



**"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).

"The Jubilee of the Year 2000 is meant to be a great prayer of praise and thanksgiving, especially for the gift of the Incarnation. In the Jubilee Year Christians will stand with the renewed wonder of faith before the love of the Father, who gave his Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. With a profound sense of commitment, they will likewise express their gratitude for the gift of the Church. Their thanksgiving will embrace the fruits of holiness which have matured in the lives of all who have fully welcomed the gift of Redemption." (Pope John Paul II: TMA n. 32)

## Monastic Voices

"You have heard, O Virgin, the announcement of the great mystery. The means designed for its fulfilment have been unfolded to you, each wondrous, each replete with joy. Rejoice, O daughter of Sion, and exult exceedingly, O virgin daughter of Jerusalem. And because to you has been given joy and gladness, allow us to hear from your lips the answer and the good tidings which we desire, that the bones that have been humbled may rejoice. You have heard the fact and have believed. Believe also in the means which have been explained to you. You have heard that you shall conceive and bear a Son; you have heard that you shall conceive, not of man, but of the Holy Spirit. The Angel is waiting for your answer: it is time for him to return to God who sent him. We too are waiting, O Lady, for a word of mercy - we, who are groaning under the sentence of condemnation. See, the price of our salvation is offered to you; if you consent, we shall at once be delivered. By the eternal Word of God we were all created, and behold we die. By one little word of yours in answer shall we all be made alive. Adam asks this of you, O loving Virgin: wretched Adam, exiled as he is from paradise with all his poor children; Abraham begs this of you, and David; this all the holy fathers implore, your fathers, who themselves are dwelling in the valley of the shadow of death. Behold the entire human race prostrate at your feet awaits your reply.

And rightly so, for on your word depend the consolation of the wretched, the redemption of the captive, the freedom of the condemned, the salvation of your entire race, of all Adam's children. Hasten, then, O Virgin, to give your answer. Hasten, O Lady, to speak the word so longed for by all on earth, in the underworld and in heaven. Indeed, the King and Lord of all things, Who has greatly desired your beauty, desires as eagerly your word of consent, by which He has purposed to save the world. He whom you have pleased by your silence will now be more gratified by your reply. For He calls you from heaven: "O most beautiful among women, make me hear your voice."

If you let Him hear your voice, He will enable you to see our salvation. And is not this what you have longed for, what you have prayed for night and day with sighs and tears? Why then delay? You, O Mary, are that Virgin in whom and through whom God our King, before all ages, determined to operate our salvation in the midst of the earth. Why do you humbly expect from another what is offered to you, and will soon be manifested through yourself if you will but yield your consent and speak the word? Answer, then, quickly to the Angel - or

rather, through the angel, give your consent to God. Speak the word, and receive the Word. Offer what is yours, and conceive what is of God; give what is temporal, and embrace what is eternal.

Why delay? Why tremble? Believe, speak, receive! Let humility put on boldness, and modesty confidence. Not now should your virginal simplicity forget prudence! In this one thing alone, O prudent Virgin, fear not presumption; for although modesty that is silent is pleasing, piety now makes speech necessary. Open, O Blessed Virgin, your heart to faith; open your lips to speak; open your bosom to your Maker. Behold! the Desired of all nations is outside, knocking at your door. Oh! if by your delay he should pass by, and again in sorrow you should have to begin to seek for him whom your soul loves! Arise, then, run and open. Arise by faith, run by the devotion of your heart, open by your word.

'And Mary said: Behold the handmaid of the Lord: let it be it done to me according to your word.'

*St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), In praise of the Virgin Mary n. 4:8-9.*

## Dear Oblates and friends,

As we reflect on the century we have now left behind, there is plenty for us to regret and bewail; plenty of cause for sorrow and penitence. But for Benedictines, there is also a great deal for which to give thanks. The 20th century was in many ways a good century for monasticism. And so, following the Holy Father's hint, I want in this letter to offer a brief review of the monastic history of the past century, inviting you to join me in praising and thanking God for all His gifts. To keep the subject within bounds, I confine my attention to those communities which follow the Rule of St. Benedict (480-546), leaving aside monastic communities of other traditions, such as the Carmelite, Franciscan, Augustinian etc. I concentrate also particularly on the monasteries of the British Isles.

Obviously, it has not been a "Benedictine Century" in the sense that the 8th to the 12th centuries were. Then the Rule of St. Benedict held a dominating influence in the Church and in society throughout Western Europe. The monasteries were the principal centres of spiritual vitality, the chief repositories of learning and culture, and almost the only stable sources of hospitality and social care. Even after the new religious orders emerging in the 13th century undercut this dominance, the monasteries continued throughout the High Middle Ages as integral parts of the religious and social landscape, in a way that a modern monastery cannot possibly aspire to do.

20th century monasticism might seem weak and marginal compared with that, but considering where it came from, and the religious atmosphere in which it lived, its history has been very remarkable. When in 1893 Pope Leo XIII arranged that all the Benedictine Congregations should be bonded together within a single federation, there were 2,765 monks then in the world, in 107 monasteries. By 1960 there were 12,131 monks in 257 monasteries. In 1990 there were 359 monasteries, though with declining numbers in the West and some suppressions in the East, the number of monks had fallen to 9,096. The number of Benedictine women in 1990 was nearly 20,000. These figures exclude the Cistercians, who also, of course, follow the Rule of St. Benedict. In 1947, for example, just the "strict observance" branch of the Cistercian family had about 4,000 monks, in 64 monasteries world wide: like the Benedictines, also showing considerable increase from their strength 50 years before. Taking the century as a whole, then, it has been an astonishing story of consolidation and growth. And this has occurred in the very century of mass apostasy from the faith; the century of atheist ideologies, totalitarian empires and human slaughter on an unheard-of scale: the century of secular post-Christianity. In the midst of all this, a way of life according to a 1500 year old Rule, characterised by the gentle but demanding search for God, in communities whose first priority is prayer, has endured, blossomed forth, and borne fruit. Surely these are good grounds for encouragement for all of us, and also for hope in this new Millennium we have now entered.

How had monasticism fared in the period leading up to the 20th century? Not very well. In the British Isles, monastic life was wiped out of existence in the mid 16th century, leaving everywhere only the melancholy vestiges of "bare, ruined Choirs". Elsewhere in Europe its persecution to virtual extinction was reserved to the period of the French Revolution. Successive attempts to restore it during the 19th century were snuffed out, again and again, by hostile governments. And in the Americas, Asia, Oceania and Africa, of course, Christian monasticism before the modern age was unknown.

The expansion of monastic life into the Third world in the 20th century has been perhaps its most remarkable feature of all. The 1996 Benedictine and Cistercian Year Book of *Aide inter monastaires pour les jeunes Eglises* lists 317 new monasteries established in the young Churches, the vast majority within the past 30 years, plus a further 243 houses of active Benedictine Sisters. These numbers have certainly grown since then. It will be impossible to chronicle all of them here, or to outline the expansion of monasticism on the Continent and in North America. Nor will there be space to dwell on the modern monastic Saints: most notably the martyrs of the Spanish Revolution (1936), of the Cambodian genocide (1976) and of the Algerian Islamic terror (1996); the Cistercians Saint Gabriella of Unity (1914-1939) and Blessed Cyprian Tansi (1903-1964); Blessed Ildephonsus Cardinal Schuster (1880-1954) and the many whose cause for canonisation is being considered, especially Venerable Columba Marmion (1858-1923) and Br. Meinrad Eugster (1848-1925). The Saints of course remain the seal of authenticity, and chief glory, of monastic life: and they have not been lacking in the 20th century. But passing over all these, let me focus on the monasteries of our own Islands.

The century did not begin with an entirely blank slate. A handful of monasteries, such as Mount St. Bernard, in Leicestershire, and Ramsgate Abbey, had been founded already in the 19th century. And there were now established in Britain also those communities which had lived in exile since the 17th century. It has been an achievement for these to have "crossed the threshold of the Third Millennium", the continuity with their proud past unbroken. Such are the nuns of Buckfast, Colwich, Fernham, Kylemore in Ireland, Oulton, and Stanbrook, and the monks of Ampleforth, Douai and Downside. The nuns of Haslemere, continuing a community founded in 1597, sadly were disbanded in 1975. Fort Augustus Abbey, which in 1998 also closed, had a somewhat tenuous but much cherished connection with the ancient continental Scottish Abbeys of Ratisbon and Lambspring. The contribution of these communities, and of others now deceased or much declined, should not be forgotten.

Our own community is an example of new growth starting from nothing more than one charismatic man's vision and powers of leadership. It began a rickety sort of existence within the Anglican Church in 1895, but it only really became established when it moved to Caldey Island in 1906. Then in 1913, as is well known, almost all its members were received into full communion with the Catholic Church. From that Caldey tree diverse shoots were sent out, which live on today.

Its sister community of nuns at Milford Haven took the same Romewards step in 1913, but then moved to Talacre in North Wales. They are now settled at Curzon Park in Chester.

Dom Denys Prideaux, who remained an Anglican, went on to found his own Anglican Benedictine community in the Caldey tradition. It became very well known at Nashdom. In 1939 it made a foundation at Three Rivers, Michigan USA, which is now independent. In 1987 it moved to Elmore in Berkshire. Similarly, some nuns who did not become Catholic in 1913 established their own Anglican community of contemplative life, at West Mallang. This community remains strictly cloistered to this day. Several other Anglican religious communities, independently founded, have come to adopt the Holy Rule as their guide in the course of the century.

The main body of the male Caldey community, now Catholic, grew remarkably in numbers, and transferred in 1928 to Prinknash in Gloucestershire. Prinknash became a member of the Subiaco Benedictine Congregation, to which Ramsgate Abbey already belonged. Daughter houses were founded at Farnborough in 1947, and Pluscarden in 1948. Pluscarden in turn established a daughter house at Petersham Massachusetts in 1987, and is involved, with Prinknash, Ramsgate and Christ in the desert, with the 1989 foundation of Kristo Buase Monastery in Ghana.

A separate tradition of monastic observance arrived in England at the beginning of the century, when the monks of Solesmes were expelled from France. They came to Quarr on the Isle of Wight in 1908, building a magnificent Abbey there. When the French monks were able to return home in 1922, a community continued at Quarr, acquiring, with its native vocations, an ever more British flavour. Solesmes monks also established themselves in the monastery at Farnborough, originally built by the exiled French Empress Eugenie as a mausoleum for her husband Napoleon III and their deceased son. That community built up a reputation as the home of several internationally eminent monastic scholars, before it handed the buildings over to Prinknash in 1947.

The nuns of Solesmes had also come to the Isle of Wight, expelled from France by the anti-clerical laws. When they returned home along with their brethren, their convent at Ryde was taken over by another community of

Benedictine nuns, with a long history of its own. This continues at Ryde, famous for its beautiful rendering of Gregorian Chant, and itself aggregated, now, to the Solesmes Congregation. In 1967 these nuns made a foundation at Bangalore in South India. Shanti Nilayam, ("the House of Peace") flourished, and is also now an Abbey in its own right.

The oldest monastic buildings in use in these Islands are not those of Pluscarden. The Monastery at Minster in Kent was founded in 670: some 560 years before us. Its second Abbess was the much loved St. Mildred, whose relics and spirit are to be found there today, together with some parts of the original Saxon buildings. Later Norman additions are also well preserved. In 1937 a group of German nuns from Eichstatt, fleeing from the Nazi regime, managed to purchase the site. The present community there has a very international flavour: they are now members of our own Congregation and Province. They recently built a beautiful new Church. They are well known for their mixed farm, run on sound ecological lines. It creates the perfect setting for a holy place whose palpable sense of peace is experienced by all visitors.

Probably the most famous monastic Church in the country is that of Buckfast, which was built entirely by the monks themselves. As with Quarr, the community came to Britain as exiles from France and Germany. Their mother house was La-Pierre-qui-Vire, famous for the austerity of its life. Many of the German brothers were able to spend the war years quietly engaged in building work, or, in the case of Br. Adam, making honey and breeding bees. Their Church was completed in 1938: a magnificent monument to persevering Work and Prayer, in the best Benedictine tradition. The Buckfast community now belongs to the English Benedictine Congregation.

The "E.B.C.", as it is generally known, remains the largest Benedictine Congregation in Britain. During the centuries of penal laws against Catholics, its monks dedicated themselves to work "on the mission". This tradition of active apostolate has remained, and the chief work of these monks has usually been the pastoral care of parishes, and the running of schools.

The senior EBC monastery is Downside Abbey near Bath. For all the long history of its community, it was only raised to the status of Abbey, along with Ampleforth and Douai, in 1899. To become an Abbey, a community must have a sufficient number of solemnly professed monks, a good and stable monastic observance and economic independence. Downside's Cathedral-like Church was completed in 1925. Its Abbot John Chapman was novice master in our community at Caldey following the 1913 conversion: he was a great scholar and a spiritual writer of enduring significance. Of 2 famous Abbots Butler of Downside, the latter became a Bishop, and one of the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council. In 1919 Downside made a foundation in America at Portsmouth, Rhode Island, later taken over by Fort Augustus, and in 1933 another at Worth in Sussex. Ealing Abbey in London had been founded in 1897: it gained independence from Downside in 1947, and in 1955 became an Abbey. It completed its Abbey Church only in 1999. Worth became an Abbey in 1965. All 3 monasteries continue to run flourishing boarding schools.

Ampleforth in rural Yorkshire was always by far the largest monastic community of 20th century Britain. At its peak it had over 150 monks. It came to the public notice particularly after its Abbot, Basil Hume, was made Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster. In 1955 it made a foundation in the USA at St. Louis, Missouri, and in 1996 it began another at Macheke in Zimbabwe. There are also little Ampleforth communities resident in Oxford, Osmotherley and Bamber Bridge.

Douai Abbey near Reading is so called after the name of its former residence in France, whence it was expelled in 1903. Its Pugin-Gothic Church was completed, very imaginatively, in 1994 with a striking apse in modern style. It recently shared the fate of Belmont Abbey, near Hereford, in being forced to close its school. Belmont, founded in 1859 as the common noviciate house for the EBC, and as the Cathedral of the diocese, became an Abbey in its own right in 1920. In 1981 it made a monastic foundation in Peru, also sending out a monk to do pastoral work among the native Catholics there. A monk of Belmont has also been involved for many years with a monastic foundation in Uganda.

The EBC nuns do not engage in pastoral work outside their enclosure. The most fruitful of them all, in terms of foundations, has been Stanbrook Abbey in Worcesterstershire, made famous by the friendship of its Abbess Laurentia (1866-1953) with George Bernard Shaw and Sydney Cockerell. Already in the 19th century Stanbrook had initiated a foundation in Australia, which continues in the communities of Jamberoo and

Lammermoor. Then in 1911 Stanbrook undertook a foundation in Sao Paulo, Brazil. From this beginning, no fewer than 14 South American monasteries have descended.

Other Benedictine Congregations in Great Britain are the Olivetans and the Tyburn Adorers of the Sacred Heart.

The Olivetan monks wear white habits in honour of Our Lady. They founded Cockfosters in London in 1936, and Turvey near Bedford in 1980. This latter is a double community of monks and nuns who share the same liturgy in a common Church. In 1998 a small community of Olivetan monks from the Abbey of Bec in France was established at Rostrevor in Northern Ireland. All of these communities have a special commitment to work for Christian unity.

The particular charism of the Tyburn nuns is Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament by day and night. Tyburn Convent was founded, on the very site of execution of the English Martyrs, in 1903. From this mother house foundations have been made in Ireland, Australia, Peru, Scotland and New Zealand.

Apart from Rostrevor, the only monastery of Benedictine monks in Ireland is Glenstal Abbey, belonging to the Congregation of the Annunciation. It was founded in 192. Its dedication to SS. Joseph and Columba reflects the community's debt of inspiration to the Blessed Abbot (Joseph) Columba Marmion, himself an Irishman, and a monk of Maredsous in Belgium. Rather like the EBC in spirit, Glenstal runs a large school. In 1975 a group of Glenstal monks went to Nigeria. Their community began in Eke, but is now flourishing in Ewu, in mid-West Nigeria.

The Cistercians, whose main work has traditionally been farming, are very well represented in Ireland. 2 Abbeys founded in the 19th century have multiplied in the 20th. 6 daughter houses have sprung from Mt Melleray, including Mellifont (1938) and Portglenone (1948) in Ireland. Mt. St. Joseph, Roscrea, founded Nunraw in Scotland in 1949, Tarrawara in Australia in 1954, and Bolton in Ireland in 1964. The Cistercians of Caldey Island came from Belgium in 1928, thereby rescuing our own community from financial embarrassment. Meanwhile Mt. St. Bernard Abbey founded Bamenda in Nigeria in 1963. Dom Cyprian Tansi, from Nigeria, was a member of the English community: he was beatified by Pope John Paul II in 1998. The English Cistercian nuns of Stapehill moved recently to Whitland in South Wales. They founded Glencairn in Ireland in 1932; this in turn founded Wrentham in Massachusetts in 1949, and a second daughter house in Nigeria in 1982. Wrentham has gone on to found 3 daughter houses of its own in America. Also within the Cistercian family are the Bernardine nuns. Their Convent at Slough was founded in 1897. A second English house was founded at Hyning in Lancashire in 1974. These nuns retain close ties with their own Bernadine family, which has monasteries today also in France, Africa and Japan.

The last Congregation to mention is the one showing perhaps the most remarkable growth of all. The Benedictine Sisters of Our Lady of Grace and Compassion began in 1954 as a small group of lay oblates caring for the elderly in Brighton, led by Miss Mary Garson. They were admitted to the Benedictine confederation only in 1992. But at a time when most orders have experienced an acute shortage of vocations, these Sisters have quietly gone on growing. There are now 194 professed Sisters of this new order. They have 15 convents, in England, India, Kenya and Sri Lanka.

All of the monasteries we have discussed above have of course been affected by the great events of the 20th century, particularly the two world wars, and the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). The end of each of the wars saw a great influx of monastic recruits. For its part, the Council prompted many changes at every level of monastic life, some of them quite radical: not all of them, dare I say? for the better. Diversity of observance between the various houses greatly increased in its wake. Especially for monasteries in the 3rd world, inculturation became the order of the day. In Britain, the post-Conciliar turmoil perhaps affected the Benedictines rather less than it did other Orders. After all, the Rule not only has a very long tradition, but it emphasises qualities like stability and moderation; it promotes a gentle sanity that is not easily reconciled with avant-garde excess. Nevertheless, during the 1960's and '70's, the monasteries of Europe were not spared requests for dispensation from vows on an unprecedented scale. At the same time, the flow of new vocations generally was reduced to a thin trickle. For some places, it even dried up altogether. The result of this is that, despite the tremendous achievements we have noted above, the great majority of monastic communities in Britain enter the 21st century with an unhealthily high average age, and numbers sharply reduced, as compared with 30 or 40 years ago.

If vocations are now generally scarce, nevertheless among the laity, monasteries have perhaps never been more highly valued. Monastic guest houses seem to be in demand, from people of all walks of life, as never before. And lay people have discovered, more and more, that the wisdom of the Rule can well be applied even outside the cloister. A considerable literature has grown up around this subject. So nearly all Benedictine monasteries now have oblates. Their numbers have dramatically increased in recent decades. Since they choose to associate themselves closely with a particular community, promising the reformation of their life according to the spirit of the Holy Rule, they also must take their place in any assessment of Benedictine life and practice of the 20th century.

What is it that all these people find so attractive about the Benedictine way? How is it that this ancient Rule has proved to be so relevant in the 20th century, not only surviving, but spreading all over the world, and exerting a beneficent influence out of all proportion to the number of religious involved?

I think that the key to the Rule's adaptability is that its only aim is the living of the Christian life. The monastery does not exist primarily to do a particular work, or to fulfil a particular mission. Rather, it is a very public, stable witness to the inherent beauty, and desirability, of the vocation common to all Christians. The chief work of the monastery, for St. Benedict, is simply to give praise to God. It is there to help those who truly seek God to achieve their aim: to "prefer nothing whatever to Christ".

And so in their quiet, unaggressive sort of way, the monasteries simply live their witness. And the qualities they particularly represent are often those for which people today hunger. Just by being, they demonstrate, for example, the value, and possibility, of community. They proclaim, not so much in words as in their daily life, that human happiness and fulfilment can flourish apart from the values our consumer society so relentlessly promotes: power, money and sex. They bear witness to the value of silence, and of being over against doing, in the eyes of God. In an age of continual change and novelty, where so much is transient and superficial, the monasteries offer the enormous wealth of tradition, to which they are heir, as a source from which all people can draw nourishment and life. The Benedictine motto is Peace, and peace must inevitably flow from any community which lives an ordered, disciplined life of prayer. Monks and nuns put their best resources into their public worship, and so their