



This portrait of Abbot Timothy was given to the Manquehue Association and hangs in their retreat house in Patagonia

ABBOT TIMOTHY WRIGHT OSB 1942-2018



Dom Timothy Wright, former Abbot of Ampleforth Abbey, died on 14 May 2018. He was 76 years old. Martin Wright (Timothy was his monastic name) was born in New Ollerton in Nottinghamshire on 13th April 1942 and, along with his three brothers – Fr Stephen, Fr Ralph (now a monk of St Louis) and Miles (died 2012) was educated at Ampleforth, all in St Thomas' House. The family business was the Midlands coal and steel firm of Butterley. A plaque on the wall at St Pancras station notes their involvement in the building of the roof.

After leaving school he joined the White Fathers with Henry Scrope (C60) with the idea of becoming a missionary to Africa but both decided it was not for them. Martin went to Fribourg in Switzerland to study French and Philosophy for a year before joining the Ampleforth Novitiate at the age of 20. His novice master was Fr Bruno Donovan who, in the middle of a class on the Rule of Benedict, came out with this limerick: "There was a young novice called Wright, who argued from morning to night; rebuked one day he was heard to say, even if wrong I'm (w)right!" This was often recalled in later years.

At St Benet's Hall, he read Geography and, after Ordination, he taught full time in the school, was responsible for Adventure Training in the CCF, gained an external degree in Theology from London University, was appointed Head of Religious Studies, developed a new A level in Catholic Theology, led expeditions along the Pennine Way, the Western Highlands Way, the Pyrenees and the Italian Alps. He organised voluntary social works for the Sixth Form at weekends, visiting a Cheshire Home, a Hospital and helping elderly people. He spent his holidays variously in Belfast, with camps for local children, in parish work in Alaska, giving retreats in Texas and Cape Town and elsewhere.

This was the time after Vatican II. When he joined the Community, all the Office was in Latin. He was one of the committee of four monks appointed by Abbot Basil Hume to produce an English Office for us. Timothy brought his limitless energy to this project, typing 12 lever-arch files of draft himself (before word processors) and the product has been in daily use for forty years.

Timothy's relationship with God was the priority in his life. This was testified to by those who had rooms under his Housemaster's bedroom in St John's in which was the exercise bike with a built-in rosary which he used each morning before going to 6.00am Matins in the Abbey (unusual for Housemasters during term). It was spoken of by those who went on holiday and expeditions with him, who remember coming in with him from an exhausting day on the hill, wet through and longing for a bath, and finding that the first priority was Mass. In his Lectio, he developed a scheme whereby he would read and ponder and make notes on what the Lord was saying to him in short passages from nine different books of Scripture each day.

In 1980 he was appointed Housemaster of St John's House. One of his students remembers that "he ran St John's with the skills that would have made him an effective leader in industry, with the ability to distil information and set objectives, so everyone had absolute clarity of what was required by both an individual and the team. You recognised that Fr Timothy simply wanted the best from you; he'd push and challenge you. In hindsight, you would recognise that mediocrity wasn't in his manual. He was clear and had drive, with a sense of purpose; you always knew where you stood with him." However, his frequent exclaiming of the word 'unbelievable' could equally heap praise, or the very opposite. While still Housemaster, he was appointed as Second Master and acted as Deputy Head when Fr Dominic was on sabbatical or away as Chairman of HMC.

It was while he was Housemaster that Timothy came in contact with José Manuel Eguiguren. This led to what he termed 'the most important development' in his life: his engagement with the Manquehue Apostolic Movement in Chile. He grasped straight away that the Manquehue Movement's way of life and prayer and lectio resonated with the Benedictine tradition. Later, he was involved in the setting up of San Lorenzo, their school in the slums of Santiago in Chile and the sending out of Ampleforth Gap year students to work there. Even in the midst of his chemotherapy he went to celebrate the Holy Week liturgies with Manquehue in Santiago.

But the big change in Timothy's life came in March 1997, when he was elected seventh Abbot of this community. As he himself wrote: "One difficulty for me was that I lacked any period of formation. I moved from Housemaster to Deputy Headmaster to being Abbot in a matter of minutes. This meant a 'dramatic change' in lifestyle. There was no 'formation.' The brethren of course were sympathetic and helpful, but with a community of 90, not all would be pleased."

His abbacy, from 1997 to 2005, came at the beginning of what Pope Francis has described as 'not so much an era of change as a change of era,' the birth pangs of a new age, which has been experienced as a great challenge, if also as an opportunity, for Ampleforth.

At his funeral, Fr Gabriel spoke of this: “In his years as Abbot, and for all his successors as Superior here, there has been the need to face the sins and crimes regarding the safeguarding of children and adults at risk. Abbot Timothy’s emails remained anguished about this right up to his death, though I think he shared the view of his successors, best described in Fr Terence’s first conference as acting superior in the autumn of 2016, that we must view this as a purification not as a persecution.

“But the ‘change of era’ extends far beyond this and has affected every aspect of a monastic vocation in the 21st century. I doubt there is Abbot, Bishop or even Pope in his ordinary teaching office, who would suggest that his judgement in the midst of such turbulence and uncertainty has never faltered. Abbot Timothy did not shy away from confrontations, he called them his tin hat moments, with a passing hint at his famous nickname.”

“These could be with whole groups, as with the whole neighbourhood over a scheme for Park House Farm, or with the monastic community, in which close votes, indeed a majority of one, were held to be evidence of a big green light from the Holy Spirit; they could also be individual and some of the brethren found Timothy all too much of a bull in the very precious china shop of their monastic lives.”

He recalled Abbot Timothy, after a fiery difference of opinion with him in the Abbot’s Council, saying, revealingly, ‘You know, Gabriel, you must always tell the truth’. “The revealing thing” continued Fr Gabriel in his funeral homily, “is that he did not say what I, rather more mealy mouthed and mean spirited, might have said namely ‘You must say what you think is right’, but I suspect without changing his view in the slightest, ‘You must always tell the truth’. He was reminding me, I think, that we are not about convenience or calculation, but about the truth, even in collision.”

“Abbot Timothy always walked St Benedict’s path of humility, which Benedict says God raises up to become a ladder. I think he probably walked it more instinctively than by plan, certainly not by any calculation, and in my self-determining arrogance I probably mistook it more often than not. But I realize his looking less than ever like a bull, has maybe some connection, with that final step on the ladder of humility: ‘The twelfth step of humility is that a monk always manifests humility in his bearing no less than in his heart, so that it is evident at the work of God, in the oratory, the monastery or the garden, on a journey or in the field, or anywhere else’. We are brought by this step according to St Benedict, to say with the tax collector at the back of the Temple ‘Lord I am a sinner, not worthy to look up to heaven.’”

Another manifestation of his humility was his readiness to recognize the efforts and initiatives of others, often with the encouraging word ‘Brilliant!’

A ruling abbot who resigns has the right to assume, if he so wishes, the title of abbot of an ancient abbey. Abbot Timothy was Titular Abbot of Westminster Abbey, and his funeral was attended by the Dean of Westminster, the Very Reverend Dr John Hall who remembered being invited in 2011 to a Mass on St Benedict's day at the abbey of Monte Cassino and finding incongruous the sight of Abbot Timothy in lace, as one of the abbatial assistants to the Cardinal celebrant. He thought it less odd when his mitred head nodded during an interminable sermon. He remembers Timothy's occasional visits at Westminster Abbey and loved his energy and impatience, his commitment to ecumenical and inter-faith relations and his bubbling enthusiasm.

It is difficult for any abbot who finds himself not re-elected. Timothy was no exception, though he rarely referred to it. It was unimaginable for him not to find other outlets for his energy.

As Abbot, he had invited a friend of Fr Jonathan, a young Iranian theologian, Mohammad Ali Shomali, studying for his doctorate at Manchester University to come to give three talks to the Ampleforth Community. He had initiated a series of Benedictine-Shi'a Muslim Conferences at one of which he had listened as the two surviving monks from the Cistercian community of Tibhirine, Algeria, spoke about their experiences of living among Muslims, which had led to the murder of most of their brethren and he had been inspired by the posthumously published writings of their Prior, Christian de Chergé.

Now, the Abbot Primate, Notker Wolf, invited him to work on developing monastic inter-religious dialogue and find common ground between Benedictines and Islam. To use Timothy's own words: "That challenge took me to many Benedictine communities in India, Sri Lanka, Philippines, Indonesia and in Africa to Algeria, Morocco, Ghana, Central Africa Republic, Nigeria, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Kenya, Burundi, Tanzania, South Africa, then to Australia, Brazil, USA, Canada. In Europe I visited Benedictine Houses in Belgium, France, Spain, Italy, Germany, Poland, Holland. In the Middle East I visited Monastic houses in Israel, Egypt, Turkey, Syria, Jordan. As a geographer it was a 'dream come true'!"

The common ground that he found lay in *Lectio*, the prayerful reading of the Bible and the Qur'an alongside each other. This was the theme of the book that he later published, in 2013 called *No Peace without Prayer, Encouraging Muslims and Christians to Pray Together*, which was based on the thesis he had written for his Doctorate in 2008. This led to his teaching a course in 2013 at Benedictine University, Lisle, Illinois (living with the community of St Procopius Monastery) and then establishing an on-line course, 'The Challenge of Two Inspired Texts: the Holy Bible and the Holy Qur'an: a Journey into Similarities and Differences.'

In February, 2017 the President of Iran awarded him and Dr Mohammad al Shomali a Special Prize, among Iran's annual Literary Prizes, for their contribution to Interreligious Dialogue between Catholics and Shi'a Muslims.

Fr Gabriel had proposed to Timothy that, after his last operation, he become a senior research fellow at St Benet's, pursuing the in-depth comparison of Benedictine Lectio with the Islamic, especially the Shi'a Islamic, approach to their Scriptures, maybe with Dr Mohammad as an honorary fellow. Fr Gabriel told us that he "had replied 'my goodness Gabriel, that would be a dream come true' but then his face fell and suddenly I realized he had never looked less bull-like. 'I am not clever enough for Oxford, why I have not even managed to learn Arabic'."

In September 2006, Monsignor Roderick Strange, the then rector, invited Timothy to be spiritual director at the Pontifical Beda College in Rome, the seminary for English speaking late vocations. He had come to know them during a year spent in Rome with the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, living in the monastery of St Paul's Outside the Walls, across the road from the Beda, where he continued to go each morning for 5.00am Matins. He was a robust presence in the House, with a cheery, 'good-to-see-you' greeting, and met regularly with his directees. He was a staunch supporter of the Sant' Egidio Community and their work as well as being a vociferous champion of the Beda and a keen proponent of Benedictine students living in College.

A friend had given him a juicing machine and most evenings he enjoyed meeting after supper with the staff and providing them with the juice of his garnered apples and carrots. Fr John Breen wrote: "Maybe this was Timothy the 'monk', being drawn into a new manifestation of monasticism by friends and companions. The only other time you would find him in our upstairs common room was to watch international rugby on television, pulling an armchair closer to the monitor and churning up the carpet under his feet as he mimed every movement, his youthful sporting accomplishments, both as student and housemaster, coming to the fore.

"He was also known for his 12-point homilies, which often resulted in breakfast banter that failed to change his ways. He was appreciated not only as a friend and for his energy and positivity but as a man of anvil-will, capable of setting a course and staying with it, most evidently in his life's project as a monk. He could occasionally become quite emotional, especially if someone was being unjustly treated, but normally he shied away from expressing his feelings. On his last 'zero' birthday he vanished from the house, finding the prospect of being the recipient of affection rather overwhelming."

From 2013 to 2016 he was teaching in Catholic Universities in America, at Illinois and in Seattle. Then, in December 2016 he was diagnosed with cancer of the colon. While receiving chemotherapy treatment in London he was made very welcome by the community of Ealing Abbey. It was there that he died suddenly while recovering from his last operation. On the morning of 14th May he was found dead at his desk, with reading glasses on and a seraphic smile on his lips.

Timothy was ready for the thief in the night, who comes to lift us up and to bring us to himself. We need not be sad about this: holding death in mind is part of St Benedict's Rule, and Timothy always reckoned it was a time for rejoicing.