

Pluscarden Benedictines

No. 191 News and Notes for our Friends September 2020

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Cover: Aerial View of Pluscarden, from the drone of Callum Fenwick

FR ABBOT'S LETTER

Dear Friends,

As this newsletter goes out, we are all trying to find ways to resume as much of normal activity as we can while the pandemic continues. Here at the Abbey we have been able to open our Church again for daily Mass, thanks be to God.

From the perspective of the priest in the sanctuary, the first sight of the faithful, sitting quietly, all masked, all eyes, is moving and a little startling. Somehow the face coverings remind me of the mantillas that were still worn in Church when I was a child. I used to think girls had an advantage over boys in having something special to wear for Mass. While not intended for this purpose, the masks do express the devotion of the wearers.

I am sure everyone is looking forward to the time when the masks will not be needed, and priests look forward to the time when they can see faces again, and not just eyes. There come to mind a couple of passages of Scripture in which the removal of the veil is symbolic of a hoped-for renewal of life. From the prophet Isaiah: "He (the Lord) will destroy on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death for ever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth; for the Lord has spoken" (Is 25:7-8). And from St Paul: "When a man turns to the Lord the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor 3:16-18).

Isaiah is describing his vision of the world to come, the 'holy mountain' on which wolf and lamb will live together, and the earth that will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord "as the waters cover the sea" (cf Is 11:6-9). The veil is symbolic of death, and all the ills and troubles of the present world that tend towards death.

Removal of the veil is symbolic of life, and liberation from all present evils.

Of course, the end of the pandemic will not bring about the messianic age. We shall be happy to return to normal life, and it is right that we look forward to this happiness. But is this hope, to look forward to the resumption of normality? In Isaiah, “normality”, the world as it is, with all its injustices, is what we hope to be liberated from. The pandemic has been compared, in its disruptive effect, to a war. Letters from the last World War sometimes indicate a profound awareness that in the battle for goodness more was needed than the restoration of the previous status quo, even though the writers might have been beneficiaries of the status quo. It is possible to work towards a recovery of what we thought normal, while hoping for much more. We might reflect on what has been the most deeply felt deprivation caused by the pandemic. Has it really been the limits on our otherwise legitimate pleasures and freedoms? Or the interruption of relationships and contacts with loved ones, and our relationship with God in Mass and common prayer and the sacraments? From that, we might reflect on whether our life before the pandemic was as focused as it might have been on what really matters.

St Paul, speaking of “unveiled faces”, is explaining the Christian experience drawing on the description of Moses in Exodus 34:32-35. Moses’ face after speaking with God was so glorious that the people could not look at him. They could receive God’s word from him only through a veil. In Christ, the veil is removed. This is an image for our present reality, the fullness of truth and the experience of God that we already have in Christ, and an expression of hope for the direct vision of Christ in glory that we shall have. For our purpose, we might reflect that in the human face of Christ we see the glory of God, and live.

In this world Christ asks us to recognize him – to see his face – in our brothers and sisters. He promises also to be present – to show his face – when we gather in his name. It is these promises that give us hope. The pandemic places limits, for a time, on our

ability to relate to one another and to gather. But no limit can be placed on our hope.

Yours devotedly in Christ,

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

Hope

“It is true that anyone who does not know God, even though he may entertain all kinds of hopes, is ultimately without hope, without the great hope that sustains the whole of life (cf. *Eph* 2:12). Man’s great, true hope which holds firm in spite of all disappointments can only be God – God who has loved us and who continues to love us ‘to the end’, until all ‘is accomplished’ (cf. *Jn* 13:1; 19:30). Whoever is moved by love begins to perceive what ‘life’ really is. He begins to perceive the meaning of the word of hope that we encountered in the Baptismal Rite: from faith I await ‘eternal life’ – the true life which, whole and unthreatened, in all its fullness, is simply life. Jesus, who said that he had come so that we might have life and have it in its fullness, in abundance (cf. *Jn* 10:10), has also explained to us what ‘life’ means: ‘this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent’ (*Jn* 17:3). Life in its true sense is not something we have exclusively in or from ourselves: it is a relationship. And life in its totality is a relationship with him who is the source of life. If we are in relation with him who does not die, who is Life itself and Love itself, then we are in life. Then we ‘live’.”

Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi* 27

FROM THE ANNALS

MAY 2020

9th: Fr Prior gave a conference before Vespers. Fr Mark presided at first Vespers of the fifth Sunday of Easter.

10th: **FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER.** Fr Mark presided and preached at Conventual Mass.

13th: Colin and Rita went to the pharmacy to pick up the community prescriptions and do other messages for the community.

15th: At 1.30 Libby Petrie's funeral took place. Several members of her family were present and a family friend who sang at the service. Fr Prior presided and several members of the community were in choir. She was buried in the cemetery with her husband.

16th: Fr Prior gave a conference before Vespers. Fr Prior presided at first Vespers of the Sixth Sunday of Easter.

17th: **SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER.** Fr Prior presided at Office and Conventual Mass. He preached at Conventual Mass.

20th: BT Openreach workers have started to erect poles upon which they will run a fibre optic broadband cable. The poles are of the telephone and telegraph type and there are to be several of them to lead the cable through the trees and into the monastery.

21st: **SOLEMNITY OF THE ASCENSION.** Fr Prior presided at Office and Mass. He preached at Mass.

23rd: Colin and Davie Thomson have taken away the step which used to be at the west door of the church and replaced it with a ramp. They have also replaced the steps on the path leading from the car park to the front door and the west door with a ramp.

Before Vespers we heard a recorded conference by Bishop Hugh. Fr Martin presided at First Vespers of the Seventh Sunday of Eastertide.

24th: **SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER.** Fr Martin presided and preached at Conventual Mass this morning.

25th: In the concrete floor at the West Door entrance to the church

Colin and Davie dug out a place for a mat. This was a noisy and very dusty process.

As usual during this lockdown we had a Holy Hour at 4.30 pm with simple exposition of the Blessed Sacrament.

26th: Colin and Davie Thomson hired a cherry-picker, a platform on a long hydraulic arm, to clean the gutters around the church.

28th: First Dies Non. The day began drizzly, but cleared up later. It was a pleasant day for a walk. Many of the brethren went out. After the walk, we had a common-room tea.

29th: Second Dies Non. This was the novitiate dies non and the weather was not so good.

30th: Before Vespers we heard another recorded conference from Bishop Hugh. Fr Prior presided at First Vespers of Pentecost.

31st: PENTECOST SUNDAY. Fr Prior presided at Office and Mass. He also preached at Mass.

JUNE 2020

1st: Memoria of Mary Mother of the Church. As is our custom after Pentecost, today and tomorrow we have a Sunday timetable. Ordinary Time has resumed. Mass today was of the memorial. Lunch and supper were festal meals.

2nd: In the morning we followed a Sunday timetable. None was followed by an optional long walk. In the evening we had a *gaudeamus* at which we watched a DVD of the film *Chicken Run*.

5th: The weather today has been very wet and windy. A short meeting followed Mass. Normally the first Friday of the month is a Recollection Day, but in June this is replaced by the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart later in the month. At 4.30 we had a Holy Hour with simple exposition of the Blessed Sacrament.

6th: Fr Prior read a homily of St John Henry Newman for Trinity Sunday before Vespers. Fr Mark presided at First Vespers of Trinity Sunday.

7th: TRINITY SUNDAY. Fr Mark presided at Conventual Mass and preached on the Trinity.

12th: After Conventual Mass we gathered for the weekly Community Meeting.

13th: There was a delivery of tree trunks for chipping into wood fuel for the biomass boiler. It was a full load for a timber lorry.

Fr Prior presided at First Vespers of Corpus Christi.

14th: SOLEMNITY OF THE BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST. Fr Prior presided at Conventual Mass at which he preached. After the Post Communion Prayer the Gospel reader exposed the Blessed Sacrament in a monstrance. We then had exposition until after Vespers.

15th: At 4.30 we had a Holy Hour at which we exposed the Blessed Sacrament with simple exposition. The hebdomadary places the pyx with the Benediction host or the ciborium with hosts for sick Communion on a corporal on the altar which has lit candles on it.

16th: We received an email from the diocesan health and safety coordinator about the steps that will have to be taken when we open the church for personal visits and for worship. It is all very complicated.

18th: Colin and Davie Thomson put in a floor mat inside the transepts and in front of the North Door. They made a recessed hole for it and fitted it. It is supposed to allow wheelchairs to go over it without clogging their wheels.

Fr Prior presided at First Vespers of the solemnity of the Sacred Heart.

19th: SOLEMNITY OF THE SACRED HEART. Fr Prior presided at Office and Mass. He preached at Mass. The format of today's feast more or less replicated that of last Sunday with solemn Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament from the end of Mass until after Vespers. Today's feast counts as the recollection day for June.

20th: Because yesterday was a feast with a Sunday timetable, we held the weekly community meeting after Mass today. The government guidelines have changed and the deans here and Fr Abbot at Minster have been considering the possibility of someone

going down by car to pick him up and bring him home. It seemed that Br Joseph thought that he would be able to do the journey, staying at Kingstanding on the way down and back.

Fr Giles presided at first Vespers of the Twelfth Sunday of Ordinary Time.

21st: TWELFTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME. Fr Giles as hebdomadary presided and preached at Conventual Mass.

At 3.45 there was a torrential downpour which caught those brethren who were taking a Sunday afternoon walk. They were droomit.

22nd: As the rules for lockdown have been eased, we can become an extended household with Colin and Rita Sim. Thus, they are able to come to Mass now.

We had tonsures today. The wood that was recently delivered was today chipped into fuel for the biomass boiler.

23rd: Fr Prior presided at first Vespers of the Solemnity of St John the Baptist.

24th: SOLEMNITY OF ST JOHN THE BAPTIST. Today is one of our patronal feasts. Fr Prior presided at Mass and preached. Rita Sim cooked the lunch.

25th: First Dies Non. The weather was sunny and hot. Many of the brethren went out for the day after Mass. Common Room Tea took place in the cloister garth.

26th: Second Dies Non. Br Joseph departed early this morning for Kingstanding near Birmingham. He will stay there overnight before continuing to Minster. The novitiate had their dies non today. The weather was warm but overcast. The novitiate had their common-room tea in the cloister garth.

27th: There was thunder early this morning and it looked as though we would have heavy rain, but the threatening weather moved away to the East.

Fr Prior gave a conference before Vespers. He presided at First Vespers of the Solemnity of SS Peter and Paul, which has been transferred to tomorrow from Monday.

28th: SOLEMNITY OF SAINTS PETER AND PAUL. Fr Prior

presided at Office and at Mass. He preached at Conventual Mass.

JULY 2020

1st: Br Joseph and Fr Abbot are at Kingstanding. They are due to return to Pluscarden on Friday 3rd July.

3rd: Recollection Day. We had a short community meeting after Mass. We then followed the normal Recollection Day timetable. There was a Conference at noon from Fr Prior. Solemn Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament followed until after Vespers.

Fr Abbot and Br Joseph arrived shortly before Vespers. The bells were rung to celebrate their arrival. They will be in quarantine for fourteen days. Fr Abbot is to stay in his suite of cell and office. He has a shower and toilet *en suite*. Br Joseph is to stay at the lodge.

4th: A short community meeting took place after Mass at which Fr Abbot told us a little about his time at Minster

Fr Mark presided at first Vespers of the Fourteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time.

5th: FOURTEENTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME. Fr Mark presided at Conventual Mass and preached.

Br Joseph is catering for himself at the lodge while someone takes lunch to Fr Abbot from the kitchen. He makes breakfast and supper for himself.

8th: Rita Sim went to the pharmacy to get prescriptions and other medical necessities. In the evening we had recreation outside in the cloister garth, but it proved chilly.

9th: It seems that public worship will be allowed to resume from the 15th. There will be an upper limit on the size of the congregation and its members will have to maintain a distance of 2 metres from each other. This afternoon, therefore, Br Michael experimented with setting out chairs in the transepts to see how many people we could safely accommodate.

10th: After Mass we held the customary community meeting.

At first Vespers of the solemnity of St Benedict, Fr Prior presided in the sanctuary.

11th: SOLEMNITY OF ST BENEDICT. Fr Benedict presided at Conventual Mass and preached. He wore an elaborately embroidered chasuble which we received from the nuns of Fernham when it closed. This chasuble is only used on rare occasions (see article).

12th: FIFTEENTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME. Fr Martin presided at Conventual Mass and preached.

13th: Memorial of St Drostan. We held a Holy Hour from 4.30 at which we had simple exposition of the Blessed Sacrament.

15th: Memorial of St Bonaventure. Public worship can resume from today, though people must wear a face covering and keep a social distance of 2 metres. We must also have contact details for everyone who comes to Mass. Because of the restrictions we can only accommodate a small number and so we have put a notice on the Pluscarden website saying that people must get in touch before coming to Mass and must receive a notification from the community that they can come to Mass.

Today was the first time anyone came to a Public Mass outside of our extended household.

16th: First Dies Non. The weather today was pleasant. After Mass several of the brethren went out for the day. It was dry during the day, though it did rain in the late afternoon. The common-room tea took place in the calefactory.

17th: Second Dies Non. Today was another pleasant day. The novitiate and those others who were working had their dies non from after Mass, but only after the short community meeting. The novitiate common-room tea took place in the cloister garth.

18th: Fr Abbot left quarantine this morning, it being fourteen days since his return. In the afternoon he gave a conference touching on some of the things he had experienced during his time at Minster. After the conference he presided at First Vespers of the Sixteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time.

The cellarer set up the transepts for the 8 o'clock Mass

tomorrow. The altar is the one that was before the plaque of St Benedict in the narthex. Fr Giles says that there is a message in carpenter's pencil somewhere on the altar saying that it was made in a hurry for the Assumption at Prinknash sometime in the 1930s. The sacristan could not find the message.

19th: SIXTEENTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME. Today was the first time we have had a public Sunday Mass since lockdown began. Only the Mass at 8 o'clock is public. This Mass is in the transepts. The altar is at the south end and the chairs are in front of it. The congregation comes in by the north door and leaves by the west door. Fr Martin said the Mass with Br Michael supervising the congregation.

Fr Abbot presided and preached at the Conventual Mass at 10.00 am.

20th: In the morning Br Finbar gave tonsures to the community. At 4.30 we celebrated a Holy Hour. There was simple exposition of the Blessed Sacrament until after Vespers.

After supper we greeted Br Daniel for his feast day and at recreation we had sweets.

24th: After Mass there was a short community meeting.

25th: An aspirant to join the community arrived today. He is staying at St Scholastica's retreat for 14 days quarantine before spending a month with the community. He is coming to the Office, but stays in the laity part of the church.

Fr Abbot gave a conference before Vespers. Fr Benedict presided at First Vespers of the Seventeenth Sunday of Ordinary Time.

26th: SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME. At the 8 o'clock Mass Fr Abbot presided. He kept the Mass short, cutting what can be cut and preaching a short homily. There were about 21 present at the Mass.

Fr Benedict presided and preached at Conventual Mass.

27th: Today there was very heavy rain all day. At 4.30 we celebrated a Holy Hour. There was simple exposition of the Blessed Sacrament until after Vespers.

28th: We are now getting some of our own tomatoes. There have been one or two pickings which have arrived.

29th: Raspberries are now coming into the kitchen as well as tomatoes. Earlier in the year there were a few strawberries.

To celebrate Fr Abbot's return, we had a *gaudeamus* this evening. The timetable was normal until Vespers and prayer time at 4.30, with the *gaudeamus* beginning at 5.45.

30th: The barley harvest has begun in the valley. As well as raspberries, blackcurrants are also coming into the house. There is a notice on the boards asking for volunteers to pick blackcurrants. Today has been pleasant, but breezy. There was a smirring of rain before Vespers.

31st: After Mass we had a community meeting. Br Michael said that John Gleeson is measuring the site for the new building in order to prepare plans for a building warrant. The community are picking gooseberries as well as raspberries and blackcurrants. The weather during the day was warm and sunny but breezy.

AUGUST 2020

1st: Fr Abbot gave a conference on Faith before Vespers. Before the conference he said that we would discontinue the weekly Holy Hour and the singing of the *Sub Tuum* after Vespers for the pandemic, though we could always resume them if the crisis flares up again.

Fr Giles presided at first Vespers of the eighteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time.

2nd: **EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME.** There were about 17 at the 8 o'clock Mass at which Fr Benedict presided. Fr Giles presided at Conventual Mass and preached.

NEWS FROM ST MARY'S MONASTERY

On May 18 the Governor of Massachusetts announced his plan to re-open the state, according to a four-phase plan. In the light of this, the bishop of our diocese, Robert McManus, announced that public Masses would be allowed again, following certain guidelines. Accordingly, we had our first public Mass again on Sunday May 24.

Shortly after the Governor's announcement Fr Gregory returned from his family's home in Milwaukee, where he had been since March 7. He rented a car and drove here stopping for one night at Mount Saviour Monastery in New York State, where the Prior, Br John, kindly allowed him to stay overnight. Fr Gregory arrived in Petersham in the afternoon on Thursday May 28. We were very glad to have him back with us again.

On June 13 Sr María Isabel Gómez, of our twin community of St Scholastica Priory, made her Solemn Profession on Saturday June 13. Since we are limited now as to the number of people we can have in our church at any one time, Sr María Isabel was unable to invite as many relatives and friends as she would have hoped. However, her immediate family and some other relatives were able to attend. Bishop Robert McManus presided and Fr Gregory gave the homily. Also present were the bishop's MC, Fr Alfredo Porras, Monsignor Francis Kelly, a Canon of St Peter's Basilica in Rome since 2013, Sr Paula Kelleher, former Vicar for Religious of the Diocese of Worcester, Abbot Patrick of Most Holy Trinity Monastery (Maronite) in Petersham, and Fr Michael Kissane, O Carm., a priest friend of Sr María Isabel's from her home parish in New York. After the Mass we had a festive meal at the sisters' priory, although we still managed to practise social distancing while eating and conversing.

Several of the brothers – Fr Gregory, Br Vincent, Br Isidore and Br Benedict Joseph – were busy doing some outdoor work for three consecutive days in July. They were helping with the landscaping in front of the newly renovated “carriage house”. The

landscaping design was created by Ildi, wife of the architect of the building renovation, Anthony Frausto-Robledo. Both Ildi and Anthony were working alongside the brothers, with Ildi supervising. Mark McCurn and his wife Annie also came on one of the mornings to help out. After the three days' work was completed, we took turns watering the newly planted grass seed. On August 3 a large boulder on our property was moved to the front of the building as the finishing touch of the project, and Ildi and Anthony returned for another day's work to complete the job with Br Vincent working by their side. The landscaping is very beautiful and greatly enhances the building.

DIC

Hope

“We need the greater and lesser hopes that keep us going day by day. But these are not enough without the great hope, which must surpass everything else. This great hope can only be God, who encompasses the whole of reality and who can bestow upon us what we, by ourselves, cannot attain. The fact that it comes to us as a gift is actually part of hope. God is the foundation of hope: not any god, but the God who has a human face and who has loved us to the end, each one of us and humanity in its entirety. His Kingdom is not an imaginary hereafter, situated in a future that will never arrive; his Kingdom is present wherever he is loved and wherever his love reaches us. His love alone gives us the possibility of soberly persevering day by day, without ceasing to be spurred on by hope, in a world which by its very nature is imperfect. His love is at the same time our guarantee of the existence of what we only vaguely sense and which nevertheless, in our deepest self, we await: a life that is ‘truly’ life.”

Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi* 3

HOMILY FOR THE FEAST OF ST BENEDICT: 11.7.2020

The Abbot, says St Benedict, is believed to hold the place of Christ in the monastery, since he is addressed by a title of Christ, as the Apostle indicates: You have received the spirit of adoption of sons by which we exclaim, Abba! Father! (Holy Rule 2:2; cf. Rm 8:15).

I recall when I first saw this text from the Holy Rule: I thought it rather odd. The Abbot holds the place of Christ, because he is called by Christ's name, when we address him as Father. Well: I'd never thought of calling Christ Father, or of deriving a theology of monastic obedience from the use of that title. The supporting text St Benedict quotes here from Romans doesn't seem to help much. St Paul is evoking precisely Christ's spirit of sonship, which all Christians are called to share. When we cry to God "Abba, Father!", we do so through the Holy Spirit, through whom we enter the relationship Jesus has with God his Father. How then can we take that cry as addressed to Jesus himself, and then use it to justify our monastic use of the word "Abbot"?

A bit of research though shows that the idea of Christ's fatherhood was quite commonplace amongst the Fathers of the Church. We find it in very early Acts of the Martyrs, in St Irenaeus, and in Origen. From Origen it was picked up by the Alexandrian Fathers, by the monastic fathers of the Egyptian desert, such as Evagrius, and then in the Latin West by SS Ambrose, and Jerome, and Augustine. So, St Benedict was certainly not being eccentric, or unorthodox here. Rather curiously the idea has re-emerged, in somewhat different form, in our own time, in discussions about Christ's gender. Why was Jesus male? Does his male-ness matter? Did he have to be male? Among the answers commonly given are that Christ had to be a man in order appropriately to represent his Father, to mediate his Father, to be an image of his Father, to reveal his Father. He had to be male also as Bridegroom and Spouse of his Church. As such also, at least in some sense, we can see him as "father" of the Church's children.

In St Matthew's Gospel on one occasion Jesus told his disciples: *Call no man your Father* (Mt 23:9). He was pointing there, as he habitually did, to God his Father in heaven, to God who alone is Father in an absolute sense. But the intention of Jesus cannot have been merely restrictive here. Rather, in Jesus we can see how human fatherhood, whether natural or spiritual, is not only relativised, but also dignified, elevated, blessed by deriving from, by participating in, the Fatherhood of God. *All fatherhood in heaven and on earth takes its title, says St Paul, from God the Father* (cf. Eph 3:15). So Paul goes on boldly to claim the title of Father for himself. *I begot you in Christ Jesus by means of the Gospel*, he tells the Corinthians (1 Cor 4:15), and he writes to the Thessalonians: *Like a Father with his children we exhorted each one of you* (1 Thess 2:11).

St Benedict very strongly desires the relationship he has with his monks to be as a Father with his sons. *Listen, my son*, he begins: ... *this is advice from a loving father*. His title as "Abbot" evokes the charismatic fathers of the Egyptian desert, who were all called "Abba". Benedict demands obedience, but that is a service to the brethren, very much in their interest: because *"the obedience which is offered to Superiors is given to God, as he himself said: He who hears you, hears me"* (cf. Luke 10:16; HR 5:6 & 15). At the end of his Rule St Benedict asks that *"the brethren love their Abbot with sincere and humble charity"* (HR 72:10). Today we delight to profess our love for St Benedict in this way, and to rejoice that he remains our father: strong, reliable, stable; ever freshly inspiring; ever newly life-giving, even after all these centuries.

Nowadays it's difficult to be a father. In modern secular culture the whole concept of fatherhood tends to be loaded with negative connotations. Fathers are regarded as superfluous, unnecessary, irrelevant; or often they're portrayed as domineering, oppressive, even abusive. But children and families need fathers, and we see a largely fatherless society all around us simply falling apart.

Thank God then for St Benedict our father! He is such, in the first place, as begetter. At the origins of our way of life, he generates spiritual children for Christ. These children find that following St Benedict helps them in their quest for union with Christ. They feel secure under his protection, and he does not let them down. Among them all we recognise a certain family resemblance; all variety of character, temperament, background and culture notwithstanding. There is a mind-set, a way of being, thinking and acting, an instinctive way of going about things that is peculiarly, or properly Benedictine. I know that there are other religious and spiritual families within the Catholic Church, and some of them are very good ones. But personally I never want to be anything other than a son of St Benedict! And while we're at it, I can't think of any other monastery in the world, or in history, come to that, where I'd rather be such a son, than in this one: Pluscarden Abbey, in the North of Scotland!

St Benedict is our father also in that he's our constant reference point, model, and source of authority; he's our teacher and guide; and from heaven we believe he continues to care for us his sons with loving affection. Why has St Benedict's fatherhood always been so fruitful? Surely because it always refers back to, mediates, points towards the fatherhood of God, or of Christ. Benedict seeks nothing whatever for himself. His whole life was turned towards God, and he first set an example of humility and obedience, before he began to teach those things to us.

Let me just mention very briefly now three aspects of St Benedict's teaching, which help explain why his Rule has proved so enduring, so perennially valuable, so strong amidst all the vicissitudes of history. First: his emphasis on the priority of liturgical prayer, which is the prayer of the Church; the prayer of the scriptures; the prayer of Christ. Then secondly: his insistence on daily reading of Holy Scripture, and on our drawing spiritual nourishment primarily from that. Then thirdly, his principled stand within the tradition of the orthodox and Catholic Fathers, and within the communion of the Catholic Church. As Abbot Alfred

often used to say, such a tradition builds up the Church, and does not produce heresies, or aberrations of doctrine or behaviour, nor does it fall out of date, nor can it be confined to one cultural or historical setting.

“O heavenly Patron, whose name it is my glory to bear, pray for me always before God. Confirm me in faith; strengthen me in virtue; watch over and protect me in my battles, that I may win the victory over my diabolical enemy, and so deserve to gain eternal glory. Amen.” *Caelestis patrone, cuius nomine glorior, semper precare pro me apud Deum: in fide confirma; in virtute roboram; in pugna tuere, ut victor de hoste maligno gloriam aeternam consequi merear. Amen.*

DBH

Hope

“A first essential setting for learning hope is prayer. When no one listens to me any more, God still listens to me. When I can no longer talk to anyone or call upon anyone, I can always talk to God. When there is no longer anyone to help me deal with a need or expectation that goes beyond the human capacity for hope, he can help me. When I have been plunged into complete solitude ...; if I pray I am never totally alone. The late Cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan, a prisoner for thirteen years, nine of them spent in solitary confinement, has left us a precious little book: *Prayers of Hope*. During thirteen years in jail, in a situation of seemingly utter hopelessness, the fact that he could listen and speak to God became for him an increasing power of hope, which enabled him, after his release, to become for people all over the world a witness to hope – to that great hope which does not wane even in the nights of solitude.”

Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi* 3

THE ST BENEDICT VESTMENT

In the year 2002, very sadly, the community of Benedictine nuns at Fernham Priory was forced to close. As the remaining Sisters were variously dispersed, and the property sold, some of their precious heirlooms and treasures came up to Pluscarden. Among them were two Festal Vestments; both in pristine condition. They were made in about 1930, when what became the Fernham community was resident at Princethorpe Abbey. The work of design, cutting, sewing, embroidering and painting these vestments was carried out by Sr Mary of St Francis de Sales Rhymer (1876-1948), assisted by Sr Walburga Campbell. Community memory relates that these sisters would do their most important and artistic work, out of devotion, on their knees.

The vestments are of gold brocade fabric, with ample forked orphreys in standard Gothic pattern. Within the orphreys are ivory silk panels on which various figures stand. The various sections are separated by silk embroidered passion flowers in shades of pink and green, edged with couched gold thread. The panels are edged with several lines of couched gold threads and cords.

One of the vestments has the figures of SS Benedict and Scholastica on the front. This chasuble was worn this year for our Solemnity of St Benedict on 11 July.

On the front of this vestment, at chest height, a panel depicts the Virgin and Child. Like St Teresa's Carmelites, the Princethorpe/Fernham nuns had the tradition of honouring Our Lady as their Abbess, with their Superior holding the title of Prioress only. So, the Blessed Virgin is shown holding a crosier in her right hand, with the baby Jesus in her left. He in turn holds an orb. She wears a blue mantle heavily embroidered with couched gold threads. Over the mantle she wears her Abbatial pectoral cross. She has a gold crown, and stars in an arc surround her head. The crown, the crosier and her cloak clasp are all embellished with tiny seed pearls. The faces and hands are hand painted on the ivory silk.

On the lower part of the vestment, below the panel showing Our Lady, there is another, depicting SS Benedict and Scholastica. He is stitched in mauve shades, and his sister in shades of blue. Between them is a short pillar in light mauve. Their faces and hands again are hand painted.

The outer arms of the forked orphrey each depict an angel blowing a trumpet. Their wings are stitched in pastel rainbow shades with each feather outlined in gold thread. The dresses are in shades of pink with a green sash and are decorated with gold thread patterns. In front of and behind each angel is a repeat of the pink and green passion flower.

On the back of this vestment is a medallion showing Christ at the Last Supper, with SS Peter and John. The panel is edged with a double ring of couched threads, with a pattern of couched twisted green and red cords inside the ring. Above the medallion are three putti with gold work halos and pastel rainbow wings. Below the medallion are two pairs of two angels; the uppermost pair have the left angel in pink with hands in prayer and the right angel in blue with arms crossed. The lower pair of angels in pink and green are shown blowing long trumpets. The pairs of angels are separated with embroidered flowers.

On the matching Chalice veil there is a portrait of St Francis de Sales, for obvious reasons! On the accompanying Burse (for the corporal) is a portrait of St Boniface, depicted as mitred and vested in red, for martyrdom, with his Archbishop's Pallium.

The descriptive details in this article are drawn from the report of NADFAS (The National Association of Decorative and Fine Arts Societies) who compiled an exhaustive account of the Church furnishings at Pluscarden Abbey between 2011 and 2015.

DBH

THE NAME OF PLUSCARDEN

The place-name Pluscarden presents problems for etymologists. In the earliest original charter relating to the Priory (1233) it is described as being founded *in foresta de Ploschardin*, and it is reasonable to assume that the name referred to its location, as was the case with many monastic foundations in Scotland. The name Pluscarden only gradually became synonymous with the religious house, which seems earlier to have taken the name “Valley of St Andrew” (*vallis sancti Andree apud Pluscardin* 1236), perhaps consciously echoing the name of the Valliscaulians’ mother house, Val des Choux. So initially then, the Priory can be thought of as lying in the newly designated “Valley of St Andrew” in the “Forest of Pluscarden”.

The name is probably from a Celtic language, either early Scottish Gaelic or else the Pictish language spoken in the region before the advent of Gaelic, which present-day historical linguists agree (on the evidence of place- and personal names) was a form of P-Celtic related to the Brittonic languages spoken throughout most of Britain to the south, of which Old Welsh is the best documented. In particular, Pluscarden has often been invoked in discussions of the proposed Pictish place-name element *carden*, which is familiar to many readers of *Pluscarden Benedictines* in the popular picnic-place, Carden Hill, three miles north of the Abbey beyond Heldon Hill, named after Carden close by; it occurs fairly frequently throughout north-eastern Scotland, especially in the several places named Kincardine. This word was apparently cognate with a rare Welsh word *cardden*, found in a small number of medieval sources, where the contexts suggest something like “an enclosure surrounded by a thick hedge”.

However, the first part of the name has less often been studied. One striking feature for historical linguists is the fact that the name is invariably stressed on the first syllable, *Pluscarden*, although Celtic-origin place-names in Scotland more usually have the stress on the second element, as *Inverness*, *Aberdeen* etc. The

stress on the first syllable suggests that the first part describes, qualifies or specifies the second, rather than vice versa as is the usual way in the Celtic languages.

Until recently, no satisfactory explanation has been offered for this first element, but in an article in the *Journal of Scottish Name Studies*, Thomas Owen Clancy, Professor of Celtic at Glasgow University, has put forward the proposal that it is either Gaelic *plaosg*, or a Pictish word related to it and to Welsh *plisg*, medieval Breton *plusk*: these nouns share meanings that include “eggshell”, “nutshell” and “husk”. The Breton form happens to be closest to *Plusc-*, but that, and the early *Plosch-*, could well be non-Gaelic-speaking scribes’ versions of *plaosg* as it would have been pronounced in early Gaelic. The Welsh and Breton forms do not seem to be found in any place-names, but there is at least one other Gaelic name in Scotland which employs *plaosg* a specifying element, albeit in the normal, second, position, Creagan nam Plaosg near Brig o’Turk in the Trossachs, “The Little Rock of the Husks”; perhaps this was a location abounding in nutshells, because animals, including domesticated ones such as pigs, frequented the wood to eat nuts. Moreover, though surely a coincidence, it is worth mentioning that the early medieval abbey of Nursling in Hampshire seems to derive its name from Old English *hnutusciell* “nutshell”.

This interpretation of *Plusc-* leaves the second part of the name in question. It is perfectly possible that we should still see it as Pictish *carden*, but Prof. Clancy also raises the possibility of *-ard-in*, either Gaelic *àrd*, *àird* “a high place, height”, or a Pictish cognate of Welsh *ardd* with a similar meaning. The final syllable would be a suffix, probably *-in*, very common in place-names in eastern Scotland, though its range of possible senses remains a topic of scholarly debate.

So Prof. Clancy’s proposal offers two possibilities for Pluscarden, either “nutshell enclosure”, Pictish *plisg-carden*, or “nutshell height”, Gaelic *plaosg-ardin* (or a Pictish equivalent of that). If it was *carden*, this may have had some relationship with

Carden nearby, and would in any case have referred to some place of importance in the *foresta de Ploschardin*. The second possibility suggests a tree-covered hill, which might well have suited the ridge of Heldon Hill that shelters the Abbey “in the Vale of St Andrew”.

Prof. Clancy’s article, on which the above is largely based, may be found free online at:

<http://www.clanntuirc.co.uk/JSNS/V11/JSNS11%20Clancy.pdf>

Alan James Obl. OSB

Hope

“The true measure of humanity is essentially determined in relationship to suffering and to the sufferer. This holds true both for the individual and for society. A society unable to accept its suffering members and incapable of helping to share their suffering and to bear it inwardly through ‘com-passion’ is a cruel and inhuman society. Yet society cannot accept its suffering members and support them in their trials unless individuals are capable of doing so themselves; moreover, the individual cannot accept another's suffering unless he personally is able to find meaning in suffering, a path of purification and growth in maturity, a journey of hope. Indeed, to accept the “other” who suffers, means that I take up his suffering in such a way that it becomes mine also. Because it has now become a shared suffering, though, in which another person is present, this suffering is penetrated by the light of love. The Latin word *consolatio*, ‘consolation’, expresses this beautifully. It suggests *being with* the other in his solitude, so that it ceases to be solitude.

Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi* 3

BEAULY AND ARDCHATTAN

Between 1113 and 1230, over forty monastic houses were founded throughout Scotland. As well as several mainline Benedictine monasteries – Dunfermline (from Bec via Canterbury), Urquhart (from Dunfermline), Coldingham (from Durham), Isle of May (from Cluny via Reading) – there were foundations from the Tironensians, Cistercians (both founded by Benedictines), Cluniacs (reformed Benedictine), and Augustinians. Finally, in 1230, three houses were founded in the Highlands from Val-des-Choux in Burgundy, at Pluscarden, Beaulay, and Ardchattan.

The story of the Valliscaulians begins in the Carthusian monastery of Lugny, near Langres in Burgundy, where a lay brother, named Viard, sought and was given permission to retire to a hermit existence in a cave in the Vallis Caulium, or Val-des-Choux. From here, tales of his austere devotion to a life of prayer spread throughout the land, eventually reaching the ears of Duke Odo III. Shortly before departing to participate in the Fourth Crusade, Duke Odo visited Viard in his cave and was so impressed by the hermit that he vowed to found a monastery in the valley if he returned safely from the Holy Land.

Duke Odo duly returned to Burgundy and fulfilled his vow at the end of the twelfth century when he founded the monastery of Val-des-Choux and granted it to the Carthusians, with Viard as its first prior. In 1206, Pope Innocent III issued a Bull recognising the new Valliscaulian Order and confirming their Rule. To begin with, the Rule demanded exceptional severity: bound to silence, an austere and common diet, wearing hair shirts, and sleeping fully clothed on beds without mattresses. Such austerity proved difficult to sustain and in 1223, another Papal Bull called for considerable relaxation in the Rule. All Valliscaulian houses were dedicated to Our Lady and St John the Baptist and ranked as priories, including the mother house, whose head was named Prior General. Their Rule followed that of the Cistercians rather than the Carthusians of Viard's monastery at Lugny; and they wore the white habits of the

Cistercians (one reason why Pluscarden monks to this day wear white rather than the traditional Benedictine black).

The Valliscaulian Order grew quickly and soon numbered 20 houses. Although following the Cistercian Rule, the Order retained characteristics of Viard's original Carthusian house, being largely eremitical with single day cells assigned to each monk. Oddly, the Order never spread outside France, the only exceptions being the three monasteries founded in Scotland in 1230. Why Scotland? Perhaps because of King Alexander II's ecclesiastical advisor, William Malvoisin, Bishop of St Andrews, who was himself French. He may have heard about the new Order when in Rome for the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. Certainly, later historians credit him with the introduction of the Valliscaulians to Scotland.

As reported in an earlier article (PB 189), Pluscarden's foundation was directly accredited to Alexander; although the king's interest would undoubtedly have extended to the other two houses, Beaulieu Priory was founded by Sir John Byset/Bisset, Lord of the Aird, west of Inverness; Ardchattan was founded by Sir Duncan Macdougall of Argyll-Lorne. Beaulieu is situated on the north bank of the River Beaulieu, close to the estuary in the Beaulieu Firth. The Burgundian monks were entranced by the beautiful location and accordingly named their new home *Bellus Locus/Beau Lieu*. A later, more romantic story, still given credence by locals today, credits Queen Mary Stuart with the naming of the village, when on a visit she exclaimed, "C'est un beau lieu!" Byset was of a Scoto-Norman family and owed his lands to a grant made by King William the Lion, later confirmed by Alexander II.

The Priory of Ardchattan lies further south, in a beautiful, peaceful location overlooking Loch Etive. A private house now stands there, but the ruins of the 13th century chapel, plus later additions, and the cemetery are under the care of Historic Scotland and are open to the public. A number of carved stones may be seen inside. It is reported that in the early 14th century, after personal inspection by King Robert Bruce, wood from the ancient yew trees was cut to fashion longbows used at the Battle of Bannockburn in

1314. Ardchattan was probably the sole house which remained Valliscaulian, while Beaulieu later linked with Cistercian Kinloss.

It is assumed that the founding monks all came from priories in France, and there is a record of a Br Nicholas, monk of the Val-Croissant Chartreuse, witnessing a charter of the Bishop of Moray in 1232. From the little information we can glean from records, there appears to have been little communication between Pluscarden and the other houses, whereas Beaulieu and Ardchattan were closely linked. For example, in 1506 the Prior of Val-des-Choux requested that the Prior of Beaulieu carry out a visitation at Ardchattan. Whether this visitation ever actually took place is unclear; the difficulties of making such a long and arduous journey may well have deterred the Prior. At the time, Ardchattan was still immediately subject to the mother house in Burgundy. Shortly after this, the Bishop of Ross sent notice that he wished to carry out a visitation at Beaulieu, whereupon the Prior wrote to the mother house asking for documents which showed that all Valliscaulians were exempt from episcopal authority. To his surprise and probable discomfiture, the response was that none of the houses was exempt, accompanied by a stern rebuke that neither the current Prior nor his predecessor had ever made an obligatory visit to Val-des-Choux, required every 4-6 years. He was summoned to attend the following year's general chapter. Perhaps more serious, he had never sent a promised gift of salmon!

Much more is known about Beaulieu Priory, especially after the Frasers of Lovat became involved in the latter half of the 14th century. One chronicler writes how Hugh Fraser took on "the expence of building the north work of the church of Beaulieu, erected that edifice called the Chappell of the Holy Cross" (Chronicles of the Frasers, ed. W. Mackay). Later that century, it is recorded that the buildings were repaired by Prior Mackenzie (d.1479) whose tomb and that of his brother Sir Kenneth Mackenzie of Kintail (d.1491) remain in the church to this day. In 1530, the priory ceased to be Valliscaulian and became a dependent house of the Cistercian Kinloss Abbey, under the abbacy of Robert Reid,

subsequently Bishop of the Orkneys. During his rule, a substantial amount of building was carried out, creating a magnificent new nave, roofed with expensive oak singles, and a new prior's house to replace the ruined original. Sadly, Abbot Reid's brother Walter decided to go over to the Reformers in 1560 and was appointed the first lay Prior or Commendator of Beaulieu. We know that in 1562 there were "aucht (8) brethir" still dwelling in the monastery, permitted by the Frasers to remain there until at least 1571.

All that remains of Beaulieu Priory today are the ruins of the church, the conventual buildings having been partially destroyed by Cromwell to provide stone for his fort at Inverness (as was the fate of Kinloss Abbey). More extensive removal of the stones took place probably in the second half of the 18th century. By the time of the death of Simon, 6th Lord Lovat, in 1633, the church was described as "wholly decayed", with the fall of the heavy oak roof breaking into four pieces the 22 feet square high altar. It is also reported that Simon had transported to his parish church of Kirkhill "the great bell [of the priory] called the Monksbell, and made a frame of wood for it", erected upon the hill near the church, known thereafter as "the bell hill".

Within the ruins of Beaulieu Priory are still to be found features of historical interest relating to our Catholic past. Above the door leading into the west front of the nave are three lancet windows, the centre one raised to make room for a small niche above the door; here is a shield displaying the initials of Abbot Robert Reid, together with a crosier and his coat of arms. Also of interest, restored and reroofed in 1901, the north transept forms the burial place of the Mackenzies of Kintail (associated also with Pluscarden as lay priors). On one side lies the tomb of Prior [Dugal] Mackenzie (died 1479), said to be an illegitimate son of Alexander Mackenzie, 6th of Kintail. No effigy now remains on his tomb. Opposite the Prior's tomb lies the monument of his half-brother Kenneth Mackenzie, 7th of Kintail (d. 1491), buried here perhaps because he was married to a daughter of Fraser of Lovat. His well-preserved effigy lies in full armour, with sword and

misericord, his head resting upon two cushions. His feet rest against a lion couchant. Space had been left at his side for his lady, but it is not recorded where she was buried. Along the edge of the tomb is carved this inscription:

hic . iacet . kanycus . mkynych . dns . de . kyntayl . qi . obiit . vii . die . februarii . ao . di . / m cccc . lxxxix. (Here lies Kenneth Mackenzie Lord of Kintail who died the 7th day of February, A.D.1491)

In 1560, at the Scottish Reformation, all three Valliscaulian foundations, along with all other Scottish monasteries, were dissolved, with lay priors from then on enjoying ownership and revenues of the buildings and lands, although the remaining monks were allowed to live out their days where once they had worshipped. At Ardchattan, the names of four monks were recorded up until 1564. A John Campbell sat in parliament in 1567 as commendator of Ardchattan and was listed in an English report of 1570 as “a Protestant lord”. He was connected also to the Campbells of Cawdor. All the Ardchattan monks were dead by 1599 and the priory remained in the hands of the Campbells of Ardchattan. Following the Reformation, Beaulys superior, Abbot Walter Reid of Kinloss, though minimally involved in state or church affairs, did attend several parliamentary sessions. In November 1571, the sale of Beaulys properties took place, and ended up in the hands of Lord Lovat and his heirs. Walter was pensioned off with a substantial payment and signed over the priorship. Today, the priory remains a “bare ruined choir, where late the sweet birds sang”, visited by another poet, John Keats, in 1818:

In silent barren Synod met,
Within those roofless walls where yet
The shafted arch and carved fret
Cling to the ruin.

Eileen Clare Grant Obl. OSB

PLUSCARDEN PENTECOST LECTURES

Each year since 1995, the Abbot and Community of Pluscarden Abbey have sponsored a series of four lectures by an invited Theologian on an aspect of Catholic Theology. The Lectures are held on the Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday after Pentecost in St Scholastica's Retreat House at the Abbey. They are open to all who wish to attend and are free, although donations are always welcome. Most of the Lectures have been recorded. Below is a complete list of each series of Lectures from the beginning.

1995 – Fr Paul McPartlan – The Eucharist makes the Church

1996 – Fr Aidan Nichols OP – Jesus Christ

1997 – Fr Tom Norris (Maynooth) – Hans Urs von Balthasar

1998 – Canon Michael Evans – Sharing God's Mission

1999 – Fr Ian Ker – Newman & the Church of the Next Millennium

2000 – Dr Patrick Sherry – Holy Spirit

2001 – Mrs Lucy Beckett – St Augustine: Teacher of the Heart

2002 – Fr Anthony Meredith SJ – God, Man & the Cappadocians

2003 – Professor John Saward – Reaching the Fatherland

2004 – Mgr Peter Hocken – The Evangelical Challenge

2005 – Fr James MacNeil – The Eucharist: Life of the Church

2006 – Fr John Keenan – In God's Image: Pope John Paul II's Theology of the Body

2007 – Deacon Laurence Hemming – A Future Perfect Gift: Time and the Sacred Liturgy

2008 – Professor Gavin D'Costa – Christianity and the World Religions

2009 – Fr Tom Herbst OFM – Holistic Ambiguity: A Western Theology of Nature

2010 – Fr Peter Gallagher SJ – God and Goodness

2011 – Prof. John Haldane – God, the Soul and the Spiritual Life

2012 – Prof. Lewis Ayres – The Mystery of the Trinity

2013 – Fr Vincent Twomey SVD – Revelation and Reason according to Joseph Ratzinger

2014 – Carol Zaleski – Immortality in Question

2015 – Abbot Erik Varden OCR – Clothed in Mercy

2016 – Fr Ian Ker – Newman and Vatican II

2017 – Dr Francesca Murphy – *Gnosis and the Theocrats from Mars*

2018 – Fr Richard Ounsworth OP – You have come to Mount Sion

2019 – Fr Martin Boland – Beauty will save the World

2020 – Sadly, this year’s Lectures had to be cancelled because of the Coronavirus pandemic. We hope that Dr Christopher Ruddy, due to speak on “Praise in an Age of Agitation”, will be able to deliver his lectures in 2022. Next year’s lecturer, all being well, will be Fr Thomas Joseph White OP.

Hope

“*Ave maris stella...* Human life is a journey. Towards what destination? How do we find the way? Life is like a voyage on the sea of history, often dark and stormy, a voyage in which we watch for the stars that indicate the route. The true stars of our life are the people who have lived good lives. They are lights of hope... Who more than Mary could be a star of hope for us?”

Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi* 49

BOOK REVIEW

The Song that I am - On the Mystery of Music, by Élisabeth-Paule Labat, translated by Erik Varden, Cistercian Publications, Collegeville, Minnesota, 2014; PB, 122 pp.

What is the meaning of music? Élisabeth-Paule Labat published her profound engagement with this question in 1963. She was born in the South of France in 1897, and brought up in a conventionally Catholic family. Very much an intellectual, her encounters with the death of those close to her, as well as with the First World War, led her towards irreligion, and an abiding sense of solitude and anguish. A musician of genius, she studied piano, composition and singing in Paris. There, especially through her study of Gregorian Chant, she found again the faith of her childhood, and in 1922 entered Kergonan Abbey in Brittany, a Benedictine monastery of the Solesmes Congregation.

In 1943 the German Army requisitioned Kergonan's monastery buildings, and the nuns found temporary refuge in a nearby manor house. While walking there alone one beautiful Autumn evening, Sr Élisabeth heard a solo violin playing Mozart's Sonata in E Minor.

“From the bow of a proficient performer, the song soared alone with a resonance that seized me to the depths of my soul... Never shall I forget the brief moments I then experienced. I knew that masterpiece by one of music's purest minds of genius. In my youth I had often accompanied it... Yet never had its simple melody seemed charged with such lyricism, such depths of tenderness... This exceptional music tore me quite away from the created world and from myself...”

That moment, akin to the ecstasy of the mystics, gave Sr Élisabeth a new understanding of her life and her vocation, and of the mystery of music. The essay presented here is the fruit of a further 20 years of reflection on what she then understood; also of all her ever continuing reading, in philosophy and theology, poetry

and literature in various languages; also of her prayer, and her whole monastic life, with its daily round of sung worship and silence and community life and liturgical Chant. Throughout, there is at least an echo of autobiography, never far beneath the surface.

Not long after this writing, Sr Élisabeth suffered a series of strokes. She was deprived of mobility; unable any longer to read; able to speak only with difficulty. Asked where she was ever bored, she would answer “No.” Asked whether she missed music, she replied with vigour, “Not at all!” After several years of more or less intense suffering, she died in 1975.

On the Mystery of Music is rather a slim volume, but dense, and at times difficult, full of quotation and allusion from the astonishingly wide reading of a deeply cultured woman. It is to be warmly recommended; to be read and pondered and re-read. After a masterful introduction by Erik Varden, eight Chapters follow: On Music considered as language; Situating the perception of Beauty; Music, relation and tears; Music and ultimate values; Music’s mission; Music and the sacred; Music and liturgy; the Music of Eternity.

How to convey something of the flavour and contents of such richness in a brief review? Perhaps some rather randomly representative snippets of direct quotation could be more useful than any attempted paraphrase or summary:

“The language of music originates in a dimension of consciousness that precedes and transcends articulate reason. Without paradox, music can express the ineffable: what cannot be spoken. We miss the point when we try to pinpoint what music expresses: because it’s beyond verbal expression. Music fills us at once with both joy and sadness. For as soon as we try to seize hold of what we hear, we are left bereft.”

“Beautiful music points beyond itself to a greater beauty. It points beyond itself to the source from which it springs, and in this respect it is a ‘sign’”.

“Music springs from the depths of the soul, where the soul itself, alongside all other beings, is in communion with Being, Beauty, Life. But in order to reach us and take us back to its hidden source, music must pass through the mind and heart of man. Therefore it brings us a message not only from a mysterious beyond, but also the most intimate inclinations, the most delicate vibrations of man’s own sensibility and interior life.”

“When sovereign beauty arises, we touch a ray of the eternal and divine. Anyone who has not been seized by this divine light has not yet gained access to music; he knows only its forecourts. When all our feelings have been exceeded, we stand before an absolute of truth and love shining forth in beauty. This absolute touches us beneath the surface of our soul. The pure beauty that transpires beyond the signs invites us to transcend music and go beyond ourselves in order to join it in its sanctuary.”

“Mozart! Could anyone whose taste has not been corrupted by the artificial or falsely sublime, anyone whose heart has at least in its wellspring remained virginal, hear this song issuing from an exceptionally pure and loving soul without being moved to the point of bursting?”

“There are, alas, great geniuses who are not pure geniuses. Here I think of Wagner, of the pernicious commotion, the sonorous showiness that, in an overheated atmosphere of passion or false mysticism, bears a philter that can fetter us as magically as the one that bound Tristan to Isolde. Art of this kind forces emotion by stirring the troubled regions of our sensibility. It sublimates them without purifying them. At times, grace is needed to reject its pernicious charm. With Wagner we are at the opposite extreme of Mozart and also of Bach, whose technical transports and most lively outbursts are always at the service of a truth that is authentic, healthy, and profound. They are bearers of an energy that does not crush the listener’s heart, but rather causes it to open out, that exalts without communicating any artificial intoxication to the dubious and superficial regions of our soul.”

“We find the model purity of musical art most fully realised in the Gregorian cantilena of ages past. It is its prerogative to achieve the very highest, densest expression by minimal means. Charged with incomparable spiritual truths, it never sets out to impress, it never seeks to excite our emotions. It is the voice of the Word, of the Spirit. The Spirit that regulated the Church’s heartbeat is its quickening breath and, like the Spirit, Gregorian Chant treats us with great respect. With sobriety and penetration it leads us into the sphere of the most sacred realities. Truly this is matchless music, steeped in grace and divine tenderness.”

“The goal of a monk is to praise God, in song and in silence, by a cry welling up from the innermost core of his being, giving voice to his being. Made thus a ‘praise of glory’ he will, in the harmony of his soul, himself become pure music. He will gain access to the mystery of music, though without ever fathoming it. As he approaches the source of music, not as a distant indefinable *abstractum*, but as Someone - a someone who is All - he realises that, even here on earth, all is music and all tends towards the music of eternity.”

“Music is supremely an art of movement. At the service of creative life, it places a matter so supple and fluid, so akin to the spirit, that it seems to take on all the modalities of life, from extreme force - think of some Toccata or great organ Fugue by Bach, closing with all the authority of a gripping theophany - to extreme gentleness, as in a Gregorian melody that approaches silence by its sobriety, yet is penetrating and suggestive, like the ‘murmur of a soft breeze’ which God manifested to Elijah at the mouth of the cave.”

“Because it is a sign, music is a message. As such, it betrays itself - no, we betray *it* - when, enthralled by its beauty, we remain incapable of going beyond it to attain the naked reality signified. The sign of the beautiful is not the beautiful itself, however much it may be bathed in its glory. It is the eternal beauty behind the sign we must attain, even as we have to perceive the voice of a superhuman, heavenly call through the voice of sound.

“I have never been able to understand how one can make music and not become a Saint - how one can love music without desiring to be one.”

“Gregorian Chant constitutes a unique phenomenon within the domain of music. It originates where all music should lead. It brings us in touch with eternal truths, not as in the case of other music, even of genius, through the intermediacy of a human personality, temperament, race, nation or any other interplay of multiple influences, but directly. No one can really understand this music without first being conformed to its mystery through love. For the contemplative, whose daily bread it is, this chant, while having worship as its first object, is equally a powerful aid to the interior life and to inner purification.”

“In becoming holy so as better to worship God, and in finding in this worship the strength we need to advance in virtue, we shall rise ever further until we reach the point at which, like the Angels, we ourselves become entirely a hymn of praise. And that is the highest degree of music man can know.”

“Monks are especially conditioned to hear the Song of the Angels. Without wanting to become an Angel himself, the monk must share in the Angels’ Song, and in everything that constitutes their life and calling.”

“At the end of time Christ will appear as the great Cantor under whose direction and inspiration man recovers his original vocation of praise, so as to exercise its full potential. His voice will now be our voice, and our voices will be his.”

“In heaven, we participate in God’s praise of himself. Here below, meanwhile, although it happens rarely and too briefly, in moments that are firstfruits of pure eternity, the Lord’s presence fills us with the indescribable joy of praising him simply because he is. At such times, before a distant horizon that hopelessly escapes us, we receive a foretaste of what the great waters of eternal music sing: *Gratias agimus tibi, Domine, propter magnam gloriam tuam!*”

DBH

ENCOUNTER

You catch a glimpse of Him peering through the lattice,
but once through the doorway of surrender
you see Him clearly, leaping over the mountains,
bounding over the hills,
running to meet you.

So leave the life-long dance
through mansions, over islands,
scanning the far horizon for a shadow.
even when you have known
in the darkness, His desire.

Must it be slowly, carefully? No! Tear open
eagerly the invitation of the Word
He let fall beneath the casement, and
leap across the threshold of longing into
the bright field of encounter.

You saw Him, as I told you earlier,
running to meet you, lithe with grace.
Did I remember to tell you, though, how
He was ablaze with the fire of delight,
exultant at the final encounter?

You'll find yourself saying what you were taught
with no hesitation: O that He would kiss me
with the kisses of His mouth!
More, much more, than you were given
to know, before, while watching
and searching on the journey.

Sr Mary Stephen OSB