

Pluscarden Benedictines

No. 188 News and Notes for our Friends Advent 2019

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Cover: Visit of Relics of St Thérèse to Pluscarden

FR ABBOT'S LETTER

Dear Friends,

Sometimes when it is time for a new edition of *Pluscarden Benedictines* I wonder what on earth to write about, so I was grateful when it was suggested that for this edition I write about my time as Abbot Visitor to the English Province of our monastic Congregation. This I can do!

I held the office of Visitor from March 2003 until September of this year. Our Provincial Chapter then elected our new Abbot Visitor, who is Abbot Cuthbert Brogan of Farnborough Abbey.

The office of Visitor is part of the special structure of our monastic Congregation, the Subiaco Cassinese Congregation. A Congregation is a union of monasteries that leaves the monasteries independent in the management of their affairs, but provides a structure for mutual support and serves to hold individual communities to a good standard of monastic life. There are currently 19 Benedictine Congregations. Each has its own legislation, regular meetings of the abbots, and its own Abbot President. Each also has a system of "visitations": the President or other designated monks regularly visit all the monasteries in an official way. Our own Congregation is unique in being divided into Provinces, currently eight. Each Province has regular meetings of the abbots and other representatives of communities, and each Province has a Visitor.

The Visitor's job is, as the title implies, to carry out the regular visitations in the monasteries of the Province. More generally, it is to serve as a first recourse for situations in which a community needs some outside help, and to be a liaison between the monasteries of the Province and between the Province and the Congregation. A feature of our own Province that affects the Visitor in particular is its broad geographical area and its diversity of culture and language. In 2003 our Province had ten communities of monks, four in the UK, three in the US, two in Mexico and one in Ghana; there were also three associated

communities of nuns, in Louisiana, Massachusetts and Kent. Since then, two new monasteries have been founded or come into the Province in the US, while three others, one in the US and the two in Mexico, have separated from the Province to be part of another structure within our Congregation.

When I became Visitor, I had been to about half the monasteries of the Province, but I could not claim to know them well. By the end of my time as Visitor I felt very much at home in all the monasteries of the Province. I consider this a great blessing. Beyond the obvious pleasure of meeting a variety of good people in many places, there is the privilege of serving the monastic life (one hopes) and thereby the Gospel. While operating within our monastic structures the Visitor becomes something of a missionary.

Besides their work within their own Provinces, the Visitors meet with one another and our Abbot President twice a year, in one of the monasteries of the Congregation. In my time these meetings took us to monasteries in the Philippines, Australia, Brazil, Madagascar, Haiti and various parts of Europe and the US. The meetings are always a strenuous exercise in the art of communication. There is no single language in which all the Visitors are fluent, and we cannot afford to bring in translators. Somehow, with patience and goodwill, communication happens. If the meetings were not always models of efficiency, they proved to me that a shared obedience to the Gospel overcomes the limitations of linguistic and cultural diversity.

In my time as Visitor I witnessed a good deal of change in our communities. In older communities numbers have gone down and generally there has been a need to downsize, scaling down work and sometimes adapting buildings. By contrast, communities that were relatively new foundations in 2003 have become better established and if not larger, at least with more of the things in place that make for growth, should the Lord give it. But the contrast is superficial. On a deeper level in all our communities there is a rediscovery of what is essential to our vocation, a ready

acceptance of the purification involved in change, and hope for the future.

It should be said that in our structure, the community to which the Visitor belongs has to make considerable adjustments to allow the Visitor to function, because a Benedictine community normally expects to have its Abbot at home, but an Abbot Visitor is often away visiting somebody else. I have inflicted my absence on two communities, Petersham during my first years as Visitor, Pluscarden in the last years. I am grateful to my confreres for their patience. And I am grateful to the monasteries I have visited for welcoming me and making me part of their lives. My prayers and best wishes go to our new Abbot Visitor, Abbot Cuthbert, and I look forward to his visits.

Yours devotedly in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Fr Anselm". The signature is written in dark ink on a white background.

“The Story of a Soul” by St Thérèse was written in 3 separate manuscripts, addressed respectively to Mother Agnes of Jesus (her sister Pauline), Sister Marie of the Sacred Heart (her sister Marie) and Mother Prioress Marie de Gonzague. Each manuscript ends with the word “love”. The last manuscript breaks off in mid-sentence as the pencil fell out of the Saint’s hand.

The end of Manuscript “A”:

How will this “story of a little white flower” come to an end? ... I don’t know. But what I am certain about is that God’s Mercy will accompany me always, and that I shall never cease blessing you for giving me to Jesus. For all eternity I shall rejoice to think that I am one flower in the wreath you have earned. To all eternity I shall echo your song, the ever fresh song of Love.

FROM THE ANNALS

AUGUST 2019

3rd: Fr Abbot gave a conference on oblates this evening before Vespers.

4th: **Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time.** Fr Giles supplied Mass in Forres this morning. The two participants in the monastic experience weekend joined us at common-room tea.

6th: Fr Matthew went to Aberdeen Royal Infirmary for a post-operation examination of his foot. District nurses are to come and change his foot dressings regularly.

Fr Benedict departed for a second visit this year to Nigeria.

7th: Monsignor Philip Whitmore is staying here for a few days. He gave a talk to the community this afternoon on the Venerable English College in Rome, of which he is the Rector.

11th: **Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time.** Fr Martin supplied Mass in Forres this morning.

Professor Phil Adamo gave a reading to the community from his account of the 1230 pilgrimage.

12th: Our builders did some work to repair the outlet of the septic-tank. In the course of that a stone from the mediaeval abbey was unearthed, the base of an arch.

15th: **The Solemnity of the Assumption:** the community's Patronal Feast. Fr Abbot presided and preached at Conventual Mass. He then departed for various Visitation duties, including at Thien Tam Monastery in Texas, which belongs to our Province.

16th: Fr Dunstan departed after his summer stay, en route back to Petersham.

The beginning of an Oblates' residential weekend. Bishop Richard Moth of Arundel and Brighton, our friend and oblate, is giving the conferences for the weekend.

18th: Fr Benedict arrived home from his trip to Nigeria in the early afternoon.

29th: In Inverness this evening Bishop Hugh ordained Dominic Nwaigwe to the priesthood. Fr Benedict attended the Ordination, at which he sang the Latin litany.

21st: Our builders Colin and Davie Thomson are working on the new car park between the Lodge and St Scholastica's retreat

At evening Chapter these days Fr Prior is telling the community about some of his adventures in Nigeria.

22nd: Ben Norby entered this afternoon as a postulant. He recently completed a degree in Theology at St Andrews University.

24th: This weekend there is a group of Quakers staying at the monastery.

26th: Fr Bede, now Prior of Kristo Buase, is with us for some days, before going on to represent his monastery at the Provincial Chapter.

Our builders start work on the back drive, grading it and preparing it for a new covering; paid for by a generous benefactor.

28th: Fr Ambrose of Kristo Buase arrived early this afternoon. He has a sabbatical period acting as parish priest in the Shetland Islands. He came to see Fr Bede. In the evening Fr Bede spoke to the community about Kristo Buase monastery.

29th: A Gaudeamus was held today in honour of our much valued Vietnamese Brothers Martin de Porres and John Bosco. Having completed their scheduled two years with us, they begin tomorrow the first part of their return journey to their own Monastery at Thien-Phuoc. The animated film *Finding Nemo* was shown. Br Martin de Porres made a touching speech thanking the community for all its hospitality.

30th: There is a meeting of the Ghana Monastery Trustees at Prinknash Abbey. Fr. Abbot and Br Michael are attending it; also of course Fr Bede.

We receive disappointing news about the substantial grant we had applied for, with good hopes of success, from the Scottish Natural and Cultural Heritage Fund. Had we received the grant, we would have been able to begin building work on the projected South Range Project next year. In the event our funding

application was turned down. Building is therefore unlikely to begin in the near future.

31st: It rained heavily today, revealing several leaks in the roof of the East cloister. Rain also prevented the contractor from laying tarmac on the back drive. Fr Prior gave a conference based on the letters of St Thérèse of Lisieux. After supper all greeted Fr Giles for his name day.

SEPTEMBER 2019

1st: Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time. A Letter from Bishop Hugh about the visit of the relics of St Thérèse of Lisieux to our diocese was read out at Mass.

4th: Cold weather: the heating is put on, to general approbation.

6th: Recollection Day. Fr Abbot gave a conference, detailing some of his travels over the past few weeks.

8th: Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time; also the 71st anniversary of the resumption of monastic life at Pluscarden. Also the 40th anniversary of Fr Giles' Ordination! Our recreation tea was held in the Cloister garden today, in sunny weather.

9th: A Chapter Meeting was held for the 3-yearly election of deans, according to our Constitutions. Br Simon was elected a dean and Br Daniel was appointed. The two *ex officio* deans (Prior and Cellarer) remain in office. Our Choir order was duly rearranged.

10th: Much work is done by various people in preparation for the arrival of the relics of St Thérèse tomorrow.

11th: The arrival at Pluscarden of the Relics of St Thérèse of Lisieux. See separate report.

12th: Today people cleared up after yesterday: carpets were lifted up, rolled up and taken away; remaining petals were swept up; benches, ladders, chairs and tables were put back in their right places.

13th: Fr Benedict departed very early this morning for the Abbatial Blessing of Dame Anna Brennan as the new Abbess of Stanbrook. He is staying at Ampleforth. The blessing takes place tomorrow.

14th: Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. Fr Abbot gave a conference. We had the usual veneration of our Relic of the True Cross at Vespers.

16th: Fr Abbot and Fr Giles departed for our Provincial Chapter. Our friend Ann Ryans came to stay, especially in order to help us out with cooking.

19th: Fr Matthew went to Aberdeen Royal Infirmary, undergoing a minor operation on his neck, and returning the same day. These days he is back on his feet, able to walk freely, so long as he doesn't overdo it. Work goes on in the new car park.

20th: The novitiate enjoyed a *Dies Non* outing today, climbing Ben Rinnes near Dufftown, in sunny weather.

23rd: Fr Giles returned from the Provincial Chapter between Vespers and supper. Fr Abbot has gone to Birkenhead to see his mother who is in a nursing home there. News from the Chapter: Fr. Abbot steps down as Visitor after a service of 16 years. Abbot Cuthbert Brogan of Farnborough Abbey is elected Visitor in his stead. Our Br Simon is elected as a member of the new Abbot-Visitor's Council.

Before Compline we offered journey prayers for Br Thomas who is going to New Zealand where his parents are in bad health, especially his father. Fr Mark takes over as sacristan during Br Thomas' absence.

25th: A fund-raising ceilidh is held this evening in Aberdeenshire, in aid of our South Range Building fund. The combine harvesters are at work all around us. A Scottish Churches child abuse enquiry is in the news these days. The bee department reports a good honey harvest. The garden produces very large numbers of fine apples.

26th: Annual Community Outing. See separate article.

28th: News came that Fr Abbot's mother died at about eight o'clock this evening, in the presence of himself and his sister. RIP. There was an evening concert of Sacred Music by Musick Fyne in our Church.

29th: Fr Chris Monaghan, an Australian Passionist who had studied at the Biblicum in Rome with Fr Abbot, arrived today to see him. Unfortunately Fr Abbot is still away, following his mother's death.

OCTOBER 2019

2nd: Today the community went to see Bishop Hugh at his house in Aberdeen.

4th: Recollection Day. Fr Prior gave a conference on Chapter 6 of the Holy Rule: *De Taciturnitate*.

7th: Today is the 40th anniversary of Fr Mark's first vows.

8th: At 4.00 p.m. Tina Campbell gave a presentation on safeguarding to the community. Bishop Hugh and about half a dozen priests from the diocese (including Fr Ambrose Flavell) came as well. Also with us for this is Fr Dermott O.P. from Edinburgh, together with a priest from Tonga who is studying safeguarding. Fr Dermot is here to offer expert advice on our own safeguarding policies and protocols. Tina Campbell is the National Safeguarding Coordinator for the Bishops of Scotland, and all members of the Catholic Church in Scotland who are in any way involved with children or vulnerable adults, are required to attend such training sessions.

Fr Martin today presided at the funeral Mass and interment of the ashes of Maggie Graham, an oblate from Lossiemouth. RIP. Deacon Vincent from Elgin also took part. A large crowd was present in both side chapels.

11th: An attractively produced Oblate Handbook arrives from the printers.

12th: Before Vespers Fr Abbot spoke to the community about his mother.

Dame Andrea Savage OSB, the recently retired abbess of Stanbrook, is staying for a week at St Scholastica's. She is our Fr Mark's sister. This is their first meeting in seven years.

14th: Monday: Fr Abbot returned to Merseyside, in order to be able to preside at his mother's funeral on Thursday. He is due back on the 30th of this month.

16th: The brethren were given the chance to see three short videos today. One by Sancta Familia Media showed the visit of the relics of St Thérèse to Pluscarden. Two others were recently discovered from Pathé News archives, showing Farnborough Abbey in 1953 and in 1960. In these two videos younger versions of faces familiar to many of us appeared: including our own Dom Basil, Dom Edmund and Dom Adrian.

18th: We hear news of the death of Graham Dunbar, an oblate of Pluscarden for many years. RIP.

We hear also, quite by chance, of plans put forward to the local Planning authorities for the building of 12 new houses in the immediate vicinity of the monastery. We register our concerns about his project to the competent authorities. Our neighbours in the valley also are united in opposition to the scheme.

19th: Before Vespers Fr Prior gave a conference from St John Climacus' teaching on prayer.

Our guest Fr Giulio Marra spoke to the community about his work with drug addicts and others at the bottom of society in Italy.

20th: Br Michael attended an "Apple Day" at the village hall this afternoon. He sold over £180 worth of our apple juice. People gave him a number of apples, asking him to identify the type.

26th: Fr Prior gave a conference on intercession, especially as taught and practised by St John Henry Newman.

27th: **Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time.** Br Simon was greeted by the community for his Feast tomorrow.

30th: Fr Abbot arrived back home in the evening.

A film crew is about today, making a programme for the series called Heavenly Gardens. Their film is to be broadcast on the BBC on Good Friday next year. They were favoured by beautiful late Autumn sunshine.

New signs appear about the grounds, most especially in the new car park, which is nearing completion now.

Even as the Pluscarden cat Baxter has become invisible to his adoring Public, so his profile has been considerably raised for the community these days, because of his now permanent domicile in

our East Cloister. Baxter must be around 18 years old now, and he finds that age takes its inevitable toll. His place of residence is convenient for those looking after him, and also for his own health and safety, particularly in view of the presence of feral cats outside, always ready and waiting for a fight. Most of the time Baxter offers instruction, by example, in the arts of relaxation and prolonged slumber, apparently without a care in the world. At intervals he deigns to interrupt this peaceful state in order to absorb large quantities of vitamins. Also, when people are about, he remains always happy to soak up whatever attention is going: especially at community recreation after supper.

NOVEMBER 2019

1st: ALL SAINTS DAY. Fr Abbot presided and preached

2nd: All Souls Day. The usual post Compline cemetery visit took place, this year in warm, light but steady rain.

3rd: Thirty First Sunday in Ordinary Time. The annual Mass Census: we count 59 in our Congregation at the 8 and 10 o'clock Masses combined.

5th: The Solemnity of the Dedication of our Church in 2015. As usual we keep today as a day of prayer, with exposition of the Blessed Sacrament between Mass and Vespers.

6th: Nurses came from Elgin to administer an anti-flu vaccine to all members of the community. Pears from the garden flood into the refectory these days: luscious, juicy and sweet.

9th: The annual community retreat began before Compline. Abbot Friedhelm Tissen of Kornelimünster is giving the conferences: all based on episodes in the *Vita Benedicti* of the Dialogues.

11th: The Official Opening of our new Car Park: constructed with the help of a substantial cash grant from the Government. Fiona Hyslop, Member of the Scottish Parliament, and Scottish Government Minister for Culture and Tourism, came to cut the ribbon at the Entrance. A small crowd of our local friends and supporters gathered for that ceremony, which concluded by Fr Abbot blessing the new site.

NEWS FROM ST MARY'S MONASTERY

From September 9-23 Fr Gregory was away in Europe. His main purpose was to attend the Provincial Chapter held this year at Montserrat. Prior to this he also visited Germany with his sisters Jeanne and Beth, where they met relatives and saw some of the places where their ancestors lived. After experiencing some technical delays with his plane in Barcelona, he made it back home safely a day later than originally planned.

During Sunday Mass on October 20 Sr Mary Gertrude Webster, of our sisters' community, made her simple profession. Afterwards we were all invited to a lunch at the sisters' priory. Sr Mary Gertrude's immediate family were here, as well as several of her friends, coming from various states such as New Jersey, North Carolina, Georgia and Louisiana.

Another visitor in October from a faraway state was Sr Lynn Marie McKenzie of Sacred Heart Monastery in Cullman, Alabama. Sr Lynn came to stay at St. Scholastica Priory to give our sisters advice on how to revise their constitutions in the light of the Vatican documents *Vultum Dei Quaerere* and *Cor Orans*, and she was well qualified for the task. Sr Lynn is a canonist, with a particular interest in canon law for religious, as well as being a civil lawyer. She is President of the Federation of St Scholastica, the large federation of Benedictines sisters in the United States. Finally, she is the current Moderator of the CIB, (Communio Internationalis Benedictinarum) which unites all Benedictine communities of women throughout the world which are recognized by the Abbot Primate.

Sr Lynn gave two talks to which we brothers were also invited. The first was a power point presentation of the meeting of the CIB held in Korea in 2017. Her second talk focused specifically on the instructions given in *Cor Orans* and their implications for contemplative nuns. Sr Lynn explained their contents in a very clear and interesting way. The second talk was particularly relevant to St Mary's Monastery, since we have a

“twin community” relationship here in Petersham with St Scholastica Priory, sharing many activities, including worship and formation classes.

At the time of writing, our current building project, the renovation of the former “carriage house,” is nearly complete. We’re looking forward to making use of the new building. We are also looking forward to our next Monastic Experience Weekend which will take place the weekend of November 8-11.

DIC

St Thérèse, *The Story of a Soul*

The end of Manuscript “B”:

Dear Jesus, why should I feel the need to tell others about the secrets of your love? You, nobody else, have taught them to me, and can I doubt that you yourself will reveal them to others as well? I know you will, and I implore you to do it. I implore you to look down in mercy on a whole multitude of souls that share my littleness; to choose out for yourself a whole legion of victims, so little as to be worthy of your love.

The end of Manuscript “C”:

I’m certain of this: that if my conscience were burdened with all the sins it’s possible to commit, I would still go and throw myself into the arms of Jesus, my heart all broken up with contrition; I know what tenderness he has for any prodigal child of his that comes back to him. No, it’s not just because God, in his undeserved mercy, has kept my soul clear of mortal sin, that I fly to him on the wings of confidence and of love...

VISIT OF THE RELICS OF ST THÉRÈSE TO PLUSCARDEN

11 September 2019

As soon as we heard that the Relics of St Thérèse might be coming to Scotland, we asked if they could come to Pluscarden. And astonishingly, wonderfully, thrillingly, they did! It all just goes to show: if you ask, you get! Though being friendly with the right people does certainly also help very much.

The beautiful casket containing the Relics of the Saint is heavy. Presumably it has some sort of lining made of lead. It arrived here anyway in a hearse, in good time for the scheduled start at 11.00 a.m. The accompanying team of undertakers stood by to offer help and advice on how to lift and carry. Their assistance certainly proved invaluable. Awaiting the Saint's arrival, we had a good crowd of people filling our Transepts. Among them were about 100 children from the three local Catholic Primary Schools. Each child had a rose to carry, and they followed the Relics in procession down the site of our mediaeval nave, as the bells joyously rang out, and we sang Psalm 121: "Laetatus sum" – I rejoiced when I heard them say, let us go to God's house!

A liturgy of welcome had been prepared, with the help of the organising committee for the Relics in Scotland, and of Aberdeen's own St Andrew Community. In case anyone might be confused about Who was the centre of attention here, four enormous photographs of the Saint were set out on stands, together with the beautiful Icon painted for the occasion by members of the St Andrew Community. After an offering of Incense, and some words of introduction by Fr Abbot, our guest Deacon read the Gospel: "Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven." Sr Anna Christi O.P. from Greyfriars Convent Elgin then spoke movingly to the children about the significance of St Thérèse. Rather lengthy Prayers followed, based on Thérèse's life and message, and dramatically read by the children. Everyone's roses were then solemnly blessed. As all present filed slowly forward one by one

to venerate the Relics, we sang a Litany of St Thérèse, and then a final hymn all about her, set to the tune “Ode to Joy”. And *then*, from a trap door in the tower, at least 50 feet above head height, rose petals began to fall. They came down in cascades, falling as in a widely spread curtain, and on and on, all over the delighted children below. The Sancta Familia Media camera captured that spectacle on film: you can see it on their marvellous YouTube video. The camera crew unfortunately had to be careful not to show the assembled children there, because of Data Protection laws: though viewers can certainly hear their excited cries. Sr Anna Christi standing prominently, though well away from the Tower, stretched out her hand, and a rose petal landed directly on her upturned palm. That was a nice moment! To round off the experience for the children, Fr Giles gave them an informal talk about monastic life. They were then free to run about outside and picnic in our grounds, favoured for that by the pleasant sunshine for which so many had prayed.

Meanwhile, the bier with the Relics was taken up again in order to be installed on the main Altar of our Church. A rapid check with a tape measure of the doorway through from the Transepts found it to be too narrow. So, the procession passed instead, and with more solemnity, through the central doors with the Angel Icons, under the Blessed Sacrament, and so straight on to the Altar. And there, folk were free to pray in silence for the rest of the day. Many came to do that, and with fervour. It was especially good to see many young people among them.

Two more little liturgies in honour of St Thérèse were celebrated that day. After the Office of None there was a brief talk by Fr Prior, then an act of veneration especially for the Pluscarden Community. During that we sang the “Ubi caritas est vera” – Where love is true, there is God. This was repeated, and then repeated, and then repeated, again and again, as the many in the public Chapels came forward to make their own veneration in turn, and to ask the Saint’s prayers. This liturgy was concluded by a special Blessing given by Fr Abbot. “May the God who revealed

to St Thérèse the mysteries of the childhood of Christ, and led her in the way of simplicity and trust, grant you childlike confidence in his merciful love...”

Our final public celebration was a liturgy of farewell, shortly before the departure deadline of 5.00 p.m. As the bier was taken up for the final time at Pluscarden, words from Psalm 88 were sung to the lovely 5th mode melody used here sometimes at the conclusion of Benediction: “Misericordias Domini in aeternum cantabo” – I shall sing forever of the merciful love of the Lord... Again the Pluscarden bells rang out, in expression of everyone’s joy and gratitude for the great grace we had received that day. And so the holy Relics went off on their way, accompanied by our love and prayer for all who would be blessed by them in the days to come; for all who would be drawn closer to God through the powerful example and intercession of the Little Flower, St Thérèse of Lisieux.

Letter to her sister Céline, still living at home, March 1889

“Do not think we can find love without suffering, for our nature remains and must be taken into account; but suffering puts great treasures within our reach. Suffering is indeed our very livelihood, and is so precious that Jesus came down upon earth on purpose to possess it. We should like to suffer generously and nobly; we should like never to fall. What an illusion! What does it matter to me if I fall at every moment? In that way I realise my weakness, and I gain thereby... I know that Jesus is better pleased to see you stumbling in the night upon a stony road, than walking in the full light of day upon a path carpeted with flowers; because these flowers might hinder your advance.”

PROVINCIAL CHAPTER OF THE ENGLISH PROVINCE: MONTSERRAT 2019

The Subiaco-Cassinese Benedictine Congregation is made up of Provinces, reflecting the international character of the Congregation, in geography and languages, in every continent. Pluscarden belongs to the so-called English province, currently with monasteries in the USA, Africa, Britain and Germany. We meet as a Province every four years, usually in the year before our General Chapter (which involves the entire Congregation). Each autonomous monastery sends its superior and an elected delegate from the community. The superiors of dependent houses are also invited, together with others associated with us. The Abbot Visitor presides and the members of his Provincial Council are also present.

Kits, cats, man and wives, this adds up to a fair number, beyond the capacity of many of our monastic guesthouses; that, and the desire to experience the wider Congregation, has led us to go farther afield than the Province in choosing a place for our deliberations, which this year led us to the famous Abbey of Montserrat in Catalonia, where Abbot Josep and his community showed us a generous welcome, instanced by the care of D. Anton's preparation for our coming and D. Xavier's careful attention to our every need.

The Abbey is about 1200 metres above sea-level, on the distinctive isolated saw-edged mountain which gives it its name. It is a millennially-ancient shrine of Our Lady, the Black Madonna, the centre of pilgrimages from far and wide, the centre, too, of their culture for ten million Catalans. The fifty-strong community has as one of their main activities the offering of hospitality to the (literally) millions who come each year, with an hotel, a youth hostel, and all else required for the support of body and soul. A rack railway and a cable-car offer an alternative to the road, which winds up the cliff-side.

The Office and Mass are in Catalan and Latin, and the singing is of the standard that one might expect in Dom Suñol's monastery. Of course the highlight is the Escolania, the very ancient boys' choir – it goes back to at least the 14th century – which sings the Virolai, an ancient hymn to Our Lady and the *Salve* daily at Vespers. The organ is of suitable scale and extent for its duties, played by a number of organists, monks and others. There were usually more than fifty lay people present for Lauds every morning, and of course the large church was packed for Vespers. The large esplanade offers space for larger celebrations, such as the 4,000 who came for Mass on the Saturday (though they took shelter from the rain which had on that day undoubtedly gone to Spain).

Our Chapter busied itself with hearing reports on the Province and on each monastery. Our Constitutions need up-dating and a new translation, we had to elect a new Abbot Visitor, in the person of Abbot Cuthbert Brogan, of Farnborough, and his Council, among whom was our own Br Simon. New documents from Rome, providing for the lives of contemplative nuns, offer opportunities and challenges, but first require to be interpreted, and Sister Scholastika Häring, a Benedictine Canonist from Dinklage in Germany, was our most accomplished guide through the thickets, enabling our Sisters together to make very significant steps forward.

It seemed like a good idea to have a break from the work, so we packed sandwiches and went off to nearby Barcelona to see Gaudi's church of the Sagrada Familia, begun in 1882, completion planned for 2026. It is an extraordinary building, one of the brethren described it as being "High Gothic on acid". High it is, with soaring towers and pinnacles – are they inspired by Montserrat's mountain? – symbols and imagery all around. Gaudi left his collaborators free to do their jobs in their own way, an instance is to be found in the epicantical folds of the angels of the Nativity, sculpted by a Japanese. Our fluent and knowledgeable guide pointed out the church's many facets, and we concluded our

visit in the crypt, where Gaudi is buried. Our bus driver took us back via the scenic route, showing us some of the sights of the city and returning by a minor, more sinuous ascent of the mountain.

As well as the Liturgy, we shared recreation and meals with the Community, who also showed us round their impressive library, their museum and art gallery as well as the treasures of their sacristy. Their greatest treasures, however, are their shrine of Our Lady, and the crypt where their beatified Civil War martyrs are venerated. Their community has been generous to the Church, Abbot Gabriel Brasò was a great Abbot President of our Congregation, and on very large tablets are inscribed the names of the Abbey's saints, prelates and scholars, beginning with a Pope – if you've got it, flaunt it! – a stimulus to present and future members of the community, and to us, to follow in their footsteps. "If you want to dwell on the mountain of the Lord", invites St Benedict, in the words of the psalm. God grant that monastic life may continue to flourish on his Montserrat, a beacon visible from afar, giving light and warmth and life to his Church and to his people.

DGC

St Thérèse to Père Roulland, Missionary Priest, May 1897

I do not understand, Brother, how you seem to doubt your immediate entrance into heaven if the infidels were to take your life. I know one must be very pure to appear before the God of all Holiness, but I know too, that the Lord is infinitely just; and it is this justice which frightens so many souls that is the object of my joy and confidence. To be just is not only to exercise severity in order to punish the guilty; it is also to recognise right intentions and to reward virtue. I expect as much from God's justice as from his mercy.

A CANONISATION: THOUGHTS ON A NEW SAINT

“For the honour of the Blessed Trinity, the exaltation of the Catholic Faith and the increase of the Christian life, by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ and of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul, and our own, after due deliberation and frequent prayer for divine assistance, and having sought the counsel of many of our brother Bishops we declare and define Blessed **John Henry Newman** [and four others] to be Saints and we enrol them among the Saints, decreeing that they are to be venerated as such by the whole Church.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

So said Pope Francis in St Peter’s Square on Sunday 13 October 2019.

What does it mean to canonise someone? Does it *do* anything? Among many possible answers, one comes to mind: the “canonised” becomes “canonical”, that is, a pattern, a norm, a guide for living the Christian life. A Christian disciple is put before us, not for rigid imitation, but as embodying certain approaches to Christian living, indicating ways of responding to circumstances, offering habits of fidelity that “click” with our own possibilities. They are set on a lampstand as “a kindly light”, as inspiration, friend, point of reference. Surprising connections form. “To live your life”, says a Russian proverb, “is not as easy as crossing a field”; it is good to be accompanied. St John Henry Newman had that gift while he lived; it has been manifested since in many lives. It is now endorsed, his sanctity sanctioned. The Scottish novelist Muriel Spark had already observed: “I have noticed that to those who have been attracted by Newman his personality continues very much alive. It is one of his gifts. He is far less dead, to me, than many of my contemporaries.” Canonisation affirms a life.

Here I only indicate three ways Newman might prove canonical.

First and famously, there is his mid-life conversion: his move from membership of the Church of England to that of the Roman Catholic Church, a move sealed in the hamlet of Littlemore at the hands of an Italian Passionist, Bl. Dominic Barberi, on 9th October 1845. This was a move conceived in prayer and fasting, study and reflection, with nothing impetuous or ill-considered about it. It was the fruit of a development he charted unforgettably almost twenty years later in his *Apologia pro Vita Sua*. It was heroic as regards the renunciations it required: of his ordained ministry, his university fellowship, his leading role in a great movement of Anglican revival, the esteem and contact of so many friends and followers. It was a turn to obscurity, to membership of a despised religious minority, “one from whom men hide their faces”, and to a Church still ravaged institutionally by the effects of the French revolution and Napoleonic wars and often hapless before a new, aggressive secularism. Yet Newman’s recognition of the 19th century Roman Catholic Church as that of the Fathers and his never-regretted entry into full communion with her has opened a way for so many. It has not only inspired the recent Ordinariate, but sustained countless individuals on a similar journey, who have drawn their courage from his or had their perplexities resolved by his resolutions. “It was by way of Newman that I turned Roman Catholic,” wrote Muriel Spark again. “Not all the beheaded martyrs of Christendom, the ecstatic nuns of Europe, the five proofs of Aquinas or the pamphlets of my Catholic acquaintance, provided anything like the answers that Newman did.”

Then again, there was his acute sense of individuality, of being himself and no-one other. Much converges around this: his sense of conscience, of accountability, of personal mission. His sensitivity too; it is no coincidence that his finest work was an *Apologia* for his own life, drawn forth by unjust criticism. But what could have turned to self-indulgent melancholy or narcissistic self-absorption was grasped by grace. It became a springboard for the sense of “myself *and my Creator*”, of “personal *Providence*”, of the “kindly Light” that rescued him from self-will. His genius

for friendship, his love of Oratorian fellowship, also flowered from the same sanctified soil. Likewise, his exercise of priesthood and intercessory prayer. He teaches us to distinguish the sense of self that merely turns on itself and one that is converted by the great double commandment of love.

He was a modern man. With his sense of history and his theory of the development of doctrine – by the whole trajectory of his ecclesial life – he also opened up a path for Christianity and the Church in the new world of modernity. A path of neither sad, prickly, intransigent fundamentalism nor of what he called theological liberalism, uncritical submission to the latest way of the world. At the age of 15, he “fell under the influence of a definite Creed” and remained there. He wrote his dense and seminal *Grammar of Assent* to defend “the faith of an Irish factory girl” against unreal rationalism. He equally regretted any needless “narrowing of communion” in the Church and the undue authoritarianism of his time, and toiled for an educated, engaged laity. He was always creatively bi-polar. He saw the Church as an organic whole, springing from and always in continuity with its apostolic origins and simultaneously alive to the needs of contemporary souls. Compelled to leave Oxford’s “dreaming spires”, he turned to the dark mills and factories of Birmingham. He would have rejoiced in the approach of Vatican Council II, and of the Popes and saints of our times.

Let each draw their own water; there is plenty. Newman’s canonical, canonised character will always echo his own multi-faceted versatility, and inspire in different life-giving ways. It will also always encourage to a life of holiness and prayer, lived in the full communion of the Church.

“I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision” (Acts 26:19).

Bishop Hugh Gilbert OSB

SAINT JOHN HENRY NEWMAN

“The Ancients worshipped; they went out of their own minds into the Infinite Temple which was around them. They saw Christ in the Gospels, in the Creed, in the Sacraments and other Rites; in the visible structure and ornaments of His House, in the Altar, and in the Cross; and, not content with giving the service of their eyes, they gave Him their voices, their bodies, and their time, gave up their rest by night and their leisure by day, all that could evidence the offering of their hearts to Him. Theirs was not a service once a week, or some one day, now and then, painfully, as if ambitiously and lavishly given to thanksgiving or humiliation; not some extraordinary address to the throne of grace, offered by one for many, when friends met, with much point and impressiveness, and as much like an exhortation, and as little like a prayer, as might be; but every day and every portion of the day was begun and sanctified with devotion. Consider those Seven Services of the Holy Church Catholic in her best ages, which, without encroaching upon her children’s duties towards this world, secured them in their duties to the world unseen. Unwavering, unflagging, not urged by fits and starts, not heralding forth their feelings, but resolutely, simply, perseveringly, day after day, Sunday and week-day, fast-day and festival, week by week, season by season, year by year, in youth and in age, through a life, thirty years, forty years, fifty years, in prelude of the everlasting chant before the Throne, – so they went on, ‘continuing *instant* in prayer’, after the pattern of Psalmists and Apostles, winter and summer, in heat and in cold, in peace and in danger, in a prison or in a cathedral, in the dark, in the day-break, at sun-rising, in the forenoon, at noon, in the afternoon, at eventide, and on going to rest, still they had Christ before them; His thought in their mind, his emblems in their eye, His name in their mouth, his service in their posture, magnifying Him, and calling on all that lives to magnify Him, joining with Angels in heaven and Saints in Paradise to bless and praise Him for ever and ever” (*Lectures on Justification* 13).

MORE NIGERIAN ADVENTURES

5 – 18 August 2019

I was delighted to be in Nigeria again this August, once again on behalf of our Abbot President Dom Guillermo Arboleda. My mission this time was to represent him at the Abbatial Election at Umuoji, and to conclude the Visitation opened in January at Ozubulu. Once again for this visit I rejoiced in the invaluable assistance of Br Peter Eghwurdjakpor, Prior (and Superior) of the monastery of Ewu. He kindly invited me to visit also his own monastery in Nigeria's Edo State, so I took the opportunity to do that before my departure home.

The security situation in the country was not without some concern at the time, with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office warning British citizens against non-essential travel. Well, that didn't apply to me, since (as I saw it) my travel was essential. The journey was made all the more interesting because of my arrival a day late, following a flight cancellation at Heathrow. This meant I lost the internal flight Br Peter had booked for me, and had to travel from Lagos to Asaba instead by bus. That was a 10-hour journey: whence we were picked up for the final stretch by the excellent Samuel, Umuoji's own official Driver. Actually, the scheduled revolution in the country was nipped in the bud by the Authorities, who took the precaution of slapping all its leaders in prison beforehand. Still, as we travelled we saw even more Police and Army checkpoints than had been evident on my previous trip in January. Bristling with automatic weapons and on high alert, their rust-encrusted vehicles still sported the usual hand painted slogans: OUR TRUST IS IN GOD, or SACRED HEART OF JESUS HAVE MERCY. Happily for me, August in Nigeria is the rainy season, in which the usual roasting heat is somewhat mitigated. When the rain was actually sluicing down, you could almost imagine yourself feeling rather comfortably cool.

Because of the nature of our business, and the tight timetable we had to observe, I found myself travelling from Umuoji to

Ozubulu, then back to Umuoji, then back to Ozubulu. That is only about a 40-minute drive, but of course each arrival and departure had to involve dancing and singing. The result anyway of it all was a happily completed Visitation at Ozubulu, and a new Abbess at Umuoji. Mother Margaret Mary Ngobidi (born 1965) stood down on completion of her 12-year term, and the 93 Umuoji voters chose instead Mother Ruphina Chukwuka (born 1970), who was immediately confirmed in Office and installed, to the exuberant rejoicing of all, herself of course excepted.

Thence to Ewu: another very long drive, much of it through long tracts of uninhabited jungle. Once as we crawled through an exceptionally large and undulating crater in the road, a group of informally dressed and variously armed men emerged from the bush and surrounded our vehicle. Oh dear. All they wanted from us though was blessing and prayer, so we granted them that, and passed on our way willingly enough, as may be guessed.

Founded in 1979 from Glenstal Abbey in Ireland, Ewu is celebrating this year its 40th anniversary. The thriving community has around 45 members, with a new foundation of its own in Calabar, to the South East of the country. The brothers are drawn from at least 15 different language groups, so communication among them is always in English. The beautifully kept grounds host a multiplicity of works. There is farm work, with cultivation of the soil, and (especially) of pigs and chickens. There are fine guest houses, and a book shop, and repository. There is a palm oil production industry. There is a large (wood-fired) bakery, which supplies bread not only for the community but also for sale to the local villagers. There are factories for the making of jam and marmalade, and for the manufacture of candles. Above all, there is the famous Herbal Medicine Clinic. This centre of Alternative Medicine, founded and overseen by Dom Anselm Adodo, employs its own specially trained doctors and nurses, biologists, psychologists and laboratory technicians. Many come here to be treated for their health complaints, and its medicines are sent out far and wide.

Vigils at Ewu begin at 0345. The brethren go to that, and emerge from Church not less than 3 hours later, as Vigils are followed immediately by a half hour meditation period (in the dark), then by Lauds, then by Mass. An informal breakfast follows: rice with a spicy sauce. Lunch during my visit incidentally also featured rice with a spicy sauce, and for supper we had rice, with a spicy sauce. The English Psalms of the Divine Office are sung (very fast) to tones developed at Keur Moussa, always accompanied by two brethren playing the Korah.

Thanks to contributions from readers of Pluscarden Benedictines, we have been able to send several boxes of books for the libraries of both Umuoji and Ozubulu. Also we have paid for a new generator for Ozubulu, which I was happy to see in operation. We have also arranged for the Umuoji Choir Mistress to attend the 4-year “Cantantibus organis” course in Rome. This course, based at the Benedictine monastery of Santa Cecilia in Trastevere, offers a thorough formation in Gregorian Chant, organ accompaniment, vocal technique and Choir direction. As for Br. Peter of Ewu: he has agreed to preach our own community retreat in 2020. We look forward to that very much indeed.

DBH

The word “Love” dominates the last conversations of Saint Thérèse, spoken amid terrible physical and spiritual suffering:

Mother Agnes: Are you afraid now that death is close?

Thérèse: Ah! Less and less!

Mother Agnes: Do you fear the Thief? This time he is at the door!

Thérèse: No. He is not at the door. He has entered. But what are you saying, little Mother? How can I fear one whom I love?

And her last words, immediately before dying:

Oh! I love him! My God, I love you!

FINDING THE COMFORT IN *CARRION COMFORT*

Despair can be a surprisingly seductive and insidious temptress. She can whisper her “sweet nothings” in one’s ear without one even really being aware of who she is or what exactly she is trying to accomplish. She has even attacked the great saints—both Saints Thérèse of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity warned their sisters not to leave bottles of dangerous medicine lying within their reach as they reached the end of their long and terrible struggles with disease—and she wins disciples in the modern world among those who turn away from God, religion, family, and love, proclaiming that nothing will ever get any better. This is her anti-gospel, subtly inculcated by the culture of today: nothing really matters; life’s only meaning is what you make of it; and if suffering gets too great or a relationship or situation becomes too painful, just put an end to it. In my own life, despair’s favourite tactic is to approach in the long, dark reaches of the night, trying to convince me on sleepless nights that my problems will never go away, God most certainly doesn’t care a bit (what has He done, after all, to remove or alleviate this pain?), life will always be like this, and I might as well just throw in the towel. While the fathers and mothers of the desert spoke often of the midday demon (*acedia*, or sloth) attacking the monk in his cell in the long stretches of time before the afternoon meal, I have become convinced that there is also a night-time demoness who seeks for disciples in the long watches of the dark: Despair.

Providentially, by God’s grace I recently came upon a poem previously unknown to me by Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Carrion Comfort.” I was meandering back to the abbey after a long *Dies Non* walk, very worn out after several nights of little or no sleep, and reading a couple of Hopkins’s poems out loud to myself when I stumbled upon this hope-filled gem:

“Not, I’ll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee;
Not untwist—slack they may be—these last strands of man
In me; or, most weary, cry *I can no more*. I can;

Can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be.”

Written when Hopkins was also in a situation of terrible suffering (exiled to Dublin to teach Latin to indifferent Irish students while spending literally hundreds of hours dedicated to the mind-numbing task of reviewing entrance examinations), this short poem was Hopkins’s way of seeking to find a reason to hope while plodding on through what must have seemed more and more to be a meaningless existence, an existence he was strapped to by the yoke of obedience to his superiors, leading to an ever more rapid decline into ill-health (due to the overwork and mental stress which would eventually kill him at an early age). He, like Sts Thérèse and Elizabeth, must have also fought the so-very seductive temptation to end it all (“I can...not choose not to be...”).

Hopkins seems to realize, however, that this suffering (which he compares to the action of a winnowing fan on grain) is purgative and part of the blank cheque all religious sign at the moment they give themselves to God by vowing their lives to Him:

“...That my chaff might fly; my grain life, sheer and clear.
Nay in all that toil, that coil, since (seems) I kissed the rod,
Hand rather, my heart lo! lapped strength, stole joy, would
laugh, cheer.”

For Hopkins, the action of a winnowing fan on grain gave him his poetic metaphor; during the long hours of sleepless nights I have often felt more prosaically like bacon being fried on God’s griddle! Nevertheless, Hopkins’s heart would rather find delight (would even laugh!) in knowing that any and all suffering, if lived in the light of Christ’s suffering and death on the Cross, can bring meaning and “stolen joy” to even the worst of dark nights. This Cross, the “rod” he kissed at the moment of his profession of vows, is the source of his hope, my hope, and all Christian hope. Hopkins surprisingly expresses the desire to cheer, knowing that even in the midst of Calvary, the victory is already won; as Christ said to His disciples on the night before He suffered, “In the world

you have tribulation; be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world” (Jn 16:33). And yet, Hopkins wonders to himself whose victory he should cheer:

“...the hero [Christ] who heaven-handling flung me, foot trod
Me? or me that fought him [Hopkins himself]? O which one? is
it each one? That night, that year
Of now done darkness I, wretch, lay wrestling with (my God!)
my God.”

Who indeed is the winner when we come through Calvary to the end of a long, dark time of suffering? Is it Christ, by whose grace we have persevered? Is it ourselves, because we have – by His power – persevered? Or is it both? It seems that Hopkins finds it a double victory, and alludes to Jacob after he wrestled with an angel/God in the desert: Jacob survived the fight, but God left Jacob crippled for life. In any case, we should remember that the ability to suffer is one of the traits that separate us from the beasts: they can feel pain, we alone can suffer; as Christians we know that there is value and meaning in redemptive suffering. Indeed, sometimes it can seem like suffering is the only shred of humanity we have left to cling to, the only thing that remains to show we truly exist as weak and frail human beings, desperately in need of God’s love.

That demoness Despair, like a crow seeking to feed on the dead and decaying flesh left behind by those who fall into its clutches, seeks to tempt us into finding our comfort by joining her in picking clean the bones of hopelessness. Along with Hopkins and God’s saints, by God’s loving mercy and grace, we can refuse to join in her ungodly feast. We do not have to join in the nihilism and facile self-pity which our world is constantly handing to us on a silver platter. We can instead take comfort in latching ourselves onto the redeeming sacrifice of Christ’s death and resurrection, and thereby give meaning to our suffering, and bring hope back into the world.

Br B-JM

COMMUNITY OUTING TO STRATHERRICK

This year the annual Pluscarden Community outing took place on Thursday 26 September. Our destination was the Catholic Chapel at Stratherrick, in the hills above the East bank of Loch Ness. In penal times this area was part of the Lovat estates, and it remained Catholic, in spite of harsh laws forbidding Catholic worship. The Church of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception was built in 1859, by a local man called Alexander McDonell, who had gone off to Australia to make his fortune. During a severe storm at sea he promised to build the Church if his ship was saved, and when it was, he kept his word. Ever since then Mass has been celebrated regularly in Stratherrick. A fine Priest's house attached to the Church bears testimony to the times when a resident Priest was required for the sake of the many local Catholics. Now unfortunately the congregation has dwindled. Indeed, the population has dwindled, as people move away from the remote countryside and into the towns and cities. Sunday Mass has up until now been served from Fort Augustus, but with increasing demands made on the clergy, that weekly Mass is now sadly under review.

The site is anyway dramatically beautiful, and the Church all that could be wished for. Back home at Pluscarden a guest Priest offered the Mass for our guests and regular visitors. Happily for us the sun defied gloomy forecasts, and smiled, if intermittently, on our expedition.

We found a warm welcome awaiting us in the person of Fr Andrew Hardon, the Parish Priest of Fort Augustus. Stratherrick's lovely Chapel is of a size to suit a relatively small community. It retains its old Eastward Altar, and is equipped with fine devotional statues and pictures. All of that somehow conveys a sense of homely intimacy, while leaving the visitor with no doubt that this is exclusively a house for prayer. As soon as all were gathered we sang our conventual Mass.

After Mass and Sext, we repaired to the small but very

adequate adjacent hall. There similarly adequate refreshments were unpacked. After that feast had been served, Fr Andrew provided a feast of another sort, entertaining the company with clarinet music. Before entering the seminary he had been a professional musician, and had played his clarinet in various prestigious orchestras.

The next important port of call was the little shrine of Mary Immaculate, rather recently constructed up on the hill above the Chapel. Bishop Hugh has blessed a little Altar there also, for the occasional outdoor Pilgrimage Mass. There we recited the Angelus, and sang the *Sub tuum praesidium*...

Some then went off to view the famous nearby waterfall at Foyers, over Loch Ness; others to Fort Augustus, for a tour around the now secularised former Abbey and Church. That was a melancholy experience indeed, for those bold enough to undertake it. The Nave of the Church has been divided up into accommodation units, for rent or sale. Where the Blessed Sacrament Altar once stood, there is now a heated swimming pool, with sauna cubicles to the side. The former monastic refectory with its fine stained glass windows is now a snooker room. The Chapter house has been converted into a flat. The Lodge though has been nicely transformed into what is now the Catholic parish Church, with the Priest's flat upstairs.

Our day at Stratherrick concluded with Vespers sung in Church. The two-hour drive home, through utterly wonderful countryside, was interrupted only by a stop off for a most pleasant supper en route. And so to Compline, and bed.

St Thérèse to Père Roulland, Missionary Priest, February 1896:
Please say this prayer for me every day: it sums up all my desires: “Merciful Father, in the name of your sweet Jesus, of the Blessed Virgin Mary and of all the Saints, I beg you to consume my Sister with your Spirit of love, and to grant her the grace to make you greatly loved.” My longing is to love Jesus and to make him loved.

THE LORD'S PATIENCE

When I settle to pray He is waiting

When I enter the Church He is waiting there

When I walk forward to receive Holy Communion
He is waiting with great love

When the Priest places Him on my tongue –

“The Body of Christ” –
and I say “Amen”

His waiting is over for the moment:
He gives Himself to me,
Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity,
And makes me one with Himself.

And there is no need for words.
He gives me Love
and I give Him love in return.

And then later, when I am too busy with many things,
He is waiting again.
He is waiting for me to put other things aside
Waiting for me to find time for Him
Time when I can simply be there with Him.

And when I keep Him waiting

He never gives up.

*Written at Pluscarden Abbey, by a Pluscarden Oblate,
October 2019*

BOOK REVIEWS

The Joy of God: Collected Writings: Sister Mary David OSB; Bloomsbury, 2019, PB, 188 pp.

Having spent much time recently re-reading the Desert Fathers and the great, early classics of monastic spirituality, I often have the impression that we men tend to see the path to heavenly bliss and union with God as a great rush up Mt Carmel. We dash up the slope, a blazing sword brandished in one hand and a desire to slaughter the prophets of Baal coursing like fire in the veins, all the while screaming “*Nada, Nada, Nada!*” Heaven seems to be a kingdom to be conquered at sword point; after all, didn’t Christ tell us that “The Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence and the violent are taking it by force” (Matthew 11:12)?

On the other hand, when reading a St Teresa of Avila, a St Clare of Assisi, or a Bl. Julian of Norwich, I get the feeling that the way to God is a far more receptive path, one of letting go, of receiving His grace and love as they come to us, and acceptance of His will. It can then seem that the way to Heaven is rather a garden path, lined with fruit trees in bloom and lovely flowers, a cool breeze blowing away the heat of the day, and guided along by a gentle and loving mother’s hand. Which is the true way? Is it one path for men, and another for women? Or is it a bit of both?

I seem to have found the inkling of an answer in this gem of a book, *The Joy of God*, by Sr M. David, OSB. An American woman (though educated at Cambridge), she left a teaching career in America to enclose herself behind the walls and grilles of St Cecilia’s Abbey on the Isle of Wight. Along the way of her all too brief monastic life, she became mistress of novices for 22 years, as well as prioress of her community. Cancer claimed her life, but not until Sr M. David had allowed God’s grace to work through her sickness, leading her along the way of holiness.

The book is called a collection of her “writings”, although it seems rather to consist of snippets of personal notes, as well as

extracts of letters of direction and counsel given to novices and nuns, with extracts of either conferences or written works. It can be hard to tell: one of the difficult things about reading this book is that although the writings are grouped according to subject (much like some collections of the Desert Fathers)—“Decision,” “Growth”, “Freedom”, etc., the reader is given no context for the excerpt being read. This means that the style of writing can change disconcertingly from that of a loving sister or novice mistress giving personalized advice to that of a typed conference or writing for publication. I found this a bit jarring at times, but not overwhelmingly so. The over-arching theme of the book, and of Sr M. David’s life, is joy – joy in life and joy in God – and it is truly a joy to read her motherly, loving advice on how to grow close to God, how to learn to let go and let Him act in one’s life. She does not mince words when confronting a reluctant sister, but her counsel and corrections are given with such love and patience that I can imagine what a blessing it must have been to have had such a directress to hand!

The book begins with a loving introduction by Dom Erik Varden, OSCO, abbot of Mount St Bernard, and concludes with a description of her last battle with cancer, written by her infirmarian at the abbey. Sr M. David’s struggle to hang on to her life, to stay with her beloved sisters, to be present to her novices until her very last breath is an amazing testimony of a woman fighting to hold on to God’s gift of existence. This intimate portrait of the last few months of her struggle is a very moving read. And it is here that I found an answer to my conundrum: are there two paths to God, one for men, and one for women? I think it must be both. There are times when we must fight to advance towards God, to defeat vices, sin, and temptations at the point of a sword (or pushing one’s self along a corridor to Mass with one’s Zimmer), and there are times when we must accept God’s grace and work in our souls—“acceptance-with-joy” as she would have called it—we must learn to allow God to do His work and be receptive to His will. We are after all made in God’s image: male and female alike,

and it is by letting God work with both sides of our soul that we are brought home to Him.

Br B-JM

***In Firmamento Caeli* by Sarah Akehurst; 22pp**

Seven years ago, in the Aberdeen Diocesan magazine, *Light of the North*, Sarah Akehurst wrote a moving article entitled “Broke but not Broken”, drawing on her personal experience as a long-term carer for both her mother and her son, and searching for God in the midst of suffering. She concluded her article with these words: “Ultimately one hopes we may experience some of the joy and humility of the saints. Finding in the path of being a carer the easy yoke that Christ speaks of, his hand upon our shoulder.”

Now, Sarah has published a little collection of poems, written over the following 7 years, in difficult circumstances, reflecting on similar themes, while invoking landscapes and places she has loved and where she has found consolation, in particular the Isle of Iona and Pluscarden Abbey in Moray. There is also a seasonal thread running throughout, from autumn to summer, and with reference to the liturgical year, with its seasons, which have, she says “a particular relationship to the rhythms of nature ... a way of sanctifying time.”

Her title, *In Firmamento Caeli*, “In the firmament of heaven”, is taken from the Canticle of the Three Children (Daniel 3), sung every Sunday morning in the Office of Lauds or Morning Prayer. The questions raised in these poems seek to find hope in the light that shines from heaven on our earthly afflictions, trying “to see or hear the presence of Christ within unpropitious circumstances as well as in places, in the passing of seasons and in the liturgy.” She succeeds admirably in conveying a vivid sense of this, with eloquence and beauty, from her first little poem entitled “Gratitude”, the result of a workshop for carers at the Benedictine Priory at Minster in Kent – “All we receive today/echoes your footsteps and reflects your face.” There is a longer poem for those

who love St Bernadette, the simple child saint – “If there are games in heaven do you hold the rope?/Can you breathe easily now and laugh?”; another evocatively set on Iona, where she speaks of the dead and our prayers for them – “Because we hear no sound it does not mean/ their cries are silent.” Of particular interest to those who know and love Pluscarden, is *Beneath the window*, in which she meditates on the beautiful Visitation Window in the public chapel, a place she often visited with her mother, afflicted with Alzheimer’s, to sit in peace and silence for a brief spell as the monks chanted the Office. “Our Lady of the Sea, in your blue firmament, remember us ... *in firmamento caeli* pray for us.”

This gives, I hope, a brief taste of what to expect from Sarah’s poems: consolation for the afflicted and inspiration for all. It is beautifully presented and illustrated. Copies may be obtained from her by contacting sarahakehurst7@googlemail.com A donation from each sale will be given to Mary’s Meals.

Eileen Clare Grant, Oblate OSB

St Thérèse to Père Roulland, Missionary Priest, July 1897

“When you receive this letter, no doubt I shall have left this earth. The Lord in his infinite mercy will have opened his Kingdom to me, and I shall be able to draw from his treasures in order to grant them liberally to souls who are dear to me. Believe, Brother, that your little sister will hold to her promises, and her soul, freed from the weight of the mortal envelope, will joyfully fly to the distant regions that you are evangelising. Ah! Brother, I feel it: I shall be more useful to you in heaven than on earth. I really count on not remaining inactive in heaven. My desire is still to work for the Church and for souls. I am asking God for this and I am certain He will answer me.”