

Labour of the Mind

A Reflection on the Note on Labour of the Mind by Fr Michael Bullock, OGS

A few years ago my Bishop nominated me as a selector on a Bishops' Advisory Panel which meant that I was sent to Woking to interview people who felt they had a vocation to ordained ministry. There was one candidate from Amsterdam, she was Dutch but her command of English was so complete that you wouldn't know it. She was pursuing post-doctoral studies in a branch of physics, and in the course of it she had also picked up a bachelor's degree in theology from the University of Amsterdam- like you do. My brief was that of pastoral not intellectual selector, but I felt I did have to ask her about her studies because they clearly were such an important part of her life. Of course I hardly understood a thing of what she told me, but I did understand enough to find myself saying "Gosh, if I was studying such things I think my head would be reeling in sheer dizziness". "But don't you feel that about theology?" she replied. Touché, and it's been touché ever since.

But, dear brothers and companions, it was the fourth Note of the Oratory "Labour of the Mind" that hooked me. A book that has been on my shelves for over forty years is entitled "The Love of Learning and the Desire for God", a study in monastic culture by a Benedictine, Dom Jean Leclercq, and published in 1961. The book is about the "learned tradition in religious communities" to which the Note refers. I am going to read to you from the blurb on the back cover: "The medieval monastery was not a static institution, but an intellectual melting-pot where monks or nuns read, studied and meditated on God. As Jean Leclercq shows, their experience proved that the desire for union with God is far from being incompatible with a legitimate wish to cultivate one's mind. 'The Love of Learning and the Desire for God' is a sensitive and authoritative study of monastic culture and spirituality from St Benedict to St Bernard and his disciples. It is in itself powerful evidence that joy, humour, beauty, and love for God can be fruitfully expressed through man's capacity for literature, humanism, and the cultivation of spiritual experience". How very Oratorian, I suggest to you. Perhaps you are a little suspicious that I have read from the blurb rather than from the book itself, and I freely admit that the book even after forty years isn't particularly well-thumbed. It's the title that got me: The Love of Learning and the Desire for God. If there is any thread that has gone

through my life, as a Christian and as an Oratorian it is that: The Love of Learning and the Desire for God.

Of course there have been and are times when the love of learning not to mention the desire for God have been warmer than others. We are all human. The field in which my mind has laboured has been fairly conventional: humanities, history, literature and as many of you will know learning languages. It is not false modesty to say that I don't claim to be good at languages, I often fail the test of ordering coffee or seeking directions to a hotel of moderate comfort, but I am interested in languages, the intellectual puzzles they present and the introduction to cultures and histories and poetry they offer.

A lot of the labour of the mind of the solitary student, or dispersed Oratorian, is likely to be a matter of informing oneself rather than gaining wisdom, but I suggest there is such a thing as holy curiosity, one fruit for example being Gilbert White's *Natural History of Selborne*, and maybe in works some Oratorians have produced if not published. Holy curiosity, I suggest, is an essential tool for any parish priest and a delight for any Christian.

I myself admit to being a bit of a plodder, my labour of the mind tends to be retentive rather than creative. I do not have any university degree higher than a bachelor's. Unlike many of the great luminaries of the Oratory I never went to Cambridge. I was at the University of Durham when the envelope arrived from what was then called ACCM telling me that I had been recommended for training for the ordained ministry. Incidentally my selection conference had been at Woking where decades later I interviewed the woman from Amsterdam as it were on the other side of the table. On the afternoon of getting my manila envelope, in the days when life's milestones were marked by manila envelopes I went straight to the university library on Palace Green in Durham and wandered through the shelves of the theology section light-headed with joy at the labour of the mind that was ahead of me. Of course it wasn't quite as simple as that, priestly formation never can be, and perhaps like many a pious young ordinand before and since I was quite surprised, surprised rather than shocked, at the speculations the staff and more talented students at my theological college were pursuing. I heard it said, although I think it was only half-believed, that the intention of theological college was to destroy your faith and then to build it up again. With hindsight I can see that I completed my studies and completed my essays on time and passed my

exams, but didn't contribute very much in seminars, tutorials or less formal conversations, partly out of a natural diffidence, but partly out of a fear of following truth. Throughout my life most of my labour of the mind has been solitary. Again with hindsight, I can see that it was only after being ordained and doing work that most of the time I enjoyed that I began to realize how beautiful a thing it is, in the words of the Note, to be fearless in following truth. This is where I think I have been for some time now and I give thanks to God for it.

At my priestly ordination in 1976 Bishop Douglas Feaver had asked me in the words of the Book of Common Prayer "Will you be diligent in prayers, and in reading of the holy Scriptures, and in such studies as help to the knowledge of the same, laying aside the study of the world and the flesh?" Very Oratorian that, I reckon, until maybe it comes to study of the world and flesh, but study had a slightly different meaning in 1662. Anyway I had replied "I will endeavour myself so to do, the Lord being my helper". The Note says that brothers will have a private rule of reading. It is arguable that we live in a post-book world, certainly far fewer books and published, and this applies especially perhaps to serious works of theology and people receive information in other ways; similar phenomena can be observed with letter-writing. However, something which has happened fairly recently in my College, and I wish I could claim credit for it but it seems to have happened spontaneously, is that brothers have been including in our reports of mutual accountability what we have been reading, how we have observed the private rule of reading, and I do believe that the College has been strengthened as a result of it.

But of course labour of the mind is more than just a matter of self-improvement. "Each brother" the Note says "will seek according to his ability to bring new thought and knowledge under the discipline of Christ, and to interpret them to a better understanding of the loving purposes of God". I remember back in the 1990s at a chapter meeting at Maryvale one of the then older brothers wondering aloud whether we might properly fulfil our observance of this Note by immersing ourselves in the then apparently new science of information technology. What would be the modern equivalent field of study a generation on? Maybe artificial intelligence, which raises up as many theological as technical questions? Almost certainly it is something we have never heard and never will. I heard an even more elderly priest recalling that when he was at Cambridge in the

1950s discussing with similarly minded pious young men ecclesiastical minutiae, a couple of hundred metres away DNA was being discovered.

Perhaps I should have asked the woman from Amsterdam, in a less formal setting, something more about her studies. A couple of years ago I did three locum stints in a row in Geneva and I asked some members of the congregation who worked at CERN, in the spirit of this Note, if there was anything I might read to lead me into the discipline at which they had excelled. I was duly directed towards ordering a copy of “Nuclear physics – a very short introduction” published by Oxford University Press, but I’m afraid it was all too much for me. Perhaps in labour of the mind we should proceed from where we already are, especially as we grow older, bearing in mind that the Oratory, as reflected in the Note on liberty, embraces a wonderful range of individual talents. This is the case now and one of the things that struck me on reading the necrology of departed brethren how it has ever been thus, and how widely varied are the fields of the mind in which we have laboured.

Just after I retired one of the companions suggested to me that I should take up bookbinding. It was a very wise suggestion, of which I think St Benedict would have approved, and it only fell down because of distance and availability of courses. Also when I was about to retire, someone wondered if I might take up golf, which I fear brought home to me the reality of retirement. I know we are all bound to be regular in recreation, but golf?

Of course when we talk about labour of the mind we are reminded that labour can be difficult and can require discipline. In thinking about labour of the mind I have been struck at how similar the processes of prayer and study are. Some of the counsel I have been given about prayer could well be given about study. Most of us will have heard the saying attributed to Archbishop Michael Ramsey when asked how much time he spent in prayer replied a touch surprisingly about five minutes- but it took him an hour to get there. Oratorians might usefully reflect on this as picture St Teresa of Àvila whose hour glass marked the passing of time, sometimes, she admitted, the very long passing. There are times of study when I really can’t get down to it, and start thinking of making a cup of tea, and in the end do neither. I don’t want to force the analogy but a similar thing can happen to some of us when we are moved to pray, although probably we would consider it pushing it a bit to include making a cup of tea inside the hour of prayer. Labour of the mind for many of us can involve many of the

characteristics of prayer, the support of a suitable place, where possible suitable surroundings, the presence for some of both dryness and affective consolation. Again in the words of the Note paraphrased interpretation of thought and knowledge to a better understanding of the loving purposes of God. Of course labour of the mind and the lifting up of the heart to God are not the same thing, but reflecting on the similarities that exist might help us in both activities. Behind it all of course behind it all and in front of it all is the adoration of God.