

**Revd Ian Mobsby Address to the Archbishops Examination Day,
Lambeth Palace, 9th October, 2014. *A New Monastic Response***

In response to Fr Thomas' work, I want to begin with a quote from David Tacey that has haunted me in its prophetic words.

What if it [the church] ignores the present challenge or does not care enough to take up a dialogue with the world? The yearning for sacredness, spiritual meaning, security, and personal engagement with the spirit are the primary needs and longings of the contemporary world. What is happening if the institutions of faith are so bound up with themselves and resistant to change that they cannot make some contribution to these needs? Our contemporary situation is full of ironies and paradoxes. Chief among these is that our secular society has given birth to a sense of the sacred, and yet our sacred traditions are failing to recognize the spiritual potential.

The gap between critical approaches to Christianity and the simplistic spirituality promoted in lots of churches lies at the heart of so much disillusionment with Christianity today. Many long for an expression of the Christian faith that reconciles heart and head, that offers a positive, engaging spirituality which is also committed to grappling honestly with difficult and painful questions, and which longs to make the world a better place.

It is for this reason, that I think contemplative forms of prayer and the pattern, (as Fr Thomas says marks time) of a daily rhythm of worship, loving action, work and rest - of religious life are so important for today. Religious Communities offer as gift to the world, places of deep spirituality and stability in our uncertain times. There is in some places in the UK context, a deep spiritual hunger that requires a deep and considered response, that draws on the wisdom I think of monastic and mendicant spirituality.

It is for this reason that I am very excited about Archbishop Justin's priorities, and that they are in the right order, that first comes the renewal of prayer and the religious life. Why because there has never

been a renewal of the Church (including the times of the Oxford Movement in the last century) without a renewal in prayer and the religious life.

I am mindful that in the age of the Church, (between the Ascension of Christ and the consummation of all things) there have been 8 major epochs of socio-cultural change since its foundation, where the Church has struggled to recontextualise from one cultural epoch into another. As many have commented, we are now in the middle of a ninth, characterized by the revolution and dominance of information technology alongside globalization and the unrestrained market, where the glocal now resides everywhere, where we now live in a market society that impoverishes justice and human community and identity, and most worryingly results in the undermining of a sense of what it means to be human. This has resulted in a severe lack of compassion for the poor, and rises in materialism, selfishness, gluttony and many others of the deadly sins.

So I think we exist in a time of crisis, where many things seem to be wrong including ecocide, in the madness of a world culture that consumes beyond what it is possible to sustain...

And so we remember from the history of the church and pastoral care, that it has been forms of the religious life – of monks, nuns and friars that have helped the church recontextualise from one epoch into another, and boy do we need it now.

I agree with Fr Thomas' focus that prayer, worship and liturgy can provide the environment for pastoral formation, helping people to experience God through sacrament, sign and symbol. But I would want to take this further to say that the cycle of prayer and worship provides not only a pastoral basis but also a missional basis, where many are seeking for spiritual healing. In our current culture there is much addiction, mental illness, stress and physical illness that accompanies living in a culture defined by speed and consumptive gratification. It is therefore unsurprising that research looking at the spirituality of Kendall in Cumbria as a reflection of UK culture

identified that the spiritual not religious spiritual seekers, were actually seeking health, wellbeing and hope.

In a 10 year research period when the population grew by 4%, the change of behavior from religious to spiritual orientation grew by 300% where people have been desperately seeking for transformation, significance and inner peace. In this context mission begins with the place of prayer, worship and liturgy as a locus for pastoral care and opening up the Kingdom of God, and in particular the love of God as the starting place of mission.

It is as David Tacey has said, there is a deep hunger from many people, and there is a rising interest in monasticism and mendicant spirituality, to which I think we as the Church should be supporting and promoting.

New Monasticism, (and I want to say from the outset that this is not a very accurate or helpful term, but has become one that has stuck), are the new novices of a fusion of both the monastic and mendicant traditions in the context of new lay communities. For the last few years now I have had the good pleasure to be coopted onto a Council of General Synod which is called 'The Advisory Council for the relations between Diocesan Bishops and Religious Communities'. For the last few years, this body has sought to engage and dialogue with many of the new communities that are popping up all over the place, many of which I do believe to be authentic expressions of what the Holy Spirit is bringing to life in our current epoch of social change.

In these deliberations, the Advisory Council has defined a process for these small and often fragile communities to understand themselves and be supportive of being forms of Acknowledged Religious Communities, where the traditional communities are recognized Communities.

The distinction is that many of the new communities have a seasonal vow rather than for life, and where these commitments are not first order poverty, obedience and chastity.

The joy has been the sense of mutual learning and dialogue between participants of the new communities and those of the established Anglican religious orders. Abbot Stuart of Mucknell Abbey and Brother Sam of the Anglican Franciscans have both been affirming, that new monasticism is part of the ongoing tradition of the religious life, but that it has a new vocation or charism which is a mixture of both friar and monk, and that there is a continuum between these two.

That being said, new monastics are serious about a calling to prayerful action, where prayer needs to be deep and contemplative. Many of us have been mining the Jesuit prayer practices of St Ignatius because they are really effective processes to open up Christian spirituality to the many 'spiritual not religious'. There is a fascination and curiosity of many in these deeper traditions of prayer, which is why I think attendances at cathedrals, has increased a lot.

In a culture that has lost any depth, where many exist at the surface of themselves, Christian prayer is a vital way of enabling people to experience the power and effectiveness of prayer.

The Moot Community (of which I am a part) runs regular meditation groups in the City of London for stressed out City workers many of whom are completely unchurched. They do this, because they experience this type of prayer to work. We use the John Main approach to meditation with an anchor word (who incidentally was a Benedictine Monk), we have now run that group for 6 years and still many many city workers come because they are hungry for depth and spiritual relief – or rather something that integrates and enables people to experience wellbeing with hopefully an exposure to the Holy Spirit and God more widely. Contemplative Prayer is very important to Moot. We now use various prayer practices in our daily rhythm of morning and evening prayer. We run a prayer development day with one of the leading tutors from the London Centre for Spirituality, which is always very popular...

So New Monastic Anglican communities are now being birthed, but I think it is important to acknowledge here – that they are very fragile and need support and encouragement. If we look at the comparisons with the Oxford Movement, these new communities are not backed by major financial donors. It is interesting to see that there were many very rich supporters when the religious orders were put back into the Church of England through the Oxford Movement. I am aware for example Hilfield Priory began in Dorset, because land and money was given to get a Franciscan Priory going, which was donated by landed gentry.

It is true to say that many New Monastic communities have lots of dreams and hopes, but not much support – both political or financial. The exception being Moot that has had a lot of support from the Diocese of London.

For New Monastics, many are exploring what a life of worship looks like. How do we live with the expectation of God's presence in the complexity of our world. In this way our lives become a living liturgy, where we experience God in the details of our lives and through the encounter with the stranger. This is a vital focus for the religious life – on God's abundance. That we do not live in a world of pure scarcity, but rather, the sense of Gods loving abundance, where our day will contain all that we need to live well if we seek God. So I think Fr Thomas' comments on monastic liturgy can also inform discipleship and formation as people live out their lives of worship of God in the ordinariness of life.

Formation in the new monasticism is catechetical, and starts with orthopathy (right or well being), orthopraxis (right living) which leads to orthodoxy (right thinking). Experience leading to understanding, as Fr Thomas said, practice leading to theological understanding. If we think of S B Bevans work on contextual theology, we are talking about the transcendent or transcendental model of contextual theology. There is a strong pastoral theology that comes from both traditional and new monasticism.

May I here commend the Archbishops initiative to set up the new community of St Anselm, which is a big risk but also a big innovation that can open up the religious life and its relevance to younger people. Wouldn't it be great if this happened at a Diocesan level... this is leadership by example.

So I am left reflecting on the renewal of prayer and a rhythm of worship is not only important for the renewal of the Church, but further, the renewal of society, and it is communities of the religious life that can play there part. Just as we are aware of the mixed economy of Church responding to cultural change, I think also we are experiencing the beginning of a mixed economy of the religious life responding to the Spirit to be able to respond to changes in culture. I am reminded of the work of Worth Abbey. Since the incredible witness and interest of many in this country to the Reality TV programme called the Monastery and later the Convent, and later still the great silence - these were watched by people in this country by the millions, Both Worth Abbey of the Roman Catholic Benedictines and the Jesuit retreat house of St Beunos have been booked out for ever not just by Christians but with curious unchurched spiritual seekers who are really interested in and open to developing prayer practices and Christian spirituality. They are a metaphor for us.

So how do we enable a connection with the possibilities of modern media, to open up both the work of traditional and new religious communities. For example I love the work of the Twittering Sister of Bethany in Southsea, or the cyber discussion groups of the Californian fathers of the Desert. They have touched something of the zeitgeist and potential of the religious life to open up the depths of the faith.

I am encouraged by the news this year, that there has been an increase in the number of novices in many Anglican religious communities. We still have a long way to go, but my hope is that as we engage with the world and society, this will breathe new life giving oxygen into the lungs of the religious communities, that will then encourage a greater appreciation of this calling, so that we can shift

from being in survival mode to mission mode, from cynicism to hope, from tiredness to renewed energy. And so we then can live out this calling to contemplative action.

A key thing that DDOs need to hear – is the need for their inclusion in listening to possible vocations to the traditional or new expressions of the religious life. As with the concerns of monastics throughout the age, we need to be careful about the over clericalisation of the Church. If we are to renew traditions of the religious life to play their part in the renewal of the church in ministry and mission, we need Dioceses to help in this discernment, and to point people with such vocations, not to ordination, but to the vocations of the religious life. We need more lay vocations to enable the church to renew itself in ministry and mission. This I am afraid is still not particularly well joined up.

With much of our culture now spiritually hungry, but not necessarily into traditional attractional models of church, there is a real potential for the church to respond to this need through the empowerment of prayer and the religious life. As David Tacey has challenged us, are we prepared to take risks to support traditional and new expressions of the religious life to rise to this potential and priority for the Church of England.

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