# DIPLOMACY WITH BENEDICT

*David Goodall*

THERE HAS ALWAYS BEEN A GAP between the language of Christian belief and practice on the one hand, and the language of the secular professions on the other. But in today's non-believing society, the gap has widened to such an extent that Christian categories of thought, in so far as they are adverted to at all, tend to be regarded as irrelevant to the serious business of ordinary living. The bottom line is what matters. Only in the caring professions, such as medicine, nursing and teaching, is there an evident correspondence between Christian precept and professional practice, since caring for others is part of the definition of what those professions are about. But what of other professions and occupations? The principles of right conduct, of course, apply whatever one may be doing; and in George Herbert's familiar words,

> Who sweeps a room as for Thy laws
> Makes that and th'action fine.

But are there particular Christian values specific to, or consistent with, the non-caring professions? If so, how do they find expression? In particular, how do they find expression in what was for thirty-five years my own profession, diplomacy?

## *Diplomacy and* Discretio

A year or two ago I was asked to take part in a discussion '*De discretione*': an exploration of the importance of the virtue of *discretio*, as that term is used in St Benedict's Rule, for a range of non-monastic, lay occupations.

The title derives, with apologies, from that of the recent book *Business with Benedict*, by Abbot Timothy Wright of Ampleforth, written in collaboration with Kit Dollard and Dom Anthony Marett-Crosby (London: Continuum, 2002)—a book which examines the relevance of St Benedict's Rule for the business world.

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At first sight, any comparison between the life of a diplomat and the Christian life as envisaged in the Rule of St Benedict may seem too far-fetched to be useful. Diplomats, after all, have status and (in normal circumstances) security, and they enjoy a comfortable and relatively privileged lifestyle. As Lord Macaulay observed:

> There is no injustice in saying that diplomatists, as a class, have always been more distinguished by their address, by the art with which they win the confidence of those with whom they have to deal, and by the ease with which they catch the tone of every society to which they are admitted, than by generous enthusiasm or austere rectitude.[1]

So, if they are to be compared to monks at all, diplomats would seem to fall into the category of the 'gyrovagues', who spend their time 'flitting from country to country' and of whom St Benedict says in the first chapter of his Rule that 'it is better to keep silent than to speak'.

Nevertheless, a consideration of what St Benedict means by *discretio* reveals some interesting parallels. The Latin word has a much wider connotation than its English counterpart, 'discretion'—as in 'discretion is the better part of valour', or in the sense of tactful reticence. (The word is also important in the Ignatian tradition, where it is conventionally translated as 'discernment', although there are some who render it as 'discrimination'.) St Benedict calls it 'the mother of the virtues', and, although he uses the word only once, its spirit pervades the whole Rule. Essentially it describes a blend of two key concepts: moderation and discernment.

***St Benedict Writing His Rule***

[1] Thomas Babington Macaulay, *The History of England from the Accession of James II*, chapter 2, cited at http://www.strecorsoc.org/macaulay/mo2e.html.

In this sense it may be said to be central, not just to the Rule, but to the Christian life in whatever form it is lived. As I hope to show, it has particular relevance to the practice of diplomacy.

To a great extent, of course, the problems facing a diplomat in trying to live the Christian life today are the same as those facing any lay Christian who is pursuing a demanding and absorbing professional career. There is the problem of ethos, and there is the problem of time. In what has become a profoundly—and often aggressively—secular environment, believing Christians in Britain are what the sociologists call a 'cognitive minority': their theocentric assumptions are no longer shared by the society in which they live and work. By some of the most articulate representatives of the media and the intelligentsia they are treated as quaint, reactionary and superstitious, if not positively malign. Irrespective of whether they are true or false, beliefs which run counter to the majority world-view *ipso facto* lose their plausibility. While operating from within the *Zeitgeist,* therefore, the believing Christian has at the same time to be able to judge it and resist it; and this is never easy or comfortable.

All Christians need not just to hold on to their faith, but also to develop and retain an inner sensitivity to Our Lord's voice. To do this requires time: time to nourish one's faith spiritually by prayer and the sacraments; time to nourish it intellectually by reading and reflection; and time and opportunity to strengthen it by association and discussion with those whom one respects and who share one's faith. The manifold pressures and distractions of modern life—professional, family, financial, cultural—leave very little time for any of this; and in this respect, diplomacy is no different from any other profession. The search for God, which is what concerned St Benedict, is not part of the definition of what diplomacy is about.

### *Negotiation*

In the words of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, diplomacy 'is the management of international relations by negotiation'. And the key word here is 'negotiation'. The diplomat's defining task is the settling of disputes or conflicts of interest by negotiation, that is, by seeking agreement—in itself an activity akin to the Christian virtue of peacemaking. It is from this task that all his or her other functions derive.

In order to help his government to achieve agreements by negotiation, a diplomat needs to understand the culture and attitudes of the country to which he is accredited, or with which he is dealing. This is necessary if he is to report accurately on the situation there, on the objectives of the foreign government concerned, and on the constraints under which it is operating. He has to meet, to entertain and to get to know people so as to identify those who matter in decision-making and those who are the most reliable sources of information, and if possible to win their confidence. In order to influence foreign opinion in favour of his own country, he must be able to represent that country, and its government, in a way which will generate respect for it as a worthwhile partner, whether commercially, politically or militarily. Moreover, the diplomat needs to have the strength of character to be able to give his own government unpalatable advice when its policies are perceived as unfriendly, or when its objectives are either unattainable or patently unjust.

This latter obligation is complicated by the perception—not entirely unjustified—that diplomats are liable to acquire an undue sympathy for the country in which they are serving. Its association with foreigners does not endear the diplomatic profession to the public, and this aversion is sometimes shared, at a more sophisticated level, by the diplomat's political masters. Diplomats cannot advise their own government on how best to promote its objectives unless they understand and report truthfully on the motives of the foreign government with which they are dealing. Although ministers recognise this intellectually, they find it frustrating. Preoccupied with their own pressing domestic problems, they tend to regard the domestic constraints affecting foreign governments as unwelcome and unnecessary complications. From this point, it is a short step to thinking that those who explain such constraints are somehow endorsing them. The inclination to shoot the messenger who brings the bad news is, after all, part of human nature. Lady Thatcher, for example, who was unfailingly courteous to her diplomatic officials individually, made no secret of her belief that the Foreign Office took too much account of foreign interests and was always looking for premature compromises when it should have been driving hard bargains.

This view of the diplomat as someone more noted for smoothness and readiness to compromise than for toughness and honesty has been

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with us for a long time, as Macaulay's observation demonstrates. It must be admitted that the objectivity diplomats must cultivate can degenerate into a kind of smooth insincerity, just as their primary concern with the governing classes of the countries with which they deal can anaesthetize them to the sufferings of the poor, insulate them from the views of 'ordinary people', and generally give them ideas above their station.

Not that diplomatic life abroad is without its hardships, climatic and otherwise. These include health risks, separation from children, and sometimes physical threat. In the concluding years of the last century, one British ambassador was blown up by the IRA and another was shot on the steps of his embassy. The Deputy High Commissioner in Bombay was assassinated by Abu Nidal terrorists shortly before I arrived in Delhi, and at least three other British diplomats in different parts of the world have been kidnapped and held hostage at different times. The diplomat abroad is one of a close-knit group of compatriots which is dedicated to a common purpose, and whose members (and their spouses) are heavily dependent on one another for companionship and support, especially in smaller and more remote posts. The diplomatic life is thus a community life, with plenty of

opportunity for the exercise of generosity, mutual help and forbearance.

### *Diplomatic Virtues*

The late Sir Harold Nicolson, one of the few British diplomats to have theorized about the practice of diplomacy, offered the following catalogue of qualities to be looked for in his ideal diplomat:

> Truth, accuracy, calm, patience, good temper, modesty and loyalty …. But, the reader may object, you have forgotten intelligence, hospitality, charm, industry, courage and even tact. I have not forgotten them. I have taken them for granted.[2]

Nicolson, no doubt, had his tongue a little in his cheek when compiling his list, and he probably saw nothing specifically Christian about it. It is nevertheless striking to see how many of the qualities he identifies either express Christian virtues or are consistent with them. How do they work out in practice?

The tact which Nicolson takes for granted is more than just smoothness and urbanity. It requires a mixture of sympathy and understanding for the other side's point of view in a negotiation, and an ability to stick both to the truth and to the essentials of one's own government's position. Instructions are not always comfortable to carry out, nor are negotiating positions comfortable to defend. Nothing is easier than to allow one's personal sympathy with the views of a foreign interlocutor to blunt the force of one's instructions and weaken the position of one's own government—or even to indicate by nods and winks that that position is unreasonable. A diplomat who behaves like this, except in the direst circumstances, may make himself more acceptable to his hosts, but he is likely to be guilty of dishonesty.

At the same time, however, diplomats are not automatons: they have to use their judgment. There can be occasions when it is right to tone down, or even to ignore, one's instructions. The speed of modern communications now makes it possible for diplomats overseas to contribute to the formulation of their instructions or to query them if they seem unreasonable. Even so, it is not wholly unknown for

[2] Harold Nicolson, *Diplomacy* (London: Butterworth, 1939), 126.

instructions to be so fatuous or misconceived as to be patently counter-productive. In such circumstances the recipient should remember the dictum attributed to Lord Palmerston:

> The only use of a plenipotentiary is to disobey his instructions. A clerk or messenger would do if it is necessary strictly to follow them.

But any diplomat who disobeys or fudges instructions simply because they are uncomfortable is compromising professional integrity and letting down the government whose mouthpiece he is supposed to be.

Modesty and loyalty, which rank high on Nicolson's list, are also integral to the practice of diplomacy, as is patience. The diplomat has always to remember that he is the servant, not the rival, of the elected politician. His business, for the most part, is to work as part of a team. An ambassador's successes are almost always those of the mission as a whole, rather than his or her own personal achievements. The diplomat has to bring all his skill and intelligence to bear on the shaping of small bricks to be fitted into buildings—buildings for which others (normally the politicians) will take the credit. And he must always remember that the access he may enjoy to great people is afforded him because those people want to know the views of his government, not because they like the diplomat personally or value his own opinions, however cogent those may be. A certain humility is therefore in order.

***The diplomat works as part of a team***

### *Loyalty and Conscience*

Loyalty, of course, has its limits, and a discussion of those limits raises the issue of conscience. All members of the public service owe loyalty to the government they serve, and are required to implement its policies as well as to help shape them. This obligation weighs particularly heavily on diplomats, who have to defend and justify their government's actions even when they may personally consider these actions to be mistaken or unwise (just as barristers must make the best case for a client whom privately they believe to be guilty). If the public servant judges a particular policy which he or she must directly implement to be unequivocally and gravely immoral, conscience will leave no alternative but resignation. But the person who is determined to see a moral problem in every issue is probably just as out of place in

the public service as the pragmatist concerned solely with what seems expedient. As long as they judge the government they serve to be both democratic and fundamentally decent, public servants will be disposed to give it the benefit of the doubt.

When issues arise which undoubtedly pose questions of conscience—for example the invasion of Iraq—it is not always easy to distinguish a policy that has unacceptable moral consequences from one that is simply unwise or mistaken, or to foresee where a mistaken policy may lead. Many young German diplomats were persuaded to stay on when Hitler came to power on the grounds that the country would have even greater need of public servants of probity under the Nazis than it did before, only to find, as time went on, that they became inextricably implicated in immoral policies.

The language in which policy decisions in international affairs are discussed is normally prudential rather than moral: the question is usually whether a given course of action promotes the national (or governmental) interest rather than whether it is right or wrong. This can make it difficult to inject moral considerations into the debate. But in my own career, I think the only issue which confronted me with a serious *moral* dilemma was the policy of nuclear deterrence. People

*The US Embassy in Dublin*

whose views I respected took opposite sides, though I myself came to think that the policy was justified.

In international relations the border between what is unwise and what is immoral is seldom clear cut. Loyalty to one's government and one's colleagues is of critical importance; but the diplomat must recognise that, in the last resort, it has to be conditional. He or she must exercise discernment on those rare occasions when loyalty may have to be withheld.

### *Patience, Confidence and Truth*

Alongside loyalty comes patience. This too is essential, because resolving international disputes by agreement is a painfully slow business—often a matter of decades rather than years. Diplomats have to accept that their own small contribution will probably have been long forgotten by the time the process is brought to completion. For example, the 1998 Belfast or 'Good Friday' Agreement between Britain, the Republic of Ireland, and the political parties in Northern Ireland was the culmination of a process which included the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, and which arguably began with the abortive Sunningdale Agreement of 1973.[3]

Nicolson rightly highlights the related qualities of truth and accuracy. There is a popular view that the role of a diplomat is to be secretive and evasive, a master of the art of finding phrases which mean different things to different people. In reality, nothing could be more disastrous in negotiating an agreement than this kind of trickery or fudging, which is bound to be exposed the moment the agreement is put to the test. Good agreements depend on precision, and therefore on truthfulness. Under the stress of a difficult negotiation, however, this principle tends to be pushed aside. The 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement, for example, affirmed that there would be no change in 'the status of Northern Ireland' against the wishes of a majority of its inhabitants, without specifying that its status was within the United Kingdom. This accommodated Irish constitutional concerns, but it enraged Unionists. The 1998 Belfast Agreement was even more fatally imprecise on the central issue of the decommissioning of IRA weapons.

[3] Seamus Mallon referred to the 1998 Agreement as 'Sunningdale for slow learners'.

It was formulated in such a way as to enable Sinn Fein to claim that there was no obligation for the IRA to lay down its arms within a specified period, while at the same time permitting the British Prime Minister to win the support of the Unionist community by claiming that the Agreement required prompt decommissioning.

Defenders of the Agreement argue that without this crucial fudge there would have been no Agreement, and that, for all its flaws, the Agreement has brought a precarious peace to Northern Ireland. It has laid the foundations for a more stable future in the province, and has brought relations between Britain and the Republic into closer harmony than at any time since Irish independence. Critics point to the IRA's continued procrastination over the comprehensive decommissioning of its weapons and cessation of criminal activity; to the Unionist community's deep disillusionment and loss of trust in the good faith of the British Government; and to the polarization of opinion within Northern Ireland which has so far made the reintroduction of devolved government there impossible. Only time will tell whether it would have been better to have forgone agreement for the sake of precision and truth, in the hope of achieving a less ambiguous agreement later.

The key quality in a diplomatic negotiating partner is that he should generate confidence: confidence in his own good faith, and in that of his government He must generate confidence that he is accurately reflecting the views and concerns of his government and not offering more than he can subsequently deliver—truth again. Conversely, the negotiator must have the courage to state the facts honestly to his own political masters (who may be reluctant to hear them); and he must have the skill and tact to do so in a way which will win reluctant acquiescence rather than explosive rejection. And while discretion is obviously important, nothing is achieved by the diplomat who is so afraid of being betrayed into an indiscretion that his utterances are confined to banalities. Diplomacy is more about communication than suppression.

***Diplomats must generate confidence***

The need for truthfulness and accuracy is not confined to the negotiation of agreements. Although ultimate responsibility for policy decisions lies with the politician, it is the official who has to set out the facts and frame the recommendation on which the politician's judgment will be based. If the diplomat gets the facts wrong or presents them in a slapdash way, the whole process of decision-making will be

vitiated. But there are many different ways of presenting the truth. Edmund Burke's phrase 'economy with the truth' has acquired a negative connotation, but it is an essential requirement for the conduct of business. No submission to a busy minister, no report on a complex international situation, no record of a conversation, can tell the whole story down to the last detail. If it did, no one would ever read it. Rigorous selection is required; and yet the result must still do full justice to its subject.

This is not simply a question of being able to write a good précis. The writer must constantly have in mind the attitude and preoccupations, both governmental and personal, of the recipient. Otherwise a truthful account may be ignored, or a sound recommendation disregarded. Good judgment is essential to the work of the negotiator, the analyst and the drafter alike. And not only good judgment, but also the kind of imaginative sensitivity to the concerns of an interlocutor which falls under the heading of tact: another dimension of *discretio.*

### *Humanity and Depth*

Perhaps, therefore, it is not as far-fetched as it may appear to see similarities between the role of the diplomat and that of the monk. Both are members of a community. Both are bearers of a message which is not their own. In the case of monks, this is a divine message; in the case of diplomats, more prosaically, it is the views of the government they represent. Both are valued less for themselves than for the message they bring. And they earn respect to the extent that they are faithful to that message, present it convincingly, and do not dilute or distort it with messages or opinions of their own. Both need discernment. Both need tact, sympathy, honesty and skill to get their message across.

Initiative and a capacity for original thought are not mentioned in Nicolson's list, but they should certainly be included. So, needless to say, should a sense of humour. Equally important is an interest in people as people and a liking for them, with all their differences, quirks and weaknesses. Diplomacy is a gregarious profession, and no one can understand human motivation who does not enjoy the company of other human beings and feel an instinctive—I might say a Christian—sympathy with them.

By the same token, good diplomats will be people of cultivated interests. While being aware and proud of what is good in their own culture, they will be eager to learn from the culture of the people among whom they are serving, and to respond generously to it. For without the sympathy which this eagerness generates, no real understanding or mutual confidence, let alone affection, will ever be established. It seems to me that this sympathy with other people and sensitivity to them is closely related to the sympathy and sensitivity which St Benedict looks for in Chapter 64 of his Rule, when he requires the Abbot to 'reflect on the discretion (*discretio*) of Jacob' and 'so attune everything that there be both scope for the strong to want more and the weak not to turn tail'.

The final quality to be hoped for is the most elusive, and in a sense it subsumes all the others. I will call it 'depth'. By depth, I mean a feeling for history, an awareness of the importance of wisdom and reflection, and a mistrust of the glib, the ephemeral and the superficial. I mean also a richness of interests and wide human sympathies; firm but unobtrusive moral principles combined with the ability to hold them against the tide of popular opinion; an ability to moderate legitimate ambition not only with sensitivity to others' needs and feelings, but also with sufficient detachment and objectivity for worldly success to appear ultimately as of only secondary importance.

Some of the key elements in what I think St Benedict meant by *discretio* are here. But there are also echoes of everything that his Rule, as a model for the Christian life, has contributed to the development of European civilisation over the past fifteen centuries. Whether individually or collectively, these elements are not the exclusive prerogative of diplomats; but the practice of diplomacy affords ample scope for the exercise of all of them.

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