



INTRODUCTION

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The essays that follow were presented in a unique world ecumenical conference on "Sanctification in the Benedictine and Methodist Traditions," held July 4-10, 1994, at a Catholic retreat center near Rome. The original vision for the conference was that of Dr. James Udy, a member of the Uniting Church in Australia. Dr. Udy had long worked for the cultivation of the Methodist heritage of the Uniting Church and he had also made the acquaintance of Benedictines in Australia. He became convinced that Benedictines and Methodists shared a common heritage in spirituality. Subsequent conversations with Professor Albert C. Outler of Southern Methodist University (who died in 1988) convinced Udy of the need for an international conference exploring this common heritage.

Dr. Udy served as president of the World Methodist Historical Society in the late 1980s and the early 1990s. He presented a proposal for a Benedictine-Methodist conference at the 1991 meeting of the Society in Singapore, and the Society voted its approval. The presence at that conference of Mrs. Febe Rossi of the Waldensian-Methodist Church of Italy offered an important connection with the Italian venue set for the meeting. Over the next three years Dr. Udy, Mrs. Rossi, and many others worked tirelessly, building relationships with Benedictine leaders, developing databases of interested persons, publicizing the event, making arrangements for the meeting, securing papers, and crisscrossing the world many times with letters and faxes. Mrs. Rossi described a pizza party she held in her home for student volunteers who helped prepare mailings for the conference; she also described the consternation of their local post office in Padova when she brought in carloads of mail to be sent out.

In the fall of 1993, as preparations for the Conference had entered a crucial stage, Dr. Udy suffered a life-threatening stroke which left him unable to communicate. Those engaged in planning the event despaired at first of going ahead with the conference, feel-

THE ASBURY THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

FALL 1995, VOL. 50, NO. 2
SPRING 1996, VOL. 51, NO. 1

ing that the event could never be quite right without Dr. Udy's visionary leadership. But a consensus was reached that preparations were already too far along to abandon the conference, so other planners doubled their efforts and preparations for the conference went ahead.

So it was that we came to Rome in July 1994 from Asia, Africa, the Americas and Europe, and met at the "Better World Institute," a Catholic retreat center south of Rome. This setting is near the town of Rocca di Papa, out of the ancient Appian Way from the City, directly across from Castel Gandolfo, the summer residence of the Pope.

The conference brought together an impressive range of persons from throughout the world: scholars, abbots, nuns, evangelists, the Abbot Primate of the Benedictine Order, a distinguished Waldensian historian from the University of Geneva, Methodist bishops, a Catholic Cardinal, faithful workers from Methodist and Waldensian churches, even a Mormon observing the conference with her friends. But the most important human presence at the conference was that of Dr. James Udy, whose partial recovery from the effects of the stroke had enabled him to travel to Italy and participate.

We came to know each other. We talked about life in God. We heard formal papers on the histories and spiritualities of our traditions, we met in groups to discuss their implications, and we walked the grounds together or sat in the gardens and talked even more. We worshipped together, and experienced the sharp pain of separation at the Lord's table. We sang Benedictine chants and Charles Wesley hymns, revival songs and contemporary Catholic choruses. We talked of John Wesley and Benedict of Nursia, of Phoebe Palmer and Hildegard of Bingen. We were challenged to think about liberation and social justice, and about piety and prayer.

We found after a while that the Catholic-Protestant polarity was but one aspect of our complex relationships. Waldensians, with their strong inheritance in Calvinism, rejoiced to hear a Catholic scholar describe the grounding of Augustine's spirituality in his understanding of election and predestination. Methodists and Benedictines became comfortable with their common teaching that "perfection" by grace is possible in this life; Waldensian participants became rather uncomfortable on this point. Methodist and Benedictine women found commonality in the narratives of their struggles for dignity and equality. We also found points where our personal paths had crossed: the Benedictine Abbot Primate recalled Sunday evening Methodist services in his hometown in Minnesota; a Methodist feminist theologian testified that her conversion to Christ had been influenced by a chance encounter with Benedictine monasticism.

This was a unique ecumenical moment. No conference quite like it had been held in the past, and no plans were made for a similar conference in the future. The idea of bringing a Protestant denominational family into dialogue with an international Catholic religious order proved to be an eminently sensible means of ecumenical contact, affording Catholic-Protestant bilateral dialogues. The choice to focus on spirituality, and sanctification in particular, proved an apt way to get at new issues beyond those conventionally addressed in Faith and Order discussions. By the time we left Rome, many of us felt that in a few short days together we had probed the very heart of our spiritual traditions. Methodist and Benedictines seemed to find in each other means of divine grace and spiritual inspiration. We left Rome newly inspired to make the ecumenical quest for visible Christian unity a central part of our own spirituality and of our own quest for sanctity in Christ. It is our prayer that readers of these essays may perceive beyond them the Spirit that so uniquely inspired this event.