

"O Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God and our most gentle Queen and Mother, look down in mercy upon England thy Dowry."

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Special issue on *religious vocations*

By Fr Armand de Malleray, FSSP

Of dragons and monks

Three abbeys, two films, one novel

Virtue

Englishness

Normality of tradition

Contemporary

Titanic?

Colwich Abbey

A comedy of errors

Promising precedents

Fancy surviving?

God's stock exchange

Celibates not doomed

Celibates redeemed

The dragon's tail

Dogmatic fog and softer rules

Sister Lancaster Act

For young souls' love

Vatican II on cloistered life

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Of dragons and monks

The book series *How To Train Your Dragon* has sold over sixteen million copies worldwide in forty-six languages. Interest spread very far beyond the small circle of dragon-owners. Indeed, most readers claim no direct or regular contacts with actual dragons. But thanks to the English author of that groundbreaking publication, it is now scientifically proven that modern people are still dragon-aware. They know well that dragons live in mountain caves where they watch over hoarded gold, and breathe fire against intruders. Not everyone is a dragon enthusiast, but instances of clinical dragon-phobia

are almost non-existent. What is true of dragons applies to monks.

Monks are known to dwell in abbeys or monasteries. Keeping some treasure of their own, they eat, sleep, walk, or talk (then in Latin) little. Like dragons, monks, nuns, and abbeys are mentioned everywhere in modern society and yet, seldom do our contemporaries come across living ones. A few illustrations will help. Take *Downton Abbey* for instance, the famous 2010s English television series. Its 'Abbey' is an English mansion peopled not with monks but with fox-hunting, lay aristocrats, and diligent staff. And yet the character Lady Mary Crawley

speaks the truth when she confides, "Monks used to live here." Before her, English novelist Jane Austen (1775-1817) wrote *Northanger Abbey*, a novel involving no monk character. Finally, the Beatles' music album *Abbey Road* (1969) further increased their global fame even though the monastery after which the road and the album were named had long disappeared.

As further witnesses to modern monk-awareness, numerous edifices built in good English stone are called 'abbey' or 'priory' despite harbouring no living monk or nun. Such are tourist landmark Westminster Abbey; safari park Woburn Abbey; private mansions Stoneleigh Abbey and Calke Abbey; plus Newstead Abbey (founded by King Henry II in expiation for the murder of Saint Thomas Becket, later stolen from the Augustinian friars by King Henry VIII, and given to poet Lord Byron's ancestors). Indeed many more 'abbeyes' still stand as empty romantic ruins, such as Rievaulx Abbey, Furness Abbey, Basingwerk Abbey, Buildwas Abbey, Byland Abbey, Fountains Abbey, Roche Abbey, Cleeve Abbey, Garendon Abbey, Croxden Abbey, Whitby Abbey, Malmesbury Abbey, Battle Abbey, Valle Crucis Abbey; or Lindisfarne Priory, Mount Grace Priory, Norton Priory, Beauvale Priory, Cardigan Priory, Bolton Priory, Grace Dieu Priory, Dunstable Priory, Walsingham Priory, and dozens more sometimes patched up. (Quoting them all, plus the ruined nunneries, would require an entire chapter!) Finally, the



(Photo by Akshaye Sikand on Unsplash)

famous college quadrangles in English universities such as Oxford and Cambridge betray their monastic origin.

But who has actually met a living monk, or a cloistered nun in the flesh? Happily I have, not only in England but abroad too. I have prayed in chapels or stayed in guest houses of Benedictines (including Olivetans), Carmelites, Carthusians, Cistercians, Dominicans, Franciscans, Bridgettines, Bernardines, Servites, Norbertines, and Redemptorists—to name but a few.¹ How grateful I am to those monks, nuns and friars! Cloistered men and women provide badly needed havens of restful silence. If such was their main or only service to the Church and society, it would already be considerable. But believers know that there is more to it. The chief accomplishment of enclosed religious of either sex goes beyond our senses. Faith only can reveal to us the crucial motive of cloistered life. It is the oblation of self to God for his glory, for one's own sanctification, and for the salvation of others. Thus, abbeys, monasteries and priories inhabited by consecrated men and women are



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mystical powerhouses. They are live connections between our fallen world and heaven. They are watchtowers of sacrificial intercession placating divine justice, obtaining graces of conversion and of healing for countless souls.

Cloistered monks and nuns also set a more radical example for layfolk, as well as for secular clergy and non-enclosed religious. Indeed, in addition to giving up private belongings, family, and subjective will through the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, cloistered members also renounce mobility. On entering this monastery or that convent, they commit to remaining there until they die (unless the good of the community dictates otherwise). This seems madness or abuse to modern men and women misled by a false understanding of freedom, which they define as arbitrary autonomy. But the Lord Jesus taught that authentic freedom derives from the knowledge of the truth, *And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free* (Jn 8:32). Surrendering created goods to God as a sacrifice of love facilitates the knowledge of the truth, freeing

up the soul. Cloistered religious show that life on earth merely prepares for life eternal. They renounce not only sinful things but even good ones, *lay[ing] up to [them]selves treasures in heaven* (Mt 28:20). The way they invest in the afterlife reminds all of the preparatory purpose of time here below in view of judgement by God, and of subsequent eternity with God or without God. No wonder that long ago monasteries became centres of civilisation, attracting within their walls scholars and pilgrims, and to their outskirts families and tradesmen, out of the darkness of paganism, into their cultural and cultic radiance. Please God, new monasteries will play a similar role in the near future. But will modern man permit it?

Modern society dislikes being reminded of judgement and eternity because the secularist mentality has successfully alienated man from God, and from God's natural and religious laws. To maintain their sinful ignorance, such people are prone to destroying cloistered communities as did King Henry VIII of England and his supporters

¹ The degree of enclosure varies of course from strict papal cloistered communities to semi-apostolic ones, or to some not canonically enclosed even though they lead a life akin to cloistered religious. I thus include formal monks and nuns, as well as friars and members of mendicant orders. But I omit from the list our dear Oratorians because they don't take religious vows, and because the choral recitation of the Divine Office is not a defining feature of their way of life. They do a great service to the cities where they minister, however, and I am grateful for the hospitality they extended to me on various occasions in London, Birmingham, Manchester, Oxford, York, Cardiff, Bournemouth, and Dublin.



between 1536 and 1541. They may target contemplative life in particular, as did 'enlightened' Emperor Joseph II of Austria in 1782. More often they will make no distinction between secular and religious, as did the French Jacobins from 1789 and their Soviet followers in the USSR, or the freemasons in Mexico from 1926 to 1929, etc. In contrast with those political leaders, the attitude of ordinary citizens is more peaceful, though no less detrimental to their souls. What is their stance? They consider enclosed monks and nuns as they do dragons. Dragons and monks are mythical creatures not devoid of cultural interest. They can attract, as do things beautiful and sinister. But such a charm must be resisted, lest one gradually lose common sense and start considering such beings as perhaps not totally fantastic, but real, worthy of interaction and, why not, beneficent.

Are even Catholics totally immune from the 'R.A.D.' syndrome just described? The 'Reductio Ad Draconem' is the practical dealing with enclosed religious as with

dragons. I know, most Catholic readers will object, claiming that they respectfully believe in monks and nuns. But so say dragon adepts in regard to their chosen myth. Let us ask ourselves the following questions, then. When did we last visit a living monastery or a convent for a time of prayer, or stay the night over there for recollection? When did we last donate alms to the monks and nuns; or help finance their new roof or boiler, or their formation; or buy their homemade beer, lavender soap, or honey? When did we last encourage young men and women to consider a religious calling, passing on to them a flyer or forwarding an email about vocational discernment? Do we recall reading good books about or by saintly monks and nuns, such as the short *Rule of Saint Benedict*, or the *Life of Saint Martin* (of Tours) by Sulpitius Severus, or Saint Hildegard of Bingen's *Book of Divine Works*, or *The Soul of the Apostolate* by Abbot Jean-Baptiste Chautard? When did we last offer specific prayers or the holy sacrifice of the Mass for the few aging religious left in our country? Or, on hearing that our friend's child was

joining a monastery, did we smile in genuine thanksgiving to God and for the Church, or secretly out of relief, assuming that our son at least would remain in the world and would 'do something useful' with his life, smart as he is; or that our daughter would not shroud herself under wimple, veil and cowl, but would marry well and give us cute grandchildren, pretty as she looks? When did we sit down or kneel before God and plainly ask him whether he called us to religious life? If already married or retired, have we looked up third-orders and oblate programmes to see what they entail and whether we may join one? Finally, when did we admit to ourselves that God willed probably five hundred times¹ more monks and nuns in our country, and that we now have a part to play in such a glorious undertaking?

¹ That would bring us back to pre-Dissolution settings, when most English people could reach some nunnery, priory, commandery, or monastery within half an hour from where they lived.

This online issue of *Dowry* No65 ends with this introduction, in anticipation of a release of the full text as a book scheduled for the end of 2025. Thank you for your interest.