

C.I.B. SYMPOSIUM: SEPTEMBER 2006

LEADERSHIP- MY EXPERIENCE

In preparing this brief presentation for you I have been profoundly challenged. When I accepted Abbess Máire's invitation on the phone to speak of my experience of leadership, I had no idea of what that would entail. For weeks....now months...I have reflected, prayed and struggled over what I might say...for we all know that Benedict has said all that we need to know...My difficulty is that now I have 23 years of experience I realise that I am only beginning to learn what Service of Authority is in our Benedictine tradition. I want to cry out with Jeremiah *Ah, Ah, Ah Lord....I do not know how to speak. I am a child (Jer 1:6)*. But I too was told to get on with it!

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So, EXPERIENCE, what is it? An English Dictionary defines it as DIRECT PERSONAL PARTICIPATION. But the Latin root of the word means TO TEST, TO PROVE, and is related to PERICULUM = PERIL! Direct personal participation in Christian leadership is most PERILOUS and RISKY because it means being in complete harmony with the ONE and ONLY LEADER – JESUS CHRIST. Most of my mistakes have been made when I have been out of tune with the Holy Spirit and deluded into thinking that the whole enterprise depended on me and my abilities, real and imagined! Or just DEAF to his promptings....or too lazy or timid to carry them out.

Benedict speaks of leadership as *THE DIFFICULT AND ARDUOUS TASK OF GUIDING SOULS AND SERVING A VARIETY OF TEMPERAMENTS (R.B. . 2:31.)* As always, Benedict is up front about the DURA ET ASPERA of the monastic life! Yes, blood, sweat and tears are our lot because of the scope of the task. Benedict asks us to care for each sister IN TOTO – from concern about the right length of her habit to her preparation for the hour when Christ comes to lead her into Eternal Life. And communities are formed of personalities as rich and varied as the colours of the rainbow! Helping each – the bright yellows, the sombre purples and every hue in between- towards maturity in Christ is exciting and demanding. Each community has its share of intractable personality problems which may never be resolved on the human level. And we all have to cope with sisters who leave, for whatever reason. We, as leaders, can suffer much personal distress in these situations. Our leadership thrusts us into deep participation, not into a detached position of theoretical management. This means pain – sometimes of long duration – leadership is inseparably bound up with learning patience.

Perhaps today we are not so ready as our predecessors to discern the presence of evil in ourselves and in the community. One of our previous abbesses, Cecilia Heywood, who made the foundation in Brazil in 1911, had, it is said, the ability to see the devil at work. Like Benedict seeing a little black boy leading recalcitrant monks out of choir, she could perceive him troubling a sister, and quickly intervene. Do we tend to draw a psychological veil over sin and temptation? Psychology is an invaluable tool, but it has to be used with wisdom and discernment – and persistent openness to God in prayer. I find

that psychology tells me *why* I am tempted in certain areas, but it does not give me the Holy Spirit's strength to overcome my sinful tendencies, for the ROOTS of sin are deep within me. I totally disagree with Gregory the Great when he states categorically in *The Dialogues* that after the age of fifty the passions die! I'm now twenty years past the fifty mark and I am still fighting fiercely. And I never cease discovering in myself the truth of Jeremiah's words:

*The heart is more devious than any other thing
And is depraved: who can pierce its secrets?
(Jer 17:9)*

If I am tempted to despair and feel as if lost in a whirlwind, then Benedict sets me back on the path of life when he speaks to all such as we who are entrusted with monastic leadership: *anxious about the account she will have to render for others, she becomes concerned about her own state also; and through helping other to amend by her warnings she finds her own faults amended (R.B. 2: 39-40)*. Sometimes when counselling a sister or giving a conference to the community the Holy Spirit highlights for me the identical weakness in myself. He catches out my devious heart and pierces its secrets!

Recently we as a community watched such a moment of truth on television. The B.B.C. produced a series of four programmes *The Convent* in which four troubled young women live in a Poor Clare convent for forty days and nights in an attempt to sort out their chaotic lives through experiencing life in a community of faith. Each woman chooses a sister as a mentor and guide, and in one scene Sr Gabriel is seen counselling Angela, a high-powered business woman, twice divorced. She is complaining at length and with deep feeling about one of the other women, Debi, complaining that she is *disingenuous*-devious and self-dramatising. We as viewers can hardly believe our ears. We have seen Angela repeatedly caught on camera sneaking out of the enclosure, smuggling in wine and subverting the house rules. Sr Gabriel sits and listens, wisely saying little but allowing thoughtful silences. Time passes, grace intervenes, and the moment comes when Angela recognises the truth. She's been projecting her own problems. *It's me who's been disingenuous* she says. A moment of truth which we could all recognise through our own experience. The Holy Spirit works in and through community. Our part is to allow him the space to spread his wings.

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Now to the CRUNCH of leadership – i.e the discovery that we can do nothing at all without the good will of those we serve. In 1983, as part of my personal preparation for the first abbatial election I set myself to answer the *question DO I WANT TO LIVE UNDER A RULE AND AN ABBESS ? (R.B. 1: 2)*. I have to admit that my response was YES and NO... with twenty five years of experience as a cenobite I knew how demanding that relationship could be...(little did I know that the election would result in an even more challenging obedience of living under the Rule as an abbess!) Today, in our culture, candidates are usually professional women, used to a high level of

independence. Learning to relate to a superior can be an uphill task, demanding much prayer, patience and mutual respect. At first glance Benedict's Rule may appear authoritarian but we know that in fact both abness and Rule operate in the context of a particular community, so that decisions, more often than not, are the expressions of the common will rather than impositions from above or outside. Obedience in Christ is a very mature thing, involving our becoming more and more like the Only Son listening to the Father and carrying out what becomes a mutual will in the love which is the Holy Spirit.

Growth in self-knowledge is the work of a life time. We have just buried a dear sister, aged 92, who was a self-acknowledged example of this life-long struggle between her self-determining ego- self and the humility of her listening self responding to God's design for her. She entered at the end of the Second World War after an exciting career in the Secret Service aged 31 and highly sophisticated. Throughout her life she struggled hard – most often without success – to curb her acute critical faculties and quick tongue. When I came on as a ' young abness', it was not easy for either of us. But to my amazement in her later years, she used to come to my room to fling herself on her knees, and most humbly confess all her critical and negative words and attitudes. She became an inspiration to me, an example of what our confessors called a 'good sinner'- devastatingly honest. She made no attempt to excuse her bad behaviour, or to put it into polite language. Entering in 1946 she was termed a 'late vocation' and the heart of her struggle lay in learning the loving abandonment of self that lies at the core monastic obedience. Now, in 2006, most candidates enter with a professional background and all that entails. This presents a particular challenge for leadership.

Our task is to invite women of today into the most satisfying adventure of maturity in Christ who is leading us to our heavenly homeland . In that perspective we see how crucial it is that we learn how to free our wills from all our own ideas and programmes, so that we are prepared to be directed by the Spirit. Sometimes it can be a totally unexpected intervention that 'breaks the mould'. One of our juniors has given me permission to share her story with you. With great faith and enthusiasm she entered in her early forties after a highly successful career. However, no matter how hard she tried to be a Benedictine she found herself confronted by the perfectionist streak in her character, and found the life hard and diminishing: she had no peace or joy. Many times I listened, and encouraged her to give herself more time, to let go and let God be God. Then came the catalyst! While driving a quad bike on our property in North Yorkshire, she and the bike did a somersault down a steep ravine. It was a remote hilly area and she had to be winched up by helicopter and flown to hospital, where six broken ribs were diagnosed. The profound shock, the intense immediate pain and helplessness of the next few weeks were the Holy Spirit's opportunity to act. Through the kindness of all who nursed her, the support and prayers of the community a radical break-through took place: she was freed from her anxiety and the REALITY of God's love and the providence took root in her. By will power this had been impossible. Since this time she has had a freedom of spirit which only grace and community could give her – and which no Novitiate programme could have planned!

This is a radical example but valuable for leadership, especially in the contemplative life. It is the Spirit who leads and we follow through prayer and attentiveness. We learn repeatedly to respect the Spirit's intimate working in each of our sisters- surely our greatest asceticism is to be truly LISTENERS allowing our sisters to be open with us and thereby growing in openness to themselves. Self knowledge in God is one of the essential roots of prayer. For us this means respecting our limitations.

Here another story comes to mind. Some of you may recall a story told by Richard Byrne OCSO in *Living the Contemplative Dimension of Everyday Life*¹ – this time concerned with the dangers of possessiveness and empire building : narrowing down the work of the Spirit to serve our own interests. Richard, had been taken by his fellow monk and friend Benjamin to see an old trailer he had converted into a place of retreat. It was a beautiful winter afternoon and they journeyed in an old truck through deep snow: Richard in a grumbling mood and out of harmony with his surroundings. On reaching the trailer his mood changed: he found it homely and conducive to quiet; he buzzed about inspecting the place, while his friend stood silently by. Richard saw how USEFUL the trailer could be to him: he had a thesis to write: 'This would be a great place to write and get research done!' he exclaimed to his friend: 'Maybe I could use it next summer?'

This time it is the friend who makes the necessary spiritual breakthrough. *Benjamin simply looked at me, he wrote, then asked ' Can't you just rest awhile?*

Why must you always be scheming about how you USE things? Can't you just BE and enjoy it ?' It was a quiet reprimand, he wrote. It was a word of sense. It was a word I was grateful for. All I could do was say, I'm sorry.

Through the friend's word the Spirit acts. Because the word is spoken in love Richard HEARS and responds with humility. The world EXPANDS for him: He now sees things as they are in their beauty - he heard the water in the kettle beginning to boil, saw the sunlight transforming the cheap metal teaspoons to silver, heard the wind in the pines and knew it was good to BE there. There is something here of Benedict's vision of the world in a beam of light – infinitely precious because infinitely loved. The Spirit uses ordinary everyday situations in which to lead us to life. Our work is be attentive so that we recognise the right moment to speak leading the other- or the community- beyond their limitations and towards wholeness and purity of heart– always attentive to learning the mind of Christ through listening to the Spirit. It must always be a word of peace that we give, for in a world dominated by achievement, competition and ruthless exploitation it is vital we nourish in our monasteries a sense of the greatness of God's Justice – his creative love active in every event and working in every circumstance - and infinitely greater than ourselves and our own plans. The Divine Office sings of this *from the rising of the sun to its setting*, and for us it means constant self-stripping, a kenosis achieved in us through prayer and service.

¹ Living the Contemplative Dimension: Richard Byrne OCSO: M.A. thesis 1971 Duquesne University.

My third reflection is about CHANGE: we are all affected by the extraordinary rapidity of change in our society. There is the sense that we are on the brink of a deep transformation – of a new era. It seems to me to be the basic challenge of today for those in leadership. Having said that, Qoheleth reminds us that *there is nothing new under the sun*. Our great English prophet of the nineteenth century, Cardinal John Henry Newman, wrote from his own experience ACT UP TO YOUR LIGHT, THOUGH IN THE MIDST OF DIFFICULTIES, AND YOU WILL BE CARRIED ON, YOU DON'T KNOW HOW FAR. ABRAHAM OBEYED, NOT KNOWING WHITHER HE WENT: SO WE, IF WE FOLLOW THE VOICE OF GOD, SHALL BE BROUGHT ON STEP BY STEP INTO A NEW WORLD, OF WHICH BEFORE WE HAD NO IDEA. THIS IS HIS GRACIOUS WAY WITH US; HE GIVES, TO ALL AT ONCE BUT BY MEASURE AND SEASON, WISELY.

So our first concern as a contemplative monastic community is to move into the future step by step, faithful to the light of our particular charism. Our first abbess, Dame Catherine Gascoigne summed this up in 1633 as *THE SEARCH FOR THAT ONE THING THE SAVIOUR SAID TO BE NECESSARY AND WHICH CONTAINS ALL THINGS IN ITSELF – MY GOD- TO WHOM TO ADHERE AND INHERE IS A GOOD THING*.

In the 381 years of our existence we have moved location four times, and adapted according to the times and culture. We have consistently endeavoured to live the essential monastic values to the full and let secondary concerns go. In the last ten years this has led us to a radical re-evaluation of our life. Seeking to conserve the community's resources, human and financial, we have been led to design a 21st century monastery sensitive to current environmental and ecological concerns. We hope to construct buildings which are easy and inexpensive to maintain yet flexible to incorporate occasion of special hospitality and to allow for fluctuations in numbers in community. Come what may in the way of external changes. In doing this we have had to move away from the complacent attitude implicit in thinking of ourselves as fine flourishing monastery, destined to remain to the end of time. The truth is that we are fragile and TOTALLY dependent on God's mercy and providence. This EXPERIENTIAL FRAGILITY is worth more than any amount of abstract reflection. Abstract thought can so easily lead us into the well intentioned self-deception of PRETENDING to feel fragile and dependent. The history of our Congregation and its communities shows us how often God delighted in sweeping away existing structures and rebuilding on the foundation of a group of nondescript nuns or even ONE monk or nun to recreate the monastic heritage. Growth depends on our true and humble awareness that ALL is God's gift.

Throughout these difficult last six years I have come to know deeply that exterior change only happens after an interior change has prepared the way. The insights of Vatican 11 on the dignity and sacredness of the human person articulated a growing awareness in the Church which has affected all religious life. This, and fewer numbers, has enhanced the

quality of life in community – even on the practical level of there being no lack of responsible jobs for even the youngest members.

As relates to leadership this experience has highlighted a tension between the life traditionally seen as contemplative – of abstraction from the world and the superior's role of guiding her community every more deeply into interiority- and the demands of active involvement in a wealth of external activities - financial, architectural, political- which are inextricably involved in our project to move IN ORDER THAT we may continue to be faithful to our charism. It is a balancing act in which one has to learn to pray as if all depended on prayer and act as if all depended on activity. At root it demands a frightening detachment from securities and a radical dependence on God: *Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all the rest will be given to you as well.*² In our day and age it seems we are being asked to practise heroic trust – leading our communities into uncharted territory as we seek the Kingdom of God.

The winds of change have blown in the English Benedictine Congregation also in these last years. At my first General Chapter the abbesses and delegates were allowed no official role, but in an unprecedented move (perhaps a sign of interior preceding exterior change) the Abbot President invited us to attend all the sessions....it was some year later that we were allowed to vote for the Abbot President, and now, in 2006, we have been granted full voting rights.

The Church and monastic life have survived many periods of change – but the experience is always new and full of risk for each generation. What must we let go? What must we retain at all cost? In Great Britain numbers of nuns and monks are diminishing (in 1983 our community numbered 51 and today we are a community of 24) – many choir stalls stand empty...do we play the numbers game as David did- or do we trust in God who delights in using the weak and the small to work his wonders?

I remember being accosted, a few days after my election, by an energetic middle-aged sister oozing aggression, who demanded *What is your blue-print for the future of the community?* She went away disgusted at my response that I had to listen and wait on the Holy Spirit. She left religious life a couple of years later- disillusioned by my incompetence and lack of vision! Now you have heard this paper, I leave you to judge !

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3255 words

² Matt 6:33 quoted in R.B.2:35

