

# **Pluscarden Benedictines**

No. 195 News and Notes for our Friends September 2021

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Cover: George Mackay Brown with Fr Giles in 1987

Back Cover: Pantocrator Icon by Br Cyprian Bampton OSB

## FR ABBOT'S LETTER

Dear Friends,

The recent Motu Proprio of the Holy Father *Traditionis Custodes*, which regulates use of the older form of the Roman Rite of Mass, does not directly affect us at Pluscarden. We have used the Roman Missal of Saint Paul VI since it was issued in 1970. For our monastic Liturgy of the Hours, we use books revised in accordance with the principles of the liturgical reform of the Second Vatican Council. It is of interest to us that, in his letter accompanying the Motu Proprio, the Holy Father remarks that, since the reform of the Liturgy has preserved the elements of the Roman Rite, those who want to celebrate in a traditional manner can find what they aspire to in the reformed Liturgy. I would say that this has been our experience. During the period of reform and into the present, we have kept the use of Latin and Gregorian Chant. Our ceremonies and the overall style of celebration are in continuity with what we were doing before the Council. Probably it will seem to anybody visiting now who might have visited around 1960 that not much has changed here, liturgically.

However, under this apparent (and real) continuity, there has been much change. The present seems a good time to review the changes that have taken place in our ways of praying over the last half century, more or less the lifetime of my own generation. This is not with a view to criticize or re-evaluate, and certainly not to propose our own experience as a model. The changes in our prayer were not sought by any of us. We took no initiatives and didn't invest great effort in bringing them about. It was simply a matter of accepting what was offered. But others did a great deal of work. It would be difficult to think of any earlier period in the Church's history when as much work on the liturgy has been done as in the Twentieth Century and the first decades of the present century. We are the beneficiaries of this. It is a matter of justice to evaluate its effects in our lives and be thankful for them.

The central common action of our day is the “Conventual” (i.e. “the community’s”) Mass. It is attended by all the brethren, open to guests and visitors, sung, and celebrated with as much solemnity as we can manage. Before the Second Vatican Council, the centrality of this Mass in the life of the monastic community was emphasized no less than now. However, the monks, apart from the celebrating priest, did not normally receive communion at this Mass. Earlier in the day, the priests celebrated private Masses at various altars, and the non-priests received Holy Communion at one of these Masses. There were advantages to this arrangement: more time spent attending Mass, the opportunity to receive Holy Communion at a Mass celebrated very quietly and prayerfully. But I am grateful for our present practice, which emerged from the Conciliar reform. Now the priests normally concelebrate, and all normally receive Holy Communion at the Conventual Mass. It allows a beautiful convergence of common celebration and personal devotion, and it helps us keep the offering of daily Mass at the centre of our lives. I would place this at the top of my list of benefits we have received from the liturgical reform.

Second on my list is the change in the text of the psalms that we use in the Liturgy of the Hours. After daily Mass, the praying of the psalms in the weekly cycle established by St Benedict is the most important element of our prayer. Until 1981, we used the Vulgate version of the Latin Psalter. This is a text of great antiquity and beauty. However, its shortcomings as a translation from the original Hebrew had long been acknowledged. For this reason, already in 1945, Pope Pius XII had approved a new Latin translation of the psalms. The Council called for this to be replaced by another new translation that would be more in line with the tradition of Christian Latin, and the result was the New Vulgate that was incorporated into our monastic Liturgy in 1981. As its name indicates, this keeps as much as it can of the language of the old Vulgate, but it is an accurate translation of the Hebrew, bringing together modern scholarship and our ancient tradition. It brings us closer to the divinely inspired words of Sacred Scripture. The scholars who gave us this deserve enormous gratitude.

Finally, I must mention the use of Scripture in our reformed Liturgy. In the older forms of the Mass and the Divine Office, the Scriptures were there, certainly. Select texts were woven together very beautifully. But real access to Scripture depended on private initiative and effort. Now, the Church opens up the Scriptures for us in her Liturgy. Any Catholic who attends Mass will have some general knowledge of Scripture, the Gospels in particular. One who follows the readings daily will have a good knowledge of the Scriptures and will want more.

It is not just a matter of knowledge. The Scriptures come alive when they are heard in the context of the Liturgy. We receive insights into their meaning, and grace for our lives. Special lights and graces are given to those who proclaim and explain the Scriptures in the Liturgy. Every homilist will have had the experience of receiving insights into the Gospel when he is preaching that he does not have when he meditates privately.

St James says, “Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights” (Jas 1:17). Our Liturgy is full of these perfect gifts from above. It always was, of course. The Church has never failed in providing heavenly food for our souls. She certainly doesn’t fail us now. The table of the word of God spread before us now is full, and I am grateful.

Yours devotedly in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Fr Anselm". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. The first letter of "Fr" is a large, stylized capital 'F' with a crossbar that extends to the left. The name "Anselm" follows in a similar cursive script.

## NEWS FROM ST MARY'S MONASTERY

On May 17, the Governor of Massachusetts, Charlie Baker, announced that most of the state's COVID restrictions would be lifted starting May 29. In accordance with that order, our Bishop, Robert McManus, issued a pastoral letter on May 25, followed by modifications to the liturgical practices which he instituted during the pandemic. This allowed us to update our own practices here. We no longer have to restrict the number of people who attend Mass. People who have been fully vaccinated do not need to wear masks and do not have to practice social distancing. Consequently, we removed the taped Xs from the pews, which we had used to mark the spots where people should sit. We still have hand sanitizer available at the entrance of the church, and masks are available for those who are not vaccinated. The holy water fonts are now filled with holy water, and we have resumed blessing the holy water once a month, at which time the presiding priest blesses the congregation with holy water. Booklets are once again available for the congregation to use, and processions are allowed. For the time being, we are still having Holy Communion under one species only, and are refraining from exchanging the kiss of peace with one another.

On June 18 we had another lecture organized for us by Carol and Phil Zaleski. It was the first such lecture since the outbreak of the COVID pandemic and our first community Zoom lecture. Carol and Phil were not present in the room with us but joined us on the screen. The talk was given by Adrian Walker, well known Catholic author and translator, consulting editor of *Communio*, and Professor of Dogmatics at St Patrick's Seminary and University, Menlo Park, California. Adrian spoke on the topic of whether technology is neutral, taking the stand that it is not neutral, but has its effects upon people.

The next day, June 19, Fr Dunstan attended his first diocesan event since the outbreak of COVID-19. Along with Sr Mary Paula he was present at the priestly ordination of Lucas LaRoche in St Paul's Cathedral in Worcester. Fr Lucas has been a friend of the

communities for several years now. He did much of his studies at the North American College in Rome.

On June 20, we invited Anthony Frausto-Robledo and his wife Ildi for Sunday lunch. Anthony was the architect who designed the renovation of the carriage house, and last summer Ildi oversaw the landscaping of the building. We thought they would like to see how the landscaping looks one year later and asked for some advice from Ildi. Also, we asked Anthony for advice regarding signs which we are planning to put on the grounds of our property.

Mass on Monday July 19 was a little different. Sr Maria Manzano of St Scholastica Priory turned 90 this year. One of her birthday requests was to have a Mass celebrated in Spanish. The date originally chosen for the event was July 14, the anniversary of her Solemn Profession. However, since Mother Mary Elizabeth was away then, conducting a canonical visitation at Our Lady of the Desert in New Mexico, July 19 was chosen as the next convenient date. The principal celebrant and homilist was Fr Edwin Montaña, a native of Colombia, who until recently was the pastor of Our Lady Immaculate Church in nearby Athol. The homily and readings were in English while the rest of the Mass was in Spanish. We did the usual Gregorian chants in Latin, although the Kyrie was sung in Spanish. At the end, the Sisters' schola sang a traditional Mexican hymn in Spanish.

On July 28 we had our first community outing since the pandemic began. We went to Mystic, Connecticut and visited the Mystic Seaport Museum. The museum complex includes buildings from the old maritime village and several ships, such as the Charles W. Morgan whaleship which we boarded.

DIC

*This year's Pluscarden Pentecost Lecturer, Fr Thomas Joseph White OP, was received as a young man into the Catholic Church at St Mary's. We hope that he will one day be able to visit Pluscarden Abbey in person.*

## FIREMEN BOLD

“My brother Bill’s a fireman bold,” goes the folksong, which goes on to describe Bill’s encounter with some dynamite, and concludes with the consoling reflection that, wherever Bill’s eternal destiny may be, he doesn’t need to worry: he puts out fires!

There are other, better ways of ensuring one’s eternal destiny, not necessarily excluding the fire-brigade. Earlier this year died Fr Georg Miessen, a Benedictine monk of the Abbey of Kornelimünster, near Aachen, in Germany. Fr Georg had a national ministry to members of the Fire Brigade and was even decorated by his country with the Federal Cross of Merit for his services.

When I was a young monk, I studied at Fort Augustus Abbey, which is quite a distance from the nearest town. The nearest regular fire brigades were at Inverness and Fort William, a long way off in an emergency, along roads that were winding and often clogged with tourists, and in winter, subject to the vagaries of the West Highland climate. For these reasons, there was a volunteer unit of the Fire Brigade at Fort Augustus; the fire engine had a garage round the back of the monastery, and since there were always monks on site, several of the community were members of the fire crew.

Calls on the fire brigade were seasonal, almost liturgical: from the autumn through to about January, there were chimney fires, people not quite getting round to having chimneys swept, and people burning wood, easily available, which deposited soot and tarry deposits in the chimneys. I remember that the first action of one member of the fire-crew when he came on the scene of a chimney fire, was to go up on the roof and ritually decapitate the chimney pot. From January to about May, forest and moorland fires were common; all the dry undergrowth was like tinder, and until the new green growth sprang up, was vulnerable to fire. From May until the autumn was the tourist season, and with the tourists came road-accidents, caused by unfamiliarity with driving on the left and on single-track roads, tiredness, and distraction. After

attending a few accidents, I needed no persuasion of the benefits of seatbelts.

We had a complete range of tools for destroying vehicles, in order to extract their occupants. There was a saw, driven by bottles of compressed air, which would cut through anything, its blade dripping oil everywhere to avoid sparks. We had hydraulic jaws which could exert a force of several tons, particularly useful for opening jammed and distorted doors. We could remove a car's windscreen in well under a minute, to gain access or as a means of escape. We were fortunate in that the local garage received the various wrecked cars, and since some of their staff were part of our crew, we were encouraged to cut roofs off, burst open doors and otherwise practise vandalism, so we were proficient and experienced when it came to the real thing.

Br John-Baptist Condon was the oldest of the crew – he received a long-service medal from the Fire Brigade. He had been in Fort Augustus so long that he knew the district and the people intimately; you didn't need a map if you had Br John. That was not his only speciality – he was very thin, and so could get into spaces denied to other people, so if someone had to climb up through a narrow hatch into a loft, Br John was your man. He was also a holy man of prayer, very useful in emergency situations.

The fire officer was Father Vincent Pirie-Watson, who died quite young. He was in charge of the school's cadet corps, energetic and active. Our fire-engine was rather an old model, setting off to a fire at top speed, it would do 20 m.p.h.; it was not the latest model. Behind it was towed a Coventry motorised fire-pump, a great beast of an affair. Communication in the glens was not easy, radio reception was often poor, and as you shouted, "Mike Tango Uniform Foxtrot, over!" into the microphone, there was, you knew, little chance of an intelligible answer, just crackles.

Later we were given a new appliance; it had been supplied to an oil-fabrication yard, but they had neglected it, so it was passed on to us, as the higher-ups were well aware that the staff of the local garage were part of the crew, and they maintained the



appliance in perfect order. Later still, we were issued with fire-axes, wonderful new toys. I remember going to one fire where one of the crew leapt from the tender and attacked the front door of the house that was on fire. He did a wonderful job of utterly demolishing the door, while the rest of us went round the back, and entered by the open back door...

Another monk discovered that the fire engine was perfect for transporting bees, and strangers to the area were mystified by the sight of a bee-suited individual emerging from the fire-engine, carrying a succession of beehives. On another occasion, there was a call to a remote highland hotel in the depths of winter. We sped through the snow-covered countryside, with stags on both sides of the road; it looked like a "Scotsman" colour calendar. When we got there, we discovered that the proprietor and his wife were both French, and were astonished to find that every member of this remote highland fire-crew spoke French. Some time after we got there, the fire-engine from Fort William arrived in fine style, with snow-chains on its smoking tyres – it was a false alarm, by the way.

On another occasion, one of the crew missed the bus, so to speak, so went to the garage, where he knew another of the crew worked. As well as being a mechanic and a fireman, he was also a rally-driver, so both members of the crew leaped aboard his Landrover and set off through the forests at top speed, the driver enjoying himself with four-wheel drifts and opposite-locks, things which the Forestry Commission normally forbade, but in view of the fire (another false alarm, but it was a beautiful day), completely legitimate. He got to the scene of the "fire" long before the fire-engine.

You never knew at what moment of the day or night the siren would sound, when you had to rush to where your fire uniform was kept, shed your habit and emerge from your chrysalis as a fully clad fireman. For those of us who were theology students, it must be confessed that when the siren went during a class it was a great pleasure to abandon an early-twentieth-century manual and respond to the call of duty!

I have occasionally wondered why I readily received permission from Pluscarden to engage in this very extra-mural activity, and suspect that the voice of Fr Maurus, himself a former member of the Auxiliary Fire Service during the London blitz, was decisive. It was not the pay, for though volunteers, we were paid: the princely sum of 3/4d per hour, or part thereof. It somehow always happened that any training or call-out invariably lasted those critical few minutes into the next hour.

Fr Maurus had some good stories to tell, including the occasion when he visited Eton in his fire-engine, and enlisted the aid of the boys... of that, perhaps, on another occasion.

DGC

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## **From the Annals**

### **May 2021**

**18<sup>th</sup>:** We heard that Nick Rodway died today. He and his wife have been regular worshippers here at the Abbey for many years.

### **27<sup>th</sup>: Feast of St Augustine of Canterbury.**

Tomorrow we are to host the funeral of Callan Malik-Oud, a Royal Marine of the SBS, who died in a motorcycle accident. He was brought up in this area and has cousins in Scotland. The funeral is to be as elaborate as possible within the range of anti-Covid regulations. Preparations and rehearsals began this morning and we had Sext in the Chapterhouse. There is a large amount of sound and video equipment in the church and Transept. In the afternoon we heard the rehearsal of a volley over the coffin.

**28<sup>th</sup>:** The funeral took place as planned at 12.30 pm. It was led by an Anglican Royal Marine padre. Various members of the community played a part, in particular Fr Benedict and Br Michael who sang *In Paradisum*. There was a volley over the coffin and a Tornado flypast.

**“ONE OF THE TRINITY WAS CRUCIFIED”**  
**Pluscarden Pentecost Lectures 2021**  
**by Fr Thomas Joseph White O.P.**

Getting the American Dominican Fr Thomas Joseph White to agree to give our Pentecost lectures was quite a coup. He is famous! An academic theologian and also popular author, he founded the Thomistic Institute based in Washington D.C. He also edits the prestigious International theological Journal *Nova et Vetera*. Now aged 50, he has recently been nominated as Rector of the Pontifical University in Rome run by the Dominicans, commonly referred to as the “Angelicum”.

One would expect such a man to be intelligent, learned, articulate, coherent, clear-thinking, thoughtful, committed; a good communicator, at ease with his subject, and with his audience; both open and interesting; entirely orthodox in faith, and well rooted in his own Thomistic tradition, while able to engage constructively with modern thought; in a word, a man definitely worth listening to. We were not disappointed! Although: he could not come, because of the Covid lock-down! So this year our Pentecost lectures were delivered on schedule, but by a live zoom link, from an office in Rome. The Community assembled in the Chapter House to receive the lectures, without any guests present at all. Yet we had a far larger audience than we have ever had before, because anyone in the whole world could freely watch or listen, then or later, via the live-stream page on our web site. Some frustrating technology glitches threatened to wreck the whole enterprise, but they were (more or less) overcome. They anyway gave us the opportunity to be entertained by Father’s banjo as we waited for the connection to work (more or less) properly.

In these four lectures, Fr Thomas Joseph explored how the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus reveal to us the mystery of the Holy Trinity. His starting point was the doctrine formulated at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, that Jesus has two natures: he is both fully human, and God the Son; both a creature, and the Creator; able to suffer and die in one nature, and unable to suffer

or die in the other. He is one Person, but he has two wills, and two operative activities, in such a way that neither is in conflict with the other. On the contrary, the divine nature of Jesus in every way ennobles and perfects his human nature. His human faculties of will and intellect are enlightened by the divine union, so that as man he possesses the plenitude of grace, both for himself and on behalf of us all. Jesus is inundated with the grace of the Holy Spirit, so that he may be compared to a man standing in the centre of the sun. St Thomas Aquinas will say that all the grace of all the Saints, and all the grace any of us ever receives in this life, flows from the super-abundant grace possessed by the human soul of Jesus. "For from his fullness have we all received" (John 1:16).

As man, Jesus had to develop humanly; he had to learn, as we all do; and he had to convey divine revelation in a human way, through human acts and human words. As man Jesus obeyed God his Father, from whom he was sent on his mission: and he related with his human emotions to God as to his Father. Jesus also obeyed, was led by, and rejoiced in the Holy Spirit. Yet he came in order to give the Holy Spirit to his Church. All this is a reflection in time of the eternal Trinitarian relations. By looking at Jesus the man we can know that the eternal Son is eternally begotten by God the Father, and that the Holy Spirit eternally proceeds at once from the Father and from the Son. By observing the love of Jesus for us sinners, we are able to know God's love for us sinners. And through the human love Jesus gave back to his Father, we too find it possible at last to love God as He should be loved.

According to St Thomas Aquinas, in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus suffered in both his intellect and will in a more intense way that anyone else has ever done or ever could do. Jesus knew what was going on there. He, divine goodness, love and purity, was falling into the hands of wicked men. He was being confronted by the mystery of human iniquity in summary form, in order to be engulfed by it. While all his natural instincts recoiled from this, his human will remained perfectly in accord with his divine will, which was lovingly set on our salvation. In his agony Jesus called on his Father. We can read into this cry the truth that

the unity of will within the Holy Trinity is not impersonal, but always proper to each of the Persons. There in Gethsemane Jesus manifested supremely his obedience to the Holy Spirit, and his complete possession of all the gifts of the Holy Spirit. But he did not there give the Holy Spirit. That could only happen once the reconciling Sacrifice, through which our sins are forgiven, had been accomplished. At the very moment of his death, according to St John, Jesus breathed forth the Spirit: indicating in this way that the Spirit eternally proceeds from both Father and Son.

What was the meaning of Christ's Passion, and how was it revelatory of the holy Trinity? In his second lecture, both rich and dense, Fr Thomas Joseph explored various theories of the atonement, setting out for us above all the most wonderful and illuminating insights of St Thomas Aquinas. Delightfully, he showed how there is no real contradiction between St Anselm and St Thomas, though there is certainly a difference of emphasis and approach. In particular, these two doctors of the Church offer different, but complementary, answers to the question: was it necessary for Christ to suffer for us in this way? Fr Thomas Joseph also considered the importance of the hidden life, and the ministry of Jesus. For "not everything is drama: ordinary life matters for God; we can find Him hidden among ordinary things." And "the New Testament is a spiritual world with a small entrance. It's accessible and not elitist. We have enough there and need no more; especially there is enough in the four Gospels for us to find God." Regarding the Baptism of the Lord: "Don't be an adoptionist! That's a path of heresy you don't want to go down!"

The third lecture looked at how the death of Jesus, and his descent into hell, manifests the mystery of the Holy Trinity. "The Incarnation goes very far. The cadaver of Jesus is the cadaver of the Divine Word, and the locus of Divine, Trinitarian Power." Fr Thomas Joseph discussed the theories of Karl Rahner and Hans Urs Von Balthasar, both of which seek in their different ways to empty hell: and with both of which major difficulties are to be found.

The final lecture focussed on Christ's Resurrection and Exaltation to Heaven. According to St Paul, it is only in the

Resurrection that the identity of Jesus as both Son and Lord is finally revealed. The Resurrection is a work of the three Trinitarian Persons together. We have New Testament texts ascribing it to the Father, and to the Spirit, and also to the Son himself. Supremely though, the Resurrection is fittingly attributed to God the Father, who is the source of the Trinitarian Life. To the Father is also attributed the Creation and Redemption of the world, and our adopted Sonship in Christ, and the New Creation and final restoration of all things. The Resurrection is the mystery beyond all others through which is manifested the Paternity of the Father and the Filiation of the Son. Then at Pentecost we have an ultimate moment of Trinitarian Revelation, when through the mission of the Spirit the mystery of the Father and of the Son is manifested to the Church.

Interestingly, the order of our illumination is the opposite to that of the divine processions. That is, our first encounter with God is through the Holy Spirit. He touches our hearts, and prompts us to acknowledge Jesus as Son of God, and Saviour, and Lord. United then with Jesus through the gift of the Holy Spirit, we thereby are brought into relationship with God the Father. With Jesus, and in the Spirit, we come to him, and know him, and are filled by him, and our cry to him is Abba! Father!

This little review can only give a slight flavour of the enormous wealth of insight packed into these lectures, and also into the questions and answers that followed them. Anyone with a computer and some spare hours is warmly recommended to visit them via our web site. To do so is to be guided, by a real master, around some of the implications of the faith by which we strive to live. With most wonderful fluency, Fr Thomas Joseph showed the internal coherence and beauty of these mysteries, and pointed towards their inexhaustible greatness. He reminded us that orthodox belief is thrilling and life-giving, and that deep reflection on its content must nourish and motivate our prayer: prompting us ever more to praise God for his goodness, mercy, and love, without end.

DBH

## **NEWS FROM KRISTO BUASE MONASTERY**

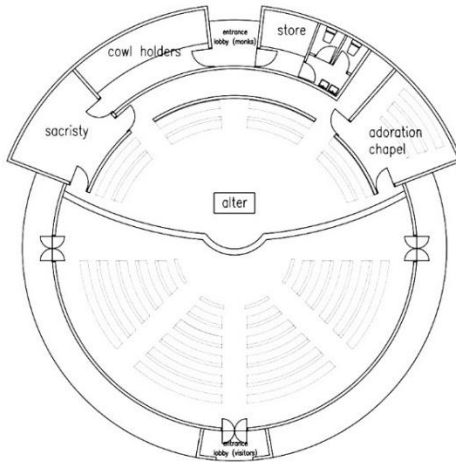
Kristo Buase Monastery from the early years has had plans for a monastic church. Once in PAX (the Prinknash Abbey magazine) on the Tenth Anniversary of Kristo Buase, mention was made of building a monastic church, yet here we are in 2021 with the monastery 32 years old and still without a monastic church. The need for both a monastic church and a retreat house has become necessary as we grow. The Community has taken the initiative this year to launch its fundraising, in aid of the Monastic Church and Retreat House, on 11<sup>th</sup> July 2021, with two Bishops to grace the occasion: the Most Rev. Dominic Yeboah Nyarko, Techiman Diocese, and Most Rev. Matthew Kwasi Gyamfi, Bishop of Sunyani. Priests and Religious of both dioceses were invited as well as some government officials.

Monastic churches are often places to which pilgrims can relate and feel welcome; however, our present chapel doesn't allow this since it seats only fifteen people, hence the need for a larger church. Being the only monastery for men in Ghana, we often get requests from religious and lay people that have to be refused, due to the lack of accommodations to host them.

Our proposed chapel would have a seating capacity ranging from 150 to 200 and would serve as a place of worship for the monks, the immediate community, and retreatants. The chapel is particularly essential to serve as a meeting point for pilgrims on retreat.

The design has been inspired by an anthill, a manifestation of the communal life and work of termites, reflecting the Benedictine monastic philosophy of communal living in diversity. This is metaphorically depicted in spikes rising from different directions, and united as community, by their convergence towards a Cross, which stands as a beacon of love, sacrifice and redemption. The chapel, drawing on its organic form and grey hue, also blends with the rock formations which punctuate a vegetative cover to create the existing landscape. Thus, the chapel rises in unison with its

natural environs, further illustrating the Benedictine sense of community.



Floor Plan

The total cost of the building of the Church is **\$358,701.51 or £258,265.09**. This excludes the furnishings of pews, Crucifix, choir stalls, etc

The local population yearns to partake in the liturgy. However, this opportunity is not available due to lack of space in the chapel, coupled with enclosure restrictions. The monastic church, when built, will be a haven for numerous pilgrims seeking solitude, Adoration and Mass before travelling on their way.

The geographical location of the monastery is in the heart of Ghana and serves as a rest point for missionaries and other pilgrims who make their way either north or south. Because of its serene location, it is a much sought after destination for those seeking a place of quiet contemplation, silence, solitude, tranquillity, and retreat from the activity of daily life. The sheer need for pilgrims to retreat from the secular world in order to reflect and pray makes the monastery an ideal haven for this purpose. The proposed Retreat house will be able to accommodate fifty persons.

Fr Antony Buaful, [www.kristobuasemonastery.org](http://www.kristobuasemonastery.org)



## GEORGE MACKAY BROWN

Tuesday 13<sup>th</sup> April this year marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the death of George Mackay Brown. Just a few days before he died, he had completed “The Harrowing of Hell”, perhaps the most beautiful religious poem he ever wrote. Clothed in the five wounds of his crucifixion, Christ makes a silent, spiral, luminous descent into the underworld, moving deeper and deeper into the past as he meets and frees first Solomon, then David, Joseph, Jacob, Abel. Finally, on the seventh step of Christ’s descent, Adam – “tall, primal dust” – turns to him from the shadows with a cry of joy. The way is now prepared for the resurrection:

*Tomorrow the Son of Man will walk in a garden  
Through drifts of apple blossom.*

What were the roots of his vision and his faith? For an Orkney boy like George, growing up in the 1920s, to feel drawn to Catholicism was a very unusual thing indeed. The Stromness of George’s childhood had no Catholic church, and no Catholic priest, and the children imbibed from their parents a vague suspicion of what was referred to as the “Church of Rome”. The words that clustered about it – rosary, pope, confession, relics, purgatory, penance – sounded sinister. “I can’t remember that we were ever instructed to hate Catholicism or Catholics,” George later wrote. “It was just that Catholicism and its mysteries lay outside our pale, and it was better so.”

Yet even as a small boy, George was mesmerised by the beauty of the psalms, and by stories both from the Old and the New Testaments. “Stories” is perhaps misleading: growing up as he was in a fishing and farming community, the parables and miracles were very real to him. In one of his most famous poems, he sees the Stations of the Cross in the endless, arduous cycle of the farming year. And the Nativity especially caught his imagination: “As a child between the ages of five and eight,” he once wrote, “Stromness seemed to me a place very like

Bethlehem, where a child might not be surprised to meet angels, shepherds, kings on a winter night.”

When George was fifteen, his English master one day read aloud to the class Francis Thompson’s “Hound of Heaven”. George was overwhelmed, and read the poem again and again until he had it by heart. “And I knew,” he later reflected, “that the man reeling from delight to vain earthly delight was a Catholic – a very sad and weak and fallible one – and that the Hound in relentless pursuit of him was Christ, or the Church. And, for some reason, these facts gave the poem an extra relish.”

After school, just as he was on the point of following his brothers into the RAF to do his National Service, George was discovered to be suffering from TB, for which there was then no cure. For a decade, he led a limbo existence, largely confined to bed. And here, propped up against his pillows one winter’s afternoon, he opened for the first time a book that was to affect him more profoundly than any other piece of literature he ever read. The *Orkneyinga Saga* tells the story of three centuries of the Orkney earldom under Norse rule, and is the distillation of poetry, stories and songs handed down from generation to generation over hundreds of years. One man from the saga intrigued George more than any other. Early in the eleventh century, the earldom of Orkney had been divided between two cousins, Hakon Paulsson and Magnus Erlendson. Magnus, the Saga relates, had not only all the attributes one would seek in a ruler and statesman, but also saintly qualities. For many years, he and Hakon got on well enough; then they fell out. On Easter Monday April 1117, the cousins met on the island of Egilsay, purportedly to negotiate peace. It had been agreed that each should bring with him no more than two ships. Hakon, however, sailed to the small island with eight, fully manned and armed. For the sake of peace, Magnus gave himself up for execution. He walked to his death, in the words of the *Saga*, “as cheerful as if he were invited to a banquet”. Magnus’s body was carried to Birsay, and the poor and afflicted of the islands were soon flocking to it as a place of pilgrimage. In 1134, he was acclaimed a saint.

Amidst the tales of Viking intrigue and revenge, the martyrdom of Magnus shone out, for George, “like a precious stone”. “For me,” he wrote, “Magnus was at once a solid convincing flesh-and-blood man, from whom pure spirit flashed from time to time.” His death by axe stroke became the “still centre” around which much of George’s thought and work now began to move.

Being a Scotsman, and cautious, George took no precipitate action. For more than two decades he allowed words and phrases from poetry and prose of every age – from Chaucer, Lorca, Herbert, Hopkins – to nudge him slowly further along the road: words luring him towards the Word. It was, he later wrote, “like gathering jewels”. Then at Midnight Mass, on Christmas Eve 1961, at the age of 40, he was finally baptised and received Communion for the first time.

This moment changed everything for him, and nothing. “Without the explanation that Catholicism provides,” George wrote towards the end of his life, “I would not see any clear meaning in life at all.” And though by no means all his work is overtly religious, all of it is shot through with the vision and understanding and hope given him by his faith. Yet he was far too canny, too well acquainted with the human condition, to imagine that his conversion would shield him from suffering.

George had an extraordinary capacity for joy: it is the keynote of his writing, and it inspired Seamus Heaney to christen him “the praise singer”. But he had also inherited from his postman father a crippling tendency to depression. “The black bird has been with me all my life,” he wrote just after his sixtieth birthday. “When it comes and sits on my shoulder and whets its beak it is unpleasant to say the least.” These depressions could go on for weeks, months even, with hardly a break, and could become so intense that he longed for oblivion. “Sometimes such a mass of dark clouds pours through my skull,” he once wrote, “that I wish I was dissolved into the four elements.” He was plagued by a groundless but nagging sense of guilt – “The sun is flashing off the snow on to the back of my head as I sit writing in the kitchen,” he tells a friend one

winter's morning, "and all that brightness makes me feel what a filthy creature I am." In his worst states he felt that the writing to which he had devoted his life was not only worthless, but somehow "a pollutant".

So how did he cope? Certainly, Sunday Mass was a source of profound consolation. "Christ opened himself to the worst rejection, pain and desolation," he wrote. "In the Mass, the sacrifice is repeated, over and over, every second of every day, all over the world; but Golgotha is made beautiful and meaningful by 'the dance of the altar', the offering of the fruit of people's labour as they themselves journey to death, suffering and rejoicing: the bread and the wine. It is the wayside inn where we stay awhile for refreshment and rest... The simplest Mass is the most beautiful event imaginable."

He was comforted too by a belief that suffering is never wasted. "One feels desperate with solitude often," he once wrote to Stella Cartwright, the woman he loved, "and then it is salutary to know that one is not alone, but is 'involved with mankind'. And that means, as I understand it, that whenever you are brave, enduring, uncomplaining, then the whole world of suffering is helped and soothed somehow. This is sacrifice, and fulfilment and renewal: an incalculable leavening."

In his depressions, George often toyed with the idea of writing to the Abbot of Pluscarden to ask whether he might come to stay at the Abbey: enfolded in the community, he felt, he might find tranquillity. In fact, he visited Pluscarden only once, on an afternoon in August 1987. He was welcomed by Fr Giles Conacher, who produced a sponge cake so delicious that it was eaten at one sitting. There was much hilarity. As George took his leave, Fr Giles was left with the impression of a man "lovable, simple, open" – "fully Christian, fully cultured and fully human."

On St Magnus Day 1996, George's funeral was held in St Magnus Cathedral, in Kirwall: the first requiem Mass held in the cathedral since the Reformation. When they came to clear his little flat, his friends found a trove of unpublished work. Amongst this was an essay in memory of his mother. It ends:

*I have a deep-rooted belief that what has once existed can never die: not even the frailest things, spindrift or clover-scent or glitter of star on a wet stone. All is gathered into the web of creation, that is apparently established and yet perhaps only a dream in the eternal mind; and yet, too, we work at the making of it with every word and thought and action of our lives.*

Maggie Fergusson<sup>1</sup>

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## From the Annals

### June

**10<sup>th</sup>: Annual Coast Day.** Br Michael has been keeping a weather eye upon the meteorological reports and earlier in the week decided that today would be the annual coast day. We bought food earlier in the week, and cooked bacon, sausages and burgers after Mass just before setting off. The hot food we placed in insulated boxes.

The members of the community travelled in the community cars. We were all able to fit into the cars and the van. The day began warm and cloudy. A partial eclipse of the sun took place in the late morning, but the sun was obscured by clouds and so no one saw it. Most forgot that it was to happen until after it had happened. At Hopeman we went to the beach hut, which the Coates' family kindly lent us for the day. There we unpacked and partook of food and drink. The clouds cleared in the afternoon. The various members of the community followed their inclinations until about 4.00 when a party returned from the ice-cream shop and all gathered to eat ice cream before packing up and setting off home.

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<sup>1</sup> *George Mackay Brown: The Life* by Maggie Fergusson, which won four prizes, is published by John Murray, £12.99.

## A SAINT IN THE FAMILY

*During a talk to the Chapter, Fr David shared some family memories with us: he is a great-grandson of Fr Charles de Foucauld's sister.*

There are saints in every family, even if not all of them are honoured in the Church's calendar.

Up until the 2000s, Charles de Foucauld was certainly well known and venerated, but it seemed that the file for his canonization would never go anywhere: too many ambiguities in his relationships with the army, and with colonisation! It seemed as though he had peaked. Nor, during my childhood, was he the object of a suffocating family cult. There was in our house, sitting on a cupboard, a rather ugly plaster bust of him – much worse ones have appeared since! – and the memory of a man more to be admired than imitated, all the more so on account of the fact that his earlier life (before his conversion) was by no means a model to offer to young people! It was clearly understood that he should only be invoked for spiritual matters, and that he was quite useless in matters of material help, since he had squandered his inheritance and done a fair job of nibbling away at his sister's...

Having heard this sort of talk since my childhood, I had no expectation of his beatification or canonization, despite the ever-growing size of his spiritual family: in 2005, when he was beatified, there were no less than a score of religious institutes and lay associations laying claim to his spirituality!

And then, miracles happened, never mind the attachment shown by successive popes to this strange man from the Sahara.

Pope Paul VI already venerated Charles de Foucauld, and my grandmother could not think of anything better than to send him an original letter sent to her by the hermit of Tamanrasset, to give thanks for his election in 1963. In return she received a beautiful personal letter from the new Pope. And now he too is a saint, Paul VI, touching the family with another brush with sanctity.

My paternal grandmother, born Jeanne de Blic, was the last of the six children of Marie de Foucauld, who was Charles's sister, three years younger than he, who had married Raymond de Blic in 1884.

The very close relationship between Charles and Marie – Mimi, as she was known – went back to the earliest days of their life, cruelly scarred by deaths: in 1864, Charles was not yet six, and Marie was two, when in succession first their mother died, then their father, followed, later that same year, by the death of their paternal grandmother by heart-attack, before the very eyes of Charles, whose godmother she was. Charles was then entrusted to his maternal grandfather, Colonel de Morlet, who brought him up at Strasbourg and then at Nancy, while Marie grew up in Paris with their father's sister, Inès Moitessier, married to a businessman. They had no other close relatives, and the many others who bore the name of de Foucauld were much more distantly related cousins.

#### *A word on the Moitessiers*

Their best claim to worldly fame lies in the two famous portraits of Inès Moitessier by Ingres, of about 1850. She led a political salon. Her two daughters, Catherine de Flavigny and Marie de Bondy supported Charles de Foucauld throughout his life. His correspondence with Marie de Bondy shows the maternal and spiritual influence she exercised over him. It was through the Moitessiers that Charles met the Abbé Huvelin, who was his spiritual director from his conversion in 1886 to the Abbé's death in 1910.

Jeanne, my grandmother, born in 1897, was sixteen when Charles made his last visit to her sister at Barbirey in Burgundy in 1913. She had seen him each time he came back to France, as he was very faithful to his family, as the abundance of letters he wrote to his sister, his brother-in-law and his nephews and nieces demonstrates: more than 450 letters between 1890 and 1916!

In 1913, at her uncle Charles's request, she had taught him to knit and to crochet, so that he in turn might teach these crafts to the

Tuareg women, for whom they would be very useful. She freely admitted that he was not very gifted in this department, but that Ouksem, the young Tuareg whom he had brought with him to introduce to his family and France, had fortunately quickly picked up the basics of knitting and crochet...

Grandma was very pious, very charitable, very sweet. She would have liked to become a religious, but her vocation was blocked by her sister Denise, who entered the Helpers of the Holy Souls, leaving a few years later for health reasons. So, Jeanne was firmly told to get married and not make a fuss. So, she had ten children, and to her great joy, among them were my uncle François, who entered Cîteaux as Br Hubert, Cistercian monk, and my uncle Henri, who was a Spiritan missionary in Madagascar for more than forty years.

Truth to tell, it was my father, Hubert, the second of the ten, who took the initiative of going off to Cîteaux to become a monk. In 1941, he became a novice aged 19, as Br Louis, but had to leave both on health grounds and to escape from being conscripted into the German forced labour organisation. He managed to get across the Spanish frontier, was trafficked by the smugglers, almost died in prison at Lerida, then, free once more, joined the French forces in Algeria and came back to fight in France with de Lattre and the commandos, all the way to the Ballon d'Alsace, where he was wounded. After him, Uncle René, the fourth, my godfather, had a try at Cîteaux, but it didn't work out. My grandfather blazed with anger when the third, François, declared that he wanted to be a monk, too! But he did persevere, and after seventy-five years of monastic life, which led him by way of Koutaba in Cameroon and Kasanza in the Congo, died in 2018 at Cîteaux... A destiny, then, as monk and missionary, which he surely got from Uncle Charles. Three of their cousins, sons of Maurice de Blic, Charles de Foucauld's eldest nephew, also became priests, Pierre and Paul in the diocese of Saint-Dié, and the third, Régis, became a Premonstratensian at Frigolet.

The tradition continues. One of my cousins, Elizabeth, entered Pesquié (it was at Ozon at that time) as a Benedictine nun, a little



ahead of me; another, Odile, joined the Beatitudes. In the following generation, Benoît-David is a Brother of St John in Ethiopia, Louis is a Dominican, Charles is on the way to religious consecration...

But holiness is not a matter of vocations; it is at the heart of the family, of families. Each couple radiating its faith is a treasure for all around it. Grace is there, spreading everywhere; like all real grace, it is impossible to tie down, but easy to recognise. Long may it continue to irrigate our families, and in ever-new forms.

Thank you, Uncle Charles!

Abbot Emeritus David d'Hamonville, of En Calcat: *Chronique de Landévennec*, avril 2021, no. 86, pp. 78-81.

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## From the Annals

### July

**16<sup>th</sup>: Juniors' Dies Non.** Members of the novitiate went out for the day. Those of the seniors who were working yesterday also went out today. One of these was Fr Mark who took out a bicycle which suffered a puncture on the far side of the A96. Unable to repair it, he began to walk home. At Miltonduff a cyclist coming in the opposite direction stopped, gave him a new inner tube, fitted it and inflated it, before continuing on to Elgin – a good Samaritan.

Fr Abbot attended the priestly Ordinations of Malachy Eze and Christopher Doig in Aberdeen this evening.

**19<sup>th</sup>:** The Covid regulations changed today. We have moved to Level 0, which does not mean there are no restrictions. We have partially opened the church. Most of the transepts are open, but a line of chairs demarcates the part for the community, so that we can avoid wearing masks in our own house. Visitors must still wear masks. We still have to keep records of those who attend Mass and the liturgy. The new level for social distancing is one metre.

## STABILITY IN THE WHIRLWIND OF CHANGE

There haven't been many novels written about religious life; I happen to have read a few of those that are available and find that the monks and/or nuns depicted in them tend to be lacking in dimension and reality. Probably, to anyone looking at monastery life from the outside, one only sees dull routine and a sad lack of any kind of exciting event that would make for a good tale. And if a novel does get written about a monastery, one usually finds caricatures rather than characters: sickly-sweet and overly pious on the one hand, or totally bland and one-dimensional on the other. This is true even for the couple of novels actually written about religious life *by religious* that I have read, sadly.

There is an exception that proves the rule, however. Rumer Godden, a successful English novelist whose career spanned the middle decades of the last century, wrote three novels dealing with religious life. She also happened to be an oblate of Stanbrook Abbey, whose nuns were instrumental in her conversion from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism. The first of her novels dealing with religious women was *Black Narcissus*, about a group of Anglican missionary nuns in the Far East, which was turned into a hit movie with Deborah Kerr in the lead. In the seventies, she wrote *Five for Sorrow, Ten for Joy* about the Dominican Sisters of Bethany, a French congregation that ministers exclusively to women in prison and whose ranks are filled with many former prisoners. Her greatest success as a novelist, and arguably the book for which she is most remembered, is *In This House of Brede*, written in the late 1960s, just as the changes of Vatican II started to affect the nuns of the English Benedictine Congregation (the novel also was filmed as a rather mediocre television movie, yet with an outstanding performance by the late and always magnificent Diana Rigg in the lead role).

As readers of this series of articles already know, I tend to re-read the books I love many times, and *In This House of Brede* holds pride of place with *The Lord of the Rings* and *A Christmas Carol*. Godden achieved a quasi-miraculous feat with her novel:

she created a realistic, though fictional, community of religious women who are three-dimensional and fascinatingly human. Just as in a flesh-and-blood community, the authoress populates her abbey with saints and sinners, and even the “saints” have realistic flaws and foibles while the “sinners” have redeeming qualities. Yet most of the nuns depicted in the novel are just normal women “getting on with” the business of daily religious life, with its successes and failures, all the while allowing themselves to be formed and fashioned by the daily struggles and conflicts that arise in any community. Every time I come back to this novel, I look forward to rediscovering these fascinating women and the intricate details of Benedictine life as it was lived out before the Council.

The novel begins its story in the early 1950s and spans over the years into the mid-60s. It is primarily the story of a successful businesswoman named Philippa Talbot, an ambitious war-widow who has steadily climbed the ranks of an anonymous government ministry in London. She is well-to-do and quite settled in her life of business and creature comforts when she converts to Catholicism from a lifetime of cultural Anglicanism. She soon discovers a call to Benedictine monasticism when she visits the fictional Brede Abbey (based upon both Stanbrook and Ryde Abbeys in Great Britain, where Godden visited and interviewed members for three years while researching the book). Leaving worldly success behind, Philippa enters Brede at the age of 41 and soon discovers herself to be a fish out of water. How can a successful, well-travelled, wilful, modern woman - used to her freedoms and little luxuries – acclimatize herself to monastic life, especially when most of the other nuns with whom she finds herself have life experiences that are far more mundane and completely different from her own? The story of how she does manage to allow God’s grace slowly to work on her and overcome her serious character flaws while bolstering up her inherent strengths makes up the bulk of the novel’s intricate plot. She is a woman with a past, a believable past, with an especially tragic incident in her family that seriously inhibits her growth both as a loving woman and a religious. It is an amazing character study,

and the novel would have been great if she were the only protagonist.

Godden, however, created and peopled this abbey with interesting, fascinating women, and created several subplots that, along with the story of Philippa's growth in monastic life, propel the novel. Told in a very non-linear fashion, the sub-plots describe the consequences of a very headstrong, elderly abbess who inadvertently sends the abbey into a financial tailspin as well as the story of the arrival of a group of young Japanese postulants who are Brede's hope for a first foundation. Along the way we meet Dame Catherine, former cellarer and Philippa's first real friend in the community; Dame Agnes, the mistress of ceremonies and teacher of Latin who is a stickler for observance and filled with an acerbic wit and armed with a razor-sharp tongue; young novice Sister Cecily, a talented singer and organist who comes from a repressive childhood (her growth into womanhood mirrors that of Philippa's growth into a fuller womanhood); and Dame Veronica, a thoroughly annoying, untalented poetess who manages to irritate just about everyone she comes in contact with. Several other sisters help flesh out the population of the abbey, all of them well-written and believable. Even the saintly characters in this novel have serious flaws and never come off as inhuman or cardboard saints.

Along the way, Rumer Godden does an excellent job of describing Benedictine monastic life, especially in her depiction both of the liturgical year and its constant round of feasts and seasons and the routine-yet never monotonous-round of daily life in a cloistered monastery. She weaves this and the intricate stories of the characters' lives into a rich tapestry with an amazing amount of craft, detail, and loving insight. Godden never descends into the maudlin or melodramatic, and if there seems to be a lot of "incident" in the novel, it is because there is a lot of incident in the life of the average monk or nun, most of which remains unseen and unknown even by one's sisters or brothers in religious life. Most of the tectonic changes in the characters' lives take place interiorly and are the direct result of the constant shaping, the buffs

and scrapes one receives when living in community. Of course, she's not entirely successful in perfectly describing the reality of life in a monastery – it would be impossible for one who has never been a religious perfectly to understand religious life and all of its ins and outs. She does, however, create an incredibly believable milieu in which to unfold the story she chooses to tell.

The novel's overriding theme is the stability that monastic life provides in the midst of change. However, the last bit of the novel, depicting a whirlwind of change, is perhaps the least successful. Most of the last tenth or so of the story relates how Brede Abbey begins to adjust to the reforms in religious life called for by the Second Vatican Council. Godden seems to rush through this section rather too rapidly; she describes much of the changes without fully exploring the emotional and spiritual impact these changes would have had on an institution that was so deeply entrenched in customs, traditions, and rules. She skips over most of the seismic, titanic struggles these changes caused in the vast majority of communities, and her Brede Abbey seemingly suffers not a whit from the mass departures and sharp decline in vocations that just about everyone experienced in the sixties.

All in all, it is an incredible ride, however, and one worth buckling up for again and again; the women of Brede Abbey know exactly how to inspire, instruct, and entertain me every time I decide to knock on the enclosure door. In fact, it was reading this novel for the first time over thirty years ago that I first became interested in the possibility of cloistered monastic life as a Benedictine. So, take the plunge and discover this wonderful novel by Rumer Godden.

Br Benedict Joseph

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### **Alasdair Roberts RIP**

We are sad to announce that Scottish Church Historian, Alasdair Roberts, contributor and subscriber to this magazine, died peacefully at home in Morar on July 29. May he rest in peace.

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Mystery & Intelligibility: History of Philosophy as Pursuit of Wisdom*; Edited by Jeffrey Dirk Wilson; The Catholic University of America Press, 2021.

I was selected by the editor of our magazine to write a review of this book largely on the strength of having sufficient interest in philosophy to be working my way, very slowly, through Copleston's *History of Philosophy* (9 vols.). This, including some modules on the early Greeks, still leaves me somewhat short of being an expert on the subject. I was afraid that the mysteries of academic philosophy might be insufficiently intelligible to a non-academic like myself and any attempt to comment intelligently on it might prove risible. On actually reading the book, however, I found it to be accessible enough to the interested non-academic who might, after all, attempt a review.

The theme of this book, as indicated in the subtitle, is that the history of philosophy, currently pursued as a separate subject in academia, should be studied alongside systematic philosophy *as philosophy* in its own right. In other words, the thought of the past still has as much to tell us about reality as that of the present. As far as I understand it, modern philosophy since Descartes has, broadly speaking, pursued the line of "What can definitely be known by reason alone?" After an optimistic start, successive generations of philosophers have pared this down to "Not much, if anything". Wilson, in his introduction, addresses this issue: "Descartes's attempt to eliminate mystery results in the destruction of intelligibility as well"; in fact, "intelligibility and mystery are possible only as long as they are tethered to one another" (p. 10). This apparently common-sense approach counters present ways of thinking which are still, despite much evidence to the contrary, geared to the inevitability and superiority of "progress". In this sense, it has more in common with the study of theology, in which old things and new are given equal elbow room. In the chapter, "What is Philosophy?", Philipp W. Rosemann explores this

concept by identifying a philosophical “field [in which] I distinguish four axes, namely (in addition to philosophy), the narrative, the religious, and the political” (p. 209). Will this widening of the philosophical “field” find acceptance in the wider academic world? Don’t hold your breath.

The theme is explored by seven authors, including the editor, who each contribute a chapter giving a different angle on it. Timothy B. Noone, for instance, critiques Jorge J. E. Gracia’s subordination of the past to the present owing to “the need to transcend cultural provincialism” (p. 41). A need apparently unconscious of the “provincialism” of the present. Historical knowledge also saves today’s prophets of the New from unconsciously reinventing the wheel; mediaeval philosophers may have had the same idea before. Much of this volume, though, is devoted to looking to the age of early Greek philosophy.

Donald Philip Verene traces the development of how we think from the beginnings; the philosophising impulse is generated by the sense of wonder (*thauma*) expressed in myth; “Myths are the keepers of the master images out of which human culture is developed ... including science” and, of course, modern philosophy (p. 113). In his own chapter, Wilson looks at how Aristotle traces the development of philosophy from the “imaginative genera” of Homer to the “naturalistic genera” of Thales to his own “pure philosophy”: a move of demythologisation and, consequently, a diminution of the necessary *thauma*. On another tack, William Desmond, in “Flux-Gibberish: For and Against Heraclitus”, a chapter that verges on the poetic, treats us to an evaluation of Heraclitus’ “everything flows” (*panta rei*) and considers how, after all, Heraclitus sees a stable *logos* at the heart of a universe of flux. And, in a fascinating chapter: “Into the Dark: How (Not) to ask, ‘why Is There Anything rather at All?’”, Eric D. Perl enlists the aid of Plotinus. Calling on the Neo-Platonist’s scheme of the Hierarchy of Being, he shows that the cause of all *things* cannot be a *thing* in the same sense; that this is a mystery where language, even thought itself, fails.

But these and the other writers explain themselves much better than I can in a brief review. One thing I have gained from reading this book is that it has shown me how, in my reading of philosophical history to date, I have had an unconscious reservation towards old ideas; that they are in some sense “obsolete” or, at any rate, that the new are to be preferred. A view well worth revising.

DDM

*Christian Asceticism* by Anselm Stolz OSB: English translation by Giles Conacher OSB; Arouca Press, Canada 2021.

Stolz taught that mysticism, in the sense of having a deep personal relationship with Jesus, was for everyone, not just the preserve of a spiritual élite – in this he was a precursor of the Second Vatican Council’s emphasis on the universal vocation to holiness. Stolz offers advice on the means to come closer to Christ, and, more importantly, to removing obstacles to Christ coming closer to us. He draws his teaching from the Scriptures and the writings of the saints, the Fathers and Doctors, who have followed the same paths and so are reliable guides for us (*from the translator*).

“The Benedictine scholar Anselm Stolz is well known for establishing the biblical, patristic, sacramental, and monastic roots of Christian mysticism. The present book, spiritual conferences Fr Stolz delivered at the threshold of the Second World War, completes his task. Here we learn that the ascetical life, forged and tested by hermits, is the touchstone of Christian perfection. As witnesses in the heart of the Church, hermits point the way to service and love of the King whose kingdom, though not of this world, renews this world wherever asceticism is truly tried. Fr Giles Conacher, OSB, has performed a great service in retrieving this work and rendering it in English with fidelity and grace.”

Carol Zaleski  
Professor of World Religions, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.