

Fr Abbot's Letter

Dear Friends,

In Scotland we think of autumn beginning with September. Life becomes quieter, the wind begins its work of denuding the trees, and the number of holiday-making visitors walking up our drive falls to a few. It's possible to pause and look back at the many events enlivening the summer.

Pride of place, here, belongs to two events especially: the simple profession, on 21 August, of Br Paschal (James) Downs, and the hosting a few days later of the Chapter of the English Province of the Subiaco Congregation. Br Paschal is 29 and a convert to the Catholic Church. He hails from Glasgow and, prior to coming to us, had worked for several years in the Glasgow University Library. He now joins Br Thomas Cole in our "Juniorate". Meanwhile, thanks be to God, 2 novices persevere, and also 1 man in "probation" in view of regular oblation, and 3 postulants. We were also heartened by the presence of 11 young (or young-ish) men on our recent Monastic Experience Weekend.

On 24 August there followed the Provincial Chapter. This is a meeting of Superiors and Delegates from the far-flung monasteries of our "English" Province, and is held every 4 years. The Abbot Visitor presides, and matters of common concern are discussed. The houses of nuns aggregated to our Congregation are also represented, at least those which can make the journey. So, all in all – as a glance at the back-cover of this magazine would show – this is quite a cosmopolitan gathering, with folk from Ghana, Mexico, and the USA as well as England and Scotland. Choir was full to overflowing, with the novitiate having to perch on extra

benches. Joseph Cullen kindly made the long journey from the south to regale our guests with music from the new organ. Above all, the Chapter was simply a moment to experience our monastic brotherhood and to be refreshed by the presence of those who, though distant geographically, “serve the same Lord and fight for the same King” (Rule of St Benedict, 61:10). This was the first occasion when nuns of Minster Abbey, near Ramsgate, took part in a Provincial Chapter, their community having only recently been aggregated to our Congregation. Fr Anselm, Superior of St Mary’s, Petersham, took the opportunity for a slightly longer stay at the “mother house”, and was able to update us on our “daughter’s” development. Br Isidore Colm, of the same monastery, is also with us for a longer period.

As visitors will have seen, the south transepts of our church now feature a striking 4-panelled piece of embroidery dedicated to the theme of creation. It is the long and devoted work of the Embroidery Guild of St Albert’s parish, Pollokshields, Glasgow. Not long after its hanging, the walls of the church were reverberating to the superb singing of the “Cathedral Sparrows” (Domspatzen) of Regensburg, Germany. This fine choir of men and boys, with its distinguished history, was in Aberdeen as part of the International Youth Festival. Regensburg and Aberdeen are twinned, and it was a privilege to receive the Bürgermeister of Regensburg, along with the Cathedral’s choir.

We are also grateful to those visitors who have spoken to us on areas of their own expertise and experience. They have included the philosopher Dr Christopher Martin, the hermit Br Harold, and the recently retired British ambassador to Armenia, David Miller. A pleasure and enrichment on each occasion.

For myself, though, the most memorable experience of the summer was a visit to Ghana and to the monastery of Kristo Buase. This monastery celebrated the 10th anniversary of its foundation on 6th August, professing on the same day Dom Gabriel Peh. Abbot Aldhelm Cameron-Brown, Visitor of our Province, and the abbots of Prinknash and Ramsgate all made it

for that event. There being a limit to the number of abbots it is desirable to have in one place at one time, I chose to go out earlier, and so was able to celebrate the Mass for the 2 simple professions of Brs John and Patrick on St Benedict's day. My elder brother Stephen was kind enough to accompany me on this visit. It was my first time to Ghana, indeed to Africa. It is said that going to Africa is like going home, and that it is impossible not to return – or not to want to. And, after only 15 days, I could see why. Mercifully, Ghana has been one of the most stable of African countries and one felt the wholesome impact of this. Here was a dignified, courteous, friendly, frankly delightful people, and a countryside far more lush and verdant than one had expected. Fr Ambrose met us at Accra airport in the evening of 30 June, and we spent the night at the S.V.D. house in the city. The first surprise of the following day was the magnified call of the muezzin reverberating over the city at 4 a.m. The bells of the local Catholic church followed, more reasonably, some time after 6. The drive to the monastery from Accra usually takes about 7 hours. Ours took a little longer and proved a good initiation into things Ghanaian. The slow-moving road out of the city was filled with people offering a variety of wares from bread and iced water (not recommended to European stomachs) to handkerchiefs, hats and tomatoes. They were generally gracious enough to appear as delighted when one declined to purchase as when one did! Further north, we stopped at a centre for the disabled where a young Muslim, crippled as a child by polio, is learning to walk with artificial limbs. The monastery is funding his treatment. It was a moving encounter. Further north still, stopping for a drink, we were serenaded by a group of children. Not long after, the ignition of our battle-scarred Landrover proved troublesome, and as ever more steam and smell issued from beneath the bonnet we thought it prudent to pull in and look for help. Fr Ambrose and a fellow-traveller set off in search of a nearby Catholic hospital, and we found ourselves caught up in a series of interlocking kindnesses involving Muslims, a Catholic nun, a mechanic and a garage. All ended satisfactorily and we

proceeded north in the gathering dark, everything depending upon the engine not stalling. The Kristo Buase community was kindly awaiting us. Their warm greetings closed a memorable day. This community now numbers 2 Africans in solemn vows, 4 in simple vows and 1 postulant. There is no lack of applicants. A layman, Reinhard, provides invaluable help also. Our Fr Ambrose is Novice Master. Br Bede, the Superior, is temporarily in Europe for a well-earned sabbatical after 14 years of pioneering work. Fr Luiz, from the monastery of Christ in the Desert, is expected to join the community for an indefinite period. There is still, though, a crying need for more support from Europe (or elsewhere). Foundations are never easy. Yet whatever the difficulties, there can be no question about the future. The monastery, and its particular “ministry” of prayer, is clearly appreciated by the local people and by the Church in Ghana generally. And one senses that, at least numerically, there will be no “vocations problem”. One of the most refreshing aspects of Ghana to the Westerner is the unabashed public expression of religion – even to the amusing slogans on vehicles or shops. e.g. “God’s Great Victory Enterprise” and “Jesus is the Owner Mechanical Engineers Ltd”. More seriously, one was struck by the immediate appreciation of religious and contemplative life. My brother and I were shown round the Ghana Military Museum in Kumasi by a young man whom one would call an “ordinary” young man. On hearing I was a monk, he said quite spontaneously, “it is the best life for man. After all, God is our Creator, and when we die we will not be able to take anything material with us. So, yes, it is best to be a monk.” It was a surprise, too, to be asked by a teenage girl at a petrol pump in Techiman, “How do you find the state of religion in Ghana?” They are a poor people materially, but it is clear that many human and spiritual values are alive and well among them, and that the monastic life will, in time, take deep root there. It is good that the 3 major houses of our Province have been given this involvement. It is hoped too that it will be possible to establish a Benedictine life for Ghanaian women.

The first superior at Kristo Buase was Fr Martin Symons, of Ramsgate, who died worn out by his labours. In his memory, the local village of Tano Buase established the Fr Martin Memorial Catholic Primary School. Visiting this was the joyful experience one would expect. The school gave every impression of being a well-ordered and happy place, so successful indeed that it is planned to extend it beyond the primary level into that of junior secondary.

Another feature was the closeness of the animal world. I had been warned of the nocturnal chantings of the frogs. Their volume was still a shock. So was that of the fruit-bats. The monastery also includes a monkey, Mildred, among its members; the faithful watch-dog, Guigo; and a small family of cats. This is not to mention the ducks and pigs that, along with the flourishing cashew plantation, form part of the farm-work of Kristo Buase. A splendid vegetable garden is tended by some of the junior monks. Guests are constant, and suppliants too. Somehow, in such a setting, both the Bible and the Rule of St Benedict take on a new relief. My brother and I were sad to bid Ghana farewell on 15th July, but grateful for the great hospitality shown us and for this introduction to a real monastic “hope” and a noble people.

Yours in Christ,

+ Fr Hugh O.S.B. Abbot

THE EDITOR’S JOTTINGS

I have been away for a month as chaplain to our nuns at Minster in Kent while their usual chaplain was on holiday.

Fr Giles wrote about the community in our June 1999 issue and we had an article in March 1998 when Minster joined our Congregation so I will confine myself to events during my stay.

My duties were light: Mass in the morning and on Sundays

a second Mass in the village church, and I shared in the Offices.

A parishioner kindly took me to Reculver – a Roman station and the remains of an abbey – to the Carmelite shrine and pilgrimage centre at Aylesford, and twice to Canterbury Cathedral for Evensong, where the Royal School of Music was singing in place of the Cathedral Choir which was on holiday. While I was there I was able to admire Mother Concordia's statue of Our Lady in the Undercroft, and two others in the chapel near the place of the martyrdom of St Thomas à Becket.

On 8 August I blessed the Minster Hermitage, situated in a field some distance from the monastery. It is to be used for *Desert Days*, not as a permanent residence. When our community was on Caldey Island we had a hermitage called *The Sambuca*, where monks could go for a retreat or *quiet days*. It was inspired by a book – *The Solitaries of the Sambuca* by Montgomery Carmichael. The hermitage on Caldey was given by Fr Georges Dowzos. Abbot Aelred was born on the Feast of St Romuald (Feb 7 in the pre Council calendar) and kept a picture of him in his cell. He hoped we would one day have “permanent” hermits near the monastery.

In fact they exist today in several places – Montserrat in Spain, La Pierre-qui-vire in France and in two of our American houses.

There was an article in *Pax*, February 1936 on *Benedictine Solitaries* by Fr Benedict Steuart and in March 1928 by Fr Theodore, *The Sambuca 1915-1928*. Our new Constitutions make provision (n 19) “the eremitical life may be permitted to monks of our Congregation with the consent and under the control of the Abbot. In each case the Abbot is to listen willingly to the counsel of the brethren and the other provisions of law are to be observed.”

An outstanding event of my stay at Minster was the Dedication of the Coptic Church in Margate by Patriarch Shenouda III from Egypt, assisted by three Coptic Bishops and every Coptic priest in Britain, many deacons and some 350 people. The invited guests included our nuns and we were given seats in the front row for the colourful service which lasted from 10.30am

to 1pm. Lunch followed with speeches until about 5pm.

There are 12 million Copts in Egypt and another one million emigrant Copts. All the Bishops must be monks, and indeed the Church has a monastic character. Monastic life first developed in Egypt, and in recent years there has been a revival of life in the monasteries in the desert. Recently the monks of our African Province made a valuable visit to their monasteries.

So my days at Minster were full of interest and I had time for *lectio* and prayer and am most grateful to the nuns for their warm welcome. It was so good to see three postulants among them. May they be followed by many others and may many people find their way to Minster's guest and retreat house.

I should add that they had a Garden Fête whilst I was there. Apart from the usual stalls there were also a stocks, where volunteers – including some of the Sisters – were pelted with wet sponges, for a fee. All together £1,500 was raised for the parish and the monastery. During the afternoon a section of the old precinct wall fell down near the guest house. Fortunately no one was near it at the time.

In a field next to the monastery a team of archaeologists were unearthing a Roman villa. So far they have only discovered the foundations but are hoping to find Anglo-Saxon remains as well. This is their second year of digging. The site covers an extensive area. The “diggers” were staying in the monastery guesthouse and indeed there are bits of Roman brick built into the monastery and also into the Anglican parish church.

I returned to Pluscarden on 25 August with the Ramsgate and Minster delegates to the Provincial Chapter.

Your Editor

Dom Alfred

WILLIAM MURRAY JACK
MBE, FRIAS, FRIBA
1921-1999

Mr Jack was our Architect here from the early 70s until his retirement on the completion of the West Wing, housing St Benedict's, in 1994. Cunningham, Jack, Fisher & Purdom (as the firm then was styled) followed on from Ian Lindsay as our architects, and Mr Jack looked after us. The first major work was a complete survey of the buildings, resulting in an up-to-date set of plans, in 1972.

Starting from that base of objective fact, he went on to design first the "Honey House" rebuilt by Liam Barr, Jim Bonnyman's South Cloister in the early 70s, the restoration of the Chancel, the construction of the new cells and the infirmary, the East Cloister (both by Jim Bonnyman, the latter with Tommy McLaughlin's help) and the restoration of the Dunbar Vestry (by Liam Barr and Richard Henderson) in the middle of the decade. St Scholastica's opened the 90s, quite a different style of architecture (built by R A Thomson), followed by the West Wing built by Robertsons and opened in 1994.

This represents quite a productive quarter-century, and the fact that we were able and willing to go forward with such projects is already a testimony to Mr Jack. (Perhaps another is the fact that he inspired the respect of all, to the degree that he was always referred to and addressed formally as Mr Jack.)

These are only facts visible to all, and although they are an enduring reminder, it is the man who was more impressive than his works. First, he was humble, the true mark of greatness. Architects, like clerics and not a few of the professions, tend to be unwilling to listen to others, and pontification has never been an exclusive preserve of clerics. Mr Jack is remembered by all who worked with him for his willingness to listen, which went so far as

to invite the opinions of all who collaborated with him. That pleased and impressed. He respected what went before in the building, and did not try to impress his stamp on either restoration work or new building, nor did he indulge in slavish parody. To work with him was to dialogue, for he was firm enough in maintaining what he felt was right. He was uncompromising, too, in the standards he demanded in contractors.

He took a puckish delight in various small touches through which he cocked a snook at various powers that be, and was a man of good humour, who poked fun at himself first of all. He was fond of pointing out that the first building for which he had been responsible in West Africa in the Colonial Service, was a lunatic asylum – which, he would proudly point out, was still standing! Anyone who ever visited his office in St Andrews could not be other than impressed by the number of framed awards on the wall of the hall (his restoration of our Chancel won a Commendation from the Civic Trust).

We were fortunate to secure the services of a man with such a wide culture, architectural and humane, with a ready sympathy for the sometimes odd requirements of our life. Br Michael and I drove down to his funeral in the medieval Trinity church in St Andrews (he had been its architect, too), where a large congregation demonstrated the esteem in which he was held, and afterwards were privileged to be invited to his burial in the rural tranquillity of Kemback.

We offer our prayers and sympathy to his wife Avril and to Katie and Peter on their loss of a husband and father. May he be a living stone in the heavenly mansions!

DGC

CONCERT: THE REGENSBURG DORNSPATZEN

After a gap of several years, we welcomed on 5 August a visiting choir as part of the Aberdeen International Youth Festival. Our Church was packed to capacity to hear the “Cathedral Sparrows”, whose principal function is to serve the liturgy at the Catholic Cathedral in Regensburg, as they have done since being founded by St Wolfgang in 975.

This reviewer was brought up in Anglican Cathedral choirs, which we flattered ourselves were rather good. But it has to be said that these Regensburgers were in a different league entirely. There were over 30 boy choristers, with about 20 men, who were uniformly youthful. All sang almost entirely from memory. Their programme of religious music was varied and extremely demanding. One lengthy piece by Bach in particular was so technically complex that the choirs of my experience would scarcely have attempted it. But not an uncertain note was heard from these boys. It was a virtuoso performance that left one breathless with admiration. No fault could be found with their pitch, their tone, their dynamic control. Most noticeable of all, especially when compared with any U.K. Cathedral choir, was the perfect blending of the voices of boys and men. And it was an experience in itself to watch the conductor. He beamed with pleasure throughout, and gave the impression of thoroughly enjoying every moment. The choir, eyes glued to his every gesture, responded by producing a sound both supple and relaxed, perfectly united, and well able to carry the heart up to God, whose beauty it in some way reflected.

Proceeds of the concert went towards the Moray Hospice Appeal; refreshments were served in the cloister afterwards.

DBH

ORGAN RECITAL

During the Provincial Chapter we were delighted to have Joseph Cullen with us, who visited specially to give the community an organ recital and also to play during Conventual Mass. Readers will remember that it was he who performed the inaugural recital on the organ last year, around the time of the Jubilee.

This time we were given a completely different programme, including J. S. Bach's "Great" Prelude & Fugue in G major, Sweelinck's variations on "Mein junges Leben hat ein End", Messiaen's "Prière après la Communion", a Voluntary in G major by John Stanley, Mozart's "Music for a Mechanical Organ", and much else, in a recital of about one hour. The assembled company of monks and nuns all found it highly enjoyable.

Joseph Cullen also visited us earlier this year, to be recorded in our church for a forthcoming CD of organ music. It will include the piece "Gaudeamus in Pace Loci", composed specially for us by James MacMillan. We hope to announce details of this in a later newsletter, and beg readers to defer all enquiries or orders until then.

DMdeK

BOOK REVIEWS

TRUTHFUL LIVING – St Benedict's Teaching on Humility

Michael Casey. 1999. 255 pp. St Bede's Publications. ISBN 1879007355. 115.99

The Australian Cistercian Michael Casey is one of the best known writers on monastic themes in the English-speaking world, and deservedly so. This book is a further feather in his cap, and should be of interest and use not only, one hopes, to Benedictine monks, nuns and oblates, but to all who are intent on pursuing the

Christian way and believe that the “ancients” still have wisdom to offer us.

In this book, Michael Casey tackles what is something of a “north face” in Benedictine terms: ch.7 of St Benedict’s Rule devoted to humility. Many modern novices (and novice masters!), and many modern readers must have wondered, perusing it, what exactly St Benedict had in mind. Are we really only meant to speak when spoken to (step 9) or never to laugh (step 10) or to do only what others before us have done (step 8), not to mention considering ourselves “lower and less valuable” than all we meet (step 7) or a “bad and unworthy workman” in all we do (step 6)? What is humility? And why do St Benedict and other saints consider it so important? Michael Casey grasps all the nettles, and “re-reads” the chapter in a coherent and convincing way. He is discreetly respectful of the modern scholarship in the area of the Rule and at the same time sensitive to the preconceptions of his readers – without adopting an abject posture before modernity. “Although times have changed and human consciousness is different, there is much wisdom that can be distilled” from the Rule’s teaching on humility. “As presented by St Benedict, humility is essentially the translation of Gospel values into the practical realities of daily monastic life.” And he would tentatively suggest, St Benedict’s message in this area could be “helpful to any seekers after God” (p.254). Indeed, the humility St Benedict advocates is nothing other than the poverty of spirit praised by the first of the Beatitudes. Where (ancient) St Benedict - and (modern) Casey – are helpful is in spelling out the practical entailments of this. Neither of them spares us the demands of discipleship.

THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST MADE PRESENT - Selected texts for the Christian Year. Odo Casel. Edited & introduced by Arno Schilson, translated by Ronald Walls. 1999. 101pp. St Bede’s Publications

It is good to have this book. Odo Casel (1886-1948) was a German

Benedictine monk of Maria Laach and a prime agent in the Roman Catholic liturgical movement of the first half of the 20th century. Against the background of World War I, the humiliations of Versailles and the Weimar Republic, the rise of Fascism and the catastrophe of World War II, this great monk and scholar continued quietly speaking of the need for a “return to the Mystery” – to the transcendent God and his revelation in Christ – and underscored the redemptive, life-giving presence of that Mystery in the liturgy of the Church. It might all seem a waste or an irrelevance, while the “real world” passed him by. Looking more deeply, though, one may see a providential convergence. What *could* make sense of the European experiences of the first half of the 20th century if not the Paschal Mystery of Christ (his death and resurrection) and its annual celebration at Easter? And it was to the Paschal Mystery, and to Easter, that Casel’s research and writing and preaching pointed incessantly. Where else is there to point?

In this book, we have Casel at his most accessible, preaching to the Benedictine nuns of Herwegen whom he served as chaplain for over 20 years. There are 12 homilies for the major feasts of the liturgical year. They are worth hearing again. They have been translated – excellently – by Rev. Ronald Walls, a priest of the diocese of Aberdeen. The book – a direct rendering of a German equivalent published in 1986 – is attractively produced, with only a few typographical errors (e.g. on p.91, line 6, a missing word obscures the sense; it should presumably be “legal”, translating *rechtlich*).

May this publication serve the theological life of those who read it, and serve a return to the Mystery hidden and revealed in the liturgy and sacraments of the Church!

DHG

St Bede’s Book are available in the UK from Goodliffe Neale Tel 01789 763 261

SANITY, SECURITY, SANCTUARY Ann Bell; 148pp; The Book Guild, Sussex, 1999. £12.95

This book is a thoughtful contribution to the pro-Life cause by an Anglican wife and mother. Ann Bell is also an artist, and several of her symbolic water colours are reproduced here.

It is always refreshing to discover a new voice being raised to challenge the prevailing assumption that abortion and contraception are good and liberating for women. This author is clear that both have disastrous physical, psychological and spiritual consequences. She avoids mere condemnation however; her style is meditative and questioning. A particular focus of her reflections is the human womb, which she would honour as good, and sacred, and deserving our reverent respect.

While her approach is independent of official Catholic teaching, Mrs Bell reaches the same conclusions in almost every detail. She praises, en passant, St Thomas More in particular, regards the Blessed Virgin Mary as centrally important, and expresses very Catholic views on the (male, celibate) priesthood. Pope John Paul II is cited several times with warm approbation. She is in no doubt that abortion is murder, and always morally evil. She does not quite (yet?) seem to have reached the position of the Catholic Church, however, that contracepted intercourse must always by definition be morally wrong. Nevertheless, she acknowledges the baneful effect which the advent of the Pill, together with feminist ideology, has had on the family, and points to the link between the sexual revolution and the current undermining of so many human values. Her book is a courageous defence of the gifts of God proper to femininity: her witness deserves to be heard.

DBH