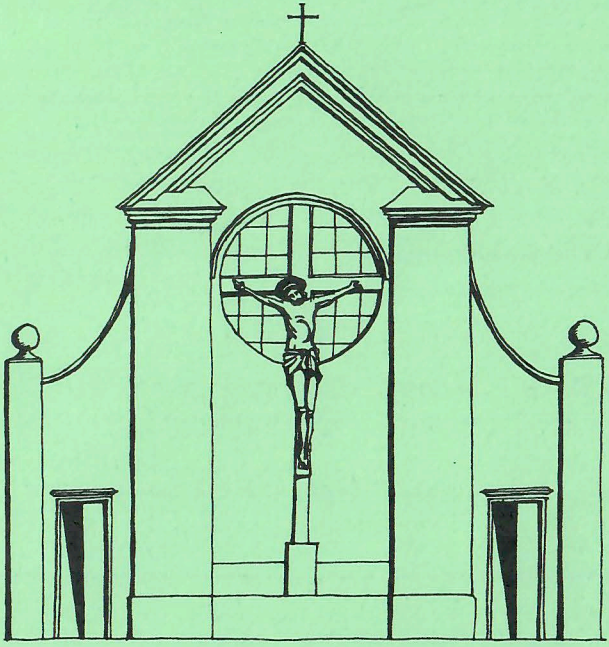
FAIRACRES CHRONICLE



Forty years of SLG Press

WINTER 2007
Vol. 40 No. 2

£1.50

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COMMUNITY NOTES

Dear Community Friends,

AS READERS of the summer issue of the *Fairacres Chronicle* know, I was installed to the office of Reverend Mother on 24 June this year, the Feast of the Nativity of St John the Baptist. We were joined on that day by our Episcopal Visitor, Bishop Michael Lewis, and by some Oblate Sisters, Associates, neighbours and members of my family. I want to express our deep gratitude for all the greeting cards, emails, letters and assurances of prayer which came to us at that time. Please take the gratitude expressed in these notes as our 'thank you'. All were much appreciated, but the volume of correspondence meant that individual responses were not possible—please continue the prayers! For those who do not know me, I have been in Community for twenty-five years and have been Prioress since February 2002. Should you be struggling to put a face to my name, I am the Sister carrying the cabbages in one of the photos in our Community leaflet. The same picture accompanied an article in a *Church Times* of last Advent—and I still enjoy gardening! As you may have noticed from the announcement in the last *Fairacres Chronicle*, I continue to be known as Sister (not Mother) Margaret Theresa.

The *Church Times* article mentioned above was written by Sister Catherine, who was installed as our Prioress on the Feast of St Benedict, 11 July. The Warden's address on this occasion is included in this issue of the *Fairacres Chronicle*. At this Eucharist, and for the following celebratory coffee, we were joined by some of our staff, who support our life in so many different ways. I would like to record our gratitude to Anne Champness, who worked as our Company Secretary for nearly eleven years and who left us in early November. We wish her well and are thankful for her many years of good and faithful service. The role of Sub-Prioress is now shared between Sisters Susan and Christine.

Sister Rosemary has been on sabbatical, and we welcomed her back to community life on Advent Sunday. She spent a month in

Ireland after my installation and since then has had a time of withdrawal here at Fairacres. There are some other Community events to record. Mary Gossy was admitted as a Postulant on the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 8 September. Sister Helen of the Mercy and Truth of God made her Profession in Life Vows on the feast of St Francis. It was a joy to have members of other communities and Sister Helen's sister-in-law from California with us for this occasion. And news of Oblate Sisters: Vera of the Patience of God, Joan Anna and Gill made their Life Oblations, on 1 January, 2 February and 2 December respectively. Mary Wheatley was received as a Postulant Oblate on 17 January. We also look forward to Donna of Jesus making Annual Promises on 6 December.

The changes of role mentioned above mean a time of transition for all Sisters, both those who are assuming new responsibilities and those adjusting to changes in leadership. This takes energy as well as time. Since the end of June two Sisters have had major surgery and another has been in hospital a number of times. We have missed the contribution of these Sisters to our daily life, both in Chapel and 'on the shop floor'. We have experienced both the excellence of the National Health Service, and some of its shortcomings, but all Sisters are making progress. These health matters have meant that sometimes we have not been able to offer as much hospitality as usual and have had to disappoint some friends when they have tried to book retreats. We know that you value times of retreat, as we do ourselves, and hope you have found alternative venues. The articles by Fr Reinhard Körner and Ruth Misselwitz included in this edition have more to say about retreats.

It is biblical to stop. In the second chapter of the book of Genesis, we read, 'And on the seventh day God finished his work which he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done.' This theme reappears as one of the Ten Commandments. Our '24/7 world' seems a long way from this wisdom, which some people realize contributes to good physical, mental, emotional and psychological health. By chance I heard a radio programme in which young business people were describing their lifestyles. When they go out in the evenings, they take mobile

phone and 'BlackBerry' with them, so they can attend to urgent business matters—even though it is well past the end of work time. Out-of-hours business queries often come from the other side of the world, and one young lady recounted that one night when she was in bed her work mobile phone rang at 2.00 a.m. and she ignored it; however, at 3.00 a.m. her door bell rang; it was her employer's taxi which had come to take her to the office. This seems to be quite usual in the 'developed' world. A quick response is expected and there is little awareness that all people need to stop.

Jesus took time to be apart from the crowds, sometimes with his disciples and on other occasions on his own. We have been thinking about our need to stop, and to help each other to do so have allocated a monthly 'desert day' for each Sister in turn, mostly on Fridays. We may increase the frequency; the style of the days is evolving. To stop and take a day of rest on a regular basis and to incorporate breathing spaces into each day is surely prophetic in our restless world. But for others, time can hang very heavily and the frenetic activity of some highlights the lack of activity of others.

We wish you all a very happy and blessed Advent, Christmas and New Year.

'Come let us adore him, Christ the Lord.'

With all good wishes,

SISTER MARGARET THERESA SLG

GUESTS

We would be grateful if guests who are familiar with us would bear in mind the Community's timetable when arranging their time of arrival. New guests are asked to arrive between 10.30 a.m. and 12.00 noon and between 3.00 and 4.00 p.m. Day guests may arrive in time for the Eucharist.

EDITORIAL

To be able to express oneself to God, and to hear God's voice: that is contemplative life. And what places of quiet have to offer above all is somewhere to practise or reawaken this ability.

THE WORDS ABOVE, taken from page 20 and the article about 'places of quiet', reflect one of the themes of this edition of the *Fairacres Chronicle*. Those who lead busy lives and those seeking silent support from companions along the way might identify with what is written in this article—together with those who, having entered monastic life in order to live in a place of quiet, find themselves nevertheless beset by many tasks and demands and much speaking, and so continue to long for such a place! These places are important, and Fr Reinhard Körner writes about what they can effect in our lives.

We know that what many of our readers wish to read about in the *Fairacres Chronicle* is how we live our lives on a daily basis; what happens. It is very difficult, though, to describe community daily life from the 'inside'. How, for instance, would we write about the midday meal which we share day by day? It is too familiar, too close to us. Some of us could perhaps write about new impressions and experiences if we were to visit another community—knowing, too, how things can often appear in a more positive and meaningful light when viewed from outside! Ruth Misselwitz's account of our daily life and of her experiences, both outwardly and more deeply, during a three months' sabbatical spent with us at Fairacres helps to communicate something of our life.

These two articles reflect something of the Community's aims, hopes and daily life—but the contributions from our Sisters and Warden will make these things more concrete. Sister Christine spoke about Sister Ellinor (whose death was reported in the last edition) at her funeral in May, and in so doing revealed something of the work of grace and prayer and silence at work in the life of our Sister. In June, Sister Judith gave a sermon as part of the Anglican Eucharist at an international conference in France; what she said about prayer and silence creates another shake of the kaleidoscope.

Looking to the Rule of St Benedict for inspiration, our Warden, David Barton, spoke in June about the importance of 'listening' and 'obeying'. Sister Edmée shares with us the fruits of many years of prayer and study, in particular her work on the Old Testament.

We are grateful too to Mary O'Regan for her seasonal contribution, a modern reflection on the Journey of the Magi to the Christ Child. We are now in the season of Advent. SLG Press—which is celebrating and rejoicing this year in its forty years of existence—wishes joy at Christmas and a Happy New Year to all who read this.

SISTER AVIS MARY SLG

ASSOCIATES

Correction (with apologies) from Summer *Chronicle*:
Maureen Jallon should read *Maureen Tallon* (NEW FLG)

NEW COMPANION

Audrey Day

NEW FLG

Revd Claire Greenwood FLG

RIP

COMPANIONS

Theresa Whistler
Barbara Peile
Moira Little

FLG

Nina Lahood
Kevin Vincent Joyner

SISTER ELLINOR OF THE TRANSFIGURATION SLG

Address at the Funeral Requiem

30 May 2007

SISTER CHRISTINE SLG

MY TOTAL EXPOSURE to the British pantomime tradition is a home-grown SLG production of about 1970 in which I played Aladdin to Sister Ellinor's Widow Twankey. It was our annual novitiate Christmas entertainment for the nuns, always a test of our life together as novices. To our great dismay, when we were well into rehearsals, we learned that Mother Mary Clare had invited the novitiate of the Society of St John the Evangelist to watch the entertainment as well—but the show had to go on, whoever was in the audience. The finer points of that panto escape my memory, but I remember Sister Ellinor making her entrance in apron and sleeves, carrying a copper washing dolly and clothes basket from the laundry, and saying something droll. As many of us remember, she had a fine dry sense of humour, as well as a fund of music-hall songs which she could sometimes be persuaded to sing.

The music-hall must, I think, have been a formative aspect of her years growing up in Leeds. She rarely spoke of those years, counting herself a Londoner, where she spent her working life. However, I remember her telling me once, after she had done some beautiful sewing on which I remarked, that her grandfather had been a tailor who taught her some of his skills. Her mother had been a great supporter of the vote for women, counting herself a suffragette, and her father had worked on the railways, doing a job which involved shift work. She came from what used to be termed 'humble origins', as well as growing up in the Depression. It was a time when, for women of her background, there were few opportunities after school-leaving age. Even with her fine and enquiring mind, there would have been no possibility of higher education. But secretarial training landed her the job she loved best before she joined us, as a secretary to the Commissioner of the City of London Police.

Entering community was not an easy decision for her. There was a diffidence in her personality which was a constant burden to her. Despite taking advice from her SSJE director, Fr Beasley Robinson, and worrying over the question for some time, it was only when Archbishop Antony Bloom said she should come to Fairacres that she plucked up courage to ask. However, I wonder whether Sister Edith (whose dedication was also 'of the Transfiguration') might not have had an unseen hand in the decision too. Oblate Sister Mary Christian remembers that when Ellinor was still trying to make up her mind, Sister Edith, then living at Boxmoor, said she was 'playing the line' with Ellinor, and that she was running up and down the river making sure that her fish didn't get away!

Life in community was even more difficult than the decision to enter, especially in those early years. She was not someone who naturally observed how community life worked, despite her best will to live it. Many times over the years, she had to make a deliberate renewal of her intention to live out the call she believed she had been given, especially when this was not clear to the Community. She also found enclosure difficult, perhaps not unexpectedly, for she had been her own person for so long. In later years she loved outings to anywhere anyone wanted to take her. And, despite the reasons that took her regularly for treatments at the Marsden Hospital, the visits to London were heaven to her. Those treatments left her with an almost useless right arm, and I always admired her determination, without complaint or recriminations, to train her left hand to do right-handed jobs.

She also loved a good 'natter', and there is an almost apocryphal account of her talking, smoking and typing a complicated document all at the same time, when she worked for the Police. But she especially loved to talk about subjects close to her heart. She had an extensive knowledge, in particular, of Russian history and of Judaism, and kept close watch on world events. Even in the nursing home she kept her interest alive—and presumably her intercessory prayer—as there was a radio on in her room most of the day, tuned to Radio 3 or Classic FM, so she heard regular news reports.

Latterly, despite her incapacity to form words and sentences, there was always an interested response when I spoke to her of current events.

By the nature of our faith and vocation, each of us has a 'word from the Lord' to give others, so this past week I have been reflecting on the word I had from Sister Ellinor. Indeed, there are several. The first dates back to our novitiate, when we had several study days here with the novices from Alton Abbey. Sister Benedicta gave some addresses on the Monastic Office. The perennial question of the use of the 'cursing psalms' came up, with passionate opinions for and against their inclusion in the Office (does this sound familiar?). As usual, Sister Ellinor had said very little, though her always-mobile features reflected the inner thought processes going on. Then in measured tones she contributed a statement on the lines of: 'Which of us hasn't wished the worst for someone else because they got the office job I would have liked, or something similar? The cursing psalms are not for a time in the past; they are for now. They speak of the dark side of ourselves and give us a way of saying so publicly and before God.'

On a similar theme—and this is Sister Rosemary's story, not mine, so I apologize if I have not related it accurately—is the occasion when, in the days when we had a meal before Vespers, she returned daily to pantry sinks of greasy, smelly, lukewarm water, full of wooden bowls waiting to be scrubbed. On one occasion she said, as she plunged her hands into the unsavory water, 'Well, this is a way of participating in the mess of the world; might as well get on with the job.'

My final 'word' from Sister Ellinor is in the person we would be commemorating today if it were an ordinary Eucharist. Some of you will remember that it was at Sister Ellinor's behest, at a Chapter in the 1970s, that we included Josephine Butler in our list of commemorations. This was in the days before the new kalendar of saints for the Anglican Church in the UK was finalized. Josephine Butler was one of the great reformers and champions of women's rights in the nineteenth century. Supported by a life of contemplative prayer, she worked tirelessly to alleviate and improve the conditions

of working-class girls at risk of becoming prostitutes. She also rescued many children and young women from prostitution and from being trafficked for that purpose. Her greatest achievement was to see the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, Acts which gave *carte blanche* to the authorities to examine any woman they suspected of having venereal disease. She began her campaign in Liverpool, where her husband was headmaster of a boys' school, but Leeds was one of the cities where she had a strong following. There must still have been people alive in Sister's early years who had been influenced, perhaps even helped, by Josephine Butler. Sister Ellinor's keen sense of justice and rights for all must, I suspect, have been formed by this tradition, as well as by her mother's interest in women's rights.

Or *is* that my final 'word' from her? I mentioned her difficulties with enclosure. We will never perceive what it must have meant to her to know that her mind was gradually failing her, especially her capacity to read; then her body, and her powers of speech, so that eventually her life was confined to one small room in a nursing home away from the Community, completely dependent on the care, or lack of it, that others gave. Her physical enclosure was about as complete as it could be. She, indeed, 'had been carried where [she] did not wish to go'. Yet were the conditions as awful as they appeared from outside, I wonder? She lived nearly six years at the Manor House, much loved by the staff. When she died so swiftly and peacefully, the nurse in attendance said to Sister Judith, 'She must have lived a good life.' I think she lived our vow of poverty in a way that few of us will ever have the opportunity to do, and it led her, simply, into the Love of God.

Thanks be to God for her life and witness.

FEAST OF ST BENEDICT

11 July 2007

The Blessing of Sister Catherine as Prioress

DAVID BARTON

'LISTEN, O CHILD OF GOD.' So, famously, Benedict begins his Rule. And it is still such a striking beginning: '*Listen'*. It is not just that Benedict lived in an age in which few could read, and so listening really mattered, though that was the case. That 'listen' echoes, and is meant to echo, deep into the traditions of faith. Do you remember that wonderful passage from Isaiah, which should be by the bed of every monastic—by the bed of every Christian, come to that—'Morning by morning, he wakens, he wakens my ear to hear' (Isa. 50: 4)? 'Listen': echoes of wisdom literature there too, and of the great *Shema*, 'Hear O Israel'. And, deeper than all of that, this is a word to take us to the first moments of creation, when God calls all things into being. He makes the stars and 'calls them by name', Isaiah tells us (Isa. 40: 26). 'Listen': Benedict's followers are to live in that moment of creative calling. It is by being awake and listening that we will be renewed. When you read through Benedict's Rule knowing that, it takes on a different colour.

Of course, it is very tempting, on a day when St Benedict's feast coincides with the blessing of our new Prioress, simply to concentrate on chapter sixty-five of the Rule, 'Concerning the Prior or Prioress'. Reading that chapter, you get the impression that Benedict was not very keen on priors and prioresses! There are many 'ifs' and 'buts' in those three paragraphs. Maybe monasteries need one, he says, maybe they don't. Benedict really favours an organisation that relies on a number of heads of departments—'deans' he calls them—with the abbot as final authority. Only reluctantly, it seems, does he approve of priors and prioresses. I am reminded of another famous problem in the Church concerning a second in command—archdeacons. The often-asked question in medieval times was: 'Can an archdeacon actually be saved?'

But perhaps Benedict was right, because in fact there is an issue around such a post. To be second in command, wherever, in whatever job, is the hardest of tasks. Leaders may wince at the fact that the buck stops with them. Which of course it does. But at least that is clear. The problem of being 'number two' is that nothing is ever quite so clear. It is not always easy to know which buck you pass up, and which you would do best to deal with yourself. And where do you belong as a 'number two'? Leaders especially, as Benedict lays it down, fall firmly into their own domain. Priors, prioresses, or any other second in command, have one foot in the place of leadership—but the other is alongside everyone else. And that can sometimes be an uncomfortable position.

So Benedict gives to the Prioress a very clear piece of counsel, which at first does not seem to answer the problem, but which in reality is the only way forward: 'The higher the position conferred on anyone, the greater must be his or her devotion to the Rule.' *Listen*. 'Listen', and that other key word of the Rule, which must always accompany it: '*Obey'*.

In the end, Benedict's Rule can be summed up in that pairing of words—listening, and learning, bit by bit, to obey. And it *is* bit by bit, because Benedict is deeply humane and his monastery is a place of learning—a workshop he calls it in one place, a school in another. And that learning takes place everywhere, and in every aspect of daily life. For example, he tells us to remember 'that all the utensils of the monastery and everything that belongs to it should be cared for as though they were the sacred vessels of the altar'. There is no sharp distinction between the chapel and the place of work; between, on the one hand, the chalice and paten, and on the other, the diary and the letter on the Prioress's desk. All are to be treated with the same alert awareness; all are part of the one wholeness of your life. That is part of the learning to obey. Obedience is to God, and God's presence pervades all things. You pray to know why you work, and you work to ensure that the harmony and wonder of the Trinity in Unity to whom you pray becomes recognized as the lifeblood of the Community.

And there is great warmth in Benedict's instructions about obedience to those in authority. Monastics owe 'sincere and unassuming affection' to their leaders. '*Affection*.' And leaders for their part should be aware of individual differences between sisters. Authority, in Benedict's Rule, is more about mercy than justice, more about understanding human weaknesses than ensuring that the rules are kept, more about love than zeal. Read the Rule carefully, and you find obedience and love are woven so closely together as to be almost the same. You emerge from reading the Rule thinking that what it is about is not an institution, but a powerful collection of caring relationships, within which people learn to put down deep roots into the love of God.

But, having said that, it is clear that Benedict's purpose is *order*. He was acutely concerned with order. He wrote his Rule almost exactly 1,500 years ago, in a society falling apart. And as Europe fell into chaos, the monasteries under his Rule were not just places of order; they became bastions of stability. We don't face chaos, but our fast-moving society also has its own anarchy, and none of us is immune from it. Order is our issue too: how to frame this Life? How to take what Benedict wrote then and translate it to the contemporary, as reformers of the religious life have always done down the ages. That remains the key question for all monastics today, and it is one that presses strongly on those who lead. So, giving thanks for Benedict, we pray for all leaders of monastic orders. We pray for Sister Margaret Teresa, and we pray for Sister Catherine, our new Prioress.

PLACES OF QUIET

REINHARD KÖRNER OCD

Author's prefatory remark: I was requested to write the following article (reproduced here in full) as a contribution to a workbook for teachers of religion.

I'VE GOT TO write an article. On top of everything else! As if I don't already have enough to do—more than enough—yet another Sunday at my desk, and then burning the midnight oil at least once in the days to come. I should enter a monastery, I tell myself at such moments, to get away from all this stress… but I'm *already* in a monastery! In a monastery to which more than 2,000 people come each year to withdraw from daily life for a few days. They seek quiet, and they seem to find it; otherwise they wouldn't come again. Most of them come year after year; many also come more frequently. It seems like it's only me, the Guest Master, who is left to look out for himself!

'Places of quiet' is my topic. I'm asked to write about how essential these opportunities for withdrawal are today, and about their importance, above all for teachers of religion. In fact (during the school holidays) such people are not infrequently among those seeking quiet. But what should I say to them? And is it possible to talk about silence anyway?

Thank heavens! Something Pope Benedict XVI said fell into my hands just at this moment, and it will get me off the hook. At the Angelus prayer in Rome on 19 November 2006, Pope Benedict said:

> In the face of the widespread need to get away from the daily routine of sprawling urban areas in search of places conducive to silence and meditation, monasteries of contemplative life offer themselves as 'oases' in which human beings, pilgrims on earth, can draw more easily from the wellsprings of the Spirit and quench their thirst along the way.
>
> Thus, these apparently useless places are on the contrary indispensable, like the green 'lungs' of a city: they do everyone

> good, even those who do not visit them and may not even know of their existence.
>
> Dear brothers and sisters, let us thank the Lord, who in his Providence has desired male and female cloistered communities. May they have our spiritual and also our material support, so that they can carry out their mission to keep alive in the Church the ardent expectation of Christ's Second Coming.[1]

That actually says it all. The Pope is right. And anyone wishing to read more about the value of silence, or looking for addresses of places in which to find quiet, only needs to go to the next bookshop or to Google on the Internet. Never before in the long history of spirituality have so many books about stillness and silence been written as at the present time, and there are abundant monastic guides and booklets on the subject, in both Internet and printed forms.

It is true that one probably needs to look a bit more closely. What are these 'oases' and 'green lungs' and 'quenching one's thirst along the way' for 'pilgrims on earth' really all about? As I am being asked, then here are a few thoughts (inspired by what the Pope said), written by a contemporary who tries hard, day in, day out, to make silence possible for teachers of religion and for others who seek it.

I love and need quiet too

I love quiet too, and I need it. That's why I entered a monastery twenty-five years ago, a 'monastery of contemplative life', as Pope Benedict puts it. It is true that the men's branch of the Discalced Carmelite Order is not one of the purely contemplative orders, but, following the wishes of the Foundress, St Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), it is one of the contemplative/pastoral orders in the Church. Nevertheless, silence and quiet have a substantial place in the timetable. The Eucharist, the Divine Office in common, and the times of prayer (two each day) are characterized in Carmelite monasteries by the spirit of silence, simplicity and recollection. I entered a monastery of this type of order because I need precisely

[1] *© Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2006*

this measure and this kind of silence in order to be human. If I didn't have it, I'd be running around in circles and more 'being lived' than 'living'. I know too from experience that there wouldn't be much going on between God and myself if there weren't these times of silence and of quiet withdrawal in my daily life. I'd then—I know this too from personal experience—be speaking in my pastoral work about, and proclaiming faith in, a God whom I don't myself know—and I'd not wish to do that to anyone!

It may be different for others, but that's how it is for me. I need a place of quiet, in order to live and to be real. For that reason, I even leave the monastery twice a year—once for three weeks and once for one week—and draw back from my very full daily life into silence.

The need to get away is great

It is true that 'the widespread need to get away from the daily routine of sprawling urban areas' is great. Many want to leave the pulsating life of the big city behind, in order to draw breath in a peaceful area, at least at weekends. In sixteenth-century Spain, St Teresa, my Mother in the Carmelite Order, still believed that it was important where possible to found contemplative monasteries in the middle of big cities in order to be near to people. She was right, and open churches and praying communities are still today a blessing to every town. Yet now, in the twenty-first century, in the era of increasing flight from the towns and of general mobility, Teresa would probably go with her brothers and sisters primarily into easily accessible places off the beaten track, to which people on a spiritual quest are also drawn: to 'places conducive to silence and meditation … in which human beings, pilgrims on earth, can draw more easily from the wellsprings of the Spirit and quench their thirst along the way'. Why is the need for solitude and silence so great? Probably because it's the same for many people as it is for me. And this not only goes for those who live in highly populated areas in large cities: people from small towns and villages make up the main proportion of those seeking quiet, including those here at our priory. Even monks and nuns from enclosed contemplative orders withdraw here. People come from all occupations and—above all here in the

east part of Germany—people with no religion are just as much among them as are 'religious' people, with and without denominational connections. That they almost all come again regularly shows that they too love the silence—and need it. A human being cannot be a human being, a Christian cannot be a Christian, and a teacher of religion cannot be authentic, if he or she doesn't—at least from time to time—have some place of quiet.

It may be different for many people, but it is so for many. It seems to me to be a question of honesty towards oneself, towards one's fellow human beings, in the family and in the sphere of work, and towards God, whether, when, how often and where one 'gets away from the daily routine'. And probably it is also concerned with an awareness of one's responsibility towards life—one's own and that of others.

Silence is an inner state

Silence is an inner state, which is probably what is primarily meant when Pope Benedict speaks of a need felt by many people, of a longing in fact. But—and Elijah in the Old Testament already had this experience (see I Kings 19: 8-14)—external silence can help us to find that inner stillness which is so necessary in life. It 'does everyone good'—or rather many people; a number do not find it so, or at least not to begin with. When it is outwardly quiet and the wheels of daily routine come to a standstill, then interior noise often increases—precisely in a monastery guest house or some other place of quiet. Many people are then disturbed by the fly on the wall in their room and by the clattering of the neighbour's spoon at silent meals. It requires much self-awareness to grasp that it is one's own thoughts that are flying around agitatedly, hither and thither, and that it is only the sabre-rattling of injured feelings which is being reflected in the clattering of the spoon. No, a place of quiet isn't heaven on earth—and no guest master, however solicitous, can manufacture that. There will always be a door creaking, or the caretaker has to drill a hole somewhere, or there is a dog barking in the neighbourhood. Times of stillness are exercises, say the old masters and teachers of the spiritual life (long before St Ignatius of Loyola began the retreat movement). Retreats are spiritual

exercises—and sometimes difficult and tedious. Becoming still within, being able to be still within, even when it is noisy externally, irrespective of the external circumstances of life, should be practised in external withdrawal.

Time out in a place of stillness will have little effect—apart perhaps from rest for the body and for the nerves, which admittedly is of value too—if the place where the thoughts find support, the emotions find clarity, and the spirit finds its source of life is not discovered or re-found. 'You must build a little cell within your soul', Elizabeth of Dijon (1880-1906) writes from her convent to a friend[2] and, as a Carmelite, she knows what she is talking about; only the person who knows how to build an 'inner cell' for him or herself and to enter into the 'interior mansions' (St Teresa of Avila) can also live from his or her centre in the monastic cell.

The soul of stillness is silence

The soul of stillness is silence. I therefore say to my seekers after quiet at the beginning of a conducted retreat that the word 'silence' is to be underlined in bold for the next few days: this does not mean talking quietly, but not talking at all; and it does not mean sometimes not talking at all, but always not talking at all.

What is the point of such continual silence? All who do keep silence right up to the end of the retreat know the answer when they look back. And because they have—sometimes for the first time in their lives—themselves experienced the healing power of several days of silence, they come again and again.

And the soul of silence is prayer

'And the soul of silence is prayer.' The Pope speaks about 'meditation', a commonplace expression these days. In the sense of the Christian tradition as understood by Pope Benedict, what is meant is prayerful meditating and meditative praying, being united with God in dialogue, in speaking and in listening, in a real conversation, as the masters of the spiritual life do not hesitate to

[2] Letter to Françoise de Sourdon, 19 June 1902, *Elizabeth of the Trinity, Complete Works*, vol. II, Letters from Carmel, p. 52

say. ‘Remember’, writes Elisabeth of Dijon to her friend, ‘that God is [in the inner cell within your soul] and enter it from time to time; when you feel nervous or you’re unhappy, quickly seek refuge there and tell the Master all about it … You used to love sitting very close to me and telling me your secrets; that is just how you must go [to] him; if only you knew how well he understands. You wouldn't suffer any more if you understood that.’[3] It can be very useful, and sometimes even vital, to express one’s personal situation and how mixed up one’s thoughts and feelings are to someone, to a pastoral counsellor perhaps, including during a time of withdrawal in a place of quiet. Yet mature humanity and adult living by faith only really becomes possible if a person learns to stay alone at times with his or her concerns, questions and problems—but actually not to stay alone with them, but rather to make all that is currently affecting him or her into the subject of prayer.

To be able to express oneself to God, and to hear God’s voice: that is ‘contemplative life’. And what places of quiet have to ‘offer’ above all is somewhere to practise or reawaken this ability.

Spiritual and material support for places of contemplative life

The Pope asks for ‘spiritual and material support’ for places of ‘contemplative life’. Here, too, I can only agree with him. As far as ‘material [financial] support’ is concerned, there is probably not a single retreat house and not a single Christian house of meditation, even in our country, which is able to cover its running expenses through the accommodation fees paid by seekers after quiet. The ‘apparently useless places’ which are so ‘indispensable, like the green “lungs” of a city’, produce nothing—apart from oxygen to draw breath. And on top of that, prices are kept moderately low, so that retreats and individually-arranged quiet days do not become an exorbitant luxury. And the ‘spiritual support’: wherein might that consist? Above all, in sensitive respect for the silence and withdrawal of those men and women who make possible for others time out in a place of quiet. That can begin with choosing, when contacting them, to opt for the good old postal method instead of causing the phone

[3] *ibid.*

to ring noisily at all times of the day and night. For they also want in their way to 'carry out their mission', which is common to us all, 'to keep alive in the Church the ardent expectation of Christ's Second Coming'.

Places of quiet are like oases

Places of quiet, says Pope Benedict, are like 'oases' in which human beings, pilgrims on earth, can draw more easily from the well-springs of the Spirit and quench their thirst along the way. Why is that so? Why do even people with no religion experience the need for the stillness of the 'oasis'? I should like to let Edith Stein (1891-1942) answer this question, since she knows very well from her own experience how it is for a heart living with religious faith and for one living without it.

> In the innermost being, the essence of the soul has begun the journey inwards. If the ego resides here—in the depths of its being, where it is actually at home and belongs—then it senses something of the meaning of its being and senses its collected energy before the division of that energy into individual energies. And if the ego lives from this place, it lives a full life and reaches the summit of its being. Whatever in the way of contents is absorbed from outside and penetrates thus far does not simply remain in the memory as a possession, but can cross over into 'flesh and blood'. Thus it can become a life-giving source of strength within … This is what those who know about the inner life have always experienced. They were drawn into their innermost being by something which drew them more strongly than the entire outside world could do; they experienced there the incursion of a new, potent, superior, life, of the supernatural life, the divine life.

There actually isn't any more to say on the theme of places of quiet. Only experience, and not theory, can convince people. The saying of Jesus, 'Come and see', applies here too (John 1: 39).

Note: This article appeared in KarmelImpulse*, 2007/III, and has been translated by Sister Avis Mary SLG.*

THREE MONTHS' SABBATICAL AT FAIRACRES

August-October 2007

RUTH MISSELWITZ

MY LAST MONTH has now begun, and although on the one hand I'm looking forward to Berlin, to my family, to my friends, to a glass of good wine and to the parish, on the other hand there's also a bit of sadness at the thought of having to leave this place. All the time I have at my disposal here has also made me aware of how 'driven' I am in Berlin. I'm not the ruler of my time, but rather the countless appointments and demands from outside rule me. Even if it does one's ego good to have the diary full and so prove that one is needed, yet it can't fill up the inner void—and in the end you run the risk of losing yourself.

I have a long day here, which is without any professional work, without television, radio or other diversions, yet is completely full. My alarm clock usually goes off at 5.50 a.m. (but if it's stormy and pouring with rain, I sometimes reset it to 7 a.m.!) It's still dark then, and if the sky is clear, I see the moon and the stars—and amongst them, large and resplendent, the morning star. The first trip I make is to Chapel for Matins. I sit in the corner, to go on dozing a bit more and listen peacefully to the Sisters' singing. After Matins—at getting on for 6.45 a.m.—I feel drawn to go into the garden. The dawn has begun, and I spend about an hour watching the day breaking. The birds begin to sing; the first squirrel—they are silvery grey here—runs down a tree trunk and jumps into the field; a fox looks to see if there is already anything around to catch; and I do my sun-salutation Yoga exercises (some exercises for the back, which have so far prevented me from having back pain). Then I have my morning prayer time, in which I include those near and dear to me, and the whole world. Meanwhile, it has become properly light, and now the sunrise's splendid performance commences: jubilation as on the first day of creation. I watch in fascination, as in front of me first the top of the towering beech tree is lit up, and then, very gradually, the entire tree glows in a blazing light with all the colours

of autumn; for then the sun has erupted over the horizon and illuminates the entire sky and the entire garden.

And here I must say a few words on the subject of the garden. For it's a bit like paradise. An enormous expanse stretches out directly in front of my room, with broad well-tended areas of lawn and grass in which stand fruit trees, greenery and conifers, not in the regimented French manner, but in the more casual English way. Among them are quite a number of smaller areas, separated off with hedges and bushes, and furnished with small statues or pictures which invite you to sit or to meditate. There are flowers of all kinds and all colours blooming along the paths, or in areas set aside for them. Bordering this recreational area is the vegetable garden, in which a glorious plethora of every kind of vegetable you could possibly wish for thrives in a wonderfully well-tended state, organized by the gardener with great passion according to ecological principles. He works in the garden five days a week, but often works on Saturdays too, and sometimes I even see him on Sundays. The garden is his family, his home, his life. That is obvious from the state of the garden.

This little paradise has now become entirely illuminated by the golden autumn sun, and I go back into the house to get warm again in a hot bath—for the nights are already quite cool. By then it's nearly 8 a.m., and I make my breakfast: müsli and fresh fruit and berries out of the garden. While I'm having breakfast, I sit before my big glass door, which leads straight into the garden, and I can see the gardener starting his work and some of the Sisters having their morning walk round the garden. If it's warm, I open the door and enjoy the rollicking play of the squirrels in front of me on the lawn, and sometimes a very bold squirrel might venture to come right up to the patio step, just in front of my chair. Bella—the proud, fluffy, silver-grey cat, with a red leather collar, to which is attached a tiny bell which tinkles very softly and clearly—greets me, and if she feels so inclined, she even sometimes seats herself on my lap. Unfortunately, though, these visits are now a thing of the past, since the night I put her firmly out of the door after she had sprung through the open window and wanted to share the bed with me.

Then at 9 a.m. the bell summons me to Mass. The corporate celebration of the Eucharist takes place every day here, and it is celebrated by priests from the most diverse fields, including clergy from the University of Oxford. On Sundays and the chief feast days, there are sermons, and I listen to them with interest (and sometimes, if they are too complicated, I get a copy of the text and translate it later in my room). The Eucharist is the central celebration of the day and the Sisters participate in it each time anew with great recollection and devotion. An important reason for my decision to spend my sabbatical at this Anglican convent was the Eucharistic table fellowship—where I am warmly welcomed—with our Church. The split over the recognition of the ordination of women, however, also goes right through the Community. Some of the Sisters don't come to the Eucharist when a woman priest celebrates. (One Sister is ordained.) The strength of this Community, though, is that both positions are maintained, without it falling apart.

The intercessions, which are always prepared and conducted by one or other of the Sisters, have a central place in the Mass. In this prayer all find their place, the sick and the departed among the Sisters' immediate acquaintances, the hotspots of this world linked with certain current events, the work of all Christian denominations on this earth, the work of all who are committed to peace, justice and the preservation of the creation, the work of those with political responsibility and the United Nations (and some Sisters also pray faithfully for Queen Elizabeth). The Holy Spirit is invoked upon all, that God's will for the salvation of this world may be done.

Here I must write a few sentences about the Community. The Community of the Sisters of the Love of God was founded 100 years ago in Oxford as a contemplative Community, and it differs from more active ones, in that its emphasis is not on any social work in this world, but on prayer for the world and consecration to God. If there is to be improvement in the world, then here this is not to be achieved by means of education, mission, cultural or political influence, but through prayer and through the Sisters' own consecrated lives, offered as a gift to God. God is sought here in silence, in stillness, according to the tradition of mystics such as

Hildegard of Bingen and Meister Eckhart, to name a couple of the better-known teachers. In prayer for the world, the connection between heaven and earth is established. The image of an angel came to me at a Sunday Mass when a Sister was serving in the sanctuary. There she stands, silent and reverent, like a sturdy tree in the earth, swinging the thurible; its fragrant white smoke envelops us all and ascends upwards to heaven. Silent and present like the angels, who preserve the connection between heaven and earth and cast a net through the entire cosmos, in order thus to prevent a crash into chaos…

Afterwards, from 10 a.m., I work in the kitchen. The cook greets me from the stove with a broad smile, and I go into the 'vegetable room', where I wash, cut up, crush, pound into pulp, prepare for jam, and so on, mountains of fruit and vegetables which the gardener has brought in fresh from the garden. This work gives me much satisfaction, as hardly anything is more meaningful than preparing from fresh fruit and vegetables meals which are then consumed together. (Meat is served chiefly at weekends.) A number of Sisters work here in the kitchen. Each has her task and carries it out in silence—some more and others less so—and with great respect and consideration for one another, so that when you enter the kitchen, a strikingly peaceful atmosphere surrounds you. The Sister in charge of the kitchen directs us as to what we have to do and she does it in such a loving and sensitive way that you never have the impression of being 'directed'. All is accompanied by warmth and gratitude. Apart from its function of preparing the meals, the kitchen also operates as the information centre for what is going on, both within the Community and for the kitchen staff! Apart from the many Sisters who come into the kitchen, I also meet there guests from all over the world who are staying here for a time and might—like myself—be working in the kitchen.

Now I must say something about the rule of silence. This convent belongs to an Anglican contemplative Community, which owes much to the Rule of the Carmelite Order, in which silence is prescribed. But it is the nature of ordinances to have exceptions, and there are many. Thus the rule of silence prevails within the common

areas in the house, but there are places, such as the garden or in rooms set aside for the purpose, where speaking may take place, and also at work. As a consequence, in the kitchen what is necessary is said, but with the prescribed restraint. The non-verbal communication has, though, a multiplicity of facets and means of expression, so that a silent sign is sometimes far more expressive than a thousand words. Once a week, at Sunday afternoon tea, it is permitted to talk for an hour in the refectory. And then I try to ask about the many interesting life stories of the Sisters, which have in part brought them half way across the world to respond to the call to this Community.

Some weeks ago a Postulant arrived; that is, a woman who hopes after her time of postulancy to enter the Community as a Sister. To my remark that it is somewhat crazy to enter a convent of women if one is a feminist, she replied: 'Yes, it is certainly crazy, but perhaps it is not *so* crazy, as these women here have no other authority over them than God—so they are really self-determining.' And she does have a point. These women actually do decide themselves how they shape their lives, independent of matrimonial and family obligations, free from any kind of ownership and from occupational career stress. Instead, they give themselves to responsibilities towards the Community, submit themselves to the ordinances of the Community and render obedience to it—all, as I have said, voluntarily. In return, the Community offers the support and security of a family (with all the advantages and disadvantages) and guarantees provision for a lifetime. The leader is the Reverend Mother, who is elected by the Sisters for five years. And even the ordination of women has found its way into this convent—all reasons for a woman such as this Postulant to seek out this place.

What motivates women to enter a convent? I believe that—apart from the religious experience of vocation, which is the main deciding factor and not to be underestimated—it's also a way of 'protest': a protest against this world's laws, which stand for achievement, success, being strong, egocentricity and loss of meaning. Here a kind of counter-model is attempted, a life in community in mutual respect and esteem. Another world is possible, and that is

practised here, not only in dealings with one another, but also in ecological respects: as far as the methods of working in the garden, of dealing with and recycling refuse and waste, and so on, are concerned. And even if there are differences of opinion and tensions here, sickness, death and despair, all these things are cancelled out; the loving and attentive atmosphere differentiates this place from other places in this world—that, at any rate, is what I have experienced here.

Back to my day. Promptly at 11.15, I get a warning that one of the Sisters will be waiting for me and I have to drop my work, because it's time for my 'English lesson', which takes place with a 90-year-old blind nun whose life story could fill whole books. Our first 'lessons' were very difficult indeed. She treated me like a schoolchild and I lost the little confidence I had in the English language. But I hung on, because of her great sense of humour and her laughter. How she can laugh! And I was richly repaid. Now we have so much fun together. We tell each other crazy stories about our respective lives. She wants me to explain the heating system to her, and so we crawl around the floor, so that she can feel the heating pipe, and neither of us understands how it works. I explain to her that these days there are computers that you can put in your pocket, and she does not believe a word of it. I tell her about films, which she listens to with enthusiasm, and we are in fits of laughter, so that the Sisters have told us to be quieter, since our laughing can be heard even as far away as in Chapel.

The bell calls us at 12.10 p.m. to the midday office of Sext. We go into Chapel; the Sisters sit in the choir and I sit in the visitors' section and listen to the Sisters singing the Psalms with their light voices.

There then follows what for me is actually the high point of the day—dinner. After the Office, the convent guests like myself are led by the Guest Sister from the Visitors' Chapel into the Choir, and there the Mother or Prioress says grace and reads the Gospel of the day. The Community then waits in silence for the little bell which is rung in the kitchen as a sign that the meal is ready. The Guest Sister takes the guests to the refectory, and the other Sisters follow. All the

dishes are on a table, and all take a plate and help themselves to what is needed. The most wonderful thing about these meals is the many kinds of vegetables fresh from the garden, with which I fill my plate right to the rim: cauliflower, beans, broccoli, beetroot, carrots, courgettes, potatoes, and so on. Rarely have I enjoyed food so much as I enjoy what is here. The way now leads into refectory, where we take up our places on long benches. During the meal there is absolute silence. The food is consumed in great concentration and recollection. Sometimes an edifying book is read by a Sister. On Sundays there is music. In the centre of the room stands another table, with desert: compote freshly made from fruit from the garden, mostly with some kind of cake. All collect something for themselves, and the getting up, standing, waiting in a queue, the mutual making way for others, making space for oneself, helping others, happens with an impressive consideration and attentiveness—all without a word, only with looks and gestures, a form of communication which has more power than any spoken word. After the meal we take our dishes into the kitchen and each one washes up her own dishes in the sinks. Here too the same silent and impressive spectacle as in the refectory—standing, waiting, making way for others and helping.

Sometimes on Sundays there is the so-called ‘formal dinner’; then the tables are laid, we take our places and are served—some Sisters go around with serving bowls and we take food out of them. Some Sundays the Reverend Mother herself undertakes this service—a strong, deeply symbolic action, which reminds one of the story of the heavenly marriage feast in which the bridegroom himself serves the guests. After dinner, I take a rest. By then I have honestly earned it, and at 2 p.m. it is time again for the Office in Chapel.

The afternoon and evening are my own. I read, reflect, meditate, walk through the picturesque alleys and historic buildings of Oxford or walk along the river, according to my mood and the weather. One of the Sisters has several times invited me to accompany her on some lovely walks. But the afternoons are also for study. Here at the convent I’ve occupied myself a great deal with mysticism. My Angel—here that is what they call a Sister whose task it is to care for a particular person—gave me some books on the subject, and

having acquired a taste for it, I got my husband to send me the book *Mystik und Widerstand: 'Du stilles Geschrei'* by Dorothee Sölle. A great discovery, and just the right thing, what I need now: resistance to violent and unjust structures, coupled with a spirituality characterized by feminism. I've chosen this place of quiet in order to find a new way to God—my means of support deep within me. Many call it the 'source of all being' or the 'divine spark', which exists in every human being; many call it simply 'God'. And the longer I search, the more I'm convinced that we all have the same source and we all seek the same God, whatever name we may give this God.

Dorothee Sölle has produced a lovely image for it:

> Speaking in terms of an image, I picture the religions of the world in a circle with the centre as the mystery of the world, the deity. The adherents of those diverse religions are drawn by this X at the heart of the world and give it names such as Allah, Great Mother, the Eternal, Nirvana, and the Unsearchable. But giving a name and forming a tradition is not the decisive issue; rather, it is how far the pilgrims advance on the way from the periphery of the circle toward its centre. How close is the unutterable X to us? That is the crucial question. We approach the centre of the circle in that the distances between the various points of departures on the periphery become ever smaller the closer we come to the centre. And so, the differences between the individual religious approaches also become less important: in the heart of God they have disappeared altogether. … In terms of the image of movement from various points of departure on the periphery toward the centre, tolerance increases with genuine piety. Fundamentalism, the extreme fixation on specific conceptions, rituals, and forms of conduct, is a massive and frequently violent denial of the mystical core. In this sense, fundamentalism is not the fruit of every religion but a matter that belongs to the periphery and the extreme opposite of mysticism.[4]

[4] *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, Dorothee Sölle, Fortress Press, 2001, ch. 3, p. 51, © 2001, Augsburg Fortress. This book is a translation of *Mystik und Widerstand: 'Du Stilles Geschrei'*, © 1977, Hoffman und Campe Verlag, Hamburg, Germany. (Reproduced with permission.)

Understood in that way, religion has a healing and life-preserving effect on the world, and only thus, I think, does it have a future. I'm all the more despairing about the religious and nationalistic tendencies of the present time, which promote separateness, the raising of one profile at the expense of another, and, in the end, the apportionment of power into smaller units.

Another almost forgotten theme has again overtaken me here. Shortly before my departure, I received as gifts from Christa Wolf two of her books, *Kassandra* and *Voraussetzungen einer Erzählung: Kassandra – Frankfurter Poetik-Vorlesungen*.[5] The first of these I am reading once more, the second for the first time. Whilst reading them, I experience again vehemently our fear at the beginning of the 1980s of the atomic war which would destroy everything, and the furious rebellion against the millennia-long suppression and demonization of the feminine—coupled with the ominous recognition that both belong together. Who still mentions this today? Have the hundreds of thousands of atomic warheads just disappeared into thin air? Has the dignity of women around the globe been restored? Has it become an inviolable commodity in all nations and religions? I fear that we are cradling ourselves in a false security…

And if I might now come back again just once more to my day, the bell for Vespers—that is, Evening Prayer—calls me from all these reflections at 5.25 p.m. After that, I go again into the garden, do my sun-salutation Yoga exercises, say my evening prayers, gather some fruit for supper and breakfast, watch the hedgehogs which now snuffle through the grass in the approaching twilight, and return to my room for supper. After that, my little kitchen gets a quick clean, as I definitely want to experience the transition from twilight to darkness, which I observe from my armchair, with a candle, and possibly music in my ears from my portable CD player.
The bell summons us at 8 p.m. for the last time in the day, to Compline—Night Prayer, for by then it's really dark. With the blessing for the night, which Mother says over us (on Saturdays she

[5] Published in English as *Cassandra* and *Cassandra: A Novel, and Four Essays* respectively

sprinkles us with holy water, which purifies us for the Sunday), all then withdraw to their cells, as do I. The last 2 hours of my day are then devoted to my journal, to sending text messages to members of my family, or to phoning my husband, and reading a few more pages in a book or in a German newspaper which I buy once a week and then read through thoroughly—that is then enough for me. The day has now ended and sleep has to have its place, so I go to bed.

Time is what I have most of here, and to begin with, that was an enormous adjustment. The feeling of always needing to be doing something, of making use of the time, arranging my time effectively and meaningfully, the problem that nothing happens—the day can sometimes be very long—all this irritated me a great deal at first. It took a while for the wheel to stop turning and for me to come to a standstill. And then came an emptiness, which it was not so easy to fill. Agitation over believing I had to have some dramatic spiritual experience got mingled with criticism of what was around me. But conversations with the Sister who has been accompanying me then led me back again and again to myself, and to my own short-comings. With her loving and gentle direction, she accompanied me through a number of crises, and also through happy times. And then I had a very surprising experience: if I *allow* the silence, *listen* to my inner unrest, don't evade its pressures, face up to my problems, and am in dialogue with myself—or, I would say, with God—then there *are* answers, and balance is again restored. My eyes and ears were gradually opened here, but only after the garish flickering and the noisy droning had faded away. Now I perceive sounds and signals which I have previously failed to hear. And that is a fascinating process.

That is what I'd gladly preserve, after this time in a convent…

Ruth Misselwitz recently spent a 3-month sabbatical at Fairacres, living alongside the Community in the guest accommodation. She wrote this report for family, friends and acquaintances and it has been translated from the German by Sister Avis Mary.

SERMON

at the

International Congress of Religious
at Belloc Abbey, France, in June 2007

SISTER JUDITH SLG

But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you (Matt. 6: 6).

THE GOSPEL PASSAGE for today (Matt. 6: 1-6; 16-18), taken as a whole, is a difficult one to preach on—all this emphasis on our piety, works of mercy, fasting and prayer being bidden to be done in secret. Dressed like this, I could not be more conspicuous on the street! I take the emphasis to be a protection against pride and complacency and, in a rather 'Reformed' sort of a way, an invitation to rely upon the Mercy of God alone, or, as religious, as an invitation into our vow of poverty; as our Rule would put it, 'an entire dependence on Christ'. So I have taken the easy way out and chosen to speak about one verse in particular [quoted above].

There was a TV programme when I was a girl—it still runs today—about a hero called 'Dr Who'. He can travel in time and space, and he does so by means of the 'Tardis'. From the outside, the Tardis looked like a standard blue police box which was supposed to house a telephone that linked directly to the police station. It was much the same size as a telephone kiosk today. But once inside, it opened out into a huge room full of all the equipment needed to travel in time and space. This gave rise to adventure and the inevitable conflict between good and evil. Dr Who was the hero, but entry into the Tardis led to encounters with the terrors of the Daleks and other mysterious creatures—my stomach still contracts when I think of the all-invading green slime!

It feels a little strange giving so much space in a sermon to Dr Who, but each time I have tried to think about that verse in this

morning's Gospel, the Tardis (which for British children of my generation and after is a household word) is what has suggested itself.

It has done so partly by means of another, more conventional image, that of the icon of the Holy Trinity. When I go into my cell to pray I have on my prayer desk Rublev's version of this icon (and in my mind I have Fr Benson of Cowley's words, 'To know the Holy Trinity you must know yourself to be taken into the Holy Trinity'). As I come to pray with this icon, this window onto God and means of his Presence, I come to place myself in that small space, the little gap left for the one who prays, between the feet of two persons of the Trinity. That is the space for me, the place I've been invited into, where I begin to enter into that circle of Love. It is visibly a small space, and I often experience it as a narrow gate—no room here for superfluous baggage; I must lay aside wandering thoughts, the lists of 'things to do' that seem to write themselves instantly in my head the minute I get down to pray! When I kneel in the Presence of God, looking at that small space, I pass through the narrow entry and find myself connected at a deeper level to the world—as if passing through that small space, whole new worlds open out—just like the Tardis, you enter into the small space and suddenly find yourself in a vast area connecting in time and space.

St Anselm, former Archbishop of Canterbury, has another idea. He thinks of the inner chamber where we are told to go to pray being not so much a geographical location, but a place in our soul. At the beginning of the *Proslogion*, he says,

> Come now, little one,
> turn aside for a while from your daily employment,
> escape for a moment from the tumult of your thoughts.
> Put aside your weighty cares,
> let your burdensome distractions wait,
> free yourself awhile for God
> and rest awhile in him.
> Enter the inner chamber of your soul,
> shut out everything except God,
> and that which can help you in seeking him,
> and when you have shut the door, seek him.
> Now, my whole heart, say to God,

'I seek your face,
Lord, it is your face I seek.'[6]

The idea of entering the inner chamber of the soul and shutting out the distractions conjures up the image for me of an opening so narrow that it needs to be squeezed through, rather like Winnie the Pooh (who is a fat teddy bear in a much-loved children's book) who got stuck trying to get out of Rabbit's burrow. But once you have done that, it opens out into a whole world, and I am back to the Tardis again.

That inner chamber of the soul is the place within us which is for God alone. As religious, we express that outwardly through our vow of chastity, and it will need frequent visits and long time spent there to keep the room in order and hospitable. Visiting the room is, quite simply, praying, and that is the root of our monastic life. To switch metaphors for a moment, St Paul tells us in our first reading (II Cor. 9: 6-11) that we need to sow generously here and, just like the harvest, we have to wait for the seed to sprout and grow and ripen; and in the meantime, that will mean the heavy labour of watering and weeding if the sown seed is to bring forth its harvest. As the Greek emphasises more strongly than the English, the reward which the Father gives comes in the future, not in the present. Like playing a musical instrument, you can read about it and talk about it as much as you like, but the thing that is going to teach you to do it is actually to DO it. We must, in a very simple sense, exercise our vow of obedience here, *do* as He says, *go* to that place, shut the door and pray to our heavenly Father.

The Greek word which is used for 'room' in this verse has two possible meanings. The first is the inner room, the private chamber. But, wonderfully, the same word can also mean a barn, a granary, a store-house or a treasury. I love the resonances of that: this inner room, whether it be our cell or the inner room of our soul, is also a store-house for grain, for nourishment and even a treasury. What richer image can there be of this place we are bidden to go to by Our Lord to pray? And surely it is all these things?

[6] cf. *The Prayers and Meditations of St Anselm*, Penguin Books, 1973.

The image of treasure and nourishment links us to our prayer of worship. As we come together to celebrate this Eucharist and be nourished in it, we come to another, similar, narrow place that opens out and connects us to vast new worlds. The bread and wine which is taken and blessed becomes the place where God chooses to narrow down his presence in humble grain and fruit of the vine in order to unite us with himself, with each other and the whole of creation; a passing through the small space of substance to open up the whole of the universe. The elements of the Eucharist which are so small—a host, a sip of wine—like the Tardis, if we enter into it, connect us in time and space with the whole universe. And it is that connection that God gives and makes here which makes our disunity at the altar so shocking.

So let us come here to the altar and to the inner chamber of our souls and enter through that narrow place in prayer and so fulfil our Christian and monastic calling. 'Let us bless the Lord.'

ON BRINGING A RIGHT SPIRIT TO THE OLD TESTAMENT

A Talk given at Fairacres during the Oblates' Week,
28 February 2007

SISTER EDMÉE SLG

And [Elisha] went up from there to Beth-el; and as he was going up in the way, little children came forth from the city and mocked him, saying to him: 'Go up, baldhead! Go up baldhead!' And he turned round and looked at them, and he cursed them in the name of the Lord. And there came forth two she-bears out of the wood, and they tore in pieces forty-two of the children (II Kings 2: 23-24).

WELL, you will be thinking, what hope is there of bringing a right spirit to that charming story! I was reminded of it in a recent conversation with an Old Testament scholar who mentioned it as an example of the savagery of the Old Testament in comparison with

the New, and he cited Luke 9: 52 ff. where the Samaritans refuse to welcome Jesus, and James and John ask: 'Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?' The reply attributed to Jesus is evidently thought to be a Christian gloss for it is now relegated to a footnote which informs us that 'Other ancient authorities read, "as Elijah did"',[7] and goes on to give Jesus' rebuke, 'You do not know what manner of spirit you are of; for the Son of man came not to destroy men's lives but to save them.' The Old Testament scholar understood this to imply a reproach of the Old Testament way of settling one's enemies, and at the time I could only agree with him, and thought no more about it.

But the next morning I found an interpretation emerging from another level of consciousness. I dimly recalled an incident in my teens when I was with another girl somewhere or other, and we were both laughing immoderately, I cannot recall about what. But our stupid laughter attracted to us a man who became a menace, and I remember our becoming alarmed. Presumably we got rid of him, and the incident is in no way a parallel to the Elisha story. But it gave me a clue. If the sneering, mocking child in us laughs at a holy man on his way up to the house of God—which is what Beth-el means—then we are laying our souls open to be savaged by forces too strong for us.

I cannot explain the story better than that, but the point I want to make is that the interpretation, and the conviction that the story is not to be read literally, emerged from another level of consciousness. We are all familiar with the idea of two levels of consciousness, the conscious mind and the unconscious, but there is a third level, rarely recognized because, unlike the first two, it has to be developed by prayer, or by some form of creative activity which is directed to this level of consciousness and not to that of ordinary consciousness—much less to all those activities which are unconsciously motivated. We can call this third level the 'supra-conscious'. It is a level we must all share, since we would not be here if we were not people who pray, and who desire above all to increase this level of

[7] Probably referring to the episode with the captains of fifty at II Kings 1: 9-16.

consciousness. And on its development, I believe, depends the capacity to read the Bible in accordance with a kind of reading we know as *Lectio divina*, traditionally practised by those living the monastic life, but by no means confined to such. (Clement of Alexandria, in the third century, taught that the path to the knowledge of God lies through the study of the Bible, but, uniquely for his time, he considered marriage the preferred state for the attainment of perfection.)

Now the problem of how we read the Old Testament may not be an issue for any of us here, but it is a problem for the Church and has been from the beginning. But whereas in the early days the culmination of the Scriptures revealed in the incarnation of Christ produced giants like Tertullian, Irenaeus, Clement, Origen, and others who all taught the unity of the two Testaments, and whose depth of understanding, both of what was amazingly new in Christ but also what was amazingly profound in the Scriptures which led up to him, enabled them to combat the influence of powerful heretics who attracted followers in those first centuries.

And of these early heretics Marcion has proved the most dangerous because he represents the Christian mind when it is undeveloped in the spiritual insight necessary for reading the Bible, especially the Old Testament. Consequently, his influence emerged once again when mystical theology ran out of steam in the early Renaissance period. Anything left of its spirit was, in general terms, finished by the Reformation on both sides of the divide—though not before Spain had produced its swansong in the teaching of the two great Carmelites, and German Lutheranism had produced Bach and the librettists who provided mystical texts for much of his music, as well as extraordinary exceptions like Ann Griffiths, and a number of others down to recent times. There are, thank God, always exceptions who are not bound by the spirit of the times. Nevertheless, as the spirit of humanism, which enabled the Reformation, yielded to the rationalism of the Enlightenment, religious thought in the West became dominated by the thought processes of the ordinary conscious mind. In such a climate Marcion was bound to re-emerge. Let us look at him first in his

second-century setting, and then at his re-emergence in the hands of a German theologian in the early twentieth century.

Marcion was a Greek who, about 140, went to Rome where he worked out his system and organized his followers into a separate community, leading in 144 to his formal excommunication. Marcion was in all respects except one (he ruled out sex altogether, even within marriage) a very modern man whose system contained elements from which the Church could have benefited. For instance, he favoured democracy in church management, was against a rigid distinction between clergy and laity, and permitted women to hold office on the Pauline principle that 'in Christ there is neither male nor female', though he retained the Pauline prohibition against women speaking in church.

His extraordinary success was not based on extraordinary claims. He did not, as his English biographer wrote, come forward as a prophet with 'the word of the Lord came unto me saying', neither did he appeal to any secret tradition.[8] So he was not a Gnostic, but what made him dangerous was that, like the Gnostics, he maintained that Christianity began with Christ. He therefore distinguished the God of the Jews and the God of the Christians, the God of the Jews being the Creator God, just but severe and cruel, while the God of the Christians is the higher God, the God of love, unknown except as he is revealed in Christ. Judgement is the prerogative of the Creator God, redemption the free gift of the God of love. The revelation in Christ was intended to replace not to fulfil the Scriptures, and the one had no connection with the other. Those New Testament writings which did not support this view he rejected, which left him with drastically shortened versions of Luke and ten of the Pauline letters. Against all the rest he maintained his conviction that they had been falsified by Judaizers.

This, then, is the heretic who was taken up by the famous Church historian, Adolf von Harnack, 1851-1930. John O'Neill, in

[8] E. C. Blackman, *Marcion and His Influence*, London, 1948, p. 8. The account of Marcion given here is taken from my article in the *Fairacres Chronicle*, Spring 1992, called 'The Bible, the Jews and the Spirit of Marcion'.

his book, *The Bible's Authority*: *A Portrait Gallery of Thinkers from Lessing to Bultmann*, which brilliantly charts the downward course of rational religious thinking in German theology, has a chapter on Harnack in which he writes:

> In all the upheaval of the post-war years, [Harnack] produced a major study on the second-century heretic Marcion, which is still the standard book on the subject. He brought to fruition the work begun in the essay on Marcion's teaching with which he won a gold medal as a nineteen-year-old student of the University of Dorpat, the work which in his speech on taking up membership of the Berlin Academy in 1890 he said remained the real object of all his research. He argued that Marcion was as great a reformer of the Church as Luther. Marcion attempted to recover the true teaching of Jesus and Paul about the God of love who was above the God of wrath of the Old Testament.

Harnack was extraordinarily influential in his day. O'Neill tells us that he 'learnt a sweet and patient tolerance of those who felt Christianity itself was threatened by his arguments', especially following the break with his father, a distinguished Lutheran theologian, who wrote a tragic letter to the young Adolph after the publication of Volume I of his History of Dogma:

> Our difference is not merely theological but a profound and directly Christian difference, so that if I overlooked it I should be betraying Christ, and no one, not even someone who stands so near to me as you, my son, could demand that of me or expect it. To name only the all-decisive issue: whoever regards the fact of the resurrection as you do is in my eyes no longer a Christian theologian.

O'Neill ends his essay by describing Harnack as the 'perfect servant of whatever comes to pass, the highly educated functionary who makes our modern world go wherever it is going'. And where Harnack's world was going was into the world of Hitler, and what he unwittingly helped to enable was the liquidation of those for whom the Bible is that rejected by Marcionism.

Harnack's book on Marcion was never translated into English, but a book by a Swedish Lutheran theologian, Anders Nygren,

called *Eros and Agape*, was and, one might say, filled the gap. The first part appeared in English in 1932, the second in 1938 and a revision of the whole in one volume in 1953. It was widely read and in its view that Agape is all good and Eros is all bad was enormously influential on theologians such as Barth, Tillich, Niebuhr and many others. Nygren's concern is to untie the knot which had, in more than a thousand year old tradition, kept Eros and Agape bound together, while an allied theme is to untie the knot between the two Testaments. Thus, on Harnack's view of Marcion, Nygren writes:

> Harnack's monograph on Marcion describes him as incomparably the most significant religious personality between Paul and Augustine. Without further qualification this judgement perhaps contains a measure of exaggeration; but with specific reference to the history of the Christian idea of love, there is probably no other between Paul and Augustine who could rival Marcion in importance. (317)

Nygren, however, is not entirely uncritical of Marcion, but he serves his cause by high-lighting the distinction between Law and Love on which point he believes Marcion was right. And if there is no love in the Old Testament, then the beautiful paean of praise which describes the love between God and his creation that lies at its heart, the Song of Songs, must be understood as concerning a pair of human lovers. Nygren only refers to the Song once: 'we need hardly mention the disastrous part played by the mystical interpretation of the Song of Songs in assisting the identification of the Eros motif with the Christian idea of Agape' (230). It would be difficult to overestimate the damaging influence of Nygren's combination of learning and compelling air of verisimilitude, especially in our theological colleges where *Eros and Agape* was recommended reading after its publication in one volume in 1953.

In 1958 C. S. Lewis published a small, modest study called *Reflections on the Psalms.* If it were possible to agree with his line, which is implicitly Marcion throughout, one would delight in much of the book. The psychological acuity he brings to the different types of psalms viewed in purely human terms is often brilliant. But he makes the cardinal error of referring to the Old Testament as

Jewish and, worse, frequently compares the Old Testament on this score to its disadvantage with the New. For instance: 'I think there are very good reasons for regarding the Christian picture of God's judgement as far more profound and far safer for our souls than the Jewish' (12). There is an underlying patronising tone toward the writers of the Old Testament which, combined with the anachronistic use of Jew and Jewish, is subtly anti-semitic. Lewis frequently reports the views of biblical scholars. Did not one of them tell him that terms like Judaism and Jewish cannot properly be used before the Inter-Testamental period? That Christians, no less than the Jews, *are* the Israelites of the biblical books?[9] Nevertheless, toward the end of the book Lewis produces some extraordinary insights, and I will return to one of them when we come to look at Psalm 137.

Now, the point of all this history is that in consequence of it, Marcionism is, alas! very much around, especially among those who have never heard of this heresy. It has, so to speak, got into the bloodstream. I was at a large meeting of Jews and Christians at Leo Baeck College a few years ago in the course of which one of the Jewish participants related that he had recently been told by a Christian lady that the God of the Christians and the God of the Jews are different and that the God of the Christians is the God of love, while the God of the Jews is the God of wrath. This was followed by several others who reported similar experiences with Christians. This kind of thinking has insidiously become part of our assumptions with the result that the Old Testament is taken at face value, and understood at the level of ordinary consciousness. This inevitably leads to the demand that we omit from our reading those passages which seem to bear out the view that the God of the Old Testament is the God of wrath. Read in this way the savagery of the Old Testament, taken literally, is held to be an element in the savagery of the treatment of the Jews by the Germans, and that on this account we may no longer use, in particular, the 'cursing

[9] See the article referred to earlier, 'The Bible, the Jews and the Spirit of Marcion', pp. 18-19.

psalms'. Thus, in the light of the holocaust and by way of reparation to the Jews, we reinforce precisely that understanding of the Old Testament which contributed to their persecution in the first place.

Against all this we must assert the necessity of bringing faith and goodwill to the reading of the Old Testament. Let us again go back to the Second century and draw from Clement of Alexandria two fundamental principles against Marcion—of whom he was a younger contemporary—as guides to biblical interpretation. The first is that we can accept as literally true nothing that is unworthy of God, and second, that we can accept no interpretation which is inconsistent with the Bible as a whole.

Origen, Clement's great pupil, studied both Testaments with a passion for the letter no less than the spirit. Origen is widely thought of as an allegorizer, but although he does on occasion employ allegory it is a misunderstanding to suppose allegory to be the method on which he relies. Far from it. His normal procedure is to study every word not only in the passage under consideration but wherever it has been used, a huge task without the benefit of our modern concordances. One example, which springs readily to mind because it comes in his great commentary on the Song of Songs, occurs at Song 1:2 where he interprets 'mouth'—'let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth'—as being that into which words are poured: 'May he pour the words of his mouth into mine, that I may hear him speak himself.' Readers now assume he is allegorizing to avoid the sexual implications of the verse. But that is because they do not know that neither verb nor noun of 'kiss' is ever used of lovers' kisses in the biblical literature, and that his interpretation of 'mouth' as being that into which words are poured is amply borne out by biblical usage as the following typical examples show:

> 'Speak unto him and put words in his mouth' (Exodus 4: 15).
>
> 'The word which God puts in my mouth' (Numbers 22: 38).
>
> 'The Lord put a word in Balaam's mouth' (ibid. 23: 5).
>
> 'That which the Lord has put in my mouth' (ibid. 23: 12).
>
> 'I … will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him' (Deuteronomy 18: 18).

‘He has put a new song in my mouth’ (Psalm 40: 3).

Let us apply this way of studying a text to the notorious conclusion to Psalm 137:

> Blessed be the one who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!

First of all, if we have faith and goodwill we will ask ourselves whether ‘little ones’ are to be understood literally as ‘little children’ or, worse, ‘babies’? And whether there can exist circumstances, however exceptional, which would justify declaring someone ‘blessed’ who takes tiny tots and dashes out their brains? And here I am not so much thinking of the tots as of those who would perpetrate such a crime. For the little ones it would be a question of a moment’s agony and then of being swept into the arms of their heavenly Father. For the perpetrator the outlook is black, unrelievedly so if he is motivated by self-righteousness, by a conviction of being blessed in the doing. Can those Scriptures, which all the truly great commentators have ardently believed to be inspired by the Holy Spirit, instruct us thus? And do we so fail in faith as to read them so? Let us, then, look carefully at the context, and at how the words in this verse are used.

First of all, the context is that of the tragedy of exile, especially exile from being able to sing the praises of God, ‘for how shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?’ The word for ‘strange’ here, *neicar,* is most often used in conjunction with foreign gods, thus: ‘How shall we sing the Lord’s song in the midst of idolatry?’ The last two verses, which are direct address to Babylon personified, desires that her little ones, *olelim*, will be dashed in pieces. The word occurs at Psalm 8: 3 in a well-known metaphorical sense: ‘Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings.’ And that *olelim* should be dashed in pieces occurs in four other places: II Kings 8: 12; Hosea 14: 1; Nahum 3: 10, and Isaiah 13: 6, at which last the ‘mother’ is again Babylon. It seems that the word is generally used as a metaphor for what a people or a city has given birth to, usually evil of some kind, which, in the prophets, means idolatry. Here the ‘little ones’ represent the false worship, that is, to a devout Israelite, the

lies, to which the 'daughter of Babylon' gives birth, and it is of such 'little ones' that a state of blessedness would be granted to the one who dashes them against the rock. But this interpretation depends on seeing that the word for 'rock' (*sela*) is a metaphor for God, explicitly so in four Psalms in each of which the Psalmist states: 'The Lord is my rock and my fortress' (Pss. 18: 3; 31: 4; 71: 3) and 'God is my rock' (42: 10;). Here, in Ps. 137, the Psalmist is not talking explicitly, but he does give a strong clue by providing the definite article. So it is not any old rock against which the *olelim* must be dashed; it is *the* rock, the one, true God, against whom all lies and false worship are to be dashed. Finally, having studied certain significant words in their different contexts, we find the key in yet another Psalm: 'Behold those who are in labour with wickedness, who conceive evil and give birth to lies' (7: 15).

So this is the metaphorical language of the biblical literature. As you see, it requires drawing out by careful study, though in our day it is enormously facilitated by the excellent concordances available. You will also understand that this is not allegorizing; there is no attempt to impose a meaning which may or may not be what the biblical writer had in mind. It is an attempt to discover exactly what the biblical writer did have in mind. And what is unexpected is the surprising consistency with which the vocabulary is used.

This, then, is the way to study the Old Testament in particular. It is rarely, if ever, to be read literally. The biblical writers take images and symbols and use them for metaphors. Nevertheless, a reader may occasionally come up with an allegorical interpretation so brilliant that it deserves to be put alongside the metaphorical, and in this case C. S. Lewis has produced such a reading of the last two verses of Psalm 137. It worries me that he seems to think a literal reading could be the one intended by the Psalmist, though I may be misreading him on this point. But here is his allegorization:

> … I can use even the horrible passage in 137 about dashing the Babylonian babies against the stones [AV mistranslation]. I know things in the inner world which are like babies; the infantile beginnings of small indulgences, small resentments, which may one day become dipsomania or settled hatred, but which woo us

> and wheedle us with special pleadings and seem so tiny, so helpless that in resisting them we feel we are being cruel to animals. They begin whimpering to us "I don't ask much, but", or "I had at least hoped", or "you owe yourself *some* consideration". Against all such pretty infants (the dears have such winning ways) the advice of the Psalm is the best. Knock the little bastards' brains out. And "blessed" he who can, for it's easier said than done.[10]

Finally, I want to return to where we began, to the suggestion that the right spirit for the reading of the Old Testament is formed at the level of our supra-conscious mind, that level which is developed by prayer, especially that silent prayer which empties itself of ideas, opinions, judgements and the like in its desire to be filled with what is fresh from the Holy Spirit. There is a very great deal in the Old Testament which yields nothing to me in the way of a meaning beyond the surface meaning, but enough does yield a meaning for me to be sure that the fault is in myself. I haven't allowed difficult passages to work on me, neither have I worked on them in the way described above. Until and unless I do they will remain either repellent or closed to me.

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[10] C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, London, 1958, p. 136.

NARRATIVE OF THE 'TRAVELS OF THE WISE WOMEN/MEN' (MAGI)

Magi
You wise men
with wounded hands
We three wise women
Want to journey
With you
searching for the star-
We can make a bridge
with our wounded hands
open to you across 'gender divide'
affirming each other
as we journey together.
A very special star
will continue to guide us all,
its brilliance more brilliant
than any other source of light.

Magi
You've travelled through deserts-
endured extreme temperatures,
climbed difficult mountains.
Your hands are wounded
Such efforts to
hold to the
sheer face of the rocks.

Magi
As we journey together
we can hold each others scarred,
wounded hands
the star will continue to shine on
us in darkness
within and without.
So, we support each other
As wounded people
With wounded hands
We shall reach the end of our
journey(ing)
The star
wise men
(three) wise women
shall rest over Bethlehem.
For in Bethlehem this night.
The 'Prince of Peace' will be born-
A gift for our world.
Together six wise people
will join hands
dancing on the roof of the out-house
for hope is born for us all.

MARY O'REGAN

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Those seeking guidance in deepening, or indeed in beginning, their prayer lives will find help in this book from someone who has long sought to practise prayer, and also to write about prayer. Sandy Ryrie begins by saying that self-offering is an essential and important aspect of all genuine personal prayer and that it can be seen as encompassing all its elements. This offering of the self is the work of God within, a work in which the person praying participates. It is a process which is not completed in this life, since human beings remain incomplete, not yet fully formed into that which God intends.

This book may be regarded as ‘spiritual reading’ in the traditional sense; a portion could be taken at a time, as nourishment and food for thought, mediation and prayer.

Sandy Ryrie is a Priest Associate of the Community and was, until his retirement, Rector of St John's Episcopal Church, Jedburgh, in the Scottish Borders. He is the author of the SLG Press pamphlet *Prayer of the Heart & Prayer in the Night,* of two books on contemplative prayer, *Silent Waiting* and *Wonderful Exchange* (reviewed on page 55), and of one on the Psalms.

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THE MESSAGE OF SAINT SERAPHIM

IRINA GORAINOV

Prokhor Mochnin, later to be known as St Seraphim of Sarov, was born in July 1759 in Kursk on the northernmost Russian steppes. At nineteen, he entered a remote monastery in a forest in Sarov in central Russia, where he received the name Seraphim (Hebrew: ‘flaming’) and became a priest. He later lived as a hermit in a simple cabin in the woods, where he kept strict silence. He eventually returned to his monastery, where he shut himself in his cell for five years. After he had emerged, people flocked to see this staretz, who radiated the fruits of the Spirit. His dictum, ‘have peace in your heart, and thousands around you will be saved’ is well-known throughout the Christian world. He taught that the aim of Christian life is the acquisition of the Holy Spirit, and that prayer more than anything else gives the grace of the Holy Spirit.

This book concentrates upon a record made by Nicolas Motovilov of a conversation with St Seraphim in 1831, soon after Seraphim had healed him of paralysis. The record was discovered in 1902 by Serge Nilus at the convent of Diveyevo and he had it

published in the *Moscow Journal* of July 1903, the same month in which Seraphim was canonized.

IRINA GORAINOV lived for some years on the island of Patmos. Her writing is based upon both knowledge of the written sources about St Seraphim and upon personal acquaintance with people living in the same tradition of prayer and faith.

Fairacres Publications 26. ISBN 978-0-7283-0170-2.
Price: £3.00.

BOOKS

Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief, Rowan Williams. Canterbury Press, 2007, £9.99. ISBN 9781853118036.

THIS IS A SLIM, beautifully produced and utterly readable book. As is explained in its introduction, it began as a series of talks given in 2005. For the leaders of the early Church, one of their most important jobs was to prepare people for initiation into the Church's life through Baptism at Easter. Consequently, the local Bishop would give intensive instruction in the weeks before Easter about what belief meant. It was with this in mind that Archbishop Rowan offered a series of talks on Christian belief in Canterbury Cathedral in Holy Week 2005, and the book is a slightly enlarged version of those talks.

The book has lovely reproductions of David Jones' paintings at the beginning of each chapter, and photographs dotted throughout designed to help the reader slow down and read more meditatively. It is a book to be read slowly and ponderingly and probably much more than once.

It takes for its outline the Creeds (Apostles' and Nicene) and seeks to explore what they tell us about God, and how what they imply draws us back again and again to the trustworthiness of God. It does so with humour and very honest and searching questioning: 'Why should we put our confidence in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth? Have we grounds for thinking him

trustworthy?' Should God be thanked for 'finding parking spaces for members of the prayer group when he can't be bothered to sort out the conflict in Northern Ireland?' And it is honest in saying in places that there are no answers to this, but it offers a coherent way of looking at things.

Perhaps not surprisingly, as it is based on the Creeds, it is a gentle and subtle meditation on the life of the Trinity, and on how our life is drawn into that and should reflect it; on how the tenets of the Creed are not only statements of belief, but a challenge that pervades our whole life. Here is an example:

> Belief in a Creator of all things visible and invisible is in fact something of deeply practical and personal meaning. It is about the possibility of an *integrated* life—not a life where some bits of us have to be covered up or swept under the carpet. 'Visible and invisible' means something for the life of each one of us, you see. There are the things in my life that I'm aware of, there are the things I'm not aware of—and there are the things that I *try* not to be aware of, that I'm ashamed of or frightened by. But all that I am is the working out of what God has made; some of it has worked out well, some not so well; I have learned to make good use of some of what God has given me and I've made a mess of some of the rest or just haven't come to terms with it. Saying that God has made us in our entirety and is concerned about all of us isn't, incidentally, the same as saying that anything we choose to do is fine—only that every aspect of who we are needs to be brought into the circle of God's light, because he can deal with all of it. ....
>
> So out of the confused and fearful and partial picture of ourselves that most of us work with most of the time, God can make some sort of wholeness. He can lead us gently to face what we find unacceptable and learn how to make it meaningful by his grace. He can draw the scattered bits of myself together. He is not going to be bored, disgusted or impatient with anything he has made, even when we have made a mess of it for ourselves. It's in this way that the creating God and the forgiving God belong absolutely together. (pp. 54-5.)

It is the taking questions and objections to Christianity seriously, the honest tussling with difficult issues and the implications of belief for a whole way of life, that make me think the book would be ideal

for someone who was either being confirmed or seriously questioning about Christianity. But it is equally a book for those who have long experience of the faith.

The book's sub-title is '*An introduction to Christian belief*'. Whilst it fulfils that by being an outline of Christian belief, it struck me as the sort of 'introduction' made between two people who turn out to form a life-long relationship.

Presumably the Bishops of the early Church gave their intensive instruction every few years or so. From reading these talks, I can only hope it is a custom which is revived in Canterbury, and I imagine that those who can attend and those who can read the script afterwards in book form would be blessed by it.

SISTER JUDITH SLG

Holy Reading: An Introduction to Lectio Divina, Innocenzo Gargano OSB, trans. Walter Vitale, ed. and introduced by Douglas Dales. Canterbury Press, 2007, £8.99. ISBN 9781853117909.

In this small but important book Innocenzo Gargano OSB, a Camaldolese monk with long experience of the path of *Lectio Divina*, provides a depth of insights into praying with Scripture. Father Innocenzo encourages his reader to attend to Scripture with commitment and perseverance. He does this by leading us directly into the text of the Gospel, looking deeply and patiently at individual words and sentences, and allowing these to resonate with, and be illuminated by, other parts of Scripture. In the process we discover how this close reading of Scripture leads to a transformation both of our lives and our relationship with God.

Lectio Divina is a centuries-old method of prayer. Fr Innocenzo's approach takes us back to an old way of reading and assimilating a text which we have largely lost touch with in our contemporary information-rich world. Rather than a superficial skimming of a mass of information, he encourages us to slow down, to take just one word and its etymological meaning, to look at its precise position and importance in a passage of Scripture, and in this way to

find the heart of the passage being read. As we do this, other verses of Scripture come to mind and illuminate the meaning of the text we are reading.

This makes this book a challenging one; it is not simply a how-to book with a method of *Lectio Divina* which we can learn to apply in order to master the text. It takes the reader deeper than that, challenging us to go more deeply into Scripture, to spend time familiarizing ourselves deeply with the whole of the Bible and opening ourselves to a process of continuous conversion. Fr Innocenzo warns us that:

> It may be possible to read the Bible on the surface, but if there is no willingness to put ourselves under review, including our own certainties, wealth and self-sufficiencies, the holy book will remain closed, even though it may materially appear open in front of us. (p. 13.)

It is only by opening ourselves up to Scripture to be changed by it that the fruits of *Lectio Divina* appear. These fruits are described by Fr Innocenzo: conversion of heart and the growth of prayer within our lives, the prayer of compunction, intercession, thanksgiving and praise. Included in the growth of prayer is the growth of contemplation. The ascetic struggle involved in a faithful, disciplined practice of *Lectio Divina*

> flows into the gift of contemplation, which alone renders us capable of mission, of evangelisation, of apostleship, which means being sent forth into the world. (p. 75.)

Finally, the epilogue of the book, 'The Mystery of Scripture', reminds us that Scripture works on many levels, literal, allegorical, moral and anagogical. The human person also functions on many levels. The challenge of Fr Innocenzo's book is that it calls us to the ever-deepening commitment to this multi-levelled process of *Lectio Divina* which is indispensable if we are to find the true meaning of Scripture and to enter more deeply into prayer:

> … we have seen how the evidence of the depths of the meaning of Scripture is closely connected to our commitment to continuous conversion. …
>
> The Scriptures, then, open to men and women in the same measure by which a person is open to the Scriptures. The Word of

> God reveals himself to a person in the measure by which that person reveals himself or herself to Christ. (p. 98.)

This valuable book will be appreciated by all who wish to be challenged, encouraged and aided in opening themselves to God in this dynamic process.

SISTER CLARE SLG

Jesus of Nazareth: from the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration, Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007, £14.99. ISBN 978-0-7475-9278-5.

This is a 'book about Jesus', as the opening words of the author's foreword state.[11] This is good news. In an age when, in the western world at least, many are rightly anxious to explore what unites Christians with other faiths and with all humanity, it is good to remind ourselves specifically of the Founder of Christianity and to see that the first book by Joseph Ratzinger since he became Pope Benedict XVI is called simply *Jesus of Nazareth*.

There is urgency, stated by Ratzinger himself, to get across *now* what he has to say, for he does not know how much time and strength will yet be vouchsafed to him to write books of this calibre. For this reason, he has decided to publish the first ten chapters (from the Baptism to the Transfiguration), written in the years 2003-6, as Part I. The next part is intended to include a chapter on the infancy narratives, postponed for the time being because the author considered it to be 'the most urgent priority to present the figure and the message of Jesus in his public ministry, and so to help foster the growth of a living relationship with him.'[12] The depth of Ratzinger's spirituality and theological study shine from this book. He is writing as a man of prayer, a theologian, rather than as Pope.

He believes that the gap between the 'historical Jesus' (the Jesus based on the *Gospels*) and the 'Christ of faith' (based upon the impression that only at a *later stage* did faith in the divinity of Jesus

[11] Foreword, p. xi.
[12] *ibid*., p. xxiv.

shape the image we have of him) has grown wider over recent decades, with the effect that 'Intimate friendship with Jesus, on which everything depends, is in danger of clutching at thin air.'[13]

Ratzinger states that the historical-critical method, based as it is on actual history, is an indispensable tool, but that it does have limits. By the nature of this method, the word of the Bible is left in the past and in history, and it also presupposes that the human words in the Bible are merely human, which misses the sense of the transcendent, that a word can transcend the moment in which it is spoken, that it is inspired. In affirming the Jesus based on the Gospels in preference to the reconstructions of recent decades, the Pope says resolutely: 'I trust the Gospels.'[14]

There are ten chapters covering the Baptism, Temptations, the Kingdom of God, the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord's Prayer, the disciples, the Parables, the principal images of John's Gospel, Peter's confession of faith and the Transfiguration and, finally, Jesus declaring his identity. I particularly welcome the fact that 40 of the some 350 pages of text have been devoted to the Lord's Prayer, of which the Pope says:

> … the words of the Our Father are signposts to interior prayer, they provide a basic direction for our being, and they aim to configure us to the image of the Son. The meaning of the Our Father goes much further than the mere provision of a prayer text. It aims to form our being, to train us in the inner attitude of Jesus (cf. Lk. 9: 28f.).[15]

This book is very attractively produced for the price, in hard covers with gold lettering and with a dust jacket, and would make a suitable gift for those willing for serious study. The publishers have included a useful glossary of terms; although some of these may seem trite, yet there is probably something here to help every Christian without specific theological training. In finding my way around this English version, I should have liked to have had the chapter names at the top of the pages, rather than the book name and

[13] *ibid*., p. xii.
[14] *ibid*.,, p. xxi.
[15] Ch. 5, p. 132.

author, which do not help. The book was written in German and published simultaneously by Herder as *Jesus von Nazareth*. Adrian J. Walker's English translation is in very good, readable and accessible language, so that it does not read as a translation, and the author's intentions are well transposed into the English idiom. I do, however, take issue on one point. It troubles me that in 2007 this book from the spiritual leader of millions has been rendered in English in non-inclusive language. I do not believe it to be necessary to translate the German for a human being, *(der) Mensch*, as 'man', and then to use masculine pronouns such as 'he' or 'his', or to translate the plural, *(die) Menschen*, as 'men'. With the constant repetition, the book is made less accessible than it need have been to the many who care about this matter.

That criticism apart, this is a fine book. I hope many of our readers will buy it and use it for study and prayer, and that we shall in due time be enriched by the appearance of Part II.

SISTER AVIS MARY SLG

Wonderful Exchange: An Exploration of Silent Prayer by Alexander Ryrie. Canterbury Press, 2003, £7.99. ISBN 9781853115578. Paulist Press, 2005, $12.95. ISBN 9780809143252.

This invaluable short book starts from the premise that the human heart has a primordial need for direct, personal knowledge of God in whose image and for whose companionship it is made. That is what prayer is for, and Sandy Ryrie can help anyone who cares to find out how to form the habit of prayer, how to maintain it and how to steady and renew the will to pray when, as so often happens, the initial impulse flags or is attacked. Starting with the pre-requisites of a time and place to pray (conditions which can almost always be met provided a strong enough impulse is there), Ryrie dwells at some length on the reality and beauty of silence, and above all on the work of attaining the level of silence at which the 'wonderful exchange' can take place. He then accompanies the reader on a path of descent to that level. It is there that the heart, the physical organ

on whose rhythmic beating our life depends, and which is at the same time the seat of all our thoughts and feelings, is—most mysteriously of all—the rendezvous where human persons encounter the divine Person whose desire to commune with them precedes and infinitely exceeds their own.

Simple as Ryrie's programme may appear to be, it is rooted in practice and pastoral experience. He knows the snares and hazards which beset those who embark on it and steers clear of over-simplification and airy platitudes on which so many books about prayer run aground. Like all good teachers, he has had his own guides along the same route and the quiet confidence with which he chooses to draw on the teaching of spiritual giants of the Egyptian desert and the Hesychast tradition of the Orthodox East, (supplying a wealth of accessible footnotes at the end of each chapter) is the fruit not merely of study and a certain affinity, but of assimilation and years of immersion in the promises of the Gospel.

The ‘wonderful exchange’ of the title, echoing the doctrine of deification—God became man in order that by the Holy Spirit man might become like God—is used here to focus more particularly on the relationship of love into which our Lord Jesus Christ invites every one who desires it, and which in this temporal life underlies and nourishes the growth of charity and compassion by which his disciples are to be known. Sandy Ryrie writes of the ‘shared subjectivity’ of the divine heart and the human heart implying a sympathy, indeed a mutual resemblance, which not even the most drastic falling away can ever entirely efface. It implies also in our fragile selves an innate capacity to respond to an initiative which is always God's, never our own, and to do so repeatedly throughout all vicissitudes of our lives. In Ryrie's understanding of prayer the utter reality of God is never anything but personal, and it is always his love knocking at the door of the heart which elicits our love in return. ‘With the drawing of this love and the voice of this calling we shall not cease from exploration’, and in this book beginners and seasoned travellers alike will find, at any stage of the journey, encouragement to persevere in that supreme quest.

SISTER ISABEL SLG

Praying the Lectionary: Prayers and Reflections for Every Week's Readings, James Woodward & Leslie Houlden. SPCK, 2007, £9.99. ISBN 9780281058549.

This book, which is based on the Church of England liturgy set out in *Common Worship*, gives the Bible references, but not the actual texts, for the set readings for every Sunday in the three-year cycle. Those who find the *Common Worship* lectionary confusing may be helped by the book. Short comments are given on the readings; for example, for the day on which I write (the Feast of Christ the King) the gospel passages are given as Matt. 25: 31-46, John 18: 33B-37 or Luke 23: 33-43, and the comment is, 'In their different ways, all these passages speak of Jesus' rule, whether already in his ministry or in his death (where it is revealed in gracious forgiveness) or in his role, which he outlines to Pilate in terms of true "kingship".' (p. 69). Similarly, there are also comments for the first and second readings. Three brief suggestions, given as one-line bullet points, follow, and these can be used in different ways: for individual preparation and prayer, for notice sheets and for preparing sermons and intercessions.

James Woodward is currently *inter alia* Director of the Leveson Centre for the Study of Ageing, Spirituality and Social Policy. Prior to his retirement in 1994, Leslie Houlden was Professor of Theology at King's College, London.

SISTER AVIS MARY SLG

Swami Abhishiktananda: Essential Writings, Selected with an Introduction by Shirley Du Boulay. Modern Spiritual Masters Series, Orbis Books. ISBN 978-1-57075-695-5.

For those who have read Shirley Du Boulay's biography of Abhishiktananda, *The Cave of the Heart* (reviewed here in the Summer 2006 number), this anthology of his writings will be a welcome addition. For those who have not, Du Boulay provides an excellent and brief introduction to his life, without which the subsequent anthology would not easily be understood. It is particularly

valuable in that the (very good) selection from Abhishiktananda's writings is both themed and arranged in historical sequence. As a result, it is possible for the reader to have a sense, not only of the development of his understanding, but also of the psychological and intellectual toughness that was brought to this spiritual journey. Reading these passages, one is reminded again what an extraordinary achievement Abhishiktananda's life was.

That in its turn cannot help but affect the reader. Spiritual anthologies often edify and instruct, and sometimes comfort. But not this one. As one reviewer has remarked, it is an 'explosive collection'. Dipping into it at odd moments and discovering a passage at random, a saying always manages burn itself into the mind with extraordinary force. 'It is not belief in the existence of God … for which faith is required. What really needs faith … is to believe in one's own existence in the presence of God.' It was natural for Abhishiktananda to write from a totally different dimension from the one we mostly inhabit. He saw the world alive with God. 'Is there anything which is *not* God?' he once asked Murray Rogers. To read him is to touch that world for a moment and to be shocked into a deeper awareness.

In many ways this is an anthology that is more than an anthology. Abhishiktananda presents certain difficulties to those who approach him through his books. He writes well, but he was always moving on in his spirit. No sooner was one book sent to the publisher than he felt the immediate need to rewrite it from an entirely new perspective. His development was so considerable over a remarkably short span of little more than twenty years that it is sometimes difficult to know where to place any given piece of writing. Shirley Du Boulay's strength as a biographer lies in the detailed thoroughness of her research, and that serves well here. The passages in each section follow each other with an inner logic. They, together with her concise and revealing introduction, seem to present us with the distilled essence of the man. After a time spent with this book, there was a sense of encounter with the original person, for which this reviewer certainly found himself grateful.

DAVID BARTON

Great Little Doctor: the teaching of St Thérèse of Lisieux, Susan Leslie. St Pauls, £6.50. ISBN 9780854397129.

When I first saw *Great Little Doctor* on the table where our Christmas gifts were displayed, I inwardly groaned and thought to myself, do we really need another book on Thérèse? But, addict that I am, I read it. I soon came to regret my initial reluctance as I found *Great Little Doctor* not to be just another book on Thérèse. It is a gem.

Leslie is well versed in Thérèse's life, writings and thought, and she puts that to good use. Instead of organizing the book chronologically through the minutiae of Thérèse's life, she presents a series of themes arranging them into a 'mosaic of little virtues' representing the whole of Thérèse's life.

The book begins by gathering up Thérèse with 'her two sister doctors of the Church', St Catherine of Siena and St Teresa of Avilá. How did this young nun, unknown in her lifetime, come to find herself in such august company? This is what the book sets out to explore.

Using her broad understanding of Thérèse's life and teaching, Leslie untangles the common misrepresentations of spiritual childhood. Three strengths of childhood, simplicity, wonder and trust, are explored in relation to Christ. Thérèse's standard is the standard of Christ himself. Christ is the Little Way. The Little Way was present before it was articulated, not as a spiritual treatise like the title 'Doctor' might suggest, but a as way of life for everyone. There is no doctrine here that even the 'littlest' of believers can't understand.

Leslie brings to the reader the accessibility of Thérèse and her teaching, how 'the spiritual lessons [are] to be found in everyday objects and events'. As the book takes you through the Little Way, each chapter approaching it from a different angle, we begin to ask, begin to see, that perhaps the Little Way is not so little after all. Thérèse emerges as one who with heroic perseverance engages intimately with everyday, ordinary life. That is exactly it—the littleness is in the ordinary. Is Thérèse's Little Way too easy? Or is precisely that its chief merit?

Only one thing depends on us: the decision to put God first.

This is Thérèse's audacious simplicity—to be what God is—love. The summation of Thérèse's life is love. Leslie points out what should be the obvious, that 'many people hold the curious belief that the verb to love is a superlative of the verb to like. This is simply not so.' Love is the divine commandment which Thérèse embraces so completely that she does become love in the heart of the church, that she does allow Jesus to love through her.

This is not an impenetrable tome to labour through, full of quotations of what others say about Thérèse. The writing is simple, clear and easy to understand. The references are precise, kept to the Bible and Thérèse's writings and life, so the book springs from the primary sources of the Little Way. Leslie shows a great love for Thérèse and also a great respect, so her insight never veers to sentimentality, but is strong and straightforward, just as Thérèse herself was. Through Thérèse, Leslie describes from many viewpoints a way of love that is for everyone, that is for us—the Little Way of Spiritual Childhood. Yes, this book is about Thérèse, but it is about us as well.

If someone wanted to learn about Thérèse, I would without hesitation recommend this book first. It is a good introduction to Thérèse, as well as being a thought-provoking and encouraging read for those of us who have known and loved Thérèse for years.

SISTER STEPHANIE THÉRÈSE SLG

BOOKS RECEIVED

From Canterbury Press:

The Language of Love: Exploring Prayer: An Anthology, John Moses, 2007, £9.99. ISBN 9781853117831.

From Continuum Books:

Holy Anger: Jacob, Job, Jesus, Lytta Basset. 2007, £16.99. ISBN 9780826480729.

From The University of Chicago Press:

The Christianity Reader, edited by Mary Gerhart and Fabian E. Udoh, 2007, US $ 40.00. ISBN 9780226289595.