

Living a Cistercian monastic life in West Wales in 2012

Our Roots

Inevitably we have to start at the beginning in order to understand the present. So whilst this talk is about Cistercian monastic life in West Wales today, the roots of that life lie in earlier times. I am grateful to our good friend M. Wynn Thomas, Professor of English at Swansea University for the attached appendix, which very clearly roots the Welsh Cistercian tradition in the cultural roots of the land. For more on the Welsh Connection go to our web site www.bcawhitland.co.uk

Madame de Chabannes and the early days at Stapehill

We moved to West Wales in January 1991. The Community had been founded at Stapehill in Dorset in 1802 by a group of refugee religious fleeing the horrors of the French Revolution. Our foundress, Madame Augustin de Chabannes had been professed as a young sister in the royal abbey of St Antoine in Paris, but with the outbreak of civil unrest she found herself imprisoned in the Bastille awaiting execution. Amazingly, Robespierre fell, the Bastille was stormed, the prisoners released and Madame de Chabannes made her way across the Swiss border to La Val Sainte fleeing with other monks and nuns. There they established a regular monastic life until it became too dangerous for them to remain in Switzerland and thus began the monastic odyssey, which took them, monks, nuns and oblates, including young children, to Russia, to Poland, down the Danube, searching for a permanent monastic home.

At last Madame de Chabannes and several companions were sent to England, where Sir Thomas Weld offered them a small property in what was then a fairly isolated part of Dorset. Life was hard and frugal. But young women came to join the Community and so an additional dormitory was built. However the newcomers were housed in the new buildings before the fabric was thoroughly dried out. That together with a regime that began with Vigils at 2.30 am each day and a diet that was most often little more than bread and water, took its toll and many of the young sisters contracted TB and died. So many that there was a papal enquiry and for many years the Community was isolated from its monastic brethren under the authority of the local Bishop. The Order of Cistercians was itself fairly fragmented, and it was not until the late C19th that it consolidated becoming the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance [O.C.S.O.]. Holy Cross Abbey thrived, maintaining a dairy farm and extensive vegetable gardens and orchard until the 1980s when it became obvious that now was the time to downsize.

Coming to West Wales

And so after looking at properties across the UK a small group came to see a property at Whitland. That property was not suitable, but the property next door was. And so over the next eighteen months the Community, whose members had been dispersed to Cistercian houses all over the world, regrouped and so began the slow process of adapting buildings that had been a farm and a motel into a monastery. It is still in process. Last year as we celebrated 20 years in Wales we completed the building of our Library/Scriptorium and the renovation of our small church, which was consecrated last summer. And now we are renovating our temporary cloisters to withstand the colder Welsh winters.

Why Whitland?

It is strange that the Community has been brought to Whitland. For it was in Whitland that Bernard of Clairvaux's monks settled in the mid C12th, just across the valley from where we are now. It brings us full circle to our Cistercian heritage and is a daily reminder of what we are about.

The Beginning of Cîteaux

So what is this Cistercian charism that inspired Robert of Molesmes and his companions to up sticks from the wealthy and influential Benedictine monastery of Molesmes and to journey to Cîteaux, which *Exordium Cistercii*, describes as a ¹*howling wilderness waste*? *Exordium Cistercii, the beginning of Cîteaux*, is a primary source text, telling us in the words of the men who made the journey, why they thought it was so important to return to the simplicity of Gospel-living, according to the Rule of Saint Benedict. What our Cistercian fathers were emphasising was that freely chosen poverty roots us poor with the poor Christ. As Gueric of Igny tells us: ² *O rich poverty, O wealthy nakedness ... if they are for Christ and freely chosen. With what riches do you not abound? Indeed who else can abound in such riches but Christ's poor ones ... pauperes Christi?* Thus the first generation of Cistercians chose to return to a simplicity of gospel living, using the Rule of Saint Benedict as its detailed road map.

The Cistercian Charism

So what is this Cistercian charism which requires a daily return to the heart of the matter, to a ³sharing in the sufferings of Christ that we might also share in his kingdom? It is a life lived in common, a simple life marked by seasonal and daily rhythms: a regularity of life that leaves the monastic free for the ⁴things of God. For the monastic vocation is a call to a life apart and yet immersed in a loving care for the earth and its people, a loving care that transcends time and space, for the monastic way of life ⁵*has its own hidden mode of apostolic fruitfulness*. It is in the hours before dawn, after praying the Night Office of Vigils together, that we remain in silent prayer, giving a visible expression to a life ⁶*wholly ordered to contemplation ... to the worship of God in solitude and silence*: a lonely watch, but always in the company of Christ.

The Framework

The Cistercian way of life is simple and unadorned. The architecture of our monasteries is plain and this is an outward expression of a desire to seek in silence the simplicity, the tranquillity, of God. Similarly we strive for a simple and uncluttered life-style and in many ways this requires the 21st monastic to be counter-cultural in a society that is both acquisitive and inquisitive. So how do we focus in order to aid our search for God?

The Common Life

We live in common, that is we share a common table and a common life nurtured by daily Mass. It is in the common life that we receive the grace to acknowledge the frailty of our individual lives, whilst at the same time recognising the divine spark common to every human being. Saint Benedict comes down very firmly upon those who slight any aspect of this common life for it is the outward and visible sign of the Body of Christ, the outward and visible expression of fellowship, of koinonia.

Prayer

The Mass and the Divine Office lie at the heart of each monastic day, the one nurturing the other, for as we participate in the Mass, so we enter ever more deeply into the redemptive mystery of Christ, a mystery in which we participate at the Divine Office. We pray the Divine Office throughout the day, beginning with Vigils at 3.30 am and concluding with Compline at 6.45 pm.

¹ Deuteronomy 32.10

² Gueric of Igny: Epiphany I.1

³ RB Prologue 50

⁴ cf 1 Corinthians 32

⁵ Constitutions 3.4

⁶ I bid 2

The daily horarium also offers time for private prayer, time for ⁷*shutting the door* and being drawn ever deeper into the mystery of the Triune God dwelling within us, so that this mystery may permeate every aspect of our daily life.

Lectio Divina

Holy reading is a particular way of reading. It is a savouring of the Word of God, ⁸*pondering in our hearts*, as did Our Lady, the Mother of God. This pondering, this rumination on the text, is not about gathering and storing up information, instead lectio divina invites us to a deeper understanding, to a knowledge of the heart. This demands of us a daily fidelity, a willingness to be challenged in our living out of what we read.

Work

The simplicity the first Cistercians sought linked closely with their love of the humanity of Jesus. They saw themselves as ⁹*poor with the poor Christ* and that poverty was expressed through manual work. This followed closely Saint Benedict's teaching: ¹⁰*let them not be depressed if local conditions or their poverty require them to gather the harvest themselves, because then they are truly monastics when they live by the work of their own hands*.

To be a monastic is to accept voluntary poverty, which requires us to work in order to earn our living and in order to give alms. The Community at Holy Cross Abbey has committed considerable time and energy to its land, as did our forebears. Working in conjunction with Forestry Commission Wales we now have 25 acres of mixed broadleaf woodland, which will in the next decade provide us with a sustainable fuel for our Bio Mass heating system. We have also developed a market garden so that year on year we are becoming more self-sufficient, likewise with our chickens, and last year we acquired our first hive of bees. We have a small monastic guest house, which is open for retreatants and day guests/groups from Easter until Advent and an altar bread industry, dispatching communion hosts across the UK.

To be a monastic is also to be *monos*, to be one, to renounce the possibility of marriage and parenthood, rather following Jesus who said: ¹¹*there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who is able to receive this, let them receive it*. It is a renunciation for a greater good, it is a witness to the kingdom, present among us here and now. Our share in this greater good is found in the seeming ordinariness of daily living, through manual work, through a listening heart and a loving attentiveness to the present moment, lived in community.

Commitment

The Cistercian Order in C21st is present on every Continent. Since 14th September 2011 Cistercian monks and nuns have been recognised by the Church as one Order, superiors meeting together every three years at one General Chapter. This is a unique institution in the Church: a unique family whose prayer girdles the earth and many of whose members live in places of political and social fragility. Our brothers and sisters suffered in the Spanish Civil War; the Dutch Lob family of Cistercian monks and nuns died in Auschwitz; Chinese brethren were persecuted in the Cultural Revolution; Congolese monks were forced into exile by the very real threat of genocide and French monks were killed in Algeria, as documented in the film *Of Men and Gods*. Today we have

⁷ Matthew 6.6

⁸ Luke 2.19

⁹ cf Guerric of Igny: Epiphany I.1 & Exordium Cistercii 4

¹⁰ RB 48.7-8

¹¹ Matthew 19.12

communities in the Middle East, the Far East, in Australia, Indonesia and New Zealand, in many countries of Africa and Asia, in Europe and in North, Central and South America.

Every monastic makes a life commitment at Solemn Profession to their monastic community, vowing fidelity to the monastic way of life, to obedience and to stability: *conversatio, obedientia, stabilitas*, lives offered in a daily witness, rooted in the ordinary, yet reflecting always the mystery of Christ.

Being in West Wales

Why is being in Wales important to us ? It is a continuation of a monastic heritage. Our own monks and nuns came to Wales in C12th and before them were centuries of anchorites and hermits, of monastic schools and monastic witness. Our lives are just a fragment of that continuum:

*¹²The valley, mist shrouded in the damp November air,
the hills beyond blurred shapes in the early morning light:
natural choir, a place of praise;
the trees, ethereal, half-recognised,
yet unfamiliar, poised on this edge of day.*

*And then the warm, pink glow,
the sun rises over the valley's lip,
flooding it with light and warmth: dawn,
bringing new life.*

*In choir we rise to greet the day,
to praise the Father, through the Son in the Spirit.
The Spirit, that hovered over the first day of creation,
that overshadowed the Virgin, and raised her Son to new life,
bursts forth in praise of this new day;
the psalmody of human song mirroring
the psalmody of light and life echoing in the valley,
and across the valley
to our brothers, sent long since by Abbot Bernard of Clairvaux.*

*Time and space suspended,
the choirs join in one unending song of praise,
in this valley, in this land of Wales.
This land of mist and hill and valley,
this land of ancient faith,
deep in the roots of time.*

I Duw y bo'r diolch

Abaty'r Groes Sanctaidd
Hen dy gwyn ar Daf
Chwefror 2012

Holy Cross Abbey
Whitland
February 2012

¹² Monastic Trilogy:Lauds

Appendix

Virtually from their very first appearance in Wales, the Cistercians forged a particularly strong bond with the country and its people. Although originally an Order introduced under the protection of the Norman Conquerors, who established monastic houses of various Orders that were occupied by "immigrants", Cistercians began to "go native" much more quickly and much more thoroughly than any of the other Orders introduced by the Norman invasion. This process of cultural assimilation was no doubt accelerated by the establishing of the Abbeys as self-sufficient working communities in rural areas remote from the Norman towns and castles. One by one those great Abbey churches were built whose ruins continue to be an admired feature of the Welsh landscape: Whitland (1140), Margam (1147), Valle Crucis (1201), Cymer, Strata Florida (1164), Aberconway, Tintern (1131: the first) and many others.

As the Cistercians began to recruit their religious from among the local population, the Order soon developed a good name among the Welsh. Between C11th and C13th – the Age of the Welsh Princes, the great monasteries played a vital role through their scriptoria in ensuring the continuity of Welsh culture from ancient times to the present. It was at Strata Florida, for instance, that one of the key chronicles of the Welsh Princes – *Cronica Principum Walliae* – was translated into Welsh as *Brut y Brenhinoedd*. And it was in the scriptorium of the same great Abbey that the precious *Hendregadredd* manuscript was compiled: a unique collection of the majestic poetry of the Age of the Princes.

As early as C12th the Abbeys at Whitland and Strata Florida came under the patronage and protection not of their founding Norman Lords, but of the native Welsh prince of their region, Deheubarth: the great Arglwydd/ Lord Rhys of Dinefwr. And following the death in 1282 of Llywelyn ein Llyw Olaf, the last native Prince of Wales, the network of Cistercian Abbeys across Wales played a very important part in sustaining the social and cultural distinctiveness of the Welsh nation. The fact that after his assassination Llywelyn's body was carried to the Cistercian Abbey of Cwm Hir for burial strongly suggests a special relationship between such Abbeys and the native population with its aspirations to a degree of national independence.

The C13th and C14th were the golden age of *Beirdd yr Uchelwyr*, the bards, who, having been Court poets, found themselves summarily scattered and rendered homeless following the violent end of the Age of the Princes. They consequently became dependant on the alms, protection, patronage and nurture of the minor Welsh gentry and of the Cistercian Abbeys. The bards were peripatetic, travelling the country as they performed a body of highly sophisticated and uniquely intricate *cynganedd* poetry, that has come to be regarded as one of the highest glories, not only of Welsh, but of European poetic culture. The greatest of these poets was, of course, the incomparable Dafydd ap Gwilym (c. 1315–1370), whose body has always been said to lie beneath the great yew tree at Strata Florida.

Therefore, involving as it did the effective destruction of Cistercian life in Wales, the Cromwellian dissolution of the monasteries following the Protestant Reformation settlement had a profound impact, not only on the spiritual, but also on the cultural life of Wales.

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