

TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

The Carthusians

To the poor of the world we give bread or whatever else our resources afford or goodwill suggests: we rarely receive them under our roof, but instead send them to find lodgings in the village. For it is not for the temporal care of the bodies of our neighbours that we have fled to this desert, but for the eternal salvation of our souls. Therefore it is not surprising if we give more friendship and assistance to those who come here for the sake of their souls than to those who come for the sake of their bodies.¹

THIS EXTRACT FROM the earliest Carthusian customary (c.1125), the *Consuetudines Cartusiae* of Prior Guigo I, may appear somewhat chilly to those acquainted with St Benedict's injunction to receive the poor as though receiving Christ himself (though in fact, as Guigo subsequently points out, the monks did give generously of what little they had to be distributed in nearby villages). But it underlines one of the most striking features of the early Carthusians, the 'unworthy and useless poor men of Christ who dwell in the desert of the Chartreuse for love of the name of Jesus', as another early prior of the Grande Chartreuse put it:² the careful and coherent way in which, from the very start, they set about creating a manner of life that would be appropriate in every particular to the vocation they had embraced. The first charterhouses were, like the Chartreuse itself, in distinctly inhospitable (though not always uninhabited) places; the monks sought to be self-sufficient as far as they possibly could; and one of the distinctive features of the early communities was the way they set about clearing or purchasing the land around the monastery (within the *termini* they themselves specified) in order to guarantee the solitude they needed. This might seem to imply that the 'poor men of Christ' had little to do with the poor men and women of this world.

Yet the contradiction is more apparent than real. One of the striking features of the early Carthusians, as with the Cistercians and others, was the way in which, even from their mountainous retreats, they took part in the affairs of the world outside. Like St Bernard (with whom he corresponded), Prior Guigo I did not hesitate to tell the Church how to behave itself, and to use his influence to espouse the principles of the Gregorian reform;³ and the early monks of the nearby monastery of Portes, one of the first to affiliate to the fledgling order in the early

twelfth century, wrote a number of letters offering detailed spiritual guidance both to religious and lay people.⁴

For all the rigour of their asceticism, then, the early Carthusians did not see themselves as entirely cut off from the needs of the Church as a whole: indeed they saw their vocation not so much as a flight *from* the world as a flight *for* the world, and their way of life, centred upon what Guigo I called the '*quasi bina dilectio*' (almost twofold love, of God and of neighbour), as a challenge and even a witness to their contemporaries. The reluctance to help the physically poor was part of this asceticism, part of a means to a greater end: those who sought to live with the utmost simplicity and in the utmost poverty themselves would have little material wealth or property to share with others. What they could share was something altogether deeper: a *philosophia*, or 'lived wisdom', that might touch hearts and change lives far beyond the bleak *termini* of the charterhouse.

From the beginning, then, what the Carthusians had to offer was not material wealth (they have succeeded, perhaps to a greater extent than any other monastic order, in avoiding that altogether), nor even gems of individual guidance, but the witness of their lives. The Grande Chartreuse itself was founded by St Bruno, formerly chancellor of the cathedral at Rheims, in 1084; and it is clear that the distinctive lineaments and rhythm of the Carthusian life owe their origins to him, even though it was the fifth prior, Guigo I, who (as we have seen) first committed their customs to writing. The life was a coherent and carefully worked out blend of the cenobitic and eremitic, each fulfilling the other; and it was made possible by the institution of *conversi* who were not so much servants as lay *monks*, and whose lives involved more manual labour than that of the choir monks, yet who from the start were clearly seen to be integral and full members of the whole community.

There were no novice masters in the early charterhouses; and monastic formation took place in the cell: Guigo I says that one of the experienced monks (as well as the prior) would be deputed to visit the novice there 'to instruct him in necessary things'.⁴ The life of a Carthusian choir-monk was minutely prescribed, and with good reason: the balance of solitude and community, the blend of prayer, physical work, recreation and study was carefully structured and maintained. From the start, then, spiritual guidance in the charterhouse was primarily a group affair, not an individual one: the whole community, in their corporate liturgy, chapter meetings and recreation as well as in their long hours in solitude, took responsibility for one another; and their founder described their life as 'His [Christ's] school, under the discipline of the Holy Spirit'.⁶ Tilden Edwards has pointed out⁷ that group spiritual direction is in fact the standard form of guidance in the Christian tradition; and the Carthusians were and still are among its exemplars. What this meant in practice is the subject of most of the remainder of this article.

First and foremost, and notwithstanding the emphasis on the community already noted, the Carthusian monk or nun⁸ had to develop a considerable capacity for self-knowledge and awareness. In a remarkable set of meditations, written in about 1115, Guigo I reflected constantly and critically on his own experience and reactions. This is what he wrote about a disaster at Vespers:

Notice how, when you recently tripped up in front of the brethren by saying one antiphon instead of another, your mind tried to think of a way of putting the blame on something else—either on the book itself, or on some other thing. For your heart was reluctant to see itself as it really is, and so it pretended to itself that it was different, inclining itself to evil words to excuse its sin. The Lord will reprove you, and set before you what you have done: you won't be able to hide from yourself any longer, or to escape from yourself.⁹

Some of the meditations are extremely short, such as the pithy Meditation 87: 'Insult any harlot you like—if you dare'. Invariably, however, the emphasis is upon self-scrutiny:

There are certain tastes, like that of honey; and there are certain temperaments and passions, like those of the flesh. When these things are either taken away or damaged, notice how this is for you (*quomodo sit tibi vide*).¹⁰

It is also worth noting that this self-scrutiny involves a genuinely pastoral concern for others:

Notice how you can, in the hope of what is to come, love the harvest in the young shoot, and the twisted tree-trunk. In the same way you must love those who are not yet good . . .

Not much is gained if you take away from a person something that he holds onto wrongly; but it is if, by our words of encouragement and by your example, you get him to let it go of his own accord . . .¹¹

This is not unhealthy self-absorption, but the indispensable precondition, not only for the Carthusian life, but for any life centred upon love: indeed the psychological acuteness of Guigo's emphasis on understanding yourself and reflecting on your reactions to all that happens to you is remarkable. To know ourselves, as Guigo makes clear throughout his 476 meditations, is to become aware both of our inherent predisposition to run away from the truth, and of the divine love existing deep within

us. Yet to face this truth will invariably be painful: for it is not just the truth, but the truth *crucified*, that we are called to worship ('*Sine aspectu et decore crucique affixa, adoranda est veritas*');¹² and by discovering what it means to love God without condition or strings attached, we are freed from the dependence on (or possessiveness of) others in order to love them as we should do—to seek their true good, not simply what we think is good for them. The theology of love underpins the whole of St Bruno's and Guigo's conception of the Carthusian life, and informs its most practical prescriptions; and this constant and rigorous probing of one's own interior intentions and reactions is its most fundamental prerequisite.¹³

Secondly, the Carthusian life was characterized by the coherent interweaving of theology and lifestyle, of the individual and corporate, that is embodied by the Latin word *utilitas*. In his meditations Guigo I wrote:

Happy is the person who chooses somewhere he may work without anxiety. Now this is a sure choice and worthwhile thing to work at (*labor utilis*)—the desire to do good to all, so that you want them to be people who do not need your help. For the more people seem to be concerned with their own interests (*propriis utilitatibus*), the less they are doing what is good for them. For this is the distinctive good (*propria utilitas*) of each individual—to want to do good to all. But who understands this?

Whoever, therefore, seeks to work for his own good, not only does not find it, but also incurs great harm to his soul. For while he seeks his own good, which cannot be sought at all, he is rejected by the common good, that is, by God. For just as there is one nature for everyone, so also there is one common good (*ita et utilitas*).¹⁴

It is worth noting in passing Guigo's psychological perception here too: the emphasis upon seeking to set people free from being dependent on your help is a fundamental aspect of all spiritual direction. The emphasis on the *common* good, on the essentially corporate aspect of Carthusian spirituality, is even more important however, and underlines the stress on group support and guidance referred to above. And the integrated nature of their lives went further than that: both Guigo I and the Carthusians of Portes, writing letters of spiritual guidance, stressed the interweaving of what was traditionally called 'spiritual exercise' (the fourfold monastic pattern of reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation) with public liturgical worship, physical exercise, study and other aspects of the common life. This a crucial point: whether later Carthusian (and other) writers, such as Guigo II, (whose *Scala claustralium* or 'Ladder of Monks' became very popular after his death in c.1190¹⁵) explored in

great detail the relationship between the four different ingredients of 'spiritual exercise', Guigo I shows no interest in that at all, instead concentrating on emphasizing the relationship between all of them and the other, more corporate, aspects of the Carthusian life, as well as to the heart of the monastic vocation itself.¹⁶ Love of God, and of neighbour—the two parts of the *quasi bina dilectio* belong together: by devoting his life to those exercises which, in the context of solitude and poverty, dispose him to receive and be transformed by the love of God, the monk who has apparently renounced his neighbour discovers instead the surest possible means of loving him.

This exploration of the practice and theology of the early Carthusians may appear to have very little to do with the wider subject of spiritual guidance within the Carthusian tradition as a whole. In fact, however, it has everything to do with it: the distinctive features of Carthusian spiritual guidance are not to be found by examining later works which happen to have been written by Carthusians but which in most cases could as easily have been written by members of any religious order, but by coming to see that it was their whole lives, and above all their *common* life, which was their primary contribution to the lives of others. When Guigo I wrote his life of St Hugh of Grenoble (and, to a considerable extent, when Adam of Eynsham wrote the life of another early Carthusian, St Hugh of Lincoln), he was not producing just another work of hushed hagiography, but offering what is in effect the essence of the Carthusian life as it could be (and was) lived by busy Christians 'in the world': both Hughs were bishops, both were described as incarnating the theology of love which lay at the heart of the Carthusian vocation, and as seeking, in lives unconditionally devoted to God alone, to be free to discern others' true worth as well as to issue prophetic warnings about social and ecclesiastical evils. Instead of simply giving the world aims, the Carthusians gave it people: a significant number of bishops and others emerged during the centuries from the *termini* of the charterhouses. Instead of compromising their own form of life, they offered its virtues, suitably adapted, for those living in the world.

Not everyone, then, has to renounce everything and don the white Carthusian cowl in order to recognize, and live, the distinctive principles and dynamic which informed and still inform their vocation. The slow and costly process of reflecting regularly on your own experience and reactions, and above all on your own motives and intentions; the concern to foster a thoroughgoing openness, even passivity, towards God in order to be more free to love other people without seeking to dominate or manipulate them; the willingness to work away at creating (and helping others to create) a pattern of life that integrates both solitude and common life in such a way as to fulfil each; and the readiness to seek a genuine simplicity of life which might help you live in loving and hidden identification with the physically poor and deprived—all these are essential

dimensions of any authentic Christian spirituality. And to achieve them we will need guidance; not only, or even primarily, the one-to-one individual guidance that has in recent years become popular, but also the kind of critical yet loving mutual support and encouragement that a group, family or Christian parish community can offer its members, not by the eloquence of its speech or even by the quality of each person's private piety, but precisely by the openness and attentive love which informs its common life.

The spirituality of the Carthusian life was influenced, like that of any other order, by the prevailing insights and circumstances of the times; and most of the authors and texts mentioned in the remainder of this article wrote letters and treatises on spiritual guidance which in large part could have been written by members of any contemporary enclosed order. The 1972 Statutes of the Order contain restrictions in this respect which not all former Carthusians have observed. The Statutes explicitly say, for example:

We never give spiritual direction by letter; nor may any of us preach in public. If seculars do not benefit from our silence, much less will they from our speech.¹⁷

From earliest times, however, the Carthusians were able to reach people without speaking: Guigo I himself describes in detail the distinctively Carthusian form of *praedicatio muta*, which was the copying of manuscripts, a form of apostolate peculiarly well suited to contemplative monks. This practice continued thereafter: Michael Sargent has pointed out the way in which late medieval Carthusian monks, particularly (though not only) in England, translated and copied earlier spiritual texts, partly in order to make them available to a wider literate (but not Latin-reading) lay audience, partly to combat the spread of Wycliffite and other forms of heresy.¹⁸ This is important: the Carthusians have never entirely separated theology from spirituality, and have never entirely lost their concern for truth, even in periods when the practice of prayer was at its most affective. The 'Mirroure of the Blessed Life of Jesu Christ' by Nicholas Love (c.1410), a Carthusian of Mount Grace, Yorkshire, is a good example of this: it is a translation of an earlier work by the Pseudo-Bonaventure, and its popularity suggests that it served both a devotional and a propagandist purpose.¹⁹

The writings of some later Carthusians certainly suggest that their *praedicatio* was anything but *muta*—and (as has already been said) much of it contains little that is distinctively Carthusian. Ludolph of Saxony, for example, who was a monk of the charterhouse of Coblenz and who lived from 1295 to 1377, wrote a Life of Christ which (to judge by the number of manuscript copies and printed editions) was widely disseminated: its emphasis on *imitatio Christi* was typical of the age, though

Ludolph's reflections on the delights of natural beauty recall similar passages in the beautiful letter of St Bruno to his friend Raoul le Verd.²⁰ Others produced works that were more explicitly concerned with spiritual guidance: Robert, a monk of the charterhouse of Le Parc-en-Charnie in France who died in 1388, wrote *Le chastel perilleux*, a treatise written to his cousin, who was a Benedictine nun: it is full of practical advice about contemplative prayer, praying in common, the sacramental life and other subjects likely to be of interest to both religious and lay readers.²¹ Others seem to have acquired something of a reputation as spiritual guides: the prolific Denys, a Dutch Carthusian who lived from 1402 to 1471, wrote innumerable letters of counsel, only a few of which survive, and also complete sequences of sermons, both for religious and for those 'in the world': his complete works fill over forty substantial volumes. Finally, Richard Methley (1451–1528), also of Mount Grace, wrote a number of treatises on the monastic and spiritual life, and appears to have been in some demand as a director.²²

As time passed, then, the Carthusians became involved in the practice of spiritual guidance to a degree far greater than was envisaged either by their founders or by their modern successors. And yet the *primary* concern of the Carthusians has never been spiritual guidance, but the way of living which, as we have seen, was their most distinctive act of witness. The establishing in 1984 of the first Carthusian monastery in the Third World, in southern Brazil, illustrates this point: their principal contribution to the poor among whom they now live is likely to be this hidden and loving identification, in the crucified *pauper Christus*, that is articulated in the Carthusian vocation, rather than any commitment to an active apostolate. And to a society less committed than ours to the pursuit of privatized perfection, such an apostolate might be infinitely more fruitful than we suppose. Why? Because, better than any frantic activist, it may help us all to rethink our values: in the desert, waiting and passivity and silence are inherently creative, not useless; apparent redundancy in the world's eyes and your own can allow God to use you for his purposes; in and through the poor, the solitary and the powerless, God ushers in the kingdom of heaven. The most recent Statutes of the Order express this with simple eloquence:

In choosing this, the 'best part', it is not our advantage alone that we have in view; in embracing a hidden life we do not abandon the great family of our fellow men; on the contrary, by devoting ourselves exclusively to God we exercise a special function in the Church where things seen are ordered to things unseen, exterior activity to contemplation . . .

If, therefore, we are truly living in union with God, our minds and hearts, far from becoming shut up in themselves, open up to

embrace the whole universe and the mystery of Christ that saves it. Set apart from all, to all we are united, so that it is in the name of all that we stand before the living God.²³

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Source: <http://www.theway.org.uk/Back/29Mursell.pdf>

NOTES

- ¹ Guigo I, *Consuetudines Cartusiae* (hereafter CC) 20:1; (Latin text with French translation in *Sources Chrétiennes* vol 313 (1984), p 206.
- ² Prior Basil, in a charter dated 1156.
- ³ See his letters, with French translation, in *Sources Chrétiennes* vol 88 (1982), especially nos 2–6.
- ⁴ Edited, with French translation, in *Sources Chrétiennes* vol 274 (1980).
- ⁵ ‘de necessariis instruat’, CC 22:3.
- ⁶ Letter to Raoul le Verd, 10; text with French translation in *Sources Chrétiennes* vol 88 (1962), p 74.
- ⁷ *Spiritual friend* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), chap 7.
- ⁸ The first community of women religious to join the Carthusians was Prebayon, in 1140.
- ⁹ *Meditations*, 282; Latin text with French translation in *Sources Chrétiennes* vol 308 (1983), pp 190–2. It is hoped that a new English translation will appear in the not too distant future.
- ¹⁰ *Meditations*, 306.
- ¹¹ *Meditations*, 167 and 297.
- ¹² *Meditations*, 5.
- ¹³ A much fuller exploration of the theology of love and its implications for each aspect of the Carthusian life will be found in my *The theology of the Carthusian life* (Salzburg: *Analecta Cartusiana* series, volume 127 [1988]).
- ¹⁴ *Meditations*, 106.
- ¹⁵ It is available in English translation by Edmund Colledge and James Walsh: Guigo II, *The ladder of monks and twelve meditations* (London: Mowbrays, 1978).
- ¹⁶ See especially *Meditations*, 390, where Guigo I explores the relationship of love of God and love of neighbour with reference to the monastic life in some detail.
- ¹⁷ *Statutes* (1972) chap 1:6.
- ¹⁸ Michael Sargent, ‘Ruusbroec in England: The chastising of God’s children and related works’, in *Historia et Spiritualitas Cartusianensis* (Acta of the 4th International Colloquium on this theme, Belgium: Destelbergen, 1983) pp 303–312.
- ¹⁹ For Nicholas Love, see the study by Elizabeth Salter in *Analecta Cartusiana* vol 10 (1974).
- ²⁰ For St Bruno’s letter see note 2 above. For Ludolph, see Charles Abbott Conway Jr., ‘The *Vita Christi* of Ludolph of Saxony and late medieval devotion centred on the Incarnation: a descriptive analysis’, in *Analecta Cartusiana* vol 34 (1976); and Sr Mary Immaculate Bodenstedt, ‘Praying the life of Christ’ (a translation of the prayers that conclude Ludolph’s ‘Life’, many of which are full of implicit spiritual guidance), in *Analecta Cartusiana* vol 15 (1973).
- ²¹ *Le chastel périlleux* has been edited by Sr Marie Brisson with full introduction and commentary, in *Analecta Cartusiana* vol 19 (1974), 2 vols.
- ²² See James Hogg, ‘A mystical diary: the *Refectorium salutis* of Richard Methley’, in *Kartäusermystik und -Mystiker* vol 1 (*Analecta Cartusiana* vol 55, (1981), pp 208–238).
- ²³ *Statutes* of the Order (1972), chap 34.