

**Sermon preached by Bishop David Walker for the  
Profession of Sister Anne in Solemn Vows  
16<sup>th</sup> May 2015 at St. Mary's Abbey, West Malling**

**Obedience**

Sister Anne, in a few minutes Bishop Laurie is going to put some questions to you. I've had a good look at them, as I presume you have, and they are mostly fine. But there is one of them where, if you're being absolutely honest, I think you might have to tell a little lie. Don't get alarmed, at least not until after I've explained what I mean.

You're going to be asked to affirm that you are making your final commitment to the Benedictine life freely, and not out of any "necessity or constraint". What I would like to suggest is that the call of God to the cloister has so taken root in you, has so grown over these last few years, both before and during your noviciate, that to describe it in words that to modern ears resonate with ideas of consumer choice is hardly the truth. You have found God here. You have found Him in the life that you share with your sisters, in a way that makes this next and ultimate step entirely necessary. No human agency has compelled you (which is what Bishop Laurie's question is really getting at) but the love and the presence of God is compelling at an entirely deeper level. And to that call you are giving your necessary consent. To do anything less would be to deny both Him and your very self.

Looking back at the pivotal moments of my own life thus far: marriage; ordination; and consecration as a bishop. None of them look remotely like choices made. Each was the only possible thing to do in the circumstances, if I was to be true to myself and to God.

The Benedictine call to obedience is what sets those who follow his Rule free from the tyranny of choice. For choice is indeed a tyrant. It demands that we get it right every time and punishes us with the imagining of how much better some alternative decision might have been. The Rule sets out good and gentle guidance as to how a community can seek to identify God's will when alternative pathways lie ahead of it. But the task is always to discern, not to decide. For the individual, the discipline of obedience to the Abbess or Abbot and community is the school in which each brother or sister practices their obedience to God.

**Stability**

But let me turn to the second hallmark of the Benedictine life: stability.

Sister Anne, when you come forward in a few minutes to stand before Bishop Laurie, you will come carrying a candle. That candle, originally given to you at the start of your noviciate, will be lit again on your deathbed and allowed to burn out at your requiem. You come in the knowledge of your ending. And you carry that ending gladly with you.

I share that privilege with you. In the South Aisle of Manchester Cathedral there is a row of inscribed stones in the floor. These are the memorials to those of my predecessors who are no longer among us. There's plenty of room for the two retired bishops ahead of me in the queue, and also for me. To my great delight the inscriptions are in exactly that part of the nave where tables are erected and refreshments served after worship. In generations to come, the very letters of my name will provide a receptacle for biscuit crumbs and spilt tea. I love that spot. By presenting me with my ending it enables me to frame all that might fall to me between now and then. And to provide me with a sense of stability in an often chaotic world.

In the same way, for the avowed Benedictine, that greater stability of knowing your place and community for life and for death, provides the context for faithfulness amongst the great instabilities of the world. In your writing of icons, following the exact patterns and forms laid down, you offer something of that stability to those outside the cloister just as you do as you and your sisters hold the needs of his creation before God in the rhythms of the Divine Hours and of the Eucharist. Your stability is not just God's gift to you but his gift through you to all humanity.

## **Conversion of life**

But let me move on to the third Benedictine hallmark, the conversion of life.

Sister Anne, you and I first met in the autumn of 1976 as fellow members of the Christian Union at King's College, Cambridge. A lot has happened since then. If some fellow believer, blessed with a gift of prophecy, had declared back then that one day you would be a Benedictine and I would be a bishop, I wonder which of us would have fled the fastest. God has been patient with us both. Over many years he has formed us into who we now are. The task of conversion is not that of a moment but of a lifetime. We are today who we are, only God knows who we shall become. This hallmark, the Conversion of Life, to which you will give your glad assent in a few minutes, is a sign of our commitment to allow God to continue that work within us. Indeed, that we do what we can to welcome and embrace the changes to which he calls us.

The challenge of the cloister is that it will give you less opportunity to run away from those aspects of your life that the Lord is seeking to convert. I suspect it's much easier for me to drown him out with the busyness of bishoping. Day by day and year by year He will reveal to you more and more of the true self he made you to be, and to which he is calling you to conform yourself. At times it will be hard. But those will often be the times when your conversion most glorifies God.

## **Conclusion**

This Benedictine life, to which you avow yourself today, offers as much a challenge to the temptations and corruptions of society today as it did when Blessed Gundulf founded his community of nuns here in 1092. His task was to restore stability to this part of Kent after the deposition of an extremely corrupt bishop of Rochester who also happened to be the King's half brother. Archbishop Justin, as much as his predecessor Archbishop Lanfranc who advised the king to appoint Gundulf almost a millennium ago, knows that the revival of the Religious Life is an essential component in the renewal of the Church.

Sister Anne, you have boldly assented to God's call to be part of this renewing challenge to both church and world. We who are here in this holy place today represent both the journey you have taken thus far and the one that lies before you. We come, hoping that our presence may be a blessing and a comfort to you. We come assuring you that our own prayers will be supporting you in the times ahead. But above all we come knowing that this step which you are taking will be a blessing to us, to God's Church, and to his very creation. Amen.