

MY EXPERIENCE OF A CHILEAN LAY COMMUNITY

MEETING MANQUEHUE: DISCOVERING PRAYER

MY FIRST ENCOUNTER with the Manquehue Apostolic Movement (MAM) was during a year off in Chile. After a very enriching sixth-form experience at the late but great Belmont Abbey School, I used a contact I met there to set up 6 months teaching English at a Business Institute in Santiago. The aim was to survive abroad independently whilst also trying to sample some of the delights that I had been promised Chilean culture, geography and life in Santiago would offer.

Alongside this new experience ran another, albeit unconscious, search for a more authentic experience of faith. I suppose it is something that many people face when they are no longer required by others' expectation – whether family or school – to deepen or live out their Christian life.

This search was crystallised by a choice—as simple as “Shall I get up to go to a mass that nobody requires me to go to, where I am not needed to sing in the choir or serve on the altar, which will be in an unintelligible language, full of strangers and where nobody will really notice if I am there or not? Or shall I stay in bed?”

It led me for a while to give up trying to find a mass in the deserted streets of downtown Santiago on a Sunday morning. When I overcame the temptation to spend half of Sunday in bed, I used to accompany my flatmates to a Lutheran Church they sometimes

attended, run by American preachers. The welcome was friendly, the music and preaching stirring—aided by a helpful translation whispered at appropriate times in my ear.

I think my unconscious search was for a meaningful relationship with God, a relationship that would bring God, who I knew was there somewhere and cared for me, into my everyday life.

I find that any experience only becomes real when I can share it with people – whether it is a film, a view, a holiday – if not it remains strangely abstract. And I was to find that my relationship with God became real when my search was shared with people who knew me—my friends. It was helpful to know that people were going through what I was going through; I was to find that my journey to God would be similar to the encounter of Jesus in the story of the Cure of the Paralytic, and my friends who would carry me there would be a group made up of ex-Amplefordians; and our stretcher awkwardly breaking through the roof would be a group of shared *Lectio Divina*.*

The Amplefordians I befriended enjoyed what I enjoyed—a formidable social agenda, rugby, and long sessions with the guitar working out obscure chords to Pink Floyd songs. Looking back, it perhaps wasn't quite the wide experience of Chilean culture I had envisaged—but it was nevertheless enjoyable, and we sucked a certain amount of the marrow out of life. Where they could fit it in to this social whirl, they were also required to teach in one of the MAM Schools. Also they were required to participate in a prayer

group once a week, which they did with goodwill and a dispassionate interest and it was to this that I was invited. You could call it the ‘cure of the paralytics’—at a number of levels...

AN EXPERIENCE OF COMMUNITY LIFE UNDER THE RULE OF ST BENEDICT

In talking to my new-found friends, I understood that receiving a group of ex-alumni year by year was part of an agreement that MAM had with Ampleforth Abbey, who in return ‘lent’ them a monk for 6 months—in the early days this was to help advise them on Benedictine Education and setting up the school.

I understood that Jose Manuel Eguiguren (the founder and *Responsible* of the Manquehue Movement) underwent his own personal spiritual search under the guidance of a monk at the Benedictine monastery of Las Condes. It led him to form similar groups in his old school and later found his own school—a community. In our small and imperfect prayer community we were just repeating what Jose Manuel had experienced – somebody in loving friendship showing somebody the Word of God speaking through Scripture – an encounter with Christ in our everyday life.

Our Head of Community was a Chilean our age – assisted by an Englishman in his mid-twenties – both experienced in *Lectio*. They would lead us, and help us try to discover how God speaks through reading scripture; I found it gave my relationship with God an authenticity, and my life a new vitality. It was the people who made this possible: the guidance given in friendship was an experience of the love of God lived out in human relationships.

It was this brief, embryonic – certainly imperfect – but very strong experience which I took back to England; it was the greatest thing that my year in Chile gave me.

UNSURE of where my next move should be after graduating, and with the experience of Chile still strong in my mind, I was invited by Jose Manuel to return to Chile; to take a year off for Christ. It turned into nearly four years. I knew it was to be a very different experience to the one I had before university. I would be living in a community house.

The community were members of the Movement who decided they didn't want to just pray and work together (in one of the schools or another movement apostolate); they also wanted to share a way of life. And to do that they had decided to adopt the Benedictine Rule. They were called ‘oblates’ – a strange term I was unfamiliar with – but I understood them to be people who weren't monks, but nevertheless lived a Benedictine life.

It was their rhythm of life, of prayer – Office and *Lectio* – work, and community living that I had to slot in with. I think I was a lot more open to the experience than I would have been in England. Everything was foreign here: the culture, the people, the language. For example, when I arrived I was picked up from the airport, and my suitcase was flung in the boot of the car along with the carcass of a dead sheep wrapped up in a black bin bag. We were all whisked away to the country for the National holiday and celebrations—men in spurs and brightly coloured ponchos, strutting around women with long skirts, starched blouses and pretty head scarves.

"It's all new—in for a penny in for a pound!" I thought, Benedictine life was not going to be so much of a culture shock...

I think this attitude of being "willing to give it a go" was very helpful to me and I could see it in those around me. Following a Rule was empowering, life-giving – not restrictive – perhaps the first time I have seen rules as such. Perhaps it was born from a need – "this fits in with what I want to do, and what we want to achieve – this helps us accomplish it".

I saw what I think must be the 'good zeal' St Benedict talked about, an enthusiasm, mixed with a warmth, a "down-to-earth-ness" and people who didn't take themselves too seriously. Getting used to it, and trying to imitate it, really unlocked the door to so much of what I gained from my time there. It was perhaps the easiest thing and the hardest thing to learn. It is like trying to reconcile the contradiction of Jesus words "my yoke is easy and my burden light" and "Pick up your cross and follow me". I have found it not only the key to success in living a fulfilling community life, but also to living a fulfilling married life—it's an ongoing lesson!

It was quite an intense experience of community life, maybe different but no less intense than a monastic experience—the "letting go"; of directing yourself and putting yourself and your fortunes in the hands of another. It used to crop up in everyday situations. Perhaps I would get a lift back in the MPV after work, and we'd take a little detour to do something:

"Where are we going?"

"Why do you want to know? Are you in a rush to get somewhere?"

Disconcerting, until you get used to it.

"Can you take on this? I would like you to go and live in Brazil for 2 months..."

"Sure, why not?"

Putting yourself in another's hands—something required of those who follow the Benedictine Rule, and also by those who want to live a happy married life—not that I would push my luck and take my wife on too many magical mystery tours on the way back from Tesco's.

I could see the Rule fostered a deep love, care and commitment, a solidarity, a forgiveness, a 'bearing with one another,' a sense of purpose in those who live by it. Much of this I recognise more now than I did then.

It can be contrasted to many people's experience of marriage—where couples start off with a deep love, care and commitment, which is slowly eroded by the daily treading on each others toes, 'baggage', defensiveness and conflicts of interest. You hear so much criticism of fly-on-the-wall documentaries about people's married life like *Wife Swap* or *Made for each other?*, making entertainment out of people getting so frustrated that they throw pots and pans at each other. But I would make them compulsory viewing for my Sixth Form students at school. The Rule and the attitudes it contains have so much to offer those outside a monastery or Benedictine community.

There were also married oblates who I was told shared the same life and same vocation, but lived out in different circumstances. As I wasn't married, I couldn't really understand what it must be like to live out a married vocation under the Benedictine Rule—when I returned for a visit 6 months ago and stayed with a married couple who were oblates, along with my wife and 8 month old daughter, I looked at the situation with different eyes.

AN EXPERIENCE OF APOSTOLATE

I WORKED in one of the schools to start off with, attempting to teach English to Chilean boys and girls—with varying degrees of success. It then transpired that my mediocre schoolboy piano skills and misspent university playing the guitar and organising the Chaplaincy music group gave me some sort of status as a 'musician' in a country where there is not a great music tradition in schools.

It over-qualified me to teach the Office choir some music that they had decided to incorporate into their liturgy and this led on to learning to accompany the Office on the organ.

Eventually it led to exploring ways to develop the music used in MAM's Liturgy of the Hours and teaching people in the centres of work and the prayer groups how to sing it—and, in many cases, how to sing. Jose Manuel told me it was one of the most important jobs in the Movement because it was helping people to pray. Never has my job had such clarity of purpose and importance. I was recently reminded of this when my school Chaplain here at Worth said that the music group I organised for the occasional Saturday evening mass was the most important contribution I could make to the boys. I don't know how much the Director of Studies would agree.

I found the integration and balance of work life and prayer life very energising. I felt that my Christian life was the whole of my life—not just the isolated pockets. It is something I have found difficult to replicate in my work on return. It was interesting to contrast with the very unbalanced life of a PGCE student and a Newly Qualified Teacher that I lived

afterwards.

It is a goal I seek now but have not yet achieved—though for some reason it seems a little more achievable with each year of teaching under my belt. I feel it a vital lesson for me to learn now, with academic duties, boarding house duties and a young family.

The greatest thing working in MAM gave me was an experience of fraternity—you simply felt close to people. I think this was created by sharing a common life and mission. It was a good way to live.

ANOTHER BENEDICTINE ENVIRONMENT

I NOW work in a place which is also 'lay' and 'Benedictine'—as a lay teacher in a Benedictine school. I am married, have a lovely wife and a young daughter, and they are my community. I teach Religious Studies in the school with great staff and pupils, and work as a Deputy Housemaster in one of the boarding houses. I am lucky, because they are also my community. It is very different to life in Santiago. It is in a different way that Saint Benedict and his community try to share something of their life and values with us.

And I think it is a tough job. As a school, in today's educational climate it is tough enough holding firm to what Christian education is about—and there is only a limited extent to which a sound Christian ethos is 'marketable'; the demise of my old school testifies to this. I also know that it is a personal battle for staff and students, even for those who are sympathetic to what St Benedict was trying to create, to live a balanced, integrated community life. Teaching and learning can, in their

own ways, be very isolating occupations and it is easy to fall into tunnel-vision, defensiveness, mistrust and sarcasm, where the common room can turn into a place of refuge, and den of shared griping.

At Worth I think we fare quite well. I see signs of balance, signs of community, signs of shared ministry, bearing with one another, trust and partnership. There is a special 'feel' to the staff common room and I notice it too when I meet the boys. The monastic presence is instrumental. I feel it a great sign of hope that Worth is serious about learning how to further develop the idea of a lay Benedictine school.

The term 'laymen' usually carries the connotation of 'inexperienced' and can be contrasted with the term 'expert'.

As the Benedictine Rule is a "Rule for beginners" not for experts, perhaps 'lay Benedictine' is a little tautological.

The Manquehue Apostolic Movement is a lay Benedictine organisation. I didn't find expert Benedictines in the Manquehue Movement, but they certainly knew what they were about, and we have a lot to learn from them.

Note

**Lectio Divina* is the ancient Christian practice, which monks have always favoured, of ruminating on a piece of Scripture, quietly allowing it to enter our heart and speak to our situation. The Manquehue version is usually undertaken in a group, with the Gospel of the day read a verse or two at a time, allowing those present to apply what they hear to their own lives and experience, either aloud or in the silence of their hearts.