

Benedicta Ward, SLG, in a Few Words: Nun, Scholar, Teacher

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In this volume we have learnt a great deal about the lives of monastics from centuries past. Thoughts now turn to the life of a monastic from our own times, to the honour and of this volume herself.

On the one hand there is fairly little to say: born Florence Margaret Ward on 4 February 1933, after an education at grammar schools and the Bolton School,¹ and a Bachelor of Arts in history at the University of Manchester, she became a member of the contemplative community of the Sisters of the Love of God, Fairacres, Oxford, in 1955, aged 22.² Case closed.

On the other hand there is a great deal to say, particularly about Sister Benedicta's scholarly life. From 1972 to 1978 Sister Benedicta studied for a DPhil at St Anne's College, Oxford, under Sir Richard Southern. This was subsequently published as *Miracles and the Medieval Mind: Theory, Record, and Event 1000–1215*.³ From 1979 to 1981 Sister Benedicta was a member of Wolfson College, and in 1982 began her work with the Theology and History faculties at Oxford as a highly successful and unanimously loved teacher of undergraduates. Sister Benedicta's long association with Harris-Manchester College⁴ began in 1991, as an associate director of the college, followed by positions as honorary lecturer from 1995 to 1999, supernumerary fellow during 1999–2013 and Emeritus Fellow in June 2013. She was made Reader in the History of Christian Spirituality at the University of Oxford in 1999, and has taught

¹ Which also boasts Sir Ian McKellen as a former pupil, something which as a *Lord of the Rings* fan, Sister Benedicta may find appealing, despite dissatisfaction with the recent film version of *The Hobbit*; 'it may be *The Hobbit* but it isn't Tolkien's *Hobbit*'.

² For some basic details I am indebted to Debra L. Stoudt's biography of Sister Benedicta, 'Benedicta Ward, S.L.G.: The Love of Learning and the Love of God', in Chance (ed.), *Women Medievalists and the Academy* (Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005). When I visited Sr Benedicta one Friday in Lent 2013 to glean details for this piece it was to this chapter that she directed me, in order that we might better spend our time on (a suitably penitential – but delicious) lunch and a discussion about Pope St Celestine V.

³ Benedicta Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind: Theory, Record, and Event, 1000–1215* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1981, rev. edn, 1987).

⁴ Or Manchester College, as it was known then.

and lectured on church history from early to reformation periods, medieval English mysticism and Teresa of Avila.

Sister Benedicta's scholarly output consists of 16 books, all still in print, including works on Anselm, the Venerable Bede and Anglo-Saxon Spirituality. Her scholarly views are often informed particularly by her own monastic context, for instance in her paper given to the Anselm Society (revised and first published in 1973), *Anselm of Canterbury: A Monastic Scholar* where she discusses the link between Anselm's scholarly and monastic lives. Sister Benedicta's monastic context can also often put her in a position to both uniquely understand and uniquely question the material with which she is presented. One example of this is her firm argument that Julian of Norwich, for years presumed to be a nun of Carrow, was a widowed laywoman with children, possibly living with her mother at the time of her illness when she received the visions. In many ways the view which Sister Benedicta advanced on the subject can be seen to have been started by a basic questioning of the material with respect to what made the most sense. Sister Benedicta could tell that Julian was no nun, not least because Julian's writing contains no hints of the cloister. A forceful questioning of the material and sources available resulted in a short but extremely influential publication, which has changed the direction of studies on Julian.⁵ Indeed it was all the more powerful because what monastic would not want to claim Julian as one of her own?

At present Sister Benedicta is working on a major study of relics, with the working title 'Relics in the Medieval Mind'. Her remarks to me upon discussing it were as follows: 'I am happy to get on with it because I am now pretty certain that I know what they meant to medieval people. The problem is that I'm still not sure what they mean to me. I don't kiss bones.' The comment was intended to amuse (and it did), but it also showed that Sister Benedicta is acutely aware of her place in a Christian – and indeed a monastic – tradition that continues.

One of Sister Benedicta's greatest scholarly contributions has been in the work of academic translation, which in itself is a process of continuing a tradition, of drawing the great texts of the past into the future. Indeed, Sister Benedicta has provided the definitive translations of many major works from the history of monasticism and Christian spirituality, such as Anselm's *Prayers and Meditations*, the Desert Fathers and the *Exordium Magnum Cisterciense*.⁶ She is currently 'wrestling' with a translation of Anselm's *Memorials* for the British Academy. Through Sister Benedicta's devotion to the gruelling work of translation many have come to discover great riches, from understanding the pure isolation of the Desert to the history of the English church as seen from the wilds of Northumbria. As Sister Benedicta has put it herself, 'To undertake translation is in itself a part of charity . . . (it is) a way of offering treasure to others.'⁷

The same of course can be said of teaching and as I am quite sure that Sister Benedicta won't thank me for an exhaustive biography, I want to instead finish with a

⁵ Benedicta Ward and Kenneth Leech, *Julian Reconsidered* (Oxford: SLG Press, 1988).

⁶ For full details see the bibliography of works by Benedicta Ward, SLG in this volume pp (000).

⁷ Benedicta Ward, 'Translator's Charity', in William Radice and Barbara Reynolds (eds.), *The Translator's Art: Essays in Honour of Betty Radice* (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1987). I am again grateful to Stoudt, 'Benedicta Ward S.L.G . . .' for drawing my attention to this.

brief meditation of sorts on the treasures she has offered – and continues to offer – as a teacher.

For a happy term of my undergraduate career I made a weekly trek to Cowley (which as a confirmed Jericho-dweller seemed to be the end of the earth). There, at 6 Moberly Close, amidst figurines of Peter Rabbit and menacing Orcs from *The Lord of the Rings*, Sister Benedicta offered to me the treasures of Julian's *Shewings* and of the *Cloud of Unknowing*. The *Cloud* and the *Book of Privy Counselling* which goes with it are both primarily works of teaching, from the experienced monastic to the young. The *Cloud* author's work of service in passing on the techniques of contemplative prayer to the young monk shows that the work of teaching lies very firmly at the heart of monastic vocation and formation. Indeed in the teaching of the *Cloud* I find something of the teaching methods of Sister Benedicta Ward.

There is the personal nature of the *Cloud* author's teaching. His words at the start of the *Book of Privy Counselling* remind us that his efforts are personally focused and invested in his tutee; 'since at the moment I intend to write to you in particular, I shall write nothing but what seems to me most beneficial and relevant to your own inclination.'⁸ Furthermore in the prologue of the *Cloud* itself the *Cloud* author warns against a half-baked approach to the material, and his insistence that his reader should read the whole text was something that, if memory serves, Sister Benedicta was equally insistent on!⁹

More seriously, in chapter 33 of the *Cloud*, the young monk is encouraged to try the technique for himself and to attempt to teach back to the *Cloud* author, in a spirit of mutuality. Over all these things is the *Cloud* author's ardent desire that the young monk to whom he writes might grow in prayer, that he might be enriched. It is, quite simply, the same process of 'offering treasure' that Sister Benedicta identified herself in the work of translation. This is something that I understand as being deeply monastic in root. It is redolent of a process of formation, of gentle encouragement and growth within and around a tradition. It is not so much a forced education as a development of the mind towards a new way of behaviour. With respect to the Christian Spirituality paper at Oxford, which Sister Benedicta taught me, it was a process of gaining the skills of interpretation in the context of a tradition, and of understanding prayer as a mode of thought.

If I am allowed a rather specific, and personal, reminiscence I will share the following, that in one tutorial Sister Benedicta reminded me that our discussions, our mutual work – my feeble essays and her excellent teaching – distanced us from the 'real work' of prayer itself. It was this comment, perhaps only really meaningful from the perspective of a nun or monk, which taught me the most. It taught me how to view the world of the *Cloud* in its monastic context of work and prayer, of the active and contemplative lives intertwined.

As the *Cloud* author points out, it is impossible to be 'fully active unless you are partly contemplative' and equally impossible to be 'fully contemplative unless you

⁸ Prologue to 'The Book of Privy Counselling' in *The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works* Trans. A. C. Spearing (London: Penguin, 2001) pp. 103.

⁹ See Spearing, *The Cloud of Unknowing* . . . pp. 11.

are partly active'.¹⁰ I believe that what the *Cloud* author is really saying in the 'yin and yang' scenario he suggests is that above all the mind must be free to follow its vocation, and that it is in the true spiritual freedom that comes from following one's vocation that union with God can occur.

In Sister Benedicta I have always detected that freedom of mind which comes with a pure response to vocation, for her a trifold and in all parts monastic one, as contemplative, scholar and teacher. It has produced extraordinary results in her scholarly work and in the achievements of her students. Indeed it continues to do so not only as Sister Benedicta continues to write and to interact with and advise countless students and scholars in her new 'anchorage' at the gates of Fairacres Convent, but also I dare say in the 'real work' of prayer.

In chapter 4 of the *Cloud of Unknowing* the *Cloud* author warns his reader to: 'take good care of time and how you spend it, for nothing is more precious than time'.¹¹ The warning has a strong Anselmian ring to it, which may be seen clearly in the following passage:

What reply will you make in that day when at the twinkling of an eye an account is demanded of you for all the time that has been dealt out to you? How have you expended it?¹²

It is clear, to me at least, that in her remarkable gifts of teaching and scholarship, and in that 'real work' which exists more privately, Sister Benedicta makes great use of the time that is dealt out to her. She maximizes those precious moments in order to offer us treasure indeed and I, for one, am extremely grateful to receive it.

¹⁰ Spearing, *The Cloud of Unknowing* . . . chapter 8, p. 31

¹¹ Spearing, *The Cloud of Unknowing* . . . chapter 4, p. 24.

¹² *The Prayers and Meditations of St Anselm*, trans. Benedicta Ward (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1973), p. 222.



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