

# FAIRACRES CHRONICLE

## COMMUNITY NOTES

### UNIVERSITY SERMON

A.M. Allchin

### *MONTE ROSA: THE WITNESS OF CAMALDOLI*

Douglas Dales

### FATHER PERCY

Sister Catherine SLG

### BROD

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Oblate Sister Sue Santha Bhattacharji

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## COMMUNITY NOTES

AT PRESENT two Sisters in Life Vows are having some time away from the Community under Leave of Absence. This, and a request from a third Sister to do likewise, and from another to make her Profession, prompts me to reflect on the commitments we make and their consequences.

Birth is a lifelong commitment, which we do not make for ourselves and which our parents may have made for us with only a very sketchy notion of what they were letting us in for. For many Christians baptism followed fast upon birth and our godparents made promises on our behalf which, God willing, eventually reveal themselves as significant for the whole conduct of our lives, and for eternal life. In religious life (in the technical sense) there is commitment at every stage, which each person must make for herself, but which we cannot make alone. The first step, which is usually outwardly quite small, is often the most momentous and most demanding. Writing a letter of enquiry to the Reverend Mother of a Community implies a willingness to take seriously in outward life some inner sense, however obscure, of God's total claim upon us. This may eventually lead to life-long commitment under Religious Vows, a covenant with God founded in baptism and recognised, expressed and guaranteed within the Community.

Entering the novitiate as a Postulant is voting with your feet, setting out on a journey which leads beyond the natural commitments we are born to, to an imperative born of faith. We were glad to welcome Patricia Clare as a Postulant on Holy Cross Day, and Hilary Bartlett a month later on St Teresa's day. Hilary has since returned to lay life; we were sad to say good bye to her, but reassured that our life here is such that it does offer a distinctive alternative and a real choice to those who try it. For some it is essential to come and see, and equally essential to move on. We give thanks for Hilary's time with us and wish her well. Celia Parton entered the novitiate on 4 November having made a journey in the most literal sense, as she comes from New Zealand. She visited St Isaac's and the Holy Land on the way here and we welcome her as the pilgrimage continues in company with us. Carol Simmons was admitted as a Postulant Oblate on 6 November.

The entirely unexpected death of Bridget Hoare, at the end of September, came to us as a most painful shock. Bridget, who would have completed fourteen years as a Companion in December this year, was at her home in Sutherland and walking with her dog in the hills when she had a fatal fall and died instantaneously. Mingled with our deep sympathy for Bridget's family in their sudden loss there is a strong thread of thanksgiving for her life, hid with Christ in God and generous in its love and loyalty to others.

More recently another of our Companions, Cecilia Povey, died, no less suddenly, only a few days after being with us in apparent good health. She had been a Companion for ten years, sustained especially by the strength and discipline of the Divine Office in her life of faith. May both these lives reach their fulfilment in the heavenly kingdom which was their goal.

It is a mark of long-term commitments of all kinds, that they throw up challenges to try our patience, our self-understanding and our sanity in ways we might well prefer to be without. Birth itself can seem rather too much to have taken on, and who has not known a desperate moment in which the mind toys with ending it all? Conversely, a life without long-term commitments may turn out to be strangely deprived, confined to what is known and reckoned possible, missing a dimension of human growth and especially of human love. The experience of religious communities shows that those bound by Life Vows are not exempt from periods of deep and testing difficulty. It would be odd if they were. Such times are not in themselves wrong or something to be regretted, but a challenge which can lead to greater reality. Often, doubtless, these struggles have been suffered in silence, but we have a responsibility to help each other through them and not be shocked or dismayed. The faith and faithfulness of each of us is highly significant in this; and in exceptional cases there is the resort of Leave of Absence.

For most of the year at Fairacres I look from my stall in chapel directly at Rublev's icon of 'the Old Testament Trinity', depicting the three angels entertained by Abraham. I think of it as 'Sarah's picture', a reminder of the promise that God made her (a promise so ludicrous that she laughed) and the blessing which followed when what could not be *was*, and she bore a child. 'With God *all* things are possible'—even, and especially, the impossible. So he lands us in impossible situations. Experiencing that seems to be part of the vocation of each Christian, and of every human being. Lifelong and long-term commitments bring us inevitably into that realm of the 'impossible' with all its potential, *beyond* our boundaries and limitations.

During Christmastide the icon on the altar is the one which we have had printed as our Christmas card this year. Each detail of it is full of significance: the Child whose birth in the dark cave foreshadows his burial and our rebirth; Joseph (in the bottom left-hand corner) whose deeply introverted gaze struggles with the unthinkable, with doubt and mistrust; the journeying magi; the midwives washing Jesus, reminding us of his humanness and our baptism; Mary in her sheer weariness after labour. In a sense its whole theme is limitation and it invites us to ponder our own limits.

When God took human flesh he committed himself to the vicissitudes of

a human life, the uncertainties, impossibilities and limitations with which our own lives make us familiar. Contemplating Jesus and the mystery of the Incarnation we can contemplate the extent of God's life-long commitment to us, made in the unflawed clearness of his own being and person. Think of God's light-years of commitment, sure and abiding when our commitment fails. And when something in ourselves holds true despite disappointments, setbacks, and 'impossibilities' of all kinds, then we understand something of unconditional love. For my first Christmas in SLG the novices were given a Sister's illustrated Christmas meditation which focused on the journey to Bethlehem and 'the slow plodding of the ass'. This struck me at the time as so dreary and remote from the spark and sparkle of Christmas that it was difficult not to laugh! Now, after not a few donkey days, I see the point, and have been glad to remember the ass.

In the icon of the Nativity not only the human beings but earth, sky, plants and animals are lit up, reflecting God's glory and giving glory to him. Simply by being so stubbornly what they are, all things, creatures, people, events, can speak to us of God's faithful-ness and enduring Love. May we be blessed in that Love as we celebrate it again in whatever circumstances are ours this Christmas.

MOTHER ROSEMARY SLG

*TO ALL OUR ASSOCIATES AND FRIENDS*

**ADVANCE NOTICE ABOUT BOOKINGS AT FAIRACRES**

We much regret having to tell you, especially after such a long closed period in 1997, that we shall not be able to receive visitors in St Columba, St Seraphim or the Hermitages. from Easter Week until the end of August 1998. This is because all three are urgently in need of repairs which are long overdue.

We shall also be having internal and external work done in Chapel, and some external work in Fellowship House. There is a likelihood that we may, for some weeks, be able to receive day visitors only.

## THE UNIVERSITY SERMON

*Preached at Great St Mary's, Cambridge  
Sunday, October 18, 1998*

A.M. ALLCHIN

The Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things, and will remind you of all that I have said to you.  
(John

14:26)

IN a small upland farmhouse in mid-Wales, in the first years of the nineteenth century, a young woman sits writing a letter to a friend in a neighbouring farm, some miles down the valley nearer towards the English border. In terms of the village where Ann Griffiths lived, her family had some standing. Her grandfather had been church warden. Her father had held office in the parish. But Dolwar Fach was a small farm; the family held it as tenants, not as freeholders, and beyond their own district they were very little known, if at all. In the England of Jane Austen, Welsh-speaking hill farmers were scarcely to be acknowledged.

This is the subject matter of the letter; after a brief opening greeting the writer comes at once to the point:

Dear Sister, the most outstanding thing that is on my mind at present as a matter for thought is to do with grieving the Holy Spirit. This word came into my mind, 'Know ye not that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit which dwelleth in you' and on penetrating a little into the wonders of the person, and how he dwells or resides in the believer, I think in short that I have never been possessed to the same degree by reverential fears of grieving him, and along with that I have been able to see one reason, indeed the chief reason, why this great sin has made such a slight impression upon my mind on account of my base and blasphemous thoughts about a person so great.

From her feelings of sorrow at her failure to understand God's nature, Ann passes at once to what she sees as its cause.

This is how my thoughts ran about the persons of the Trinity. I feel my mind being seized by shame, and yet under constraint to speak, because of the harmfulness of it. I thought of the persons of the Father and the Son as co-equal; but as for the person of the Holy Spirit, I regarded him as a functionary, subordinate to them. Oh what a misguided imagination about

a person who is divine, all-present, all-knowing, and all-powerful to carry on and complete the good work which he has begun in accordance with the free covenant and the council of the Three-in-One, regarding those who are objects of the primal love. Oh for the privilege of being one of their number.

The letter may well surprise us, both in its contents and in its style. It forms one of a little group of eight such letters, all that we have in prose from the hand of its writer. Wales' foremost literary scholar of our century, Saunders Lewis, has declared them to be among the finest texts in the whole history of Welsh religious prose. One is not inclined to disagree with him.

There are four points about the passage which, from a theological viewpoint, deserve our attention.

Firstly, the writer is a person of deep feeling. She experiences reverential fear, overwhelming shame, in considering the errors she has made in her understanding of God. She is also sensitive and tender-hearted, and powerfully moved by the things she believes. We remember that she is part of a movement which expects the life of faith to make a deep and transforming impression on our feelings.

But, secondly, she is also a person of a clear and penetrating intellect. She speaks at once of 'a matter for thought', she expounds 'one reason, indeed the chief reason' for her perplexity. She seems to experience her thoughts as somehow having a life of their own: 'this is how my thoughts ran ... I feel my mind being seized with shame'. In the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth there is a common-place book belonging to the family at Dolwar Fach. In it there is a page where Ann, at the age of nineteen, has tried to write out a few scripture texts in English. She then adds one or two words in that unfamiliar language, of which she had only a limited knowledge. The first is 'incomprehensibility'. We should have known it was her, even if she had not signed her name on the page.

Thirdly, she is a person of outstanding theological intuition. Her grasp of the nature of theological thinking reveals itself in two ways in this passage. First in the mind which can see and express so clearly the failure of Trinitarian understanding which lies at the root of her dilemma. 'I thought of the persons of the Father and the Son as co-equal; but as for the person of the Holy Spirit I regarded him as a functionary subordinate to them'. She cannot have been aware of it, but in that one sentence she has articulated a tendency which has been common enough in Western Christendom, both Catholic and Protestant, for some centuries. It is a tendency which in our own century has aroused, on the one side, powerful movements of enthusiastic, spirit-filled religion, and on the other, probing, careful and creative efforts to restate a more fully balanced doctrine of the Trinity. At

the same time, as scholars in the Christian East became aware of it, they have come to see this tendency to undervalue the person and work of the Holy Spirit as one of the most important differences between East and West in Christendom.

But, and here is our fourth point, Ann not only has a grasp of the contents of Christian theology. She has an equally penetrating grasp of its nature. Her error she sees is the product of her own misguided imagination. The truth is something which she receives as a gift from the God who reveals himself.

Dear sister, I feel a degree of thirst to grow up more in the belief in the personal indwelling of the Holy Spirit in my life; and this by way of revelation, not of imagination, as if I thought to comprehend in what way or by what means it happens, which is real idolatry.

On any showing this is an extraordinary letter. The product of a very fine, accurate mind, as well as a tender, over-sensitive heart and conscience. Knowing as I do now more about the context from which it came, of the quality of preaching and teaching which characterised the Methodism of North Wales at that time, in particular the teaching of Thomas Charles of Bala and Thomas Jones of Denbigh, I can see that Ann was not so isolated a figure as at one time I thought. But still, we can hardly deny that there is something astonishing in it. Here is a woman in her mid-twenties with perhaps two years of formal schooling in a little village school, someone who carries all the responsibilities and cares of a family hill farm with her—for she is looking after her father and her two unmarried brothers, her mother having died when she was seventeen. We hardly expect such depth of reflection, such clarity of analysis on a point of pure theology.

But I do not want to linger over the person and life of Ann Thomas, or as she has always been known, Ann Griffiths, which was her married name. She died in August 1805, almost a year after her marriage to Edward Griffiths of Meifod, and two weeks after the birth and death of her only child.

What I want to do in the rest of this sermon is to look back into the tradition of which she was a part, that tradition of religious and theological poetry and prose which forms the backbone of the Welsh literary tradition as a whole for over a thousand years. One of the things which marks it is its understanding of the Holy Spirit as ‘all-present, all-powerful and all-knowing’ to carry forward the work of God, Three-in-One.

Here for instance is a passage from a mid-thirteenth century work, *Ymborth yr Enaid, The Food for the Soul*, whose writer was, as he tells us, a Dominican brother, very probably one who had studied in Oxford. This work

reaches its climax in a highly detailed description of Jesus as a boy at twelve years old; but that vision is preceded by a substantial discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity and of the way in which that doctrine is to touch the life of the believer. In it the writer sees the Church in heaven and the Church on earth as alike animated by sparks of a love which is truly divine.

From the tender love which flames between the Father and the Son (to which the Holy Spirit has been likened, and which he truly is) come the sparks of the church triumphant, and from there they pass to the hearts of the faithful who are the church militant here below. However small these sparks may be, they cannot be any less but only greater than the whole of creation, since, although they are called sparks, they are not less than the whole of the fire from which they come, that is to say the Holy Spirit, who is no less than the unity of the three persons together.

It is nothing less than God himself, God the Holy Spirit, or the three persons together, who dwells in the hearts of the faithful. Their responsive love for God, and their love for their fellow Christians, flows directly out of that love which is at the heart of the Trinity.

Therefore, through the tender love which comes from the sparks of the Holy Spirit, who is the tender love of the Father for the Son and the Son for the Father, humanity, the creature, is united with the creator who is God almighty.

The author of this treatise writes with a fullness and theological definition which is rare in the vernacular literature of the middle ages. We can see in his work influences of the writing of Peter Lombard, and very probably of Richard Fishacre, one of the first Dominican masters in Oxford. But the vision which it asserts, of a human life as grounded, rooted, in the divine life and love, is one which can be found in many places in the Welsh poetry of these centuries, which stretch from the ninth until the nineteenth. One particular formulation, striking but not untypical, comes from Meilyr Brydydd, writing in the first half of the twelfth century:

I will not break my friendship with my friend  
A friendship according to the Trinity.

The covenant relationship established both by bonds of human kinship and by bonds of personal commitment, for the word *ceraint* will cover both meanings, is rooted in, established by the eternal relationships which exist within the very life of God. Human life, personal and social, is made in the image and likeness of the triune Godhead.

The poets of this period, and to some extent the poets even till today,

can make similar and even more daring claims for their poetic craft, as being the gift of the Holy Spirit himself.

So in a fifteenth century controversy over this very topic Rhys Goch Eryri exclaims:

No, there is no muse but one  
This to the tongue not seldom  
From the Holy Ghost has come,  
And then is sent from heaven,  
Home of all gifts to us men  
So that God's praise we may sing  
As bond for her obtaining.

In the middle ages the word for 'muse' in Welsh, *Awen*, was constantly identified with the first word of the Angel's salutation to Mary, *Ave*. The word which brings the Spirit to the blessed virgin, the Spirit by whom the Word becomes incarnate, is the same word which brings inspiration to the poet, allowing him to embody in his words, the praise and glory of God as it is made known throughout creation and redemption. There is in this poetry, an extraordinary, latent, underlying Trinitarian structure of thought.

It would be foolish to say that such a vision of the poetic craft is universally or even widely held among poets today in Wales. But it was certainly not at all absent from the minds of the four great Christian poets of the middle years of this century, Saunders Lewis, Gwennallt, Waldo Williams and Euros Bowen. And in only 1996 a volume was published by one of the most brilliant and prolific of our younger poets, Gwyneth Lewis, a poet who writes with great eloquence in both languages, English and Welsh. It is a collection called *Cyfrif Un ac Un yn Dri, Counting One and One Makes Three*. On the cover we see a naive painting dating from the 1840s in which a young woman in Victorian finery is being baptised by a black-gowned minister in the River Rheidol, just above Aberystwyth. We see the two figures, the minister and our Mary-Ann, but it is a third person, the Holy Spirit, who performs the baptism, who unites earth with heaven, human with divine. We see two with our outward eyes; with the eyes of faith and understanding we see three.

I have spoken in this sermon of the tradition of Wales, of a people who share the southern part of this island of Britain with us though too often we seem to be unaware of that fact. After Ann Griffiths I have made mention in it of a notable representative of that tradition, who, in all probability, was educated in the early middle ages in Oxford. I would like to conclude with an equally eminent representative of the Welsh tradition who was educated

in this university in the 1560s and 70s.

Edmwnd Prys as a young man became a fellow of St John's and a Preacher to the University. He had gifts, particularly in the study of languages, which would have enabled him without difficulty to make an ecclesiastical career in England. But he decided, for whatever reason, in 1577, to return to West Wales. There he became rector of Maentwrog and Archdeacon of Meirionydd, and there he died in 1623 at the end of a long and chequered career, in which he had written much. Towards the end of his life he had brought to conclusion his long-awaited metrical version of the psalms of David. This was a work of such quality that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it was frequently bound up with the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer as an integral part of both. It is a work which laid the foundation for the later flowering of Welsh hymnody in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

But I quote not from the psalms but from one of Edmwnd Prys' own poems, his *Ode on Our Redemption*, one of the great theological poems of the Welsh language. His begins with a verse which declares:

I shall praise in every clearing  
The choice made in the heavens  
A design of great love,  
Three were united through the greeting  
The great God, the good angel and the maiden.

This is the point where the work of our redemption begins in the design of great love which brings together heaven and earth, in the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit. It is a design which is rooted in the being of God, Three-in One, in whose image and likeness humankind and all creation is made. It is the revelation of 'the free covenant and counsel of the Three-in One' of which Ann wrote in her letter to Elisabeth Evans; it is that eternal covenant which lies behind creation and redemption alike. It is that covenant and counsel, that design of great love which in the end will draw all things to their fulfilment in the feast of God's kingdom, in the joyful interchange of the divine love.

#### *For Further Reading*

An introduction to Ann Griffiths is to be found in A.M.Allchin, *Ann Griffiths, The Furnace and the Fountain*, University of Wales Press, 1987.

For more on *Ymborth yr Enaid* and its writer, see Oliver Davies, *Celtic Christianity in Early Medieval Wales: The Origins of The Welsh Spiritual Tradition*, University of Wales Press, 1996.

For the poem of Rhys Goch Eryri, see the anthology *Welsh Verse, Translations*, Tony Conran, Seren Books 1992. This anthology has a substantial introduction giving a survey of the history of poetry in Welsh.

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## FORTE BONA, THE WITNESS OF CAMALDOLI

DOUGLAS DALES

*The holy Church of Christ is united and formed with such charity that all together form a single body and, in a mysterious way, the whole Church is present in each.*

St Peter Damian

HIGH in the forested hills above Arezzo in Italy, lie the monastery and hermitage of Camaldoli. Ever since their foundation early in the eleventh century by St Romuald, an unbroken witness of prayer has been maintained in observance of the Rule of St Benedict. Today Camaldoli is the centre of a lively tradition of Christian teaching and mission; it is also the mother house to communities throughout Italy, and in America, Brazil, India, France, Poland and Tanzania. There are about 120 fully professed monks and 240 nuns in the whole order throughout the world. Their centre in Rome is the monastery of San Gregorio al Celio in the ancient heart of the city, the monastery founded by St Gregory the Great, from which St Augustine and his companions came to evangelise England in 597. There is also a convent of contemplative nuns on the Aventine hill in a monastery dedicated to St Antony.

If you go to Camaldoli, you climb up winding roads into the great forests which have surrounded it from the beginning. Originally it lay on an old Roman road from Ravenna into central Italy, and St Romuald chose the location because of its wild solitude. In the valley lies the monastery with its ancient guesthouse and pharmacy. The core of the building goes back to the tenth and eleventh centuries, and the present monastic church is built over a Romanesque crypt. This church is decorated with paintings by Vasari, and there is a cloister in pure classical style, reminding us of the close links between Camaldoli and the earliest stirrings of the Renaissance in Florence. Throughout its history, this order has had a powerful tradition of learning and spiritual teaching.

From the monastery, with its colourful mountain cloister full of flowers, you climb up through the forest for a couple of miles to the holy hermitage of the Transfiguration. The trees are an important part of Camaldoli's inheritance: for many centuries they were in the guardianship of the monks, and today the sheer height of the trees and their murmuring in the wind create an overwhelming atmosphere of peace and timelessness.

The holy hermitage comprises a large enclosure, fronted by a chapel, refectory and library, which are open to visitors. You can also see the cell of St Romuald, which gives a glimpse of how a hermit lives. Its inner structure

is like the inside of a snail's shell: there is a wide corridor turning right which is for exercise during winter; this leads into the principal room, in the inside corner of which the hermit sleeps in a wooden box-bed for warmth. Leading off are a small study and an oratory, a kitchen and bathroom. It is a complete living environment, designed to withstand the inroads of winter in the mountains.

The hermits meet together for the Offices and the Mass and for a common meal each day. The eremitic life is an integral part of the Camaldolese way; any monk may seek it, and this life is seen as complementary to life in community, from which it is not at all separated. This two-fold aspect of the monastic vocation is captured in the symbol of Camaldoli, drawn from the mosaics of Ravenna: two doves imbibing together from a chalice, over which hangs a star. If you are privileged to penetrate the enclosure, you find an ordered village of monastic houses, some of which are medieval in origin. They are surrounded by a swathe of cleared ground and then a high wall overhung by the trees. At the head of the enclosure is a lovely Romanesque chapel flanked by the monks' cemetery.

The founder of Camaldoli was St Romuald, who died in 1027. His story is told in a 'Life' written twenty years after his death by St Peter Damian, who to some extent was trustee of his spiritual legacy. There is further information about him in the account of some of his disciples who died as martyrs while engaged in mission in eastern Europe early in the eleventh century; it was written by another follower, Bruno of Querfurt. These have recently been translated into English with lucid introductions by one of the American monks at Camaldoli.

St Romuald grew up in Ravenna and was of aristocratic background. Shocked by the sight of his father killing a kinsman in a duel, he withdrew into the monastery of St Apollinare in Classe, just outside Ravenna. Its most beautiful church still remains there, with a wonderful mosaic in the apse portraying St Apollinaris, who was the first bishop of Classe: he came from Antioch, when Classe was a thriving Roman naval dockyard where Christianity soon took root. While there Romuald had two visions of the saint in the church, which confirmed him in his monastic vocation. But he did not fit easily into community life; his desire for a more rigorous ascetic life made him enemies and he had to flee. The rest of his life was spent wandering throughout Italy and elsewhere, and the small hermitage at Camaldoli was just one of the ascetic communities which regarded him as its spiritual father. Only much later did it emerge as one of his most significant foundations. It fell to St Peter Damian to capture the essence of Romuald's spiritual teaching

and stature. Meanwhile the conviction that martyrdom lay at the heart of the ascetic life inspired some to pursue mission in the borderlands of eastern Europe.

Throughout its long history, Camaldoli has remained true to this vision: the martyrdom lying at the heart of ascetic prayer and mission, and the double aspect of the single monastic vocation—in community and in the hermitage. St Francis spent some time in the holy hermitage in the early part of his spiritual life. During the unification of Italy in the nineteenth century, this order like many others lost most of its temporal wealth. Today the monks are tenants in their own historic buildings, which are now in the guardianship of the state: their ancient forest is part of a vast national park straddling the Apennine mountains.

Since the end of the war, and especially in the wake of the second Vatican council, the scope of their mission and witness has blossomed remarkably. One of their most regular friends was Pope Paul VI before he became archbishop of Milan. In many ways, Camaldoli stands for the spirit which inspired and paved the way for the Council. Within the last thirty years, Camaldolese communities have been established outside Italy, in the wider Catholic Church, notably in America where they have close links with some of the Anglican (Episcopalian) religious communities. Their houses in Brazil and Tanzania are significant contributions to the development of the indigenous spiritual life and witness of the Church there in the midst of poverty and social deprivation, while their community in India is on the interface with Hinduism. This creative spiritual dialogue with Hinduism was spear-headed by the remarkable ministry and teaching of Father Bede Griffiths, an Anglican born in 1906, who became a Benedictine monk in 1931; he went to India in 1955 and became a hermit at Shantivanam, which became a Christian ‘ashram’ included within the Camaldolese life in 1980. His life was a marriage between eastern and western spiritual traditions, and a beacon for the whole Church, based upon the conviction that ‘contemplation is the awakening to the presence of God in the universe around us: contemplation is knowledge by love.’

Today, Camaldoli serves the Italian church with an ambitious and varied programme of Christian teaching conferences and spiritual retreats throughout much of the year. In high summer the monastery welcomes entire families for ten days of Christian common life and recreation. At the heart of their teaching lies the concept of ‘Lectio Divina’, the exposition of the Bible in a spiritual manner to address the pastoral needs of laity and clergy. To help include visitors within the life of their worshipping community, they have developed a remarkably accessible and melodious form of monastic

chant, which draws deeply on traditional plainchant, but is imbued by a charismatic freedom of spirit. In Rome, their monasteries provide for novices and students from many countries reading theology at the university there; and they have an active twinning relationship with a Romanian monastery. As Mass starts in San Gregorio on a Sunday morning, you can hear the Orthodox chanting in the side-chapel drawing to a close. The Camaldolese have maintained close and sympathetic links with the eastern churches over many centuries, since before the council of Florence.

The spirit of Camaldoli is especially congenial for Anglicans. The monastery of San Gregorio has always been of special significance for English Christians, Catholics and Anglicans, as the source of the mission which was sent to Kent by Pope Gregory the Great. In the corner of the sixteenth century baroque church of St Andrew there, you may still find his marble senatorial chair. St Gregory's advocacy of the teaching and example of St Benedict did much to commend it to the English church and, through the English missions, to Carolingian Europe. By the tenth century, the Rule of St Benedict had become the norm for monastic life in the western church. The way in which the Camaldolese have preserved the integral unity of community and eremitic life, their sense of mission, and their dialogue with eastern Christianity, all contribute to a spirituality which is very close in its essence to the early centuries of Benedictine monasticism, which did so much to form the English church. At the same time, the liberal Christian humanism of the early Renaissance, which Camaldolese monks did much to foster, remains alive in the intelligent openness of spirit and evangelical fervour which greets a visitor, and which evidently continues to attract able young people, men and women, into their ranks. Without forfeiting a deep-rooted orthodoxy of belief, or the integrity of their contemplative enclosure, they have ensured that the core of their vision is accessible to the spiritual needs of the wider Christian community, western and eastern. Its witness and spiritual significance is therefore truly ecumenical.

*Camaldoli: a Journey into its History and Spirituality*, by Lino Vigilucci

(translated by Peter-Damian Belisle) 1995. ISBN 0-940147-37-8.

*The Mystery of Romuald and the Five Brothers* (translated texts), Thomas Matus:

1994. ISBN 0-940147-33-5

Source Books and Hermitage Books publish these in America at

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## IN MEMORIAM FATHER PERCY

SISTER CATHERINE SLG

FATHER Percy Coleman was a friend of SLG for many years. He was first brought to Fairacres by his close friend, Father Gilbert Shaw who was then our Warden. When Fr Percy preached at Fr Gilbert's Requiem he had for several years been coming regularly to celebrate the Eucharist and to hear confessions. As early as 1977 he spoke to us on the subject 'Woman and the Priestly Ministry'; and although his intention was to lead us to pause and look again at the arguments, some of his hearers were surprised at how favourably inclined he seemed to be. In his retirement Father Percy was often priest in residence at Fairacres or Boxmoor for Easter and for Christmas when it became a tradition for him to sing Good King Wenceslas with us on Boxing Day. Any sister opening the door to the tall soldierly figure in its black raincoat and beret would be invariably greeted with some poker-faced sally of wit, followed at once by his rare and winning smile. At recreation on a Sunday afternoon, when deafness made it difficult for him to make general conversation, we would soon all find ourselves listening to an urbane discourse on some topic of the day, usually of an international or historical character, the range and precision of his information never failing to astonish his hearers. Towards the end of his life when he could no longer leave the Charterhouse to come to us, some of us were able to go to him.

We are glad to be able to share with you Rosie Deedes' reflections on her ministry to Father Percy—and his to her—in his last days, together with extracts from the first retreat Fr Percy gave to SLG. For those who never knew him these may breathe some life into the dry bones of the obituary notices: born in 1911 and baptised Frederick Philip, studied at the London School of Economics (where he acquired the name Percy) and at St Stephen's House; ordained priest in 1941, for thirteen years General Secretary of the Church Union, Warden of the Community of St John the Baptist, Clewer for eleven years, Rector of the City parish of St Andrew-by-the-Wardrobe 1971-1984, Lecturer and honorary curate at St Botolph's Aldgate; died 14th April 1998.

But for those who knew Percy and loved him, even his own words on the page may miss something essential: what one of the obituaries called his 'somewhat emasculated, clericalised voice'. One of my abiding memories is of Fr Percy celebrating the Eucharist on some major festival and singing the Canon. It was the same voice and 'emasculated' was the last word one would use to describe it.

Retreat addresses are a very intimate kind of preaching, speaking to the heart of the hearers. These extracts give no hint of the more public Fr Percy: his commitment to social justice and to the unity of Christians, his work in the Church Assembly and the Advanced Sunday School he ran at St Andrew's. But it may be that the hidden work of tending souls, of guiding Christian lives, will be the longer lasting. Fr Percy did not write books or chair commissions, but challenged his brothers and sisters to 'press on, to learn what is held out to us by Christ who has laid hold on us.' Fr Percy seemed always to speak without any written text or notes—with the occasional hesitation, with some repetition for emphasis—but entirely without deviation. He had learned how to master his material and present it with this fluency from the teaching and example of Harold Laski at LSE. I was given to read that first, 1964, retreat entitled 'The Restoration of the Image' (perhaps twenty-five thousand words in length) when I was a novice and I copied out long passages from the final section, 'Holy Communion'. They came at once to mind the first time I visited Fr Percy in the Charterhouse, when difficulties with moving and speaking were added to his deafness.

Sometimes our Lord hardly seems to be stretching out his hands to take us and when they do take us, then the holding seems to be almost purposeless. Perhaps this may be the least bearable part, that having brought ourselves to say that we wish to give ourselves fully to him he stretches out his hands to take us and then just holds us there.

All the while he is holding us, he gives thanks. He gives thanks for his own creation which we are. That in itself should be a sustaining thought. When the life for which we had so gladly given ourselves seems to be leading nowhere, and seems to cease to be life, we can recall this truth. Our Lord in the Upper Room rejoiced over creation in the traditional Jewish words, and so he gives thanks over us. He is, as it were, offering a consecratory prayer for us. And sooner or later the hands begin to press upon the bread and break it. The fingers press upon the bread and something which may have looked rather attractive is broken down into pieces, broken bits of bread ... Let us pray that we may all be ready for the breaking and, if it seems that the pressure is too long maintained or that the pattern is not what we expected, let us still by God's grace retain our initial spirit of surrender and let ourselves go more and more into the grasp of those hands, so that their purpose may be accomplished.

The Lord gives, but he does not give silently. He gives saying 'This is my Body'. Yes, the Bread is his Body in Holy Communion. But we are also taught that we are the Body of Christ, so surely we can think of Christ himself looking upon *us* and saying 'This is my Body' We are baptised into our Lord, into his life and into his passion, into his death and into his

resurrection and ascension. ‘This is my Body’—but for giving. Our Lord takes, gives, thanks, breaks and gives in order that life may be bestowed. This is the pattern for all who are taken into the Body. We may rejoice that we are called into the giving that God may be known, and being known, may draw others to himself.

Our Lord’s taking and giving thanks and breaking and giving of the bread of Father Percy’s offered life went on for months as he became more weak and helpless, right to the very end, to his death in the early hours of Easter Tuesday. In her reflections on his last days. Rosie Deedes, Curate at St Botolph’s, has written:

‘I had only known Fr Percy in the latter stages of his life when verbal communication was getting progressively harder and his mobility and ability to do things for himself were very restricted. It didn’t take me long, however, to realise I was in the company of a great man of prayer, as well as someone with an invincible sense of humour; and as I sat alongside this priest of such vast pastoral experience and spiritual depth, the most moving part of the vigil for me, a young fresh-faced curate, was that just as I was waiting now with Percy, so he must have waited with many of his parishioners when they were facing death. In his pyjamas and removed from his beloved books and pictures, he was just another patient, just another bed. To pray for healing in this situation was to pray for Percy to be relieved of his suffering and to die. During the Maundy Thursday vigil, while the Sacrament was exposed on the altar at St Botolph’s, I sat with Percy and it was as hard to sit with this dying man as it must have been for the disciples to sit and wait with Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane

When I sat with him on Easter Sunday, knowing it would be for the last time, I expressed my feelings of helplessness to Percy. Nothing can prepare you or train you to sit with someone as they die. I was there alone apart from the angels, and I had no sense that what I was doing was helpful or right or had any value. I wanted so much Percy’s reassurance, I wanted his wisdom and pastoral expertise and I felt completely inadequate. I know that Percy understood my vulnerability then; he looked at me as I wept and I glimpsed a tear in his own eye too. In that moment I knew that all I have to bring to being a priest is who I am, and in that instant, I was being fully me, and Percy understood and I’m sure God did too.’

In her panegyric at Father Percy’s requiem, Valerie Pitt said:

‘What I and no doubt others found in Percy was easier to recognise than to describe, a different quality in the silences between us, a deepening of his pastoral kindness, an increasing clarity and simplicity, even in the depths of his illness, in his being himself. And something else: I formed the habit when I visited him at the Charterhouse of asking for his blessing, though it was not my normal practice. But it was one priestly function he could still

exercise and it expressed my own increasing veneration for what was in him even *in extremis*.’

For that self, priestly, pastoral and memorable to all who loved him, we give thanks to God, wonderful in all his saints.

## BROD

YOU would like Brod. I first met him at a Christmas party. He must have been about ten or eleven years old. He sat opposite me at the table. The party was at a home for mentally handicapped people. When I say ‘home’ I mean home. Not some dreary ‘do good’ place. No, a real home where Brod can stay until he dies. Brod was already a fixture. You could tell that by the way he looked at you. He was safe. He had a place. He could look out from it. As soon as we had sat down he said to me, ‘What’s your name?’ I could just make out what he was saying. His mouth was not completely under his control. I told him, ‘I am Brian’. He repeated it over and over again as if to make sure of it. Then I said ‘What do they call *you*?’ He said Rod; or Bod, or Brod, I couldn’t make it out. The person next to him said, ‘You’re Brod aren’t you’. I noticed Brod was very interested in the people who had been invited to the meal—people he had never seen before. He stared at each of us. If he found us looking at him, he gave a big laugh, his mouth wide open and the food in it dripping on to the table. I found myself being pleased that I was important to Brod.

On my visits to Brod’s home, I found him usually very pleased to see me. He takes me by the hand. He took me to show me his drawings. They were pinned up on a board with those of some of the others of the family. I should tell you Brod’s home was in Northern Ireland. When you are in the house you wouldn’t know. Only on Sundays the differences show. Three of the family are Catholics, and go off to St. Patrick’s. Two are Church of Ireland, and two others Presbyterian. They go off to their own churches. Sunday is the only day when they split up. Brod is not happy on Sundays. He has a special friend, one of the helpers. Brod is a Catholic, his friend is a Protestant. He can’t understand why they have to split up. It seems silly. Brod knows God is someone who likes people to be together. He doesn’t *think* this. He knows it. He couldn’t tell himself or anybody else *how* he knows it. When he goes to church he sits looking at the big crucifix over the altar. He can’t take his eyes off it. ‘That is Jesus’, he was told. ‘Why doesn’t he move?’ ‘Why doesn’t he cry out?’ He watches. He doesn’t listen to all the words of the priest or the people. He likes the music. He watches the man on the Cross and he watches everyone when it is time to go up to the front. He watches as he is given a piece of bread—everyone is given a piece. He hears the priest say, ‘This is Jesus’. So the piece of bread and the man on the Cross are the same. Again he didn’t know how, he couldn’t think, but he felt sure he was beginning to love Jesus—to see (to somehow know) what Jesus was doing. He saw him moving, speaking. ‘Here I am, come and share me—share

my broken bread’.

It is hard for me to explain how Brod can see, feel and be certain about this without thinking. But I found it out by watching Brod begin to take bread from the table at home and give a piece to everyone. He was doing what the priest did on Sundays. After a while Brod began to take bread in his pocket and give it to visitors. Sometimes, after someone had said something nasty to him, he would take the bread out of his pocket and give the other boy or girl a piece. Sometimes he would do it after he had lost his temper with someone. Sometimes he would do it to say ‘Thank you’ for something I gave him. I noticed on Sundays, when they came back from different churches, he would share his bread-roll with Protestants. In fact some of the people in Brod’s house got worried. He seemed to have a ‘thing’ about bread. When I quietly asked him about the bread he said ‘It is Jesus’. I must admit I was a bit worried. I thought he might have got it all mixed up. But the strange thing was that I couldn’t get it out of my head. Brod was telling me something I needed to know.

I was sure of this when a Pakistani boy came to the home. He was of course a Muslim. Brod met him at once with a piece of bread. They both sat down and ate it together. I found myself beginning to cry. I cried with joy.

I wanted to tell everyone what I had seen. I did tell everyone. Even if Brod didn’t understand many words he had heard those simple words. He took, he blessed, he broke, he gave. In some deep way, beyond thinking, he had seen the man on the Cross in the broken shared bread. He had seen the terrible divisions of the people who took holy bread in separate churches when they could have this bread broken and shared everywhere with everyone. How did I know this? Because I had seen people, who could not put two words together, make excited sounds as the Bread was lifted up by the priest, as they moved forward out of their seats to receive the bread of Life. Their cries and excitement shamed my pious shuffle to the altar. The man on the Cross had become alive with his words, ‘This is my Body for you’.

Brod belongs to a whole lot of people who are excluded with the rest of the nobodies who don’t contribute anything, or are not economically productive. That is the deep hurt of millions—they are the poor: blacks, Jews, prostitutes, children of decaying housing estates, unemployed, the aborted embryos, the stateless persons, women. If there is a God who cares, he is the God of these. Brod knows he is included in the bread sharing. It means for him that he not only belongs but he can through this simple act

help others to come in out of the cold. Brod has broken out of our divided churches with the bread of life. Bread means this to everyone—something to be broken and shared to make us all one family. It not only is broken but it breaks all our neat little attempts to have what we have all to ourselves. Bread is ‘brot’, what a laugh! Brod is well named. He is the bread giver—the man on the Cross. The plaster Christ must ache to be able to laugh like the real Jesus did, and does, laugh. Brod who can hardly speak one clear word has spoken the word we can all too clearly hear. It is the Good News. It’s all out of Northern Ireland!

## THE SPIRITUAL SUPERMARKET

DOROTHEE SÖLLE

CAN religion in a multi-religious society become a danger, and are there criteria for distinguishing true paths and false paths, meaning and unmeaning in the spiritual supermarket of the present day? I would like to recall one or two foundation concepts which have a bearing on these questions. First of all, living religion represents a unity of three elements which in the Christian tradition are designated as follows:

1. the institutional element associated with *Peter* and based on tradition and continuity.
2. the intellectual or analytical element, associated with *Paul*, and
3. the mystical element, represented by *John*; and what pertains to love.

The representatives of all three elements, Peter, Paul and John have each a tendency to regard themselves as absolute and to treat the others as subordinate. But religion can only remain alive where there is interplay. And in contemporary Christianity this balance is deeply disturbed. The mystical element has been suppressed and made invisible. In the Roman Church Peter and his followers are supreme, in Protestantism, Paul and his followers. *Mysticism is homeless*—and yet a great many people need it and are searching for it.

Years ago an American-Indian medicine-man told me about the college students who come every year in their hundreds to the Reservation in order to experience sweat-huts and ritual dancing. He called them 'spiritual orphans'. Their spiritual hunger should be taken seriously but not the 'fast food' with which they seek to appease it. If I understand the New Age movement correctly, its adherents think they can dispense with 'Peter' and institutional religion; they misunderstand the meaning of tradition and commitment. Many members of sects change gurus, groups and rituals at frequent intervals. One day precious stones, the next day, deep breathing! The absence of the 'petrine' element leads to far too strong an emphasis on the quality of a group's experience, it turns it into a sect. But the 'pauline' element too is almost entirely absent. Many devotees of sects reject outright the theological clarity embodied in 'Paul', and in consequence they run away from reality and often become totally dependent on their current guru. The introverted mentality of the little group, always revolving round itself, seems to me extremely problematic. Indifference to politics goes hand in hand with withdrawal and leads to the loss of solidarity. *The mysticism which makes us*

*more capable of love is reduced to a 'happening'.*

The 'guru' who two thousand years ago held the three dimensions together can represent the claims of commitment and 'Scripture' (rather than the current craze), of analytical clarity (rather than waffle) and of love in action as the heart of religion, without abandoning his followers to fundamentalist literalism. As disciples of *this* guru, Christ, a multi-religious society should not trouble us too much.

\* \* \* \*

*Teach, us, God, how to be a minority,  
in a country that is too rich,  
too hostile to the stranger and too military-minded.  
Conform us to your righteousness  
Not to the majority.  
Guard us from the lust for peace-at-any-price  
And from subservience to big numbers.*

*But see how hungry we are  
to be enlightened by you.  
Give us men and women who can teach us,  
not just presenters with rating statistics.  
See how we hunger for you to show us the way,  
how much we want to know what matters.*

*Give us kinship with those who have no 'lobby',  
who are without work and without hope,  
who are too old to have any market value,  
or too awkward and too useless.*

*Wisdom of God, show us the happiness of those  
whose delight is in your law  
who meditate on your word day and night.  
They are like a tree planted by the waterside,  
that brings forth its fruit in due season.*

Dorothee Sölle, *Träume mich, Gott*.  
Wuppertal 1994, Peter Hammer Verlag.

### *Acknowledgement*

The above article and prayer by Dorothee Sölle were first published in the periodical *Wort auf dem Weg*, July-October 1998. We are grateful to Verlag die Quelle for kind permission to publish them in translation, and also for permission to include in a subsequent issue of the *Chronicle* another article by Frau Sölle: *For and Against Asceticism*.

BEIR BEANNACHT ÓM CHROI GO TÍR NA H-EIRREAN'  
(Bear a blessing from my heart to the land of Ireland.)

SISTER EILEEN MARY SLG

WHEN I was asked to write 'something about Ireland' for the *Fairacres Chronicle*, I wondered which Ireland to choose. In the course of nearly twenty-five years I have visited or lived in that country for longer or shorter periods, for the most part in Belfast. There is no shortage of stories from that troubled city but we hear far less about the Republic now that it is a foreign country. A scrap of conversation remains in my memory:

Irish friend: 'The English don't understand the Irish.'

Me (defensively): 'The Irish don't understand the English.'

Irish friend: 'We don't have to. We were the colonised people.'

I remember the shock that I experienced when I first read a book entitled *The Troubles 1968-1995* by a Dublin journalist, Tim Pat Coogan. He was trying to be objective but nevertheless, his viewpoint was so different from anything that I had heard before, that it was difficult to hear, let alone accept, anything he was saying.

Yet the dichotomy between the English and the Irish cannot be as great as we like to think. Hybrids such as myself who carry the blood of both nations in our veins, can be counted in thousands if not millions. We cannot conjure up a sense of guilt or penitence when confronted with examples of British perfidy for we know that our own forebears were among the victims. Our family memories recall the shipwreck off the Galway coast of an unseaworthy boat taking my great-grandparents and their four sons to America. Only the mother of the family survived together with her three year-old son who would grow up to be our grandfather. Shared memories such as these could become a point of reconciliation if both sides were prepared to accept their kinship with the other. But for the Irish I shall always remain an English Protestant, kindly though their thoughts of me may be.

It is said that Ireland is one of the most civilised states in the world, not in spite of its history but because of it. In 1916 the Proclamation of the Provisional Government addressed to the people, promised 'religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens' and declared its 'resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts ...' Despite, or perhaps because of the comparative poverty of the country until recent years, it seems to have tried to keep these promises.

Although in the field of education much is controlled by the Roman Catholic Church, care has been taken to provide equal educational resources

for the Protestant minority. This is so even where numbers are falling and schools are kept open which elsewhere might not be regarded as viable. Nurses, another vulnerable group, also appear contented with their pay and status.

The Irish sit lightly to rules and regulations. This can be a problem, especially for pedestrians trying to cross a Dublin street, but in many circumstances it is therapeutic. During a prolonged stay in a country hospital, I was visited by my brother. Having flown from Manchester and driven across Ireland by car he was happy to consume his sister's rejected dinner. The entrance on to this scene of the Ward Sister was an embarrassment but we need not have worried. Not an eyebrow was raised in surprise or reproof. He was simply offered a second helping and accommodation for the night if he wanted it.

Out of necessity the ecumenical movement is still alive and well in Ireland. Dublin possesses a unique institution in the Irish School of Ecumenics founded by Michael Hurley SJ in 1970. From the beginning this institute has rested on an academic basis, providing post graduate and diploma courses in ecumenical and peace studies. Students are drawn from all parts of the world including developing countries with their own minority problems. Yet it has always operated on a shoe-string budget, and without help from the Government it would not be flourishing today.

These are a few aspects of Irish life and character which attract English people, who nevertheless often have difficulty in forming deeper relationships. Ireland has become a popular venue for holiday-makers who return home enthused by its beauty, its warm-hearted hospitality, its humour and its cultural life. No one would quarrel with this but I doubt if it does much to heal the unspoken but enduring memories which lie hidden beneath an hospitable exterior.

To go on pilgrimage is something different.

This year I was invited by a Roman Catholic family to revisit a place which in itself is a microcosm of the history of Ireland. The townland of Gartan is the first habitable land east of the Donegal mountains, and as such was the scene of conflicts from the earliest times between warring tribes. St Columcille/Columba was born here and traces of his monasteries and shrines remain in the ruins dotted about the countryside. But there are less holy memories. In later centuries settlers from England occupied the fertile areas around Londonderry to the east, bringing with them exploitation, evictions and migration of the native population. The country west of Gartan has been designated a Gaeltacht (an Irish-speaking area), one of four in the Republic. Many find peace and refreshment in the beauty of its mountains and loughs

but it is also used by paramilitaries as a place in which to learn the Irish language and practise their martial skills.

On the other hand, the inhabitants of this land are serene and simple people. At the time of Partition they were given a choice between going into the Republic or remaining a part of the Six Counties. They opted for the Republic, thereby ensuring that Roman Catholics, Anglicans and Presbyterians would live in peace together. As English Protestant visitors we valued our welcome into the intimacy of this Roman Catholic household. We listened to the stories, read the old yellow newspaper cuttings and felt that Ireland was beginning to reveal its true face to us.

We wait to see the effect on traditional Irish life of the arrival of the ‘Celtic Tiger’, the prosperous business community of the cities. We await the results of closer co-operation between North and South. But what our two countries cannot do is to ignore and hide from each other. For in some mysterious way we are two halves of one whole.

*‘beir beannacht óm’ chroi go tír na h-eireann’*

## BOOKS

*THE TASTE OF HIDDEN THINGS* by Sara Sviri. The Golden Sufi Center, 1997. Price in UK £9.95. ISBN 0-9634574-8-9

*The Taste of Hidden Things* is a highly accessible account of the mystical path as understood and practised down the centuries and still today by Sufis in many parts of the world. The author, Sara Sviri, is an Israeli scholar who studied Arabic and Islamic Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and who, having herself been drawn on to the Sufi path, has now written what she calls 'a portrait of a system, a living system, as I have come to know it over many years' (Preface).

The book describes by a variety of means - the poetry of the great Sufi mystics such as Rumi, for instance, and the first-hand accounts by novices and masters of both today and of former times—the experiences and problems encountered universally on the spiritual journey, whatever one's religious affiliation. The opening sentences tell us that the central image of the Sufi path is the human heart and that Sufi teaching 'revolves around the heart as that organ in which Divine mysteries are hidden, and where the mystical journey takes place' (p.1). But, precisely on that account, there is a great deal about suffering, not as having any redemptive power in itself but as a means of opening the heart:

God's mercy comes to us through what outwardly appears as contradicting His Law (namely, through suffering, deviousness, injustice, pain...) and is then given wholly, directly, inwardly. This is what suffering is about. It is through the application of misfortunes and heartbreak as remedies that Divine Mercy comes into the heart and transforms the personality where efforts failed. (p.39)

But there is also a great deal about efforts. They have to be made, even though 'effort cannot be divorced from the self which executes it' (p.27), so there is a chapter called 'Effort and the Effortless Path'. This is one of the many fascinating themes of the book. Another is the place of dreams and their function to reveal or promote inner transformation, about which there is a chapter called 'Dreams and Destiny'. There are many other fascinating themes, but I shall confine myself to mentioning only two more.

The first of these is in a chapter called '*Dhikr*: The Experience of the Remembrance of God'. *Dhikr*, remembrance of God, is both a practice and a mystical state. 'Due to its depth, ordinary, mental consciousness is often excluded from the awareness of the "inner *dhikr*", and the practitioner may become conscious of it only when the *dhikr* surfaces again onto the outer

planes' (p.125). And, later in the chapter: 'The innermost recess of the heart.....is called *sirr*, "secret", alluding to the introverted, interiorised nature of true mystical experiences: they are kept *secret* even from the conscious mind; they are the place of intimate communication between the soul and God, where nothing else has access' (p.131). This is extremely important for those who practise silent prayer to understand. From the standpoint of ordinary, conscious mind, it is of the essence in such prayer that 'nothing happens'. And here it should be said that the frequency with which the adjective 'mystical' occurs is, in this context, conducive to dissociating it from the extraordinary and the unusual. All of us, for whom prayer is central, are on the mystical path.

The second is the whole chapter called 'Eros and the Mystical Quest'. A passionate love of God is that which characterizes Sufi mystics above all, and has profound implications for the interpretation of the Song of Songs, quoted in this chapter. Sara Svirj handles the subject in a remarkably inclusive manner. After relating an experience of her own, she goes on:

I also understood why the Sufi tradition is full of Eros, and why it revolves ceaselessly around love, referring to itself as the Religion of Love.....why for Sufis the mystery of love has always included a strong element of passion, *'ishq*; why all great Sufi poets and teachers have implied time and again that *'ishq*, love-desire, passionate love, is not a mild pietistic affection or ideal, nor a dreamy, sentimental, poetic metaphor, nor a refined philosophic concept. It is a crude, ruthless, and glorious reality which pervades all levels of being, body and soul, and demands complete receptivity, sincerity, attention, and responsibility. *'Ishq* cannot be taught, cannot be preached; its potency can only be experienced.

(p.111)

In relation to Eros, Sufis live dangerously in a way which has not been encouraged in the Christian tradition. The arousal of human, sexual feelings, is regarded as an essential element in the opening of the heart to God. And yet, for Sufis similarly, the literal consummation of erotic passion constitutes one of the gravest pitfalls of the mystical quest. 'Therefore the masters [are] strict and explicit: no "acting out"' (p.121). So the chapter ends: 'To learn how to live within the power of desire for the created and yet yearn for the Non-created means to make the heart, which has become intoxicated with love, a doorway to the Infinite' (p.123).

It will be clear by now that *The Taste of Hidden Things* is not a book which will appeal universally. But for anyone in whom this brief description kindles a response, I cannot commend it too warmly. For those

in the religious life, in particular, there is much wisdom and guidance to be appropriated from its pages. But, for all who have read thus far, I will conclude with a saying from the chapter called ‘Sufi Ethics and Etiquette: The Path as a Way of Life’, which states that Sufism is nothing but the possession of good nature: ‘Sufism is good nature; he who has the better nature is the better Sufi’ (p.165)

SISTER EDMÉE SLG

*The Taste of Hidden Things* is obtainable from Blackwell’s, 50 Broad Street, Oxford, OX1 3BQ. Price £9.95 plus £1.75 for postage and packing.

*FACES OF THE CHURCH: Meditation on a Mystery and Its Images*, by Geoffrey Preston OP. T.&T. Clark, Edinburgh 1997. £15.95

The general literary recognition of the Dominican friar Fr Geoffrey Preston is posthumous; he died twenty-one years ago, aged 41. Hitherto we have had a book of retreat addresses, and then one of homilies for the seasons\*: now Fr Aidan Nichols has dug further into Preston’s papers and edited this volume of essays on the Church. Although they were not written as one volume, yet the editing is of a high order and so much so that Bishop Walter Kasper, in a foreword, speaks of finding here riches ‘in a systematic perspective.’

Preston’s approach is wholly rooted in the faith that the Church is God’s gift, and the means of revelation of Jesus. As such, we can only know its structure and essence by turning to the scriptures and to the traditions of Christian prayer. So the book has thirty short chapters, building on the conviction that there can only be understanding if we enter into the whole range of images that characterise the Church. The first chapter takes some basic biblical words—Ekklesia (Assembly), Temple, Flock, and so on—with each chapter following the development of meaning in both Old and New Testaments. Other chapters—Kingdom, Bride of Christ—are rooted, inevitably, more in New Testament terms. What stands out is a willingness to see the multi-faceted witness of the scriptures. Thus, on ‘The Poor of the Lord’:

There has always been an ambiguity in the tradition about which model to follow here. Should it be that of Christ the workman of Nazareth? Or Christ the wandering preacher, dependent on the generosity of well-to-do ladies, though often enough in real need as well? Or that of the Fourth Gospel, where the followers of Jesus have a common purse, as befits those who have been given the new commandment to love one another? Or again, that of the Jerusalem church, where there was not a needy man amongst them, even though they had all things in common?

He goes on to show how these models have been variously taken up in monastic tradition, and then asks what demands are made on us by our present awareness of world poverty, for ‘the Church, unlike secular society, lives by the End’.

The second section of the book looks at the sacraments. Three things characterise the approach. First, the overarching importance of baptism, which marks us as being ‘*in Christ*’; secondly, a great awareness of just how the sacraments have been celebrated over the centuries, with different practices and emphases both emerging and being replaced; and thirdly, a profound insight into the recent reforms of the Roman rite which never falls into being just a liturgical study or a lament for times past. So Preston writes of the Anointing of the Sick and of the prayer, ‘*May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up*’:

God raises up prophets and Christ raises up the sick; God raises up Christ from death and will raise up our mortal bodies. The prayer that follows asks that the man may indeed be healed and may resume his normal way of life. There is an implicit orientation here to the Eucharist. Healing is directed to fitting people for the Eucharist, for celebrating in the full assembly of the People of God our return from the far country, hag-ridden and disease-ridden, to the land where there is no more pain.

Two more sections follow; a final Trinitarian discussion of the mystery of the Church, preceded by some ‘Privileged Moments of Living in the Church’. Of these, several involve many people—Pilgrims, Saints, and others—whilst John the Baptist, Mary and Joseph get individual treatment. Joseph gets one of the shortest chapters, but its value is in inverse proportion to its length, looking at Jesus’ foster-father as the one specially called to give Christ his Jewish name and identity as ‘*Great David’s Greater Son*’. The chapter on Martyrs illustrates two characteristics of Preston’s writing. By building it up on interpretation of the Revelation to St John he shows his strength as a loving reader of the scriptures. Then, discussing relics, he shows his fundamental attitude of always looking forward to what God will do. By dying for Christ, the martyrs are most closely conformed to him, and this closeness is expressed in a particular way in the liturgy:

We place relics of the martyrs under the altar, for they are there precisely as relics in expectation of the Second Coming of the Lord. The relics long to stop being relics: they focus the prayer for the raising of the dead. As such they intensify the prayer which the Mass itself is: ‘Come, Lord Jesus’.

It may be either in hope or in despair or sheer puzzlement we put the question ‘How can we be the Church?’ In whichever of those states we find

ourselves, Preston will prove a true helper and guide. So he writes of Ministry, that much abused word:

Whichever ministry is ours, each ministry is meant to speak Christ until he comes, to continue the series of the world's incarnations, the *Sequentia sancti Evangelii* ('The Continuation of the Holy Gospel', the traditional Latin formula for announcing the gospel reading at Mass). When he *does* appear, then ministry will cease: the Church will cease to be ordered, to be ordained, and will simply *be* in love. We are told to pray that he comes quickly!

JOHN SCOTT

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G. Preston, ed. A. Nichols: *God's Way to Be Man: Meditations on following Christ through Scripture and Sacrament*. Darton, Longman and Todd, 1978.

G. Preston, ed. A. Nichols: *Hallowing the Time: Meditations on the Cycle of the Christian Liturgy*. D.L.T. 1980.

*THE ADVENT ADVENTURE*, by David Rhodes. Triangle, 1998, £5.95

The linking of Advent with Adventure in the title of this book gives a clue as to its purpose. Adventure, as the book says, is a journeying into the unknown, leaving the secure behind; and so must involve risk. A warning is given at the outset: 'this book will probably disturb you'. Part of the risk, it seems to me, and one worth taking, is an acceptance of David Rhodes' starting point—namely, that Advent is a time for reflection on the earthy realities of the first coming of Christ and their meaning for us in the here and now. The material world is the arena where the search for meaning is played out, and the emphasis is on our participation—an example being: do we run the risk of falling off the bicycle by riding it, or are we content to remain as spectators?

The author's starting point is the streets of the inner city, with particular focus on the homeless and their gift to us. Place and location are important: 'Death on the doorstep', 'The Darnall Dog', 'Inner city Angel', being some of the chapter headings. Starting from the premise (not entirely justified in my view) that religion always seems to want to distance what it calls 'the spiritual' from the earthly, the author concentrates on our physical apprehension of Christ in others, and sees the festival of Christmas as being a sign of life and hope precisely because it celebrates the involvement of God in the material world. The point is frequently made that Christ's birth occurred in the most unexpected place amongst the most unlikely people. My own deep friendships with the homeless confirm the value of the unexpected. I would therefore be content to remain with the fact of

unexpected and unhoped-for encounters being in themselves the meeting place with Christ, rather than legislating that these must occur on the streets of the inner city.

The resources we are given for journeying cluster around the birth narratives in St Luke's Gospel with occasional references to the Old Testament prophets and to modern day icons of faith. An obvious omission seems to me to be Matthew 25, the parable of the sheep and goats, designated in the lectionary as a possible Gospel reading for Advent Sunday.

The daily entries seem random and couched in a sort of narrative style with numerous rhetorical questions. The entry dated December 21 is entitled 'Final approach' and my reaction was 'So there is a plan after all!' The content ranges from the individual to the corporate, the O.T. to the N.T., the Gospels to animal stories, small observations of everyday life to global issues. Frustrating at one level, and yet interestingly reflecting so accurately the sort of conversation one may hear any day of the week amongst a group of homeless people—jumping from issue to issue but with nothing of irrelevance or insignificance.

The real life stories are deeply moving, and the validity of the reflection on them cannot be denied. The most memorable entry is that for Christmas Day entitled 'The gift of life' with the dual observation that God's gift comes to those who have nothing, and that those whom the world deems nothing are the most sacrificially generous. That observation by the author in itself refutes his statement elsewhere in the book that salvation is not a mystery.

The reflections drawn from particular encounters with those on the edges of society are the strengths of this book, and are a cause of rejoicing within it because we can, if we look long and hard enough, catch sight of a God active in the world around us. The author shares with us the experience of Big John's funeral. Big John, after a lifetime of homeless desolation and dependence on drink and drugs, prayed and came to faith through the help of others. John's testimony (written some years earlier) was read out at his funeral; and I finish with David Rhodes' comment on that moment of coming to faith: 'In a way, he had nothing to lose. He had long since lost everything. And it was into that emptiness that God gently poured his love. Sometimes when we are so low that we are scraping the bottom of the barrel we come up against the wood of the Cross. Emptiness and love: two of the things at the centre of what our own journey is all about. The question is, dare we risk the emptiness in order to receive the love?'

OBLATE SISTER SUE SLG

*THE ENGLISH MYSTICS: AN ANTHOLOGY*, by Tarjei Park. SPCK, 1998, £9.99

This book begins with a brief introduction to the subject of mysticism which is worth reading in its own right, being of exceptional usefulness and clarity. Starting with a discussion of the most modern senses of the word—‘from Tarot to I Ching’—Tarjei Park goes on to outline the development of Western Christian mysticism, focusing on four key writers: St Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, St Bernard, and Richard of St Victor. He then concentrates on the fourteenth century, when the three English mystics he here presents, Walter Hilton, the Cloud-author, and Julian of Norwich, all lived.

Within the actual anthology, it is good to see the often over-looked Hilton in head place. With both Hilton and the Cloud-author, Park selects judiciously from across the full range of these writers’ works, rather than confining himself solely to each author’s most well-known text. Thus, for Hilton, as well as extracts from his major work *The Scale of Perfection*, there are also passages from *The Mixed Life* and *Of Angels’ Song*. For the Cloud-author, as well as passages from *The Cloud of Unknowing*, there are extracts from *The Epistle of Prayer*, *Benjamin Minor*, *Dionise Hid Divinity* and *The Epistle of Privy Counsel*—to give them their more familiar mediaeval titles, although Park sensibly updates them. This breadth helps to make this a particularly fine teaching anthology, despite its physically slender size.

Julian is a slightly different case, in that she wrote only one major work. However, for all three authors Park provides brief but deft introductions outlining their life and thought, and this is particularly successful with regard to Julian. He draws attention to the Biblical origins of some of her most distinctive assertions, and thus encourages the reader to explore her text from a wider perspective than is provided by much modern commentary on her.

When it comes to the extracts themselves, Park provides his own translations throughout the anthology, and these prove to be exceptionally readable and lucid. I hope he will have the opportunity to do more translation work.

In a final section of the book, brief passages are included from other devotional writings of the time: the Ancrene Wisse, and the writings of Edmund of Abingdon, Richard Rolle and Margery Kempe. This section is perhaps the least satisfactory part of the book, if only because it tries to do too much in such a tiny compass. The main problem is that these passages represent two very different forms of writing. One kind is intended as sound,

plain and reliable guidance, however beguilingly written. The second kind is more in the nature of a personal record of ecstatic experiences, and here Park is up against a common problem: what is one to call this second kind of writing? His solution, to call this whole section ‘Paramystical Writings’, does not strike me as successful, despite his careful explanation of this term in the section’s introduction. While one understands the caution with which he wishes us to approach accounts of physical phenomena, the term seems to come from a different strand of vocabulary to that used in the rest of the book. It has overtones of ‘paranormal’, and introduces an element of confusion into this otherwise exceptionally clear and coherent work.

Despite the last section, this remains an excellent introduction to the English Mystics, with notes and an up-to-date bibliography of exactly the right length. Tarjei Park obviously has a lot more to contribute to this field of study.

SANTHA BHATTACHARJI

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## BOOKS RECEIVED

### **From Canterbury Press**

Douglas Dales, *Called to be Angels, An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon Spirituality*, £5.99.

Bernard Barlow OSM, *'A Brother Knocking at the Door': The Malines Conversations 1921-1925*, £25.

### **From Darton, Longman and Todd**

George Hacker, *The Healing Stream: Catholic Insights into the Ministry of Healing*, £10.95.

Laurence Freeman, *Web of Silence: Letters to Meditators*, £7.95.

Peter Verity, *Out of the Ordinary: Awareness of God in the Everyday*, £6.95.

David Mahon, *Full Face to God: An Introduction to the Enneagram*, £9.95.