

Fr Jock Dalrymple – Homily at the Memorial Mass of Dom Edward Corbould OSB – Brompton Oratory – 28.1.25

In the Easter holidays of 1974, my second last year at Ampleforth, I was browsing in an Edinburgh second-hand bookshop when I came across an unexpected treasure, a large volume entitled *The Corbould Genealogy*, purporting to trace the history of the Corbould family from the 9th century onwards and filled with imaginative illustrations and photographs. In its pages, I discovered some of Father Edward's antecedents, including Garbald the Viking, with an illustration to match, and, jumping to the 11th century, Gobaude the Norman; then on through the Middle Ages to the mid-18th century, and the well-known left-handed Norfolk portrait painter, Richard Corbould; from the 19th century, Robert Rutter Corbould of Long Island, New York; and finally, as the book's final entry - since it was published in 1935 - a certain Michael Corbould, born the 29th of September, 1932.

Thrilled, I purchased the book and packed it, and on the first evening back in St Edward's, rushed down to Father Edward's study to show him my discovery, wondering if he'd ever seen it before. He obviously had, because his face took on a stern demeanour, he looked me in the eye and said, *'I want you to put that in a draw and never let me see it again.'*

Ninety years on from the publication of that book, we gather in this vast church and fill it as we mourn, pray and give thanks for little Michael, better known to us as Father Edward.

Why is the church packed to overflowing? I believe the readings, chosen with Edward in mind, help illustrate why.

Take the psalm, Psalm 26. Father Edward's faith was a very positive one, or at least certainly grew into that, life-enhancing rather than life-denying – as is well illustrated by the psalm response: *I am sure I will see the Lord's goodness in the land of the living.*

He certainly was – and did.

And St Paul to the Philippians:

Don't be anxious about anything,

*but in everything, by prayer and supplication,
with thanksgiving, let your requests
be made known to the Lord.*

*...Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honourable,
whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely,
whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence,
if there's anything worthy of praise,
think about these things.
...and the God of peace will be with you.*

That very much was Fr Edward, wasn't it? For me, one of the most distinctive features about him was that he hardly ever spoke ill of anybody. He had this capacity always to see the good in people. And similarly, to act always with courtesy and to express gratitude.

What of that gospel of the Road to Emmaus?

I wonder how many of us, at a low point in our lives, have found Father Edward walking by our side, just as the two disciples found Jesus beside them on the Emmaus road?

Edward helping us to make sense of what we've been experiencing, encouraging us to endure and to find hope.

For me, a vivid memory is how in February 2005, at just about the lowest point in my life, Edward, in his mid-seventies, drove three hours to Shropshire and three hours back to Ampleforth, just to have lunch with me, to encourage and give hope.

Similarly, with how many of us has he celebrated a simple Eucharist around a table - as we'll hear from his nephew Rupert in his eulogy later in this Mass - helping us to experience God's presence and God's gift of self.

I presume that, like me, many of you will have sought out and been moved by the obituaries of Father Edward in *The Times*, *The Telegraph* and the *Catholic Herald*, and perhaps elsewhere. They were very eloquent, but for me they were in danger of misunderstanding his life.

For example, the opening of *The Times* obituary described the contrast drawn by a monk between the two types of monk at Ampleforth... '*those who pray.....and Fr Edward who lunches.*' So much has been made of Edward's ministry to the great and the good, and all those baptisms, weddings and funerals, occasionally with the tendency to speak rather disparagingly of him as a '*society priest.*' (That said, I thoroughly enjoyed Father Abbot's gentle irony in his homily at Father Edward's funeral, that at times it seemed as if Father Edward was the only priest in England and Wales.)

This extraordinary ministry was certainly a feature of his life from, say, the early nineties to two or three years ago, and lasted 30 years. But preparing this and reflecting on his life, it struck me that this was just one third of that life, a flowering and a fruitfulness in those last three decades, but built on the first 60 years of a much more constrained and sometimes hidden existence.

The way he was and lived and ministered in these last decades, he was very much the last of a generation (apart, of course, from Fr Henry here with us!) I don't think we'll see anybody like him ever again.

Rupert will talk more about the first 20 years of Fr Edward's life, including of the uprooting when his Anglican vicar father became - with all his family - Catholic, at a time when it must have caused a break with almost all that had gone before in their lives; of his schooling at All Hallows and Ampleforth; and of his short time in the City.

That said, I always find it rather difficult to imagine Father Edward in pinstripes.

And then, aged 20, his entry into the monastery; the tough and bracing years of novitiate in the early 50s; followed by his degree at Oxford, at St Benet's, a full monastic life at the same time as much studying.

And three dates, significant ones.

1959, when he first started teaching history in the school.

1962, when he was ordained priest.

And 1966, when he became housemaster, appointed by the then Abbot, Basil Hume.

(Incidentally, both of those great men had the advantage of not just being holy, but looking holy too. There's something about a monastic lope....)

In the light of what has been said and written about him, I think it's important with regard to his years as housemaster, to stress that when I was in St Edward's from 1970 to 1975, Father Edward was just about ever-present.

If he was away, it was with the cross-country team in the spring term, the under-15 Colts cricket team in the summer, the normally unbeaten third-fifteen rugby team in the autumn, or with an event linked with the CCF.

As regards that presence, it might have been slightly different in Fr Edward's last years as housemaster, but for so many of us, in both the early and later years, he became a role model, recognised as very much at home in his own skin, and respected for both his fairness and integrity, and for not having 'favourites'. Moreover, he was someone for whom almost all of us felt real affection - mainly, I think, because we knew he was (and remained) so obviously genuinely interested and concerned for each one of us.

Although he was viewed by some as a little straight-laced and traditional – the obituaries pointing out how his house 'jaws' on Thursday nights often seemed to focus on the 'four last things' - the breadth of his interests meant he could find common ground with almost anybody (whether through virtually any kind of sport, gardening, art, history, politics of the true blue variety, or the CCF).

His obituaries stress that he wasn't a disciplinarian, but nor was he ever a pushover either.

My three brothers all went through St Edward's and preparing this homily, I asked them for their memories. In response, my younger brother, Robert, came up with an unexpected one - of the only time that Edward lost his temper with him. In his second last year, he'd skipped High Mass on Sunday by staying in his room, but been caught. He was duly summoned to see Father Edward in his study.

Rob described the outcome as follows: *'I rather arrogantly said I thought I would learn more about God revising for my theology A-level than by attending the Abbey Church. I couldn't have said anything more guaranteed to rile him. He so valued personal discipline, observance, and humility.'*

So Fr Edward had definite standards and values. Yet, as one of my contemporaries, himself a secondary school teacher, remarked, *'it's very rare for a teacher of teenagers to win universal respect.'*

The housemaster.....and the school teacher, the history teacher...

As someone who studied history at university, I still rather blame Father Edward that I have no real interest in anything that happened after 1600. In my time in the school, he taught two A Level courses: the 8th to the 12th century one year, from the coronation of Charlemagne to the 12thc Renaissance, which I followed, and then from the 13th to the 16th century, the next year.

I was very struck by what another contemporary who became a history teacher wrote to me:

'Father Edward was a defining influence on I think many history teachers, schoolmasters like me, the course of whose lives have been effectively determined by his classes. He was a central figure in, if it doesn't sound too pompous, an Ampleforth School of History, operating somewhat apart from the academic mainstream, but perhaps wielding an influence beyond its numbers.'

And my friend added, by way of part explanation, *'Edward had an instinctive awareness of the primary role of the aesthetic in not just history, but faith.'*

So the disciplined, ever-present, rather conservative, but loved monk, housemaster, and history teacher...sometimes on holiday on the continent in those years with the Ampleforth laymaster, Ronald Rohan, in a mini, camping, studying church architecture...

When, then, did the metamorphosis into something rather different take place, where the pastoral priest rather took over from the monk, perhaps slightly separating him from his fellow monks in the monastery, a cause sometimes of tension and sadness - and when the holidays became rather more comfortable!

Well, perhaps that began around 1992, during the last decade of his time as a housemaster, and gathered pace in 2002 when, aged seventy, he was deprived of his house, and his beloved garden.

For me, however, he continued to develop and grow in stature as the years went by. I'll always remember a comment my mother made in the 1970s after he'd come to stay with us. She had taken him up to our old family home, 200 yards up the drive, which had become a Servite convent, and a holiday home for people suffering from multiple sclerosis, to introduce him to the sisters and the guests in their wheelchairs: and I recall vividly her saying how she felt Fr Edward was rather out of his depth, not really knowing how to relate to the guests.

15 years or so after that first visit, when he came to stay with us again she took him there a second time, later commenting how very much at ease he had been this time.

What caused the change and growth? Perhaps partly his participation for many years from 1980 onwards with his nephew Richard and the Plummer family on the Ampleforth Pilgrimage to Lourdes? It's important to remember, too, that during these years alongside the very fruitful public ministry of baptisms, marriages, and funerals, there were many hidden visits to the sick and the dying, and those struggling with their mental health.

So many telephone calls too – and the ministry of anniversary and birthday text messages.

Another friend, a priest who had difficulties in his ministry and was eventually laicised, wrote very powerfully to me after Edward's death about his gifts as a pastor.

He began by suggesting that Edward's impressive clarity of vision was epitomised by his trademark spectacles, *'wiry and delicate, but with an underlying strength - and always crystal clear lenses.'* He felt that the eyes behind these spectacles held the same clarity, and remembered how if the print was particularly small when he was reading, Father Edward would remove these spectacles - and how this act of removal always seemed to my friend almost itself a sacred act.

He recalled particularly how when they were concelebrating a thinly attended House Mass in St Edward's together, the gospel had been that of the rich young man, and how Edward had removed his spectacles, before reading the sentence: *'Jesus looked at him and loved him'*, making those words *'sing'* for him.

My friend continued: *'many years later I met him when my own world was falling apart, and he looked at me and loved me. He proceeded to give me both comfort and hope by telling me, 'you will still have a ministry', something that has been very true.'*

He went on: *'Father Edward had a God-given ability to make the person in front of him feel as if they were the only person in the world at that particular moment.When he was present in that way, he brought the eternal presence into our midst.'*

And he concluded perceptively: *'others may have witnessed his darker side, for we all have one. I'm sure he tried the patience of some in authority. But I cannot imagine him ever trying the patience of those to whom he ministered.'*

In what might Fr Edward's shadow side have consisted? He could certainly be stubborn and he was a man of very strong self-will. He was also extremely competitive, particularly when participating in sport (not least when playing golf with his great friend and fellow monk, Simon Trafford). But this shadow side ensured that his gifts as a devoted pastor - patient, energetic, indefatigable, so non-judgmental, and fully present to so many – shone even more brightly.

The pastoral priest...and the pilgrim. There's a sense in which Edward was very much both a pilgrim both throughout his life, and also a frequent pilgrim to specific places, to Lourdes and above all to Medjugorje.

He visited Medjugorje almost every year between 1986 and 2022. Was it his fellow monk and friend Father Francis Dobson who encouraged him there first? Each year Fr Edward took a group at the end of October or the beginning of November, always staying with the same family, the Sivrics, and normally working with the same guide, Branca.

Last night both the Sivrics and Branka emailed their memories of him. Mario Sivric wrote: *'he came here each year to be strengthened in his ministry. He was such a beautiful priest with a heart full of love.'*

And Branca recalled one of the major 'fruits' of Edward's Medjugorje pilgrimages: how, just after his first visit, he had been at a wedding dinner sitting next to someone he'd never met before called Charlotte. The pilgrim

communicated his enthusiasm for what he had just experienced in so powerful a way that Charlotte decided she needed to go to Medjugorje.

She duly did so, initially, with her mother, the first of many such pilgrimages – and often with Fr Edward. Out of them came the whole world of Wintershall with the annual Nativity play, and the performance of The Life of Christ on the Wintershall estate in rural Surrey, and the Passion Play on Good Friday in Trafalgar Square. In an interview a few years ago Edward spoke about how the effect of his pastoral ministry could be compared to the throwing of a stone into a pond, with consequent ripples - and the ripples in this case certainly have rippled. This last year, 25,000 children have visited the Wintershall Estate to learn more about Jesus.

Inevitably, for one so active, and until very recently, apparently so ageless, the diminishment that comes with old age and infirmity was very hard for Fr Edward. And he certainly underwent a stripping in these final years, having to live what he had preached in so many house jaws and homilies, not least when he was seriously ill in 2016, a period we will hear more about from Rupert.

I visited him in July last year in the monastic infirmary. By that point, he could only move with the help of a hoist. He was obviously struggling with the indignity, and with the sheer physical effort and the pain, though remaining very much himself through it all.

And then these final days, about which again we'll hear more later from Rupert. As November began, it was very obvious that he was dying. On the evening of Monday 4 November, I had the good fortune to be driving down from Edinburgh to a retreat in Surrey, telephoned the infirmary, and was given permission to pop in on him on Tuesday morning on what turned out to be the last full day of his life.

His eyes were open. But the great communicator was no longer able to communicate at all, as he lay there motionless. I prayed with him, gave him a final anointing, and said my farewells. It wasn't easy saying good-bye to him, one of the biggest influences in my life. And I know that I was far from alone in feeling this – and that this was only one of many moving farewells Edward had had with some of his many many friends in the final weeks of his life.

Yet, if anything, Fr Edward's ministry had become even more fruitful through these final years of diminishment. I'd like to conclude this homily by drawing

attention to an article in *The Tablet* last year, by one of the last of the many people he received into the Catholic Church, appropriately enough, called Edward.

(The other) Edward wrote:

'Two months later, in 2022, I started to have weekly meetings with Father Edward Corbould. He's now 90, but he immediately offered to help me. He put no pressure on me. Every week he said the same thing:

'Make time for prayer. Try to go to Mass as often as you can. Think about what we've talked about. And let me know if you'd like to meet again.'

He was incredibly generous with his time. But there was also something deeply private about him. I knew that I could trust him to be totally discreet. He put me at my ease completely. He has a very gentle presence. And I had a real feeling of his representing Christ on earth.

...At every meeting, Father Edward also said 'Just remember that you are loved by God.' Such an amazing thing to say. Such a lovely thing to know. I knew he really, really believed it.'

Perhaps that's what Father Edward would want us to take away with us today, what he would say to each of us:

Make time for prayer.

Try to go to Mass as often as you can.

And above all, just remember that you are loved by God.