



"Nothing Dearer Than Christ"

Oblate letter of the Pluscarden Benedictines

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

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be consoled (Mt 5:4)

Visit the sick, and bury the dead. Go to help the troubled, and console the sorrowing (HR 4:16-19)

We do not grieve as those who have no hope (Fr. Abbot, 5th October 1999)

When I am weak, then am I strong (2 Cor 12:10)

Monastic Voices

On the ninth day of my mother's illness, when she was 56, and I was 33, this religious and devout soul was released from the body. I closed her eyes and an overwhelming grief welled into my heart, and was about to flow forth in a flood of tears. But under a powerful act of mental control my eyes held back the flood and dried it up. We did not think it right to celebrate the funeral with tearful dirges and lamentations, since in most cases it is customary to use such mourning to imply sorrow for the miserable state of those who die, or even their complete extinction. But my mother's dying meant neither that her state was miserable nor that she was suffering extinction. We were confident of this because of the evidence of her virtuous life, her faith unfeigned (1 Tm 1:15) and reasons of which we felt certain. So when her body was carried out, we went and returned without a tear.

Why then did I suffer sharp pains of inward grief? It must have been because a very affectionate and precious bond was suddenly torn apart. With much feeling in her love, she recalled in her last sickness that she had never heard me speak a harsh or bitter word to her. And yet, my God our maker, what comparison can there be between the respect with which I deferred to her and the service she rendered to me? Now that I had lost the immense support she gave, my soul was wounded, and my life as it were torn to pieces. When at last I was alone, I was glad to weep before you about her and for her, about myself and for myself. Now I let flow the tears which I had held back, so that they ran as freely as they wished. I wept for the mother who had died before my eyes, who had wept for me that I might live before your eyes.

But now, on behalf of your maidservant, I pour out to you, my God, another kind of tears. They flow from a spirit struck hard by considering the perils threatening every soul that dies in Adam (1 Cor 15:22). She, being made alive in Christ, though not yet delivered from the flesh, so lived that your name is praised in her faith and behaviour. But I set aside for a moment her good actions for which I rejoice and give you thanks, God of my heart, my praise and my life. I now petition you for my mother's sins. Hear me (Ps 142:1) through the remedy for our wounds who hung upon the wood and sits at your right hand to intercede for us (Rm 8:34). I know that she acted mercifully and from her heart forgave the debts of her debtors (Mt 6:12; 18:35). Now please forgive her her debts, if she contracted any during the many years that passed after she received the healing waters of salvation. Forgive, Lord, forgive, I beseech you. Enter not into judgement with her (Ps 142:2). Let mercy triumph over justice (Jm 2:13) for your words are true, and you have promised mercy to the merciful (Mt 5:7).

I believe that you have already done what I am asking of you. But as the day of her deliverance approached, she desired only that she might be remembered at your altar which she had attended every day without fail, where she knew that what is distributed is the holy victim who abolished the account of debts which was reckoned against us (Col 2:14). He triumphed over the enemy who found no fault in him in whom we are conquerors (Jn 14:30; Rm 8:37). By the chain of faith your handmaid bound her soul to the sacrament of our redemption. Let no one tear her from your protection. Let not the lion and dragon (Ps 90:13) intrude themselves. She would never say that she had no debts to pay; but she would insist that her debts have been forgiven by him to whom no one can repay the price which he, who owed nothing, paid on our behalf. My Lord, my God, may all who read these words remember at your altar Monica your servant and Patrick her husband, through whose physical bond you brought me into this life. As a result of these confessions of mine may my mother's request receive a richer response through the prayers which many offer, and not only those which come from me (2 Cor 1:11).

St. Augustine (354-430): Confessions, (abridged) IX, 28-37.

Dear Oblates and friends,

I had intended to write about the Great Jubilee in this letter. But I hope you will pardon me for choosing instead a very personal theme. I want to tell you about my dear mother, who died on October 5th. One reason for writing about her and her passing is simply to thank so many of you who heard the news on the grapevine, and sent, in a torrent, letters or cards of sympathy. All of them told of the deeply consoling support of your prayers. Many of you had had Masses said also, for her, for myself and for my family. I am so grateful for it all, and do apologise for not answering each one individually.

But more than this: my mother was a source of inspiration to countless people throughout her life, and perhaps never more so than during her final illness. So I thought that her example and witness might perhaps inspire and encourage you too.

She was born in 1927, the daughter of an Episcopalian Archdeacon, from Glen Esk in Angus. He used to take her with him, even as a little girl, on his pastoral rounds, visiting his parishoners, and especially the poor and the sick in their homes; always seeking to share with them somehow his own deep love of God. This experience was to have a profoundly formative influence on her.

At the age of 16 she approached her local Catholic priest for instructions, but her father heard of it, and persuaded her to remain an Anglican. "If it's not necessary to change, it's necessary not to change" was his constant advice. So it was to an Anglican Missionary Society, of very Catholic outlook, that she sought to dedicate her life. China, her first choice, was closed, so she trained as a teacher, learned Swahili, and went out to Tanganyika, now Tanzania, in East Africa. She loved it there, and made many life-long friends. She was given responsibility for education over an enormous area, and much of her time was spent on safari, miles from the nearest European, travelling often by canoe. Once she and a companion were in a truck that broke down at a swollen river. The two young women set out for help, walking through the night. To keep their courage up, they sang psalms: especially Psalm 90 (91) of Compline. Whoso dwelleth under the defence of the most High, shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty... He shall defend thee under his wings, and thou shalt be safe under his feathers... Thou shalt not be afraid for any terror by night... For he shall give his angels charge over thee: to keep thee in all thy ways. The next morning, on reaching human habitation, they discovered that they had walked right through the middle of a large pride of lions. Thou shalt go upon the lion and the adder: the young lion and the dragon shalt thou tread under thy feet. Because he has set his love on me, therefore shall I deliver him...

Fortunately for me, she was not to spend her whole life as a celibate missionary teacher. She became ill, and had to return home. In fact, her health was never good. She suffered all her life from chronic asthma and bronchitis. Without modern medicine, she would certainly have died many times over, before ever I arrived on the scene. Anyway, she met my father, a widower with 2 small children, and very soon they were married. 4 more children followed: actually not as many as she would have liked. But it was still quite a lot to be getting on with. She devoted herself wholeheartedly to her family, to which there were never wanting extras who lacked a secure and loving home of their own. She was a wonderful cook, highly skilled in knitting and all other house-wifely tasks: above all, she was a great teacher, organiser and encourager of her children. She also fully backed up my father when he embarked on the adventure of running a small and virtually self-sufficient farm in rural Herefordshire.

As we became a bit older, she found more time to devote to the local parish. She catechised the children, and got them to bring their parents with them to Church. She founded a Christian youth group. She visited the house bound, doing all she could to convince them that, far from being useless, they were infinitely precious to God, with an irreplaceable role in the Church. And she did this without ever drawing attention to herself. She hated the limelight, and kept well out of it.

When I was 16, I started to be troubled by the thought that perhaps I ought to be a Roman Catholic. She sent me to see Fr. Jerome, who was Abbot of the nearby Benedictine monastery at Belmont. He invited me, in his inimitable way, to pray. I little thought, then, that the seed of a monastic vocation had already been sown. For the time being, however, I followed my grandfather's maxim, and did not change. But then it suddenly seemed clear to me that change really was necessary. She entirely supported me, and quite soon afterwards, to my great surprise, came to the same conclusion herself, and was quietly received into the Catholic Church at Belmont. Like me, she never had the slightest doubts about this decision. She plunged at once into Catholic parish life, feeling completely at home, and being welcomed with open arms by all. Her need for daily Mass was a principal consideration when my parents eventually decided to move into Belmont Abbey's own semi-sheltered housing.

My mother was quite clear that Jesus had promised only the cross to those who would follow Him (cf. e.g. Lk 9:23). She knew that His real work began only after His active ministry had ended, and He had set His face for Jerusalem. When called to follow the path of suffering, therefore, she seemed quite content. And I think that, for her, as for her Master, her end was the crown and glory of her life.

Cancer was diagnosed at the beginning of October 1996. Already secondaries had started to appear in her skeleton, so we were told there could be no question of a complete cure. Treatment could be palliative and delaying only.

She had a double mastectomy. Then a low vertebra, eaten away by cancer, collapsed, causing terrible pain. It was re-built with bone from her hip and much iron mongery in a high-tech. operation. Then a strangulation hernia very nearly killed her again: another emergency operation saved her life in the nick of time. Then her upper arm spontaneously snapped. A long pin was inserted to hold it together, but the arm became badly swollen with lymph, and never really recovered. Then she fell, and broke her pelvis. Throughout it all, radio therapy continued, giving some relief to pain caused by new cancer spots, attacking especially the low spine. She had some very unfortunate experiences due to bungling in various hospitals: but also some very positive ones, especially in the Hereford Hospice.

The battle lasted for 3 long years. Again and again, it seemed that pneumonia must prove fatal, but again and again she pulled back from the brink. And always she remained constantly, astonishingly cheerful. "Indomitable" was the word that everybody used of her. She was not in the least afraid of death, but she had tremendous zest for life, and for the time being simply refused to accept defeat. She derived enormous pleasure from many things, but especially her family, and her grandchildren. The only thing she complained of was smothering sympathy ("Oh you poor thing"). And she hated being so doped up with morphine that her mind became muddled, or sedated into oblivion. She said she would rather have the pain.

She was walking in the midst of different lions now, but as in Africa, she trusted entirely in God. 2 of her favourite prayers from this time: "O God, you have given me so much. I ask you to give me one thing more - a truly thankful heart." And the prayer of King Henry VI: "O Lord Jesus Christ, Who hast made me and redeemed me, and brought me where I am upon my way. Thou knowest what Thou wouldst do with me. Do with me according to Thy will, for Thy tender name's sake."

I cannot speak enough of the love my mother had for me. Very shortly before the end, she asked if I could come to see her, since she had not long to go. We had a lovely few days together. I had the great consolation of giving her not only Holy Communion each day, but also the Sacrament of the sick. Our parting was not tearful, as usual, but perfectly cheerful and easy. She went down rather rapidly after that. Nevertheless, the day before her death, she managed a long chat with Dom Jerome, in which they spoke freely of death. That evening I spoke with her on the phone, and as always she was completely positive and interested in all our doings. Her last words to me expressed the hope that we might meet again. And indeed, I hope so too. Shortly afterwards she fell asleep. She never woke again. She died most peacefully, at home, without any distress, with my father by her, as always, holding her hand.

The funeral was at Belmont, as she had arranged. Although there were some tears, it was far from a gloomy occasion, with warm sunshine smiling on a huge gathering of family and friends. All the children had a present, which she had previously bought and wrapped up for the occasion. Fr. Simon of Belmont, a close friend, presided, in white vestments. I read the Gospel: Jn 14:1-6. In his homily, Fr. Simon turned our Lord's words around. "You must think of Anne saying this" he said. "Do not let your hearts be troubled... There are many rooms in my Father's house. I am now going to prepare a place for you...so that where I am, you may be too". And then at Thomas's question she would be very firm: "Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life". At the final commendation, Fr. Jerome and I stood together to sing "In Paradisum" and "Chorus Angelorum". The family asked for no flowers, but donations for the Hereford Hospice. But the children decorated the grave, in the own way. A large pipe cleaner spider was the centre piece. She would have been delighted with that.

I have found confirmed, yet again, from experience, these last weeks, that the Catholic Church what she is supposed to be, a communion of love. So much prayer, so much tender compassion, so much love, from so many. So the dominant note must be not sorrow, but just thanksgiving. And so I will leave you, and my mother, with words from the Divine Praises we sing at Benediction. She once said she would like a tape of this to be played as she lay dying. *Benedictus Deus. Benedictum nomen sanctum eius...* Blessed be God; Blessed be His Holy Name; Blessed be Jesus Christ, true God and true man... Blessed be God in His Angels and in His Saints. *Fiat. Fiat. A men. Amen.*