

**ST CASSIAN'S CENTRE, KINTBURY (6)****2. One way in which the centre has tried to deepen the initial response it evokes**

The articles would be incomplete without at least a cursory account of the summer programme of "YESWEEKS", five of which are organised each year between late June and mid-August at St Cassian's. I am delighted to say that the custom has spread to other centres, and even to other countries. They have been devised as a follow-up to the usual three to four days retreat and their origin lies in two events. The first was the wish expressed by a number of those who had been to St Cassian's during its first year to return for a week's reunion, open to anyone who had made a retreat before. The team organised a special programme for this group, and the following summer two such weeks were arranged, the number increasing year by year until the present total of five weeks each summer was fixed in 1980. This was when the Brothers were celebrating the Tercentenary of our foundation and were encouraged to look for some needs which we were not meeting and to respond creatively to them. For us at Kintbury it was an opportunity to revise the formula of these weeks (until then popularly known as "jamborees") and to redesign the experience, giving it a more positive and challenging spiritual character. As a name for these attempts to deepen the initial retreat experience, we hit upon the term, "Yesweek". "YES" was an abbreviation for "Youth Encounter Sharing", although this was soon forgotten with the "YES" coming to mean its standard positive sense of openness and willingness to respond to the invitations and challenges provided by others and by God. The idea is beautifully expressed in *2 Corinthians*, when Paul swears "by God's truth, there is no Yes and No about what we say to you. The Son of God, the Christ Jesus that we proclaimed among you... was never Yes and No: with him it was always Yes, and however many the promises God made, the Yes to them all is in him. That is why it is 'through him' that we answer Amen to the praise of God". (2 Cor. I, 18-20).

The "Yesweeks" attracted a significant number of tertiary level students and young workers or unemployed. They were designed to cater for the sixteen to twenty-six age-group, with the understanding that many taking part would have left school and would have chosen to come to St Cassian's as individuals or with small groups of friends. The weeks are a joyful experience but sometimes a difficult one, since they are intended to encourage further growth rather than to pander to a sort of re-living of the original Kintbury experience, as though this were some kind of drug to "get high" on. Each season of "Yesweeks" has been based on a theme, usually the exploration of a particular New Testament book:

- 1980: My Relationships: Yes to others, Yes to myself, Yes to God.
- 1981: *St John's Gospel*: deepening my Christian life.
- 1982: *Colossians* and *Philemon*: Paul's vision of life in Christ.
- 1983: The challenges of *St Luke's Gospel*.
- 1984: The sacraments in the Christian life.
- 1985: (projected) An exploration of *Acts*.

**Facing the challenges which life presents**

The study of the Scriptural texts follow imaginatively designed patterns, and though these are soundly based academically, to show that my religious education does not stop when I leave school behind but moves into a new phase for which each one must assume personal responsibility, the real point of the week is to face the challenges which life at home, at school or work, in college and in society generally offers the individual who is trying to live a mature Christian life. We need the help and support of our brothers and sisters as well as of Christ to grasp these challenges, and the "YESWEEK" makes this available. This is not the time to go into details, but one aspect of the experience deserves special mention: the practice of devoting one twenty-four period in the middle

of the week to examining the implications of the theme being explored for one's sexuality, especially in view of the choices which young adults face in our society. Obviously this is an important aspect of life which most who come to Kintbury need to discuss, though usually the lack of time and the nature of the situation do not allow the topic to be opened up by groups during the standard retreats. Remember that the retreat-centre attracts young people from a wide variety of backgrounds and points of view (including many which are confused) and that the intention is to cater for sinners rather than for saints, so all can feel at home here (as they are at home in the gospels). I shall never forget the moment at the very beginning of an early "Yesweek" when, during the introductory meeting, I asked for a volunteer to give an example of a personal problem or difficulty they wanted to face during the week, and an eighteen year old girl whom I shall call *Kathleen* announced immediately, "Well, my problem is very clear-cut: I'm in love with Mike, a married man who at this moment happens to be serving a prison sentence. Do I leave home and move in with him, when he comes out! I know how my parents will react". (So did I, since I had come to know her devoted and strictly Catholic parents!) The temptation is to *overreact* and speak out in a very condemnatory way, or to *underreact* and fail to speak out at all. I have lost touch with Kathleen, but I do know that she eventually moved in with Mike, though fortunately she did not totally break relations with her disapproving and concerned parents. I think about her from time to time, and I pray that her life will be happy and that she will not lose touch with Christ, whatever becomes of her. For me, Kathleen was another invitation to stand beside so many anxious parents and educators and share their anxiety as well as their childrens'. Elsewhere I have called it "sharing the darkness". But to return to the "Yesweek", needless to say other members of the group were encouraged by Kathleen's willingness to share her problem so openly and frankly. She made it easier for them to share their own, and to keep a sense of perspective.

Another point about the "Yesweeks" is that the team insist that the last twenty-four hour period of the week be dedicated to coming to terms with the practical implications of what one has discovered during the week in relation to everyday life, the context in which I live with my needs and my gifts and my choices. This may be a strong contrast with the Kintbury atmosphere of joyful personal support. Kintbury is not about escaping from life, but facing up to it. The danger for all retreat-centres, as I have said, is that they can become havens for those who are seeking refuge from realities which are too hard. The challenge is to show that God goes with us, goes before us indeed, inviting us to move forward. *Marcos* wrote from Chile (to which his family had eventually returned from political exile in London) to tell us that the memory of two visits to Kintbury was a continuing inspiration for him to try to do something about the desperate poverty in which some of his fellow countrymen were living and to try not to lose sight of God in the whole mess, because "life without the love of God is too hard".

After a "Yesweek" in 1982, *Jim* wrote from South Wales about his efforts to work with friends to organise some lively youth liturgies in his own parish, of his continued praying over the topics discussed in the retreat, of further reading to deepen his own faith ("Now I'm in the middle of a fascinating book by Thomas à Kempis called *Imitation of Christ...*"), and of his discovery of the needs of his older spastic sister, whom he has taken for five walks in her wheelchair: "I really thank God for that sister of mine and I really love her a lot". He goes on to reflect about the meaning of suffering in human life, especially in his own experience, to which Kintbury has opened his eyes.

A final point about the connection between centre and school. We have seen what the centre is about: *opening eyes and broadening the vision*. In my view, too often the education given in school seems to be about narrowing the vision; not in theory, of course, but that is the way it can work out. The pressures to conform (in terms of curriculum and pedagogical method) must be resisted, and the experience of a few days in a retreat-centre may offer a necessary Christian alternative, which could otherwise be lacking. In my view, the centre need not be too concerned about tying in with existing patterns in school-based R.E. Let it concentrate on opening up a fresh vision and experience of what the Christian life is really about for those who choose to try it outside the organised sphere of classrooms, assembly-halls and so on, and, in opening up that vision to present a personal challenge to "choose life".

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