



**"Nothing Dearer Than Christ"**

Oblate letter of the Pluscarden Benedictines

**Elgin, Moray, Scotland IV30 8UA**

DBH Series No 17, May 2001

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

## Dear oblates and friends,

Sr. Teresa of the Holy Spirit ODC died last November aged 93. She had an enormous influence on me, ever since Dom Maurus sent me to see her shortly before I entered here. That visit was an unforgettable experience. The heavy Carmelite double grille which her monastery maintained has a powerful visual impact, especially on first acquaintance: but that was soon forgotten, as one became aware of being in the presence of someone extraordinarily close to God. She had known Dom Maurus well in the 1930's, when they worked together in the Legion of Mary in Liverpool and elsewhere. She then became a Carmelite, and he a Benedictine; but they kept in frequent touch by letter. Pluscarden occupied a very important place in her heart: she prayed constantly for our community from its beginning, and especially for our novitiate. So when I came here she prayed for me, Dom Maurus' last novice; and it was my exceptional good fortune to enjoy her friendship, support, prayer and quite frequent correspondence from then until the end of her life. Although news of her death came as a heavy personal blow, I don't for a moment believe that this devoted disciple of St. Thérèse will have given up her life of intercession now she is in heaven. The letters will no longer arrive, but the prayer surely goes on, more powerfully now than ever.

I have preserved an enormous pile of her letters. Written in tiny but perfectly legible handwriting, they often cover several large pages: full of wisdom and good advice; also of chatter about family and friends, and faithfully remembered prayer intentions, and literature and music and poetry. I asked the Prioress of her community for permission to copy some snippets from these letters for you, and she gladly agreed, though on condition that Sister's real name (it was not Teresa of the Holy Spirit) be concealed. So the main part of this letter will be by her, not me. The letters always began, according to Carmelite tradition, with a (Latin) word of Scripture - sometimes an apt Psalm verse, or often simply "Jesus". They ended with ever-varying and heart-stopping assurances of love and prayer: "I will have no truck with 'affection'. The Lord said 'love', and 'love' He meant, and so Christians have used it ever since; and so will I. So: Peramanter (= very lovingly) in Domino. May He be with you. Much prayer always - and for you all. More and more prayer. I count on yours. May God bless and hold you. May Our Lord steep you in His own unfailing love. Delight in the Trinity! Much love and prayer, till death and beyond. Keep on upholding me with your blessing. In unitate Spiritus Sancti."

Although her consuming interest and dominating theme was always the love of God, and our union with Him, Sister's letters also amply displayed her penetrating insight into human character. "Why do people interest me so much?" she asked. "I don't know. Only that they matter more than anything else in the world." Experience showed that she was almost always right about people! She had deep sympathy with human weakness, and was always full of concern about individuals in any sort of trouble. On the other hand, she had a devastating ability to see through and puncture any bubble of self delusion. It is remarkable that someone so completely innocent of the ways of the world should be so hard to deceive! Another constant theme was her love for her own Carmelite order. Entirely traditional in outlook, she felt that it was most important to retain any external structures which had succeeded for centuries in nurturing and protecting the life of prayer. When in the 1960's her opinion was asked, her comment was: if the grille goes, I go! It stayed, fortunately, and so did she. On the

other hand, she would not say or hear a word against Church authority. Her own Superior was always "Our Mother"; her monastery's foundress "Our Beloved Mother", the Pope "Our Holy Father".

I have taken almost at random the few remarks from her letters given below. Even though they are out of context, I hope that at least some small part of her infectious love of God will shine through, and help and inspire you perhaps as much as they have done me.

## Monastic Voices

A letter awaiting me when I arrived here as a postulant 17 August 1984

I spent 1 August and thereabouts, thinking of your arriving at Pluscarden, and meeting the first impact, then all the new things one by one, and hoping that it was being all full of wonder and delight, as it often is... Now I shall have to begin again on 17th! A story that never changes and never palls. So repetition is never burdensome.... I think you will find the "pull" of all the things you have loved and left surprisingly less than one would imagine. (1) Because you will be in a new world with its own ways, and its own joys, where all these things have no place. So one does not remember them, still less, think about them. This is very much so when one enters upon an enclosed life, of course; but I should think that all Religious life has this effect. (2) Your standard of values will alter. You will see that these things have value - God forbid that we ever deny it: God made them and made them very good. But for you their attraction will gradually diminish, because we pursue what we most value. (3) In the end, when the day comes, and God begins to pour out upon you all His riches, in the excess of His giving, you will feel that you have given nothing at all. (In which you will be right!) You will positively clutch at anything which comes into your mind as having been abandoned, because, paltry as it will seem, it will do a little to assuage the continual ache of being unable to make any return. This is one of the penalties of intimacy with God. I hope it will come your way, one day, because it will mean that you have begun to meet God in all His splendour.

## Generosity

Be generous... You can't see the sense of some of the things obedience requires you to do? You aren't meant to! If you could see a nice little plan in it all, it would lose its value; it would become commonplace. But to go on blindfolded, flung back onto utter trust in the guiding power of God's love: that is a tremendous capacity that we have to acquire if we are going to reach the higher levels of contemplation, of sanctity. We are not of use to God, in the highest degree, that is, unless He can twist us around His little finger. And it is only in the degree that we will be useful to Him that He gives us the highest gifts (of knowledge and intimacy with Himself, and all that goes with them). Those who take up their stand on the lower slopes do not need them. So: we have to drop the rudder, let go of the steering wheel, and be quite certain that we will not crash, or sink.. The situation occurs and re-occurs, I think, in a life given over to God, always from a new angle, until one becomes habituated: in the end, this self-abandonment becomes automatic. And every time the depths of the soul in grace grow deeper, and life becomes more simple, and for us there is nothing, and no-one, except Him.

## Religious life

I often think Religious life can be compared with a long sea voyage as in the old days of sail: the same high hopes as one sets out; the same alternation of utter bliss, a placid sea, the sails singing, the sky unflecked; and of days, weeks, months of unbroken struggle and toil, apparently to little or no effect; and lots more that one only learns from experience; and presiding over all, the deep-down knowledge that one would rather die than give it up.... The challenge of an ever greater intimacy with Our Lord intensifies as one goes on - one cannot escape it - ever more nakedly exposed to one's own gaze, and, fairly certainly, to everyone else's. Perhaps some wilt under this. Don't you! There is only one possible failure: to stop trying.

## Junk of the mind

Dropping one's "fixed ideas", of which one is often hardly conscious, is one of the biggest "hold-ups" for growth in God: I feel that more and more. If only one could drop all the barnacles and start again with an absolutely

clean sheet! It's worth struggling for! It is because of this "openness" that the reactions of the Saints were almost always a surprise: for them, every situation was "new". There was no accumulated mass of long-since-formed ideas and deeply-rooted opinions as there are in us lesser folk - ideas and opinions purely natural, for the most part, never examined or questioned, but just called into play as beyond dispute, final and absolute! I long to empty completely my mind and heart of all this accumulation, just as one would clear out an attic stuffed with junk: and then to leave it so, so that the Holy Spirit could breathe where He willed - all the time. Meister Eckhardt knew about this. He said: "Just in so far as you go out from yourself with all that is yours, just so far will God enter, with all that is His" - His reactions, His attitudes, His spontaneous wisdom and insight... Once this became so, God could really use us: all day long.

## **Joy**

We have so much to be thanking God for, beginning with the gift of life itself and the gift of hope which carries us through the dark patches and so on. I think our God is pleased when we remember, and proclaim our indebtedness to Him. JOY is one of my key words. Perhaps the key word. It is better than "peace", for peace can be flat and passive. But Joy is always a living spark.

## **"Take possession "**

One of my most recent preoccupations goes like this: We (that is, I, throughout) are always too anxious to arrange our growth in God: to assess, clarify, arrange, decide. This is the wrong way on. Our job is to relax, let go, get out of the way. (We all know this, heard it a thousand times, but so often fail to make it real, part of us. On the contrary...) We need to let Him take possession: He will purify: eradicate: heal: make holy. Our part is simply this: first to be always "present", "there" - ready - waiting, listening, watching, and again waiting: second, when He speaks, to yield - without discussion, without distance, cogitation, examination, "semi-choice". If I can create the conditions in which He will be heard, and if He is allowed, what will He not do?! How much He longs: how eagerly! Yet He waits. He asks permission! If only I were not so coarse: if only I had some faint shadow of the delicacy of God.

## **Modern scripture scholarship**

Holy Writ, they so often indicate, has been "mastered" by them. But it isn't meant to be mastered by you: it's meant to master you. And when that is not your attitude, the rest is not only irrelevant but obstructive. Who cares whether it was actually e.g. St. Mark who said this or that? Someone said it, and the Church guarantees it. And it is infinitely worth hearing.

## **The novitiate**

What is that pensive, sensitive, rather-wrapped-in-the-clouds young man doing cheek by jowl with that rather crude, hearty, no-nonsense, rugger-player type? Answer: for what they can give to each other - ultimately: when they are both softened by a heavenly charity....

## **Holiness**

God can and will make us as holy as we can possibly become, just in so far as we let Him: it does not depend in the least on the conditions of our life. But: the circumstances that He does drop us into, are chosen just because they are the ones that will give us the most opportunity to become as holy as we can possibly be.

## **Prayer amid busy-ness**

The thwarting of our regular prayer life by the ceaseless claims of duty is actually an intimation of, or invitation to, another form of prayer. This does not mean that the old form of prayer ceases. Certainly not. When the opportunity comes for an hour or more of silent, contemplative prayer, one seizes it with great joy and with both

hands. It is something one must never lose (by any fault of one's own). But one needs the other kind too. How to describe it? Our Lord is just there, waiting, amid all one's activities. One falls into step with Him. You go on together. That is all. This kind of "association" with God looks neither back nor forward. It has few memories, and no plans. It is, of its nature, entirely in the Here and Now - a vivid awareness of God, at every moment. It's a familiar sort of prayer, and makes for intimacy.

## **Priesthood**

Lots of prayer, especially for the burden of priesthood. Burden may seem a strange word to use, you may think. But I think it must be so. What costs nothing is worth nothing. And the priesthood is worth everything. The thought of yours fills me with awe. I suppose the things of God grow more real with each passing year, looming larger as the things of earth more and more fall away....

## **One typical story among very many others...**

There is nothing much to say about us at the moment, so let me tell you a true story. Scene: Wallasey General Hospital. A missionary priest, at home for a fairly long break was helping the local P.P. by doing the hospital visiting. Walking back on the way out after the visiting was done, he used to stop and have a word with any patient who looked as if he would like it. This day he stopped by the side of a man who was obviously very ill indeed; in fact not far from the end. But he was quite conscious and seemed to welcome his presence. So the priest began to tell him about Malawi, which was the scene of his own missionary work. It turned out that the patient had been in Malawi, too, which made it more interesting, and after a little comparing of notes, the conversation went like this:

Patient (suddenly): I was a priest then.

Priest (as soon as he had taken in the implications of this): Wouldn't you like to put things right?

Patient: I'd give anything to put things right!

Priest: Well, here's your chance! Here I am!

Patient: How can I in the middle of a ward, like this? They are all straining their ears already to hear what we are saying.

Priest: We can both speak Malawi.

And so, in this primitive little language, a man of very different background made his peace with God. I love this kind of story! If a person was the greatest millionaire the world has ever known, he could not arrange for himself a thing like this: no human person could bring the one person needed to the right place at exactly the right moment; only Divine power. i.e. God is great in a way that men could never be - it's not just degree: it is entirely in kind of power. So: if a soul needs such and such a counsellor to speak the necessary word, God will cause this man to come from the ends of the earth. He will make mountains as plains before him; He will still the waves of the sea. The soul that has need of his aid will not be disappointed, although to content it a universe might have to be overthrown. God's action in satisfying souls of good will knows no limits. No creature can prevent it or even delay it. It makes light of difficulties, turns obstacles aside or breaks them: forces its enemies to serve as its instruments. Before it, barriers are opened, valleys are filled, mountains are brought low; precipices are changed into smooth paths.... Incidentally, the lapsed priest in my story, though he was at first opposed to it and said he was at peace now and wanted no more, finally agreed to the missionary priest's urging to get in touch with his Bishop and have the situation put right formally as well. And after that, the sick priest didn't die! Evidently the illness was one of God's put-up jobs!

## **Jane Austen**

Jane Austen - on this side of adoration! I never dared ask you if you were an addict, in case you said "no" and cast a permanent shadow over our friendship! No availability here, of course: we have no fiction! But I know a great deal of her almost by heart, and have often to struggle with the temptation to recall my memories when life gets dull. In some, the heroine is a quiet character and acts as a foil to show up the inferiority of the rest - as in "Mansfield Park" which is lovely, all the same. But I like the sparkling heroines best: Emma, Anne in "Persuasion" to some degree, and above all the irresistible Elizabeth Bennett in "Pride & Prejudice". Some one said that if she had never written anything but the 1st chapter of P & P, she would have been immortal. I love every word of it (P & P). Do you know it? And I agree with you about her stature as a moralist. I have come to appreciate that more and more since I came to Carmel. Re-read P&P some time and steep yourself in e.g. the events of the night when Elizabeth announces her engagement to D'Arcy, first to her father, then her mother, then to Jane - all these utterly different situations, each a different aspect of her genius, and each absolutely "huggable" in its delightfulness. Why did you start me off!!