

A Month of Sundays

Nicholas Buxton

An edited version of the following article was published in *The Tablet*, 3rd December, 2005.

“The first forty-eight hours are the worst,” Said one of the monks at Worth when I told him I was going to spend a month with the Carthusians, “But if you can get through that you’ll be fine!” Helpful advice, no doubt, but not exactly reassuring. Well, the first forty-eight hours were pretty tough, and to be honest, I didn’t really enjoy it much. I had been looking forward to going to Parkminster so much, but when I actually found myself alone in my cell it just became an endurance test. I persevered, however (though many don’t apparently), for as one of the brethren pointed out, there is a big difference between seeking an experience, and seeking that which it is an experience of. After a period of acclimatisation – probably about a week – I slowly began to appreciate life in the artificial desert of the Charterhouse. I started to notice how the silence, discipline, and paradoxically, the enclosure – which seems so restrictive when looked at from the outside – actually allowed for the opening up of a new interior space, free and still, that I am seldom aware of in my normal everyday life.

The monk’s basic needs are provided for, but that’s it; there are no frills. Food is eaten from metal dishes (called gamelles) with a wooden spoon. Before Vatican II novices had to make their own spoon. The food was simple but adequate, if at times a little eccentric. I was constantly surprised by what I found waiting in the hatch every day. Except on Fridays; the traditional day of abstinence. When I was at school this meant fish and chips, which ironically was by far the best meal of the week. At some monasteries it means soup for lunch, and/or no dessert at supper. At Parkminster it means bread and water. Only. I was told it was permissible to sprinkle a little salt on my bread. I wasn’t enthused. A few days before my first Friday, I stashed a couple of apples and some cheese; perhaps not quite in keeping with the spirit of things, but then it was my birthday!

Strangely it wasn’t so much the creature comforts of my normal everyday life that I missed most (though having said that, I did think about my fridge more often than I normally do), but the altogether more congenial regime of other monasteries. I kept thinking about my stay at Worth, exactly a year previously, where I could wander around the garden at my leisure, enjoy the beautiful view, chat to the monks over coffee after lunch – or just *have* a cup of coffee, for that matter. Generally my experience of staying in monasteries has nearly always been joyful, and yes, *fun*. But there’s not much you could call ‘fun’ about life in a Charterhouse. No peals of laughter echo round the cloister. Maybe that’s as it should be, but it’s quite hard to get used to. As is going to bed at 8pm in order to be up again at midnight for three hours of church. Every day.

Parkminster is huge, but apart from my cell, the church, and the 227 paces along the cloister between the two, I didn’t get to see much of it. And to begin with that was frustrating. Not that I was wanting to rush around all the time, but because it just seemed a bit grim. It wasn’t just the solitude and the silence that got to me, but the feeling of being totally isolated. I’m quite content to spend time at home alone, but I can still make phone calls, read the papers, or go for a walk. Not here. Far harder than the outward discipline of the timetable and the austerity of the regime, however, is just being present. Every few days or so Dom Cyril, the novice master, would drop by to check up on me. “Are you here yet?” he would ask. It took a while to really understand what he meant. With none of the usual distractions I soon became very

aware of how much time I spend elsewhere - anywhere and indeed everywhere but *here* – thinking about all the things I could or should be doing, the people I might be seeing, and so on. “Remain seated in your cell and it will teach you everything” say the desert fathers. To be truly silent, to avoid all needless preoccupation with the past and the future, to just *be* in the here and now, is to be present to God, to encounter God in the silent emptiness that is the heart of our being; where, emptied of our selves, we can share in His being. Even people who do not believe in God would surely agree that there is something very interesting about the fact that most of the time we are simply *not present*, either to our selves or each other, never mind God.

For all the emphasis on silence and solitude, however, the Carthusians are still a community, and the communal aspect of their life is vitally important. Apart from gathering together in church every day, they also go for a walk once a week, which is the only time they are allowed to talk. After a week of no conversation at all, the concentrated burst of half a dozen half hour encounters made me realise how much we take our normal social interaction for granted, and how much we must fail to really *hear* as a result. Not to mention how banal and disposable much of our everyday chatter is. There was no time for the exchange of mundane pleasantries, we just plunged straight in. Obviously there was a certain amount of sharing – they wanted to know about me, my impressions of the life and so on, but by far the most interesting thing for me was hearing the stories of how each of them had ended up as Carthusians.

On the one hand there were people, usually the older ones, who had joined the order more or less as soon as they reached adulthood. In this category I also included those who had been secular priests or members of other orders before joining the Carthusians. The other main group consisted of people who had searched and wandered in the world, unable to settle, unable to find satisfaction or make a commitment, in careers or relationships, before finally ending up in the Charterhouse. It was fascinating, though in some ways a little disturbing, for me to hear their stories, which had so many familiar resonances for me. Surely I’m not heading for this too? I could completely identify with their restless search for fulfilment, and the inability to find it in anything less than total commitment to the only thing that promises to be ultimately fulfilling. Anything less is just not sufficiently demanding to warrant commitment.

Going on the walk made my experience of Parkminster much less lonely than it had been to begin with. The cloister took on a human dimension that had been largely absent from my initial impressions. After about ten days, I felt quite settled, and for the rest of my stay, was able to enjoy the stillness and space afforded by the simple rhythm of prayer and silence. I came to understand something of the singularity of purpose embodied in the Carthusian way, their simplicity and radical poverty of spirit that strives to be as nothing, for that is what we are, before the God who is everything. Jesus calls on us to deny our selves, take up our cross, and follow Him, for those who lose their life for His sake shall find it. The Carthusians take this injunction very literally.

In spite of the fact that I had found the life a little too challenging at times, as I sat in church for the last few offices before I was due to leave, I suddenly realised how much I’d got used to and grown to love the place. I knew then that I’d look back on my month with great fondness for years to come, feeling very fortunate to have shared for a brief moment in the lives of a great bunch of ordinary people doing an extraordinary thing. I tried to think of the most appropriate word to sum up the month. ‘Fun’ wouldn’t have been strictly accurate, while ‘interesting’ is just banal. Then on

the morning of my departure, it suddenly came to me: inspirational, in the proper sense of the word. It was a truly special time. But I didn't fully appreciate quite how special it was until afterwards. My first day back in the 'real' world felt very odd indeed. I had been looking forward to going home; looking forward to coffee, music, and well, everything really. But it was actually all rather bewildering. Not to mention noisy. The religious life is intense, that's what I like about it, and at Parkminster it's even more intense than at most places. That's why I found it so difficult to begin with. Like neat spirits, it was too strong for me. But then I got used to it. However, that didn't mean the intensity lessened, just that I didn't notice it so much. Until I left, that is. And then, readjusting to normal life was as difficult and as unhappy as it had been to adjust to life in the Charterhouse during the first couple of days. I actually found myself missing the place – the exact reverse of my arrival - and I was sad.

The religious life is either totally mad or truly sane. Paul said that God makes foolish the wisdom of the world (1 Cor 1:20, 3:19). By implication then, God's way probably seems foolish to the world. These days, many people certainly think that monasticism in general, never mind an order as extreme as the Carthusians, is completely crazy. But if God is real, and loving him - because it is our nature to love - is our highest duty, then the Carthusian life, centred as it is on a love that forsakes all others, makes complete sense. Obviously there are sacrifices, and no one said it was going to be easy, but when you have everything you need, you don't need anything else. In the closeness of their relationship with God, in whom all creation has its being, they are close to all people. The claim that their life of prayer is a hidden ministry to the whole world should be perfectly coherent to anyone who believes in God. Jesus teaches us to pray in secret (Matthew 6:6). In a number of ways then, the Carthusians are the church's secret pray-ers.

Nicholas Buxton
Trinity Hall, Cambridge