



ERIK VARDEN

PHOTO: MARGOT KREBS NEALE

A meeting with the abbot of a Cistercian monastery brings an unexpected taste of the joy and ebullience that comes from living in the spirit / By MAGGIE FERGUSON

Spirituality without platitudes

EVER SINCE he was a boy in Norway, the son of a country vet, Erik Varden has felt a sense of longing – of homesickness “for a homeland I recall but have not seen”. There were decades of “rudeness, pain and questions” before he discovered where this was leading him: before, 17 years ago, aged 26, he arrived at the enclosed Cistercian monastery of Mount Saint Bernard in Leicestershire, where he is now Abbot, and where he hopes to die.

The Shattering of Loneliness, shortly to be published by Bloomsbury Continuum, is the

fruit of his years of searching. It is that rare thing: a book that had to be written. It could change lives.

“Must I have personal experience of something to say, in truth, that I remember it?” Varden asks in his introduction. It is a question he has pondered all his life. The six chapters in his book dwell on six biblical exhortations to remember – remember you are dust, for example, remember you were a slave in Egypt, the disciples remembering the Last Supper on the road to Emmaus. He presents these not simply as invitations to learn about things that

happened long ago, but also as invitations to live them and be personally involved in them. He weaves them into “a narrative of redemption that not only reaches back to time’s beginning, but remembers forward, into eternity”.

His frame of reference is formidable: he draws with ease on the Old and the New Testaments, as well as writers from Virgil to Stig Dagerman. And he explores the lives of remarkable men and women; some of faith, some of none. If this suggests a weighty tome, take heart. The book is just 164 pages long, written in short, clear sentences of exceptional sensibility. And the difficulties and temptations it explores are startlingly contemporary – sexual addiction; “disposable selfhood”; inertia.

Varden is slim, his close-cropped hair giving way to a frosting of grey. His slight accent gives his words precision, and he speaks, and listens, with concentration. It is as if he is constantly travelling between this world and his world of prayer, carrying messages. Yet there is a lightness about him, too; he is quick to laugh.

SITTING ON a bench in the monastery garden, we begin by talking about an intriguing problem he dwells upon in the book – the problem of “getting stuck”. “Not to move forwards on the path of life is to move back,” wrote St Bernard of Clairvaux, an exponent of a reform movement in Benedictine monasticism that resulted in the Cistercian order, and Varden warns that “the fearful possibility of stalling should motivate us until our last breath”. “Stalling”, or “lingering”, is, he believes, “a professional hazard for monks”.

“You’re in this place, you know you’ll be here till you die, you have a view of the cemetery, the *horarium* is the same day after day, and the temptation is to think, ‘Now I’m here I’ve just got to stay put and wait.’ Whereas I like to think there is a dialectic tension intrinsic to monastic life. Benedictines take three vows: of obedience, of stability and of *conversatio morum*. I see this last as precisely a vow not to get stuck.”

What are the signs that one is stuck?

“A loss of joy.”

And how do you get unstuck?

“It’s said about St Anthony of Egypt, often thought of as the first monk, that he started each day by saying, ‘Today I begin.’ When you endeavour to live life seriously, and zestfully, it is constantly new: every day is a bit like the first day of creation. We start our day, at 3.20am, with Vigils, and the first psalm St Benedict would have us sing is Psalm 95 – ‘Today, if you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.’ Today! When monastic life works, you recognise it in a sort of energy, an ebullience.”

And what about when it doesn’t work? What about the unravelling of sexual misconduct in the Church? In *The Shattering of Loneliness* Varden links the Desert Fathers with Freud in suggesting that libidinal passion is very often a symptom of spiritual malady.

“I think in a lot of cases it is. We must not spiritualise or psychologise away terrible misdeeds; and certainly there are recognisable pathologies that pertain to medical diagnosis. But this surely can’t answer for everything. I

think that monastic tradition sits on, as steward, such a tremendous wealth of insight and wisdom – practical wisdom – that the Church and the world has not just forgotten but has probably never known about,” says Varden.

Part of this wisdom is the need for every monk to have a spiritual guide, or confessor, with whom he must talk freely and regularly about the darkest recesses of his heart or mind.

Meantime we – perhaps particularly journalists – must not wallow in evil. As an adolescent, Varden was for a time obsessed with the Holocaust. Now, he says, “I see the darkness still ... but it has lost its fascination”.

What about the victims of evil? “The anguish of the world”, he writes, “is embraced by an infinite benevolence investing it with purpose.” How to communicate that to someone suffering acutely without enraging them? “One can only try to communicate it by trying to embody the benevolence without naming it. As St Francis is said to have said, ‘Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words when necessary.’”

From evil, we shift to goodness. In his book, Varden quotes St Seraphim of Sarov as saying, “Only a good deed performed in the name of Christ brings the fruits of the Holy Spirit” – and this has unsettled me. I tell him of a friend of mine – one among many possible examples – who is married to a banker, and could live a life of luxury. Instead, she spends her days helping single mothers in tower blocks. She has no faith. Are her deeds therefore futile?

“There’s an important categorical distinction here. Seraphim certainly doesn’t say that a good deed not done in the name of Christ doesn’t do any good. Goodness is always a participation in the source of all good, whether you recognise it or not. But what Seraphim talks about is the conscious breaking open of the heart in order to embrace that in-dwelling of the Spirit and make it personal.

“And this is one of the great paradoxes: the Lord exercises immense courtesy. He never imposes himself, never forces himself upon anyone. If I don’t let him in, he’s not going to force his way in. But that is not to say that someone who does good blindly, but who’s open to that imperative of goodness, isn’t vulnerable to a sort of propaedeutic of the spirit – an inward preparation of the heart that, whether in this world or the next, will bear fruit. Good is always good.”

IN THE SAME vein, I wonder what Varden feels about people of non-Christian faiths. He responds without hesitation: “One can certainly and obviously learn from them.”

His Shia Muslim room-mate at Atlantic College in Wales was to be an important influence on his journey. It was a Buddhist monk who introduced him to “silence as a possible mode of expression for spiritual yearning – my awakening to prayer; in a way”.

And as he prepared to become a Catholic, the Second Vatican Council document that

impressed him more than any other was *Nostra Aetate* – “I thought to myself, ‘Gosh! A faith that can express in a dogmatic statement such a clear statement of what it holds to be true and yet extend a hand of friendship to what are apparently rival truth claims – that faith has something going for it.”

The Catholic Church’s claim to be the steward of the fullness of truth, he goes on, “isn’t the same as claiming a monopoly on truth. The truth is always *greater*. As monks, we’re prepared to extend a hand of friendship to any hand prepared to extend itself in our direction. This holds for the way we relate to people who believe differently.”

He speaks of his admiration for the monks at Tibhirine in Algeria, whose story is told in the film *Of Gods and Men*, who lived in harmony with the largely Muslim population, increasingly realising that they were risking their lives for the sake of that friendship.

To encounter such clear and rock-like faith as Varden’s, coupled with a complete absence of spiritual pride, is rare and moving. He talks in his book about the need to grow in humility, but how can we do this? How does it work? In the Benedictine sense, he says, “humility is a function of the truth”; and in the monastery “we try to live a preferential option for the truth”.

Embracing the truth can be “as I know only too well, deeply unpleasant. There are so many

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things one wants to try to dress up, even to oneself." But St Benedict "outlines a way to self-knowledge. His concern is to free us from the need to seem more than we are. He would root us in the real, rescue us from self-elevation."

It strikes me, listening to him, that humility is a kind of liberation; that the feeling of freedom Varden emanates, despite the apparent constraints of his life, has its roots in his not needing to prove himself in any way at all. I think of Etty Hillesum, staring through the slats of a cattle truck at a strutting Nazi soldier, and asking, "Which of us is free?"

IT IS TEMPTING, visiting a community so apparently vital as Mount Saint Bernard, to think one can leave the spiritual heavy-lifting to the monks. But Varden is clear the call to holiness "is addressed to all of us. It's a matter of having an ear to hear that call, a will to heed it."

Occasionally in *The Shattering of Loneliness* there's a bit of frustration about the way some of us – monks and nuns included – seem to regard our faith "as if Christianity were some sickly sweet glaze you smear on life, rather than an invitation to transformation". He talks, for example, of "the atrophy of charity" – what does that mean?

"There is always a risk that we reduce charity to an observance, putting a Cafod envelope in a tray, or whatever it is, and forgetting to actually try to live and embody charity – though I'm not saying I succeed in this," he says. "To live charity is dangerous: it involves an investment of self, and a shedding of self, that is heroic."

And when he says that "Christian life fails to convince because it lacks incarnate credibility", what does that mean? "We Religious, for example, we moan and moan about the vocations crisis, when really what we need to ask is, 'What do people see when they look at us? Do they see men and women fired with good zeal and energy and a life in movement? Or do they see something stagnant and lifeless?'"

And what is "platitudinous spirituality"? He laughs heartily – "I have a bit of a quarrel with the word 'spirituality'. I occasionally use it as an abstract noun, spirituality being a human being's capacity for life in the spirit. But I find the word spirituality with an adjective attached to it just nauseous. If someone asks me to give a talk about 'Cistercian spirituality', I say I don't know what that is."

Our time is up. Varden fetches two bottles of dark, loamy Mount Saint Bernard beer before we climb into the monastery Ford Fiesta and head for Loughborough. Varden has told me that during his years of searching he visited Caldey Abbey in Wales where he met a monk who made a deep impression: "We talked about nothing at all, but there was something about him that was just luminous. I thought, 'Whatever it is he has, I want.'"

My meeting with Varden has made a similar impression on me. As the train chugs south, I dwell on the words spoken by Jesus to the Samaritan woman in the heat of the midday sun – "If you but knew the gift of God".

RICHARD LEONARD

I am 25 years a priest this December. I have never heard a paedophile's confession



In the present climate in Australia, Catholic bishops cannot win a trick. In their long-awaited 60-page response to the findings of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, they accepted 98 per cent of the commission's recommendations. But this was drowned out in the media coverage by their refusal to accept one recommendation, and their insistence that others were directed to the Holy See, not them.

It didn't help that the bishops' report was released in the shadow of Francis' trip to Ireland, where, perhaps understandably, protesters had commanded as much attention as the Pope – and that all this came at the same time as Archbishop Viganò's lurid allegations of the cover-up of sexual misconduct by Vatican figures over three papacies hit the international headlines.

Ordinary Australians are filled with rage against the leaders of the Catholic Church in regard to sex abuse and its cover-up. But the relentless focus on a handful of areas where a genuine debate is to be had, about where the rights of a secular inquiry starts and the prerogatives of religious liberty end, does not make the Church safer for children and vulnerable adults.

One issue that drew fierce criticism from the Royal Commission was celibacy. It did not claim that celibacy causes sexual abuse but found that it fosters a clerical culture that lacks a healthy attitude to sexuality in general, can infantilise some adults, and encourages priests to believe that their first obligation is to protect the Church.

While valiantly asserting that many blessings have come from having a celibate clergy, the bishops in their response said they would be open to asking the Vatican to revisit the mandatory celibacy of priests, especially if this was to be recommended by the Plenary Council. In 2020 this will bring Catholics from all over Australia together to discuss the future of the Church.

Surveys show that even most practising Catholics in Australia believe that celibacy should no longer be essential to the priesthood. The media take was sadly predictable. Children have paid the price for being the junior members of a celibate club that lacks transparency and accountability, and resists outside scrutiny.

The loudest criticism, however, concerned the Confessional Seal, or, more precisely, the Royal Commission's recommendation that there should be mandatory reporting of child sexual abuse when it is disclosed

to a priest hearing Confession. The bishops pushed back firmly on that one. But their protests will come to no avail because most Australian states are in the process of legislating against priest/penitent privilege. It's worth noting that the commission made no such recommendation in regard to the legal privileges of journalists or lawyers and their sources or clients.

I am 25 years a priest this December. I have never heard a paedophile's confession. Having asked at least 100 priests if they ever have, the answer is always, "No. Never." Some might be withholding the truth, but not all are. Though I concede it has almost certainly happened, seeking to have one's confession heard goes against the obsession for secrecy that this crime feeds upon. The reality is that these days parishes would be lucky to have a couple of penitents a week.

In future, on hearing a confession of child sex abuse, I will be expected to immediately proceed to the police station where, almost certainly, I would not be able to name the offender, give an address or describe him or her. Maybe, for identification purposes, the state will demand closed-circuit cameras inside Reconciliation rooms. Since confessors are simply mandatory reporters, they wouldn't have any role in discerning if a claim of abuse was true. The police and the courts would reach a judgement on that.

As particularly egregious as child sexual abuse is to all of us, you could make a valid argument for the mandatory reporting of a host of other despicable felonies – domestic violence, rape or murder, for example – confessed in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Maybe in the present and coming climate, both for the good order of this sacrament and for the protection of good men, we should consider the immediate re-introduction of the Third Rite of Reconciliation as the parish norm.

But the lived reality of this sacrament has next to no traction in this debate. Communication is about what is heard, not about what is said. In the face of the public's well-founded and grave mistrust of the Church, we are defending a duty of absolute non-disclosure that seems to have emerged in the form we know it in the seventh century, and was codified in 1215. When public mistrust meets sexual abuse, the protection of even one child beats canon law every time.

Richard Leonard SJ is the author of *Match and Dispatch: A Catholic Guide to the Sacraments* (forthcoming, Paulist Press).