

Pluscarden Benedictines

No. 91 News and Notes for our Friends September 1991

FR ABBOT'S LETTER

Dear Friends,

September is a memorable month for us because it recalls the official re-opening of the monastery on the feast of Our Lady's Birthday, 8th September 1948, forty-three years ago. It is interesting to look at the photographs taken on that occasion and to observe the changes of the years. Changes in sartorial fashions of both the laity and clergy – the latter wearing birettas and lace cottas and the Archbishop in *Cappa Magna*. It appears to have been a rather chilly day and the congregation are well clad. Among those who are still with us are a young seminarian carrying the Bishop's crozier, now himself the Bishop of Aberdeen, and the young parish priest of Forres, who is now the senior priest of the Diocese and Provost of the Cathedral Chapter. In 1948 half of the present community had not been born.

Together with these changes, the ruins of Pluscarden have been transformed and brought to life again. The Church was roofless, a tent had been erected in the choir to shelter the altar. The procession treads gingerly down the night stairs with its loose steps and no guard rail, while the floor is just sand with broken tomb-stones lying around.

Each year as the 8th September comes around our gratitude to God, and to all who have shared in this work, is renewed. Incidentally, the 8th September is not the titular feast of the Church: the 15th August, Our Lady's Assumption, is the patronal feast, together with St John the Baptist on 24th June. St Andrew is patron of the valley, not of the Church. So it is the monastery of Our Lady and St John the Baptist in the Valley of St Andrew. It would seem it was St Andrew's Glen before the monastery was

founded.

Our Lady's nativity is the patronal feast of our monastery at Petersham in New England. They hope to begin building their church next year. It seems fitting to build God's house first and then permanent quarters for the monks.

In Mexico, Our Lady is also patroness of the monastery under the Spanish title, Nuestra Señora de la Soledad: Our Lady of Solitude, a beautiful title for a contemplative community, and the place is truly a solitude on a hill. Their feast is on 6th September. The monks already have a small but beautiful little church reminiscent of a chapel in Greece, so the monks are now constructing a simple monastery in Mexican style, of adobe brick and all on the ground floor built around a cloister. The first side, consisting of eight cells, a small library with common room with and open cloister, is nearly completed. With further funds it is hoped to construct another side of the cloister. £2,000 will pay for a monk's cell. We found sponsors for five.

In recent weeks we have transferred the Scottish Section of the library to the chapter house. We have still to carpet the floor. In an effort to exclude winter draughts and summer swallows we have constructed inner glass doors in the thickness of the wall at the West entrance of the church. During August the small area for coaches near the bridge was enlarged through the generosity of the Kitson Family and Frank Slowey. In preparation for the building of the West Wing a small quantity of good stone has been built up on the site, most of it coming from the old hospital at Dufftown.

There have been several musical events, notably the concert given by an orchestra from Iceland as part of the Aberdeen International Youth Festival. On a memorable evening at Darnaway Castle, by the kindness of Lord and Lady Moray, Richard Baker talked of 'Music in my Life'. During this month, musicians from Regensburg in Bavaria provided Baroque music – which sadly I missed – and our old friends, the Deeside Choristers sang Evensong here. But I will leave it to a more musical pen to write of these occasions.

In October our Abbot Primate will be in England from

Rome to take part in the meeting of the Union of Monastic Superiors at Hawkstone Hall. Some forty Abbots, Abbesses, Priors and Prioresses – Benedictine and Cistercian – from Great Britain and Ireland will be taking part. The theme is monastic life and the laity and promises to be very stimulating.

Yours devotedly,

+ D. Alfred, Abbot

STRING ORCHESTRA OF REYKJAVIK COLLEGE, ICELAND

The Aberdeen International Youth Festival has given us many exciting concerts over the years and this year's was, perhaps, the most ambitious yet in size and variety. Although the orchestra consisted only of strings and percussion, there was great contrast in mood between the three items. The first, Janacek's Suite for String Orchestra, was quirky and cheerful. The second, Shostakovich's Chamber Symphony, was imbued with a deep, Russian melancholy. Shostakovich's music is always marked by an intensive quality, set against the background of the Soviet political system which he was forced to go along with.

The sponsor of the concert was SVALI, manufacturer of Icelandic spring water fruit drink, and, during the interval, it was possible to sample their product, as well as other refreshments.

The last item in the programme was Serenade by Leonard Bernstein for solo violin, strings and percussion. The violin solo was played by Sigrun Elvadsdottir. In his book, *Am I too Loud?*, Gerald Moore says that he once accompanied a "beautiful violinist" in the Wigmore Hall, that is to say that the lady was extremely good looking, unfortunately she had "no aptitude for music". Fortunately on this evening the extremely charming young lady played as beautifully as possibly could be imagined. A

considerable battery of percussion was deployed, and as a serenade this one, anyway, would have ensured that the young lady in question would not fall asleep.

These days we are accustomed to youth orchestras playing the most difficult works with aplomb and at this concert the precision was most noticeable, though some of the players looked extremely youthful. We are grateful to all those who helped to bring them here for a memorable occasion, not least the sponsors, SVALI.

D.A.W.

PLUSCARDEN'S OLDEST BOOK?

On the opposite page we print a reproduction of a page from a Latin Bible. It is, in fact, the last page of the New Testament, Chapter 22 of St John's Book of the Apocalypse (or Book of Revelation). The black letter print is beautifully clear. The writing at the foot of the page is less so: *Thomas Ross Monachus a Pluscarden hunc possidet librum vere* [to which has been added, *mentius*] *ex dono Vulhelmi Zeng (? Young) burgensis a Elgin in Moravia anno MVCXLI vere* [*mentius* added] and at the side of the page the signature of *Patricius Dunbar de Sanquar*.

This may be translated, *Thomas Ross monk of Pluscarden on owns this book (liar) given by William Young, Baillie of Elgin in Moray in the year 1541 (liar)*. The rival claimant puts his signature at the side, *Patrick Dunbar of Sanquhar*.

Until fairly recently the book was in the library and is at now Blairs in College. It belongs to the Scottish Bishops and is now in Edinburgh with the rest of the Blairs archives.

Thomas Ross was probably the last surviving monk of Pluscarden. His name appears on a charter of 1586 as the last remaining monk. His signature first occurs on a charter of 1548, the last of 12 monks. In 1599 it was reported to the Kirk Session that "The monk of Pluscarden has baptised the bairn". He is not

named, but would seem to be Thomas Ross (*The Records of Elgin*, Crammond, Vol II, p. 170).

Patrick Dunbar was the eldest son of Alexander Dunbar. He was Baron of Sanquhar near Forres and in 1560 the monks made over to his brother, John, the lands of Westerton. It would be interesting to know where and when this edition of the Latin Vulgate Bible was printed and also its subsequent history during the three hundred years and more since it left the hands of John Ross and found its way to Blairs.

There is, of course, a much older book in the British Library in London, the Anderson Pontifical, found at Brodie Castle and bearing the signature of the Rev. Anderson, Minister of Drainie and chaplain to Major Bateman at Pluscarden. There is evidence to show that it was once in use at our monastery in pre-Reformation times.

D.A.S.

THE WEST WING

Planning Permission Granted

We have now passed another significant milestone with the granting of Planning Permission for the West Wing. Work is now in progress on working drawings. We have begun accumulating materials, especially Scots slates, of which we are going to need over 30,000.

RICHARD BAKER AT DARNAWAY CASTLE

Of the various events staged in connection with the Abbey's West Wing Appeal, there is no doubt that the recent evening at Darnaway Castle has been by far the most rewarding in financial terms, for £5,000 was added to the Appeal.

The evening took the form of a musical autobiography of Mr Baker, who though probably best known to most people from his years with the BBC, has had a number of strings to his bow. He

interpreted “Music in My Life” in a generous way, and illustrated his reminiscences with recordings from the sound archives and more recent material, interspersed with pieces which he played on the piano.

The audience enjoyed themselves on a beautiful evening in a wonderful setting, for Lord and Lady Moray had very kindly made available Darnaway’s Randolph’s Hall for the occasion, adding another dimension to the day.

We are very grateful to all who made such a success of the evening, not least our sponsors, who by advertising in the programme (printed free by the Moravian Press, who also print this newsletter), contributed the bulk of the evening’s profit. Mr Robert Young, of our Appeal Committee, should not go unacknowledged, for he inspired the event and set it up.

BOOK REVIEWS

The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetic by Hans Urs van Balthasar. Vol. V: ***The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age***. Published by T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1991.

“*On earth the broken arch; in heaven the perfect round.*” The line is Robert Browning’s. And often verified. Schubert left his Symphony unfinished and St Thomas his Summa, nor did St Bernard complete his Commentary on the Song of Songs. Is this a fate of masterpieces? Yet there are exceptions. In 1987, a year before his death, Hans Urs von Balthasar, the Swiss Catholic theologian, had been able to conclude what may well rank as one of this century’s finest theological masterpieces. It was the fruit of 27 years work. It runs to 15 volumes, plus an epilogue, in its original German. It has the form of a trilogy. It comprises a theological aesthetic, a theo-dramatic and a theo-logic, that is, a study of the beautiful, the good and the true as found in Christ and the Christian revelation.

Comparison with Thomas Aquinas is inevitable, even if

premature. St Thomas brought together the wisdom of Classical and Arabic philosophy, of Scripture and of the Fathers of the Church. 700 years later, von Balthasar has aspired to embrace both the whole humanist tradition of the West, from Homer to Heidegger, and the entire Judeo-Christian inheritance: Scriptural, patristic, scholastic, poetic and mystical. Simply as a performance, it is impressive. Von Balthasar is not a Baedeker or a Michelin. He has a vision, and it is that that guarantees unity. Only time, that is, the Body of Christ in time, will judge the lasting truth and value of von Balthasar's venture. Its Catholic character, though, seems sure, and both modernism and fundamentalism are far from it. Even surer is the superb courage that animates the whole. Here, one feels, is Christian and Catholic thought as it should be: Christ-like in its brave exposure to the full reality of the human and the divine. Yet in his preface to the opening volume, von Balthasar calls his work a fragment. Browning is right.

The first part of the trilogy is now fully in English, published in 7 volumes by T. & T. Clark. Its German title, *Herrlichkeit*, has been well rendered, The Glory of the Lord. Volume I – *Seeing the Form* – is introductory: the form is the revealed figure of Christ, the glory as it appears, and the seeing of it our perceiving of it by faith in the rapture of grace. Volumes II and III choose 12 outstanding Christian thinkers, clerical and lay, who have sensed the aesthetic of the Christian reality and reflected it in their writing: here Dante, Vladimir Soloviev and Charles Péguy stand beside predictables like Augustine. Volumes IV and V try to fathom the connection between the glory of God on the face of the crucified and risen Christ and the glory that shines out from all existent reality. The last two volumes, on the Old and New Covenants respectively focus on the uniqueness of the glory of divine love shown to Israel, in Christ and in the Church: “and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.”

Volume V, *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*, (13th C. to 20th C.) continues Volume IV's treatment of the same in Antiquity (Homer to Aquinas). For many, these may prove the least accessible volumes of the seven. Metaphysics, after all, is not

a word to captivate English-speaking readers, while the author's culture, catholic and sensitive as it is, is also markedly Middle-European. Von Balthasar's style, too, is often more suggestive of Wagner or Mahler than of the Mozart he loved. Misprints, too, may further daunt the reader. Precept for precept greets him on p. 9. Meditation replaces mediation some 100 times, etc. etc. Yet it would be wrong to by-pass this section of the work. Von Balthasar's march past of "modern metaphysicians" reassuringly includes Julian of Norwich, Ignatius Loyola, Cervantes, Goethe and Holderlin as well as the names familiar from histories of philosophy. More importantly, he is tackling a central issue. If we are to receive the glory of God as a free, supernatural gift, we must already have some awareness of what glory is. In the last resort, such an awareness is offered us by the "miracle of being" (p. 613). The fact that I am, that everything else also is, and yet that none of us need be is, if we open ourselves to it, something glorious.

In philosophical language, it means that essence and existence are distinct, and therefore that being suggests a free Giver beyond itself. "The direction of the meandering historical paths of Western Metaphysics becomes straightforward and simple if we centre the chaotic fragments around the authentic metaphysical question: 'why is there anything at all and not simply nothing?'" (p. 613). If metaphysics asks such a question, then it is faithful to the primal experience of any child and will not be a traitor to wonder. It will stand in the light of being and be open to what is beyond it: "all free revelations of the word from the heart of the Godhead" (p. 633). But here, von Balthasar urges, so much that is modern, for all its splendours, does disservice. The miracle has been progressively eclipsed. The lines that run from late medieval theology through Luther and the Reformation (pp. 29ff.), from the Renaissance's appeal to the Classical past (pp. 247ff.), from Cartesian rationalism (pp. 451ff) have all failed us. Saints in their abandonment (pp. 48ff.) and the great fools of literature like Don Quixote or Dostoevsky's Idiot (pp. 141 ff.) may have kept the skylights open. But, more often, we have been left in artificial light or consigned to darkness, told to admire the harmony of the

universe, for example, or reduced, like Sartre to “a lonely existence devoid of eros” (p. 284). History has brought us to a valley of decision. Not a decision between antiquity and modernity, but between Christianity and nihilism. “The history of the modern period has no clearer result” (p. 249). The Christian task, therefore (pp. 646ff.) is daunting but simple. We are called to be the guardians of metaphysics, of thought open to the miracle.

It sounds impossibly grand. But it means, says von Balthasar, simply this: loving our neighbour, not with our love, but with the love of Him who glorified the Father, not himself.

D.H.G.

MONASTERIES OF THE SUBIACO CONGREGATION
The English Province No. 10
Our Lady Queen, Monastery, Tickfaw, Louisiana, U.S.A.

In response to an invitation from the Bishop of Raleigh, North Carolina, the Benedictine Sisters of Ferdinand Indiana, agreed to make a contemplative foundation at Durham, North Carolina in a monastery vacated by Carmelites. The pioneer group arrived at the monastery on August 5th 1970.

On May 7th 1977 the monastery was granted the status of an independent priory with its own noviciate. Two years later the community moved to the Diocese of Baton Rouge, Louisiana at the invitation of Bishop Joseph Sullivan. Ten acres of land were purchased at Tickfaw in 1984 and a monastery was built.

The Federation of St Gertrude numbers more than 1,560 sisters. They have schools with over 50,000 students and they care for hospitals with over 100,000 patients. The Tickfaw sisters, in their desire for a more contemplative life, asked the Holy See for permission to become *moniales*, i.e. nuns in solemn vows. This has been granted and Mother Mary Clare of Petersham went down to Tickfaw for the Solemn Profession of the first five nuns. Bishop Stanley Ott of Baton Rouge presided and Mother M. Clare gave

the Cowl to the superior, Mother Mary Herbert, who then gave it to the other four nuns.

On 11th July 1991 the community was aggregated to the English Province of our Congregation. The little community now numbers eight and is fortunate to have two monks of St Meinrad's Archabbey as chaplains. The monastery is purpose-built and very peaceful and attractive. It is hoped to build a church to replace the present temporary chapel. The garden and grounds are very well kept, thanks to the hard work of the chaplains and Tickfaw is a quiet, country place, ideal for a monastic community given to the praise and adoration of God.

D.A.S.