

Pluscarden Benedictines

No. 193 News and Notes for our Friends Lent 2021

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Cover: The Sleeping St Joseph Statue

Back Cover: Pluscarden in January

FR ABBOT'S LETTER

Dear Friends,

In the Apostolic Letter *Patris Corde* (“With a Father’s Heart”) Pope Francis proclaimed a special “Year of St Joseph” lasting until the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception on the 8th December this year. This is in celebration of the 150th anniversary of Blessed Pope Pius IX’s declaration of St Joseph as Patron of the Universal Church.

The Apostolic Letter is written with a view to the Covid-19 epidemic, which, the Holy Father says, has shown the importance of “ordinary” people: “Our lives are woven together and sustained by ordinary people, people often overlooked. People who do not appear in newspaper and magazine headlines, or on the latest television show, yet in these very days are surely shaping the decisive events of our history.” Pope Francis sees St Joseph as such a one: “Each of us can discover in Joseph – the man who goes unnoticed, a daily, discreet and hidden presence – an intercessor, a support and a guide in times of trouble.”

To provide ourselves with a focal point for our prayers we have placed a statue of “sleeping Joseph”, an image particularly dear to Pope Francis, in the place that our crib occupied over Christmas. Customarily, people place under this statue notes with prayer requests for St Joseph. If any of you have such requests, please send them. You find details of how to do this in the enclosed prayer card.

I remember as a child sometimes seeing attached to a picture of St Joseph the words of Scripture, “Go to Joseph” (Gen 41:55). I was pleased to think that prayer to St Joseph was recommended in the Bible. When I started reading the Bible and realised that the text quoted referred to the other Joseph, and had nothing to do with our Saint, I was disappointed and a little annoyed.

Still, the application of the text in Genesis to St Joseph has a valid foundation in the connection that St Matthew’s Gospel makes between that Joseph and St Joseph. The former is of course

remembered first as the man of dreams, then as the one through whom the children of Israel went into Egypt. In St Matthew's Gospel, St Joseph is guided by God's angel through four dreams, and he takes his family to Egypt.

The "dreams" are revelations in which the dreamer receives divine guidance or assurance for the future. Now, one might think such a dreamer is far from "ordinary" because he would not have the doubts and uncertainties that we have. Yet the Scripture shows us in both Josephs, persons who experience and feel all the troubles that life offers.

In Genesis, Joseph's adolescent dreams showed him a future high destiny, all his brothers bowing before him. Yet he experienced being rejected and sold into slavery by his brothers, then years of humiliation, a deep feeling of being forgotten, and a living death in Egypt, the symbolic land of death. There comes a moment when the dreams seem true: he sees his brother bowing before him in Egypt. But this is not a happy ending. It makes him go deeper into the meaning of the dreams and into his memories. He discovers the truth that the dreams concealed, that his pre-eminence among the brothers was not in his power but in his suffering by which he brought them life. He learned this not from dreams – there are no more dreams once he is reunited with his brothers – but through painful dialogue with his brothers and through acceptance of their limitations.

Joseph comes to the truth through a long purification. His dreams contained the truth, but also very much of himself, and one might say that his vision of himself hid the truth. St Joseph is very different. His dreams say nothing about his own prospects. We might say that his vision is empty of self. It doesn't contain a complete map for his life's journey, with an assured happy ending. He sees only the next step to be taken. His dreams don't take him out of ordinary life, but into it. They end, as far as we know, when he brings Mary and Joseph to Nazareth and they begin a family life that to their relatives and neighbours is unremarkable.

The first Joseph is full of himself, and absorbs the attention of others: his brothers, his father, Pharaoh and all Egypt. He is far-

sighted. St Joseph by contrast sees only God, Mary, Jesus and the next thing to be done. The first Joseph has to go far to reach the simplicity and clarity that St Joseph has from the beginning.

If we are to think of St Joseph as a man of vision, it is not because he had heavenly visions, or clear certainties about the future, or even a sense of his own importance in the general scheme of things. His clarity came from love: his love for God's law, because of which he is called a just man, his love for Mary, and his fatherly love for Jesus. This same love made him amenable to the guidance of God's angel. He is a good patron for us, teaching us to be attentive to those within our care and the tasks God gives us, and trusting in God's angels who accompany us.

Yours devotedly in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr Anselm". The "F" is a simple vertical line with a horizontal top bar. The "r" is a cursive loop. "Anselm" is written in a fluid, cursive hand.

Prayer to St Joseph

*Hail, Guardian of the Redeemer,
Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary.
To you God entrusted his only Son;
in you Mary placed her trust;
with you Christ became man.*

*Blessed Joseph, to us too,
show yourself a father
and guide us in the path of life.
Obtain for us grace, mercy and courage,
and defend us from every evil. Amen.*

FROM THE ANNALS

NOVEMBER 2020

2nd: FEAST OF ALL SOULS. As is customary, most of the priests of the house said three Masses today. In the course of the afternoon the sacristy department set up lights on each of the graves in the cemetery; there are over 114. After Compline the community went in procession to the cemetery where Fr Abbot said the prayers and then blessed the graves.

3rd: Tonight, we begin our annual retreat. We went for the usual pre-retreat long walk after. The retreat began at Compline time. This year's retreat will be restricted, though we are to have conferences from Sr Anna Christi O.P. of the Elgin community.

4th: Sr Anna-Christi O.P. gave the first conference this morning. We had to make a number of adjustments to abide by the rules on social distancing. Sister gave her conferences with the aid of a computer. She based her retreat on the legend of Notre Dame de Colombier and the Contes de Montbrun.

5th: SOLEMNITY OF THE DEDICATION OF THE ABBEY CHURCH. Fr Abbot presided at Mass and preached the homily. We keep this solemnity as a Recollection Day.

6th: Conventual Mass today was a Mass for the dead of the house. Sr Anna Christi gave her second talk today.

7th: Sr Anna Christi gave a third talk today, focusing on Mary.

9th: Feast of the Dedication of the Lateran Basilica. Sr Anna Christi gave her final conference, on the house of the Father.

10th: Retreat Recollection Day. Fr Abbot gave a conference, after which we exposed the Blessed Sacrament on the main altar until after Vespers. The brethren took it in turns to watch. After supper we greeted Fr Martin for his feast and then dispersed.

11th: Feast of Saint Martin. Fr Martin presided at Office today, but Fr Abbot presided at Conventual Mass and gave the end of retreat homily. The members of the community then renewed their vows. This brought the retreat to a close.

18th: A mason was here today in order to begin to prepare panels of different styles of rubble stonework to be shown to Historic

Scotland for their judgement and approval for the South Range.

22nd: SOLEMNITY OF CHRIST THE UNIVERSAL KING.

Fr Abbot presided at Office and Conventual Mass.

29th: FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT. Fr Martin presided at Conventual Mass and preached. There was also a pastoral letter from Bishop Hugh which was read after the Communion prayer.

30th: SOLEMNITY OF ST ANDREW. We follow a Sunday timetable today. Today we had a gaudeamus to make up for community outings we had missed. The film was *The Green Book*. We had an interval during the film when we ate a buffet supper. Baxter the cat came into the calefactory and ate some of the food which he found; this included stilton cheese.

DECEMBER 2020.

1st: Baxter the cat was very ill today and had to be taken to the vet. It seems that any blue cheese, such as stilton, is poisonous to cats. The vet began treatment and kept him in overnight.

3rd: Baxter the cat returned today. He seems much improved.

4th: Recollection Day. Br Joseph, the Ceremonarius, gave the first of a series of short reminders on ceremonies. At noon Fr Abbot gave a conference. Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament followed.

5th: There was very heavy rain overnight and the burn has risen significantly.

8th: SOLEMNITY OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY. Fr Abbot presided at Office and Mass and preached at Conventual Mass.

There has been further heavy rain and the water in the burn has risen to a depth of over two metres. Someone from the Scottish environmental authority took measurements.

10th: There was some rain today, but the depth of water in the burn continues to go down. Br Joseph continued with his ceremonial reminders.

12th: Fr Abbot gave a conference before Vespers, continuing his series on St Luke's Gospel.

17th: O Sapientia. From today we sing the great O antiphons at Vespers each day until Christmas Eve. There are other liturgical

changes which begin today to underline the approach of Christmas. Designated officials of the monastery preside at Vespers each day. If the designated official is not a priest, a priest presides in his place.

John Gleeson, the quantity surveyor for the South Range Project, is staying at the lodge. He was in evidence today, wearing a mask and measuring certain parts of the ground floor.

Fr Abbot presided at Vespers in the sanctuary and intoned the antiphon *O Sapientia*. At supper we traditionally read one of two articles from early editions of Pax. This year we heard the article giving a short account of the great O antiphons and the customs associated with them in medieval English religious communities. The other article has a description of how Christmas was celebrated on Caldey.

After second table we lined up in statio and went into the calefactory which had been prepared for this meeting in the course of the day. Tables with tablecloths were in the centre of the room around the central pillar. Candles lit the room, many of them in candlesticks used only on this day. Normally a mazer features heavily. For this we fill a silver cup with warm spiced wine. The second acolyte of choir brings it into the calefactory after we have sung the antiphon *O Sapientia*. Fr Abbot blesses this mazer, tastes it and passes it on to the Prior, saying, *prosit*. The Prior, and after him each of the monks in turn, tastes and passes it on in the same way until it has gone round the community. This year, due to Covid, we could not have a mazer, and so the second acolyte of choir poured the wine into the cups which each of the brethren had been given. The *O Sapientia* recreation is meant to be a *modest scholastical congratulation* and so there was no great amount to eat, though the first mince pies of the Christmas season made their appearance. At the end we sang *Shepherd in the Fields Abiding*. After this Fr Abbot read the prayer intentions and we made our way to Compline.

18th: At the community meeting after Mass Fr Abbot mentioned that there would be stricter Covid-19 regulations shortly. We are presently in Tier 1, but with the rest of mainland Scotland will go

to Tier 4 on Boxing Day. This is the highest tier, more or less equivalent to a full lockdown. The guest house will close. From now on the Sunday Mass at 8.00 am will be the only public Mass.

19th: Baxter the cat was sick several times this morning. Br Michael took him to the vet, who said the cat was suffering renal failure and that they could not help him. The vet therefore put him to sleep at 4.20 this afternoon. Br Michael brought the body back to the abbey.

20th: Bros Michael and Daniel buried the body of Baxter the cat just to the north of the visitor centre hut.

22nd: Presents have been arriving. This year they have been put in plastic crates in the cloister. Br Michael set up a smart phone on a small, flexible tripod atop the lectern in order to livestream Vespers.

23rd: We livestreamed Mass, Vespers and Compline today. Br Michael reports that it seems to work well. There has been almost no publicity, but those who know about it have spread the word.

24th: Christmas Eve. The brethren set to work after Mass to decorate the house: church, calefactory and refectory. In the cloister, a team set up a Christmas tree with lights, decorations and baubles. There is another tree in the refectory. Once more, the kitchen saw much activity with various cooks making preparations for today's meals and future ones. A tradition has grown up of having muesli for supper on Christmas Eve and Holy Saturday. The Vigil began at 10.15 pm and continued until shortly before midnight, after which Mass began. Fr Abbot presided at Mass and Office. He preached at the Mass, which was livestreamed. There was effectively no congregation at Midnight Mass.

25th: SOLEMNITY OF CHRISTMAS. Priests celebrated the dawn Mass at various altars after Lauds, except for Fr Benedict who said the 8.00 am Mass in English at the altar in the transepts. This was our only public Mass today. After Terce, the Christmas mail was distributed. We hold back all non-official mail from 17th December and parcels from earlier, until Christmas Day.

NEWS FROM ST MARY'S MONASTERY

Every year on December 17, the day when the “O Antiphons” begin, we have a brief ceremony in our chapter room with the sisters of St Scholastica Priory, which is then followed by a light supper. We inherited the tradition from Pluscarden, which goes back to the original Caldey community, which later moved to Prinknash. After singing the antiphon “O Sapientia” we all drink a sip or two of hot mulled wine from a large chalice, which is passed around the room. The ceremony was a little different this year, however, because of the COVID pandemic. For sanitary reasons, we didn’t all drink from the one cup but drank from individual glasses instead. Following the pre-dinner drink, we were able to give the sisters a brief tour of our newly renovated carriage house. God willing, in the future when the pandemic subsides, we will be able to invite others in to see the renovated building. After the tour, the meal proceeded as usual.

On January 14 we began using a microphone in our refectory. Previously we hadn’t been using one since the refectory is fairly small. But it’s not always easy to hear the public reading, so we decided the time had come to try a microphone. The new sound system has been a big improvement and we can all hear the reading clearly now.

It’s been fairly quiet here, due to COVID-19. By now we would have reported on our latest monastic experience weekend. Unfortunately, we have had to put these on hold because of the virus. Likewise, our gift shop is closed at present, but when it opens again visitors will find a new item for sale. Br Benedict Joseph has been busy knitting “cowls.” But they’re not the cowls which we monks wear in choir. Rather they are small, colourful neck scarves for women. The material he is using is called railroad yarn, which is made from nylon. He’s also been baking fresh bread on a regular basis which we all enjoy.

DIC

“I SLEPT BUT MY HEART WAS AWAKE” **(Songs 5:2)**

Addressing families in the Philippines in 2015, Pope Francis revealed a personal devotion that he had practised for decades:

“... I have an image of Saint Joseph sleeping. Even when he is asleep, he is taking care of the Church! ... So when I have a problem, a difficulty, I write a little note and I put it underneath Saint Joseph, so that he can dream about it! In other words, I tell him: pray for this problem!”

The Holy Father entrusts all his concerns to the intercession of the sleeping St Joseph and so this enables him to sleep too! In this year dedicated to St Joseph, with a world still in the grip of the pandemic, as a focus for our prayer we too have our own statue of the sleeping St Joseph.

In his Apostolic Letter *Patris Corde* (“With a Father’s Heart”), promulgated to inaugurate this year dedicated to St Joseph, Pope Francis observes that in the Gospel of Matthew we learn that Joseph was a “just man” (Mt 1:19): he was “*ever ready to carry out God’s will as revealed to him*”. As a faithful Jew this was revealed to Joseph *in the Law*, but also through *four dreams*. We will see that the situations through which Joseph slept were hardly conducive to sweet dreams!

The context of the first dream, Mary’s pregnancy, is the most familiar. Whether one believes that Joseph was in anguish over an apparent infidelity or, being familiar with the prophecy of Isaiah that “*a virgin will conceive and bear a son*” (Is 7:14), he thought himself unworthy of so great a mystery, either way he must have been in great turmoil. So what does he do? He sleeps. In the *first dream* he receives divine consolation and instruction – take Mary as wife, the child is conceived by the Holy Spirit, name him Jesus (Mt 1:20-21).

The complete *context of the second dream* may seem obvious from St Matthew, i.e., after the adoration of the Magi. The *second dream* brings no consolation but a demand for immediate action –

escape Herod, flee to Egypt (Mt 2:13). He does so. But St Luke completes the picture. If they fled *immediately*, we must conclude that Mary and Joseph had *already* visited Jerusalem to present the child Jesus in the Temple (Lk 2:22). We can suppose that as Joseph slept, Simeon's words about the child ("fall and rising of many") and to Mary ("a sword will pierce through your own soul") would have weighed heavily upon his chaste heart (cf Lk 2:34-35).

The *context of the third dream* is the Holy Family's life in Egypt, the traditional land of bondage for the Jewish people (Gen 15:13; Ex 1:13-14). The dream itself is a summons to return to Israel and again, like the first, a fulfilment of a prophecy – this time "*out of Egypt I have called my son*" (Mt 2:15; Hos 11:1).

The *context of the fourth dream* is Joseph's discovery that Herod's son governs. He is afraid to return to Judea. The angel's message in the third dream was not very specific: merely "go to Israel". Now what? Complain and murmur against God for a lack of clarity? No. Sleep. St Matthew tells us that Joseph "*being warned in a dream*" (Mt 2:22), withdrew to the district of Galilee. Joseph was warned of the danger, yet seems to have discerned himself where to go – to Nazareth; another prophecy fulfilled: "*He will be called a Nazarene*" (Mt 2:23, Is 11:1, Jg 13:5, 7).

What can we learn from the sleep of St Joseph?

"Even through Joseph's fears, God's will, his history and his plan were at work. Joseph, then, teaches us that faith in God includes believing that he can work even through our fears, our frailties and our weaknesses ... that amid the tempests of life, we must never be afraid to let the Lord steer our course. At times, we want to be in complete control, yet God always sees the bigger picture (*Patris Corde* 2).

The sleep of Joseph teaches us *trust in God*. When God intervened, Joseph did not understand, nor did he complain but humbly accepted:

"The spiritual path that Joseph traces for us is not one that explains, but accepts" (*Patris Corde* 4).

Joseph was a just man, he obeyed the will of God; yes, as revealed in his dreams; but also as revealed *in the Law*. Indeed, each of Joseph's dreams was seasoned by God's Word: Isaiah 7:14 (1st dream), Hosea 11:1 (2nd and 3rd dream), Judges 13:5, 7 and Isaiah 11:1 (4th dream). Joseph's obedience and discernment, whether consciously or unconsciously, were the fruit of his love of the Scriptures.

In Lent, let us devote more time to Scripture. To escape reality? No, so we (like St Joseph) can truly discern what God is doing at this time in history. In Lent, let us turn to St Joseph in prayer for guidance; entrust ourselves to him, try to understand him more, using the Holy Father's Apostolic letter *Patris Corde*. Why? It is "his year" – yes. But more than that, it is in order to imitate our Saviour, because Jesus himself was taught by St Joseph. Also, tradition holds that St Joseph died before Jesus began his public ministry. In Lent, we follow Jesus into the desert as he is driven by the Holy Spirit at the *beginning* of his public ministry (Mt 4:1). Can we suppose that Jesus' thoughts in the desert were full of the one he called "father", the one who had just died? It is reasonable to think so.

So – let us go to the Scriptures, let us go to Joseph! He will take us to Jesus asleep in the boat in the midst of the storm (Mk 4:38), and – like father, like Son – let us trust, pray, sleep ... dream.

DJC

"Often in life, things happen whose meaning we do not understand. Our first reaction is frequently one of disappointment and rebellion. Joseph set aside his own ideas in order to accept the course of events and, mysterious as they seemed, to embrace them, take responsibility for them and make them part of his own history. ... The spiritual path that Joseph traces for us is not one that *explains*, but *accepts*. Only as a result of this acceptance, this reconciliation, can we begin to glimpse a broader history, a deeper meaning" (*Patris Corde*).

PILGRIMAGE TO THE HEART OF THE FATHER

Reflections Offered during the Annual Retreat 4-9 November 2020

“To love means to travel, to run with the heart towards the loved object. The Imitation of Jesus Christ tells us: he who loves ‘runs, flies, rejoices’ (i.III, c.V, n.4). To love God, therefore, is to travel towards God, with the heart, a wonderful journey.”¹

This wonderful journey towards God with the heart constitutes a pilgrimage, if one considers the definition of Pope Benedict XVI: “To go on pilgrimage really means to step out of ourselves in order to encounter God where he has revealed himself, where his grace has shone with particular splendour and produced rich fruits of conversion and holiness among those who believe.”²

We often think of pilgrimage in terms of physical travel to a location, but a pilgrimage to God is made by the mind and heart, through an intellect illumined by the grace of faith. For the reflections offered to the community during the annual retreat in November, I proposed a pilgrimage to the heart of God the Father using the “road map” of a medieval tale, “The Legend of Notre Dame de Colombier”.

The choice of a legend for this pilgrimage comes from the Catholic understanding that signs, symbols and stories point beyond themselves to the transcendent truth they represent in a way that engages us, effecting an interior transformation. As sacramental theologian Nathan Mitchell observed: “A symbol is ... an environment to be inhabited. Symbols are places to live, breathing spaces that help us discover the possibilities that life

¹ Pope John Paul I, General Audience, 27 September 1978.

http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-i/en/audiences/documents/hf_jp-i_aud_27091978.html

² Pope Benedict XVI, Address of the Holy Father Benedict XVI: Visit to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana. November 6, 2010), accessed August 16, 2019.

https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2010/november/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20101106_cattedrale-compostela.html#

offers. To put the matter succinctly, every symbol deals with a new discovery and every symbol is an open-ended action, not a closed-off object. By engaging in symbols, by inhabiting their environment, people discover new horizons for life, new values, and motivation.”³

The Legend of Notre Dame de Colombier comes from the Aude region of France. Seeking solace from his wife’s untimely death, Count Robert de Montbrun leaves behind his two young sons to fight in the Crusades. Every night his sons mount the castle tower to look out for him, but after years of silence and upon learning of the total defeat of the Crusaders at Mansourah, they despair of a reunion. In his absence, they train a cruel and talented pack of hunting dogs. When the sons are grown, they hold a festival to meet eligible young women for marriage. It is in vain that the parish priest urges them not to hold the festivity that weekend, for it is the Paschal Triduum. Twice during the festive dinner, a poor pilgrim knocks and seeks an interview with the sons, only to be rebuffed. Finally, the sons order their hunting pack to be set loose on the pilgrim to teach him a lesson and leave them alone. That night, atop the tower, they hear strife between the man and the dogs in the oak grove below their castle. In horror, they rush to the scene and discover that not only have the dogs cruelly killed the pilgrim ... but that the pilgrim is their father, returned unexpectedly from the Crusades.

“Could but this offended heart send us a sign of forgiveness to bring peace to our deeply troubled souls!” they cry with tears of true contrition. The legend continues, “Almost immediately, the rays of dawn crept over the sky and a flock of doves, arising from some unknown place, began to flutter about them.” One of the doves alights on the shoulder of the victim and “in the pool of blood in the open heart, she dipped her beak and on the unrolled parchment, on which the count had written the feats of the

³ Nathan Mitchell, “Symbols are Actions, not Objects.” *Living Worship* 13/2 (Feb 1977), 1-2. as quoted in Avery Dulles, S.J., “The Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” *Theological Studies* 41, no 1 (1980): 59-60.
<http://cdn.theologicalstudies.net/41/41.1/41.1.2.pdf>.

Crusade, she sketched, just as it should be built, the outline of a chapel.” The sons honoured the miraculous sign of forgiveness and built the chapel, naming it Notre Dame de Colombier, or “Our Lady of the Dovecote.” The tale ends with the words, “Then the sun rose above the mountains and everything was illumined by her rays of gold. It was the day of new beginnings. It was Easter Day.”

As our imaginations encounter the symbols of this legend (the father, the sons, the dogs, the heart, the dove, the chapel) the light of faith shines upon the intellect, like the sun rising over the mountains, illumining everything with her rays of gold. The story sheds new light on aspects of the Paschal mystery and renews our appreciation of its gift. This legend is not an allegory, where every character or event corresponds to an aspect of the Paschal mystery. It is more like the legends described by J.R.R. Tolkien in his essay, “On Fairy Stories”:

It is not difficult to imagine the peculiar excitement and joy one would feel, if any especially beautiful fairy story were found to be “primarily true”, its narrative to be history, without thereby necessarily losing the mythical or allegorical significance that it had possessed...⁴

What is “primarily true” about the Legend of Notre Dame de Colombier is the broken heart of the father, the forgiveness and constructive penance bestowed upon it by the dove, and the chapel as the place where repentant hearts can worship God in peace restored. Within the legend, these symbols are beautiful in themselves. Yet, faith nudges us to notice that the pierced heart of the crucified pilgrim of Love, Jesus Christ, reveals to us the merciful “heart of the Father” and the action of the Holy Spirit. It is from the pierced side of the Crucified One that blood and water gush forth and the Church is born, a Church of forgiven sinners and sons. The Catechism, indeed, reminds us that the Church is “a plan born of the Father’s heart”.⁵ As Tolkien says, “Legend and

⁴ JRR Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories” in *Tree and Leaf* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), 72-73.

⁵ CCC 759

History have met and fused ... the Evangelium has not abrogated legends; it has hallowed them, especially the happy ending.”⁶

The remainder of the reflections to the community unpacked the aspects of the legend which reveal, from a new angle, various aspects of our faith: the restorative chamber of the heart of Christ, the formative role of the Blessed Virgin who is “Our Lady of the Dovecote” in our spiritual lives, the role of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity in the new creation, and the dwelling place for God in the Spirit that we ourselves are.

Most importantly, however, the legend brings us on a journey of love whose destination is the “heart” of the Father, revealed most perfectly by the Sacred Heart of Jesus Christ, who loves us not only to death, but beyond death into new life. I close with words from a dialogue St Catherine of Siena had with Our Lord: “Why, gentle and spotless Lamb, since you were dead when your side was opened, did you want your heart to be pierced and parted?” Jesus replied, “There were many reasons, but I shall tell you one of the chief. My longing for humankind was infinite, but the actual deed of bearing pain was finite and could never show all the love I had. This is why I wanted you to see my inmost heart, so that I could show you more than finite suffering could show.”

Sr Anna Christi OP

From the Annals

December 26th: FEAST OF ST STEPHEN. There was a buffet supper at the St Stephen gaudeamus, which was an extended recreation in the calefactory. Compline in the Lady Chapel followed the gaudeamus. We, with the rest of Moray, move to tier 4 along with the rest of mainland Scotland. The regulations are much stricter. Places of worship are allowed to function with a maximum of twenty participants. As there are 17 in the community with Colin and Rita Sim making up our extended household, there is no room for members of the public at our liturgies.

⁶ Ibid.

CHANTS AT MASS FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

In the repertoire of Gregorian Chant, the Mass for the first Sunday in Lent is unique. On this day alone every proper Chant – the Introit, Gradual, Tract, Offertory and Communion – is taken from the same Psalm. The antiquity of this tradition is attested unanimously by all the most ancient liturgical manuscripts. Five precious Antiphonals survive from the Frankish Empire in the Carolingian period, dated from around the end of the eighth and the beginning of the ninth centuries. These manuscripts carry no musical notation; none had as yet been devised. But they supply the texts for the Chants sung at Mass on each Sunday or Feast or special day through the year. Often these texts will be indicated by their first words only, supplied as an aide memoire for Cantors who are presumed to know the repertoire by heart.

The scribes of these manuscripts were not themselves at the origin of the Chant tradition. On the contrary, they regarded themselves only as faithful witnesses to what they had received from the Catholic Church, especially as represented by the Church of Rome. Who selected and compiled these texts for singing at Mass, almost all from the Psalms? When or how did this selection come to be regarded as canonical, and as such, eventually, fixed and unchangeable? The history (of course) is complex, and disputed, and contemporary manuscripts from Rome are entirely lacking. We can surely be confident, though, that the process of compilation, and also of musical composition, had as least started as far back as the time of St Leo the Great, in the mid-5th century.

From the late 9th century, liturgical Antiphonals began to be produced, bearing these same texts, but now adorned with notation. Or, to be more precise, neumatic signs, according to various different systems, were inscribed over the words to be sung. The earliest such manuscript is the famous “Cantatorium”, from the monastery of St Gall in Switzerland: known to scholars as *Stiftsbibliothek Codex Sangallensis 359*. Our illustration shows this book open at the page for the First Sunday in Lent: in red “Dominica in XL-ma” (Sunday in Quadragesima). The first entry

gives the text for the Antiphon at the Introit, just as we still have it: *Invocabit me et ego...* (Ps 90:15-16). Since this Antiphonal was written only for the specialist Cantors, no music is given here for the Introit, which would have been sung, from memory, by all. The Introit is followed by the Gradual: in red, “RG” - “Responsorium Graduale”. *Angelis suis mandavit de te ut custodiant te in omnibus viis tuis* (Ps 90:11-12). The Verse of the Gradual follows, marked by a black “V” in the margin. *In manibus portabunt te...*, Amalarius of Metz, writing in about 830, explains that the first part of the Gradual should be repeated after the verse, in the manner of a Responory. Since we are in Lent, there is no “Alleluia” to follow the Gradual. Instead, we have the Tract: in Red “Tr”. *Qui habitat in adiutorio altissimi...* (Ps 90:1-7,11-16).

The Lenten Tracts of the Gregorian repertoire are most interesting. Usually, they are set in the Eighth mode, and consist of between two and five verses. The scriptural words of the Tracts are adorned with complex *melismas*, or long series of notes on a single vowel sound. Only well trained and competent cantors would attempt this singing; all others would participate by listening. Scholars tell us that the Tract chants belong to the earliest stratum of the developed repertoire. There is no need for us to imagine that they began simple and gradually became more complex. More likely the musical decoration we have would have been considered an essential feature from the very beginning. On the First Sunday in Lent, on Palm Sunday, and Good Friday, the Tracts are unusually long, and also, unusually, set in the Second Mode. On the First Sunday in Lent, thirteen verses from Psalm 90 are sung.

Tracts make much use of repeated musical formulae. These, however, are deployed with great flexibility, and variety, and subtlety of expression, always sensitive to the meaning of the words they adorn. The St Gall scribe has taken care to mark for us detailed nuances of expression throughout, in a way that the later four-line stave was unable to convey.

During the century or so that followed the writing of the St Gall Cantatorium, many other centres of sung liturgy, whether monasteries or Cathedrals, all over Europe, produced their own

transcriptions of these same Chants. Among the most important surviving manuscripts from this period is the one written for the Cathedral at Laon, dated around 930, and one written for the Monastery of Einsiedeln, dated around 970. These two manuscripts faithfully reflect the St Gall scribe's details of nuance and expression, but now further supplemented and enhanced with even greater precision. The Solesmes "Graduale Triplex" (1979) reproduces the neums of Laon and either St Gall or (where lacking) Einsiedeln, set above and below our standard four-line stave. With this most useful aid, modern singers of the Chant are provided with reliable guidance towards its best and most authentic interpretation.

Why Psalm 90 (or 91 in the Hebrew numbering) on the first Sunday of Lent? Because during the forty days fast of Jesus in the wilderness, a verse from this Psalm was quoted at him by the devil, according to the Gospels of Saints Matthew and Luke. *Angelis suis mandabit de te – He will command his angels to keep you in all your ways; they will carry you in their hands, lest you strike your foot against a stone.* St Mark doesn't detail the temptations in the wilderness, but we can recognise allusions to our Psalm in his mention of the angels who ministered to Jesus, and the wild beasts who did him no harm (Mk 12-13).

Reflecting on the devil's quotation, the fourth century Bishop St Gregory Nazianzen made this fine comment: "O past master of evil", he cried, "why suppress the verse that follows? You didn't finish the quotation, but I know full well what it means; *super aspidem et basiliscum ambulabis – we shall tread on you as on a serpent or a poisonous monster.*

St Gregory would probably have been thinking here also of the prophecy pronounced by God over the serpent in Genesis: *The offspring of the woman will crush your head.* That is, Christ, and with him all who belong to him, will reverse Satan's victory over Adam and Eve, and totally defeat him. As St Paul wrote to the Romans: *The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet* (Rm 16:20).

Psalm 90 is extremely familiar to the monks of Pluscarden.

Following the prescription of St Benedict in the Holy Rule, we sing it every night at Compline (HR 18:19). We sing in Latin, though our *Nova Vulgata* version differs somewhat from the version available to the Chant composers.

Pluscarden retains the custom of singing the ancient Tracts in the Masses of Lent, together with the other Chants. However, simply because of their length, we abbreviate on the First Sunday of Lent, and on Palm Sunday. On those days we sing the texts, as given in the Gradual, but to the ordinary second mode Psalm formula. This must not be taken to imply any weakening of resolve to carry out the liturgy as well and as fully as we can, given the resources we have. Far less does it imply any hesitation about trusting in God, as expressed in Psalm 90, or seeking support from the holy Angels amid troubles and difficulties, or rejoicing in Satan's overthrow under the feet of Christ. All of that will anyway be expressed at the Easter Vigil, when with lighted candles in our hands, we will all together solemnly, publicly declare our rejection of Satan, and all his works, and all his empty promises, together with our belief in God the Father Almighty, in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord, and in the Holy Spirit: God our helper and our refuge, in whom, ceaselessly, we put all our trust (Ps 90:2).

DBH

From the Annals

December 31st: Recollection Day. Fr Abbot gave a conference. There is a tradition of trying to sum up the previous year at this end of year recollection day. In many ways not much has happened because of the one large event of Covid-19. We exposed the Blessed Sacrament from Sext until after Vespers and the brethren took turns to watch before the Blessed Sacrament. Vespers was first Vespers of the Solemnity of Mary the Mother of God at which Fr Prior presided in choir. Benediction followed Vespers, at which Fr Abbot presided. At Benediction we sang the *Te Deum* in thanksgiving for the blessings of the past year.

THE MARTYR MONKS OF CASAMARI: DOM SIMEONE CARDON AND HIS FIVE COMPANIONS

On 17th April this year, a group of monks of Casamari, an ancient Cistercian house in Italy, will be beatified in the Abbey church. They will be beatified, declared “Blessed”, because they were killed out of hatred for their faith, as martyrs, by French Revolutionary soldiers in 1799. Paradoxically, four of the martyrs were themselves French. Their feast will be kept on 16th May.

The information that follows is summarised from an article in *Collectanea Cisterciensia*, which was itself a translation from the Italian. The article’s author points out that God is not looking for heroes, but for sons and daughters, people who, like the martyrs of Casamari, put their trust wholly in him.

In mid-April 1799, the French General François Macdonald, in command at Naples, reacted to the news of the advance of Cardinal Fabrizio Ruffo⁷ by organising the retreat of the French troops. Like all such hurried departures, the French retreat was accompanied by pillage, violence and killing.

Most of the French troops withdrew northwards along the Tyrrhenian sea, while another group, 13–15,000 strong, followed an inland route. On 10th May, they arrived at Cassino, where they pillaged the abbey and the town; next day, Aquino, and on 12th May Isola del Liri, where they killed six hundred.

On the evening of the 13th, a small group of 20 soldiers burst

⁷ Cardinal Ruffo deserves a footnote! Fabrizio Ruffo, 1744 – 1827, was a son of the Duke of Baranello. Pope Pius VI enrolled him in his civil service, then made him treasurer-general, thus automatically minister of war. He was made a Cardinal in 1791, a deacon in 1795. The French advanced on Naples in December 1798, and he decamped from there to Palermo with the royal family. In February 1798 he landed at Cortona with 8 companions, but no money or arms. With Fra’ Diavolo, he raised an army, the Sanfedists, upset the French-established republican government, and advanced on Naples, driving out the French, leading to the capitulation of the French-Italian forces. The *New Catholic Encyclopaedia* describes him a “militant audacious prelate, gifted with organisational talents.”

into the nearby ancient Cistercian monastery of Casamari; the Abbot, Dom Romualdo Pirelli, was absent, living in Palermo, also well aware that, if he stayed at Casamari, his life was in danger.

The resident community was led by the Prior, Dom Simeone Maria Cardon, who welcomed the revolutionary soldiers kindly, and made sure that they were given something to eat. The soldiers wanted more and began to pillage the monastery. Some of the monks, realising the danger, fled and took refuge with the Redemptorists in the neighbouring village of Scifelli, while others hid themselves in the monastery's fields, where the corn was already tall.

Prior Simeone, baptised Ignace Alexandre Joseph, was born at Cambrai, and after ordination joined the Maurist Benedictines at St Faron, Meaux. During the Revolution, he found himself one day in Parliament, where he spoke eloquently against the Constitutional oath. Responding to protests, he said, "If everyone has the right to freedom of speech, then I have it, too." As a result, he had to flee Paris, disguised as a sailor. His journey to Rome was difficult: he spoke no Italian, so was regarded with suspicion, and could only travel at night, sleeping in huts, from which he was often driven. He suffered greatly from hunger, thirst, and exhaustion. After he entered the Cistercians at Casamari he was made Cellarer, then Prior. He was very charitable, and declined to be dispensed from the regular penances of the Strict Observance, despite ill-health

He had already been arrested and imprisoned on Good Friday, and then released. Knowing that the retreating French planned to attack the monastery, he was advised to disguise himself and flee, but was resolute to live and die in his habit.

At first, he hid himself in a cave in the garden, then decided to return to the monastery, where he was surrounded by soldiers, who searched him thoroughly, hoping to find money. The Prior explained that there was none in the monastery. The soldiers lost patience and struck him with their sabres and bayonets. The old monk tried to fend off the blows, but to no avail; he died next morning, forgiving his killers.

Meanwhile, other drunken soldiers entered and profaned the

monastery church, smashing the tabernacle and throwing the consecrated hosts on the ground. The novice master, Fr Domenico Maria Zavrel, hurried to the church, gathered up the hosts and hid them in the sacristy, but the soldiers returned and began smashing the high altar and breaking up the sacristy furniture.

Fr Domenico was born at Chodov, Prague, in Bohemia, and was baptised John Chrysostom. He joined the Dominicans, but felt called to greater solitude and penance, so, at the age of 51, set off for Rome and entered Casamari, where he was a monk for 26 years. He was a little man and needed a stick, on account of his infirmities. He was a great peacemaker, very humble, a great student of theology, a man of deep prayer and an esteemed counsellor of his abbots. He appears to have been excessively demanding in matters of observance, but nonetheless was superior, cellarer, and novice master, a post which suited him, and in which he formed four martyrs. He had strong views on a number of topics and did not hesitate to espouse them.

An officer tried to restrain the soldiers, and gave the consecrated hosts to Br Ermenegildo, who passed them on to Br Eustacchio, who put them in the infirmary chapel. The soldiers entered this chapel, and found several monks there: Fr Domenico, Br Albertino Maria Maisonade and Br Dosideo Maria Coci, who were in tears and praying to God to forgive the sacrilege. The soldiers searched the place and once more threw the hosts on the ground, and went on to kill Fr Domenico, who died with the names of Jesus and Mary on his lips, and then Br Albertino. They wounded Br Dosideo in the side, and he pretended to be dead.

Br Albertino Maisonade was a Frenchman from Bordeaux, who “for the sake of his conscience” went into exile when the Revolution began. He entered Casamari and was professed in 1793. When the French arrived, instead of fleeing, he went to adore, in tears, the profaned Blessed Sacrament in the infirmary chapel. When the French soldiers returned, they killed him with two sabre-cuts to the head.

Brs Modesto and Maturino were hunted down and killed in the corridors. Br Modesto Maria Burgon, a Burgundian Frenchman,

was first a lay-brother at Sept-Fons, but when his monastery was suppressed by the Revolution, he fled to Casamari, where he professed in January 1797. He was shot and killed in one of the corridors.

Br Maturino Maria Pitri was another Frenchman, his father a gardener of the royal palace at Fontainebleau. Drafted into the Revolutionary army against his wishes, he preserved his ideals and his virtue. In January 1799, he arrived at Veroli, where he suffered a terrible asthma attack, and was given up for dead. Providentially, Fr Simeone was visiting the hospital, and so, being a Frenchman, was able to hear his confession. The Prior was astonished to discover that the young soldier had lived chastely, and the soldier told the Prior, that if he lived, he would enter the monastery. Three days later, perfectly cured, he hid in the chaplain's apartments, whence, early in the morning, he was secretly taken to Casamari and given the habit of a Cistercian oblate. Shot in the noviciate corridor, he dragged himself to his cell, where he was finished off with the bayonet.

A Milanese lay-brother, Br Zosimo Maria Brambat, professed in 1795, was wounded by a musket-ball and sabre-cuts as he was going up the stairs that led to the Refectory. He did not die immediately, and hid; three days later he set off for Boville Ernica to receive the last sacraments, but died, exhausted, just after leaving the monastery. Br Egidio Corticelli was also gravely wounded. Some days after the sack, the French soldiers left the Abbey of Casamari. General Thibault arrived in the night after the attack, and finding the Prior still alive, wanted to call a doctor, but the Prior said, "I will do nothing to shorten or prolong my life; I entrust myself to God. I forgive those who have caused me this night of expiation. My children, this is nothing." Thirsty, he asked for cold water. He gave little presents to those who were in his cell, and died about 7.00 a.m.

On 16th May, after the soldiers had gone, eight monks who had escaped came back to the monastery and buried their dead brethren.

DGC

TOLKIEN ON “GOOD CATASTROPHES” AND THE LONG DEFEAT

During my years in France, I had the immense privilege three times to hear the story of Juliane, an elderly Parisian Jew who was a survivor of the horrors of Auschwitz. During the Nazi occupation, though she and her mother had spent years passing as non-Jews, at the age of 19, and due to the jealousy of a neighbour, Jacqueline was separated from her mother (whom she never saw again), rounded up with hundreds of other Parisian Jews and shipped off to Auschwitz. She survived long enough to be present when the Allied forces liberated the captives, but only after a gruelling, days-long death march through the snow, from camp to camp, all the while watching several of her companions die from exposure or summary executions. Returned to Paris after the war, she married and had a child, but her husband died tragically while her daughter was still young. Walking through a nearby forest after his death, seeking solitude while battling severe depression and suicidal thoughts, she came upon a large *calvaire*, one of the many Crucifixion scenes which still dot the French countryside. Confronted for the first time with such a graphic depiction of the mystery of the Cross and the redemptive love of Christ, she was converted to Catholicism almost on the spot. She still lives in Paris, one of the last living survivors of the Shoah, giving witness to God’s love present even in the darkest evil and most tremendous suffering.

For me, Juliane’s encounter with the suffering Christ is a small example of what J.R.R. Tolkien referred to in his writings as *eucatastrophe*: God in His merciful providence saving a situation when everything seems darkest. Tolkien’s neologism comes from two Greek roots: *eu* meaning “good” and *catastrophe* meaning “an overturning; a sudden turn”. In other words, it is literally the opposite of a catastrophe or disaster. It is God sticking His divine finger into the events of daily life and turning them for the better, at the moment when everything seems lost or headed for inevitable tragedy. Eucatastrophe is not to be mistaken for a *deus ex*

machina, which is a dramatic device used when the author has got his characters into an impossible situation and has to use extraordinary means to extract them from it; for example, a heroine about to be eaten by a grizzly bear suddenly finds a revolver stuffed in her back pocket and thus saves the day.

No, eucatastrophe is God intervening in our lives and turning certain defeat into unexpected victory. Tolkien first explains the concept in his famous essay, "On Fairy Stories", and one can see how examples of this "sudden turn of events from disaster to victory" abound in the stories we loved as children: the handsome prince comes to rescue Snow White from seeming death, or Cinderella from her drudgery, or Sleeping Beauty from her death-like sleep. Though these are not explicitly divine interventions, one can see how Tolkien was able to apply such plot devices to his own writing. Examples abound in his works, especially in *The Lord of the Rings*: Aragorn shows up miraculously with an army at the siege of Minas Tirith, just when the battle was turning definitively against the forces of good; Eowyn destroys the Witch King just when he is triumphant over his slaying of King Theoden; and most famously when, at Mount Doom, Frodo has succumbed to temptation at the end of his quest and claimed the evil One Ring for himself, only to have it violently wrested from his possession by Gollum, who then in his foolishness, destroys himself and the Ring forever.

The occurrence of eucatastrophe in stories and our own histories is, according to Tolkien, not just to bring about a "happily ever after." A eucatastrophe is, he states, a vehicle of joy: "the sudden joyous turn ... in its setting is a sudden and miraculous grace, never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of ... sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief." This experience of grace and victory breaking into our world is a cause of a joy so sharp that it causes tears: "when the turn comes," says Tolkien, "[it causes] a

catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given by any literary art..." To give another, more directly Christian understanding of what he meant by "good catastrophes", Tolkien once stated that in the story of mankind's relationship with God, the Incarnation of the Word is the *eucatastrophe* of salvation history, and the Resurrection is the *eucatastrophe* of the Incarnation; in both cases, God intervened directly just when things seemed darkest and without hope, and turned utter defeat into utmost Joy.

Tolkien, however, was nothing if not a Christian realist: he was neither a blind optimist nor a depressing pessimist. He felt that, in spite of the good news of the Incarnation and our salvation by the Paschal mystery, history is nothing other than the story of what he referred to as the "Long Defeat." He illustrated this in his saga of Middle Earth in many ways: in his fictional world, we see from the beginning of creation how all is geared ever more downwards towards defeat after defeat. For example, the Elves, the most highly gifted of God's children, over the eons of their existence decline towards obscurity and constant sorrow, due to their immortality; the men of Numenor, the most powerful and skilled race of Men, fall ever downwards from being the long-lived and magical masters of a vast empire towards mediocrity; splendid works of enchanted art are destroyed or lose their power. Tolkien saw this same principle reflected in our own salvation history: ever since the Fall of Adam and Eve, despite our increasing scientific knowledge and mastery over our milieu, mankind moves from defeat to defeat on the moral level, religion loses its hold over our souls, love of God and neighbour are replaced by atheism and a heartless philanthropy... The world will continue this mad decline towards its own dissolution until the final eucatastrophe of all – the glorious return of Christ and the final judgement of humanity. Only then, that final glimpse of poignant Joy that comes from being snatched from the hands of complete defeat will become the eternal Joy of basking in God's loving glory.

As Christians, however, we must not let the thought of the Long Defeat cause us to despair. We perhaps are not privy to

great, cataclysmic, eucatastrophic manifestations of God's presence, but we are each of us, daily, partakers in small manifestations of God's loving kindness. The smile of a child when all seems dark, the warmth of the sun on chilled skin, the invitation of a friend to go for a walk when one is loneliest, an unexpected phone call or email from a loved one on a sad day, can all be experiences of joy snatched from sorrow, small victories over daily defeats. The joy we feel in these miraculous moments comes from the knowledge of possible defeat that has been turned into God's triumph, no matter how small, over the forces of evil.

Br Benedict Joseph

From the Annals

January 1st: SOLEMNITY OF MARY MOTHER OF GOD. Fr Prior presided and preached at Conventual Mass. Lunch was a talking meal, as is our custom. In the evening there was a gaudeamus at which we saw the film, *The Darkest Hour*.

3rd: SOLEMNITY OF THE EPIPHANY. Fr Abbot presided at Office and at Mass; he preached at Mass. After the homily Fr Benedict sang the announcement of moveable feasts. Fr Abbot blessed the cellarer, the sacristan, and the infirmarian, who each wore a cope in the traditional colour and had brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh according to their offices. They left the sanctuary and the chapel by a different route from the one they had come in by. Fr Abbot also blessed the Epiphany Cake after the Post Communion prayer. We also heard the letter from the Justice and Peace Commission of the Scottish Bishops' Conference.

5th: From midnight there was a renewed lockdown. From now until the end of the lockdown, there will be no further public Masses.

6th: We continue to hold the Epiphany gaudeamus on this date. The brethren entertained each other with music, songs and skits.

BAXTER OF PLUSCARDEN ABBEY

Baxter arrived at Pluscarden in 2005, brought to us by the Cats Protection League. When he was first described over the telephone as having lost his tail and front teeth in an accident, a sympathetic welcome was guaranteed. But Baxter was no hapless victim of ill fortune: he was a strong-willed survivor and an opportunist of the first class. We learned later that the tail had in fact been lost in a desperate dash through a closing door, a door which Baxter perceived to be beckoning him into a land of plenty.

The name Baxter was given to him by one of the carers in the Cat Protection League, and arose from his having been taken in by them from the food processors of that name in Fochabers. He had allegedly been making a nuisance of himself there, loitering about the place and repeatedly trying to gain access to that hygienic fortress. We found out later that Baxter had been living comfortably with a family just a few hundred yards away from the factory; but his natural attraction for food and human company kept him permanently within the food processor's precincts.

These habits were firmly maintained when he came to stay with us at Pluscarden. Wherever there was a human gathering, Baxter would join the company; and if scraps of food were on offer, he would become the most attentive of companions. In his early days, he would roam freely among our neighbours; and from his portly appearance it was clear that some of them must have added to his daily portion. It is often debatable who actually owns a cat, with the relative contributions of food and shelter varying according to the cat's fancy. It is clear that, for a cat, the owner is simply the most favoured vassal.

However, it was his character as a Benedictine Cat that won him world acclaim. The little book, "Baxter, a Benedictine Cat" has sold thousands of copies since it was first printed and sold in the Abbey shop. The simple format, with a photograph of Baxter demonstrating different chapters of Saint Benedict's Rule, is immediately engaging and widely popular. The Latin version of the book was sent to Pope Benedict and was gratefully received,

prompting a gracious reply and an Apostolic Blessing. Although as a Benedictine his practice of the virtue of obedience was very much accommodated to his feline nature, Baxter's desire to conform to custom was remarkable: he was often to be seen taking his place as the monks processed into Vespers; and he would rise from his bed to line up with the brethren coming out of Mass. On the occasion of the funeral of one of the monks, he appeared out of nowhere to lead the coffin all the way into the church to its station in front of the altar.

In his twilight years, no longer able to jump up to the windowsill of his den by the front door, Baxter was finally admitted to the monastery cloister. His inability to turn his back on a quarrel with local feral cats got him into serious trouble; so it was for his own protection that he was sequestered in our enclosure. Failing strength together with deafness seemed to mellow his character somewhat, and he was a tranquil presence among us until the end. At the venerable age of 77 years, he finally succumbed to kidney failure, and has been laid to rest in a peaceful spot near the Visitor Centre. No doubt his many followers will journey there to pay their last respects.

DMdK

Baxterdammerunglied – Two Songs

After Christmas, we have three Gaudeamus nights, essentially monastic parties. For the third, the Brethren entertain themselves – the primary aim, according to Fr Maurus – and perhaps each other, with various contributions. This year I suggested to Br Lewis that we provide a couple of songs, in Latin, to mark the passing of Baxter, the Abbey cat. Br Lewis was inspired by Catullus, and followed a metre which Br Michael rendered, “Give me two Granny Smiths and a banana”, in 11 syllables, sung to a mediaeval tune; I produced a doggerel (catterel?) item, sung to the tune of a hymn for the Office of the Dead. The Brethren sang along. Despite injuries inflicted on the Latin language, no Romans died.

Luget^e O monachi Pluscardenenses
Et quantum ^est hominum fideliorum!
Baxter mortuus est, nobis dilectus,
Baxter, pulcher necnon mitis amicus,
Quem nos omnes mulcere solebamus

Nam mellitus erat etsi mingebat
Inter quos libet locos cupiebat;
Intra sellis nostrum se collocabat
Despuebat iratus quos obstabant;

Quem cognoverat Pontifex et omnes,
Ill^{um} æternum vixurum sperabamus;
A Michæl^e erat diligenter cultus
Osculis^{que} omnium exaltabatur

Qui nunc it per iter tenebricosum
Illuc unde negant redire quemquam

At nunc vos qui fidèles orbis estis
Supplicari decet Omnipotenti;
Quin ut forsitan ignibus heu dolet
Baxter gaudeat iam æterna luce,

Grieve, O you monks of Pluscarden, / and all you faithful souls! /
Baxter, our beloved, is dead, / Baxter, our pretty and soft friend /
whom we all used to stroke.

For he was honey-sweet even if he used to leak / wherever he felt
like; / he plonked himself down in the midst of our seats / and
scornfully looked down on those who got in his way;

The Pope knew him, and we all / hoped that he would live forever;
/ He was carefully looked after by Br Michael, / and used to get
puffed up by the kisses of us all.

He who is now making that shadowy journey, / to that place from
where they say there is no return.

And now you, who are the faithful souls of the world, / you must
make supplication to the Almighty one, / so that indeed Baxter,
who perhaps now alas is grieving in the midst of flames, / may
rejoice in eternal light!

Felem murumque canimus,
Fletu aelinum plangimus,
Morso caseo morbido
Noniam claustro ambulabit.

Baxter nostrum migravisse
Mortemque eius nuntiamus ;
Flora noniam catillabit
Neque mica mensae cadens.

Hypocaustum semper quaerens,
Dormiens in aestu solis,
Cellerario expetens
Cottidie delicias.

Toto orbe et ubique
Impressa et diffundata,
Imaginibus venditis,
Fama eius est cognita.

Vitae novem prolongatae,
Triste sed cauda truncata,
Amicus albus et niger
Pia manu nunc sepultus.

We sing of a cat and mice, / in tears we bewail our dirge, / having
bitten the deadly cheese, / he will no longer walk the cloister.

Our Baxter has passed over, we announce his death; / he will no longer lick Flora,⁸ / nor the morsel falling from the table.

Always seeking the places under which the heating pipes run / and sleeping in the heat of the sun, / every day he sought / treats from the Cellarer.

The whole world over, everywhere, / printed images of him were distributed and sold, / he was famous.

Of nine long lives, / but sadly shortened tail / our white and black friend / lies now buried by a pious hand.

DGC

From the Annals

January 9th: Fr Abbot gave a conference. He announced some changes at Mass, tightening up our adherence to anti-covid procedures. He also read out a letter from the Abbot-President.

10th: THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD. Fr Prior presided at Conventual Mass and preached.

11th: The community took down the Christmas decorations in choir, calefactory, refectory and cloister. Fr Abbot announced that the crib would remain in place until Candlemas. It is not a precedent, but is just to keep the community more cheerful in lockdown. The Novitiate are now responsible for doing the sacristy work, though Fr Mark will continue to work there for two days a week.

January 13th: Feast of St Kentigern. This was the feast day of the late Br Mungo, Mungo being a hypocoristic name for St Kentigern.

Archbishop Philip Tartaglia of Glasgow died today. He was covid-19 positive and had a heart condition.

⁸ “Flora” is very late Latin for the content of marge tubs, which Baxter liked to lick clean.

BOOK REVIEW

The Shallows by Nicholas Carr (Atlantic Books, London, 2010).

If Pluscarden Abbey is typical of other contemplative monasteries, then much debate and head scratching will have gone on in the monastic world over the last decade or two about how to respond to the challenge that the internet poses to enclosure: is it friend or foe? Carr's book warns us against internet addiction and he opens his case by describing the way in which using the web as a research tool over time has sharpened his facility for speedily gathering and synthesising facts relevant to his needs; skimming the brief texts and hypertexts that web pages provide via search engines; collating the useful and discarding the irrelevant. On one level this seems to be making one smarter and more creative, as many of Carr's friends and colleagues say. But alas, this skill comes not without cost. It takes over, one becomes a kind of web junkie and impatient of reading whole books. He quotes one acquaintance, who admits that "I can't read *War and Peace* anymore"; and Carr regrets this loss of what he calls "deep reading".

In a chapter entitled *The Vital Paths* he explains, in some detail, about recent research on the brain and in particular *neuroplasticity*. Studies on animal neurology from sea slugs to monkeys, and humans from amputees to violinists, have revealed the brain's ability to adapt and remap its circuits in response to injuries or a change in habits to a much greater extent than was previously thought. Far from becoming ossified soon after middle age, this *neuroplasticity* lasts until much later in life, not just plastic, but "massively plastic" as Michael Merzenich, a pioneer in this field put it. However, neurological growth in one area of the brain, in order to accommodate a new skill for instance, will be at the cost of diminishment in another area.

The brain takes time to adapt and once adapted resists change; this is an advantage in developing new skills and good habits, but a positive disadvantage in the case of bad habits and unhealthy

addictions. The human brain has different levels: an upper level which has the kind of memory which stores information needed for immediate tasks, such as information gathering on the web, but does not retain it for long; and a deeper level of memory which stores information long term in the subconscious. This deeper level is also responsible for the way in which we synthesise this information intuitively and creatively. It can be seen then that the habit of web surfing will strengthen the upper at the cost of the deeper level of memory, hence the title of the book.

The development of IT and the internet must be seen in the historical context of the development of technology, and in particular, what Carr calls “intellectual technology”. In the chapters *Tools of the Mind* and *The Deepening Page*, he shows how we not only create our tools, but also how they create, or at least shape, us. Beginning with the first maps and mechanical timepieces – apparently monks were in at the start of clock development with their need for a detailed horarium – Carr explains how these guides can also alter our inner perception of space and time. Going on to show how the development of writing replaced oral traditions, how printing replaced the scribe and so on, he describes how new technologies change the inner world as much as the outer, as old skills and memory capacities are replaced by new ones and how our inner neurological map adjusts to these changes.

So how are we to judge the internet in context of all this? Is it a threat to monastic observance, particularly *lectio divina*? Carr, as I said above, bewails the loss of the capacity for “deep reading”; he goes so far as to admit having trouble settling into the writing of this book at first, but finding it easier as time went on. As I was reading it myself, particularly when he describes internet “addiction”, I wondered if he was making enough allowance for novelty value, the lure of the *new*. An enclosed monk is, perhaps, not in the best position to judge how these things go on in the outer world, especially ten years after this book was published; the people one meets from the outside with their i-pads and smartphones seem no “shallower” than before. My own experience, over

six decades of initially mesmerising technological novelties, leads me to the conclusion that these things become part of the furniture in the long run. I can, moreover, although not an *intense* web surfer, vouch for having just finished reading *War and Peace* – on an e-reader.

Be that as it may, whilst *The Shallows* is far from being a paean to anti-IT Luddism, Nicholas Carr has a case: there are pitfalls to be surmounted and the detailed, but never dull, techno-historical context into which he puts his case could prove a valuable aid to understanding how and how not to use the internet.

DDM

From the Annals

15th: Memoria of Ss Maurus and Placid. Yellow aconites have appeared beside the drive up to the abbey and snowdrops too have made an appearance there.

17th: SECOND SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME. We heard that Bishop Vincent Logan, bishop emeritus of Dunkeld, had died last week on 14th January, the day after Archbishop Tartaglia.

18th: Today we begin the week of prayer for Christian unity. We will be having bidding prayers at Mass each day for this intention.

20th: Conventual Mass this morning was a *Mass in time of pandemic*. Fr Abbot intends we should have this Mass each week.

23rd: Fr Abbot gave a conference on St Joseph before Vespers.

24th: THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME. (Sunday of the Word of God) Fr Mark presided and preached at Conventual Mass. The Gospel reader placed the book on a cushion on a table in the middle of the sanctuary as a kind of enthronement.

28th: Fr Matthew, who is the only member of the community over 80 years old, received the first of his covid-19 vaccinations today.