



"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).

January February March 2009

Christmas-tide, Ordinary time & Lent.

MONASTIC VOICES ...Dear Oblates, Just before the Monastic Fathers speak to us, I say "Testing, Testing!!" Am I getting through one way or another? This, please God, will come by surface mail or airmail but may also come by e-mail if you wish. I am counseled not to enter into lengthy correspondence such as "spiritual direction" by e-mail but by conventional mail. "Oblate letter" yes, "business letter" yes, but SD by snail-mail (except in Dire Necessity by way of exception.) Anyway, please include your postal address in an e-mail if it is not "Dire Necessity" – for a reply in "real time" rather than virtual! (i.e., for reply in "Monastic Time!") I am under constraint to divide my time with the garden. Those who wish to relieve the monastic constraint may offer themselves to Br. Cyprian for some work in the garden! (We'll provide the clothing!)

Before I go farther, I would like to renew my, & your, thanks to Fr. Benedict who will still be available for consultation as also the other monks who have formerly done so. But just before the MONASTIC VOICE just an indication of who it is you are getting for those to whom I am an unknown quantity. I borrow this thumbnail biography from an Aberdeen, Diocesan magazine from a year or two ago. This is where I came from & how I got here so to speak:-

(With permission from the diocesan magazine of the Diocese of Aberdeen "Light of the North' The Way of A Pilgrim")

Being like the late Fr. John Beveridge (prematurely deceased diocesan priest), originally a "fly Fifer" hailing from Dunfermline, "City & Royal Burgh", it is not surprising in some sense that, as a teenager, I did a sort of doubletake when I came across a novel entitled "A Monk of Fife." (By Andrew Lang) I had some vague sense that this title presaged something in my life that would one day be revealed. We lived for the first eighteen years of my life in Abbey Park Place, about three hundred yards from the Abbey, within its ancient enclosure, one door away from the Abbey Sunday School that I attended for many years, and always within the range of the curfew bells that toll each evening at eight, ever since the great fire in Dunfermline. Three generations of my family lived together for most of these formative years. Grandparents, parents and my brothers & sister. My grandfather, Jimmy, was a one-time militant, atheistic communist turned minor capitalist, antiquarian and president of the Credit Drapers' Association. My grandmother was an Episcopalian. My father, brought up in North Queensferry, had leanings towards the Salvation Army and fundamentalism. My mother belonged to the Church of Scotland. My sister and I tended to go to the Church of Scotland Abbey a bit more frequently on a Sunday than our parents. We did not feel awkward about this nor did they. When I was eighteen the family business went bankrupt which caused a rift in the family. It was years before I came to understand the ins and outs of this crisis which had hit us so hard. Our Lowland roots were sundered. I had cut loose from home as a university student in Dundee. Already my two younger brothers had known several new houses that were to become home Edinburgh, Dufftown, Nairn, Cawdor (near Inverness). They knew far more chop and change of circumstance than either myself or my older sister. I studied philosophy in the hope of finding the meaning of life only to discover with amazement that most British & English-speaking philosophers couldn't care tuppence about that; a fat lot of use! When I graduated, I fell back on religion but I had drifted away from the Church of Scotland. Monksthat "Monk of Fife" somehow seemed to loom large again. My long-suffering father, still

expectant of my useful occupation, said, “Son, the only monks I know of are Catholics. The Catholic church is just across the road.”

We were living in Dullanbrae House in Dufftown at the time. “Why don’t you ask the priest across the road about it?”

And so I did. In response to my enquiries Canon Philips said, “Well, there’s a monastery near here. The food’s not very good and the beds are hard, but I’ll get in touch with them for you.” Next, my Dad took me to Pluscarden Abbey, one time daughter-house of Dunfermline Abbey, and despite my supposedly being a graduate and knowing something I was a bit nonplussed when Fr. Maurus the guestmaster and novice-master said, “You don’t have any practical experience of life and you’d better think about whether you want to be a Catholic.” The thought had never entered my mind! I thought he would simply say, “What size do you take?” (of habit!) So I decided to do voluntary service overseas and taught English in Sierra Leone and became a Catholic in Sumbuya, Sierra Leone. I was instructed by the Holy Ghost Fathers, now the Spiritans. My godparents are Sierra-Leonean. I was received at the Easter Vigil in St. Albert’s Secondary School Hall by Fr. Michael Courtney RIP. I came back to Pluscarden as a postulant and lasted a week. At a second attempt a year later I lasted five and a half months (doing a bit of teacher training at Craiglockhart teacher training college and later working with the forestry commission at Culloden in-between). The late Fr. John Cunningham of Nairn had once said to me, “if you ever leave their mob (the Benedictine monks!) you might think of our mob.” He meant the diocesan clergy. After working in a fish-freezing plant at Dalcross, as kitchen-porter at Kyle of Lochalsh, I studied for the priesthood for the Diocese of Aberdeen at St. Andrew’s College Drygrange. I served as a diocesan priest for fourteen and a half years but I had been bitten by the monastic bug and it wouldn’t let me rest. And so to my third attempt at monastic life. Now, at the ripe old age of 57 (correction, 60!) Jimmy Birrell has become Fr. Martin OSB of Pluscarden. My parents, God rest them, and younger brothers, became Catholics too. And so our journey of life continues and deepens and has become a veritable pilgrimage whose exact ways are a mystery but whose final goal is, please God, known as in a glass, darkly: “Lead, kindly light...”

There you have it! That is how I got to where I am now. But to our task. Some have asked me what my plans are. To which I have answered that they are still forming—& indeed one plan is NOT to try to seriously change anything (unless constrained to do so!), certainly, for at least a year. I was given this advice way back when I was in secular life, & ignored it with disastrous consequences! Nevertheless, I might like to air some possibilities such as:-

- A) Whether some of you might like to have a weekend here at the monastery together sometime next year? (Some have already mentioned meetings elsewhere but then surely “charity begins first, at home” with our own monastic family, i.e., here at Pluscarden).
- B) Whether any would be interested in the occasional variant of a recorded talk? Have any of you the expertise & time to reproduce lots of little disks?
- C) The letters & things on the website—are they a help?
- D) Have any of you special skills & /or etc , you would like to put at the service of your Pluscarden Oblate brethren?
- E) Any other suggestions or rather, promptings after prayer to the Holy Spirit? Several have already mentioned one or two points.

Your responses, if many, may need to await general reply in the next Oblate Letter. Here are some of my projected themes for future Oblate Letters .

Plan of themes for future Oblate Letters:-

- 1) The 13th Step of Humility.
- 2) Psalm 94 the Invitatory.
Prayer & Creation.
- 3) The Sensus plenior or Spiritual Meaning of the Rule— especially as it finds an application for Secular Oblates.
- 4) God’s Providence & the Rule.
- 5) The Infirm & illness
- 6) Artists & craftsmen in the Rule. Arts & crafts in the Benedictine way.
- 7) The Cellarer—Work
- 8) The Cellarer—Property
- 9) Garden work in the monastery. The Benedictine & creation. Monastic garden hints!!

- 10) Monastic Eating & drinking, the kitchen—& monastic recipes!!
- 11) The guesthouse & monastic hospitality. Serving Christ in the guest.
- 12) The monastic Pilgrim—“ Those sent on a journey”.
- 13) A view from the monastic library.
- 14) The annalist. Monastic history. Christian history & the history of revelation.
- 15) St John Cassian
- 16) St Basil
- 17) Monastic spirituality & music. Chant, praise, singing.
- 17) The Abbot
- 18) The Prior
- 19) The Noviciate— monastery & life as the school of the Lord’s service.
- 20) The Bursar. Narrating & counting God’s mercies.
- 21) Monastic industries.
- The greater silence & the lesser. The Opus Dei & the opus saecularis. “ Sun & moon O bless the Lord”.
- 22) The New Foundation.
- 23) Monks & brethren from elsewhere. Oblates & their oblate brethren of the wider family of the faith.

And now at last to our chosen MONASTIC VOICE, but in this instance within the capsule of my sermon for the start of this year . A sermon on beginnings for new Oblate Masters & for all of us at the start of Lent as much as at the turn of the year :-

Solemnity of Mary Mother of God

Readings:- Nb. 6,22-27 Ps. 66 Ga. 4,4-7 Lc. 2,16-21. Year B.

1st January 2009

“Direct we beseech Thee , O Lord, all our works by Your holy inspiration & carry them on by Your gracious assistance, that every prayer & work of ours may begin from You & through You be happily ended through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

This prayer taught me in my early manhood has stuck through the years as ever relevant & the more so for a Benedictine monk as I now am. A prayer like that is more precious than gold. Indeed our Holy Father St. Benedict admonishes us so to pray whenever we begin anything—which is usually several times or even many times each day. He says in the prologue to His Rule, “In the first place, beg of Him by most earnest prayer, that He perfect whatever good you begin, in order that He who has been pleased to count us in the number of His children, need never be grieved at our evil deeds. For we ought at all times so to serve Him with the good things which He has given us, that He may not, like an angry father, disinherit his children, nor, like a dread lord enraged at our evil deeds, hand us over to everlasting punishment as most wicked servants who would not follow Him to glory.”

Every time we begin the Divine Office in our singing of the psalms here, seven times a day & once at night, we begin with these or very similar words “O , God come to our aid, O, Lord make haste to help us! (exclamation mark) or you could say that every time we pray to God we begin with the prayer, “ HELP!” This we have received from the Desert Fathers of monasticism, passed on by St. John Cassian. This he says in his Conferences, so dear to St Benedict:-

“AND AS THIS WAS DELIVERED TO US BY A FEW OF THOSE WHO WERE LEFT OF THOSE WHO ARE REALLY KEEN. AND SO FOR KEEPING UP CONTINUAL RECOLLECTION OF GOD THIS PIOUS FORMULA IS TO BE EVER SET BEFORE YOU. "O GOD, MAKE SPEED TO SAVE ME: O LORD, MAKE HASTE TO HELP ME, "FOR THIS VERSE HAS NOT UNREASONABLY BEEN PICKED OUT FROM THE WHOLE OF SCRIPTURE FOR THIS PURPOSE. FOR IT EMBRACES ALL THE FEELINGS WHICH CAN BE IMPLANTED IN HUMAN NATURE, AND CAN BE FITLY AND SATISFACTORILY ADAPTED TO EVERY CONDITION, AND ALL ASSAULTS. SINCE IT CONTAINS AN INVOCATION OF GOD AGAINST EVERY DANGER, IT CONTAINS HUMBLE AND PIOUS CONFESSION, IT CONTAINS THE WATCHFULNESS OF ANXIETY AND CONTINUAL FEAR, IT CONTAINS THE THOUGHT OF ONE'S OWN WEAKNESS, CONFIDENCE IN THE ANSWER, AND THE ASSURANCE OF A PRESENT AND EVER READY HELP. FOR ONE WHO IS CONSTANTLY CALLING ON HIS PROTECTOR, IS CERTAIN THAT HE IS ALWAYS AT HAND. IT CONTAINS THE GLOW OF LOVE AND CHARITY, IT CONTAINS A VIEW OF THE PLOTS, AND A DREAD OF THE ENEMIES, FROM WHICH ONE, WHO SEES HIMSELF DAY AND NIGHT HEMMED IN BY THEM, CONFESSES THAT

HE CANNOT BE SET FREE WITHOUT THE AID OF HIS DEFENDER. THIS VERSE IS AN IMPREGNABLE WALL FOR ALL WHO ARE LABOURING UNDER THE ATTACKS OF DEMONS, AS WELL AS AN IMPENETRABLE COAT OF MAIL AND A STRONG SHIELD. IT DOES NOT SUFFER THOSE WHO ARE IN A STATE OF MOROSENESS AND ANXIETY OF MIND, OR DEPRESSED BY SADNESS OR ALL KINDS OF THOUGHTS TO DESPAIR OF SAVING REMEDIES, AS IT SHOWS THAT HE, WHO IS INVOKED, IS EVER LOOKING ON AT OUR STRUGGLES AND IS NOT FAR FROM HIS SUPPLIANTS. IT WARNS US WHOSE LOT IS SPIRITUAL SUCCESS AND DELIGHT OF HEART THAT WE OUGHT NOT TO BE AT ALL ELATED OR PUFFED UP BY OUR HAPPY CONDITION, WHICH IT ASSURES US CANNOT LAST WITHOUT GOD AS OUR PROTECTOR, WHILE IT IMPLORES HIM NOT ONLY ALWAYS BUT EVEN SPEEDILY TO HELP US. THIS VERSE, I SAY, WILL BE FOUND HELPFUL AND USEFUL TO EVERY ONE OF US IN WHATEVER CONDITION WE MAY BE. FOR ONE WHO ALWAYS AND IN ALL MATTERS WANTS TO BE HELPED, SHOWS THAT HE NEEDS THE ASSISTANCE OF GOD NOT ONLY IN SORROWFUL OR HARD MATTERS BUT ALSO EQUALLY IN PROSPEROUS AND HAPPY ONES, THAT HE MAY BE DELIVERED FROM THE ONE AND ALSO MADE TO CONTINUE IN THE OTHER, AS HE KNOWS THAT IN BOTH OF THEM HUMAN WEAKNESS IS UNABLE TO ENDURE WITHOUT HIS ASSISTANCE.” ST JOHN CASSIAN. (Conference 10)

Today, my dear brethren, we are beginning a New Year as we celebrate the Solemnity of Mary Mother of God & our Mother too. How wisely we begin as we are doing now, with prayer, following the holy admonitions of the Fathers of the Church, the monastic Fathers, St. John Cassian & our Holy Father St Benedict. “In the first place, beg of Him by most earnest prayer, that He perfect whatever good you begin.” Almost every day in this monastery we pray this prayer(at prime) near the start of the day, at about seven o’clock : “DÓMINE, Deus omnípotens, qui ad princípium hujus diéi nos pervenire fecisti: tua nos hódie salva virtúte; ut in hac die ad nullum declinémus peccátum, sed semper ad tuam justítiam faciéndam nostra procédant elóquia, dirigántur cogitatíones et ópera.Per Christum Dominum Nostrum. Amen.”

That is,“O LORD God almighty, who has brought us to the beginning of this day: defend us in this same day by Your power; that we may not fall into any sin, but that all our thoughts, words and works may be directed to the fulfillment of Your will. Through Jesus Christ our Lord .R. Amen.”

The beginning of this DAY---indeed, life’s “little day” that is “rounded with a sleep”, the Day of this New Year is beginning as we celebrate this Sacrament. (Of the Mass) In our celebration we gather up four themes:- Firstly, Christmas, whose Octave day this is.

Secondly, the circumcision of our Lord on this 8th day of His earthly life fulfilling all righteousness that the Old Testament Covenant required.

Thirdly, we celebrate the naming of Jesus as precisely that “Jesus”, “ Saviour”, “ the one who would save His people.”

Most importantly, & finally, we celebrate the Divine Motherhood of our Lady:- “ the Word was made flesh,” can mean nothing else but that he partook of flesh and blood like to us; He made our body his own, and came forth man from a woman, not casting off His existence as God, or His generation of God the Father, but even in taking to Himself flesh remaining what He was. This the declaration of the correct faith proclaims everywhere.” These are the words of St Cyril of Alexandria which were adopted by the 3rd Council of Ephesus in the year 431. “In fact, the One whom she conceived as man by the Holy Spirit, who truly became her Son according to the flesh, was none other than the Father's eternal Son, the second person of the Holy Trinity. Hence the Church confesses that Mary is truly "Mother of God" (Theotokos)”. (from The Catechism)

In today’s gospel there is the holy haste of the Shepherds, the vulnerable repose of the Christ-child, the astonishment of all the witnesses, the treasuring & pondering in the heart of Mary, the glorifying & the praising, the fulfillment of God’s preordained will. All of these are the elements of our lives as Christians & as monks. So on this solemnity of the Mother of God when the Church urges us to plead for the intercession of our Lady to bring peace to our lives & to the world by the simplicity & poverty of our lives these are the words with which our Holy Father St Benedict points us in the direction of blessing in 2009 & in eternity: - “Who is the man that desires life and loves to see good days”? If hearing this you answer, "I am he," God says to you: "If you would have true and everlasting life, keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceitfully; turn away from evil and do good; seek after peace and pursue it”. And when you shall have done these things, my eyes shall be upon you, and my ears hearken to your prayers. And before you shall call upon me I will say: "Behold, I am here!” Would we not weep to hear those words? –In 2009— At any time. We shall hear them today & in this

Mass “ Corpus Christi!” — “The Body of Christ!”
End of Sermon.

“O God come to our aid , O Lord make haste to help us” ; my prayer as new oblate master,
the prayer of us all as we began a new year & the prayer of us all as we begin Lent. We could call
this the ‘Jesus’ prayer of the Divine Office, the Opus Dei. What a joy for us, brethren, to throw
ourselves on the mercy of God in the Divine Office after invoking our Lord in this way!
Books & media... Prayers....Sundry final Items including items for your diary..see over>
Books & Media RB–Lenten Book Ch 48 RB “ During the Lenten season let them be employed in
reading6 from morning until the third hour, and till the tenth hour let them do the work which is
imposed on them. During these days of Lent let all receive books from the library, and let them
read them through in order. These books are to be given out at the beginning of the Lenten
season.”As it is with every human endeavor so with all art & literature. Everything is on a moral
,spiritual scale as a +or-. Lent is a time to ponder the total content of the media & arts we engage
with actively or passively. There is a spiritual parallel of “passive smoking” Lent is given us to
return to God, to turn our hearts to Him. We can review our handling of the media but not with
grimness but joy & a smile. As a bishop in Benin as said recently:“ If our spiritual environment is
polluted, we have to take the necessary measures to purify it, seal off the ozone concentrations,
diminish the CO2 emissions, clean ,up the sewers and wash the dirty linen.That means curing our
problematical hearts, which are ill and intoxicated with all sorts of ,decay, waste and turmoil which
separate us from God. A smile helps greatly in spiritual ecology. It is necessary to plant a real smile
at the heart of our relationships in the families, communities, at work etc. The less we smile the
more the tensions grow. Smile then! Do not have to be pushed to smile. Smile at length.”

Three books & people who handled the media with Christian assurance & good humour, mastering them rather
than being mastered by them:-

- 1)“Witness to Hope, The Biography of Pope John Paul II” by George Weigel published by Harper Collins, price
£25. This book gave us three months of pleasurable & edifying reading in the refectory. This is theology made
palatable by a
master of living. The lenten smile of charity is printed on every page. (& there are 991!).
 - 2) “Mother Angelica” by Raymond Arroyo. The founder of EWTN, the amazing world-wide media
nexus at the service of the gospel. Again “mastering the media rather than.....”. Churchill’s words “
The impossible takes a little longer,” spring to mind—but in Mother Angelica’s case it does not!
 - 3) “The Stars & the Stillness, A Portrait of George Macdonald” by Kathy Triggs. A profoundly
Christian man (not a Catholic) of Victorian times & again a master of the media in the service of
Christian values. Deserves to be better known as inspirer of the ‘Kale-Yard’ school of Scottish
writers &, perhaps more remarkably, of such as C.S. Lewis & Tolkien .
- These books might brighten your Lent!

Your Prayers:-

Oblations since letter 41 DBH :-

Norman Kenneth MacDonald, Marcin Bernard Liszkiewicz & Robert Thérèse Hill.
Novice: Kathleen Reddy.
No. Of aspirants including Hesterah Plessis & Beth Fraser.

Condolences: to Juliette Stewart on the death of her husband, Robin.

Congratulations on Silver Jubilee of Profession, Brother Michael on the 5th of March.

News of Forthcoming Events(Items for your diary & “ To Do” List):-

Opportunities to meet together by attending the same event!–

June 2-4th, the Pentecost Lectures, Fr. Tom Herbst OFM on the Theology of Nature.

20th June a “Musick Fyne” concert.

28th June 1st Aberdeen Diocesan Pilgrimage.

August, the fruit picking season at the Abbey!!(Thou shalt not muzzle the ox!!),

23rd August, 2nd Aberdeen Diocesan pilgrimage.

1st-3rd September a Symposium on Scottish Sacred Music.Book early to avoid disappointment.

One Sundry Item ! . Some of you may have long ago read 'Poustinia' by Catherine De Hueck Doherty on creating your own desert for God in your heart & home(worth a read), rather like the Schoenstatt movement concept of the " Homeshrine". Some of you,I know, have a special area in your home for prayer. I have long thought that it would be wonderful to have half & quarter-size mouldings of our Lady of Pluscarden (as in the sanctuary here) in resin / Or?—i.e. replicas for peoples' homes. Anyone care to investigate & or run with the ball? (Framed reproductions ,too?)— Perhaps the oblates' equivalent of monastery & cell. Prayer helps.
Yours in Christ & S.P.N.B. with Easter Blessings,

Fr. Martin Birrell OSB