

A channel of God's love for many

Father Jonathan Cotton, OSB

A member of Ampleforth Abbey in England, Father Jonathan Cotton became a Benedictine in 1961. After a life engaged on various fronts, especially in parish work, he moved to Loppiano (Florence) in 2022, where he lived at the "Claritas" spirituality center for religious and attended the Sophia University Institute. He came into contact with the spirituality of the Focolare Movement in 1972, had a close relationship with Chiara Lubich and was a passionate witness to unity for many in ecumenical and other sectors of the church and society.

Fabio Ciardi, OMI

Having taught all his life, 79-year-old Fr. Jonathan Cotton was still eager to learn more, and sat at a school desk next to young people in their 20s. It was a surprise for the other students to find themselves with such an older fellow. But with his unmistakable smile and pleasant English humor and accent, he did 'look' like a freshman.

"I want to go to Loppiano, to Sophia University Institute," he had said, "to update myself with study in theology, philosophy and spirituality, and at the same time take a break from my intense apostolic parish work. Although I always tried to be faithful to prayer and meditation, there is less time for this in a parish because of the many ongoing relationships with people seeking advice or material and spiritual help."

But the tumor appeared suddenly, forcing him to return to his abbey, where he died a few months later on Jan. 17, 2024. It was the eve of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Few knew his first name was Anthony, because he had chosen the name Jonathan when he decided to become a monk in the Benedictine abbey of Ampleforth, in 1961. He knew the name meant "Yahweh gave", and it suited him. He felt his life was a gift from God.

A light that illuminates the monastic vocation

Fifty years ago, on May 29, 1974, he summarized in a few lines the life he had lived up to that point: "I am a monk in the English Benedictine Congregation. In 1965 I made my solemn vows, and in 1971 I was ordained a priest. I live and teach in this monastic school with about ten other brothers... The monastery to which I belong is beautiful and with much positive spirit. There are several young priests my age or younger. I am 31 years old." Already these few lines reveal a person happy in his vocation, radiant. He studied history in university and puts his degree to good use in teaching.

This was the opening paragraph of a first letter written to Chiara Lubich, in which shared the fruits of his encounter with the Focolare Movement two years prior. "In 1972," his letter continues, "as a result of a series of circumstances and completely in opposition to my own ideas (since I do not feel very attracted to movements or venturing into new kinds of associations), I went to the Mariapolis in Manchester (UK). There I saw crystal clear that there was something very special. But I struggled for three days before giving up and accepting the grace God was offering me. Since then, the Ideal of unity has meant more and more to me. I was fortunate enough to live for six months in a parish in Warrington near the Liverpool focolare. There I found young religious, gen and volunteers¹, focolarini and focolarine. God's grace through everything and everyone won me over."

The light he saw shining in this new ecclesial Movement illuminated him in his own monastic vocation, which, even so, was already clear to him in a luminous manner: "I think it is necessary to bring into light the values of monastic life that we are living," he wrote in his letter of May 29, 1974, "in such a way that certain cobwebs are swept away, and its true beauty and design can become clearer... Since meeting this Ideal, it seems to me that all these realities that I knew, have now been given new meaning and inspiration."

A Contemplative in action

This is the first of a few hundred letters written to Chiara Lubich over years by Father Jonathan. He shared his journey with her, a journey that oriented itself in many directions. He begins an intense experience of parish life, which will find its culmination in St. Mary's Leyland, with avant-garde initiatives, involvement of a growing number of lay groups, and twinning with remote villages in Cameroon and Guinea Bissau... He initiates meetings with religious from other Institutes, with whom he shares the experience of spiritual life. He builds bridges of communion with Anglican Benedictines, with believers of other religions... He intensely promotes ecumenical dialogue in his native England...

His relationship with the Focolare Movement sustains him in every initiative and feeds his inner life. "I understood," he recounts, "the beauty and greatness of the spirituality of unity. It helped me to revisit my relationships with my brothers in the abbey, and then in the parish. In this way I established new and deep relationships with people of all ages, young and old, men and women. I no longer lost contact with people connected to this spirituality. All of them have been a great support for me and have helped me a lot."

Fr. Jonathan not only receives but also gives. He thus becomes a point of reference for many. "I always found him to be a true spiritual goldmine," shared Roberto Catalano, a lecturer at Sophia University Institute, "capable of reading situations and seeing people not from a simply human point of view, but rather approaching from the gaze of God. Jonathan was clearly a mystic and a contemplative. He conveyed this by his very presence even without speaking, and often only with a smile."

"As the Father has loved me..."

Since 1980, he served intensively as coordinator for many religious in the United Kingdom, and regularly attended international meetings of the Movement of Religious, to which he made an immense contribution especially through his life witness and fidelity to unity. "Life

is Jesus in our midst," he wrote to Chiara Lubich at Easter 1976, "He has filled every aspect of my monastic vocation."

From the very beginning, Chiara sensed God's work in this person and his potential. She often answered his letters and sometimes jotted them down. She had early on entrusted him with a word from the Gospel as a program of life: "As the Father has loved me, so I also have loved you" (Jn. 15:9), commenting that she desired that he might "correspond fully to the infinite Love of God who has called him, to be a channel of this for many others." It was a mission that Fr. Jonathan fulfilled faithfully.

Peace among the thorns

I conclude here with this moment of communion by Fr. Jonathan on Nov. 16, 2022 in Loppiano (Italy), speaking to members of various formation schools present for a day of in-depth study:

I am Brother Jonathan, an English Benedictine monk, and I entered the novitiate 61 years ago. I met the Focolare Movement in 1974. The Benedictine charism can be described as Prayer and Work, or Peace among the Thorns. In our monastery we pray eight times a day in choir and celebrate the Eucharist. I remember seeing a monk say at the end of his life, when he was very ill, that although he could not participate in any of the prayers in community, he felt that his whole life was a prayer.

Before coming to Loppiano I met a person who lived the life of unity for a long time. This person pointed out to me that we can say that Jesus is in our midst when we feel happy, content and at peace. But with the help of the Holy Spirit, he brought me to also understand something else. That Jesus is there even when there is misunderstanding, suffering and evil. And here in Loppiano I feel that Jesus lives in me and in others. It is a living reality. Then, listening to Chiara, I always feel that when she speaks, she starts each time from her life experience. It is a living presence especially when, by God's grace, it is possible to have Jesus in our midst. But sometimes in difficult moments, when we encounter Jesus Forsaken, I cannot always recognize Him. Sometimes my mood goes up and down! I ask myself: Why am I not like Chiara Luce Badano who felt blessed, at peace, and even happy in suffering to the end?

I realize that this is also a component of my prayer. I experience that the cry of Jesus on the cross, which always remains mysterious and difficult to explain, provokes me and pushes me to ask myself: what should I do? And the answer is increasingly clear: I am called to live it and recognize that Jesus is a person to be chosen always, in joy and in suffering. It is not that prayer is easy. In fact it is 'hard work'. St Benedict called it *opus* or *opus Dei*, work of God.

I am beginning to see that life is much more important than words, although it is good to share something as a gift for others. This can lead to a new understanding of God and my relationship with him. The Holy Spirit is always at work in us, especially when we try to give ourselves in communion with others and they truly listen to us from the heart, that is, when we love one another.

¹ Focolare Movement youth and adults committed to witnessing the Idea of unity in everyday life. On the other hand, focolarini and focolarine are consecrated lay people.