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Article

Silence, Leadership and Service: A Medieval Premonstratensian Contribution to Interreligious Dialogue

WILLIAM HYLAND 4

Review Essays of *Truth and the Church in a Secular Age*

Truth and the Church in a Secular Age: A Reflective Review

ANN LOADES 15

Half-Objections and Remarks

JEAN-YVES LACOSTE 25

Truth

ALISTAIR MASON 36

Book Reviews

YAZID SAID and LEJLA DEMIRI, eds. *The Future of Interfaith Dialogue: Muslim-Christian Encounters through A Common Word*

Reviewed by NICHOLAS TAYLOR 41

JOSEPH VERHEYDEN and JOHN S. KLOPPENBORG, eds. *The Gospels and Their Stories in Anthropological Perspective*

Reviewed by NICHOLAS TAYLOR 43

FRANCIS MINAY. *A Summoning Half-Sensed: Poems*

Reviewed by BRIAN SMITH 44

FRANCES WARD. *Full of Character: A Christian Approach to Education for the Digital Age*

Reviewed by DAVID JASPER 45

KATHLEEN LYONS. *Mysticism and Narcissism: A Personal Reflection on Changes in Theology during My Life as a Cenacle Nun*

Reviewed by REUBEN PRESTON 47

KAREN O'DONNELL. *Broken Bodies: The Eucharist, Mary, and the Body in Trauma Theology*

Reviewed by ARMOND LÉON VAN OMMEN 50

A special request regarding the late Professor Donald M. MacKinnon

Dr André Muller, who is working on an intellectual biography of Professor Donald M. MacKinnon (1913–94), would be very interested to hear from anyone who knew the Scottish philosophical theologian, or heard him lecture or preach, or corresponded with him, or has any information about him.

Dr Muller can be contacted via email (mulan398@gmail.co.nz) or by post (14a Arnot Ave, Clouston Park, Upper Hutt, 5018, New Zealand).

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Silence, Leadership and Service: A Medieval Premonstratensian Contribution to Interreligious Dialogue¹

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The Christian middle ages are often portrayed as a time of interreligious conflict and religious intolerance, marked by crusades, inquisitions, and the like. Without glossing over that, it is also often recognized, at least in scholarly circles, as a time of substantive exchange between Christian, Muslim and Jewish intellectuals, sometimes in person, for example in Spain, Sicily and the Holy Land, but more often through the exchange of books and ideas. This led in turn to figures such as Thomas Aquinas becoming involved in a type of dialogue with figures such as Maimonides, Avicenna and Averroes. But parallel to this intellectual interchange, the Christian middle ages were most of all a time for intense spirituality, particularly in monastic circles, where the articulation of leadership models in monastic rules, such as those of St Benedict and St Augustine, are still quite relevant today, and I will argue can play an important part in interreligious dialogue. This article will concern a twelfth century religious order, the Premonstratensians, or Norbertines, who were regular canons, that is religious who lived in community according to the ancient Rule of Saint Augustine but were more pastoral and outward looking than many of the monks had been at that time. One Premonstratensian, Anselm of Havelberg, explicitly developed ideas on ecumenical dialogue, and we will see how these, when combined with the Premonstratensian spirituality² of silence, edification and mutual service, can provide a model for those involved in interreligious dialogue today.

¹ This paper is a version of a talk given at the Centre for the Study of Religion and Politics Conference: 'Silence, Texts and Service: Towards a Christian, Hindu and Buddhist Dialogue', 24 September 2016, University of St Andrews.

² Essential studies of early Premonstratensian spirituality include Caroline Walker Bynum, 'The Spirituality of Regular Canons in the Twelfth Century', in *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 22–58; Theodore J. Antry, O. Praem. and Carol Neel, *Norbert and Early Norbertine Spirituality* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2007), pp. 1–28; Bernard Ardura, *The Order of Prémontré: History and Spirituality*, trans. by Edward Hagman (De Pere, WI:

Among the early disciples of Norbert of Xanten,³ the founder of the Premonstratensians, was a theologian named Anselm. We know almost nothing of his early life but do know that he studied theology at Liege and, at some point, he met Norbert and became for the rest of Norbert's life one of his closest followers. In 1129 Anselm was appointed to the frontier bishopric of Havelberg in eastern Germany. During Norbert's lifetime, particularly after he was made Archbishop of Magdeburg, Anselm assisted him in his role as advisor to Emperor Lothair III. After Norbert's death in 1134, Anselm continued to serve Lothair as an advisor, and in 1136 he led a delegation to Constantinople to cement an alliance with the Byzantine emperor. While there Anselm engaged in discussions with Greek theologians, in particular a bishop named Nicetas, on some of the issues which continued to divide the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches. Anselm would write about these discussions later in his life. Under Emperor Frederick Barbarossa Anselm helped mediate the quarrel and arrange a treaty between the Pope and Frederick. Anselm travelled to Constantinople again as part of a German embassy, and was rewarded by being made Archbishop of Ravenna, a suitable city given his career as a diplomat and ecumenist, surrounded by the great Byzantine churches of the sixth century. He died in 1158.⁴

As bishop and advisor to an emperor, Anselm clearly emulated Norbert. Anselm saw Norbert not only as holy but also as a nuanced ecclesiastical statesman, who tried to keep the delicate equilibrium between the Pope and the Holy Roman Emperor which had emerged after decades of struggle for power over the Church. As an advisor to both pope and emperor, Norbert had walked a fine line to preserve concord despite the efforts of those on both sides who would have liked to have undermined this fragile consensus. In all of his activities Anselm took Norbert as the model of how to combine contemplation with service to the Church. Norbert's combination of the contemplative and active lives was a marked feature of the new orders of the twelfth century, of which his own Premonstratensians were an important example. Against the attacks of some conservatives who criticized

Paisa Publishing, 1995); Francois Petit, *The Spirituality of the Premonstratensians: The Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries*, trans. by Victor Szczurek (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press and Cistercian Publications, 2011).

³ For a recent biography of St Norbert, see Thomas Hangrätinger, O. Praem, *Der heilige Norbert, Erzbischof und Ordengründer* (Magdeburg: Norbertus Verlag, 2011).

⁴ A detailed overview of Anselm's life and career is provided by Jay T. Lees, *Anselm of Havelberg: Deeds Into Words in the Twelfth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 1998).

the way of life of new orders such as the Premonstratensians, Anselm composed a work known as the *Apologetic Letter*, in which he argued for the usefulness, dignity and ancient origins of the way of life of canons regular. Anselm argued that new forms of religious life are not necessarily bad for being new, just as older things are not necessarily good because they are old. As he put it:

For everything old was new at some time, and therefore is neither more or less contemptible because it was new or is new. Nor is something more or less acceptable because it is or will be old, but rather it should be acceptable to all good men because it is good and useful whether it is old or new. For there are ancient goods and new goods, ancient evils and new evils – and surely if the antiquity or novelty of evils does not deprive them of force, neither should the antiquity or novelty of good things bring them dignity.⁵

This idea that diversity in the life of the church could be a positive thing was developed in Anselm's book known as the *Anticimenon*, or *Controversies*.⁶ It is due to this work that Anselm has been seen as an 'ecumenist';⁷ not only did he wish to further understanding between groups within the Roman Catholic Church, as Norbert did, but also between the recently-estranged Catholic and Orthodox churches (from now on to be referred to as the Latins and Greeks). Anselm says he wrote this work at the request of Pope Eugenius III and his own confrères, who were asking him to explain why there was a growing variety of approaches to religious life within the Latin church, and also why there were even more differences between the Latin and Greek churches.⁸ The work has three parts: the first a sophisticated treatment of the theology and meaning of Christian history,

⁵ Translated in Theodore Antry, O. Praem., Andrew Ciferni and Carol Neel, *Norbert and Early Norbertine Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 2007), p. 42.

⁶ For a translation, introduction and analysis, with excellent bibliography, see Anselm of Havelberg, *Anticimenon: On the Unity of the Faith and the Controversies with the Greeks*, trans. by Ambrose Criste, O. Praem. and Carol Neel, *Premonstratensian Texts and Studies*, 1/Cistercian Studies 232 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010).

⁷ For example, G. R. Evans, 'Unity and Diversity: Anselm of Havelberg as Ecumenist', in *Analecta Praemonstratensia*, 67 (1991), 42–52.

⁸ *Anticimenon*, pp. 43–46.

while the second and third recount debates Anselm had with a Greek theologian in Constantinople.

The first part sets the tone for the debates with the Greeks by discussing the way the living power of the Holy Spirit acts in history. Why, he tells us people are asking, are there so many new things in the Church, like new religious orders? Does this mean the Catholic faith itself is changing? Anselm describes historical development from Abel to the Second Coming of Christ. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Anselm saw development since the time of Christ as positive. Beginning with the earliest Old Testament stories, Anselm shows how it is understandable, and even to be expected, that there would be a diversity of religious life as an expression of the one faith, and these diverse expressions are to be expected and not feared. From its beginnings, the Church began to spread throughout and beyond the Roman world, and expressions of Christian faith and experience were by no means uniform and identical.

The Holy Spirit remains as a teacher in the Church, continuously renewing the Church as it spreads and exists in time. For Anselm, the diverse cultural expressions of Christian experience must stay rooted in the teachings of Christ. Jesus is the unchanging ideal and model we seek. The faithful change in various ways, but the model does not. In order to maintain this fidelity to Christ, there are changes which must take place over time. The Church changes as it grows; yet that growth is contained within the unchanging Christ who is beginning and end. The Church goes through times when it must clarify teachings because of disagreements between theologians on various issues which had not been discussed in earlier ages. The Church also develops new cultural expressions due to changing circumstances, such as persecution and new peoples receiving the faith. One can think of the Church as moving both forward and in a kind of circle: forward by learning from times of persecution and theological conflict, and also in a circle by going from peace through disruption and back to peace.

Anselm sees the Church moving toward Christ through an ever-changing variety of expressions of faith. As the centuries have progressed since the coming of Christ, Christians worship one God in one faith, even when they do so in different modes of life, such as lay people, monks or canons regular, or with varieties of ritual which have developed over time in different places. History shows that the Christian faith was gradually established throughout the world, and that to regulate the life of the Church in different places, different rules and precepts came into being. This is not a sign of decay, but instead an indication of the richness of the diversity of the gifts of the Holy Spirit to the Church. This is not a relativizing of doctrine, as Anselm believes that the Catholic faith must be one and cannot be

compromised by different customs. But once this assent on the faith is secure, pluriformity is a positive and expected sign of vitality.⁹

Anselm extends his image of the inspiring varieties of religious orders to include the Christian East, pointing out that the Eastern churches are not all the same in every detail. The Armenians and Syrians in turn differ from the Greeks and each other but are similarly united in the same Catholic faith. He describes Constantinople not as a city of heterodoxy, but of religious devotion and variety of Christian ways of living. The Greeks thus share both the common ground of the one faith and a variety of religious life with the West. If Latin Christians could grasp this, then many of the differences between east and west could not only be accepted but praised. The Holy Spirit is present in the church everywhere, and one of the ways the Holy Spirit enkindles enthusiasm in the church and brings about renewal in different times and places is by inspiring new forms of religious expression:

So by God's wondrous design, since from generation to generation new forms of religious life always rise, the youth of the church renews itself like the eagle's, so that it may fly the higher in contemplation, with the strength to gaze directly, unblinded, at the rays of the true sun.¹⁰

Anselm takes his readers from the beginning to the end of history, showing them that, through his revelations, God fashions them in His own image but that they are responsible for fashioning themselves in that image as well, animated by a love of each other that does not merely tolerate diversity but glories in it. He now moves to the second part of the *Anticimenon*, the debates, having asserted that Greeks and Latins have come out of and still hold the same faith in the same Christ.

While debates between Anselm and Nicetas did take place, it is not a simple transcription. Rather, Anselm the writer has crafted his presentation to point out to his Latin audience the appropriate way for Latins and Greeks to approach one another as belonging to the same family of faith. This format allows Anselm to put provocative statements in the mouth of Nicetas, subtle criticisms of some Latin positions which would otherwise be awkward for him to do.

When questioning how the Greeks could disagree with the Latins, Anselm describes them as 'very wise in the knowledge of the Scriptures'.¹¹ He also mentions thousands of Greek saints who suffered for Christ, and

⁹ See Lees, *Anselm of Havelberg*, pp. 190–215.

¹⁰ *Anticimenon*, p. 74.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

whose feasts are solemnly celebrated. How can Greeks be wrong on fundamental matters of the faith with so many saints and even popes in their illustrious history? Anselm acknowledges that there are differences in teaching and liturgy between the Greeks and the Latins. He also says, significantly, that there are misconceptions among the Latins about the practices and beliefs of the Greeks, with the language difference being an important barrier to mutual understanding, leading one side to attribute beliefs to the other which they really do not hold.

Anselm emphasizes that he came to the discussion not to argue, but to discover with Nicetas the common faith he believes they both share. He wants to see Latin and Greek walk the way of charity, not trying to score points in debate, but humbly seeking truth together. This is becoming harder to do. It is not just a question of language difficulty between Latin and Greek, but also mutual misunderstanding and mistrust. Both sides must fully explain what they mean by certain words, not just assuming they already know, and investigate the real meanings behind the words. In the two debates which follow, about various doctrinal and ritual points which apparently divide the two sides, Anselm the writer will shape his discussion with Nicetas to create a sense of alternating confrontation followed by a commitment to mutual understanding and reconciliation. Anselm will usually be portrayed as the 'heavy', the one who is arrogant at first, but then comes to be more respectful of Greek views. The debaters emerge as peacemakers: Anselm presents the possibility not only that misunderstandings rather than differences may be at the heart of the divisions in Christendom, but that it is the Latins – supposedly the side he will defend – who have often misunderstood the Greeks.

Anselm is making the point that when Greeks and Latins talk to each other they often become exasperated; this must be overcome. Otherwise, the attempt to understand gives way to rancorous accusations.¹² Nicetas asserts that the real issue is Latin arrogance; the emphasis is on the behaviour of the Latins and how they present their arguments, rather than on the contents of the arguments. The sense is that a proper presentation and attitude will go a long way toward resolving conflicts. Both sides move toward peace. Anselm significantly cites many Greek Fathers, and Nicetas significantly is pleased that Anselm cites Greek Fathers, and wants to know if he respects them and holds them to be authoritative: Anselm says:

I do not exclude, disdain, reject or judge worthy of rejection any gift of the Holy Spirit given to any faithful Christian, whether Greek, Latin, or any other race. On the contrary, I receive and

¹² Lees, *op. cit.*, pp. 243–45.

embrace with an open mind every man who speaks and writes what is true and consonant with apostolic teaching.¹³

The second debate ostensibly treats differences in sacramental practice, but the details of these arguments are secondary, however, to the deeper problem concerning the authority by which such disputes should be decided. Nicetas responds that there can be no reconciliation with the Latins if the Pope demands absolute obedience and conformity and argues that venerable tradition and great saints have established eastern customs. Nicetas will honour the Roman church, but it does not then mean that all things must be done as Rome does, and followed in common. In Nicetas's speech, Anselm the writer has eloquently presented Greek fears and also pointed to common ground on which to fashion a compromise. And, Nicetas asserts, even if this practice was not uniform, significantly, '[T]hey esteemed and encouraged each other mutually in peace and charity. Making no judgement against each other, they celebrated councils together as opportunities arose.'¹⁴

What about the role of the Pope in a future council? Nicetas says the Pope must not rule by *fiat*, but rather be a bishop among bishops, whose ability to settle divisive issues depends on the combination of authority and personal charisma that moves the disputants to look to him for non-partisan judgments. This points to a major issue in all ecumenical dialogue, the establishment of trust. Nicetas says that strife ought to be feared by both sides more than the difference in sacramental practice. Anselm the debater for his part is grateful to have his misconceptions and false ideas about the 'wise Greek people' put to rest. Nicetas responds that truly Latins and Greeks seem to differ not in the great things but in the smallest. The problem in differences of practice is not one of salvation, although differences do lead to misunderstandings. Both disputants together call for a universal council in the right spirit to overcome differences, something possible only if all those attending the Council imitate Jesus, a meeting where arrogance, immaturity, pride and ignorance should have no place.

We know from history that Anselm's advice was not heeded in his lifetime, but this does not take away the achievement of Anselm in this work, or the significance of what he has to say to divided Christians today, and dialogue between faith traditions. Like his mentor Norbert, Anselm embraced the role of a peacemaker. He hoped to steer conflicting forces, both within the Latin Church and between Latins and Greeks, from renewed outbreaks of divisive argument. The *Anticimenon* emphasizes that diversity

¹³ *Anticimenon*, p. 147.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

is actually a good thing and to be expected, and even more strongly, is the fruit of the action of the Holy Spirit in different times and places. Anselm calls for respectful leadership on all sides, giving each other the benefit of the doubt in holding to their traditions and formulations. He also acknowledges that serious scholarship done in charity to reach authentic and mutual comprehension is the way forward. All this calls, fundamentally, for a posture of receptivity, charity and respect.

This attitude was not advanced in a vacuum but is congruous with Anselm's vocation as a Norbertine regular canon, often described by the Latin phrase '*docere verbo et exemplo*', or 'To Teach by Word and Example'. This descriptive phrase goes back to the founding time of the Norbertines in the twelfth century, and was central to the very specific and new way the early canons regular, most prominently among them the Norbertines, described the very purpose and nature of their peculiar way of life, and in doing so differentiated themselves from the older types of monasticism prevalent up until that time. This expression articulated their self-identity and understanding what they meant by it can help us to understand how this Norbertine spirituality and heritage can be useful and beneficial to us to explain the context of Anselm's interreligious dialogue.

The environment of the twelfth century that saw the rise of the Norbertines has long been acknowledged by scholars as a crucial turning point in the history of Christian spirituality. Part of this change involved an emphasis on the humanity of Christ, his sufferings and compassion, and the need for Christians in their prayer life to make an emotional and imaginative connection and empathy with Christ, leading to an imitation of him. Along with this imitation of the compassionate Christ of the gospels came a new emphasis in the life of the clergy and ultimately the laity on responsibility and compassion toward one's neighbour.

The fact that we today take this for granted as an essential feature of Catholic Christianity, as passed on by the friars, Jesuits and the many religious movements, both male and female, which would follow this period, both Catholic and eventually Protestant, shows the depth and effectiveness of this shift. While many scholars had long noted that the new groups of regular canons such as the Norbertines must have played an important role in this new phase of Catholic life, a specific study by the scholar Caroline Walker Bynum some forty years ago took up this topic in detail and with much success.¹⁵ She asked, how were communities of regular canons, including the Norbertines, different than other monastic communities, whether Benedictine, Cistercian or others? How did they articulate a notion of the Christian life, and specifically life in their own communities, in ways

¹⁵ Walker Bynum, *op.cit.*

that were different than the monks had up until that time? Bynum asked the question how were these communities different from one another? And when she looked at the writings that monks and canons produced for internal use, formation documents for novices, commentaries on their rules, etc, she found a very important difference in the conceptualization of what community life means, which gave insight into the seismic shift in Catholic spirituality, and one which has much to do with our Norbertine ecumenist.

The canons used the phrase *Teach by word and example*, in different contexts and repeatedly, as the way to express their particular view of the religious life. Central to their view of community life was the concept of *edification*, a word that literally means 'to build up', in this case to strengthen or build up one's neighbour, whether by tending to their physical, spiritual or emotional needs. The canons emphasize that every member of the community, from the abbot down to the newest novice or the lay brothers, is both a teacher and a learner. The monks tended to emphasize that monks are primarily learners. There is a sense articulated among the canons that every member of the community, not just the abbot or even the priests, but everyone, is called upon to edify or build up their fellows by both what they say and what they do. There is an important emphasis on effective speech, and the link between conduct and speech in the process of edifying our neighbors and fellow community members.¹⁶

It is important, both for historical purposes and even more so for making applications to our own topic, to realize that the canons did not mean to apply this only, or even primarily, to official figures such as abbot or prior, or only to formal teaching moments, such as in the classroom, chapter, the pulpit, or the confessional. They certainly included these, but the concern goes far beyond this, and much deeper. Instead it is meant to refer to all interactions between canons, the day-to-day life together, the hundreds of moments, most of which are quite ordinary and undramatic, which make up life together in any community. The canons see every community member as called upon in every situation to both instruct and be instructed by what we do and what we say. They call for their fellow canons to cultivate an awareness of the effects of their own words and deeds on one another. This will lead to the formation of a very specific type of community within the abbey, and then the canons will carry this same awareness to the laity and others they encounter outside the abbey walls. Having been trained to view community a certain way, the canons then can take this awareness to teach everyone they encounter by word and example, and also to learn from those they encounter.

¹⁶ Walker Bynum, *op. cit.*, pp. 43–46.

This assumption, that canons are responsible not only for the state of their own soul, but also for the spiritual progress and well-being of their neighbour, was a very different focus than that found among the monks at that time (let me emphasize that most monastics since have embraced these changes). And whereas monks were concerned to avoid scandalizing their fellows, they articulated more a concern about how their behaviour in the cloister and beyond would appear to God. The canons still discuss this, but as Bynum points out, there is found among the canons a new emphasis in the religious life, and indeed the Christian life, as building up of our neighbour. This was also reflected in how monks and canons of Norbert's time discussed silence and speech, and its place in community life. The monks did not stress edification or instruction by words, more specifically conversation between community members, at all. With regard to silence, canons saw silence as a preparation for fruitful and edifying discourse with other people. In contrast, monastic authors tended to see silence as a good in itself, specifically as preparation for discourse with God. Many monastic authors stressed the negative aspects of speech, something which is an opportunity to sin (gossip, complaining, etc.), and thus should be regulated and kept to a minimum. In other words, keep silent to avoid sin and to better hear God. The canons tended to stress the potential usefulness of speech. While of course acknowledging that silence is essential for discourse with God, the canons stress there is such a thing as harmful silence, which can prevent the wisdom of effective speech. For the canons, edifying speech is a cure for too much silence.¹⁷ The purpose of silence is to ensure that when speech does take place between community members, it will be edifying and useful, and will not be harmful, derogatory and merely self-serving.

It is important to reiterate that this obligation was not restricted to formal moments of teaching, such as a homily during the Liturgy, or an exhortation given to novices by their abbot, or a priest to a penitent in the confessional, or some other such occasion. Instead, this injunction to teach or instruct by word and example was meant to refer to every aspect of community life. It was meant to create a climate of individual responsibility understood in a community context. Thoughtless words and selfish acts were not just bad because God was watching and would punish you and hold you responsible, but rather because they hurt and offended or misled another member of the community and hindered his or her development. And it is not just an avoidance of doing bad and hurtful things which is at the heart of this teaching. Rather, it is having a serious and conscious awareness of the positive value of our good and uplifting words and actions on those around us.

¹⁷ Ibid.

And in the writings of early canons, they stress that this awareness is important to have in every situation. When meeting in the cloister or walking in a garden, while eating together or in a meeting together, while attending to the sick in the infirmary or praying together in church, canons were called upon to be aware of how our words and actions affect others, whether to avoid hurting them or more positively to bring them strength or joy or consolation. Every interaction is an opportunity for edification, and we are life-long learners and teachers at the same time. Whereas the monks in Norbert's time emphasized that one must shun bad behavior in order not to offend God and give scandal to our neighbour, the canons urge how one must bring your neighbour to do good by your words and examples. The canons took the idea of being a light to others beyond the personal virtue talked about by the monks and gave it a profoundly social context.

Anselm of Havelberg, a disciple of Norbert and an exemplar of this spirit, in his emphasis on the mixed life of action and contemplation, stressed the alternation between study and teaching, silence and words. Silent preparation through contemplation and awareness is necessary before useful and helpful speech and is at the heart of the Christian life.

In conclusion, this Norbertine spirituality combined with the approach toward variety and diversity in the works of the Spirit, provide I believe the foundations for interreligious dialogue. We must undertake together serious scholarly studies on the context and nuances in meaning of words we use to express spiritual realities; we must assume on a deep level that the Holy Spirit dwells and rests upon not just ourselves, but also upon our dialogue partners; we must display in our silence a posture of charity and attentiveness to the promptings of the Spirit, speaking to us through others; and when we emerge from this attentive silence, to speak words and undertake actions of charity and edification. And finally, we must strive that our writings and meetings and conferences reflect all of this in our tone and content. Then we can, perhaps, fulfill the promise of the *Anticimenon*, extending it beyond the twelfth-century horizons of Anselm, in the words of Dom Bede Griffiths: 'It is no longer a question of a Christian going about to convert others to the faith, but of each one being ready to listen to the other and so to grow together in mutual understanding.'¹⁸

¹⁸ Found at http://www.azquotes.com/author/5930-Bede_Griffiths.