

The Cowley Fathers' father

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Richard Meux Benson, the founder of the first Anglican religious order for men, died 100 years ago this week. Geoffrey Rowell appreciates his contribution to church life

ONE of the gifts of the Oxford Movement to Anglicans was the revival of religious communities. Since the Dissolution of the Monasteries under Henry VIII, there had been only occasional isolated instances of community life in the Church of England, the most notable being that of the Little Gidding Community under Nicholas Ferrar, in the 17th century. It was not just that monastic communities had disappeared. They were also suspect — particularly convents — as places in which, anti-Roman Catholic Protestant polemic alleged, nefarious practices went on, aided and abetted by sacerdotal tyranny.

Narratives such as *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk* (1836) reinforced these prejudices, and made titillating reading for upright Victorians. Others, however, began to see religious communities as valuable parts of pastoral and social outreach, particularly among women, besides providing opportunities for women's ministry. Church of England bishops shared much of the contemporary prejudice, and when the High Church Bishop of Exeter Henry Philipps challenged Priscilla Selton that in her Plymouth community she was running a nunnery, and was imitating convents in Roman Catholic countries, she was outraged: "No, no, my Lord. Oh dear, no!"

Vows, in particular, were suspect. They were perceived as leading to the tyranny of Mothers Superior or of priestly Wardens, and of subverting authority, whether of bishops or of Victorian fathers; and yet vows are what the total commitment of love demands. Samuel Wilberforce, one of the bishops who most supported communities, could nevertheless write

in 1854 of his concern about sisters' hoods' developing an unhealthy "self-consciousness and morbid religious affections" in their exaltation of the contemplative life, and their encouragement of "perpetual confession" — altogether, he said, "an un-English tone".

Yet the pastoral work of Sisters in parishes, and such things as the presence of Anglican Sisters among those who accompanied Florence Nightingale to nurse injured soldiers at Scutari during the Crimean War, contributed to a growing acceptance of religious communities.

OF THE Oxford Movement leaders, it was Edward Bouverie Pusey (1800-82) who contributed most to the revival of the religious life. Indeed, the beginning of the Anglican revival of the religious life for women can be dated to Trinity Sunday, 1841, when Marian Rebecca Hughes made her three vows of religion before Pusey.

And it was Pusey who had a significant influence on Richard Meux Benson, the founder of the Society of St John the Evangelist (SSE), the first Anglican religious community for men, though it had precursors in associations of clergy living under a common devotional rule, of which the Society of the Holy Cross (SSC), founded in 1855, still has a significant witness today.

Wednesday this week was the centenary of Benson's death, and his remarkable ministry, teaching, and witness has a continuing importance for Anglicans. Born in 1824 into a wealthy Evangelical family — his mother belonged to the Meux family of brewers (hence Benson's second name) — he was educated at home, and by tutors, and then, unusually, spent six months in Rome, where he met many ecclesiastics.

This included making contact with the Jesuits, and visiting the Benedictines of Monte Cassino.

Benson went up to Christ Church, Oxford, in 1844, the year before John Henry Newman was received into the Roman Catholic Church. Here he encountered Pusey, who was a Canon of Christ Church and Regius Professor of Hebrew. From Pusey, he gained a proficiency in Hebrew; a love of both scripture and the Church Fathers; a powerful sense of the

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NEW RESEARCH

THE Trustees of the Fellowship of St John the Evangelist have launched an international research project into the history of the SSE. It is led by Dr Serenhedd James, of St Stephen's House.

Dr James would like to hear from correspondents in possession of historical material relating to the Cowley Fathers, or from anyone who wishes to share their memories of the Society's work. Email serenhedd.james@stsho.ox.ac.uk, or write to The Cowley Project, 5 St Andrew Street, London EC4A 3AB. thecowleyproject.wordpress.com facebook.com/cowleyproject

reality of God's grace, in which *lex credendi* and *lex orandi* — belief and prayer — belonged inseparably together; and, above all, what Pusey called "the Great Mystery" of the transfiguring, indwelling life of Christ, which changes us by the Spirit from glory to glory, that we may at the last be partakers of the Divine nature.

As Donald Allchin once put it, what Benson gained from Pusey was "the passion for holiness, for the experience of the knowledge and the love of God".

ORDAINED in 1848, Benson served a brief curacy at Surbiton, and then returned to Oxford as Vicar of Cowley, then a small village outside the city, where he had time for study, reading, and prayer, as well as the pastoral duties of a parish priest. During this time, he forged links with those concerned with the beginnings of parochial missions, and with the inauguration of retreats in the Church of England. A strong call to missionary work in India also began to develop, and, when his mother died in 1859, he would have gone to start a missionary college there, had not Bishop Wilberforce, conscious of the new housing being built that would join Oxford with Cowley, persuaded him that it was his duty to stay.

On the feast of St John the Evangelist, 1866, with two others — an American, Charles Gratton, later to be Bishop of Pond du Lac, in Wisconsin, and Samuel Wilberforce O'Neill, formerly a master at Eton, and subsequently to fulfil Benson's dream as a missionary in India — the Society of St John the Evangelist came into being.

It was to be a company of mission priests, and the dedication to St John, the beloved disciple, was no accident. As we see from Benson's massive devotional commentary on the Passion narrative, *The Final Passover*, the divine life promised in the great high-priestly prayer of John 17 was at the centre of the life of the community: "This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent."

The life of what was to become known as the Cowley Fathers was enabled by the full round of monastic worship, a daily celebration of the eucharist, a seven-fold office, and long times of private prayer. Benson's discipline led some to describe him as made of catgut and iron. And all of this went hand in hand with a deep commitment to his growing parish.

AMONG others who came to join him were another American, O'Prescott, George Congreve, and Bernard Maturin. Maturin wrote of Benson as "thin, wiry, and ascetic, though full of energy"; "modulations of his voice were like music, and his language and diction were perfect . . . heightened by the curious sense of detachment which always impressed his hearers."

It was what led an elderly woman, on being asked whether she understood Benson's sermons, reply: "That gentleman just opened heaven to me, and I can look right in." He had a strong sense of spiritual warfare, and the reality evil. It was not for nothing that he called his commentary on the Psalms *The War-Songs of the People of Peace*.

Benson's theology was profoundly Trinitarian. He told Fr O'Neill that "the practical neglect of the doctrine of the Trinity have been the great cause of the decay of Christendom," and the theology of the Trinity, like all truths of divine revelation, was not "abstract considerations, but active energies with which we must cooperate."

Benson had no use for abstract intellectualised theology. For him as Charles Gore noted, Christianity was a life that embodied a doctrine. The created universe testified to God, who could not but "burst the bonds of his own existence", as Benson powerfully put it.

Like another Anglican student of St John, Brooke Foss Westcott, Benson saw the incarnation predicated in creation: "It is the eternally predestined glory of the Incarnation which (so to speak) unveils the act of Creation from its unworthiness of God."

The outreaching of God's love in creation, he believed, is fulfilled in the incarnation, and ultimately in humanity made in the image of God's being fitted by grace to share in the divine nature, because it is the divine love that is the source of creation: the costly self-giving and self-emptying is the reality of God which we encounter.

It is equally that sacrificial love that is known in the cross, and in the salvation that changes us in discipline of prayer and sacrament to share in the glory of the ascended Christ. Christ is taken up into glory, and, "like an electric flash, the glory of the Spirit shines out in the fires of Pentecost."

In the most profound sense, Benson's is a charismatic theology drawing more from the East than from the juridical idioms of medieval Western theology. As Michael Ramsey (who rated Benson alongside Westcott as one of the great theologians of the 19th century) noted, Benson was a mystic and theologian at the same time. His vision still has an importance for the Church in our own time.

Today, the SSE house in Oxford with its fine Bodley church, is housed to St Stephen's House theological college; and St Edward's House, Westminster, has become part of Westminster School; but the society continues to flourish in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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