

FR FRANCIS DOBSON OSB 1939-2018



Fr Francis Dobson died on 9th January 2018 aged 78. He was born in Newark, Nottinghamshire on 31st May 1939. Timothy Dobson came to Gilling in 1947 at the age of eight, and went on to St Dunstan's House. After leaving school, he worked in the family textile business before qualifying as a Chartered Accountant, going on to work for Price Waterhouse in London (1963-66) and Johannesburg (1966-67), where he found apartheid hard to live with and was relieved to come back to the UK.

He joined the monastery, aged 27, in 1967 with Fr Christopher and two others, who did not persevere. He was clothed in the monastic habit by Abbot Basil Hume and given the name Francis, taking solemn vows in 1971. From 1970 to 1972, he studied at St Benet's Hall and at Plater College, Oxford, taking a diploma in Social Studies.

After ordination in 1976, he worked on two of our parishes, Knaresborough and Leyland, before returning to teach Politics and Religious Studies for the next 30 years, besides running the stationery shop and helping with Junior House Scouts. He was Chaplain to St Aidan's House for over ten years – and then to St Cuthbert's from 2003-2016 and often used to stand in for Housemasters who were away for a day or two.

Fr Francis managed to combine teaching and chaplaincy work with a bewildering array of other jobs: Assistant Novice Master, Business Manager of the Ampleforth Journal, promotor and organiser of students going to Lourdes, Assistant leader and Chaplain to the Duke of Edinburgh Award activities. He was also responsible for preparing candidates for Confirmation, was Chaplain to the School Infirmary, Assistant Head of the Religious Studies department, Vice President of the staff Common Room, Second Guest Master, Honorary Secretary of the Ampleforth Society, coach to the 3rd XI cricket and, of course, coordinator of the essentially school-run, school-based fundraising enterprise at Ampleforth known as FACE-FAW (Friendship and Aid to Central & Eastern Europe and Friendship and Aid to the World).

For many years he was a brilliant organiser of Headmaster's Lectures. Ex-Prime Ministers, politicians, Foreign Ambassadors, Foreign Correspondents, etc were

telephoned and almost invariably agreed to come. In fact they mirrored Fr Francis because he would always say ‘Yes’ when asked for help. That is why he collected a plethora of jobs. But you would be well advised not to ask him to drive you anywhere!

He was both interested and hugely knowledgeable in politics and taught it to great effect. However, if you telephoned him when he was teaching in his small room in the Clock Tower you were quite likely to be greeted with the score in the Test Match, and the class might equally be discussing cricket as the complexities of American politics or the forthcoming General Election. He was passionately interested in cricket, and in particular Nottinghamshire County Cricket. As a child, watching them at Trent Bridge, he would always insist on staying till the last over. His classroom in the new JCB building was recognisable from its three icons: his crucifix, the TV for watching the news (or cricket) and a shelf full of Wisden. Right up to the end of his life he was watching cricket on the TV in the monastery infirmary, while England were being hammered by the Australians in the Ashes.

His memory for cricketing facts and figures was incredible. His family never received conventional birthday cards from him: he would always send a letter giving some random facts that had happened many years earlier on the birthday: Larwood bowling someone out or someone hitting a century. As an Uncle he never seemed to tire of bowling to the children or teaching the skills of table cricket if it was raining! It seems that he was also keen on fishing, sailing and skiing, though this was never apparent to his monastic brethren. What we do remember is his insatiable appetite for ice-cream: going out in his pyjamas to buy it at 11.00pm in Lourdes, third and fourth helpings in the monastic refectory and extra supplies during family holidays to the delight of the children. It may be a relief to some of those who celebrated Mass with him in St Aidan’s or St Cuthbert’s or other houses where he often supplied, and on expeditions or in the Infirmary, that Masses with his family often ended in giggles as well. But they too were humbled by his faith and spirituality; it shone through everything he did.

His was a life sustained by a deep, uncluttered faith. This did not have to be articulated, it was so obvious, for he taught not so much by words as by example. Conversations with him on occasions could be perplexing, especially if one met him in a passage, because he would begin talking to you about twenty yards away so that when you met you had little idea of what he was talking about, so you had to ask him to start at the beginning.

Fr Alexander McCabe, a contemporary of Fr Francis in the monastery, writes:

“Francis was an exceptional character. There was a huge, uncomplicated openness

about him, which was the fruit of an inviolable innocence on the one hand, and a deep-seated reluctance to assert himself or to impose a definitive view on any issue, on the other. He had a truly humble self-doubt in him.

“Francis did not, I think, spend much time trying to understand himself. He was simply too busy for that. He was a combination of strong and straightforward impulses inspired by faith and buttressed by an extraordinary capacity for hard work, complex, large-scale organisation, and prayer. In all this, he seemed to be driven. And in all this he was utterly non-judgemental of others.

“Yet it is not easy to rid oneself of the conviction that Francis was a blithe spirit, a person of exceptional holiness who exhibited outstanding chastity in a world wallowing in depravity, exceptional humility of life in a world ever seeking its own glory, and who displayed, with unstinting integrity, the qualities that made of him an exemplary Benedictine monk and priest.

“You would normally find him ensconced in his tiny office, just off the main hall, biro between his teeth, typing away, organising students in daily meetings of house reps, eliciting ideas from them for raising ever more money for FACE-FAW, the school’s official charity. He liked to put up notices of blank A4 paper round the school with a single word printed in the middle of the page in a seriously tiny font which forced you to look at it really closely. It might read just ‘10.59,’ nothing else. Yet everyone knew this meant the time of the meeting – i.e. railway time, not approximate time. This was when you were expected to be there – not 11.00. In this way, Francis tried to make his notices mean something to the standard unthinking teenager and his mind was ever active in finding new opportunities to engage students in some worthwhile charitable cause. His office became a sort of tiny hub of the Ampleforth universe, at the heart of which was a highly efficient and tireless brain at one level, and a deeply mischievous, unpredictable spirit at another.”

Francis’ last major work was to write the history of FACE-FAW, published in the last issue of the Ampleforth Journal. It was meticulously researched, careful to give credit to all the students who had contributed. Over the years, countless students were inspired to do something helpful in their gap year by working with FACE-FAW partners. Helping Mary’s Meals feed school children in the poorest countries was one of the on-going commitments that inspired Fr Francis, and his enthusiasm was infectious. The messages of thanks and support after his death from many organisations helped by FACE-FAW, including those in Romania, Ethiopia, Mozambique and Zimbabwe suggest that this may be his most lasting memorial.

One such project was the building of a school in Mozambique and a French businessman with four children at Ampleforth involved himself with this. When his

eldest son became a monk of Fontgombault in Northern France, Francis went to his Simple Profession. At the end of the celebrations, Francis was given – and carried back with him all the way from France – the gift of a large and very heavy stone statue of Our Lady, ‘Patron of a Good Death.’ In fact, it was so heavy that it almost killed him getting it here and might well have served its purpose there and then. The statue remained in the monastery infirmary where it was not far from Francis’ bed in the final months of his life.

In his later years, at the invitation of the local bishop, Francis went to Ethiopia to find out how he could further the work of Mary’s Meals there and be of service to the indigent local community. It was to be his last foray into the world of large-scale starvation and it was to bring him to the brink of physical and mental exhaustion. His preaching could be opaque, mystifying; some suspected he quite enjoyed mystifying people. The great St Cyprian of Carthage talking about prayer once said: ‘God listens not to the voice, but to the heart.’ It could be said of congregations listening to Francis that his words were often unintelligible but his heart was so transparently good.

Fr Alexander continues:

“Over the years that I knew him, there were a number of significant figures that caught his attention and to whom he would return time and again in his homilies and retreats. A saying of one of them, Charles de Foucauld, succinctly expresses Francis’ whole approach (though he would never have put it into these words himself): “It is not necessary to teach others, to cure them or to improve them; it is only necessary to live among them, sharing the human condition and being present to them in love.” “Indeed, one of Francis’ favourite words was ‘sharing.’ I noticed how it came into practically everything he would say either in a homily or a talk or Bidding Prayers. Life was about sharing one’s gifts with others, sharing resources, sharing our surplus with the deprived and the disadvantaged.

“Francis loved anything to do with the lives of the saints and in 2005, we decided to go to Rome together to visit the great (‘minor’) basilica of St Lawrence-Outside-the-Walls on the feast day of our monastic patron, 10th August. Hosted by his lifelong friend John Morris (D55, RIP 2017) who lived and worked in Rome for virtually his entire career, we went somewhat awed to the very place of St Lawrence’s martyrdom, a small spot 3m square inside the basilica, which was opened only once a year, on the saint’s feast day.

“The climax of our trip was evening Mass in the church at Amaseno, the little medieval village up in the Abruzzi where the people had all gathered before the tall-standing and surprisingly substantial relic of the blood of St Lawrence, which had

begun to liquefy on 9th August and would slowly coagulate again on the evening of 10th. Francis and I witnessed it in all its glowing, fiery beauty – the experience of which left him in tears throughout the entire Mass.

“Rome also saw him bring his own solution to the problem of crossing a road heaving with traffic from every direction. As he made his way to the middle of the road, he would wave his stick high in the air and stop dead. He would then face the traffic, arms and legs in the form of an X, which would be forced to come to a screeching halt, after which he would, with visible effort, slowly hobble to the other side, drivers gazing in disbelief at his mad daring.”

From 1979, he began coordinating the work of Ampleforth College students on the annual pilgrimage to Lourdes, an endeavour that was to have a profound impact on his life. Over the years, he would make more than 80 pilgrimages to Lourdes and 20 to Medjugorje. His annual visit to Lourdes was the highlight of his year when not only did he take part in the Ampleforth Pilgrimage, which he had done since 1957, but he usually took a *stage* group in the weeks before. In 1989, he was made a titular member of the Hospitalité de Notre Dame de Lourdes and in July 2009 the Bishop of Lourdes appointed him an Honorary Chaplain of the Grotto.

When illness prevented him going on pilgrimage he would watch on television, in his room in the monastery infirmary, the live-screening of Mass in the Grotto at Lourdes, or in St James’s Church in Medjugorje. Thus it was that in 2016, the first year he had not come on the Ampleforth pilgrimage, he saw the entire pilgrimage turn round, at the Sign of Peace in their Mass at the Grotto, and wave at him.

One of the things that stood out was the fact that he had energy in an extraordinary degree. Despite only ever getting a minimal amount of sleep, he was perfectly happy to be contacted by anyone at any time of the night as he simply never shut down. He was generous to a fault with his time and concern for others, nothing was too much trouble. Links with students were kept alive after they left with Fr Francis’ work on the Ampleforth Journal (1973-1989), as Honorary Secretary of the Ampleforth Society (1994-2009) and as founding editor of *The Diary* (1999-2009) and continued during his illness. Many remember receiving unexpected telephone calls or emails, for he had a genius for keeping in touch, and indeed everyone who came in touch with him was moved by his kindness and interest in their lives. He had a sort of itch for communication and an insatiable hunger for information. “What’s happening?” he would ask breathlessly, always assuming that something was, and terrified to be missing out. He was a stickler for accuracy and had the slightly unsettling habit – even in his final months of illness – of resorting to the computer on the spot to check a fact, a sports result or a story that was in dispute. This was not to put one in the wrong, but because he knew how unreliable personal memory could be and preferred

to put the record straight if need be.

When Fr Francis received the diagnosis that his prostate cancer had spread and was attacking his bones and that there was no cure, his reaction was that it was a great grace because he saw that he had been given the time to prepare himself for death. He wrote at the end of an account of his vocation: “On June 14th 2016 I learnt of my illness. I had a stunning uncertainty, fear and beautiful grace. Actually it is to try and stand on one’s head, no longer to seek to be important, to have nothing but the gifts of the Lord.”

Francis was a man at peace; at peace with himself, at peace with others and at peace with God. It was a peace that could not be taken away. It was not an absence of pain, because in spite of medication he suffered much. His peace was founded on his love and concern for others and an acceptance that he was loved by God. That peace was founded on a humble life. If humility is distilled Christianity, Francis had it in spades.

He was always cheerful, never complained and was always welcoming and grateful to anyone who visited him. And that never changed, even at the very end of his life. The nurses loved looking after him.

He continued to attend Sunday Mass in the Abbey Church and to join with the monks in choir for the Divine Office for as long as he could. Right up to the end, he continued to promote the work of FACE-FAW. His life mirrored the rhythm of Jesus’s life, one of great activity followed by one of great passivity, of passion, of suffering. He died peacefully in the monastery infirmary at Ampleforth on 9th January 2018, at the age of 78.