

Brendan Smith

Charles Dermot Smith born 31 October 1923; St Aidan's House September 1937-July 1941; Captain 1st XI 1941; Head of House St Aidan's 1941; monk of Ampleforth 1941-81 – clothed as a monk in September 1941 with monastic name Brendan; St Benet's Hall, Oxford 1944-48; Salesianum, Fribourg 1948-51; ordained priest at Ampleforth July 1951; master at Ampleforth 1951-9, 1960-75; at St Louis Priory 1959-60; Housemaster St Aidan's House 1960-75; Prior of Ampleforth 1975-8; married Jenifer Dawson 1981; died 20 June 2007 Somerset.



Brendan Smith, who died on 20 June 2007, was a monk of Ampleforth for nearly forty years. He was a crucial figure, both in the life of the school and the monastery, and being Prior at the time of Abbot Basil Hume's elevation to the Archbishopric of Westminster, was, for a month, the Superior of the Community. His decision to leave the monastery a few years later was a source of great anguish, both for himself and for the Community, and it is understandable that there was quite a long period of estrangement and pain. He always retained, however, a deep attachment to his monastic community and to the monastic values which had formed him and which he loved very much. His later years were years of quiet and progressive reconciliation. His laicisation had been canonically

recognised, and with his wife, Jenifer, he visited the monastery with increasing frequency. He always remained in close touch with Cardinal Basil Hume, who wrote the foreword for his book about God, which he wrote in his later years – a book which was rooted in his own experience and profound spiritual search and upheaval.

Brendan Smith was born and brought up in Harrogate and came to Ampleforth in September 1937. He was very gifted intellectually. His main academic subject was mathematics, but he was a voracious student of literature, and was also an extremely able games player. In spite of his poor eyesight, he had an uncanny sense of timing in ball games, particularly as an elusive centre three-quarter in rugby and as a batsman. He often found great difficulty in explaining how it was that he was able to strike so sweetly a ball that he could not really see clearly. He was Captain of Cricket in his final year and scored one particularly notable century against Sedbergh.

In 1941, he was one of a large group of school contemporaries who joined the monastery. He read mathematics at St Benet's Hall, Oxford, and for three years studied theology at the Salesianum at Fribourg in Switzerland. In 1951 he returned to Ampleforth to be ordained and started work in the school. In addition to teaching mathematics and coaching games, he was also School Librarian, and cultivated increasingly his interest in literature. He was already fluent in French, and in order to read *Dante* in the original, he set himself the task of becoming fluent in Italian. After a short spell in St Louis in 1960, he succeeded Fr Anthony Ainscough as Housemaster of St Aidan's, a post which he held until 1975. This was a period of huge cultural uncertainty, and of profound change in the educational climate. What

came to be known as the student revolution coincided with the impact of the Second Vatican Council on the experience of personal faith, and on the style and ethos of educational and religious institutions. Brendan responded alertly to all these currents, and became a key figure in the way they were interpreted at Ampleforth. Although his own discipline was mathematics, his literary interests led to his becoming head of the English Department. His personal approach to learning was deeply cross-curricular, particularly with regard to the aesthetic dimension of mathematics, which he loved to explore. His somewhat left-wing sympathies made him in some ways critical of the more traditional aspects of the public school ethos, and his acute sensitivity to the shifting aspirations of the young made him feel quite often, somewhat out of tune with the culture in which he lived.

By nature he was both rather diffident and fastidious, and few would have suspected during these years that he was increasingly facing a dark crisis in his own vocation. Abbot Basil's decision to appoint him Prior of the monastery in 1975 represented a calculated and brave attempt to place him in a situation where he might find, in the monastery, greater peace and stability than he had found in his work in the school. However, at this time Brendan had become afflicted with a deep sense of sterility and of personal anguish, and although he tried bravely to commit himself wholeheartedly to the service of the community, this absence of a sense of personal fulfilment became more than he could sustain. After a long period of heart searching, which he shared most fully with his superiors and with other friends in the community, he eventually decided to ask for laicisation.

This was, of course, a difficult period for him. It was a situation of contradiction and of apparent betrayal, which he would dearly have loved to avoid. But he received loving and steady support from Jenifer Dawson, whom he married in 1981. At first he taught mathematics in Cambridge, and then they moved to Wales. It was not easy for him to adjust to the presence in his new family of many stepchildren, and his personal life had been complicated for him by the long experience of feeling that his creative life had foundered on the rocks of a personal failure for which he felt deeply responsible. He acquired gradually, however, a deepening sense of peace and fulfilment with the support of his new family. His marriage was a very happy one, and his devotion to his stepsons and their children gradually came to be warmly reciprocated. He remained deeply committed both in general and in detail to the central attitudes and practices of his monastic experience. The Liturgy of the Hours became a central part of his life, and he recovered bit by bit the sense that he had a creative contribution to make in a field where his search for God, his love of the paradoxes of mathematics, and his profound knowledge of European literature came providentially to coincide. The result was a really rather remarkable book *The Silence of Divine Love*, published in 1998, in which, within the context of faith in a God of love, he explored the many ways in which saints, artists and writers had strived to interpret the experience of spiritual darkness.

They moved to Somerset in 1997 and his last years, although increasingly punctuated by the onset of old age and illness, were years of increasing serenity and joy. He was deeply grateful for the support and friendship he received from his erstwhile monastic colleagues, and it meant much to him that these were represented, together with his wife Jenifer, at his bedside in his last illness.

The last words of his book are: 'Only empty-handed shall we be able to approach the holiness of God. On the way we may find ourselves in darkness and in rough water like the disciples who were in the boat with Jesus. Only when we have

we shall finally hear the words of Jesus: 'It is I, do not be afraid'. It is not given to everyone to write, so eloquently, his own epitaph.