



**LONDON CHAPTER OF DOUAI OBLATES**

**OCCASIONAL PAPERS I**

**2010**

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The cover photograph shows a group of Douai oblates

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*Douai Abbey*



## INTRODUCTION

These papers were all delivered to the London Chapter of Douai Abbey Oblates between 2008 and 2010. They are not intended as contributions to the vast scholarship on Benedict and his *Rule* but as evidence of the attempts being made by one small group of oblates to inform themselves and to share their insights and enthusiasms with their fellow-oblates, not simply because they feel they have something to offer but also with the humble object of stimulating discussion from which they can learn. Some of these papers are brief reflections while others are more detailed essays; some were prepared by oblates holding down fulltime jobs while others were produced at a more leisurely pace by oblates with more time. They are offered to other oblates of Douai in the hope that they will encourage that lively discussion on what it means to be an oblate which takes place during our exciting oblate retreats at our monastery.

It might be of interest to other oblate chapters to hear how the London Chapter of Douai Oblates structures its meetings. They take place on a weekday evening, simply because the majority work during the day, and last some two and a half hours. We meet in the living room of one of our members and have a glass of wine while the meeting gathers. There are usually half a dozen of us.

We start with twenty minutes' silent meditation. Then a paper prepared by one of us is read and this is followed by discussion. We end with a Table Blessing and sharing of the food and drink we have brought to share.

Our meetings take place every second month in central London and we are always keen to welcome oblates of Douai who live near enough to attend, or indeed those considering becoming oblates of Douai.

This, our first collection, is dedicated affectionately to the memory of Derek Vidler, a model for all oblates, who died in April 2010. His paper on the centrality of the Gospel for spirituality is placed first in this collection.

Feast of St Benedict  
11 July 2010

## CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

Derek Vidler

The only spirituality for the Christian is that of the Gospel and the Gospel reflected in the other writings of the New Testament. I am always suspicious of those who speak of Benedictine, Franciscan, Carmelite, Dominican, Theresian, Ignatian or any other spirituality. A spirituality that is not rooted in the Gospel of Christ is not worthy of the name of Christian. When St Francis of Assisi went to Rome to win approval from the Pope for his new religious order, the Cardinals of the Roman Curia asked to see his Rule. He replied that his only Rule was the Gospel of Christ. This they would not accept. Religious orders had to have a Rule. Francis was to spend the rest of his life agonising about this and it continued after his death with the Franciscans splitting up into a large number of groupings.

At the centre of Christian spirituality is the God who is love, the Father of his Son Jesus Christ. Let us be very clear that it is the Christian relationship with God which is of supreme importance and without which Christianity becomes a set of rules and regulations. All forms of Christian spirituality are founded on and catch fire in the example and experience of Jesus and our relationship with him. Through Christ in the Holy Spirit we are drawn into a deep and loving relationship with the Trinitarian God, and if this is not as real, in fact more real, than the other relationships of human life, we will not be, as Christ intended us to be. The Greek word *monos*, in its primary meaning in Christian spirituality, is an aloneness, a solitude with God himself. From this basic meaning developed the word monk and monastery. Being alone with God is not just for monastics but for every Christian. I think it was Cardinal Hume who once said that the Carthusian search for God in the silence of his cell finds its echo in every Christian.

One of my great heroes has been Dag Hammarskjöld who served twice as Secretary-General to the United Nations until his untimely death in September 1961 at the heart of the war in the Belgian Congo. Hammarskjöld was an outstanding brilliant man with a keen intellect. Hammarskjöld in a rare statement of his fundamental beliefs in 1953 in a radio interview said that from generations of soldiers and government officials on his father's side of the family he inherited a belief that no life was more satisfactory than one of selfless service to humanity. From scholars and clergyman on his mother's side of the family he inherited that, in a very radical sense of the Gospels, all were equals as children of God. He found an explanation of how human beings should live a life of active social service in full harmony with themselves as members of the community of the spirit: He found this, he wrote, "in the writings of the great medieval mystics for whom self-surrender had been the way to self-realisation, who in singleness of mind and inwardness had found

strength to say 'yes' to every demand which the needs of neighbour and to say 'yes' to all that life unfolds for us." Hammarskjöld's favourite authors were Thomas à Kempis *The Imitation of Christ* and Meister Eckhart.

To come to know and love God is a life's time work and will not be complete until we see "face to face". It is a time of growth and development. Jesus often spent the night in prayer and in his forty days in the desert after his baptism by John the Baptist he wrestled with evil. There is no easy path. God is always unknown in himself. We can have some ideas about God; the old Penny Catechism described God as "The being who exists in and of himself and is infinite in all perfections". [Some have said this is really the definition of a parish priest!] However, as theologians tell us, God is known by what he is not rather than what he is. He has no limits; he is all powerful; he is timeless; he is all seeing and so on. These are ideas telling us what God is not. The reality is beyond us. A Carthusian novice master has put it succinctly; what God is in himself "is entirely hidden from me. God for me is an impenetrable mystery. I can only name Him in comparison with creatures ascribing to Him the perfection of whatever exists in an imperfect state in creatures. I know that God is more unlike than like all that is attributed to him - even all sacred scripture says of him." The unknown author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* speaks how we must empty ourselves of all our ideas about God. These are not God - only ideas about Him. In the silence of mind and heart we can pierce the Cloud of Unknowing by love. Therefore I will leave on one side everything I can think and choose for my love that which I cannot think.

He may well be loved but not thought. By love He can be caught and held, but by thinking never. Therefore though it may be good sometimes to think particularly about God's kindness and worth, and though it may be enlightening too, and a part of contemplation, yet in the work now before us it must be put down and covered with a cloud of unknowing. And you are to step over it resolutely and eagerly, with a devout and kindling love, and try to penetrate the darkness above you. Strike the thick cloud of unknowing with the sharp dart of longing love, and on no account think of giving up.

I am talking about the ordinary Christian life not some life which specialises as it were in the contemplative life of monks and nuns. In 1953 as he took up the United Nations Secretary-Generalship Hammarskjöld wrote in his private diary: "Night approaches now. For all that has been - thanks. To all that shall be - yes." Shortly afterwards he wrote; "Not I, but God in me". In April of the same year he quotes from his favourite author Thomas à Kempis. "Their lives grounded and sustained by God, are incapable of pride. They attribute to God whatsoever good they have received, seek no glory from one another, but do all things for the glory of God alone." In April 1956 he wrote: "Understand - through the stillness; act - out of the

stillness; conquer – in the stillness.” Less than two months before his death he wrote: “Give us a pure heart that we may see Thee, a humble heart that we may hear Thee, a heart of love that we may serve Thee, a heart of faith that we may love Thee. Thou whom I do not comprehend but who has dedicated me to my fate, Thou . . . ”

Jesus as we have seen often spent time alone in prayer to his Father and he recommended his followers to retire to some quiet place at home to pray, to be alone with God. This time of silent prayer and searching for God is at the heart of our Christian calling to be followers of Christ. Nothing can ever replace it and nothing can be achieved in the Christian life without it.

For us as Christians God has revealed himself fully in the Risen Lord Jesus who sends the Holy Spirit to dwell in us. In the Liturgy of the Church we pray to the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit. The ancient heresy of Arianism, which taught that Christ is not truly divine, brought about a change in the wording of many prayers. Take: “Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit”. Originally this was “Glory be to the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit.” This professes our faith in the Trinitarian God. We go to the Father *through* the Son in the Holy Spirit. Notice how some of the oldest prayers of the Liturgy were changed from “Through the Son...” to “Who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit.” It is in the sacraments of baptism and confirmation that we come to share in the life of God himself. We can call God *Our Father*. We become like brothers and sisters with Jesus. This is tremendous. We take a new life and a new love. The relationship that Jesus has to his Father by his divine nature becomes our relationship by grace to the Father. Leo the Great in his Christmas sermon says that Jesus became man to share our human nature so that we could share in his divine nature. This is reflected in the silent prayer the priest says at Mass as he pours water into the wine when preparing the gifts for sacrifice: “By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity.”

Greek has four words to express the different sorts of human love. Love for parents and family, for friends, for husband and wives. English has only the one word: “Love”. St Paul when writing to the Corinthians explains to them the various gifts of the Holy Spirit. But one gift far surpasses all the others – the gift of *love*. He uses the Greek word *charis* from which we get words like charity, grace, charism etc. His paean of Love is too well known to quote but what should be noted is that this love he speaks of is a gift of the Holy Spirit which enables us to love like God in Christ. It is true it can and does mingle with the other human loves we experience like rich oil poured into water. It is so much more than what we ordinarily mean by love. It is the love Jesus spoke of when he said “Forgive your enemies”; “Go two miles with the one who asks you to go one”; to share your goods with others, to take up the cross, to deny oneself.

In baptism and confirmation we are born again to a new life in Christ. We become a branch of the vine, a member of the Body of Christ. There is no I in Christianity; it is always yours or ours. When the disciples asked Jesus how to pray they were not asking for a particular prayer but prayer that would reflect the Christian family. Jesus gave them the *Our Father*; not *My Father* but *Our Father*. And so it is throughout the *Our Father*. Christian Prayer always includes others.

In the *Acts of the Apostles* we hear about the life style of the early Christians: "The whole group of believers was united, heart, and souls: no one claimed private ownership of any possessions as everything they owned was held in common." The apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus with great power and they were all accorded great respect. None of their members was ever in want. (Acts 4:32-35) The early Christians: "Remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood and to the breaking of bread and to the prayers." (Acts 2:42) These four elements remain a standard for every Christian. To remain faithful to the Apostolic witness to the Resurrection of Jesus, crowning all that he had taught; to a sharing of one goods so that no one goes needy; faithfulness to the Eucharist in which Christ's sacrifice is made present for us and Himself received in Holy Communion, and to "the prayers". I want to pause for a moment on "the prayers." In the Jewish practice at the time of Our Lord all males who had become adults (usually 13 or 14 years old) were bound by morning and evening prayers. They were bound to do this with a minimum of 12 others thus forming a synagogue. The early Church continued the importance of these morning and evening prayers which by the third century had become distinct offices of psalms, readings and prayers often called the Cathedral Offices. It is important to notice that this is quite distinct from what later became the Monastic Offices. The first monks merely added five other hours of prayer together with a lengthy office of readings. This has become usual for monastics. The *Second Vatican Council* in its *Decree on the Sacred Liturgy* emphasised the importance of the daily office of morning and evening prayer for all Christians. In doing so it was returning to the very earliest traditions of the Church.

The evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience are counsels of perfection for all Christians not just religious. The gospel tells the story of the rich young man who had kept all the commandments but was lacking in one thing. Jesus asked him to sell what he had and give to the poor and come follow. The young man was already a good man and it says, "Jesus loved Him". He loved him so much he wants the young man to grow even further into that sort of love that Christians have through baptism and confirmation. Poverty means not being possessive, being able to value all things as God's gifts. Oscar Wilde was right when he said: "The cynic is the person who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing." Chast-

ity is that love in marriage or in the single life which enriches us in God's love through faithfulness to our calling to be married or single. Obedience is given to God alone and is our wholehearted commitment to him of whom Jesus said "I come to do my Father's will." Humility as St. Paul describes it in the Letter to the Philippians, the completely emptying out of self so that we have no obstacles to loving as the Holy Spirit, moves us. Self puts up a barrier between ourselves and God and stultifies our Christian vocation.

I started out with saying I am very suspicious of spiritualities; I want to stress there is only one spirituality, that of the Gospel of Christ. A final word about St Benedict: the original monastic communities of men and women were all of lay people, ordinary Christians. They were not an exclusive elite but more a leaven in the dough. St Benedict's *Rule* envisages a group of people living together in community. In the Prologue Benedict says that they join the group "to do battle under the Lord Christ, the true King". He stresses that the member must listen to Christ and his words so that he become wise like the man who built his house on rock. The community and *Rule* is a school in the service of the Lord. He stresses prayer together and especial prominence is given to morning and evening prayer. Private ownership is a vice and grumbling a form of self-seeking. The utensils of the kitchen must be treated as sacred as the vessels for Mass. The world is God's world which he made and has given us and has been redeemed by Christ. We must see this world as God's world. Benedict sums up his rule; "To prefer nothing to the love of Christ."

It was the boast of a pagan Roman author who said, "See how these Christians love one another." When St Augustine came to England in the sixth century Bede tells us they didn't know the language at all well although they had recruited some who could speak to the English on their way through Southern France. But Bede says it was their way of life that brought in the converts because they shared and loved one another. Surely this is the gift of baptism and in particular of the Holy Spirit coming in Confirmation to make us witnesses to Christ by our way of life,

St Paul writing to the Corinthians in answer to questions they had put to him speaks of the new creation in Christ which is the vocation of all the followers of Christ: "What I mean brothers is that the time has become limited and from now on those who have spouses should live as though they had none; and those who mourn as though they were not mourning; those who enjoy life as though they did not enjoy it; those who have been buying property as though they had no possessions and those who are involved with this world as though they were people not engrossed in it, because this world as we know it is passing away." (1 Cor 7:29-31)

*A paper read to the London chapter of Douai Abbey Oblates on 20 Oct 2009*

## THE GIFT OF SILENCE

*Contemplative prayer – Purity of heart – Pure prayer*

David Rees

### **Listening in silence**

St. Benedict obviously cherished silence and saw it as a necessity for anyone who wanted to pursue the spiritual path. He devotes a whole chapter of the Rule to silence (RB 6) as well as mentioning it in a number of other places too. The very first word of the Rule, and the sentences that follow, imply the need for silence: “Listen . . . listen with the ear of the heart”, obviously influenced by the Psalmist (Ps 95): “today if you hear God’s voice, harden not your heart”. How had he arrived at this thinking of the importance of silence?

Here we have to revert to the teaching of the 4th Century Desert Fathers in north east Egypt, the earliest monks. The monk Ithagus handed on to Abbot Isaak and his monks this approach to silent prayer concentrating on one word such as Abba. This approach is to strive to what they considered pure prayer – prayer going beyond words and thoughts to empty oneself of the Ego and therefore making one accessible to the Holy Spirit; in other words, to LISTEN in silence. You cannot be listening if you are occupied in wording. John Cassian, a monk from the Balkans area who visited Fr. Isaak, listened to this teaching and indeed practised what Fr. Isaak practised and taught, and so recorded this in his *Conferences* – a handbook for Christian meditation in our own time. It was from John Cassian that St. Benedict learnt about the necessity of silence/silent prayer, to strive for purity of heart, as he termed pure prayer, in our life of prayer.

### **The place of silence in the monastery**

Benedict speaks of some of the reasons why his followers should observe silence. First of all personal prayer, *lectio divina*, and study are hard to achieve in the midst of noise and chatter. He sets aside certain times, seasons and places in the monastery that will provide an environment of silence: “The Oratory must be a place of prayer . . . when the Work of God is over all must depart in absolute silence.” (RB 52).

During meals there should be complete silence disturbed by no whispering. Only the reader’s voice should be heard (RB 39). Yet recognising our human weaknesses he goes on to say: “I have resolved to keep watch over my ways, so that I may not sin with my tongue” (RB 6). He further suggests that sometimes silence can be better than speech even when the conversation is about good things: “I have accepted silence . . . refraining from words that are good . . . because of the value of silence.” (RB 6) In RB 7 he encourages his disciples to “speak gently and seriously with words that are weighty and restrained”.

### **The need for silence**

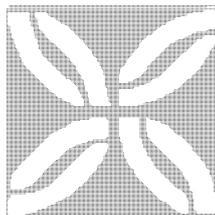
It may all seem today unnecessarily detailed and perhaps rather negative. We have to remember when this was and the kind of people with whom St. Benedict was dealing, many of whom would have been recent converts from Barbarism (RB 22). So silence was a new idea to many of them – so equally true of our own times. What does emerge from the writings of St. Benedict is his deep love and appreciation of silence, not just for the sake of silence but silence for the sake of something – as a way to God and union with him. For Benedict it was a matter of cultivating an inner stillness and silence in order to LISTEN to God and to experience his presence within. Whilst it is not easy for any of us, including the monastic, who would be the first to admit it, to incorporate Benedict's teaching in our lives to find places and time for silence and stillness in our daily lives. It requires discipline and faith that leads to practice prayer in silence. Yet we yearn for silence and stillness if we but realized and accepted it.

### **Pure prayer**

This spiritual search for pure prayer – purity of heart is exemplified in the teachings of John Main OSB and as being taught across the world today in true Benedictine tradition by his successor, Laurence Freeman OSB. Their fellow monk, Bede Griffiths OSB, was a great follower of the prayer of the heart as he taught in his Ashram at Santivanan in India with both Hindu and Christian meditators. This pilgrimage in pure prayer/purity of heart transcends all religious differences and unites us in our silence that all human beings share in common how ever much we resist it. Our resistance is because we remain in fear of silence whereas the journey leads us away from fear to the realms of the love of God in totality. Pure prayer/purity of heart is surely the way we place ourselves at the disposal of the Holy Spirit. How apt that we are sharing this two days following the Feast of Pentecost.

All this proves how tradition in essence and at best prevails from generation to generation. St. Benedict's voice comes through in silence into our silence: "LISTEN . . ." he says. In that way we might hear the voice and feel the breath of God through the Holy Spirit in our lives.

*A paper read to the London oblates on 2 June 2009*



## PURITY OF HEART

Klara Brunnhuber

### Prologue

Nothing pains parents more than losing a child—be it physically or in spirit. Nothing, on the other hand proves a father's love more than letting his son go, allowing him the freedom to make his own choices, accepting that he may use this freedom to make mistakes, may even use it to turn against the father and cut himself off completely. Despite all this, a father's love remains full of hope, full of patience, waiting – until one day the prodigal son may return, eventually.

### In the Beginning

In the beginning, God created heaven and earth. He created life, and in His own likeness humankind. Into this tangible, growing, breathing, multiplying world, He poured His love and the greatest gift of all – free choice. In doing so, He gave up control, made Himself vulnerable, gave man the power to hurt Him where it hurt most: He allowed him to choose to separate himself from his creator.

Man and woman were created in a state of perfect innocence. They remained unaware of this until they fell into sin. As they fell, they fell completely – with body, mind and soul. The fruit they ate opened indeed the door to a new world – full of thoughts and emotions they never knew existed: knowledge of their own sin, shame and fear. They gained all this and lost so much more – the unimaginable closeness and unity with God, and with it their inner hold, their inner axis, their inner self, their true identity.

### Longing

Ever since, spiritual people have been longing to regain what has been lost, willing to dedicate their lives to find a way back into God's presence. With the psalmist they cried out:

“O wash me more and more from my guilt  
and cleanse me from my sin.  
O purify me, then I shall be clean,  
O wash me, I shall be whiter than snow...  
A pure heart create for me, O God,  
Put a steadfast spirit within me...  
Do not cast me away from your presence,  
nor deprive me of your holy spirit.”

(Psalm 50)<sup>1</sup>

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1 Ps 51 in the Hebrew numbering

## Hope

Through his life, death and resurrection, Jesus has thrown open the gate. He promised: "God blesses those people whose hearts are pure. They will see him!" (Matthew 5.8)

With the parable of the prodigal son, Jesus laid out for us the necessary steps for obtaining this precious purity: Stop what you are doing – Look around you and realise the error of your ways – Accept that you are a sinner – Turn away from sin – Walk the long path back to God – With a humble heart confess your sins and accept God's judgement. Only so can you be welcomed back home as a son.

## Monastic Calling

What does this mean for people with a monastic calling? One of the desert fathers, Abba Moses explains in *The Philokalia*<sup>2</sup>:

The goal of our profession... is the kingdom of God. Its immediate purpose, however, is purity of heart, for without this we cannot reach our goal . . . We give up country, family, possessions and everything worldly in order to acquire (it) . . . (But) perfection does not follow immediately upon renunciation and withdrawal from the world. Fasts and vigils, the study of Scripture, renouncing possessions and everything worldly are not in themselves perfection...; they are its tools . . . As (St. Paul) says 'Though I give my body to be burned, and have no love, it profits me nothing.' Whoever has achieved love, has God within himself and his intellect is always with God.

The path back to God requires a pure heart. In order to achieve that holy state, we need to show dedication and patience. Ultimately, however, we need much more than we can achieve through our own efforts. We need God's gifts of mercy and love.

Let us take a deeper look at the tools that may help us on the way.

## The Four Renunciations

In her book *Humility matters for practicing the spiritual life*<sup>3</sup>, Margaret Funk describes the path leading to a contemplative life and back to God in the form of four renunciations:

In the first renunciation, we renounce our former way of life, characterised by the attachments of the ego: at all times we do good and avoid evil. In practical terms, we achieve this by serving the poor, sharing our goods, being faithful in friendships, commitments and work assignments, worshipping with our faith

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2 G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, Kallistos Ware ed., *The Philokalia – The complete text. Volume 1. Compiled by St Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St Makarios of Corinth*; Faber and Faber, London, Boston. 1990; 95-96.

3 Mary Margaret Funk, *Humility matters for practicing the spiritual life*, Continuum, New York, London. 2006, 9

community, contributing to society and the arts, safeguarding the environment and engaging in dialogue globally. Whenever we sin, we repent and ask for forgiveness and make amends.<sup>4</sup>

In the second renunciation, we renounce the 'eight thoughts' that, when unchecked, lead us down the slope towards our afflictions. Abbot Jamison's second book *Finding happiness*<sup>5</sup> is dedicated to these 'eight thoughts' and their role in modern life. He summarises: The first three are thoughts about the body: gluttony, lust and greed. The next three are thoughts in the heart and mind: anger, sadness and acedia. The two final ones are in the soul: vanity and pride. The presence of these thoughts does not mean that a person has done something wrong; they are present in everybody's life. Although they come from within us, the 'eight thoughts' sometimes seem to be bigger than we are and it feels as if they were attacking us from without. The desert fathers and mothers, experts in all matters regarding these thoughts, also called them demons, the servants of the Devil. They understood that these thoughts, if unchecked, make us receptive to temptation, the luring voice that attracts us so forcefully to sin. The fact that Evil is constantly trying and testing us, in no way means that we have no choice but to surrender. Jamison says:

When people freely choose to turn the 'eight thoughts' into actions, then vice is indulged and the demons have their entry into the soul...So the demons are always working to persuade us to turn our thoughts into vices, but we are completely free to choose not to do so.

However, we are not left wholly defenceless in facing the 'eight thoughts'. As Jamison explains, each of these "has a corresponding opposite virtue: for the three thoughts of the body these are: for gluttony moderation, for lust chaste love and for greed generosity. For the three thoughts of the heart and mind: for anger gentleness, for sadness gladness and for acedia spiritual awareness. Finally, for the thoughts in the soul: for vanity magnanimity and for pride humility."

Becoming aware of the existence of the thoughts and their constant fight for supremacy over the soul does not benefit us as individuals only but has an impact on how we relate to people around us. The purpose of these lists of thoughts is not an academic exercise, but a framework for developing self-awareness, a practical tool for looking both inwards and outwards, for understanding our interaction with the world, for realising our place in the world. Jamison stresses that living out the discipline of self-awareness is essential not only for personal happiness but also for society's happiness.

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<sup>4</sup> Funk op cit, 137-138

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Jamison, *Finding happiness – Monastic steps for a fulfilling life*, Weidenfeldt & Nicolson, London. 2008; 41, 42-43, 53-54.

The way to liberate ourselves from vicious behaviour is to enter our inner world, name its demons and then ask for help to contain them. It is immensely important that we realise that we cannot go this way alone. We need to ask and accept guidance from people who are spiritually more advanced and graced with the power of discernment. Margaret Funk then continues:

In the third renunciation, we renounce our self-made thoughts of God, so we can know the God who is God...We not only refrain from urging our faith on to others who may have encountered a different faith tradition. Most importantly, we need to refrain from projecting on God our ego-centric ideas of him, to give up our self-made image of God. We lay aside our thoughts, feelings, passions. In emptiness we stand naked before God and the Presence springs up . . . We are mute. We practice unthinking and are known heart to heart."<sup>6</sup>

In the fourth renunciation, we renounce the thoughts of our self. We . . . leap from self-centredness to sacrifice on behalf of others . . . As our silence deepens, humility springs up . . ."<sup>7</sup>

It is the outward sign of our purity of heart, when body, mind and soul are integrated into one harmonious being.

The journey of the four renunciations is often called 'The Way'. It is known by many religions. Margaret Funk suggests that what humility is for a Christian may be the same that is enlightenment for a Buddhist, realisation for a Hindu, sincerity for a Confucian, righteousness for a Jew, surrender for a Muslim, and annihilation for a Sufi.<sup>8</sup> For us Christians, Jesus' life – although he himself was without sin – is the perfect example for the way to humility, to complete obedience and self-sacrifice. Jesus did not abolish suffering in the world but he showed us how to suffer well. He showed us that every moment, every encounter, every suffering has the potential to become yet another step on our way to salvation.

### **The Benedictine Way**

The three Benedictine vows of stability, obedience and *conversatio morum* are reflected for monks and oblates in the inner attitude of determination, consistency and obedience, together with continuous reflection, self-awareness and an inner willingness to turn away from sin. If pursued in sincerity, this path helps to gradually purify and open our hearts, expose our innermost self to God, and prepare us to be ready, through grace, for His love.

*A paper read to the London oblates on 7 April 2009*

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6 Funk, 138-139

7 Funk, 137-138

8 Funk, 9

## CHAPTER VII of the Rule of St Benedict

Thomas Brunnhuber

### Introduction

The desert fathers and mothers teach that the antidote to vanity and pride is humility. Humility and sin is better than virtue and pride according to Augustine. The Eastern Church fathers see in *homoiosis theo*<sup>9</sup> the goal of every Christian life. Only through humility are we becoming Christ-like, are we practising *the imitatio Christi*.<sup>10</sup>

In *Humility Matters* Margaret Funk argues what is surrender for a Muslim, sincerity for a Confucian, annihilation for a Sufi, realisation for a Hindu, enlightenment for a Buddhist, righteousness for a Jew, is humility for a Christian.<sup>11</sup> Humility is what others see of our purity of heart.

St Benedict's *Rule* has to be seen in this tradition and in many ways develops this tradition of humility as a concept of spiritual growth in the western church. The idea of development did not exist in Benedict's or Climacus' time (to whom we owe the elaboration of the image of the ladder) but the idea of growth is expressed through the image of the ladder. Benedict is the master of the paradox as climbing down will take us up. This idea does not follow common sense or logic but can be seen as a *Koan*.<sup>12</sup> At Douai, Michael Blee, the Architect who designed the new part of the Abbey Church, created a Jacob's ladder above the entrance porch as a constant and material reminder of this inner development as a transformation of our lives.

### Terminology and background

Humility stems from *humus* with means soil/earth. In German, humility: *Demut, Mut zum Dienen*. That is: courage to serve. Humility has nothing to do with humiliation.

Chapter 7 for the most part is taken from the *Rule of the Master* and Benedict edited the original. I will not go into any details about his editorial work which has been described by de Vogué, then Kardong and Holzherr. Cassian could be regarded as the spiritual father of this chapter. He described 10 steps of humility not as steps to be taken but as signs for spiritual growth. Cassian's steps are more a diagnostic tool.

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9 Plato – likeness to God

10 The Imitation of Christ.

11 Mary Margaret Funk, *Humility Matters*, Continuum 2006

12 A *kōan* is a fundamental part of the history and lore of [Zen Buddhism](#). It consists of a [story](#), [dialogue](#), question, or statement; the meaning of which cannot be understood by [rational](#) thinking, yet it may be accessible by [intuition](#). One widely known *kōan* is “Two hands clap and there is a sound; what is the sound of one hand?”

### Formal structure of RB 7<sup>13</sup>

Chapter 7 is at the heart of the Rule and for some commentators it is the most important part of the Rule. It is certain the longest of the chapters. The symbolism of 7 and 12 implies perfection.

First step:	Relationship to God
Second step:	Relationship to myself
Third step:	Relationship to others
Fourth step:	Relationship with emotions
Fifth step:	Telling somebody my thoughts and emotions
Sixth step:	Reconciliation with my mediocrity
Seventh step:	Facing my shadow
Eighth step:	Accepting reality
Ninth step:	Confrontation with my reality
Tenth step:	Embodying humility in laughter
Eleventh step:	Embodying humility in speech
Twelfth step:	Embodying humility in my bodily expression

### Inner development<sup>14</sup>

Right at the beginning of Chapter 7 Benedict uses the image of the ladder. Jacob is dreaming of this ladder when he flees from his brother who could be taken as his shadow. The ladder in the early church has been used as an image of contemplation. Paradoxically we climb up to God while we descend into our own reality. If we encounter ourselves then we can encounter God. In other words on my way to God I will have to face my shadow, passions and emotions. Climbing up would mean bypassing my reality. This leads nowhere.

Benedict interprets the ladder in a very personal way. The rungs are my body and soul “and the steps themselves mark the decisions we are called to make in

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13 Anselm Gruen, *Benedikt von Nursia*, Herder 2004

14 A Gruen, *Benedikt von Nursia*, Herder 2004

the exercise of humility and self discipline”<sup>15</sup>Discipline (*discipere*) means to take in you own hand to seize, to analyse. I must take my own life in my hands. The early monks said, he who fights without method fights in vain.

Benedict’s Chapter 7 can be seen as a way, or method of self-discovery which includes my physical, emotional reality. This often involves the things I do not want to see or live and could be regarded as what C.G. Jung called ‘the shadow’. Facing my shadow becomes quite apparent in the 7th step: I am no more than a worm with no claim to be human.” This is strong language but helpful when I consider the imagery of my dreams or the unconscious.

Chapter 7 is more than self exploration as it is an ascent to God – through my earthly existence. The aim of contemplation, hence the aim of the heavenly ladder is union with God; a movement from fear to perfect love.

### **Integration and Transformation<sup>16</sup>**

The endpoint of the way of humility is worth considering. The eleventh step shows where followers of St Benedict can and will arrive. This is not a lofty experience; this is total transformation in Christ.

The way of humility is a way of prayer. We can deduce that the steps of humility are also steps of prayer. All these years the monk has been making progress in the task of building his life around the prayer of the publican that was so praised by Jesus (Lk 18:9-14). The monk described by Benedict is very close to the ideal promulgated in the Eastern Church and in such works as *The Way of the Pilgrim* is not only the principle devotional exercise but progressively becomes the theme song of one’s whole life.

Humility becomes the monk’s style and thus finds its bodily expression. Casey suggests interpreting the bodily expressions positively (down cast eyes and head bowed). Humility in this understanding is not a spiritual phenomenon only but an existential transformation that involves body, heart and soul.

“The superficial self has almost disappeared. The authentic, inner self has become paramount and, as a result, disorder is banished and truth and love have proportionately more influence on outlook and behaviour. Life has been radically transformed.”

Most of what Benedict wrote in his *Rule* is lifted from other sources, notably the *Rule of the Master*. The following words are his and must reflect his own experience. “But as we progress in this way of life and in faith we shall run on the path of God’s commandments, our hearts enlarged with inexpressible delight of love.” (RB 49)

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15 P Barry, *Rule of St Benedict*, Canterbury Press, 2003

16 M Casey, *A Guide to Living in the Truth*, Liguori 2001

*A paper read to the London oblates on 9 December 2008*

## OBEDIENCE

Iain Campbell-King

### Defiance/Disloyalty as Obedience

When I first started to think about the notion of obedience I found that I could not shake off the image of Barbara Woodhouse crying “walkies!” and half wrenching the head off some unfortunate beast.

The prioress of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, Sister Christine Vladimiroff, responded to a request from the Vatican’s *Congregation for Societies of Apostolic Life and Institutes of Consecrated Life* that Sister Joan Chittister be kept from attending a conference in Dublin at which the role of women in the church, including the issue of ordination, was to be debated. The prioress refused, arguing instead that her refusal was not done out of disobedience to the Church but rather obedience to the fundamentals of Benedictine communities:

Benedictine communities were never intended to be part of the hierarchical or clerical status of the Church, but to stand apart from this structure and offer a different voice. Only if we do this can we live the gift that we are for the Church. Only in this way can we be faithful to the gift that women have within the Church.

### Following Orders

In his book *Finding Sanctuary* Abbot Jamison retells the story of one of the fathers of the desert where he asks four monks about their virtues. Each in turn spoke of how one fasted a great deal; the second was poor; the third was a man of great charity and the fourth had lived for over twenty years in obedience to an old man. According to Abba Pambo, this last monk was the most virtuous of all since all others had achieved what they set out for themselves but the last one, *restraining his own will*, does the will of another. Jamison points out that this notion of obedience illustrates the connection between love and obedience in the monastic tradition.

This is an important point because most people think of obedience along the lines of following the instruction of another person without question. The *Milgram* experiment demonstrated the use of authority when faced with a situation in which “the subject” is instructed to inflict electrical shocks on unseen victims who failed to answer a question correctly. With each “failed” answer the voltage is increased. The finding that so many people would go to life threatening voltages raised the question of is it always a case of “only following orders”?

Many years ago I too was in a situation of having to obey without question commands from senior officers when on board a ship. My role as a lowly lieutenant onboard a frigate was that of the weapons officer. When need be I had to instruct opening fire on other ships – which we did on thankfully few occas-

ions. But the training was always tempered with the *caveat* that if I had legitimate concerns, I could disobey. It seems that obedience is viewed in the context of power and flows but one way.

### **Blind Obedience today**

As a notion in today's society the idea of Obedience runs counter to how people view their lives. The popular talk is of personal freedom, individual human rights, freedom of choice. People believe that they make decisions without being answerable to other people and yet to look around one can see that the rules that people obey are there but are not obvious – they are hidden. An example of this would be the fashion industry. Only the other morning on the train into London I noticed that most young people, male and female alike, are now sporting similar spectacle frames. All no doubt very expensive but all the frames look very similar. So the hidden agenda of the fashion houses has worked. People tend to obey the unwritten rules and the subliminal messages of the adverts.

We are governed by the rules of blind obedience. We think we are being individuals making choices freely and without undue pressure but this notion of freedom is misguided as to be seen as different is to be seen as someone "outside". A few years ago I was in discussion with a group of colleagues when the discussion turned to the disappointment of one with the fact that she had seen a briefcase which would have been ideal for her husband. Everything about this item was perfect except one thing; the colour: it was brown. My eyebrows rose heavenward and she explained that in "the City" the colour of such items has to be a uniform black; brown simply would not do. People would notice and this could make a significant difference to future prospects. (I kid you not; this was said in deadly earnest).

Talking of uniform, some schools decided that having a uniform was divisive and caused alienation amongst children. Many in the liberated 80s and 90s decided to abandon school uniforms altogether. Nevertheless children found that through another form of conformity they could form allegiances and hence the gang identity. Some social commentators have argued that this is just young people expressing their individuality but in fact it is young people obeying the power of advertising and through the "dress code" exercising another form of authority.

In short people frequently use the language of freedom but live in thrall to hidden rules. There is nothing wrong with obeying good rules and there is certainly nothing wrong with exercising free choice. The problem lies in claiming to be doing the one while actually doing the other. When people (for example MPs) claim to be obeying rules but break them, we call this hypocrisy. When people claim to be free but are in fact obeying unstated rules, we don't have a word for it. Is it important? Well I think it is. People do not know that they are in thrall to other people's agendas and hence do not see the need to escape from them. The consumer society can blind people to their deeper dependency.

## Benedictine Obedience

But how does Benedict's *Rule* make a difference? Well for one thing it is set within a context of a community and although many people would, at first, think of the notion of obedience being the complete opposite to freedom, yet it may be the case that obedience may not be as opposed to freedom as one would think. Certainly, for all the reasons I have given earlier, the term is not a popular idea in our world today. And for those of us of a certain age the image of Barbara Woodhouse is difficult to shake off when one mentions obedience. But Benedict did not share our hesitations about obedience. For Benedict it is clear that the obedience is rooted in obedience to God - not to mere mortal objects and things.

*This paper was read to the London Oblates on 9 February 2010*



## WHAT IS HAPPENING AT VESPERS

Simon Bryden-Brook

### The worship of the Holy Name of YHWH

Before coming to a consideration of the structure of Vespers, it is necessary to be clear about the purpose of the Divine Office. What is the point of it? Like all liturgy – it is designed to lead to action on our part, a response of some kind. The focus of Vespers is God and our desire to worship God, but we ignore at our peril<sup>17</sup> the truth that the very exercise of listening to the Word of God in the scriptures, mainly the psalms at vespers, results in the focus returning to us and our response. God is not content with being worshiped – he wants us to do something about it. Not for one moment wanting to belittle this important and indeed central function of prayer and the scriptures, let us focus for a moment on our desire to worship God.

For the Jew, only God is holy, so that even the so-called holy place in the temple of Jerusalem is in fact empty and merely symbolic of the divine presence. When Solomon is dedicating the Temple he prays of “This house, the place of which you have said ‘My Name shall be here’.”<sup>18</sup> In fact, God is so holy for the Jews that they cannot and will not even pronounce his Name, indicated by the four Hebrew letters YHWH (they prefer to say Adonai, [which is Kyrie in Greek, Lord in English]). It is interesting to observe that although the name of God is never of course uttered during the psalms, it is often referred to directly or indirectly and revered. Thus at Sunday Vespers, some of the psalms of which are also used on various feast days, we have in Psalm 109 [110] ‘Holy his Name, to be held in awe’ or ‘*sanctum et terribile nomen ejus*’ and we bow. In Psalm 112 [113] on Sundays too we have ‘may the Name of the Lord be blessed both now and for ever’ or ‘*sit nomen Domini benedictum ex hoc nunc et usque in saecul*’ – and again, we bow in reverence at this reference to his Name<sup>19</sup>. In the *Magnificat* too we have the phrase ‘holy his Name’ or ‘*sanctum Nomen ejus*’ and again at this indirect reference to the holy name of YHWH (יהוה), we bow.

### The Trinitarian God

As Christians we have a special understanding of God, a Trinitarian one, which means that we see God in a wholly new light from the Jews. “Everyone who calls

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17 At Morning Prayer we are chilled by the words of the *Venite* (Ps 94/95) “I sickened of that generation . . . and vowed in my anger, they shall not enter into my rest.”

18 1 Kings 8:16.

19 Both these psalms celebrate the greatness of God, of whom we stand in awe and yet whose work of justice and peace we seek to share. Later in Vespers during the *Magnificat* we will hear the announcement of the Incarnation with its call to us to bring about the kingdom. See also the last few verses of Ps 112, with what we must as Christians see as a reference to the Incarnation and birth of Jesus.

on the Name of the Lord shall be saved” says St Paul<sup>20</sup> and of course, “At the Name of Jesus, every knee shall bow!”<sup>21</sup> We have this paradoxical teaching on the Trinitarian nature of the Godhead which transforms how we understand, or try to understand, God. Matthew's gospel ends<sup>22</sup> with the injunction to ‘baptise in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’. God is the Source of all Being, Creator, loving Parent – but we also know that the Incarnation means that God is in Jesus, the Human Being. So when *we* bow to the Godhead, we bow not only to the Father but also to the Son, to the first Person and to the Second of the one undivided Trinity. We also know that we have received the gift of the Spirit, living in us as children of God, divinising us to share in the great work of God ‘in Christ’. “We pray to the Father through the Son and in the Spirit and we know that the presence and action of Son and Spirit are sufficient for this task and take us up immediately into the divine presence.”<sup>23</sup>

This is why as we pray the psalms we end each one with a Trinitarian doxology “Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit etc” and we bow. It is impossible for Christians to pray the psalms and pretend that we do not believe in the Trinity. We are, with our sisters and brothers the Jews, praying to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – but we do so in the knowledge of the Incarnation, of the Coming of the Spirit and thus of the Trinity. “We pray to the Father as Christ and because Christ taught us. We pray through Christ because we do not pray alone, but always in Christ's Spirit, the Holy Spirit praying with and within our praying.”<sup>24</sup>

### **The content of Vespers**

The structure of Latin Vespers at Douai can be confusing for visitors – not knowing when to stand or sit, which way to turn, what comes next or even what is being sung – still less what it all means! There are so many treasures in the office, however, as we already know from our participation at Matins and Lauds in English at Douai, that any effort made to become more familiar with Latin Vespers is well rewarded. So let us look at how this Vespers is structured.

There are two main focuses of attention in the offices of Lauds and Vespers – the psalms at the beginning and the Gospel canticle at the end. At Latin vespers particular psalms are allocated for each weekday, psalms 144 (ii) to 147 [145 (ii) to 147 (ii)] on Saturdays for example, and these are then rounded off as it were by the Gospel canticle, the Song of Mary or *Magnificat*. The psalms are Hebrew hymns or poems with two main messages: the first is that God is present, lovingly longing for us to acknowledge this; and the second is that God reigns

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20 Romans 10

21 Philippians 2:10

22 Mt 28:19

23 Professor Lewis Ayres of Durham University, ‘Mystery for all to see’ in *The Tablet* 6 June 2009, p 8

24 Ayres, loc cit, p 9

and wishes us to respond to his covenant love for us and to be involved in realising the Rule of God in our world and among those we encounter. This is the Jewish prayer then, with which we fully identify ourselves, and which we sing alongside Jesus, the faithful Jew. It is of course also Mary's prayer, the prayer of the Church.

### Calling on Yah

We start the office by rising to our feet and calling on the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, whose name is so holy that no Jew utters it, even today, as we have seen. God's name is not particularly well-known even to Catholics but it is as we have seen indicated by the four Hebrew letters YHWH. The Jerusalem Bible transcribes this as 'Yahweh' but this is not a word that anyone sensitive to the roots of our religion can easily say publicly – Jesus *never* did. The Jews *are* however allowed to utter its abbreviation, Yah or Yeh. So our office begins with our turning to the altar, symbol (but only symbol) of the presence of God, invoking God's aid in our attempts to praise God as we sing in Hebrew Hallelu-YAH! Let's praise Yah! As we know from the psalms, the Jews did not believe that God actually confined himself to Jerusalem, to Sion, still less that God could be found only in the Temple, the Holy of Holies. But just as Moses felt himself unworthy before the burning bush, so we should revere the bare stone altar with its two simple candle flames, aware that we are in the presence of the All Holiest, whose ancient name is Yah!

### The Psalms and the Rule of God

After this solemn opening acknowledging God's presence, we then sit for the four psalms. These are each presented with its own antiphon, a few words which suggest to us something of the riches of the psalm in question. These repay a little study. On Saturday the first antiphon is usually '*Regnum tuum Domine*' – 'Your kingdom Lord is a kingdom for all the ages!' It is of course a Jewish prayer and it also features as the central message of Jesus. He taught us that the kingdom is not something in the future, although its full *realisation* is, but that it is *challenging* us now and we are called, as the followers of Yah, to proclaim it and to practise it: justice, peace, freedom, love, unity.<sup>25</sup> With Jesus and the Jewish people we pray these psalms, acknowledging the presence of God in nature, in salvation history and in our own lives; we listen to God's call to bring about God's Rule on earth and yearn with Jesus and the Jews for the triumph of Yah.

When the psalms are over, we rise, and remain standing to the end, for the more solemn part of the office, as now we want to add to our Jewish heritage, our specifically Christian insights. A short scripture reading is followed by the respond, a sort of short musical meditation taken from a psalm or referring to the feast or liturgical season, and then the hymn, a further topical meditation.

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25 We celebrated the other day the feast of Maximilian Kolbe, the Franciscan in Auschwitz who responded to Jesus' call to bring about the kingdom by taking the place of one condemned to death.

### **Acknowledging the Incarnation**

Then the tone changes dramatically as we prepare to sing, at Vespers, the great Song of Mary, composed in anticipation of the Coming of Jesus, the Incarnation<sup>26</sup>. It is prefaced by a carefully chosen antiphon, intended to focus our minds on one aspect of the great mystery of our religion about to be proclaimed in the Gospel canticle. (The monastic community at Douai reclines to sing the *Magnificat* antiphon, but to avoid too much movement at a solemn moment visitors should remain standing in respect as we prepare to sing Mary's song. It is also best to remain standing when the antiphon is repeated after the *Magnificat*, although the monks again recline.)

In the *Magnificat* we affirm the promises of Judaism; we acknowledge the presence and the claims of Yah, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to whom Jesus committed himself fully but we, unlike our brothers and sisters the Jews, know that God made great promises which would be fulfilled only by God's own assumption of our humanity. We turn to the altar as Mary sings in great joy of the imminence of the realisation of this promise – Jesus is coming! Now the altar is not simply the presence of Yah, like the Ark of the Covenant that sat in the Holy of Holies in the Temple of Jerusalem on Mount Sion, but it symbolises the presence of Jesus, coming among us, the Holy One who was not too Holy to disdain joining us as a human being. Having sung the psalms with Jesus the Jew, we now sing with Mary, God-Bearer, looking forward with joy to God's most momentous intervention in human affairs.

### **Calling on Yeshua**

So we turn from the altar after the 'Glory be' so that we can sing again the antiphon chosen for the canticle. Then comes the magic moment when for the first time we call on God as Jesus, the Human-God. His name in his own language is Yeh-shua (meaning 'Yah saves'). Christians refer to this as the Holy Name at which we bow our heads and we are *encouraged* to be intimate with Jesus, our brother, and call him by his personal name. Our respect for Yah, the Source of All Being, *prevents* us from being so familiar with the Father by uttering God's name YHWH. But we hesitate at Vespers even to utter the name JESUS. We have waited through the psalms to acknowledge Jesus and we have sung Mary's Song as she waited in joyful hope for the coming of our Saviour, and now at last we acknowledge the Incarnation by crying in Greek – '*Kyrie eleison, Christe*

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<sup>26</sup> The other two Gospel canticles, the *Benedictus* and the *Nunc Dimittis*, were also composed one just before and the other just after the birth of Jesus.

*eleison, Kyrie eleison* – ‘Lord, Saviour, Lord, have mercy on us’, echoing the Hebrew call to Yah with which we opened Vespers.<sup>27</sup>

### **Yeshua responds in his own prayer**

And Jesus then responds. In the name of the Christian community, of the body of Christ, the abbot sings to us Jesus’ own prayer about our wish to acknowledge God, to yearn for his Rule, to commit ourselves to bringing God’s rule into effect in our own small circle. This is the great encounter, the challenging encounter that is happening at Vespers. Yah’s desperate longing for humankind to share in the work of bringing justice and peace to the world, God’s Rule, has led to God joining us in our fallen human lives in Yeshua, showing us that we can indeed share the divine work. What is more, we can become the very presence of God in the world, the body of the risen Jesus.<sup>28</sup>

### **The dynamic**

So we can consider the Our Father, a prayer which even the most sceptical of scripture scholars acknowledges was composed by our Lord<sup>29</sup>, as the high point of Vespers. We have mused on four psalms in the presence of Yah accompanied by Jesus the man, Jesus the Jew. Then Mary reminds us that the coming of Jesus was to fulfil God’s promises, and we finally call on Jesus as Lord, Kyrie, to which he responds in the prayer he gave us. This is a prayer which summarises the faith of Jesus and challenges us to move from being obedient followers of God, like the Jews, to move even beyond our recognition that Jesus is Lord, to the profoundest mystery of the Incarnation, that Jesus calls *us* to be the presence of God in the world. God is not in a stone altar with candles, not even in the broken bloodied corpse of the Human-God lying in Mary’s arms, but in the Risen Body of Christ, the Church. Just as the dynamic of the Eucharist is the making present of Jesus first through bread and wine to the end that God’s people can be the Body of Christ, so in Vespers the dynamic is the same: a Sacred Encounter and a Challenge.<sup>30</sup>

*Originally read to the London Chapter of Douai oblates on 18 August 2009*

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27 At Lauds we do not use the Greek ‘Kyrie’ but now we acknowledge God as Trinity and call on the Triune God, not just Yah or Jesus, in our intercessions.

28 29 So it is that at Lauds at Douai, and in the Roman office, rather than one person it is the whole Christian community, as the Body of Christ, that joins in reciting Jesus’ prayer, his response to our cries of acknowledgment, our cries of greeting, our recognition that Jesus is the fulfilment of Yah’s promises – Yah saves! Jesus!

29 e.g. Geza Vermes, *The Authentic Gospels of Jesus* (Allen Lane, 2003) see pp 221-227

30 This is not to deny of course the important truth that Jesus is also to be found in the marginalised of Matthew 25, but that it is our duty as Christians to be God’s presence in the world, ministering to the rest of divine humanity.