

FAIRACRES CHRONICLE

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COMMUNITY NOTES

IN COMMON with most religious communities at this time, the Sisters of the Love of God are a community in transition. That is not new or surprising for rapid and complex social changes are affecting us as much as every other institution, social group and family. And, more importantly, we are committed to change as a living body filled with the Holy Spirit and responsive to the call of God.

But since the beginning of this year we have had Community meetings at Fairacres about a number of real fundamentals: our Rule, the Night Office, and the manner in which we celebrate the Eucharist. It is rather like examining the floorboards of the room you are living in, or (something we have become all too familiar with) maintaining business as usual while a general refurbishment of the buildings is in progress. I must admit it sometimes seems a bit chaotic! Change is happening to us, and we vary a good deal in how much change, and how much uncertainty, we are comfortable with. Some of us prefer to get to grips with an issue by anchoring our decision-making in practical matters; and some have to sense and surrender to a more obscure inwardness before allowing externals to fall into place more or less by themselves. Either way, we need a clear vision of the end; and uncovering that is itself a contemplative activity and an exercise in community living.

The work we are doing in relation to our Rule focuses a 'continuous assessment', a fine-tuning and adjustment, which we are doing less self-consciously all the time. In part we are looking for words which will express what has already happened. And the current series of meetings are part of a process which began two or three years ago when in Chapter we agreed to attempt to make for ourselves (that is, from our own experience and understanding) a fresh statement of our way of life. Since the original Rule given us by Fr Hollings SSJE, we have had two others, each related to and developing the one before. The work we are doing now is slow partly because we do want to move all together on this (not easy when we live in four houses) and there is a limit to the number of meetings we can encompass. Also, we recognise that the work itself

is of value and not to be hurried. What is written will need to be approved by the Chapter before it is adopted, and that will not happen for a matter of years, perhaps even many years. Meanwhile, those who value and support the life of the Community may pray for us more urgently by knowing we are *in via*. And those among you who are examining fundamentals in your own lives may find the knowledge a support: we are fellow-pilgrims.

Fairacres, as the Mother House and the administrative centre of the Community, often seems to those who live here, and to Sisters who visit from elsewhere, to be a place of many meetings. And that is true, in contrast to the less complicated life, with fewer Sisters, at Bede House, Boxmoor and St Isaac's. But the fabric of all our lives is also woven into longer, more fundamental and vital rhythms, not least the repetition of our daily necessities. Sr Irene, who died in 1992, is famous for enquiring daily of the Sister who opened the curtains and brought her breakfast, 'Is today an *ordinary* day?' And we all delight in the return to *ordinary* days when big festivals, like Easter, are over! Special days help us to notice and value the ordinary, and the constants which sustain us. Similarly, being aware of change stimulates us to perseverance and more conscious reliance on the faithfulness of God. 'Well and good, Lord God, if all things change, if only we are rooted in you' (St John of the Cross).

When one is in retreat, alert for God, almost anything can take on significance. Last year I was in retreat at Fairacres during 'eights week' and could hear, above the roar of crowds on the riverbank, all the loudspeaker announcements. Suddenly I heard: 'The race has been stopped.' 'Stop racing. Stop racing. Thank you.' 'This race will not be re-rowed.' Apparently a boat had been disqualified. Rules had been broken. The crowd fell silent. It was over. Finished. And I realised thankfully that it is not like that in Community where life goes on whatever happens—there is no disqualification, and the endeavour of faith, hope and love is not called off.

We just have to find a way of working with things as they are, to have, as Fr Gilbert Shaw said, 'the patience which refuses to be disillusioned'. At the same time my eyes were resting on a wall of pink honeysuckle with bees working over it very thoroughly and

methodically, and so the old story of Robert the Bruce and the spider came back to me. Do you remember it? Robert the Bruce was hiding in a cave, in despair, and his attention was caught by a spider crawling up the cave wall, and never quite making it to over the ledge at the top. Fascinated, he found himself watching as if his own life depended upon it: would the spider make it? Eventually, just by starting again and again and again, it did—and Robert the Bruce went back to fight—and won.

On 5 March Sr Tessa was blessed as the new Sister in Charge at Bede House and we gave thanks with Sr Adrian for her five and a half years in that office. After a time of rest and retreat, Sr Adrian has now joined Sr Anne and Sr Clare at St Isaac's.

A more major and difficult change of circumstances occurred in January when the Chapter voted to release Sr Sarah (Sarah Smith) from her membership of the Community. This was in response to Sarah's own request and has freed her to continue her studies in Auckland, where she is laying the foundations for a career as a psychotherapist. Sarah came to England for two months during the Christmas vac, so we were able to spend time together and try to understand something of the way her life has been moving. She has now been released from her vows and is no longer a nun. When we said goodbye she gave us a plant, a white escalonia for the garden, and symbolically broke off a cutting—we pray that it will 'take', and that the Love of God will heal what is broken and continue to be a bond between us.

We duly admitted the two new Oblate Postulants I referred to in the last *Chronicle*, Susan Jane on 2 December, and Sally Ann on 9 December. We welcome them into fellowship with us. The sudden death in January of Canon Stuart Mallin bereaved the Scottish Episcopal Church of one of its most loved and respected pastors and ourselves of a friend of almost forty years' standing. And we heard on 13 April that another Scotsman, our friend and Priest Associate, Brian Meney, had died after a long period of illness and severe disability. For both of them we pray, giving God thanks and praise for their faithful ministry and for the joy their friendship brought to so many.

Now we are in Passiontide and on the last lap of preparation for Holy Week and Easter. May the coming days find us all watchful in prayer and alert to learn that love which is our Lord's meaning.

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Brian Meney, Priest Associate 13th April 2000

DELIVER US FROM EVIL

Homily for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

JOHN BARTON

MY MOTHER used to knit long sausage-shaped draft-excluders for the bottom of doors, and sell them at sales of work at her church. To make them more interesting she decorated them with button eyes and a forked felt tongue so that they looked like snakes. But a new incumbent came to the church, and he was shocked. Didn't she know, he said, that in the Bible snakes were a symbol of the devil, and that she might be encouraging occult practices by letting people buy them? My mother, nothing daunted, changed the tongues to four little feet, added a tail, and sold them as dachshunds, which are not mentioned in Scripture either for good or ill.

Such sensitivity as this to possible symbols of the devil is probably unusual, but the incident reminded me that there are people in the Church today who are indeed extremely aware of the devil and see his hand everywhere. At one time such an interest was perhaps a mark of a certain kind of Catholic mentality, but today it seems to have become a clear indication of a particular type of evangelicalism, as in the case of my mother's vicar. It is easy to mock when it becomes a knee-jerk reaction, and I have just done so. But evangelicals who are deeply concerned about the devil and all his works have a point when they say that this is a continual concern in the New Testament, and that the modern world is out of step with Scripture in ignoring the power and danger of the forces of evil. Today's Gospel reading reminds us that one of the reasons for the fame of our Lord Jesus Christ was that he became known as an exorcist. The usual explanation of this now is to say that many things were attributed to demon-possession in the world of first-century Judaism which today we should explain biologically, but that Jesus naturally accommodated himself to the beliefs of his time; and indeed he could not have failed to do so without falling out of his frame, as it were. But we do not treat all of Jesus' teaching in this way, and perhaps it will not do simply to explain away a belief

in dark forces like this. The Gospels speak decisively of the existence of non-human powers in the world which may be benign or malignant, angels or devils. And we ought to give some account of that belief.

It seems to me that a belief in such powers is hardly *de fide*: I wouldn't say that someone who didn't believe in them was not a Christian. But it does seem that a great deal is lost if we don't give some place in our system of belief to forces that are not just reducible to human control. Where the devil is concerned, it is open to Christians, I believe, to interpret scriptural language as referring not to a person—for surely anything we could call diabolical would have to be sub-personal, as much as God is supra-personal—but to the shapeless horror which threatens human life; the plague that stalks by night and the pestilence that destroys at noon-day, as Psalm 91 puts it. And I doubt whether that horror is mainly to be encountered in those rather marginal occult actions and practices which evangelical Christians in particular seem to get so worked up about. I don't doubt that there are people who go in for magic and witchcraft, but I don't think one meets them on every street corner, or that, for example, children who dress up as witches at Halloween are endangering their souls. It seems to me to lurk in other places altogether, and actually to be more a part of daily life, not less, than if we associate with overtly occult beliefs and doings. The demonic is present where human life is distorted and corrupted by forces which human beings cannot control, and it is such forces from which we most need deliverance by God.

Distortion and corruption of the good for human beings occur through economic forces which, once unleashed, cannot be tamed; through mass hysteria and the whole mentality of large groups, in which the will of a collective mass of people overpowers the intentions of any given individual and makes all individuals mere cogs in a destructive machine; and, at the individual level, it occurs where people have the kind of dysfunctional personality that poisons everything and everyone around them. I know someone whose very presence causes strife and dissension; as soon as he is around, people start to argue not just with him, but with each other,

in highly destructive ways that threaten to spoil all the good of human friendship and solidarity. And I am convinced that he is not to blame for this: it is a personality problem quite outside his own control. Any human community is vulnerable to such people, who are also very adversely affected themselves by the wake of desolation they leave behind them. I do not talk in such a case of possession—I use more psychiatric language—but I am clear that the phenomenon is one that other times and places would identify as demonic, and correctly in so far as it is not the product of any person's deliberate sin: it seems to come from beyond the person in question. Even if the problem for this person is a psychological one, the problem for everyone else is his power to create an atmosphere in which no-one else can flourish, and this power seems to have a life of its own, like the brooding sense of evil that some people can sense in a place where bad things have happened. In this it is quite like the collective madness of a crowd out of control, which does things no individual member would be likely to do of their own volition. It is in this kind of phenomenon that I would see the work of forces we would call demonic. Even if they arise out of the human psyche rather than from some malign fallen angel, they have all the characteristics that people in the time of Jesus attributed to such a source: they reduce human beings to a subhuman level. And this kind of evil is indeed all around us, not just in the fevered imagination of a certain kind of Christian but in the daily experience of everyone.

It is for this reason that we still need, as much as anyone ever did, the message that Jesus is the supreme exorcist, that is, the one who can tame the destructive powers of evil. The New Testament writers are of course unanimous in believing that Christ has indeed conquered the forces of darkness. St Paul, and the epistles attributed to him such as Colossians and Ephesians which are widely believed to be from rather later authors, speak freely of Christ as overwhelming the principalities and powers that govern the world. There are reasons in the background of early Christian belief which made this an important theme, but I have sometimes wondered whether at its root is the memory that Jesus had indeed been a great

exorcist. St Paul is said to have known very little about the earthly Jesus, but perhaps he knew that much. The cross is presented in Colossians as the place where a final victory over the forces of evil was won, and Christians were set free from the grip of the rulers of this world to take their place with Jesus in the heavenly realm. Human liberation from shapeless horror is promised through people's association with the risen and ascended Lord, who makes possible a human community free from malignant and corrupting influences.

In the light of our continuing experience of such influences, we are bound to say that if victory is essentially won, there do still seem to be some mopping-up exercises to do; but the early Christian conviction was that Christ's healing and wholesome power would in the end remove the demonic from the world. However we conceptualise evil, we continue to affirm that conviction, as we pray (in the words of the Litany) that God will 'finally beat down Satan under our feet'. The world is full of evil forces which we cannot control; as Christians we trust in the love of God, which in the end casts out fear.

(Professor John Barton is author of Love Unknown, published by SLG Press)

AN EXPERIENCE OF PAIN

ALAN HEATON

HAVING just undergone coronary bypass surgery, and for a few weeks never feeling completely free from pain despite the help of medication, I was prompted to reflect a little on pain and its relation to the life of the spirit. One can read in the lives of heroes of the Faith of some who have deliberately sought physical pain, or who have cheerfully accepted unsought pain and made it an offering to God. I do not doubt the faith or the sincerity of such brave souls, but for my part I have found pain neither an ennobling experience nor a spiritual opportunity. What possible satisfaction, I wonder, could

God receive from our offering of pain to him unless we believe that the pain is his will even if not directly caused by him?

If contemplation is not simply a self-indulgent exercise it must surely be about learning to find God, not only in prayer, but in the people and events of everyday life. And here is the rub, because the main effect of severe pain, and perhaps even more of ongoing pain, is that one is conscious of it to the exclusion of all else. Life becomes focused on coping with it or devising ways of easing it—in other words, one becomes completely self-absorbed. Even visits from family and friends can seem an unwelcome intrusion. How then is one to be aware of the presence of God in a situation where one's awareness hardly goes beyond oneself? It seems to me that much of our thinking about such things as pain has been bedevilled by a dualism which fails to recognise the complete integration of body and spirit and the very real effect that the one has upon the other. And so, at a point where one very much needs a sense of God's presence, there comes a real sense of absence as there is no room for anything or anyone in the self-absorption of pain. One simply hangs on in the hope that things will change and prayer, certainly for me, could be no more than the objective praying of the Office

This experience made me think again about the cry of dereliction which in Mark's Gospel, is the only word from the cross. How often preachers and writers try to make this more 'acceptable', either by looking beyond it to the end of Psalm 22 of which these are the opening words and so finding a sense of confidence in them, or by linking this cry with the more spiritually uplifting words found in the other Gospels. But perhaps we should let Mark's 'word' stand by itself as a real insight into the nature and effect of physical pain. The humanity of Jesus is real, and so his experience of pain is real. Body and spirit are as completely united in him as they are in us and with the physical agony of crucifixion would perhaps come that total absorption by the pain, an awareness that leaves room for nothing else, not even God, and so: 'my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Of course, God was not absent either for Jesus or for me, but at such a moment experience and faith

are not singing from the same hymn-sheet! Perhaps things look different after the pain has become a memory. I wait to see!

This complete self-absorption must surely be an intimation of what hell is, a state shutting out all others, including God. So without rejecting the usual understanding of the ‘descent into hell’ that we profess in the creed, perhaps we may allow that this mystery speaks also of that experience on the cross and see it as the full working out of the reality of the Incarnation, because, as Gregory of Nazianzus asserted: ‘what Christ has not assumed he has not healed’.

(Alan Heaton is a Priest Associate of our Community)

RESPONDING TO CHANGE

Homily For The Eighth Sunday Of The Year

Hos.2:16-17, 21-22. II Cor.3:1-6. Mk 2:18-22

BRIAN CASTLE

LAST month I attended an international mission conference in Pretoria, South Africa. The conference included what was described as an ‘exposure’ programme when participants were asked to focus on an issue currently facing South Africa, the host country. My exposure was to the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission where I learnt about the country facing change and dealing with its past. To do this I spent a day in the township of Soweto listening to people who had given evidence because their relatives had been shot or beaten by the apartheid authorities, and on the Sunday I met members of a white Dutch Reformed Church congregation in Pretoria who were adapting to a new South Africa in a very different way. One member of the group I was with had had both his hands blown off by a parcel bomb sent by the apartheid authorities: it was both moving and disturbing to see what happened when he met a member of the congregation who had been a brigadier-general in the South African security forces back in the

apartheid days. In all of these encounters, the change that was happening in South Africa was viewed in very different ways. For some it couldn't come soon enough and change needed to be radical; for others change was inevitable rather than welcomed and it was important to hold on to some things from the past; after all the past wasn't all bad.

Change is usually welcomed by some and feared by others. Today's readings, which have been very creatively drawn together, point to a variety of responses to the change necessary when facing God. St Paul makes it clear that those who are holding on to the old way in the face of the revelation brought by Christ are gravely mistaken:

He is the one who has given us the qualifications to be the administrators of the new covenant, which is not a covenant of written letters but of the Spirit: the written letters bring death, but the Spirit gives life. (II Cor. 3:6)

St Mark heralds a change by arguing the reason why the disciples of Jesus don't fast in the same way as John's disciples:

Surely the bridegroom's attendants would never think of fasting while the bridegroom is still with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they could not think of fasting. (Mk 2:19)

Then St Mark discusses the relationship between the past and the future in terms of sewing patches and wine skins:

No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; if he does, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and the tear gets worse. And nobody puts new wine into old wineskins; if he does, the wine will burst the skins and the wine is lost and the skins too. No! New wine, fresh skins. (Mk 2:21-22)

The emphasis in this passage is on making sure that the new is given as much chance as possible. The new patch on an old cloak will not work because it will leave a tear. New wine will be lost in old wineskins because they will burst. The emphasis is on making sure that the new have the best possible chance of working and the old is very much secondary. In other words, the new beliefs and practices brought by Jesus may mean a complete reassessment of the old ways: 'New wine, fresh skins.' But look at the way the other

Gospel-writers handle the same story. St Matthew by and large follows the same line as St Mark, stressing at the end that with new wine in new wineskins both are preserved. But St Luke puts a different emphasis in the same passage. He shares the same story about not fasting in the presence of the bridegroom, but then adds a slightly different emphasis with the patch and the wineskins. St Luke has a greater concern for the old:

No one tears a piece from a new cloak to put it on an old cloak; if he does, not only will he have torn the new one, *but the piece taken from the new one will not match the old.* (Lk 5:36)

Luke gets in another word in support of the old in the next part of the passage:

And nobody puts new wine into old skins; if he does, the new wine will burst the skins and then run out, and the skins will be lost. No, new wine must be put into fresh skins. *And nobody who has been drinking the old wine wants new. 'The old is good' he says.* (Luke 5:37-39)

Even the Gospels display a tension in the relationship between the old and the new. As one moves forward, how much of the old can be preserved? 'Not much,' suggests Mark. 'Be aware of the quality of the old,' says Luke, 'which may be better than the new.' Today's first reading, from Hosea, brings another dimension into the debate. Hosea describes Israel as God's unfaithful wife. Israel has not been open to God's word, Israel has not been willing to listen and so she forfeits the right to be the betrothed of God. Israel has not been willing to change in the light of God's word through the prophets. However, God does not forsake her, but leads her out into the wilderness, the place of stripping and uncertainty, and in the light of her self-discovery, will betroth himself afresh to her:

I will betroth you to myself for ever, betroth you with integrity and justice, with tenderness and love; I will betroth you to myself with faithfulness, and you will come to know the Lord. (Hos. 2:21-22)

All through its history, the Judeo-Christian tradition has struggled with the question of whether to leap forward into an unknown future at the summons of a beckoning God or whether to hold strongly to the truths and statements that have been important

expressions of the faith journey in the past. The Church continues to struggle with how it can be an inheritor of the past rather than a slave to it. The relationship between the patch and the cloak, the wine and the wine-skins is a crucial one.

Change, moving from a past that may be familiar and comforting, into a future which is frightening and unsure, can be hard. It depends where we stand within the process, as the people from Soweto and those from the Dutch Reformed Church in Pretoria demonstrated. Whether we believe we will gain from the change or lose from it will affect our attitude towards it. One thing is clear, namely that we have to form some kind of relationship with the past. As Desmond Tutu reminds us in his new book, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.' But as Hosea hints, we will need to be lured out into the wilderness by God—the wilderness, the place of stripping and uncertainty—and be ready for him to speak and betroth himself afresh to us.

(Brian Castle is Vice-Principal of Ripon College Cuddesdon)

LIVING THE PASSION

An Address given at the Fellowship Retreat, October 1999

SISTER CHRISTINE SLG

*In stillness nailed,
To hold all time, all change all circumstance,
in and to Love's embrace.*

TODAY I would like to consider our relationship with God in general, and ponder on some of the elements of the SLG vocation which anyone first meeting us would consider typical of it. I am not necessarily talking about a formal association, but rather of a more than superficial contact with us, however it has come about. There must have been something attractive about our vocation to have brought people to the point of asking to learn more about it. Perhaps one way of approaching this subject is to begin from within the

Community, by saying something about our current thinking and praying about vocation.

Earlier this year we embarked on rewriting our Rule. It has taken us well over six months to discover a viable way of working together, and of communicating our thoughts around four houses, one of which is on the other side of the world. Modern information technology makes this easier than it would have been a few years ago, but we are beginning to realise as well the importance of face to face communication, when possible, in a project of this size and time-scale

As we worked out our method we began to think deeply and widely—and hard—about the roots of our vocation. Why have we been called into existence? What elements constitute our vocation and give it its unique expression? How do we express it in language both comprehensible and contemporary, yet which will be strong enough to form the hearts and spirits of the Sisters in years to come? Although it will be many years before the task is completed, the process itself is a means of deepening vocation as we each try to formulate our thoughts. There has already been a great deal of creative thinking which has given direction to the work. In June Mother Rosemary produced in leaflet form a summary of our consideration of the question, ‘What is distinctive about SLG?’ In one paragraph she said:

From the beginning the Sisters of the Love of God have found themselves identifying with the love behind the Passion. The Community has tried to make its whole life and prayer available to God for the same purposes, in our contemporary world and beyond the limitations of space and time.

It is undoubtedly this ‘love behind the Passion’ which draws people to us, and from which our contemplative prayer and life spring. Many of you would say that the reverse is true, that you were seeking teaching in contemplative prayer and the search brought you to SLG. Perhaps, but there are other contemplative communities to which you could have gone for that teaching. You must have caught a glimpse of our particular expression of a contemplative life. So, how shall we define that phrase, ‘the love

behind the Passion'? It is a difficult piece of theology to expound, for it has many layers of meaning. It is the love contained in the desire of God to become incarnate, in order to show us how splendid was the idea of unsullied humanity in its first conception. It is the sacrifice of the incarnate Son, who in unfaltering love followed the Father's will wherever it led. It is the love that fills up 'what is behind of the afflictions of Christ for his Body's sake'. Now, what does *that* mean? We so easily misinterpret this to mean that I must *do* something to complete the incomplete work of Christ on the cross. If this is so, it makes nonsense of Christianity and of the God in whom we profess to believe. Fr Gilbert Shaw perhaps explained it well in the introduction to *The Face of Love*:

We can look on the Passion as God's act of love in which he has done everything for us, and be appropriately thankful in accepting it, and ever penitent because we were bought at such a great price. The Passion does not end there. It is offered to us that we should be drawn into it in our acceptance and return of God's re-creating love...

In the Passion we behold God's love drawing souls from the darkness of disobedience to the liberty of light. 'I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me' (John 12:32). In moulding ourselves and our prayer into the knowledge and love of his Passion we shall be giving ourselves into his continuous intercession to draw us and all humanity into unity and the knowledge of himself; and in doing so we shall be giving him what he is asking for—the extension of his reconciliation and the acceptance of his love. We are bought at a great price, the price of self-sacrificing love, and the least we can do is to answer that love by giving love.

Our response is a work of faith through which we answer the love that first loved us by returning his love, both in keeping his commandments and also in the overcoming of the world through the belief that Jesus is the Son of God (cf. John 5:3–5).

Having made the response of faith, we must allow our love to grow through prayer and meditation on scripture. For those in community these elements are combined in the recitation of the Divine Office, supported by times of personal prayer, pondering on scripture and study. Doubtless each of you will have already

discovered, or be searching for, ways of incorporating times of prayer into your own lives. All our lives we remain in need of these times set apart solely for God, even when we find, to our surprised delight, that we are being prayed in by God, all the time. Continual prayer is a great gift, and one can be tempted to say that because it is given that it is enough. But it simply does not satisfy, for it creates a thirst of the spirit to stop and be with God. Nor does it allow God to draw one fully into the work of reconciliation which is at the heart of the 'love behind the Passion'. That work, that channelling out to become a means of allowing Christ's love to draw others to God, requires stillness of body and mind, and ultimately of heart or spirit. 'Turning continually to the gaze of God as we meet it in Jesus is the heart of our contemplative vocation,' to quote again from Mother's leaflet.

This stillness can usually best be achieved by being alone. Solitude plays a large part in the SLG vocation. It both balances the hours we spend in the corporate office and communal work, and gives us opportunity to cultivate our life with God. Our individual cells are both a refuge and a fiery furnace which purifies us by and for the work of prayer. Solitude must be attractive to anyone called to contemplative prayer, not just monks and nuns, and though some temperaments find it easier than others to be alone, all of us in due course face the loneliness of the call. All of us at some point in our lives will have experienced the excruciating pain of being unable to communicate adequately with others or another, of feeling that one will never make contact, that no one cares whether one lives or dies. It is an experience of adolescence, when the human condition is thrown into sharp relief. But all of us experience it to a greater or lesser degree most of our lives. Bishop Rowan Williams once preached an excellent sermon on 'Being Alone', one in the collection, *Open to Judgement*. He expounds more eloquently and convincingly than I what I would like to communicate, so I must resist the temptation to quote the whole sermon! A few extracts will serve to reinforce my words. He opens by remarking:

There are plenty of subjects that Christians seem to treat with consistent unseriousness, with a painful lack of imagination and

sympathy. And one such subject is loneliness. Most of the time we are so caught up in a bland rhetoric of ‘communion’ and ‘sharing’ that we fail utterly to confront that more puzzling and disturbing fact of irreducible human isolation. ‘We pray for the old and lonely’—words heard quite frequently in intercessions, implying that loneliness is an unfortunate condition like diabetes or colour-blindness. But what about the loneliness of each one of us? It has little to do with what we do or where we do it, whether we are married or unmarried, optimists or pessimists, heterosexual or homosexual. It has to do with the sudden clefts we experience in every human relation, the gaps that open up with such stomach-turning unexpectedness. In a brief moment I and my brother or sister have moved away into differing worlds, and there is no language we can share. It is when I see what my words or actions have done to someone else, or when I realise what picture someone has of me; when things that matter to me are met with polite incomprehension; and when I cannot hear and understand the importance of what someone is trying to tell me.

We may experience ‘the gaps that open up with such stomach-turning unexpectedness’ and shrug them off with ‘that’s life’. But what of the loneliness that descends upon us when we go to prayer? First of all, recognise that it is there, and that prayer will bring you to this place, even if you’ve never been there before. It is a recognition of a fundamental aspect of our humanity, and one which God will use if you are willing. It enables him to demonstrate that all his promises are sufficient and true. The loneliness will not disappear—as I said, it is fundamental to the human condition—but it will be tempered into a contentment of being alone with God. The temptation is to abandon prayer, especially when loneliness has dogged one for weeks or months, and the myriad things, good in themselves, that we lay aside in order to pray persuade us that we would feel better and be more useful to God and society if we accomplished some of them.

We will receive little help from the culture around us in staying with a life of prayer. Our society does not understand solitude, is afraid of it, as Bishop Rowan points out:

Any culture which is terrified—as ours is—of silence and aloneness is one in which the sense of human reality, human truth, is being eroded ... Solitude teaches us about our truth; but it teaches us too that our truth is not our own. It is... ‘behind and beyond’ not at our disposal, not to be grasped by us. And if we see Jesus as the ultimately lonely person because of his complete embodying of a truth that can’t be grasped, we are driven to say finally that he is the ‘home’ of all *our* truth, our reality...We cannot grasp or plan or organise our reality, but it is somehow in the hands of God. There is, behind and beyond, someone who not only sees and grasps, but accepts and holds our reality. This is not even to argue a doctrine of providence—God plans, even when we can’t—only a belief that we are not deserted by our unknown God, even when all our nameable and domesticated gods forsake us. When all our words vanish, the Word remains. In our silence and empty fear, the reality of our grounding in God and our acceptance by God make itself known.

I seem to have brought us to a rather gloomy place, as if this particular vocation lives only with and within the negativity of the human condition, with the pain and suffering of the world. The validity of contemplative prayer is its capacity to increase our love of God, of ourselves and of those with whom we share this planet. So as we grow in love we are gently led to stand before and with the darkness. The darkness can never overwhelm us, for we always stand in and with Christ, so that, ‘it would be a mistaken and frustrating devotion to look into the Passion and only see the suffering, and fail to comprehend the joy of the dedicated will,’ to quote again from Fr Gilbert.

It would be presumptuous of me to say that to reinforce your association with us you must have a certain rule of life in order to participate in the SLG vocation. For all of us the constant yearning for God as we meet him in Scripture ought to be enough. The Sermon on the Mount and the Ten Commandments should provide all that we need to live our lives. Indeed they do, and for some of us using them as the compass for our actions is a sufficient life-long work. For others, there is a necessity to give specific shape to daily living in order to align their understanding of their own vocation

with that of the Community's. If you are considering your own rule of life, its strengths, weaknesses and demands, you might like to bear in mind two further quotations. The first is one from a homily of Fr Gilbert's which we read alongside our Rule chapter on the Rule itself, to expand and comment on it:

The Rule is the instrument by which you live: Love requires obedience to Love, and the Rule as the formation of the disposition for love is vital to our life. It helps us to live objectively; to live always in the challenge of meeting God, meeting the Community, and meeting the world around us. The foundation of your Rule is Love.

The other is from Mother's résumé:

What we can do is tiny, but if it brings that fragment of space and time for which we are responsible into alignment with truth it will hasten the time when God shall be all in all. That is the end that we look to.

'The joy of the dedicated will' arises as love increases, and that can only happen if we give it time, in both senses of that phrase, practically day by day and in patient waiting to see what the outcome will be. This is our desert journey, so we must not lose heart. The quails appeared when the morale of the Israelites, journeying through the wilderness, was at a low ebb; thus it is for us when there seems to be no point or little refreshment in going to prayer, or even carrying on with ordinary daily life. God's merciful providence comes at the right moment, through someone we meet, some slight change of circumstance which we had not looked for or expected. In Psalm 105:40ff. the psalmist reminds us of how it was for the Israelites:

He spread a cloud for a covering, and fire to give light by night.
They asked, and he brought quails, and gave them bread from
heaven in abundance.

He opened the rock, and water gushed forth; it flowed through the
desert like a river.

For he remembered his holy promise, and Abraham his servant.

So he led forth his people with joy, his chosen ones with singing.

Let us claim that mercy and 'the holy promise' to Abraham for

ourselves. If we do we shall then have strength to continue our journey with joy and with singing.

The last lesson we read at Night Office on the Saturday before Advent is from one of the homilies of St Augustine. It repeats and sums up my theme, so I end with a passage from it:

Let us sing Alleluia here below while we are still anxious, so that we may sing it one day there above when we are freed from care. So...now let us sing Alleluia, not in the enjoyment of heavenly rest, but to sweeten our toil. Sing as travellers sing along the road, but keep on walking. Solace your toil by singing—do not yield to idleness. Sing but keep on walking. What do I mean by ‘walking’? I mean, press on from good to better. The apostle says there are some who go from bad to worse. But if you press on, you keep on walking. Go forward then in virtue, in true faith and right conduct. Sing up—and keep on walking.

THE ROLE OF THE NURSING RELIGIOUS

SISTER SHIRLEY CLARE SLG

BEFORE I entered this community, I was working for a time as a palliative care nurse in charge of a hospice. As Community Infirmarian I have the sense of being entrusted once again with the task of using my training and experience to nurture life and health, and to help others find in illness, dying and death a deep, shared encounter with life in its fullness. I was originally asked to write the paper from which the following article is adapted, by the Association of Nursing Religious. In it I was not primarily concerned with practical, physical care, but rather with the spiritual and psychological effects of illness, dying and death, as these are experienced by both patient and carer.

More than ever I see that our work is about powerlessness. Maybe the word ‘powerlessness’ needs to be explored. When we are ill, particularly perhaps when we are seriously ill, we can find that we are more truly poor in the Biblical sense, being caught up in

a process of self-emptying, of handing ourselves over, of being 'handed over'.¹ For carers too this can be a process of being stripped, with a gradual realisation of their own helplessness and essential limitation. This mutual loss of control may be a special gift, yet it is one that can be fraught with fear, anger and deep resentment. Sheila Cassidy has written:

Slowly, I learn about the importance of powerlessness.
I experience it in my own life and I live with it in my work.
The secret is not to be afraid of it – not to run away.
The dying know that we are not God.
All they ask is that we do not desert them.²

As a nurse and a religious, I can never forget about obedience in my response to illness. (I am thinking of serious illness here, though the same principle applies in all illness). There is an obligation of obedience to what is happening in and to the body. This is part of the process of 'letting go into God', bringing us to the poverty of dependence, leading to spiritual and psychological wholeness. This does not mean of course that we stop trying to get better; rather it is a willingness to work with God instead of against him. Older attitudes to illness and ways of coping with it are slowly but surely giving way to something quite new. Our response must be to allow the entire process and progression of serious illness to become creative and life-giving of itself.

For me as an infirmarian one of the most important aims is to establish a partnership of mutual trust in which physical, psychological, spiritual and social aspects of life and care can be integrated. Every person is unique, with unique needs, and each has a personal responsibility for his or her own health. Our part is to offer support, information and advice and, when necessary, the appropriate care. We have to learn to communicate at many levels. Speech is only one way of doing this. The mind and body have powerful means of revealing unacknowledged fears, needs and hopes and indeed will reveal them if we ignore the warning signs.

¹ *The Stature of Waiting*, by V.H.Vanstone. DLT. 1982.

² *Sharing the Darkness*, by Sheila Cassidy. DLT, 1988.

Part of the infirmarian's responsibility is, I think, to help our brothers and sisters in a sensitive and non-invasive way to interpret the signs, without taking away their control. For religious it can be very difficult, even shaming, to admit to fear of illness, dying and death. We have been trained to look upon illness as something to be welcomed, part of our sharing in the sufferings of Christ. Death is to be embraced as the final consummation of our vowed life. I would not deny the truth of these precepts but, wrongly understood, they can force us into a false endurance and acceptance.

The only event of which we can be certain in our lives is our death. Fear of our own death, the deaths of relatives and friends and those with whom we share our lives is probably the most emotionally fraught challenge of human existence. In everyday life most of us will suppress this fear, but when confronted with imminent death we become anxious. Perhaps this anxiety is less obvious within communities of faith, yet I would suggest that for this section of society too there is fear of *dying*. And this is entirely natural, for why should *we* be relieved of something which Our Lord himself endured for our sakes?

Generally speaking, committed Christians are not afraid of being dead but of the process leading to death. Nevertheless, most people, including believers, continue to experience fear and anxiety which may be defined in three ways: 1. Fear of what happens after death. 2. Fear of the process of dying (pain, loss of control, rejection—the feeling that one is no longer of any use, isolation). 3. Fear of extinction, of ceasing to be.

Fear of what happens after death

None of us knows the answer to this question. The degree or depth of fear will be qualified by religious beliefs and the perception of how one has lived one's life—awareness of past or present sins, self-esteem, feelings of worthlessness and so on.

Fear of the process of dying

Research over many years suggests that this is the major source of the fear surrounding death. We are afraid of physical suffering as it pertains to issues of personal dignity, isolation and rejection more

than we fear the physical symptoms themselves. Anxieties may arise about our ability to cope with such things and whether we will do so ‘bravely’ or else somehow ‘disgrace’ ourselves. Loss of control can be hard to bear and the physical aspects of dependence can give rise to embarrassment, as well as the more subtle emotional and psychological aspects of being unable to prevent or influence an inevitable event. Previous encounters with the death of those we have known will also influence us. If we have seen someone dying in great pain or diminishment then we are much more likely to fear these things for ourselves. On the other hand, to witness someone dying peacefully and with dignity can be very positive and confirming.

Fear of extinction

This has something to do with our perception of what it means to be human, vulnerable and finite. If we can see our life as gift, rather than something that is ours by right, then it can become easier to relinquish our very tenuous hold on it when the time comes. However, for a young person as yet unfamiliar with death, whether or not they have religious faith, the response may be quite different. When we are young we possess a powerful sense of being in control of our destiny and usually imagine it will be years before we need think about our own death. As carers we should discard any expectations about the way anyone may face death. Repressed feelings as well as physical suffering may well have an adverse effect on the spiritual state even of those with seemingly assured faith; while personality, culture, race and relationships will all play their part.

Nothing has so much shown up our fear of death as the influence of modern medical science. The ever advancing frontiers of medical research have encouraged us to see death as something to be held back—the ultimate enemy to be defeated—and that so needful sense of the rightness and normality of death seems to have faded from our consciousness. Yet death and the process of dying which prepares us for it are vital to our understanding of life. ‘In dying we live’—the two are inseparable. Society, however, is shocked and frightened by talk of death; it is something to be covered up, hidden and dealt with as unobtrusively and hygienically

as possible. This is tragic and means incalculable loss, not only for those who die, but also for their family, friends and carers.

None of us can know what happens at the moment of death and immediately afterwards, although I myself have felt at these moments a strong sense of the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, as at the Annunciation, and I am filled with profound awe in the presence of an unknowable and divine mystery. Others too will have witnessed the transfiguring and transforming beauty that can emerge after death in the faces of our own brothers and sisters as they are set free from all earthly pain and from everything that has hindered them in the process of becoming their true selves in God. When I trained as a nurse it was the custom when a person died, after composing the body and removing any intravenous lines, to cover them and leave them 'to rest' for at least an hour before beginning last offices, always, of course, respecting any wishes expressed by the family to spend time with their dead relative. From friends still employed within the National Health Service I understand, however, that this no longer happens in many hospitals—only in our hospices. Instead, nursing staff are encouraged to 'despatch' the dead person as quickly as possible to the mortuary in order to make way for the next patient. This seems to me a tremendous loss and to show a grievous lack of respect for the body and for death itself.

Every person has the need and right to die with dignity and as religious we have a responsibility to ensure and promote maximum skill, compassion and kindness in our nursing practice, together with minimum intervention and intrusion. We need to achieve the best possible quality of life within our reach for our brothers and sisters. The good nursing religious can help to ensure this by providing a place or an atmosphere of welcome, safety and warmth. The hospice movement and the growth of informed palliative care has done much to meet these needs but I believe that as religious we carry a special responsibility to practise and witness to the spiritual values expressed in hospice care. This work had its origin, after all, in the great religious houses and abbeys of the Church, so in a real sense it is simply a continuation of a sacred charge.

The words *hospice* and *palliative* may themselves arouse fear because of their associations, yet I believe that a right understanding of them can help us enormously. A hospice is a place of welcome, the word being derived from the Latin *hospes* meaning ‘host’. *Hospitalis*, a further derivative, means ‘friendly welcome’. The word *hospitium* perhaps begins to convey the meaning and purpose of a hospice and for our purposes, the community infirmary or nursing home, for it implies a warm feeling between host and guest; a place of welcome and care for those in need—*any* kind of need. The word ‘palliative’ comes from the Latin *pallium*, a cloak. Palliation therefore means a covering; not treatment of the underlying cause but amelioration of the effects.

The World Health Organisation agrees the principles of palliative care as ‘affirming life and regarding dying as a normal process. It neither hastens nor postpones death.’ While palliative care itself is concerned with the dying and those suffering from advanced disease the palliative care *approach* should also be adopted to promote physical, psychological and spiritual well-being in all who are ill, as an integral part of care for all. Our aim must always be to provide total care, centred on quality rather than on length of life, complementing other health care in a parallel, not sequential, way. It is an attitude of mind and a philosophy dependent not so much on place or buildings as on a disposition of kindness and understanding, and a willingness to stand back or to be alongside, while of course implying the necessary degree of knowledge and skill.

The many issues surrounding death include adjustment to the numerous ‘losses’ of advanced and terminal illness; the need to facilitate and guide completion of ‘unfinished business’; death in the place where the person wishes to be, as far as possible; and aiding the processes of grieving and bereavement. It is important to allow the sick and dying to develop their own ways of coping and adapting even when to us they seem like misinterpretations of the truth. Personal relationships based on trust and friendship can be vital in counteracting some of the worst consequences that can follow from social isolation. Palliative and terminal care involve

teamwork and good teamwork can be rewarding and satisfying for the sick person as well as for those caring for them. It is extremely important for the patient to have a variety of people with whom to relate; but at the same time there should be one person to whom they turn more specifically in trust. Such a person need not be the principal carer nor even the main source of spiritual support. Carers too need support and respite during what may be a protracted and draining experience. We have to be aware of undercurrents of grief, loss and possible guilt and be ready to seek or give help as needed.

Those of us who care for the sick must learn that when faced with the mystery of death, we are helpless and ignorant. When we have done all that is humanly possible we must come to terms with an essential powerlessness. The dying person will need to know that they will not be deserted but the time will come also when the carer must step back and allow the Holy Spirit to work. The dying person will usually indicate in many different ways when that stage has been reached. There is a distinct withdrawal which can be a source of distress. Carers and family, possibly feeling rejected and useless, have to be reassured that the person is simply conserving strength for the journey and becoming more dependent upon God.

Above all, the wishes of those who are ill or close to death should be paramount. Such people are especially vulnerable to well-intentioned but unwanted medical intervention. The freedom to make informed choices voluntarily can only come when we share our knowledge, expertise and responsibility. We have to learn to accept rather than reject some course of action which we feel to be 'wrong' or misguided and to let go of thinking we 'know best'. This may not be the case and the ill person should be enabled to take control, as far as possible, of their own living and dying. We have to allow the traditional barriers to fall, accepting, for example, that the person who cleans their room or cooks their food may be the most important and supportive person. We need to be sensitive to the ever-changing needs of the dying person.

Compassion requires that we acknowledge and accept our own feelings as well as those of the sick person. This mutual recognition and acceptance can draw us closer together not only as nurse and

patient but in our common humanity as brothers and sisters in Christ. Honesty and communication are essential to building relationships that are life-giving.

Sickness and dying, death and bereavement, remain the inescapable challenges they have always been. They can also be experiences of the utmost value, both in our own lives and in the lives of those for whom we care. We have a sacred trust which for me is beautifully expressed by Dame Cecily Saunders, in words with which I shall end. She says of a dying person:

You matter because you are you, and you matter until the last moment of your life. We will do all that we can to help you not only to die peacefully, but to live until you die.

FELLOWSHIP RETREAT

Although this retreat was originally established for members of the Fellowship of the Love of God, we now welcome all who have any form of association with us, or who are exploring contemplative prayer as SLG practises it. It is a silent retreat for twenty to twenty-five people with talks each day given by the leader. Anyone who has been finds it a rich and beneficial experience. Come and see!

This year the Retreat will be held from November 3-5,
(Friday evening to Sunday afternoon)

led by Sister Tessa SLG

at The Retreat House 11 Abbey Square Chester

The cost is £60.

(£10.00 non-returnable booking fee, balance of £50.00 due by
1 October)

*We regret that we must ask for payment of the full fee for any
bookings cancelled after 15 October.*

All bookings and enquiries about the retreat should be made to:

Mrs Debbie Davies
48 Headington Road Headington OXFORD OX3 7LS
Phone: 01865 763 251

BOOKS

CELEBRATING THE SEASONS, *Daily spiritual readings for the Christian year*, compiled and introduced by Robert Atwell. Canterbury Press, 1999. £18.99 (Hard cover)

AUSTIN FARRER 2, MECHTILD OF MAGDEBURG 3,
GREGORY OF NYSSA 17, GREGORY THE GREAT 14

Where do you begin with an anthology? I began at the end, with the index of the authors of *Celebrating the Seasons*, to produce those *Grandstand*-style scorelines. No surprise that Augustine of Hippo is clear winner with a score of forty-five, Gregory the Great and Gregory of Nyssa leading the rest with Julian of Norwich challenging strongly, neck and neck with Bernard of Clairvaux.

What *Celebrating the Saints* (which was reviewed in the *Summer Chronicle*) does for the sanctoral cycle of the Christian year, *Celebrating the Seasons* does for the temporal cycle. In it Robert Atwell has gathered readings for each day from a wide range of non-Scriptural sources, and offers them for use in public worship and private reflection. Because this collection does not follow any one of the multiplicity of lectionaries now current, the readings reflect more generally on the great themes of creation, redemption, sanctification, rather than relating directly to passages of scripture.

In his introduction Atwell refers to the monastic custom of appointing commentaries and homilies to be heard alongside the scriptural readings at Vigils. These were drawn from the Fathers: chiefly Augustine, Leo, Gregory, Jerome, John Chrysostom. The Roman Catholic Office of Readings maintains the same pattern and extended the range of sources to include teaching documents of the Second Vatican Council, but rather little else from the last six hundred years or so. Although this may appear to have been an unduly conservative policy, the writings of modern theologians are perhaps more easily accessible to the general public than patristic writings—a point Atwell makes when explaining the prominence of

the early Fathers among his sources. And they have stood the test of time.

Only time will tell whether Michael Ramsay, Sebastian Moore, Maria Boulding, and Martin Smith will be worth hearing in a hundred, or five hundred, or fifteen hundred years time. They are worth hearing now; and they speak for us as well as to us. Compare, for example, Leo the Great, in the passage given for the First Sunday of Lent:

None of us, dear friends, is so perfect and holy as to make reflection and improvement unnecessary. All of us, regardless of rank or dignity, should be concerned to embark on the race which is set before us with fresh determination this Lent, making an effort over and above the norm.

with the alternative reading, from Harry Williams' *The True Wilderness*

Lent is supposed to be the time when we think of Jesus in the wilderness. And the wilderness belongs to us. It is always lurking somewhere as part of our experience, and there are times when it seems pretty near the whole of it. Most people's wilderness is inside them, not outside ...

But words from fifteen hundred years ago can also pierce to the heart: Augustine, this time:

... the less attentive we are to our own sins, the more we tend to pry into those of other people. We seek not what we can correct, but what we can criticise. And since we are not able to excuse ourselves, we are ready to accuse others.

The difference may be more one of tone than of substance, and I would guess owes a good deal to the translation.

How will *Celebrating the Seasons* be used? Perhaps simply as an anthology, to dip into at random or to yield a passage on a particular theme. Not, probably, as a source of readings for school assemblies as is suggested for the companion volume. Whereas in *Celebrating the Saints* stories predominate, albeit stories from which instruction can be drawn, here the emphasis is very much on doctrine. It would be good to think of this book finding a place on the prayer desk beside the Bible when Morning or Evening Prayer is

said. The ASB made no provision for readings apart from those from the Old and New Testaments, and although the notes to *Celebrating Common Prayer* allow a third reading or for one of the other readings to be replaced with a non-scriptural passage, there is not much encouragement to do it. Perhaps *Common Worship* will make good this omission.

The most obvious way of using the volume is one which its compiler surprisingly doesn't suggest: as a source of sermons at the Eucharist. The extracts have been limited to five hundred words, which is about five minutes' worth and not too much for the weekday celebration or evening service. Not that there ought necessarily to be a sermon at every Eucharist; but perhaps more often than there usually is, and more often too than the workload of the busy vicar or other minister usually allows.

We who have an Office of Readings, whether Dawn or Night Office, may well find passages here to substitute for those in our own use which have not worn very well. Hearing the same material every year for twenty or thirty years shows up the ephemeral—although there's surely a place for something that speaks to us now but need not be expected to go on speaking to us. Some of the passages which I look out for eagerly are here: the robust perceptiveness of St Dorotheus of Gaza

... Sometimes a person hears a disparaging remark and passes it by without being disturbed, as if he had hardly heard it, whilst at another time he hears it and is immediately disturbed. What is the reason for such a difference? ... This man who is sitting in peace and quiet, as he thinks, in fact has this latent anger inside him and he did not know it. One hurtful word spoken by another who happens to be passing by and immediately all the poison and rottenness within comes gushing out. If he wishes to gain mercy let him repent and he will see that instead of complaining, he should give thanks to that brother as the person responsible for bringing him such self-knowledge.

And Lancelot Andrewes on the Epiphany, which T. S. Eliot used in *Journey of the Magi*:

They came a long journey, and they came an uneasy journey.
They came now, at the worst season of the year ... So desirous

were they to come with the first, and to be there as soon as possibly they might; broke through all these difficulties, and behold they did come.

And we, what excuse shall we have if we come not? If so short and easy a way we come not, as from our chambers hither?

Others are not—it is after all not my anthology—but I would want to note them as alternatives. A passage from Newman’s sermon ‘The Invisible World’ for Advent, a hymn of Ephrem the Syrian (an author in fact well represented in this collection) on the Pasch have come for me to be almost as much an integral part of the Office as the changing hymn melodies which mark the seasons, or the very scripture passages themselves. So another way of using this collection might be to enlarge it by collecting extracts from your reading, or from sermons you have heard (or indeed that you have preached). It could also be a gateway to a more extended study of the authors represented: the Notes and Sources section is exceptionally helpful. As I found when I looked up the Lancelot Andrewes sermon quoted above, such an exercise will make you even more respectful of the task Atwell has performed: an editor has to decide not only what to put in, but also what to leave out. If this collection of short passages meets our modern preference for soundbites, there is no need to be limited by it. Our brothers and sisters in Christ across the centuries have so much to say to us.

SISTER CATHERINE SLG

VARIETIES OF UNBELIEF. John Habgood. Darton, Longman & Todd, 2000. £8.95 paperback.

Just before I was sent this book for review I heard a young Presbyterian minister read a paper in which he wrestled with trying to reconcile the evangelical tradition in which he had been reared and which he believed himself called to preach, with the challenge of neo-Darwinism. He found himself drawn to a deist conception of God but could not see how on that basis he could make sense of the Incarnation. He remained a believer, but many, faced with such dilemmas, have turned from belief. This is the situation Dr. Habgood addresses. He says, ‘My aim has been to enter into the

minds of some general types of unbelievers and then to indicate in a similarly broad fashion why such unbelief can seem compelling, and why I hold it to be mistaken.’

The book began life as a series of Bampton lectures. It is not, I suspect quite the kind of thing Canon Bampton had in mind when he endowed them 250 years ago, since he expected his lecturers ‘to confirm and establish the Christian faith and to confute all heretics and schismatics.’ He would have wanted them to undertake the role of a polemicist, as defined by Foucault: ‘the person he confronts is not a partner in the search for the truth, but an adversary, an enemy who is wrong, who is harmful, and whose very existence constitutes a threat.’ Dr. Habgood deliberately eschews that role and argues that ‘to acknowledge a continuing dialogue between belief and unbelief is a humbler, more humane, and ultimately more fruitful way of proceeding.’ His stated aim is ‘not so much to confute as to explore: not so much to argue with unbelief as to understand it.’

His characterisation of different varieties of unbelief is illuminating and he has many shrewd things to say both about their limitations and about the inadequate theologies that have often provoked them. Rather than attempt to summarise all the many themes explored in this rich and penetrating survey, let me single out the one I personally found most helpful. Early on he quotes Pascal: ‘All appearance indicates neither a total exclusion nor a manifest presence of divinity, but the presence of a God who hides himself,’ and later he devotes an entire lecture to what he calls *The Presence of an Absence*, asserting that ‘a sense of the absence of God need not be spiritually disastrous and may sometimes be spiritually necessary.’ If this, which all the mystics have known, were more regularly taught to church-people, fewer would fall away.

John Buchan described Montrose as a passionate moderate. Dr Habgood asks if it is possible to be a passionate but critical believer. This book is his answer, and it is affirmative

MICHAEL PATERNOSTER.

SILENT DWELLERS—Embracing the Solitary Life by Barbara Erakko Taylor. Continuum, New York, 1999.

This is an interesting and authentically written book, tracing the author's journey into solitude and silence. We read of her ups and downs, her struggles, her mistakes and wrong assumptions, the joys and new discoveries as she tries to respond to the solitude into which she feels God is calling her.

The author herself points out that it seems a strange and crazy call for her—she who loves to chatter! Barbara Taylor comes from a technology-rich background, having designed technology systems for the White House Executive Office as well as several other companies and federal agencies. A high-powered life, and yet she now lives a life of simplicity and solitude in her suburban home. She found herself boxed-in by religious disciplines which she gradually reduced and discarded in favour of a simpler lifestyle.

In the book she describes herself as a hermit who did not leave all behind—at one point in her attempts to develop this call to solitude she went off into the wilds of nature with a motorised caravan determined to be an *authentic* hermit! She spent a lot of time and energy trying to find the perfect setting together with the minimum requirements for a life of solitude and silence. It failed miserably, and feeling the defeat keenly she returned home only to discover, on opening the door, that her place of simplicity and solitude was none other than her ordinary house in its suburban setting. She had been trying to *acquire* simplicity, trying to create it rather than simply *being*, being vulnerable, being a failure, being human. As she herself says, 'It was too simple for me to comprehend.' She finally realised after painful struggles that 'the hermitage is where the soul becomes simple before God.'

Life for her gradually became slower, simpler, but she found that she could not force or rush this process—she had to go with the slowness of it, allow the pace of it to take hold and shape her life in its own way and own time.

Throughout this process and throughout the development of the call to solitude Barbara Taylor was trying to understand the importance of a call which seems to run counter to the basic nature

of humans to live in community, to be gregarious. Trying to carve out this space within modern society allowed her to reflect on why it is necessary and why the call to a solitary life is for some the way that God chooses to bind people into the body of Christ. For her, as for all solitaries, the call is a call to solidarity with humanity and also a call to live and express the utter aloneness of the human condition before God. The solitude contains everything: ‘human truth and horrible lie. The silent dweller listens inwardly to the story he or she has constructed, using the illusions at hand.’

She says at one point that a hermit is different to a mystic in that a mystic feels—however sporadically—the presence of God and that presence for a mystic *is* God, whereas a hermit feels silence and that silence for a hermit is God. I'm not sure that I fully agree—mystics who experience the presence of God seem to be at pains to point out that the experience is not God.

Her journey into solitude has, she feels, made her more human and allowed her to be more human. For her, prayer has become much simpler in that it does not ask her to disown her selfish thoughts or quiet her racing mind but allows ‘the whatever’ that there is within her to be held in an accepting embrace. In her journey into solitude and silence she finds life and prayer more integrated. And yet she is not slow to admit that her solitude is a messy affair, that ‘there is nothing holy about it’. There is a lovely touch of realism here—a realism which pervades the whole book.

Although there were a few places where I felt unable to agree with her entirely—her concept of prayer for example, seemed to focus on listening to her body—on the whole I found this book gently and sensitively written and one to be approached and read with gentleness and humility. There was a sense of standing on hallowed ground as one read of this call from God and as the author shared the struggles of having herself and her space carved out by God in this way. I found that it was a book that took me into a solitude and a prayerful silence where I could stand in my own ‘sandals’ and my own incompleteness before God.

OBLATE SISTER JANE SLG

THE ENGLISH SAINTS—EAST ANGLIA by Trefor Jones. Canterbury Press, 1999. £12.99.

As a child of the Roman mission to Britain in 598, (growing up in Rochester, the see established in 604, second after Canterbury) I read *The English Saints* and its account of the later conversion of East Anglia with a degree of shameful complacency.

But a good account it is—readable, well researched, illustrated with black and white photographs (beyond the prohibitive expense, some colour might have enhanced our appreciation of the vitality of extant representation of these saints), drawings and maps. There are also eight appendices of factual information and an excellent glossary. (I didn't know that a Berserk was a Viking warrior thought to be possessed by the god Odin!)

Trefor Jones is a resident of East Anglia, presently living just up the road from Walsingham at Wells-next-the-Sea. He has been ordained in the Orthodox Church which has a worshipping community in Walsingham. It is against the background of this experience that he writes with such clear feeling for the spread of Christianity in these parts. You have to understand the general current of life here in order to get beyond the historical facts. At the same time, knowledge of the Church as a small and fragile network of cells, committed to 'living the life' as the means of evangelising its message provides a sympathetic framework for the unfolding of this story.

There are five features that emerge from Jones account and which seem to offer us important signs for the evangelisation of an area like East Anglia today. The first is a practical one: analysis. Jones provides a good picture of post-Roman Britain and the cultural influences within which the Christian mission worked. In our rapid turnover world, it is all too easy to think that we begin everything with a blank sheet. We do not. Mission today, as in the seventh century, confronts memories, customs and attitudes that cannot be ignored if we are to enter into conversation with the world about the Christian faith.

A second feature is the distinction between urban and rural settings. He observes that the pre-Augustinian Roman Church

flourished in towns and cities and among the middle-classes, leaving the rural population largely unaffected. Part of the genius of the missionary saints whose story he tells is located in their ability to live out a Christian life in remote places where holiness grew, as it were, from the very soil they tilled. It was from that shared experience of life that ordinary people came to faith in Jesus Christ.

The third feature is the inevitable harnessing of the influence of royalty in the service of the gospel. The Church/State debate is certainly nothing new. Not only do East Anglian Kings like Earpwald, Sigebert and Ana come to be endowed with sainthood, but within royal families a dynastic pattern of sanctity also emerges. Perhaps the most famous of these was Etheldreda, enshrined at Ely, which had slightly more than its fair share of noble saints. Jones' chapter entitled 'Sisters, Nieces and Aunts' paints a delightful picture in which we imagine that the heavenly court is indeed a figure of something we have already known on earth.

Fourthly, Jones points us to the indelible impact of holy places on the contours of East Anglia. In some cases this might be through the living of the monastic or eremitic life. From the fragility of these enterprises a freshness emerges in Jones' account which seems to be in contrast to the burden of institutionalisation sometimes felt today. In no small part might this be due to the heroic sanctity of martyr saints like Ethelbert and Edmund. But the site of an episcopal see also plays a part. In the recent events organised to welcome Bishop Graham James as seventy-first Bishop of Norwich, there was a gathering in the ruins of the ancient cathedral at North Elmham. The liturgy of welcome there provided a conscious recollection of the foundation of an East Anglian see by St Fursey and St Felix, its Christian witness centred on a number of different sites and only moved to Norwich by Bishop Herbert de Losinga in 1095.

Finally, Jones concludes his account with a chapter stirringly entitled, 'Changing Times'. By the eleventh century England is on the threshold of centralisation in civil and ecclesiastical life. One is left with the impression that the force and vitality of the local is subsumed by the conforming ordinances of the universal. It is

perhaps at this point that *The English Saints* presents us with a challenge.

If Christianity is to survive in Britain, do we need to recover something of the freshness of the faith of the early East Anglian saints and their freedom from management and administration? Should we sense a call to return to simplicity and solitude in places both geographically and socially remote from the centre of power? Jones offers us a great deal of raw material with which to reflect on these questions and the future of Christianity. His book is indeed a travelogue, in time as in space. As such its merits are evident. But though it enchants (the cover photograph of sunset over Cromer pier evokes memories of my childhood holidays) it also disturbs and challenges us to ask searching contemporary questions it does not intend to articulate.

MARTIN WARNER

(Martin Warner is Priest Administrator of the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham)

ICONS OF THE PASSION, A Way of the Cross by W. H. Vanstone and Sheila Wrigley. DLT, New Edition 2000. £4.95.

I think there is a high and peculiar calling for all who are partakers in the covenant to leave their own ceiled houses to see their King wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. No wonder the sun hid its rays when its Creator was pierced by nails. It is a marvel to me to think who it was that was on the cross, he whose eyes are as a flame of fire piercing through heaven and earth at once, unable to see his creatures, the work of his hands. My mind is too overwhelmed with the marvel of it to say anything more on the matter.

So wrote Ann Griffiths two hundred years ago in one of her letters, her mind arrested in wonder at the thought of ‘who it was that was on the cross’. In the wood carvings of Sheila Wrigley and the words of W. H. Vanstone, *Icons of the Passion* invites us both to go out and see—to gaze upon this mystery—and to ponder more deeply the

nature and love of such a Creator as they are revealed in the Passion.

This new edition, enhanced by a larger format and full colour reproductions of the twelve wood carvings which give the book its title, has been published as a tribute to the memory of W. H. Vanstone who died last year. As such, it is perhaps not surprising that it is his name which is emphasised on the front cover as the author, but it seems somewhat misleading and unjust that Sheila Wrigley's fine work, which provided the initial inspiration for Canon Vanstone's meditations, should receive the designation merely of 'illustrations'. Any implication, however, that the icons themselves are of subsidiary importance is quickly dismissed by a reading of Vanstone's own introduction in which he acknowledges it a privilege to be allowed to set his meditations beside them. Some readers may find that gazing on the icons and allowing them to reveal their truth will suffice; for others (for most of us tend to incline primarily either to words or pictures) it may be that the meditations provide the main matter for their reflection; yet both compel whole-hearted and prolonged attention and while both have each their own meaning, their complementarity and shared sympathy of perception offers the possibility of deeper understanding.

The fusion of theological and devotional vision that may be glimpsed in the quotation from Ann Griffiths with which I began, underpins all Canon Vanstone's writing, alongside an ability to relate this understanding to everyday experience—and this is no less true of these meditations than of his more 'theological' books. Readers already familiar with those works will recognise here his vision of the love of a God who chooses to surrender his freedom in order to give himself unreservedly to his creation, ever prepared to bear the cost of this risky and precarious endeavour. They may see too, as they contemplate Sheila Wrigley's wood carvings, why Vanstone discerned in them 'an interpretation of Jesus' Passion to which (he could not) but assent'. For here in wood and words is depicted and explored both the depth and cost of that so generous divine and self-emptying. It is happily fitting that the icons now

hang in the parish church of St Thomas, Kirkholt where Vanstone spent the years of his ministry that were so formative in shaping his theology.

In the meditation accompanying the carving of the crucifixion Vanstone writes:

It is not through the pain that was inflicted on Him that He is our Saviour, but through the totality of His self-expenditure, of His self-giving. He gives Himself for the world “unto death”: until He is drained: until there is no more to give. He loves us and all the world not with measured and limited benevolence but “unto death”. Therein lies our hope and the world’s salvation.

As I looked at Sheila Wrigley’s carving of the spent, slumped figure on the cross and read Vanstone’s text, a new depth came from the words which we hear in our Solemn Liturgy on Good Friday: ‘Behold the wood of the Cross, on which was hung the world’s salvation’, with its answering response, ‘O come let us worship’.

The modest size and price of this book belie the treasure that can be found within. Perhaps the greatest gift it may hold is to lead us to the wordless response of marvelling love.

SISTER NICOLA SLG

THIRSTING FOR GOD, by Robert Llewelyn. Darton, Longman & Todd 2000. £7.95

For someone whose writing career began when most people are easing themselves into retirement, the output of Robert Llewelyn has been considerable in volume and impressive in quality. Had he done no more than inaugurate and edit the *Enfolded in Love* series, with its trim pocket anthologies of classic spiritual writers, he would have done much to make known to many of us—who might otherwise never have come across them—some of the jewels of all Christian traditions, prised from their settings in the foxed pages of vintage editions. In the course of the years, however, Father Robert has become well-known on his own account as a scribe instructed in the kingdom of God, and in this collection of sermons we can find things old and new brought out of a treasury of pastoral wisdom, uncommon sense and disciplined devotion to the Word of God.

While the sermons belong, as the author explains, to a period of three years in a withdrawn country setting where he ministered at Bede House to a tiny flock, preaching every Sunday and on greater holy days on the appointed texts, they betray no signs of their provenance in the heady turmoil of the late sixties and early seventies. Thirty years on, they read with the same fresh pertinence, the same winning practicality they had for those who first heard and then went away to think about them. A trained mathematician, with long practice in the art of making himself clear to small boys, Father Robert writes as he speaks with spare precision mellowed by the warmth and humour of a wise priest who has travelled far along the ways of prayer and made lifelong friends of his guides and fellow-travellers. His illustrations are the fruit of close observation and tend to stick in the memory long afterwards. Here, for instance, he describes the difference between *chronos* prayer (praying by the clock) and *kairos* prayer (praying when in a fix).

People who are only of the *kairos* brand generally find prayer unrewarding when they turn to it. And naturally so. They may be likened to those who are taking their first swimming lesson after the boat has capsized. Whereas the *chronos* people have been doing their ten lengths in the pool daily, and on finding themselves unexpectedly in the sea they are, relatively speaking, unperturbed. For those who belong to *chronos*, prayer is a habit of life, it is the same for them whether the sun is shining or the storm clouds are gathering, their habit of prayer continues.

This passage reflects (no doubt unconsciously) an equability and gentle wit, a pervasive health of mind and spirit, which those who know him will recognise as characteristic of the author. People who have lived for nine-tenths of a century and who continue to be sons and daughters of encouragement to others have clearly gleaned from life something more than experience. ‘Let the Holy Spirit be your pacemaker’, says Father Robert; and again, ‘Spiritual joy is not the prerogative of a happy nature’. Such observations give the reader pause. They offer glimpses of an adventure which beckons strongly and from which the constraints of daily living cannot debar us.

SISTER ISABEL MARY SLG

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