

## Listen carefully and attend with the ear of your heart

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For some years, the Bishops' Conference of England & Wales has been running a major initiative in support of Marriage & Family Life. This began with a project entitled 'Home is a Holy Place'. One of the fruits of that project was the recognition that the Church needed to address issues of mental health and that the experience of parish and family life would, in fact, enable the Church to respond to the needs of those facing mental health difficulties - something that will affect one in three of us at some point in our lives.

So, in 2009, the Bishops' Conference employed Gail Sainsbury - here with us today - to guide a small grants project. The sum of £70,000 was set aside from the annual Day for Life collection and parishes, deaneries, chaplaincies and schools were invited to seek funding for the projects. In the event, 11 projects were funded. These were wide ranging; research into the mental health needs of Irish travellers in prison; relief of stress for examination candidates in schools; a choir for dementia sufferers; resources for prayer for those with mental health difficulties; mental health needs of youth; support groups in parishes for those with mental health difficulties; a national project on the theme of dementia, to name some. The projects ran for one year, closing with a conference in February 2012. One of these projects was established by Jo Bird, whom I am delighted to introduce here today.

The results of this conference were very well received by the Bishops of England & Wales and the project has, in fact, continued longer than originally intended, funding being provided to enable the work to continue and with the Reference Group ensuring that the needs of those with mental health difficulties continue to be brought to the attention of our Bishops. In addition, a retreat for those caring for those with mental health difficulties is being offered each year and an annual symposium now takes place at St. Mary's University, Twickenham, with this year's subject being 'Mental Health & Young People'.

Before introducing Jo, I would like to offer some of my own reflections on Mental Health that have arisen out of two places. I will begin with the Rule of St. Benedict, for I believe the Rule has something to say that is helpful for all engaged in Mental Health provision.

At the beginning of his Rule for Monks, Saint Benedict writes:

'Listen carefully, my Son, to the master's instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart.'<sup>1</sup>

He speaks here for those who have answered the call from God to live the monastic life. His words are appropriate for every Christian. You may have heard about the Holy Door in St.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Obsculta, O fili, praecepta magistri, et inclina aurem cordis tui.' FRY.T, et al, RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English, Collegeville, The Liturgical Press, 1981. Prologue, 1.

Peter's, opening for the Jubilee of Mercy that is currently underway. The image of the open door is a good one for us too, for it speaks of an open ear and an open heart. Both are, I believe, necessary if we are to respond appropriately to those living with mental health difficulties.

Is the ear of my heart inclined towards the one on my care? How do I enable the patient, the friend, the family member, to have a mind and heart that is open and, thereby, able to move away from the life of fear and loneliness that often goes along with mental health difficulties?

When I was Bishop of the Armed Forces, I was privileged – on two occasions – to be invited to the Tri-Service Mental Health Conference. At one of these conferences, a paper was given on Post Traumatic Growth. This rang bells for me in many ways. The paper spoke of a journey. There were resonances for me with the journey described by St. John of the Cross, where the experience of the 'Dark Night of the Soul' is a necessary part of the Christian journey. Lived through, ideally with the accompaniment of a guide, this 'Dark Night' leads to a new experience of God. It is a journey that is lifelong.

This paper on Post Traumatic Growth raised, I think, some difficulties for the Military listener, who needed troops in theatre and a clear indication as to when a serviceman or woman would be 'well.' Once you introduce the theme of growth, one is never sure when it ends – at least in this life. For St. Benedict, this is no problem. The life is a pilgrimage of listening and there is no rush.

A little while ago, I added my signature to an open letter in the press, calling for equal funding for mental health services. One of the things we now know is that, more often than not, the journey through mental health difficulties to a new experience of wholeness of life is a long one. Yet, we are in a world that likes quick solutions. What is needed here is an approach that allows for time, for the open ear and heart. We are very good at 'doing stuff'. It is easy, if we encounter someone on the street, to stick a pound coin in their cup, or buy them a burger. It is far more difficult to sit on the pavement and listen. In the contexts from which we have come to this gathering, that business of *being* with others is key. There is always the temptation to rush in, do something that makes us seem active and busy, and move on – perhaps with too much haste. The modern world encourages this and is something of which I know I am all too guilty. We are brilliant at being busy – but the path to mental health demands more. I need an open ear and listening heart. I must give time.

One of the ways in which time can be given is being modelled by Jo Bird in her project in the Catholic Parish in Nuneaton. As I mentioned earlier on, this project was funded by the Bishops' Conference of England & Wales for one year. It continues and, last year, Jo was able to make a film about the project. This film has gone to every Bishop of England & Wales as a model for them in the pastoral care offered in our Dioceses.