

Pluscarden Benedictines

No. 202 News and Notes for our Friends Summer 2023

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Cover: Br Simon with his mother and Bishop Hugh

Back: Digital Illumination of St Matthew by Br Cyprian OSB

ABBOT'S LETTER

Dear Friends,

A confrère recently told me about his experience of staying in his parents' house after they had both died. As long as one of them was alive, whenever he went there, he felt he was going home. But this changed when neither of them was there. The building and its furnishings were all the same, but the place had become strange. The feeling of being at home had not been about the familiar surroundings and all the memories contained there; it had been about those who made it their home, and they were no longer there.

A Catholic can go into a Church he has never been in before, and he feels at home. It might be very different in shape and style from the Church he had known as a child. He might not like it. But he is at home. The feeling doesn't come from a familiar environment or a connection with his childhood. It comes from those who make the Church their home: Jesus present in the Blessed Sacrament; His Body, the faithful people who worship there.

It is important for us to know we have a home. Knowing this provides the security we need to grow and flourish and become ourselves. Then we become home makers ourselves in one way or another, and this is what we work for during the most productive years of life. Eventually we come to look forward more and more to our final homecoming. We feel drawn towards the Father's house.

One of St Benedict's names for the monastery is "the house of God". The monastery is as it is, those occupying it live as they do, not because of any programme or ideal, but because they know they are living in God's house. For the monks this house where God makes his home is the spiritual home in which they grow, in which they invest their productive lives, and in which they journey towards the Father's house.

The consideration that the monastery is the house of God is particularly to the fore when St Benedict speaks of the monastery's guest house. The monastery has to be managed in such a way that there is always accommodation for those who need it, and "the house of God is to be managed wisely by wise men".

A monastery can be a place where people return after many years absence, sometimes after many of the monks they used to know have died. In spite of the time and the changes, they feel they have come home. A particular characteristic of a Benedictine monastery is continuity, the preservation over a long time of a distinct family spirit, a fruit of stability in one place over successive generations. Underlying this is the unchanging presence of Christ, the experience that God makes his home here. A monastery's relative unchangeability can give a human aspect to this presence, allowing people to feel at home with God.

It isn't part of our Benedictine vocation to establish monasteries that will go on for ever. But we recognise that we can be a significant help to people just by being stable places where people can experience homecoming, and we have a responsibility in this regard.

At Pluscarden we are especially aware of the value of Benedictine endurance, because of the old buildings we occupy. We know very little of the men who lived here centuries ago, but they make their presence felt in their buildings, now ours.

The monastery isn't ours: we are stewards of God's house. In fulfilment of our responsibility to the place, since the arrival of the founders of the present-day community in 1948 we have been gradually restoring the ancient medieval buildings and, where the original buildings have not survived, constructing new buildings that harmonise with the surviving old ones.

For many years we have wanted to complete our monastic buildings with better accommodation for women guests. At present we have a women's guest house at some distance from the monastery. The women self-cater, and the building does not allow as much quiet and privacy as some might like. We wish to offer hospitality to women equivalent to that offered to our male guests,

in a building adjacent to the monastery, with easy access to the Church, a quiet atmosphere, and meals provided from the monastic kitchen.

Around this primary objective we have planned our “South Range”, called “St Joseph’s” because we have placed it under his protection. In addition to the new guest rooms for women, the project includes an expansion of our kitchen and dining areas to allow us to provide for more guests.

The plans for this have evolved over many years. Adjustments have had to be made to match the plans to our financial resources. Covid, of course, caused delays. Now we are ready to begin construction. We have the major part of the money needed for the project, but we shall need help to complete every part of it. We commend the project to St Joseph, and trust in the support of our friends.

Yours devotedly in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr Anselm". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial 'F'.

FROM THE ANNALS

MARCH 2023

3rd: SOLEMNITY OF ST AELRED. We celebrate the solemnity today, rather than on the 5th, because that is the Second Sunday in Lent and takes precedence to the Solemnity. As usual on this day, we followed a modified Sunday timetable.

Fr Abbot presided at Office and Conventual Mass, at which he presided and preached.

Lunch was a festive meal. None was at 3.35 and Vespers at 4.30. Tea was in the refectory between None and Vespers. The customary *gaudeamus* began at 5.45 at which the community watched the film *Dark Waters*, a legal thriller concerning pollution. Br Simon left for Bishop's House in Aberdeen where he will be on retreat until just before his Ordination to the diaconate.

5th: SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT. Fr Benedict presided and preached at Conventual Mass today. The juniors are doing the sacristy work under the supervision of Fr Benedict in the absence of Br Simon, the sacristan. Fr Mark also assisted in some of the preparation for Conventual Mass.

8th: Br Michael set off for London early today together with Rita and Colin. There they intend to pick up a new (second-hand) car.

9th: Br Michael returned from London with a Honda car. This will be mostly used by Rita and Colin, and replaces the Lexis they used formerly.

Br Simon returned from Aberdeen with the big Toyota Avensis. He brought relatives with him from the airport.

10th: Feast of St John Ogilvie. Today Bishop Hugh ordained Br Simon to the diaconate. Br Simon had brought his mother, his sister Sophia and his brother-in-law from Aberdeen Airport. Unfortunately they lost their hold-luggage in Amsterdam and only had what they were wearing and their cabin luggage. Br Simon's mother had brought a dress for the occasion in her cabin bag, but the others had to wear their travelling clothes.

The Ordination Mass began at 11.00. Bishop Hugh presided and

preached. Br Joseph was on hand as the deacon of the Mass from the beginning. Br Simon joined him from the Ordination.

Lunch followed the Mass and ceremony of Ordination, and was a buffet in the cloister. None was at 3.30, and thereafter we followed an ordinary timetable.

There is a group of students from Aberdeen University staying at St Scholastica's, and so Br Simon's family are staying in a part of St Benedict's Retreat.

11th: We had a common-room tea this afternoon which Br Simon's family attended. There he cut a cake which Rita Sim had made and iced for the occasion. The community joined the family in eating the cake.

12th: THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT. Fr Mark is the hebdomadary and as such he presided and preached at Conventual Mass. Br Simon was the deacon at the Mass and will fulfil that function at Conventual Mass throughout the week.

Br Simon's family members have now received their missing luggage. This meant they had it with them when Br Simon drove them to Aberdeen Airport today to catch their flight to Warsaw.

The students from Aberdeen University also departed today. Fr Giles went with one carload of them; he is to spend two weeks as chaplain to the community of nuns at Minster Abbey and must catch a flight from Aberdeen Airport early tomorrow morning. He is therefore spending tonight with the Bishop.

13th: Early this morning Fr Benedict started off on a journey to Caldey Island where he is to give the community of Caldey Abbey their annual retreat. He is travelling by car and by boat for the last part of the journey.

17th: Feast of St Patrick. Today was the annual clergy day when we invite the priests of the diocese to come for Mass, drinks and a meal. It can take place on different days of the year, but is always about this time. A fair number were able to come. We celebrated Mass at 11.00 at which several of the guests participated. Thereafter we had nibbles and a drink in the calefactory, before going to the refectory for lunch. After lunch there was coffee, again in the calefactory.

19th: FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT. Fr Martin presided at Mass and Office. He was principal concelebrant at Conventual Mass and preached.

20th: SOLEMNITY OF ST JOSEPH. We celebrated this Solemnity today, as the normal date of the feast fell on the Fourth Sunday in Lent which takes precedence over the Solemnity. It is also Br Joseph's feast-day and so, according to custom for priests and deacons, he presided at Office. As a deacon he could not preside at Conventual Mass, but he did preach. The day's timetable was much as that of a normal Sunday with a festal lunch.

21st: Feast of St Benedict. This feast-day is kept as of lesser importance than the Solemnity kept on 11th July. The liturgy is of the feast. This year the mid-Lent long walk took place after None. The brethren walked east along the base of Heildon Hill, went up into the forest and returned by the diagonal path down to the Abbey. We then partook of a common-room tea in the calefactory.

22nd: At Chapter Fr Abbot read a letter from the Abbot-President. We also heard that Fr Benedict is trapped on Caldey Island due to storms in the region.

25th: SOLEMNITY OF THE ANNUNCIATION OF THE LORD. Fr Martin presided at the Office of the Solemnity, but Bishop Hugh presided at Conventual Mass. It was Br Simon who preached the homily, the first time he has ever preached.

Vespers were the first Vespers of the Fifth Sunday in Lent and Br Joseph presided as hebdomadary.

26th: FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT. As there are two priests away, there are only three priests in the house. Today Fr Abbot celebrated the 8 o'clock Mass and heard Confessions before Conventual Mass, while Fr Martin celebrated the parish Mass in Forres at 11.30. This meant that there were no other concelebrants when Fr Mark presided at Conventual Mass. As the hebdomadary for the week, Br Joseph preached the homily.

Fr Benedict arrived home from Caldey Island tonight.

27th: Fr Prior returned from Minster this evening after Compline.

28th: Recently we received a Citroen car as a legacy from Jim Shore, an oblate and regular guest over many years at the abbey. It

is a fairly new and unused car. Br Michael, the cellarer, decided not to keep it, but to trade it in together with our Toyota Auris and buy an electric car. He arranged to buy the new car in Aberdeen, a second-hand Kia Niro e-car.

29th: Electricians installed a charger for the new car today.

30th: For the past several weeks we have had to do without our heavy duty kitchen mixer. It broke due to the heavy usage it receives and it has taken some time to repair it. Today it is back in the kitchen.

The Chrism Mass took place this evening in Buckie. Br Simon represented the community. There he replenished the oil stocks.

31st: The usual Friday community meeting took place today after Mass.

APRIL 2023

1st: After Mass Br Michael, having collected most of the drivers in the community outside the back door, explained to them how to operate the new Kia Niro electric vehicle.

2nd: **PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD'S PASSION.** Fr Abbot is hebdomadary this week. As is customary, he presided at today's Conventual Mass. Before Mass, he blessed the palms and Br Joseph read the Gospel of the Entry into Jerusalem. Then the community and the congregation processed around the transepts before entering the church.

Three clerics read the Passion Gospel in three parts in English. Br Simon read the part of Jesus, Fr Mark was the narrator and Fr Benedict took the part of the other speakers. When necessary, Br Michael in choir led the crowd parts. After the Gospel, Fr Abbot gave a homily.

There was a common-room tea this afternoon, the last recreation until Easter.

6th: **HOLY THURSDAY.** Today we began Vigils at 5.30. Lauds followed at 7.30 after which there was pittance. At 9.30 there was Terce and at 12.40 Sext and lunch. None was at 2.30 while tea and stop work were at 4.00 before Stations of the Cross at 4.15.

Supper, as is now traditional, was a talking meal to which the male guests also came. We had flowers in the refectory.

7.00 pm saw the start of the Liturgy at which Fr Abbot presided. From this time until the Easter Vigil, Fr Abbot no longer receives signs of honour. At the Gloria the main bells were rung in the transepts and the brethren in the church rang small bells. From now on there will be no bells rung until the Gloria of the Easter Vigil. Sufficient hosts were consecrated for the needs of the next two days, when there will be no Masses. There were about 21 laity present at the Mass. After Mass we took the Blessed Sacrament in procession to the Lady Chapel, set up as an altar of repose with candles and flowers. The community then returned to the main church for Compline. There was watching before the Blessed Sacrament from after Compline until midnight.

7th: GOOD FRIDAY. The morning followed the same timetable as yesterday. The day began cold and became warm and sunny.

The Liturgy began at 3.00. About 40 people attended, apart from the community. Br Joseph brought in the cross for veneration, singing the *Ecce lignum*. The Passion according to St John was sung in Latin by three singers: Fr Benedict who sang Jesus; Br Michael who sang the narrator; Pierce Yip who sang the other voices.

8th: HOLY SATURDAY. Again the morning followed the same timetable as on Thursday and Friday.

In the afternoon we stopped work at 4.00 before Vespers at 4.30. Supper followed at 5.15. After this most of the community were able to go to bed before being wakened at 10.15 before the beginning of the Easter Vigil at 11.00. We were able to have the Vigil in the normal style for the first time in a number of years.

The paschal fire was outside the west glass doors. Fr Abbot presided and blessed the fire and the paschal candle. Br Simon carried the paschal candle into the church. Br Joseph sang the *Exultet*. At the Gloria the main bells were rung, again with the brethren ringing smaller bells in the church. Pierce Yip, a regular guest at Eastertime, played the organ. Fr Abbot preached at the Mass which ended around 2.00 a.m. There were about 16 or 17

laity at the Vigil.

9th: EASTER SUNDAY. We were wakened at 6.00 for Lauds at 6.30. At the Office the eggs and bread for pittance were blessed. Easter pittance is one of the few meals during the year at which the brethren can talk to each other.

Fr Abbot again presided and preached at the Mass. There were 45 to 50 people in the laity chapels.

At Vespers Fr Abbot presided at Vespers, but Br Joseph presided at Benediction.

10th: Today and tomorrow we follow a mitigated timetable. We rose at 5.15 for Vigils at 5.30. Basically, the day was similar to an ordinary Sunday.

11th: In the morning we followed the same timetable as yesterday morning. In the afternoon None was at 2.30 and afterwards the community took part in a long walk. The group again walked along the bottom of the hill towards Ness End, then shortly afterwards we turned up and walked back along the forest trail. Some turned and went back down to the Abbey at the path directly above the abbey, while others walked further on to return by the main road.

As is our custom, a common-room tea followed the long walk.

12th: From today and until Sunday Vigils begins half-an-hour later, otherwise the timetable is as normal.

13th: This afternoon a Chapter-Meeting took place on the subject of building plans.

14th: Clergy of the Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham are on retreat at St Scholastica's Retreat. After None there was a common-room tea to allow Mgr Newton of the Ordinariate to meet the community.

15th: The priests of the Ordinariate are saying Mass in the Lady Chapel after our Conventual Mass has finished.

16th: SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER (OF DIVINE MERCY). Fr Giles, who is the hebdomadary, presided and preached at Conventual Mass.

The Ordinariate had their Mass in the Lady Chapel at which they used vestments from Caldey Island.

17th: Br Joseph's mother's health has seriously deteriorated recently. She is suffering from advanced ovarian cancer, it seems. He has been in touch with his family and, due to the gravity of the present situation, has gone down to Birmingham to his parents' house. He left shortly before lunchtime. He arrived at his parents' house at about 10.30.

18th: The Ordinariate clergy have been replaced by a group from the deanery of Chelmsford, who are here on retreat. They joined us for the regular common-room tea on Tuesday.

19th: In the late morning after our Conventual Mass there was a Requiem Mass for the repose of the soul of the mother of Sister Lucy Murdoch. She died in the pandemic and there was no opportunity then for a full funeral.

After None there was a chant practice. Several people were absent due to appointments, so the practice was rather sparse.

As Br Joseph is away, there was no new prayer-list this evening; Br Joseph usually oversees the provision of the daily prayer list.

20th: A group from Findhorn came to work in the garden today. We greeted Fr Abbot for his feast-day at Chapter before Compline.

21st: Memoria of St Anselm. Liturgically we keep Fr Abbot's feast-day as a memoria. Nonetheless, we did have a festal lunch. Vespers were at 4.30 and there was a gaudeamus at 5.30 where we watched a courtroom drama in black and white from 1957 called *Witness for the Prosecution*, starring Charles Laughton, Tyrone Power and Marlene Dietrich. The plot was by Agatha Christie.

23rd: THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER. Fr Mark presided at Office and Mass. He preached at Mass.

24th: We greeted Fr Mark for his feast-day at Chapter before Compline.

25th: Feast of St Mark. It is the custom for priests and deacons to preside at Office on their feast-day. Fr Mark is already the hebdomadary, so he was already presiding at Office. He did preside at Mass.

NEWS FROM ST MARY'S MONASTERY

Last time we reported that most of the monks here in Petersham were sick with COVID-19, all except Br Isidore and Br Jerome. This time it was Br Isidore's turn to get COVID. He tested positive on December 11 and was out of commission for several days after that. Two of the sisters also got COVID at the same time. But they were all out of isolation by the end of the week and were able to attend the common celebration for *O Sapientia*, held on the 17th.

On December 4, 2022, we were pleased to have another lecture organized for us by Phil and Carol Zaleski. The speaker this time was Professor Jon Levenson, professor of Jewish Studies at Harvard Divinity School. His topic was the love of God in the Book of Deuteronomy. It was a very interesting talk spiced with the humour for which he is well-known. This was Professor Levenson's first visit to Petersham but he is no stranger to the communities since both Sr Mary Frances and Fr Gregory had classes with him at Harvard. Professor Levenson's wife also attended the talk. Afterwards there was an opportunity to meet them both and enjoy some refreshments.

We have a new monk living with us at present. Fr Columba Hight came to us from the monastery of Christ in the Desert on January 9, 2023, to begin a trial period for a possible transfer to St Mary's Monastery. He is currently a junior (in simple vows). Prior to his entry at Christ in the Desert he was a priest of the Archdiocese of Hartford, Connecticut and was ordained in 2011. His interest in monastic life began at Regina Laudis Abbey in Bethlehem, Connecticut when he did their Monastic Internship Program in Land Stewardship in 1989. Although he became a priest in the United States, Fr Columba is a native of Canada. He was born in Toronto but grew up in Nova Scotia, which is appropriate, since both of his parents were immigrants to Canada from Scotland.

Since his arrival Fr Columba has been doing various jobs, such as cutting down trees, cooking, working in the garden, and doing preparations for brewing. On April 4 he attended the Chrism

Mass at the cathedral in Worcester to pick up the holy oils for the communities.

On April 19 we hosted a meeting of the monastic superiors of New England. This is normally a regular event; however, it hadn't taken place in several years due to COVID. Thus, the superiors had a lot of catching up to do. Represented were: Saint Benedict Abbey, Still River, MA, Mount Saint Mary's Abbey, Wrentham, MA, Saint Joseph's Abbey, Spencer, MA, the Abbey of Regina Laudis, Bethlehem, CT, Saint Anselm Abbey, Manchester, NH, and Weston Priory, VT. The meeting was held in the recreation room of St Mary's Monastery. After Sext the superiors had a meal together with the two communities at St Scholastica Priory. Finally, there was another brief meeting for the superiors followed by optional tours of the two monasteries.

DIC

From the Fathers

“Do not be surprised if you fall back into your old ways every day. Do not be disheartened, but resolve to do something positive about it; and, without question, the angel who stands guard over you will honour your perseverance.”

“When a ray of sunlight enters the house through a crack, it lights up everything inside and even shows up the finest dust in its beam. So it is with the fear of the Lord when it enters a human heart. It reveals all the fallibility still lurking there.”

“Repentance is the renewal of baptism. Repentance is a contract with God for a second life. A penitent is a buyer of humility. Repentance is constant distrust of bodily comfort. Repentance is self-condemning reflection, and carefree self-care. Repentance is the daughter of hope and the renunciation of despair. A penitent is an undisgraced convict. Repentance is reconciliation with the Lord by the practice of good deeds contrary to the sins. Repentance is purification of conscience.”

St John Climacus

NEWS FROM KRISTO BUASE MONASTERY

19th January: Fr Solomon Amedorme Gbeglo from the Apostolic Vicariate of Donkorkrom spent a week with us. It was his first visit since his ordination on 9th October 2021. Years before he had been a novice at Kristo Buase with the name Br Leo and has visited us frequently throughout his time in the seminary.

30th January: Hervé Pianzi, a young man from Democratic Republic of Congo, who has been staying with us for about two months to learn English decided to return home. Fr Antony drove him to Accra to catch the plane first to Ethiopia and then a connection to DRC. Hervé has a good singing voice and is a talented drummer.

2nd February, Presentation of the Lord: The religious of the diocese gathered at Techiman Cathedral in their numbers for the Day of Consecrated Life. Our bishop, Most Reverend Dominic Yeboah Nyarko, was the main celebrant and preacher at the Mass. Afterwards there was a buffet festive lunch in the grounds of cathedral house. The bishop answered any questions or concerns the religious of the diocese have. During the meal, Most Reverend Emmanuel Kofi Fianu SVD, bishop of Ho diocese, turned up as he was attending a meeting of the Catholic Health Service.

3rd February: Fr Antony attended the Inauguration of Catholic Health Service Trust, Ghana, and National launch of World Day of the Sick at Holy Family Hospital, Techiman. Many bishops, priests, religious and civic officials were in attendance.

17th February: Fr Antony and our two novices, Brothers Benedict and Michael, went on the delayed noviciate outing to places around Kumasi, including the Sisters of St Louis, the lake, the new airport (not yet operational), and the butterfly centre.

23rd February: Rt Reverend Graham Barham Usher, Anglican bishop of Norwich, came from Kumasi where he was visiting, to have a day of recollection here. He spent his early years in Ghana

and had stayed as a guest with us when he was a deacon (1996/7). His mother now lives in Elgin.

15th March: Canon Philip Gillespie, the Rector of the Pontifical Beda College, Rome, conferred the Ministry of Acolyte on our Brother Louis Osei in the College Chapel. Among the concelebrants were our Abbot President Guillermo Arboleda and Father Joachim Takia, a priest of the diocese of Techiman, who is studying in Rome, and is a good friend of the monastery. (see photo)

18th March: The community attended the Lenten recollection for religious held at St Joseph's, Kintampo.

23rd March: There was an incident about 9 pm. There were some people in a motorcycle trailer on the other side of our locked gate who refused to make themselves known, staying completely silent. The security informed them he was going to shoot the pump action shotgun in the air as a warning which he did so twice. They did nothing. The security and Fr Antony patrolled inside the compound wall for about an hour to make sure no one attempted to climb the wall. The rest of the night went off peacefully.

2nd April, Palm Sunday: The procession, as usual, began at the bore hole and we came to the church. The number of people who attended was good.

4th April: The community attended the 12 noon Chrism Mass at the Cathedral which was full of priests, religious and laity.

15th April: Fr Antony and Br Gabriel attended the Blessing of Marriage of Francis Moh (our bookkeeper) and Matilda Kuusaalesuo at St Paul's Cathedral, Techiman.

16th April: On Divine Mercy Sunday, a large congregation came, the Dagaaba choir sang very well and there was much dancing and alleluias.

DGP

ST JOSEPH'S GUESTHOUSE SPONSORSHIP

Let the building commence!

The new women's guest house, dedicated to Saint Joseph, is now scheduled to be built during the coming year and we hope that it will be open for use in the second half of 2024. Accommodation for nine persons, with ensuite toilets and showers, takes up the upper two floors; the basement is for library and archive storage, together with laundry and utility rooms.

Friends of the Abbey are still warmly encouraged to contribute to the project, and we hope that the visible progress of the building will draw more people to add their donations. In addition to the "Donate a Slate" fund, we are also beginning a "Donate a Stone" scheme, in which donors will receive a certificate with a photograph of the location of their stone in the finished building. The stone will be marked with the donor's "mason's mark", a simple design made up of straight lines formed by chisel cuts.

The stone facing of the building will incorporate both rubble work and shaped stones, the latter being cut with mallet and chisel by the local firm of Harper and Allan. Several tonnes of stone have already been cut. The design of the building incorporates a gabled entrance with an open porch; and the staircase at the rear of the building is within a semi-octagonal tower (like the Dunbar Vestry attached to the Abbey church). Both features incorporate cut stone. The plinth and corners of the building, and the surrounds of all the external doors and windows are also cut. If you would like to contribute to this, a donation of £200 will secure your stone sponsorship.

Since we started fundraising in 2015, several thousand people have contributed to the building project, either directly with monetary donations, organising functions to promote donations and publicity, and taking part in the succession of fundraising events. We have been very conscious of the breadth of this support, and we are greatly encouraged and humbled by the love

which has been shown to us and our way of life. We hope that the building will provide some of the reward owing to all this generosity.

We have just enjoyed another fundraising concert by Sing Moray in the Abbey Church, which was packed to overflowing with an audience who were treated to a superb performance of Rutter's Requiem and the Tippett Spirituals. Further events are planned for later in the year/

DMdeK

From the Fathers

“So too the Spirit is present like the sun to each individual who is capable of receiving him, and emits an influence which is sufficient to help them all, but is not divided; and they profit by sharing in him according to their natures, not according to his power.

“Through him hearts are raised on high, the weak are led by the hand, those who are advanced gain perfection. He it is who shines on those whose hearts are purified and stainless and makes them truly spiritual through the common communion they have with him.

“Even as bright and shining bodies, once touched by a ray of light falling on them, become even more glorious and themselves cast another light, so too souls that carry the Spirit, and are enlightened by the Spirit, become spiritual themselves and send forth grace upon others.

“This grace enables them to foresee the future, to understand mysteries, to grasp hidden things, to receive spiritual blessings, to have their thoughts fixed on heavenly things, and to dance with the angels. So is their joy unending, so is their perseverance in God unfailing, so do they acquire likeness to God, so – most sublime of all – do they themselves become divine.”

St Basil, *On the Holy Spirit*

DIACONAL ORDINATION OF BR SIMON PIĄTOWSKI

11th March 2023

In the hushed, verdant garden of the cloister grow many things: not just wispy beards, but human plants and flowers, shrubs and bushes, trees, every kind of flora. Together they create a space where the Lord walks in the cool of the day, and others too find refreshment. Perhaps one could say, a place where the tree of life is once again within reach. And so I'm honoured to be here to confer the ministry of deacon on one of Pluscarden's plants. Br Simon is, of course, already grounded here, by choice, by call, by profession. What would be the apt botanical metaphor for ordination, I don't know – grafting perhaps? But whatever, everything that grows in the garden is called not only to have life, but to give life. Every monk is to bear fruit, and for some that fruitfulness – that spiritual fatherhood – passes by way of ordained ministry.

And so, from today, for you Br Simon. It is not just that you are enhanced by this gift of the sevenfold Spirit, but all of us, the whole garden, your brethren, your family, the monastery's friends, the diocese, indeed the whole Church which is the garden of God. This is a good day. You may remember the touching episode when Joseph Ratzinger was ordained a priest on 29 June 1951, how at the moment of the laying on of hands, a bird, perhaps a lark, rose from the altar, and trilled a little song of joy. There will be some quiet trilling here today.

It was under a tree that the young Hans Urs von Balthasar, pondering his future, heard the word, "You will not serve; you will be taken into service."

Let's turn to St Paul and the reading from 2 Corinthians. "Therefore," he says, "having this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart." This is one rather literal rendering of its first line. How beautiful that St Paul understands his ministry (diakonia) in the light of God's mercy. In the beginning, there was mercy. St Paul says it again in 1 Timothy: "though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor and insolent opponent, I received mercy

because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief” (1 Tim 1:13). This is the mercy he met on the way to Damascus. There, God, the God of his ancestors, “who had set me apart before I was born and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me” (Gal 1:15-16). The mercy was the uncovering of Christ to him. It was from this St Paul’s apostolic mission (diakonia) flowed. Christ was shown him “so that I might preach him among the Gentiles”. When a candidate for the monastic life asks for acceptance into the community, he asks for “the mercy of God and your fellowship”. From the beginning and to the end, a life is simply a chain of mercies, and the first great determining mercy is Christ becoming real in our lives, the light of his face breaking upon us. And your ordination today, Br Simon, flows from the same grace. is part of that, the one true story. Greek language allowed St Paul to describe himself as “merciéd”. This is what uproots the clerical pride St Benedict fears and Pope Francis repeatedly deplores.

Those of us here whose lives were touched by the late Fr Maurus of this community learned from him the art of creative etymology. Where does the word “diakonos / deacon” come from? “Derivation unknown”, says one lexicon. For Fr Maurus that would be like the glimpse of a rabbit to a dog. “Dia” = “through” of course, and “konis”, dust. Question answered! (So the ancient Greeks themselves believed, apparently.) “For we are dust and unto dust we shall return” and “what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your servants – deacons of dust – for Jesus’ sake.” A deacon is dust illumined, dust transmitting the light of a face, through word and altar and charity. For St Paul, ministry is precisely this: light coming from darkness, treasure carried in clay jars, death to self and life for others. In the garden of God, every plant is set in the dust of the earth, in the humus of humility and human limitation, and from there brings fruit. Once we accept our dust, then the light can stream through it, and our dust dance within it, refracting “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” This is mercy too.

Therefore, says St Paul again, “we do not lose heart.” It must have been a temptation he felt, and it remains such in all ministry

in every generation, and not least – not least – today, when we in the Church are often left tasting our own dust. But we do not lose heart. St Paul says it at the beginning of this reading and again at the end of the chapter. “Not to lose heart” means not to let what is bad get into us and take us over. Not let evil mesmerise us, be it in ourselves or our brethren or the Church or the world. Not allow it to embed itself in us, define us, discourage us, make cowards of us. “Not to lose heart”: it became, a lexicon says, “a Christian technical term expressing the unflagging pursuit of the goal of service to neighbour, or of apostolic ministry, as well as the tautness of the determined heart that does not let up or lose courage”.

Let me mention one last mercy. In the Gospel, our Lord speaks of giving his life as a ransom for many. It is a mercy for us to share in his self-gift for the many. According to the Acts of the Apostles, those seven men, in whom the Church has recognised the first deacons, were appointed to meet a specific need: undernourished Greek-speaking widows in Jerusalem. They were appointed to respond to neglect. St Benedict dislikes negligence or neglect, -of the poor and the sick, of children and guests. And it’s these needy, the many needy, who are mercy for those who serve them. The Ordination Prayer of Deacons mentions explicitly, uniquely, “concern for the sick and the poor”. And when the Gospel book is handed to the new deacon, it’s not just as something to carry aloft to a lectern; it’s what is proclaimed to the poor. This is the mercy of the many, of meeting life’s poor, of being healed by them of negligence, narcissism and excessive self-regard – the mercy of Christ in the other.

Dear Br Simon, Our Lady and the Saints will be invoked upon you in a moment, family, friends and brethren are around you, the saintly deacons of many centuries are welcoming you into their sacramental brotherhood: St Stephen and his six companions, St Lawrence of Rome, St Vincent of Saragossa, St Ephrem of Edessa, Alcuin of York, St Francis of Assisi and even, until two years before his death (I think), Reginald Cardinal Pole, the son of a martyr. What a varied, flourishing garden they make! What

enrichment you will bring! May the merciful Spirit come on you in power and take you, body, soul and spirit, into the service of the Lord – and of us. Amen.

Bishop Hugh Gilbert OSB

From the Fathers

“Perfect renunciation, therefore, consists in one’s attaining freedom from desire concerning this life and having *the sentence of death* so as not to rely on oneself. Its beginnings, however, are alienation from external things such as possessions, vainglory, the common customs of life, or attachment to useless things. Examples are given us by the holy disciples of the Lord: John and James, who left their father Zebedee and even their boat, their only source of livelihood; Matthew, who rose up from the tax-office and followed the Lord, not only leaving the profits in the tax-office, but also despising the dangers likely to come upon himself and his family at the hands of the authorities for leaving the accounts of the tax-office in disorder. To Paul the whole world was crucified, and he to the world.

“In the same way one who is violently seized by the desire to follow Christ can no longer care for anything to do with this life: not for the love of parents or relations, if this is in opposition to the commandments of the Lord; not for the fear of men according to the example of the saints who said, *we must obey God rather than men*; and not because of derision from outsiders on account of their good works.”

St Basil, *Asceticon*

MONASTIC APICULTURE

The sun shone warmly on the Pluscarden valley on the first day of June 1948. Donald Grant, the local postie, was in his garden at East Lodge, Westerton, There he could both see and hear the bees he kept in a few old-fashioned beehives, facing up the Wangie hill. As he was rather expecting, round about midday a swarm of bees came out from one of these, and clustered on a near-by branch. The bees were doing what comes naturally to them. Swarming is the honeybee colony's means of reproduction and multiplication. The old queen goes out with the swarm, which, depending on the size and condition of the colony, could number from between 1,000 to 30,000 bees. Many of these will be young bees who have never flown before. These are known as "repletes": all loaded up with honey, ready for their coming task, and typically not at all aggressive. Meanwhile, left behind in the parent hive will be some unhatched cells containing young virgin queens: maybe up to thirty of them. Depending on conditions, each of these virgins might subsequently go out with a smaller swarm of her own. The chances of survival for such secondary swarms steadily decrease as the season advances. If any swarm tries to go out in July, in the North of Scotland, it will very likely fail to build up sufficient strength and stores in time to get it through the winter. "A swarm in July is not worth a fly".

Anyway: Donald knew well how to manage a hanging swarm. Once it had settled, he shook it into a straw skep, placed that on the ground nearby, and watched as fanning bees by its entrance exposed their scent glands to mark the spot. A wonderful sight followed. The cloud of bees roaring around with tremendous energy overhead came down to the skep entrance. Within minutes almost all of them peacefully settled, and then, as if by miracle, flowed in perfect order into the skep. Donald picked it up and put it in his garden shed. He knew that he should wait until the evening, and could then put those bees anywhere he liked. None of them would think of returning to their old hive. Instead each bee emerging the next day would note its new position, and henceforth

take that as home. “A swarm in May is worth a load of hay. A swarm in June is worth a silver spoon.” These bees in Donald’s skep, weighing maybe 5 or 6 pounds, definitely had great promise. And he knew exactly where he wanted to put them.

Just down the road from Westerton stood the old Priory ruins. Now, for the first time in nearly 400 years, they were occupied again by monks. These were the five pioneers from Prinknash, toiling hard to prepare the place for a planned official opening ceremony on 8 September that year. Donald was very friendly with these monks. He was a daily-Mass Catholic, and had been actively assisting the community from its first day, and before. Abbot Wilfred Upson had stayed with the Grant family on his reconnaissance expedition in 1943. Following that visit, Upson had decided to respond to the invitation of Lord Colum Crichton-Stuart, buy the Priory ruins, and set about restoring them.

Probably Donald did not then know that St Jerome listed beekeeping as among the occupations particularly suitable for monks. But he certainly did know that the mediaeval monks of Pluscarden had kept bees. In the ancient enclosure wall, on its south facing aspect, are set four recesses – bee boles – designed precisely to accommodate a straw bee skep. So with help from his friend Jim McBean of Elgin, and with the willing cooperation of our Br Andrew, Donald installed his skep in one of these recesses. And so began the first of the monastic industries at Pluscarden: launched even before the community itself officially was. Happily it’s still going, now in its 75th year.

When Dom Alfred Spencer came up to be Prior of the newly independent community in 1966, he largely took over management of the bees from Br Andrew: though always with help from Donald Grant and Jim McBean. Attempts to use the old bee boles tended to encounter opposition from brethren working in the garden, more or less directly in the bees’ flight path, and so quite liable to be stung. So as the bees increased, they would be housed elsewhere, on or off the estate. In those early days the monastery hives were mostly home-made, of the traditional double-walled type, with brightly painted overlapping planks and gable roofs, in a

variety of shapes and sizes. As far as the bees were concerned, these hives were ideal: cool in summer and warm in winter. But old fashioned hives are awkward to move around, and quite impracticable for migratory beekeeping. So Dom Alfred gradually transferred the Pluscarden bees to a large collection of simpler hives that had come up with him from Prinknash. These were of the American “Modified Dadant” design. They were made probably sometime in the 1940s: they are going strong to this day. They had belonged to a Gloucestershire commercial beekeeper who gave all his stock to Prinknash when he retired. The great R.O.B. Manley, author of *Honey Farming* (1936) and *Beekeeping in Britain* (1948) had popularised this type of hive. It’s less commonly used nowadays, but still suits us here very well.

The present monastic beekeeper took over from Abbot Alfred in 1985. Willing help was always available, at need, from the Moray Beekeepers Association, who traditionally held an annual summer meeting at Pluscarden. For many years also the Aberdeen Agricultural College maintained a free Bee advisory service. Their Bee Officer in the ’80s and ’90s was Bernhard Möbus, who had been a German prisoner of war. He met and married a Scottish girl, so settled down here: but around the same time he also met and fell hopelessly in love with bees. Bernhard was a wonderful man: always very good to us; a genius with bees, and a gifted teacher. One of his projects was to calm down the tempers of the Pluscarden bees, by progressively introducing his own gentle strain of native black bees. Normally Bernhard worked without a veil: but not at Pluscarden. Various attempts had been made over the years to expand or improve our bee stock, with imports from Buckfast, or from Italy, or France, or Cyprus. There’s no doubt that selective breeding will produce bees that are more prolific, less addicted to swarming, easier to handle and more efficient at making honey. But cross fertilising different strains tends to produce fiery tempers, and our bees came to acquire some notoriety for their spiteful disposition. This characteristic can re-emerge from time to time. The only thing to do then is to retire and replace the offending queen as soon as possible.

Bees have not changed in the slightest since 1948, but the environment has changed a good deal. Modern agriculture has wiped out almost all the wildflowers available in abundance to Donald Grant's bees. As far as a bee is concerned, the huge barley fields that border the Abbey now might as well be Sahara desert. Most areas nowadays will not be able to sustain more than around ten colonies. Beekeepers with more colonies than that generally spread them around in various out-apiaries. But also: the varroa mite – “varroa destructor” – has now arrived, and is here to stay. Left untreated, these parasites will eventually overwhelm their hosts. The infested colony will suddenly collapse; bees from nearby will rob out its honey, and large numbers of mites will go off with the robbers, intent on continuing their campaign of destruction in a new home.

Still, the Pluscarden estate remains a favoured site for bees. The first crop of the year usually comes, if Spring weather is favourable, from the sycamore trees, of which there are plenty all about. Then: over the hill to the north of us large fields of oil seed rape come into flower in late April. The bees love it! They will fly two miles to get it. You can always tell if a bee has been on the rape: its whole face comes back bright yellow. Sometimes we take our hives to these fields: though rape honey rapidly granulates, so is quite difficult to deal with. There usually follows a “June gap”, when no large crop of honey can be expected. But once July arrives, in most years we get at least some honey from local wild clover. Clover honey is utterly delicious: a symphony of subtle flavours unfold in the mouth as it's gently savoured. Clover needs really warm days though, as well as bees sufficiently strong to store it in quantity. Later in July the lime trees flower. Sometimes they produce a fine crop, and of a very superior quality too. It's a source of great pleasure for a beekeeper to pass under a lime tree when it's roaring with foraging bees. Our greatest asset of all, though, is the heather. The bell heather, which flourishes well under cover of Scots Pines, usefully flowers all the way from mid-June to October. But the more abundant ling heather comes out in early August. Over the hill to the south of us, limitless acres of

moor land are covered with purple flowering ling. It's always worth putting hives on that. Given sufficient sunshine for a sufficient number of days, the ling flow tends to be heavy, and honey supers can fill up very rapidly. This honey is like nothing else. A deep reddish colour, with a jelly-like consistency, it's set beneath beautiful white cappings. It has a heady aroma and highly distinctive flavour: "the taste of a summer's day". Many claim that New Zealand Manuka honey can barely compete with Scottish heather honey for wholesomeness and general excellence. Pluscarden heather honey certainly flies very quickly from the shelves of the Abbey shop.

To be continued
DBH

From the Exsultet

On this, your night of grace, O holy Father,
accept this candle, a solemn offering,
the work of bees and of your servants' hands,
an evening sacrifice of praise,
this gift from your most holy Church.

But now we know the praises of this pillar,
which glowing fire ignites for God's honour,
a fire into many flames divided,
yet never dimmed by sharing of its light,
for it is fed by melting wax,
drawn out by mother bees.
to build a torch so precious.

THERE IS NONE SO BLIND AS HE WHO WILL NOT SEE
*The Consequences of Hypocrisy in
Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation"*

American Catholic author Flannery O'Connor wrote one of her last short stories, "Revelation", as she was dying from the lupus that had plagued her for years. It is a scathingly humorous indictment of the prevailing attitude of religious self-complacency and racial hatred that was prevalent among whites in the southern United States during the time of the Civil Rights movement. It is, as is much of O'Connor's writing, a masterpiece of satire and social critique, yet laugh-out-loud funny in its storytelling. It is also, like most of her later stories, a parable of the Christian life. Spoilers ahead, so be wary!

The story's main character is a middle-class Evangelical farmer's wife, Ruby Turpin. She and her husband, Claud, grow cotton and raise animals, and she is especially proud of their herd of pigs, whose pigsty she keeps immaculately clean. Ruby is described, in fact, as pig-like, being portly with beady, black eyes and smooth skin. Ruby is contented with her lot in life, with the life Jesus gave her, with "just a little bit of everything", but especially that she is white and prosperous. She and Claud are sitting in the waiting room of a doctor's office, waiting for Claud to be treated for a work-related injury. As they sit waiting, Ruby scans the patients stuck in the office with her; gazing with a gimlet eye at each one, she thanks Jesus for having made her better than any of them. She is exactly like the Pharisee of Luke's parable of the Pharisee and the publican—she is grateful that she is better than everyone else and not like the trashy people she is surrounded by. She is certain that because she is a believer, she has already attained salvation, a common belief stemming from Calvinism that assures the believer that all those chosen by God are predestined for salvation, a gift that nothing, not even the most grievous sin, can ever take away. Her pride in being white, Christian, and middle-class has wrapped her in a smug shell that makes it

impossible for her to truly love truly. She is the epitome of what is known as “gracious living” in the Southern United States: good attitude and a surface-level charm that can mask a lack of real virtue. Ruby is so certain that her faith in Christ has already saved her that she feels free to condemn nearly every person she encounters, based on the external qualities she sees, be it the clothes they wear, the colour of their skin, or their social position. She remains wilfully blind and ignorant to the actual situation she is in, as well as to the fact that she is perilously close to Hell because of her lack of charity and presumption of salvation.

Into Ruby’s life comes a common character-type in O’Connor’s stories: a reluctant prophet. Her name is Mary Grace, and she is sitting in the waiting room with her mother. Mary Grace is the opposite of Ruby—outwardly ugly and plainly contemptuous of everyone around her. She is a mentally ill college student who seems to be engrossed in a book called *Human Development*, but she grows increasingly disgusted and frustrated by Ruby’s asinine and self-complacent statements. Having become irate at Ruby’s attitudes towards others, Mary Grace throws her book at Ruby’s face and insults her, calling her a warthog from Hell, causing a shock that will change Ruby’s vision of the world.

Ruby, whose vision of her life and those in her orbit has always been secure, is shaken to the core. She has been certain of God’s favour because of the privileged position she finds herself in, especially when compared to the blacks and “poor white trash” she comes into contact with. The black workers on her farm, to whom she is condescendingly nice, treat her with the respect that was expected of them in those times, but obviously hold her in disdain. Literally struck by her violent encounter with Mary Grace, she begins to question her position in God’s plan and asks a Job-like question: how could God allow something so horrible and shocking happen to someone like her?

She is then gifted with a vision: a bridge leading from Earth to heaven, and on it are hundreds of souls marching up to Heaven, singing. She is shocked to see that those getting into heaven first of all are those she has despised most in life, those she has always

judged to be beneath her: white trash, immigrants, and blacks. At the very end of the procession, she sees herself and Claud and those like her, who'd always had "just a little bit of everything", on their way to Heaven, but only after their self-proclaimed "virtues" were burned away by fire, and one is immediately reminded of Jesus' admonition in Matthew 21:31 "Amen, I say to you, the tax collectors and prostitutes are entering Heaven before you!"

Ruby Turpin is a woman who is rather like a fat old turtle, with a hardened carapace of "virtue" and "manners," and a self-righteous surety of her own goodness in the eyes of God. She, like most of us, needs the violent force of grace that Flannery O'Connor wrote of so often, before the scales can fall from her eyes and she can see her true self. Nevertheless, she is redeemable, as are almost all the characters in O'Connor's writing. Indeed, the love that O'Connor has for this character comes out despite the very sarcastic humour with which she depicts her. One can imagine her laughing with love at her as she writes of Ruby's silent, judgmental asides. For example, when in the waiting room, a dirty, white trash woman tells of how she recently bought herself some "joo'ry":

Ought to have got you a wash rag and some soap, Mrs Turpin thought.

I think Flannery O'Connor was in touch with a side of God of which most of us are unaware. I mean God, the loving Father, patient with our self-righteousness and our wilful blindness to our faults; this Father who regards our sin and failings with laughing indulgence, right up to the surprise moment He lets violence or awful events smack us in the behind at the providential time in order to wake us up from our complacency. O'Connor writes of this kind of grace, which she referred to as "like a bullet in the gut", in story after story.

This is a story worth reading over and over again. It is O'Connor at the very height of her powers, although sadly at the point of death. Her descriptions of the bridge into Heaven and Ruby's interactions with those around her are definitely "worth the

price of admission”. Be warned, however, that this story is likely to evoke a timely examination of conscience as we prepare ourselves for the beginning of Lent.

Br Benedict Joseph

From the Fathers

“For keeping up continual recollection of God this pious formula is to be ever set before you. ‘O God, make speed to save me: O Lord, make haste to help me’, for this verse has not unreasonably been picked out from the whole of Scripture for this purpose. For it embraces all the feelings which can be implanted in human nature, and can be fitly and satisfactorily adapted to every condition, and all assaults. Since it contains an invocation of God against every danger, it contains humble and pious confession, it contains the watchfulness of anxiety and continual fear, it contains the thought of one's own weakness, confidence in the answer, and the assurance of a present and ever ready help. For one who is constantly calling on his protector, is certain that He is always at hand. It contains the glow of love and charity, it contains a view of the plots, and a dread of the enemies, from which one, who sees himself day and night hemmed in by them, confesses that he cannot be set free without the aid of his defender. This verse is an impregnable wall for all who are labouring under the attacks of demons, as well as an impenetrable coat of mail and a strong shield. It does not suffer those who are in a state of moroseness and anxiety of mind, or depressed by sadness or all kinds of thoughts to despair of saving remedies, as it shows that He, who is invoked, is ever looking on at our struggles and is not far from His suppliants. It warns us whose lot is spiritual success and delight of heart that we ought not to be at all elated or puffed up by our happy condition, which it assures us cannot last without God as our protector, while it implores Him not only always but even speedily to help us” (St John Cassian, *Conference Ten ix2-xi*).

AND THE WALLS CAME TUMBLING DOWN...

Recent visitors to the Abbey will have noticed a large security fence in front of the Lodge, with a minatory notice excluding unauthorised personnel, and demanding the wearing of hard hats, safety boots and all the rest – what’s going on?

The Lodge, a Listed Building, is a very useful resource. Just outside the Abbey gates, with its sitting room, kitchen, bathroom, it has a double room, a twin room, and a single room. It is self-contained, level access, and so ideal for families, especially those with children, couples, people who need to be on their own – even monks! – and is part of the Abbey’s patrimony; it needs conservation and development to fulfil its potential.

But anyone who has stayed in the Lodge in recent years will have been aware of things being not quite as they should be... The heating was unreliable, so at irregular intervals the ice age would return, a monk would be summoned and go scampering up a ladder into the loft, there to insert a ball-point pen into the front of the boiler, which (sometimes) would then return to life and restore heat.

Doors... Seen from outside, the front doors are visibly a parallelogram, rather than a rectangle, difficult to keep closed, and like other doors, jamming half-open or closed. The more observant will have noticed that the stone cross over the front door has been removed, lest it fall on some unfortunate person. The window to the left of the front door has a central stone mullion, no longer vertical, and the walls have large cracks. It might fall down, it is falling down, Something Must Be Done!

The Lodge was built in the early nineteenth century, without any real foundations. Until about fifty years ago, the Black Burn used regularly to flood; it would flow out through our front gates and engulf the Lodge. The Lodge’s kitchen used to be in the front room, and there the kitchen sink discharged straight outside, down beside the downpipe from the roof. At various times, people have poured concrete into the resulting void, but without much effect.

So the front wall and entrance gable have been subsiding for a long time, and now are in urgent need of attention.

Faced with such a situation, the first thing you have to do is make a diagnosis, before you can work out the treatment required. This requires going deeper, investigating below the surface. We have dug holes, stripped off plaster, torn down ceilings, lifted floors, and realised that the front gable-porch and the front wall are falling down and will need to be carefully dismantled, the stones marked and set aside, the roof propped up and supported, proper foundations supplied, the walls rebuilt as they were, the roof reconstructed, leaks repaired, the interior re-floored, insulation installed, new heating, wiring, doors... The kitchen and bathroom will need to be remodelled, the chimney masonry inspected and repaired.

The difficulty with a project like this, is that there are many unknowns and imponderables, and as the cupboards are opened, out will tumble unsuspected skeletons: it is very difficult or impossible to know in advance exactly what will require to be done, the time required for the work, and last of all, the bottom line – how much??

The exploration and planning have been done, we hope soon to start on the required works, things will get worse before they get better, but the result should be a structurally sound building, energy efficient, comfortable and useful. Meanwhile your patience, prayers and tangible assistance would be most welcome.

DGC