

A DIFFERENT KIND OF MONK: WILLIAM ULLATHORNE

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IT IS PERHAPS COMMONPLACE NOW to talk of the paradox of Ullathorne's life in terms of his monastic and missionary vocation. There is however uncertainty over the depth and extent of his relationship in the EBC with the Benedictine tradition. Clearly his training was monastic, yet his life was spent almost exclusively beyond the walls of his monastery. Yet it is wellknown that he was often anxious to retire from episcopal office, whether because of the strain of his work or from a deeprooted desire to return to full monastic observance.

Ullathorne was clearly a man of action, a man of independent and adventurous ideas, a born leader and administrator, and in his developing years, a prickly, arrogant, perhaps pompous personality. One indeed which Downside might have been glad to see the back of in 1832. Yet his maturity as man and priest owed much to his spiritual development as a monk. In his mature years he became more absorbed by the study and practice of the Benedictine tradition.

He developed firm views on the monastic life and the role and conduct of the EBC (as he did on most matters), and in other circumstances might have been a great reforming abbot. His biography then might have been that of the man who recreated modern English monasticism, rather than the man who recreated diocesan government.

Butler described Ullathorne's monasticism as the mainspring of his life, and of course, he himself was profoundly influenced by the Bishop's thinking. Clearly, in order to understand Ullathorne and his conduct of ecclesiastical affairs, we need to try and understand his monasticism and its influence on his mind and heart. In tentatively exploring some of the views he expressed, both published and unpublished, I hope to draw on the corporate wisdom and experience of the EBC to enlighten me. In contemplating some of the man's thoughts, with a few hesitant reflections of my own, perhaps it is possible to suggest where one should really place Ullathorne in the broad spectrum of Benedictine monasticism.

The material offered here is exclusively from his years as bishop, in which I am chiefly interested, though I am also drawing upon the work of an Australian colleague dealing with Ullathorne's early training and spiritual influence. Obviously Ullathorne had a good deal of contact with Benedictine monks and nuns, both officially and unofficially, and that produced the first revelation in my provisional studies of the man. He never, during his English years, cut himself off from his Benedictine brethren; quite the reverse, for he was a regular correspondent, guide and advisor. Naturally, archives in the care of the EBC are full of evidence of such activities, but I have used a limited amount to illustrate his views and attitudes. In general, I have not used the many letters of spiritual guidance. I feel some diffidence, for instance, in attempting to evaluate the letters of spiritual guidance to his nuns.

I shall attempt to tackle Ullathorne's Benedictinism in three ways. Firstly by looking at his

relationship to the Benedictine tradition and spirit in his own formation, in its influence on his life, and in what he had to say about monasticism, its spirituality and, of course, the Rule.

Secondly, I shall offer a few instances of the attitudes of other Benedictines to Ullathorne: what they said about him and to him. How much confidence did they repose in him? What use did they make of his episcopal authority? Did they view him as an asset to the Benedictine way of life and to the EBC?

Thirdly, I will look at his attitudes to the EBC, to the contemporary practice of Benedictine life, rather than the spirit and tradition of the Order. In these, was he critical or complementary? How did he attempt to help or hinder in terms of his advice, direction and jurisdiction?

As anyone knows who has read *Cabin Boy to Archbishop*, Ullathorne's early religious training was almost nonexistent, and his vocation came not from any monastic influence. He arrived at Downside unlettered, spiritually illiterate, with no clear idea of any religious formation. He presented to his masters, particularly Polding, his novice master, a blank page on which his mentors were able to write clearly and ineradicably.

Yet curiously, Ullathorne's early spiritual training did not reflect a strong monastic tradition, but more the English Counter-Reformation tradition of recusancy. A few books which Ullathorne himself recalled as formative bear mention. Gobinet's *Instruction of Youth* was a systematic, practical book of spiritual training, rigorous but not Jansenist, and firm in inculcating moralistic religiosity. Challoner's *Think Well On't* was in a similar tradition of practical spirituality grounded in everyday life. It emphasized ascetic discipline and well-schooled virtue rather than the higher flights of mystical prayer. It did however, like the same author's *Lives of the Desert Fathers*, bring Ullathorne into his first and formative contact with the Desert Fathers. Augustine Baker's work was in the same English recusant tradition.

His novitiate textbook was a Spanish classic of the Counter-Reformation, Rodriguez' *Practice of Religious Perfection*, suggesting that monastic education was more rooted in the practical needs of the Counter-Reformation recusant world and that it had drifted somewhat from its monastic origins. The practical manifestation of this drift was later to trouble Ullathorne. The *Practice of Religious Perfection*, however influenced Ullathorne profoundly, and led to his lifelong devotion to Scripture and the Desert Fathers, on both of which he drew heavily.

This, and his reading of Abbot de Rance, put into Ullathorne's head the notion of a Trappist vocation, from which he was dissuaded by Polding. For a man who became such a practical and pragmatic leader, Ullathorne had a remarkable streak of Romanticism in his soul. The romance of the sea brought him to the lowest form of life in the merchant marine, his longing for 'a grand romantic spiritual ideal' (*Autobiography*) took him to Downside, nearly to La Trappe, and almost certainly to Australia.

The Downside novitiate and juniorate were of course monastic in their routine and training, but there is a strong sense that they trained missionaries. This probably explains Polding's missionary preoccupations as much as anything. It was a training which created in Ullathorne

what Butler called ‘a thorough and great monk’; certainly he was no mystic, but a man of pragmatic and realistic spirituality. He blended to an almost ideal degree a deeply religious sense with a shrewd human perception.

After fifty years as a professed monk, Ullathorne reflected on his training at Polding’s hand when he spoke of his ‘vigilant Prefect and well trusted spiritual guide’. He recalled Polding’s first talk to the novices in which he advocated docility in the hands of their masters and warned of the danger of pride, something which Ullathorne took a long time to conquer. He learned in the novitiate how silence strengthens the understanding and how obedience invigorates the will.

Naturally above all, Ullathorne was trained in the understanding and love of the Rule of St Benedict, and he often spoke and wrote of its value. His most lengthy and detailed discussion of the Rule was given in 1875, the year after his jubilee, in an address on the Festival of All Benedictine Saints. Butler described it as the clearest and truest short exposition of the spirit of Benedictinism.

In it, Ullathorne drew a likeness between the monastic Orders and the prophets of the Old Testament, as lovers of solitude, humble of heart, austere in selfdenial, undoubted in courage, strict enforcers of the Divine Will, rebukers of the sinful and sensuous world, and proof that God never abandons his people. Ullathorne was never one to flatter or to curb his tongue, so we can take it from this that his admiration of and devotion to the monastic ideal was full and genuine.

It is an attractive and often overlooked element of his personality that Ullathorne never totally lost his romantic devotion to the monastic vision. Monastic orders he described as ‘the grandest expression the world has seen of that elevation of soul to which men may ascend through the power of grace...’. Genuine monks ‘belong to the grand poetry of life’. The language in which he speaks of Benedictinism is of quite a different order to his blunt episcopal dicta.

Having surveyed the early history of the Rule, Ullathorne explored what he believed to be its distinctive characteristics. Benedict’s Rule, he believed, was made distinctive by the reform of stability and by the spirit of the saint with which it was imbued. It was a spirit of ‘luminous discretion’, a spirit of largeness and freedom, which was powerful because it was rooted in the solid centre of stability. Perhaps because he had spent over forty years away from the conventual life, he emphasized strongly the binding, creative power of stability and community life. Without it the spirit of largeness and freedom was apt to degenerate. The force with which he emphasizes this suggests the longing in his own soul for a full return to a life of conventual stability.

The three forces welded together on which Benedict built the monastic life were the vows binding a monk to his monastery, the choral office, and the common life. To lose one of these is to lose the spirit and strength of Benedictinism, to lose the genius of the Order and its founder. These are powerful words and must have been deeply moving from the mouth of a man who had long lacked the support of physical stability and whose pursuit of the common life and observance of the Office had been in personal isolation.

Clearly this powerful blend of stability and freedom of spirit was a lifelong inspiration to Ullathorne, not something which came to him later in life with the wisdom of years and the experience of isolation. Two letters, both to the President, will suffice to illustrate that these were not just the words of a public discourse.

In 1850, in the midst of negotiating the restoration of the hierarchy, he wrote in heartfelt tones to the General Chapter, describing himself as a ‘grateful and attached member of the Congregation’ (Birmingham Archdiocesan Archives B1941). He declared that he had derived from the Order ‘whatever of a good spirit may have supported and directed me in a life of uninterrupted labours’. The ‘tranquil stability of conventual observance and remembrance...have given me substantial support amidst the ever shifting changes of my life’. Again, in 1863, he wrote of ‘St Benedict’s great reform’, the introduction of the words ‘*stabilitas in monasterio*’. This could only be dispensed with to meet special exigencies of the Church which required careful delineation. His doctrine of a man’s duty was based on the words of Edmund Burke, that ‘the best preparation for any duty to come, however anticipated, is the careful doing of the duty in hand’. ‘This great principle of stability and of choral and monastic training is what is best calculated to form strong, patient and solid characters’. ‘The most perfect monk is he who thinks of nothing but making himself a perfect monk. And this most perfect monk will turn up the most perfect missionary’; that is, the quality of missionary life, he thought, turned upon the quality of monastic life.

There was no doubt in Ullathorne’s own mind of his devotion to the Order and the value of his monastic training, but I want to look now at his practical relations with the Benedictines of his time, particularly those of the EBC. What was his practical rather than spiritual relationship with his brethren? It cannot be said that Ullathorne was always the easiest of personalities ; great powers of leadership and strong ideals seldom make for easy companionship.

Throughout his long and busy career, Ullathorne was a regular adviser, guide and influence among the EBC. Apart from his role as episcopal visitor to Benedictines in his own diocese, he was regularly asked for opinions on a whole range of issues, but particularly matters of jurisdiction. He was especially sensitive to, and aware of the problems in relations between bishops and religious. Late in life, he advised his auxiliary Ilsley about a visitation to Erdington: ‘We must be careful to avoid a collision in this only case of an exempt house of men in the diocese’ (BAA B7571). He advised him not to use the usual *pro forma* for visitations, but to draw up a special one. He was only entitled to interrogate the *quasi parochus* about his missionary duties, and he could only visit and inspect the altar used for Mass for the people. Ullathorne was of course uniquely able to understand the sensitivities of both parties. In 1859, he was consulted about the jurisdiction problem in relation to Ampleforth. His reply indicates a mature judgement as well as understanding of canon law. He explained that a bishop cannot validly *de jure* forego his rights of visitation, but he may *de facto* forbear to use them. He advised consideration of the missionary origin of Ampleforth and its parochial activities, but was clear and firm on his conclusions: ‘I have no doubt of the actual right to visit the administration and conservation of the parochial sacraments’ (Ampleforth 239/220).

However, it was often even trickier problems than episcopal jurisdiction that he was asked about. In 1880, he was consulted by Ampleforth (BAA B6997) as to how best to deal with a situation in which a priest had gone off suffering from scruples about his profession.

Clearly, his views were respected. In the EBC's difficulties of the early 1880s, his opinion was canvassed from Rome and acted upon (Ampf 253/14). Two instances of the confidence and esteem in which he was held will serve to illustrate Benedictine reaction to Ullathorne. Both date from his appointment as Bishop of Birmingham. One from Luke Barber, the English Benedictine President, contrasts the Congregation's relations with Ullathorne and with the other Benedictine bishop, Bishop Brown; one the 'disinterested friend and brother', the other 'the captious and querulous friend to Ego'. He concludes, 'This is a very *cosy* way of talking to a Bishop, but please remember we are brothers'.

The other letter, from beyond the EBC, from Abbot Gueranger of Solesmes (BAA B1607) spoke of the love which he knew Ullathorne to hold for the Order. He expressed confidence that he would continue to serve and protect 'the children of St Benedict' as he had in the past. Ullathorne was warmly assured of the prayers of all Benedictines in his work, for he had welcomed Gueranger's reforms.

We have seen so far an image of a monk, idealistic and romantic in his attachment to the Benedictine spirit, but tough, rigorous and practical in its application. He had no illusions about the perfectibility of Benedictine monastic life, but no doubts about the problems presented to it in the nineteenth century world. Ullathorne was confident that the Benedictine way of life, lived properly and to the full, had in it the capacity to play a major part in the Catholic revival. 'I know well that this religious expansion of the Congregation would serve the best interests of the Church in England in very important ways...It is a deep conviction in my mind...that the spirit of St Benedict is as well fitted for the exigencies of the Church in modern days as it was for those of the middle ages, for it is a spirit at once generous, practical and accommodating to circumstances' (BAA B1941).

While no one in the EBC would have disagreed with this statement, it seems that few shared Ullathorne's vision of how the spirit should be made to work. Butler suggests that his relationship with the EBC was not in practice a happy one, but he does not really pursue this. The relationship was evidently complex, even uneasy, and this constitutes only a tentative attempt to grapple with it. It was *not* a cold and distant relationship; Ullathorne *was* consulted regularly, as we have seen, and his advice heeded. He *was* treated as a confrere by the leaders of the EBC, and the warmth with which he commended his niece to her Benedictine vocation in 1877 is genuine: 'My dear child, I believe in your vocation and thank God for it; be faithful to the end and you shall receive the crown of life' (BAA B6130).

Yet ultimately, in terms of what he hoped for, the EBC was a disappointment to Ullathorne. There is no doubt that, if Pius IX had accepted his resignation in 1862, Ullathorne would have become a great, if stormy, reforming abbot, and probably President General, and the shape of the EBC in the twentieth century would have been very different. Instead, Pius IX, in the famous 'accident' in St Peter's, told Ullathorne to 'stand to your place. Persevere until death. You have yet many things to do' (BAA B4115).

It was true that he had very many things to do, and another twenty years of active life in which to do them, but he was deeply disappointed in the things he hoped to do for the EBC. In numerous letters to the President General, and in more detail in the address on all Benedictine Saints, Ullathorne spelled out what he saw to be the contemporary role of the EBC (BAA 'Letter book' A4). It was marked, he wrote in 1858, by a spirit of 'unity and fraternity', and he had observed over the years 'the gradual innovation of discipline, and the higher cultivation of the Benedictine spirit'. He spoke warmly of the zeal of Benedictine missionaries and of their cordial relations with the bishops and secular clergy.

His warmth and interest were not always understood, as he wrote in 1874, that 'some years ago there was an impression amongst some members (of the EBC) that I had not much zeal for the interests of the Congregation' (Ampf 246/46). He ascribed this to a certain reserve which he put on himself interfering in EBC matters. However, he felt that his zeal was not now in question, and made it clear that 'I have never been silent before third parties where my evidence could be of use in vindication of what is good and meritorious in the body'.

The real problem between Ullathorne and the EBC was over the conduct of missions. He believed that the role of the solitary Benedictine missionary, who had been the pattern of the recusant period, was essentially a temporary arrangement. It had been a necessity of the time, but was unsatisfactory, inimical to the Benedictine spirit, and ought in the present conditions to be brought to an end. This is the area in which his powerful theological emphasis on the need to combine stability with freedom of spirit was put into practice. There were dangers in one without the other, which he had apprehended as a missionary in Coventry, and surely also in Australia, but he was here concerned with the circumstances of the English Church. While at Coventry, he reflected upon the missionary role of the EBC, and saw that circumstances were changing from those which had necessitated missionary constitutions. The new Orders were coming onto the English scene and demonstrating the possibility and desirability of community life. Yet those whose ancient tradition was one of the common life were still living as isolated missionaries. This was bad for the individual monks and bad for the future of the Congregation since few people had any chance to experience what the reality of Benedictine life was in its full glory.

'This led me to reflect that if on the mission, and especially in important towns, we could only live in community, and with as much community life as the circumstances of a mission would allow of, we should not only ourselves have the kind of life which is natural and proper to us, but that the spirit of our holy Order would become understood, and fit and generous minds would be drawn towards us and towards our state of life, and our present monasteries would thus become supplied with a proportionate supply of men and means' (BAA B1941).

This idea of missionary priories was what he had in mind when building on a large scale at Coventry, and it remained his firm view and ambition for the EBC throughout his life. He wrote often of his anxiety at the 'provisional' state of things and the dangers inherent in it for the monastic life and its future. The men who had spent their whole lives in these circumstances 'did not fully realise the extreme importance of giving the earnest of a tendency towards the normal state of *vita communis* which the Holy See I know expects, and which in my whole

intellect and conscience I believe would secure the prosperity of the Congregation to a far greater extent than has hitherto been realised' c.1874 (Ampf 246/66).

In order to emphasize the need for monastic as well as missionary life, he drew clearly the distinction between the monastic and priestly vocation. One did not necessarily mean that the other followed automatically, or indeed at all. 'Profession does not essentially involve the right to that state, still less the right to the missionary call' (Ampf 244/156). He was not in doubt as to the missionary value of Benedictinism, or of the importance of the EBC in the Catholic Revival, but he who more than anyone had experienced the reality of missionary work, was convinced that the kind of life he had led had served its purpose. As he told the gathered Benedictines in 1876, 'the change for which the Order has toiled is come'; things were ready for a return to normal, and that meant to full conventual life in missionary priories. His very longevity and breadth of experience had enabled him to discern the changes in English Catholic life, to reflect upon the shift from a recusant community to full Church status. It enabled him too to see that rapid results often ran out of steam, and that God's work was often done at a slower pace, built upon steady, sure foundations, rather than through ambitious, headline-catching projects.

Ullathorne's ideal for the EBC was the Erdington Priory of Beuronese monks, under his own episcopal care. 'The fathers are much respected in the Diocese, and are giving great edification through their religious spirit. The school taught by the fathers is prospering. The mission is in a good state. A number of priests from the missions and from Oscott are glad to go to the fathers as their confessors. Their services to religious communities as extraordinary confessors exercise a valuable influence. In short, all that I had anticipated in accepting the foundation is being more and more realised' (BAA B8507).

Ullathorne became a leading figure in a pressure group to redirect the EBC more along these lines. The influence of Solesmes and Gueranger was important, as was the example of the Erdington community. Ullathorne was immersed in the controversies which came to a head in the late 1870s and early 1880s over the framework and constitution of the EBC, and particularly over the question of episcopal jurisdiction. The mission versus monastery battle was a long and messy one, with pamphleteering and appeals to Rome and personal slanging matches. Ullathorne did his best to remain relatively aloof from the infighting, advising as he saw best. He was in a position to be able to avoid taking sides and to speak for the long term good of the Order and Congregation. His expressed view, which apparently carried weight in Rome, was as follows: 'Unquestionably something is wanting to strengthen the Congregation and the weak state in which such houses as St Gregory's and St Laurence's were left for years, has done much to weaken the reputation of the body, and especially the neglected state of ecclesiastical studies. All this is known at Rome, and unless promise is held out of a thorough revision of your position, you will have much to contend with. The only way to get clear of false accusations is to admit what is true, and express the willingness to put it right. Then you will stand on clear ground, and easily get rid of what is unjust and untrue' (Ampf 253/14).

However, as Dom Daniel Rees commented, 'the last decades of the nineteenth century were a time of missed opportunities' (*Benedict's Disciples*, ed. D.H. Farmer, Leominster 1980,

305). The battles were finally resolved practically in 1900 with the revision of the Constitutions, and the inspiration of Ullathorne passed into the hands of men like Butler and Gasquet. Ullathorne's vision of monastic priories was lost, but a partial adaptation to normality was achieved in the modern Constitutions of the EBC. His demand for a blend of stability and conventual life with freedom and largeness of spirit is perhaps met therein.

The deep personal interest in the EBC which Ullathorne expressed never wavered, nor did his devotion to the Order. His criticisms and admonitions came of a deep devotion to the Benedictine way of life and a desire to perfect and advance it. For instance, his detailed and perhaps finicky criticisms of the introduction of reforms at Stanbrook in 1872 were made, as he said, 'from a sincere motive of benefitting the community', and confident in the 'general ardour' and 'pleasant tone' which pervaded the house (BAA B5178). His was a genuinely fatherly interest, guiding, admonishing, protecting and usually only praising to a third party.

Ullathorne stands foursquare in the tradition of English recusant life, and played a major part in carrying the Church out of that, and into a new way of life. He was very much heir to the ideas and spirituality of Augustine Baker, whose writings he described as 'of great value' in spiritual guidance (BAA B1941). The title which Dom David Knowles gave to Baker of 'a principal agent in the rebirth of the EBC' (*The English Mystical Tradition*, London 1961, 153) applies equally to Ullathorne. Their lives were not dissimilar in that they began with a period of irreligion, and reconciliation to religion and almost immediate Benedictine vocation. Both spent the major part of their monastic lives beyond the conventual walls, and both became embroiled in controversy over missionary and monastic ideals.

Ullathorne and Knowles himself stand at either end of the corporate endeavour to restore English Benedictine monasticism; it was a complex enterprise, working on a number of levels, so it should be no surprise that the characters of the main protagonists were often baffling and apparently contradictory. The spiritual relationship between Ullathorne and Baker requires far more discernment and expertise than I can bring to bear, but I believe they must be seen, not only as part of the great river of the Order of St Benedict, but more specifically as boulders lying along the course of the idiosyncratic twisting, turning and tumbling stream of post-Reformation English Benedictinism.

By way of conclusion, to reinforce what I hope I have conveyed of Ullathorne's uncritical devotion to the spirit of St Benedict and critical devotion to the EBC, I quote part of a letter of thanks on the occasion of his monastic jubilee in 1874:

'It is a delightful thing to recall those simple and happy times. It is an awful thing to feel that 50 years of religion have passed and that the shadow of the eternal gates is falling on us. It is a grateful thing to look back on all God's mercies and protections. It is a hopeful thing to look from past mercies upon the future. It is a joyful thing to instruct our young brethren in our older experience and to contribute to the tradition of our Congregation. It is a pleasant thing to see the zeal that prevails among the young for greater discipline than their fathers in religion knew' (Ampf 250/5).

On reflection, I think it is unsurprising that Ullathorne did not contemplate retiring to Downside in the 1880s, which was in his view troubled and misdirected. Instead he preferred

the solitude of his beloved Oscott, from where he joined the long march of Benedictine saints on the feast of St Benedict 1889.