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**How to work together Think Tank**

**unMonastery – Relearning the Rules, part two  
a conversation between Brother Paul Quenon and Ben Vickers**

**Transcript**

Ben: I think that's probably one of the major differentiators between what we're trying to achieve and how the monasteries operate, or at least our perception of the Benedictine monasteries, as isolated spaces retreating from civilisation. We consider the interface with the local community to be a major part of our work but we're still at times questioning that as an absolute direction. In terms of where you're located, what kind of relationship do you have to the local area?

Br. Paul: Well, we're out in the country, it's mostly an agricultural area. I would say... Yeah, there are farms still, but many of the neighbours have jobs in town, they'll commute, go to Bardstown or even Louisville, which is an hour away. Some of them are Catholic, some of them come to early Mass on Sunday.

The monastery has been here over 150 years, so we're a permanent part of the neighbourhood so to speak. Not everybody knows us – you'd be surprised – but a lot of people do, and they might have worked for us at one time, in construction or on the farm. We don't have a farm anymore. And there are poor people in the neighbourhood. We have an outreach programme, a charity programme. Our policy is that, and this is kind of like the ideal of the Order, we live by the work of our own hands, and the surplus we have over and above our income can then go to the poor.

We serve a good number of poor people in the neighbourhood. There's an agency, a couple of agencies, we work through – we don't do direct help anymore the way we used to. So, instead of just handing out food baskets at the front gate the way they did back in the 1950s, we fund a number of agents.

Ben: Okay. There's a couple of questions that I want to ask around that. But before I do, in terms of the *work*... What kind of work is your order engaged in?

Br. Paul: Yes. Well, it varies from monastery to monastery of course. Some monasteries are still into agriculture of some sort. For instance, our monastery in California has vineyards and orchards; they're very agricultural. Our monastery in South Carolina, they're growing mushrooms now, making a good income with mushroom. But a lot of the monasteries in the United States have turned towards small industries in a rural area. For instance, making candy; the nuns have been doing that, making fruit cake. So, that's our industry here at Gethsemani, making fruit cake and making bourbon fudge, and then selling it through the mail.

Ben: This is interesting to us, since one of the things that I've been curious about—with respect to unMonastery. In our initial thinking, or at least one of the ways that we designed it was with government policy in mind, and that means that there's a specific funding stream in terms of almost selling it as a service to governments and small towns and cities. But, the original intention was to create a high degree of autonomy for those who had the aspiration to live in the world in a different way, and in reflection we've realised that before we move forward into the future we need to seriously think about production as a means for supporting what we do. I wonder, since production has always been a part of the monastery as I understand it...

- Br. Paul: Yes. Well, in some form or other. The ideal of the Cistercian reform of the Benedictine Order in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, 11<sup>th</sup> century, was to be independent, that we would not be dependent on the aristocracy and on donations. Of course there was some of that, that's how they got their land for the most part, but at least if you look at the constitutions, to be self-supporting has been the goal. It doesn't always happened that way, but that's what we're aiming at. So, to do that—now, there are monasteries, for instance, who derive a lot of their income from a bookstore, a gift shop, especially the European monasteries.
- Ben: So, in respect to this kind of production, historically the monasteries have played a significant role in innovation. Devising new farming techniques, medicinal, educational and I wondered: in the present moment for monasticism there's what I perceive to be a difficult situation, in not attracting a younger generation... and this is my perception – I might be wrong. But this is creating a bottleneck for bringing in new innovative ideas, and I wanted to know: how receptive do you think the existing monasteries would be to this?
- Br. Paul: Innovative ideas?
- Ben: Receptive... Yes.
- Br. Paul: Oh. Well, if it solves a practical problem I think people would be open to it, because every monastery... We exist in a changing situation, and so a lot of monasteries are always looking for new ways of making an income. For instance, getting back to our monastery at Mepkin in South Carolina, they had been raising chickens and selling eggs for decades. That became an issue with the animal rights people, and they weren't really doing that well with the chickens so they simply sold all the chickens and started this mushroom business, and that's done quite well.
- Ben: Interesting, one of the focuses of unMonastery is technological innovation, that's kind of our specialty, do you know of monasteries within your particular Order, whom are engaged with new forms of technology?
- Br. Paul: Oh yes, as a matter of fact. At Christ in the Desert, a monastery in New Mexico... They're not Cistercian, but they are Benedictine, and they have developed an economy based on website management and design, and they're doing quite well with that. Now, there was a monastery in Minnesota, they were Cistercians of the Common Observance, which is a branch... it's really a separate Order, but it's the same tradition. They had developed a quite lucrative business of restoring inkjet cartridges and they were doing so well that the business really consumed too much of the abbot's time and effort, and they were making millions of dollars... but then the whole thing collapsed because they just could not make it... They couldn't live under so much pressure, business pressure, whilst also living the monastic life at the same time, and the abbot who was a young man who had developed this business... He just left the monastery.
- Ben: Really? To continue the business?
- Br. Paul: No, the whole place just collapsed, they just broke apart and each went their way.
- Ben: That's really compelling, since one of the reasons why we were driven to look at the monasteries to begin with was to try and understand them as a different way of life, a kind of insulation from the existing job markets and essentially capitalism, and it's interesting to hear that story in terms of the unsustainability of a monastic way of life in the context of creating a business. In terms of your experience... How do those forms of work fit or not fit together?

Br. Paul: Well, there's two aspects to that. On the one hand, let's face it: we're all tied into a capitalistic system. You can look at all the monasteries... you know, it's just... there's no way of getting away from it. And we haven't really tried to get away from it, we've just tried to take advantage of the market system that we have. On the other hand, you don't want—as we have touched on already—for it to take over and become a dominating situation... To meet a market demand for instance, it can then be inimical to the quiet of the monastic life. A very recent example of that is right here at this monastery. We used to make cheese, we had been making cheese since the 1950s, and as of this year we have stopped selling cheese... And the reason is, for one thing, we don't have enough people to do that very labour-intensive work, and the dilemma was that if we try to keep up that production then it simply consumes all our time, and then you don't have enough time for the quiet life.

Ben: One of the things that is striking to me is that you are able to reference the activity of other monasteries, and curious to know how the different monasteries are connected to each other; how they communicate and how they might come to compare notes?

Br. Paul: Yes. Well, that's a good question. And I remember that you were interested in that whole thing, what kind of a system we have. *[laughs]* and... I don't know how much you've read up on this already, but the Cistercian monasteries are on the one hand autonomous, each abbey is autonomous economically, and each one has its own superior. Now, in the time of the Cistercian reform back in the 11<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> century the monastery of Cluny was sort of like a mega corporation. Cluny was the major monastery in a whole web of monasteries, and the Abbot of Cluny was the abbot of all these different monasteries. The Cistercians rebelled against that, each monastery has its own abbot and there is no supreme abbot. Now, we have what we call the Abbot-General, but he is not really the general in the usual sense, he's more like an agent for the general chapter.

The general chapter is the supreme agent of the Cistercian Order, and the general chapter is comprised of the abbots and abbesses of all the Cistercian monasteries around the world. They all get together every other year or so and make decisions as a collective – it was one of the first parliamentary bodies in Europe. So, the legislation is determined collectively. So, of course, at the general chapters there is information given out about each monastery, so each monastery has to make a house report, and then there are committees set up to address certain problems. There might be some monasteries that need special help, probably need some problem solving so that is taken care of and advice will be given. And that's, of course, up to the monastery to apply it.

Now, there's kind of a substructure underneath this general chapter, and that would be the mother-daughter system, the mother-house daughter-house system. The mother-house is a monastery which establishes another monastery. In other words, the monks from Gethsemani Abbey went off to California and started a monastery in California. We have six daughter-houses from Gethsemani. Now, the abbot of the mother-house remains the superior of the daughter house until they're an independent and solidly established enough to elect their own abbot. At that point they become independent, but there remains a connection, because every second year the abbot of the mother-house makes a visitation to the daughter-house, and that visitation is basically an advisory function. The abbot, the Visitor, has to interview every monk in the monastery and see to the welfare of the house.

Now, he does not become abbot of that monastery, they already have an abbot, all he can do is make recommendations. So, it's kind of an honorary system, the monastery may or may not take it seriously, they may or may not apply the recommendations made. But hopefully the recommendations to begin with were things that arose from discussion with the monks. Nowadays most abbots will do a dialogue, a community dialogue – everybody together – perhaps read his recommendations or his house report, get feedback from the community, revise it, then draw up a final form and that's what is presented to the general chapter.

Ben: That's very interesting, because of an experience that I went through last weekend. Right now there's a group of people in Athens, that want to start another unMonastery, but in order to arrive at a clear sense of commitment to that we had to spend a very long time sat in a circle discussing this and aligning our perspective.

It took us a long time to get to those kinds of agreements, but when we were at the stage where we were thinking about the different responsibilities that people would take, that same mechanism of the mother and daughter... I took on a similar role to the one you describe, by saying "I will just be a mentor, I will just make recommendations, but you have total autonomy." and it's just super interesting to hear... It's almost as if there's an essence that emerges through people gathering and attempting to do similar things, maybe.

Br. Paul: It's a similar organic procedure, isn't it?

Ben: It was a slow and painful procedure, but in a good way, in that we spent three days having day-long conversations until we arrived at a place that made sense for all of us.

Br. Paul: And so you got there without having known anything about the Cistercian system.

Ben: No. *[laughs]* Which is...

Br. Paul: So, you reinvented the wheel. *[laughs]*

Ben: Well, I think we keep reinventing the wheel over and over again. It's worth saying that when we started the project we said that "unMonastery" would only replicate certain elements of monasticism, but with more time spent speaking to those who live under the Rule the more I find that we're just doing exactly the same thing in a very, very haphazard, messy way.

Br. Paul: Isn't that interesting? Here's a little bit of philosophy about why monasticism has survived over the centuries. To put it this way, if everything depended on the abbot... Suppose you have a one-legged table. Well, that's not very stable, is it? What we have is a tripod, and instead of just one leg on the tripod we have... Well, what's the second leg on the tripod? Well, the second leg on the tripod is the Holy Rule. There's a structure which is given, which seems to have defined for us the structure, and actually it has defined for us a three-legged structure.

So, the abbot has to follow the Rule, he can't just arbitrarily make up new rules. I mean, make up something that would be contradictory to the Rule. So, what's the third leg? Well, the third leg is the community. The community itself is the third leg. Then you get a stable tripod, and the abbot has to listen to the community as well as to the Rule, and the community has to listen to the abbot and follow the Rule. That seems to me to have been a great reason for why the Rule of Saint

Benedict has survived so long.

Ben: But presumably in order to make this work effectively you need a coherent decision making process or is it done entirely through speaking to one another?

Br. Paul: There is a voting system and we vote for the abbot to begin with. The abbot is not appointed, he's voted by the community, by the professed members of the community.

Ben: Why do you think this is the process?

Br. Paul: Because the abbot should be an expression of the community. Ideally he comes up out of the community, but it doesn't always happen that way. So, it's not a monarchy that we have, it's not a democracy, it's something of a parliamentary system. There is an executive branch, there is a judicial branch, and there is a... Well, the people have a voice. And in the Rule of Saint Benedict, as you may have come across, he says "Everybody should be listened to, even the youngest and the newest member of the community, because sometimes the Holy Spirit can speak through that person". So, there again, it basically stems from the autonomy of our monasteries. In its maturity the abbot is not appointed unless there's some dire situation; he is normally voted in by the community.

Ben: There's something in respect to the Rule, and I think one of the things that people who I'm working with find most attractive is that it proposes an entirely different idea of work and life, and that those things aren't necessarily separated. There's a book that we've been reading by an Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben, and there was something I wanted to quote from the book, to hear your reflection or your understanding of it. He says in reference to the Rule "A life that is linked so closely to its form that it proves to be inseparable from it, in which both Rule and life lose their familiar meaning in order to point in the direction of a third thing. Our ~entire~ task is precisely to bring this third thing to light." I wonder if you could illuminate maybe what Agamben means by the third thing?

Br. Paul: Oh. Well, I like his idea that the form and the life are very, very closely associated. There again, it's an organic union that takes place. But, of course, the form is always changing too, just like life changes. I mean, the life here does not look exactly the way it did when I entered 55 years ago. I would think the third thing, that's a good question. Maybe it's best simply to leave it as an open question, unanswered. I think it's the life of the Spirit. Since the monastery is here to serve the monks, the monks are not here to serve the monastery. "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." [Mark 2:27] So, you know, the thing that's brought to life is the intangibles.

Ben: You said an interesting thing there about how the monastery is different to the way in which it was when you first entered. I've been really curious to try and understand how within an individual monastery the culture changes or evolves over time?

Br. Paul: *[laughs]* Well, of course the culture changes, and the time was when we were not talking to one another. The silence was very strict, and it was pretty much the abbot running the whole show. And, of course, that's not the Rule of Saint Benedict; if you read it carefully, The Rule recommends that if not everybody's is consulted, at least the "sanior pars", the saner people, the more sensible people will be consulted by the abbot. Well, there was a time when that wasn't happening, and so as a result it set a rigid pattern. Or, it set a way of life in which

there's a bit of autocratic style of abbot. If you read the history of Gethsemani, we've had autocratic abbots, *[laughs]* and the monks just kind of crouched and obeyed. Then as we became more democratic as a culture, people started coming in and saying "Hey, look – you know, let's have a little say about this."

So, we started... You know, the only thing we've ever voted about in the past was about admitting somebody for solemn vows, a community vote had to be taken for that. And then a vote for a certain expense, beyond a certain price; the monastery itself has to agree to making a certain expense. But now, since Vatican II, we vote on a lot of different things, and so that's been an evolution. So, part of the change, evolving change comes about through the community itself, the personnel. We are not the same group of people from when I came to the monastery, I'd say right now I'd say there's about 11, maybe 15 people in the community who were here when I came, and so everybody else is new and they come in with new ideas.

The other thing is the abbot himself is... I've had five different abbots. Each one is different, each one has different ideas. He'll come with certain tastes, he'll come with certain ideas about what's the best thing to do, and if he's a smart abbot he can bring about a change. The fact that you have an abbot to begin with allows for the genius of an individual to have some sway, and I think that's a healthy thing. I mean, there's something that should be said for an abbot who's been in office for 30 or 40 years, that creates a certain kind of stability, and then you create your own comfort zone within that. But there's something else to be said about not keeping an abbot more than six or 12 or 18 years, because a person, as Father Timothy Kelly said – he was a previous abbot – an abbot has pretty much given all he has to give within the first 10 years.

Ben: And how is it decided? The abbot would step down? And do they step down into the community, or do they move to a different monastery?

Br. Paul: Oh, it can happen either way, it depends on the abbot, some of them need to go and get—sometimes the community needs for the abbot to get away. *[laughs]* Sometimes the abbot needs to get away. Some abbots just gracefully step down into the community. They may be appointed to another job in the Order though. But here the decision to retire an Abbot is your main question "How is the decision made?". It can happen through the visitation. The abbot visitor comes, he sees there's dissatisfaction, there's restlessness, and he can make a recommendation that the abbot resign.

Now since Vatican II we've had a new system. For the Holy Rule the abbot's term is indefinite – he could just go on until he dies. But there's a clause now in the constitution that when we do have an election we can decide ahead of time whether it's going to be for a limited term, and that limited term would be six years. After the six years you can make another decision whether to have another six years, or simply to elect him on an indefinite term.

Br. Paul: So, I wouldn't exactly say that the abbot is first among equals, but some abbots I'm sure try to make it that way.

Ben: Okay, that's interesting. One of the things that people often say to us is "Why monasticism?" like "Why are you interested in this?" one of the responses that we sometimes give is that the Benedictines, but also monasticism as a whole, has enabled people consistently over 15 centuries to live together, in relative harmony... And this is no small feat obviously, particularly if we look at the state

of the world in this moment. With respect to this I wonder whether that's a value that the monasteries espouse, and how you would relate to that as something valuable?

Br. Paul: Oh, yes – absolutely. You know, that's part of the School of Charity. The Rules of Saint Benedict call the monastery a School of the Lord's Service, and the Cistercians came along and called it the School of Charity. So, what we're trying to do is to generate a kind of... Well, it explains itself, doesn't it?

Ben: Maybe it doesn't. Because I wonder what you mean specifically by charity in the context of Cistercian monasticism.

Br. Paul: Well, I would say mutual help, mutual respect and concern for one another. A common spirit, a common aspiration to live a prayer life and a contemplative life. A sense of a common root, we all come from the same tradition, and all the monasteries are trying to develop an appreciation of the Cistercian tradition.

So, there is the common life. The common life is one of the ideals of the monastery, and there is such a thing as the common life of an order, or the common life of a region. The idea of the common life is something we've always had within the monastery, but it's been expanded and broadened out to interrelationship between monasteries.

Ben: A lot of the things that you've mentioned and we've spoken about seem to me to be things that would be invaluable for people to understand in this moment, and worth learning from, particularly a younger generation. I wonder how, without people necessarily living in the monasteries, that they could learn from these concepts, and do you think there's any aspiration for the values present within monasticism to permeate outside of itself?

Br. Paul: Oh. Well yes, there's a lot of that now actually. The monasteries around the world, and a lot of it started in this country, having developed associate groups. In other words, there's people out in the world who come to us, looking to plug into what we have here. They see something vital, they see that there is a unique kind of spirituality. They want to associate themselves, and so we call them associate groups. The Abbey of Gethsemani has the Lay Cistercians of the Abbey of Gethsemani.

Ben: That brought up something in my mind, the people that I've been living with, whom I share a structured routine, in which a bell is rung in the morning and there's a series of rituals, and we eat together – among other aspects. Well, and it's probably important to say, we began drawing from monasticism because of a very basic idea of autonomy, a building where non-specific things would happen but a kind of work – these were our very early, naïve ideas. But through this process, and in practicing a routine and by sharing with others on a distributed basis this routine, you begin to notice a sense of connectedness. Particularly when that routine is the same way every day for three months, it completely changes your relationship to a group, but it also completely changes your relationship to the world. This though was a short lived experience, and obviously you've been doing this for 56 years, so it's very... I can't even begin to comprehend what that feels like.

Br. Paul: Yeah. *[laughs]* Yes, I think your experience has been very significant, and also very characteristic of what happens with these people who associate with a particular monastery, because... there's a history here, and I don't know if it's typical of what

other associate groups do, but it's probably not too different. A lot of people began to associate with Gethsemani because of the spirit of solitude. These would be people who have come to an appreciation of solitude as an essential in their life, and they've read Thomas Merton and they realised that this is something that we cultivate.

So, as individuals they began to read Cistercian writers, and then they would come to Gethsemani and make retreats. Now, what happened over the years was that this all become more structured as time went on, and they began to realise that if you're going to be Cistercian then you have to have a community life. It's not just a matter of being solitary and living a normal life, The Cistercian life is both solitary and is also communal, and so each town, each city has made it more of a point of having all the members of this associate group get together once a month, and have prayer together and have discussion together.

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