

Abbot Stuart Burns - Ecumenical Guest – Contribution for the Seminar on the Monastic Life and Christian Unity

First of all I must pass on to you the warm and fraternal greetings of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, who, as you may know, is a Benedictine Oblate of Salisbury Priory. Greetings, too, from the other Anglican Benedictine monasteries.

Archbishop Justin was enthroned in Canterbury within days of Pope Francis' Inaugural Mass. At the dinner after the ceremony, at which some of you were present, Archbishop Justin spoke energetically about the scandal of disunity within the Body of Christ – centuries old divisions whose roots, certainly in the West, were more political than theological and firmly belong to the past; they have nothing to do with the situation in the twenty first century.

The following morning the invited ecumenical guests from overseas made 'courtesy' visits in small groups to greet Archbishop Justin. I had the privilege of accompanying two of them: one made up of representatives of the 'newer' communities like Taizé, Sant Egidio, Bose and the Jesuits [!], and the other of Benedictine communities: Bec, Chevetogne and San Gregorio dal Cielo here in Rome. To both groups he addressed the same two questions: "What do I need to hear?" and "What do I need to do?"

The answers from both groups were remarkably similar: "Listen to the Gospel and listen to the poor, and work for the unity of the Church." It was advice already dear to Archbishop Justin's heart, and which he has taken and is responding to in many ways. I would simply like to tell you about one of them.

Lambeth Palace, on the opposite bank of the River Thames to the Palace of Westminster – the Houses of Parliament – has been the official residence of the Archbishops of Canterbury for centuries; a symbol of status and power! [It even has a dungeon and a prison!] Over recent decades it has become more the seat of administration and bureaucracy.

Within weeks of his enthronement Archbishop Justin had moved almost all of that to some nearby offices so that Lambeth Palace could, in his words, "become an icon of Christian hospitality".

"Now, what do I do with all this space?" he asked a friend. "Fill it with young people," was the answer. So one very significant facet of the 'hospitality' is what he has called "The Community of St Anselm" – named after St Anselm, the eleventh century monk of Bec, a great theologian and an Archbishop of Canterbury.

Archbishop Justin invited sixteen young people, of various Christian denominations and from all over the world, eight men and eight women, to come to live and pray with him for ten months. He appointed as Prior a young Swedish priest whose post-graduate research was in Benedictine Studies. He is assisted by some sisters and brothers of the Chemin Neuf Community in caring for and teaching them. Their day is structured round the Office and Eucharist – each observing the Eucharistic disciplines of their own Church – with periods of silent prayer, study and manual work. On Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays they study the Christian faith and tradition, and on Thursdays and Fridays they work with agencies caring for the poor and marginalised. A further twenty young people are non-resident, and, while continuing in their normal jobs, live a modified rule of life and join the resident community on Monday evenings and for one study day each month. On Sundays each member of the Community is attached to a church of their own tradition. For the resident members there are two week-long retreats and a thirty day retreat, either Ignatian or

Benedictine. They also spend a short period of a few days in January staying with a traditional Anglican monastic community. The non-resident members have one week's retreat, and are encouraged, if they can, to spend time in a monastery to get the feel of the rhythm of the life.

The experience is a weaving together of the Benedictine, Franciscan and Ignatian charisms in the context of the busy and rich life of the Archbishop and Lambeth Palace, meeting people from all over the world and from all strata of society ... They also have 'quality time' with people like Cardinal Schonborn, Fr Cantalamessa, the Preacher to the Papal Household, the Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomew, an Orthodox delegation from the Moscow Theological Institute which is planning a partnership with the Community of St Anselm, Jean Vanier, the founder of the l'Arche communities, the Primates of the various Provinces of the Anglican Communion, leaders of the reformed churches and other religions, politicians and economists, and many others.

The ten months are an experience of very deep Christian community – which, as you can imagine, is one of struggle as they are confronted with the pressures of close community life, a strict prayer regime, so many different cultures and Christian traditions to come to terms with, and a programme of rigorous biblical and theological study, as well as immersion in the international tensions and crises of the day.

It was interesting to observe, for example, the relationship develop between a protestant man brought up in a military household in Ireland during the 'troubles', who had been brought up to believe that any Roman Catholic would gladly kill him, and a conservative Roman Catholic who had been taught that all protestants were bound for Hell! – or a Kenyan Pentecostal rebelling at having to 'worship' with the constraints of a formal Office and the Psalter in the first months, and coming through to a profound love for and appreciation of the Psalms.

In the first weeks, most of them couldn't wait for Sunday when they could worship in a way they were used to. Then followed a time, as the depth of the Community developed and they began to engage more deeply with the Office, when they began to sense a certain superficiality in the normal Sunday worship...but by the end of the ten months, each member left with a deep sense of their Christian vocation as a member of the one Body of Christ, but with a renewed appreciation of their own tradition., and a glimpse into the love and the heartache of a leader of the Church.

One saw a lived experience of what Pope Francis advocates: the focus on the communion we all already share as baptised members of the Body of Christ. The unity they had achieved in ten months was palpable, as was their joy and sense of purpose as the Archbishop commissioned them to return to their countries to work with the Holy Spirit in bringing the integrity of the Gospel to bear on their society.

The next 'cohort' arrived on 3<sup>rd</sup> September, and I spent the evening with them before flying out here: another sixteen young people from thirteen different nationalities: Anglican, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Lutheran, United Reformed and Brethren; quite a mix! – and another twenty non-residents – quite a challenge!