

<p style="text-align: center;">Pluscarden Benedictines No. 86 News and Notes for our Friends June 1990</p>

FR ABBOT'S LETTER

Dear Reader,

“It is memory that makes the whole depth of man.” This dictum of Charles Péguy sprang to mind when Sheriff Stanley Gimson spoke to the Community, on 28th April, about his years of experience as a prisoner of war of the Japanese in Burma. His own remarkable sketches, made at great peril at the time, and photographs taken since on return visits, further enhanced his absorbing personal account. It was sobering to hear and see such things: well-built young men reduced to some 5 stone ... three men surviving, and helping others to also, by an unshakeable attachment to their piano accordions ... men only a step from starvation putting on plays and concerts, and all this against a background of gruelling work, cramped quarters and collective isolation. Sheriff Gimson never dramatised unduly, but we left his talk salutarily reminded of the perversities and resources found in every human heart.

On the 5th May our Abbot President's Council met at the Abbey of En Calcat near Toulouse in the south of France. Our meeting coincided with the Centenary of the Abbey and of the nearby Abbey of nuns in the village of Dourgne. On the Wednesday the two large communities came together for the day. All the French Abbots of our Congregation were there as well as the Abbots Visitor from the various Provinces, and a number of Abbesses. The Abbot Primate from Rome was the chief concelebrant at the Mass and preached the homily. We had a festive meal together and the monastery and workshops were open for visits. Later in the afternoon the Abbot and Abbess of Dourgne each gave a conference. This reminded us of the meeting of St

Benedict and his sister St Scholastica, when her prayer caused a thunderstorm and obliged him to prolong his visit. So at En Calcat, the storm broke out – lights were fused, microphones failed and came to life again. It was still raining after Vespers but the nuns went home to Dourgne.

Each Abbey has a community of about 80, both are very impressive, situated in the countryside of Languedoc at the foot of the Black Mountains. On the Sunday we were taken up the mountain to see the magnificent view, and on another afternoon to Albi to see the Cathedral and Bishops' Palace, now an art gallery. This part of France was the birthplace of the Dominican Order and the fortress-like Cathedral was a reminder of those troubled times. The High Altar of the Cathedral has been moved to the West end and the great choir with some eighty stalls beyond the screen is rarely used.

During the greater part of June I have been away, visiting the monasteries of the English Province in Mexico and the U.S.A. I left here on 23rd May and flew out to Boston and Petersham. The Community there was in retreat. On Sunday morning I flew on to Albuquerque in New Mexico, via Dallas. The entire community had come 150 miles to meet me there, and after an interesting tour of the old Mexican-Indian town centred round the church of St Philip Neri, we had a festive meal together. Next morning Prior Philip and I flew down to Mexico City – across the Gulf of Mexico and barren country. The City lies in the crater of an extinct volcano and from the air stretches as far as the eye can see – it is the biggest in the world and badly polluted by the exhausts from cars. We were met by Br Fernando who drove us down to the Abbey of nuns at Ahuatepec, where we spent two nights. They have a beautiful monastery on a hill and a garden filled with flowers and some fifty beehives. Their neighbours are the monks of Cuernaveca of the Swiss American Congregation, who have charge of an enormous parish and are in process of building a big church.

We returned to Mexico City and further north to our monastery of N.S. de Soledad (Our Lady of Solitude), a seven-

hour journey. It is in a very solitary place down a long dirt road with cactus and scrub everywhere. We arrived to find a state of crisis. The pump had broken down and there was no water; the car had also broken down and the monks had not returned from the town where they had gone to shop; and Br Ezechiel was said to be in hospital in intensive care. Happily this proved to be a false rumour and he was back at the monastery the following day.

Life at La Soledad is very simple. There are three professed monks, two postulants and an Oblate. Vigils are at 4 a.m., the only lighting is from kerosene lamps and there is a stiff climb up a rocky path to the chapel – water is pumped from the river to irrigate the garden and for domestic use. The monastery is built of adobe in the local style and the foundations of a new monastery have been dug on top – of the hill – to replace these temporary buildings. Br Juan is a wood carver and there are several other wood carvers in the village. Their work is sold in the monastery shop. There are two Benedictine Sisters who live near the monastery, who have a clinic and do catechetical work in the village. They have obtained wells and pumps to replace the polluted water at the river and their work is highly appreciated. A group of oblates and friends support them by obtaining medicines, baby food and other material needs. During my visit the Superior, Br Fernando, celebrated his feast day and the villagers came to the monastery for a picnic lunch under the trees – they brought a band with drums, guitar, double bass and concertina and played and sang throughout the meal, after which the children danced and sang. They packed the little church on Sunday with an overflow outside and sang with the support of three guitars, a flute and a tambourine. It was impressive to see so many small children. I was taken to see the nearest town, San Miguel Alende with its fine Mexican Churches.

After a week in Mexico we left for the monastery of Christ in the Desert in New Mexico. A friend of the monastery drove us to Mexico City. On the way we called at a restaurant for a meal and to my surprise found the waiters and waitresses all wearing Highland dress. In Mexico City we ran into a violent

thunderstorm. Here we were guests of the Benedictine Sisters who have a school and also work among the poor. They warned us not of come out of our rooms before 6 a.m. as they have ferocious guard dogs. When I opened the door at 6.05 a.m. I found a large Alsatian outside, but when he saw the white habit he vanished round a corner. After Mass we made a little pilgrimage to the basilica and shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Even at that early hour it was thronged with pilgrims and the Canons and boys' Choir were singing Terce. The great modern round church is most impressive but much more so is the faith of the people.

From Mexico City we went via La Plaz, where the temperature was 102°, and Houston to Albuquerque. The following day we were on the road again, calling at the Indian Pueblo of S. Domingo, the biggest in the area, with its church, served by Franciscans, in the centre. The Indian settlements have their own police force and the State police are not allowed to enter the territory. At Santa Fé (The City of the Faith of St Francis) we saw the seminary and adjoining Carmel and nearby, Jackie Kennedy's house. It is a beautiful city with fine houses and a multitude of hotels and restaurants and a thriving tourist industry. A big hotel built in Mexican style stands on the site of the former Loretto Convent built in 1852 but the chapel has been preserved – it contains the “Miraculous stair” – it consists of 33 steps, is circular without a central support, has two turns of 360° each – wooden pegs instead of nails were used throughout. It is said to be the work of a mysterious old man with grey hair and a donkey. He refused to accept payment and was not seen again.

We saw the old Spanish Cathedral of St Francis which is served by the Friars. The Bishop lives in Albuquerque. It has a statue of “Our Lady of Conquering Love”, originally called “of the Conquerors”. On to Espaniola for a meal in a Chinese restaurant – a brief stop at Abiuiu for Br Philip to register his vote in the local elections and then a thirteen-mile drive up the Canyon on a very rough road to the monastery, arriving at 4 p.m. in time for None.

I spent a week at Christ in the Desert and at once felt at home though in many ways it is very different from Pluscarden. It

is set in a very beautiful wide valley with rocky cliffs on either side and a river flowing through it. The buildings are of the simplest. The Church can be seen above the trees but the other buildings are some distance away and merge into the rocks. The refectory, kitchen, library, common-room and office are together; the cells are grouped in twos along a winding path, while guest-house and shop and workshops are also each some distance apart. The workshops are well equipped for weaving, woodwork, icon painting etc. There is an area for garden and more ground could be cultivated if the community grows. The heating is all by wood stoves and solar heat. The light is all by kerosene lamps except in the refectory which is supplied by solar electricity. The Community numbers six with two postulants.

Vigils are at 4 a.m., Lauds and Mass at 6.30. The winter can be very cold and the summer very hot. I experienced this while I was there.

The Oblate Sisters who live some twenty miles away are hoping to form a community similar to that of the Brothers. We went to see them one morning at El Rito where they have a temporary house and to see their new home some miles away. We had dinner in the little El Rito restaurant, completely filling the one small room – it is next to the Church of San Juan Nepomuceno built in 1827 by the Spanish settlers. It was the cradle of Catholicism in Northern New Mexico and Southern Colorado. On the way back I saw the village of Abiquiu with its old Spanish church and former Dominican Convent and further up the road the “Carson Forest Museum” with a collection of live wild animals, birds and reptiles native to the region: black bears, wolves, racoons, eagles, snakes etc.

On Trinity Sunday it was time for me to leave. We planned to set off at 2.30 but it rained steadily in the morning and the Community urged us to go after Mass because the road becomes treacherous after rain. In fact it was quite a hazardous journey with the car skidding from side to side and threatening to go over the cliff into the river. But we got through and eventually arrived at Albuquerque.

I was very impressed by both La Soledad and Christ in the Desert and the little communities in both places. It is no wonder they are attracting vocations. But I think a man needs a genuine vocation to the contemplative life in order to persevere – the solitude and the way of life are themselves a test of a true vocation.

On the Monday I flew back to Boston via Dallas, where Br Finbar and a guest met me and then got badly lost in Boston. I spent a week at Petersham and while I was there Fr Peter from Prinknash also arrived. It was my first visit to New England in the summer and it was beginning to get very warm. I was taken to see the Maronite monks whose monastery is also in Petersham. They are building a new monastery, all in wood, and the present monastery will become a new guesthouse. Each cell has its own little garden like the Carthusians and they also have three hermitages in the forest. Sunday was the feast of Corpus Christi and an exceedingly warm day. There was a procession after Mass and Exposition until after Vespers. On Monday morning before Mass I clothed another novice, Br Augustine, who joins Br Timothy and Br William. After Mass we had an outing to the Berkshires, with a picnic in the forest by a river and drove up to the top of Mount Graylock, the highest point in Massachusetts. Unfortunately the mountain was covered in misty cloud and rain, so the view was non-existent.

Early next morning the novices, junior monks and nuns left for a three-day seminar at St Anselm's Abbey, Manchester, while Fr Peter, Br Finbar and I went over to St Joseph's Trappist Abbey at Spencer, which is half-an-hour away by car. Abbot Augustine gave us a most interesting tour of their workshops – "Trappist Preserves" and the "Holy Rood Guild Vestments". It is a very large and good community and Dom Augustine has been particularly kind and supportive to our monks and nuns at Petersham, so I was glad to have the opportunity to thank him. Later that afternoon Sr Scholastica and Fr Anselm drove me to Boston and saw me safely on to the plane for Glasgow, where Fr Mark's father met me, and after Mass at St Cadoc's put me on the

train for Elgin, oddly enough a “Sprinter” from Glasgow to Aberdeen and an Inter City 125 from Aberdeen to Elgin.

On Sunday, the feast of St John the Baptist, the Aberdeen diocesan Pilgrimage was here and our Bishop preached. The Church was packed with about 600 people and an overflow in a marquee – a Knight of Malta and Knights and Dames of the Holy Sepulchre added dignity to the procession.

I was delighted to find the roof on St Scholastica’s Retreat hostel on my return. Lady Cawdor had very kindly come on 16th April, Easter Monday, auspicious date for a new beginning, to begin the foundations at the controls of a mechanical digger, and when I went away there was not a great deal to see.

I also missed the visit of our neighbours of Pluscarden and Birnie Kirks, who came here on Trinity Sunday for an ecumenical service, led by the Minister, Mr Gordon Cowie, and by the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, Rt Rev. Prof. Robert Davidson, who preached, and whose Meditation is reproduced elsewhere in these pages.

Next Sunday our Mass was enlivened by the presence of an octet of the Landshut Swing Band, who played a very dignified selection of appropriate pieces. Fr Symeon preached in German. We are always pleased to see our friends from Elgin’s Bavarian Twin-town.

Rather in the spirit of the “Landshut Wedding”, a group of local people marked the 600th anniversary of the Wolf of Badenoch’s firing of Elgin Cathedral, and his putative burning of Pluscarden on the way, by walking from Lochindorb Castle to Elgin Cathedral, calling in at Pluscarden for a restorative cup of tea on the way.

Fr Mark’s last letter from Ghana told of his recovery from tropical ills, to which we pray he will not again succumb.

Wishing you joy and blessings

Yours devotedly

D. Alfred, Abbot

THE HILL FIELD

The Abbey's title proclaims the area of our little estate as "twenty and one-half acres, or thereby", and our Agricultural Return, which we fill in for the Department of Agriculture, shows how little of that is really available for use, once buildings, roads, lawns and much else have been subtracted from the total.

Now, by the kindness of the Wills family and the generosity of Mr Ian Petrie, that has been greatly changed, for Mr Petrie has bought and given us the Hill Field, which lies on the hill behind the Abbey and has an area of just under 36 acres.

This secures the setting of the abbey and gives us room for future agricultural or similar developments. Meantime we have let the grazing, so as to keep all tidy, and also produce an annual income.

Most important of all, is the fact of having space, in which to get peace for prayer or reading, in quiet and with the beautiful view of the countryside spread out below, for as the Community grows, so does the value of space to balance the koinonia of the community with the solitude of the monos. We are very grateful indeed.

MEDITATION DELIVERED AT PLUSCARDEN ABBEY ON 10TH JUNE 1990

**by the Right Reverend Professor Robert Davidson,
Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland**

Someone used to come to see me occasionally. Whenever I saw his face I knew what was going to happen. For the next fifteen or twenty minutes, all I would say was no more than 'yes' or 'no'. I would hear all about what he had been doing, his problems, his family, his good days and bad days: then he would say "thank you for listening, I must be going." All I could do was to sit back and take it. He was not at all interested in me. I was just a useful

sounding board.

I wonder whether God doesn't sometimes feel like that about us. We bring to him our prayers; and it is right that we should so do. We tell him all that has gone wrong in our lives; we share with him our good days when it is great to be alive, and our bad days. We ask many things from him for ourselves and for others. There is nothing wrong in all of this, but if this is all, haven't we got the wrong end of the stick; haven't we turned prayer upside down? Haven't we forgotten the important thing about prayer which is summed up in the word "adoration"?

Sometime ago I was driving with my daughter across the Kingston Bridge in Glasgow. Suddenly she said one word "look". There it was, a marvellous sunset, the dark outline of cranes and ships and distant hills etched against the blazing brightness of a sky suffused with orange, red and purple. It was one of these magical moments when nothing needs to be said. You just knew you were in the presence of something much bigger, greater and more wonderful than yourself. It makes you feel small, humble, yet curiously glad to be alive, filled with a sense of wonder.

That is adoration and that is where all true prayer and worship begin: not asking God for anything, not even saying we are sorry or saying thank you. These are all things centred on ourselves. Adoration is the moment when we are lifted out of ourselves; when we see life in the light of the wonder and greatness of God; when we turn to God to praise him not because of what he gives us, but simply because of who and what he is. As the Shorter Catechism puts it, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever"

- to glorify God just because he is God,
- to acknowledge that we, with all our hopes and needs, are not at the centre of the universe,
- to see ourselves always in the light of a larger vision of One whose majesty and greatness can never be fully put into any words of ours.

Perhaps true adoration only begins when we know that any words we use to try to describe God must be weak, inadequate words, and we become silent, in the silence of wonder.

So come let us adore him. Let us remember who God is; and then keep silence before him.

Creator of all, heaven and earth, the vast immensities of space

the beauty in the tiniest flower, in the smallest particle:

Creator of all, yet Father, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,

the God who so loved the world that he gave his only Son:

Creator of all, yet present with each one of us now and always,

knowing us better than we know ourselves, the Holy Spirit in our midst.

Come let us adore him ... in the silence of wonder.

BOOKS AND THINGS

Several generous bequests have enriched our library in recent years. None so much, however, as that of the late Mgr Hugh McEwan (1925-89), for six years Vice-Rector of the Scots College in Rome, more recently parish priest of St Michael's, Dumbarton, and a well-known and much-respected Catholic figure. Fr McEwan was a man of broad but coherent interests.

Biography, contemporary political history, ecumenism, Scripture, the Papacy, the Second Vatican Council, Church History, Scottish Presbyterianism were all within the compass of this large-minded priest, himself an elegant writer and the competent biographer of Bishop Henry Grey Graham. "Tell me what you read and I will tell you what you are." Mgr Hugh's library indicates the stature of the man, and we are grateful to his sister, Mrs Teresa Kane, and to a priest friend, for allowing us to be the beneficiaries.

* * * * *

It is good to hear that the Dutch Bishops have reclaimed this year the year of St Willibrord (658-739). He is honoured by the English as one of their greatest missionaries, by the Dutch as their apostle and the founder – in 690 – of the See of Utrecht, by Benedictines as a dedicated propagandist of their Rule. May he intercede for us all!

* * * * *

Recent issues of the ANALECTA CARTUSIANA contain a useful contribution to the manuscript tradition of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, viz. a transcript of the Ms. Harley 959 in the British Library (A.C. no. 119, vol 2, ed. J. Clark); more documentation on the General Chapters of the Order (A.C. no. 100:21) and an interesting compilation on liturgical change in contemporary Charterhouses (A.C. n.116:5, Die Kartause, Liturgisches Erbe und Konziliare Reform, by Hansjakob Becker). This last includes Books 5 to 8 of the Order's 1975 Statutes, and part of their 1981 Missal and Lectionary. The Carthusian liturgical tradition has always been somewhat distinctive, and, if anything, is more so now. The changes seem to have been managed sensitively and to be generally appreciated. In the author's judgement Carthusian fidelity to the primacy of the spiritual in this domain could well be exemplary for the whole Church.

Copies of these and other issues of the series are available from Dr James Hogg, Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, A-5020 Salzburg.

D.H.G.

PLANS AND PROGRESS

On Easter Monday Lady Cawdor kindly came and officially marked the beginning of work on St Scholastica's, while a crowd of interested supporters looked on. Since then, the walls have gone up, the roof is on (the slaters are at work still), the floor and ceiling are in, and so are the windows and inside walls and doors. It all looks very fine.

We have no desire to emulate some foreign tour operators, and so, although the building is due for completion on 31st August, and official Opening on 3rd September, it would probably be wiser, if you hope to come and stay here, to think more in terms of the end of September – there's many a slip!

Meanwhile our West Wing appeal is progressing steadily, we have received a very generous gift from the Dulverton Trust and we have just reached £127,000, a tribute to the hard work of our Committee and our Appeal Co-ordinators, Mrs Anita Milne and Mrs Susan McDonald, but even more to the generosity of you, our readers and constant supporters.

Some dates for your diary:

8th September, 7pm, "The 'Messiah' for All", sponsored by Capel-Cure Myers Capital Investment. Come and listen to the Choirs, Moray Chamber Orchestra and Soloists, or join in yourself – we are providing scores.

On ITV at 11 am on Sunday 7th October, Mass will be live from Pluscarden, when the Conventual Mass will be broadcast nationally on the commercial channel.