

Obedience

Donald Nicholl

It is not often that one is given the privilege of being present at the very moment in which a movement or an institution took its origin. But in the case of the Spode House Conference Centre I was granted that privilege.

This is how it happened:

In the Spring of 1952 I found myself on many occasions visiting Fr Conrad in Blackfriars, at Oxford. I would often seek him out in the shack at the far end of the garden where he had established Blackfriars Publications. Not only did Conrad edit *Blackfriars* and *Life of the Spirit* from that cheerful, ramshackle structure, but from there he also managed to bring out numerous attractive hard back volumes under the imprint of Blackfriars Publications. It was a place where Conrad seemed to be in his element, encouraging his fellow Dominicans, as well as nuns and layfolk, to hand on the fruits of their contemplation to a wider public. He was even prepared to entrust the editing of a special issue of *Blackfriars* (on the Church in Germany) to the inexperienced hands of a very recent graduate, none other than the present writer.

I always used to look forward to calling upon Conrad at that far end of the garden because I knew that I would be received with a cheerful smile. I knew that I would also receive a fresh injection of the ideas, visions and gossip that made the Catholic world so lively and merry in those days – maybe an early glimpse of some penetrating article of Fr Victor White's or a review from the pen of Fr Richard Kehoe, full of original suggestions.

On other occasions I would go to see Conrad in his room within the enclosure. That had its amusing moments in those days because his room was next to that of an ancient Dominican who in the prime of life had been famous as a preacher of missions. It was on account of his neighbour's missionary proclivities that Conrad would sometimes look rather hollow-eyed of a morning – because the dear ancient believed himself to be still in the prime of his mission skills and that Conrad was his chosen apprentice. Fairly frequently the old man used to awaken in the middle of the night and, imagining that he was supposed to be setting off to preach a mission, he would bang on the wall that divided his room from Conrad's and shout for his apprentice to get ready quickly; because otherwise they would be late for their assignment.

At this Conrad used to get out of bed, slip on his habit and go next door. There he would sit side by side with the old missionary, on the edge of the bed, clutching a suit case and joining in the fiction that the two of them were sitting in a railway carriage *en*

route for Manchester or Liverpool. So far as I remember it was usually Liverpool, There, in bygone days, the old man had suffered the trauma of seeing a church group go up in flames as a result of the faithful having brandished their lighted candles when they were renewing their baptismal vows at the close of the mission. "Never let them light their candles", therefore, was the constant injunction dinned into the apprentice missionary's ears.

Not surprisingly, Conrad would sometimes look a bit haggard in the morning after such a night journey.

Yet on no occasion did I ever find him anything but cheerful and smiling – except once, and that was so unprecedented as to make me surmise that the railway journey the previous night must have proved specially taxing – perhaps they had even travelled beyond Liverpool to Belfast! All the same I had never seen Conrad looking so down, quite crestfallen, and I brashly enquired if my surmise was correct.

"If only it were so simple", he seemed to say. It was far more serious than that: the Dominican Provincial had told him to abandon his beloved Blackfriars Publications and move to Spode House in order to set up a Conference Centre there. Even to me, who only stood on the margins of the publishing enterprise, that news came as a blow. It would mean the end of the excitement of that adventure and the break-up, probably, of a circle of congenial friends in Oxford who had gathered around Blackfriars Publications. And all for what? For exile in darkest Staffordshire.

Conrad was low in spirit, struggling with that most fundamental of religious demands, i.e. obedience. I had seen him reckoning with obedience previously. In 1950, the Holy Year, he had approached the Prior for permission to go to Rome. During the interview the Prior had explained that he was himself heading a company of Dominican tertiaries on just such a pilgrimage. "Oh, I don't mean that", Conrad had somewhat naively replied, "I mean a proper pilgrimage – on foot". The Prior's reaction to the suggestion that his own pilgrimage was not "a proper one" provided Conrad with certain lessons in obedience. He did not go to Rome. But he took the setback in his stride, in the manner of an errant schoolboy caught in the act.

In the same way I had observed him now and again mischievously slipping controversial articles past the ecclesiastical censors, who tended at that period to be somewhat heavy-handed, solemn and lacking in humour, with their *imprimaturs* and their *imprimi potests*. But I knew all the time, and Conrad knew all the time, that his differences with the censors were no more than a game when all was said and done. Their differences were never so serious that the censor might some day demand Conrad's head upon a platter, nor vital enough for Conrad to place his neck on the block.

But the order to proceed to Spode was another matter altogether. Both the order itself and the manner of its issue seemed to constitute a judgment censuring the generous visions, as well as the frustrations and persistence, that had gone into Blackfriars Publications and which had borne such a rich harvest of Catholic writing. Now it seemed, quite suddenly, as though it had all been for nothing.

Yet the very next day Conrad was restored in spirit, his mind already set upon fulfilling his obedience at Spode House. The rest of the story is known to thousands of people whose lives have been immensely enriched through their stay at Spode House.

However for me there remains a gloss upon the story in the form of an incident that took place one afternoon in the Cafe Pergolesi, in the city of Santa Cruz, California. There my friend, Angela Tilby, of the BBC, was recording the answers given by various people to certain questions that she had been asking in the course of piecing together the radio series entitled *The Long Search Continued*. Off and on Angela had spent a year probing gurus, pundits and religious leaders with her searching questions. Her work now almost completed, Angela was finally addressing my colleague Mary Holmes. She put to Mary a question which she had already put during the past year to gurus and pundits in all corners of the earth. "What", she said to Mary, "is the highest form of religion?"

Instantly and without a trace of hesitation, Mary replied, "Obedience".

The rest of the Cafe company gathered round the tape-recorder, way-out liberals to a man, nearly fell off their chairs with shock on hearing that reply. It was the last thing they either expected or wanted to hear.

Even Angela looked taken aback because, as she told me later, in whatever corner of the earth she had put the question previously she had invariably got back the answer, "Mysticism", or its equivalent. Only here had she been given that unequivocal, rasping response, "Obedience".

I believe that the reason why I understood Mary's response straightaway can be traced back to that day in 1952 when I had been privileged to observe a triumph of obedience in Blackfriars. Already by that date Conrad had acquired a reputation as a pundit on the higher flights of mysticism, on the "shewings" of Lady Julian particularly. Now he was displaying a yet higher form of religion, which is obedience. Of course, Lady Julian must also have had a part in that. How could I think otherwise when I notice that it is on 8th May that I find myself writing these lines, that it was on 8th May that Lady Julian received her revelations — and it was on 8th May that our "obedient pundit", Mary Holmes, was born?