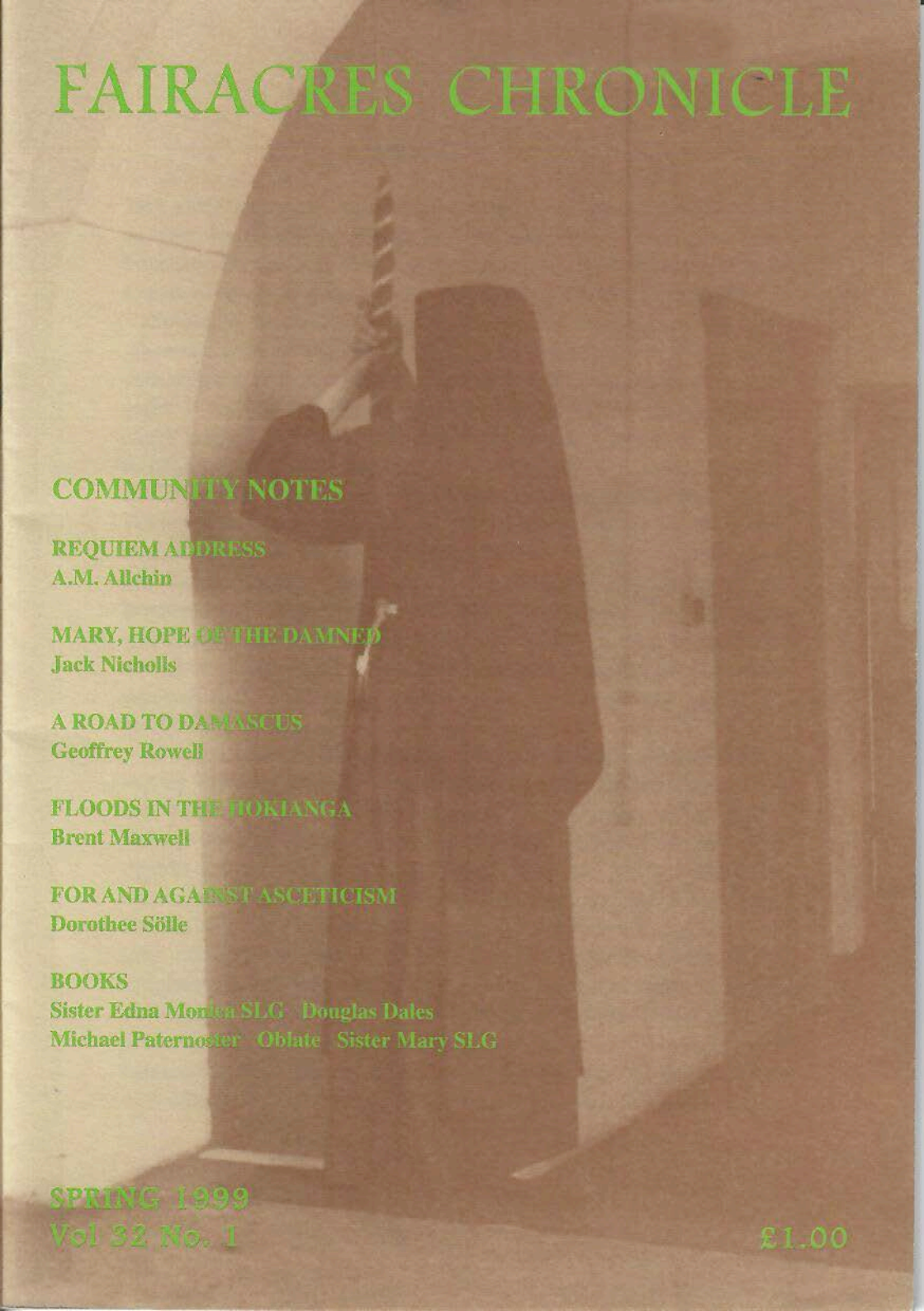
FAIRACRES CHRONICLE



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ADDRESS AT THE REQUIEM MASS AND FUNERAL OF SISTER HELEN MARY, SOLITARY OF GOD SLG

Preached at Fairacres, 8 January 1999

A.M. ALLCHIN

First Reading: 1 Kings 19.4-8; Second Reading: Romans 8.28-39 Gospel: John 17.1-15

IT is fitting that we should read this Gospel today, the opening verses of the High Priestly Prayer which lifts us up into the very life of the Trinity as we remember before God our Sister, Helen Mary Solitary of God, recently departed this life.

Her life was marked by the sign of the Trinity in a very special way. She was baptised in 1912 in the Church of the Holy Trinity in Hastings, and when she came to Fairacres in 1961, she took as her dedication the mystery of the Holy Trinity. John Donne's words 'Blessed be God who is God, only and divinely like himself' might have been a kind of motto for her life which was lived so resolutely for and towards the mysteries of the Divine Being, God Three in One.

On this particular occasion, this Requiem Mass and Funeral for Sister Helen Mary, words seem singularly inappropriate, and I feel the burden of them. Should we not worship better, should we not honour *her* memory more truly by silence than by speech? If I asked Mother Rosemary if I might say something today, it was not only because I have thought for a long time that after Sister Helen Mary had left us it would be necessary to try to say—and perhaps write—something about her; but even more because quite recently I have become aware that this very hidden life of our Sister had in these last years begun to take on a public and open significance of a kind which perhaps we had not thought of before.

And the presence here today of Father Christopher Armstrong and Meriel—Father Christopher in whose parish Bardsey lies—and the presence with us of Jean Higgie and Esther de Waal and Oblate

Sister Mary ,whose house in Bangor bears the name Enlli—people who worked very closely with her in her life on Bardsey—all this underlines the fact that her life is taking on an open, public significance.

Sister Helen Mary was given in these last thirty years since she went up to North Wales in 1969, the gift, the charism, of a particular calling which we now begin to see has an unexpected, universal meaning. She went to North Wales in 1969 seeking a place for the solitary life and she was drawn there, to the end of the Llyn Peninsula, by the presence of Father Derwas Chitty. In the eighteen months before his sudden death in 1971 she gained from him great depths of knowledge and understanding of two things which had formed his own life. First, his unrivalled insight into and knowledge of the origins of the Christian monastic way, particularly in the Christian East. And secondly, his sense that Bardsey Island was in some mysterious way, to him at least, a place of God's presence and a place of resurrection second only to the Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem. For him in some strange way the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Church of the Resurrection, and Bardsey Island coincided.

These convictions of his were not notional but embodied. Sister Helen Mary once said to me, 'When he read the great sayings of the Fathers, he *was* what he read: his face shone'. This particular gift received through him Helen Mary was to live out for the rest of her life. She found that everything he had said about the monastic tradition and about the island was true. It was a place of resurrection in a very specific, powerful, incomprehensible way. ('Incomprehensible' was one of her favourite words.) Not of course in any way which excludes the places, but in an all-embracing inclusiveness of Divine Love and Life.

At first Sister Helen Mary spent the summers on the island, but gradually she worked her way toward living there all the year round. That was not an easy thing to do. It had not been done for at least four and a half centuries that someone should live the life of monastic prayer all the year round in that isolated place. There were practical difficulties of many kinds on the way, but she overcame

them bit by bit, by patience and very stubborn determination, and by faith and hope and love. On the island she found that what had been said about it was true; and as Bishop George Hacker tells us in that moving sermon which I received from Oblate Sister Hilary only last week, there was for her on the island an overwhelming sense of the presence of the Saints. They had, she felt, shown her the way, and shown her that the life she was living was true.

But if the gift of the island was absolutely specific, it was also open and inclusive. And for her spiritual nourishment she found herself more and more drawn to the Syrian Fathers, the school of Isaac of Nineveh and John of Dalyatha. The two extremes of the old Christian world, East and West, were united on Enlli in her prayer and in her life. But she looked further than that. She was drawn more and more into the mystery of prayer and silence and adoration as it has been made known not in one religious tradition only, but in many. She received particular help from the writings of Swami Abhishiktananda. So much of what he wrote seemed to confirm her own discoveries. And then beyond all that, the opening out to all creation. For the presence of God was given, communicated through the very substance of creation— the rocks and the sea, the wind and the sun and all God's creatures. Creation, Redemption, Transfiguration, were woven together into one, all lifted up into the mysteries of the Triune Life.

At first in her life on the mainland and also in her early years on the island, Sister Helen Mary lived a life of great rigour and of great strictness. As I waited for the boat at Pwllheli—in those days it was quite a long trip—it could take two or more hours—as I waited one day in the seventies, some other visitors going to the island said to me, ' You do know that there's a nun living on the island now, don't you? You don't speak to her.'

As time went on she grew into a great sense of discernment and liberty of spirit—it was beautiful to see it growing. And as more retreatants began to come to the island (which greatly rejoiced her heart), she became more willing to receive now one, now another, to share with them some of the fruits of her prayer. And very

occasionally, as on one specific occasion which Esther could tell us about, in the last years she came out to speak to a whole group.

Of the circumstances which surrounded the illness which made it necessary for her to leave the island in 1992, and the frailties and confusions which marked her last months here, this is not the time to speak. Nor is this the occasion to think of all that her life means for the life of SLG. But I believe that is something we shall need to do as time goes on. For it was of course within the context of the life of this Community that this calling was heard, received, and lived. And humanly speaking it was the commitment to the prayer of this Community that made all this possible for her. It can hardly be coincidence that today we are giving thanks for the teaching and life of Father Cary, and being reminded of the vision and sacrificial living of the first years of this Community, 70 years, 80 years ago. Enough to say that Bardsey, Ynys Enlli—which is to Wales what Iona is to Scotland and what Lindisfarne is to England—has known after a break of more than four centuries the living presence of monastic prayer and monastic life—that presence that had marked the island for a thousand years before the Reformation. The way has been opened up by her faithfulness and obedience to the vision, and now others are following it. A new epiphany of the island as a place of resurrection has been given, a new discovery of what she had discerned to be the island's true vocation.

As she wrote in the summer of 1987: 'This mystery of Bardsey is founded on that which has been given and lived here from its first origins and in all its depths, and which today and from henceforth has received a new beginning in *this* time, in *our* time'. For our Sister's prayer and faithfulness to the new life that has come to us from the dying and rising of Christ our Lord, in *this* time, in *our* time, we give thanks to the Eternal Father, in the power of the Holy and Life-giving Spirit, to whom Three Persons, One All Holy God, be glory through the ages of ages. Amen.

SERMON PREACHED FOR THE LIFE PROMISES
OF
OBLATE SISTER SUE OF THE DIVINE COMPASSION SLG

Fairacres 17 January, 1999

BISHOP JACK NICHOLLS

SUE, I like the colour of your habit—let me explain why. During a recent visit to a religious community, I was quietly reading a devotional book in bed, at something turned eleven o'clock in the evening, when I suddenly found myself moving towards the floor as the bed collapsed under me. Not being willing to spend the rest of the night at this awkward angle, I mustered together my very limited capacity for 'do it yourself', went down the corridor and collected a pile of the largest volumes I could find. On returning to the room, I propped up the bed and was pleased to discover that I had chosen almost exactly the right number of books, there being only one slim volume over. I opened the book. It was an elderly volume entitled 'Russian Icons' and as I returned to my bed I began to peruse the contents. I was struck by one particular plate. It depicted Christ as Judge, flanked on either side by Mary and John. The description named this particular icon as a *Deésis*, that is, a panel of the Last Judgement where Mary and John are shown interceding with Christ on behalf of the damned. John is not the young, clean-shaven man of the Gospel, but the elderly, bearded mystic of Patmos. Mary is in russet brown, not blue. She is an elderly peasant woman, and because of her role, she became known in Russia as 'Mary, Hope of the Damned'. Here is the determined peasant mother who is not going to go away until she gets her way for her children. Here is the importuning woman of the Gospel, doggedly determined.

William Cowper, the eighteenth century poet (who wrote, amongst other things, 'O for a closer walk with God'), needed Mary, Hope of the Damned. He believed in salvation for all—except William Cowper. He believed that everyone was lovable

except himself—not an unusual state of mind for priests and religious. The pity is that he was an English Protestant of the 1700s and the knowledge of Mary, Hope of the Damned was not available to him.

John Wesley was not dissimilar. ‘And yet this mystery, I do not love God. I never did....Therefore I never believed in the Christian sense of the word. Therefore I am only an honest heathen....And yet to be so employed of God!’ he wrote to his brother, twenty eight years after his conversion. He knew that he was used, but like many of us, for himself he needed Mary, Hope of the Damned.

Bishops too are in need of her. I have recently read ‘From the Holy Mountain’ by William Dalrymple. In it he tells the story of the holy monk who had charge of a very naughty novice. Sadly, the novice died, and the holy monk was worried as to his whereabouts. Surely he would be in the lake of eternal fire! On seeing the monk the novice cried out, ‘O my father, my father, thankyou, thankyou, thankyou!’ ‘Why do you thank me, my son?’ said the holy monk’. ‘Because if it were not for you dear father, I would not be here, so thankyou, thankyou, thankyou!’ ’But you are in the lake of fire so why thank me for your being here?’ continued the monk. ‘It is because of your prayers,’ said the novice, ‘that the Lord has sent along this bishop on whose head I am now standing’. Bishops too need Mary, Hope of the Damned.

My wife and I have recently returned from the Holy Land. It was the experience of a lifetime. There was much laughter and many moments of tears, but among the most moving was the visit to the traditional site of Jesus’ resurrection appearance to Peter after breakfast on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. This encounter in the Gospel is read at the consecration of every bishop, and reading it again there, I was more conscious than ever of the impossibility of the task ‘Feed my lambs’, ‘Tend my sheep’; and also of the impossible question ‘Do you love me?’ But I carry on with joy because I believe that now, as then, God continues to make do with very poor material, and Mary, Hope of the Damned, with John, prays.

When I was on the staff of the College of the Resurrection at Mirfield, I remember interviewing a prospective student who told me, in a beautiful Welsh accent, that he had a special friend. I asked him about his special friend and he answered by talking to me about St Bueno, whom he regarded as his special friend in heaven. The members of this Community also have a special friend. Mary is your special friend. Stubbornly, she will not stop praying for the damned and for you. BUT there is a price, a cost, an oblation. You are called to be Mary, to pray for us, for all of us poor souls, and maybe especially for those who feel themselves to be damned. You're Mary for Ray. You are to join Mary in lives of prayer, stubborn prayer, for this poor damned world. Peasant brown befits your vocation. You see, I know you now too well. And a pure, untouchable blue isn't really you at all. I shall always think of you of this Community as determinedly peasant brown, like Mary.

BOOKS

THE SPIRIT OF PLACE: Carthusian Reflections. Darton, Longman & Todd, 1998. £9.95

Old Boots. Monastic boots; not higgledy-piggledy but in pairs; all facing the same way. They remind me of Father Lucius Cary SSJE saying that contemplatives preach sermons by the way they move and walk and the care and reverence with which they handle ordinary objects in daily life. These must be boots with a story! Are they drying after a Carthusian corporate walk? Are they awaiting repair, but perhaps there is now no Brother Cobbler? Are they awaiting the Last Judgement? Have they belonged to deceased Brethren and will new young monks step into them? The photographs in this book are unique and evocative. Some of them are more like oil paintings in their colour and texture. One can look at them again and again, and for a long time, and find oneself strangely heartened, calmed and quieted.

The photographs accompany sermons given by the Prior to his Brethren at St Hugh's Charterhouse, Sussex. The Prior says: 'I like to enter into the spirit of the liturgical season and let myself be carried along each year, ever deeper.' (p.62) The reader is assisted into this current by being offered talks mostly for the same occasions over a few consecutive years. One can dip into the book as the particular season or feast comes round, and it is best to read slowly, a little at a time. The sermons are unpretentious, but their purity and directness speak to a deep part of one's being; and sometimes a simple sentence or phrase can surprise the heart, effectively piercing it as with the sword of the Spirit. My initial hesitation due to the seeming 'luxuriousness' of the book soon faded as I began to read the text. In a beautiful way the words and photographs together convey something of the Carthusian spirit.

I would, however, like to direct attention to the series of books by 'A Carthusian' which Darton, Longman & Todd have published in recent years. There are four books of Carthusian Novice Conferences:

The Way of Silent Love 1993 £7.95
The Call of Silent Love 1995 £9.95
Interior Prayer 1996 £9.95
The Freedom of Obedience 1998 £9.95

These all originated at the Grande Chartreuse in France where the Order was founded in 1084. I recall from John Fenton's review of *The Way of Silent Love* in the Fairacres Chronicle, mentioning the high quality of the English translation, and this is true of them all. Another book, subtitled A Carthusian Miscellany, is:

The Wound of Love 1994 £9.95

The Wound of Love gives a selection of Chapter sermons from various houses of the Order which contain reflections that are full of wisdom and experience, with an awareness of the pitfalls and testings that occur in the life of faith and total consecration to God as the years go by. I found the quotations from the Carthusian Statutes themselves most valuable, and I admire the faith and honesty of the Prior who wrote of 'The Poor Communities', and how one responds to God in a situation of old age, sickness, falling numbers, and no entrants into the novitiate.

The Way of Silent Love expounds the Beatitudes and shows how each Beatitude reveals a different dimension of that purity of heart which it is a monk's primary aim to acquire. The Conferences emphasise the Gospel requirement of love for God and neighbour, and are imbued with Trinitarian faith and the awareness that it is 'with God's own love that we love him', to recall words of Fr. Cary again.

The Call of Silent Love explores the meaning of vocation as it is revealed in Scripture from the Old and New Testaments. These reflections are relevant for everyone because:

> The Christian is not a separate species of human being, but what each person is called to be. And the monk is not a separate species of Christian. He tries to be what every Christian ought to be. Conformity to Christ in faith, hope and love: this is holiness, and each person is called to this holiness. (p.29)

There is an utterly clear and up to date searching exposition of the teaching of the Fathers on the purification of the passions ‘as a way of harnessing energy to be used in the service of love and truth and goodness’. (p.126) And since ‘spiritual life’ is ‘the life of the Spirit of God incarnated in the life of a human person, according to all the capacity of his or her being’ (p. 92), we are challenged as to ‘what a prodigious work of transformation should be going on in us if we are to become disciples of Christ in all truth’. (p.163)

The Conferences on *Interior Prayer* are perhaps those most unquestionably relevant for everyone who prays and who wants to grow in prayer. The value of this teaching again lies in its rootedness in the study of Scripture as well s in meditation upon it. We are invited to understand what prayer is by entering into Jesus’ own prayer as St. Luke’s Gospel reveals this to us; and then different aspects of prayer are examined in the light of other biblical texts. Prayer is seen as part of life as a whole. We need firm foundations in building up our faith, so that life and prayer together become coherent, and even the most material aspects of our life need to be ‘organised in a way which will facilitate and express our turning toward God in faith and love’. (p.119)

The Spirit of Place does make one realise what a culture shock anyone entering the Charterhouse must experience. One can sympathise with the young man who compares his Clothing as a Cloister Monk to the *saut de l’ange* a high dive made with the arms outstretched until the very last moment before entering the water. (p.83) The Prior draws out the fact that while the world warns of folly and the unknown, the Church and the tradition we receive from the saints encourage us to dive, and assure us that, in the monastic life, we will find deep water and an element in which we can not only survive, but learn how to flourish.

This series of Carthusian books is significant. Besides their other values, they should encourage everyone who cares about the monastic life to pray for it and to empathise with its present situation. Possibly unintentionally, and certainly without its being pre-eminent, the books do show us an Order, tracing its origin back to the eleventh century, proud of the motto ‘*numquam reformata’,*

never having needed to be reformed, nevertheless having to ask searching questions about how to adapt to changing circumstances.

In *The Freedom of Obedience* there is a chapter entitled 'The Father Master of Novices in the history of Chartreuse'. This gives a survey of the history of the Order, and also records the drastic decline in numbers both of those being professed and of those persevering in lifelong stability in the Order after profession. The present Father Master reflects on our own century:

> .....thrown into upheaval by two world wars, by the appearance of massive atheism, by Marxism, by the affirmation of the person and absolute personal freedom, by an intellectual relativism, by confrontations with other religions in a world become small, by an accelerated mutation of culture and morals.....

He speaks of present day aspirants to the monastic life as:

> more and more 'converts', coming from a non-practising or non-religious milieu.....their Christian knowledge, particularly in the area of doctrine, is very poor.

And he adds that:

> All young people, even those coming from a Christian milieu, have quite critical intellectual habits, a mistrust of dogmatic authority and of institutions in general, a very lively sense of their liberty and their personality. Frequently their intellectual maturity far surpasses their affective development. Formation should be adapted to these people if it is to be effective. Our Order has to show that it is capable of giving them the life of union with God and fraternal charity that they seek, without which our Order cannot continue to exist. pp.(169-170)

Whether an Order is 900 years old, or not yet 100 like SLG, this is something that needs to be taken seriously to heart. How can we articulate and make available for the next generation the teaching we have received? How do we adapt and make appropriate changes in the life so that it is not totally inaccessible to our end-of-twentieth-century culture and 'mind-set', without being unfaithful to the tradition of life which we have inherited from those who have lived the monastic life from the earliest centuries of the Church?

A clue is given in *The Call of Silent Love* where the Father Master speaks of the transmission of the tradition being accomplished not only by the handing down of doctrines and monastic practices, but by 'a kind of symbiosis' through the life that is faithfully lived and shared. He points to the last link to the living tradition as being 'the generation that has preceded us', and says that 'this immediate contact is very important' because 'the breast that nourishes the younger members of a community on its substance is the concrete milieu of this living community'. (p.126) As the final chapter of our SLG Rule says, we are all living stones who contribute to the building up of 'the living Church of Christ on earth' by ourselves being built into it, and by our interaction with those others whom God has called, 'in mutual obedience and love'. This absolute *sine qua non* of fraternal charity shines out of all the Carthusian books. It is perhaps what the newcomer to the life most needs to experience, but it goes along with the ability to bear witness to the need for real conversion and sacrificial living.

This series of Carthusian books offers us mystical and ascetical teaching in a clear and accessible form, both deeply Trinitarian and Scriptural, for us to assimilate and take into our own lives. The books are a powerful–yet gentle and loving–restatement of the monastic tradition. If the past twenty or thirty years have seen somewhat of a loss of confidence in such traditional teaching, one can hope that these books will help people to look again at what that tradition has to offer, and to pray that we ourselves will have the courage to take up and live by these monastic virtues which are so contrary to the spirit of the world of which we are a part.

SISTER EDNA MONICA SLG

COMMUNITY-UNITY-COMMUNION: Essays in Honour of Mary Tanner. Edited by Colin Podmore. Church House Publishing, 1998. £9.95

This book contains a wide-ranging collection of essays by those engaged in official ecumenical activity in several Christian churches. It salutes the retirement of Dr. Mary Tanner, a notable

Anglican leader in this field, to whom the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Runcie, pays generous and sympathetic tribute. Christopher Hill offers an important review of her many contributions, notably her adaptation of the traditional Anglican criteria into Scripture, tradition and *experience*. This led her to recommend the reception of 'praxis' rather than full agreement in theory (for example, in the case of the ordination of women) as a *modus operandi* within and between churches, after the model of the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15. She also emphasised the importance of consistency at all levels of ecumenical dialogue. It is clear that her own integrity and diplomatic skill contributed greatly to these ends.

The quality of the essays in this book is, however, very varied. There is an excellent sermon on Dietrich Bonhoeffer by John Arnold, but the contributions of bishops John Baker and John Habgood are rather lacklustre and defeatist in tone. It was odd for this reviewer to read a report by Flora Winfield, the local unity secretary of the Church of England Council for Christian Unity, about his own parish, thinly disguised by altered names! There is some very pedestrian stuff and some very odd conclusions embedded: for example, 'we have been made aware that all beliefs and practices are culturally relative.' (p.153) There are howling examples too of ecumenical jargon, and an exotic specimen of feminist theology tangential to the main theme of the book.

However, what is good is very good, and of value to anyone wishing to examine the progress of recent ecumenical dialogues, especially with the Lutherans. There is lucid and informed discussion of the Meissen and Porvoo agreements with the Lutheran churches in Germany and in the Nordic-Baltic region. There are Lutheran and Methodist perspectives upon the Anglican insistence on episcopacy as one of the pre-requisites for ecumenical reunion. There is some interesting elucidation of the meaning and scope of the word *coining* as a hallmark of the Church's ecumenical fellowship; and some pertinent Lutheran observations about the value of the diaconate within the life and witness of the church in Scandinavia and elsewhere.

One or two pieces look out from the world of formal ecumenical exchange with refreshing sharpness and vigour. Nicholas Lossky writes with elegance and fervour from within the Orthodox tradition about the true meaning of the word *katholos*, revealing a profound sympathy with Anglican spiritual theology. Eric Kempe re-examines the declaration of the Anglican bishops at the Lambeth Conference of 1920 concerning the urgent need for ecumenical progress, and its probable basis. He believes that clause VIII of this statement is of abiding worth: 'We believe that for all, a truly equitable approach to union is by the way of mutual deference to one another's consciences.'

Catholic presence in these debates is thin: there is a rather stiff defence of papal policy, including the recent invitation for churches to review the ecumenical future of the papal office in the encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*; and this is matched by an interesting discussion of Anglican notions of primacy by the editor.

Perhaps the most percipient and prophetic piece is by Brian Beck, the secretary of the British Methodist Conference. He is alert to the positive significance of difference and diversity within the Church , and the inherent instability of instruments of formal reunion. He is also frank about the demise of traditional denominational formation and loyalties among the rising generation of Christians in modern western society. He commends the positive importance in spiritual terms of patience, watchfulness, forbearance and faithfulness in ecumenical encounters and co-operation. (p.234)

This vision is corroborated by the distinguished contribution of Jean Marie Tillard OP. He indicates the dangers of too hasty or superficial a forgiveness between separated churches in the light of their past antagonisms. He affirms the real value of such *koinonia* as there can be, however imperfect or incomplete, and highlights the complementary significance of varying Christian traditions: 'is it possible now to see these as the relevant emphasis or necessary (perhaps Providential) affirmation of crucial elements of Christian faith and practice, rather than as a rupture with the common teaching?' (cf. p.268) He concludes that many schisms within the Church occurred because they were indeed declared to be so by

those in authority when tensions became unbearable, often for a mixture of theological, political and social reasons. (cf. p.270)

This compendium illustrates the strengths and inherent limitations of current ecumenical theology. These principles are set forth at the beginning of the book, and permeate many of the pieces. The received order, 'Kingdom-world-Church', is one of them, as is the hidden agenda of a single united organism in this world. There is also perforce rather too much self-consciousness about the formal boundaries persisting between churches, many of which seem irrelevant to ordinary members. The urgent spiritual and evangelistic need to bury remaining man-made barriers to full inter-communion between Churches which profess faith in terms of the Nicene Creed and practice baptism in the name of the Trinity, is rather shied away from. The discussion is equally oblivious to new dangers to ecumenism: tensions between Catholics and Orthodox in central and eastern Europe and Russia, xenophobic and anti-Semitic mentalities in certain Orthodox churches, and the proliferation of semi-Christian sects in the West, hall-marked by fundamentalism or by admixtures of New Age beliefs.

Perhaps the most striking absence in almost all the contributions is of contentment with the reality of the fundamental unity of the Christian church, which can be experienced however incompletely by actual ecumenical encounter. This is a unity to be sensed, not achieved by human negotiation, and it emerges most strongly through sharing in the Eucharist. There is equally an ambivalence towards the rich diversity within Christianity—a modern and secular flirtation, however understated, with uniformity, which flies in the face of human nature as it is. If, however, the Church is perceived as the great tree portrayed by Jesus in the Gospels, then its branches are part of its glory, and no one part can claim to be the full expression of the truth of Christ, though for each to live to the full it must enter more deeply into that truth. Therein lies the mystery and attraction of ecumenism: the closer we come to Christ in this way, the closer we find ourselves to each other.

DOUGLAS DALES

SPIRITUALITY AND THEOLOGY, by Philip Sheldrake. Darton, Longman & Todd, 1998. £12.95

This book is subtitled 'Christian Living and the Doctrine of God' and is a contribution to the *Trinity and Truth* series edited by Bishop Sykes, who says in his foreword: 'It has often been forgotten that belief in the Trinity entails a way of life.' This is largely because for many centuries, at least so far as Western Christendom is concerned, theology and spirituality have been pursued as separate disciplines, with no close connection between the devotional and intellectual approaches to religious belief and practice. Sheldrake is deeply, if not passionately, concerned that we should *live* our theology. He maintains at the outset that 'a theology that is alive is always grounded in spiritual experience'. Conversely, religious experience needs theological evaluation, and searching questions must be asked. Not all that passes for spirituality in our consumer society will pass the test.

Christian theology is not an academic discipline that can be pursued in a neutral and uncommitted manner. 'To do theology means being a *theological person*, not merely using theological tools.' In fact, he says, 'the key to good theology is prayer'—that is, prayer understood as a relationship with or contemplation of the divine rather than as devotional practices and techniques of meditation. This understanding of theology harks back to the patristic and monastic tradition nourished on *lectio divina.* In the West this tradition began to be undermined as early as the twelfth century, mainly because of Abelard and his school, with their rationalist and speculative approach, which tended to reduce the doctrine of the Trinity to 'solving God's crossword puzzle'. Eastern Orthodoxy has managed to preserve something of the earlier understanding of theology, but has not really come to terms with the developments that have led to the contemporary situation, whereas one of Sheldrake's major concerns is to show that the fusion of theology and spirituality is not only possible but necessary in the

post-modern world. He quotes with approval two American feminist theologians. Anne Carr writes:

> As the experience of God's salvation in Christ and the response of individuals and groups to that salvation, spirituality can be understood as the source of both theology and morality.

Again, countering the widespread practical unitarianism that sees the Trinity as an unnecessary piece of sacred mathematics, Catherine Lacugna writes:

> The doctrine of God is ultimately a practical doctrine with consequences for Christian life

—to which Sheldrake adds, 'and for human life'. Sheldrake sees the point of the doctrine of the Trinity as revealing the nature of God as 'being in communion', a dynamic rather than a static concept, and affirms that

> the reality of God is more likely to be encountered by ways of 'knowing' espoused by mystical texts that are, at the same time, ways of unknowing from the perspective of conceptual thinking.

Having in the first part argued a case for the mutual interaction of theology and spirituality, he proceeds in the second part to three case studies. The first looks at the trinitarian theology of Julian of Norwich. It hardly needs saying now that she is to be taken seriously as a profound and original theologian and not dismissed as a mere devotional writer. For Julian God is as God does: 'Know it well, love was his meaning'. It is love that unites the Trinity. Love is the inner life of God. The second compares, from either side of the Reformation divide, George Herbert and St Ignatius Loyola: neither are systematic theologians, but both sought to live their theology. Finally, he considers the theme of 'place' and human identity, noting the ambivalence of the Judaeo-Christian tradition towards the notion of holy places. It is interesting to compare this necessarily brief discussion with the fuller treatment in *Flagships of the Spirit*, edited by Stephen Platten and Christopher Lewis. Medieval cathedrals are in themselves an image of the world which speaks powerfully to those who understand the symbolism, but one

which is almost meaningless to the uninstructed tourist, who nonetheless picks up some sense of the numinous. Sheldrake writes

> Sacred place, or better, the sacred quality of place, is where the timeless and the deep can be found and in this is both grace and revelation.

He rejects the assumption of Eliade and his school that there is a single category for understanding sacred places, and maintains that places have a plurality of meanings for those who relate to them. The tragedy of modern life is that the human need to belong to an ordered and meaningful world is negated in the urban wasteland which stresses mobility more than settlement.

Having drawn attention to the spiritual vacuum of our post-modern fragmented society, he insists the theologically rich traditions of Christian spirituality are still capable of making a significant contribution to the reshaping of society, but not by a desperate attempt to be relevant at all costs.

MICHAEL PATERNOSTER

FLOODS IN THE HOKIANGA

On the afternoon of Thursday 21 January the Sisters at St Isaac's witnessed some awesome weather. It rained—poured solidly—from three o'clock in the afternoon until half past seven at night. We had to shout Vespers in order to hear each other above the deafening sound of the rain on the tin roof, and in chapel we could smell earth. After Vespers we watched part of the hills opposite sliding into the stream, patches of turf at first, followed by trees.

Our house is set on a hill and we were safe when at eight o'clock friends began phoning to see if we were all right—the road below us had been washed away with some of our fencing. We suffered no other damage apart from the temporary loss of our water supply, but our local community was severely affected and a state of civil emergency was declared. We thought you might like to share the report from our local paper.

NOAH'S ARK

WHO can deny the epic proportions of the weather this summer?

For days leading up to the big flood lightning storms oscillated in and out of the valleys and up and down the coast as massive billows of warm and cold air ground against each other in a battle to find space. Drum rolls of thunder sounded warning of the huge forces involved and ominously the air was still and thick. And then on that fateful Thursday 21 January, a fat black cloud, descending like a curtain over a stage, eclipsed the settlements of Whirinaki, Pakanae, Opononi, Omapere, Pangaru, Mitimiti and Pawarenga from the outside world until the next morning.

In that black maelstrom the greatest volume of water ever to fall from the sky in living memory collected in the high forest catchments and rushed down to the settlements below.

As the water saturation levels of the thin forest soils on the steep Waima and Warawara mountain ranges reached critical levels whole hillsides started to move downwards with their cargo of boulders and gigantic forest trees. What many of us thought was continuous rolling thunder turned out to be boulders and tree trunks grinding their way down gullies sweeping all before them. Trees were literally skinned of their bark and branches and then presented as ballistic missiles to the valleys.

The light stuff came out first, great rafts of bark and leaves regurgitated into the harbours, followed by the contents of backyard gardens and then the trunks of palms and tree ferns. A huge brown slick crept down the coast from Mitimiti and came around the Hokianga's North Head to meet the one at Pangaru. As the darkness of night settled over the scene there grew up an eerie stillness disturbed only by rush water still draining away and the raucous clacking of helicopters coming and going.

For the lucky ones clustering together through the night there was a shocked sense of something terrible having happened. Unbeknown to them, out in the darkness there were others battling the elements for their very survival. Daybreak revealed the tangled mass of forest trees entwined in the wreckage of peoples' lives. For some communities it was obvious that things would never be quite the same again.

For several days there seemed to be barely any tidal movement at all in the harbour so great was the volume of water to be drained away.

For months to come debris will wash up on the shore and provide rich pickings for fossickers. Piles of driftwood will be reminiscent of the days before the forests were cleared when forest debris impeded free movement along harbour beaches like much of the west coast of the South Island still is today.

Yes, the weather was of truly biblical proportions with extremes that may not have been experienced for a very long time indeed.

Some of the trees washed down were hundreds of years old and have survived anything that's been thrown at them in that time. Some have quoted the predictions of forebears and others the Bible

to explain the worsening weather but scientific models also suggest that as greenhouse gases released by factories, cars and even cows warm the atmosphere, weather patterns are provided with extra energy to blow us about.

This results in more extreme weather events in every respect including floods like we've just been through.

If the global community can't come to some agreement on restricting the production of greenhouse gases then we will all have to adapt and prepare ourselves for the consequences. This will be a heart rending and expensive process, one that the community of Pangaru is already facing in the most profound way.

Unfortunately, the changes are not necessarily gradual but can occur in a stepwise and often catastrophic manner. Predicting what might happen next, and when, will be difficult and therefore maintaining critical infrastructure such as roading, water supplies and sewerage will be a major challenge.

Because of the levels of poverty within our community we will be largely dependent on outside funding to assist in making changes and this will inevitably mean compromises will need to be made. As always the marginalised and economically disadvantaged will bear the brunt of change and the principles of fairness and social justice will be sorely tested in the process.

And where people are stressed and desperate will environmental safety get a look in?

There will always be the temptation to try to modify nature, to divert and deepen rivers, to clear vegetation and to contemplate major earthworks rather than to accommodate nature, building sensibly so as to avoid its extremes.

The question will always be how sustainable are these projects and who is expected to pay?

Not only is the human world under threat in the present climate but also many other species already struggling to hang on will be pushed to the edge.

Recently a tiny species of bird called the rifleman was rediscovered in the Warawara making it the only known locality for the species in Northland, in fact north of the Kaimai.

Conceivably the homes of this small community of birds could be swept away at any time by landslides of the extent we saw in the last storm.

Now some may consider this a perverse luxury, to worry over the fate of an inconsequential bird when so many of our own have been made homeless but it could also be seen as a sign of maturity for a community to respect the existence of other wild species and to make efforts to protect them from further human incursion.

Now the little rifleman is not directly threatened but in Africa we are witnessing an environmental apocalypse where unsustainable human populations are driving to the wall other animals they share the land with.

When we make contingency plans for the next downpour let's be mindful of the other species around us and not ride roughshod over the principles of environmental safety and sustainability for the sake of short-term expediency.

When the waters rise again let's make sure that every thing gets into the ark!

BOOKS RECEIVED

From Canterbury Press
James McCaffrey OCD, *The Fire of Love, Praying with Thérèse of Lisieux, £5.99.*
Robert Atwell (Compiler), *Celebrating the Saints, Daily Spiritual Readings for the Calendar of the Church of England, £18.99*

From Darton, Longman and Todd
Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart, £6.95*
Michael Ford, *Wounded Prophet, A Portrait of Henri J M. Nouwen, £9.95*
A Monk, *The Hermitage Within* (new edition), *£7.95*

From I.S.P.C.K.
David Emmanuel Singh, *Spiritual Traditions; Essential Visions for Living, £9.00*
Paulos Mar Gregorios, *Global Peace and Common Security, £4.00*
Gnana Robinson (ed.) *Religions of the Marginalised; Towards a Phenomenology and the Methodology of Study, £4.00*
T.V. Philip, *East of the Euphrates; Early Christianity in Asia, £7.00*
Lalrinawmi Ralte, (Compiler), *Women Reshaping Theology; Introducing Women's Studies in Theological Education in India, £4.00*
F. Hrangkhuma (ed.), *Christianity in India; Search for Liberation and Identity, £7.00*

A ROAD TO DAMASCUS:

THE VISIT OF THE ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY TO SYRIA AND LEBANON

According to the Acts of the Apostles it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians. Antioch itself, (now Antakya) with little evidence of its former splendour, is a dusty little town in the former Sanjak of Alexandretta—the finger of Turkey which points south round the gulf where Alexander the Great defeated Darius of Persia at the battle of Issus. But the ancient patriarchate of Antioch still has a flourishing Christian life in Syria and Lebanon, though Christian divisions between East and West mean that there is not one but a number of Patriarchs of Antioch.

At the invitation of the Middle East Council of Churches, and of Bishop Riah, the Anglican Bishop in Jerusalem, the Archbishop of Canterbury spent a week earlier this year visiting Syria and Lebanon—the first Archbishop of Canterbury to do so. I was privileged to be with him as a member of his party, having a particular responsibility for relations between Anglicans and Christians of the Oriental Orthodox tradition—the ancient churches of Armenia, Syria, Egypt, Armenia and the Malabar coast of India The visit had three main themes. First, of course, was an ecumenical one, and in both Damascus and in Beirut we were given the warmest of welcomes by Christians of all traditions. We were conscious too that in this ancient homeland of our Christian faith there was much anxiety about the emigration of Christians from both the Holy Land and from Syria and Lebanon, movingly described by William Dalrymple in his best-selling book, *From the Holy Mountain*. The Archbishop has warned of the danger of the Holy Land becoming simply a

Disneyland or theme-park of Christianity with only a minimal Christian presence. Secondly, we were concerned to give further impetus to dialogue with the Muslim community, and there were significant encounters both symbolic and substantial which enabled us to build new bridges and make new relationships. Finally, to go to the Middle East is to go to a part of the world where peace is threatened and where fault-lines, often with religious dimensions, divide Israeli from Arab. Acknowledging that religion is part of the problem in the Middle East, it is important to realise that it is also part of the solution, and nowhere more so than in Jerusalem to which three great faiths look as a holy city. There is an urgent importance to recognising that Jerusalem has that significance and is not simply the preserve of one particular state or cummunity. Fulfilling that part of the programme, we were able to meet with President Assad of Syria, and the President, Prime Minister and Speaker of the Parliament in Lebanon.

Arriving at Damascus at mid-night, (I had set off with the Archbishop immediately after a consecration at Southwark Cathedral), we were greeted by the British Ambassador, Stephen Griffith, our chaplain in Damascus, and representatives of the Syrian churches and government. Next morning our first call was on Patriarch Zakka, the leader of the Syrian Orthodox churches at his Patriarchate in the old city of Damascus. Making our way through priests and seminarians singing haunting Syriac chant, we were received by the Patriarch in his reception room, where the Archbishop was presented with a copy of a Syriac Bible. Not for the last time on this visit mention was made of the visit of PatriarchZakka's predecessor, Peter II, to Queen Victoria, who was said to have exclaimed on seeing him, 'Now I know what Abraham was like!' The widowed Queen took the Patriarch to the mausoleum at Frogmore where her beloved Albert was buried

and asked him to pray over Albert's tomb in Aramaic, the language spoken by Jesus. Later in the week Patriarch Zakka welcomed us to the monastery and seminary of St Ephraim, newly constructed at Sadnaya outside Damascus, and the warnest of greetings were exchanged. There is hope that this may lead on to exchanges of students and clergy, and Patriarch Zakka will be welcomed as the Archbishop's guest here in England in the not too distant future.

From the Syrians to the chapel of Ananias off the street called Straight, for a Prayer Book Matins, where the supporting choir included the Ambassador. On to the Greek Melkite patriarchate, where a brass band of enthusiastic young people fanfared us into the church with Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy' (not very Eastern) and where haunting Arabic chants were sung inside reminding me of some marvellous Good Friday music I once heard sung by Fairuz, a Lebnanese Christian singer. From the Melkites, who are Uniate Catholics of the Eastern rite, to the Greek Orthodox patriarchate, and another welcome by Patriarch Hazim, who had gathered a welcoming lunch party. In the evening the Archbishop spoke about mission to a large gathering in a magnificent church hall, and this was followed by a supper party hosted by the Ambassador where there was an opportunity for exchanges with Muslim intellectuals.

This led on to a Friday visit to the great Ommayed mosque, formerly the cathedral of Damascus, and still bearing Greek inscriptions which testify to this, as well as magnificent mosaics, and then to the Abul Nour mosque, where the Archbishop was welcomed by Sheikh Armed Keftaro, the Grand Mufti of Syria, a venerable but vigorous figure, who has a considerable following amongst the Muslims of Syria. In a new mosque, with some 2,000 gathered in the main prayer hall, maybe the same number in the galleries above, and, as

we found out later, even more in two basement rooms linked by closed-circuit television, the Archbishop was welcomed graciously by the Grand Mufti, and then had the opportunity to speak before Friday prayers began. This was again the first time an Archbishop of Canterbury had done this, and these are important occasions, not just for those present, but for those to whom what was said was broadcast throughout the Middle East. Archbishop George urged dialogue and mutual understanding, stressed the need for Christians and Muslims to uphold the values they share in common, and warned of the danger of demonising each other. (We were told this was originally translated as 'Satanise', reminding us of the pitfalls of translation). Further conversation followed with the Minister for Religious Endowments, who hosted a lunch for a number of political and religious leaders. The day finished with a meeting with the Evangelical Community and young people.

On 30th January, our last day in Syria, we were asked to call on President Assad, appropriately stage-managed with waiting time (just under two hours), and an impressive approach—long drives to the presidential palace, and then a walk down a vast marble corridor, to be received by the President at the top of a flight of steps. The hour and a half's conversation was a sign of the importance accorded to this visit by the President (a reminder that the Archbishop is one of only three leaders in the Christian Church who has the personal office which can enable him both to represent and take significant initiatives, even though the Anglican family is much smaller than either the Roman Catholic or Orthodox churches). The day finished with a confirmation for the Anglican congregation, who include a significant presence of Sudanese refugees for whom the Archbishop's visits to the Sudan have been of considerable importance.

Lebanon, which was the second stage of the visit, still bears the marks of the civil war, as we began to see as we

wound our way down the mountains of Lebanon, where Mount Hermon shone dazzling in the sun, reminding me of Dean Stanley's little sung hymn for the Transfiguration.

O Master, it is good to be
Entranced, enwrapt, along with thee;
Watching the glistering raiment glow,
Whiter than Hermon's whitest snow,
The human lineaments that shine
Irradiant with a light divine;
Till we too change from grace to grace
Gazing on that transfigured face.

Somehow that transfiguring of our lives was what this visit was all about. But the bombed and pock-marked buildings of Beirut, and the military police in our cavalcade were only part of the scene. Beirut is rebuilding and rebuilding fast, even though clogged with traffic. Anglicans are but a tiny presence, but the Armenians have their Catholicossate at Antelias, where a moving chapel displaying the bones of some of those massacred in the Armenian genocide at the beginning of this century reminded us once again of martyrdom and the terrible consequences of religious divisions. Catholicos Aram presided over an Ecumenical Service, where the Archbishop was able to address the Church leaders of Lebanon. A series of meetings with the Grand Mufti of the Sunni Community, the head of the Shi'a Community, and a representative of the Druze Community were important in the inter-faith dialogue, as was an interesting panel discussion of Muslim-Christian dialogue.

In the meetings with political leaders we were made aware of the continual tension caused by the Israeli occupation of Southern Lebanon—but also the interlocking complexities of Syria and Lebanon in terms of Israeli withdrawal. On our final day, a visit to the Kifa'at Foundation showed what the vision of one man from the Orthodox tradition could bring into being to help the handicapped and other young people of all faiths and traditions. Earlier that morning the reception hosted by Cardinal Sfeir, the Maronite Patriarch, gave the warmest of welcomes from the Catholic community of Lebanon, and with so many Eastern-rite Catholics present enabled us to remember Dom Lambert Beauduin's vision of

unity for Anglicans at the time of the Malines Conversations—but 'united but not absorbed'.

These packed days in Syria and Lebanon were both exhilarating and exhausting. The press interest was considerable (in marked contrast to the situation in this country)—after every meeting in Lebanon the press were present wanting photographs and comment . What we have heard since is that the Archbishop's visit was an encouragement—a very Pauline word—to the Christian communities, a symbolic gesture, which yet overflowed into real meeting and the creating of friendship. It was a marker and a staging-post, which now has to be taken forward, in the possibility of a forum for Christian-Muslim dialogue, in the taking forward of the discussions with the Oriental Orthodox in a renewed dialogue, and in the enabling in all kinds of ways of a growing together of the churches, and a welcome and renewed concern for the things that lead to peace.

GEOFFREY ROWELL