

Cardinal Hume Memorial Lecture

*George Basil Hume: A Monastic Archbishop*

by

*Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor*

Archbishop Emeritus of Westminster



Wednesday 17th June 2009

Cathedral Church of St. Mary

*Newcastle upon Tyne*

It is a privilege for me to be invited to speak to you here, in his home city of Newcastle, on the 10th anniversary of the death of George Basil Hume, monk, priest, Abbot and much loved and respected Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster.

I first met Basil Hume at his monastery of Ampleforth in the summer of 1973. It was a time of turbulence in the Church in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, and I was looking for a spiritual director for the English College in Rome, of which I was then the Rector; and I thought he might have a monk available for such an important work. I remember well how kindly he received me, and suggested that after compline – night prayers – we should have a good chat, which we certainly did. We took to one another at once, and I was able to tell him all the difficulties, troubles and challenges involved in being Rector of a community of 50 or 60 young men, and in effect ask for his counsel and advice. He responded by telling me all his problems and challenges in being Abbot – spiritual father – of 150 monks and priests, a hundred of whom lived and worked in the monastery (many of them in the large public school attached to it), while the rest were on parishes or engaged in other work.

During my stay, he took me round the monastery and the school, introduced me to several of his monks and gave me the “feel” of the place and of the community. I was deeply impressed by the humility, wisdom and humanity of my new acquaintance, and we became friends. I came away with two strong impressions. The first was that I had been in contact with an outstanding monk and pastor who had the qualities needed to be a fine bishop or archbishop and so have a positive influence on the Church in England beyond the confines of his monastery. My second impression was the attractiveness of the Benedictine ethos and tradition which Basil Hume exemplified and by which he had been formed.

It began back in the fifth century, in or around the year 480, when St Benedict was born in Nursia (the modern Norcia), in Umbria. This was in the heart of what have come to be known as "The Dark Ages", when in Western Europe civilisation seemed to have disintegrated. In Italy, in the words of one historian, "The picture is one of decay, disorganisation and confusion perhaps without parallel in history...the ceaseless wars at home and abroad had thinned the population ...The land was devastated by famines and pestilences...great tracts had been reduced to deserts, the people had become demoralised and degenerate, agriculture and education had well-nigh died out, and society was corrupt to the core" . On top of all this came a series of barbarian invasions. Visigoths, Goths, Huns and Vandals invaded Italy in succession; Rome and other cities were repeatedly sacked. These invaders were all either pagans or Arians, hostile to Catholicism, and a religious map of Western Europe in 485 shows it as being all under either Arian or pagan ascendancy, the fully Catholic districts being only in the Northwest corner of Gaul and in Wales and Ireland.

If we think of our own society today as troubled and anxious, we should take courage from the realisation that St Benedict's world must have seemed infinitely more so. As a young man, he went to Rome to study, but was repelled by the corruption around him and experienced a call to a life of solitude and prayer. He retired to a cave at Subiaco, thirty miles from Rome, and for three years lived there alone, an extraordinary time of prayer and penance. But although he wanted to be cut off from the world, his fame spread and others came to join him, forming in effect a young monastic community. Before long, great Roman families were coming and asking him to educate their sons, and no less than twelve other small monastic communities grew up around Subiaco under St Benedict's influence.

But the influence and reputation he had gained attracted jealousy and enmity, and in or about 525 he left Subiaco with twelve chosen companions and set off to establish his community elsewhere. Above the small, fortified town of Cassino was a citadel high up the mountainside, and on the top of the mountain a plateau on which stood an ancient temple to Apollo. St Benedict and his monks turned the temple into a chapel dedicated to St Martin and there established the monastery for which St Benedict's Rule was written and where the Benedictine Order as we still know it today was born.

St Benedict was not of course the founder of Christian monasticism, which already had a history of more than two hundred years by the time he was born; and there were monasteries of one kind and another all over the Christian world. Some, like the famous monastery on the island of Lerins, had large communities of monks: but many others were small, deriving their inspiration from the ascetics and hermits of Egypt and the Near East, with this asceticism reflected in the various rules they followed. St Benedict therefore was writing from within an existing tradition; and his Rule drew on the other rules known to him as well as on his own experience and his knowledge of what was happening around him.

But although much in St Benedict's Rule echoes what is to be found in other Rules, there are crucial differences of nuance which carry the distinctive stamp of his own personality, not least in its moderation and the concessions it makes to human frailty. He calls it a rule "for beginners", and its spirit is summed up in its injunctions to the Abbot that he should "aim to be loved rather than feared": that he should "always prefer mercy to judgement"; and that he should "so regulate everything that the strong may desire to carry more and the weak do not turn tail". While its emphasis throughout is on seeking God, it shows a wonderful understanding of human nature, at once merciful and resolute, generous and prudent. Its aim is to lay down a framework within which a good monastic community, whether of men or women, can become, in the words of one of Basil Hume's friends and mentors, Fr Columba Cary-Elwes, "a place of intercession, a place of community, a showing of the meaning of the Church to the world".

Apart from the Rule, which tells us a great deal about the man who composed it, the best picture we have of St Benedict comes from the saint who did most to propagate the Benedictine ideal, namely St Gregory the Great. Describing the ideal abbot, he says: "The thoughts of the abbot should be pure; his actions should serve as an example; he should know when to keep silent and when to talk to good purpose; he should be filled with compassion for his brethren; he should devote himself to meditation; to the upright he should be a humble companion but he should act as a resolute ruler in the battle to vanquish vice and sins; in him the care of exterior affairs should not be carried so far as to militate against the spiritual impulse, nor should the care of the inner life make him neglect the necessities of his charge." It is clear that St Gregory, in drawing up that picture of a good abbot, had in mind Benedict himself, the kindly founder, the man of prayer and the model of the Benedictine spirit.

In the ensuing centuries, monastic communities following St Benedict's Rule became the spiritual and intellectual fortresses in which all that was noblest in culture and learning was preserved and developed: centres of civilisation centred on prayer and the word of God, erecting buildings of beauty, cultivating the soil, educating the young and helping to care for the poor, the sick and the dispossessed. When monastic life in our own country and in other parts of Europe was extinguished at the Reformation, it continued to flourish elsewhere and today there are more than 10,000 monks and nuns across the world still following the Rule written by Benedict nearly fifteen centuries ago.

Less than fifty years after the last medieval Benedictine abbey in England – at Westminster – was dissolved by Queen Elizabeth I, the English Benedictines established communities in exile – in France, in Lorraine and in Flanders – of which the modern abbeys now at Downside, Ampleforth and Douai are the direct descendants. And it was at Ampleforth, the largest of the three and the closest to Newcastle, that Basil Hume was for thirteen years the abbot.

Before becoming abbot, Basil Hume had made his name as a gifted teacher, both in the monastery, where he taught theology to the young monks, and in the school, learning to strike the right balance between indoctrination and dialogue. He ran the modern

languages department, was a greatly respected housemaster to a family of sixty boys and helped coach the First XV. He was also a member of the Abbot's Council, addressing an agenda much wider than that of the school, including the affairs of the Abbey's parishes in Lancashire, South Wales and Cumbria. So perhaps it was not surprising that in 1963, when only forty years old, he was chosen by his brethren to be abbot.

His term of office spanned the closing years of the Second Vatican Council and the upheavals which followed, when so much that had seemed immemorial and immovable in the Church was being challenged from within and overthrown: not an easy period in which to be governing a large body of intelligent and dedicated men and guiding them along the course of their spiritual life.

Later, when he became Archbishop, he necessarily spoke and published a great deal. But the essence of his teaching is to be found in the collection of homilies given to his monks when he was abbot, published in 1977 as *Searching for God*. In them, he drew on monastic tradition and the Church's treasury of doctrine in a way that is profoundly orthodox and at the same time profoundly personal. The pastoral role of a monk, he said in a phrase redolent of fifteen centuries of monasticism, was *contemplata aliis tradere*: to hand on to others those things which have been contemplated – and which, in being contemplated, have been found to be true. And as a true monk, he saw that the importance of the monastic life, of a monastic community, to the Church lies in the primacy it gives to prayer and the search for God: in what it is rather than what it does.

Between the lines, the reader can discern a man wrestling with all the difficulties, intellectual and emotional, which afflict the rest of us: "There can be no serious practice of prayer", he says at one point, "which is not accompanied by darkness and a sense of unreality." The serenity which came to seem so characteristic of him was not easily won.

Although by temperament, and I think by conviction, a traditionalist, Basil Hume was a traditionalist who was able to come to terms with, and respect, the need for reform, and who had the imagination which enabled him to get inside the attitudes and sensitivities of others, even those whose attitudes and sensitivities were remote from his own. The first word of St Benedict's Rule is *Ausculata*: "Listen"; and it was by listening and talking sympathetically to individuals that he was able to heal divisions within the community. At the same time, he ensured that the big changes to the liturgy – which impacted with particular force on the monastic life – were softened by the respect shown to permitted alternatives. It was this experience as abbot at a time of turbulence that shaped his character and style when he moved to the wider, national stage.

His appointment as Archbishop of Westminster in succession to Cardinal Heenan took most people by surprise. Being abbot of a monastery in rural North Yorkshire seemed an unlikely preparation for becoming Archbishop of Westminster, the busiest and most populous diocese in the country. But it promised a new and refreshing style of leadership for the Church in England and was widely welcomed: the Holy See was felt to have made a good choice. For Basil Hume himself, however, it was a daunting prospect. Speaking

from the heart at his farewell mass as Abbot of Ampleforth, he said that “the generosity of the press and the expectations of so many people, expressed in over a thousand letters... have been to me a profound shock...the gap between what is thought and expected of me, and what I know myself to be, is considerable and frightening.”

At that time I was still Rector of the English College in Rome and I well remember him arriving in Rome a few days after his appointment, apprehensive and worried; well aware that he knew little of the life of a bishop, that he had never lived in London and believing in all humility that he lacked many of the qualities needed for the task. I vividly remember taking him to his first audience with Pope Paul VI, and how he came out from the audience a changed man. Pope Paul, that wonderful and underrated pope, had said to him “Do not be afraid. The Lord has chosen you. Never cease to be a monk in your task as pastor of your people.” (One of his monks who was there at the same time rather ruefully recalls Basil telling us that the Pope had said to him “Be yourself”, while to the monk, who went in afterwards, the Pope said “Be holy!”) From then on his serenity re-asserted itself, and he was able to accept his new position with equanimity and resignation.

His strengths were neither as an administrator nor as a strategist. He saw the role of the bishop, as he did that of the priest, not in functional terms, but as being essentially to live the life of faith, and to share that faith with those for whom he was responsible. In his heart he had room for everyone, and a special sensitivity for the marginalised: those divorced and remarried, the homosexuals, the drug addicts, the sufferers from Aids. His ability to listen, and to speak to different people with freedom and sympathy, meant that he was able to offer reassurance within the Catholic community to all but the most entrenched conservatives and the most extreme liberals, as well as reaching out to those outside the Church who recognised the authenticity of his faith and the generosity of his spirit.

On his death at the end of his twenty three years as Archbishop, many of his obituaries credited him with having changed the image of the Catholic Church in England for the better and having brought it into what journalists call “the mainstream”. It is certainly true that, just by being himself (as the Pope had urged him), this thoughtful, gently spoken and quintessentially English prelate (though he was in fact half French) smoothed the rough edges of many people’s perception of Catholicism. It is also true that to his own flock he communicated a sense of reassurance and authenticity – two facets of the same quality.

Because he was so transparently a man of prayer, whatever he had to say on spiritual matters had the ring of authenticity; and this authenticity was profoundly reassuring at a time when British society seemed to have drifted away from its Christian roots and become permeated with an unthinking, dismissive agnosticism, increasingly treating faith in God as the private eccentricity of a dwindling minority. But the sense of inadequacy never entirely left him; and as time went on he reproached himself for having been unable to stem the rising tide of unbelief and religious indifference, leading him to say on his deathbed that he would be coming before God “empty-handed.”

In the ten years since his death, it would be difficult to say whether, in Western Europe, and in Britain in particular, the tide of unbelief and agnosticism has advanced or receded. Statistics are misleading and point in more than one direction. Even the dubious evidence of opinion polls suggests that Britain remains at heart a Christian country. Christian believers may be fewer, but more of them than in the past have made the transition from what Karl Rahner called "a Church sustained by a homogeneously Christian society ... to a Church made up of those who have struggled against their environment in order to reach a personally, clearly and explicitly responsible decision of faith."

Certainly, we no longer have a "homogeneously Christian society". On the contrary, the intellectual climate is broadly speaking one in which unbelief is almost taken for granted. With some exceptions the tone of the media and the commentariat, as well as being relentlessly critical and irreverent, is unsympathetic to religious faith. This is sad for much of this comes from ignorance. Direct attacks on religion have become more frequent and more outspoken, and determined efforts are being made – ironically in the name of tolerance and non-discrimination – to weaken the cohesion of faith communities, for example by calling into question the legitimacy of "faith schools". The situation is one which Basil Hume would certainly have recognised, but has become even more challenging.

I like the Chief Rabbi's story of the Jewish sage looking up from the Talmud and saying "Thank God, things are so good". Then he pauses and adds "But if things are so good... why are they so bad?" Sir Jonathan Sacks says "The Jewish answer is that in achieving material abundance we have lost our moral and spiritual bearings. In achieving technical mastery, we have lost sight of the question 'To what end?' Valuing science at the expense of ethics, we have unparalleled knowledge of what is, and unprecedented doubts about what ought to be."

A Christian can only agree. "Christian belief", in the words of Pope Benedict XVI, "is an avowal of the primacy of the invisible as the truly real, which upholds us and enables us to face the visible with calm composure". And as Alexander Solzhenitsyn said back in 1983, when he received the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, "The crisis of humanity today is that it has lost its sense of the invisible ...if I was called upon to identify briefly the principal trait of the entire twentieth century I would be unable to find anything more precise and pithy than to repeat over and over again, 'Men have forgotten God'".

The prodigious advances in scientific knowledge, in medicine and in technology which make modern life, at least in the affluent West, "so good" have been accompanied by the loss of the sense of dependence upon the unseen God, or of any firm criteria by which to judge between truth and falsehood, or between right and wrong, beyond what is politically acceptable or unacceptable at the present moment. Instead, we are all infected by the postmodernist contention that every moral system is simply a "cultural construct" and that each human being creates his or her own truth. So too many people now live in a moral vacuum and a fatherless void. What we – perhaps too easily - castigate as

“materialism” and “consumerism” are ways of trying to fill that void – of giving meaning and purpose to lives which are otherwise felt to be meaningless.

For the Christian believer too, this is a lonely world in a different sense. Faith has become “counter-cultural”; which means that it is not shared by the majority of the people among whom we live. The sociologists tell us that there is an important cultural dimension to belief: that beliefs, however reasonable, which are not shared by most of those around us ipso facto lose, not their truth, but their plausibility - their “believability”. To hold on to a belief generally (even if unthinkingly) regarded as outlandish requires courage, as any public opponent of abortion today will tell you. It also requires support – support from those who share it, and whose intelligence one respects and trusts. That is why the Church is a community, and not just a collection of individuals. That is why example is so important.

Which brings me back to Basil Hume. Direct attacks on faith are damaging but they are easier to deal with than the climate of thought – or lack of thought - which encourages them. Confrontation is unavoidable and sometimes necessary; but confrontation alone is not enough. Defence against direct attacks has to be well reasoned as well as robust; and in the relatively open, democratic society which Britain happily still is, a well reasoned defence will get a hearing. In Britain at least, there is still a place for dialogue.

But our Catholic faith is not just a series of propositions to be defended or moral precepts to be proclaimed: it goes to the heart of what we are. As Hilaire Belloc once said, the most convincing proof for the existence of God is not to be found in St Thomas’s five ways: it is to be found in the encounter with holiness. If the Christian faith is true, it must show itself in how Christians behave and what they are seen to be. This is as true for every individual Christian believer as it is for bishops, cardinals and popes. So to conclude this lecture in memory of a great archbishop, let me endorse the verdict of Adrian Hastings, who wrote: “What matters about Basil Hume was not the correctness of every opinion or policy, but his spiritual integrity, recognition of which united Catholics of very different theological opinions as well as the national community as a whole. He was a sound teacher but a superb witness through the gentle holiness of his behaviour and, as he said himself, ‘modern man listens more readily to witnesses than to teachers.’”