

# A Benedictine Response to Climate Change

Hardly a week goes by without climate change being mentioned in the news. The world is at last recognizing that climate change is a fact and not a theory. It is up to humankind to do something about it, as Pope Francis reminds us again and again in his excellent encyclical letter; *Laudato Si*. The responsibility lies with us, you and me. I quote: *The natural environment is a collective good, the patrimony of all humanity and the responsibility of everyone* (95).

There have been many high profile meetings on this subject. The most recent was last December in Paris when the United Nations convened an international convention. It was here that the *international community adopted the first universal climate agreement. Every country pledged to curb emissions and to strengthen resilience to potentially devastating climate impacts.* (UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon 22 April 2016) One hundred and seventy-one countries gathered in New York in April to sign up to the Paris agreement. Urgent action is now needed, as many countries are experiencing the effects of climate change. Through this agreement it is hoped that there will be a worldwide conversion in the ways each country uses the earth's natural resources. For countries to change its citizens must whole-heartedly embrace and adopt sustainable and ecological ways of living. For this to happen, as we Benedictines know, the first person to change must be me. There has to be an individual eco-conversion.

Today, I am going to talk to you about one particular Benedictine community's response to climate change, that of my own community at Stanbrook Abbey in North Yorkshire, England. I should emphasize, there are others; this is just but one response. There are Benedictine communities throughout the world who are responding to the reality of climate change. In preparation for this workshop I have found out a wealth of information and other approaches from these communities.

In 2002 after five years of intense discernment the Stanbrook community took the very difficult and painful decision to move from its home in Worcestershire. It was a great act of faith on the part of the community and expressed the Paschal Mystery in each one of the sister's lives. They let go, to

choose life. It was also a great moment of opportunity, which my community grasped. We wanted to build something that would express monastic life for Benedictine women in the twenty-first century. To articulate our monastic vision for the future therefore, we drew up a document, which became our template and guided us through the minefield we were stepping into. I have gone on record as saying that if we had known at the time what was involved in moving we would have pulled down the shutters and told the Holy Spirit we weren't in!

The area we now live in is The North York Moors National Park. This National Park is different from the others found in my country, mainly because of its rich monastic heritage. Our monastery overlooks the ruins of the Cistercian monastery of Byland established in 1155 and behind us four miles away is St Aelred's monastery of Rievaulx. We were about to renew the monastic footprint.

The brief given to our architects, Feilden Clegg Bradley of Bath called for a building, which would enable our monastic community to live in a way which makes it possible for us to *pray always*. The design was to foster contemplation through its simplicity, beauty, sense of space and tranquility, taking full advantage of natural light and views. The monastery relates closely to the surrounding undulated landscape. Our brief also requested a monastery designed for the twenty-first century, economic to run and sensitive to ecological and environmental concerns.

The site chosen, Crief Farm has one of the most stunning views in the whole of North Yorkshire. Like Subiaco and Monte Cassino we are on top of a hill. The farm is in an area of pastureland and forestry land. The sustainable monastery we wanted to build had to enhance not destroy the site. St Benedict understood God's creation and the gifts God has given us. The Stanbrook community had to now really own this and take to heart the stewardship of what Benedict said in RB31 on the *Qualifications of the Monastery Cellarer: He will regard all utensils and goods of the monastery as sacred vessels of the altar*. Also in RB32 *The Tools and Goods of the Monastery: Who ever fails to keep the things belonging to the monastery clean or treats them carelessly should be reproved*. Before we had even broken ground our responsibilities had seriously begun.

We had to be countercultural in this throw away society we live in. Our intention was to have as low a carbon cost as possible and have a minimum environmental impact. In order for this to happen the key sustainability features built into the design were:

- [ A woodchip boiler, which heats the whole building using woodchip bought from a nearby farm. In our former monastery we had three huge oil boilers and one gas boiler that heated the main building. The new boiler alone reduced our carbon footprint enormously.
- [ Solar panels- to preheat hot water
- [ A reed bed sewage treatment system (in lieu of a sewage treatment plant.
- [ Rainwater harvesting – for use in WCs, laundry and garden maintenance. To be honest we already had this system in our old monastery but it only fed our laundry and a few odd taps throughout the main monastery building. Even in the nineteenth century the community was becoming savvy in sustainability!
- [ Sedum roofs – to reduce surface water run-off and maintain wildlife habitats.
- [ Shading via deciduous plants provided to large areas of glass, so that more shade is provided in the summer than the winter.
- [ Building materials locally sourced where possible, including the stone for walls and floors. Stone cladding to walls actually uses some waste/offcuts from paving material.
- [ Very high levels of insulation and low energy appliances and fitting throughout the building.
- [ Natural ventilation is used throughout including to the Church and chapel, which use wind protected stack vents at high level to draw air through the building.

All these features were essential in allowing our community to maintain the balance and rhythm of our contemplative Benedictine life and of the ecological balance of the land around us. This balance and rhythm is engrained in all Benedictines. It is at the heart of the Rule. The cycle of the Benedictine life revolves round the cycle of the year, both nature's seasons and the liturgical seasons. This truly can be called the *Work of God*. What we have done and are still trying to do is to witness as Benedictines and as an

individual community that change is possible. *Clothed then with faith and the performance of good works, let us set out on this way, with the Gospel for our guide that we may deserve to see him who has called us to his kingdom.* (RB Prol:21)

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20 May 2016