



Monastic Encounter

Monastic
Interreligious
Dialogue (MID) in
Great Britain & Ireland

*Newsletter No. 1 -
Spring 2021*

Real and authentic dialogue

"I think Saint Benedict's command to 'listen' is absolutely essential for our world today. If we are able to listen better, and with an openness and readiness to learn from one another, we'll begin to break down walls that we don't even realise exist. This is important when people see themselves as occupying different sides of the aisle, especially in terms of religion and politics, as many do today.

Our monastic tradition makes us well-placed to reach across this aisle, particularly through interreligious dialogue. I don't want to use the word 'dialogue' too quickly, because real and authentic dialogue is only possible if there's a level of trust on both sides. We need to focus on building friendships and bonds of peace first of all, and our charism of hospitality is a significant and effective help here.

When I was Abbot of Conception Abbey in Missouri, USA, the local diocese appointed me Vicar for Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue. Since then, I've had some enriching experiences of encountering people of other faiths, getting to know one another and engaging in some dialogue. It all begins with simply meeting, becoming acquainted, listening to one another and trying to understand how we might see things differently. We don't necessarily need to talk about religion or hot topics. Working together on social projects – taking care of the poor, the homeless, the environment – or sharing artistic and cultural experiences are simple but very important ways to develop lines of communication, joint-working and friendship between believers.

Our monastery had never had contact with the local Jewish community so, over the years, we invited them to visit and pray and talk with us. Later on, it was wonderful for me to be invited to preach at a Shabbat service in the synagogue. It was a great thing to pray the psalms together and to listen to an organ recital based on a psalm text. We shared a meal and vegetable lasagne was a popular and Kosher choice!

In terms of dialogue with the Muslim community, we had a luncheon with the small population in Kansas City to get us meeting and talking, and we also attended one of their Friday prayer services at the mosque. Since becoming Abbot Primate, I made a visit to Nairobi, Kenya, where monastic communities living in areas with a significant Muslim presence came together to talk about our shared understanding of God. There was an enriching discussion about daily conversion in our life of faith, which helped us to see things in a different way, to grow in mutual respect and to look at building a shared future together. Another wonderful and enriching experience was a visit to the Islamic Institute in London which brought us together for prayer and discussion, and we hope for a similar meeting in Vienna soon.

I think we have something to teach others, and they have something to teach us. Looking at the ties we have with others is an important and helpful starting point for meeting, befriending, and talking with believers of other faiths. For example, a dialogue with Buddhists can be possible and fruitful when we consider some of our shared monastic practices. When we do this, we focus on what brings us together, despite our differences, and we look at how we can enrich one another. That's real and authentic dialogue."

**Gregory Polan OSB
is Abbot Primate of
the Benedictine
Confederation
and resides at
Sant'Anselmo,
Rome.**



Buddhist encounter in the Netherlands



Fr Oswin Gartside CR writes:

Each year a small group of monks and nuns from around Europe gathers to share stories and to encourage one another in promoting dialogue with people of other faiths. These are the co-ordinators of 'Monastic Interreligious Dialogue' and our commitment is to promote the work of monasteries in the particular 'dialogue of spiritual experience', when people share their spirituality by explaining how they pray, what their beliefs are, how they search for God, as well as what their religious practices are.

We met in the arid Atlas mountains of Morocco, hosted by the Iberian region, in 2018 and then in St. Willibrord's Abbey, in the green woods and fields of the eastern Netherlands, in 2019. Last autumn's conference in Ligugé Abbey near Poitiers, France, was postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic. This report outlines the activities of the 2019 conference in Slangenburg.

The monks at Saint Willibrord's built the monastery in Slangenburg by hand after the Second World War, using the rubble of war to build a beautiful monastery around a farmyard which receives large numbers of visitors to its tranquil setting. The Abbey has had significant involvement with Eastern religions since its earliest days and its present Abbot, Henry Vesseur, is himself a Zen teacher. The monastery has recently opened an extended retreat centre and has a Zen rock garden, designed by a practitioner under the rafters of the former barn, to invite contemplation.

The monastery enjoys good relations with Zen River monastery near Groningen. We duly visited and were given a very friendly welcome, talks, tour and lunch. This Soto Zen monastery has members from many countries and belongs to the White Plum lineage. Their Dutch roshi, Tenkei Coppens Roshi, has introduced traditional Japanese ritual practices in worship and daily life to strengthen corporate life and correct Western over-emphasis on personal practice, while maintaining some modifications for its European cultural setting, such as including men and women together. He gave us a dharma talk, leading us in a simple introduction to Zen meditation in four steps. We were allowed to see the meditative practice surrounding their midday meal, Oryoki, which is taken in the Zendo, the same hall and seat as their daily meditations. We were also shown the sewing workshop, industriously making garments for meditation for people from across the continent. Their monastery is something of a treasure house of Japanese cultural artefacts, which was a very rich experience. We concluded the visit with tea and conversation with members.

Back at St Willibrord's, we were given a stimulating account by Fr Anselmo Park OSB (Waegwan Abbey, South Korea) on Thomas Merton's encounter with Buddhism and dialogue with Buddhist monks. It is the subject of his recently published and prize-winning book. Fr Anselmo brought out themes of mutual transformation and communion.

Fr William Skudlarek OSB, the international Secretary General for Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (St John's Abbey, Collegeville, USA) spoke to us of his life and some of the influences that have shaped his thinking on interreligious dialogue. Among these influence were Pierre de Bethune OSB, time spent in parish ministry in Brazil, William Johnston SJ, Japanese Zen and the Gethsemani Encounters. He quoted Thomas Merton: "I am going to Asia to learn to be a better monk." Fr William stressed this form of dialogue rests always on human relations and on developing friendships (monastic hospitality always implies 'omnes').

The last day of the conference was with members of the Flemish-Dutch region. They gave an illustrated talk on the annual encounters they have undertaken. These have been not only with the Dutch Zen monks, where they discussed compassion, but also with Jewish rabbis where they discussed the The Song of Songs and a growing familiarity with Senegalese Sufis in Antwerp. During the Jubilee Year of Mercy they discussed mercy in the two traditions. Together with the brothers of St Willibrord's we made an act of prayerful thanksgiving, which included the words of Guru Nanak and a surah from the Qur'an.

These conferences are always stimulating and encouraging. They build unity between monastics, between Christians and between regions and language groups, as well as across the boundaries of creeds. Thank you to all who have sustained me in this endeavour in recent years. I am very pleased that Br Justin Robinson OSB (Glenstal Abbey, Ireland) has agreed to take on care for supporting the work of monastic interreligious dialogue in Great Britain and Ireland, and I'm grateful to his Abbot, Brendan Coffey OSB, for making this possible.

Oswin Gartside CR is superior of the Community of the Resurrection, an Anglican monastic community, in Mirfield, West Yorkshire.

Why interreligious dialogue?



Above: Pope Francis embraces the Grand Imam of the Al-Azhar Mosque, Ahmad Al-Tayyeb.

Sr Agnes Wilkins OSB writes:

A few years ago, Pope Francis said that 'Benedictines have always been recognised for their commitment to ecumenism and interreligious dialogue.' He encouraged those present at the meeting of the Benedictine Confederation in Rome to 'continue this important work for the Church and for the world, placing your traditional hospitality at its service.'

It has become something of a cliché that the world is now a global village and that different races, religions and cultures come into contact with one another as never before. Monastics are not immune from this exchange, unless perhaps we are hermits or Carthusians. Global interaction is facilitated by the ease of travel (outside of a pandemic!) along with modern technology and communications. Even if we tried, we couldn't easily avoid some form of contact with other religions and cultures.

Pope Francis, writing in *Evangelii Gaudium*, states that 'an attitude of openness in truth and in love must characterise the dialogue with followers of non-Christian religions, in spite of various obstacles and difficulties, especially forms of fundamentalism on both sides. Interreligious dialogue is a necessary condition for peace in the world, and so it is a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities.'

Why should monastics take the Pope's words seriously? Haven't we left the outside world behind, instead making prayer for the world our work in the cloister? How can we do this work of dialogue? Surely it's enough to simply pray about the situation?

... continued from page 3

I think for most monastics, prayer is indeed enough. We are engaged in interreligious dialogue – at least interreligious ‘concern’ – just by being monks and nuns. We are after all at the heart of the Church, and her concerns are ours. In confirmation of this, the Abbot of Genesee once said during a retreat to Henri Nouwen: ‘the monastery is the centre of the world.’ That made him think, as it does us, but I think there is a real sense in which it is true.

Despite all of this, I think it is still appropriate and very desirable that a few monastics should be more actively involved. Monastics are particularly well suited to this task because of a certain depth of spirituality, combined with a knowledge of, and commitment to Christian/Catholic doctrine.

It is highly desirable, if not necessary, to be deeply grounded in this way before branching out to become involved with other religions. Along with the rest of the Church we are still sounding the depths of *Nostra Aetate*, which encourages engagement and a friendly attitude towards other religions. For monastics it is perhaps fortuitous that Buddhism and Hinduism, for instance, have a monastic strain which is a good point of dialogue for Christian monastics.

Islam of course has no monasticism and even seems to be against it in principle, but, in my experience, Muslims in dialogue are deeply respectful towards Christian monastics. This facilitates friendly relations and growth in mutual understanding.

My own particular interest is in Christian and Muslim relations, but I have also taken an interest in Hinduism in the past, and Buddhism to a lesser extent. I find involvement, especially with Islam, throws my Christian faith into relief and somehow enables me, as a result, to become more Christian.

My interest in Islam began about twenty years ago, around 2001/2, when we still had a UK interfaith group. I attended one of the meetings, when for the first time the topic was Islam. I was not too happy as I felt my interfaith interests lay elsewhere, but after a challenging lecture from Anthony O’ Mahoney – then a lecturer at Heythrop College – in which he spoke of the pressing need in our day to engage with Islam, I decided that I would like to engage with this challenge.

At the time I was nearing the end of a degree in Catholic theology by distance learning at the

Maryvale Institute, Birmingham, and it seemed a good way to make use of it. However, it was a few years before I could do a PhD, as about this time Stanbrook Abbey began the process of moving from Worcester to Wass, which wasn’t a period conducive to serious study and research.

When we finally arrived in Wass, North Yorkshire, it proved both impossible and impractical to do this study at Heythrop College in London which later closed. I managed to pursue my studies locally at York St. John University. There was not the academic infrastructure in my area of study, but God in his providence put in my path people who helped me enormously, such as Maurice Borrmans M.Afr, a very eminent French Islamicist, who had written some of the books I was working on.

My thesis is a study of the life and writings of two converts from Islam to Christianity, both of whom have left writings to help Christians understand Islam. The first is the Anglican bishop Hassan Dehqani-Tafti, who became the first native leader of the Anglican church in Iran. He was bishop at the time of the Islamic Revolution of 1979, at which time he had to take refuge in England where he lived for the rest of his life. He became an auxiliary bishop at Winchester Cathedral and is buried there.

My second subject was Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil, a very observant Muslim who was born in Fèz, Morocco, in 1904. He was a brilliant student destined for a responsible position in the newly independent Morocco, and for this purpose was awarded a government grant to pursue further studies in France. However, whilst there he converted to Catholicism and his life was changed forever. He eventually became a Franciscan priest in Paris, where he died in 1979.

***Sr Agnes Wilkins OSB
is a Benedictine nun
of Stanbrook Abbey,
North Yorkshire.***



*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*