Easter Triduum 2026

Good Friday Conference

"Conversatio Morum: a Way of Growing in Christ"

..for our Triduum booklet I was asked to give a short introduction to the title of the talk which Abbot Robert invited me to give this morning..

"to gain entry to the Berlin Philarmonic Orchestra under Herbert von Karajan, one had to fulfill two essentials; they had to have the music within them, & they must learn how to play in time with others."
In monastic life, under our composer Jesus Christ, & under the care of our conductor, Abbot Robert, we must have a thirst for God, & we must commit, across the spectrum between the stone deaf & those with perfect pitch, to nurture one another, not for a promenade series, but for the journey of a lifetime, an eternal lifetime."

The traditional vows in Religious Life are poverty, chastity & obedience..our Benedictine vows include obedience with two different ones; stability & conversatio morum..

Stability means we are rooted to this Community & its works for life. We don't have a Provincial or Regional Superior who oversees wide spectrum of communities & their works, & can ask you to move from Glasgow to Brighton, Hull to Halifax..we belong here in this Community, & any of its works off-site, for life..

That rootedness of inclusion & belonging grounds our life together..we are in it for the long haul "together" [a Pope Francis word]
word "conversatio" is from "conversari" conduct..manner of life, & it envelops monastic behaviour, conduct, life in community & self discipline..
a discipline of character & life woven to obedience & stability..

Prologue to Rule of St Benedict is fine overture to St Benedict's 72 Chapters, as it summarises relationship between virtue, the beatitudes, & the gifts of Holy Spirit..
it is itself rooted in Gospel..18 quotations in it are lifted from scripture..
whereas all Christians are bound by their baptism to seek God & follow Christ, the monk vows to do it "unremittingly"..not just following wisdom but seeking it out..
Cistercian monk Michael Casey explains difference by use of terms mentoring & nurturing..
A mentor takes on an apprentice & by word skill & example, helps the apprentice to become as good at the mentor at their particular craft..
A nurturer takes on an apprentice to help them to grow by word skill & example, & eventually to become better at the particular skill than the nurturer..going beyond & breaking new ground..
..monk breaks new ground leaving tried & tested footprints across field of virgin snow for others to see & to follow, with courage care & faith, that we have explored before them & have set down some firm footprints & warm heartbeat..

- One of our wise seniors in Community when I was a novice & junior was Fr Columba Carey-Elwes who wrote book "Monastic Renewal" 1966 who talked of "standing in the middle way of the redeemed"
in 2019 Pope Francis wrote an Exhortation "Christus Vivit" to Young People & to the Entire People of God..to young he wrote:
"may the Holy Spirit urge you on as you run this race. The Church needs your momentum, your intuitions, your faith, We need them! and when you arrive where we have not yet reached, have the patience to wait for us."
.."the middle way" of Fr Columba..rock & sand; sheep & goat; swaledale & herdwick; practising & lapsed..

  Fr Columba wrote:
  "St Benedict wasn't aiming at establishing the most austere discipline in the Church [like Cistercians or Carthusians] he was legislating for beginners, for men who couldn't do without their bottle of wine a day. Transplant this Rule to 20th cent taking only the positive life-giving regulations & omitting the mitigations, & the spirit of mitigation, & you are left not with a Rule for everyone but for giants..
  Each soul has its way of following Christ, each Order/community is a presentation of some facets of an almost infinite manifestation of the divine in Christs humanity..we must praise the Lord for this wonderful variety & each go his own way rejoicing"

- ..in the orchestra of Community we must, with the help encouragement understanding of our conductor [our Abbot in conversation "conversatio" Robert] & our composer [Jesus in prayer] self appraise on our journey into Christ & into Community..3yrs or 45yrs after asking to be invited to "come & see"
  what am I pleased about in my journey in faith so far this year?..this Lent?
  what is a struggle?
  what effect has the struggle had on me?
  what would I like others to know about me?..& what might they be prepared to help you with over the next few months?..& will you have the humility to ask?
  it is spiritual accompaniment..the Emmaus walk..care for the sick, the excommunicated, pilgrims & the poor, & murmurers..
  & how do we care for our Abbot?..& you for your Parish Priest?..tell him..
  what we love like find inspiring about you & your four years as our Abbot
  where we would like to see you put your energy/wisdom in next year
  how we [me] are prepared to help you to achieve it

- "conversatio morum"..conversion of life, openness & transformation..a journey
  It is stability & change..
  Elizabeth Canham in her book "a School for the Lord's Service" wrote of stability
  "Stability does not imply a static response to life..the vow of Conversion of Life makes it clear that dealing with change is also essential. By this vow the monk recognises that he is not yet fully the person God created him to be, that he is on the way to knowing himself as one loved & created in the divine image whose call is to be as Christ in the world but who has not yet arrived."
  ..stability & change..to remain & to grow transformed by Holy Spirit & by real life in community..outward attitude behaviour & inner self..fervent passionate living, as we grow in emotional & spiritual maturity..

- Conversatio morum..an invitation to grow into Christ..very Pauline..that mystical & relational union where believers are incorporated into Christ's death & resurrection ..this Holy Week & every holy week in the ordinariness & holiness of our daily lives ..a deepening from being human "in Adam" to being redeemed "in Christ"..resulting in a shared identity that transcends social cultural & ethnic boundaries..

Faith in Christ demands from each of us a moral way of living based on the 10 commandments & the beatitudes..Mt 5: 3-12 "be-attitudes" to be followers of Jesus with attitude..with belief conviction purpose authenticity grit gentleness compassion.. ..key aspects of this journey into Christ:

Participation & union ..a relationship which is dynamic/passionate/inspiring

Transformational..the entire process of salvation, individually & collectively, from baptism onwards into eternity

identity & adoption: a new liberating identity of peace..adoption into the Body of Christ..& a freedom from the fear of sin..

ethical living: a practical realisation of the new way of living in fruits of the Spirit..51 fruits of Spirit I share with Confirmation candidates [honesty creativity harmony spontaneity truth] choose 3 in which you see your Mum Dad elder sister choose 3 in which you will grow once Confirmed & for life

& always with a communal aspect: one body, breaking down & through distinction celebrating difference*

"one of the most precious gifts in a community is to be found among the people who cannot assume important responsibilities. They have no ability to organise, inspire, look ahead or command. But they have very sensitive & loving hearts. They can straight away recognise people in difficulty, & with a smile, a look, a word, make these people feel they are close to them, carrying their cross with them. The poor are always prophetic. As true prophets always point out, they reveal God's design. That is why we should take time to listen to them, & that means staying near to them, because they speak quietly & infrequently; they are afraid to speak out, they lack confidence in themselves, because they have been oppressed & broken. But if we listen to them, they will bring us back to the essential. Those "insignificant" people are at the heart of the community & carry its extremes as well. It is the love of the hidden people which keeps the community united. The leader brings unity through justice, but these loving people are creators of unity just by being who they are. In their tenderness, they are artisans of peace." [Community & Growth: Jean Vanier 1980]

"happy the gentle; they shall have the earth for their heritage" Mt 5 v4 a heritage they/we receive..nurture..& hand on in trust to next generation richer for our stewardship of it..

& conversatio morum seeds, grows, is nurtured from this spiritual understanding in scripture..the ground zero of monastic theology is in the gospels..the vow which guides us into the likeness of Christ, through the example of Apostles & their personal commitment "together"

..to transform annoyance into understanding; frustration into patience..tidally tide by tide..step by step conversions bring us to a different place as we become different people..[you leave here on Easter Day different from person who arrived yesterday teatime] ..& you might be told that in 3mths time by a loved one..speaking of your change & their change through you..
"semper reformanda" always reforming..mission statement of our Catholicism

Sr Joan Chittister OSB speaks of Conversion of Life as being committed to our own adulthood:
"if you want to know if you are committed to your own adulthood ask yourself.
"in the last three things that bothered me in this community, whom did I blame?"

- our goal, our due north, is Christ & our journey, our growth, into him..we fall down & we get up again each day of our lives..Christ reaches out to us in mercy & love, & we can begin again..[calming of storm..Peter walks doubts sinks & is rescued.."man of little faith, why do you doubt?" & Jesus & Peter get into the boat "together"..
..rich young man Mt 19: 16-22.."Good Master what must I do?"..Jesus lists commandments..19/20 A* what did young man think? he was in..instead a call for radical conversatio morum.."go sell come follow me"..& you know answer too well..
& in Mk 10: 17-22 is a key extra sentence before invitation "Jesus looked steadily at him & loved him"..a steady look of love from Christ & in Christ..relationship presence grace courage..he left sad but how long did it take him [you] to come back & to get into conversatio again with Jesus?..

- Ch 4 of RSB tools of good works ..Abbot Barry's translation "guidelines for Christian & monastic good practice"..copy of chapter for each of you..
..fine little book "St Benedict's Toolbox" by Jane Tomaine [2005] Benedict lists 73 actions as his "Tools of Good Works." She chooses half; each tool is an action the supports the growth of Christ's Spirit within us & calls us to conversion of life..
look at & listen to the list..
"do not be arrogant; do not grumble; do not say negative things about others."
be encouraged by those you already practice..
then choose two or three more to work on & pray with in the next week..& so on..

- in last fortnight we have had full Yr 8: 250 students from St Thomas More Academy in North Shields here on retreat; five groups of 50 students & 5 teachers for a 24hr overnight retreat; each group split into dormitories & compiled questions on monastic life & faith for Br Edmund & I to answer..just a few of their questions reflect their own search for Christ in a conversion of life..[give you a copy of full list for you to pray & ponder on]

do you often feel lonely?
If you believe in God, why does he let sick children die?
What inspired you to become a monk?
What is the hardest thing you've had to accept being a monk?
Looking back on your vocation, is there anything you know now that you would have done differently?
How do you become a better Christian in today's life?

How do you cut a sandwich?
Do monks become saints?
How long did it take to get used to the life?
Do you believe in Hell? ..is it eternal suffering or is it separation from God?
Have you had a Gregg's?
Who is your favourite biblical character/
Do you sometimes forget how to pray?
Can you get excluded?
How does God inspire you in everyday life?
Have you considered ever being a bishop?
What is the best thing in your life?
What is it like to live with the same people everyday?

..in other words, what aspects of your life in Community, your daily conversatio morum, can we as Yr 8 identify with & learn from in practising daily life in family school & friendships in North Shields?..
..& all the while realising that their questions..& yours..challenge us monks to question & to go deeper in our collective & individual journey "standing in the middle way of the redeemed" [Fr Columba] "taking only the positive life giving regulations & omitting the mitigations & the spirit of mitigation [justification for what is "less than" ..] & you are left not with a Rule for everyone but for giants"

Questions or contributions from you now?..

- Leave you with a copy of this text for you to take away, to pray & to ponder over, allowing it, tide by tide, day by day, to be a help to your own conversatio morum.. "conversatio"..my laptop anticipates word & completes it as "conversation" which is an accurate alternative..a conversation between you & God, you & your community/family, & a conversation with yourself..your own self appraisal, stability change & thanksgiving..

Chapter 4 of Rule "Guidelines for Christian & monastic good practice."
Jane Tomaine's checklist of Tools of Good Works
& the full list of questions put to me by Yr 8 from St Thomas More Academy North Shields..
& story by Sr Joan Chittister OSB from her time as a novice in her Community..a true story & one you really need to read..

..a Holy Spirit moment to finish
..between Mon & Wed this week we had 55 Yr 11 students here from St Bede's & St Joseph's College Bradford..in their Easter holidays with a whole range of teachers helping them revise for their GCSE exams in May..students teachers sacrificing three days of their holiday..on Tues morning one teacher asked at breakfast what I would be doing in the day..told her I was shaping this talk on Conversatio Morum..she told me of a three times a year magazine their vith form St Benedict's largest Catholic vith form in country..named after St Benedict after their long connections with us here..&

in the issue just published is an article in their Cathsoc newsletter "the Encyclical" by Alise Baskakova on Conversatio Morum..giants in Bradford thanks be to God..

& thank you for listening..may you return home on Easter Day as nurturers giants & beloved disciples..

Christ is the Morning Star
who when the night of this world is ended
brings to his Saints
the promise of the light of life
& opens everlasting day.

Fr Bede
2 April 2026

CHAPTER 4

Guidelines for Christian and monastic good practice

THE FIRST OF ALL THINGS TO AIM AT IS TO LOVE THE LORD GOD with your whole heart and soul and strength and then to love your neighbour as much as you do yourself. The other commandments flow from these two: not to kill, not to commit adultery, not to steal, not to indulge our base desires, not to give false evidence against another, to give due honour to all and not to inflict on someone else what you would resent if it were done to yourself.

Renounce your own desires and ambitions so as to be free to follow Christ. Control your body with self-discipline; don't give yourself to unrestrained pleasure; learn to value the self-restraint of fasting. Give help and support to the poor; clothe the naked, visit the sick and bury the dead. Console and counsel those who suffer in time of grief and bring comfort to those in sorrow.

Don't get too involved in purely worldly affairs and count nothing more important than the love you should cherish for Christ. Don't let your actions be governed by anger nor nurse your anger against a future opportunity of indulging it. Don't harbour in your heart any trace of deceit nor pretend to be at peace with another when you are not; don't abandon the true standards of charity. Don't use oaths to make your point for fear of perjury, but speak the truth with integrity of heart and tongue.

If you are harmed by anyone, never repay it by returning the harm. In fact you should never inflict any injury on another but bear patiently whatever you have to suffer. Love your enemies, then; refrain from speaking evil but rather call a blessing on those who speak evil of you; if you are persecuted for favouring a just cause, then bear it patiently.

Avoid all pride and self-importance. Don't drink to excess nor over-eat. Don't be lazy nor give way to excessive sleep. Don't be a murmurer* and never in speaking take away the good name of another.

Your hope of fulfilment should be centred in God alone. When you see any good in yourself, then, don't take it to be your very own, but acknowledge it as a gift from God. On the other hand you may be sure that any evil you do is always your own and you may safely acknowledge your responsibility.

You should recognise that there will be a day of reckoning and judgement for all of us, which should make us afraid of how we stand between good and evil. But, while you should have a just fear of the loss of everything in hell, you should above all cultivate a longing for eternal life with a desire of great spiritual intensity. Keep the reality of death always before your eyes, have a care about how you act every hour of your life and be sure that God is present everywhere and that he certainly sees and understands what you are about.

If ever evil thoughts occur to your mind and invade your heart cast them down at the feet of Christ and talk about them

frankly to your spiritual father or mother. Take care to avoid any speech that is evil and degenerate. It is also well to avoid empty talk that has no purpose except to raise a laugh. As for laughter that is unrestrained and raucous, it is not good to be attracted to that sort of thing.

You should take delight in listening to sacred reading and in often turning generously to prayer. You should also in that prayer daily confess to God with real repentance any evil you have done in the past and for the future have the firm purpose to put right any wrong you may have done.

Don't act out the sensuous desires that occur to you naturally[1] and turn away from the pursuit of your own will. Rather you should follow in obedience the directions your abbot or abbess gives you, even if they, which God forbid, should contradict their own teaching by the way they live. In such a case just remember the Lord's advice about the example of the Pharisees: accept and follow their teaching but on no account imitate their actions.[2]

No one should aspire to gain a reputation for holiness. First of all we must actually become holy; then there would be some truth in having a reputation for it. The way to become holy is faithfully to fulfil God's commandments every day by loving chastity, by hating no one, by avoiding envy and hostile rivalry, by not becoming full of self but showing due respect for our elders and love for those who are younger, by praying in the love of Christ for those who are hostile to us, by seeking reconciliation and peace before the sun goes down whenever we have a quarrel with another,[3] and finally by never despairing of the mercy of God.

These, then, are the guidelines to lead us along the way of spiritual achievement. If we follow them day and night and never on any account give up, so that on judgement day we can give an account of our fidelity to them, that reward will be granted us by the Lord which he himself promised in the scriptures: what no eye has seen nor ear heard God has prepared for those who love him.[4]

The workshop in which we are called to work along these lines with steady perseverance is the enclosure of the monastery and stability in community life.



The Biblical Imperative 1–2

[1]*Love the Lord God with your whole heart, your whole soul and all your strength,*

[2]*love your neighbor as yourself* (Matt 22:37–39 RB; Mark 12:30–31 RB; Luke 10:27 RB).

Other Imperatives 3–21

[6]*Do not covet* (Rom 13:9).

[8]*Honor everyone* (1 Pet 2:17 RB).

[9]*Never do to others as you would not want done to yourself* (Matt 7:12 RB; Luke 6:31 RB).

[10]*Deny yourself so that you can follow Christ* (Matt 16:24 RB; Luke 9:23 RB).

[12]Do not seek personal comforts.

[14]Relieve the condition of the poor.

[18]Help the troubled.

[20]Do not let your actions model worldly behavior.

[21]The love of Christ must come first.

Relationship with Others: Part I, 22–33

[22]Do not act from your anger.

[23]Let go of a resentment.

[26]Never turn from someone who needs your love.

[29]Do not repay *evil for evil* (1 Thess 5:15; 1 Pet 3:9).

[31]*Love your enemies* (Matt 5:44; Luke 6:27).

Relationship to Self 34–40

[34]Do not be *arrogant* (Titus 1:7).

[39]Do not grumble.

[40]Do not say negative things about others.

Relationship to God 41–50

[41]Hope only in God.

[42]Acknowledge God and not yourself for your goodness and talents.

[43]Own up to the bad things you might do, take responsibility for them and admit them.

[47]Every day face the reality that you are going to die.

[48]Every hour be aware of what you are doing.

[49]Acknowledge that God sees you at all times and in all places.

[50]When evil thoughts enter your heart, fling them immediately onto Christ and share them with your spiritual director.

Act with Humility 51–62

[51]Watch your lips and guard against evil or vicious talk.

[52]Do not talk excessively.

[55]Listen willingly to holy reading.

[56]Pray often.

[57]Every day admit your wrongs to God in prayer with tears and sighs.

[58]Turn away from doing wrong things.

Relationship to Others: Part II, 63–73

Reaching Out to Others

[63]Live God's commandments in all your actions.

[65]Do not hate anyone.

[66]Do not be jealous of anyone.

[68]Do not love to quarrel.

Hope in God 74

[74]And finally, never lose hope in God's mercy (RB 4.74).

St Thomas More Academy North Shields
Year 8 Retreats March 2026; 50 students & 5staff in 5 overnight stays

Questions compiled in dormitory groups

- Group .1. 16/17 March 2026

Do you often feel lonely?
Can you get married?
Can you see family?
How old were you when you became a monk?
Are there any limitations to daily life when you are a monk?
Why did you become a monk?
What are the reasons why people become monks?
Why do monks wear habits?
Why is there a school?
Is it fun to be a monk?
Do you regret becoming a monk?
If you believe in God, why does he let sick children die?
What was your name before you became a monk?
What inspired you to be a monk?
What is the hardest thing you've had to accept being a monk?
What is your favourite thing about being a monk?
Have you changed someone's belief?
Did you ever want to give up being a monk?

- Group .2. 17/18 March 2026

Looking back on when you started your vocation, is there anything you know now that you have done differently?
What are your thoughts on the current situation in the Middle East?
Do you feel isolated from the world in this life?
Would you help someone pray for a selfish prayer?
Do you have any regrets about being a monk?
Who do monks live such a simple life?
Can you stop being a monk?
What's the hardest part of being a monk?
is it always sunny here?
Can monks get married?
What football team do you support?
How do you cut a sandwich?
Why did you choose Ampleforth?
Do monks have weekend holidays?
Are you allowed to party?
Do monks become saints?
How do you become a better Christian in today's life?
What is the best place to chill out?

- Group .3. 23/24 March 2026

Do you like the people who come?
Is it difficult to stay disciplined?
What footballer is your favourite?
Are you allowed to have iphones?
Who is your favourite biblical character?
How does it feel to be called by God?
Why do we need God in our lives?
Do you play sports, & if so, which ones?
Why choose Christianity?
If you do get paid, is it much?
Have you had a Greggs?
Are you allowed to go to watch a Leeds match?
What happens when a monk dies?
Do you ever wish you could marry?
What is your favourite bible story?
Who is God's parents?
Have you ever questioned your faith?
Why does God punish good people?
Do you believe in Hell?
If God is all good, why did he make bad people?
Do we know God is a guy? [from a girl's group]
Why did God call you?
Are you allowed to retire?
How long did it take to get used to the life?
What happens if you talk during silent lunches?
Are there televisions to watch sport?

- Group .4. 24/25 March 2026

Do you sometimes forget how to pray?
How did it affect you becoming a monk?
Do monks get days off sick?
What do you do when you are married but you want to be a monk as well?
Can you become a monk with a criminal record?
If you wake up & didn't want to be a monk anymore, are you allowed to stop being one?
Do you like the jobs you are given?
Can you get excluded?
Do you believe in reincarnation?
How does God inspire you in everyday life?
Why did you give your life to the Catholic Church?
Have you considered ever being a bishop?
What's the hardest challenge you have had as a monk?
What temptations have you faced in life?
What is the most important part in your life?
What sacraments have you committed?
What is the best thing in your life?

- Group .5. 25/26 March 2026

Have you helped someone to connect with God?
Did you ever think you would become a monk?
What happens if you are not a very good singer?
What is Hell? Is it eternal suffering or is it separation from God?
Do you fear death?
Do you believe there will be eternal life with God?
Do you miss your family?
What technology do you use to make life easier?
Have you ever fallen out with God?
Do you ever get bored of the routine of being a monk?
Do you have to catch up with missed prayer?
Do you struggle with Church politics?
Do you struggle to see Christ in the world today?
How do you earn money as a Community?
What kind of rules do you live by?
What is it like to live with the same people everyday?
How do you choose an Abbot?
What was the first thing you liked about Ampleforth?
Did you enjoy RE in school?
What was the hardest experience you ever had?
How is there evil in the garden of Eden if evil comes from free will?

The writing started when I was still a child. I remember writing stories in grade school about imaginary brothers. In high school I worked on the school newspaper day and night. After I entered the convent, I discovered the spiritual journal, probably provoked by Merton's "Sign of Jonah", which was very popular at the time. Whatever the cause, the fact was that I simply could not not write. I recorded every thought I had about the spiritual life, every reaction I had to the newness of monastic life, every response I had to the structures of formation and the nature of community life. I worked on the journal every night in the novitiate just before lights out and then tucked it into the corner of my tiny desk only to begin again on every day that followed. I knew, somehow, that someday I would look back on this work as a treasure house of idea development, a map of my own spiritual coming of age.

One morning I went to my novitiate desk to add a paragraph as usual and discovered that the journal was missing. It was not under the spiritual-reading books on the right side of the old drop-top desk. It was not under the stationery on the left side either. The desk was the only private place a novice had except for a three-drawer clothes stand by the bed. The journal had to be in the desk. There was nowhere else it could be.

Our novice mistress was a rigid woman who lived by the book. Her role, she thought, was to turn us all into what the male world said were good nuns. She scrutinized our cleaning assignments with exhausting precision, she kept us to rigid schedules, she demanded unquestioning conformity, she emphasised unfailing obedience, and she punished infractions swiftly. I watched her closely from the day the journal showed up missing, but, harsh as she was with us, much as I found myself on my knees in front of her, often for less than perfect adherence to the rules, I never saw as much as a glimmer of indication from her that she was even aware of the journal, let alone in possession of it. Nevertheless, down deep in me I knew there was no other explanation. She had to have it; she surely had it. I was puzzled. And wary. Difficult as it was to stop the flow of reflections in me, I never wrote another personal word in all those years.

five years later, the night before my final profession, I got word that the novice mistress wanted me to meet her down the hall from the scholasticate, at the elevator. It was a strange request. We had hardly seen one another in years and never ever talked about anything we did. Night Silence had, in fact, already begun. No one talks about anything to anyone after night prayer in a monastery. Nevertheless, she was indeed waiting for me, elevator at the ready, when I came down the hall. Silently and solemnly she took me to the basement, then to the boiler room, and finally to the incinerator. "Open it," she whispered as she brought something out from under her apron. I recognised it instantly. My journal. "Here," she said as I swung open the top of the flaming furnace. "I think you ought to burn this now. You don't want to do this kind of thing anymore."

But why not? I thought as I threw the journal slowly and reluctantly into the fire. To this day, I can see the flames curling around those pages still. The only difference is that now I know the answer to the question.

[Heart of Flesh ; Joan D Chittister OSB]