

Pluscarden Benedictines

No. 205 News and Notes for our Friends Spring 2024

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Cover: Roof boss from the Slype

Back: *Hic panem tribuit. Sonat. Hic capit. es malus icit*: based on ms. Vat. Lat. 1202, designed by DCB

FR ABBOT'S LETTER

Dear Friends,

At the time of writing, we have just celebrated the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, 2nd February. This is the day we take down the crib. It is a little sad, but the forty days have been enough for the imagination to play with the scene and form memories that will stay until next Christmas.

At the centre of our crib is, of course, the baby Jesus. Close to him are Mary and a young-looking Joseph, kneeling. They are both kneeling in a relaxed attitude, focused on the child yet (one imagines) aware of all the others present. Very close to the crib, kneeling, are a wise man and a little shepherd boy. A little further back, standing, are the other wise men, a shepherd, and a maid. One of the wise men stands leaning in towards the crib, getting as close a look as he can. The other just stands there. He is the figure furthest away from the crib.

With the people are the beasts: a crouching camel, a standing donkey, and an ox lying in the straw. The ox is closer to the ground than any other figure in the scene except the child Jesus, its large head close to the crib, eyes on the child. There is also a lamb.

The whole scene is too much to absorb in one visit. I like, on each visit, to allow my eye to go to one figure or another and focus on it. Often enough I am drawn to the camel. It is so arranged that one doesn't see the whole camel, only its face. You cannot look at the child without coming face to face with the camel. It is hard to look at a camel face-on without laughing.

Long ago the birth of Christ was prefigured in the birth of the promised child to old Abraham and Sarah, the child who would become the father of God's people Israel. He was named 'Isaac', which means 'laughter'. His mother, told she would have a child, laughed at the notion she and her husband might have a child in their old age. This natural human response to the ridiculous became joyful laughter when God fulfilled his promise and Sarah

had her child. We might laugh, with joy, seeing the King of the universe enthroned in a manger under the solemn gaze of the camel.

After the camel, I look for the wise men. The two who are closer to the child express their wonder on their faces. It is the third, the figure furthest from the crib, who draws my attention. Why does he stay at a distance? He is the only figure in a position to see all the others and take in the whole scene. Maybe he needs to keep a distance so his mind can absorb all that is there. He needs time to 'process'. He will go to the crib in his own time, not in a rush of emotion.

Then there is the ox. The other beasts are there because they are useful to the people. The donkey has carried the mother and child, the camel a wise man. The lamb makes a fine gift, perhaps more useful than the gold, frankincense and myrrh of the wise men. And all the people in the scene are there because God has specially sent them or called them.

The ox is the only creature that is not in the stable for some service or following a mission or call, but is just there. He might feel he doesn't need a reason. This is his stable, after all, his straw, his manger. The question is, why are all these others here in his home? The ox is the poor dumb creature who just happened to be there when Christmas happened around him.

In the beginning God set everything in motion by his word. When the Word of God comes into the world at Christmas, human lives are set in motion. Feeling its attraction, we all make our way to the crib. Everyone's journey is different. We all hear the news of the new life in a way special to ourselves. We make our own way in our own time to the place. Each has his or her own stance toward the child who is the centre of our world. God calls us from wherever we are and we go to the crib.

And the crib comes to us. God comes to us where we are. "I stand at the door and knock." Sometimes ox-like we cannot find the words to invite him in or the light to go to the door and open it. But "the ox knows its maker and the ass its master's crib", and the

Lord knows the hearts of his dumb creatures. So even for the ox, perhaps especially for the ox, Christmas can happen.

Yours devotedly in Christ,

+ Fr Anselm

SAVE THE DAY!



Pluscarden Abbey

Walking Football Tournament

Saturday June 22

Over 18s: men and women

Squads of 7 (team of 5 + 2 subs)
£50 per Squad (or £10 per player)



Registration at 11 am

First match kicks off at 11.30 am

Raffle and Stalls

Contact Frances Wardhaugh for entry forms:
pluscardenabbeywalkfootball@gmail.com

NEWS FROM ST MARY'S MONASTERY

We were pleased to have Fr Abbot visit us for about two weeks from late November to early December. His visit coincided with Thanksgiving, so he was able to enjoy a convivial meal with the two communities for this traditional American holiday. While he was here, he and Fr Columba went on a day trip to Regina Laudis Abbey in Connecticut. Also during Fr Abbot's stay we had a meal with the Maronite monks of Most Holy Trinity Monastery in Petersham. They came over for Vespers on St Andrew's day. This was followed by a festive supper in our refectory. As is traditional when we get together with the Maronites, we had pizza. This was the first meal we have had with them in a while, since the last one was shortly before the COVID pandemic began.

Speaking of COVID, in late November Br Bernard got COVID, but managed to not give it to anyone else. About a month later Br Isidore also got COVID. Once again no one else got it. Br Isidore was able to come out of isolation in time for the Christmas midnight Mass, and enjoy the rest of the Christmas festivities.

On the afternoon of January 6, all the brothers went for a walk in the forest together. Lately we have been exchanging ideas for improving the landscaping on our property. We were discussing the possibility of creating more trails, so we thought it would be best to walk along the existing trail first. Fr Columba shared his knowledge of the local flora and fauna as we walked along. It was a good time for a walk since the next day we had our first heavy snowfall of the year.

Plans are underway for the construction of a new workshop building to be located behind the monastery in the garden area. The size will be 50 feet by 30 feet and will consist of three sections: two workrooms (one for pottery, one for carpentry) and the third a space to house a tractor and a woodchipper. The building is being kindly donated by a generous benefactor, who is also donating the tractor and woodchipper. Hopefully, construction will begin in the spring with the laying of a concrete foundation.

DIC

80TH BIRTHDAY OF BR PATRICK OBENG-NKETIAH OSB

We all know the famous saying of the psalmist: Seventy years is the span of our days, or eighty if we are strong (89[90]:10). Today, here at Kristo Buase, we rejoice in Brother Patrick achieving 80 years. Do we remember what age Moses was when he began his mission of liberating/redeeming the chosen people before Pharaoh? The text in Exodus reads: Now Moses was eighty years old, and Aaron eighty-three years old, when they spoke to Pharaoh (7:7). Acts of the Apostles reveals that at this age of 80: an angel appeared to Moses in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in a flame of fire in a bush... This Moses... God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush (7:30, 35). Brother Patrick as you celebrate your birthday of 80 years may you become for us another Moses redeeming the people.

At Mass today, we start reading the Second Book of Samuel. Although the passage is not a part of the Mass lectionary, later in the Second Book of Samuel we read the story of Barzillai the Gileadite who says: “I am this day eighty years old. Can I discern what is pleasant and what is not? Can your servant taste what he eats or what he drinks? Can I still listen to the voice of singing men and singing women? Why then should your servant be an added burden to my lord the king?” (19:35-36) In the last year, Brother Patrick, you have been burdened with mobility difficulties. Yet in no way are you a burden to the community. In fact, you are an inspiration as you struggle, normally aided by Brother Michael, to daily Mass, which has always been the joy of your life.

Finally, the Book of Judges states: “And the land had rest for eighty years” (3:30). For the Hebrew Bible, rest is the entering and residing in the Promised Land. The Letter to the Hebrews sees rest as Baptism and being Church while Christian thought talks of the sabbath rest of eternal life. Brother Patrick, we look forward to you being with us here on earth for many years to come as a promise, church, a sabbath, a heaven for us.

Prior Bede OSB

Bees and Monks Part III: Bees in the Bible

Bees and their honey occur rather frequently in Holy Scripture: though what they symbolise can vary considerably according to context.

For the ancient Hebrews, it would seem that bees symbolise in the first place violent, even irresistible aggression. Anyone who has experienced a determined attack by large numbers of angry bees will readily understand the power of that image. So, in the first Chapter of Deuteronomy, as Moses reviews the history of Israel's wanderings since the Exodus, he reminds the people of an early defeat they had suffered near Kadesh. They had refused then to heed the Lord's instructions, given through Moses, and on their own initiative had decided to take on the local Amorites.

The Amorites, says Moses, who live in that country of hills, came swarming out against you like bees, pursued you and beat you from Seir to Hermon (Dt 1:44; cf. also Nb 14:39-45).

The Prophet Isaiah takes up this image of bees (with flies or mosquitoes as well) as representing overwhelming aggression, applying it to an imminent Assyrian invasion, coordinated also with one from Egypt.

The Lord will whistle for the fly that is at the source of the streams of Egypt, and the bee that is in the land of Assyria (Is 7:18).

The same image recurs also in the Psalms; only here this is only to illustrate the power of the Lord's help:

Nations were swarming around me: in the name of the Lord I cut them down.

They swarmed around me pressing upon me: in the name of the Lord I cut them down.

They swarmed around me like bees, they flared up like a brushwood fire; in the name of the Lord I cut them down (Ps 117/118:10-12).

Aggressive bees are mentioned also in the Fourth Book of the Maccabees. This Book is found in the Greek version of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint. The Orthodox Church holds

all four Books of Maccabees as canonical; the Catholic Church recognises only the first two; the Protestants reject all of them. The context here is the familiar story of the seven brothers cruelly martyred in the persecution of Antiochus Epiphanes. The story is somewhat expanded in this Book with additional commentary. The author wonders at the astonishing heroism of the mother, who was prepared to urge all her sons on to death, rather than see them betray the laws of God. In the animal world the natural instincts of mothers always prevail. This is illustrated by birds, in the first place; then by bees:

Even bees fend off intruders at the season for making honeycomb. They pierce with their sting like a sword those who molest their young, and defend them to the death. Yet not even her affection for her young caused the mother of these youths to waver. Her soul was thus like the soul of Abraham (4 Mc 14:19-20).

In quite another mode, the peace-loving scribe Ben Sira holds up the bee as a symbol of the deceptiveness of appearances. The poor, he says, should not be under-estimated, far less despised. They also may possess true wisdom. By way of comparison:

The bee is small among living creatures, but what she produces is the best of sweet things (Sirach 11:3).

A previous article mentioned how the bee is held up in the Greek text of Proverbs as an example of hard work that is also orderly and wholesome and honourable (Prov 6:8, LXX).

As for honey: that is referred to in holy scripture over 70 times.

Eat honey, my child, since it is good (cf. Proverbs 24:13).

Signs of the practice of serious apiculture in the world of the Ancient Near East can be found in the Prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Jeremiah speaks of storage of honey, together with wheat, barley and oil (41:8). Ezekiel mentions honey as a trading and export commodity (27:17).

Honey makes a very nice present, as we all know. So the Patriarch Jacob, fearing the hostility of “the man” – actually his son Joseph – in Egypt, sends him in advance a gift of honey, “the

best produce of the land” (Gen 43:11). Similarly in the First Book of Kings, the wicked King Jeroboam sends a jar of honey to the prophet Ahijah, hoping to receive from him in return some good news about the future of his sick child. In this case the bribe does not work at all. All the news is bad, and the child dies.

Where honey is abundant, there is happiness, health, contentment, and delight.

Since nothing could be more delightful than the Word of the Lord, the Psalmist naturally compares it with honey.

The words of the Lord are sweeter than honey that drips from the comb (Ps 18/19:10).

How pleasant is your promise to my palate. Sweeter than honey to my mouth (Ps 118/119:103).

Ben Sira speaks of honey as if in the person of Wisdom:

Memories of me [Wisdom] are sweeter than honey; inheriting me sweeter than honeycomb (Sirach 24:20).

Or as the Book of Proverbs teaches:

Kindly words are like a honeycomb; sweet to the taste, wholesome to the body (Prov: 16:24).

In the Song of Songs, the Bridegroom searches for adequate images with which to praise his adored Beloved:

Your lips, my promised Bride, distil wild honey. Honey and milk are under your tongue, and the scent of your garments is like the scent of Lebanon (Song of Songs 4:11; cf. also 5:1).

Or, by contrast, in the Book of Job, Zophar the Naamathite reflects on the inevitable come-uppance of the wicked:

No more will he know the streams of oil, or the torrents of honey and cream (Job 20:17).

On the other hand, there are always dangers in excess. So the Book of Proverbs insists:

Eat to your satisfaction what honey you may find, but not to excess, or you will bring it up again (Prov 25:16; see also 25:27; 27:7).

Most notably: when the Lord wishes to encourage the Israelites enslaved in Egypt, or subsequently wandering in the desert, he speaks of Canaan, the Promised Land, as a land *flowing*

with milk and honey (Ex 3:8 etc.) We Christians of course take this as an image of heaven, the desired destination of our earthly pilgrimage, and our only true homeland. In the ancient Church, the newly baptised were sometimes invited to take both milk and honey, as a symbol of their entry into the Kingdom of God, or as a foretaste of the delights of heaven to come.

Some hints of foretaste were also given to the Israelites of old. When the manna fell from heaven, while they were still in the wilderness, it was delicious: tasting *like wafers made with honey* (Ex 16:31). So Moses will later remind the people in song: *The Lord feeds Israel on the yield of the Mountains; he gives honey from the rock to taste, and oil from the flinty crag* (Dt 32:13). This idea is taken up again in Psalm Ps 80/81:16 – *If only my people would listen to me ... I would feed him with pure wheat, would give you your fill of honey from the rock*. This Psalm text is pressed into service, slightly adapted, for the Feast of Corpus Christi. Considering the wonderful gift of the Holy Eucharist we sing: *Cibavit illos ex adipe frumenti, et de petra melle saturavit eos, alleluia* – *He fed them from the fat of the wheat, and gave them their fill of honey from the rock, alleluia*.

Two texts in Isaiah Chapter 7 speak of *curds and honey*. They are not so easy to interpret. In verse 15 this food seems to be an image of divine favour and prosperity for the Royal child, the Messiah. But in verse 22 curds and honey seem by contrast to be images of poverty. This is all the destitute homeless have to eat! That interpretation fits well with what St Matthew says of the diet of St John the Baptist. *His food was locusts and honey* (Mt 3:4): a sign presumably of his austerity. Perhaps this was the normal rough food of desert nomads? Perhaps also this could signify John's association with the strict diet laws of the neighbouring Qumran community? Incidentally the honeycomb pattern on our organ pipe shades is intended to evoke our Patron St John the Baptist. One likes to think it also evokes our own Pluscarden bees!

There are two highly dramatic stories in the Old Testament involving honey.

In the Book of Judges we read of how Samson one day encounters a lion, and tears it to pieces with his bare hands. Later he comes back to the place, and sees that a swarm of bees has settled inside the lion's carcass. Heedless of stings, Samson takes some of their honey, and casually eats it as he goes along: telling no one at all of what he has done. Later, celebrating his marriage to a Philistine woman, he sets a riddle for his Philistine guests.

Out of the eater came what is eaten, and out of the strong came what is sweet (Jdg 14:14).

The Philistines, unable to guess the riddle, but anxious not to lose the wager, decide to cheat. So they threaten Samson's Bride, who, managing at last to cajole the answer out of him, passes it on to them. They triumphantly return within the stipulated seven days to claim their prize.

What is sweeter than honey? they ask, and what stronger than a lion?

Just for the record: these guests do get their promised reward, but at a cost they would not have wanted to pay. Also, Samson's first attempt at marriage comes to an abrupt end at that point.

Then in the First Book of Samuel we read of how King Saul, hard pressed in war, pronounces a curse on any member of his army who tastes food before the Philistines are beaten in battle. So when the men of the army pass by a honeycomb clearly exposed to view, none of them dares touch it. There must have been a strong nectar flow in progress, on a lovely warm day, because honey is visibly dripping out of that comb. Unhappily, the solemn pronouncement has not been passed on to Saul's son Jonathan. Spotting the honeycomb in his turn, though lacking Samson's bravado with stings, Jonathan pokes the end of his stick into the comb, and (presumably after running like mad) puts it to his mouth. Honey, as we have said before, is very good for you: so *Jonathon's eyes grew brighter* (1 Sam 14:27).

Again just for the record: Jonathan wishes that more Israelite soldiers had had a taste of honey that day: it would have given them strength. For his part, Saul wants to put Jonathan to death for

his disobedience: but the army refuses to countenance such sinful folly.

To end on a high point: according to several early Greek New Testament Manuscripts, the Risen Lord himself, on the very Day of Easter, ate some honeycomb. That variant reading is followed in the Latin Vulgate Bible; also in the Authorised (King James) version. This occurred during the Lord's appearance to the assembled disciples, according to St Luke (Lk 24:42). Our modern versions, including the Nova Vulgata, tend to speak here only of dried or grilled fish. How much nicer that would have been though, with a little honey on top

DBH

Pax æterna CD

The CD with Tom Donald is a revelation. Very original and very subtle. Much more than an odd experimentation of putting two worlds – chant and piano – in one room and see what happens. It's a dialogue done with a due respect, taste and a high level of musicality. Congratulations!

Dr Giedrius Gapsys, Musicologist, Professor of École de Chant Grégorien de Paris.

Pax Aeterna grows in interest each time I hear it. It's impressive how the piano improviser Tom Donald stuck with his 15-year dream to find the monks to set it in motion. Plain Chant has its own beauty, language, and tones to suit the moods of each text it sets. It is timeless, mystical, beautiful and, above all, prayerful: sung here so positively and effortlessly by the six-monk schola. Tom has been sensitive to the sentiment of each piece, in its varying colours and texture. His piano improvisation, recognising the prayerfulness of the words and modes, has collaborated well with the monks, achieving a most successful outcome. This recording deserves our support and attention.

Maureen Woodhead, musician, teacher of singing and of piano.

Dom François Le Bannier

In our monastic hymnbook, especially in our monastic Proper, there are a dozen hymns by François Le Bannier, some exclusively for the Solesmes monasteries, such as his “Puellus Placidus” for Vigils on 15th January, then, in a different metre, hymns for St Anselm, for Vigils and Vespers. The Cluniac Abbots naturally attract his attention, as do the monks Gregory VII and Augustine of Canterbury, while for St Clotilde he achieves a “possible”, Vigils, Lauds and Vespers hymns. Local piety ensures that St Cecilia receives the same degree of attention – but who was François Le Bannier?

He was a monk of Solesmes, born close by, in the little town of Avoise, the same distance as Elgin is from Pluscarden, in Bas-Maine, on 29th October 1817. After successful schooling at Précigné, a dozen kilometres from Solesmes, he entered the abbey in 1839, and made profession two years later, on the Abbey’s Patronal feast, SS Peter and Paul, 1841. His whole life was spent in the humble labour of obedience. He had no obvious gifts, and only attracted attention by his shy and awkward manner. He had a heart of gold, even if his mind was constantly wandering, and nature and grace sang together in his head.

He was friends with the famous author, Louis Veuillot, who wrote of him, “His whole life was a burden, but faith was his pillow, and the good man reached heaven without ever waking up.” Louis Veuillot was an unlikely person to befriend Le Bannier. A self-educated journalist, his Catholic faith was re-energised in 1839. Editor of *L’Univers*, he was something of a thorn in the side of the Gallican hierarchy, and a hero to rural clergy; an Ultramontane, a fervent supporter of Pope Pius IX and Catholic teaching, often belligerent in his expression; excommunicated by the Archbishop of Paris, supported and encouraged by Guéranger and the Pope; imprisoned by the State; a prolific author whose collected works filled forty volumes. In his “Letters”, published by his brother Eugène, are five to Dom Gondreau, the Prior of Solesmes. In these, the only monk whom he mentions by name is

Le Bannier – in October 1843 he hopes to come and give Le Bannier a good teasing. In another letter he sends “greetings to all, hello to Fr Lebannier” (sic). In his Letter 97 he denies having become a Gallican and proposes to send a parish priest to Fr Le Bannier for liturgical formation. Imprisoned in La Conciergerie, which he calls his “summer house”. he laments the presence of abundant fleas and parasites – not like Solesmes – and the absence of Père Le Bannier.

There is a story told of him which illustrates his character. He had the duty of “knocker-up”, a responsibility which exists in some monasteries and used to be part of life in some northern English mill towns – someone who goes from door to door, knocking on the doors to arouse the dwellers therein to go to work or to the Work of God. Once, as he was making his way from cell to cell with his lantern, he came to the door of a monk who had the day before received a collection of hummingbirds for the Abbey’s little museum. The light of his lantern caught the colours of the birds’ plumage, bright and metallic, and he was so enraptured by the sight that he was unable to resist inspecting them more closely by the light of his lantern. By the time he had finished, the time for Matins had long passed, and he had completely forgotten that he was supposed to have woken his brethren for choir, and so he was obliged later to make satisfaction at the Chapter of Faults, when public acknowledgement of such failures was made.

He made up for himself a language, a pastiche of sixteenth-century French, into which he made a translation – which was not without its charms – of the meditations on the life of Our Lord attributed to St Bonaventure. Here is a sample:

“As for a very long time, for the space of more than five thousand years, the human race was prostrate in the depths of misery... the most happy angelic spirits, full of compassion at such a great distress... as soon as the fulness of time had come, besought the Lord more earnestly and insistently than had ever been done before.”

This linguistic pastiche became so familiar to him, and he was

so much in the habit of living and thinking several centuries in the past, that even his letters were full of instances of these antique turns of phrase. Thus he wrote to Abbot Guéranger, “It has always seemed to me that a great portion of my glory in paradise would have been lacking, and that the rejoicing there would have fallen sadly short, had I not been clothed with the priesthood of Jesus Christ. Blessed be God the Almighty, who by dint of trimming, hammering and polishing such lump of wood has made me not just a monk, but even a monk-priest.”

It might seem that such a man would be utterly useless in a community. Dom Guéranger, however, was able to draw from him the hymns he needed for the proper Offices of the French Congregation, and still today we sing the verses of the good Fr Le Bannier. Dom Bérengier wrote, “How often did we see him standing at the door of his Abbot’s cell, hiding the verses he had just composed under his scapular, and awaiting with an anxiety visible to every eye, the interview which was about to decide the fate of his poetry. For Dom Guéranger had such good taste, and such a sure liturgical sense, that he was never content with anything substandard, or even reasonably good; and when we used to see Dom Le Bannier going away with lowered head and an air of embarrassment, we were quite sure that he would have to begin again. But we also saw how his homely and good features used to shine with an almost childlike joy, after the demanding Aristarchus had praised his verses. It was by this unceasing work that he learned to handle all the modes and all the rhythms of liturgical poetry with an ease, a skill and richness of expression that was admired by the hymn-writers of the Congregation of Rites.”

At the end of 1866 Dom Le Bannier was sent to the monastery of St Mary Magdalen at Marseille. He could not bear the high temperatures of 1867, and died a holy death on 22nd September, saying that St Michael was going to take him into Paradise. That was where he belonged: he was not made either for this planet or our time.

DGC

ST JOSEPH'S HOUSE - BUILDING NEWS

The work on the new women's guest house has proceeded steadily in the past three months, with a 2-week break for Christmas and New Year. It is quite usual to see at least four different tasks being pursued at any time: internal blocks being built, external stone work being laid, large dumper trucks being loaded with aggregate, a crane lifting pallets of stone or cement, large panels of insulation being fixed in place, a digger excavating a trench.

At the time of writing, the lowest floor is nearing completion in its outer fabric, with nearly all the stonework in place, and the ground level on the north face gradually coming up to that of the adjacent St Benedict's. Next in sequence will be the laying of the concrete beams which will form the floor of the next storey, which will comprise the main entrance porch and the first floor of the women's accommodation.

All the windows and doors of the first two floors have a very handsome stone lintel with a hood moulding and label stops, all finished with mallet and chisel by the stone masons, using details from some of the medieval stonework. Photographs show the lintels being lowered into place. The whole building is a remarkable harmony of ancient and modern, incorporating the latest standards of building technology and energy conservation alongside hand-cut sandstone.

If anyone would like to sponsor any of the lintels, please contact John Gleeson, our project manager, at john@gleesonhbconsultants.co.uk. We have had several dozen sponsors for individual stones and over two thousand donors of slates, which has been greatly encouraging. If you would like to be involved in this in any way, please contact John.

DMdeK

SILVER JUBILEE OF BR THOMAS COLE

8TH DECEMBER 2023

The word “jubilee” comes from the Hebrew word for a horn, and Br Thomas’s attaining his silver jubilee of monastic profession deserves a fanfare of horns and trumpets in salute. Twenty-five years is a long time in anyone’s life. Br Thomas been round the block and demonstrated perseverance, and definitely ranks as a senior of the community. That is no mean feat, the work of grace, but also the result of human effort, of corresponding to grace, and reason to be thankful to God and to the brother who day by day has lived out the commitment of his vows.

We count our years of profession from our first, temporary or “simple” profession which for Br Thomas took place in 1998. His Solemn Profession featured in these pages in 2001, with a photo of him and his parents, Dawn and Murray Cole, who had had to fly from his native New Zealand – he has since become a UK citizen – and Fr Abbot.

Before coming to us he taught in a grammar school, English and Latin, which he continued to teach and study at Pluscarden. A fellow-postulant was Glenn Tattersall, now pastoring a parish in Melbourne.

Like most monks, Br Thomas has worn many hats, sometimes simultaneously. He energetically and assiduously cultivated a wide variety of carefully chosen lavender cultivars at the top of the Hill Field, clearing the ground, fencing out rabbits and other undesirables. Aquaculture necessitated supplying fishponds and running water for the fish. His foes were fish-loving birds, fended off with nets.

His entrepreneurial tendencies found expression, too, in the manufacture of Benet’s Balm, of beeswax furniture polish and creams, sold in our shop and others. He began the manufacture of soaps. Coffee grounds vanished, reappearing as exfoliating soap...

He took his turn in looking after the guest houses, and people still inquire after him. Sacristan, another unremitting task, also fell

to him; he kept the church very clean. Asian flavours still characterise his kitchen stints.

Our Subiaco-Cassinese Congregation is international, and Br Thomas forged links with our Vietnamese Province, making many challenging trips to Vietnam, whence a succession of monks have come, learning English as he learned Vietnamese, no mean achievement. He accompanied Bishop Hugh to Vietnam, resulting in the presence in our diocese of Anh, who is studying for the priesthood.

Our Vietnamese brothers enlivened our life with topiary, arts and crafts, taming wild birds, gardening, and Asian cookery. Once, a large quantity of pigs' ears was ordered for Sunday lunch... Their time in the sewing-room resulted in new styles of travel-smocks, which can still be seen around the monastery.

When his parents in New Zealand grew old and infirm, Brother Thomas had to take on the intermittent role of carer – his brother lives in Hawaii, a long way from New Zealand, and his sister, who sadly predeceased them, lived in Australia. He became his parent's resident staff and stay, caring for them both until his father's death. Then came Covid, and New Zealand's draconian isolation measures marooned Br Thomas as he cared for his mother and made himself useful in the parish, until she too went to her reward. We are glad to have him back among us.

Not many were present for the Jubilee Mass due to the wintry weather, with many of his friends living on the far side of the world. Bishop Hugh, who as Abbot had professed Br Thomas all those years before, was happily present.

In his homily for the feast of the Immaculate Conception and Br Thomas's Jubilee, Fr Abbot turned over the ideas of fear and concealment. Adam was afraid, and so hid. Mary, though disturbed by the announcing angel's message, was disturbed, but not afraid. Adam's fear, after his sin, led him to conceal himself from God – but the angel didn't need to seek for Mary. Mary was modestly hidden, yet open and available, whereas Adam hid on account of what he knew – his guilt. He thought he knew God, but he no longer did so, or he would confess his guilt and seek forgiveness.

He had become ignorant, moving into a realm of separation from God.

Mary is not ignorant, she has faith. She waits for knowledge, faces what is obscure. Faith is open.

Monastic profession is something that happens in a secret place, a hidden room, the monastery church, the monk's heart. Yet it is also open, before the Church, a witness for the Church, it comes from a true knowledge of God. We live in ignorance and faith. We profess our knowledge of God, and because of it we place ourselves completely, with confidence, in his hands. How can this be? That is not an objection, but an opening up to the Holy Spirit, who will come upon us as he came upon Mary. She knows God, she is in prayer, not ignorant, she has faith. Her situation is utterly different from Adam's, she waits for knowledge; what is obscure, for revelation.

The monk's knowledge derives from the secret of his heart. He embraces what at any point going forward must be quite unknown; because it embraces the future, he cannot possibly know. It embraces the whole of a man's life, yet it is also open.

And so we wish Br Thomas well and assure him of our prayers as he embarks on the next stage of his monastic life. To what will God call him next? He doesn't know, we don't know, but at a deeper level, what God calls him to, calls us all to, is a deeper knowledge of him, to continue truly seeking what he has already found... Just now, the field of his endeavour is green – it's the garden, where God and Fr Abbot have put him! – and as we thank Br Thomas and God for a quarter-century of monastic life, we pray for the hundred-fold that one day will be gathered into the Lord's barn. *Ad multos annos!*

DGC

LAURUS BY EUGENE VODALAZKIN
Exploring themes in the life of a Holy Fool

What is a “holy fool”? Also known as “fools for Christ” (*cf.* 1 Co 4:10), it is a class of saints known throughout the history of Christianity. Wikipedia gives a rather dry definition: “The Holy Fool or *yuródivyy* (юродивый) is the Russian version of foolishness for Christ, a peculiar form of Eastern Orthodox asceticism.” The *yurodivy* is a Holy Fool, one who acts intentionally foolish in the eyes of men. The term implies behaviour “which is caused neither by mistake nor by feeble-mindedness, but is deliberate, irritating, even provocative.” These are men and women who consciously act in opposition to culturally accepted norms—for instance walking around scantily clothed or even nude, sitting for long hours in the snow, or stealing from rich misers to give to the poor—all in order to draw attention to the radical *otherness* of Christ. It’s a way, or vocation, to draw closer to God and has been practised since the time of the Desert Fathers and Mothers.

This rather rare path of holiness is not exclusive to desert ascetics or to our Orthodox brethren—St Francis of Assisi and his earliest followers show us many examples of extreme behaviour taken to imitate Christ more fully; my own patron, St Benedict Joseph Labre, exhibited very radical (repulsive even to his contemporaries) forms of asceticism in his path to Christ. More recently, an excellent Russian film, *The Island*, has a holy fool as its main character, Fr Anatoly. Fr Anatoly even goes so far as to set fire to his abbot’s personal possessions to show him the evil of being too attached them.

Using a holy fool as protagonist, Russian novelist Eugene Vodlazkin published his novel *Laurus* in 2012, winning several book awards for his work, including the Russian Big Book award, which is equivalent to the Pulitzer Prize or the Man Booker Award. It was translated into English in 2015 by Lisa C. Hayden and it is simply wonderful.

The novel is set in the 14th and 15th centuries and tells the story of a young Russian orphan named Laurus from a small village. He goes into the forest surrounding his home to live with his grandfather, who is an herbalist and doctor of sorts. Laurus learns all he can from his grandfather before the old man passes away. Left alone at his grandfather's death, he meets and falls in love with a young woman whom he meets near his cabin. Thereafter, because of his pride, he falls into a terrible mortal sin resulting in the death of his lover and feels he must spend the rest of his life atoning for this sin.

Laurus travels through medieval Russia, sets himself up in a distant village as a healer of those afflicted by the Black Death, later spends time living on the outskirts of a monastery, and eventually undertakes a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in his search for redemption. He meets many fascinating and strange characters and his travels to foreign lands are beautifully described.

There are many fascinating aspects of this novel. It helped me understand the religiosity of the Russian character better and the hold that the Orthodox faith has on its soul. I remember thinking to myself, at my first reading of *Laurus*, that it's not surprising that atheistic ideologies never truly took root in the ground of the Russian soul. The exploration of the theme of the holy fool was also eye-opening and I ask myself: how far are we willing to go in our commitment to Christ? Are we willing to leave all, even social respectability, to become His servants? Are we willing even to go so far as to say grace before meals publicly, make the sign of the cross, or be seen praying the rosary in public, even when we know it will make us stick out in the crowd or appear foolish to others? It seems to me that the greatest trailblazers in Catholic history are those who stepped out of the mould and broke all the rules that were keeping them from being radically faithful to their calling as Christians. Even a hidden soul like St Thérèse of Lisieux broke free of the socially acceptable norms of her cloistered life to become one of the greatest saints of recent history. We can ask ourselves: how far are we willing to go to become saints?

Laurus also highlights the theme of compunction, a very monastic virtue and spoken of often in the great masters of monastic spirituality. I get the feeling that in the West we've lost a true sense of the horror of sin and its effect in the life of our soul. We often go blithely to confession (if we go at all), recite our sins, say our penance, and move on. But have we really recognized what sin is and does? I'm not advocating an over-scrupulosity which leads us to doubt God's mercy, or which causes us to spend the rest of our lives grovelling in misery. But we should perhaps develop a healthier sense of the fragility of our relationship with God and not be afraid to remember and ask forgiveness for our sins, past and present, even those already confessed. By doing so we develop a greater humility, a better awareness of our capacity for evil, and a deeper wonder at the greatness of God's infinite love.

DBJM

SUBSCRIPTIONS FOR PLUSCARDEN BENEDICTINES

Somebody recently drew to our attention that the subscription rates for our quarterly magazine have not increased for over 20 years. We are hugely encouraged by everyone who has taken an interest in our life and spirituality over the decades, and we continue to supply many copies of the magazine free of charge. However, it does cost money to print and post, and subscribers contribute to this and to the continuing work of the Abbey. After a comparison with similar publications in Britain and Europe, it seems fair now to ask an annual subscription of £15 from readers in the UK and £20 from readers abroad. We are not rigorous in striking people off the mailing list, so you need have no fear except for the occasional gentle reminder! God bless you all for your continuing generosity.

THE PASCHAL MYSTERY IN GREGORIAN CHANT

September 2023 saw the twelfth meeting of the Monastic Chant Forum, held at Quarr Abbey. The theme of this meeting was the Paschal Mystery in Gregorian Chant. Our speakers were three, each from his own angle casting light on the chosen theme.

Abbot Xavier set the scene each day with a lecture on the historical and spiritual aspects of the Triduum liturgy. How this was celebrated in different places at different times; how it developed, grew, changed; then how we got to where we are now with our current liturgical books. Dr Giedrius Gapsys, master musicologist of the Chant, gave detailed analyses of pieces discussed in order to arrive at the best possible interpretation. He focussed his attention in particular on the Responsories of the Night Office for the Triduum.

The input of Jaan-Eik Tolve was above all practical. A conductor of genius, he took us through and conducted all the Chants we studied.

HOLY THURSDAY

Abbot Xavier: The current form of the evening Mass of the Lord's Supper was not at all the norm in the Western Church for most of its history. In particular, from the 16th century, according to a decree of Pope St Pius V, no Mass could be celebrated after midday. So from then until the 1955 Reform, Mass on both Holy Thursday and Holy Saturday was celebrated in the morning. This can now seem very strange to us. Maybe it would be less so if we returned to the ancient practice of strict fasting on these days? Perhaps also: the idea of the Mass as a communal meal recalling the Last Supper would have seemed merely Protestant to many Catholics in former times. All the emphasis of the Church was on the Mass as a sacramental sacrifice: the re-presentation of Christ's saving death as intercession and atonement and redemption.

Now, since the liturgical reform of Pope Pius XII, Holy Thursday evening everywhere marks the solemn beginning of the great and intense drama that is our Triduum. The Mass begins with

the celebrated Introit: *Nos autem gloriari oportet – it behoves us to glory, to boast*. Here texts of SS Paul and John are put together (Gal 6:14; Jn 11:25). Here we do not so much gaze on the mystery of Christ’s Cross, as proclaim our participation in it. For the name of Christ, sung out in the previous day’s Introit (*In nomine Domini omne genu flectatur*) is also our own name, and our very identity. The *gloriari* of this day’s Introit will be picked up immediately in the sung *Gloria* that follows: the first we have sung (ordinarily) since the beginning of Lent, and so also accompanied by joyful organ and bells.

The Gradual *Oculi omnium* (Ps 144:15). There is a dual movement in this wonderful VII mode piece, as our eyes strain upwards, while God in his mercy and compassion looks down on us. Meditating in wonder on this Psalm text, notably within the context of the Holy Eucharist, and its Institution, the composer stretches out, or plays with, especially, two words: *Aperis* – “you open” – and *manum* – your “hand”; then finally *benedictione* – “in blessing”. So we sing here of gratuitous, limitless, outpoured blessing, coming from God, and sacramentally mediated to us here in this very celebration. These Chants may incidentally be heard on the Pluscarden abbey CD: “The Liturgy of Holy Week”.

The Chants for the washing of feet are already a musical form of enacted drama. Here we do what Jesus did: which actually is what every Eucharist does. In a special way here we enter the love of Jesus, in acting out our love for the brethren (*Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est – wherever love and charity are found: there is God*).

In the Communion Chant for Holy Thursday, we sing the actual words of Institution, according to St Paul: *Hoc corpus quod pro vobis tradetur* (1 Cor 11:24). This Chant is set, very suitably, in the VIII mode, as we solemnly make memory of Jesus; we participate in his intention: we follow him through his death to his resurrection. And the immediate outcome of that for us is adoration: carried out now until midnight, in order that we might be placed properly in the right mind for entering the mystery of Good Friday the following day.

Giedrius Gapsys:

According to the tradition of the Western Church, certainly since the time of Charlemagne, on each of the three days of the Triduum 9 lessons at Vigils are followed by 9 sung Responsories. These Responsories represent something of a musical and liturgical highlight. The first word of one of the Good Friday Responsories has given its name to the whole very dramatic Vigils Office, where candles on a stand are solemnly extinguished one by one: *Tenebrae factae sunt dum crucifixissent Iesum* – *There was darkness [over the whole land] when they crucified Jesus* (Mt 27:45).

Jaan-Eik Tulve:

To cite here some of Jaan-Eik's oft-repeated mantras: We must feel the text; we must feel the movement; feel the direction; feel the modality; feel the beginning and feel the end; always sing both with a very good legato, and with very fluid movement; keep the energy; sing the accent; move always toward the accent; taste each word; understand the construction of the piece; always go towards the end. We must understand each piece from the inside! What is its meaning? This we discover more and more with each passing year of constant practice. There are no notes in Gregorian Chant; there is only movement. All ornaments are for the sake of the text, to help the text, so that we pronounce the text well and sing it well. We must pay close attention to the ancient neumatic signs. But also: we are not to be merely enslaved by them. Be sure that Gregorian Chant allows a great deal of freedom in interpretation.

To take briefly just one example: the Maundy Thursday Introit *Nos autem gloriari oportet* (IV mode). The first 3 words are all light, flowing rapidly forwards. The 3 unison notes on the last syllable of "autem" are given precisely to help us keep the energy moving onwards. So don't stop after that!! Everything then tends towards the word *oportet* – *we MUST boast* – and especially its central, accented syllable. Boast in what? *in cruce Domini nostri - in the cross of our Lord...* Each note of this solemn proclamation receives its due musical weight and emphasis. But even all of that

keeps on moving towards, or preparing for, the most important moments in the piece: *in quo* and (even more important) *per quem*. In him; through him: Jesus! In and through him alone we have salvation and life and resurrection; in and through him alone are we saved and set free.

GOOD FRIDAY

Abbot Xavier:

At first Good Friday and Holy Saturday were everywhere days of silence, with little or no singing, apart from the elaborately sung Night Office. Even now our main Good Friday afternoon liturgy begins simply with silence. There is no Introit, and no Kyrie eleison. The daytime Psalmody was traditionally recited *recto tono*, without Antiphons. Hymns also were omitted. Why? Because we don't feel able to sing about the mysteries of these days! Our task is only to enter them; conforming ourselves as far as possible to the mind and heart of Jesus. How do we do this? For our forebears of the first millennium especially, the privileged means of access to the heart of Jesus must be through the inspired Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. So we sing the Psalms and Prophetic Canticles that Jesus himself sang and meditated on; these texts that are filled with the presence of the Holy Spirit, and that speak of his mystery. Also, of course, we dwell on the Gospel passages that speak of his Passion, and the Pauline and other New Testament passages that unfold its meaning. All of these texts we encounter in a very intense way in the Responsories of the Night Office.

The Good Friday afternoon liturgy, as celebrated according to the current *Missale Romanum*, represents a bringing together of many different traditions. In early times perhaps this celebration comprised almost nothing more than a singing or reading of the Passion Gospel according to St John. The communal veneration of the Cross spread above all from customs of the Church in Jerusalem, attended of course by many international pilgrims. From the time of Constantine and his mother Helena in the 4th century people would flock there to venerate the Relic of the True

Cross. They found this act to be a powerful sign of their faith and devotion. So there arose a demand for similar celebrations, or liturgies, at home. And: singers like to sing, so there arose singing for that too. Then, since Christ's death is a great intercession, solemn intercessions were added – sung of course – above all for the holy Church on earth. Then later, Holy Communion was added. Often at first this would be for the presiding Priest only.

The long 6-verse Tract of the current Good Friday Liturgy in the Second Mode is a response (probably not before the 8th century) to the reading from Isaiah 53. In this Tract the suffering Christ cries out to his Father, with words of Psalm 101. As we sing, or listen, we find ourselves crying out to God with Jesus. *Domine exaudi – Lord listen to me...* We pray in him, and he prays in us. Yet even here the last verse points to the mystery of Resurrection; for even in the darkest moments, the Christian never fails to hold fast to hope in Christ's victory. *Tu exurgens, Domine, misereberis Sion – Rising up, O Lord, you will have mercy on Zion...*

The same invincible hope is found in the Gradual, taken from Palm Sunday: *Christus factus est* (GR 148, Phil 2:8-9). Death, yes, of course, but also triumphant exaltation. This Chant is used for the Lauds responsories on these days, and its text is also sung at meals in the monastic refectory.

Then the sung Passion. Already this is in the form of an acted out drama. There have been many adaptations from this liturgy, most notably by J.S. Bach: but the conventions established in the Chant have always been retained, with the Narrator as a tenor, Christus a deep bass, the Crowd high tenors.

The Chants set for the veneration of the Cross come from the East. They evoke the two poles, apparently contradictory but actually united in the Heart of Jesus, of profound suffering and of perfect joy. *Ecce propter lignum venit gaudium in universo mundo.* – See: *because of the Cross joy has come into the whole world.*

Pere Xavier suggested that the Reproaches of this liturgy are among the most beautiful of the whole year. (Jaan-Eik had us sing them very, very slowly, very carefully, word by word, with intense

feeling: *Quid feci tibi? Responde mihi.* – *What have I done to you? Tell me.*) But then, interspersed, the clamorous, triumphant *Sanctus Deus!!* Here, on Good Friday, we sing the Holiness of God, as the Greek and Latin Choirs shout across to each other the message of Christian hope and confidence. We sing of God's deathlessness and of his invincible power. And here again what we touch on is a joy that is proper to Good Friday.

Then, very rare in the Roman liturgy: poetry, as Venantius Fortunatus is given his say: *Dulce lignum, dulci clavo, dulce pondus sustinens* – *Sweet wood, with a sweet nail, bearing a sweet burden.* If such paradox lies at the heart of our Gospel, how much more particularly of today's celebration.

Giedrius Gapsys

Maybe the triduum Responsories originated in Rome in the 6th or 7th centuries? Then they would have been learned by heart and passed down by repetition and imitation. Hartker, hermit at the monastery of St Gall in Switzerland, at the end of the 10th century, spent some 11 years writing them out. He is always extremely careful, making almost no mistakes, and clearly he knew the music intimately, and loved its every note! His very beautiful manuscript, inscribed in black and red, must be studied carefully by all who want to sing these Chants well.

Jaan-Eik Tulve

The Gradual *Christus factus est* (GR 148). We see clearly in the first phrase how Gregorian Chant springs from sung Psalmody. Essentially what we have here is simple recitation on 2 notes, one tone apart. Everything else is light ornament.

Note the long melisma in the second part on the word *illum*. The stretched syllable is precisely the unaccented one, drawing out the end of the word towards its conclusion. We have the same feature in this piece on the words *autem* and *crucis* and *illi* and *nomen* and (final) *nomen*. Resist the temptation to emphasise ornamental notes here. The structural notes are the important ones. *Illum* is sung essentially on one note, Do: dropping, very simply, at the end, to a cadence a minor 3rd below (La). The other notes weave around that essential Do, not to distract from it, but precisely to bring it out.

HOLY SATURDAY

Abbot Xavier:

Today at last the Cantors agree not to sing. But in the evening, their moment will come... Today: silence; barrenness; no major liturgy at all; no celebration; a stripped-down Church and a bare Altar.

Then at last: the Paschal Vigil. We say it's the most important and solemn liturgy of the year. Yet still, by and large, it has not caught on. In spite of multiple instructions and exhortations and reminders, it never succeeds in drawing the crowds who come for the Christmas midnight Mass. Perhaps after all, this is rather traditional? In ancient times the people would go to the Day Mass, as usual. It was above all the monks, or the Cathedral clergy, who kept special Vigil at night.

As with the other great Triduum liturgies, our present Vigil is a modern construction, made up out of ancient elements from varying traditions, put together in this way.

The beginning, with light shining amid darkness, with a blessed Easter Fire, and the Easter Praeconium sung by the deacon before the Paschal Candle, is found in the 5th century in Jerusalem and Italy and North Africa. The text of the *Exsultet* is found in very many manuscripts from all over Europe. Later it would be considerably elaborated and ornamented, before being cut back again in the 16th century.

Now we have 7 readings before the Gospel. Once there were 12, as in the Monastic Office. Then they were reduced to 3 only. The structure of Reading, Chant, Prayer, seen most clearly here, is fundamental to all liturgy. God speaks his word: this word which is also a saving act, and a divine revelation, and a self-communication. In response to that: as we willingly receive, so we sing, we praise, we rejoice. The account of the Crossing of the Red Sea in Exodus 15 is immediately followed by the Chant *Cantemus Domino*, already contained in the scriptural text. Here, in the very time of Moses, liturgical Chant was born. The people delivered by God from slavery and death sing to him in joyful praise, and we

take up their words: of course, in Gregorian Chant. And then: prayer. Prayer to sum up; prayer both to thank and to ask.

After the *Gloria in excelsis Deo*, sung once again with organ and bells, we have the solemn Alleluia, sung three times by the celebrant, each time at a higher pitch, in the noble VIII mode. This is not a song to fill time, or to accompany, or even to meditate. This is a performative announcement. At last, the moment has come. Now: Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia! And in this word – he is present among us now. Alleluia! So we don't listen to this sitting down. No! We all stand, and repeat each time, and then take it away with the exultant song of Psalm 117: *Confitemini Domino quoniam bonus – Give thanks to the Lord for he is good*. Here we sing also our own identity. We are those who bear Christ within; who receive Holy Communion; who have been redeemed, and reborn, and to whom eternal life is solemnly promised.

And here the eschatological dimension is clearly seen. We look not just backwards, and upwards, but forwards. We long for his final coming. The cry goes up at midnight: behold the Bridegroom! And this cry is our Alleluia!

EASTER DAY

Abbot Xavier:

The Day Mass of Easter is celebrated with two IV mode pieces, the Introit *Resurrexi* (GR 196), and the Offertory *Terra tremuit*: pieces of deep mystery; Christ singing of his own resurrection in the presence of his Father. If we sing these pieces well, with understanding, we are most wonderfully drawn into the mystery ourselves.

Also mysterious are the Alleluia and Communion, which share the same brief text from St Paul: *Pascha nostrum immolatus est Christus – Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us* (1 Cor 5:7). So we sing here of Christ's death. For resurrection is from the dead. But note: there must be no gap, no pause (this is clearly marked in the ancient Chant manuscripts) between *Christus* and *Alleluia* in the Communion Chant. The mystery is one, and without separation! But then: the final three Alleluias need to be

sung very separately, for each is different. The first is deep and slow; the second progressing from that upwards; the third very strong and triumphant.

Only the Gradual of Easter Day is an expression of sheer joy: *Haec dies quam fecit Dominus – This is the Day which the Lord has made*: give him praise, for he is good. The verse of this piece is adapted with different texts for each day in the week following. Each one of these is its own unique expression of Easter joy.

Jaan-Eik Tulve

Jaan-Eik pitches the *Resurrexi* of Easter rather low. He also takes it all very, very slowly and deliberately: although its ornaments are quick. The overall movement is large, broad; definitely entirely unhurried. The ornaments always take us on towards the next syllable or word. Compare the light opening notes of *posuisiti* with the opening notes of *Nos autem gloriari* of Holy Thursday. These are rapid notes of introduction: they are emphatically not violent or loud. Look also at the neumatic signs above the “alleluia” that follows *manum tuam*. They show that this word is to be sung with very great deliberation and emphasis!

By contrast, in the Gradual *Haec dies*: a piece full of energy and movement starts off with a couple of notes marked low, slow, broad. But then: off. Light, moving, energetic, until the high and expanded *quoniam bonus – for he is good*. This is marked very, very broad: take it all very, very slowly.

DBH

THE SEASON OF ADVENT:
Gregorian chant from the monks of Pluscarden Abbey

The new CD released by the monks of Pluscarden is a musical and liturgical goldmine. The singing of the main chants of the Mass and the Divine Office for the season of Advent is of a very high standard, reflecting profound appreciation of both text and music. The booklet of 31 pages provides the Latin texts for all 34 tracks, together with full translation and notes on each item. The care that has gone into the production of the CD is evident also in the quality of the sound editing.

One of the most attractive features of the recording is the way it evokes the four-week structure of Advent, moving from a distant glimpse of light and joy to chants thrilling with expectation on the threshold of Christmas. Section II is particularly lovely: listen to the lifting of the tonic accents in the antiphon *Ecce Dominus noster* (track 8), and the opening of the high walls and gates in the next antiphon, *Urbs fortitudinis*; the Alleluia, *Laetatus sum* (11) flows forward in youthful joy, whilst in the Communion chant, *Ierusalem surge* (12), we sense we are standing on tiptoe.

There are many other glorious moments. An extra-liturgical favourite of many monastic communities, *Rorate caeli* (4), is evidently loved by the monks of Pluscarden. The Alleluia of the third Sunday of Advent, *Excita Domine* (19), dances with joy as it invites the Lord to come, *veni*, and save us.

The singing is underpinned by a good understanding of the early neumatic signs that give expressive sense to the music. Marian chants are intrinsic to the atmosphere and mystery of Advent, and the two final items make a fitting climax to the recording: *Ecce Virgo*, the ecstatic Communion chant sung on Sunday IV of Advent (33), together with the loveliest of pieces, the solemn version of the *Alma Redemptoris Mater*.

This CD succeeds in conveying the beauty of the sung liturgy. Time stands still, to allow glimpses of eternity to enter our lives.

Dame Margaret Truran