

ENCLOSURE

Good morning, and a very warm welcome to Home Retreats. I am Fr Christopher and here with you this morning to reflect upon the reality and concept of Enclosure. We begin with a quotation from the Rule of St Benedict Chapter 66.

If possible, the monastery should be built so that all necessities such as water, mill and garden are contained within the walls so they can practice the various crafts there. That way it will not be necessary for the monks to venture outside, for that is certainly not beneficial to their souls. We want this Rule read rather often in the community so no brother can excuse himself because of ignorance. RB 66

This Chapter is on the Porter of the monastery and in it St Benedict suggests that the monastery is enclosed by a wall and that water, food supply and workshops are all contained within. The Porter who is posted at the gate, to let people in and out of the monastery, is meant to be mature enough not to want to venture out himself, and he discourages the monks from venturing or ‘roaming’ outside, as another translation puts it. Benedict says that this roaming is not beneficial for their souls. Earlier, in Ch 1 On the Kinds of Monks, Benedict has castigated the fourth kind of monk, the Gyrovagues, who wander from Cell to Cell, never stable and consumed by their gross appetites. John Cassian, in his commentary, says that this venturing, wandering or roaming is a sign that the monk is not set on the process of conversion, the road to God. Thus ‘Enclosure’ is linked to the whole notion of Stability – a Benedictine Vow, and to the whole purpose of the monastic life, to seek God. How can it be relevant to non-monastics? And how can it help us during the time of ‘lockdown’ which we are experiencing?

When I was Novice Master, I wrote a small pamphlet to help Postulants and Novices come to grips with the reality and notion of enclosure. I suggested that their smallest enclosure was their own heart, their True Self. Although, eventually, we want to live with an open heart, compassionate and loving, we need, none the less, to learn to enter there ourselves and discover God, within, who has called us to himself in the secret of our heart. Perhaps that is why Benedict asks us to listen – with the ear of our heart, to the Master’s instructions, spoken by a Father, who loves us. There, in the secret of our heart, we learn to know God and begin to know ourselves. If this prolonged period of lockdown has given us an opportunity to know our own selves and begin to know God better, then it is of immense value.

The next level of enclosure is the Cell, our own room, a slightly bigger space where we can find things to do, and where, in theory, we could invite others in to meet with them. This doesn’t happen in the monastery, but it could in non-monastic situations, and it does when we invite another to share our space, engage with them, and form a relationship. There are those in lockdown and shielded, who will temporarily, only be within one room, and may be feeling claustrophobic and screaming to have a larger space and more contact with others. So the ancient monastic practice of going to your ‘cell’, and letting your cell teach you everything, is clearly something which we can learn to our benefit. This, of course was before the days of telephones and internet which can penetrate the walls of our cell and make the space much bigger through communication. But the question is posed – how do we learn to live with ourselves in a small space, and with no other contact? Will we go mad?

Even in a ‘closed’ novitiate, the novice shares the enclosure enjoyed by the whole Community, where the prayer, work, meals and interaction of the monks takes place. An equivalent for those in lockdown might be, your family or care-home or household, however large or small that may have been. Here we learn the skills of living with others, of

community life, of giving one another space, but also co-operating with each other, working together, relating at various levels of intimacy and care. We learn to adapt to different temperaments, skills, ages, interests and outlooks. We learn to show interest, to get to know others at different levels. We learn to listen, to share both ideas and feelings, to be sensitive to moods, to different approaches to situations, to the effects of news or revelations, to spiritual development or insights, to intuitive knowledge or intellectual understanding. We may also be learning to appreciate others and to express our thankfulness. For all of us it is a workshop of learning and discovery of who we are and who others may be, what masks we wear or how open we are. We get to know ourselves and one another. Of course, many households have a garden or back-yard – somewhere to escape the rest of the family, which allows for more and for personal space. One member may go to his shed, another to hang out the washing, another to weed the border, or kick a ball around, or get a better signal on the mobile. Even in these conditions, there are escape-hatches for all of us, including monks who go for walks in the grounds, or do some manual labour outside. We might, however, remind ourselves of those who have no such extra space, or who are confined to the house out of fear or frailty or inability to get outside.

There is one last level of enclosure in a monastery, however, which is the outer enclosure, beyond which we do not go without permission of the superior. This is the level mentioned at the beginning, beyond which it is not beneficial for the monks to roam, wander or venture. Obviously people do – with or without permission, and it is legitimate to ask why we would want to keep to enclosure. In lockdown conditions, many will have experienced this form of enclosure, imposed by the Government to protect us from the spread of a virus. Otherwise, most would regard this form of restriction to our movement as intolerable. Monks choose to be thus restricted for specific reasons. Here, in the monastery, is where we have chosen to dwell, under a Rule and an Abbot. We have chosen to join this particular Community, for better or worse, with these particular people living this particular way of life. We discover that it is always evolving, as members die and others join. The work may change, and certainly the conditions change. At times we are instrumental in the changes, but sometimes they are imposed by outside conditions or agencies. Throughout, we remain faithful to this Community. It is some measure of our maturity and our faithfulness, that we remain within the enclosure and do not seek distractions elsewhere – whether they are temporary or more long-term, even permanent. This ‘Stability’ is an expression of our acceptance of God’s call, to this place, this situation, this community. We do not want to be elsewhere, living another form of life, with other people. We come here, to seek God, and it is here that we will find him, it is here that he will be found by the individuals of the Community and by the Community as a whole. It is also here that He will find us, if we wait for Him.

Are there parallels here with a family, despite the variable size of families and of monasteries? Society is built on these units of the family where faithfulness is epitomised by the couple who formed the family from two disparate families. These family units are being challenged today by our present society, and although no walls enclose family units, there are expectations and mores which influence all members, more or less directly. Perhaps this lockdown experience has highlighted some of the values and challenges of the family unit and thus the level of enclosure that each of us submits to, or feels prepared to entertain for the sake of the others.

Enclosed or Cloistered Communities present challenges to even monasteries who enjoy greater freedom of movement, let alone present a challenge to family units in society as a whole. They pose the question, ‘Why enclosed monks or nuns?’ Their response, in their very existence and commitment to God, questions our acknowledgement and commitment to God alone. We could all ask ourselves whether this lockdown experience has drawn us, even a

little towards God, or towards the spiritual at the very least. Another challenge these Communities pose, is the emphasis we give to Being and Doing. Perhaps lockdown has helped us shift our awareness of these two apparent opposites, and enabled us to bring them more into balance. Finally, there is the question of 'Being Oneself', of Authenticity and being True. In a sense we return to the 'heart enclosure'. Has lockdown asked us to reflect on who we are, authentically, and whether we are being true to ourselves? Therese of Lisieux reflected on her role in the Church, within an enclosed Carmelite Monastery, and she seemed to realise that her role was to be love, at the heart of the Church. In being and in doing this, she was named the Patron of Missionaries.

Monastic Communities, fully or partially enclosed, together with locked-down families and other units, are not there for their own sake. We are there for others. We are all in lockdown for the sake of the nation and the NHS. We have voluntarily 'enclosed' ourselves for the common good. This experience has made us pause and reflect, I hope, and made you pause today for this retreat. I hope the pack of materials and questions provided, will help in that reflection process upon the experience and the merits for Enclosure.

Thank you for listening, stay well, and I pray that the rest of your day will be fruitful.