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**THE COLLÈGE DES BERNARDINS :
THE UNEXPECTED REBIRTH
OF A CROSSROAD OF KNOWLEDGE
AND SPIRITUALITY**

by

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Overview

For decades, the Collège des Bernardins had languished behind high walls, and was no longer being used for its original purpose as a residence for Cistercian student monks who had built it on marshy foundations centuries ago. The faith of an exceptional man, the then Cardinal of Paris, managed to break down the walls which had isolated the Collège's amazing architecture from the outside world, and brought it back to life, making it a place for discussion, study and research. Today, Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger's dream has come true. This venerable institution has now resurrected the mission which was entrusted to its founders, and has become a place at the crossroads of knowledge and spirituality.

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TALK : Michel de Virville

The Collège des Bernardins' project

The Collège building is an essential part of our project. It is part and parcel of our activity. It was built in 1247 by Cistercian monks. This religious order, founded by Bernard de Clairvaux in 1115, spread across Europe where three hundred and fifty large monasteries were built in the space of about one hundred years. These monasteries were both large-scale agricultural businesses and places of meditation. They also had very large libraries and were well-known for their intellectual Christian, and Greco-Roman activities.

St. Bernard did not want the monks to live in the city. However, at that time, many European cities were establishing universities, including the Sorbonne in Paris. In 1247, Étienne de Lexington (1198-1258), the successor to St. Bernard, decided that it was necessary to build a place where there could be some creative interaction between the intellectual life of monasteries and universities. Having considered various European cities, he chose Paris as the location where he established the Collège des Bernardins, and he constructed a magnificent building. The rose window which decorates the Collège's gable has five roses, each one representing one of the arts taught at the university. These five roses encircle a small central rose which represents theology which we consider to be the unifying theme of the Collège.

During this period, the Western world was experiencing a rebirth of scientific thinking based on Aristotle, especially in its universities. The return of the philosophy of Aristotle in Europe was supported by Jewish and Muslim traditions. In the Christian tradition a new coherence had to be developed with the prevalent Christian theology founded more in the works of Plato. This Aristotelian thinking was the precursor of the philosophical ways of thinking which are present today. Discussion in universities was based on how one could integrate philosophy and science. What the Collège is attempting to do is to recreate discussion between culture and theology in the hope that society and Christian wisdom can benefit from this.

For five centuries, the Collège was one of the colleges of the Sorbonne before it was taken over during the French Revolution and put to various uses which were very different from its original intellectual purpose. Until 1995, it housed a fire station. Today, after extensive building work and the removal of the walls which surrounded it, the Collège has again become one of the most beautiful Gothic buildings in Paris. It has also now reverted to a place where original, intellectual work can take place. During his visit to Paris in September 2008, Pope Benedict inaugurated the renovated Collège des Bernardins and spoke about the culture which signals the rebirth of the Collège and the launch of this project.

The Collège is made up of three divisions. The first is the teaching section : the Collège is one of the three theology faculties of Paris. It trains future priests, and also includes a permanent training centre which annually welcomes nearly four thousand students. The second section is a research division which encompasses six departments which cover all aspects of society. The third section is focussed on cultural creation : discussions are organised regularly and are available on-line. The Collège also hosts impressive exhibitions and concerts.

The research division is the strategic core, the meeting point which links the theology faculty and the Collège's activities of debate and art. The six departments of the research section are devoted to the spread of knowledge and education ; enterprise and the economy ; bioethics ; democracy and globalisation ; Judaism and Christianity ; and finally, creation and art.

To make all of this function properly, the Collège employs thirty-three employees and there are one hundred and fifty volunteers, thirty of whom work on the equivalent of a full-time basis. The annual budget is six million Euros which covers all our expenses including the rent of the building which is owned by the diocese.

The nature of the Collège

The Collège's mission, as defined in a charter in September 2009 by the management team under the authority of the Archbishop of Paris, Cardinal André Vingt-Trois, is as follows : *'The Collège des Bernardins is a place devoted to the questions and hopes of our society and their interaction with Christian wisdom'*. This mission has remained unchanged. If these *'questions and hopes of our society'* had not been highlighted in this text, it would have been very difficult for us to ask non-Christians to come and join us in this work. This is why the second part of the mission emphasises that *'everyone is invited to take part in these discussions by participating in work groups or undertaking research and training, or developing artistic expression.'*

The mission can be expressed into four different ways which, in our opinion, overlap very broadly but which, as far as the people we are dealing with are concerned, may be understood rather differently.

First, the Collège aims to *'build an alliance across generations to lay a basis for the future...'*. This highlights the fact that the Collège has a tradition of being a place of research and is expecting new generations to prepare for the future. However, the content of what this work would include is uncertain.

The mission statement continues, combining faith and culture *'... freely, moving forward together, Christians and non-Christians alike, in a way in which we can live our lives to the full...'*

'... allowing Christians to express their faith using a variety of present-day languages in actively interacting with the Church's mission...' (this part is clearly Christian but still corresponds to our project) ;

'... in a place where there is communication, research and action.' This final part shows that there is real openness and that the Collège does not limit itself to the Christian doctrine alone.

With regard to the Collège, we use the words 'tradition' and 'open'. Thus the question to be asked is if it is possible to be both based historically on Christian tradition and at the same time be completely open, in other words is this Collège a place of work which is legitimately open to everyone. This question is a double-edged sword : is it legitimate for a Catholic place to be this open ? And if so, are we not in the process of abandoning the heart of Christian tradition ? Alternatively, is it possible to welcome people to the Collège who are radically non-Christians and who question our faith ? As far as this is concerned, our most memorable experience at the Collège has been the creation of a Chair des Bernardins : a person is invited to be the Chairman for two years to help us to accelerate the development of the Collège. Our first Chair was René Girard. His successor was Marcel Gauchet, widely known for not sharing our religious convictions, but was rather comfortable in the Collège and showed that it is possible for a non-Catholic to occupy such a position.

For this spiritual meeting to be possible, we still have to think about management. There are two factors which we have to reconcile : human relations and content. Among the six principles of discernment which I will discuss later, I mention the following : *'No activity of the Collège should take place without paying attention to people and content.'* Producing, thinking and communicating without paying attention to the network of people who will be the communicators and distributors of this content is like not allowing an element of creativity nor the possibility of new questioning to emerge when one widens a circle of thinkers. Conversely, having purely networking activities, without any connection to a solid content (which may be an understandable temptation for a recent institution which has a reputation to build) would be very sterile.

Based on tradition and being open : a project for our time

We define ourselves as being based on tradition and being open. In our connection with university research, this is problematic. Our priority is not to work towards developing knowledge, but towards our collective future. This is not to say that we short-circuit the scientific and technical aspects. Far from it : we are concerned that they are present in the Collège at the highest technical and scientific level. However, that is never the complete objective because the Collège is not a timeless place, but a place which exists today, rooted in this European tradition. It is this same tradition (which is mainly Judaeo-Christian) which drove the development of science and secularism which paradoxically did not always take place in harmony with these religions.

These European traditions have more recently spread throughout the world, and today we are concerned that this might lead to the loss of what we believe to be good. In fact, history has shown that the Church is deeply involved in this process, both as an initiator and as an interactive force. The Collège's mission is to be a place where one can look at this heritage differently, with all those who made it including humanists, in the hope that humanity can make the best of it. This is why we are always thinking about the future and the use that we can make of knowledge.

So what then is this place which appears to be a religious building, but has no religious Service or Mass ? Obviously the quality of the work conducted there distances it from everything which is mediocre, and also those who preach discrimination and intolerance have no place there. But we can see it, even though it is not always obvious to see and judging it is sometimes difficult.

We are currently at a moment in the history of the Church which is far from banal. The Church in Europe is neither expanding in demographic terms nor in terms of its influence on society, politics or morals. Therefore it is very tempting to become radicalised to stress what makes it different from others. The Collège's approach is the exact opposite. To bring in some new energy, we think it is essential to go 'back to basics' and start afresh with the fundamentals of the message. The team at the Collège is not a team of Catholics who are ashamed of their heritage. They are all committed to helping to understand Christian heritage. Many are theologians in the technical sense of the term, and are convinced that this message has the ability to raise questions which are also relevant to non-Christians, and this is the key to the renewal of the Church. *'This is the resolute understanding of openness which is the creative implementation of our mission and our Christian uniqueness.'* For this, we have to construct a situation in which it is possible to work with those who are the best in their area of expertise. These people are not necessarily Christians.

In this context, the Collège des Bernardins wants to be a place of excellence, but this may raise questions. The aim of the Collège is to be a place where things happen which cannot happen anywhere else, but this should not make it an elitist place. We must therefore acquire the disciplines of knowledge and techniques as they exist today, or else we run the risk of relying too hastily on situations and questions which are incompletely identified. Therefore, we have to agree to make this effort with those who master these disciplines before we work on the questions which people are asking today.

A university setting

The Collège des Bernardins is above all a theology faculty, but we also offer training which can lead to a degree as a result of an agreement made between the French government and the Vatican. Is it a university setting ? Yes, in the strict sense of the term. However, we think that it may be risky to label it in this way because we know that researchers are often placed in disciplinary 'silos' by university organisations whose criteria of classification are based principally on whether their academics publish enough articles in specialised magazines. Such

a situation leaves no place for interdisciplinary work which is contrary to our fundamental, methodological choice of working with different disciplines in the areas of human science. These are the sciences which help us to question again our theological and Christian heritage. It is by studying sociology, psychoanalysis and economics that we can carry out this exciting work.

However, at the same time, we are convinced that human beings cannot be ‘cut up into pieces’, and this creates a paradox. We must simultaneously accept the disciplinary character of knowledge which we have of human beings, but also argue against all the approaches which avoid interaction between these disciplines. In addition, because we work for a result with the future in mind, we include in our work people active in society apart from university professors and experts who are involved in this work. There is also a theologian involved in our work and we deliberately bring in those who work in the field as co-researchers.

In the department specialising in enterprise and the economy, we made a very encouraging experiment. Three years ago, we asked for tenders with a budget of two hundred thousand Euros to conduct research into ownership. Ten research teams attempted to win the tender including Armand Hatchuel’s team from the Centre de gestion scientifique of the Paris École des mines and Olivier Favereau’s team from the Paris X Nanterre University. Both were selected. They were surprised to see the Church finance research. This allowed them to continue their earlier work by encouraging them to look at the ultimate aim, and to address the question of how to finance the economy. This then questioned who was responsible for the future and for the significance of the company. If one wants a company to last a long time, it must have a long-term strategy, but this is not possible if the shareholders or finance have exclusive power. How then can one combine the power of finance with the capacity for building a project for the future ?

Art and the Bernardins

Artistic activity has always been part of the Collège des Bernardins. The issue of the place of art in the Collège is still a very relevant question, and it is for this reason that we hold discussions with people who have different convictions. However, if we restrict ourselves to rational thought and disregard emotion and sensitivity, we miss out on an essential part of human nature. Within the Collège, there is a special research department which addresses this problem : in it, activities take place with artists and creators. Discussions in this department are very original.

This originality is reinforced by the choice that we have made to base our thinking on contemporary creation with artists who are currently working. Consequently, we show a great deal of art installations which are sometimes misunderstood. However, this is undoubtedly the part of our activity which is most well-known outside the Collège and which contributes to our image of being open, especially to younger audiences.

Which topics are our priorities ?

From the beginning, we organised our priorities around a research section which is the driving force of the Collège. It is the necessary link between the theological side and the arts side of the Collège. We might have been tempted to increase the number of departments (adding to the six already mentioned), but our limited resources have forced us to concentrate on certain areas which we consider to be essential, such as education and communication, the economy and politics.

Europe and globalisation are fundamental problems discussed in the Collège, and will continue to be permanent topics there. Andrea Riccardi¹ is the Collège’s third Chair and the

¹ Andrea Riccardi is a history professor, a speaker on religion and an Italian politician. In May 1968, he founded the Sant’Egidio community. He was also the government minister for International Cooperation and Integration in the Monti cabinet.

subject for the next two years is 'Globalisation : a spiritual question'. We are all surprised to see how globalisation in France is considered to be an essentially economic question, and one which has negative consequences. We are convinced that it is also the precursor of something which will be an integral part of humanity. Nations have a duty to interact, and we are currently at a level of interaction which humanity has dreamt of since the beginning of time : we are now reaching that level. This is a very special moment in time for us and that is why we want to discuss this subject over the next two years. This shows to what extent the Collège relies on people who are capable of strongly motivating others in order to achieve what is essential.

Developing discernment

How do we choose what we do and how we do it ? How should this discernment be carried out ? How should one involve all those people who are working with us ?

This year we wrote a 25-page document entitled 'Missions and orientations of the Collège des Bernardins' at the end of which we decided on six principles that we need to think about and carry out. We have drawn up this table so that we can share these principles with those who work at the Collège, regardless of their convictions. This is a new activity based on 'think tank' sessions during which the programming and the way in which events are organised are discussed and chosen according to the six principles. We are convinced that this is the beginning of a new stage in the development of the Collège and that it will continue.

DISCUSSION

The legacy of Cardinal Lustiger

Question : *To what extent does the effect of Cardinal Lustiger's very strong personality help to explain the unique quality of the Collège des Bernardins ?*

Michel de Virville : I met Jean-Marie Lustiger who was a student chaplain when I was in my first year studying mathematics. At our first meeting, he talked for two hours in a very charismatic way about the 'forces of life' and 'forces of death'. Because of his past, he found the daily world full of spiritual questions. He thought that if we did not take spirituality seriously, there was a risk of another Shoah or a Holy War. He spent his life studying contemporary reality to show the importance of this duality of life and death, and to find the solutions which enable us to overcome our 'death instincts'. In a way, the Collège des Bernardins is continuing what this exceptional man started, by creating a school for people who are not exceptional.

As far as I am concerned, secularism is a delayed consequence of the gamble taken by the original Christians to disseminate the Jewish faith founded on the Bible in Greek logic, as we can read in St Paul's speech on the Acropolis. Over a few centuries, the Judeo-Christian tradition has facilitated the exercise of reason. It drove out old gods and enabled religion to become separated from the exercise of political, economic and scientific power which we have inherited today. Faith now appears distinct from reason and this explains the work which we are carrying out in order to encourage mutual recognition. We have encountered obstacles along the way, and in so doing we found the strength to face this complex reality, even though we are not directly in the front line. We are an armoury, not an army.

Clearly, we are tempted to draw on Cardinal Lustiger's personality in order to move forward, but his uniqueness was his desire not to look back on the past, but to use it to build for the future. This is what we need to do. This explains why we are not constantly referring to him.

Q. : *How did Cardinal Lustiger raise the necessary funds for this renovation ? And what are your financial resources at the present time ?*

M. de V. : The first problem that we had to solve was to restore the building and to find the 54 million Euros for the building works. When Étienne de Lexington decided to build the Collège, Paris was surrounded by Philippe Auguste's wall and for security reasons he had to build the Collège inside the wall. The Clos du Chardonnet plot of land (named after the abundance of thistles there – *chardons*) was the only area available, but because it was on the banks of the Bièvre and Seine rivers, it was very marshy. The Cistercians established themselves there, but as soon as it was built the building started to sink and fifty years later the cellars were filled with earth. When we bought the building, the wine cellar was completely buried and had never been used. It was therefore necessary, before anything else could be considered, to stabilise the structure.

The first third of the renovation works was financed by the diocese which rented a building housing the offices of the archdiocese to pay off a loan. The second third was paid for by the region, the city and the Ministry of Culture, and the last third was financed by sponsors. During the last five years of his life, Cardinal Lustiger used all his powers of persuasion and conviction to gather as much money as possible from Parisian sponsors in order to achieve his goal. His lifelong dream had been to rebuild the Cistercian faculty of theology.

Today, two-thirds of our financing is ensured by the patronage of individuals and the other third by corporate sponsorship. In the long term, we hope that we can reverse these percentages and increase the contribution of non-Christian sponsors which is currently too small.

The Collège, individualism and religions

Q. : *What is the relationship between the Collège and Islam ? It seems to be different to that with Judaism.*

M. de V. : We are convinced that, in the logical progression of the *Nostra Aetate* papal encyclical, Christianity has lost a great deal because of the distance it has put between itself and Judaism. We are not really ourselves without this very personal relationship. This is why one of the departments in the research section is devoted to joint work on Judaism.

The situation is different with Islam. It is crucial however for the Collège to invest in its relationship with Islam. Whatever happens in the future, we are going to have to live with Islam both on a religious and social level, and in the long-term. How then, in a secular world, can one live with a religion which is still partly in a pre-secular phase ? Catholicism itself was not so long ago in this pre-secular phase even though I am convinced that, in a paradoxical way, secularism could not have come about without the existence of Catholicism. If secularism took place, it did so with difficulty because of the institutional church. How then can we use this personal knowledge of secularism to start a real discussion with Islam ?

Jacques Huntzinger, a former French ambassador to Israel who was once asked by Jacques Chirac to head the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, told us he wanted to discuss Islam and secularism. The Collège des Bernardins seemed to be the most appropriate place for such a discussion. Two years after we met him, a very interesting book was published, and a conference took place which brought together interesting people from all the countries in the Mediterranean basin. We have now launched another part of this work which should last two years.

Q. : *The Collège's neighbour, the Église de Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet, is a symbol of conservatism in the Catholic Church. Was the Collège des Bernardins renovated as a reaction to this conservative tendency, or is the Collège a symbol of an attempt to breathe life back into the Church and, if this is the case, are there ways of measuring such effects in France and abroad ?*

M. de V. : In his 'Spiritual Exercises', St Ignatius writes that love is shown by what one does, not by what one says. How can I answer your question without seeming to boast yet doing justice to the originality and reputation of the Collège... For such a recent organisation as

ours, our reputation is important as a recent study showed : one-third of Parisians know who we are, and those who know us also have a good idea about what we do. Clearly, we have neither a mission nor any ambition to interfere directly with how the Church is governed. I am sure that it would be a big mistake to look for immediate answers. We have to accept that this may take us a long time, whether it is a question of ideas or people...

Q. : *What is your relationship with the Protestant Church ?*

M. de V. : In my presentation, I think I spoke more about Christians than about Catholics which was a subtle way of talking about Protestantism, but also about orthodoxy. For me, these frontiers exist institutionally, but they do not really exist in intellectual work. Take the example of Olivier Abel² : he represents Protestant thinking today, but he is totally at ease with his activities in the Collège.

Q. : *There is great misunderstanding today about individuals who have moral obligations about belonging to a family, a tradition, a religion, or having an opinion. Individualism is the most destructive religion which exists.*

M. de V. : The topic of individualism is both crucial and very difficult. This is especially the case in companies. In our research, one of the key questions was to decide whether management should be based on the individual or the person, the latter being a construction of human relations. A key element in the Arab Spring was probably that Arab societies had become individualistic and asserted their differences. This made the uprisings possible. All the disciplines of the market or of democracy are processes : can society be based exclusively on these processes ? Do we want an assortment of individuals to be organised by these processes which have become mere points of reference ? Is this the aim of human life ? Of course not ! But saying that it is, implies that one has contributed a small amount. Wanting to oppose the inhuman aspect of this point of view does not mean that one should oppose the extremely healthy aspect of economic or democratic disciplines. How do we not 'throw the baby out with the bathwater' ? We are trying to keep the baby...

Management according to St. Matthew ?

Q. : *What means of communication do you use ?*

M. de V. : Firstly we use the usual channels. We publish together with others about forty books a year which are theological publications or are related to our research. The faculty of theology publishes a magazine.

As well as these traditional channels, we also have audio and video products. Many of our theology lessons can be found on the Internet, or by visiting the Collège des Bernardins' website. There are also an increasing number of videos of events which have been put on-line and therefore reach an even larger audience. On one occasion, one of our servers was saturated as more than fifty thousand people were using the site at the same time ! There will be a new site at the beginning of 2013.

The research section has now opened a blog, and we have been trying for a short time to generate discussions using social networks. However, we are in the early stages and the blog is not as successful as the website which is very popular.

Q. : *Do you teach management at the Collège des Bernardins ?*

M. de V. : I am doing so at the moment, basing my lessons on my own professional experiences including being director of the Collège. However, I am sure that in the long-term, the Collège will have its own school of management, which is part of its objective. Management according to St. Matthew ? I think that the Parable of Talents is the managerial

² Olivier Abel is a professor of philosophy ethics at the Faculté libre de théologie protestante, Paris.

metaphor for the 'economy of knowledge', gratuitousness and love. If one cannot understand that this is at work in all living phenomena then we are making a big mistake. In my view management should be founded on this in order to stimulate enthusiasm, rather than on superficial egalitarianism.

Q. : *What is your role as director of the Collège des Bernardins ?*

M. de V. : My role ? Firstly, I am responsible for managing the Collège and I try to bring together the various 'tribes' who do not know each other. These include contemporary artists, researchers in human sciences, theologians, Catholics in continuing education at the Cathedral School (the Collège's religious training institution), and so on. We need to get to a point at which they do not just live together in the Collège but that links are created so that future, fruitful collaborations can be possible. We have not reached the level of interaction that we would like : the best is yet to come. This aspect takes up a large part of my time.

I also make sure that the Collège is open to the outside world. Catholicism sometimes goes through periods during when it is open to change and new events. This is not the case at the moment, but we have to watch for all the signs of the Collège becoming closed-off so that it is not tempted to become inward-looking and isolated.

Q. : *Is the French population's general reticence with regard to globalisation philosophical or even spiritual rather than economic ?*

M. de V. : France is undoubtedly the country which was the most fortunate to have been able to follow what was happening in the world. The French empire was an important part of our history, and it lasted several centuries. France felt that it was the capital of a global empire and some parts of the world still identify with France. As a result, some people do not feel that they are detached from reality by remaining French, and see the current process of globalisation as an Anglo-Saxon phenomenon which brings nothing more than control of the market. Many young French people (apart from the elite) only see globalisation from the point of view of unemployment, immigration and aspects of the financialisation of the economy, all of which are very easy to criticise. I would like to invite George Soros to the Collège des Bernardins in order to hear what he has to say about this !

Q. : *Do you have any contact with young people ?*

M. de V. : When a visitor walks into the Collège des Bernardins, he notices that it is a centre where the majority of people who are older and retired are welcomed, like most French cultural facilities. This is not a satisfactory state of affairs for us and it is a dangerous situation for an institution one of whose aims is '*the alliance of generations to lay a basis for the future.*' Is this impossible ? Not at all ! Every time we have done this in an organised way, we have succeeded. For example, we have a club of young sponsors made up of more than two hundred young adults, often couples. If the young people did not organise it, there would be no sponsorship. We must manage to consolidate and develop things which happen from time to time. The average age of the team at the Collège des Bernardins is around thirty and those who work there are extremely active, which is an essential feature.

Presentation of the speaker :

Michel de Virville : specialist in human resources, researcher, senior civil servant, company manager. He was the cabinet director of an ex-Minister for employment (Jean-Pierre Soisson), and general secretary and director of human resources at Renault. He is Honorary Councillor to the French Cour des Comptes (Court of Auditors), and has been the director of the Collège des Bernardins since it re-opened in 2008.

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