Dear Friends,

Incredibly, we are now in Advent and fast approaching the end of Michaelmas. Notwithstanding the continuing reality of the pandemic, this has been an exceptionally busy and energising term for the Margaret Beaufort Association. On the 23rd October, we ran our first ever MBA Study Day on Catholic ethical leadership & management. Sponsored by the Tablet and led by six prominent speakers, the day culminated in a plenary which was beautifully facilitated by Prof. Eilis Ferran. Attendance was very good and feedback has been extremely positive. In this issue of the newsletter, there is an overview of the day by Melanie Prejean-Sullivan and the text of Charles Wookey’s thought-provoking talk. (And for those who are interested, there is a video recording of the day which can be accessed via the MBIT YouTube site.)

Also, in this issue, we look at the first of a two-part exploration of the Institute’s namesake, Lady Margaret Beaufort. Who exactly was she and how do we, as members of the MBA, respond to her? Do we see her primarily as a philanthropist and an advocate for higher education; as a woman of deep piety and prayer; or as an ambitious and ruthless figure who stopped at nothing to advance the interests of her son, Henry VII? In August, I went to Westminster Abbey and spent some time photographing her tomb and reflecting on the mystery surrounding this profoundly pious, intellectually gifted and enigmatic figure. For those of you who read Philippa Gregory’s highly contentious account of her life in the Red Queen, Professor Richard Rex’s, ‘The King’s Mother: Piety, Politics, and Philanthropy in the Life of Lady Margaret Beaufort’, the Mary Ward lecture for 2019 – printed by kind permission in these pages (with part II to be printed in the Lent edition of the newsletter) – acts as a spirited counter to Gregory’s depiction of Margaret Beaufort.

What’s in a name? I posed this question to Professor Janet Soskice about MBIT’s namesake when I went to meet her in late September. Prof. Soskice was one of the founding members of MBIT and I wanted to learn more about how discussions with like-minded and influential Catholic figures in her basement kitchen in Cambridge had gone on to become a pioneering institute focused upon the provision of theological education and training for Catholic women.

This issue also pays homage to two much missed alumae who died in 2020 and 2021. We see how the suggestion of commissioning a handpainted/handwritten icon of St Hildegard of Bingen and beautiful bespoke calligraphic sign in memory of Ann Taylor were realised thanks to the generosity of members of the MBA. Elsewhere, the text of Mel Ward’s moving eulogy for a Memorial Mass for Antoinette (‘Tonie’) Askin is reprinted. We also hear from alumna, Maria Stec who writes to us on the situation that has been the subject of much alarm in recent weeks in her native Poland.

As we move through Advent to the coming of our Blessed Lord at Christmas, let us pray for one another and for all at the Margaret Beaufort Institute who have worked so tirelessly throughout the year to keep the original vision alive and to continually reinvigorate it with their faith, creativity and integrity.

With warm good wishes,
Susanne

Susanne Jennings, President of the Margaret Beaufort Association
The King’s Mother: Piety, Politics, and Philanthropy in the Life of Lady Margaret Beaufort
by Professor Richard Rex

PART I
The King’s Mother or the ‘Red Queen’?

Lady Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond and Derby, generally known in the reign of Henry VII as ‘the King’s Mother’, was the unlikely matriarch of the Tudor dynasty. She needs little or no introduction in Cambridge, where her memory is kept alive not only by this Institute, but also by a continuous oral tradition which hands on from generation to generation the tale of her benevolence and patronage towards the entire university.

That tale was first summed up in the memorial sermon delivered a month after her death by John Fisher, Chancellor of this University, and her spiritual director. He described Lady Margaret as ‘she that ordained two continual readers in both the universities to teach the holy divinity of Jesus, she that ordained preachers perpetual to publish the doctrine and faith of Christ Jesus, she that builder a college royal to the honour of the name of Christ Jesus, and left till her executors another to be builded to maintain his faith and doctrine’.¹

When the King’s Mother died, all England knew of it. But today Lady Margaret is little known except among Oxbridge dons and Blue Badge guides. If she does have any kind of purchase on popular culture, it is as the infamous ‘Red Queen’ in Philippa Gregory’s sequence of fictionalised historical romps, The Cousin’s War, televised by the BBC in 2013. Philippa Gregory’s Red Queen is a rum customer: a delusional religious maniac persuaded of her own sanctity, sinlessness, and spiritual authority; her voices and visions legitimising a career of self-seeking and murderous ambition dedicated to placing her son on the English throne. The culmination of her demonic hypocrisy is her conversation with Richard III’s supporter and betrayer, the Duke of Buckingham, in which she urges him to murder the Princes in the Tower. Magnificent fiction, maybe, but not history. After this fantastical episode, the Red Queen indulges in the following grotesquely complacent soliloquy:

By allying myself with sinners. I received the punishment for their sins. I was not sinful myself – and God, who knows everything will know this – but I let myself join with them; and I, the godly, shared the punishment of sinners.²

This is the sort of thing one might perhaps hear from an extreme antinomian preacher in the catastrophic years of the mid-seventeenth century, but those brought up on late medieval Catholicism, a religion of penance, pilgrimage, and purgatory, could not imagine themselves in such terms. If there was one thing late medieval Christians knew – and perhaps Martin Luther may stand in this respect as the archetypal late medieval Christian – if there was one thing they knew full well ... it was that they were sinners.

¹ John Fisher, Here after foloweth a mornynge remembraunce (London: Wynkyn de Worde, [1509]. STC 10891), sig. B5v. (The spelling has been modernised in all quotations from early printed books.)
Margaret herself sounds rather different from the Red Queen, and we hear her voice in many sources. This is because she was no mean scholar herself. As John Fisher put it, ‘Right studious she was in books, which she had in great number, both in English and in French’. Pious reading was a common element in the gender role often inhabited by aristocratic ladies in the later Middle Ages, and so was the commissioning of devotional writings, but Margaret went one step beyond this in that she actually translated some devotional writing from French into English in her own right. The better known of her two efforts is the meditation on holy communion which comprises Book IV of that Christian classic, the *Imitation of Christ*. Margaret is only translating here, but we may confidently conclude that what she chose to translate, and the words into which she chose to translate it, reflect her thinking more faithfully than a paperback novel:

How dare I, so simple, and so poor a sinner, be bold to appear before thee? And how may it please thee to come unto such a wretch?

And again she prays:

O my God, thou art saint of all saints, and I the filth of all sinners, yet thou inclinest thyself unto me that am not worthy to behold thee.

The point is made still more directly in her other translation, the *Mirror of Gold for the Sinful Soul*: the title says it all. When her spiritual director, John Fisher, was commissioned to preach an elaborate series of sermons to her household in 1507, he took as his theme one of the great devotional constructs of that era: the ‘Seven Penitential Psalms’, which included, of course, the most famous of them all – *Miserere mei, deus, miserere*.

**Politics**

Not that we should react to a ridiculous extreme against the ‘Red Queen’, for in one respect she does reflect her historical inspiration. Lady Margaret dedicated her life to the interests of her son, and once he had gained the throne, she showed that she liked the trappings and the realities of power. And she was a politically active and politically shrewd operator. Of course, for a noblewoman in that society, any sort of public role was predicated on marriage. Having been born on 31 May 1443, Lady Margaret was married off to a distant royal connection, Edmund Tudor, in 1455, at the age of 12. Now, noble girls were often contracted in marriage at the age of 12 or 13, but medieval people were not stupid. Sexual intercourse was generally postponed until a fuller physical maturity, if only for the sake of maximising fertility. But in an act which would be classified today as horrendous child-abuse, Edmund Tudor made his child-bride pregnant. The purpose of this premature consummation was to render the marriage canonically irreversible and thus assure himself entirely of her princely dowry, worth some £1000 a year. Margaret gave birth in January 1457, still only 13, an even younger age then, so to speak, than now, and the experience seems not only to have left her subsequently infertile but perhaps also to have stunted her growth. When John Fisher preached in King’s College Chapel in the presence of Margaret and her son in 1507, he remarked on her diminutive frame, declaring that it must seem ‘miraculous to us all that one so young and so slight’.

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should give birth to one so tall and so well-built’.⁸

Even before Margaret was a mother, she found herself a widow. Edmund Tudor enjoyed her dowry for little more than a year, and died on 1 November 1456, after playing a busy part in an outbreak of conflict in south Wales, amid the growing disruption that was to erupt before long into the Wars of the Roses. Little more than a year afterwards, however, she was a wife once more, wedded to Lord Henry Stafford, second son of the Duke of Buckingham. But such security as she attained through this alliance was disrupted by Edward IV’s overthrow of her cousin, Henry VI, in 1461. This event saw Margaret lose control of her infant son, who was snatched away just five years old to be brought up as the ward of a Yorkist henchman, Lord Herbert. It is remarkable that the relationship between mother and son survived first what proved to be nearly a decade of separation in Henry’s childhood, and then another dozen years of separation through his exile. For in a political crisis around 1470, which saw Lord Herbert executed, Margaret and her brother-in-law, Jasper Tudor, spirited the young Henry out of the kingdom to the relative safety of Brittany. Margaret’s second husband died in 1471 (4 October 1471), and her almost immediate third marriage, to Thomas, Lord Stanley, in 1472, was undertaken to ensure political shelter and survival in the now decidedly Yorkist kingdom.

The death at the battle of Tewkesbury (4 May 1471) of Prince Edward of Lancaster, followed by the murder of his father, Henry VI, left Margaret’s son, despite the question-marks over the legitimacy of their descent from John of Gaunt, as perhaps the nearest thing to a Lancastrian claimant to the throne of England. The bright idea which was the great idea of the Tudors – the idea that they reconciled through dynastic union the warring houses of Lancaster and York – was Margaret’s idea, one she first mooted in the closing years of Edward IV’s reign, as she put out feelers regarding a matrimonial alliance between her son and one of Edward’s many daughters. The idea grew fast once Richard III had betrayed his brother’s memory by seizing the throne from his young nephew, Edward V. This internecine coup began to tear apart the Yorkist faction. Lady Margaret may have borne the train of Richard III’s queen, Anne, in the coronation procession up the central aisle of Westminster Abbey on 6 July 1483, yet within weeks she had joined a plot – featuring her nephew, Henry Stafford, Duke of Buckingham – to break the young princes out of the Tower of London and replace Edward V on the throne that his uncle had wrested from him. It was Margaret who began to manoeuvre her powerful and increasingly alienated Yorkist husband, Thomas Stanley, towards the alternative regime. Richard III had made Stanley Constable of England following the defeat of Buckingham, and summoned him with his host when Henry Tudor finally invaded in 1485. Yet, famously, Lord Stanley turned up at Bosworth Field with a considerable force which he then held back from action until making a late but decisive intervention for Henry and against Richard. It is inconceivable that this volte face owed nothing to Lady Margaret, although it should be noted that Lord Stanley had made quite a success, throughout the Wars of the Roses, either of arriving too late to join battle or of holding aloof with his large retinue in order to applaud the victor. However, we should perhaps reflect that, had Henry Tudor, rather than Richard III, fallen at Bosworth on 22 August 1485, even fewer people today would ever have heard of Lady Margaret Beaufort. Who, after all, knows the name of Thomas Stanley’s previous wife? (Eleanor Neville, sister to Warwick the Kingmaker.)

For Philippa Gregory, Margaret’s political ambitions and achievements are summed up in a small change which is seen in her signature during the reign of her son. Gregory has her confiding to the reader, shortly after her son’s victory at Bosworth Field, ‘I shall sign myself Margaret Regina, Margaret R’.⁹ Of course it wasn’t quite like that. Lady Margaret did change her signature from ‘M Richmond’ to ‘Margaret R’. But this came much later. ‘M Richmond’ is last found in a paper from 1497, while

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⁹ Gregory, Red Queen, p. 387. See also p. 76.
‘Margaret R’ is first recorded in 1499.¹⁰ For Philippa Gregory, this suggests a pretension to royal royal status. This is too much. Lady Margaret could not pretend to the title of queen, and obviously the R still stands for Richmond. Yet the change was clearly a rather showy regal affectation, at the very least an assumption that everyone must have known who she was.

Margaret’s political role did not end with Henry’s triumph at Bosworth. In a sense, it became even more significant. In many ways, Henry VII’s mother was more truly his partner in government than was his wife, Elizabeth of York, whom he indeed married as part of his strategy for healing the divisions of the realm. Elizabeth’s life as queen was entirely taken up with pregnancy and the care of the royal infants. Married on 18 January 1486, she gave birth to her first son, Arthur, on 19 September, which was pretty quick work. She died on 11 February 1503 of complications following the birth of her last child (at least her seventh). One might almost say she was consumed by her children. Margaret had been spared this fate by the disgraceful behaviour of her first husband, and was therefore free to focus on politics and power. She had a very pronounced sense of her rank. Throughout her daughter-in-law’s lifetime as queen, Margaret was careful never to be upstaged or outdressed by the king’s wife, ostentatiously appearing in apparel that proclaimed her equal status. She liked the taste of power, and was one of very few women in medieval English history to exercise recognised public authority, presiding over what was in effect a subdivision of the King’s Council in its jurisdictional role, at her palace of Collyweston in Northamptonshire. Margaret and Henry crossed paths constantly, and when they were not together, they communicated by letter on major issues. Only a few of these letters survive, but enough to show that they were an important vehicle for their relationship. Henry VII was not a trusting man, and his mother was one of the very few people he felt he could really trust. Her mediation in public disputes, such as the incessant squabbling between town and gown in Cambridge, was an exercise of delegated royal power. Lady Margaret therefore took a step along the road which led through her great-grand-daughters, Mary and Elizabeth, to the acceptance of the principle that a woman, a femme sole, could exercise jurisdiction. It is worth reflecting on the fact that Henry VII’s claim to the throne came through his mother and her descent via John of Gaunt from Edward III. Why did she not herself become queen? The answer is that in fifteenth-century England it was accepted that a woman could transmit a claim to the throne, but not that she could exercise it. Within a hundred years, Mary and Elizabeth would each claim the throne in their own right. Lady Margaret had done much to bring about the change in attitudes which made that possible. It is a long road from Margaret Beaufort to Margaret Thatcher, but without the King’s Mother five centuries ago, maybe the Iron Lady would not have arrived quite as early as the later twentieth century.

TO BE CONCLUDED IN THE LENT ISSUE OF THE MBA NEWSLETTER

[¹⁰] Jones and Underwood, The King’s Mother, p. 86.
What’s in a name? ‘Lady Margaret Beaufort was the obvious choice’: an interview with Professor Janet Soskice

I met with Professor Janet Soskice on a warm and sunny morning in late September. Well-known in Cambridge and international circles as a formidably intelligent Catholic philosophical theologian, Prof. Soskice taught for more than 30 years at Cambridge University’s Faculty of Divinity where she is now Professor Emerita. Currently, she is on the faculty of Duke Divinity School as the William K. Warren Distinguished Research Professor of Catholic Theology. Closer to home, she is Chair of Council at MBIT. I was interested in Prof. Soskice’s experience of having been one of the founding members of MBIT and equally curious about the choice of Lady Margaret Beaufort for the Institute’s name. Why Margaret Beaufort? ‘Well,’ she said, ‘there were others in the running including Julian of Norwich, but Margaret Beaufort seemed the more obvious choice. There were those Cambridge associations and the fact that the Canonesses of St Augustine had established Lady Margaret House as a hall of residence for Catholic women studying at Cambridge. And the link with theological education and philanthropy was there, too.’

She suggested we go outside and enjoy the rare fine weather. And so, we sat in the shelter of her pretty Cambridge garden and discussed the Margaret Beaufort Institute – its history, mission and name.

MBIT started life as an idea which quickly took root in fruitful discussions and shared meals in Prof. Soskice’s basement kitchen. In this domestic setting she was joined by those who shared a single vision: that of founding an institute whose mission it was to provide Catholic women with the opportunity to receive first rate theological education and training. Among those who were part of the early stages of the Institute were Timothy Radcliffe, OP, Sr Pia Buxton, IBVM, Janet Lash, Susan O’Brien, Deborah Jones, Rosemary Boyle, Margie Tolstoy and Hilary Clay. Prof. Soskice described how, in the early days of MBIT’s inception, she spent time talking to women’s groups. ‘These were women who had been effectively purged from [taking an active role in] the Church. At that point lay ministries were ‘men only’ domains.’ But this was changing due to the identification of a gap in the mid-1980s whereby intelligent and gifted Catholic women were eager to be more actively involved and recognised in the building up of the Church in all spheres of influence. ‘There now existed a high level of religious women who wished to be educated in theology at university level. They were keen from the outset’.
MBIT started in a room at Lady Margaret House with Deborah Jones as its acting administrator. When considering who might lead it as its first principal, Prof. Soskice immediately thought of Sr Bridget Tighe, FMDM. ‘I had taught her when she undertook the BA (Tripos) in Theology & Religious Studies at Cambridge as a mature student. Bridget had worked for years in Jordan and was due to begin studies at the School of Tropical Medicine in London.’ Prof. Soskice discussed the possibility of the position with Sr Bridget and then wrote formally to her superior to see if she might be granted permission to take on the challenge of leading this fledgling and pioneering Catholic institute for women. ‘And to our delight, she was amenable!’

In common with so many exclusively female initiatives within the Church, there were stumbling blocks. In the early stages, there were those who expressed ‘outright hostility ... many were openly critical and suspicious. There were even those who, she remembered, ‘questioned whether we had the right to use the name of Lady Margaret Beaufort.’ With time, such suspicions were allayed, and many former critics became supporters and admirers of MBIT for what it accomplished over the years. Now, nearly 30 years on in its history, there are still challenges (‘just different challenges’) but Prof. Soskice is optimistic. She believes that the institute is in excellent hands with its two co-principals, directors of studies and dedicated staff. As to the future, she is firm in her conviction that ‘God loves women’ and that the mission of the Institute is one that will, through Providence, endure. Asked what she would say if called upon to sum up the Margaret Beaufort Institute from the original vision to the present day, she replied: ‘We began with the belief that if women were well-formed in theology, then their voices could be heard. And I think we succeeded.’

Susanne Jennings
Summary and Reflection on our MBIT Associates’ Study Day on Ethical Leadership 23 October 2021

In these last few years, I have noticed that while my appetite for learning has not diminished, the flavors of presentations are often anything but delicious. Speakers who have published great books or even controversial articles are not always as interesting in person as they are on paper. There has been one very notable exception to this trend in my life, the sessions offered by the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology. Our first MBA study day on “Ethical Leadership” is a perfect example.

There was a healthy balance of academically anchored research with references to many authors’ ideas to investigate and spiritual inspiration for how we can apply what we learned to our everyday lives. It was equally balanced in its presentations of Benedictine and Ignatian spiritualities and ethical applications.

I appreciated Anna Abram reminding us that an overseer (epi-scopus) is not necessarily a leader, as so many of us have learned to our chagrin. It is unfortunate that in the secular as well as the ecclesial spheres, we have used military terminology and the mindset of domination with fear and manipulation as models of leadership. She pointed us to C. Lowney’s Heroic Leadership about the Jesuits and their capacity to translate vision into motivation for successful “best practices.” She also mentioned G. Beyer’s Just Universities about how higher education, especially in the United States, has given into a corporate business model to everyone’s detriment. Finally, I am grateful for the way in which she explained how ethical leaders should practice moral self-awareness, cultivate the ability to accept their limitations, practice moral attentiveness, creativity, and improvisation.

[Editor’s note: the overview of Charles Wookey’s contribution is not included here. His paper, An instinctive sense of fairness: reflections for the Church from working with business is printed in full in this edition of the MBA Newsletter by kind permission.]

Dame Laurentia connected the Rule of St. Benedict with Alistair MacIntyre’s After Virtue. She gave us a mnemonic of “Ds” and began with a visual image of the Chapter Room in Worcester Cathedral where monks would have sat in a circle for their deliberations, with a central pillar to remind them that no one person was at the centre. That place is occupied by Christ. This helps us to de-centre ourselves from anything which is not Christocentric. She illustrated dialogue with Rublev’s icon of the Trinity, open to all. She reminded us of delegation illustrated in RB 47, that leaders must delegate and accept the talents of others for the good of the community. She also asked us to consider discretion and moderation in our aim to live ethically.

Fr. Adrian Porter gave us a thorough introduction to the writings of Ignatius on ethical leadership with a list of many points made in the Constitutions. The first and foremost was to be “one with the Society’s aim” and to “give glory to God in ministry for the help of souls.” Over a dozen pieces of advice were part of a solid lesson for all of us on how to live and lead ethically. We must practise the virtues of charity and humility, be prudent and discerning, well-informed and not pre-occupied with what isn’t part of our call. The General was to reconcile as a learned counselor, rather than preach and to practise subsidiarity, with confidence in Provincial leaderships. I interpreted that to mean that leaders should never be what we might call today, “micro-managers” interfering in the details of work of those they lead.
Gemma Simmonds challenged us to a renewed focus on ethical leadership in our Church today, one which is being proclaimed by Pope Francis, but perhaps not yet embraced as readily as we need. I share her passion for an awakening of those in authority to wake up when they hear the voices of contemporary prophets or, as she explained, “professional nuisances.” We are, many of us, tired of “bad, internal-focused leaders.” She reminded us that a pontifex is a “bridge-builder.” And I was heartened to be reminded that we can just as easily translate the Greek of our New Testament into kin-dom as kingdom to come to a fuller understanding of what Jesus taught us about the reign of God. We need reminding that the justice and righteousness of that reign is what we work for in the here and now, and not just the hereafter. She encouraged us to find God in all things and practise “contemplation as a long, loving look at the real.”

Catherine Arnold of St. Edmunds helped us to review how vocations and jobs are discerned within an ethical framework. She divided jobs into three categories: those who seek to inform; those who hope to influence and transform; and those who manage and deliver outcomes. Her remarks reminded us of the profit vs. purpose-driven corporations and she challenged us to think about the limits of authority and responsibility. Being “head-driven” and “heart-driven” can bring about peace. Her quotation of a portion of the Matriculation blessing of St. Edmunds, was particularly enlightening for me, “May we be delivered from fear before new truth, complacency before half-truth, and pride that would claim all truth.”

The breakout sessions were helpful for those of us who seek to know people who share our thoughts and questions, to help us feel empowered to speak and to be heard, to make a difference. Prof. Eilis Ferran, one of the Directors of the MBIT, spoke of accountability and left me with an encouraging thought, “We all have agency, maybe more than we know.” At that point, I returned to contemplate the logo of the Synod again.

It occurs to me that this day on ethical leadership was one when women and men from all over the globe felt enlightened, engaged, energised, and empowered. Each of the speakers in his or her own way, from their own perspective and expertise helped to shine a special light into the darkness. Our Church is facing many problems which have increased exponentially during the pandemic. It was refreshing to engage in healthy dialogue with our Catholic heritage. Whether we refer to Benedict or Ignatius, business leaders or researchers, lay or religious women and men, the answers are already here for us. We are called to continue to hold the spotlights on those answers, to respond ethically and enthusiastically to our own individual invitations.

Melanie-Préjean Sullivan, DMin
An instinctive sense of fairness – some reflections on working with business for the Church
by Charles Wookey

In the summer of 1995 eight senior business leaders spent a weekend at the Benedictine monastery of Worth Abbey in Sussex. They were invited to explore with a group of monks what a business and a monastery may have in common. They came intrigued by the thought that the Rule of St Benedict had been continuously guiding monastic life for 1400 years. Maybe there was something to learn here that might help their businesses to be sustainable in the long-term. The only pre-read was the Rule.

The CEO of a hotel group had read closely the chapter in the Rule about hospitality – the importance of treating any guest to the monastery as Christ. He was very moved by this, and then reflected on the quality of genuine care and consideration for guests which the best hotels showed, and which could not be faked. Towards the end of the closing session another business leader said, “I run an organisation but what I’ve realised over this weekend is that it’s also a community”. The Abbot of Worth Stephen Ortiger then replied “Thank you. We live in a community and what I have learned over this weekend is there is something to be said for being organised!”

In 1960 shortly before his death one of the founders of Hewlett Packard, David Packard gave a speech reflecting on his company. He said:

“..a group of people get together and exists as an institution we call a company so they are able to accomplish something collectively which they could not do separately. They are able to do something worthwhile – they make a contribution to society (a phrase which sounds trite but is fundamental)”. (Miller J,50)

In a different plane the Church has a similar rationale. Jesus called his disciples friends, and if anyone wanted to be one of them, they had to accept and join his other friends - they were committing to follow him as a band, becoming something together that they could not accomplish alone.

How the purpose of any shared endeavour is characterised, and how people are thought about, shapes what happens. In recent decades we have seen the consequences in business when narrow and reductive ideas about purpose and people take hold. In this talk I’m going to explore how a charity formed after the great financial crisis is helping to challenge these dominant ideas and support businesses to inhabit a more creative and generative sense of their role as social organisations. I’ll then look to see what parallels there may be in the world of the institutional Church, which is currently suffering its own distinctive travails, and where an exchange of insights may yield some hopeful pointers.

Blueprint for Better Business was established as a charity in 2014 but its origins in fact go back to a seminar of City leaders held at Schroder’s bank in 2009, reflecting on what had gone wrong. Pope Benedict had just published his Encyclical on Catholic Social Thought Caritas in Veritate, and Brian Griffiths, Vice chair of Goldman Sachs rang the Archbishop of Westminster’s office. “This contains by far the best ethical critique of what has gone wrong. You should use this to engage with City leaders.” The seminars drew on the insights in the encyclical to focus on business culture
one outcome, not the purpose. The other is that a business needs to recognize that it is a social organization, and to care about people whether they are employees, customers, suppliers or the communities on which the business depends. There is a latent capacity for people to commit – providing discretionary effort – which comes from feeling they are ‘valued members of a winning team on a worthwhile mission.’ – to quote one CEO It is better for business, better for society and better for people. It is just not easy to achieve.

Why? Because it is always both an organisational and a personal challenge, and also a systemic one. Organisationally it requires creating a compelling narrative and operating model which links the purpose to the strategy and the outcomes from the strategy back to the purpose. It also depends crucially on how people behave and fostering a culture where each person is seen as a “someone not a something”. This is a personal challenge because we all have choices in how we decide to show up at work, what commitment we are willing to make to others, and whether we are ourselves willing to challenge and change our own assumptions and behaviour, and especially the frame of mind we bring to work.

This question of mindset is the fundamental one. In The Future We Choose, her book on negotiating the 2015 Paris Climate agreement, Christiana Figueres writes

“...if you do not control the complex landscape of a challenge (and you rarely do), the most powerful thing you can do is to change how you behave in that landscape, using yourself as a catalyst for overall change. All too often in the face of task, we move quickly to “doing” without first reflecting on “being” – what we personally bring to the task, as well as what others might. And the most important thing we can bring is our state of mind.” (Figueres, p 49 emphasis added)

When he was running Marks & Spencer in its heyday Marcus Seiff was reputedly forensic in his inspection of margins on individual product lines. He would as one may expect be very curious when margins were too low. But he was equally curious when he thought margins were too high – was M & S charging its customers too much or paying its suppliers too little? He had an instinctive sense of fairness where customers and suppliers would feel they were being well served. He wanted relationships not transactions, and he also believed that doing so led to a successful long-term business even if it did not maximise short term profits.

Alongside such an organisational mindset what is also needed, and especially now, is an awareness of the systemic dimension. The market never exists in a pure state and is always a social and cultural construct. UN climate change documents have described the change needed today as moving from an economic system optimised for growth and profit to one optimised for human well being and a sustainable ecosystem. Growth and profit are both still needed – but not as ends in themselves but as means to these broader systemic goals. In a world of rising temperature and rising social inequality this overarching narrative – which applies as much to governments and the third sector as well – provides a powerful reinforcement to the logic of business becoming “purpose-led”. It is the way business contributes to, rather than obstructs, this vital systemic change which the world needs.

So how may these provocations about purpose and people with which people in the business world are now familiar be applied to wider systemic issues in the Church?
First of all, the Church does not exist for its own sake. Its purpose - its reason for being - as Vatican 2 puts it is to be a sign and symbol of the reconciliation between God and humanity achieved by the life, death and resurrection of Christ. It carries this mission through history as a community of people gathered together, through what they say, what they do and how they do it.

But even the best foundational purpose can become obscured. When she took over as CEO of the homeless charity Shelter in the late 1980s, Sheila McKechnie found a highly purposeful organisation that had lost its way. “It should be a campaign for the homeless” she said. “But it’s become a home for campaigners”. She had a major job to change a culture that had become self-serving.

There are many facets to the critique of the churches over the child abuse scandals, and they are both shocking and tragic. But one fundamental aspect is the way in which many - though not all - senior people thought about their duty to the institution. They allowed themselves to think that the Church did exist for its own sake, and their role was to protect the institution rather than to serve the gospel, often unthinkingly putting the good name of the Church ahead of the care of victims and survivors.

A good purpose in business always reveals the gap between the current state and what some future better world which the business can help bring into being. It fosters aspiration and stimulates innovation and creativity about better ways the business can realise that purpose. The Church’s true purpose constantly calls the institution to reflect on its role and work and illuminates both its shortcomings and the path ahead. And indeed the most powerful sources of change and renewal from within the Church today are coming from a reappraisal of how best to serve the Gospel, recognising in the painful exposures of the corruption of power and hypocrisy the true seeds of spiritual freedom in humility, seeking the truth wherever it leads and utter dependence on Christ.

A related aspect of this shift is noted by Christiana Figueres in the quote above on the relationship between ‘being’ and ‘doing’. I had the great privilege of being Cardinal Basil Hume’s public affairs assistant for 11 years until he died in 1999 aged 75. He would often put his head round the door for a brief chat. I recall him coming into the office after his 70th birthday, and announcing baldly, “I’ve made a decision. I’m going to be more and do less. Goodbye.” He meant it. Fewer lectures, more parish visits, more time in prayer and reflection, less busyness.

He was rare. It seems a risk of both some business and church leaders to be action addicted. Charles Handy, the organisational expert once spent a day with the Catholic bishops on their study week. One image he uses in his work is a doughnut – any job has a core element in the middle which circumscribes the things you must do. Then around it and within the outer ring is space for discretionary activities - which you can do if you wish. Working within that outer ring is often the source of energy, renewal and creativity. He reflected afterwards that the trouble with the bishops was their lives are almost all core. By that he meant that the burden of activities and obligations on them was such that they had little time and energy to spend in the penumbra. The culture of the institutional Church exacerbate this tendency by placing too many burdens on the best people. It is not surprising that burnout, depression and stress are common in church leaders.
I recall reading about a US CEO who said there were three key parts to the job. Define reality, say thank you, and get out of the way. Define reality – create the narrative about the purpose and strategy in a way that is compelling and inspiring, so people understand the shared worthwhile endeavour and are inspired to be part of it. Say thank you – spend lots of time finding the good things that are happening and thank those individuals responsible (by the time he retired CEO Douglas Conant had sent 30,000 handwritten thank you cards (Conant, 2)). And get out of the way – appoint good people and then do not micromanage.

One of the many fascinating changes taking place in the business world as a result of Covid is in the internal culture of large organisations that have had to adapt to remote working, which does not lend itself to command and control. The backstory of people’s lives is visible through the zoom window, and suddenly the quality of human relationships has become much more important. People have had to be trusted to get on with it, and often they have done so. Less oversight has led to more innovation and creativity, less control to higher trust. Less core, more penumbra.

In some ways, though, the Church can have the opposite problem – not releasing people from too much control but being able to create any sense of a shared endeavour. When I started at the Catholic Bishops’ Conference in 2001, I was asked to create an HR function and reorganise the team. The overt contract was a bunch of people committed to the Church working together who did not mind about being paid poorly because they believed in the mission. The hidden psychological contract was rather different. People felt undervalued because they were badly looked after, and were highly resistant to any challenge or suggestion of common action. They all just did their own thing and would only do the things they personally cared about. It took time, significantly increased pay and a number of staff changes to create a more professional culture with a genuinely shared sense of collective purpose.

Sr Helen Alford, whose thinking has been instrumental in shaping the work of Blueprint, frequently uses the analogy of friendship to describe the common goods an organisation creates. It is a simple but profound insight for people soaked in the culture of individualism which has done so much to distort and narrow our vision of what is possible. When people become friends, they create something together – the friendship – which is a shared good, and one that only exists because of the commitment both have made. It is real but cannot be cut up or shared out. In the business world today where so much of the value is intangible and lies in the people who work together, there is increased recognition that the value for society created by the business is far more – and more important – than just returns to investors. The language of “stakeholders” gestures towards this but is still inadequate as it presumes a mindset of competing interests where the question is a fairer distribution of the benefits or sharing of the burdens. What is needed is a richer language to characterise the social friendships which businesses can create and to draw attention to the human reality that businesses form or deform people by the quality of relationships they create, and through which they generates goods and services, and so profits.

When we started Blueprint a number of theologians pointed us to the importance of moving from doing things ‘to and for’ people to ‘with and alongside’ them, inviting people into a process of creating shared goods through relationships based on respect for the dignity of people. One implication is the importance of dialogue and the need for true accountability.
More businesses are now recognising the vital importance of including diverse views and perspectives and creating the conditions for genuine openness to being influenced and changed. True dialogue leads to new insights and better outcomes and is essential in navigating complex systems where no one has the whole picture, there are no linear processes, and the future is deeply uncertain and emergent.

In different ways inhabiting this way of acting remains a huge challenge both for businesses and the Church. If businesses exist to serve and benefit society and not just make money for shareholders, how do they best hold themselves accountable to society for what they do? How could they innovate to create new forms of dialogue if the law does not require it? If the Church does not exist for its own sake but the sake of humanity, how should the institutional side of the Church hold itself accountable not only in a hierarchal sense but also to the communities it exists to serve?

The Church as an institution exists to point to Christ in whom Christians believe we find the best answer to the question ‘What does it mean to be human?’ But we also know that

“... Christ plays in ten thousand places
Lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his,
To the Father in the features of men’s faces.” (Hopkins, 51)

Despite the lack of inclusive language, Hopkins’ insight remains beautiful. It may be there are some stirrings in the business world that have something to say to the Church as she is prompted to think in a different way about purpose and people. A renewed and thoughtful dialogue about creating the conditions for human fulfilment would be enriching for both.

References


Charles Wookey is the CEO and one of the founding members of Blueprint for Business, an independent charity that acts as a catalyst to help businesses be inspired and guided by a purpose that serves society. Charles’s working background spans business, government, an economic think tank and, latterly, policy for a major faith institution. He has worked as a senior research officer at the Institute for Fiscal Studies and as a Clerk to the Trade and Industry Select Committee at the House of Commons. He went on to become assistant general secretary of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference where he was principal advisor to the bishops on domestic public policy issues. He also worked closely with Cardinal Hume for some years.
Introduction

On the 9th September, we held a belated but heartfelt farewell to our dear friend Antoinette. It was especially joyful as many of us had not seen each other since the previous spring. Sue Price and Roberta Canning had helped prepare a beautiful Mass with Fr Tony Rogers who had worked with Tonie throughout her many years at OLEM and also during her very successful time in prison chaplaincy. He spoke about her complex character, her periodic need for withdrawal from the bustle and barrages of life and her seemingly endless fount of generosity. Tonie’s life was so rich in goodness, graciousness and the kind of raucous laughter that comes from true friendship that it is hard to make any attempt to sum it up. But we all knew she loved us.

The ethereal Ang haunting tones of Rita Connolly performing the Deer’s Cry perfectly summed up a woman who simply sought to represent Christ and bring Christ and certainly beheld Christ in us all. Here below is the text of my address at her Memorial Mass.

Antoinette Askin: Memorial Service Address
Thursday 9th September 2021. St Laurence’s RC Church Cambridge
Antoinette Askin – what a woman!

When I was asked to speak at this service about our dear friend, you can imagine how delighted I was. Tonie was a very, very special lady and I’m sure she’s still with each of us in a very special way.

There are so many of us here with such precious memories and I have gleaned a few over the last few days from some of you and I suspect (and hope!) that you’ll all recognise the themes of generosity, wisdom, and soup. Roberta, Kay, Nonie, Mari, Tony, Amber, Rosalie, Susan, Anne, Susanne, Anna, Maggie, Roberta, Bo and so many others – thanks for your support with this.
Tonie has touched our lives in many different ways, bringing light and love and generous catering to those of us who knew her through OLEM, the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology and Cambourne Catholic Church (now St John Fisher).

Tonie was a fantastic listener. As a pastoral assistant, she supported many, many folk - often those struggling to stay within the church or simply struggling to cope with life. I remember how I would vent my frustrations about lack of support for the Cambourne Catholic community, our fledgling church which was booming, and she would nod wisely and calmly till I’d said my piece and then gently and lightly say ‘yes...but you could also see it this way’. Her gifts at diffusing frustrations and gently nudging you towards a positive, fruitful, practical path were second to none. She cared deeply about those she met and held them and theirs in prayer regardless of her own health troubles.

Unswervingly generous and unmaterialistic she treated many of us, in numerous times. My children loved visiting her office where there was often the revelation and delight of a new kind of confection. They also learned from her to be, as Mary Ward said, ‘doers of good and lovers of justice.’

Tonie once invited a group of us from Cambourne to join the Anglia Ruskin chaplaincy students on the student pilgrimage to Aylesford. Those of you who have been to Cambourne know we rent the hall and set up each Mass from scratch – hundreds of chairs, statues and all – our altar is a trestle table ... our Stations of the Cross are blue tacked up posters precariously placed around the hall each Mass in Lent. So, for our children to be at such a magnificent shrine was sheer ecstasy and Tonie treated them all to hot chocolate and doughnuts and, re-enforced with glucose, they leapt and skipped and prayed their way around the Rosary Walk enraptured by seeing images of the stories they knew with such innocent glee! We were all lit by their free, innocent, ebullient happiness and Tonie had that gentle beautiful smile on her face as she napped all the way back to Cambridge on the coach.

Susanne Jennings mentioned a time when she was unable to travel to lead a retreat in Cromer and Antoinette just said ‘I have a car. I can take you’ and did! If you mentioned in passing something you liked...such as a book...or a cake, you might well find it on your desk or in your pigeonhole, appearing as if by magic a few days later.

Anna Abram, co-principal of Margaret Beaufort told me how, from their very first conversation, Tonie had spoken with her quiet warm welcome which was always so encouraging. Tonie, who herself was not confident in crowds, knew how such encouragement can transform us. During this conversation, Tonie shared her passion for prison ministry and convinced Anna that it was something MBIT must engage in more. A year later, the first intensive course in prison chaplaincy took place and now, Dr Elizabeth Phillips has developed the work further so that it has become embedded in the profile of the Institute. Tonie’s empathy for those on the fringes, for restorative justice, and living with compassion and justice overflowed into genuine transformation of institutions and individuals near and far. While watching the drama, ‘Time’ starring Sean Bean the other week, I was reminded of Tonie as it showed the power of prison chaplaincy and how a woman’s tenderness can bring reconciliation out of unthinkable pain.
More than one person described her as our ‘MBIT saint’ and I’m sure I’m not the only one who wouldn’t be surprised to see her ladling chicken soup out of a vast pot at the celestial banquet. But I’m sure that Tonie, like Dorothy Day, would demur and say, ‘Don’t call me a saint – I don’t want to be dismissed that easily’. She was deeply prayerful and practical, never pious. Her ability to lead liturgies which let us be still amid our busy lives and gently held in the palm of God was a rare and beautiful gift borne of a deep and abiding love.

Tonie wore her keen intellect and learning lightly and all of us who attended seminars learnt from her wise experience and roared at her witty one-liners. She was a passionate advocate of the gospel of the poor and had zero tolerance for power mongering in the church, any sign of which she was able to quash with astute witticisms and a twinkle in her eye. A calm and strengthening presence for so many, she lived as she believed. It was not surprising that, in all the many years that she helped run the RCIA at OLEM, many were strongly impressed and influenced by her evident integrity and her radically active and grounded faith. It was hard not to be!

In 2019, Zest a lively, spiritual and social group for older people led by Tonie, moved from OLEM to MBIT. ZEST- standing for Zechariah and Elizabeth serving together – served to form deeper faith and friendship through meals and films and conversation. You can guess who often catered. Tonie’s soups and home-made bread were legendary at OLEM and were delicious, substantial and sustaining. Her Study of the effect of clericalism on the elderly showed a genuine concern for effective, transformative, and compassionate ministry for us all. She could be be sharp and blunt and unnervingly and accurately truthful and was never afraid to call out the Pharisees and hold them to account. Her fiery temper was roused when her deep sense of righteousness was affronted. For those undeserving of the verbal tsunami, she would readily and profusely apologise later.

Rosalie celebrated Tonie’s courage in the midst of adversity. Susan remembers her ‘side smile’ of amusement. The madcap life of the rectory was frustrating and hilarious in turn. The time when Fr Rex abducted a black Labrador from Parker’s Piece thinking it was Rebus, the parish dog, comes to mind. She found two bemused hounds in the corridor and had to apologise to the fairly confused owners.

I’d like also to share a special memory with you from Bo, who worked in the parish office at OLEM for years with Tonie. Tonie was, as expected, a great support to Bo and her family when Bo’s mum was in her final years. The old lady had grown up in Poland with the hardship of the war and the camps around her. She treasured the taste of bread – and what bread Tonie baked! So, every week Tonie baked Bo’s mum a loaf. She couldn’t eat it all, but that didn’t matter – just being able to hold it in her hands and inhale its fresh aroma was an absolute joy for her. And there would be soup with it, too! That Tonie baked her a loaf, each and every week for the last years of her life and she relished its arrival with Bo, was a sign of love from the church and that her daughter was cared by a dear friend for in the workplace, too.

Such thoughtfulness. Such generosity. Such simple, heartfelt love. Such practical and tender healing. Such gospel, gift and gratitude. Oh, Tonie, so very, very you!
In Memoriam ~ Ann Taylor

On the 18th November, the Margaret Beaufort Association led Thursday Evening Prayer and ‘unveiled’ the icon and sign that had been commissioned and paid for through the generous donations of our members. Both are now installed in the Oratory at MBIT & it is hoped to have the icon blessed in early 2022.

Handwritten Calligraphic Sign by Derek Batty, Calligrapher & Artist

Hand painted Icon of St Hildegard of Bingen by Sr Esther, OSB of Turvey Abbey
Dear Fellow Alumnae,

As someone who has fond memories of my time at MBIT and its strong community spirit, I ask all of you for your fervent prayers for Poland, for the victims of this recent crisis at the Polish-Belarus borders and for its peaceful resolution.

I now live and work in Krakow and am anguished by, and strongly condemnatory of, the ongoing situation whereby human tragedies are being used by the Belarusian side to conduct actions against Poland’s sovereignty.

Most of the migrants are victims of ruthless political action and the greed of the smuggling mafia. For this reason, I would like to stress that those who suffer by this evil need our care in solidarity and prayer. At a time when a real humanitarian crisis is unfolding on the borders of my country, please join me in prayer for the people who belong to this most vulnerable of groups and who are used in this situation by the Belarusian government: migrants and refugees.

From the very beginning of the socio-political crisis in Belarus, the Catholic Church has called for solutions to problems through dialogue and encouraged prayer, remembering the words of Christ that without him we can do nothing.

May you join me in asking Mary, the Queen of Poland to be close to those who struggle for peaceful resolution in this difficult situation at the border & may St Michael Archangel protect us.

From Poland with love and heartfelt thanks,

Maria Stec, OV
This study day will explore two of the most influential thinkers and faith leaders of the twentieth century. Merton, a Catholic priest/monk and Heschel, a Jewish rabbi embodied the prophetic imagination in their writing, in their relationships and in their lives. Through them, we will see how the issues of their time – race, technological advances, interfaith relations, failures in the exercise of ethical leadership and the search for authenticity in religious practice – are the self-same issues that challenge us in the twenty-first century. A dialogue of hearts, minds and souls with opportunity for active engagement and reflection.

Course Leaders: Dr Melanie Préjean-Sullivan & Susanne Jennings

Date: Saturday 22 January, 2.00–4.30 pm

Cost: £35

Register at Eventbrite: https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/o/the-margaret-beaufort-institute-of-theology-33109216441

This event is online.