On Eagles' Wings:

Exploring the Hinterlands of the Order for Baptist Ministry

A decade ago the Order for Baptist Ministry was founded, providing among other things, a place to nurture a contemplative spirituality in the midst of life and ministry for a denomination often characterised by activism. Reflecting on those origins is rather like standing on a hill surveying the landscape around, or even more so, 'rising on wings like an eagle' (from Isaiah 40, as part of the 10th Anniversary Convocation in November 2020 explored). That perspective enables us to see the far horizons of influence and nurture that have provided the deeper roots of the life of the Order. The conversations between a group of friends in 2009 and 2010 that led to its beginnings drew on those deeper roots, even if not very clear to us at the time. The Order did not emerge *ex nihilo*, but has deep roots that extend near and far within the rich landscape of Christian spiritualities.

In the immediate neighbourhood lay both explicitly Baptist and Celtic territory. The Order wanted to discover a charism which was explicitly Baptist, and this is expressed in the Dream document, but there are others who also live happily within a more contemplative Baptist tradition. There were personal links between founding members and **The Baptist Union Retreat Group** (BURG), for instance. For decades previously, BURG had provided a programme of regular and occasional retreats with a contemplative ethos. Founding OBM members Paul Goodliff and Colin Norris led such a retreat in the first years of the Millennium, as did Geoff Colmer. BURG remains a source of retreats for OBM members still.

Until 2010, Baptists wanting a dispersed religious community to belong to tended to join **The Northumbria Community**, with Baptist minister Roy Searle as its leader (a few others looked to the Iona Community instread). With its spirituality drawn from the Northumbrian, Celtic tradition, and looking to the saints from that tradition, pre-eminently St Cuthbert, it provides a way of belonging and a set of daily offices that are widely used by Baptist ministers. In some ways, OBM provides a similar vehicle for spirituality, but drawing upon the Western Catholic tradition rather than the Celtic, and offering, perhaps, a more varied set of daily offices. Taking advice early from Roy Searle was invaluable, and there is at least one member of the Northumbria Community who attends an OBM cell and fully participates in the life of this Order in that regard. The two communities are peaceable neighbours.

Looking further into the Baptist roots of OBM, on the far horizon, as it were, are those early Baptists who were much more **sacramental** than those in the period from the 18th century Evangelical awakening until the late 20th century (who tended to be much more functional in their understanding of ministry, epitomised by the President of Bristol Baptist College in the mid 20th century, Dr. Arthur Dakin[1]). Two volumes in the series *Studies in Baptist History and Thought* both edited by Anthony R. Cross and Philip E. Thompson explored these roots, with baptism and the eucharist especially in focus.[2] It is now clearly demonstrated that sacramentalism is not antithetical to Baptists, but an early and authentic dimension of Baptist life discovered afresh in the latter years of the 20th century, and an important aspect of the theology and spirituality of those in the Order. The role of Dr John Colwell in

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[1] cf. Paul Goodliff, *Ministry, Sacrament and Representation. Ministry and Ordination in Contemporary Baptist Theology and the Rise of Sacramentalism.* Oxford: Regent's Park College, 2010. pp.27–28.

[2] (edited) Anthony R. Cross and Philip E. Thompson, *Baptist Sacramentalism, Studies in Baptist History and Thought Vol. 5*. Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003; — *Baptist Sacramentalism 2, Studies in Baptist History and Thought Vol. 25*. Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2008.

forming this understanding in a generation of Spurgeon's students is explored in Goodliff (2010)[3]

Allied to this movement was that mid-century rediscovery of a more formal liturgy for public worship given expression in *Orders and Prayers for Church Worship*[4] and maintained to this day in a modified form at Neville Clark's former church of Amersham-on-the-Hill Free Church, where OBM member Ian Green is currently the minister.[5] Translating that aspiration for a formally-ordered public worship (now as rare as hen's teeth among Baptists!) into a pattern of a Daily Office is one way in which those roots continue to nourish the OBM. That liturgical tradition provided *Patterns and Prayers* in 1991 (I see that I bought my copy when it was published at the Baptist Assembly in Bournemouth that year) and subsequently *Gathering for Worship* (2005). Dr Chris Ellis had a hand in editing both, and he was for a couple of years Visitor to OBM. However, the focus of both volumes is public worship, and the focus of the Daily Office is much more upon daily personal prayer — a dimension of Baptist spirituality not explicitly provided for in either volume. It comes as no surprise that a Baptist College like Regent's Park that takes an ordered approach to its chapel worship (with its own book of services and prayers) looks occasionally to the OBM Daily Offices for material to assist ministerial students in the bulk of the week when they are not in chapel. It complements these service books in offering an ordered rather than merely spontaneous or extempore way of daily prayer and Scripture reading.

If we survey the far horizons in another direction we find that there are roads that run from the Western Catholic tradition into the homeland of the OBM, just as there are others that run from Baptist and Celtic traditions. Foundational, of course, is the Benedictine Order and its spirituality from which so much else springs, or reacts to.

Benedictine Roots

There is not so much a distinctive "Benedictine spirituality" as "Benedictine soil" in which most of other Western Catholic spiritualities find their roots planted. Indeed, until those developments of the monastic movement that sought to reform Benedictine monastic life, or to distinguish themselves from it, Benedictine spirituality was simply monastic spirituality. Its principles and practices were precisely those that were universal (in the way that the Western Catholic Church was simply 'the Church' in the West until the Reformation in the 16th century.)

The story of St Benedict is well rehearsed in many places and here we simply need to note that he was born about the year 480 in the neighbourhood of Nursia, about 75 miles NE of Rome. Sent to Rome to study in his youth, he was shocked by the moral corruption he saw about him, and withdrew to live as a hermit in a cave at Subiaco, not far from a cenobitic monastery. When he began to be sought out by others, he organised them into little groups of 12 monks each with an abbot. This was in part a reflection of the Egyptian monastic models, and perhaps also a model of Jesus and the Twelve. The Twelve monastic communities he formed were directed by Benedict for 25 years until they were driven out, and a few of them withdrew to Monte Cassino. Here he spent the last 17 years of his life establishing his monastery, and composing his Rule. There he died in 547. Social and

[3] Paul Goodliff, *op cit*. 2010. pp. 61–63; 66–69.
[4] E. A Payne and S.F. Winward, *Orders and Prayers for Church Worship*. London: The Baptist Union, 1960)
[5] Ian M. Randall, *The English Baptists of the 20th Century,* Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 2005. pp.320–324.

religious order at the time was weak, despite Italy being generally ruled peaceably by the Vandal Odoacer (476–89) and the Ostrogoth Theodoric (493–526), and this contributed to the strength of this early monastic movement, which offered relative stability and security. It was not until the Lombard invasion ca. 588, that the monastery at Monte Cassino was first destroyed.

The lasting document that arose from that movement is *The Rule of St Benedict*.[6] It is now widely acknowledged that this was primarily an adaptation of an earlier anonymous, *Rule of the Master* (RM), although the quantity of literature on the monastic life in 6th century Italy was large, and there is such complex borrowing from the sources such as Augustine, Basil and John Cassian, that there is nothing especially new about Benedict's Rule. The first part (chapters 1–7) amount to a translation of the RM; the chapters on the practical regulations show more independence, but are still closely related to RM; while the chapters 67–73, on fraternal relations, are not derived from RM.

The Rule would have been seen as subordinate to Scripture, so it should not be viewed as somehow equal to, or replacing Scripture. Rather it is a way of ordering a life so as to conform to revelation through Scripture. Indeed, the Rule is everywhere replete with Scriptural references.

Why has this Rule come to survive, and even dominate, Western monasticism, where others (such as RM) have fallen into obscurity? The genius of the Rule is the considerable flexibility it gives to the Abbot in administering his community according to the Rule. The RM is three times as long as Benedict's Rule, and much more prescriptive.

The characteristics of the spirituality that is derived from Benedict, or perhaps better described as embodying the Benedictine way of discipleship, are summarized as (i) whole of life, (ii) epitomised by the abbot, to whom the monks give obedience and respect, and (iii) humility.

The balance between work, prayer and study is at the heart of the Rule. The spirituality is as much expressed in working with the hands (in farming, or weaving, for instance) as it is in the daily round of prayer, in serving others — especially the weak and the suffering — as in seeking personal holiness. Benedictine spirituality offers this charism (gift) to the wider church — spirituality embraces the whole of life, not simply a set of devotional practices or ways of praying.

You could say that all other developments are those that emphasise one or more of those aspects of life held in balance in the Rule. The Franciscan emphasis upon working in the wider world a development of the work and service dimensions of Benedict's Rule; the enclosed Orders that emphasise silent prayer and meditation, such as the Cistercians or Carmelites, develop the place of silence and solitude in the Rule; while the Dominicans and Jesuits have placed greater emphasis upon study. Nonetheless, all of these later developments and adjustments to Benedict's original balancing act in some way will embrace the patterns of this Rule in some form or another.

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[6] *The Library of Christian Classics, Volume XII, Western Asceticism*, (Trans.) Owen Chadwick, London: SCM Press, 1958. pp. 290–337.

The high regard for the abbot, and obedience to his guidance, that the Rule demands seems very alien to our egalitarian and suspicious culture. However, it was not so strange to a society familiar with the rule of a Roman *paterfamilias*, and the absolute governance expected of Emperors and more local magistrates. There was still something of this expectation as recently as the 19th century British family structures, where the father in the family ruled. Perhaps one of the gifts that Benedictine spirituality continues to offer to a very different culture — one addicted to individualism and self-realisation through independent self-governance — is the place of obedience to another who embodies something of the wisdom and grace of Christ. An older form of spiritual direction offered that (it is now generally much more tentative), as also an older respect for the Pastor (and African Protestantism, often very charismatic, embodies this still). In the Baptist location of government in the community of the faithful, rather than in an individual *per se*, this emphasis upon submission to the community discernment is expressed lightly in the disciplines of both *The Order of Baptist Ministry* and the *Northumbria Community* — the two groups amongst English Baptists most closely related to a form of "Religious" life. Obedience is the theme of chapter 5 of the Rule, but it permeates all the Rule. Obedience to the abbot is the same as obedience to Christ, and should be enacted swiftly. However, this is always counter-balanced by the need for the abbot to listen to those he leads, and in important matters to consult with other abbots. Discernment is the key virtue needed by those who lead, accompanied by compassion. However, there is no doubt that overall the response of the monk must be one of wholehearted and total obedience to the abbot's requirements. The devastating abuses of such power that characterize so much later monastic history do not of themselves entirely discredit this essential element to Benedictine spirituality — the shallowness and lack of holiness that seems to characterize much of Western Christian discipleship, and especially ministerial life, would benefit from a dose of obedience![7] In a straightforward translation of this into the life of the Order, certain freedoms in the choice of material in personal prayer can be willingly subordinated to the discernment of the cell, so that others put a check on unbridled individualism. Thus, if I wanted to use another set of Daily Offices, or none in utilising a more extempore or un-ordered patter, I would willingly subject that desire to the cell of which I am a part, because they might see some reasons for that desire that are hidden from my perspective, and perhaps are unhelpful.

In Benedict's Rule, with obedience comes silence (ch. 6) and humility (ch. 7) expressed in the humble confession of sin, aware that our lives are lived constantly under the sight of God. Terrence G. Kardong believes that the heart of Benedictine spirituality is this awareness of the fear of God[8].

Thus the first step of humility is to utterly flee forgetfulness by keeping 'the fear of God always before one's eyes (Ps 36:2).... We should guard ourselves at all times from sins and vices, that is, of thoughts, tongues, hands, feet or self-will, but also desires of the flesh. Let each one take into account that he is constantly observed by God from heaven. (Rule 7:10–13.)

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[7] cf. Paul Goodliff, "In Obedient Living Find your Home" Reflections on Baptists and Discipleship. in (eds.) Myra Blythe and Andy Goodliff, *Gathering Disciples. Essays in Honour of Christopher Ellis.* Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, Wipf and Stock, 2017. 60–72.

[8] Terrence G. Kardong, Benedictine Spirituality, in (ed.) Philip Sheldrake, *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*. London: SCM Press, 2005. 148–150. 148.

The reverence for the abbot is expressed similarly towards the weak and the lowly too, for in them we also encounter Christ. In offering hospitality to the poor, in caring for the sick, and also in the way in which the members of the community exist in mutual love for one another, the fear of God under-girds a way of following Christ and finding 'perfection.'

The Rule envisages about six hours of labour each day, and four hours of *lectio divina*. This latter discipline was primarily the reading of Scripture and to patristic works on Scripture. The reading was intended to lead to *meditatio*, the turning over in the mind of what had been read, and often memorized during the *lectio*. But private prayer is hardly envisaged at all, other than the *meditatio* and the silent pauses after the psalms for listening to the voice of God. Prayer, as petition, is seen by Benedict as short and pure. If the heart is pure, and the petitioner humble, then prayer in those terms need not be prolonged. Here Benedict is dependent upon Cassian's *Conferences*.[9] — "The First and Second Conference of Abba Isaac. On Prayer."

Significantly, one of the changes Benedict made to RM was to rename the chapter on 'The Spiritual Art' as 'The Tools for Good Works.' (ch. 4) Silence, fasting, vigilance, prayer and moderation in all things should be cultivated. Holiness is a task to be worked on, while always a gift (Benedict is no Pelagian)

Benedictine spirituality reminds us that while always the work of the Spirit, our collaboration in humble obedience with her work is vital if we are to grow in grace and Christlikeness. The sheer stability of a life-time's commitment to those practices that shape us by the Word of God enables the transformation of the inner life, the character and its dispositions that counter the siren voices of post-modernity and secularity. With their lure and myth of the self-sufficient individual, forging heroically their own self-realization, ever present in Western culture — and subtly present in the church through its thoroughgoing seduction by the culture of the consumer — we need the reminder that Benedict provides that conformity to Christ requires a commitment to his community of fellow disciples, and submission to the practices that open us up to the sanctifying presence of Christ by his Spirit. Commitment to OBM is a contemporary way of embodying that stability — and intention to maintain this way of life, and these practices, until death.

Dominican Roots

It has been rehearsed several times that the first seed of the Order was sown by a class of Spurgeon's students with John Colwell who, when studying the Dominicans, asked the naive question why Baptists — and Spurgeon's students in particular at 'the Preachers' College' — did not have an Order of Preachers to nurture life and ministry after the initial probationary period in accredited ministry had been completed. So, we turn to the roots in that Order of Preachers and St Dominic.

St Dominic (1170–1221) was originally a Canon Regular of St Augustine at Osma in Castille. In 1203 he and his bishop were in Southern France on business when they came across the papal preaching mission undertaken by the Cistercians to the dualist heretics called Cathars or Albigensians. Dominic gathered a group of dedicated preachers to proclaim orthodox

[9] *The Library of Christian Classics, Volume XII, Western Asceticism*, (Trans.) Owen Chadwick, London: SCM Press, 1958. pp. 214–246.

Catholicism in this area, and founded a religious order to do so. In common with the spiritual fervor of the age, this espoused a life of poverty, humility and discipline. Coming from the Augustinians, he understood the nature of combining liturgy, contemplation and pastoral ministry. He died in Bologna, where he is entombed in great style in San Domenica.

The Order of Preachers (OP) was formally approved in 1216. It was a response to concrete pastoral needs rather than a theory or spiritual wisdom, and reflected its founder's experience of priests living in community and following a monastic rule. Contemplative spirituality was present from the start and remains an emphasis of the Dominicans, while action was at its inception. The structures were democratic and practical rather than hierarchical, and Dominican spirituality is effectively evangelical and missionary. Dominic placed a strong emphasis upon study, which really replaced the traditional monastic emphasis upon manual labour. The Dominican Friar is typically a student and teacher, and it is perhaps not surprising that the Dominican House in Oxford, Blackfriars on St Giles, continues to be an important part of the Catholic presence in Oxford (Greyfriars, the Franciscan House, closed to students 7 years ago.)

The traditional emblems of the Order have *Veritas* , truth, overarching everything. Then *Laudare, Benedicare, Praedicare* — "to praise, to bless, to preach." Taken from St Thomas Aquinas, *Contemplata aliis tradere*, "to hand on to others what we have learned in contemplation," summarises their work.

Dominicans have included the theologians Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas, and the great painter Fra Angelico. This variety of ways of approaching truth and proclamation is characteristically Dominican.

That question by a group of Spurgeon's students, "why do Baptists — who are above all, preachers — not have something similar?" and then, mulled over by John and me, gave rise to the Order of Baptist Ministry in 2010. You could say, there are Dominican roots to the Baptist Order!

The contribution of Dominican spirituality today, especially to Baptist ministers, would be (i) the emphasis upon study to find the truth, and then to proclaim the gospel; (ii) the diversity and inclusivity of its sources and practices (there is no one Dominican spirituality); and the democratic and inclusive way they are organised — women play a significant role, and each community elects its leaders for a limited time and determine policy in local chapters. They are, in many ways, the most Baptist of the Catholic orders; and (iii) the twin poles of action — especially proclamation, writing and pastoral care — and prayer. Encountering Christ in contemplative prayer energizes and equips the friar for effective preaching.

Franciscan Roots

The church in the 12th century was in great need of reform. Parish clergy were poorly taught and often simply poor. Many of the Benedictine monasteries were by now wealthy. Ordinary folk were superstitious, neglected by the clergy and ignorant. In this context various sects grew up, denouncing the errors of the church and with their own clergy, owing little allegiance to the Pope, they desired a return to primitive Christianity. Into this world was born Francis, son of a rich merchant in Assisi in c.1182. Hoping to become a knight, as he entered adulthood, he began to be drawn towards a life given over to God. In the church

of St Mary of the Angels near Assisi he heard the call to go in utter poverty and live a life in strict obedience to the words of Christ. This he did for three years until he was joined by Bernard of Quintavelle, another rich man of Assisi. Together they formed the Order of Friars Minor, and when they had become a group of twelve, they went to Rome and petitioned the Pope, Innocent III, who gave them permission to preach the gospel of repentance everywhere. As the Order grew, its wealth began to grow, and established houses were formed, so Francis increasingly withdrew from it. In 1224 he spent some weeks at the top of the mountain called Verna, where he received the stigmata. Two years later he died.[10]

The spirituality of this extraordinary man can be summed up, says the great 20th century scholar of the Franciscans, John Moorman, in four ways — 'his total obedience to Christ, his prayer at all times, his desire to suffer with Christ and his love of nature in all its forms.'[11]

Clare joined Francis in 1212, and formed the order for women known as the Order of Poor Sisters (later known as the Poor Clares) Herself a contemplative, Christ is for her the mirror into which the sisters gaze — the mirror that reveals the poverty and humility of Christ — so that she, and her followers, might themselves become mirrors and examples to those living in the world, not least in their care for the sick.

The followers of Francis and Clare continued to spread their characteristic spirituality after the death of those two founders, and the Lesser Brothers for men, and the Poor Ladies for women were joined by the Third Order Regular — lay men and women who lived in their own homes and some of which later became small communities. These are the Three Orders of St Francis. There are Franciscan communities amongst both Roman Catholics and Anglicans, while the 'Third Order (now called the Secular Franciscan Order) continues to advance the distinctive spirituality of contemplation allied to active service.[12]

Of the spiritual writers that emerged from the movement, the most significant is Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (1221–74), a master of theology at Paris who wedded Franciscan spirituality with the wider theological tradition. In *The Soul's Journey into God* he traces a journey from creation, through the human person to the Trinity, culminating in a seventh moment of ecstatic rest in the crucified Christ.[13] Giovanni Fidenza was ill as a child and his mother made a vow to St Francis so that he was "snatched from the jaws of death and restored to perfect health and strength." He joined the Order in 1243, when it was at a low ebb, and the most important period for St Bonaventure was as Minister general from 1257–1267. It was at the beginning of this time that he withdrew to Mount La Verna, where Francis had had his vision and stigmata, and from his experience there wrote *The Soul's Journey into God.*

The first six chapters trace the stages of the journey, beginning with presenting ourselves to the whole material world, and then ascending the stages that are implanted in us by nature,

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[10] St Francis of Assisi. *Writings and Early Biographies*, (ed.) Marion A. Habig. Third Revised Edition. London: SPCK, 1979.

[11] John R. H. Moorman, The Franciscans, in (eds.) Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright and Edward Yarnold, SJ, *The Study of Spirituality*. London: SPCK, 1986. 301–08. 303.

[12] *Celebrating Common Prayer*, London: Mowbray, 1992. is a version of the Daily Office for Franciscans.

[13] Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey into God*. New York: Paulist Press, 1978. An online version in Latin with English translation can be accessed at
aculty.uml.edu/rinnis/45.304%20God%20and%20Philosophy/ITINERARIUM.pdf

deformed by sin and reformed by grace. (1.6) "Christ is the way and the door, Christ is the ladder and the vehicle, like the mercy seat placed above the ark of God and the mystery hidden from eternity." (7.1)

Bonaventure inspired other Franciscans to write mystical works, such as Jacopone da Todi (1230–1306) whose poems are "the perfect literary monument of Franciscan spirituality — its intensity of emotion, its religious realism, its paradoxical combination of austere penitence and gentle sweetness, its sudden flights into the unseen"[14] and Ramon Lull (1232–1314) who died a martyr in North Africa at the hands of the Moslems aged 82.[15]

A common characteristic of much Franciscan spiritual writing is adherence to the life of Christ. One might say that Franciscan spirituality involves both a mystical and literal following of Christ in the physical characteristics of his earthly life. Another is a constant wrestling with the tension between the active evangelical life, and the withdrawal from it for prayer and contemplation. This has been present throughout the history of the Franciscans. It is the adjustments made to that balance that we learn today how to be both people of active service and ministry, and people of prayerful contemplation. The journey inwards is saved from mere self-indulgence by the sacrificial way that the Gospel is preached in word and deed; the journey of a life of costly service is saved from mere activism overshadowed by pelagianism by the frequency and sincerity of the withdrawal from the world for prayer.

Carmelite Roots

The origins of the monastic movement called the Carmelites is obscure, but we know that by the early 13th century there were groups pf former Crusaders settling on 'the Holy Mountain near the Wadi 'ain es-Siah associated with Elijah. This disparate group of hermits, living in isolated cells approached Albert of Vercelli, Patriarch of Jerusalem, for a Rule somewhere between 1206 and 1214. Incursions of Moslems forced the group to leave the Holy land in 1238. A General Chapter of the Order in Aylesford, Kent in 1247 eventually produced *Quem honorem Conditoris*, which is the final version of the Rule. In it we find traces of the hermits who wanted to live free-range in the Holy Land, the small group who wanted to live as a community on the sacred Mountain, and the mendicant order akin to the well-established Franciscans and Dominicans.

"The simplicity and openness of the Rule contains a *nostalgie* for the fresh vistas and solitariness of the Holy Mountain of Carmel and it is to this nostaligie that later reformers such as Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross would respond in their sixteenth century 're-formation' of the Order."[16]

At the heart of all Carmelite spirituality is a desire to live a life of allegiance to Jesus Christ, serving him faithfully with a pure heart, through prayer and the service of one's neighbour. Jesus Christ is seen in the faces of those we encounter and whom we serve, and such a vision sustained by solitude, silence and prayerful reconciliation. Chapter 7 of the Rule says

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[14] Evelyn Underhill, *The Mystics of the Church.* London: J. Clarke, 1925. 96.
[15] Ramon Lull, *Art of Contemplation*, (trans.) Edgar Allison Peers, Gordon Press, 1979.; Ignatius Press, 2002. and *The Book of the Lover and the Beloved*. (ed.) Kenneth Leach. London: The Sheldon Press, 1978.
[16] Peter Tyler, Carmelite Spirituality, in (eds.) Richard Wood and Peter Tyler, *The Bloomsbury Guide to Christian Spirituality*, London: Bloomsbury, 2012. 117–129. 118.

"Let each remain in his cell or near it, meditating night and day upon the word of the Lord and keeping vigil inn prayer, unless he is occupied with other lawful, activities." In this regard, it draws inspiration from the earlier Desert Spirituality, but the solitude and silence is found in the midst of the world, not by withdrawing from it, and accompanied by acts of mercy and preaching.

By the middle of the 13th century communities with the name Carmelite were evident in Cyprus, Messina in Sicily, Aylesford and Hulne in England and Marseilles in France, and by the end of the 13th century there were 30 houses in England, centred on London, Oxford, Norwich and York, as well as new houses in Scotland and Ireland.

In England, the Order was identified with the promulgation of 'the new mysticism' of Walter Hilton and Richard Rolle. But its greatest spiritual flowering lay in the 16th century in Spain. Until 1452 there were no women Carmelite nuns, although with the promotion of 'lay' spirituality under Thomas Netter (d. 1430) lay women rapidly found a place. Female Carmelite communities grew rapidly in France, Belgium, Italy and Spain, and it would be in Spain that the re-formation of the Order under St Teresa of Avila would begin. She took the name for her reformed Carmelites, *Descalzo*, or 'Discalced', meaning shoeless — a spiritual reform that predated her. Teresa's spirituality was in essence a desire to return to the original eremitical and cenobitic element of the Carmelite life. Those who opposed this move emphasised more the mendicant aspect of the original charism. She was the first in a series of outstanding female Carmelite saints and writers, including St Thérèse of Lisieux (d. 1897) and Edith Stein (1891–1942).

Teresa was not allowed to study theology at a University, but she had absorbed and reinterpreted the medieval mystical tradition as a young woman, before the very books she had read were proscribed in the 1559 Spanish Index of Valdés. Although intended to control lay spirituality, the proscription galvanized Teresa into producing some of the greatest spiritual classics of the Western Church — *Camino de Perfecciòn*, *Meditationes del amor de Dios*, *Libro de Las Fundaciones*, and *Las Morados* (The Interior castle.)

Meanwhile, she met her outstanding co-worker, Juan de Santo Matia in Medina del campo in 1567. At the time Teresa was 52 and more than twice John's age, fresh from founding her first convent in Avila, but like Teresa, Juan was finding it hard to live the life of greater asceticism closer to the eremitical life of the first Carmelite fathers. He wanted to leave and join the Carthusians, but Teresa persuaded him to remain and work with him to reform the Carmelites from within. On 28 November1568 the Carmelite Father Provincial heard him and four others renounce the Mitigated Rule, and embrace the Primitive Rule of our Lady of Mt Carmel. Juan took the name by which we now know him — San Juan de la Cruz, Saint John of the Cross.

They encountered opposition, unsurprisingly, and while Teresa was confined to the Carmel of Toledo, John was imprisoned and disciplined at the Mitigated Priory in Toledo. There he found God in the deepest darkness of his dark night, and so began his remarkable career as poet and theologian. His great poems, including *The Dark Night of the Soul, The Living Flame of Love* and *The Spiritual Canticle*. The irony is that in seeking to suppress the reforms, the institutional and inquisatorial opposition merely provided the impetus for some of the greatest spiritual writing ever produced.

Such a story is repeated in the life of Edith Stein, a Jewish German, and significant philosopher, studying under Edmund Husserl, who converted and became St Theresa Benedicta of the Cross, and who died in Auschwitz on 9 August 1942. She had written about being truly radical in following the mystery of the way of the cross and the path to Calvary—and was critical of a cultural Catholicism that was unable to resist Nazism. This path to Calvary came to her on the afternoon of 2 August 1942 when the SS arrived at the convent at Echt, demanding she and her sister Rosa leave. The Carmelite vision of radical and personal transformation through prayer and service is epitomised in the life of this Jewish Christian saint.

In the life of OBM we find a discipline of stability drawn from St Benedict, a way of living an ordered life of prayer and action that draws upon Dominican and Franciscan patterns and from the Carmelites the way in which service of one's neighbour — so very much an aspect of Baptist activism — is sustained by prayer, solitude and prayerful recollection. To these we might add the Order of Jesuits and especially the Spiritual Exercises of its founder, Ignatius Loyola, from which is drawn most obviously the discipline of daily examen, or review of the day. In a quiet and relaxed setting, for about 15 minutes, focusing upon whatever has been enjoyed, and found life-giving. Without moralising, or seeking self-approval or disapproval. Simply thanking God for the gracious gift of those events. The prayer from the heart as simply and honestly as possible puts the day to rest.

With regular use of the *examen* we begin to notice what is creative in our lives and to distinguish it from what is destructive. The struggle between good and evil takes place within our lives and experience, and the first step is to appreciate God's creation.

This reflection together upon the inner life is also at the heart of the work in cell to engage in *examen.* This is a deliberate examining of those aspects of the life of the minister that are not explicitly related to the church or organisation in which the minister holds office — so often the sole topic of discussion at other gatherings of ministers. Here, discipleship, prayer and attentiveness to God are in focus, not programmes of work, numbers attending services or the size of the offering.

Paul Goodliff
3rd December 2020
The Feast of St Francis Xavier