

Spiritual Directors in Europe Conference 2017

Nestled in the Cheviot Hills in Northumberland, in the north-east of England, is an architectural jewel called Minsteracres. Built as a statement of wealth by an owner of some of the regions long disappeared coal mines, Minsteracres now serves the area as a christian retreat house run by the Passionist Fathers. The Director, Fr. Jeroen is aided by a very loyal group of volunteers.

This year, from Wednesday the 8th, to Monday the 13th, of March 2017, the retreat house hosted the annual conference of Spiritual Directors in Europe (SDE). We were given a very warm welcome and afforded every facility. The local group, coordinating on behalf of SDE and led by the indefatigable Mary Nono, included Kathryn, Sheila, Penny, Jim, Lesley, Lya and Adele. All were committed, creative and generous with their time and this resulted in a most successful conference.



The county of Northumberland is the place of the rebirth of Christianity in Great Britain. The county takes its name from the old Kingdom of Northumbria. We were welcomed to the conference therefore, in the names of nine northern saints: Aidan, Cuthbert, Bede, Hilda, Oswald, Benet Biscop, Bega, Wilfred and Godric. The lives of these saints had been lived in solitary places and had been shaped by prayer, silence, scholarship, service and teaching. It was these very same pursuits that had gathered us together as spiritual directors in conference. The northern saints had not seen the great divisions that convulsed Christianity in later centuries. They would surely, therefore, have approved of the joy, contemplation and warm friendship that characterises our gatherings of Spiritual Directors in Europe. The excitement of meeting old friends and making new friends from across many Christian denominations and some seventeen countries exhilarates and is there for all to see.

The traditions of the conference were symbolised beautifully by Peter Ball who was a founding member eighteen years ago. He gifted the 2017 conference with an icon that he had lovingly "written" himself. Fittingly, the icon was of St Ephraim of Syria, the patron saint of spiritual directors. In turn, and towards the end of our conference, Peter would be honoured with a life membership of SDE and a gift of some watercolour paints with which to pursue his favourite hobby.

However, the conference is never solely about socialising and networking and this year opportunities for learning came in the shape of workshops and the presentation of guidelines for spiritual direction by the Retreat Association. Each participant got the chance to attend two of these workshops: the Northumbrian Community, the Methodist tradition, Capacitar, the creation story and the drawing of Celtic knots. Meanwhile, 90 year-old Fr. Mark, a resident of the community, kept his book and card shop open for long hours each day.

The evenings in Ministreacres were given over to sampling local culture and entertainment. The "Newcastle Cloggies" were not content to simply perform traditional dances, they had us all up on our feet. The same applied to a wonderful cèilidh music group that entertained us on another night. Fr. Mark was at the heart of things and ran a little bar selling glasses of wine and beer at very reasonable prices. So impressed, by the atmosphere, were some of the performers, they wondered aloud if they could join SDE! Participation was the key to sending everyone to bed tired, happy and definitely inculturated.

There were two days of pilgrimage this year. On the first day of pilgrimage, our initial stop was at the famous sculpture, the Angel of the North, by Antony Gormley. The sculpture is truly an overwhelming

piece and the 55 tons of steel, which sits on top of a mine shaft and is anchored 33 metres into the ground, celebrates the North East's coal mining and shipbuilding industries.

Having walked in the shadow of the Angel, we went on to visit an exhibition celebrating the Venerable Bede at Jarrow Hall. Mary Nono, had arranged for the exhibition to open specifically for SDE as it was not due to open on the day that we had available to visit. St Paul's church, the home of the the Venerable Bede and a place of worship now for over 1300 years, is next door to Jarrow Hall and we were able to spend some contemplative time there. Our day ended with a visit to the magnificent Durham Cathedral. The tombs of both Cuthbert and Bede are in the Cathedral and in the presence of these two spiritual giants we attended a sublime evensong sung by the Cathedral Choristers.

The second experience of pilgrimage came, in fact, on the very last day of the conference. We travelled to Lindisfarne or, as it is known, Holy Island. Access to the island depends on the tides. Some of the braver souls among us walked the route across the wet sands marked by tall standing posts. It was a difficult and exhausting walk but all arrived safely and, justifiably, triumphant. On the island itself we were welcomed by the community of Aidan and Hilda. One of our number, Penny Warren, is a member of the community and we were shown great hospitality. The visit to the site of St Aidan's monastery was memorable with a marvellous lecture delivered by a local historian in St Mary's parish church which now stands on this site. Parts of the church are said to date back to the seventh century. Next door to the church are the extensive ruins of a later monastic foundation. This place and the whole island are definitely a thin place, a place where we can feel and experience the transparency of the veil between our tangible world and the spiritual world.

Between the two days of pilgrimage, we had a desert day. We also had time for observing, participating in and experiencing spiritual direction. This was done in the customary triads. Finally, time was set aside for the annual organisational business of SDE and the Annual General Meeting (AGM).

The desert day is a much loved part of the conference. It is a day of silence and prayer. It is a day of reflection, a day to breathe deeply, a day to discern what the Lord is saying to each one of us and, perhaps, where the Lord is leading us as a group of spiritual directors. Minsteracres was the perfect setting for such a day.

The time set aside for SDE business was a time for the AGM and any other necessary organisational formalities and decisions. This crucial work took place under the experienced and watchful eye of Paul Booth. Very importantly, we were careful to take the opportunity to acknowledge the selfless and invaluable work of those on the executive committee: Rafaël Maria Theuvenet, Aija Kaartinen, Paula Malciuc, and Elemér Vizi. This year Aija, our secretary was returned for a further term of office. It was also announced that our conference, in April 2018, will take place in Magazzuno, in wonderful Lombardy, in Italy.

As we left Minsteracres, we left behind us the beautifully restored earthenware bowl we had brought from Poland. It symbolised the healing of divisions in the Christian faith. We send ahead of us to Italy a gorgeous glass plate bearing the cross of St. Cuthbert. The Angel of the North sped us on our way:

*"No one has ever seen an Angel
and yet every angel
is a focus for our hopes and fears."
(Antony Gormley)*

Denis Gleeson
20/03/17