

The former abbot of England's only Cistercian abbey tells **Maggie Fergusson** that when he was asked to become a bishop in Norway, the trauma was devastating

# Thy will be done

**N**EARLY SEVEN YEARS ago now, new to *The Tablet*, I was sent to the Cistercian monastery of Mount St Bernard in Leicestershire to interview its abbot, Erik Varden, who had just published his first book, *The Shattering of Loneliness*. Sitting in glorious autumn sunshine, he told me that this place, his home of 17 years, was where he hoped to live out the rest of his life.

Just a week ago, on another gloriously sunny day, this time in Blackfriars, Oxford, Varden talked about how life has since changed for him utterly, in ways he could never have predicted, but in which he now recognises the hand of providence. In 2019, the apostolic nuncio visited Mount St Bernard and asked him to move back to Norway, and to become Bishop of Trondheim. "It was a traumatic thing for me," he admits. "You know, on the one hand, as a monk, one tries to live in a state of availability. We pray, a number of times each day, 'Thy will be done'. We believe that the spirit works mysteriously through the Church, and this commission came to me very specifically, and I wanted to embrace it in the spirit of faith. But what surprised me was a great outpouring of grief: it was a real bereavement."

**HE WAS ALSO** exhausted, and run down. "And, fortunately, well, I collapsed." For months, on doctors' orders, he rested in a French convent – a kind of "in between land" – "And that was a wonderful thing because I could get my grieving done. So when I finally arrived in Trondheim, in October 2020, I did so joyfully."

Formidably intelligent, quick to laugh and full of initiative – at Mount St Bernard he set up a commercial brewery to shore up the abbey's finances – Varden, still just 51, is a great gift to the people of Trondheim. But is he still able to lead anything like a monastic life? "I still like to get up early, about five, and devote that first part of the day to prayer and reading. And my present life gives ample opportunity to practise obedience, more radically, in some ways, than in the monastery. In the monastery, the dynamic of obedience is largely predictable: a matter of being faithful to the rhythm of the day. Whereas the life of the bishop is largely unpredictable: you just don't know who's going to turn up, and to need you."

And then there's hospitality, "a fundamental monastic duty, and a grace. This is a wonderful thing in Trondheim, particularly in the cathedral parish, with my collaborators there, there is a tremendous spirit of hospitality."



ERIK VARDEN

And what about community life? "Well, obviously I haven't got a monastic community. But I'm fortunate in having two communities of the order in the diocese, so I visit them fairly regularly. And then there's the cathedral community, the group of priests there. And I'm happy that we've been able to introduce Lauds and Vespers in the cathedral every day. So we gather for that."

Trondheim is not strictly a diocese, but one of four "territorial prelatures" in Europe, the others being Tromsø, Loreto and Pompei. It's vast – 55,000 square kilometres – and Varden is responsible for about 18,000 Catholics from 130 nations (the ethnic Norwegians are a "vanishingly small minority, about four per cent", while there are large groups from the Philippines, Poland, Vietnam and Eritrea). "When I preside at Sunday Mass, and look out over the congregation, it's just wonderful because I'm looking at a cross-section of the world."

And what moves Varden, when he meets with his flock, is "a yearning for the good, the true, the beautiful". When the synodal process started, he went round his parishes, talking to people about what they wanted, and found that "the overall expectation was uniform in its *maximalism*: people just wanted more of everything: *more* churches, *more* Masses, *more* teaching, *more* charitable enterprise, *more* liturgy, *more* sisters, *more*

priests, *more* provision for youth and children."

Young people are especially close to his heart. He is moved by their interest in liturgical patrimony, their longing for "a form of worship in which the transcendent, or an aspiration towards transcendence, is explicit". And what does he learn from them? "Lots! Enthusiasm! I'm impressed by their commitment to friendship, their spirit of service, their very sincere search for the truth." If a 17-year-old turns up in the cathedral bookshop asking, "Could you tell me what this faith is all about?", Varden is delighted.

Years ago now, I drove Jean Vanier to Blackfriars to give a talk. Afterwards, he was given supper with the young friars. On the way back to London, he admitted that he had struggled with their being so intellectual: he was relieved he shared his life with men and women with learning difficulties, who lived more from their hearts than their heads. Anyone who has read Erik Varden's books will know that he is formidably intellectual, his reading broad and deep. Is there a balancing act to be achieved between the head and the heart? "The monastic Fathers sometimes talk about the process of enabling the 'descent of the mind into the heart'. I think the overcoming of that apparent dichotomy, and the discovery that the heart also possesses intellectual faculties, is important. It's rather like learning that we look out on the world with two eyes

rather than one. And it's interesting, isn't it, that as physical beings, so many of our vital functions are about the coordination of parallel limbs?"

But Varden is emphatic about the importance of our "carefully sifting" the material we admit into our consciousness through books and films. "It's vital we don't allow in rubbish. It's one of the things that

my first years in the monastery taught me. Obviously, in the monastic novitiate you find yourself cut off from lots of stimuli that you take for granted, and that feels wonderful for about three days. But then you realise how much stuff you are carrying inside you, how acute your visual memory is. I could remember scenes from films I'd watched that I wished I hadn't, because they were unpleasant or violent, and these things had stuck."

Of course, we do not always have control over what lodges in our memories. In his latest book, *Healing Wounds*, Varden writes this: "Such can be the legacy of trauma, especially trauma sustained early in life, that it seems to acquire an autonomous, ordering force in

**'The life of the bishop is largely unpredictable: you don't know who's going to turn up, and to need you'**

the forging of a destiny." Is he confident that the Church is doing everything it can do to look after those who have suffered clerical abuse as young people, to learn from them, to ensure that the abuse scandal of recent years is never repeated?

"It's impossible to answer that question on behalf of the Church," he says, "because it is an entity which is simply too large, and which operates in so many different modes and different places. But the immense advantage we've got now, to speak of this country and Norway, which are the situations I know best, is that we have clear criteria for what is and isn't acceptable behaviour, and clear procedures for reporting abuse, and bodies equipped to process these procedures. And I think that gives us ground, not for complacency, but for considerable reassurance." But we must also, he says, confront the legacy of abuse in terms of the "logic of sin". "We need to recognise that here is a burden of inflicted evil, which needs to be redeemed. Though the redemptive sacrifice has been accomplished once and for all, it is still working itself out in the mystical body. And I would argue that we would do well to recover something of the notion, which seems very old-fashioned now, of reparation: that even after a sin has been confessed and forgiven, there will still be a burden to carry."

In a more uplifting passage from *Healing Wounds*, Varden talks movingly of the widen-

ing embrace of the Church's prayer, "for the Church, for catechumens, for the unity of Christians, for the Jews, for non-believers, for those in tribulation". Over the past fortnight, I suggest, there seems to have been a sense of all these groups feeling a vested interest in the new pope. Watching Pope Leo XIV appear on the balcony, Varden was moved when the cameras turned to the crowd, and "there was this girl, aged seven or eight, who just burst into tears – in the way we do when we see someone we love whom we haven't seen for years, and we thought we might not see again, or when we come home after a painful absence. In all likelihood, she didn't even know who this individual on the balcony was. But she knew that, well, now the Pope is there, we've got someone to look to and we've got someone to comfort us." While in every continent "walls are being built and bridges exploded", what the world sees in the Pope is "the possibility that humanity might be one".

**I WOULD LIKE** Varden to speak about what we might expect of Pope Leo in terms of Augustinian spirituality, but I recall from our first interview that he doesn't much like the word "spirituality", except as an abstract noun. Instead, he speaks of "the spirit of Augustine". "There was a sense of honesty about him – a sane realism – regarding the human condition, in its sublime and its deplorable aspects. He

understood the importance of friends, of not being self-sufficient. He took the science of theology extremely seriously." Above all, he had a capacity for joy. "He has a wonderful passage about the *jubilus* in music: in Gregorian chant you have complex parts, like the alleluia verses, where a syllable is just left to soar. And Augustine says it is an expression of that longing to rejoice which is structural to the human heart."

It's time to wrap up. But I want, just for a second, to return to Mount St Bernard. Is there really no part of him that looks over his shoulder and longs to be back there? He laughs robustly: "That would just turn me into a pillar of salt! I am where I am. The older I get, the more I believe in the extreme importance of an active consent to what *is*, not living in the conditional in terms of 'woulds' and 'coulds' and 'mights'." And yet he sometimes thinks of something that the Bishop of Stockholm, Cardinal Anders Arborelius, said in an interview when he was appointed a cardinal. "A journalist asked what he would do when he retired, and he said, 'Well, I hope to return to my community, if they're prepared to receive a weary old man. Because I've been 'lent' for a purpose, and when that purpose is finished, well, I'll return to the norm.'"

*Healing Wounds* is published by Bloomsbury Continuum at £12.99 (Tablet price, £11.69).

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