

Pluscarden Benedictines

No. 103 News and Notes for our Friends December 1994

FR ABBOT'S LETTER

Dear Friends,

We have had a quiet autumn and so far, like the rest of the country, are enjoying a very mild winter. At this time of year fewer tourists show themselves and fewer guests. It is a time for intenser recollection and preparation for the great feasts of the Christmas season. I like to think of the phrase in Acts 9:31: *So the church ... had peace and was built up.*

Two recent visitors opened windows for us on two very different worlds. Fr Patrick Breen is one of the few priests serving the small Catholic population in Iceland. He gave us a lucid account of the state of the Church and the country. Dr Ann Renfrew, an oblate, spoke of her work at a mission hospital in Zimbabwe. It is a sad fact that, though Zimbabwe boasts one of the best medical schools in Africa, very few Zimbabwean doctors serve their own people. Most emigrate. Dr Ann and one Indian colleague attend to the needs of a vast rural area. This would be heroic in itself. The spread of Aids, however, adds a dimension of growing horror.

When the first five monks came to Pluscarden from Prinknash in 1948, they were given lunch by the Sisters of Mercy in Elgin. The sister who opened the door to them was Sr Catherine. On the 24th September, she celebrated the golden jubilee of her profession – a joyful event, presided over by our Elgin-born Bishop. The day following, I joined Bishop Mario and Elgin's parish priest, Canon Robert McDonald, for the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the solemn blessing of the parish church, St Sylvester's. It was an occasion for the whole parish, long centred on the sisters' convent and St Sylvester's, to remember its beginnings.

On 1st October, we had the pleasure of a visit from Bishop Vincent Logan of Dundee with several of his diocese's religious. From the 7th to 30th October, Br Finbar and I visited Fr Anselm and the brethren of St Mary's, Petersham, Massachusetts. New England was predictably lovely and the amount of sunshine rather a surprise to visitors from Scotland! Life at the start of a monastic foundation is never easy, but I have a real sense of progress and strengthening each time I visit. News of St Mary's, including the new church, will be found on another page.

We returned in time for our annual retreat. It was given by Fr Stephen de Kerdrel, OFM Cap. He is now what Abbot Alfred once was in his pre-Benedictine life: novice master to the Capuchins at Pantasaph, N. Wales. We are grateful to Fr Stephen for his refreshing conferences, which did indeed help us in "getting to know the Father" – their chosen theme.

At the moment of writing, we look forward, not only to Christmas, but to the golden jubilee of one of our brethren, Dom Barnabas Kerr. Dom Barnabas came from Prinknash in 1948 and has been an ever-dependable member of the community, serving in many capacities, from precentor to cook. He made his first vows on 8 December, 1944. What he would most appreciate is your prayers.

Finally, there has been the conferring of the red hat on Archbishop Thomas Winning of Glasgow. Scotland now has a cardinal again. Like his forerunner, Cardinal Gray, Archbishop Winning has always been supportive of our community. We thank him for this and pray for him in his new responsibilities.

With every best wish for Christmas and 1995,

Yours in Christ,

+Fr Hugh OSB, Abbot

EDITOR'S JOTTINGS

During the next few months we will be celebrating the centenary of our communities of Prinknash, Pluscarden and Farnborough and the Anglican Abbey of Elmore. We began as an Anglican community on the Isle of Dogs, London in 1895 and, after a series of moves, settled down on Caldey Island, South Wales on St Luke's day, 1906 where the community was received into the Catholic Church in 1913. So we began our centenary celebrations on St Luke's day with a pilgrimage to Caldey described by Fr Giles in his article. The sea crossing was rather rough so the words of the psalm the next morning at Lauds: "The glorious surging of the sea" seemed very apt.

Only three days previously I had flown from Mexico City to Heathrow – an eight hour journey by night – and by contrast with the sea voyage, The City of Norwich of British Airways provided the smoothest and most enjoyable flight I have known.

I was in Mexico for the Visitation of our monastery of La Soledad (Our Lady of Solitude) some three hours by road from Mexico City. A very beautiful monastery is being built on top of a hill. It is the work of skilled local craftsmen – very simple and in the Mexican style. It was to be blessed by our Abbot President on 10th December, the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. There are ten monks in the community, though one was absent for the photograph.

I had already made the Visitation of Christ in the Desert with Fr Anselm from Petersham. Here we found a growing community of nineteen monks drawn from several countries: Vietnam, the Philippines, Taiwan, Mexico and the USA. Some of the cells are a considerable distance from the church. The monks need more accommodation and a better water supply heating is by individual woodstoves and lighting by a solar system. Work has begun, clearing the ground for a monastery adjoining the church. At a time when vocations are none too plentiful and religious houses have been closed we are sometimes asked "what about the monks?" So a few statistics may be of interest.

In 1880 there were in the entire world 107 Benedictine monasteries with 2,756 monks. By 1950 there were 205 monasteries and 10,509 monks. In 1960 257 monasteries and 12,131 monks. Then followed the suppression of the houses behind the Iron Curtain. In 1990: 359 monasteries and 9,096 monks.

Our own Congregation of Subiaco has a total of 1,396 monks; of them 269 are young monks “in formation”. We can look to the future with confidence. Monasteries are very vulnerable in times of persecution or when faced by hostile governments so that all through history we have had our 'ups and downs'. But we always survive and the present day growth of monastic life in Africa, Asia and South America more than compensates for losses we may have endured in Europe.

Your editor
D Alfred OSB

CALDEY HOMECOMING

Usually we combine our Ghana monastery's annual Trustees' meeting with some other event, this year it was the dedication on Caldey of a new altar in the island's church of St David, beginning the centenary celebrations of the community which led to Caldey, Prinknash, Pluscarden and Farnborough, Nashdom and Elmore, Milford Haven, Talacre and Chester and the daughters beyond the seas which have sprouted from this vigorous parent stock.

St Luke's day was chosen, “Homecoming Day”, anniversary of the 1906 return to Caldey from Painsthorpe after their 1901 departure and of the 1928 move to Prinknash. It was also the 25th anniversary of William and Lena Parcell's wedding, on Caldey, and they shared our celebrations.

The day before Dom Drostan and I departed, a crisis developed over a lady whose instability of mind and residence were pretty much in equilibrium; the crisis was eventually resolved by two police officers, two paramedics, three monks and a doctor,

at 11.00 p.m. The contemplative life does not always conform to popular stereotypes.

Thus next morning I arose early, but not bright, and we set off to Prinknash, where we were well received, and demonstrated, by our ineptitude at the snooker table, that we had not miss-spent our novitiate.

On Monday after Mass we set off, Abbots Augustine (aged 89) and Basil, with Br Simon, from Elmore, plus Fr Magnus of Farnborough, Fr Fabian and Tony Baily (D. Theodore's nephew), Abbot Bernard and Fr Derek of Ramsgate and Abbot Alfred, ourselves and about ten Prinknash brethren led by Fr Francis. After 160 miles, we left the cars in the Tenby church car-park and walked to the harbour, where waves were bursting over the seawall, a portent of things to come...

An hour later, they started loading the boat, cases of gin and whisky (we never saw them again!), our luggage, various domestic necessities, islanders and ourselves. By this time the boat was afloat, and had a distinctly lively motion. As soon as we cleared the harbour wall, folk got sea down their necks with every other wave. The sea flipped a fender, in the form of an old tyre, inboard. Full of water, it hit Abbot Augustine over the head. Some started to look very introspective, and after a while, leaned over the side.... Br Drostan maintained his sangfroid.

A Former Naval Person said he thought it was Force Six, and a bit marginal. Later we heard the skipper of the island boat (he is also the lifeboat coxswain) had only put to sea because of the VIPs and the big "do" next day. After a rather damp forty minutes or so, we were met at the slip by the community, who led us processionally, in the steps of our forefathers to the guesthouse, and a welcome sherry. It tasted unconventional, due to the salt with which my head and face were encrusted from the spray and waves. A cup of tea followed, and then Vespers, up at the monastery.

The Caldey Office was well sung, with about 18 of our hosts in Choir, which was warm and simple – like our hosts themselves. It was about 5 - 10 minutes' walk between guesthouse

and choir. After Vespers, supper, after supper, Compline, after that, bed.

Next day, after Lauds (6.30; Vigils? 3.30 – you must be joking!), I went for a walk for an hour or so with Tony Baily, up to the lighthouse, along the cliffs, watched the sun rising and the waves breaking, found a sambuca and a wide variety of motor vehicles – four DUKWs, an ambulance, a fire-engine, a crane and cars and vans in such states of decrepitude as would cause Br. Meinrad's eyes to pop. They do not suffer from MOTs and such-like inconveniences.

After breakfast, followed by Terce, there was a choir and ceremonial practice for all, presided over and jovially directed by Caldey's Abbot Robert, when we inspected the interior of the 6th century St. David's, where the altar, mensa provided by Prinkriash and base made by Jim Purchase with Caldey stone, was to be dedicated. A very simple church, like a smaller-scale Birnie, chancel with arch and tiny nave, it was restored by W. Done Bushell. It contains windows by Dom Theodore (our Lady and St Helena, and a small window showing a fish), and one over the door, which I am assured is Dom Illtyd's, though at Caldey it was described as Theodóric. The monastic congregation was shoehorned into the chancel, everyone else filled the nave.

Mass started at ten, with Dom Robert presiding and explaining as we went along. Fr Hugh Randolph, himself neatly combining the Anglican, the Prinknash and Cistercian elements, preached, after which followed the dedication proper, with plenty of chrism, incense and lights. Fr Vince, the retired Parish Priest, was prominent. The Mass over, we re-staged the group photo of about seventy years ago, in the same spot, and then ate lunch, which while not the same as seven decades before (it was quite fresh), was consciously constructed around the menu of St Luke's day 1928. It was prepared by the Islanders and Br Gildas, and there was absolutely no reason for Dom Robert to apologise for it. We ate in the former Abbot's sitting-room, a large chamber with wood-panelled walls and parquet floor, lit by a large bay window and adorned by works of Peter Anson, whose paintings and

drawings and influence are everywhere.

After this, a few kindred spirits went and inspected the Norman Priory of St Teilo, in part of which our community's pioneers spent their first night, then back for tea and Vespers. The next morning's programme promised to be full and interesting: Lauds and Mass at 6.30, breakfast at 7.30, and departure by boat at 8.20, weather permitting. Grave misgivings were obvious on all hands, as the weather had certainly not moderated.

As we lay in bed that night, we could hear the wind howling, interspersed with lashing rain (sea spray??), and breakfast next morning was begun amidst speculation about what it was prudent to consume, possibly later to be offered to Neptune, and the number of Kwells required, and the time to be allowed for their action, to ensure a prosperous voyage in the absence of a calm sea.

This speculation was brought to an abrupt end by the intelligence, conveyed half-way through the meal, that if any of the younger members of the party were really desperate to get off the island (perhaps with an unrefundable air-ticket), the lifeboat would be launched, and they would be taken off. Otherwise, the voyage was postponed. Even those of us with delusions of youth had none of urgency, and so more toast was ordered, and the reprieved condemned men ate a heartier meal. Here I am compelled to say how much I enjoyed the home-made butter and the Jersey milk, which took me back to my very early youth.

With this enforced leisure before us, my namesake of Prinknash and I set off to circumambulate as much of the island as we might in the morning, I seeking exercise, he seeking ornithology. There are impressive cliffs round much of the island, with many rocky reefs around their bases, and we saw seals taking their ease among the breakers and booming surf. Some beaches are sandy, but the bathing on all but one is said to be dangerous. Certainly one of the monks, Br Samson Sumner, who had the reputation of being a strong swimmer, was drowned in 1914. A small black cat accompanied our walk, but abandoned us after some hours, when we left the beaten track to lose ourselves in

gorse and brambles.

After lunch, we were promised the boat would appear in sight at four. In fact, it was about an hour after this when we eventually left, the whole island and monastic communities down on the slip to embrace us and wave good-bye, unload the boat and see us aboard. On the trip back the sea was almost millpond-like, except over by St Margaret's, where the waves were bursting in impressive spray forty feet high, while the setting sun was going in for Caspar David Friedrich-like effects over the sea and islands.

At Tenby we loaded into the various vehicles, and set off at various speeds. We got back to Prinknash at 10.30, and went quickly to bed. On Friday afternoon we went and saw Fr Columba in Nazareth House and were given tea. On Saturday we came north, ending our journey in 1st class's unaccustomed luxury (2nd was full), and Fr Mark met us at Elgin.

D.G.C.

NEWS FROM ST MARY'S

During August we received the building permit for the new church, and so work began. First to arrive was the stone, delivered in tipper trucks, and dumped near the dog kennel. The building site was cleared, and as there was a lot of rock (ledge) just below the surface this involved the site having to be blasted with dynamite for a number of weeks. Once all the rubble was cleared this very large hole, for the foundations of the building, was levelled off using sand and gravel. So far the concrete foundations of the front and one side of the building have been poured. The walls of the basement at the front are nearly finished. Soon they will have to put earth up against all these concrete items in preparation for our severe winters, during which the ground can freeze to the depth of three feet. This earth should protect the concrete from any frost damage during the winter.

On 19th August, Leonard Malouf (brother of Sr Mariam),

who recently received the doctorate in Sacred Scripture from the Gregorian University (Rome) visited us to give a talk, or rather a report, on his doctoral topic: The Benedictus. At the end of August and the beginning of September, the community had its annual retreat, preached by Dom Philip Lawrence, Prior of Christ in the Desert, New Mexico. The retreat concluded with the renewal of vows at Mass on 4th September. That evening Dom Mark Serna, Abbot of Portsmouth, Rhode Island, came to visit Prior Philip. He stayed with us for two days, and it was good to hear how a longer established monastery, originally founded from Britain, is getting on.

Fr Abbot mentions in his letter his visit here in October. He arrived on the seventh and was accompanied by Br Finbar. At this time Fr Anselm was missing as he had been assisting Abbot Alfred on the Visitation of Christ in the Desert. Fr Anselm arrived back on 8th October. Since September Br Gregory has been studying on Wednesdays at Boston College. He is tutored by Dr Thomas Hibbs, who is an expert on St Thomas Aquinas. In the spring of 1995 Notre Dame University Press will be publishing Dr Hibbs' new book on the *Summa Contra Gentiles*. He came to Vespers, supper and Compline on 29th October and so was able to meet Fr Abbot and the Community. The following day our Pluscarden visitors departed for Scotland via a short stop in Amsterdam.

Now we are steeling ourselves for the long winter ahead. If you have never experienced a New England winter you cannot imagine what it is like. The ground is covered with snow or thick ice for months on end. Last winter was one of the worst on record, but hope springs eternal, and at last spring will come. Until then, these notes from this little monastery in the New World are at an end.

BOOK REVIEWS

A Practical Guide to Spiritual Reading by Susan Annette Muto, St Bede's Publications, Petersham 1994. ISBN 1-879007-09-6

Dr Susan Muto's book, of which this is a new and revised edition, emerged as the product of a series of courses and conferences given at Duquesne University in America under the auspices of the Graduate Institute in Spiritual Formation. That sounds academic, but she tells us herself that her aim in writing was to respond to two eminently practical questions: "How do I do spiritual reading?" and "How do I tell which texts to use?" The result is a handbook which provides general guidelines on the aims and difficulties of the "formative" reading of a book for spiritual profit (Part I); three specific reading programmes around the themes of "Living the Desert Experience", "Here I am, Send Me" and "Stepping Aside and Starting Again" using texts from the Bible and selected modern spiritual works (Part II); then what might be described as a "browser's guide" to classic works of Christian spirituality in the form of an annotated bibliography grouped into the categories; essential.

Secondary, Edifying, Recreative. At the end there is an appendix which gives a more systemic reading plan in a three part, twelve month, cycle to take the more serious student through some of the great works of our tradition: the Fathers, the Medieval mystics and a few moderns such as Søren Kierkegaard, John Wesley and Thomas Merton. The selection of works here, incidentally, seems to have been largely determined by what has appeared to date in the Classics of Western Spirituality series of paperbacks, published in Britain by SPCK.

Dr Muto's book is, in many ways, really quite excellent. It sets out principles, gives detailed information on what is worth reading and, equally important, currently in print. The editions referred to are American but most of the works cited are also readily available in Britain. My reservations, such as they are, concern the selection of books for the three reading programmes of Part II and one or two grating anomalies in her classification of books in the sample bibliography of Part III. It seems particularly strange to find St Athanasius's *Life of Antony*, that great gem of spiritual writing from the patristic era, included within the Secondary.

Advent is the season of desire. On reaching the end of this book my great regret was that Dr Muto had not made more of the historical material relegated to the appendix. Admittedly it is aimed at a general audience, but is it too much to hope that someone will produce something similar on specifically monastic and contemplative themes? Last year Tim Vivian published a very useful annotated bibliography for the first five centuries of that tradition in a survey entitled “Reading the Saints: Early Monastic Texts and Resources Available in English” (Cistercian Studies Quarterly 28 (1993) pp 17-58), but there remains an uncharted millennium from St Gregory the Great to Augustine Baker. In the past few decades a steady stream of monastic texts in translation has been flowing from sources throughout Europe and America. We need a handbook in the style of this *Practical Guide to Spiritual Reading* to make them digestible, and to make them known.

DAF

Benedictine Roots of Faith in Australia; Salvado, Ullathorne, Polding (1992) Marion Sitzmann OSB. St Bede’s Publications, Petersham, 53pp

Succisa virescit, cut down it sprouts anew, is a Benedictine motto and it is nowhere more true than in the period after the Napoleonic wars. Over nine hundred communities of monks had disappeared but throughout the nineteenth century new ones were founded, sometimes in the most unusual places.

This booklet is about three great monks who helped establish the church in Australia: Rosendo Salvado, monk of a suppressed Spanish Abbey, who was an heroic missionary to the Aborigines and founded the Abbey of New Norcia in Western Australia – now in the Subiaco Congregation; William Bernard Ullathorne of Downside whose concern for the convicts led him to be instrumental in the abolition of Transportation; and John Bede Polding, also of Downside, who was the first Bishop of Sydney and the real founder of the Australian Church. The three brief biographies emphasise their contribution to Australian history and

assess their achievements and failures. It is interesting to note that although the two English monks were most successful on the wider stage, it was Salvado who succeeded in establishing monastic life for men in Australia. This was Polding's dream but it was frustrated, partly by his own Irish clergy. One would question, however, the author's statement that he failed in ensuring, 'a continuing Benedictine presence in Australia' (p 52) as in 1849 he founded a community of Benedictine nuns which still flourishes at Jamberoo and at Lammermoor and has recently joined our Congregation.

Despite this and a couple of misprints, e.g. "America" for "Australia" on p 39, one can heartily recommend this well presented work as an introduction to these three missionary monks, worthy successors of St Boniface and St Augustine of Canterbury. It proves that Australia really *does* have a history.

DAH