

BEDE GRIFFITHS - ICON OF INTEGRITY

Cardinal John Henry Newman once described the guileless as:

those who live in a way least thought of by others, the way chosen by our Savior, to make headway against all the power and wisdom of the world. It is a difficult and rare virtue, to mean what we say, to love without deceit, to think no evil, to bear no grudge, to be free from selfishness, to be innocent and straightforward...simple-hearted. They take everything in good part which happens to them, and make the best of everyone.

Such was Father Bede Griffiths, *Swami Dayananda*, at Shantivanam in South India - a monk in sannyasi orange robes, who came to the ashram gate before 6 a.m. to welcome my companion, Sr. Maurus Allen and myself in August of 1976. What an ineffable gift that year was - the year of Father Bede's 70th birthday. It was the year Brothers Amaldas, Christudas and Anthony were all away studying, so Fr. Bede affectionately referred to us as his 'monastic community.' Actually, there were four of us Benedictines who had come from afar: Fr. Bernardino, a Camaldolese Benedictine from Italy, Fr. Vincent Cooper from Ealing Abbey in England, and Sr. Maurus and I, two Nuns from America.

Fr. Bede's wisdom and great love for the Scriptures, both East and West, shed tremendous light on the Word for all of us. He gave homilies daily, during the Eucharist and at Vespers, on the Epistle and Gospel for the day. He radiated a deep joy whenever he opened the scriptures for others. He honed in immediately to the mystical meaning beneath the Word. Each afternoon from 4 until 5 p.m., Fr. Bede expounded on the Upanishads and/or the Bhagavad Gita (cf. *Rivers of Compassion*) over the course of the year. Foreigners often came for a day or two and inevitably would ask the same questions about reincarnation, karma and purgatory. Fr. Bede was extremely patient and always guileless in responding to whomever questioned him, sometimes to the utter frustration of those of us he called "my community" that year.

December 17, 1976 was Fr. Bede's 70th birthday. Thomas, the guest master and nephew of Fr. Ignatius Hrydayam, S.J., made a lovely design on the temple floor of seven petals, one for each decade of Father's life, then placed small boats on four of the petals in honor of the years since Father's ordination. In the center was Bede Griffiths' newly released volume *Return to the Center*. Village girls came and filled small oil lamps so that the entire temple was aglow.

The birthday celebration was beyond any I had ever experienced. Drummers began at 5:30 a.m. in the temple as Fr. Bede himself was being accompanied down to the bank of the Kavery River for a special Indian puja (ritual), during which his feet were washed and he was incensed and garlanded. He was truly loved, not only by those within the ashram but by the many Harwijan villagers who came to do him homage. He often went to their villages on Hindu feastdays.

In 1955 Fr. Bede said he was going to India to find the other half of his soul. And this he did in utter simplicity as a monk of both East and West. Westerners frequently offered to give him donations toward putting more permanent roofing on his huts and other buildings at Shantivanam, but Fr. Bede insisted on the thatch as being more compatible with the villagers among whom he lived. The thatched roofs also gave a local blind man an assured job, as he sat in the shade of the ashram gate and wove the thatch into a finished product. The blind man and his granddaughter, who led him back and forth, loved Fr. Bede and were loved by this holy foreigner who was not a foreigner among them. Fr. Bede's love for the poor kept pressing him to new creative possibilities. He always gave to those who asked, sometimes to the dismay of the community, and arranged that whatever food was available would be given to those who arrived at the gate.

I returned to Shantivanam in 1988 and enjoyed another of Father's birthday celebrations, this time his 82nd. He had requested that his birthday be shared with the poor, so two huge trucks were borrowed to haul all the ashramites to a far away village recently "adopted" by the ashram. Finances had been sent so that the villagers could build sturdier houses in place of the mud huts that often washed away. This visit was to be a tour and progress report, together with entertainment by the men of the village (the women had no time to practice the dances) and supper with the ashramites. I am sure a donation had been given also toward the supper as we each received a hard boiled egg, which was a rarity at Shantivanam.

To live simply, to love totally, one had to be utterly detached from things and attached to the divine. Such was the understanding of the Indian monk, therefore called "the renunciate" or in Sanskrit, the "Sannyasi." Frs. Bede, Monchanin and LeSaux (Abhishiktananda), all lived as Christian Sannyasis in India. While Fr. Bede wrote no treatise as such on the subject (as did Abhishiktananda in *The Further Shore*) he frequently mentioned its value and importance in his conferences and writings. (cf. Jesu Rajan's *Bede Griffiths and Sannyasa*). He claimed by word and proclaimed by his life that the renunciation of the self is the greatest and most difficult of all: "The surrender of the ego is the only way of life." He had written in the

Golden String how he saw in the midst of his conversion "the greatest obstacle in life is the power of self-will." (p. 135).

Fr. Bede's availability bespeaks the degree of renunciation he must have had, as he always made time for those who requested to see him or even anticipated such. And when you were with him, he made you feel as if you were his only concern for the day. He had no secretary, and if he had to change an appointment, he himself would come seek you out and humbly apologize. He himself distributed the mail before dinner each noon, calling each by name and reverently bowing with a warm smile as he handed you yours.

The co-founders of Shantivanam dedicated the ashram to the "adoration of the Holy Trinity," the great love and preoccupation of Father Bede. Wayne Teasdale referred to this as "the central focus of Bede Griffiths' contemplative theology." (cf. *Toward a Christian Vedanta*, thesis on the thought of Bede Griffiths.) Fr. Bede believed that the Hindu experience of advaita and the Christian experience of the Triune God would someday be the Hindu-Christian meeting place.

In Vermont, 1990, where Fr. Bede was resting in a ski lodge after his first stroke, he often shared his intuitions of the Trinity with which he awakened sometimes at 1 or 2 a.m. Most people would have been upset or restless with such insomnia, but Fr. Bede was radiant with the joy of these intuitions.

In a conference given in 1989 at Shantivanam on the Eucharist, he concluded:

Jesus in the Eucharist, is the Jesus of the Resurrection, in the glorified state where He is totally one with God, and He becomes present by His will. Simply by saying, "this is my Body; this is my Blood," He makes this Sacrament. He makes this sign of His presence. So, under that sign of bread and wine, He becomes present in His glorified Body, His Consciousness transformed and that Body and that Soul taken up into the Life of the Spirit, totally one with the Father. And through that Spirit He draws us into this Divine Life, this Divine Consciousness, and we are all destined eventually to enter into the fulness of the Divine Consciousness and the Divine Bliss: SAT-CITT-ANNANDA. That is the destiny of our lives.

What the Christian doctrine gave to Advaita was the profound insight of the interpersonal communion and community of love within the Godhead.

Fr. Bede always had a keen thirst for contemplative prayer, even as a young man before entering the monastery. For him, contemplative prayer brings you into that state of oneness where you experience the indwelling presence of God in your heart; and that, he often said, is the real end of prayer. He believed that the monastic call is a call to the contemplative experience but has been somewhat covered over today. I delighted to find in his autobiography, his own initial confusion about monastic life being a "contemplative life," as there seemed to be nothing in the monastery which seemed to have the least relation to sitting crosslegged, undisturbed. On the contrary, he experienced like all of us, the atmosphere of incessant activity, the whole day being taken up in a constant round of duties, in the choir, in the house, in the garden, workshops, etc. , which left little time for leisure, the leisure of contemplation. But he wrote:

It was some time before I learned the true nature of contemplation. Contemplation is a habit of mind which enables the soul to keep in a state of recollection in the presence of God, whatever may be the work with which we are occupied. In this sense, it is the true aim of every Christian life. But it is obvious that it is impossible to do this without some definite training. The monastic life is simply an organization of life for this specific end.

His lectures at New Harmony, Indiana, in 1990 (cf. *The New Creation in Christ*) focused much on contemplative prayer and his desire to assist the laity to form small groups to enable the renewal of contemplative life in the world.

Fr. Bede was a leading figure in Interreligious Dialogue. Early on at Shantivanam, after his arrival in 1968, Fr. Bede held East-West seminars on the mahasamadhi anniversaries of Shantivanam's cofounders, inviting special personages to contribute papers on interreligious themes which were very unique and instructional. I marvelled at an elderly Hindu named Vamnikamardin, who quoted Thomas Merton and John of the Cross as fluently as he did his own Gita or Puranas and Upanishads. Several times, we, Father's community, accompanied him to the Catholic Seminary at Trichy or to the Benedictine Monastery in Bangalore where Fr. Subash Anand and others shared the riches of the East. Then, in 1978, when our own North American Board for East-West Dialogue was formed, we voted to bring Fr. Bede to the States as a "roving monk lecturer", to share the treasures of Eastern spirituality. (cf. *The Cosmic Revelation*, the edited version of lectures at Conception Abbey during that tour of the monasteries.) Brother Amaldas accompanied Fr. Bede and gave lectures and demonstrations on Yoga. It was during this monastic "tour" that Fr. Bede visited our newly purchased 40 acres in Sand Springs, Oklahoma, and offered Eucharist on the ground in what then became

known as The Forest of Peace. We marked the spot and built Osage+Monastery and chapel there. When he said goodbye, Fr. Bede said he would never return to America again, but he came three more times!

In 1981, our intermonastic Board again invited Fr. Bede to be keynote speaker at our East-West Conference in Kansa City, Kansas. He was much loved and appreciated for his holiness, wisdom, and understanding of both eastern and western spirituality, and the warmth and intensity of his presentations. (cf. *Riches from the East*, Credence cassettes) His presentations even gave him new life. This time he had been in a hospital in South India with hepatitis, and we were not sure he would be able to come. He was weak, but the very experience of sharing with so many invigorated him. Before and after the conference, he spent time at Osage in the Forest of Peace, this time celebrating Eucharist in the chapel built on the spot where he had offered the first. Again, he was sure he would never get to the States again.

While he did much for the Church in India, contributing considerably to Indian Christian theology and interreligious dialogue, his wisdom and compassion have gone forth to the four corners of the world and are continuing to nourish hearts everywhere. Fr. Bede had been to England on occasion, and to America just before Vatican II, but it was only after he turned 80 that the Spirit moved him to share the riches of both East and West more extensively in the USA, England, Germany, Israel and Australia. He accepted invitations to go to Africa, Greece, and the USA before his final stroke grounded him only three days after his 86th birthday. His hand written letters from across the world were always a surprise and were always received as a great gift. Once he said, "I no longer prepare my talks, they just seem to flow out. My talks in England went marvellously well."

Fr. Bede's last visit to Osage was in July until August of 1992. His heart was fluctuating after his taxing conferences in England, Australia and Germany. Although he asked to see a medical doctor and was given prescribed medicine, he rose during the night and wrote out a surrender to the Holy Trinity:

Midnight - July 22, 1992

In the name of the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit. At this hour I feel called to entrust my life wholly into the hands of God. I do not wish to trust in the power of any medicine, but to trust wholly in the power of the Holy Spirit to heal me and make me whole. I put myself under the protection of the holy Mother of God, trusting in her loving care to preserve my life as long as it may be necessary and at the Cross of Jesus Christ to save me whether in life or in death and bring me to the Father, who created me and redeemed me out of His love. I hold no one in this monastery in any way responsible but entrust my life wholly into the hands of God.

Bede Griffiths

At doctors orders, all conferences and appointments were cancelled and he became once again like a novice, meditating and eating and sleeping in his hut. Indeed, "the surrender of the ego" was a way of life for Fr. Bede. Instead of any self pity, he revelled in his time and devoured Michael von Bruck's mammoth work, *The Unity of Reality*, did a book review of it, made a tape on "Aging and Stages of Life," and wrote a gem of a page on "Religious Vows Today." To a friend in Germany, among other letters, he wrote from the **Forest of Peace:**

Somehow I feel that I have said enough and need more time for quiet. This place has had a profound effect on me. **It is the most peaceful place I have ever known, and makes me feel the presence of God more intimately.**

It is good to share with others, but one needs constantly to be renewed in the Divine Presence, which solitude can bring....

Something very deep is happening to me. It is disturbing in a way - I have been reading the book of Deuteronomy /Old Testament - it is appalling. [Appalling and incredible were two of his most favorite words.] The God of Israel was a God of murder and destruction, ordering the slaughter of men, women, and children. We have to read the Old Testament with new eyes. Even the best of the prophets are affected by it , like the psalmist.

Anger, hatred, and revenge, are the order of the day. Jesus came to set us free from the Law (the Torah), as St. Paul so well understood, and to put an end to that religion of judgement and condemnation by revealing the mystery of unconditional love. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," is the final word. We are all conditioned by our ignorance and all need forgiveness.

(letter to Roland Ropers 7/22/92)

Fr. Bede (Swami Dayananda) was truly a sacrament of God's presence on our earth. With him as a center of contemplative life, inculturation and interreligious dialogue, with his life of renunciation and holiness, radiating peace and joy, Shantivanam grew in length and breadth, in width and depth and became a literal "crossroads of a million private lives." His friends became our friends from countries all over the globe. Long before the Berlin Wall fell, people braved it to come from Poland to hear his teachings and share in his Satsangs (faith sharings with all the ashramites), in order to take back the riches to their people. Even today, Fr. Bede's books have been translated into Czechoslovakian and some are pleading for permission to publish them for the spiritually starving people in that country.

Just before I left Shantivanam, after an unbelievable year of "presence", someone who had just arrived referred to Fr. Bede as an "icon of integrity." I couldn't have phrased it better - an icon of integrity, a man without guile, joyfully full of sacred wisdom and radiance.

It is right....that those who give illumination - those minds clearer than the others, joyfully full of the sacred radiance, and obviously able both to receive the light and to pass on what they acquire - that these should spread their overflowing light everywhere among those worthy of it.

Dionysius (*The Celestial Hierarchy*)

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