

What is the underlying theology behind the retreat-work at St Cassian's?

The basic conviction around which what quickly became known as "the Kintbury experience" was built is that each person has inherent value which is to be sustained and used (once it has been discovered) in the relationships which each one forms. A lot of teenage (and adult) "hang-ups" arise from the fact that, as people grow up, they acquire many negative self-impressions and they become blind to the good in themselves. However well-intentioned, parents and schools play a leading part in this situation. Often religion plays a decisive part in the process (so that it becomes a real enemy of faith), since the image of God with which so many people are encumbered is a basically negative and fearful one, which does nothing to help them grow, since they have no desire to relate with a God who is "like a merciless tyrant".³ Often a good deal of remedial reflection and action is required since a repudiation of "the God I don't believe in"⁴ may well be necessary before a search for an alternative God can really begin. This is not a private task, for we all need help and support, including affirmation to combat the self-depreciation which so many people practise.

My visit to retreat-centres in Australia and the U.S.A. in 1977 helped me to work out more explicitly what we had been trying to do in our centre since the retreats began. In Sydney, a priest friend drew my attention to a slogan which, with some modification, was eventually to become a kind of motto for Kintbury. I express it here using my own name, as it needs to be personalized:

*I'm Damian
and I'm O.K.
'cos God doesn't make junk
but he collects it!*

The last four words were added by me, since though the first page of the Bible makes it clear that "God doesn't make junk - "God saw all that he had made, and indeed it was very good",⁵ two pages later on, the problem arises, told in the story of the Fall. (One recalls Karl Barth's answer to a fundamentalist student who asked him if he believed that the Serpent really spoke. Barth replied, "I don't believe the Serpent spoke, but I believe in what he said!") We note that God's judgment has traditionally been understood to include the first promise of eventual redemption. Throughout the developing revelation of God, as recorded in the Bible, people come to understand that, even if *we* make junk for ourselves and others, and turn the world in which we live into a junkyard, our dark human situation is relieved by the promise of God's salvation or healing presence for all who will accept him. We Christians believe this was fulfilled in Jesus, the Lamb of God who collects the "junk" of the world (cf John 1,29) not to use it against us as evidence of guilty complicity in that destructive process, but to offer us the hope of a more abundant life. (John 10,10).

This is the Good News we all need to hear at every stage in life, but nowhere more urgently and more comfortingly than in adolescence, with all its bewilderment:

*"that toil of growing up;
The ignominy of boyhood, the distress
Of boyhood changing into man;*

The unfinished man and his pain
Brought face to face with his own clumsiness".⁶

The challenge of the slogan ("I'm Damian," etc) is to let it question me and to respond to it honestly, to confront the reality in my life, and then, as a next step, to try to account for the reality by sharing my experience with others. I used to suggest that one could respond to the statement in one of five ways: by placing next to it a tick ("Yes, it's true!"), or a cross ("No, I don't believe it!"), or a question-mark ("I don't know"), or a tick and a question-mark ("Yes, BUT..."), or a cross and a question-mark ("No, BUT..."). As you will guess, the three responses which were most common were those which included one of the three question-marks, which signified an underlying question or series of questions, to be pondered and identified, alone and in a "sharing-group".

The team's growing experience of what we were now calling "ministry" led us to see that the work of *healing* had a key place in the retreat-experience, and that the implications of this meant that individuals were called to respond to the new life received by sharing it with others. It was in the United States in 1977 that I first heard and came to adopt the expression, "Become Good News!". This was another way of expressing the challenge implicit in another expression we often used at the time: "Kintbury begins when you leave!".

Each person is invited to share his or her discovery in the world to which they return with something to give, namely *themselves*. Bro Simon Ryan, who made a strong contribution to the Centre for a few months during Kintbury's second year (1976-77), used to express the effect for the individual by quoting the final stanza of the W.B. Yeats poem I have quoted:

"I am content to follow to its source
Every event in action or in thought;
Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!
When such as I cast out remorse
So great a sweetness flows into the breast
We must laugh and we must sing,
We are blest by everything,
Everything we look upon is blest".⁷

This non-Christian poem shows clearly the connection between self-acceptance, self-forgiveness and the singing or celebration of the resulting "sweetness" with which the individual is "blest". In Christian terms, it is God who forgives and accepts, when he is accepted; he is to be thanked and praised in personal prayer and in the liturgy of the group. It might be added that, from the very beginning, music played a big part in Kintbury. As well as praising God, it helps to build up and express a sense of community, so it was natural that it should punctuate the day and colour the style of liturgy, which was devised to allow individuals and the constituent groups to which they belonged maximum participation. Music and celebration are a natural response to God's generosity, discovered as an experience of the Good News: "It is by grace that you have been saved, through faith; not by anything of your own, but by a gift from God; not by anything you have done, so that nobody can claim the credit. We are God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus, to live the good life as from the beginning he had meant us to live it", is the Jerusalem Bible's attractive way of expressing Ephesians 2, 8-10. There are two connected responses: to sing the Good News, and to live it. The response will never be secured once and for all, for it is essentially a personal response to be made in the changing circumstances of life as well as expressed in the liturgy.

In the next issue of *Lasalliana*, I shall continue this account by presenting the outline of a typical session at St Cassian's.

¹ Pre-eminently treated in Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, December 8th 1975.

² For a more detailed treatment, see *Growing into Faith*, Gerard Rummery and Damian Lundy, London, 1982.

³ An expression used by one of my students in 1975, when explaining why he hates God, even while continuing to believe in Him.

⁴ This expression is a title of a stimulating book by Juan Arias (Eng. trans. Dublin, 1973).

⁵ Genesis 1,31. cf. I Timothy 4,4: "Everything God has created is good".

⁶ and ⁷ W.B. Yeats, "A Dialogue of Self and Soul", *Collected Poems*, London, 1967.

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