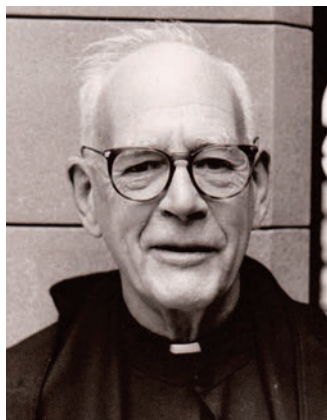


FR THEODORE YOUNG

1921 - 2017

FR JONATHAN COTTON OSB



Fr Theodore Young OSB was a remarkable human being, a remarkable monk and a remarkable priest. He managed to overcome a sense of personal inadequacy to achieve his human, monastic and priestly maturity. He is a classic of somebody who faced the demons in his own life and with the help of God and others. He went through the pain of self-knowledge and achieved what he did. As the scriptures state in various places: we need testing by fire to be genuine disciples of the Lord.

He was proud to have been born on the Wirral, a place he felt that it was good to be associated with. He was the second child of Herbert and Theodora Young (née Alsop), born on 9th November 1921; they baptised him Richard. His elder sister Thora (nick-named Puckie) was born the year before in 1920. Theodora Alsop was the daughter of the Reverend Arthur Alsop and Dora, and he was the Anglican rector of Bendall and Acton Trussel in Staffordshire for over 50 years. Arthur's father had been the rector before him. The work of his father took the family to Ilkley and that is where he felt he was from. It was not a happy relationship that he had with his father: his mother meant much more to him.

Theo was probably quite like his father by temperament, with strong views about things which he expressed, as he had the gift of being clear and articulate. As a newly ordained priest on his ordination holiday, he stood up to his father in a robust manner. His father was not pleased! As regards his mother, a convert, he loved the way she went out to serve the poor in Ilkley. Theo used to accompany her on these visits. His mother had a very strong relationship with Theo and his sister Thora.

Theo's cousin Gill Hutchinson Smith was the daughter of Theodora Alsop's Br Maurice and his wife Jessica. Theo's mother Theodora and Jessica Alsop became great friends. Gill Hutchinson Smith's grandchildren – James, Christopher and Howard Douglas – were happily educated at Ampleforth. Gill was very fond of Theo and welcomed him often into her home.

Theodora (Theo's mother) joined the Catholic Church on her marriage in 1918. Her journey to become a Catholic included somehow meeting Pope Pius XI in Rome and was the only one in the audience who did not make some gesture of respect: she was

from evangelical Anglican stock. The Pope stopped to talk to her personally and that had an immense impact on her. She took instructions and became a Catholic.

Theo's relationship with his father afflicted his life, and he felt a special empathy with any child who did not have a dad or could not get on with his or her dad. In the Liverpool Catholic school where he served as a Chaplain, 95% of the children came from single parent families, the majority living with the mother.

Theo was educated at Ampleforth. The student, Richard Young, completely failed to build a good relationship with his monastic Housemaster and he thoroughly disliked him. It seems the feelings were mutual. Theo confessed to me that he was not exactly the model compliant school boy and he blamed the lack of a relationship on himself, as well as the monk. He was a failure academically. He discovered later in life that he was dyslexic in numbers, and he could never do parish accounts. Sometimes his teachers ridiculed him. Theo recalls that one day at school at Ampleforth the maths' teacher said to him; "Young, your future in life is going to be standing outside a post office with your tongue out so that people can wet the stamps they have bought." That remark really riled Theo all his life, and he spoke bitterly to me in his old age that such a remark to a young boy was extremely damaging as it had been to him. Richard Young did not like school!

In his priestly life Theo was a genius with the young who confided in him and whom he treated with the greatest respect. He had a special affinity with those who had low self-esteem, or who had problems and might be in serious trouble with the authorities as he had been. He would never treat them as he had been treated by others. He knew hundreds of such students, especially as he was the Chaplain in St Mary's High School Leyland and in St Benedict's in Garston, Liverpool.

With this start to life, why did the young Richard Young decide to enter the monastery and try his vocation? He had been helped by a very fine Ampleforth monk called Fr Stephen Marwood who understood and listened to the troubled boy. That was one factor. The new youngish Abbot he went to see about being a monk was Abbot Herbert Byrne. Later they were to be together in Leyland on the parish, and they became adult friends for life. He understood Theo, and perhaps Abbot Herbert was influenced by those few years he considered the happiest in his own life, when he was at St Peter's in Seel Street. It was as a "mission father" that Abbot Herbert was brought back to the Abbey to be the long and successful Abbot whom many of the present older brethren still remember with esteem and often affection. Abbot Herbert clothed Br Theodore, aged 18, as a monk in September 1940.

The novitiate was not easy in the middle of the 2nd World War. He had one companion to begin with: Br Martin Haigh, and later in the early part of 1941, Br

Edmund Hatton arrived. Br Martin and Br Theodore did not find each other easy. The former was a handsome, intelligent, self-assured and sporting young man who also was a budding artist. He found Theodore irritating and once again the feeling was mutual. In choir he would whisper loudly to Theo; “you’re singing out of tune!” It was true that Martin had a fine singing voice. The arrival of Br Edmund was a godsend because without him both Martin and Theo might have inflicted a serious injury to the other. Br Edmund kept the peace!

Theo could not follow the Latin of the hymns or the psalms with ease, or the Latin of the liturgy. To help him Abbot Herbert used to teach him the meaning of the hymns, and these particular lessons took place after manual labour in the afternoon. Theo found it very hard to focus on what was a meaningless exercise for him and anyway he was tired after the manual work; one afternoon session he confessed to the Abbot that everything he was being told went in one ear and came out the other. Abbot Byrne made a very interesting reply: “Yes, my dear Brother, but I think what we are doing does us both good!”

Somehow Theo persevered. He went through to solemn profession in September 1944 together with Br Martin. Three years later he was ordained a priest. He remained in the monastery not teaching but working in the bookshop and as a typing secretary for the Headmaster Fr Paul Nevill. He was popular in the bookshop, which was a bit of a refuge for the boys in the school, and he began to make an impact on the boys as he was to do all his life. As typing secretary to the Headmaster he also held his own. One story he told was of refusing to type out the report to which Fr Paul Nevill had written the standard remark – ‘Very Satisfactory’. The report was from his own former Housemaster about a boy in the same House as he had been in and was very critical of the boy. Theo could see himself in that boy’s report as the same had happened to him, and his school reports used to cause bad feelings between him and his father. He showed this later report that Fr Paul had hardly looked at to the famous Headmaster and told him; “If you want this report to go home to this boy’s parents, somebody else will have to type it!” Fr Paul re-read the report, changed the Housemaster’s negative comments into positive ones, and all was fine.

Theo was one of the very few monks who did not go to St Benet’s Hall in Oxford and this set him largely apart from his contemporaries. He had masses of common sense and was able to understand, empathise with and love others. Some other monks with degrees might not have had those gifts.

In 1951 he was sent onto the missions, as going to an Ampleforth parish is called. He went to St Peter’s, Seel Street right in the heart of Liverpool city centre and soon got to know the people and made an impact. There was one young man who had very delicate health and it was suggested that Fr Theo should take him to Lourdes on

pilgrimage. The doctor counselled that he was so ill he would probably die on the journey. Theo asked the doctor, who was a good man and could see no hope for the boy, "If you were the father of this boy, would you take him to Lourdes?" Realising that there was no possibility of any cure from the hands of doctors and surgeons the doctor said he would take him. Theo took him and that boy lived and had a long life. It was in Seel Street that he learned about the British bobby. One Catholic policeman warned him of the realities of life. Theo never forgot it: "Father you should understand that policemen are not only sometimes liars, they are trained liars!" This saying may not apply to the modern policeman.

Theo was in St Peter's, Seel Street for the first six years of his pastoral ministry as a monk on the parishes and then he went to St Mary's in Leyland where he stayed 26 years, from 1957 to 1983. Once again he made an enormous impact on the people, especially the young. He would cycle round the town, later he had a small van. He was outspoken and not everyone found him easy to work with. The majority however were taken by his compassion and human qualities. If somebody was in trouble he would help them if he could. There were many stories of people who did not see him as a priest but as a friend. When he died I collected the Facebook references that were made about him from the Leyland town website, and some others wrote to me about him. I have 12 pages of A4 tributes about him. One after another present day respectable adults wrote that Theo helped them to move from being a young disruptive teenager to grow to be a mature man or woman integrated into life as best they might be.

A personal example of Theo's impact on others happened to me during a baptism I was conducting soon after Theo's final return to Leyland in June 2012. There was one young man at the ceremony who had a massive mop of black curly hair and who seemed to be bored by the ceremony. At the end of it he came up to me and said: "I hear Fr Theo is in the house. Could I visit him?" I said "Of course" and as we walked down the corridor he said: "I have not seen Fr Theo for 40 years but in all that time I have never met another man as nice as he was!"

His work was pioneering also because he did not confine himself to Catholics but to anyone. He worked with the Methodist minister in visiting homes. He would help any young person and anyone else if he could.

While he was in Leyland Theo did all the things assistant priests do: weddings, baptisms, funerals, visiting, dealing with parishioners and their many diverse needs and worries. He was in Leyland with another famed Ampleforth monk, Fr Edmund Fitzsimons. It was Fr Edmund who built the magnificent Church, recognised by an architecture award in 2013. Theo witnessed the magnificent Church being built and masses of other buildings connected with the Church, like schools, the parish centre

and the new Priory House and remained wedded to the pastoral side of monastic priestly life, not really too interested in the building programme that went on around him. He was quite different to Fr Edmund and found companionship with his former teacher Abbot Herbert who ended his life in Leyland after being Abbot of Ampleforth in 1963. They used to say Vespers together over a cup of tea.

He also had another great friend, a Salford diocesan priest, Fr Vincent Whelan, the Parish Priest of Chipping, a small village north west of Preston on the edge of the Trough of Bowland. They hit it off with each other and Theo was heartbroken when Fr Vincent died in the late 1970's. Abbot Herbert, Fr Theo and Fr Vincent were a trio of friends.

This friendship with Fr Vincent Whelan may have been the catalyst for his support and help of priests. At his funeral, Fr Terence said: "While Fr Theo's work with parishioners, and especially with the young is well-known to most of us, what is perhaps less obvious is Fr Theo's work with priests as a confessor and guide. He was committed to supporting and helping his brother monks or diocesan priests or from other religious orders that he got to know. He was valued as a confessor, spiritual advisor, supporter and friend. Many priests have contacted me to say how much they were encouraged by him, how they would go on walks with him, how they enjoyed his hospitality, and how much they learned from him. He was a warm-hearted man.

"Fr Theodore was moved to Knaresborough as Parish Priest of a thriving parish. He spent 15 very happy years back in Yorkshire, again heavily involved with the youth of the parish: drum-kits in the basement and so on! He had a knack of looking helpless whenever some financial or administrative demand arrived, and generally the parishioners rallied round to help. He loved it there, and apart from all his pastoral work in the parish he made new friends with many of the diocesan priests of the Leeds diocese. When he was told he would be leaving Knaresborough to return to Liverpool at the age of 77, he heard that the parishioners thought of writing to the Abbot to petition that he should stay. He advised them not to do it, because he said it would make no difference anyway, and it would save a lot of unnecessary work, as well as saving him some embarrassment."

He went to our parish in South Liverpool called St Austin's in Grassendale. There he stayed for almost 14 years from 1998 to 2012. Again he was much loved by the people and particularly by the young in the High School in Garston, which was first called St John Almond, and then St Benedict's. Theo was the Catholic Chaplain and continued in that role until he was almost 90. He was said to be the oldest Catholic Priest Chaplain in the world! He worked in the parish but the school was his main area of activity and he once again had a huge impact. At the end of his time at St

Austin's the school had changed to become a joint Catholic and Anglican School called the Enterprise South Liverpool Academy. There was no place for him to work as a Chaplain in this new school. This was a very painful moment in his life as he and his fellow monks in St Austin's at the time could not see the point of a Catholic school losing its Catholic life and ethos. He found it very hard to come to terms with what happened, but in the end allowed his sadness and sense of loss disappear as a stream can diminish and disappear into the sand.

In Liverpool he suffered two heart attacks and a stroke, which left him increasingly incapacitated. It was hard for him to climb the stairs to his room in the Priory house at St Austin's. Theo had a love for Liverpool and particularly for Liverpool football club that was intense. He could see nothing but goodness and generosity in the Liverpoolian. He used to compare his experiences there in contrast to other places he had been. His example was that once, when lost in his car a friendly Liverpoolian taxi man drove in front of him to his destination. When Theo offered him a fare for his trouble the taxi man replied: "No Father, it is free."

For the last five years of his life from 2012 to 2017 he lived in Leyland. He arrived as an invalid and throughout those five years he never set foot in the Church. Carers came in four times a day to get him out of bed and look after his bodily needs. District nurses and doctors were on hand. He had a room downstairs and many visitors came to see him. He always lit up when a visitor entered his room. His mind did not lose the ability to make judgements and the ability to engage in conversation, but he did lose his memory of the names of people and where they had fitted into his long and busy life. This really did not seem to be an obstacle, and many people found him still a tonic in their lives.

The staff in the house loved him: and we brethren also chipped in to help him especially at night. He became a friend of Fr Jonathan and Fr Paul and he taught both of us a great deal. Fr Stephen also helped him faithfully every morning getting him his first cup of tea. We used to take it in turns to make his evening meal, and in the end it was always the same: scrambled eggs and not even on toast! I found him also a very wise and good confessor in this period of time and in some ways he got to know my heart and mind very well, as I did his.

In the end his health deteriorated and on 10th July 2017 he left Leyland leaving an empty hole for us in the community. But it was necessary, as he needed 24-hour nursing care, which we could not provide. What he found at Ampleforth in the infirmary was the greatest kindness and professional help, even though he did miss Leyland. But he realised it was God's will that led him there.

Theo never made a decision about himself. He was simply asked to leave one place

and go to another and he obeyed. He saw this obedience at the heart of the monastic life. He obeyed when he was told he could no longer drive, though it was hard for him. But there was much more to his monastic life than that. He was faithful to the Divine Office all his life until he was unable to do it. But that worried him and he was always sad that he could no longer say the psalms. Monastic life on the parishes developed and changed in his life time. Right up to leaving Leyland the monks would not say Divine Office together. But in the 1970's and 1980's other parish communities would do so. At Knaresborough after Leyland he was alone: but at Liverpool the brethren said the divine office together and the same at Bamber Bridge, Workington and Leyland. It is now simply taken for granted that we do this. Also that we eat together, as much as is practical, and try to live a community life. Theo joined in all these developments quite naturally, and took it in his stride.

He had what has been present in our community for centuries: a kind of instinct for the monastic life that has expressed itself in different ways even in the last four decades. Sometimes in the last five years of his life in Leyland he and I used to say Compline together (we did not do this in community at that time), and he was always grateful. He used to pray and say the rosary as a priority, especially even when he could do not much else.

It was a special joy to be told by one of the Ampleforth carers, Nick, that Fr Theo was very ill on Saturday 28th October 2017 at about 5.45pm, just as I was getting ready to celebrate the Sunday Vigil Mass in Leyland, almost 100 miles away from Ampleforth. Furthermore, Nick said Theo was agitated and he was asking for Fr Jonathan. I was able to drive over that evening to Ampleforth and spend an hour with him and come back again to Leyland in the early hours of Sunday. When I entered his room Fr Theo's face lit up as usual, despite his frailty and the weakness of his voice. It was one of those unforgettable moments of communion with a dying friend. He died peacefully in the monastery infirmary on Monday 30th October 2017 ten days before his 96th birthday.

He wrote this in 2010: "My experience over the last 70 years has been a very happy one – like everyone else, in whatever career they choose, there have been bad days, but the happy ones far exceed the bad ones – largely because of the support of my Abbots, and my Community, and the kindness and concern of so many people I have come across. I have found this in the Parishes I have served, not only from Catholics, but from people of all denominations, and none. I would like to thank all those who have been involved in my life, during the past 70 years, and assure them that they are all in my daily prayers."

He will be praying for us all from heaven still as we remain in communion with him as we journey onwards day by day until the good Lord calls us also to himself.