2025 Father Ignatius Memorial Trust Pilgrimage Evensong:

Address by Dr Scholastica Jacob of the Herbert Kelly Institute for the Study of Anglican Religious Life, St Antony's Priory, Durham.

Thank you for inviting me to address you this afternoon. Ever since I first became interested in Fr Ignatius and his community (over ten years ago now) I have hoped to visit Llanthony and attend this event – so being here today fulfils a long-held ambition for me.

And this is a truly awesome setting. Benedictines, it is said, build on hills, Cistercians in valleys and it seems to me that here, Fr Ignatius in his true *sui generis* style did both!

I have been thinking about Fr Ignatius' motto: 'Jesus Only' and what that says about his life and ministry, but also what it says to us today. It is so simple and yet for Christians it sums up the 'entire law and the prophets', to borrow from St Matthew. It is of course very Benedictine too. St Benedict says in his Tools of Good Works that his monks should 'prefer nothing to the love of Christ'. And if one follows this call to total commitment it can lead to what the world may perceive as madness, where, as the poet John O'Brien writes:

> *In the safe, sanitized kingdom of the sane*
> *Foolishness is exuberance and emancipation.*[1]

Fr Ignatius himself discovered this. He wrote in his autobiography:

> So, I became a Benedictine. Relatives, except my mother, would have nothing to say to me. My bright prospects in the Church would be forever ruined; the world would say I was mad; the Church would regard me as most dangerous, a kind of ecclesiastical Ishmael. I should have to face persecution of every kind – want, suffering, poverty. Yet I firmly believed God was calling me, and I must obey.[2]

The fool, the prophet and the saint – the Rule of St Benedict is broad enough to embrace all three as it has done throughout the centuries. Commentators have disagreed into which of these categories Father Ignatius fell and he himself acknowledged to Francis Kilvert, when he

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[1] John O'Brien, 'In Praise of Folly', *Nourished By Ravens*, forthcoming.
[2] *Autobiography of Rev. Father Ignatius,* Llanthony Tracts, Abergavenny, 1896. Quoted by Donald Attwater, *Father Ignatius of Llanthony*, Cassell & co. 1931, p. 13.

visited this place, that a monk must be either a philosopher or a holy fool.[3] I think he had a bit of all three.

'Here we are, fools for the sake of Christ' writes St Paul[4] and indeed it can be argued that whether, in the nineteenth century or in the twenty-first century following Christ, the commitment to 'Jesus Only', seems as ridiculous to the world as it did in the first century.

But for this very reason, Ignatius, I'm sure would have argued, that one must learn to be a fool because: 'The wisdom of this world is foolishness to God'[5]

And religious zeal and foolishness frequently coincide. Take for example St Simeon Stylites who, dismissed by his monastery as unsuitable for community life, reportedly spent thirty-six years living on top of a pillar. During this time, however, he attracted much attention and inspired imitators. While this particular form of observance, thankfully, has not survived, we don't know how many were brought to God in a more conventional way through his dramatic witness. Perhaps more enduringly St Antony, the father of monasticism, while he may have shocked many by his sudden renunciation of all his worldly goods, came through his simple manner of life, as recorded by St Athanasius, 'to be loved by all'. Even the Holy Father St Benedict himself would have been considered by his contemporaries in fifth-century Rome to have lost the plot by abandoning his studies, all his privileges and the promises of a successful life.

But

> *The goal of Christian faith,* (however it is expressed, writes theologian Jaroslav Pelikan), *is to subject the total life to God […]. All life is under God, depending upon and subject to Him.*[6]

And this, of course, frequently requires breaking boundaries and conventions.

As part of my job at the Herbert Kelly Institute in Durham I am researching the growth of Anglican religious life. The founders in the mid-nineteenth century were generally regarded as saints, renegades or fools. Those who sought the desert way of silent prayer within monastic walls were considered especially foolish or dangerous. While the apostolic

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[3] *Kilvert's Diary*, Jonathan Cape, 1971, vol. I, p. 223.
[4] 1 Corinthians, 4:10.
[5] 1 Corinthians. 3:19.
[6] Jaroslav Pelikan, *Fools for Christ, Essays on the true, the good and the beautiful*, Philadelphia, Muhlenberg Press, 1955, p. viii.

sisterhoods flourished from the mid-nineteenth century (and the men took much longer to get started than the women) the church, it may be argued, was not ready for the contemplative monastic life.

In many ways, although ultimately his initiative was not successful, the history of Anglican Benedictine monasticism began here with Fr Ignatius. Would he have succeeded if he had been more diplomatic? Less controversial? Had a better understanding of the monastic life? I doubt it. The Anglican communities had to grow from the active and missionary to the contemplative more gradually – and we can see this happen in many orders such as that of Lydia Sellon's Holy Trinity Society which developed from a nursing order to a contemplative one over several generations. Monastic growth cannot be rushed, it takes time of silent prayer, discernment and self-isolation from the distractions of secular living.

The desire to retreat from the 'vanities' of the world to seek God, and to become more authentically of the world, has continued through the centuries and taken many forms. I think there may be something about certain landscapes that engender awareness of the transcendence and immanence of God. 'Geography is simply a visible form of theology' wrote biblical scholar Jon Levenson[7]. And this is particularly true of monastic theology.

The sense of place is intrinsic to monastic life. Drawn to wilderness landscapes, Antony in the desert, Basil in the mountains of Cappadocia, Benedict in the caves of Subiaco – 'A monk out of the desert is like a fish out of water'.[8] Although today we can understand this to be a metaphorical desert – sometimes to be experienced in the desolation of the inner city or amidst a madding crowd – the truth remains. While such a situation may appear reckless, foolish or dangerous it is for this very reason that it is chosen.

The desert, however it is experienced, is a place where we can set aside time and space out of our busy existence to deepen our search for the presence to God; to learn acceptance, self-emptying and detachment. Beautiful wild spaces are not essential to this process, but they help us gain perspective and see our smallness, vulnerability and the foolishness of our own self-important lives.

Pilgrimages are a way that those of us unable to make the radical choice of permanent withdrawal to a monastery, can experience something of that encounter, away from daily

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[7] Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible*, Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985, p.116.
[8] Sayings of the Desert Fathers, PG:6577C

preoccupations that can lead to personal transformation. A physical journey to a holy site has been central to many world religions throughout history, take Chaucer's assorted travellers to Canterbury or the Muslim pilgrims to Mecca. Today the media has discovered the value of this. I have recently watched the BBC series 'Pilgrimage' which takes a diverse group of celebrities along well-known pilgrim trails. They come from a mixture of religious backgrounds (and none) ranging from personal deep faith to avowed agnosticism, and I have found it moving to experience with them the insights and self-knowledge they gain on the journey. Of course pilgrimage does not need to involve travel, the true journey is the one within, to the heart and soul, where all social conventionality can be discarded, but certain landscapes and terrains seem to help this inner exploration.

And I wonder if there is something in these hills and surrounding area that creates and nurtures holy foolery. I am struck by another Benedictine from these parts, Fr Augustine Baker. Although separated by two hundred years and the confessional divide, they have, I think, some things in common. Both were considered by their contemporaries unconventional and possibly dangerous. Both antagonised those in positions of power and influence. Both were great communicators and preachers but unable to settle in their own communities. And yet their writings and reputation live on, and both hold a place in the history of English Benedictine life.

Baker counselled the nuns he guided to constantly turn their hearts to God as surely as a compass turns towards the North. His doggerel:

> *Consider your call*
> *That's all in all*

is basically the same as Ignatius' 'Jesus Only'.

Another Anglican founder and priest, Herbert Kelly, of the Society of the Sacred Mission after whom my Institute is named, was considered a maverick in his own lifetime and indeed, despite founding the Society and Kelham College, considered his life to be an abject failure. As he wrote to Gregory Dix at the end of his life:

> I can, and do, lie awake and scream over the fool things I did [...] I have tried writing books, lecturing, preaching, and have never really brought anything off. It is just blundering incapacity which wrecks – and seems to mark – everything.[9]

[9] Letter to Gregory Dix, 1944 (SSM Archives: SSM/HK/C/L/815/2).

But, in this very failure, Kelly saw the mystery of the resurrection and developed his own theology of failure which he saw manifested in his beloved pigs. He recounted:

> I took a dear old Father to see some "proofs of the being of God" – actually I called them "proofs of the resurrection." I showed him our fat old pigs, screamingly ugly [...]. Oh yes! If I had showed you flowers, and sunsets, and stars, you would have said. "Ah! How true!" But I do not feel as if I greatly wanted God to tell me that beautiful things are beautiful. I desperately want to know if there is a God who understands that bundle of incompetence and commonplace, ugliness and self-satisfaction, which make the most obvious experiences of that sublime thing I call my Personality. Can he make any use or sense of it?

Kelly's words, I think, will resound with many of us.

But Fr Ignatius must have the last word here in this place where we come to remember him. Stability was hardly a vow that he observed too scrupulously and yet after all his wanderings it is here, Llanthony Monastery, with which he is most associated. In a published sermon he wrote:

> And now, in the midst of this age of restless unbelief and harum scarum speculation, a Benedictine Abbey is rising in true monastic solitude among the Black Mountains in Breconshire, where St David [...] and many other holy monks and hermits in days gone by lived for God and God alone.[10]

In concluding his reflection on monastic life with these words, that most gyrovague of monks, Fr Ignatius, still captured something of the Benedictine sense of place – of stability. The annual pilgrimage here, it strikes me, is one way to keep this alive even in today's restless and harum scarum world.

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[10] From 'The Monk in the Church of Britain', in *Llanthony Teachings of Fr Ignatius*, Reginald Berkeley, 1890, p. 218.