

We are always people of our time. It's not possible to exist in any other. And time changes us and we change time. This thought was prompted by a page from the Daily Mail discovered recently in the house of a neighbour, Dawn Riddle, which was being cleared after her recent death. It was a page celebrating the arrival of monks and nuns at Turvey Abbey dated March 26th 1981 and to me, now, somewhat dated in its language and approach. It's entitled 'Togetherness comes to the abbey' but starts off on a rather shaky note by mislocating the Abbey 'at the Northampton end of the sweet, dreamy, stone village of Turvey,' (perhaps in contrast to Station End) and describes the Abbey as 'a dream house of ancient stone, oak and gables. It looks like the perfect weekend retreat..' and much more in this vein. A lot of the article is missing but what caught my attention was not just the 'togetherness' of the original vision but the, to me, quaint explanatory way Dom Edmund spoke of the nuns, and Mother Lucia spoke of the monks – neither knowing quite what the monks and nuns were letting themselves in for. Here is a sample:

Dom Edmund Jones in a flowing white robe (made by the nuns) talked to me (the woman's editor Diana Hutchinson) in the stable block where three monks have already made a temporary home.

He has his own kitchen and freezer, plus a washing machine, too. 'I certainly do not expect the sisters to do our laundry. They have a washing machine too. I expect it will break down one day. And then I shall be happy to offer them the use of ours...'

I expect and hope there was some humour in that remark! And a sample of Mother Lucia's, in return, commenting, firstly, on the nuns cleaning and reassembling the roof of the dairy:

'My sisters are new to it. But it's very good for them to work with their hands. They are all college girls and this does them good.'

And of the monks: *'Well there are fourteen of us and only three of them at the moment...When they are ready they can take over some of our land.'*

Well, forty years later, it has not quite turned out like that. We've had to re-interpret the Rule of St Benedict in a different way, to some extent; indeed, in a different way almost daily, to make it fit our present circumstances, and to make our present circumstances fit the Rule, or better, the *spirit* of the Rule. For what this short, and now dated, article misses is that underlying dynamic of human relationship which cannot be captured in words but is always made up, perhaps, of the exceptions which prove the Rule: those daily encounters with difference in both people and places, which make up our real work – the incarnation of God's love in the many acts of kindness called forth from us, moment by moment and which may, or may not, be visible to others whether we are at the Northampton or Bedford end of the village. And it has been my experience that we receive as much as this from others, indeed more, than we ever give ourselves. Part of the flow of God's love which happens to be here in this place, now, but could be anywhere – the important thing is to let it happen in whatever form it takes.

If local conditions of poverty require them to get in the crops themselves, let them not be distressed, for then they are truly monks if they live by the labour of their hands, as did our fathers and the apostles. Yet let all be done with due moderation for the sake of the faint-hearted.

There's a whole world of commentary in this short extract from chapter 48 of the Rule, not least the observation that 'college monks and nuns' were probably already the norm by then. The struggle with service and its nature is a perennial.

Br John Mayhead
Monastery of Christ Our Saviour