

# **Pluscarden Benedictines**

No. 189 News and Notes for our Friends Lent 2020

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Cover: Abbey in Winter by Fr Matthew Tylor OSB

## FR ABBOT'S LETTER

Dear Friends,

We just celebrated the Feast of the Presentation, commemorating the occasion when Mary and Joseph brought their new child Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem to “present him to the Lord”. Then, as St Luke tells us, there was a man, Simeon, to whom it had been revealed by the Holy Spirit that before he died he would see the Christ of the Lord. Simeon took Jesus in his arms and thanked God for fulfilling His promise.

It is a wonderful image: the old man representing all that is best of the Old Covenant holding in his arms the little body in which the New Covenant is made. Simeon personifies Israel in his justice, in his piety, in his hope, in being a vessel of the Holy Spirit, and in having received the word and promise of God. Unlike the father of John the Baptist, Zechariah, with whom Luke began his Gospel, Simeon seems not to be a priest or to hold any special position among the people, at least it is not mentioned. He is in the temple because he is a devout Jew, one of the people of God. In fact, Luke introduces him to us simply as “a man”. All of us can look at him and see in him what human life should be as it comes towards its end.

In the Old Testament, and quite contrary to how we think, old age is a blessing, because the old person has been given so many years, so much of God's gift of life. In this perspective the happiest moment of life is the last, because life is a gift and at that moment the gift is complete. If one envisions life as a gift, a Christmas present boxed and wrapped, then the last moment of life is when the gift has been unwrapped, the box opened and the gift lies there to be seen. It might not be known until that moment whether a life has been blessed or not. A person whose life has been full of misfortune, though he has been faithful to God, might in his last moment be filled with joy by a glimpse of God's eternity and the complete triumph of goodness and life. The last moment of someone whose life has been prosperous and happy might be an

experience of total loss. So the last moment might be a total reversal of all that has gone before. It is all in God's gift. But by and large in the Old Testament God's gift is a long and happy life spent observing God's law, crowned by a happy serene death. This is what St Luke evokes when he describes the devout old man Simeon holding Jesus.

The experience of the faithful in the New Testament, as St Luke himself describes it, will seem very different. In the New Testament God's gift to his faithful will often be a life full of trouble, shortened by painful martyrdom, on the pattern of the life and death of Jesus. Luke does not want us to see a contradiction, but a seamless continuity and harmony, promise and fulfilment. There might appear to be contradiction between the goodness of God, His love for us, His wish to bless our lives and make them long, prosperous and happy, on the one hand, and on the other hand, our actual experience of what happens in life, especially what happens when we try to follow the Gospel. The contradiction is resolved in the body that Simeon holds in his arms.

At the beginning of his life on earth, the child Jesus brings a serene and happy death to the devout and utterly worthy old man, fulfilling all the promises and hopes of the Old Testament. At the end of his life, on the Cross, Jesus gives a happy death to the utterly unworthy thief. Simeon and the thief are together in Paradise; each saw a helpless body, the body of a baby, or the body of one crucified, and recognised their salvation.

We might say we have here three experiences of goodness: that of ordinary human happiness and fulfilment, with a long life, prosperity, children, leading to a happy death; the experience of suffering for the sake of Jesus; and the other experience of suffering that is the result of sin and puts us on the way to penance, the way of the thief. All of these recognise Christ, and they recognise one another. The thief is like the labourer in the vineyard in Jesus' parable, who comes to work at the last minute of the last hour, and still receives full pay. Simeon is like the labourer in the same parable who has been working since break of day. Unlike the

labourer in the parable, Simeon surely rejoices to see the reward given the other, because when he sees Jesus, he sees not the fulfilment of his own piety, but the fulfilment of mercy.

Yours devotedly in Christ,

+ Fr Anselm

### **St Gregory the Great on the *Song of Songs***

After its banishment from the joys of paradise, the human race came to the pilgrimage of this present life with a heart blind to spiritual understanding. If the divine voice had said to this blind heart “Follow God!” or “Love God!” (as was said to it in the Law), once this was uttered, the numbing cold of its obtuseness would have prevented it from grasping what it had heard. Accordingly, divine speech is communicated to the cold and numb soul by means of enigmas. In a hidden manner God instils in her the love she does not know, by means of what she knows. Thus allegories are produced by clothing divine thoughts in what we know. When we recognise the exterior language, we attain interior understanding.

In the *Song of Songs*, the language of what appears to be physical love is employed, so that the soul may be revived from her numbing cold by means of her usual manner of speech. Growing warm again, she can be spurred on to the love that is above, by means of the language of the love here below. But we must come to this sacred marriage feast of Bride and Bridegroom dressed in a wedding gown, that is, with the understanding that comes from interior charity. Without such a wedding gown we will be cast out into the exterior darkness, which is to say into the blindness of ignorance. By means of this passionate dialogue then, let us pass over to the virtue of passionlessness (Prologue).

## FROM THE ANNALS

### November 2019

**12<sup>th</sup>:** The community retreat, led by Abbot Friedhelm, continues. In comparison to other retreat givers we have had, his conferences are quite brief. All his conferences are based on the Life and Miracles of St Benedict, about which we read in Book II of the Dialogues, usually attributed to St Gregory the Great.

**13<sup>th</sup>:** We see an advance copy of “Country Living” magazine for December. It features an article on Pluscarden Abbey, with plenty of pictures, including snow scenes.

**15<sup>th</sup>:** Today was the retreat recollection day, with exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. We have some rather half-hearted snow.

**16<sup>th</sup>: Feast of St Margaret.** The retreat ended today. Fr Abbot preached at Conventual Mass before the customary renewal of vows.

Bishop Hugh arrived this morning. He is staying overnight before going to celebrate Confirmations locally tomorrow.

After None there was the usual post-retreat community walk. Abbot Friedhelm and Bishop Hugh joined us for that. The walk ended in the dark with the people at the end coming in late, assisted on their way by the light of a torch.

**18<sup>th</sup>:** Brother Benedict-Joseph, having been with us for a year, is leaving us at the end of the week to go to Petersham. There was a celebratory and farewell *gaudeamus* in his honour in the evening. An amusing musical slide show of his time with us was shown.

**20<sup>th</sup>: Memorial of St Hugh of Lincoln.** Bishop Hugh joined us today, presiding at Mass, and participating in an evening *gaudeamus* in his honour.

**21<sup>st</sup>:** Br Simon’s father died this evening in Warsaw. The whole family including Br Simon managed to gather in time for his death, which was blessed by the prayers and sacraments of the Church. *Requiescat in pace.*

**24<sup>th</sup> SOLEMNITY OF CHRIST THE UNIVERSAL KING.** A Scottish Bishops' Letter about the forthcoming General Election was read out at Mass.

**27<sup>th</sup>:** The funeral of Br Simon's father took place today in Warsaw. *Pluscarden Benedictines* Issue 188 arrived from the Printers.

**30<sup>th</sup>: SOLEMNITY OF ST ANDREW.** Fr Prior presided at Conventual Mass and preached.

## **December 2019**

**1<sup>st</sup>: FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT:** the longest Advent possible this year. Br Thomas was to have returned home about this time, having been seeing to the care of his sick and elderly parents in New Zealand. But Bishop Hugh has requested his assistance for an important visit to Vietnam in the New Year. Br Thomas speaks Vietnamese, and so will be able to act as interpreter.

**2<sup>nd</sup>** Fr Abbot set off with Fr Giles early this morning, en route for Australia. They are conducting the visitation at New Norcia, near Perth, Western Australia, on behalf of the Abbot President. They pay a fraternal visit also to the small community of Anglican Benedictines at Camperdown, near Melbourne.

**5<sup>th</sup>:** The community is blessed again by the presence of Ann Ryans, who volunteers to cook for us during her stays.

**6<sup>th</sup>: Recollection Day.** Fr Prior gave a conference on the love of God according to St John of the Cross.

**8<sup>th</sup>: SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT.** We had the usual joint Carol Service with Pluscarden Kirk in the evening. There was quite a good turn out this year.

**9<sup>th</sup>: SOLEMNITY OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF OUR LADY.** Fr Prior presided and preached at Conventual Mass.

**11<sup>th</sup>:** Brothers Joseph and Simon went to the Dominican Sisters' house at Greyfriars to sit exams for their Theology degree course.

**12<sup>th</sup>:** General Election. Many of the brethren these days use a postal vote. One went out to the polling station by bicycle.

**14<sup>th</sup>:** Wood chipping operations in our back yard prepare us for a warm Christmas period. Fr Prior gave a conference on Isaiah 35. Our front drive and car park are something of an ice rink in the current frosty weather. The honey department attempted to deliver a consignment of glass honey jars to the shop in the dark evening. The deliverer found himself unexpectedly in a horizontal position, with jars all over the car park, many of them broken.

**15<sup>th</sup>: THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT.**

**16<sup>th</sup>:** Fr Abbot and Fr Giles arrived back from Australia today.

**17<sup>th</sup>: O Sapientia.** Fr Abbot presided today at Vespers in the Sanctuary. In the evening we held our traditional *O Sapientia* assembly in the calefactory. The Dominican sisters from Elgin joined us. A good log fire burned, hot mince pies were consumed, a mazer of warm punch was ceremoniously passed around, and *Shepherds in the Fields Abiding* was sung.

**21<sup>st</sup>:** Ann Ryans returned, in order to stay with us over the Christmas period, and to do much of our cooking. All parties involved find this arrangement very satisfactory.

**22<sup>nd</sup>: FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT.**

**24<sup>th</sup>: Christmas Eve.** Fr Abbot gave the customary community conference, then all available brethren set to work putting up Christmas decorations. A fine Christmas tree was set up in the East cloister.

Solemn Vigils of Christmas were sung in full as usual at 10.15 p.m. We had round about 30 people in the congregation at Midnight Mass and a similar number at the Day Mass, and maybe 20 at the 8 o'clock Mass.

**25<sup>th</sup>: SOLEMNITY OF THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD.**

The Priests of the house said their own Dawn Masses as usual after Lauds. This year Fr Giles made quantities of home-made bread, especially for the Christmas pittance, taken by the fire in the calefactory.

Ann Ryans, not allowed to cook today, joined the brethren for Christmas lunch, in an all-time first for our community. We had

two other guests unexpectedly and unusually staying with us over these festive days.

**26<sup>th</sup>: FEAST OF ST STEPHEN.** We rise an hour later than usual today, and for the next few days. This is useful, because Christmas in the monastery tends to be quite exhausting.

**27<sup>th</sup>: FEAST OF ST JOHN THE EVANGELIST.** After None at 2.30, there was a long walk, declared optional because of inclement weather. Several stalwart brethren went nevertheless.

**29<sup>th</sup>: FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY.** A letter from Bishop Hugh was read at Mass.

**31<sup>st</sup>: End of Year Recollection Day.** Fr Abbot gave a conference on the theme of memory. The *Te Deum* was sung before Benediction in thanksgiving for all the blessings of the past year.

## January 2020

**1<sup>st</sup>: SOLEMNITY OF MARY THE MOTHER OF GOD.** Fr Prior presided and preached at Conventual Mass. The brethren exchanged New Year's greetings according to custom before lunch, which on New Year's Day is a talking meal.

In the evening the film *Free Solo* was shown: about how Alex Honnold climbed the granite face *El Capitan* in Yosemite Park alone, and without any ropes or other safety equipment whatever.

**4<sup>th</sup>:** Fr Abbot gave another conference on memory.

**5<sup>th</sup>: THE SOLEMNITY OF THE EPIPHANY.** Fr Abbot presided and preached at Conventual Mass. According to custom the dates of the moveable feasts for the coming year were sung in Latin; the cellarer, sacristan and infirmarian received special blessings, and an Epiphany cake was blessed.

**6<sup>th</sup>:** Monday. This evening we had our traditional "home entertainments" *gaudeamus* for the Epiphany. Some very fine comic sketches were performed, as well as the usual songs, recitations etc., amongst which was a demonstration of African dancing by Br. Innocent.

**7<sup>th</sup>:** Fr Abbot departed for Kornelimünster in Germany, where he is to act as Co-Visitor for their canonical Visitation.



**11<sup>th</sup>:** Having acted as Parish Administrator in Shetland for the past couple of years, Fr Ambrose is now officially incardinated into the Diocese of Aberdeen, and is appointed Parish Priest in Lerwick henceforth with full rights.

**12<sup>th</sup>: SOLEMNITY OF THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD.**

Fr Benedict said a supply Mass in Forres this morning.

**13<sup>th</sup>:** Our electricians spend several days making a very thorough check of all our wiring and appliances, in accordance with standard safety procedures.

**15<sup>th</sup>:** Edward Atkinson of Johnston & Carmichael Accountants gave a presentation of the accounts for 2018 to the community this afternoon. The community remains financially viable, thank God!

**18<sup>th</sup>:** Fr Abbot gave a conference on the text: *Si vocem eius audieritis – if only today you would hear his voice!* (Ps 94)

**22<sup>nd</sup>:** Very strong winds these days. The mistle thrush sings of the approach of Spring.

**24<sup>th</sup>:** Moray Council inspected our kitchen recently on behalf of Food Standards Scotland. They issue a certificate confirming that we conform to food hygiene legislation.

**26<sup>th</sup>: THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME.** “Sunday of the Word of God”. At Conventual Mass the lectionary and then the Book of the Gospels were prominently and honourably enthroned in the Sanctuary.

After Mass Fr Giles baptised two children of friends of our community. Many kilts were worn for that, and pipes played in our Transepts afterwards, up to the time for Sext.

**27<sup>th</sup>:** This week there is a meeting here of monastic guest-masters and guest mistresses.

## **February 2020**

**1<sup>st</sup>:** On behalf of the community Br Joseph attended a Day for the Religious of the Diocese given by Bishop Hugh at Greyfriars Convent Elgin. He spoke about it at the evening Chapter.

**2<sup>nd</sup>:** **Sunday, the Presentation of the Lord.** The usual Candlemas ceremonies were carried out. In addition, today Fr Abbot conferred

the Ministry of Acolyte on Brs Joseph and Simon. This is for each of them one step closer to Priestly Ordination. Henceforth one of them will always exercise his ministry in the Sanctuary during Mass; bringing the sacred vessels to the Altar, and assisting with the ablutions after Holy Communion.

**3<sup>rd</sup>:** Fr Prior administered the Blessing of St Blaise for throats after Mass.

We hear of the murder in Nigeria of the 18 year old seminarian Michael Nnadi, at the hands of Boko Haram terrorists. Michael has been a friend of our postulant Br Innocent. We feel confident that he died as a martyr for Christ.

Fr Abbot departed to spend some weeks at Petersham. We have our deferred Candlemas community Walk, amid hailstorms.

**5<sup>th</sup>:** The first of a new fleet of RAF Poseidon anti-submarine planes is delivered to nearby Lossiemouth.

**8<sup>th</sup>:** Fr. Prior read a conference on the subject of personal prayer.

**10<sup>th</sup>:** The Feast of St Scholastica. The St Andrew community is here this weekend. We have some more snow showers.

**12<sup>th</sup>:** There was a novitiate outing to visit Beaulieu Priory, built for the Valliscaulian order as a sister house to Pluscarden in 1230. The ruins are well kept and open to the public. Fr James of Beaulieu Catholic Church showed himself most hospitable at tea time.

**15<sup>th</sup>:** Something over 30 students from St Andrews University Catholic Society are here for the weekend, according to well established custom, with their Chaplain Fr Michael John Galbraith. They are catering for themselves at St. Scholastica's. Fr Prior gave them a couple of conferences. Many of the students took the opportunity to go to confession also.

Fr Prior read a conference to the community on purity of heart.

## NEWS FROM ST MARY'S MONASTERY

Towards the end of 2019 we were pleased to have two more lectures arranged for us by Carol and Phil Zaleski. The first, held on November 10, was given by Stephen Harris, a professor of English at UMASS Amherst. Professor Harris teaches a wide variety of subjects including data science, the history of cryptology, Old English, Medieval Latin, early medieval Christianity and the history of linguistics. His talk was on St Bede's hymns and his community's devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Stephen focused on Bede's hymn XI, *In natali sanctae Dei genetricis* (PL 94:631). He brought out very well the richness of St Bede's vocabulary and use of biblical imagery.

The second talk was by Karin Öberg, professor of astronomy at Harvard. Her main field of activity is in astrochemistry and she is currently leader of the Öberg Astrochemistry Group at the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics. She gave us a brief summary of our knowledge of the universe as it stands today, and dealt with the interesting question of whether there is life on other planets. She managed to put difficult concepts simply in layman's terms. During the question and answer session Karin told us about her conversion to Catholicism, which was influenced primarily by the writings of C.S. Lewis, G.K. Chesterton and J.J.R. Tolkien.

On the weekend of November 8-10 we hosted another Monastic Experience Weekend. Although we had a decrease in the number of participants this time, all who took part found it a very positive experience.

In late November Br Isidore went to Trinidad to attend the diaconal ordination of Br Antony of Kristo Buase. It was a fitting sign of the fraternity which links the various monasteries in our English Province. The ordination took place on November 30 at Mount St Benedict Monastery, where Br Antony has been residing during the time of his studies in Trinidad. A large crowd was in attendance including the Archbishop of Port of Spain, Charles Jason Gordon, the Abbot of Mount St Benedict, John Pereira, the

Apostolic Nuncio to the Caribbean, Archbishop Fortunatus Nwachukwu, originally from Nigeria, Carmelites and Spiritans, as well as representatives of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Trinidad. Br Isidore's sister Angela Colm, who is fond of travelling, also came from Canada for the event.

In the last issue of *Pluscarden Benedictines*, in the Annals section, it was reported that Dame Andrea Savage, former Abbess of Stanbrook Abbey, and sister of Fr Mark of Pluscarden, "stayed at St Scholastica's." Here we can report the same thing. This time the "St Scholastica's" in question is our twin community, St Scholastica Priory. Dame Andrea stayed in Petersham for about four weeks in total from December 9, 2019 to January 11, 2020. Before she left, she gave us an interesting talk on the history of her community, going right up to their move to Wass, Yorkshire in 2009.

On January 17, the feast of St Anthony of Egypt, Sr Mechtilde of our sisters' community made her Simple Profession. Many friends and family members came for the occasion, some from far away as Florida, where Sr Mechtilde was born and raised before moving to New Hampshire. Afterwards we were all invited to a festive meal at St Scholastica Priory.

In early December Br Benedict-Joseph Miller came here from Pluscarden. Originally a member of the Community of St John, he came to Pluscarden seeking a more contemplative monastic life. After a year of discernment there he has come to stay with us at St Mary's Monastery.

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## FIFTY YEARS ON

It is said that Churchill only invoked God when he thought things had come to a pretty pass. Whether true or not, it demonstrates a sound instinct: God always responds to 999 calls.

So it was that, fifty years ago, having failed exams as a result of laziness, lack of direction and other factors, I promised Our Lady that, if I passed my re-sits, I'd go to Lourdes on pilgrimage, as a helper of the sick. I duly passed, and the following summer went to Lourdes with a group of young people from our archdiocese. There I prayed, helped the sick, enjoyed life in the community of our group, attended liturgies, and became a little more serious in the practice of my faith. In that experience lay the germ of my monastic vocation.

Many years later, I was staying at our Abbey of Belloc, not very far from Lourdes, preparing for our General Chapter. It was the year of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my priestly ordination, and I asked Fr Marc, Prior and guestmaster, if he thought Abbot Jacques would allow a trip to Lourdes? Abbot Jacques was all in favour, so Fr Marc and I set off in the car, stopping here and there for Fr Marc to make pen-and-ink drawings. In Lourdes we found a compliant convent where we were allowed to park the car, went to the Grotto and prayed and celebrated Mass in the Rosary Basilica, where we met a friendly sacristan (now retired), built like a second-row forward (which he was), a former paratrooper. He told us how, when St John Paul II visited Lourdes, no one had thought to make arrangements for the Angelus bell to be rung, so when the Pope announced the prayer down by the Grotto, our friend took off through the crowd, which parted before his impressive speeding bulk, and managed to get to the bell in time to ring it. We went to Bartrès, where Bernadette had cared for the sheep, picnicked in the forest and had a thoroughly pleasant day.

Fifteen years later came ineluctably the fortieth anniversary. Providentially I was invited to be chaplain to a bus-load of Jumbulance pilgrims to Lourdes. Fr Abbot responded positively to

importunings, and so I was able to return to Lourdes to give thanks for the gifts received there.

A Jumbulance, as its name rather implies, is a jumbo-sized ambulance, a bus fully equipped for the care and transport of the sick, with space for beds, for wheelchairs and for those caring for the Very Important Pilgrims occupying these. It has a fully accessible toilet, a good kitchen and a lift for wheelchair-bound and less able passengers. Under the floor is a capacious hold and a hobbit-like den for the relief driver. Jumbulances take the less able on holidays and pilgrimages throughout the UK and continental Europe. It is partially sponsored by the English Premier League, whose logo it bears.

I flew down to Gatwick and from there went to Douai Abbey, where I was hospitably entertained, and given a personal tour of their library and archives by a justifiably proud Abbot Geoffrey Scott. Next day I joined the bus at nearby motorway services, and as we made our way to the Chunnel, we picked up more VIPs and helpers, including doctor Joe and nurses. It was borne in upon me how few are the motorways in Scotland, in comparison to our southern neighbour. I'd never crossed the Channel underground before, and that was a fascinating experience, a marvel of civil engineering and organisation. By the time we emerged from the Tunnel, night was falling. We rolled down the motorways of France, stopping every three hours to change drivers. John, Brendan and Zoë were quite exceptional. I am not a good passenger in buses, but their driving was so smooth that not even on winding Pyrenean roads did I experience queasiness – I was most grateful. The bus journey lasts twenty hours, and like Peter Rabbit under the basket with a cat on top of it, there are aspects one would prefer to forget. On the other hand, it offered great opportunities for getting to know fellow-passengers and occasional sights of well-known landmarks and landscapes. At various motorway services, some of the ladies bought bright yellow waterproof jackets, costing €30. The same jackets, in Lourdes, sold for €50 and €60 – sad but true.

In Lourdes we stayed at the Polish Mission, where the Sisters made us most welcome, putting up with our comings and goings and sometimes unpredictable needs. After lunch and journey-recovery time, we celebrated Mass in their chapel. Their house is up above the town, and so quiet and peaceful, with wonderful views of the mountains. They fed us royally.

Next day, Sunday, we attended the International Mass in the underground Basilica of St Pius X, a hugely capacious church equipped with all that is needed for everyone to hear and see all that is going on. I met an Ewe-speaking priest from the diocese of Kpalime in Togo, and afterwards spoke to Emeritus Archbishop Campaoré of Ouagadougou, capital of Burkina, whom I'd met in Africa. The principal celebrant was a Spanish archbishop whose fervent homily was accessible in length and content. Afterwards the priests went in procession to the Grotto and prayed there. In the afternoon we had free Grotto-time, and after supper took part in the torchlight procession, which gained from being in the darker time of the year.

Monday was forecast to be fair, so we wound up into the Pyrenees along the valley of the Gave, with penstocks a frequent sight, supplying the various hydro-electric schemes. We celebrated Mass in the church at Gèdre, then continued until we came to Gavarnie, surrounded by impressive mountains, garnished with glaciers and up to three thousand metres high, within sight of a 420-metre-high waterfall, no dribbling affair. There we ate our picnic on a *terrasse* and either enjoyed the sun or explored a little. I exercised my French, in assisting with the purchase of various hand-made souvenirs. One enterprising lady collected a ten-kilogramme rock in her wheelchair, taking it home to add to the other souvenirs in her garden. The Gendarmerie provided entertainment in the form of a helicopter, practising mountain-rescue exercises. For those more carnal, another wide-screen TV in the depths provided the match between Scotland and Samoa.

Over the next few days, we did all that one should in Lourdes: we took part in the processions of the sick and the Blessed

Sacrament, we visited the Grotto several times and prayed there. There we reaped the reward of virtue: if you are accompanying the sick, you jump the queue. We went and bathed in the *piscines* – in the group of which I was part, there were some very impressive-looking operation scars to be seen. Considering the numbers, the helpers were very reverent and considerate, ensuring that it was a prayerful experience.

There are some very large trout in the Gave, demonstrably willing to eat bits of bread, or cake, or peanut-butter bars – the arrival of each crumb was greeted by competing swirls in the water, the gaping of a wide pink mouth and the vanishing of the proffered morsel, dropped from the bridge or carefully tossed into their eddy, a godsend for anyone who is becoming bored with proceedings.

We went to Bartrès, where Bernadette's wet-nurse lived and is buried, and where Bernadette stayed for a while as a shepherdess. We celebrated Mass in the little church, which, like all the churches we visited, was beautifully kept, clean and tidy, due in this case to the labours of two Franciscan Missionary Sisters, one Korean and the other, who was described as Burkinabaise, turned out to be from Nandom in Ghana, and was delighted to meet someone who knew where that was, and able to sing her a worship-song in her own language. It was one of the few wet days, and our planned lunch spot was closed, so John drove us back to Lourdes, where the Hotel Versailles kindly allowed us to eat our sandwiches in their café, which was equipped with a distracting large-screen TV, on which the All Blacks were relentlessly dismantling Canada. We visited St Bernadette's parish church that afternoon, with the font where she was baptised, but the place was shrouded in tarpaulins and scaffolding; it is only a year into a programme of repair and conservation. Thence we walked or wheeled to the *cachot*, the town prison in which Bernadette's family found refuge, and to her family's house, before wandering down-town to the Grotto once more.



Another day saw us visiting the former monastery of St Savin, of very ancient date. Its founder is entombed in the main altar; he was last examined in the 1920s. There are Gallo-Roman remains, as well as much more recent constructions. The young and friendly sacristan made sure we had all we required for our celebration. As we finished our Mass, ACROSS turned up for theirs, and we went for a coffee before exploring the spectacular views.

We went for Mass, too, in Bétharram, where St Michael Garicoits exercised his ministry and was consulted by St Bernadette – the priest there had spent over thirty years in Ivory Coast, and like all we met was most kind and flexible in putting up with us and our needs. That afternoon we went to the Lac de Lourdes, over 150 acres of water, set in hills and forests, well set-up for our requirements, and ate our picnic lunch in the sun.

Lourdes was by now a little busier: 20,000 members of the Rosary Pilgrimage under the aegis of the Dominicans, two- or three-hundred strong. A number of them looked askance at my white habit, wondering what manner of beast I might be. They were an international assembly. Evidently, for most people, one white habit resembles another, for when I was trying to go to confession to a Dominican, I kept being buttonholed by others with the same desire, so that I had to hurry to catch our bus. On another occasion, as I was conversing with a friar, two old English-speaking ladies came up and asked the way. I told them, and was complimented on my English by my Dominican companion... Dominican superiors have their quirks, too – I met one Friar, named after Albert the Great, an adjective which applied to all his dimensions.

The chapel at the Polish Mission was the scene of our closing Mass, with the Sacrament of the Sick for our VIPs. We also navigated our way up and down the sometimes-steep paths to celebrate the Stations of the Cross.

The Friday after our arrival we loaded up in the afternoon, and set off back northwards. We reached the Tunnel in the dark of early next morning, once more meeting the ACROSS jumbulance

we'd frequently met in Lourdes, and successfully unloaded everyone at their appropriate drop-off point. I spent another night at Douai and then flew back to Inverness and home.

The whole pilgrimage ran with that deceptive smoothness which betrays much experience and hard work in preparing and organising, particularly by Charles Nicholson and Chris Chisholm. If you want to experience the reality of Lourdes and gain the real benefits of such a pilgrimage, I can think of no better way. If you can't go yourself, then material or prayer support is the next best thing – watching the numbers on the diesel pump when filling the tank was a sobering experience!

I thank God and Our Lady, Fr Abbot and my community, Charles and Chris for inviting me, and all who gave me this chance for such a gracious celebration of forty years in the priesthood

DGC

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### **St Gregory the Great on the *Song of Songs***

This book is called not “The Song” but “The Song of Songs”. For just as in the Old Testament there are holy things, as well as the Holy of Holies, and there are sabbaths, as well as the Sabbath of Sabbaths, so too in Sacred Scripture there are songs as well as the Song of Songs. The holy things were kept in the tabernacle and brought outside of it. The sabbaths were celebrated every week. But the Holy of Holies was shrouded in a more hidden worship, and the Sabbaths of Sabbaths were observed only on their own feasts. Likewise, the Song of Songs is a kind of mystery, and is solemn in a more interior way. One penetrates this mystery by grasping hidden meanings. For if we focus on the exterior language, then there is no mystery (N. 6).

## KING ALEXANDER II OF SCOTLAND

High up on the East Front of Pluscarden Abbey are three small stone carvings, easily missed and much weathered by time and the elements. They represent a King, a Queen and an unknown personage. The King is obviously Alexander II of Scotland (1198-1249) alongside his first Queen, Joan, eldest legitimate daughter of King John of England. He is commemorated in the stones of Pluscarden because he was responsible for the Valliscaulian foundation of Pluscarden Priory.

Prior to his accession to the throne Alexander spent some time at the English court of King John, a not unusual arrangement between the two kingdoms when peace prevailed. In 1213, John knighted the teenage boy and the following year Alexander succeeded to the Scottish throne, on the death of his father William the Lion. He immediately ran into trouble from rival claimants but, being both strong-willed and ambitious, he quickly set about overcoming any opposition. Donald Bane MacWilliam, his principal rival, “with a numerous band of malignants”, led an insurrection in the north, ruthlessly defeated by a strong northern chieftain, one Ferchar Maccintsacairt, later created Earl of Ross as a reward. Donald was a direct descendant of Malcolm Canmore’s first wife Ingibjorg, widow or daughter of Earl Thorfinn of Orkney. (An interesting though irrelevant note here is that Thorfinn was said to have accompanied the infamous King Macbeth on a pilgrimage to Rome.) Ingibjorg’s son Duncan II had reigned very briefly in 1094 but all three sons of Malcolm and his second wife Margaret reigned in turn. Dynastic opposition was directed against the sons of Malcolm and the half-Saxon Margaret in favour of the “House of Moray” and was aggravated by antipathy towards increasing Norman influence. The MacWilliams garnered some local support but were completely wiped out.

One gruesome tale (though some reports place it during another brief uprising in 1230) relates how Donald’s daughter was battered to death against the mercat cross in Forfar. Alexander

himself gained a reputation for ruthlessness against his enemies and in the 1220s, he is said to have ordered the hands and feet of eighty men of Caithness to be cut off to punish them for roasting their bishop alive.

In 1215, Alexander joined the English barons in their struggle against John, and led an army into England in support of their cause. This action led to the sacking of Berwick-upon-Tweed by John's forces. The Scottish army reached as far as Dover, where in September 1216, Alexander paid homage to Prince Louis of France, chosen by the barons to replace King John. When, however, John died, the Pope and the English aristocracy switched their allegiance to his nine-year-old son, Henry, forcing the French and Scots armies to return home.

A threefold peace followed and, to cement the new relationship with the English Crown, Alexander married Henry's sister Joan at York Minster in 1221, when he was 23 and she was only 11; she was his third cousin, their common ancestor being the Norman Henry I of England. The marriage lasted for almost 17 years but, sadly, was childless, a not insignificant problem for a royal marriage. Joan never lost her preference for her childhood home and was on a pilgrimage to Canterbury in 1238, possibly to pray for the gift of a child, when she fell ill and died. The following year, Alexander married another third cousin, a French noblewoman this time, Marie de Coucy, and two years later they had a son, the future Alexander III.

The year before Joan's death, a final peace was concluded between Scotland and England, brokered by the papal legate Otto, through the Treaty of York, with Alexander abandoning his claim to the countries of Northumberland, Cumberland and Westmorland. The border between the two countries was fixed on the line of the Tweed and Solway rivers and has remained fixed, more or less, to this day. Several years later, Alexander turned his sights on securing the Western Isles, at this time still part of the Norwegian kingdom. On his way to conquer the Isles, he fell ill from a fever and died on the Inner Hebridean island of Kerrera in

1249, leaving his seven-year-old son to succeed him. He was buried in Melrose Abbey.

In 1224, Elgin Cathedral was built on land granted by Alexander to Bishop Andrew of Moravia (Moray). Alexander was also a generous benefactor to the religious orders, with a particular predilection for the Mendicant Orders, Franciscans and Dominicans; he established Dominican houses at Edinburgh, Berwick, Ayr, Perth, Aberdeen, Elgin, Stirling, and Inverness, and Franciscan foundations were made at Berwick and Roxburgh. He and his mother, Ermengarde de Beaumont, endowed also the Abbey of Balmerino in Fife, a daughter house of the Cistercian Melrose Abbey. In 1230, he was responsible for bringing the Valliscaulians to Moray where, under his patronage, they established the priory of Pluscarden in the Vale of St Andrew. Around the same time, following his example, two sister houses were founded by local lairds at Beaully in Inverness-shire (John Byset), and Ardchattan in Argyll (Duncan MacDougal, Lord of Argyll), although Alexander has also been credited with the founding of Beaully. In 1510, Beaully became Cistercian and in 1454, following union with Urquhart Priory, Pluscarden became a Benedictine community and changed from the white Valliscaulian habits to the black habits of the Benedictines of Urquhart and Dunfermline. Today, of course, our monks have reverted to the original white habits of Val des Choux, Caldey and Prinknash.

Eileen Clare Grant Obl. OSB

### **St Gregory the Great on the *Song of Songs***

Sometimes in Sacred Scripture the Lord calls himself “Master”; sometimes “Father”, and sometimes “Bridegroom”. When he wishes to be feared, he calls himself “Master”; when he wishes to be honoured, “Father”; when he wishes to be loved, “Bridegroom”. Thus through fear we may come to honour, and through honouring him, to love (N. 8).

## **WHEN GRACE IS LIKE A BULLET IN THE GUT: DISCOVERING FLANNERY O'CONNOR**

A self-centred young college graduate wakes up to his love for his mother only after she suffers a stroke due to his mistreatment of her; a one-legged philosophy student gets knocked off her high horse only when her artificial leg is stolen by a Bible-selling charlatan, and an egotistical and deluded granny discovers her real connection to mankind only when she has witnessed her entire family shot dead by a gun-wielding prison escapee. This is the world of Flannery O'Connor, arguably the greatest American Catholic writer of the last century.

Born the only child of a fervent Irish-Catholic family in the Bible Belt South, Mary Flannery O'Connor was an artistic genius little appreciated by her mother. Her father, a failure as a businessman, died at a young age from lupus (the same disease which would kill her later at the age of 39), when Flannery was only a teenager. She was a committed Catholic (though she revelled in making fun of the starchy and ignorant nuns who taught her in parochial school) in a sea of Evangelical Protestants, and she grew into a quirky and independent-minded young woman appreciative of the irony inherent in the circumstances of her life. By the time of her father's death, she was a person of deep and abiding belief, able to see God at work in the tragedy of her father's death. In fact, she accepted this tragedy with faith, saying that "God's grace was like a bullet in the gut". This early experience of the way God uses suffering to help us grow closer to Him – a fact the modern world resolutely rejects – changed her life, and later informed her writing. Her ability to see God's presence at work, especially in the grotesquely violent events of life, can give us a new perspective on the activity of grace, if we are willing to take a journey into the world of her stories.

What is grace, after all? A few years back, in a car with several confrères after a week-long retreat at a local Trappist abbey, a couple of the brothers said the week had been worthwhile

for them, since they had received “a lot of graces” during their time there. This really struck me... what is grace? Should we only see grace as the feel-good moments of life, as a kind of spiritual lollipop that God passes out to well-behaved children? Sure, it can be that at times. However, in my own experience, often I’ve only been most truly awakened to God’s grace at work in the midst of great trials: after terrible loss or suffering. It has taken the sharp pain of falling, bloody-kneed and broken-hearted, to the ground finally to awaken myself to the fact that I can’t save myself and I desperately need God’s help to go another step. And looking at the lives of the saints – Padre Pio’s stigmata, the piercing of the heart of St Teresa of Avila, the nine months of imprisonment and torture (by his own brothers in religion!) for St John of the Cross, the fifty years of nearly complete silence on the part of God in St Teresa of Calcutta’s life – I think they would agree. It is not necessarily the moments of deep ecstasy or union that bring us closest to God, but the moments in which the violence of the Cross is imprinted on our souls.

For Flannery O’Connor, who firmly believed in this truth – one has only to look at how she heroically bore her struggle with the lupus that would eventually kill her – the main problem with modern society is that it has blinded itself not only to the activity of grace, but even more fundamentally to the reality of original sin. She decided to use her God-given talent for writing compelling stories to awaken her contemporaries to those two realities: sin and grace. O’Connor was an heir to the tradition of Southern Gothic authors (which includes such luminaries as Eudora Welty, William Faulkner, and Walker Percy) and their use of outrageous characters and odd situations, yet she added the note of shocking violence into her stories. Inserting this violence was necessary, she felt, in order to get her readers to wake up to the reality of sin. Most of her main characters are deeply flawed and self-delusional, people who make everyone else around them miserable while they themselves wallow in their blind pride. Then, like an explosion of dynamite, some terrible event occurs which brutally makes them wake up to

their delusions, but usually only after having experienced a terrible loss. Isn't that how God often does the true work of converting our souls? The addict who bottoms out and realizes that he has nowhere to go and no one who can help except God; the parent dealing with the loss of a child to some terrible disease; the husband or wife dealing with the desertion of a spouse... It is so very often in such moments of heart-rending loss that God wakes us up to our desire for Him, and our need of His grace. It's these grotesque moments that can most truly lead us out of spiritual darkness into the light of God's mercy.

Like J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, Flannery O'Connor saw her path as a Christian writer quite clearly. For them all, it was vitally necessary to evangelize their culture, not by writing overtly Christian works of literature in which the reader is beaten over the head by the moral of the story, but rather, in a hidden way, to awaken their readers to the God of love, present in all the details of daily life, from the most mundane to the most grotesquely violent and tragic. And yet isn't it in those most violent moments, when grace hits us like a bullet in the gut, that we can most easily find salvation?

Br Benedict-Joseph Miller

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### **St Gregory the Great on the *Song of Songs***

As honour is more worthy than fear, so is he [the Lord] more pleased to be called "Father" than "Master"; and as love is dearer to him than honour, so God is more pleased to be called "Bridegroom" than "Father". In this book, the Lord and the Church are not called respectively "Master" and "Servant", but "Bridegroom" and "Bride", so that he may be served not only in fear, nor only in reverence, but also in love, and so that by exterior words, an interior affection may be kindled (N. 8).



## **GUESTMISTRESSES' AND GUESTMASTERS' CONFERENCE**

Every two years, those responsible for hospitality in monasteries living under the Rule of St Benedict in the British Isles gather in conference. Their organisation is quite informal, there are no office-holders or committees. The meetings are usually in January, when some guesthouses at least are comparatively quiet, and those who run them may absent themselves without deleterious consequences. Monastic guest accommodation varies greatly in scale, from a few rooms to complete buildings, sometimes very large. Sometimes their running is entrusted to a single monk or nun, sometimes to a team, and often nowadays there are lay folk involved or in charge. The common factor is that they are all inspired by the provisions of Chapter 53 of St Benedict's Rule, which lays down something of a job-description of the one responsible for hospitality, and some pointers on the attitude that monastics should adopt toward guests, as well as some practical, experience-based remarks on guests and this ministry.

It is the nature of monastic life, that although vowed to stability, this applies to the whole, not the particulars, and so, at the drop of a mitre, so to speak, a nun or monk may suddenly become responsible for the guesthouse and all who come there, without previous experience, never mind training. How do you manage bookings, crises, troubled or troubling customers, the legacies of the previous incumbents? The answer is to pick the brains of those more experienced, and so, as with many monastic meetings, networking and exchanging experiences is the name of the game.

In 2018 the conference was held at Buckfast Abbey in Devon, with its vast resources and many facilities for guests and visitors, who come in their hundreds of thousands. This year it was held at Pluscarden, with rather more modest resources and numbers. We had fifteen participants, monks and nuns from four Benedictine Congregations, representatives male and female, of the Cistercian tradition, from Britain and from both sides of the Irish Sea, North

and South, with their lay assistants, habits black, white and black-and-white. Catering by Ann Ryans and Rita went down very well, in every sense.

Owing to the vagaries of airline travel, some of our number had to travel on the Monday, and so were able to take advantage of the hospitality offered by our Elgin neighbours, the Dominican Sisters of St Cecilia, who kindly showed a group round their convent and then offered a cuppa and cakes.

On the first day of the conference, the programme consisted of a one-day course, cut down from the two-day Scottish Mental Health First Aid version, under the title of “Mental Health and Wellbeing Awareness,” delivered by Mrs Emma Cameron of The Spark. The feedback forms were unanimously positive, and all agreed that they would recommend the course.

Next day Professor Claude Wischik, of the University of Aberdeen, offered us “A Neuropsychiatric Perspective on Development, Sexuality and Spirituality,” split up into sections separated by questions and discussions. “Stimulating and helpful,” “meaty,” “excellent speakers,” were some of the reactions, and the questions and discussions bore this out. We were very grateful to Professor Wischik for making so much time for us in preparing and delivering his papers, delivered with humour, insight and seriousness.

Our conference concluded with a tour of the inner parts of the monastery and, after Vespers, a buffet supper in the cloister with the community, welcoming and tolerant of the disruptions. Next day most participants departed, apart from a couple of happy exceptions, whose company we enjoyed a little longer.

DGC

## St Gregory the Great on the *Song of Songs*

The holy Church, waiting through the ages for the coming of the Lord, for so long thirsting for the Spring of life, declares openly how much she wishes to see her Bridegroom in person, how she longs for him, and so she cries out: *May he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!* (1:1) To her the Lord had sent angels, patriarchs and prophets, all bearing spiritual gifts. But the Bride wishes to take those gifts now from the Bridegroom himself. That is, the holy Church, sighing for the coming of the Mediator between God and man, sighing for the coming of her Redeemer, addresses the words of her prayer to the Father, that he may send the Son, that he may illumine her with his presence, that he may speak to this same Church no longer through prophets, but by his own mouth. Hence, it is written of this same Bridegroom in the Gospel, when he was seated on the Mount and spoke the words of his most sublime precepts: *Jesus opened his mouth and said.* That is: he who at one time, for the encouragement of the Church, opened the mouth of the Prophets, then at last opened his own mouth (N. 11).

... The fragrance of your ointments surpasses all fragrances (1:2, Vulgate text). The holy Church here below has its fragrances for as long as it is strong in the power of its knowledge, of its purity, of its mercy, of its humility, and of its charity. If the life of the Saints did not give off this fragrance of virtue, Paul would not have said: *for we are the aroma of Christ in every place* (2 Cor 2:15). But superior by far is that anointing contemplation of God to which one day we are to be called; by far superior to the fragrances of our virtues is the fragrance of the oils of God. And however great are those things which we have already received, immensely more potent are those which we are to receive from the contemplation of our Creator. That is why the soul sighs and exclaims: The fragrance of your ointments surpasses all fragrances. In other words: those blessings which you keep for us when we contemplate you far surpass all the rewards of virtue which you have given us in this life (N. 20).

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Gregory the Great on the Song of Songs:** translation and introduction by Mark DelCogliano, Cistercian publications, Collegeville, Minnesota 2012. 326 pp, PB or HB.

Also:

**Gregory the Great: Moral Reflections on Job: Volumes I, 2, 3, 4 and 5** (so far) translating Books 1 - 27; translated by Brian Kerns OCSO, with Introductions by Mark DelCogliano, Cistercian publications, Collegeville, Minnesota 2014-2019; HB.

*St Gregory the Great and his Spiritual Legacy* was the title of a Pluscarden Pamphlet published in the year 2004. That Pamphlet records with regret the neglect, or even eclipse of St Gregory (c. 540-604) in modern times. At the time of writing there was a dearth of good English translations of his writings. In particular, his huge work the *Moralia in Iob* had last been translated in full by the Anglican Tractarians in around 1850. They affected a horrible and barely readable ‘translationese’, which presents any modern reader with unnecessary, almost impenetrable obstacles. But this woeful situation has now changed. The problem has been addressed and the lacuna filled: or at least nearly filled. Lovers of St Gregory owe Cistercian Publications a debt of gratitude for their excellent recent work: and we are grateful also of course to the translators and editors whom they publish.

Publication by Collegeville of the *Moral Reflections on Job* began, one volume at a time, in 2014. We learn from the jacket notes that Dom Brian Kerns has been a Cistercian monk now (2020) for some sixty-three years. The fifth volume in the series came out in 2019, though we don’t yet have it in our library. That takes us up to Book 27, out of Gregory’s total of 35. Please God our translator retains the health and strength to continue his work to the end. This brief review notice would certainly not presume to find any fault with his translations, or with any other aspect of these volumes, which are well produced, with good introductions,

and consistently helpful cross references and other notes presented throughout in ample margin spaces. Every monastic library should surely aspire to hold the complete set, and at least some members of the community should read the lot, if they have not already read it all through in the original Latin.

Not that such a task could be undertaken lightly. You need plenty of time and much determination to stay with Gregory's sprawling style, as he meanders his leisurely way through the whole of Job, verse by verse, allegorising every detail as he goes, and drawing his moral conclusions, especially suited for Pastors, and for contemplatives. These are not volumes to pick up for light entertainment, or for momentary spiritual uplift. But if we stay with them, we find ourselves gradually drawn into Gregory's richly informed view of the Christian life, of Holy Scripture, of God, of prayer, of preaching, of upright moral behaviour. This particular view was enormously, even dominantly influential in the Latin West for the 800 or so years following Gregory's death. In particular, Gregory's teaching nourished the prayer and reflection of the mediaeval Benedictine or Cistercian monks and nuns. But his works came to be regarded with ever increasing distaste in the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Enlightenment. The lowest point of their popularity must have been the 1960s, whose spirit starkly contradicted more or less everything Gregory taught and stood for. But now, thank God, we are being given renewed access to St Gregory's writings, whose value certainly does not diminish with the passing of the centuries.

To focus now, though, not on the great *Moralia*, but on the relatively tiny commentary of St Gregory on the *Song of Songs*. The authenticity of this fragment, which covers only the first 8 verses of the Song, has long been questioned. Now it is brilliantly and exhaustively presented by Mark DelCogliano. Before getting to his own translation of the text, with its explanatory notes, and useful sub-headings, Professor DelCogliano treats us to an Introduction of 109 pages, all of it fascinating and worth reading.

Gregory's surviving exposition of these verses of the Song of Songs takes only 35 of the 326 pages of this book. It is followed by a series of excerpts from Gregory's other known writings which comment, tangentially, on the Song, as compiled by Paterius, St Bede, and William of St Thierry. For anyone seriously interested in the subject, scholarly appendices then set out most useful tables of correspondence, wound up at the end by an excellent Index.

The story about the production and survival of St Gregory's writings will be familiar to anyone who has followed the controversy about the origins of the Dialogues. Gregory's habit was to comment on a scriptural text *viva voce*, normally to a selected audience of monks and clerics. Shorthand scribes would take down his words as they came, and Gregory would then go over their notes to edit them for later publication. Sickness and the burdensome duties of his Office often prevented him from carrying out or completing this task. Also: Gregory was a perfectionist. When the Abbot Claudius innocently enough took his own, unauthorised version of Gregory's words and prepared them for publication, the Pope indignantly ordered all this material to be withdrawn and returned forthwith to himself. Gregory was obeyed, and Claudius' work is all now lost. It included Gregory's commentary on the Song of Songs, which probably, from other available evidence, as DelCogliano speculates, covered the entire text. What has almost miraculously come down to us now is just a small part of the original, unedited short hand notes. These would have been stored for future reference in the Papal archive, together with material excised from his published works by the editing hand of Gregory. Later researchers could and did copy or otherwise use this material, until the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century, when the Saracens sacked Rome, and the whole archive was irreparably lost.

The first notable excerpter of St Gregory's writings was a Papal Notary called Paterius. Already during Gregory's lifetime Paterius began work on his *Book of Testimonies*. For this book he culled and re-arranged passages selected from all over Gregory's works. These scattered passages he presented, for the greater

convenience of readers, in the form of a running commentary on Scripture. Only part of Paterius' work has come down to us, but it includes his selection of Gregorian comments on the Song of Songs. DelCogliano presents these, now also harmonised with a very similar work undertaken by St Bede (c. 635-735). St Bede wrote his own commentary on the Song of Songs in six books, but in a seventh book he offers us an expanded version of Paterius' selection. "If there should perhaps be anyone who scorns our work", writes Bede, "he may have ready access to those statements of Gregory that ought to be read, which all agree are not to be scorned in any way".

A third excerpter of Gregory's comments on the Song presented here was William of St Thierry (c. 1080-1148), friend of St Bernard. At one time these two men were convalescing together in the infirmary at Clairvaux, and they spoke there freely about the Song of Songs, which both viewed as a divinely inspired window into the contemplative experience of God. William would come to write his own commentary on the Song. In addition, he compiled two *florilegia* of Patristic interpretations, one drawn from the writings of St Ambrose, the other from St Gregory. William knew St Bede's work, but expanded it. He also did some skilful editing of his own, praised by DelCogliano, in order to make decontextualised Gregorian passages as clear as possible.

By their patient and dedicated work, the modern scholars and translators reviewed here have rendered us a notable service. Hitherto obscure, difficult or simply unavailable texts of St. Gregory have been made readily accessible for anyone. The "Doctor of Christian Experience" is of course worth reading for his own sake. But his writing retains special importance for us because of the authority it had for later ages, and because of its defining influence in the history of Western Christian Spirituality.

DBH

**The Way of Benedict: Eight Blessings for Lent, by Laurentia Johns OSB, SPCK, 2019, PB, 123 pp.**

On the occasion of her Silver Jubilee of monastic profession, Dame Laurentia of Stanbrook set herself to count her blessings. One of the greatest of these, she concluded, was the grace to have lived for so many years under the guidance of St Benedict. Further pondering led her to count other blessings which naturally flow from a life following St. Benedict's Rule. Eight such blessings form the Chapter headings for this little book. They are: the blessing of beginning, the blessing of Gospel living, the blessing of attentiveness, the blessing of the Word, the blessing of worship, the blessing of reverence, the blessing of welcoming, the blessing of "beyond". Each of these Chapters ends with two or three points "for reflection and action", sometimes qualified "personally or in a group".

The genre adopted here is that of reflections on the Rule of St Benedict for lay people; perhaps specifically for lay people making a retreat in a Benedictine monastery; or more specifically yet, as the book title implies, for lay people making a retreat in a Benedictine monastery in lent. The theme of lent remains present throughout. In the background, now and then, we detect hints of sadness and loss, reflected in the book's dedication: to the author's brother whose untimely death occurred in 2017, and her father, who died in 2016. But of course, overwhelmingly the tone is positive, even enthusiastic, as the author seeks to transmit her own love for Benedictine wisdom and monastic living. Those who know the Stanbrook community well will surely perceive everywhere here the mark of its own unique spirit and style, which the author strongly endorses, and with which she entirely identifies.

DBH