

## Bede Griffiths – The Renunciant

Bede Griffiths' prophetic message was the utterance of the Holy Spirit breathed through a life of surrendered love. Christian contemplative seekers through the centuries have embraced with surrendered love the challenge of Christ's warning that "unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain", and that "one who loves his (her) life loses it". (Jn. 12:24-25)

Fr. Bede Griffiths was no exception to the challenge. When Alan Griffiths entered Prinknash Abbey in his late 20s, among many things he and other young novices had to study was the desert teachings as recorded by John Cassian. From here they learned the classic spiritual and ascetical practices of this "surrender" in three stages. These were known as "The Three Renunciations" and then a "fourth thing".

The first is that by which in bodily fashion we despise all the wealth and resources of the world. The second is that by which we reject the erstwhile behavior, vices, and affections of soul and body. The third is that by which we call our mind away from everything that is present and visible and contemplate only what is to come and desire those things that are invisible.<sup>1</sup>

*affliction, emotions*

I would like to focus on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Renunciation or surrender in Fr. Bede's journey, plus the 4<sup>th</sup> "thing" described by Cassian and Fr. Bede's experience of that insofar as any of us could grasp or share.

Before he underwent the traditional 1<sup>st</sup> Renunciation, Alan Griffiths' basic monastic commitment in Prinknash Abbey, we all know that he left Oxford after graduation with two other young men, despising wealth and the resources of the world, especially the technology. At this same time he experienced the 2<sup>nd</sup> of the classic Renunciations during his surrender of his intellect the night of his conversion also before his monastic commitment.

According to Cassian this 2<sup>nd</sup> Renunciation or surrender is by way of rejecting "the erstwhile behavior, vices, and affections of soul and body." In a letter dated Nov. 1, 1953 to a directee from his monastery pen, Dom Bede described almost minutely the struggle with this 2<sup>nd</sup> Renunciation which began the night of his conversion, before, mind you, his monastic commitment. He wrote:

I have been telling Mary that my prayer has undergone a revolution through my discovery of the meaning of sin. Of course, I have known it in general before, but this has been a deep, interior experience renewed from day to day. It will take a long time for it to sink in, but I do believe it is what I have been seeking. I have always felt an obstacle between myself and my deepest being, and I am sure that the obstacle is pride. I feel that Jung's psychology and oriental methods of prayer tend to make me overlook this fundamental matter of personal sin. This seems to be the *essential* work of Christian prayer. For sin is the offence against God in the sense

that it is an offence against *the ultimate law of being*. It seems to me that it touches the depths of one's soul. Only when we have realized this deep, interior sin and repented of it with all our will, can our interior being be open to God. Then God is experienced as *love*, reaching down into the depths of our being and drawing us to itself. This again seems to be a peculiarly Christian experience – God is known as absolutely *other* than ourselves, giving himself gratuitously to us, more deeply present to us than we are to ourselves, but still absolutely *other*. It is a union of love – two really distinct beings united in one. But one must keep one's mind on the reality of one's personal sin. One must recall the incidents of rebellion, self-assertion, self-will etc. which have occurred in the past and recognize one's sin and repent. It must be a completely personal act of acknowledgement and reparation. One must realize that pride, anger, hatred, jealousy, lust and sloth are perpetually active in us and only the grace of God can save us at any moment.

This may not mean as much to you as it does to me, but it has to become an interior experience, a grace which needs to be renewed day by day, until the hard shell of pride begins to be worn through. I feel sure that this is the obstruction which keeps one back all the time.

Isn't your desire to be *above* everything all the time probably due to this? The way lies in exactly the opposite direction. One has to learn to place oneself *below* everyone and everything. The inmost centre of the soul is the *lowest* point of our being: it is where we become nothing and God everything. But to reach it one has to go back and back, beyond each point of self-assertion by which the wall of pride has been built up, until one reaches childhood, - then beyond that, because there is sin *latent* in childhood, until one realizes that there is no good in oneself, and that every particle of good comes not from ourselves but from God, and that it is *only* by grace that we do not pervert every good thing we find in ourselves.<sup>2</sup>

B.G letter to Mary Allen 11/1/53

Fr. Bede had many minor experiences of surrendering his former way of life such as in his departure from his homeland for India, the refusal of monastic and Indian hierarchical Superiors to sponsor the "new foundation", and the like. But only Bede Griffiths knew the many times he was called to surrender his "former way of life" at Shantivanum and even at Kurisumala.

A graphic phrase describing this second renunciation penned by a Tibetan monk, must have intrigued Fr. Bede in his later years, as he copied these words into his small handbook: the surrender of the "disease of striving for any achievement".<sup>3</sup>

At the sunset of his life no doubt Fr. Bede embraced this challenge to full surrender though no longer able to articulate such in writing or otherwise but joy exuded and abounded – was this that “fourth thing” Cassian refers to which is bestowed upon “the perfect renunciant by way of remuneration and reward”.<sup>4</sup>

The Fourth thing: In 1990 several of us close to Fr. Bede ( Russill, Asha, Wayne and myself) lived in a Challet in New Hampshire with Fr. Bede. Among other things Russill recorded “An Experience of Shantivanam” with sacred chants, poetry, music, devotional songs, spiritual readings and commentaries by Fr. Bede and the group. Each morning all of us would gather in Fr. Bede’s bedroom with his “milk with tea in it” and he would be radiant describing the experience he had had at 2 or 3 a.m. It was always the Holy Trinity, the Son coming from the Father and the intense love between them being Itself the Holy Spirit with a fresh nuance each morning.

This 4<sup>th</sup> thing, which is bestowed upon the perfect renunciant by way of remuneration and reward—that he should deserve to enter the promised land, where the thorns and troubles of the vices do not grow. This will be possessed in purity of heart in this body, after all the passions have been driven out. This does not depend on the virtue or effort of the one who toils; it is the Lord himself who promises that he will show this when he says: ‘Come to the land which I shall show you.’

Fr. Bede very well exemplified the joy-filled stage of realization that Cassian wrote about, the inner and outer freedom of the person who is no longer attached to anything..

Actually every Christian – every person must embrace each and all of these surrenders in order to continue and progress on the spiritual path whether Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Taoist, Sikh or Christian. While Bede Griffiths embraced and endured each of these surrenders in his lifetime, he chose to live the life of a Hindu Renunciate – the Sannyasi, donning the Kavi doti, lungi and prayer shawl, and taking the name of Dhayananda, while remaining totally committed to Christ.

The Hindu Sannyasi is one who, according to Abhishiktananda, gives unswerving attention to the Presence. In this tradition, according to Fr. Bede, the greatest part of the renunciation is in the surrender of the self. The *aham kara* – the “I maker”. Throughout Fr. Bede’s all but 87 years, the surrender of the self was always involved in each and all of the classical renunciations embraced and lovingly surrendered to. He wrote in his autobiography (1954) that the most important thing one must do on the spiritual path is the surrender of the ego—the self. And as an octogenarian, enriched with evermore wisdom and grace, Bede said: “The most difficult thing one must do on the spiritual path is the surrender of the ego,” this was bodily

renunciation, yes, but even more beneficial and sublime is “renunciation of the heart.”

For Fr. Bede, every surrender, every renunciation was for the sake of Communion with the Beloved, finding the One in everyone and everything: “the fullness of Him who fills everything in every way”. (Eph. 1:23)

I know that Supreme Person, radiant like the sun **beyond** darkness;  
Who knows him goes **beyond** death for he is the only way to life immortal.  
Svetasvetara Up. III, 8

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#### End notes:

1. Cassian, John, *Conferences*, trans. Boniface Ramsey. Ancient Christian Writers. No 57 (New York: Newman/Paulist Press. 1997), Conference III, VI.1 and VII.1-3
2. Griffiths, Bede letter to Dr. Mary Allen, Nov. 1, 1953 printed in *Falling in Love with India*. Ed. Adrian Rance Saccidananda Ashram, Shantivanam, S. India 2006
3. Norbes, Namkhai, the Six Vajra Verses as quoted by Meath Conlan in *The Wisdom of a Prophet* (Springfield, IL Templegate, 2006)
4. Cassian, John, *Conferences*, X.5&6. (For another take on this “4<sup>th</sup> thing” of Cassian cf. Sr.Meg Funk, *Humility Matters*.)

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