

An Alternative School

—*brother John*

ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS ARE FAMILIAR PLACES OF LEARNING in North America. To mention just a few, alongside the standard Public Schools, we find Private Schools, Charter Schools, Home Schools, and more recently Virtual Schools. Each has its unique purpose and method for learning.

A Benedictine Monastery is an ancient and less known Alternative School. Weston Priory has a place in that monastic tradition. The Rule of Benedict describes the monastery as a “school of the Lord’s service” (R.B. Prologue). In this school, the learning is concerned with the “Kingdom of God.” Today the brothers might drop the “g” from the Kingdom and say it is all about the “Kindom of God”. The human family and the local Community are all “kin”. All are related as children of God. So relationship is what this alternative community is all about!

The Weston Community is about brotherly relationships exemplified in the life and way of Jesus as told in the Gospels. A particular source of inspiration is the “beloved Community” as described in the Gospel of John. “By the love you have for one another all will know that you are my disciples” (Jn. 13:35). “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (Jn. 15:12). Love is the fire that fuels the life of the Community.

The learning in this alternative community is uniquely about brotherly love. The classroom as well as the dynamics of learning is the experience of the community. It is a learning by practice, in the concrete experience of everyday living—not by lectures on abstract



doctrine but by common engagement, silence, conversation (Latin: *Conversatio*, in a broader sense than the exchange of words, vital to monastic Profession), and contemplative prayer.

The monastery is a school of “service”. The oratory, the dining room, the kitchen, the workshops; the field and forest, the garden, the barns with their friendly inhabitants, the grounds; the guesthouses, neighbors, the whole universe: are all wide open classrooms. Here, all are teachers, learners, disciples; brothers as well as guests, visitors, friends, and co-workers in their manifold interactions. Such a rich variety!

Novices or newcomers to the Monastic school are tested to see if “they truly seek God” and are eager for monastic training to that end (Rule of Benedict, Chapter 58). Desire for God and fraternal love are the burning heart of monastic learning. The whole monastic curriculum is directed to expanding and deepening the heart. The monk learns to Listen with the Ear of the Heart, but also to Look with the Eyes of the Heart, to Think with the Thoughts of the Heart, to Speak with the Voice of the Heart—in short, to Live from his Heart.

This learning brings the monastic community to express its love and desire in the language of the heart: poetry, song and music. The celebration of that learning has become the Common Prayer of the Weston brothers. At the same time deeply traditional, rising from centuries of monastic prayer, and richly creative and contemporary, Liturgy is its vital expression for offering hospitality and welcome to all who come to share the bounty of the Lord’s table in the Priory. ■