I have tried to explain why I think that the documents of the Magisterium have something to contribute to our search for an appropriate contemporary expression of the monastic instinct.

My abbacy has been marked by two phenomena which I have sought to understand: the sexual abuse of children by monk-priests of the community and the departure from monastic life of men who have been solemnly professed, and in some cases ordained, for ten or more years.

The day after my election in 2005 saw the arrest of the first of two monks who were eventually convicted of the sexual abuse of minors. In the last eleven years other offenders in our community from the past have been uncovered. I have repeatedly returned to two questions: 'what led to this offending?' and 'how was it possible for this behaviour to go unchallenged?' My hypothesis is that there was something gravely disordered in the communion within our monastic community.

Whilst I expect that some men in the monastic community will leave during the course of their postulancy and noviciate or at the end of their period of temporary vows, I do not expect men to leave in significant numbers after Solemn Vows. At the time of my election nine men in a community of 92 were living away from the community and its works and others have left subsequently: why?

Needless to say, I cannot give a clear answer to the questions I have asked – but asking these questions led me to search for some understanding – and I would like to share the fruits of that search.

Perhaps naively I assumed that the unsettled state of the Church and of the world from the 1960s onwards was to blame for the problems I was seeing in the community. I also noted the increasing size of some communities which returned to the structures and practices of the 1950s. I wondered whether the Second Vatican Council might be part of the problem. But then I started analysing the data in my own community.

I have to tell you that I can now trace the sexual abuse of minors by members of our community back to monks who were professed in the 1920s. I have met with and listened to some of the survivors of abuse who were abused by members of the community in the early 1950s. The sexual abuse of minors in my community is not a post-Vatican II phenomenon.

I have researched the departure of men in Solemn Vows from our community since 1885. Only 5 monks left from Solemn Vows between 1885 and 1940. Then a change occurred and men started leaving after Solemn Vows. My analysis shows that the largest percentage of departures was from monks who made their Solemn Profession in the decade 1951-60. One third of monks making Solemn Profession in this decade eventually left monastic life. My hypothesis is, therefore, that there was something wrong in monastic life in England, perhaps in the West, before the Second Vatican Council. This was a controversial hypothesis in my own community where the 1950s were regarded by many older brethren as the golden years from which we have now fallen away.

In this context it is helpful to read the four volumes of the *Congressus Generalis de Statibus Perfectionis* (First General Congress of the States of Perfection), which was held in 1950. This Congress considering Religious Life describes many of the issues which are by convention associated with the years following the Second Vatican Council. By way of a few examples it describes the intrusion of the world into the cloister and into the cell, the refusal by religious to account for the expenditure of money, and a personalist account of obedience in which the superior has to earn the respect of the monk or nun before obedience to instructions follows. I suggest that the General Congress of 1950 makes it clear that religious life in the Catholic Church was

already in ferment in the 1940s: in this respect my own community was simply part of a more widespread picture.

In the course of my abbacy I have noted that one of the features of my community is that for many years it has failed to pay much attention to what was being said by the Magisterium. The brethren who were members of the community at the time of the Second Vatican Council created their response to the Conciliar documents – but they have remained fixed in what they had developed in the 1970s. The notion that there was a body of post-conciliar teaching developed in the 1990s and the early years of this present century which guides our interpretation of the Conciliar documents went largely unnoticed.

In 2008 I was working with my community to try and decide what our task was in the years that lay ahead of us. We were a diminishing community but we still believed that we had a future – so what was the Lord asking of us? I was determined that we should try and think with the Church – for the first time in many years. At this moment I was pointed towards the Address of Benedict XVI to the Plenary Session of CICLSAL in 2008. This address is very short, 1100 words in the English text of which the last 780 words provided the crucial insights as far as I was concerned.

I would like to point you to the following comments:

- ❖ “*Christo omnino nihil praeponere* [prefer nothing to Christ] (cf. Rule of Benedict 72, 11; Augustine, Enarr. in Ps 29: 9; Cyprian, Ad Fort 4). These words which the Rule of St Benedict takes from the previous tradition, clearly express the precious treasure of monastic life lived still today in both the Christian West and East. It is a pressing invitation to mould monastic life to the point of making it an evangelical memorial of the Church and, when it is authentically lived, “a reference point for all the baptized” (cf. John Paul II, [Orientale lumen](#), n. 9).” and
- ❖ “monasteries are called to be places in which room is made for the celebration of God’s glory” and

- ❖ “The path pointed out by God for this quest and for this love is his Word itself, who in the books of the Sacred Scriptures, offers himself abundantly, for the reflection of men and women.” and
- ❖ “those who enter the monastery seek there a spiritual oasis where they may learn to live as true disciples of Jesus in serene and persevering fraternal communion, welcoming possible guests as Christ himself (cf. Rule of Benedict, 53, 1). This is the witness that the Church asks of monasticism also in our time.”

In brief this short address suggested that a monastery which sought life, the kind of life which is envisaged by the renewal promoted by the Council, should

1. seek to think with the Church,
2. place prayer and especially the liturgy at the forefront of its concerns,
3. seek to promote the practice of lectio divina among its brethren,
4. build fraternal communion, and, finally,
5. try to establish the spirit of hospitality envisaged by the Rule in all its apostolic encounters.

As far as I was concerned I now had the fundamental principles upon which a monastic renewal in our community could be based, however it struck me quite forcibly that it might be prudent to try and see whether these insights were isolated in a lone text from Benedict XVI or whether they were reflected in other documents of the Magisterium. In this context I want to draw your attention to eleven documents issued in the last 25 years that I regard as of particular importance. These I have listed in Appendix A of this talk¹.

¹ 1990 CICLSAL *Potissimum institutione*, Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes

1994 CICLSAL *Congregavit nos*, Fraternal Life in Community

1995 John Paul II Apostolic Letter *Orientalis Lumen*, to mark the Centenary of Orientalium Dignitas of Pope Leo XIII

1996 John Paul II Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, On the Consecrated Life and its Mission in the Church and in the World

2001 John Paul II Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, at the close of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000

One of the challenges of offering a seminar at the Congress is that it needs to be comparatively brief so I cannot offer you a thorough examination of all of these elements of a renewed monastic spirituality which I have drawn out from Pope Benedict's Address. I will offer, instead, a short treatment of two strands: communion and *lectio divina*.

In my view one of the best statements about communion in the Church is to be found in St John Paul II's Apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* in which he says:

‘To make the Church the home and the school of communion: that is the great challenge facing us in the millennium which is now beginning, if we wish to be faithful to God's plan and respond to the world's deepest yearnings.

But what does this mean in practice? ... Before making practical plans, we need to promote a spirituality of communion, making it the guiding principle of education wherever individuals and Christians are formed ... A spirituality of communion indicates above all the heart's contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity dwelling in us, and whose light we must also be able to see shining on the face of the brothers and sisters around us. A spirituality of communion also means an ability to think of our brothers and sisters in faith within the profound unity of the Mystical Body, and therefore as “those who are a part of me”. This makes us able to share their joys and sufferings, to sense their desires and attend to their needs, to offer them deep and genuine friendship. A spirituality of communion implies also the ability to see what is positive in others, to welcome it and prize it as a gift from God: not only as a gift

2002 CICLSAL Starting Afresh from Christ: A renewed commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium

2008 Benedict XVI Address to the Plenary Assembly of the CICLSAL

2008 Benedict XVI Address to the Representatives from the World of Culture, College of the Bernardins, Paris

2008 CICLSAL Instruction *Faciem tuam*, The Service of Authority and Obedience

2010 Benedict XVI Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church

2014 Francis Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People

for the brother or sister who has received it directly, but also as a “gift for me”. A spirituality of communion means, finally, to know how to “make room” for our brothers and sisters, bearing “each other’s burdens” (Gal 6:2) and resisting the selfish temptations which constantly beset us and provoke competition, careerism, distrust and jealousy. Let us have no illusions: unless we follow this spiritual path, external structures of communion will serve very little purpose. They would become mechanisms without a soul, “masks” of communion rather than its means of expression and growth’ (Taken from *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 43).

St John Paul II’s emphasis on the centrality of communion in the life of the Church in this document of 2001 was anticipated in a number of earlier documents and it has been taken up in a number of more recent documents.

The Congregation for Religious, if I can use this outdated title for the sake of brevity, spoke of the importance of the communion and the quality of community life in its document on Formation, *Potissimum institutione* in 1990 (see especially §§26-28)², and this theme can be traced through *Congregavit nos*, Fraternal Life in Community from 1994 (see especially §§8-10)³, into the document on Obedience and Authority *Faciem tuam* of 2008 (see especially §§16-19)⁴. Again the emphasis on communion is to be found in papal documents of the same period such as the Apostolic Letter of St John

²See, for example, the members must be clear among themselves on why the community exists, and on its basic objectives. Their interpersonal relationships will be marked by simplicity and confidence, being based primarily upon faith and charity. Toward this end, the community is formed each day under the action of the Holy Spirit, allowing itself to be judged and converted by the Word of God, purified by penance, constructed by the Eucharist, and vivified by the celebration of the liturgical year. It strengthens its communion by generous mutual assistance and by a continuous exchange of material and spiritual goods, in a spirit of poverty and with the help of friendship and dialogue. (*PI*, 27)

³See, for example, In creating man and woman in his own image and likeness, God created them for communion. God the Creator, who revealed himself as Love, as Trinity, as communion, called them to enter into intimate relationship with himself and into interpersonal communion, in the universal fraternity of all men and women.

This is our highest vocation: to enter into communion with God and with our brothers and sisters. (*CN*, 9)

⁴See, for example, The spirituality of communion presents itself as the spiritual climate of the Church at the beginning of the Third Millennium and, therefore, as an active and exemplary task of religious life at all levels. It is the main pathway for the future of a believing life and of Christian witness. (*FT*, 19)

Paul II *Orientale Lumen* of 1995 (see, for example §§14-15)⁵ and the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* of 1996 (see §§ 45-54, especially §46)⁶. This same theme of Communion continues to today appearing as it does in the 2014 Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People of Pope Francis who said, “Men and women religious, like all other consecrated persons, have been called, as I mentioned, “experts in communion”. So I am hoping that the “spirituality of communion”, so emphasized by Saint John Paul II, will become a reality and that you will be in the forefront of responding to “the great challenge facing us” in this new millennium: “to make the Church the home and the school of communion” (Francis, Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People, §3).

I do not want to overstate matters but I think that I would say that there has been a long tradition of idiorrhymicity in my own community – and probably in several of the houses of the English Congregation. I believe that this idiorrhymicity is out of step with the expectations of young people entering monastic life today. My impression is that younger men coming to our monastery see there the outward form of the community and communion that they so greatly desire but when they come to live in the monastery they find the mask of communion rather than the living soul. I think that this is of considerable importance in the longer run. This may well be one of the reasons why younger men leave after a period in Solemn Vows. They come to the community seeking communion – but they do not find it or find only a pale shadow of the reality they seek. Then they believe that the community is capable of change – but eventually they see that no change is forthcoming, they lose heart and they depart. I would point

⁵See, for example, Whatever path the Spirit has in store for him, the monk is always essentially the man of communion. (OL, 14)

⁶A great task also belongs to the consecrated life in the light of the teaching about the Church as communion, so strongly proposed by the Second Vatican Council. Consecrated persons are asked to be true experts of communion and to practise the spirituality of communion as “witnesses and architects of the plan for unity which is the crowning point of human history in God’s design”. The sense of ecclesial communion, developing into a *spirituality of communion*, promotes a way of thinking, speaking and acting which enables the Church to grow in depth and extension. The life of communion in fact “becomes a *sign* for all the world and a compelling *force* that leads people to faith in Christ ... In this way communion leads to *mission*, and itself becomes mission”; indeed, “*communion begets communion*: in essence it is a *communion that is missionary*”. (VC, 46)

you to those monasteries on Athos and in the Coptic Church which are flourishing: they have all abandoned idiorrhythmicity and embraced coenobitic life. I think that this is true of those monasteries and monastic new movements which are flourishing in the Western Church: they have a strong experience of communion.

I turn next to *lectio divina*. I believe one of the finest treatments of the monastic enterprise in the recent Magisterium is to be found in St John Paul II's Apostolic Letter *Orientale Lumen* where we read:

Monasticism shows in a special way that life is suspended between two poles: the Word of God and the Eucharist. This means that even in its eremitical forms, it is always a personal response to an individual call and, at the same time, an ecclesial and community event.

The Starting point for the monk is the Word of God, a Word who calls, who invites, who personally summons, as happened to the Apostles. When a person is touched by the Word obedience is born, that is, the listening which changes life. Every day the monk is nourished by the bread of the Word. Deprived of it, he is as though dead and has nothing left to communicate to his brothers and sisters because the Word is Christ, to whom the monk is called to be conformed.

Even while he chants with his brothers the prayer that sanctifies time, he continues his assimilation of the Word (*OL 10*).

Once again it is possible to trace this focus on the encounter with the Word of God through the pages of the Post Conciliar documents. The Congregation for Religious made a series of references to the practice of *lectio divina* in the document *Potissimum institutione* (see §§22, 26-28, 31, 47 & 76)⁷, and there are significant references in

⁷See, for example, More than their brothers and sisters dedicated to the apostolate, the members of institutes totally directed toward contemplation spend a good part of each day in a study of the word of God and in *lectio divina*, under its four aspects of reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation. Whatever may be the terms employed in the different spiritual traditions, and the precise meaning that is given to them, each one of these steps preserves its uniqueness and necessity. *Lectio divina* is nourished by the word of God, where it finds its point of departure, and to which it returns. The seriousness of biblical study, for its part, guarantees the richness of the *lectio*. Whether this latter has for its object the text of the Bible itself, a liturgical text, or a great spiritual page of Catholic tradition, there is a faithful echo of the word of God, which must

8

Congregavit nos (see §16)⁸, *Starting Afresh from Christ* (see §§23-25)⁹, and *Faciem tuam* (see §§5-7)¹⁰. Both St John Paul II and Pope Benedict made important references to *lectio divina* in their teaching documents. Thus Saint John Paul II underlined the importance of *lectio* in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (see, for example, §94)¹¹ in which he particularly praises shared *lectio divina*. I need hardly say that Pope Benedict wrote extensively on the Word of God but I would draw your attention in particular to his Address with Representatives from the Word of Culture in

be heard and, perhaps, in the manner of the ancients, even murmured. This initiation requires courageous practice during the times of formation and all the further stages depend upon it (*PI*, 76).

⁸See, for example, In recent years, community prayer has been enriched by various forms of expression and sharing. ... For many communities, the sharing of *Lectio divina* and reflection on the word of God, ... have been particularly fruitful. Differences of age, formation and character make it advisable to be prudent in requiring this of an entire community. It is well to recall that the right moment cannot be rushed. ... Where it is practised with spontaneity and by common agreement, such sharing nourishes faith and hope as well as mutual respect and trust; it facilitates reconciliation and nourishes fraternal solidarity in prayer (*from CN 16*).

⁹See, for example, Christ is truly present in his Word ... Recognizing him requires a gaze of faith which is acquired through the habitual reading of the Word of God, through prayer and above all through the exercise of charity because the Mystery can only be fully known through love (*from SAfG 23*). and

Holiness is inconceivable without a renewed listening to the word of God. ... “It is especially necessary that listening to the Word of God should become a life giving encounter... which draws from the biblical text the living Word which questions, directs and shapes our lives” (*from SAfG 24*). and

The Word of God is nourishment for life, for prayer and for the daily journey(*from SAfG 24*). and

Prayer and contemplation provide the ambient for the reception of the Word of God and at the same time they spring from listening to the Word (*from SAfG 25*).

¹⁰See, for example, ... the real obedience of the believing person is adhering to the Word with which God reveals and communicates himself, and through which he renews his covenant of love every day... Therefore, every morning the believing person seeks a living and faithful contact with the Word which is proclaimed that day ... And at the end of the day placing him or herself before the Word, praising God as Simeon did for having seen the fulfilment of the eternal Word within the small events of the day (cf. *Lk 2:27-32*), and confiding to the strength of the Word whatever has remained unaccomplished. The Word, in fact, does not work only by day, but continuously, as the Lord teaches in the parable of the seed (cf. *Mk 4:26-27*)... The loving encounter with the Word shows one how to discover the way to life (*FT 7*).

¹¹See, for example, The word of God is the first source of all Christian spirituality. It gives rise to a personal relationship with the living God and with his saving and sanctifying will ... Meditation of the Bible *in common* is of great value. When practised according to the possibilities and circumstances of life in community, this meditation leads to a joyful sharing of the riches drawn from the word of God, thanks to which brothers or sisters grow together and help one another to make progress in the spiritual life (*VC 94*).

Paris in 2008 and his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* of 2010. Quotations from these works are pretty superfluous since they are wholly devoted to extolling the importance of the Word of God, nevertheless I would like to point you to one or two significant but brief points made by Pope Benedict.

‘The word of God draws each of us into a conversation with the Lord: the God who speaks teaches us how to speak to him’ (*VD* 24). This is crucial to our understanding of the Word of God in Scripture. Each of our monks needs to understand that the Word of God draws us into prayer, teaches us how to pray and provides some of the answers to our prayers. This requires us to shape the formation which our younger monks receive so that they are introduced to the monastic culture which Pope Benedict so often described¹². Central to our teaching must be the attempt to ensure that younger monks appreciate the communal nature of our encounter with the Word¹³. Quite how this is to be achieved is not yet clear to me. The older brethren in my own community are very resistant to the idea of *lectio divina* in common – and the example of the seniors has a great impact on the younger brethren. At present I am attempting to change my own style of teaching in my conferences – I am trying to share the fruits of my own lectio of both the Scriptures and the Rule; but I, too, am at the beginning of a learning curve!

In this short paper, then, I have tried to explain why I have taken the community entrusted to my care on a journey back to the Sacred Scriptures, the Rule and the teachings of the *Magisterium*. This journey was prompted by real problems in the community, problems which could not be denied by anyone; problems which encouraged us to look at our community life with a critical eye motivated by the belief

¹²See, for example, Here we need but recall the monastic culture which is the ultimate foundation of European culture; at its root lies a concern for the word. The desire for God includes love for the word in all its dimensions: “because in the word of the Bible God comes to us and we to him, we must learn to penetrate the secret of language, to understand it in its structure and its mode of expression. Thus, because of the search for God, the secular sciences which lead to a greater understanding of language became important”. (*VD* 32)

¹³See, for example, In this regard, however, one must avoid the risk of an individualistic approach, and remember that God’s word is given to us precisely to build communion, to unite us in the Truth along our path to God. While it is a word addressed to each of us personally, it is also a word which builds community, which builds the Church. Consequently, *the sacred text must always be approached in the communion of the Church*. (*VD* 86)

that the monastic life has something crucial to offer the Church. If the monastic life really does witness to the Love of God then surely we must do our best to live lives which testify to the integrity and beauty of this expression of our shared baptismal faith.

At the time of the Second Vatican Council our community kept many of the external forms of monastic life. We are blessed to have a prayerful liturgy which takes a properly prominent place in our life. Though we are much smaller than we once were – and though we will undoubtedly become smaller still – we still have representatives of every generation from the 20s to the 90s. We have embraced the concept of deaneries because our size tends to lead us to become an institution rather than a community and we believe that these deaneries will help us in our desire to build a real communion between us. We have begun to listen to what the Church is saying to us. We are trying to share the riches of the Rule and the Scriptures with all who live and work on our campus as part of our expression of the hospitality which St Benedict urges upon us. I think that we still have a considerable distance to travel before we will have integrated what scholarship has taught us about the Scriptures with the challenge offered to us by the Word of God and the support which that dialogue brings – but at long last I think that we have ceased to sit in judgment on the Word and have moved to a place of receptivity in which the Word judges us.

Finally I would suggest that there is one Benedictine characteristic which is ever more necessary in our world today – and which was not explicitly mentioned in the short text I cited at the beginning of this talk: we need to promote perseverance among all the brethren. The Benedictine way of life flourishes when people persevere over the course of decades. The desire for instant satisfaction of the desires, even the desire for God, is deeply engrained in our culture. May God in his goodness enable us to become witnesses to the beautiful effects of perseverance in a vowed way of life in which we are, step by step, transformed into the image of the one we serve, Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom be praise now and for ever.

1. 1990 CICLSAL *Potissimum institutione*, Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes
2. 1994 CICLSAL *Congregavit nos*, Fraternal Life in Community
3. 1995 John Paul II Apostolic Letter *Orientale Lumen*, to mark the Centenary of Orientalium Dignitas of Pope Leo XIII
4. 1996 John Paul II Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, On the Consecrated Life and its Mission in the Church and in the World
5. 2001 John Paul II Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, at the close of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000
6. 2002 CICLSAL Starting Afresh from Christ: A renewed commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium
7. 2008 Benedict XVI Address to the Plenary Assembly of the CICLSAL
8. 2008 Benedict XVI Address to the Representatives from the World of Culture, College of the Bernardins, Paris
9. 2008 CICLSAL Instruction *Faciem tuam*, The Service of Authority and Obedience
10. 2010 Benedict XVI Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church
11. 2014 Francis Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People