

## **ASA Chaplains Day: Towards a Theology of School Chaplaincy August 3, 2023**

When I left university clutching an arts degree with a major in history I had determined only one thing about my future: I had no intention of being a school teacher. Perhaps I should have checked the fine print. Twenty years later, I found myself accepting a call to become the inaugural school chaplain of an Anglican community school in Coffs Harbour on the mid-north coast of New South Wales.

Some months into what was proving to be an immensely painful baptism into the world of schools I recall telling my bishop that I'd learned one thing: I don't have to accept every new challenge that comes my way (of course, I haven't learned that at all . . . ). There, in my mid-forties, I was having the first-year-out-teacher-experience, an experience that retrospectively helped me to understand the shell-shocked look my husband John carried around when we were in our twenties as he'd begun life as a school teacher.

More than anything it was hard to get a handle on what sort of creature I was dealing with: the school. It was like a zoo on wheels. Every conceivable variety of animal – many young and unruly, some travelling in packs, some solitary beasts, some so unusual that they have never been identified and classified. It was like some giant, magnificent aviary with a collection of specimens from around the Earth, and a few from Mars too. And this menagerie included students, teachers, cleaners, office staff, grounds folk, and parents who periodically flew in, perched, and sometimes shat on us.

The zoo has wheels. This menagerie travelled through time at the speed of light: before you could get your head around what was happening, and your mouth open to say something moderately useful, it was too late – the term was over and everyone just disappeared. (I loved to wander around the campus during the holidays – it was so uncomplicated, so safe! Me and the ducks, real ones, cleaning up the last remaining vegemite crusts from the corners of the infants' playground.)

I'm not sure that I ever fully articulated a theology of school chaplaincy but let me share with you something I found incredibly helpful. The questions I began to ask were fundamentally about identity and community: what are we doing here? who am I in this community? how do I live well here? how do we live and work together? What a gift it was to find that these questions are the very stuff of the Rule of St Benedict.

Yes, the Rule of St Benedict – a small handbook intended to guide the life of a community of monks written in 6<sup>th</sup> century Italy. The rule consists of 73 short chapters, a booklet really.

I will now confess that my very first encounter with the text – or more accurately the list of chapter headings – did not immediately inspire me to read on. At the time I was retreating at the Benedictine monastery at Jamberoo and I saw the Rule

primarily as a curious monastic artefact. What need did I have for “ The Arrangement of the Night Office in Summer”, “ The Sleeping Arrangements of Monastics” or “The Qualifications of the Monastery Cellarer”. Although chapter 59 “The Offering of Children by Nobles or by the Poor” seemed tantalising – I was the mother of teenagers at the time.

My real discovery of the Rule came via a book that I had randomly picked up in the Grafton Cathedral bookshop: a contemporary commentary by American Benedictine nun Joan Chittister (*The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages*, Crossroad, NY, 1992).

It is the concrete and specific nature of the text, its focus on what we might regard as the minute details of a long-past way of life, that can seem initially off putting. But it is the very same quality that is at the heart of its endurance. The Rule, Chittister says, “is concerned with life: what it’s about, what it demands, how to live it.” (p. 19)

It began to give me an angle on living in this multifaceted creature called the school . And in particular, an Anglican school.

I had never been more conscious of integrating faith and work than in the context of the school community. School, like the monastery, is an intentional community. Not a twenty-four hour residential community to be sure, but certainly of serious enough proportions, in terms of our sharing of time and space, for us to encounter many of the same challenges that Benedict addressed. There were practicalities to sort out so that we could live an orderly life together, roles to be clarified, good leadership to be exemplified, rhythms to the day and year, but above all respectful relationships to be nourished.

Schools, like families and indeed monasteries, see the best and the worst of you. Under pressure, day by day, relating to young human beings going through the toughest of life’s growing processes with behaviours to match, it is impossible to be anything but yourself. You can’t just put on your Sunday best. Forgiveness and reconciliation, with a big dash of humility, become imperatives for community life.

Suddenly the Rule became for me a treasure house where I could mine for clues about living inside a community. Let me share just a few of the insights that nourished this time for me.

### **Listening**

Probably the most quoted words from the Rule are the very first – the beginning of the prologue to the rule:

Listen carefully, my child, to my instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart.

“Listen up!” how many times have you said that! Nothing is possible unless students pay attention. But we know too that it is not a one way street. Unless we listen to our students and to each other our enterprise is doomed. Listening must be a

foundational value for building community. But it is not just any sort of listening that we need to grow – it is heart listening. The sort of listening that goes beyond the surface. You will all know the experience, daily in the intense environment of a school, where someone will fly off rudely yet underneath is a different story. If only we find the time and space to listen more deeply. This must be the hardest thing to sustain and tend in a school - but if we can manage it even for a fraction of our time it is truly transformative – grace filled. You will all have stories that will confirm this.... For chaplains heart listening is perhaps our central call – listening to students, teachers, executive, cleaners, parents, the office crew - all the members of the “zoo on wheels”!

### **Hospitality & the Opus Dei**

The prologue to the Rule also encourages us to put first things first: “make prayer the first step in anything worthwhile that you attempt.” And in chapter 43 we are reminded that “nothing should be accounted more important than the work of God” – the *opus dei*. Twelve chapters of the Rule are devoted to the conduct of public prayer. In a way you might expect this emphasis in a monastic community. But the monastery was also an economic unit with an immense number of administrative and organisational matters to deal with, and my suspicion is that, being human like us, it just might have been easy to overlook or take for granted the core business (any institution, particularly as it grows faces this danger).

So what about the school community? The foundations of the school in Coffs had been dug in prayer. Birthed out of a local parish, the first sods were turned in great faith. In its early days the school was staffed by church attending Christians and steeped in prayer and worship. Then the kids came, and their parents, and staff hired more for their teaching expertise rather than an expressed Christian faith. By the time I arrived in the 5<sup>th</sup> year of the school a dangerous “us and them” culture – “Christians and non-Christians” – was beginning to threaten the development of a healthy community. The key challenge was how to grow an inclusive culture that was solidly grounded in our Anglican way of faith.

Two Benedictine principles came to the rescue: the centrality of public prayer (the *opus dei*) and the practice of hospitality. Hospitality and prayer are deeply connected. Like everything in the Rule they about the practical questions of how we use our time and space. A contemporary commentator on the Rule (Demetrius Dumm) makes this clear:

Time is one of the most precious gifts that we humans receive from God. It is clear that Benedict wants his monks to acknowledge this gift by returning choice portions of their time each day to God. In this way, they will practise the most basic form of hospitality, which is to make room in their schedules for the entertainment of God’s real but mysterious presence. All other forms of hospitality, whether it is welcoming guests or respecting nature, derive from this profound respect for the mystery of God. Thus, the apparent folly of ‘wasting’ time on God becomes the wisest possible use of this precious gift.

(Demetrius Dumm, “The Work of God”, in Anthony Maret-Crosby (ed.) *The Benedictine Handbook*. Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2003, p. 103).

Worship in the school environment is, of course, a conundrum. How can you be compelled to worship? In reflecting on how to approach worship in school I recalled the famous dictum: *lex orandi, lex credendi* – as we worship, so we believe. Worship (I'm thinking about our Sunday gatherings) is a core place for learning and growing. No one has arrived. We gather to hear of God's love and mercy, we listen to each other's needs, we bring our needs before God. All in a hospitable space that we call sacred or holy. And, importantly, we come always partly unbelieving. The stranger or outsider is in us, not just in the newcomer or unbeliever. We are all on a faith journey, none of us has arrived. And we are all welcomed as honoured guests in the house of God. If this is true of Sunday worship - where folk choose to attend – perhaps it might be true of worship in our Anglican schools.

In Coffs this became my aim: to develop in the school chapel as a hospitable space for listening, nourishing and journeying together; a deep space, where things matter and are taken seriously. A space which gives God space to work with us. In Coffs there was no purpose built chapel so I took over a left over space in a new building that had been destined to be a small drama space.

This emphasis of the centrality of the chapel might give the impression that students in Coffs spent hours and hours attending services. In fact most students would attend chapel for a mere twenty minutes a fortnight (staff twice a week for 15 minutes). A small space and a small amount of time, but somehow it seemed bigger in the life of the school community – not visibly bigger, but rather like something nudging and seeping into the life of the school. In his rule for community life Benedict directed that the “oratory ought to be what it is called, and nothing else is to be done or stored there”. Joan Chittister expands: “Have a place where you can go in order to be about nothing but the business of being in the presence of God so that every other space in your life can become more conscious of that Presence as well” (Chittister, p. 139). Reading this was a great “aha” moment for me, confirming my more intuitive grabbing of a space for a small chapel.

### **Humility**

There is so much more that could be said!

The long, early chapter on humility (7) inspired me to begin thinking about the school as an ironically counter-cultural activity. In the midst of our core business of socialisation and education our gospel foundations also called us to call our culture to account – and to challenge, for example, the values of materialism and individualism. Humility also allowed us to be wrong, to be given yet another chance and to honour the remarkable achievements of average human beings.

In the period after I ceased to be chaplain to the school I served on the College Board. At the end of my seven year journey with that community we finished a process of trying to articulate the particular charism of the school. Now that I look back I can see the gentle footprint of St Benedict and his Rule in our vision and values statements, but most particularly in our hopes for “departing collegians” who, we dreamed:

will have a passion for learning and will value the virtues of wisdom and integrity. They will be individuals who endeavour to positively transform the communities in which they live and work. In the great and the small things they do, they will enliven and enrich our world.

I think St Benedict would have approved.

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