

Pluscarden Benedictines

No. 177 News and Notes for our Friends Lent 2017

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Cover: Br Meinrad Gibson O.S.B. (1934-2017)

FR ABBOT'S LETTER

Dear Friends,

On 5th January our Brother Meinrad went peacefully to the Lord. He had continued to take part in much of the normal round of daily community life almost to the end. He continued to do much of the work of general maintenance that had been his for decades. Under his care cars and all machines seemed to acquire immortality. He had a genius for keeping them working long beyond the life-span intended by the manufacturers. Still scattered round the monastery are notes in his distinctive hand-writing. Such a note might, for example, be attached to an apparently dead toaster, explaining which parts of it will still work, given the appropriate encouragement.

These notes are testaments to his love for the monastery, his refusal to give up on things, his ability to find a way to move forward. He brought these same strengths to his dealings with human beings. To complex and apparently insoluble problems he would not necessarily bring a solution, but he would help stop things from coming to a bad end, and often he made things better. He did for people what he did for machines: he helped them keep going.

He lived in community for nearly 48 years, and over all that time seems to have got along with everybody. This certainly does not mean he did not find some of the characters he met difficult, especially when he was new in community, but everybody seems to have liked him and been able to talk to him. I think this is unusual. For most of us, we might get on well with some, maybe even most, but usually there are some whom we avoid, or we build a wall against them. The ability to maintain a good relationship with everyone was a great gift that Br Meinrad brought to our community and it strengthened us enormously.

How was he able to do this? Some of it was certainly his natural temperament. But following his nature, he could easily have used his natural affability just to create a conflict-free zone

around himself, a comfortable niche. Instead, he took care of his brothers in community, and many outside the community too, in many little ways. Many visitors and guests have commented how Br Meinrad would just look over at them or smile, and they felt he cared, they were encouraged. Put simply, he really loved everyone around him.

Two things made his general friendliness a powerful force for good. First, he never strove for any kind of effect. He was always simply himself, fully present, the same with everyone, happy to be with whoever he was with, very human. He did not just love, he allowed himself to be loved.

Secondly, for the whole of his monastic life he was focused on heaven. He took very seriously St Benedict's admonition that we should have death daily before our eyes, and he really did that. This did not at all remove him from the realities of day to day life. On the contrary, his love for people (and even his love for cars and machines!) was all the stronger because it was pure. This became very evident as he approached death. He was thinking about various current issues of maintenance around the monastery almost to the end, as if he expected to be back on the job soon. At the same time he was fully prepared for death, and went into eternity as easily as if he were going into his workshop.

I would like to think that for him this prayer of St Paul was answered: "It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ" (Phil. 1:9-10 RSV).

The word "discernment" here is very apt for Br Meinrad. St Paul uses the Greek word from which our English word "aesthete" is derived. An aesthete is someone who loves beauty and is discerning in his love, someone who has "good taste". St Paul's discernment is "good taste", but on the moral plane. Danker's *Concise Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament* gives the following extended definition of this word: it is the "gift to grasp what is required for helpfulness in a relationship."

Br Meinrad had this gift. He went into situations and helped. It is easy enough to look at a situation from outside, and see a solution. Most of us are good at seeing what others should do and advising them! Discernment is seeing what we can do to help others. It is not a knowledge from outside, but a knowledge of oneself first of all, and of the other person from one's relationship with him or her, based on love, and made effective by a readiness to persevere in relationship with the other and to help.

Our Brother Meinrad was a discerning man. Though he would have laughed if anyone said it when he was alive, he showed the beauty of the Gospel lived authentically. May the gift he brought to the community not leave us with his death, but be embedded permanently in our common life, that we might "approve what is excellent, and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ."

Yours devotedly in Christ,

† Fr Anselm

PLUSCARDEN PENTECOST LECTURES

6 - 8 June 2017

"Gnosis and the Theocrats from Mars"

Dr Francesca Murphy

Professor of Theology

Notre Dame University, Indiana, USA

1. Tuesday 6th June at 3 pm
2. Wednesday 7th June at 10.30 am
3. Wednesday 7th June at 3 pm
4. Thursday 8th June at 10.30 am

More information later on the website.

NEWS FROM ST MARY'S MONASTERY

On November 2nd, All Souls Day, we made our annual visit to the town cemetery. We do this every year to visit the graves of the deceased members of our communities: Fr Cyril, Br Stanislaus, Mother Mary Herbert, and Mother Mary Clare. However, in the near future we will no longer have to go all the way into town to visit their graves. On December 12th the town of Petersham voted to allow us to have our own cemetery on our property. So by All Souls Day 2017, we should have our own cemetery, located near to where our original church stood.

As readers of Pluscarden Benedictines might know, in 2009 the sisters of Our Lady Queen Monastery in Tickfaw, Louisiana relocated to Petersham to join the nuns of St Scholastica Priory. When our cemetery is all ready the bodies of the Tickfaw nuns will be exhumed from their current resting place in Louisiana and transported to Petersham for burial in our new cemetery. Likewise the bodies of our brothers and sisters in the town cemetery will be re-interred in the monastic cemetery. We are very pleased about this since it is the normal monastic custom to have a cemetery on the grounds of the actual monastery.

From November 3rd to 5th we held our third Monastic Experience Weekend. Once again the number of participants doubled. The first time we had one participant, the second time two, and this time we had four young men taking part. Three of them were students at Christendom College in Virginia, and the fourth participant was a young man from New Jersey. As usual they sat in choir with us, lived in the enclosure for the weekend, did some work and attended all of the community exercises including recreation. We also added a time slot for anyone who wanted to have a chat with one of the monks. Once again it was an enriching experience, both for us and the young men who came. As a result of making contact with Christendom College, Fr Dunstan will be attending their annual Discernment Weekend for vocations in February.

Also in November we were pleased to have Fr Abbot visit

us. This time he arrived along with Abbot Friedhelm of Kornelimünster. They flew in from Chicago where they were conducting a Visitation at the Monastery of the Holy Cross. They arrived here on Sunday, November 20th, late in the evening. The next day after Vespers, the Sisters invited us over to their Priory for a light, festive meal, so that we could all welcome Fr Abbot and Abbot Friedhelm together. After the meal, Abbot Friedhelm gave a talk about Kornelimünster. The following day Abbot Friedhelm flew back to Germany but Fr Abbot stayed on a week longer. Since his visit coincided with the American holiday of Thanksgiving, he was able to enjoy another festive meal with us and the sisters.

DIC

From the Martyrology

7th March

Bl. LEONID FEODOROV, bishop and martyr at Kirov; born Orthodox, he became a Russian Byzantine rite Catholic, partly influenced by Vladimir Soloviev, whom he met in his mother's St Petersburg restaurant. In fear of the secret police, he studied at Rome, supported by St Pius X, was ordained and became a Studite hieromonk. Returning to Russia, he was immediately exiled to Siberia. Appointed Catholic Apostolic Exarch of the Byzantine Rite Russian Catholics, he underwent a show trial in 1923 and was sentenced to ten years at Solovki in the White Sea. He died, worn out, on this day in 1935. One who knew him said, "The Exarch's love of God and fervent faith were well shown in his manner of celebrating the Holy Liturgy. This was, above all, how he won souls."

FIFTY YEARS AGO: THE GOLDEN JUBILEE OF PLUSCARDEN'S INDEPENDENCE

FR ABBOT'S HOMILY FOR 14TH DECEMBER, 2016

On the 21st of November, 1966, the solemnly professed monks of this monastery assembled under the presidency of the then Abbot of Prinknash, Dyfrig Rushton, to begin the process of electing the first Superior of the Monastery following the grant of independence on the preceding 15th September.

This was the first meeting of the new monastic Chapter. As always at a meeting of a monastic Chapter, it would have begun with the roll call. The name of each monk would have been read, and everyone in turn would have said 'Present' as his name was called. The names read on that day were: Dom Columba Wynn, Dom Maurus Deegan, Dom Basil Heath-Robinson, Dom Bruno Webb, Dom Vincent Dapr , Dom Edmund Fatt, Dom Andrew Prescott, Dom Ninian Sloane, Dom Barnabas Kerr, Dom Camillus Warner, Dom Adrian Walker, Dom Bernard Morgan, Dom Mungo Aitken, Dom Drostan Nunan, Dom Duthac Grey, Dom Hildebrand Flint, Dom Fergus Gorman: seventeen in all.

Up to that point, since the community's foundation in 1948, the community resident here was an extension of Prinknash Abbey and was governed by the Abbot of that monastery through an appointed Superior. The last acts of the Abbot of Prinknash for the new community were to preside over the election of its first Superior and then to install that Superior in office. We are happy to have with us today Abbot Dyfrig's successor, the present Abbot of Prinknash, Abbot Francis.

The grant of independence would have made little difference to the daily flow of life here. It was not as noticeable to the public as the resumption of monastic life here in 1948, or the elevation to the status of Abbey and the blessing of the first Abbot in 1974. But it was the crucial step in the community's growth. It made it possible for the community to continue on a permanent basis.

It is normal for a Benedictine community to be “independent” or “autonomous”. Of course it is a relative autonomy, within certain larger structures, but by and large a Benedictine community manages its own affairs, spiritual and temporal. This is the situation envisioned by the Rule of our holy Father Saint Benedict. Still, the granting of this status is never automatic. It requires a considered decision and commitment on the part of the monks who will make up the new community. The monks here at that time had already been here together for some years. But they had retained the security of being attached to a larger and more established community, their mother house at Prinknash. There was an element of risk, material and spiritual, in separating from the mother house and taking full responsibility for themselves.

The risk was perhaps greater than we can easily realise now. Though the community then was approximately the same size as now, the majority of them were monks who had come from Prinknash. In the years they had been at Pluscarden, only a few had entered the monastic life here. This was during a period, after the Second World War, when vocations were numerous, particularly to the monastic life. In fact it was a boom time for vocations. Pluscarden had not benefited from this. It must have made the brethren wonder. By 1966, the general trend of growth was over, and many of those who had entered in the previous twenty years were leaving. Again, it must have made the brethren here wonder. On the basis of experience, there was little reason for them to expect vocations. Financially, they were not well off. The buildings were more of a ruin than now. It was not the warm and reasonably comfortable house it is now. It was cold, and unhealthily damp. The seventeen were not choosing an easy future for themselves.

For their first Superior they elected not one of their own but a monk of Prinknash, Dom Alfred Spencer. For him, too, the future he now faced would not have seemed easy. Apart from the difficulties inherent in the office he was elected to, he had to abandon hopes he had entertained for a more solitary form of

monastic life. If he was ever happy about this change in his life, he never said so! He arrived here at 5.35 on the evening of 14th December, and was installed in the Superior's place at 6.00 the same evening. He would occupy that place, first with the title of Prior then as Abbot, for the next twenty six years. At his installation the seventeen gathered again, to hear him make his oath of fidelity and to make their own individual promises of obedience to him. With that, the new community was launched. Because of that, because of the choices and promises those seventeen and Prior Alfred made, we are here today.

Only one of us here now was here then: Br Adrian. Most of us knew some of the seventeen; some of us knew most of them. What can we say about them? I think it was a Trappist Abbot who compared a monastic community to a box of chocolates: a lot of soft centres, and some hard nuts. Probably the proportions of hard to soft were reversed among our seventeen. They were not as gentle and easy going as we are now.

If one compares the various Religious Orders in the Church to the military, some Orders, the missionary ones, might be compared to Commandoes or Marines. The Monastic Orders are like Guards. They don't go out on campaign, there are no great battles and glorious victories. Their task is to stand guard on the walls and towers. What is asked of them is that they stay at their post, vigilant.

The remarkable thing about our seventeen is that only one later left the monastic life, for reasons that deserve sympathy. For the rest, one is still here, the others all kept their vows and promises to the grave.

When the roll call is made at a monastic Chapter meeting, you often have to strain your ears to hear some of the monks reply, "Present". From some older ones, it is a faint whisper. I like to think that as a monk is being laid in the grave, an angel calls out his name, as the Chapter clerk does in a Chapter meeting, and in a voice too soft for us to hear the reply is given, "Present. Here I am. I stand guard, until the Resurrection." I would like to think that

when the names of those Chapter members of 1966 were read out today, each replied, “Present”.

Fifty years from now, at the hundredth anniversary, perhaps one or two of those here now will be here then. Most of us will be gone, but should there be a roll call, may we all reply, “Present”.

**ABBOT ALFRED’S REMINISCENCE ON THE 25TH ANNIVERSARY
OF PLUSCARDEN’S INDEPENDENCE, 1966-1991
(From *Pluscarden Benedictines*, No. 92: December 1991)**

In September 1966 our General Chapter met in the Abbey of Subiaco, and it was then that Pluscarden was given the status of a Conventual Priory. Pluscarden was to be no longer a dependent house of Prinknash, but was to have its own Conventual Chapter, its own novitiate, and the right to elect its own Conventual Prior. In his letter from the Chapter to us at Prinknash on 19th September, Abbot Dyfrig reported that he “had been given independence by acclamation.”

Abbot Dyfrig returned from Rome to Prinknash on 10th October. On 16th November, the feast of St Dyfrig, he received the Solemn Profession of ten of the Prinknash Brothers and gave them the Cowl. The following day he left for Scotland. On the 21st November it was the turn of the five Pluscarden Brothers to be Solemnly Professed, thus giving them a Chapter vote in the election of their Superior. So it was that the Pluscarden Chapter met for the first time. Its business was to elect a Prior, and the lot fell upon me. Such an election has to be approved by the Abbot President in Rome. In those days there were no Fax machines, let alone email. The confirmation came through on 5th December. From 10th to 12th December the Provincial Chapter met at Prinknash. Immediately after that, I left on the night train for Aberdeen with Abbot Dyfrig, arriving on Wednesday 14th December. We were met there by Fr Maurus and Dr Macfarlane. After Mass at Queen’s Cross Convent, we called on Bishop Michael Foylan, who had invited us for lunch, then drove over the

snow-covered roads to Elgin, arriving at the monastery as the bells were ringing for Vespers. Abbot Dyfrig lost no time in installing me in the Chapter House and then, before Vespers, in my stall in Choir.

It is these significant events in the life of the Community that we have been recalling in the past weeks. A threefold silver thread: the Silver Jubilee of the Solemn Profession of Brs Andrew, Bernard and Mungo: the Silver Jubilee of the Monastery as an independent house, and the Silver Jubilee of the Superior. We kept these quite simply with a Mass in thanksgiving, a festive dinner and a recreation in the evening. We did so with deep gratitude to God for the blessings of the last twenty-five years.

**THE INSTALLATION OF PRIOR ALFRED BY ABBOT DYFRIG.
From PAX, the Review of the Benedictines of Prinknash,
No. 318, Spring/Summer 1967**

Father Alfred was for a number of years the novice master at Prinknash. He was installed on 14th December, and with that act Pluscarden ceased to be a monastery dependent on Prinknash. It was with very mixed feelings that I made that last journey to Pluscarden: feelings of thanksgiving and joy that the hard work of the past sixteen years had been so abundantly blessed; sadness at the inevitable break in our lives. Most of the monks at Pluscarden had been professed and ordained at Prinknash, so that it was with a very real sense of loss that I came away after the Installation. We feel sure, however, that there will always be a strong bond of fraternal charity maintained between the two communities, and we here, on our part, will watch the progress of the Priory with the greatest interest. Of course we feel honoured that Pluscarden chose their Prior from the mother house, and we know that in Father Alfred the best monastic tradition will be maintained. We wish him a long and fruitful rule and hope that he will soon be gladdened by an influx of vocations.

DOM MEINRAD GIBSON O.S.B. (1934 – 2017)

On Thursday 5th January Dom Meinrad Gibson died in a holy and very peaceful manner, in his monastic cell, surrounded by the prayers of his brethren, and supported by all the rites of holy Church. The Requiem Mass, followed by the Burial in our cemetery, was held on Friday 13th January.

Br Meinrad was born in Dundee into a large Catholic family on 28th January 1934: so he was not quite 83 when he died.

He did National Service in the RAF, and worked for a time in the Steel industry. He was regarded as rather a late vocation when he entered Pluscarden Priory aged 34, making his first profession on 24th August 1970.

The name Meinrad was given to him by (then Prior) Alfred. It was in honour not so much of St Meinrad, the 9th century hermit, as of Br Meinrad Eugster (1848-1925), a lay brother of the Benedictine Abbey of Einsiedeln in Switzerland. The cause for beatification of Br Meinrad Eugster has long been in process: he was famous for his holiness, humility and hard work.

When James Gibson entered the Pluscarden community, it seemed in rather a fragile state. Vocations had been few, money was not at all abundant, and the accommodation in and around the mediaeval ruin was extremely spartan. James seemed an unlikely candidate. – But he stayed; and his staying was crucial for the later development of the community. He always retained something of a place as backbone or heart of the community. He was elected dean, or member of the Abbot's Council, soon after his solemn profession. That post is renewed every three years, but he held it without interruption until shortly before he died. Under Abbot Hugh he was appointed first Sub Prior, then for several years Prior.

Br Meinrad was of a placid disposition. He was no friend to haste, hurry, bustle, feverish activity, or energetic toil. Some who had lived with him for many years asserted they had never once observed him move swiftly. He was certainly steadfast though. He loved working with engines, vehicles, gadgets and plumbing; so he did maintenance work throughout his monastic career, also taking

care of our lawns and grounds. He was always extremely faithful to the Divine Office, and also to his own prayers and devotions. He had great trust in Our Lady. He always had something of a focus also on death, and the Last Things, and on desire for heaven.

Br Meinrad's own death was precipitated by a cancerous growth which closed off the bile duct on his liver. After a stent inserted by key-hole surgery failed, his decline was quite rapid. His attitude towards the end was consistently cheerful, accepting, grateful and faith-filled. Happily he was able to prepare for death in his own monastic cell, with little or no medical intervention; his mind clear, and his disposition calm and peaceful.

In Memory

You are right that Meinrad was ready to go. In fact, he's been preparing to go since the day we walked into Pluscarden together. You recall the story about why I was no. 3 in the group and he was no. 4? He claimed he actually arrived before me, but stopped halfway up the drive to consume his last packet of fags! A good story illustrating St Benedict's strictures about the criterion for seniority, although, as we all know, it was not, in fact, his last packet of fags!

By all the usual measures, and, by his own reckoning, he was the least likely of the four of us to stay. But he was the only one who did – and for how long! Some of us had fancy ideas about why we were there and thought we could write them down and explain them to people. He walked into a culture that was completely new to him, absorbed it and lived it day in, day out exactly (I imagine) as it ought to be lived. Without all the rhetoric, he just lived the life of a monk. When the end came – and long, long before it came – he was ready to reach its explicit conclusion.

May he rest in peace and pray for us all to follow.

Frances Johnston, fellow novice with Br Meinrad
late 1960s and early 1970s.

HOMILY FOR REQUIEM MASS
Isaiah 25:6-9; Romans 14:7-12; Matthew 11:25-30

“It will be said on that day, ‘Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.’”

It’s a beautiful thing happening today. The soul of our much-loved Br Meinrad is being taken up in the Eucharistic arms of Mother Church and presented to the Most High while his body is entrusted to Mother Earth, under the grass he so regularly mowed.

“This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”

“What is it to believe?” asked the Welsh poet, Waldo Williams. And he answered, “Giving solace / Until deliverance arrives.” Br Meinrad, you gave us over so many years such a full measure of solace, and now your deliverance has arrived. These words are for you: “This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”

It’s a beautiful thing how, through the celebration of the Mass, someone we have known, treasured, laughed and moaned with can be taken on their final journey to the arms of the Father by the prayer of the Church, the word of God and the body and blood of Christ. The Greek word for the great Prayer of the Eucharist is “anaphora”. It means offering. It means a carrying up, taking away, bearing a burden. My brother used to call Br Meinrad the monastery’s MTO – Motor Transport Officer. Certainly he spent a great deal of time in, on, under vehicles of one description or another. He was famous for this. The words “Ford Transit” and “Br Meinrad” will be forever joined in the monastic memory. Now, all of us here, our respect and affection, the breath of the Holy Spirit, the cross of Christ, the prayers of Mary, the angels and the saints are carrying, conveying, transporting him to his eternal destination. Our Head who is Christ, the Body which is us, together carry this lightest of burdens. Tayport, the steel works, Cardiff, National Service, Edzell, Pluscarden, the laundry, the kitchen, the workshops, the choir, the chapel; Ghana, even; the

everlasting Dean, the Subprior, the Prior. We are carrying all this – to him who says, “Come to me, all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest.” “Rest” was high on Br Meinrad’s list of desirable things.

It would be a temptation to tell stories of Br Meinrad. When, after a long blank time, 4 youngish men appeared in 1969 wanting to be monks, why was Br Meinrad the last to pass through the monastery door? Because he paused on the drive to smoke his last cigarettes. (Of course, they weren’t!). But the temptation must be resisted. It would be tempting to tell the tale of his long years teasing a rather proper, literal-minded and very precise brother. “What is the exact time?” Br Meinrad would innocently ask. With a flourish, the brother would draw out his pocket-chain watch and solemnly tell him the time. “Are you sure?” our hero would ask. “May I just check?” and then draw back his own sleeve to reveal some 3 or 4 watches on his arm. But the temptation must be resisted. There was the memorable visit to the monastery of Kornelimünster in Germany. There was the long love affair with Baxter the cat. But the temptation really must be resisted... There was this delightful, mischievous side to him. But not that only.

Is what goes on in monasteries real? Well, Br Meinrad was the real thing, the genuine article. “Thus says the Lord: ‘Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool ... But this is the man to whom I will look, he that is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word’” (Is 66:1,2). Something real went on in the heart of James Gibson, and it kept doing so. And so he became a monk, and he went on “monking”. Not because he had read it in books, not because he was forcing himself to embody an ideal, but because he really did fear God in the biblical and Benedictine sense. He took God seriously. God’s name, God’s word, God’s grace, God’s love: he took them seriously. He was “always mindful”. He kept the day of judgement before him. The last thing he said to me was on those lines. My strongest memory of him when I was a young monk was of the one who stayed behind in the oratory to pray. He embodied so much of the monastic “thing”. He had a quiet heart. He kept himself at peace. He was a restful person

to be with. He was the un-self-conscious catalyst of the community. He glued us together. He carried the culture. He had it inside himself. And so, he had the respect of realists and idealists, the young and the old, the bookish and the practical. He gave us all solace, until his deliverance arrived. He did it just by being around. He didn't particularly talk the talk – though he could come out with penetrating one-liners – but he did walk the walk: sometimes with a sigh and a grumble and rather slowly, but always steadily, and all the way to the end. He was the real thing.

But perhaps saying too much of this may be a temptation too. The monastic life is a treasure. And two things need doing with a treasure: it has to be protected and it has to be shared. Br Meinrad did the first. He was one of those blessed monks, without whom the monastery cannot stand, who doesn't go out and about, hardly ever gives a talk, isn't widely known, doesn't have or need a great outside following, doesn't write books. We don't read that St Joseph went around, saying, "Have you met my son?" He just protected the treasure, and Mary too kept her Son's words in her heart. Br Meinrad was a Nazareth man. For all his brotherliness, there was a solitude to him. God formed it in him. He had depth. It wasn't murky, but it wasn't free of suffering. And there he protected the treasure, and the treasure protected him. "Alive or dead, we belong to the Lord," says St Paul. Living and dying, first and last, he was and is the Lord's, and "each one of us", the Apostle says, "shall give an account of himself to God." Each one of us. I think we should respect this. Christ will give him rest. Christ will give him solace. Until the day of resurrection breaks, we can let him stay hidden with Christ in God, under the shadow of his wings. There is something here that calls for reticence, something to be treasured in the secret places of the heart. St John Cassian says that the death of a brother can pierce the heart and provoke conversion. Our best tribute would be to take the Lord as seriously as Br Meinrad did: this man who was so good to be with. So let us entrust Br Meinrad to his deliverance. Let us leave him to its silent joy. May he really, truly rest in peace.

Bishop Hugh Gilbert OSB

MEDITATING ON MISSION IN PLUSCARDEN PEACE

The “Democratic Republic of Congo” is a far cry from Scotland’s Morayshire Vale of St Andrew – especially when the DRC’s hot and humid rain forest is remembered in a freezing winter at Pluscarden Abbey. But more striking than that is the contrast of atmosphere. Pluscarden is renowned deservedly for its Peace; the DRC, deservedly, is not! I am anxious to get back to my beloved troubled Congo. But I am revelling in the Benedictine Pax here; “In loco isto dabo pacem” (In this place I will give Peace) ... and I will get the monks’ powerful prayers for the DRC into the bargain too. In this Peace I am still grateful for the Mission I have been privileged to be sent on. I was encouraged here in Pluscarden many years ago to respond to that “foreign missionary” call, and have been supported ever since. What we have in common, in a contemplative life in northern Scotland or in an active ministry in “the Heart of Darkest Africa”, is that basic truth: *Nil carius Christo* – Christ and His Love is more important than anything else.

This Congo, the old Belgian Congo, is 80 times the size of Belgium; our diocese of Basankusu just over twice the size of Belgium. I have been active as a Mill Hill Missionary there since 1980, but the MHMs have been in this area since 1905. A lot was accomplished with up to 60 feet-on-the-ground missionaries there at the same time. When I arrived there were nearly 40. But at present only 3!! However, our general council are planning to send more – from our new, growing body of African and Asian members.

We may move our training of local missionary candidates down to Kinshasa. But back up in Basankusu we will need to discern what aspects of Mission to take on, alongside the local Church personnel who are covering much of the pastoral work – a good number of Congolese priests and sisters, and some brothers, along with dedicated lay men and women. Our diocese now has its second Congolese bishop; the first one was appointed back in 1975, when he was already much involved in inculturated liturgy

and youth work. Both bishops have stressed a “pastorale d’ensemble” (combined pastoral approach): Firstly, combining Evangelisation; as Message (catechetics, liturgy, movements); as diaconia/service (development, health and “Caritas” work, education, and justice and peace and natural resources); as “communion” and spiritual accompaniment (working together as fellowship or family); as managing the material and financial side of things; then having priests, consecrated people and laity working together in teams, councils, commissions etc. The vision is clear and ambitious; and of course has varying degrees of implementation.

This dynamic pastoral approach has been hampered by years of war and political tension, and the consequent deterioration of the socio-economic life and the degradation of the infrastructure. Our dirt roads which were bad keep getting worse – in many places impassable. For instance we can get to Waka parish, 50 miles to the East of us, in four and a half hours by Land cruiser; a bit further you need a strong motor-bike – and the diocese goes on for another 300 miles. That also means that people can’t get their cash crops to port. Then, if they do get some through, there are much fewer boats than there used to be. So there is little cash-flow and people are becoming more and more disheartened. On top of that, there is no regular plane anymore, for the better off trader (or the “poor” missionary!).

As if all that was not enough, there is a major political crisis on-going. I am writing this in November 2016 and do not know what December will bring. The President’s second and final mandate comes to an end on 19th December; but the elections have not yet been held. Some claim he should carry on till a new president is elected (in 2018??). Others say he will no longer be a legitimate president as from 20th December. Observers say there is a serious danger of violence. Our bishops have issued a press statement (20th October) on national dialogue and the security situation, which they see as very serious. They call yet again for a non-violent, peaceful solution and a consensus built on a much more inclusive dialogue, for the superior interests of the Nation –

with agreement on the length of the transitional period, on the authority during the transition which was not foreseen by the Constitution, and on linking presidential, legislative and provincial elections. They are very concerned about reports of insecurity in various parts of the country.

This political tragedy in such a vast country dwarfs other more personal dramas like the Mill Hill house-fire in Basankusu, where the main house went up in flames after the paraffin-fired fridge blew up. Benedictine “detachment” and Ignatian “indifference” are great in theory – but losing everything is not easy to take!

I hope the country avoids serious violence, and that I can get back to my people soon. The “ordinary” people are lovely, and deserve a better life. Resilient and faith-full as they are, things are getting very hard. So, don’t just leave the praying to the monks. Oblates and other friends of Pluscarden please join in!! Thank you.

John D Kirwan MHM Obl. OSB

(PS. I too hope that the A96 dualling project does not come to disrupt the centuries-old peace of Pluscarden and its valley.)

From the Martyrology

24th March

Bl. OSCAR ARNULFO ROMERO, Archbishop of San Salvador and martyr, was shot on this day in 1980. St John Paul II said of him, “A bishop of God’s Church was assassinated while he exercised his sanctifying mission, offering the Eucharist. He took upon himself the cause of the poorest, defended persecuted clergy, protected the poor and affirmed human rights, despite opposition to his thought and pastoral action.”

THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING

“...you find nothing but a darkness, and as it were a cloud of unknowing, you never know what... This darkness and this cloud is, whatever you do, between you and your God, and it impedes you, so that you cannot see him clearly by the light of understanding in your reason, nor feel him in sweetness of love in your affection.”

It is entirely appropriate that the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* is himself unknown. Evidently ‘he’, possibly was a priest of the Carthusian order. His dialect locates him in the English East Midlands in the second half of the 14th century. He may have been acquainted with another, albeit certainly different, writer of profound spiritual guidance, Walter Hilton, Augustinian canon of Thurgarton Priory in Nottinghamshire, author of *The Ladder of Perfection*.

The Cloud flows in the bracingly astringent stream of theology labelled apophatic, “beyond speech”, focused on the inexpressibility of God. This is not lazy agnosticism, “maybe there’s a God, maybe there isn’t”, but a cool-headed confrontation with the paradox, God is, yet God is unknowable – “except that you feel in your will a naked intent towards God.”

But *The Cloud* is not a work of theology, it is a tract of spiritual guidance addressed to a “friend in God”, a younger person, but one committed to the “negative way” of silent contemplation. It is an austere way, yet, like de-cluttering one’s home and one’s life, profoundly transforming: it means simply laying aside – not rejecting, but ceasing to hold on to – our cherished beliefs, opinions, notions, and directing our attention, with “naked intent”, on that unimaginable light that lies beyond the cloud: “Lift up your heart to God with a meek stirring of love, intent on himself, and none of his goods.” All our intellect can know of God is his expression in the universe, but such knowledge can never satisfy the instincts of the heart. What we cannot know, we can and must love, and “smite upon that thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of longing love.”

The cloud may break, “then will he sometimes, perhaps, send out a beam of spiritual light piercing this cloud of unknowing that is between you and him, and show you some of his secrets, of which man may not, no, cannot, speak.” But any such openings come by the grace of God, they are neither to be expected nor sought for. The term “mystical”, often applied to the very varied English spiritual writers of the 14th century, can be misleading: Richard Rolle promotes a passionate, sometimes unsettlingly emotional, approach to prayer, Walter Hilton, a disciplined progress along the path to the spiritual Jerusalem; Julian of Norwich was granted, and explored profoundly, true mystical visions. But the *Cloud* author is different from all these, admitting, with a gentle self-deprecation reminiscent of St Benedict, that he has not himself experienced what the grace of God may yet grant to his disciple, and concentrating on firm but gentle guidance coloured with humane common sense, again in the spirit of St Benedict. His aim, “one-ing”, union, is not mystical ecstasy, simply perfection in being who we are, in God.

The author is emphatic about “the keeping of time”, the touches of God may come – and go – in an instant: “And therefore take good heed unto time, how you spend it, for nothing is more precious than time. In one little time, as little as it is, may heaven be won and lost.” This calls not for obsessive time-keeping, but an ordered life that allows for quiet alertness to the promptings of the Spirit; there can hardly be a better model than the calm rhythm of the monastic day, with its balance of physical and mental work, relaxation and prayer.

There is wise, simple guidance on ways of centring the mind into the silence, for modern readers not unlike some of the techniques taught in Eastern religious, or even purely secular, contexts. The recommendation to repeat “a little word of one syllable...” “God” or “Love” is commonly compared to the use of a *mantra* in Eastern meditation. But *The Cloud* is not a self-help manual, not a course of mental therapy; such techniques may well be beneficial to our well-being, but that is not our author’s prime concern.

At a deeper level, there are resonances with the philosophy and meditational practices of Vedanta, Yoga and Buddhism. But there are important differences: the aim is not enlightenment or liberation, but simply to live a God-centred life. And “one-ing” with God is not something we can achieve by our own efforts. We cannot pull ourselves up by our own spiritual bootstraps: “but if I shall say it to you truly, let God draw your love up into that cloud, and cause you through the help of his grace to forget all other things.”

But there are so many other distractions in the frantically busy, noisy world of today, especially the relentless pressure to hold – and express – opinions, to judge and find fault with others, to put the world to rights; we are constantly exhorted to be “activists”. What place can there be for the silent contemplative?

At the heart of *The Cloud* is profound *lectio divina* of the story of Martha and Mary, examining why Jesus declares that Mary “has chosen the best”. The writer does not glorify those called to the contemplative life over those led to active busyness in the world. But he makes clear the absolute priority – whatever our calling in life – of single-minded “naked intent” on the “one thing”.

For the anchorite or anchoress blamed for running away from the world, for selfish attention to their own spiritual welfare and neglecting their responsibilities to others, our author has simple advice: “For I tell you this: one loving, blind desire for God alone is more valuable in itself, more pleasing to God and to the saints, more beneficial to your own growth, and more helpful to your friends, both living and dead, than anything else you could do.”

But, conversely, we should beware of judging others, those whose spiritual way or worldly views are different, even in our opinion downright wrong: “Let everyone beware lest he presume to take it upon himself to criticise and condemn other people’s faults without having been truly touched within by the Holy Spirit in his work. Otherwise he may very easily err in his judgments.

Beware therefore. Judge yourself as seems right to you between yourself and your God, and leave other people alone.”

Very, very few are called to a life of pure contemplation. Most of us, whether in religious orders or laity, seek to be in the world yet not of it. Our witness to the world is not in our words, it is not even in our deliberate actions. Our testimony is the people we are, expressed in the things we do without thinking. We can only change the world by changing ourselves, and we cannot change ourselves by our own efforts, being preoccupied with what we should say, what we ought to do. We can only make progress by humbly setting aside our own opinions and concerns, no matter how strongly and sincerely held, and, with “naked intent”, allowing the grace of God to work within us: “and therefore I pray you, incline yourself longingly towards this meek stirring of love in your heart, and follow after it, for it will be your guide in this life, and bring you to bliss in the next.”

Alan James Obl. OSB

From the Martyrology

22nd March

At Munster on this day in 1946, **B. CLEMENS AUGUST VON GALEN**, the “Lion of Munster”, born at Dinklage, son of a noble family, nephew of a bishop, he spent 27 years in parish life, where he was known for love of the poor and outcasts. In 1933 he was appointed bishop of Munster, the first under Hitler’s régime, with the motto, “Neither praises nor fear will distance me from God”. He was an outspoken critic of the Nazis, called to Rome by Pius XI for consultation on the encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge*. He spoke out against euthanasia and confiscation of church property, so in 1943 his house was bombed by the Nazis. In 1946 he was made Cardinal, on his return he spoke to 50,000 people on 16th March. Gravely ill, he died less than a week later, on this day, three days after an operation.

REVIEWS OF BOOKS RECEIVED

The Oxford Handbook of Christology, *Edited by Francesca Aran Murphy, assistant editor Troy A. Stephano*;
670pp, 246 x 171mm; HB, OUP; 2015, £95.00

What do we make of Jesus Christ? What does he mean for us? How do we best speak of him, of who he was, and the difference he has made? In some ages of the Church, questions such as these have been posed as urgently and crucially important. Great minds have wrestled with them, certainly not without controversy and division, but at best bringing definitive doctrinal clarification, and helpfully leading the faithful ever more into the fullness of truth. By contrast, in some ages, the whole subject has appeared something of a stagnant backwater, with almost nothing either interesting or original being written about it. In case you were tempted to think that the second decade of the twenty first century might fit into the second of these categories, we have here a window into contemporary ideas around the subject of Christology, with discussions that are fairly fizzing, at least in academic Theology departments around the English speaking world. To reiterate the parameters of our subject, as set forth by the Church of the Councils: “In the Incarnation, *God* truly is human, God truly is *human*, and, most headbangingly of all, God *truly is human*” (p. 5).

Francesca Murphy, well known to the Pluscarden community, and currently Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Notre Dame, USA, has managed to persuade forty highly eminent authors to write original essays for this book. Her purpose is to present in readily accessible format the current state of Christological discussion; as she says, in order to last students and their teachers for the next half century. A glance at the table of contents reveals a truly mouth-watering list of topics covered. Nor are we disappointed on closer inspection: the standard of writing throughout is impressively high. Casting the net somewhat beyond the bounds of the Anglo-Saxon world, and of conventional

orthodoxy, we have essays on Chinese Christologies, African Christology, Feminist Christology, and on Christ as he appears in Islamic literature, and in the writings of the early Gnostics. Let it be noted at once that all authors identify themselves as believing Christians, committed to the common project of investigating and expounding the truth of Jesus Christ.

The forty essays are organised into seven Parts. 1) The Bible; 2) Patristic Christology; 3) Mediaeval Christology; 4) Reformation and Christology; 5) Modern and Post-Modern Christology; 6) Imagining the Son of God in Modernity; 7) The Grammar of Christology: Christological Norms. This is an “inter-confessional” discussion. There are Protestant, Anglican and Eastern Orthodox contributors, though the majority certainly seem to be Roman Catholic. Disagreements between theologians nowadays are quite often not strictly confessional; but lest anyone should imagine denominational difference to be now merely irrelevant, we have an essay on “Normative Protestant Christology”, by Kenneth Oakes, and another on “What makes a Christology Catholic?” by Gilbert Narcisse O.P. (translated from the original French by Kenneth Oakes).

The “Handbook” category certainly affects the style of writing. The tone can seem at times somewhat breathless, as authors who have a lot to say in little space hurtle through their assigned subject, cramming their text with cross references to appended Bibliographies for further reading. Generally the standard of proof editing is quite high, though alas not quite infallible.

Amid such wealth of topic, I offer here one or two little snapshots, taken more or less at random. So: Gregory Glazov writes on Jewish suffering (specifically in the Nazi Holocaust) according to Pauline and to recent Papal thought. We know well that Vatican II and the post-Conciliar Popes went far beyond mere condemnation of anti-Semitism. Emphasising the Jewishness of Jesus, they have stressed the irrevocable nature of God’s Covenant with his Chosen People. Insistently, they have ruled out of court all language, formerly commonplace in the Church, about God

rejecting unbelieving Israel, because of her wilful blindness and infidelity. No longer are Catholics permitted to speak about the replacement of Israel by the gentile Church in God's predestinating plan of salvation; far less about a curse resting forever on the Jewish people for their crime of Deicide. The trouble is: such language seems to be firmly rooted in the New Testament, and especially in the teaching of St Paul, as set forth in Romans Chapters 9-11. Glazov therefore subjects these Chapters in particular to close analysis, focussing especially on echoes in them of the Servant Songs in Isaiah. He concludes, with the modern Popes, that St Paul does not in fact teach what a superficial reading might lead us to conclude. On the contrary: on the basis precisely of these Chapters, we can coherently assert that through the identity of the Jewish People with the Messiah, any Holocaust denial must actually involve a failure to grasp the mystery of Christ's suffering.

Joseph Wawrykow has an excellent essay on the Christology of St Thomas Aquinas. This contains elements, as we know, that some moderns very much dislike. Thus: there is no human person in Jesus: only the Person of the Divine Word. On the other hand: in order to be pleasing to his heavenly Father, Jesus the man needed to have all the gifts, graces and virtues; and his possession of them was due entirely to God's grace. Or again: Jesus needed to possess, and did possess, all the gifts and perfections associated with the virtues of Faith and Hope. But those virtues themselves he did not have, or need. Or again: Jesus was subject to external temptations, but not to internal ones. Surely, cry many today, all this diminishes the full humanity of Jesus? How can we identify with such a model? And to these objections Wawrykow offers bold and satisfying answers. St Thomas did not flinch from seeing through all the implications of a true Incarnational theology. What Jesus Incarnate lacked of our humanity were only our imperfections. And he is not merely our model, but above all our Saviour: his mission was not merely to identify with us, but above all to divinise us.

In various places in this book one encounters the perceived

opposition, first arising within liberal Protestantism, between “The Jesus of History” and “The Christ of Faith”. Interestingly that reflects rather closely more ancient oppositions set between the humanity and the divinity of Jesus. The “Quest for the Historical Jesus” came to dominate debate for over two centuries: but it seems now to have receded into the status, thank God, of one more episode, more or less interesting, in the history of Christology.

Gavin D’Costa responds to the question much posed nowadays, in face of the plurality of religions, about the uniqueness of Jesus. Many modern theologians have been ready to capitulate, and effectively reduce Jesus to the status of one wise man, maybe one saviour, among others. Not D’Costa. His concern is rather how to present Jesus, the true Jesus, in the variety of cultures today. For him, the history of heresy may be termed bad inculturation, and the history of Conciliar dogmatic definitions, appropriate inculturation. As for the unique salvific efficacy of Jesus, this has been defended in very different ways. Did you know that the classical Calvinist way can be summed up under the acronym TULIP (Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, Preservation of the saints)? A more liberal approach, popular across the denominations today, may be termed ROSE (Resurrection Overcomes Sin in the End). If that, with its implicit universalism, seems too hard to square with the data of revelation, we have also ROSEY THORN theologians... and plenty of others besides.

Four of the authors presented here have delivered lectures at Pluscarden: Francesca Murphy herself, Thomas Weinandy OFM Cap, Aidan Nichols O.P., and Gavin D’Costa. Another, Brian Daley S.J. has frequently visited Petersham. Clearly, there is no need for us to close our annual Pentecost lectures down for want of good and interesting speakers to invite. A book such as this should certainly be in our library, and now, courtesy of OUP, it is. Doubtless few will read it from cover to cover. But you don’t need to. Just to know it’s there will be useful; and time spent dipping here and there will certainly not be wasted.

DBH

The Spirit of Solesmes: The Christian Life in the Works of Dom Prosper Guéranger, Abbess Cécile Bruyère, Dom Paul Delatte: *Selected, edited and introduced by Sr Mary David Totah OSB*; PB, Gracewing, Leominster, 2016, 266 pp.; £14.99

The republication by Gracewing of this book is an event to be welcomed with rejoicing and gratitude. Following the sad demise of the previous publishers, for several years it remained out of print; unavailable; unobtainable through normal means. And this was most inconvenient. One was always wanting to recommend it to people: for ideal *lectio divina*; for healthy and wholesome spirituality; for helpful wisdom and insight; for inspiration, edification, instruction, consolation, nourishment; for good writing in the best Benedictine tradition; for a book to be read with pleasure and returned to with ever renewed profit. Sr Mary David offers us here an anthology, organised thematically in fourteen Chapters, each with its own excellent introduction, followed by an array of snippets: some of a few words only; some of a full page or so; most around a paragraph in length. They are from conferences, letters, private notes, published books or articles, homilies, commentaries on Sacred Scripture or on the Holy Rule. Never imagine that French spirituality of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries could offer little of interest or relevance for us moderns. We find here on every page an astonishing freshness, liveliness, vigour, humanity: and all of it proposing a life at the heart of the Church, in an authentic and uncompromising following of Jesus Christ.

The first of the authors cited, Dom Prosper Guéranger (1805-1875) more or less single-handedly restored Benedictine monastic life in France after the French Revolution. He was the founder and first Abbot of Solesmes, and of the Solesmes Congregation. His cause for beatification is currently under investigation by the competent Roman authorities. Then there is his spiritual daughter, Cécile Bruyère (1845-1909), first Abbess of the nuns of Solesmes, “inheritor of Guéranger’s spirit and Mother of the whole French Congregation”. With her whole community in 1901 she migrated

to exile at Ryde on the Isle of Wight, where she died, and where our editor happily remains Prioress and Novice Mistress. The third author to be cited is Dom Paul Delatte (1848-1937). As Guéranger's second successor, he oversaw a huge expansion at Solesmes, then built Quarr Abbey on the Isle of Wight. To give here just one brief quotation of his: "Those who belong to God, who live by God, are given over to joy. Since we are with the Lord, and he with us, how do you expect our life not to be a life of joy, of exultation? ... Sadness has something blasphemous about it ... I think it is a duty for each one of us to be joyful. It is a remarkable religion in which joy is a precept, in which the command is to be happy, in which cheerfulness is a duty" (pp. 144-146).

Get hold of this book as fast as you can, just in case it ever goes out of print again. And maybe keep a spare on hand as well, in case someone borrows your copy from you, and fails to return it.

DBH

The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of the Inklings by Philip and Carol Zaleski (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York 2015)

"During the hectic middle decades of the twentieth century... a small circle of intellectuals gathered ... to drink, smoke, quip, cavil, read aloud their works in progress, and endure or enjoy with as much grace as they could muster the sometimes blistering critiques that followed."

Thus Philip and Carol Zaleski begin their massive work on the "Inklings". Their title is most apt; one has only to think of the companions of the *Fellowship of the Ring*. The Inklings were a group with shared interests and passions, often in disagreement, but all loyal to a central and shared cause, with deep love of the landscape that many of them had fought to defend in the Great War. That War, which introduced killing on an industrial scale, had a profound influence on these men who, far from fleeing into a

fantasy world of escape, shared “a longing to reclaim the goodness, beauty, and cultural continuity that had been so violently disrupted”. At a time when lack of religious belief and harsh realism possessed the literary world, they believed, inspired by their Christian faith, “as did their literary and spiritual ancestors, that ours is a fallen world yet not a forsaken one.” In so doing, they adopted the traditional literary style of “myth”, so often employed to point to underlying truths, one of which is that all that the Creator made is *good*. Another characteristic these writers shared was a passion for language, for *words*.

The name *Inklings* demonstrates this: a group of men who dipped their pens in ink and shared the “inklings” or ideas that came to mind. Most people today will have heard of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis; less known are the other two leading members, Charles Williams, author of increasingly esoteric novels, and Owen Barfield, the anthroposophist, disciple of Rudolf Steiner, who outlived the others by far and who enjoyed literary fame in later life in the US, having a strong influence on the American writer Saul Bellow.

Lewis appears to have been the “glue” that held the fellowship together: already an intellectual giant, bombastic, often irritating and pompous, but kind to a fault and always with the hand of friendship held out. It was in his rooms at Oxford that the group would meet to share work and ideas, convening more informally on another day in a local pub. If the Zaleskis convey a most atmospheric vision of these occasions, noisy, passionate, frank (literary discussion married to Hobbit-like conviviality), they manage to bring Lewis especially to vivid life. This reviewer is reminded of a big, boisterous dog, wanting to be everyone’s friend but sometimes irritating them by his penchant for leaping up!

Lewis *was* everyone’s friend, even if he often disagreed, sometimes vehemently, with one or another. He was the prime initiator of the fellowship and invited others, including Williams and Barfield, to join. There does not appear to have been any discussion beforehand as to whether to admit a new member (apart from a prohibition on women – one wonders how this kind of

“club” would be greeted in today’s feminist society!). “The qualifications ... are a tendency to write, and Christianity”, explained Lewis succinctly in a letter to Williams, inviting him to a session. Tolkien was more reserved. A staunch, practising Catholic, he was frequently disturbed and even infuriated by Williams’ eccentric ideas and much disliked his novels, probably because of the thinly veiled interest in the occult that lay behind them. The Zaleskis suggest there was also perhaps an element of jealousy because of the close friendship that developed between Lewis and this “new boy”, but they concede that Tolkien did find pleasure in his company and respected his critical perception and was happy to help Williams advance his university career.

Tolkien had great admiration for much of Barfield’s writings, especially his work on language *Poetic Diction*, if not for his religious beliefs; but it was Lewis, once again, who had enjoyed a close friendship with Barfield since their youth. A passage from *Surprised by Joy*, the story of Lewis’ spiritual journey to God, sums up their abiding relationship and eloquently reveals the attraction of opposites:

“But the Second Friend is the man who disagrees with you about everything. He is not so much the *alter ego* as the anti-self. Of course he shares your interests; otherwise he would not become your friend at all. But he has approached them all at a different angle. He has read all the right books but has got the wrong thing out of every one. It is as if he spoke your language but mispronounced it. How can he be so nearly right and yet, invariably, just not right?”

Williams was the first to die, the end of his life described with an appropriately poetic poignancy by the authors: “tired, lonely, unable to escape the disparity between outward eloquence and inward uncertainties ... An old man (old at fifty-eight!), he rehearsed his life, as the ancient do.” His death, as did his life, had a profound and lasting effect on his fellow Inklings. Tolkien, despite his misgivings about Williams’ more esoteric views and

what he perceived as lapses from orthodoxy, wrote most kindly to the widow and arranged for Mass to be offered. For Lewis, his friend's death confirmed him (and the others) in his belief in eternal life:

“No event has so corroborated my faith in the next world as Williams did simply by dying. When the idea of death and the idea of Williams thus met in my mind, it was the idea of death that was changed.”

Tolkien the Catholic family man; Lewis the “mere Christian”, Williams fascinated by magic; Barfield the forerunner of “New Age” philosophy: realists yet romantics who wanted to restore the fundamental truths of a fallen world – faith, hope and charity, these men enjoyed a unique fellowship, the likes of which it is most unlikely we will see again for, to quote a comment on the Pals Battalions of the Great War, “men are not like that anymore”. The Zaleskis have done us a favour in bringing this literary relationship so vividly to life, seemingly effortlessly weaving people and themes together to create a colourful tapestry. This is a “literary biography”, which none-the-less brings the characters alive to our imaginations in all aspects; and above all it is a Christian story, for Christianity, the authors remind us, was central to their lives and their shared aim of “a revitalization of Christian intellectual and imaginative life”.

“Yet although the Inklings were guilty of the heresy of the Happy Ending, they were not optimists; they were war writers who understood that sacrifices must be made and that not all wounds will be healed in this life. Their belief in the Happy Ending was compatible with considerable anguish and uncertainty here below. One may be as gloomy as Puddleglum or as convinced as Frodo that ‘All my choices have proved ill’ without losing hope in a final redemption.”

Eileen Clare Grant Obl. OSB