

Opening talk

Welcome to our first Chaplaincy retreat in Whitby. We are living in the largest convent of Anglican nuns, and we are grateful for the hospitality of their chapel during this weekend. There are 60 nuns belonging to this convent.

It is always a great privilege to be on a retreat. Jesus promised to be with those who gather in his name; and this way of gathering is really very special. It represents a generosity of spirit, a willingness to give up other exciting things to do, in order to find our way to Christ and to become his people, the Church. So the other people who have come are a real gift to us, and we to them.

We try to have a specific spiritual aim at the start of each retreat, and this tends to be a choice which comes to me. I have to look at you, and read the signs of the times, in order to choose how to give you what will help you to be Christians.

One of my sisters is the mother of three children, two of whom are teenagers. She said to me one day, in the midst of the terrible strife teenagers love to cause, "I feel I'm becoming a "No" person." Most people have heard the phrase "Mother Church". I guess that in most people's eyes this mother has become "a No person" too, and the religion preached by the Church is widely seen as negative and mean, and characterised by the opening phrase *Thou Shalt Not*.

Nothing could be worse than this. Jesus said, *I have come so that they may have life, and have it in its fulness*. St Irenaeus declared, *The glory of God is man fully alive*. We can't live with an image of Christianity as a turning-away from life.

Accordingly, I decided that if we chose three tough, forbidding-looking concepts, and did our best to pump some real blood back into them, we might catch a glimpse of our religion as a path of abundant life, a glorious and huge vision of real humanity, that would knock the socks off anything else the world has thought up. That, after all, is the only possibility; if our faith doesn't do that, it doesn't represent the real God; and what isn't God isn't worth believing in.

So I've chosen the three words that are meant to characterise monastic life: *poverty*, *chastity*, and *obedience*. But I'm going to dig out their relevance, not for the nuns who live in this house, but, instead, for married people. We'll trace in each of these words a line which begins in the heart of Christ, and ends in Christian living. I hope that you'll recognise these qualities as much realer, much closer to home, and much more lovable than you think at this moment.