



## Not a Papal Conspiracy but a Spiritual Principle: Three Early Anglican Apologists for the Practice of Retreat

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### ABSTRACT

The first silent preached retreat in the Anglican Communion was held in 1858. The exercise quickly aroused suspicions because it appeared to be dangerously close to Roman Catholic practice. Based upon original printed sources, this paper reviews arguments put forward during the next ten years by three advocates of the led retreat, to counter such fears. Far from being part of a Roman plot, they claimed that the retreats were an expression of a fundamental spiritual principle, which was not limited to any particular denomination and party.

**KEYWORDS:** Oxford Movement, Protestantism, Retreats, Ritualism, Roman Catholicism, Society of the Holy Cross

The recent Lambeth conference began with a three-day retreat, which followed what is today a familiar format. It combined informed input from Archbishop Rowan Williams with unhurried time to meditate on what he had said, and uplifting corporate worship with the opportunity for silent solitude in the peace and sanctity of Canterbury Cathedral.<sup>2</sup> This pattern, which was introduced into Anglican practice in 1858 by some followers of the Oxford Movement, is known as a

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2. Accessed on January 3, 2009 at <http://www.lambethconference.org/diary/eventdetails.cfm?EventID=51238D4A-AEAD-55E8-E28DB4FC979DC687&View=month&linkDate=07%2F01%2F2008>.

‘preached retreat’. It had evolved in seventeenth century Catholicism as a way of making St Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises* available to a larger number of people, than was possible using the one-to-one method which their author had envisaged. Over the years, the addresses have often departed from the sequence of meditations and contemplations which the Basque saint had suggested, but the general form had remained the same.<sup>3</sup>

Its arrival in this country was greeted with great misgiving. In the middle of the nineteenth century, there was a fear in England of perceived Papal aggression which Prof. John Wolffe of the Open University has recently compared to the present day antagonism to Muslims.<sup>4</sup> Suspicion surrounding anything with a connection to the Jesuits was compounded by the fact that this devotion was being promoted by the Society of the Holy Cross, (*Societas Sanctae Crucis* or SSC), a group of Ritualist clergy who themselves were regarded with great mistrust.

An example of the level of suspicion of this method was provided in the summer of 1869, when William Walsham How hosted for his fellow clergy a retreat in his Shropshire vicarage, conducted by Edward King. None of them belonged to SSC, but nevertheless a letter appeared in the local newspaper, written by an anonymous neighbouring evangelical clergyman, accusing the group of meeting for the purpose of secretly celebrating the Roman Mass.<sup>5</sup>

In this paper, we study the arguments which were employed in the 1860s by three early apologists for this devotion, to allay suspicions. All members of SSC, William Lyall, Richard Benson and Thomas Carter asserted that these retreats followed a fundamental spiritual law, which had governed God’s dealing with his people throughout history. Our exposition will help to fill a gap in current studies of the Oxford Movement, which, on the whole, have ignored this distinctive form of devotion, and we will also learn something about the state of the Anglo Catholics at that time. First, I must explain why the Society of the Holy Cross was so mistrusted, introduce our three writers and their contributions to the debate, and recount how preached retreats were introduced into the Church of England.

3. G. de Guibert, *The Jesuits: Their Spiritual Doctrine and Practice – A Historical Study* (trans. W.J. Young; St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1972), p. 533.

4. J. Wolffe, *Is Religion History?* Open University Webcast. Accessed on December 4, 2008 at <http://stadium.open.ac.uk/berrill/>.

5. F.D. How, *Bishop Walsham How* (London: Sibster & Co. Ltd, 1898), p. 96.

*The Society of the Holy Cross*

*Societas Sanctae Crucis* was a group of young parochial clergy who came together in 1855 under the leadership of Charles Lowder, whose ministry lay amongst working people living in grim social conditions around the London Docks. The Society had three main priorities.<sup>6</sup> The first was evangelism and pastoral work amongst those living in the growing industrial cities. As this could only be done by priests whose lives exemplified the gospel which they preached, their second concern was for 'the deepening of priestly spirituality and holiness of life'. This they hoped to do by promoting 'fellowship between Ritualist priests, to strengthen their spiritual discipline through a rule of life, and to provide them with guidance over such [pastoral] matters as the hearing of confession'.<sup>7</sup> A third aim, emerging from 'a...conviction of the transforming reality of supernatural grace',<sup>8</sup> was to emphasize the Catholicity of the established church.

In all of this, they were closely allied to the early Tractarians, but differed in two ways. Though the Fathers of the Oxford Movement had argued for the essential catholicity of the early Anglican divines, their successors tended to look on the contemporary Continental Roman church as their exemplar of good Catholic practice. Secondly, they had a concern for ritual, which was not a mere aping of Rome, but grew out of their concern for mission. They were convinced that colour and ceremony both expressed the inexpressible, conveying the highest truths to the heart through the senses, and also attracted people, who lived in a drab mechanical world, into the light and warmth of their parish church.<sup>9</sup>

In coming years, some of its members were to face prosecution because of their ritualism and they were also attacked because of their advocacy of auricular confession, a matter which reached the House of Lords in June 1875.<sup>10</sup> The suspicion that they aroused was deepened

6. L.E. Ellsworth, *Charles Lowder and the Ritualist Movement* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1982), p. 21.

7. N. Yates, *Anglican Ritualism in Victorian England 1830–1910* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), p. 71.

8. G. Rowell, 'The SSC in Context', in W. Davage (ed.), *In This Sign Conquer* (London: Continuum, 2006), pp. 1–14 (10).

9. Ellsworth, *Charles Lowder and the Ritualist Movement*, p. 1. In practice, the appeal of Ritualism was mainly to the upper and middle classes, and its strength was to be found in Brighton rather than Bermondsey; Yates, *Anglican Ritualism in Victorian England 1830–1910*, p. 377.

10. K. Macnab, 'Mackonochie and the Controversies Over Confession and Ritual', in S. Davage (ed.), *In This Sign Conquer* (London: Continuum, 2006), pp. 78–119 (98).

by the secrecy with which the Society surrounded itself. It was important that, if its members were to be able to freely share their spiritual and pastoral problems, a rule of confidentiality be adopted for their chapter meetings. Further, in order to protect each other as legal and verbal attacks grew, membership lists and some literature were kept out of the public domain.

Lowder had found inspiration for his society in the example the great French seventeenth century saint Vincent de Paul and his Company of Mission Priest.<sup>11</sup> The use of retreats had always been a key part of Vincentian devotion, and further in the 1850s the practice of preached retreats was growing rapidly in Continental Catholicism. It was to be expected, therefore, that at some point, the members of the Society should begin to experiment with this form of devotion, which they began to do in the first year of their existence. It was also inevitable that some of the suspicion which fell upon SSC should be attached to this Roman spiritual practice when they began to actively promote it. The situation was not helped when they failed to acknowledge that the retreats which they advertised in the *Church Times* were in fact being arranged by them. As late as 1896, the Protestant polemicist Walter Walsh used this omission as a reason for warning his readers not to take part in such dangerous events. 'Loyal Churchmen', he wrote, 'would do well to avoid Retreats if they wish to retain their allegiance to the principles of the Protestant Reformation'.<sup>12</sup> The dangers of the Society's approach had been pointed out as early as 1860 by the Revd R. Hooper, when he published a pamphlet in which he pleaded with the Bishops to establish houses to which overstressed clergy could retreat for periods of rest and spiritual refreshment. In it he stated, 'such seclusion is not necessarily accompanied by secrecy and it is vitally important that...[it be] free from the slightest suspicion that it has a tendency to the thoroughly un-English religion of Rome'.<sup>13</sup>

Our three authors were very aware of these reservations and in fact their writings, which we now introduce, provide the main evidence for their existence.

11. Ellsworth, *Charles Lowder and the Ritualist Movement*, p. 21.

12. W. Walsh, *The Secret History of the Oxford Movement* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1898), p. 58.

13. R. Hooper, *A Plea for Seasons and Places of Spiritual Retirement for the Working Clergy: by a Priest of the Church of England* (Oxford: T & G Shrimpton, 1860), p. 8.

*The Three Advocates of the Practice of Retreat*

The oldest of the writers was the Revd (later Canon) Thomas Thellusson Carter (1808–1901). He had left Oxford before the Oxford Movement was firmly established but became a well-known advocate of its principles, being much in demand as a preacher. He became Rector of Clewer in 1844, founding the Community of St John the Baptist in 1852 to take charge of a penitentiary which he had established three years earlier.<sup>14</sup> An essay written by him, simply called *Retreats*, appeared in a volume entitled *The Church and the World in 1868*. This book was the last of a series of three collections of essays on issues of concern to the members of SSC, which were edited by the militant Revd Orby Shipley.<sup>15</sup> Carter's contribution was reprinted in 1893 in a slightly abbreviated form as the introduction to the collected notes of retreat addresses which Carter had given to clergy and religious between 1860 and 1870.<sup>16</sup> All quotations in this paper are taken from the original version. Carter was the last of the three writers to join SSC, becoming a member in September 1859.<sup>17</sup>

Our second author, the Revd Richard Meux Benson (1824–1915), had joined SSC in November 1856.<sup>18</sup> He had forsaken his Evangelical upbringing within the Clapham Sect after hearing the preaching of Newman and other leaders of the new movement when a young undergraduate.<sup>19</sup> He was licensed as curate of the village of Cowley in 1850, and in 1859, was persuaded by the Bishop of Oxford, Samuel Wilberforce to devote his energies to caring for a new industrial suburb which was developing at the Oxford end of that parish.

In 1866, he founded the Society of St John the Evangelist (SSJE) to lead parish missions and conduct retreats.<sup>20</sup> Under their name, a tract was published in London by J.T. Hayes. It is some fifty pages long and

14. F.L. Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (London: OUP, 1957), p. 241.

15. T.T. Carter, 'Retreats', in O. Shipley (ed.), *The Church and the World: Essays on Questions of the Day 1868* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1868), pp. 417–49.

16. T.T. Carter, *Retreats with Notes of Addresses* (London: J. Masters and Co., 1893).

17. K. Macnab 'The First Decade: 1855–65', in W. Davage (ed.), *In This Sign Conquer* (London: Continuum, 2006), pp. 63–77 (74).

18. Macnab, 'The First Decade: 1855–65', p. 73.

19. M.V. Woodgate, *Father Benson of Cowley* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1953), pp. 1, 34.

20. Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, p. 157.

is entitled *Retreats*, or more fully, *Of the Advantage and Aim of Spiritual Retreats*. No date or author is given but it is possible to deduce the year of publication with some confidence. It cannot have been printed earlier than August 1865, when Father Benson and the American priest Charles C. Grafton had first moved into a small suburban house near Benson's tin mission church in Cowley, to live together under rule as the Mission Priests.<sup>21</sup> The last possible date for publication is 1868, as Carter quotes the tract in his essay of that year.<sup>22</sup> There is one final clue; the works by Benson listed in an advertisement on the last page were all published before or during 1866.<sup>23</sup> We can therefore assume that this document was published in 1867 or early 1868. Moreover, because the tract appears to exhibit a wide experience of leading retreats in this country, it was almost certainly written by Benson himself. Although he was prolific spiritual writer, retreat giver and missionary, only one volume of his retreat addresses was published.<sup>24</sup>

Our third author, William Lyall, is a less well-known figure. He was the eighth person to join SSC, becoming a member in September 1855, and was still active ten years later.<sup>25</sup> By then, he was rector of St Dionis Backchurch in the City of London.<sup>26</sup> I am attributing to him a document which came to light recently in St Deiniol's Library in North Wales, entitled *The Need and the Means of Associated and Devotional Retirement for the Clergy*. It is a twelve-page pamphlet bearing no date, no publisher, no page numbers (although these have been supplied in the following account), and no named author. There is, however, a statement on the last page, 'Any person wishing for further information on this subject is requested to communicate with the Revd W.H. Lyall of Fitzroy Square, London, N. W.' The author tells us that he is one of a small group of clergymen who had practiced retreats in great privacy over the past seven or eight years, testing the results of the system before commending it to their brethren. He further records that the numbers attending these events had steadily increased, and that at a recent gathering 'persons of high authority and influence in

21. Woodgate, *Father Benson of Cowley*, pp. 72, 74.

22. Carter, *Retreats*, p. 447.

23. R.M. Benson, *On the Advantage and Aim of Spiritual Retreats* (London: J.T. Hayes, c. 1868) p. 51; Woodgate, *Father Benson of Cowley*, p. 184.

24. R.M. Benson, *Eight Sermons and Addresses delivered by the Revd Father Benson in a Parochial Retreat held at St David's Church in the Parish of Merthyr Tydfil* (London and Merthyr Tydfil: J.T. Hayes, Farant and Flint, 1888).

25. Macnab, 'The First Decade: 1855-65', p. 72.

26. *Crockford's Clerical Directory* (London: Horace Cox, 1865), p. 406.

the church' had been present, giving the practice 'a sanction which warrants our regarding them as an established part of our ministerial system'.<sup>27</sup> It is likely, therefore, that this pamphlet is based upon Lyall's experience of the early SSC retreats, and certainly his description fits in with what little we know from other sources. We can safely assume that this pamphlet was published in 1863 or 1864, seven or eight years after the initial gathering in 1856, and that the author was Lyall himself.

How had SSC initiated the practice of retreat?

### *The First Anglican Retreats*

Carter tells us in his extended essay that members of Society of the Holy Cross met together for spiritual withdrawal at the home of the Revd F.H. Murray, rector of Chislehurst in Kent, in February 1856, repeating the exercise in July of the following year at St Thomas' Vicarage, Oxford. He reports that the plan adopted on these occasions was to

read passages from a spiritual book, which afterwards formed the subject of mental prayer. There were also two conferences each day on practical questions, the subjects chosen at one of the meetings being Conversion, Home Missions, Confession etc.

He says that a third retreat was held the following year (1858), when 'for the first time definite meditations were given and the rule of silence observed'. After this, the practice had grown into the form which was generally prevailing when he was writing.<sup>28</sup>

Carter has omitted two important details. First, he fails to mention a gathering of some eighteen or so clergymen, recorded in Maria Trench's biography of Charles Lowder. They had met in July of 1856 at Dr Pusey's home in Oxford, at which a programme similar to that of the meetings at Chislehurst and at St Thomas' had been followed.<sup>29</sup> Secondly, he does not explain why the 1858 retreat had taken a different form. It would appear that the first three periods of retirement had proved to be unsatisfactory. First, there had been little opportunity for personal reflection and solitude. As Henry Liddon writes in his *Life of Pusey*,

as compared with modern retreats, [the retreat at Pusey's house] was obviously deficient: meditations are better than conferences; and if souls

27. W.H. Lyall, *The Need and the Means of Associated and Devotional Retirement for the Clergy* (London: c. 1863), p. 5.

28. Carter, *Retreats*, p. 432.

29. M. Trench, *Charles Lowder: A Biography* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Co., 1882), p. 96.



are to deal faithfully with God and with themselves a rule of silence is a practical necessity.<sup>30</sup>

Secondly, the programme, which had included daily communion and the full monastic offices, was a busy one, with little leisure for personal reflection.

Because of the inadequacy of these first experiments, Dr Pusey, who had advised the members of SSC when they were drawing up their rule, had turned for help to Benson. In his younger days, Benson had visited Rome when he had met the Jesuits and presumably becoming familiar with their way of leading retreats.<sup>31</sup> He spent the early months of 1858 making a detailed study of the practice, and came to two conclusions. First, retreats should be silent; 'do not have conferences during retreat', he said, 'you meet to converse with your own heart and with God only'. Secondly, retreats should follow the Ignatian pattern, but adapted to English needs.<sup>32</sup> By this last statement, he seems to have meant that the period of withdrawal should take the form of a preached retreat, with the leader's addresses based upon the sequence of the gospel meditations and contemplations to be found in the *Spiritual Exercises*.

So, it was that in July 1858 that Lowder, Murray, and some eight other like-minded priests,<sup>33</sup> met at Bishop Wilberforce's new theological college at Cuddesdon, and spent three full days together in silence under Benson's leadership. Benson gave four addresses a day, followed by periods of silent meditation, all within a liturgical routine of daily communion and the Anglican daily offices.<sup>34</sup> The method of the preached retreat, upon which the Lambeth Conference's opening time of preparation was based, had now been introduced into the Church of England for the first time, and it was to remain the norm for the next one hundred years.

We turn now to the writings of our three apologists, and review how they explained and defended this spiritual innovation.

### *The Ignatian Roots of the Retreat Movement*

Despite the distrust of the Jesuits and of St Ignatius by many English people, all the writers acknowledge that the method was based upon

30. H.P. Liddon, *Life of Edward Bouverie Pusey*, Vol. III (London: Longman, Green and Co., 1894), p. 378.

31. A.M. Allchin, *Silent Rebellion: Anglican Communities 1845-1900* (London: SCM Press, 1958), p. 192.

32. Woodgate, *Father Benson of Cowley*, p. 44.

33. The names are given in Benson's notebook to be found in the archives of SSJE at St Edward's House, London.

34. Woodgate, *Father Benson of Cowley*, p. 45.



the *Spiritual Exercises*. Carter's essay reveals an intimate knowledge of the way in which retreats were being offered in the Roman church, probably gained during his visits to the continent.<sup>35</sup> He gives a detailed description of a four-week retreat, which had been undertaken recently by someone who desired to join the Jesuits, followed by an account of a preached retreat. He introduces the role of the director, who guides the programme, gives addresses based upon the Exercises to stimulate personal meditation and is available for personal counsel.<sup>36</sup> Carter's opinion is that the full Exercises were too elaborate for ordinary use; however, they supplied a standard and a direction for present retreat givers, suggesting the subjects which might be offered for meditation and giving the director principles by which he could choose and adapt his materials.<sup>37</sup>

Lyall, without mentioning Ignatius, clearly assumes that the Exercises are the basis of the retreat. He says that whilst much variation was possible in the subjects covered at the discretion of the conductor, they commonly covered such themes as the special claims of the priestly vocation, sin and repentance, our Lord's ministry as an example for those who are ordained, and the progress of a holy life through its various stages of purgation, illumination and union. These themes echo those of the Exercises. Similarly in his tract, Benson says that the retreat addresses which were offered 'though variously handled must remain pretty much the same'. He then listed what is in fact the sequence of St Ignatius' meditations, covering creation and sin, the reality of the Kingdom of Christ, and finally, the continuing presence of the risen and ascended Christ who empowers and transforms us.<sup>38</sup>

Lyall states that the retreat conductors did not try to arouse the emotions, nor did they encourage mere abstract contemplation or intellectual study, but rather, their aim was to enable 'solid improvement in virtue and the more entire surrender of the soul to the obedience of Christ, and to his service on earth'. This is a good summary of Ignatius' own aims when producing the Exercises, although omitting his emphasis upon the 'discernment of spirits', which leads to the recognition of the hidden motives that guide the choices which we make. It would appear then, that the advice which Benson had given in 1858

35. W.H. Hutchings, *Life and letters of T.T. Carter* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1908).

36. Carter, *Retreats*, pp. 429–31.

37. Carter, *Retreats*, pp. 423–29.

38. Benson, *Retreats*, pp. 26, 27.

that retreats should be Ignatian, but adapted to English needs, was being heeded by his successors.

*Arguments for the Defence – The Positive Value of Retreats*

How did our authors counter accusations that this was a Papist form of devotion?

First, our apologists claim that, although the practice of retreat was common in the Roman church, these Anglican gatherings were different in character, and were free from any taint of Papal influence. At one point, Carter suggests that the very inadequacies which were exhibited in the initial experiments made by SSC, showed that the early pioneers were not slavishly following a ready-made Roman system, but were finding their own way. 'These retreats...were an effort of life, springing from amongst ourselves, not borrowed from without'. These imperfect first attempts were 'the outcome of an earnest and vigorous, though as yet inexperienced, life'.<sup>39</sup>

Lyall is somewhat bolder, making his case for the efficacy of the practice by pointing directly to the experience of the Catholic church. 'The great importance attached to this system in the Church of Rome, as well as the momentous results in the cultivation of a devotional life attributed to its use, must be familiar to the greater number of our readers'. However, he assures them, at the Anglican retreats, there had not been any dogmatic teaching, but the subjects dealt with had been chosen because they were practical and experimental, dealing with the relationship of the retreatants 'to their Creator and their Redeemer, their present and their future life'. There had been no controversy or distinctive theology, but rather, the aim had been to lead people 'to commune more deeply with their own souls and with God...[seeking] greater perfectness [sic] in their personal character and life, and in fulfilment of the duties of their vocation'.<sup>40</sup>

He gives further reassurance that Anglican retreats differ from Roman ones by describing the relaxed discipline of these early retreats. Sometimes, a strict rule of silence had been observed, but at other times, quiet but serious conversation had been allowed. However, experience had shown the great importance of a rule of silence, and of punctuality of hours. He specifies that there had been no attempt at asceticism; 'on the contrary, the need has been felt and

39. Carter, *Retreats*, p. 432.

40. Lyall, *Devotional Retirement*, p. 5.

enjoined for taking sufficient food and rest, in order to keep the minds fresh and collected'.<sup>41</sup> Benson too assures his readers that there is no extreme self-denial. Fasting may have been part of the retreat tradition in the past, but it was not enjoined now, as the work of retreat was such a demanding exercise.<sup>42</sup> The impression is given that at these early retreats, unlike the regimentation which some may have associated with the Roman system, there was an ordered but relaxed regime, reflecting the freer Anglican ethos.

A second argument put forward by these apologists was that the practice of retreat was an expression of a fundamental spiritual law, which had been revealed in the way in which God dealt with his people. Thomas Carter begins his essay by claiming that although the establishment of retreats was one of the most important practical gains of the [Anglican] Catholic Revival, they did not belong solely to that part of the church. This was true even though auricular confession, which certainly was a party matter, was commonly practiced in retreat. The reason for this was that the exercise tended to awaken the conscience, leading to the desire for relief, and this ministry of absolution could not be withheld from those who asked for it. However, he argues, the principle of retreat was too deeply embedded in Holy Scripture for it to be merely identified with one party.<sup>43</sup> He uses a catena of scriptural examples of periods of retirement into silence and solitude to establish what he calls the 'principal' or 'law' of retreat. This, Carter suggests, states that through the silence and the ordered meditations, the exercise leads the retreatant into a more profound experiential knowledge of God. The soul is led through a series of stages that he summarizes in note form as follows:

The preparation of the soul for the reception of Divine truth – the bringing of the mind of man into harmony with the mind of God – the setting his will and spiritual faculties free from the powers of the world – the predisposing and fitting him for sustained intercourse with unseen things – the enabling him to maintain his standing ground on a higher level of spiritual consciousness, and thus enduring him with power to go forth to the fulfilment of high and arduous efforts in correspondence with the designs of GOD – the illumination of his soul through increasing knowledge and the revelation of secret mysteries – such are the results which we have seen to be attained during such hours of isolation and retirement from the visible world.<sup>44</sup>

41. Lyall, *Devotional Retirement*, p. 6.

42. Benson, *Retreats*, p. 24.

43. Carter, *Retreats*, p. 417.

44. Carter, *Retreats*, pp. 418–21.

Carter then continues the catalogue of examples of withdrawal beyond the New Testament into the history of the church. The desire to retire from the world either for short periods or permanently arose quickly in the early church, he claims, eventually becoming embodied in the contemplative orders. As the monasteries spread, the monks would seek opportunities for occasional periods of greater seclusion. They helped lay people to follow their examples, and the Dominican and Franciscan Orders systematized and developed the practice, forming plans to guide the conduct of retreats.<sup>45</sup>

Benson shares Carter's sense that the practice was a continuing element in God's way of working. Periods of spiritual retirement had always been part of the life of the church; indeed, it was by them that the foundation of the church was laid, and it was through them that God had always manifested himself. 'Retreat seasons belong to a law of Providence coexistent with the overtures of revelation to man'.<sup>46</sup> Like Carter, Benson offers evidence to substantiate this thesis in a long review of the lives of biblical heroes, from Noah through Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Daniel, John the Baptist and St Paul, to 'the retreat of St John and his clergy at Ephesus', to which we owe the record of the Incarnate Word in the Book of Revelation.<sup>47</sup> Further, he draws attention to the example of Jesus himself, who spent forty days in the desert after his baptism, and who took his disciples away for rest and refreshment from the increasing demands of the crowds. However, the first and greatest Christian retreat for Benson is the ten days that the Apostles and the Blessed Virgin spent in prayer in the upper room between the Ascension and Pentecost. He writes, 'When we would keep Retreats we are only seeking the further outpouring of that same spirit which they then sought and obtained. And as they sought in obedience to a promise, [so] have we the promise if we also seek'.<sup>48</sup>

This belief, that a retreat can be a time of empowerment by the Spirit forms a third argument in favour of the practice, and leads Benson to have a high expectation both of the effectiveness of retreat, and of the commitment of those who come. He says,

Fear to expect too little from them. We ought not to go [into Retreat] merely to meditate, nor to be taught, nor to form resolutions, but to be

45. Carter, *Retreats*, p. 422.

46. Benson, *Retreats*, p. 9.

47. Benson, *Retreats*, pp. 10–18.

48. Benson, *Retreats*, p. 16.

ourselves transformed by a special communication of the grace of God... Retreats with a lower aim and too indulgent a rule will... have so little token of result, that men will, after some experiments, think them not worth the difficulty they occasion.<sup>49</sup>

He therefore insists upon the careful observance of silence 'with such intensity as to leave unviolated [sic] the thought of continuous adoration'. Benson assures his readers that this silence does not lead to gloomy and selfish introspection, but rather 'it binds all who are together in the closest possible bond of conscious community of action, and of rapturous sympathy'. Even the periods allowed for recreation should not be considered as an interruption of the work, but as occasions when we call upon the mind to gather its energies 'to go on with the great spiritual conflict'. Moreover, far from being dour occasions, these periods of withdrawal have about them a tone of rest and recreation 'for the presence and the sympathy of Jesus makes them to be so'.<sup>50</sup>

A fourth contention of our writers was that retreats met the urgent spiritual needs of the clergy at that time, who Lyall praises for 'an increased zeal for souls, and whatever relates to the service of God'. This was shown in the restoration and increased care of churches, in the more frequent services which were conducted with greater reverence, in the observance of holy days and seasons, in the more frequent celebration of the Holy Communion, in increased devotional zeal, in the quickening of the inward life and in a more intimate communication between the brethren. However, all this activity had increased the pressure on the clergy, who were in danger of regarding the Christian truths which they taught as affecting others rather than themselves, and of saying the offices mechanically. In addition, because they were working at a time of substantial growth in the population, there were added distractions when they were at home. There was also an urgent need for fellowship amongst them, because clergy often lived alone, and were isolated from one another by the demands of their office. It was true that regular clerical meetings for the study of Scripture, for sharing information on church rules and practices and for mutual support were now becoming more common.<sup>51</sup> However, on these occasions, there was no opportunity for

49. Benson, *Retreats*, pp. 19, 21.

50. Benson, *Retreats*, pp. 22, 23.

51. The present writer is now a member of such a group, The Soar Valley Clerical Society, which came into existence in 1848 and has continued meeting to hear papers ever since.

private meditation, for the soul's communion with God in silence and for the thoughtful application of the truths received. Therefore, Lyall concluded, there was a need to combine instructive addresses with private meditation, and this was best done through retreats.<sup>52</sup>

As a final reason, Carter suggested that retreats provided an opportunity for the clergy to learn some essential devotional skills. Very few of them had attended one of the theological colleges which were now being established, and so the active clergy were poorly trained in methods of prayer, meditation and self-discipline, and urgently needed the opportunity for self reflection. Together with the rest and companionship of the retreat, these disciplines, which they would experience in retreat, would produce permanent and beneficial practical results in their parish ministry. He feared that their professional duties could easily become mechanical and perfunctory, losing freshness and spiritual power. 'The stir, the movement, the increasing activity of everything around us, are additional reasons why every means of encouraging calmness, the spirit of rest, the power of viewing truth in its inner depths and simplicity...must be specially valuable'. Periods of retirement provided an opportunity for this spiritual training to be given.<sup>53</sup>

So, our advocates claim, this novel form of devotion was meeting an urgent need within the Church of England, provided much needed training for clergy, and, although drawing on the experience of the Roman church, had a distinctive character. Most important of all, it was nothing new, but the rediscovery of what had always been an essential part of the Christian life, and could be a source of new strength and vigour for the whole Church. However, it might be objected that whilst their arguments from Scripture and church history substantiated the principle of spiritual withdrawal, they did not necessarily validate the particular method of the preached retreat. This is a distinction that they failed to make.

Along with putting forward their arguments, the three writers were able to report the encouraging growth of the practice in the ten years since its inauguration in 1858, and to this we now turn.

#### *Evidence for the Acceptance of Retreats*

Benson's tract begins with a note of regret that numbers coming on retreats were small, but he suggests that there was no rush to come

52. Lyall, *Devotional Retirement*, pp. 1-4.

53. Carter, *Retreats*, pp. 440-44.

because the results of a retreat were not always immediately obvious. In practice, the main work of the method amongst the clergy was not so much a startling transformation of outward life as the development of their spiritual life and a deepening of their communion with God. What these retreats lacked in numbers, they might well deliver in intensity.<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, Carter seems to be more optimistic. He tells us that by 1868, retreats were being held at eighteen to twenty places a year, and that the average attendance was twenty priests, with the greatest number being forty.

Further, already the practice was no longer restricted to clergy. Carter mentions that periods of retirement were being held for religious and for businessmen, but that progress in offering retreats in general was held back by a shortage of suitable conductors.<sup>55</sup> Benson fleshes this out, telling us that not only were retreats being held for sisterhoods but also for their associates, and that these were now well established.<sup>56</sup> He also mentions retreats for parish congregations, 'at one time for men, at another for the women of the parish'.<sup>57</sup> Referring to the retreats for businessmen in London, he tells us that the retreatants met in the early morning and again in the evening, so leaving the day free from 9.30am to 6.00pm for them to go to their work.<sup>58</sup> He too is concerned about the need to train more conductors, suggesting that the best way of doing this was for candidates to attend retreats themselves, but as committed retreatants, rather than being there primarily 'to gather hints'.<sup>59</sup>

Lyall concludes his pamphlet with a description of an adaptation of the retreat principle, which had been introduced during the previous year in Buckinghamshire. A Rural Dean had invited his clergy to meet at his parsonage for prayer. They had then moved to the church for Morning Prayer and to listen to an address, followed by a time of meditation either in the church or in a private room. After lunch together, there had been a further time of meditation. Although there had been no rule of silence, there had been 'the greatest quietness in mutual intercourse observed by common consent'. Carter also mentions this experiment, which had continued up to the time that he

54. Benson, *Retreats*, pp. 1–7.

55. Carter, *Retreats*, p. 433.

56. Benson, *Retreats*, pp. 3, 33.

57. Benson, *Retreats*, p. 33.

58. Benson, *Retreats*, p. 32.

59. Benson, *Retreats*, p. 35.



was writing.<sup>60</sup> Here is the beginning of the practice of the quiet day that was to become an important feature of Victorian spirituality.

Benson even dares to look forward to the day when at the time of ordination, a retreat would be interposed between the days of the examinations and the ordinations themselves.

The examination can disclose in some degree what it is that we bring to God. The retreat would quicken in the soul an earnest longing, an assured hope, a transcendent faith, a grateful love, by which to obtain personal gifts from our dear Lord to strengthen the ministerial powers then bestowed.<sup>61</sup>

It was to be another twenty years before this vision was to be fulfilled, but by 1887, H.B. Bromby, addressing the Church Congress, could speak of 'the silence and the awful stillness' of the ordination retreat in which 'the indelible stamp of the priesthood upon the soul and the thought of the sweet burden of the sacred ministry has been borne in upon [the ordinands] and...centred them upon God'.<sup>62</sup>

A picture emerges then from these three authors of the new-born retreat movement growing gradually but confidently, and looking forward to the time when the devotion which they were offering would become more acceptable. In fact, others did quickly begin to see its value, and the involvement of men of a more moderate churchmanship, such as William Walsham How and the saintly Edward King, did much to widen its acceptability. Within the first twenty years, a few ardent Evangelicals, such as the two episcopal cousins Edward and Robert Bickersteth, were commending the practice to their brethren.<sup>63</sup> Even Bishop Thorold (1825–1895), no friend of the Ritualists, was to use Quiet Days as an important part of his strategy for the spiritual development of the re-organized diocese of Rochester.<sup>64</sup> It was to remain true, however, that right up to the middle of the

60. Lyall, *Devotional Retirement*, p. 9; Carter, *Retreats*, p. 433.

61. Benson, *Retreats*, p. 32.

62. H.B. Bromby, 'Retreats and Quiet Days', *Church Congress Report 1887* (Wolverhampton, 1887), p. 364.

63. F.K. Aglionby, *The Life of Edward Henry Bickersteth, D.D.: Bishop and Poet* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1907), p. 31; M.C. Bickersteth, *A Sketch of the Life and Episcopate of the Right Reverend Robert Bickersteth, D.D., Bishop of Ripon 1857–1884*, with a Preface by his cousin Edward Henry Bickersteth, D.D., Lord Bishop of Exeter, (London: Rivingtons, 1887), p. 241. For ordination retreats, see Bromby, 'Retreats and Quiet Days', p. 364.

64. C.H. Simpkinson, *The Life and Work of Bishop Thorold* (London: Ibister and Co. Ltd, 1896), pp. 207–12.

twentieth century, the success of the Retreat Movement in England was intimately linked with the fortunes of the Catholic wing of the established church.

What do these three apologists reveal about the character of the Oxford Movement in the 1860s?

*The State of the Oxford Movement in the 1860s*

First, these early advocates of retreats in the Church of England shared with the founders of the Oxford Movement an intense concern for personal holiness and a belief that sanctity could only be achieved within the fellowship of Christ's Church, through the grace conveyed by the sacraments and by the maintenance of an orthodox adherence to the Faith as taught by the universal church.<sup>65</sup> Their affirmative comments on the spirituality of their contemporaries show both how successful the earlier generation had been and how much more work needed to be done, in part because of this success.

Secondly, the idea of retreat would have been natural to the Oxford Fathers, although the time then was not right for its introduction. Newman established his own retreat and community at Littlemore in 1842, living in retirement there with a few friends until he was received into the Roman Catholic Church in 1845. In that year, the future great Tractarian Rector of Wantage, William Butler, had written to John Keble saying that hardly a day went by without him thinking about a retreat to which young clergy could go for spiritual refreshment.<sup>66</sup> From 1848 onwards, religious communities were being established, the basis of whose life is the idea of withdrawal, and the founders of these would not be unaware that in the Roman Catholic Church, retreats and religious communities tended to go together. However, strangely, our authors make no reference to this continuity of thought.

Thirdly, at a time when it seemed that the established church was losing its status in society, the first Tractarians had endeavoured to persuade the members of the Church of England to embrace its ancient heritage and authority as a rightful part of the wider Church Catholic.<sup>67</sup> For them, the established church was the true Catholic church of this country, and the papists were interlopers. Our writers shared this view,

65. M. Chandler, *An Introduction to the Oxford Movement* (London: SPCK, 2003), p. ix.

66. A.J. Butler, *Life and Letters of William John Butler* (London: Macmillan, 1894), p. 33.

67. Chandler, *An Introduction to the Oxford Movement*, p. ix.

and so it is not surprising they completely ignored the experience of the Roman church in this country, even though there is some evidence that retreats, in the form in which we are discussing them, had already been introduced by the English Catholics as early as 1839.<sup>68</sup>

Fourthly, as already noted, the members of the SSC and other Anglo Catholics of the time tended to look for inspiration not to the Anglican Divines, as had Keble and Newman, but to Europe, as they worked towards the restoration of full Catholic practice within the Church of England. Pusey, Benson, Carter and Lowder had all travelled to the Continent, bringing back ideas. Perhaps we see here something of the all pervasive influence of Dr Pusey. Urged on by his own spiritual hunger and by his desire to find material for use in the direction of other people, in the 1840s, he moved away from the spiritual teachers of the Protestant Reformation and began to read Counter Reformation books on the spiritual life, on self examination and on mental prayer, arranging for their translation and publication.<sup>69</sup> He recommended some of his directees to read the *Spiritual Exercises*,<sup>70</sup> and the Ignatian preached retreat fitted in well with his outlook. It was perhaps largely due to him that the spirituality of the Counter Reformation seemed to dominate the Anglo Catholic movement at this time and for many decades afterwards.

It is perhaps not surprising then that there is little citation in these defences of the retreat method to precedents in earlier Anglicanism. It is true that the references to these in the history of the Church of England are few and far between, but we find Hooker retiring to his parish church during Lent,<sup>71</sup> parish clergy staying at Little Gidding to join in the community's life of prayer,<sup>72</sup> Gilbert Burnett spending six days in silence before his consecration as Bishop of Salisbury<sup>73</sup> and William Law advocating regular periods of spiritual retirement.<sup>74</sup> Basil Kennett translated Bishop Anthony Godeau's retreat for his parochial clergy in the Diocese of Grasse and Vence in 1703, and significantly this was

68. M. Heimann, *Catholic Devotion in Victorian England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 144.

69. G. O'Donnell OP, 'The Spirituality of E.B. Pusey', in E. Butler (ed.) *Pusey Rediscovered* (London: SPCK, 1983), pp. 231–54 (237).

70. E.B. Pusey, *Spiritual Letters* (London: Longman, Green and Co., 1898), p. 53.

71. E. Grislis, 'Richard Hooker and Mysticism', *Anglican Theological Review* 87.3 (2005), pp. 253–71 (256).

72. A.L. Maycock, *Nicholas Ferrar of Little Gidding* (London: SPCK, 1938), p. 217.

73. J.R.H. Moorman, *The History of the Church of England* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1958), p. 251.

74. W. Law, *A Serious Call to the Devout Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), pp. 130–32, 218, 282.

republished in 1860.<sup>75</sup> Further, Barry Smith has argued that the *Spiritual Exercises* were known and used by Anglicans in the sixteenth century,<sup>76</sup> although Martin Thornton says that the Caroline Divines rejected the teaching, both of St John of the cross and St Ignatius.<sup>77</sup> It may be that our apologists did not mention these examples because they were ignorant of them, although this is unlikely. It is possible that the absence of references reflects a tendency amongst the Tractarians, as with all new enthusiasts, to downplay what had gone before, and to assume that spiritual life began with them.<sup>78</sup> Or, and this seems to be most likely, it may well be that the preached retreat was such a new method for the Church of England, there being no earlier examples of its use, that reference to previous experience seemed to be irrelevant.

In short, the introduction of Ignatian retreats, although a new departure introduced from the Continent, was well in keeping with the previous priorities of the Oxford Movement, and may be seen as a natural continuation of its work.

High Church colonial bishops, missionaries and religious took the insights and practices of the Tractarians all over the British Empire and beyond, and after years of testing and sifting by practical experience, some have become an integral part of the Anglican Tradition. Amongst these is the practice of the preached retreat, and the retreat at the Lambeth Conference showed how this particular method has been widely recognized, being no longer identified with just one particular ecclesiastical party. In Rowan Williams, we have an experienced and inspired practitioner. However, since Vatican II, other forms of spiritual withdrawal have come to the fore, and certainly in England, preached retreats and the retreat houses within which they are offered appear to be in decline. Perhaps the time has come for a reassessment of this gift from the Ritualists, which is the purpose of the ongoing research of which this paper is part.

75. A. Godeau, *Pastoral Instructions and Meditations for an Annual Retirement of Ten Days* (trans. B. Kennett; republished by R. Hooper; Oxford: T and G Shrimpton, 1860).

76. B. Smith, *Ignatius Loyola's Spiritual Exercises and their reception into the English Reformed Tradition, with special reference to their use in the Anglican Church* (Manchester: Unpublished Dissertation, Master of Philosophy, Manchester University, 1991).

77. M. Thorton, *English Spirituality: An Outline of Ascetical Theology According to the English School* (London: SPCK, 1963), p. 254.

78. P.B. Nockels, *The Oxford Movement in Context, Anglican High Churchmanship, 1760–1857* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 3.