



"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).

"Seeking his workman in the crowds to whom he calls out, the Lord says again: 'Is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days?' (Ps 33/34:13). If you hear this and respond, 'I do!' God says to you: 'If you desire true and lasting life, keep your tongue from evil and your lips from deceit; turn away from evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it' (Ps 33/34:14-15). When you have done this, my eyes will be on you, and my ears will listen for your prayers; before you even invoke me, I will say: 'Here I am!' (cf. Is 58:9; 65:24). What could be sweeter, dearest brethren, than this voice of the Lord calling to us? See how the Lord in his love for us shows us the way to life. Let us therefore gird our loins with faith and the performance of good works. Let us set out on his path, with the Gospel as our guide, so that we may be worthy to see him who has called us into his Kingdom" (Holy Rule, Prologue: vv 14-21).

"What are the tools of good works: ...To live in fear of judgement day. To have a horror of hell. To yearn for eternal life with all spiritual longing. To keep death daily before one's eyes.... Never to despair of the mercy of God" (Holy Rule Ch. 4: Title & vv 44-47; 74).

Monastic Voices

O good Shepherd Jesus, good, gentle, tender Shepherd: behold a wretched and pitiful shepherd cries out to you. He is weak and clumsy and of little use, but still he is a shepherd of your sheep. O good Shepherd, a shepherd who is not good cries out to you: anxious for himself, anxious for your sheep. You have entrusted them to this poor sinner, your servant, to rule. So I beg you sweet Lord, not for gold or silver or precious stones, but for wisdom, that I may know how to rule your people.

You know, Lord, my heart. You know that my desire is to devote wholly to their service whatever you have given your servant; to spend it completely for them. You know also that I am ready to be myself wholly spent, poured out, for them. May all I perceive and all I utter, my leisure and my occupation, my thoughts and my actions, my prosperity and my adversity, my life and my death, my health and my sickness, yes all that I am be spent on them, be poured out for them, for whom you yourself did not disdain to be poured out. Grant me, Lord, through your grace that is beyond our understanding, grant that I may bear their infirmities with patience, that I may have loving compassion for them, that I may come to their aid effectively. Taught by your Spirit may I learn to comfort the sorrowful, confirm the weak and raise the fallen. May I be myself one with them in their weaknesses, one with them when they burn at causes of offence, one in all things with them, and all things to all of them, so that I may gain them all. And since you have given them this blind leader, this unlearned teacher, this ignorant guide, if not for my sake then for theirs teach him whom you have made to be their teacher, lead him whom you have bidden to lead them, rule him who is their ruler.

Hear me, therefore, hear me, O Lord my God, and let your eyes be open on them day and night. Spread forth your wings in love and protect them; stretch out your holy right hand and bless them; pour into their hearts your Holy Spirit, that He may keep them in unity of spirit and in the bond of peace; chaste in their bodies, lowly in

their minds. May He be present when they pray. May He fill their hearts with the rich abundance of your love. May He refresh their minds with sweet compunction, enlighten their hearts with grace, cheer them with hope, humble them with fear, kindle them with charity. May He suggest to them the petitions which you wish graciously to hear. May He be present in their meditations, that they may know you, and readily call on you when in adversity, or consult you when in doubt. O sweet Lord, by the working of your Holy Spirit may they be at peace within themselves, with one another and with me. May they be modest, kind and obedient; serving and supporting one another; fervent in spirit, rejoicing in hope, always patient: through poverty, through abstinence, through labours and vigils, in silence and in repose. Be in their midst according to your faithful promise. Inspire them, also, my God, to have of me who am your servant, and their servant for your sake, such an opinion as may profit them. May they have such love and fear of me as you see to be good for them. I for my part commit them into your holy hands and loving providence. May no one snatch them from your hand, nor from the hand of your servant to whom you have entrusted them. May they persevere with gladness in their holy purpose, and through their perseverance may they obtain everlasting life.

Taken from the Pastoral Prayer of St. Aelred (otherwise "Alfred") of Rievaulx, 1110 - 1167.

Dear oblates and friends,

As long expected and awaited, at about 2 o'clock in the morning of Tuesday 25th September, in the monastery infirmary, fortified by the sacraments of holy Church and the prayers of his brethren, Abbot Alfred died. As he went through his final agony, Fr. Abbot read the tremendous words prescribed for the dying since at least the 8th century: Go forth, Christian soul, out of this world. Go in the name of God the Father Almighty who created you. Go in the name of Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, who suffered for you. Go in the name of the Holy Spirit, who was given for you. Go in the name of Mary, Virgin Mother of God; in the name of blessed Joseph; in the name of the angels, archangels, thrones and dominations; in the name of the patriarchs and prophets; of the holy apostles and evangelists; of the holy martyrs, confessors, monks and hermits; of the holy virgins, and of all the Saints of God. May peace be yours this day, and may your home be in heaven... The first prayer of the whole community, chanted as soon as all were assembled in the very early morning, was the heart-rendingly beautiful responsory (in the fourth mode) "Subvenite": Saints of God, come to his aid! Hasten to meet him, angels of the Lord! Take his soul and offer it in the presence of the Most High. May Christ who called you, take you to Himself. May angels lead you to the bosom of Abraham. Eternal rest grant unto him, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon him.

This was the death not just of a member, but of the father of our community. For by the mysterious decree of Providence, it had fallen to Dom Alfred to lead the Pluscarden community as its first independent Prior; then in 1974 to be blessed as its first Abbot. His, then, was the hand on the helm during a period of great upheaval in the Church. He was the one who had to set the tone at a time when everything seemed open to change. So to him, at least in large part, we owe our identity as a monastery of contemplative life; our patrimony of a full and rich Latin liturgy, to which nothing is preferred; our tradition of hospitality, and of simple and humble manual labour, exercised through small industries; our excellent relations with the Bishop and clergy of our diocese, and with our neighbours in the valley and beyond. How fitting it was, then, that this monk chosen to be Abbot should die on the very anniversary of his Abbatial blessing. Surely something of his legacy to us can be glimpsed in the prayer of his patron St. Aelred for his monks. Abbot Alfred loved to pray this during his life. We do not doubt that this work of intercession continues for us all, monks, oblates and friends, only more powerfully, more purely than ever, now that he is eternally with God.

I don't intend in this letter to give a full account of Abbot Alfred's life. That will appear in the forthcoming edition of Pluscarden Benedictines, now under new management. But I think that some reflections about life and death might be appropriate, especially in the light of the quotations from the Holy Rule at the head of this letter. St. Benedict almost defines the monk (and therefore, by extension, the oblate) as someone who yearns for life; who wants to follow the Lord, believing that He is the one who gives us life. But he also advises the monk, the Christian, to "keep death daily before his eyes". This is not just a warning to live with a sober sense of the impermanence of all things, and to be ready at all times to let go of one's hold on all that is not God. More positively, it comes from an understanding of death as the door through which we must pass in order to enter into the fullness of life.

The death of a faithful monk is without doubt a loss for the community: but it is not merely a loss. It is not even really a cause for sadness. The departed brother has simply gone on ahead, where we all hope to follow. He has

achieved his aim, reached the end of his race, completed his service of the King; and now all that remains, saving perhaps some temporary purgation, is the reward. And what is this? What the happiest possible marriage on earth dimly reflects or points towards - eternal union with the Beloved; entry into the limitless joy of the Trinity; the glory of heaven. There those who belong to Jesus Christ enter their inheritance of the love eternally bestowed by the Father on the Son. There, according to our capacity, we will know, with all the Saints, in all its breadth and length and height and depth, the love of Christ, which surpasses knowledge (cf. Eph 3:18). There we will be not just with Him, but in Him, and He in us (cf. Jn 17:26). There we will be like Him, for we will see Him as He is (1 Jn 3:2). There we will drink from the torrent of His delights, drawing life from its source (Ps 35/6:8). So Mother Teresa of Calcutta would say, almost in envy, to a dying Christian, "When you meet Jesus, please give Him my love, and tell Him I hope to be joining you with Him soon".

It is quite common for death to seem a mere slipping away: a perfectly peaceful, even gentle passing from one stage of life to another. This is always a great and most desirable blessing; as is the serene acceptance of death without any fear, which we often associate with very holy people. But some very good and holy people cannot view death in this way. Their experience is more like that of Our Lord in Gethsemani: every instinct in them revolts at the thought. Sometimes God seems to ask them to drink very deeply from this bitter chalice, so that the process of dying remains for them an utterly dreadful thing right to the end. This is their way of sharing in Christ's passion: the final purification asked of them, before they come definitively into His presence. It is quite compatible with faith, hope and charity, even exercised to a heroic degree. It was, in some respects, the way taken by Abbot Alfred, on his journey out of this world.

Perhaps I may be allowed to mention two little signs which seemed at the time to confirm our confidence that this suffering has now given way to perfect joy. The first came through a guest, brought here shortly before by an oblate, for his first-ever stay. This person knew nothing of Pluscarden, and virtually nothing of the Catholic faith, but was sorely in need of peace and healing for mind and heart. All unawares of the events of the night, he happened to mention on the morning of 25th how he had been lying restless and troubled, when at about 2 a.m., he had been overwhelmed by a sense of goodness, and the certainty that "there is something very beautiful here"... The second little sign was the funeral itself. It wonderfully expressed the love and respect in which Abbot Alfred was held, the good that had been achieved through his life, and the great chorus of prayer now raised on his behalf. Here he achieved his properly dignified and graceful ending.

Traditionally, monks have given very concrete expression to their ardent longing for heaven, and also to their ever-present awareness of death. We read how the early desert fathers would often choose to live in or amid tombs. St. Aelred kept a coffin in his cell, and used to practise lying in it, while meditating on death, judgement, heaven and hell. We might think such practices exaggerated, even morbid, but for those monks they were simply a way of expressing the truth of their baptism. They had died to the world, to self, with Christ, and now they wanted only to live the new life, the Christ-life, the life through which we become conformed to His resurrection (cf. Rm 6:4-5). "For me" says St. Paul, "life means Christ; death a prize to be won... I long to be released, and to be with Christ" (cf. Phil 1:21, 23).

Abbot Alfred had death very much before his eyes, particularly through his long illness. Latterly he kept a card by his bedside, on which was written a famous remark of St. Hugh of Lincoln (1140-1200): "The day of my death will not be a day of judgement, but a day of grace and mercy". As for yearning for eternal life with all spiritual longing: this was surely the obsession that dominated his whole life. From his entry into the Capuchin Franciscans on leaving school, to his battle against physical weakness in his final years and months, there, quietly persisting, was his single-minded quest for Christ's Kingdom, following the guidance of the Gospel; his obedient response to the voice of Christ insistently calling.

It is worth emphasising that the Christian and monastic focus on life beyond the grave does not detract from the value of our life in this world. On the contrary: it provides it with its purpose, and meaning. With an eternal goal in view, life is always worth living, no matter how painful or drab, no matter how few the apparent achievements. When we understand this life as a journey or pilgrimage towards our true and heavenly home, we can gratefully accept whatever happiness comes our way, but without becoming unduly dismayed if it should be replaced by sorrow, or by trials and difficulties. These things can be seen as coming from the loving hand of God, helping to prepare us for heaven. And experience proves that one who lives not for himself, but for God, in fact is blessed with happiness and fulfilment; while content always seems to elude someone who lives entirely for himself. It is because of our eternal destiny that we have no need to regard our own death, or that of those dear to us, as the ultimate catastrophe. On the other hand, also because of this, we regard every human life as possessing intrinsic dignity, which is always worthy of respect. We condemn abortion and euthanasia, since

they deny that respect due no less to the weakest and poorest. For this reason, too, we regard the attempt to create and manipulate embryonic human life in the laboratory as an abomination.

Unfortunately the secular culture that surrounds us today knows nothing of God or of His Kingdom, or of eternal life. All the more reason, then, for all of us to "gird ourselves with faith and the performance of good works." Faith underpinned by fidelity to daily prayer and spiritual reading. Good works expressed in concrete acts of kindness, for example to the sick: perhaps especially to those who are terminally ill.

St. Benedict's response to an un-Christian culture was to create a Christian one. Living in a monastery certainly makes it easier to keep a true and Christian perspective on life. The monk is constantly being reminded of the Gospel promises, and of his own need to respond to them. At the simplest level, wherever he goes about the house, the monk sees the image of Christ hanging dead on the cross. This is a stark reminder of the death we all have to undergo. Much more is it our assurance of the eternal life that has been bought for us at such a cost. Christ showed through His cross that He counted nothing dearer to Himself than us. Through our acceptance of our own cross, we can show that we in turn hold nothing dearer to ourselves than Him.

All of us want, like Abbot Alfred, to have a priest with us when we die. But what of those who do not have this consolation? The prayer of the Church, we say, will supply its lack. May I end then by recommending to you one traditional Catholic devotion? It is to say 3 Hail Mary's, just before getting into bed at night: one for all who have died that day, one for all who will die that night, and one for one's own happy death... Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.