



"Nothing Dearer Than Christ"

Oblate letter of the Pluscarden Benedictines

Elgin, Moray, Scotland IV30 8UA

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"Let nothing be preferred to the Work of God" (HR 43:3).

Monastic Voices

I will fill this house with glory, saith the Lord of Hosts ... great shall be the glory of this last house more than of the first, saith the Lord of Hosts: and in this place I will give peace, saith the Lord of Hosts. Haggai 2:7-10

"Over 700 years ago white-habited monks came into this beautiful Vale of St. Andrew. They built a monastery, and they dedicated their Church to our Blessed Lady, St. John the Baptist and St. Andrew. For 300 years the monks lived in this monastery; they worshipped God in its Church; they used the psalms to sing His praises, and day by day the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass was offered. Then came the Reformation. The monasteries were closed, the monks were driven out, their property passed into secular hands; and many of the buildings were utterly destroyed. Pluscarden, hidden away in this distant part of the country, fortunately escaped this utter destruction.

The monastic life came to an end, but the monks were allowed to remain on in their old home. Yet there is pathos in the thought of those old men, each in turn coming to an end of his life on earth, believing that an end had also come to the monastic life for which his predecessors had erected these beautiful buildings. At last, none was left. Gradually the roof fell in, the fabric decayed, and Pluscarden was dead. For 400 years the Church remained derelict. But 1000 years is as a day in God's sight. Pluscarden was dead, but Pluscarden is alive again. There is no roof on the Church, there is only temporary accommodation for the monks, but they are back again; the years of dereliction are bridged, and we are gathered together this morning to unite in thanking God for this day, and for all that is implied in all the solemn ceremonies.

It is good to know something of the past history of Pluscarden, but it is much more important to know something of the purpose of this new life which is being infused into these dead bones. Why did the monks of old live such an odd life? Why are we going to live it again? Why are these walls to be restored, not merely to preserve a beautiful material thing, but in order to provide a home, a monastery where once again, in this 20th century, men will come apart from the world to be monks?

Have you ever asked yourself the question, what do I really believe about prayer? Do I really believe it to be a terrifically powerful, vital force, which, with the faith behind it of which our Lord spoke, can really move mountains? If you believe what our Lord said about the power of prayer, then I can tell you something of the value of this life of ours.

In a monastery are a number of men living together. By virtue of the vow they have made, every action of their lives is turned into prayer, so that whether they are working in the fields, in the kitchen, in their various workshops, or in the Church they literally fulfil the old adage "to work is to pray". All are united in the one supreme purpose of serving God, all contributing towards the production of a great spiritual force, so that their monastery becomes a spiritual power house. Just as a power house produces its electricity, so does a monastery produce this spiritual power which spreads out over all the earth. Each monk, however insignificant he may

seem to be, by that wilful determination to serve God in this life to which he has been called contributes towards that volume of prayer which continually rises to God, in adoration, in worship and in intercession. That is the primary way in which we monks may serve our fellow men. To provide an oasis of peace and spirituality in this world of materialism and unrest, and to pray, by night and by day, for the peace of the world, for the needs of both mankind in general, and for individual souls.

Around you are these ruined walls; we hope in God's good time to restore them. For 400 years they have stood, beautiful in their decay, but dead. A great privilege has been granted to my monks, and also a great responsibility. I most earnestly ask you to pray that God bless this work. That we, hidden away in our monastery may be given the strength to persevere in our work - of re-construction, but more especially in the building up of our monastic life. May we all be united in our faith: all working together for the honour and glory of God, for the peace of the world, and for the salvation of men."

From the sermon preached by Abbot Wilfred Upson at Pluscarden, 8 September 1948

Dear Oblates and friends,

8 September this year marks the Golden Jubilee of the solemn re-opening of Pluscarden as a Benedictine Monastery. A Jubilee, as we are constantly being reminded these days, is a time of spiritual grace and favour; a time for reflection on the past; a time for re-dedication and commitment for the future; a holiday time, above all, for giving thanks and praise to Almighty God for His many great and wonderful mercies. I want to reflect on some of those mercies a little, in this letter, since Pluscarden's existence today as a living monastery is really nothing short of a miracle: or rather, a series of miracles past numbering.

The re-opening nearly didn't happen. Lord Colum Crichton-Stuart had tried several times without success to get a religious community to take Pluscarden off his hands. In 1943 he presented Abbot Upson of Prinknash with a final chance. Take it or leave it: otherwise it goes to the Office of Works. We owe everything, then, under God, to the vision and faith of Abbot Upson, who accepted the offer, in those dark war years, and resolutely saw the project through, despite every obstacle and difficulty. And indeed, there were not lacking, at the time, those who dismissed the whole idea as a piece of romantic folly: utterly impracticable; scarcely even desirable; certain to fail. More than once, over the next few years, it seemed as if they would be proved right...

A work force of 5 pioneer monks was eventually sent up in April 1948 to prepare the way for the main body to come: so that the old ruins would be at least more or less habitable. Let me mention with honour the names of those 5: Dom Brendan McHugh, Superior; Dom Ninian Sloane, Cellarer; Dom Maurus Deegan (then only a Junior - but still going strong!), cook; Br. Cuthbert Swarbrick, carpenter, and Br. Andrew Prescott, Sacristan. There was plenty for them to do. Their first night they spent on the floor in the kitchen. More than adequate ventilation was provided by the un-glazed windows. There was then no proper water supply; no proper drains; no gas or electricity. In fact almost nothing was in place. One of their first tasks was to fit up the present Lady Chapel as a monastic Church, and to transform the barn-like area of the first floor of the East range into monastic living accommodation.

Another name to mention with honour here is that of the Grant family. Donald Grant was the local "postie", who offered his help to the community on day 1. The Grant family were the congregation at the first public Mass, on Sunday 18 April 1948. Eventually they moved into the lodge, where Helen Grant remains to this day: surely our oldest and firmest friend.

After the grand ceremonies of 8 September, a community of 14 Prinknash monks was established here. In those days the 3 houses of Prinknash, Farnborough and Pluscarden were regarded as one community, and monks could be transferred from one to the other. Our Brs. Mungo and Drostan, who joined Pluscarden specifically, nevertheless had to spend part of their formation period at Prinknash. It was very helpful for Pluscarden's numerical strength at that time to have Junior monks sent here temporarily from the Mother House to complete their studies. Actually, it became known as a "finishing school", since so many left after their time here! One of those who persevered is our present Abbot Visitor, Dom Aldhelm of Prinknash.

The brethren here worked hard to make their own living, through the establishment of small industries. Woodcarving and stained glass manufacture flourished, as did the market garden. There were also hens, geese,

pigs and bees. But the work of restoration needed huge sums expended, which could not possibly be earned in this way. The money would have to come from donations. But these were years of post-war austerity, and the expected money notably failed to pour in. The flood of expected vocations also turned out to be more like a thin trickle. Prinknash was fully occupied with trying to build its own new monastery, and could do little to help. So the 1950's, which were boom years for so many Catholic institutes, were for Pluscarden years of holding grimly on, amid physical hardship, financial constraint and uncertainty about the future. Almost the only restoration work accomplished was the roofing of the central tower in 1955.

A breakthrough came in 1960, when Dom Camillus received a legacy. This was just enough to pay for a new roof over the East range, which was raised to its original level of 2 stories, the top floor being set aside for the noviciate. While this work was in hand, a tourist from Edinburgh called Archie Wallace paid a visit. He had come to the Faith partly through his knowledge and love of the Scottish Border Abbeys. And here was a ruined Scottish Monastery, being restored to its original purpose! At enormous personal cost, Archie committed himself to contribute regularly two thirds of his annual income, to pay for the workmen to keep going, and re-roof the transepts. And so it was done. This made possible the move of the Choir from the Lady Chapel to the South transept aisle, with a temporary shelter over the central altar.

Independence from Prinknash was granted in 1966. The Community elected Dom Alfred Spencer as Prior. It fell to him, then, to guide Pluscarden through the turbulent '60's. The community he came to certainly had many problems. Nevertheless, it had a strong fundamental unity. This was manifested above all in the unanimous desire to maintain the contemplative nature of the life, and in the attitude of unconditional loyalty to the Holy See. And so it happened that, without acrimonious debates, without internal factions, Pluscarden chose to keep the full monastic Office, as set out in the Holy Rule, and to retain for it the Latin language, with its Gregorian melodies. When the New Vulgate version was promulgated, Pluscarden duly adopted it, following the liturgical books published by Solesmes.

After a short period, Prior Alfred appointed Dom Maurus as his number 2. It was an inspired choice. They could scarcely have been more different, in background, character and temperament. But they made a wonderful team, providing united and stable leadership through this crucially formative period. Partly because there had not been a great influx of vocations prior to the Vatican Council, Pluscarden was spared the turmoil and mass exodus that afflicted so many monasteries following it. And just when vocations in most other communities were beginning to dry up, at Pluscarden they started to flow again, after a long gap. The first fruits of these, who stayed, were Dom Meinrad and Dom Giles.

And so in 1974, Pluscarden was raised to the status of Abbey, and Dom Alfred became the 1st Abbot. Now more firmly established, with a wide circle of friends and oblates, and with wonderful local and ecumenical support, the Pluscarden community could get on with restoring buildings. The South cloister and the infirmary block came first; then the Chancel was roofed at last in 1980. The East cloister followed. The new St. Scholastica's Retreat replaced the old RAF hut accommodation for lady guests in 1990, and an appeal was launched for a grand new West Wing for male guests, which was finally opened in 1994. In 1992, Dom Hugh Gilbert was elected 2nd Abbot of Pluscarden: and so the story goes on... 14 Pluscarden monks rest in our cemetery; with 2 others at Prinknash, and 2 at Petersham. The 1998 Benedictine Yearbook lists the strength of the present community as 31 members.

50 years on, and the question is still asked: why monks? Can Pluscarden's continued existence into the 3rd Millennium be justified? Is the whole enterprise still a piece of romantic folly?

The answer Abbot Upson gave in his homily remains of course as valid now as it did then. As one of the brethren once famously remarked, "I'm only here for the prayer". What Pluscarden was then, it still is today: above all else, a house of prayer. And as St. Benedict prescribes, the great centre of this prayer is the praise of God, expressed in the public liturgy of the Church.

Yes, of course the life of a monk must be a life given to intercession. And as Oblate Master, I have been able to witness, at first hand, something of the tidal wave of grace that pours constantly out of this place, touching the lives of so many people: sometimes manifestly; more often in an entirely hidden way. (One Oblate recently wrote: "Pluscarden didn't provide an instantaneous cure. It was more like being given a course of antibiotics. At first you notice no change, and then it is borne in on you that you do feel better...")

But beyond anything good that Pluscarden does, or achieves, is its deeper purpose, which is simply to give glory to God. For 50 years, every day, all the priests of the monastery have offered Holy Mass. This is the supreme and perfect sacrifice of praise, because it is Christ's own sacrifice, made present, for our participation, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Day in, day out, for 50 years, the 7-fold office, St. Benedict's "Work of God", has been given here absolute priority. Whether or not any guests or visitors have been present; whatever the financial situation; whatever the pressing demands of work or business; whatever the temperature in an unheated Church, the gentle rhythm of the sacred chant has gone on, and on, in these lovely old buildings, as it once did all those centuries ago. This needs no justification. As I said in my first Oblate letter, God alone is worth it. And in fact, for those to whom this vocation is given, the ceaseless round of the Divine Office in Choir is a source of deep happiness, such as the world cannot give.

On 8 September, we, the monks, together with our Oblates and friends, will be giving God public thanks for Pluscarden. Why? Because we love it. What do we not owe to Pluscarden: or rather, to the divine Providence that has given us so much through it? Speaking for myself, I have to acknowledge that Pluscarden has given me a home, a family, a shelter; daily nourishment, both physical and spiritual; a reference point, an anchor, an inspiration, a consolation; a vocation. I am thankful for Pluscarden rather as an astronaut is for his space ship: my life depends on it. What never ceases to amaze me is that many of our Oblates and friends would not say much less, in their own case.

And finally. 8 September is the feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The Jubilee must therefore have a distinctly Marian note, and that is very much as it should be. Who could doubt that Our blessed Lady, who is invoked under the title of Our Lady of Pluscarden, and who is also the Queen of monks, Help of Christians and Mother of the Church, has watched over this place during the past 50 years with special maternal care? Let us then entrust the next 50 years to her, asking her to preserve Pluscarden as a House of God, in which her Divine Son will be truly sought, and served, and loved.