

Pluscarden Benedictines

No. 95 News and Notes for our Friends September 1992

LETTER FROM FR PRIOR

Dear Friends,

Summer is turning to autumn, and Fr Abbot, by the time this reaches you, will be attending the Abbots' Congress in Rome, from where he will go to conduct the visitation of Kristo Buase in Ghana. It will be a new continent for him. Please keep him in your prayers. He will return to us in mid-October.

Coronasti annum benignitate tua; You have crowned the year with Your generosity. So we sing weekly in one of the Lauds Psalms, and, as our apples, plums and pears are gathered and the harvesters are busy in the fields around us, it is a verse that comes easily to mind. As usual, our summer has not been inactive. The Diocesan Pilgrimage is always a significant event. This year it coincided with the feast of the Body and Blood of the Lord, Corpus Christi, and took the form of a procession with the Blessed Sacrament, Benediction and a sermon from Bishop Mario. Fr Abbot was at this time celebrating the ancient former Benedictine Abbey of Chester's 900th anniversary, at the invitation of the Anglican Bishop, at a ceremony graced by the Prince of Wales in his persona as Earl of Chester, and at which Cardinal Hume preached. A few days later, from the 23rd to the 25th of June, we had the honour of a visit from Viktor Dammertz, Abbot Primate of the Benedictine Confederation. It was his first time here, though he has, during his term of office, visited some 700 monastic houses in all! He gave us a fine talk on the revival of monastic life in Central and Eastern Europe, and then fielded a wide range of questions with wisdom, clarity and humour. He laid much emphasis on monasticism's specific service to the Church: one of prayer, community life and hospitality. The first week of July brought

another monastic visitor, Fr Kevin Seasolz of St John's, Collegeville, Minnesota, for long a professor at the Catholic University of America and now editor of the influential liturgical journal *Worship*. He gave several stimulating talks both to the novitiate and to the Community as a whole.

On the 9th July Br Augustine Holmes made his first Profession. The same month, however, brought the death of our Fr Basil. Another loss has been that of Dr Archibald Wallace, a benefactor and friend of long standing. Obituaries of both will be found in this issue.

Visitors to the Abbey are familiar with the approach road that runs from the gate opposite the Lodge to the front of the monastery. This was laid and tarmac-ed many years ago by the Royal Engineers. More recently, the Sappers have been helping us again: resurfacing our back drive, and shifting a garage to a more sightly setting. We are grateful to Brig. Gilbert for initiating this.

Other endeavours progress too. Brs Benedict and Ambrose have now completed the second year of their studies towards ordination. Br Cyprian has finished work on a window for the monastic church at Fort Augustus. Our shop has been re-roofed, as has one of the transept aisles. Both our guest houses have been well patronised.

The name of Alexander Dunbar, last Prior of mediaeval Pluscarden, will be well known to our readers. On the feast of our Lady's Assumption, we had the pleasure of a mass visit from members of the Dunbar Association, many from the U.S.A., led by the local scion of this ancient family, Sir Archibald Dunbar.

In June I attended a course for monastic Novice Masters and Mistresses at Minster Priory, Kent. Talks were given by Fr Marcel Rooney, a monk of Conception Abbey, Missouri, presently teaching liturgy at the Benedictine University in Rome. He spoke with competence and grace on the relevance of the Church's catechumenate and rites of initiation to the process of monastic formation. The Community at Minster is also hosting a Monastic Study Week in the second week of September, which four of our Juniors are attending. Fr Anthony Meredith, S.J., will be guiding

them and others in the study of St John Chrysostom's classic *On the Priesthood*.

So much for the immediate past and present. But we think of the future too. At the end of October, Fr Abbot, while remaining Abbot Visitor of the English Province of our Congregation, will be remitting his pastoral care of this community after 26 years in office, and the Community will proceed to elect a successor. We, therefore, most particularly, ask your prayers. As Superior of the Birmingham Oratory, Cardinal Newman used to say to his fellow-Oratorians: Pray for me, and you will be praying for yourselves. Adapting his words to our situation, we can say: Pray for this Community, and you will be praying for yourselves. Pray that, in this sense too, the Lord will crown the year with his generosity.

Yours in Christ,

Fr Hugh

DOM BASIL ROBINSON O.S.B.
Monk of Pluscarden Abbey

Third of the five children of William Heath Robinson and his wife Josephine (née Latey), Alan Heath Robinson was born at Hatch End, Pinner, Middlesex on 27th October 1909. He was received into the Church by Fr Bevan, of the London Oratory.

After studies at the Royal College of Arts under Rothenstein, he entered Prinknash Abbey in 1932, received the religious name Basil, was professed on 10th February 1934 and ordained priest on 9th March 1940.

One of the pioneers of the Prinknash pottery, he invested long hours and great energy in making it a success. In the early fifties, he was appointed as Prior of St Michael's Abbey Farnborough, and in 1958 came to Pluscarden Abbey, which was then similarly a dependent foundation of Prinknash, and where

conditions were fairly primitive.

As a result of ill-health, he spent five years in England, where he made a name for himself as a preacher on behalf of the Catholic Truth Society, before returning to Pluscarden in 1974, where he was able to resume artistic activities on a larger scale. These included a set of a dozen stained glass windows for the Baptistery at St Mark's. Oxfords, Edinburgh, and sculptures, sacred and secular, in wood, stone and fibre glass, ranging from abstracts to over life-size figures, which found homes in Scotland, England, Ireland and Wales. In more recent years these included a St John Ogilvie in wood for St Paul's, Whiteinch, Glasgow, another, larger, in fibre glass, together with St Thomas the Apostle, for the Catholic Church in Keith, a stone Madonna and Child for Deer Abbey and a number of works for the church at Ellon. At the time of his death he was working on, among other things, a St Andrew in fibre glass for St Andrew's Episcopalian Cathedral in Inverness. The then Lord Lyon, a notoriously exacting judge, described his heraldic lintel for Vaughan House at Fort Augustus Abbey as among the finest he had seen.

Invited to North Wales to carve stone sculptures for Garthwin he completed these works, and stayed on as Chaplain to the Benedictine nuns of Talacre Abbey, and was able to combine this with artistic and apostolic activity. After the nuns moved to Curzon Park, Chester, he took up residence in the parish of St Winefride's, Holywell, where he soon became a well-known figure, continuing his various works. Last year it was discovered that he had been suffering from leukaemia for several years, and a stay in hospital was necessary, after which he moved to the Mercy Sisters at Colwyn Bay for convalescence. There he remained, an active and lively member of the community, until his death on Monday 20th July.

To sum up a monastic life of sixty years is not easy, when it has been as *mouvementée* as Fr Basil's. St Benedict advises that a potential monk's vocation be measured against certain criteria, which are the acid test of a vocation. He must display zeal in obedience, and Fr Basil was certainly meticulous in seeking

permission for his various requests and projects. Humiliations are another of the hard and rugged ways that lead to God, and he suffered these in plenty. They were by no means artificial, and arose from such circumstances as his illnesses and the demands and responsibilities placed upon him. In community he was always very willing to perform those essential, unspectacular and by no means popular minor tasks, which others prefer to avoid. Such a willing horse is a pearl beyond price! The Work of God, as St Benedict calls the liturgy, must come first in a monk's life, and here again, Fr Basil was never behindhand, always one of the first in Choir for Vigils, to be relied upon to make a generous vocal contribution. In short he truly sought God, and to remain stable in persevering in that quest over sixty years is no light thing.

He retained a fresh and open outlook, espousing the charismatic movement and the Focolare (whose magazine "New City" published some of his large output of poetry); for him the generation gap did not exist. He was an enthusiastic ecumenist, both in the provision of artistic works for other Churches and by direct participation.

Energetic, friendly, humorous, loving, committed to his God, his communities, his family and friends, his was a wide circle, with which he corresponded faithfully, if illegibly. He loved to be allowed to "represent the Community" on occasions at which he was present.

He knew himself as a wounded healer. Now at last his wound-scars, which caused him much un-necessary pain in this life, are healed, and one who shared very fully in Christ's Passion now, surely, shares his reward.

D.G.C.

DR ARCHIE WALLACE, R.I.P.

When Archibald Wallace was about to enter the University, his father took him for a holiday tour in the Borders. There he saw the ruins of ancient monasteries, and that led him to their origins and, eventually, led him into the Catholic Church. In 1954, on holiday

in this area, he came to visit this ancient ruin. We had just made our first step towards restoration by putting a roof on the tower. Fr Ninian showed him round and told him of our origins. A few days later we received a cheque for £1,000.

The following year he came as a guest, and became an Oblate. He suggested that we roof the Transepts at his expense, but his name must not be mentioned. He became the head of the Bacteriology Department of Edinburgh City Hospital and Senior Lecturer at Edinburgh University, but lived in a bedsitter while his salary was divided among his many charities. On his retirement he spent seven years in Libya, setting up a research department to combat tuberculosis. He left a trained staff behind him when he left, having contracted serum hepatitis as a result of doing clinical work there. Another of his great battles was against smog, which he insisted did enormous damage to the lungs, and smog is now a thing of the past, while his name is forgotten. That was his way. The work was the important thing, not the credit. At one time he was ill for a lengthy period, the cause was hepatitis. He was living still in a bed-sitter, feeding himself and sometimes spending twelve to fourteen hours a day at his researches and clinical work (the latter in his “retirement” and with patients whose living conditions were very poor). St Paul once wrote, “Let him labour with his heart at the thing which is good, that he may have something to give to the one who is in need.”.

He died on Sunday 2nd August, at about the time we were beginning Vigils, and now he has met the one who said, “So long as you did it to the least, you did it to Me”, and, “Let not your right hand know what your left hand does.”

Not hard to guess the Royal welcome given to this hidden son at his death. We must pray for his soul, not so much because we think of him in Purgatory, but rather to put wealth in his hands which he will, as ever, give to the most forgotten souls in Purgatory! his new patients till earth crumbles and “there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor pain - and they shall see his face.” Let Maranatha, “come Lord Jesus”, be his epitaph.

D.M.D.

BOOK REVIEWS

The Shape of Catholic Theology, Aidan Nichols, O.P.; T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1991.

Fr Aidan Nichols, an English Dominican, has emerged over the last few years as a prolific writer in the field of theology. Such titles as *The Art of God Incarnate*, *Yves Congar*, *The Theology of Joseph Ratzinger*, *Theology in the Russian Diaspora*, *From Newman to Congar*, *Holy Order. Rome and the Eastern Churches*, *The Holy Eucharist* and *A Grammar of Consent* are evidence of the wide cast of his net. A recent addition to the list is *The Shape of Catholic Theology*, subtitled *An Introduction to its Sources, Principles and History*.

This book is a useful, intelligent orthodox, clearly articulated and pleasingly written introduction, not to “the material content of Catholic theology, its subject matter, its themes and topics, but to the form in which that content is contained: its basic patterns, its constituent elements, the way or ways in which the assertions of Catholic theology are arrived at” (p.7).

A brief summary, however inevitably inadequate, may indicate the work’s value. It begins by discussing the personal qualities, of nature and of grace, with which one may reasonably expect a theologian to be equipped, and then passes on to a definition of the theological task itself. Theology should lead us to union with God but it is not mere “spirituality”; it should be guided by the teaching authority of the Church but cannot be reduced to the mere transcribing or justifying of Church pronouncements; it must be versed in the historical “monuments” of the Christian faith but must not degenerate into anthologising or antiquarianism. It is rather “the disciplined exploration of what is contained in revelation” (p. 32), a charism in its own right, a ministry in the service of revealed Truth. It must neither sunder itself from the Tradition nor refuse contemporary challenges. “Theologians have a high calling, and they must acquit themselves with a profound sense of responsibility” (p.33).

Theology and philosophy have long interacted, and as one would expect of a Dominican, Fr Nichols is an advocate of a real, if ancillary role for philosophy in theological enterprise. This role is, broadly, two-fold: showing the basic compatibility of revelation with human rationality, and functioning as a “principle of order” within the data of faith. Let history illustrate this. We have, on one hand, a long tradition, for example, of Christian arguments on behalf of God’s existence and goodness, and, on the other, the permeation of the whole theological corpus of, say, an Augustine or a Thomas by their respective chosen philosophies.

These presuppositions established, Fr Nichols now gives his attention to Scripture and Tradition, the sources of theology. The canonicity, inspiration, inerrancy and interpretation of Scripture are all thoroughly treated. The discussion of biblical inspiration is usefully clarified by an analogy from conciliar Christology. The Bible is at one and the same time fully human and fully divine. Theories that privilege the first at the expense of the second, or vice versa, may be dubbed “Nestorian” or “Monophysite” respectively. The truth lies in the balance of paradox – something realised by Vatican II, the “Chalcedon” of the theology of the Bible. The nature and scope of Scriptural inerrancy, subjects that caused much heart-searching in the recent past, are shown to have been substantially clarified, in their turn, by growing awareness of the differing literary characteristics of Scripture on the one hand, and of the specifically salvific purpose of its inspired teaching on the other. The chapters on Tradition are among the best in the book, Fr Nichols’ debt to his fellow-Dominican Yves Congar being noticeable here. Tradition is understood as being, firstly, “the whole life of the Church in all its essential lines ... the way of life and worship that is the Church ... the institutions, rites and practices that make up the Christian religion in all its concreteness”, and, then, at the more reflective level, as “the orthodox faith of that same Church ... the rule of faith of a Church in continuity with the apostles” (p.169). Nichols then launches on an admirably informed and clear-headed treatment of what are called the “monuments” of Tradition, its

witnesses. His headings are Liturgy and Christian Art, the Fathers of the Church, Councils and Creeds, the Sense of the Faithful. Would there was space to distil the riches on offer here!

Mere knowledge of the sources, however, is never enough. We need to discriminate, evaluate... Nichols proposes two “aids or helps”, different but complementary: Experience and the Magisterium. The need for a theological rehabilitation of experience is widely felt. Fr Nichols endorses it, indeed contributes to it, without suggesting that theology is no more than reflection on experience, a thesis not without its advocates but which says so much that it effectively says nothing. Turning to the relationship between theology and the day-to-day teaching of Pope and bishops, he maintains “the independent origin of the theological vocation in the gifts scattered by the Holy Spirit through the Body of Christ, while also asserting that in the final analysis appraisal of how a particular theologian has used these gifts vis-à-vis the faith of the Church rests with the bearers of the hierarchical magisterium” (p. 258).

Finally, and thereby broaching the question of plurality and unity in Catholic theology, the author presents an 80-page history of Catholic theology, and then concludes with reflections on what he calls the “theological principle of order”. This is, if you like, the leading idea, the basic principle, drawn from Revelation, which a particular theologian inevitably adopts, which shapes his entire theological thought, and which, if wisely chosen, guarantees his distinctive contribution to the plurality-in-unity of Catholic theology. Thus we have theologies centred on the Cross, on Glory, on Liberation, on Mystery etc. Varying conceptions of the theological task are also *ad rem* here, and they need not contradict each other. Symphony, not monophony or cacophony, is the Catholic ideal. Fr Nichols still hopes for a new St Thomas to arise, and ends with a plea for a *pax theologorum*, not least because the mission of the Church “cannot be prosecuted with either vigour or fervour unless the energies of Catholics are mobilized positively, for the salvation of the world, and not simply negatively, in continuous criticism of each other” (p. 355).

It is doubtful whether any available work in English in this field can match Fr Nichols' breadth and sureness of touch. Could an explicit treatment of Revelation in itself, as the source of Christian theology, have found its place in the book? If so, this is the only substantial lack this reviewer felt. Be that as it may, the book is surely a must for any budding, or even jaded, theologian. It began as lectures to ecclesiastical students, and is most appropriate for such a readership, but it may appeal more widely too. If theology is faith seeking understanding, is there any believer who is not a theologian, and who would not benefit by knowledge of the parameters of disciplined Christian thinking? Above all, it is simply refreshing to read a work of theology that joys in the Catholic Tradition and its perennial vitality; that, with Newman, "feels no temptation at all to break in pieces the great legacy of thought thus committed to us"; and, with Congar, believes that theology "is the highest of the habits of mind a Christian man or woman can acquire" (quoted p. 13)

A Benedictine may be forgiven for pointing out that Odo Casel was never abbot of Maria Laach (cf. p.335), and that he cannot make full sense of the reference to St Benedict's Rule in a footnote on p. 286. But these are trifles. The number of misprints, including the re-naming of Newman's *Grammar of Assent* after Nichols' own, derivative *Grammar of Consent* (! p. 60), is the only blemish for which the publishers may be arraigned.

D.H.G.

The Book of Saints, Compiled by the Benedictine Monks of St Augustine's Abbey, Ramsgate; pp. xiii, 606; 6th edition, A. & C. Black, London, 1989.

Subtitled "A Dictionary of Servants of God canonized by the Catholic Church", its scope is summarised by the title of a recent French translation: "10,000 Saints", encompassing as it does figures ranging from the Old Testament Prophets to those canonised or beatified in 1988.

This is a vast and laborious field to cover, and there are

very few gaps (if gaps they are) spotted by this reviewer. Each entry gives the name and status of the saint or blessed, their feast-day, their ministry in the Church, their dates and a brief biography. Legendary saints are mentioned as such. There is a useful Index of Emblems for identifying anonymous figures by their iconography, and a list of Patron Saints. It is generously illustrated in black and white.

The fact that a sixth edition has been published underlines the usefulness of this work, which has no current rival for scope and value. For anyone who has ever wondered, "Who was St So-and-so?", it is invaluable.

D.G.C.

WEST WING APPEAL

We are pleased to be able to tell you that our Architects and Quantity Surveyors think that work should be able to start on the building at Easter 1993, and that the basic cost of the building should not be more than £450,000, plus professional fees and VAT, if applicable.

In the first week of August we had two events designed to bring the target nearer: Neil Mackie, the well-known Tenor, and his wife Kathleen Livingstone, equally-reputed Soprano, kindly gave a Viennese Evening of solos and duets at Brodie Castle, an unqualified success, for which we are most grateful to the performers and their accompanist, Donald Hawksworth, the National Trust for Scotland, Brodie of Brodie and Trudo Fruit Juices, the evening's sponsors.

At Pluscarden later that week, the Aberdeen International Youth Festival and Moray District Council brought a concert by young Canadians, the Mount Royal Youth Choir, from Calgary, conducted by David Ferguson. Grenville Johnston was right to congratulate them, as he thanked them, on being such good ambassadors for their country.