



Monastic Encounter

Monastic
Interreligious
Dialogue (MID) in
Great Britain & Ireland

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Growing in faith together



Studying in a Benedictine boarding school can occasionally have the feel of a Harry Potter movie. Even for a Christian student the image of monks gliding around the corridors of a castle in their flowing black habits can be a surreal sight, at least in the early days. For Omar Amin, an Egyptian-born student who has just completed his studies at Glenstal Abbey School, it was just so.

Born in Cairo, Omar moved to Ireland when he was only eight months old. The family lived in County Limerick, not far from Glenstal Abbey, before moving up the country and then relocating to Saudi Arabia during his teenage years. He went to school in Dhahran before coming back to Ireland for the final three years of his secondary education at Glenstal Abbey School.

“I had a fairly rounded view of different religions even before I went to Glenstal” explains Omar, speaking from the family home in Saudi Arabia. “I grew up in Ireland and started secondary school in Saudi Arabia with the children of other foreign workers: Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists and so on.”

Arriving at Glenstal in 2019, Omar was one of a handful of Muslim students living and studying there whilst their parents worked abroad in the oil industry. “I got used to everything very quickly, including seeing monks in the school. I think it’s a really good thing having them in there because we get to know them well, we listen to their interesting stories and we see they’re very knowledgeable” says Omar.

Hoping to be an ambassador for his religion, Omar wanted to show and explain the beliefs and practices of Islam beyond the common misconceptions which often prevail. Questioned about his religion by other students, Omar realised he didn’t have all the answers which encouraged him to learn more about Islam. “It worked well and strengthened my faith, and maybe it encouraged my classmates to learn more about their religion too” Omar adds.

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Tapping into Christianity's Jewish roots



The monastery of Sainte Marie de la Résurrection is admirably situated at the historic site of Emmaus, the place where the downcast disciples met the Risen Lord. Tasked with a mission of presence and dialogue, Emmaus is a useful model of encounter and accompaniment for the monks and nuns living in Abu Ghosh, an Arab Muslim village located on the Jerusalem to Tel Aviv highway in the State of Israel.

Founded in 1976 by the Olivetan monastery of Bec-Hellouin in northern France, its first monks were led by Father Jean-Baptiste Gourion – an Algerian Jewish convert – with a mission to tap into Christianity's Jewish roots and to build cordial relations with Jews and the State of Israel.

The superior today is Father Louis Marie Coudray, a lean-built and amiable Parisian who has called Abu Ghosh 'home' for nearly forty years. Born and raised in Neuilly-sur-Seine, the then-teenage junior monk of Bec-Hellouin was sent to the Holy Land as a volunteer during his mandatory military service in the late 1970's.

"A challenge!" begins Louis Marie. "Establishing a cordial Christian monastic presence turned towards the Jewish world in the land of Israel, living in an Arab Muslim environment, integrating into the local Church and receiving pilgrims all at the same time! In a small community, we must ensure the monastic timetable is preserved, the material tasks are completed, our living is earned and the many visitors are welcomed. Our life is marked by a family atmosphere and by encounters and links with the Jewish, Christian and Muslim populations."

Each week, hundreds of visitors (both foreign and local) come to the monastery to visit its historic buildings, enjoy its beautiful gardens and to learn more about its mission in the Holy Land. Faithful to their vocation, the community have built a large network of Israeli and Palestinian friends over many years, and welcome many French Catholics who are visiting or working locally.

"We are a place where groups of Israelis know they will be well received, and where pilgrims can discover the links with Judaism and the complexity of the current political and human situation" explains Louis Marie. "It is a matter of deconstructing and dismantling simplistic visions, and of disentangling generalizations. All of this is to be done modestly, according to the charisms and gifts of our monks and nuns."

In addition to a rigorous life of liturgical prayer and the reception of visitors, the community are engaged in the production of ceramics and various liqueurs, the study of Hebrew and an exploration of Christianity's Jewish roots. Louis Marie has himself focussed on Catholic-Jewish dialogue, serving as a Consultor on the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews and in his work for the French Bishops' Conference.



Above: A panel discussion with Prof. Franklin Rausky of the Elie Wiesel University Institute.

“The link of the Jewish people with the land of promise, the land of their Fathers, is constitutive to their identity and there is a great sensitivity to everything that concerns Israel as a State” says Louis Marie. “I enjoyed a legitimacy and esteem among the Jewish community, having lived in Israel for nearly four decades. So, I was seconded to the Bishops' Conference in Paris as Director of the National Service for Relations with Judaism. I organised and attended meetings, conferences, common action, solidarity projects and community events between Catholics and Jews.”

Thinking about the shape of dialogue and relations with Judaism today, Louis Marie considers both historical and contemporary dimensions. “We rediscover the roots of our faith and the history of the Church, situate Jesus in his context and trace the history of salvation begun with Abram. Today we explore the significance of the permanence of the Jewish people and of the Covenant for us Christians, and we consider the meaning of the rebirth of the State of Israel and the questions of justice that this raises.”



Above: Guiding a Holy Land pilgrimage with Bishop Michel Dubost, Rabbi Yann Boissière and Imam Foudil Benabadj.

Throughout Louis Marie's personal journey of faith, the relationship of Christianity to Judaism and the Holy Land have been “elements which are fundamental to the living and deepening of my faith in Christ and my spiritual life.” Guiding groups around the country allows him to transmit his knowledge of the country and to help deepen a visitor's perception of the Bible. Most recently, Louis Marie guided a group of Christian, Jewish and Muslim pilgrims and religious leaders from France around Israel and Palestine to learn more about the land's religious and political past, present and future.

Living the monastic life at Abu Ghosh, with this community's particular mission and set of circumstances, is surely a service to the Church, to the land of Israel and Palestine, and to the world. Nearly fifty years after the community's arrival in Israel, how is their mission lived today, in faithfulness to their founding ideals? Louis Marie answers: “by a presence of prayer and fraternity, by meeting people in order to bring down preconceived ideas, by encouraging a deepening of our faith and our view of the local populations and the political situation.

Here we reflect and invite people to know God's plan, and we welcome in order to build fraternity and respect for everyone.”

Father Louis Marie Coudray OSB Oliv. is superior of Sainte Marie de la Résurrection monastery in Israel, a Consultor on the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews and former Director of the National Service for Relations with Judaism at the French Bishops' Conference.

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Religion and the spiritual life is never far away in a Catholic school in the Benedictine tradition. "Faith was stressed more than in other schools and the topic of religion would often come up in conversation in the dormitories. I really enjoyed our religion classes which showed me other perspectives. I think the whole experience strengthened the faiths of students because spiritual life was always subtly communicated and practiced."

Students are often invited to give the morning assembly at the school, and Omar was invited to speak on the occasion of the Islamic prophet's birthday. "It was a happy and proud moment for me, to be encouraged to talk about something important to me and to share my beliefs" Omar explained. As the school year was almost coming to a close, the Islamic holy month of Ramadan was underway and Omar was helped to observe the prayers and fasting. He felt the support of students and

staff alike: "it was a hard period because my meals and sleep pattern didn't follow the school timetable. The kitchen staff were very helpful in accommodating my needs, and our Dean of Boarding let me use his kitchenette out of hours. My friends brought snacks for me and tried a solidarity fast with me, but they only lasted a few hours!"

Now finished school and beginning an engineering degree, Omar looks back fondly on his time at Glenstal Abbey School. "They were amazing years. The school and monastery will always be an important part of my life, because living there in a boarding school opens your mind, makes your personality more rounded and prepares you for life. As a Muslim in a Christian Benedictine school, I was helped to grow in my own faith, as my classmates were too."

Omar Amin is an Old Boy of Glenstal Abbey School (2019-22) and is now an engineering student at the University of Limerick in Ireland.

Dialogue in Great Britain and Ireland

The Great Britain and Ireland Commission of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MID) was reconvened in 2019 by the Union of Monastic Superiors, with Br Justin Robinson OSB of Glenstal Abbey asked to become co-ordinator.

Br Justin was invited to speak at an online meeting of MID's Board of Directors in September. Speaking from Ismailia during a visit to Egypt, he updated directors on the recent activities of MID in Great Britain and Ireland, talked about his hopes for MID in the future and received advice and best practice from the participants joining the call from as far away as South Korea and the USA.

Thus far, the 'Monastic Encounter' newsletter has been circulated to share stories of the dialogues which are underway and in the future it's hoped study days can be organised on the subject of interreligious dialogue. As international travel opens with the lifting of COVID restrictions, attendance at the annual European meeting of DIM co-ordinators should soon become possible. Monks and nuns who are interested in connecting together via MID or who wish to write for this newsletter are asked to get in touch!



Above: Br Justin Robinson of Glenstal Abbey and Fr Maximilian Musindai of Saint Anthony the Great monastery in Egypt speak to the online meeting of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue directors.

Edited by Br Justin Robinson OSB
MID Co-Ordinator for Great Britain and Ireland
Glenstal Abbey, Murroe, Co. Limerick, Ireland
midgbi@glenstal.org
www.midgbi.org