

ST CASSIAN'S CENTRE, KINTBURY, (5)

In the last two issues of *Lasalliana*, I tried to describe how the retreats at St Cassian's developed a pattern, and style which seemed to work very effectively as an instrument for youth ministry. I left the Centre in 1982 to undertake further studies in theology, and I know that things have continued to develop at St Cassian's, as new people have come to work in the team, bringing new insights and modifying the vision and techniques they have inherited, to suit changing circumstances. That is how it should be. It shows that the Centre is alive and growing. Here I want to conclude my account with information about two other aspects of youth ministry as it has been exercised by those associated with this Lasallian development in England.

1. Are the aspirations of the centre being realised? How can you tell?

When people ask if the aspirations of the Centre are being realised, obviously I cannot offer any objective way of judging that. No professionally-conducted survey has ever been made, but I can point to the hundreds of letters received by members of the team over the years, in which the young people who have visited the Centre express (often very movingly) their joy and gratitude at the difference it has made to their lives. From the early days, a constant question was whether the effect would be *lasting*, and obviously it would be foolish to generalise. Nevertheless from the number of Kintbury contacts who still write to me from time to time, and from the stories and bits of news I hear in various places, I have reason to believe that a high proportion of those who have experienced a retreat at St. Cassian's have been permanently affected by it in a positive way, some quite spectacularly, especially those who came back to deepen and continue their search for the new life. At times it was necessary to discourage some from returning, and to point them away from the tendency to treat Kintbury as a kind of drug, suggesting an alternative future direction for their search and a more realistic approach. All shrines and retreat-centres tend to collect their share of "groupies" (as pop-singers and filmstars do) and the team must act responsibly and charitably to help the people who develop an unhealthy fixation with the place. A small number of young people have been actually banned from returning to the centre. Of course, most of those who become friends of the centre eventually come to realise when the experience offered by Kintbury has served its purpose and look for other ministries to serve their present needs. Sadly these can be hard to find.

To illustrate the successful way in which Kintbury has helped those who have used the centre, I can mention three or four examples from recent correspondence with people who are now in their middle twenties. To avoid any possible embarrassment, I will change all the names (except for David's, whose letter prompted this account).

Jack, who is studying with a view to training for the priesthood after some years of setbacks and disappointments, including bad health, wrote to tell me of coming across one of my letters to him encouraging him to thank God for his personal gifts and not to waste these. I cannot recall writing the letter, but its effect, after some months of darkness, was to lead Jack into praying again. Let him speak for himself: "Through this new deep prayer I had begun, I found I was like a new born child, searching for answers to unasked questions, In the Book of Sirach, chapter 2, the words, 'Accept all that happens to you' struck very deep. I realised that he had not left me but rather had been supporting me; he left me to find him, my own way... I felt I had to let you know that I found my path in life. Whether I achieve the priesthood or not, my path is always with and for God".

Silvia first came to us as a young police-woman, shocked by the Brixton race-riots which she'd been called upon to police. In Kintbury, at a key moment, she experienced God's healing love very deeply and learned to pray more personally, a feature of her daily life to which she has remained faithful. Having left the police, she's now doing a two year programme of youth and community studies, which she finds very challenging as her tutor is a Marxist. She is searching for a vocation to which she is almost ready to commit herself. She writes very openly: "It's a funny feeling — I definitely feel I have some kind of vocation — but he's not letting me know yet — which is fine by me — I'm enjoying myself — perhaps it's to be a youthworker — something that I've always had my heart set on — so we shall see... I still blame you for getting me into all of this — so thank you — I always remember you during my prayers".

I have already spoken about *David*, in the fourth year of his education degree. He worked with us on the Kintbury team for a year, after leaving school (not a particularly easy year, either!). You'll recall that I'm answering *his* questions here, which have stimulated me to go back over the familiar territory and re-tell Kintbury's story. I think David will make a fine teacher, and I found the concluding paragraph of his letter very moving: "While we are on the subject of St Cassian's I suppose that it would be only right for me, once again, to thank you from the very depths of my being for the chances you gave me to help me to become alive! We must sit down one day and I'll tell you an interesting tale of a young man's growing awareness of the God not out and beyond him but at the centre of his being".

"Work-in-progress"

What interests me about all these examples is that they are extracts from a "work-in-progress". The search is not concluded and the young adults know they must keep moving. Is it unrealistic to see these examples as the tip of the iceberg? I don't think so, for I could quote many others. Let me offer one more, from *Judy*, in her final year as a student nurse, who received a great deal from Kintbury and came back to help us a few times with our summer programme. She writes: "I think of you often and remember with affection the time that I have spent at St Cassian's over the years. You and many others had a profound influence on me during those often troubled times. Thank you!".

To Jack, Silvia, David and Judy, what can I say in my turn but, "Thank you!" (the Eucharistic dimension of Kintbury memories and the letters in which these are expressed)? What they, like so many others, have taught me is that to accompany others in the way of faith is always as much a matter of receiving as of giving; and that where "two or three meet in my name, I shall be there with them" (Matthew 18,20) is a promise that we can *know* to be "a saying that you can rely on" (I Timothy 3, 1).

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