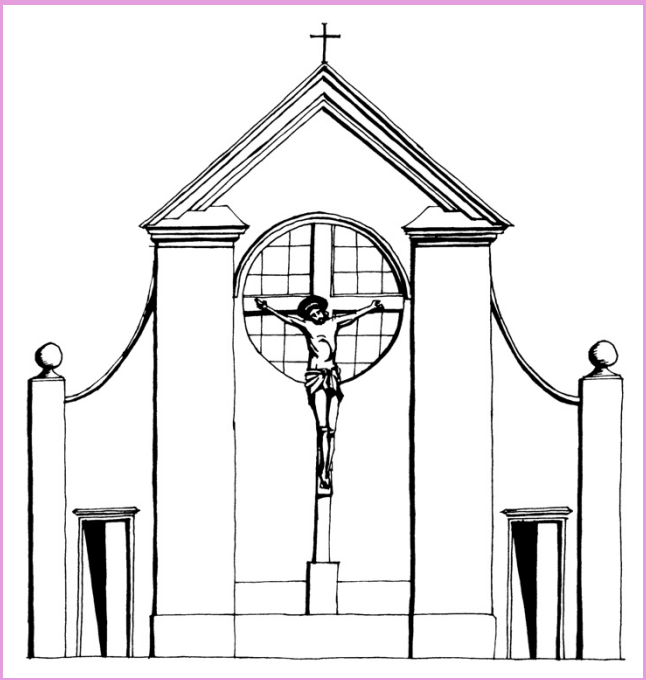
FAIRACRES CHRONICLE



SUMMER 2012
Vol. 45 No. 1

£ 2.00

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DEO GRATIAS

THE SISTERS OF THE LOVE OF GOD

are pleased to announce
the election
on
28 May 2012
of

SISTER MARGARET THERESA OF JESUS

to serve as Reverend Mother of the Community
until the year 2015
and
ask all their friends to remember in prayer
SISTER MARGARET THERESA
together with the Community,
particularly on the day of her installation, 24 June 2012.

COMMUNITY NOTES

DEAR FRIENDS,

I am beginning these Notes in the middle of May; the lawn is a rich green colour, and the vegetables, fruit bushes, trees and flowers look vibrant once again. We are very thankful for the much-needed rain which has descended most days, after the very dry months of March and April. The builders currently working here were not so keen to see rain, and their progress has been hampered. The foreman—not a man who usually mentions God—asked that the Sisters stop praying for rain! But there have been gaps in between the rain and hail, and this week we were able to have part of the Rogation Mass outside, processing round the garden and asking God's particular blessing upon all crops, both those in our garden and those of other people, while remembering those who not only have no garden, but also no food. Now we look forward to the Feast of the Ascension, to Pentecost and to entering Trinity-tide once again.

In the Winter edition of the *Fairacres Chronicle*, I mentioned that our guest accommodation would be very restricted during the installation of a lift. On Rogation Day we had just one guest for a quiet day, but were delighted that another visitor from the other side of the world was able to extend his brief visit to us slightly, so that he could join us for the Rogation Liturgy. This was Archbishop David Moxon from New Zealand, who brought news and greetings from Sister Anne at St Isaac's Retreat. Sister Anne is no longer Warden at St Isaac's. This work has been taken over by a married couple, and that much-valued place in the Hokianga continues to be used by many people seeking a place for retreat. Sister Anne has moved into the refurbished 'batch' where Clem (the Reverend Clementina Gordon, founder of St Isaacs Retreat) lived in retirement. Sister Anne has a new telephone number, as indicated on the back cover, and she no longer has fax facilities. Archbishop David is Co-Chair of ARCIC III,[1] and it was very interesting to learn how the

[1] The latest phase of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission.

Commission is seeking to continue the work of ecumenism in circumstances which seem at the best lukewarm, and sadly at times chilly, or even icy.

In mid April, the first of our 2012 Associates' Retreats took place at Shallowford House. This is about five miles from Stafford and is the Retreat House and Conference Centre for the Diocese of Lichfield. It is in a rural setting, and much of the time we could hear enthusiastic birdsong, and in the background, the rhythmic sounds of trains speeding through the beautiful Staffordshire countryside. The railway line is about 300 yards from the retreat house, but unfortunately there is no local station.

For the foreseeable future, we expect to organise two retreats a year: one in July at Llangasty (Wednesday to Sunday) and the other, shorter, one for a weekend, either in the spring or autumn. We would value some feedback from readers as to whether you have a preference regarding the timing (earlier or later in the year) and the location of this shorter retreat, and about anything else you would like us to bear in mind as we plan for 2013 and beyond. Our instinct had been to concentrate on the autumn for the weekend retreat, but those at Shallowford were enthusiastic about the spring, which prompted this request for some feedback from you. Please write to the Reverend Mother, marking the envelope 'Retreats', or email the Sisters at sisters@slg.org.uk indicating that it is for the Reverend Mother. Thank you in anticipation.

I am conscious that asking you to write entails a not insignificant expense. Although we are not yet half-way through the year, the sharp increase in postage has led us to think about Christmas cards. While we enjoy hearing from so many of our friends as we celebrate the Incarnation, and having the cards on display in the cloister by the refectory, we shall understand if it is no longer possible for you to send cards to us. For those who have computers, we are very happy to receive electronic greetings.

Some news not included last time is that Sister Mary Kathleen returned to Fairacres at the end of September, after spending many years as a solitary, first at Bede House, then with the Community of the Servants of the Will of God at Crawley Down, Sussex. We are glad to have Sister with us 'in the flesh' once again. Many things have changed since she was last resident at Fairacres!

During the lift work, we are experimenting with the timetable by having a different Sunday afternoon and evening and some space on Mondays, with no guests on that day. After the work concludes, it will help us with preparations if guests coming on a Monday arrive after 2:30 p.m. Another change is that some of our staff who work at the front end of the Convent near the car-park are helping by answering the front door when we are in Chapel. This enables us to concentrate on a central aspect of our work, and it is a great help practically—for, as you may be aware, it is quite a distance from Chapel to the front door.

Our Sister Cynthia of Jesus died in early March. She had been at Marston Court, a care home run by the Orders of St John Care Trust, for nearly two-and-a-half years, and we are very grateful to all the staff there for their professional and imaginative care of her. It was lovely that Sister Cynthia's niece from Canada and two of her great nieces were able to be present for her obsequies. In a recent sermon, the preacher pointed out just how many diaries need consulting when arranging a funeral; this was our experience in March, and the arrangements were rather protracted. I could imagine Sister smiling wryly and remarking, 'could be worse, Sister'. Her coffin was received into Chapel on the evening of 11 March, and the customary night vigil, when we watch by turns throughout the night, was observed, followed by the Requiem the next morning. We then paused, and in the late afternoon when the undertakers were free, we processed through the garden behind the coffin, singing hymns, and Sister Cynthia was returned to the funeral home. Two days later, when the cemetery people were available, she was taken to her final resting place with our Sisters at Rose Hill Cemetery. The prospect of so many seeming 'bits' to the arrangements was rather daunting, but as often happens when time-hallowed customs need to be changed, there were some advantages also. The address given at her funeral follows these Notes.

One aspect of prayer which seems to be shared by all who engage in it is aridity. Sister Christine's talk to some of the Oblate Sisters in March is included after Sister Cynthia's funeral address; we anticipate that it will 'ring bells' with many of you. Sometimes aridity seems to cause another aspect of prayer that most of us share, distractions, and they in turn can fuel the sense of aridity. But

perhaps we can see both aridity and distractions (while resisting the temptation to become engrossed in them) as part of our dogged offering to God. We also have in this edition material from the Oblate Sisters themselves, concluding the article 'Living on the Margins', the first part of which was in the Winter *Chronicle*.

We offer the possibility of 'living alongside' us, from a week to a number of months, both for those asking to join the Community (when it is usually a requirement) and for those seeking to deepen their relationship with God. Megan Roderick has contributed an article about the year in which she lived alongside the Community in our house at Boxmoor, Hemel Hempstead (1981-2). Our other long article is from Sister Avis Mary on creative writing and what it means to her.

Some of you will be aware that many local authorities no longer provide direct home support for people in old age or disability, but rather financial aid, with which they can individually purchase this assistance. As a consequence, many support workers have been made redundant. A number of our elderly Sisters need more assistance, and to help them in their daily lives and reduce the work load of those who are younger, we have employed more staff, so that there is a carer on duty during most of the day. SLG Press has assistance from a new employee, after a gap which enabled us to rethink the role and employ someone with the skills needed at this time. We are grateful to our benefactors who make this possible.

Increasingly, information is shared and business conducted electronically. Prayer and spiritual reading also feature on the Web. In response to this, SLG Press is now making more material available via its website. We are working on modifications to the Press site to enable the sale of e-books, and a first selection of fifteen of our publications is currently being converted to e-book formats, viewable both on the Amazon Kindle and on other e-book readers. We also plan to make them available for sale via Amazon, but it is of course better for us financially if you buy directly from us, as we do not then have to pay Amazon for selling for us. We hope that the new e-books will be available fairly soon. But we wish to reassure those who prefer hard copies, or who do not have access to electronic material, that we are continuing to publish our traditional

pamphlets. The e-books are an extension of what is available, not a replacement.

I mentioned the Feast of Pentecost at the beginning of these notes. As Christians pray particularly at this time that the Spirit may be enabled to work within us, parts of the Sequence and of an ancient hymn for Pentecost are good vehicles for that prayer:

What is soilèd, make thou pure;
what is wounded, work its cure;
what is parchèd, fructify.
What is rigid, gently bend;
what is frozen, warmly tend;
straighten what goes erringly.
Fill thy faithful, who confide
in thy power to guard and guide,
with thy sevenfold mystery.

O Comforter, draw near,
within my heart appear,
and kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing.

With all good wishes,

SISTER MARGARET THERESA SLG

R.I.P. SISTER CYNTHIA OF JESUS SLG

14 September 1919 – 3 March 2012

ADDRESS AT THE REQUIEM MASS ON 12 MARCH 2012

SISTER MARGARET THERESA SLG

The Readings at the Requiem Mass were:
Tobit 11: 10-15; Romans 8: 35-39; John 14: 1-6.

Some words from the Gospel which we have just heard: 'I am…'; or to put it in context, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life'—words of Jesus recorded in John 14: 6.

Sister Cynthia loved St John's Gospel, and this verse seems very appropriate for her funeral. 'I am', Jesus says, and Jesus was the foundation of Sister Cynthia's life; faith in him enabled her 'to be', and to be faithful to the life to which she was called. She gave me the impression of not suffering from doubt with regard to God, of not having any sort of crises of faith, but I guess she did, as do most of us—and I have only known her for the last third of her life.

She was born in 1919 in Montego Bay in the north of Jamaica, the third of nine children. She spoke wistfully about the white sands of the bay, and the blue, blue sky—even on a really sunny day, the sky in Oxford came nowhere near this blueness. Sister Cynthia was very much a family person and was very close to her two sisters, Dorothy and Mavis. Her parents were staunch Anglicans; the church calendar and activities were an integral part of their lives. Her maternal grandfather was the choirmaster and organist at the Anglican Cathedral in Kingston for many years. Sadly, Sister Cynthia's father, an accountant, died in 1932, and as a result only the fees of Kingston Technical School could be afforded, rather than those of the High School. But, like many of her siblings, young Cynthia was good at figures, and trained and then worked as a bookkeeper. 'Mama' died nearly forty years after her husband, and in 1971, after her mother's death, Sister Cynthia came to England to enter the Community.

Sister Cynthia came to SLG without having seen the Convent and without having been to England. She came by boat, a banana boat, and, I think, was the only female on board apart from a stewardess. It docked at Tilbury, and it is said that she thought she was near to the Convent when she saw a sign for Oxford Circus. She was fifty-two, and arrived in October. What a huge adjustment, and an example of her deep faith! The change of temperature was a shock for 'extremities', as she called her feet and hands.

She returned only once to Jamaica, in 1988, when her eldest brother Carlton was dying. We have lovely photos of her with nephews, nieces and their families, many of whom had never met her. She had a great love of children: in her youth she accompanied her youngest brother Percy to the cinema to watch Westerns; and this affinity with children continued throughout her life. In her eighties, she enjoyed playing cricket with some children at one of our 'open garden' afternoons—and she could still run!

Sister Cynthia was meticulous in her work. When polishing the brass censer, each link of the chains received individual attention. She would speak about polishing the brass in Kingston Parish Church, especially the communion rail. She was in charge of our house at Burwash for a time, and her detailed house reports give an insight into the day-to-day life of that Convent in the 1980s. Being a very thorough Sister, she often took rather longer to do things than most of us, so being on time was rather a challenge to her. When told it was time for something, her usual reply was: 'Coming, Sister.' (We learnt that this should be taken as in the future tense, rather than the present!)

It was her deep faith which enabled her to come to England to join the Community and, once here, she was faithful to what she had been called. She was a person of deep prayer, with a strong devotional side; she was particularly vigilant in intercessory prayer, especially for her family and the Community. Mass and the Office were very important parts of her day, and she walked closely with God. She was often heard talking quietly to herself, saying with great meaning, 'thank you, Father, thank you.' She was a generous, thankful and gentle person, who had a strong awareness of, and concern for, others. She gave herself fully to God and the Community; she delighted in beauty, bright colours, flavoursome

food and sweets. Her face often bore a radiant smile. But, like all of us, she had another side: she could be self-willed, even stubborn, mischievous, and irritating at times.

She had a very good sense of humour, which I think emerged more in her later years when she became what I can only describe as 'more Jamaican'. Sisters, the cat, aeroplanes, indeed anything, were referred to as 'man'. One phrase which she used, especially when things were not going too well, was: 'Could be worse, man.' As her memory began to fail and reading became more difficult, she allowed herself to watch television: tennis, cricket, horse-racing, athletics, 'In the Night Garden', 'Babe'; all delighted her. Slowly, Alzheimer's Disease emerged. A group of Sisters, known as 'Aunties', helped her, and she was able to continue to participate in much of our life—and she gave to those who helped her. She taught us her night-time prayer:

> Now I lay me down to sleep,
> I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
> If I should die before I wake,
> I pray the Lord my soul to take.

which she ended with a resounding 'Amen'.

Sadly, as the Alzheimer's progressed, life here became a source of distress and anxiety for her; silence just didn't make sense any more. After her ninetieth birthday in 2009, she moved to Marston Court. There she relaxed and 'had a new lease of life'. She enjoyed being with the other residents, the entertainments, the staff and all the care they gave—and, although we know she had loved being here, when we visited, she did not ask to come back. Slowly, the Alzheimer's increased its cruel grip upon her and sometimes it was hard to elicit any response from her or to engage with her. It was as though a barrier had come between us, which was painful to witness. We have the words of Scripture which we heard as our second reading:

> 'For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels … nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.'[1]

[1] Rom. 8: 38.

Although Sister Cynthia appeared to be separated from other people, she was not separated from God.

But in the last few weeks of her life, something miraculous was given to both her and us. From our first lesson:

> Tobias … applied the medicine on his [Tobit's] eyes, and it made them smart. Next, with both his hands he peeled off the white films from the corners of his eyes. Then Tobit saw his son …[2]

The miracle was this: it was as though the barrier, the film, which appeared to have separated Sister Cynthia from us was removed. Sisters returned from visiting her, reporting that she had spoken to them, she had really engaged with them and even spoken a sentence. She became physically frailer, and towards the end of February, it seemed that she was being drawn from this life to be more fully with Jesus. She received loving and careful care, and one of the carers was with her when she died early on 3 March. One of the last responses I received from her was a definite and confident nod to my saying, 'Jesus is waiting for you, and you are waiting for Jesus.'

Her wait is over. May she rest in peace and rise in glory.

[2] Tobit 11: 10-13.

ARIDITY IN PRAYER

SISTER CHRISTINE SLG

FIFTY YEARS AGO it was common to read of the consolations of prayer and the state of aridity that afflicts those who live a life of prayer. 'Consolations' and 'aridity' were terms taken over from Spanish and French spirituality, which influenced much of English spiritual writing until well into the twentieth century. They are words not much used in contemporary writing on prayer; we tend to use 'joy' and 'darkness' instead. Consolations and joy very often go together, and tend to describe the awareness of God at work in our lives. Aridity (or dryness) and darkness in prayer, however, are similar to, yet different from each other. Darkness, or the 'Dark Night', as St John of the Cross called it, usually leaves us with a sense of something being different in ourselves after the time of prayer, even if the time given to it seems to be a fairly futile exercise. Aridity is a symptom of a dark night, rather than the night itself.

In the Carmelite tradition, dryness in prayer, which St John of the Cross considers to be a passive state, is closely connected with the nights of 'sense' and 'spirit'. These passive nights, particularly the night of the spirit, are accompanied by the acute pain of self-knowledge and by a belief that God has abandoned us, or the world, or the Church. I cannot claim to be in a particular place on this continuum; indeed, for most of us prayer does not follow a neat and tidy pattern. The growth in knowledge of God, or of not-God, or in self-knowledge, and a deepening impotent sorrow for the suffering world, continue throughout life. The pain we experience at this level will not usually be apparent to others. It would be lovely to feel that this is a secure place to be, but this sort of prayer brings little in the way of comfort or consolation.

I would like to explore aridity a bit more, because it is likely to afflict us all for a large part of our life of prayer. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* defines it thus:

> The term is used to refer either generally to a lack of conscious fervour and delight in the Christian life as a whole, or more specifically to a lack of fervour and delight in prayer and other

> spiritual exercises. Such a condition may be due either to a deliberate turning away from God or to factors outside a person's control. In the latter case, all spiritual writers agree that it provides an occasion to recall humbly one's own weakness and to appreciate that the service of God does not depend on felt consolations. Regular Christian practices should not be abandoned just because of a feeling of aridity.
>
> Different authorities assess the significance of aridity diversely: those who regard conscious joy in the Lord as a normal and desirable feature of the Christian life recommend various active ways of trying to escape from aridity, whereas others regard the lack of sensible devotion as a sign of God's purification of the soul, and the readiness to do without consolations as a sign of spiritual maturity; other authorities treat the presence or absence of conscious fervour as a matter of complete indifference, with no effect on the practice of the Christian life.[1]

It is incomprehensible to me how anyone could deliberately turn away from God, once a true faith in God has been professed. There is much room for doubt within each person's belief, and for ideas and images of God to change throughout life, giving rise to a profound uncertainty about what true faith is. Indeed there is even more room to doubt that Jesus is the Son of God and has shed his blood to save us and has risen from the dead; for many of us there will be years of wrestling with the simple, yet truly great, fact that God is as human as each of us. Doubt must be respected and allowed to arise in our minds, not ignored as being 'non-Christian'. If we suddenly find that our lifetime response to living by gospel teaching is no longer valid or true, it does not mean that we have abandoned belief in or knowledge of God. These remain at depths too inarticulate ever to result in speech. I suspect that many people wrestling with anger at how God has apparently treated them, or how God allows suffering, think they have abandoned belief, but I am not so sure. Our God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and loves the challenge of a good argument, respecting anger as a creative force which can be transformed into the greater creativity of love.

[1] 'Aridity', *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 100.

But what about the 'factors outside a person's control'? The writer of this entry in the *Dictionary* seems to be implying something other than the misfortunes of war, poverty, sickness, grief, or any of the other elements of loss that contribute to a life of un-ease, or of suffering. The factors seem to be more in the realm of maintaining the discipline of setting aside time for prayer; of the constant struggle to still the cacophony of voices that manifest themselves in the mind when one stops to pray; of the boredom in prayer when nothing seems to ever happen or change; of there not being much joy in the practice of prayer. Prayer is indeed arid—dry and thirsty work with not much relief in sight.

There are well-tried ways of rekindling fervour, the 'various active ways' referred to in the *Dictionary*: Bible study, saying the rosary or the Jesus Prayer; concentrating on one's breath going in and out; writing down thoughts in a journal, or on a piece of paper which can then be destroyed; using short periods for silent unstructured prayer, rather than attempting long stretches. However, there comes a point when none of these ways of kick-starting prayer helps, and even short periods of prayer become long stretches of being 'in a dry land where no water is' (Ps. 63: 1). That is the point when we need to admit that there is nothing we can do to 'conjure up' God, and that we don't even know how we will continue living both with the thirst for God and with the sense that God has probably abandoned us to die of this thirst. Now is the point when we take our courage—or our cowardice—by the scruff of the neck and make a leap of faith, saying, 'This is how it is, and if I die of thirst that is fine. I would rather not, and the prospect is frightening, but I will try to trust and believe that God has my best interests at heart.' This declaration is not a magic trick to change the situation; however, there often comes a peace which enables us to accept things are as they are. Perhaps there is even a glimpse that this is the way of the Cross, and the way we are called to share in the Passion of Jesus.

Aridity and Depression

It is easy to confuse aridity and depression; indeed there is a low-grade form of depression that mimics all the signs of aridity, and which most of us experience from time to time, or even most of the

time. And there are the other forms of depression which need particular treatment by drugs, or counselling, or both. However, depression does not prevent or preclude the development of a strong and faithful prayer life; indeed it can be 'part of the territory' as we are called into contemplative prayer. We are not separate parts of mind, body and spirit stitched into a skin which we call Me. I find that a good test as to whether someone is experiencing a crippling depression, or whether it is aridity, is described by Kevin Culligan OCD in an essay in *Carmelite Prayer: A Tradition for the 21st Century*, entitled, 'The Dark Night and Depression'.

> Despite the inability to meditate discursively and the loss of pleasure in prayer and spiritual practices, a person nonetheless feels a deep commitment to seeking union with God and following Christ as the Way to this union. As pained and as confused as persons now are because of their difficulties with discursive meditation and loss of fervour, this third phenomenon is an essential requirement to determine whether one is, in fact, in the dark night of sense. The inability to meditate discursively in itself does not indicate the dark night; the person may simply have given up the spiritual journey and decided against a life of prayer. Nor does the loss of felt satisfaction by itself necessarily suggest the presence of the dark night. This might be attributable simply to physical or mental illness, which diminishes all desire to pray. But the presence of the three phenomena together is a reliable sign that the dryness one now experiences in prayer is symptomatic of the dark night of sense.
>
> In practice it may take some time … to determine whether all three phenomena are present together. When I am uncertain about the simultaneous presence of these three signs, I might ask a person: 'What if you were to give up this whole idea of a prayer life?' When that question is met with indifference or long-winded rationalizations, I suspect the person's difficulties are due to some cause other than the dryness of the dark night of sense. But if someone responds emotionally, sometimes with tearful eyes or cracking in the voice, saying something like, 'Oh, I couldn't do that! This is my whole life', then I feel more confident that the person is undergoing the loss or dryness that John of the Cross calls the dark night of sense.
>
> John attributes this dryness or dark night of sense primarily to the deepening of God's self-communication to the person. God is now beginning to communicate more directly to the person's

spirit or in the interior of the spiritual self, leaving the senses or the exterior self empty and dry. The dryness results from the loss of sensible delight one previously felt in spiritual practices.[2]

Perhaps in the end, when all that we can say about prayer itself dries up, we do best to remember St Paul's declaration in Romans 8: 26-28:

> … the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.
>
> We know that all things work together for good for those who love God.

This talk was first given to Oblate Sisters at Fairacres on 28 February 2012

ASSOCIATES

NEW

Priest Associate
Nicholas Gregory Rundle, 19 January 2012

Fellowship of the Love of God
Margaret M. Eaton, 19 April 2012
The Revd Damian Feeney, 13 May 2012

R. I. P.

Companion
Lisbet Rutter, 7 April 2012.

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[2] *Carmelite Prayer: A Tradition for the 21st Century*, ed. Keith J. Kegan, Paulist Press International, 2003, pp. 123-4.

LIVING ALONGSIDE AT SLG – THIRTY YEARS ON

MEGAN RODERICK

FOR TWELVE MONTHS, from summer 1981 to summer 1982, I lived alongside the SLG Sisters at the Convent of St Mary and the Angels, Boxmoor, Hemel Hempstead. Although the title of this article makes it seem like a long time ago, the experiences of those days are certainly still very much alive in my consciousness.

Let me explain what 'living alongside' means in reality: it means that the Sisters accept you into their lives and into the enclosure for a temporary period of time, on the understanding that you wish to experience and share in their life, without, however, making any form of vow or religious undertaking. When I went to Boxmoor (as it was generally referred to), I personally knew very clearly that I was not following any sense of vocation to the contemplative life as such; however, what I did feel was a very strong sense that this was something I needed to do in order to complete a certain cycle of my life. For me, it represented the culmination of my spiritual journey up till then.

To explain briefly how I came to this point: my family background was Methodist (my maternal grandfather was a Methodist minister). I grew up with church attendance three times every Sunday and considered it simply a normal part of life. At Manchester University, where I studied French, I had brief flirtations with Meth Soc (student Methodist Society), the Evangelicals, Transcendental Meditation… Then at Oxford doing my Postgraduate Certificate in Education (teaching qualification), I stayed at the House of St Gregory and St Macrina, at the instigation of my brother, Philip Roderick, now an Anglican priest, but who had spent some time in a Greek Orthodox monastery.[1] This was a house run by the Society of St Alban and St Sergius for students at the University. I ended up singing in the Russian Orthodox choir in Old Church Slavonic! I had the privilege to meet Nicholas Zernov in person while I was

[1] Philip Roderick is Adviser in Spirituality to the Bishop of Sheffield, Founder-Director of The Quiet Garden Movement (www.quietgarden.org) and Community Leader of Contemplative Fire (www.contemplativefire.org).

there, and I read some of those fantastic Russian Orthodox theologians, such as Vladimir Lossky.

After a short period teaching French and Italian, I decided to pursue my interest in spirituality and religion by doing a post-graduate Diploma in Theology at Bristol University. (I remember being particularly blown away by St Paul's Epistle to the Romans! Somehow actually studying it made it fantastically real and relevant.) This then led on to a year spent working as a member of the team running Marygate House, a Christian conference centre on Holy Island, Northumberland. During my time there, I had the great fortune to come into contact with Ralph Wouldham, vicar of Lowick on the mainland, and his daughter Ruth, who was one of my partners-in-crime at Marygate House and who also preceded me at Boxmoor for a six-month period. Ralph was one of those truly holy people you sometimes come across in life and his kindness and hospitality, together with that of his wife Mary, will never be forgotten. I also met Roland Walls on a couple of occasions, since he was our spiritual director at Marygate, and I remember a trip we made to Roslin one wintry day to meet the community there. It was all very spartan.

After Marygate (another twelve-month stint, during which time I was confirmed into the Anglican Church), I went to work at Sir Michael Sobell House Hospice, Churchill Hospital, Oxford, as an auxiliary nurse. While there, I started making plans to go to SLG. Ruth was already at Boxmoor so I duly visited her there to check out the situation. I remember she came to meet me at the station, munching avidly on a large bar of chocolate. 'How are things, Ruth?' I asked. 'Fine', she said through a mouthful of chocolate, 'but I'm always hungry!'

To cut a long story short, in the spring, after I'd been at the hospice for five to six months, I wrote to Sister Rachel Mary asking if I could live alongside them for a while. She wrote back, advising me to think about it for a while and carry on at the hospice. When I wrote again after another couple of months, asking the same question and saying that I'd like to go there for twelve months, she replied in a note: 'The Lord has spoken. You must come.'

When my father took me to Boxmoor in July 1981, the Sisters gave us tea on the lawn and my father was in his element, chatting

happily away to everyone there: Sister Rachel Mary, Sister Angela, Sister Edwina, Sister Adrian and Sister Christine. I was taken into the large, rambling house, with a large chapel, set in its own grounds. I was allocated a cell upstairs in the main building, that is, in the Sisters' enclosure, not in the guest wing. It was a nice room overlooking the back garden. Long and narrow, it had the bare necessities, but I was quite OK with that, having lived in rented bedsits for most of my life since I'd left home for university, and not being one for a lot of luxury. Throughout my stay at Boxmoor, I wore my own clothes, not a habit as the Sisters did.

The next day, I was given my duties: cleaning the house. For the first period of my stay there, every morning I'd go around the house cleaning the floors and dusting, and sometimes I'd deal with the outside drains—one of the first delightful things I had to do! Each Sister had her area of work, and this was rotated every so often, or at least it was in my case. After some weeks—I can't remember how long—I was transferred from the cleaning to the laundry, where I remember doing quite a lot of washing and ironing. After that, I was put in the sacristy, where every morning I had to lay out all that was needed for the priest for Mass the next day, and tidy up afterwards. I also remember spending some pleasant hours sewing a set of bishop's vestments with Sister Christine, my sewing skills not being bad, due to some reasonable lessons in primary school, supplemented by my mother's instruction. I never did the cooking, but I was taught how to make the brown bread buns we had every day; so late morning, I'd trot off to the kitchen and produce the batch of buns for that day. That was fun.

Other duties involved going outside to open the front gates every morning after Lauds, and doing an hour's gardening every day after lunch. I enjoyed the gardening—under dear Sister Angela's guidance—and spent many a happy hour digging or hoisting forkfuls of manure onto the plots, ready for 'veggies'. Sister Angela loved the garden and, although already very bent over through arthritis, was always out there, come rain or shine, and always had a twinkle in her eye. I remember I had to put on some very baggy trousers to garden in, which had to be held up by a belt, and this caused some considerable mirth. The gardening was one activity where the rule of silence—maintained throughout the

day—was slightly less rigid, since instructions had to be given and so on. We also had a very short time of chat over a cup of tea after None, which was at 3 p.m.

In a few ways my life in the convent differed from the Sisters'. I had a few hours free every afternoon when I could go outside the convent grounds if I wished; I didn't have to get up so often for Night Office (Matins) at 2 a.m., although I did try to get up for it a couple of times a week; and I didn't join in their recreation period on a Sunday afternoon. Apart from that, though, I seemed to share in their life fairly comprehensively. Night Office was difficult, but good; certainly there was the sense of praying for the world at its greatest time of need.

As well as my daily walks outside the convent grounds (often into Hemel Hempstead or around the local roads), I also had a few stays away: a couple of weekends with my parents, a slightly longer stay with my brother and family to help him move house in North Wales, and a few days in Kent with a good friend, Wendy, who wanted some psychological support dealing with a young family. I remember one evening at Wendy's house, when she'd organised a French conversation group (she was also a French graduate), I was conversing with other members of the group, mostly young professionals, and trying to explain what I was doing (er… I'm living in a convent at the moment, although I don't intend to become a nun…) and being faced with mostly blank expressions!

One small trip out that I recall with the Sisters was after a heavy snowfall that winter. We all went out for a walk, wellies on, tramping through the knee-deep snow. I thought afterwards we must have been an interesting sight—and I still have the photo to prove it!

On occasion, individual Sisters would have short periods of retreat, when they were excused attendance at the Offices and they could read and meditate in St John Climacus, the small, self-contained flatlet set aside for this purpose. I also had my turn at retreats, but I must admit I found the added isolation quite difficult. However, I valued my talks with Father Gregory CSWG from Crawley Down, who was spiritual director to some of the Sisters at that time. I also found his writings very enlightening.

The daily Offices were:

2 a.m.	Matins
6 a.m.	Lauds
9 a.m.	Terce, followed by Mass
12 noon	Sext
3 p.m.	None
6 p.m.	Vespers
8 p.m.	Compline.

The small group of Sisters and myself would sit in two rows facing each other across the chapel, and we'd sing the Office, basically the Psalms. I vividly remember one evening when there was a huge storm outside: everything was dark, there was thunder and lightning, and great crashing noises outside the chapel. There we were, singing away, but it was as if we were opening our mouths with no sound coming out—we simply couldn't hear anything above the sound of the storm. Needless to say, this proved too much for us—if my memory serves me correctly, it was Sister Adrian sitting next to me—and we ended up dissolved in giggles! However, all the rest of the time, of course, we were models of sobriety. I must admit I got pretty familiar with the Psalms by the end of my stay.

Feast days were different, especially, of course, the major feasts like Christmas and Easter. Then we had coffee for breakfast instead of tea (wonderful!) There was a sort of quiet celebration and sense of joy—difficult to describe, really. Then there were the Sisters' celebrations of the anniversary of their Profession, and what was very sweet was when they all gave me home-made cards for my birthday, with personalised notes and wishes on them. That made the day special for me and I still have them all.

Another thing that gave variety to the life was the changeover of Sisters: during my time there, several more Sisters came to spend time at Boxmoor: Sister Catherine, Sister Patricia Thomas (who very sadly died at the relatively young age of 60 in 2007) and Sister Avis Mary (our current Editor). Sister Patricia Thomas really struck me by her energy and zest for life: she was so full of enthusiasm for everything. I became very fond of all the Sisters I lived with during my time there.

I also had a change of scene when I went to Bede House in Kent[2] to help out there for two weeks. I loved being there: Sister Helen Columba very kindly relinquished her bedroom for me in the lovely old main house (she herself moving temporarily to what was not much more than a walk-in cupboard!) and I went for many walks in the country roads around the convent. The chapel was atmospheric and I think I found it more intimate than the chapel at Boxmoor. Certain places speak to you, and the chapel at Bede House spoke to me. The only thing I found a bit uncomfortable was the silent meals at Bede House: it seemed very strange to be sitting around a table with others and not uttering a word! (At Boxmoor, the dining tables were arranged in a horseshoe formation facing the garden, so it was quite easy simply to look out at the garden meditatively while eating.)

So, to sum up: all the Sisters were very kind to me while I was there, and I felt a real sense of sharing and bonding—insofar as this was possible of course, based on a limited amount of communication. Sister Rachel Mary remained my mentor (she was the Sister-in-Charge of Boxmoor at the time) and was someone I could talk to in the evening if I needed to let off steam or discuss any particular problems. We remained in touch until shortly before her death in 1987, even though by that time I had got married and moved to Greece. She was operated on for cancer while I was at Boxmoor, but within a short time she was striding around the garden again behind a wheelbarrow, lopping off dead branches at the bottom of the garden. Her incredible strength of character is something that has remained with me ever since.

You never really know what you learn from this sort of experience: fortitude? strength of character? humility? forbearance? It's hard to tell. All I can say is that it was an experience not many people have, and I thank the Sisters of the Love of God for giving me the privilege of sharing their lives for that (relatively) short period of time.

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2. Bede House consisted of a converted farmhouse (the main house), the chapel which was a former oasthouse (a building designed for drying hops during the beer-brewing process) and a number of huts specially constructed for sisters who were drawn to the eremitical way of life, or for visitors on retreat.

As a postscript: within a month of my leaving the convent, my mother suffered a cerebral haemorrhage, completely out of the blue, and died within twelve hours of it happening. I was not with her at the time, but I had spent some time with my family after leaving Boxmoor and we had managed to catch up. I shall always be grateful for that period of grace, for the Sisters' messages of condolence and for the strength I somehow had within me to get through that extremely painful period of loss.

ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTORS

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JOHN ARMSON, a Priest Associate of the Community since 1975, trained as a medic before ordination. He then mostly worked in theological education. He retired from being Precentor at Rochester Cathedral in 2001. After a couple of years in the Hengrave Ecumenical Community, he now lives by himself in Herefordshire.

OBLATE SISTERS WRITE ON THE THEME OF 'LIVING ON THE MARGINS'

MANY PEOPLE feel themselves to be on the margins at some time in their lives. For a meeting last summer, Oblate Sisters of the Community offered written contributions on how their oblature links with 'Living on the Margins', which led to a fruitful and ongoing discussion. Some of their writings were printed in the Winter edition of the *Fairacres Chronicle*. Further contributions, this time from those who made their Life—or, where applicable—Annual Promises after the turn of the millennium, are printed in this edition.

PART TWO

Sheila Margaret (2005)

Many, many years ago there was a television adventure series called 'The Water Margins'. It was set in historic China, the era of fighting war lords and cruel repression. Hidden on water margins lived a band of warriors under a charismatic leader, who led the men out into the lands where they would right wrongs and defeat evil wherever they found it. The way I read this is that there is good, there is energy, to be found by being on the margins.

Having said that, we all live on the margin: Abraham Herschel wrote that we all live on the edge of mystery and do nothing about it. We know what that mystery is: our God as creator, as Trinity, as Father, brother, lover, as Holy Spirit, as Jesus Christ, Redeemer. If that is not enough mystery, I don't know what is! Our efforts to live this mystery are very tiny in the scheme of things, but as promised and committed people we live on the margins of our faith, living the life in God that hopefully brings some light into our lives and the lives around us.

There are many margins in our lives, boundaries which often define us: our home, our work, our status in our community. There are other things that create margins for us. Pain—physical pain—is one of these with which I am somewhat preoccupied at the moment,

finding that pain and infirmity can isolate a person, push us into the margins. Age can place us on the margins as well.

SLG is, of course, a place where life is lived on the margins, a life dedicated to living alongside that mystery that Herschel spoke about; seeking to make that mystery visible in a life lived. We as oblates have that imperative, to live in the light of that mystery, wherever we are, and whoever we are. As the television meerkat character says: 'Simples!'

Carol (2005)

My father was killed in the war, so as a child I was unusual in being fatherless—I knew no one else in the same position—and in having a mother who went out to work—very unusual in the 1940s and 1950s. This was a sad margin; but it also made me different from my friends, which I quite liked!

In the past I have sometimes felt on the margins at church, where there seemed little understanding of silence in prayer or worship, but over the years I have always received much support from SLG and my spiritual director, even if I didn't always feel nourished in my own church.

As an oblate, I share the life of SLG to some degree, but I live 'outside the gate', so there's a certain tension between belonging and being different. When I'm at Fairacres I feel at home, but I'm also very aware that I'm only a visitor, however welcome, and I shall return home to Durham. So in a sense I'm on the edge and know I can always make a getaway! At home I'm on the margins of SLG, due to distance and my circumstances, but the underlying connection and commitment is always there.

I feel most on the margins spiritually among my close family, none of whom share my faith in an obvious way, though they're tolerant of their odd wife or mother who goes off to a convent at regular intervals. This is the hardest margin for me.

The last time I stayed at Fairacres, I arrived just before Vespers and went straight to chapel. As I walked through the chapel door, I was enfolded in a silence which was almost tangible, as I was drawn into the life and worship of the Community once again.

Jane (2006)

I do not want to say that the oblates are the same as the nuns—we are not. We do not live together, for a start. But what we do share is a coherence of 'speech' and 'language'. What binds us together are 'prayer' and our own 'inner solitude' before, and in, God, which we each seek to live out in some way.

Thinking of my place on the margins, I live on the edge of a town, in a predominantly affluent area. Here I feel called to try and live a life in keeping with the ethos of SLG, in simplicity, and acknowledging my dependency on God. I am now serving as a priest in a church which accepts my need for contemplative prayer and solitude, but I am aware that this church is itself 'on the margins'—a small congregation, hidden among the larger, more active, churches in the town. Here I live and serve; as an oblate, I regard it as a small part of the offering of SLG, which as a contemplative community is itself called to be on the margins. The contemplative will always be in some way 'on the margins'. There is a vulnerability in all of this, a vulnerability in which I guess we all, oblates or nuns, share, as we live out our calling.

But the Church of Christ of which we are all members is itself called to live on the margins; to have the courage to stand before God and the world with the barriers down; and in this place to 'see' more clearly. Here on the margins the Church is called to live a life of simplicity and connectedness, rather than reinforce the values of greed, individualism, competition, and economic affluence. I like to think that the offering of SLG is in some way strengthening the Church to live in this place.

I recently came across a quotation from Alexander Solzhenitsyn: 'The meaning of earthly existence lies not, as we have grown used to thinking, in prospering, but in the development of the soul.'[1] The life to which we are all called is always going to be on the margins, and it is for the sake of the 'soul' of the world. It is both costly and a great gift. To God be the glory.

[1] Cancer Ward, Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

Vera (2007)

For a long time this seems to have been my normal position. I find it a good place for observation, which I find necessary for informing intercession. As far as SLG is concerned, the margin seems to be part of the interface between the enclosure and the world, so an integral part of oblature. Being on the margin leads to greater availability to, and for, others. It can also be a place of hurt and isolation, which makes for empathy with the pain of much of the world. The Daily Offices provide a feeling of togetherness, so there is no need for constant interaction.

Joan Anna (2007)

I think it is true to say that everyone at some time in their life has been on the margins—alone, apart from a group where we felt safe and comforted. Listen to the news, read the papers in today's society: so many troubles and problems, and one can feel very alone and useless.

I have come to the conclusion that being 'on the edge' is part of the experience of suffering with our Lord and Saviour. When I think what He suffered: mocked, beaten, deserted by his followers, alone, suffering not only in the flesh but spiritually, not for His faults but for our sins—surely we can bear a little of what He suffered by suffering and accepting our feelings of being on the edge! As Oblate Sisters, this should be a part of our lives, when we share with Sisters in full Profession their experience of being alone in their cells and sharing their prayers in Community. Perhaps this is what Mother Mary Clare envisaged so many years ago: a group of women who could live in a small way in their own homes the lives that the Sisters lived in enclosure.

Gill (2007)

I have been much stimulated (and exasperated) in most of my professional life finding myself in areas where it seems that voices are not heard and the things that I believe in or am passionate about seem not to be much valued by the majority. Retirement, after ten years of working in a retreat house and as a counsellor, was one of the hardest times. It was as though I had been pushed to the edge of

my identity, I hadn't realized how important my role as care-giver and listening ear was to me, and it was a great shock to one who thought of herself as a mature person! This was, perhaps, the time when I have most experienced living on the margins; being a 'has-been'.

I became an oblate about five years before retirement, knowing that I needed a channel to keep me on a growing edge through into my 'latter years'. I am strengthened in my resolve and the practice of prayer by my close association with the Community. It is a bit like the relationship of the earth with, say, a comet. We meet 'full face' every so often, and then we oblates spin off back into the world's space, only to return again at regular intervals. The Community gives us a name, claims us, and then looks out for our regular return and greets us back as part of the landscape; not always seen, but always there, and sharing its orbit in far-away places.

Dot (2008)

Being an oblate means to live on the edge of everything. That is all we have to offer: the edges. We only have the margin free in our lives, that bit in which the world may take a share of us. That's all that is left; and even that becomes less and less, as we withdraw more and more. Because God is all the rest of us—the centre and essence of our being. He is who we are and, in his image, we can be no other. He is our vocation as oblates. He is where we go—even, and especially, in the midst of the throng, and when the clamour, the unbelief and pain of the world becomes too much. Then the margin is once again do-able, its demands accepted, even as part of God's will—liveable and, yes, OK.

Louise (2009)

Anyone who lives the contemplative life, whether in community or outside, always lives on the margins. We inhabit the frontier between light and darkness; the 'road less travelled' is always ours. Silence is community. Solitude is a place for seeking God. We oblates always face two ways at least.

Everything that lives, changes. Relationships change with the passing of time and alterations in our circumstances, our health and energy. The Community is changing, sometimes imperceptibly—both corporately and as individuals within it. Therefore, the relationship between the Community, its members and the oblates is bound to change over time. How we all perceive and manage change will determine whether we grow or not—in love and service to God and to others. God alone doesn't change and our first response is to answer him. He doesn't change but he is always creating 'all things new', so change is built in to our lives, whether we like it or not. Looked at in the light of a new creation, change becomes a positive thing and not the marginalisation of one group by another, or the 'spoiling' of something we thought we had, which may in fact have been static and unreal for a long time. The Tree of Life is watered by a flowing river, not a still pool.

Living on the margins is counter-cultural. It is connected to self-emptying in order that we may be available for God to use us, whether in Community or in the world. It can be winter, but it can also be Advent. We may know the dark and dry seasons of winter in prayer and life, but no matter how long they last, the spark is still there. We are God's prodigal children, forever turning and returning to our Father. From our life on the margins, we turn to the Centre again. The margins become the centre. We need to remain small, poor and powerless—empty for the Spirit of life and growth to have room to breathe into us.

Kathlyn Joan (2011)

I live on the margins between England and Wales, and in some ways, the margins of society, for where I live there are fewer people, less entertainment and few shops. It does not worry me. I am fully content with my vocation and discipline of prayer. I know I am thought to be 'odd' by friends and relatives. That does not worry me either. I see myself to be 'in' the world but not 'of' the world, but my vocation is to put God's love into the world: to be there for those in need; to visit the housebound and minister to the sick; to be a listening ear and support to those undergoing broken relationships; to be there for my children and grandchildren if in need.

There are the times when new ideas come from the margins. The concept of 'team ministry' was born in the margins of the county where I live and has been adopted by most of the dioceses in the country.

I never feel marginalized from the convent. Jesus said, 'I am the Vine, you are the branches.' To me, the convent and the Sisters are the vine, and we oblates are the branches, connected by prayer and our Rule. We return to the convent to be recharged, to be Christ-like in the world, to serve wherever it is needed.

Eileen (Annual Promises 2006)

On leaving church one evening, I saw in the distance a luxuriant green field, encircled by dark green growth with hedgerows, thistles, weeds and wild flowers sharing the same common ground. It brought to mind thoughts of living on the margins. The circle, a visual image of God's all-encompassing love and provision; a place of growth and solitude. I likened it to my visits to Fairacres, an oasis, a place of acceptance, a place to be, a place of prayer. The minutiae of life are the surrounding borders where joys and sorrows intertwine on fertile ground. The thought came to mind that the areas could be reversed: God could be the margins, the field the world encompassed by God's love. Increasingly it seems to me that God turns our thoughts upside down. This has the potential to be both challenging and exciting.

As an Oblate Sister of SLG, I sometimes struggle with how full my life is. Have I got it wrong? Have I allowed myself to become too busy? How can I be a 'still point' in my work at the hospice, within my home as wife, mother and grandmother, as well as in the role of churchwarden? The only answer I can give without sounding arrogant is that God has gifted me. Why? Quite simply because he chooses to.

‘I WANT TO BE A WRITER’

What Creative Writing Means for the Writer

SISTER AVIS MARY SLG

Writing and the Fairacres Chronicle

ABOUT THIRTY YEARS AGO, and then again about ten years later, the readers of the *Fairacres Chronicle* were asked what they would most like to read, what they wanted to hear about from us. The answer was clear: ‘We want to know more about the Sisters’ daily lives; we want to know about the life of the Community.’ This presents us with a challenge, since at one level our lives are fairly uneventful and humdrum—although that is perhaps less true now than when the question was put. It does seem that more happens now; yet the basic stable pattern of prayer, worship and daily work—mostly carried out in the same place, Fairacres—remains, accompanied by the joys and sorrows of human life. In the ‘Community Notes’ at the start of each edition of the *Fairacres Chronicle*, the Reverend Mother writes news and reflections; and we are in no doubt that most readers turn to these first.

Since becoming Editor of SLG Press, including the *Fairacres Chronicle*, I have had particular reason to reflect on the mission of the journal now, in the twenty-first century. Many of our articles are not directly about our daily lives. It is not easy for us to write articles about this, for it takes some considerable skill to write about ordinary life in such a way as to sustain interest, and we could not fill the magazines with such articles. Perhaps it *would* be possible to write about one’s time of service in the laundry, or in the garden, or caring for the Community’s computers, in the same way that it would be possible for a parish priest to write an article about the work of the parochial church council, or about visiting parish schools and addressing the pupils. It can be done; yet there are pitfalls. One of these is that it could be dull in the extreme; another is that it could emphasize things which are confidential, contentious, or simply not yet ready for the world at large.

What we do, therefore, is to attempt to share something of our life more indirectly, passing on in the magazine things which matter to us and which support us in our attempt to live a life of prayer. We print contributions written by ourselves, or by associates and friends; articles which have their origin in some talk or sermon given at Fairacres; and items which communicate something (usually about the life of the spirit) which we should like to share and pass on. There never seems to be any shortage!

In commissioning, selecting and writing material for the *Fairacres Chronicle*, I have learned that an article about life day by day is probably dull only if it is dull to the writer—which it presumably isn't, or the writer wouldn't have written it. If it is something which gives life to the writer, then it can perhaps give life to others. For instance, in 2008 I wrote a two-part article about family tree research, 'Tracing the Ancestors: A Spiritual Quest', a subject which was particularly significant to me at the time, as was the attempt to reflect theologically upon the subject. I received positive feedback from some readers who were themselves thinking about tracing their family trees, or who were beginning to do so.

The Writer's Craft

Many people are daunted by the very idea of putting pen to paper, or of writing something on the computer. Word-counts can sound very demanding, yet in reality it is often far more difficult to cut down words than to spin them out. A certain confidence and a facility with words are needed—that is, the ability to 'get into words' fairly easily—and not everyone feels equal to it. Those of us who have been fortunate in the education we have received will have acquired some skills in this regard, sometimes skills in a whole variety of forms of writing.

As the years go by, I appreciate more and more what was available educationally in the Britain of the 1950s-1970s: 'free at the point of use', to use modern terminology. Those were the days of 'mandatory' and 'discretionary' student grants and of fees paid entirely by the local authority. Imbibing solid English, French and German grammar; précis-writing (without understanding, years ago, why one would want to identify long-windedness and cultivate conciseness); composing structured prose in classical Latin (with its

very long sentence structures, which we knew as Latin 'periods'); churning out instant, structured essays in three-hour examinations from facts stored solely in the head; composing legal opinions, court documents and watertight contracts: all these things were hills to climb. I have come to see these things as tools of the writer's trade which have been pure gift, albeit also acquired through many years of sheer hard slog.

In more recent years, experience of copy-editing and proof-reading has been another facet of the writing experience, and I am grateful for all that I have learned, and go on learning, through SLG Press. Translation work has added yet another dimension, juggling a love for two languages simultaneously, to enable others to share something I have found good myself, or to help someone, or indeed, simply for the joy of translating. I have found that I can be just as happy in seeing promise in the words of others, and in enabling those words to be published through translation and editorial work, as I am about creating and sharing my own words. I have also found that the trained eye of someone else can transform my own writing and spark off new ideas and directions—however much I may have been under the impression that I had already completed a piece of work.

Creativity, Silence and Prayer

For me, serious writing amounts to one thing, whatever the subject: *contemplata aliis tradere*, handing on to others the fruits of contemplation, to use the traditional Dominican adage. If that sounds rather grand, perhaps it can be expressed more simply as sharing with others some of the things about which I have been reflecting, praying, thinking theologically; things which are part of my experience. It is a good thing to do in itself, and the fruits and how it affects readers are outside of one's knowledge and control—though it is nice to hear occasionally that something has been helpful. But the writing is the thing, and after that it is in God's hands.

When I was nine or ten years of age, the usual question from the 'grown-ups' (after the comment, 'Haven't you grown!') was: 'What do you want to be when you grow up?' I always knew the answer to that one. 'I want to be a writer', I said. I am sure that I

then visualised 'being a writer' as producing novels, short stories and essays. Perhaps that was due to a certain lack of perception that there were possibilities other than fiction, poetry and biography. I remember, a few years later, earning my 'Scribe' and 'Writer' badges as a Girl Guide, and wearing them with gladness, especially because it had been possible to earn them simply by doing something I already enjoyed.

At about the time I became aware that I wanted to be a writer, I was entered for a not-very-demanding external competition at school and was presented with a short list of books from which to choose a prize. I chose a recently-published book, *The Young Writer* by Geoffrey Trease.[1] I owned few books, and this was one which I was especially proud to have, and which I devoured. It could also have been called 'I Want to be a Writer', for the front inside cover stated that this was the ambition of many young people and that some of the steps towards its fulfilment were described in the book. Inside the back cover it was stated that Geoffrey Trease could not himself remember a time when he did not intend to write. He says:

> 'I want to be a writer' is a statement which need not be voiced to any other living soul. The words need only be framed silently in the heart, where they are heard by the only person who can take useful action: oneself.[2]

Trease also states:

> 'Young writer' so far as this book is concerned, means little more than beginner. The beginner may be well over twenty—or much older, since … it is never too late to begin. But … our 'young writer' will be generally assumed to be still at school or to have left quite recently.[3]

I remember feeling very grown-up in having a shiny new book addressed to me in this manner!

Although a variety of other things have had priority for me over the decades since then, I have realised increasingly over the last ten years that the answer that I gave as a child remains true. It *is* a

[1] *The Young Writer,* Geoffrey Trease, Nelson, 1961.
[2] *ibid*., p. 3.
[3] *ibid*., p. 10.

writer that I want to be when I grow up! Often enough the conditions for writing simply do not seem to be there, and time goes by and nothing happens; but Trease says:

> If you want badly enough to write, you will do so. Either you will learn to stop your ears against the clamour round you, or you will endure cold bedrooms and public gardens, typing out your pencilled draft when a chance offers.[4]

This is true, although possibly it is easier to endure the clamour which is around us in the initial stages of scribbling things down, of writing what comes to mind, than in the subsequent stages of working it over. In general, some kind of deep silence is needed, not only to enable ideas and creativity to come about, but also to work over what has been written, shaping and refining it, clarifying it—and it may then have to be in the cold bedroom or the garden. Many people with good ideas stop too soon in this process of working things over again and again, making a good copy-editor indispensable. This applies to translations too; I find myself that a surprisingly small percentage of the work is concerned with the foreign language; the rest of the time then needs be spent in the destination language, fine-tuning the translation, sometimes apparently endlessly.

Rachel Mann, writing about the value of leisure and rest, and the need for these things within the Church, says:

> Although work may be sustained for a length of time without rest, creativity—that fierce pulse of true ministry—cannot.[5]

Neither, in the long run, can we write, or minister through our writing, if our lives are filled with work, noise and lack of creative leisure. We may be able to do some writing, but in the long term our creativity will be diminished. When life in SLG Press seems to be filled with work and activity—publishers also have to sell!—I remind myself that the Press was founded as an overflow of our life of prayer and that, without silence and prayer, writing and editing can lose focus.

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[4] *ibid*., p. 61.
[5] 'Rest is a True Vocation', Rachel Mann, *Church Times*, 8 Apr. 2011, p. 12.

A Writer Simply Has To Write

Over the decades, I have not been very clear what it is that I should write about. In being Editor of SLG Press, I have found the answer to this puzzle: a writer simply writes. It does not have to be in response to some vision for a blockbuster novel. It does not need to be a doctoral thesis. Or a deep, meaningful book about prayer. There certainly is no requirement to have been given an 'assignment', or to have set readings for a sermon, before writing. There is no writing qualification which must be obtained, no examination to be passed before death! A writer just writes what needs or wants to be written—an introduction, a review, an obituary, a letter, an email, an article, a translation, a set of minutes. Sometimes circumstances delay writing: I first had the idea for this article more than two years ago.

> 'But what shall I talk about?' asked the nervous speaker, suddenly asked to deputise for a missing lecturer.
>
> 'When in doubt', said the experienced old chairman, 'I just tell 'em the story of my life.'[6]

A writer creates something readable out of true experience, and this applies on the one hand to works of imagination such as novels, and on the other to works of potentially dry academic detail. The writer's self-belief that there is something to communicate will, as with public speaking, convey its message, and energize. A writer simply has to write. I identify completely with what Esther de Waal says of Thomas Merton:

> Merton wrote because he had to write. For him his writing and his life of prayer were inseparable. He needed both in order to live. Prayer was essential for this was the way in which he could know God most fully. He was a writer because this was the way in which he could express himself most fully.[7]

A writer starts with whatever raw material is to hand, however simple, and writes about it, not considering it too trivial or too silly. In her book *Motherhood and God*, Margaret Hebblethwaite reflects theologically on the meaning of being a mother, and on finding

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[6] Trease, *op. cit*., p. 12.

[7] *A Retreat with Thomas Merton: A seven-day spiritual journey*, Esther de Waal, Canterbury Press, 2010, p. 26. ISBN: 978-1-84825-066-6.

God in motherhood and motherhood in God. On pages 57 to 63 of the book there is a remarkable description of a two-hour period of caring for her two young children, aged four and two. She gives a blow-by-blow account of things just as they were in those two hours: shopping, tea and bath time. Expressing the ongoing sense of failure to meet the demands of the situation, something which many mothers experience, she comments that it was a 'typical example of the continuing dimension of failure in my regular life as a mother—not an extreme or exceptional time of crisis'.[8] The following paragraph is taken from the middle of her lengthy account:

> ... Aware that Dominic has only had three bites of pizza bianca, I propose some more tea. Dominic says he wants cake. I get down the cake. 'Not that cake.' There isn't any other cake.' 'So I want biscuits.' I get down the biscuits. 'Not those biscuits.' 'There aren't any other biscuits.' 'Then I want cake.' I get down the cake for the second time. Cordelia says 'Also me want.' I hand Dominic a piece of cake. He says 'No I want it hot.' I tell him you do not eat cake hot, never ever ever. 'Then I don't want it.' I give Cordelia a slice of cake. Dominic says 'I want some too'. I give him some. 'No, that's too big.' I give a smaller piece. He accepts it. He takes a bite. 'I don't like it.' Cordelia does not eat hers either. They drink Coca-Cola. ...[9]

Margaret Hebblethwaite follows up the narrative with the comment that if she had not written it all down immediately after it happened, she would not have been able to explain in detail why she had had such a difficult time with the children that evening. A few of the incidents remain in her memory, but 'the problem lies in the multiplicity of difficulties without a breathing space'.[10] Furthermore, as she comments, just a few additional small factors would have made the situation critical: 'One is prepared for a certain number of disasters, but if more goes wrong it can be difficult to survive.'[11]

At one level, there might seem to be little point in writing and publishing this everyday account of a difficult evening with the

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[8] *Motherhood and God*, Margaret Hebblethwaite, Geoffrey Chapman, 1984, p. 57.
[9] *ibid*., p. 60.
[10] *ibid*., p. 63.
[11] *ibid*.

children; it lasts for over four pages. We can witness such incidents ourselves day by day, when we are out and about, or in our own families. Yet precisely here is the writer's genius. This four-page piece of writing has a brilliance which it is hard to describe or assess. The author has written from her own experience. She has shaped it into a story through her skill as a writer, through the manner and style of the writing. In telling her story as it is, she has produced a masterly piece of writing which the reader—whether directly interested in child-rearing and family life or not—will, once begun, not wish to put down. It is of general human interest; it will, for instance, probably resonate with our own experience of stressful situations, of times when we feel unable to take charge of events.

I have spent quite a lot of time over the past few years reflecting on two American television series which were very popular in the 1970s, *The Waltons* and *The Little House on the Prairie*. My revived interest and greater appreciation came when watching the latter on German television, dubbed into German. Each series was based on a writer's autobiographical stories of childhood family experience many years previously. *The Waltons* was based on the accounts of Earl Hamner, and *The Little House on the Prairie* on the accounts of Laura Ingalls Wilder. Earl Hamner creates the character John-Boy Walton as an echo of himself, and he puts into this character his own boyhood longing to become a writer. Speaking of himself, he writes:

> We were in the midst of the Great Depression of the Twenties and Thirties. We were self-sufficient, but cash money was almost non-existent. And I had a secret, strange and impossible dream. Years later I tried to put into words some of those alien, confused, and mysterious yearnings.

One of the places he does so is in the pilot episode of *The Waltons*, 'The Homecoming—A Christmas Story'. John-Boy's mother, Olivia Walton, discovers a tablet which the fifteen-year old has hidden under his mattress, and she asks him what is in it.

> John-Boy: You know what's in this tablet, Mama? All my secret thoughts—how I feel, and what I think about. Things I never told anybody 'till now. What it's like late at night to hear a whippoorwill call and its mate call back, the rumble of the midnight train crossen

the trestle at Rockfish, watchen water go by in the creek and knowen that some day it'll reach the ocean and wonderen if I'll ever see the ocean. Sometimes I hike over to Route 29 and watch the people in their cars and wagons go by and I wonder what their lives are like. Things stay in my mind, Mama. I can't forget anything. It all gets bottled up and sometimes I feel like a crazy man. Can't sleep or rest till I rush off up here and write it in that tablet.

Olivia: I do vow.

John-Boy: If things had been different, Mama, I think I could have done somethen with my life. What I would have liked, Mama, was to have tried… to be… a writer!

Olivia: If that's what you want, couldn't you still try?

John-Boy: It wouldn't be right. Not in these times. It takes a college education to be a writer and even if we had the money it wouldn't be right to risk it all on me. And anyway I can't disappoint my daddy. He's got his heart set on me taking up a trade.

Olivia: He just want you to know how to make a living.

John-Boy: I could sure never do that, scribblen things down in a tablet.

In an episode called 'The Fire', by which time John-Boy is seventeen, John Walton asks him what he is doing, as it is getting late. When John hears about his son's writing, he tells John-Boy to 'keep at it':

John: What're you doing, homework?

John-Boy: No, I'm just writ'n some stuff.

John: Let me ask you, son: when you're 'just writ'n stuff', what're you writ'n?

John-Boy: Well, you want me to read it to you?

John: Sure, go ahead.

John-Boy: Alright. 'The house is hushed now. The hour is late. The night is still, except for a whippoorwill that calls from the crab-apple tree. In the kitchen, I hear the voices of my mother and father as they speak quiet, private things to each other. Sleep flows through the house like a silent river. Soon our own sleep will join in the flow of that quiet river, and each of us will dream our separate dream.'

John: Why'd you write that down?
John-Boy: Oh, daddy, I don't know that; I just *have* to write it down.
John: I should keep at it.
John-Boy: I sure will…

Earl Hamner did make it to the University of Richmond on a scholarship in 1940 and became a highly successful and acclaimed writer. In a similar way, with the support of his family, John-Boy Walton gets to the fictional Boatwright University in fictional Westham in September 1934 and studies journalism. John-Boy then starts a provincial newspaper known as the 'Blue Ridge Chronicle' and begins to publish novels. In later years he works in New York City and in London as a journalist and continues to publish stories. Both Hamner and his fictional creation were able to fulfil their ambitions. Despite difficult times, they never gave up on their dreams.

Making Sense of the World

Geoffrey Trease says of the moments of self-doubt which come to every writer:

> You may wonder sometimes … Why should I want to write? Hasn't enough been written already? For nearly three thousand years authors from Homer onwards have been multiplying the literature of the world—what can there be left to write about? These moments of doubt come to most of us. If you are a true writer, they will pass like any other mood. The world is changing every minute, and every minute there is a new point of view to be expressed.[12]

A writer, just like anyone else, continues to gather human experience throughout life, both in small things and in situations and events of great moment. In the process of becoming ever more the writer one truly is, there are inevitably times of darkness, tedium, frustration, effort and hidden growth, as well as times of satisfaction, happiness and reward. As in the life of the spirit in general, purification is needed with regard to life's experiences: in suffering, loss, boredom, failure and betrayal, as well as in

[12] Trease, *op. cit*., pp. 99-100.

happiness and in glimpses of true joy. If the writer continues to reflect on and be purified by such experiences, a depth is created which can enable something new, something indefinable, to be brought forth and meditated, however many contributions may already have been made on a particular theme. In the words of the exiled Duke Senior in William Shakespeare's *As you Like It*, reflecting rather romantically on the positive side of having come to the safe and restorative Forest of Arden, and comparing his seeming sufferings there to the ugly toad which, according to legend, produces in its forehead, by supernatural means, a 'precious jewel' with healing qualities:

> Sweet are the uses of adversity,
> Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,
> Wears yet a precious jewel in his head;
> And this our life, exempt from public haunt,
> Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
> Sermons in stones, and good in every thing.[13]

I should have liked to have been able to come up with a more specific set of answers concerning why 'I want to be a writer', and even more to have been able to identify the qualities which may lie behind the writer's compulsion to write. Yet I am not much closer to an answer now than I ever have been. I think that sometimes we write to try to find something—to find an answer, to acquire greater understanding and knowledge, to locate a memory, to find the self, to find God. Clarity may come with the writing itself. As different people have expressed this in different ways, some universal truth must be involved. Graham Wallas wrote in *The Art of Thought*:

> The little girl had the making of a poet in her who, being told to be sure of her meaning before she spoke, said, 'How can I know what I think till I see what I say?'[14]

E. M. Forster, in an essay entitled *Aspects of the Novel*, puts the same words into the mouth of a fictitious, unnamed woman, who had been accused by her niece of being illogical:

> For some time she could not be brought to understand what logic was, and when she grasped its true nature she was not so much angry as contemptuous. 'Logic! Good gracious! What rubbish!'

[13] *As You Like It*, William Shakespeare, Act 2, Scene 1, 12-17.
[14] *The Art of Thought*, Graham Wallas, Jonathan Cape, 1926, p. 106.

she exclaimed. 'How can I tell what I think till I see what I say?'[15]

Picking up on E. M. Forster's words and speaking on the subject of writing poetry, W. H. Auden wrote in his *Aphorisms on Writing*:

> A poet has to woo, not only his own Muse but also Dame Philology, and, for the beginner, the latter is the more important. As a rule, the sign that a beginner has a genuine original talent is that he is more interested in playing with words than in saying something original; his attitude is that of the old lady, quoted by E. M. Forster: 'How can I know what I think till I see what I say?' It is only later, when he has wooed and won Dame Philology, that he can give his entire devotion to his Muse.

The French author André Gide said of the process of writing:

> Too often I wait for the sentence to finish taking shape in my mind before setting it down. It is better to seize it by the end that first offers itself, head or foot, though not knowing the rest, then pull: the rest will follow along.

Words of Jane Shaw, Dean of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, particularly resonate with me: 'Writing is how I make sense of the world.'[16] In trying to make sense of the world, the writer just has to start somewhere, anywhere. William Styron suggested that the writer should lower his or her threshold until there is no longer any felt threshold to cross; he said, recorded in the book *Conversations with William Styron*: 'If writers had to wait until their precious psyches were completely serene, there wouldn't be much writing done.'[17] Even if sometimes writing does not bring us the degree of insight we hope for, it can still be a step in an on-going process. As the poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote:

> Be patient towards the unresolved: love the questions themselves, and live them now. Gradually, without realizing it, in the distant future, you may come to live into the answers.

For the writer, this could perhaps be translated to mean something like: 'Be patient towards the unresolved: keep writing; write about

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[15] *Aspects of the Novel*, E. M. Forster, ed. Oliver Stallybrass, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976, p. 99.
[16] 'Back Page Interview', Jane Shaw, *Church Times*, 13 January 2012, p. 40.
[17] *Conversations with William Styron*, ed. James L. W. West III, University Press of Mississippi, 1985, p. 10.

the questions themselves, and live them now. Gradually, without realizing it, in the distant future, you may be able to write with greater insight and clarity.'

Handing On Lived Faith and Experience

Fr Reinhard Körner OCD wrote in one of his books on Christian spirituality:

> I have been writing books since my mid twenties. In them I want to share my faith, to pass on to others what has been helpful and important to me in my own living-out of the faith. That is the reason I write. I am always the one on the receiving end, too, as in seeking after words and formulations, my thoughts and discoveries clarify within me: what I have lived becomes experience which has been reflected upon.[18]

In the interplay between the longing to share our faith and our experience of living, and the writing process of seeking after words and formulations, another creative process comes into play. Our thoughts and discoveries clarify within; and we may then find that we have more available to us than we imagined for handing on as lived faith and experience, as the fruits of contemplation—*contemplata aliis tradere*.

[18] *Gott ist auch wer! Meditationen für die Advents- und Weihnachtszeit*, Reinhard Körner OCD, St. Benno-Verlag, 2008, p. 7.

NEW FROM SLG PRESS

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REINHARD KÖRNER OCD

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The book is selected from Dr Körner’s published writings and from talks given by him which relate to the theme of the farewell discourses. Some chapters refer more specifically to Jesus himself, or to the Holy Spirit, or to the Father. The final chapter is a detailed reflection upon the words of the farewell or high priestly prayer of Jesus, echoing the reflective nature of that prayer in John’s Gospel.

REINHARD KÖRNER is a member of the Carmelite Order and runs the Carmelite retreat house at Birkenwerder, north of Berlin. For many years he has led retreats, presented talks and given spiritual guidance, and he is the author of many books.

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LEISURE

MOTHER MARY CLARE SLG

First published when computers were in their infancy, and when there was a hope that people would in future be able to enjoy increasing leisure, this short essay is still pertinent to our thinking on the use of time both for work and play. Mother Mary Clare urges us to reflect on whether we regard work as toil and drudgery and leisure time as the real place of self-fulfilment and self-realisation. From there she suggests ways of perceiving that work and leisure are complementary. Both can be used as entry into the peace, the rest, which God gives, to participate in the re-creation of the world in the resurrected Christ.

MOTHER MARY CLARE SLG (1906-88) entered the religious life in 1930, and was Reverend Mother of the Community of the Sisters of the Love of God 1954-73.

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BOOKS

Parallel Lives of Jesus: Four Gospels, one story, Edward Adams, SPCK Publishing, 2011, £12.99. ISBN: 978-0-281-06377-2.

'As four yet one', says Dr Adams in the dedication of *Parallel Lives of Jesus* to his father, who taught him to read the Gospels that way.

In the introduction he notes that the important factor in the writing of the Gospels is the desire to preserve the memory of Jesus, and understandably they exhibit a significant degree of commonality. He lists twenty-four shared special episodes in the Synoptic Gospels; but whereas John follows the broad outline, he includes only seven of the twenty-four episodes. Although written for different readers and hearers Adams has shown how all of the Gospels agree that Jesus is prophet, teacher and a worker of 'miracles' or 'signs', and that he is the Davidic Messiah, Son of Man, Son of God and Lord. None of the Gospels names its actual author, so strictly speaking they are anonymous; but for this study Adams follows the traditional titles. Yet each of the evangelists had their own individual reasons for writing.

Part 2 sets out this individuality of the Gospels in turn; giving an account of their narrative features and structures, and drawing attention to their individuality as befitting a guide book.

Matthew himself was most probably a Jewish Christian and he was writing for a predominantly Jewish Christian audience; and so Adams shows that in much of Matthew Jesus was the fulfilment of the Old Testament. He uses 'this was to fulfil what was said by the prophets…'; and by showing how different elements of Jesus' ministry fulfilled the Old Testament, he conveyed the impression that his life and ministry conformed to a pre-disclosed divine plan.

Mark is the most action packed; giving with his repeated 'immediately' the impression of a 'young man in a hurry'. In his Gospel, Jesus expresses a particular concern for secrecy, and issues commands for silence to his disciples, to demons and to those who witness or receive healing. This is often referred to as 'the Messianic secret;' and the theme probably reflects a genuine

historical concern on the part of Jesus, as well as the theological conviction that one cannot properly understand who Jesus is until after his death and resurrection.

Luke writes 'so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed', and features Jesus as the Saviour of the world. It is the most socially orientated, showing concern for the poor, and acceptance of outcasts and sinners; also, the role that women play in the ministry of Jesus.

John is simultaneously the most simple and profound, yet its clarity and plainness makes it accessible to new readers. It is the most theologically rich, with exploration into the relationship between Jesus and the Father and the use of 'I am,' an Old Testament formula of divine revelation. In the symbolism of the 'I am' sayings, with every day realities like bread, light, good shepherd, Jesus shows the theological significance and link to the Old Testament. There is the emphasis on the heavenly and divine character of Jesus as well as the genuine humanity in the relationship that Jesus has with his Father before the foundation of the world.

Finally Adams takes six selected parallel episodes from the beginning, middle and end of the Gospels and explores their unity and plurality in a more focussed way. He does this by setting out the passage in parallel columns; thus giving the opportunity to identify the shared story and investigate the differences.

For those who wish to delve into study more deeply Adams makes reference to many modern writers and gives notes for further reading. But it is a book for beginners as well as scholars and anyone who has a desire to learn more about the Gospels: it is one that can be explored again and again.

SISTER ALISON SLG

The Lord and His Prayer, Tom Wright, SPCK Publishing, 2012, £8.99. ISBN: 978-0-281-06801-2.

This short book of 89 pages was first published in 1996 and is now being re-issued. Tom Wright (who also publishes as N. J. Wright), was addressing worshippers in the pew, for the book began as a

series of sermons in Lichfield Cathedral during Advent 1995, and indeed, in places there is an Advent tone. The author, at the time Dean of the Cathedral, explains in the Prologue that he wants to share, within the context of the Church's worshipping and witnessing life, some of the fruits of his academic study on the subject of the historical life of Jesus (p. 1). He was also responding to the first stated objective of the Diocese of Lichfield, namely, worship and prayer; and, in the cathedral's 800th anniversary year, to its first priority for action, namely to develop its prayer life.

That is the intention of the book: to develop the prayer life of the person in the pew and of the worshipping congregation. It differs from many other publications on the Lord's Prayer, which are usually intended to combine a contribution to Christian spirituality with some serious study of the text. This book simply helps people to pray—which reflects the origins of the Lord's Prayer, the response of Jesus to his followers' plea for teaching about prayer. The author conveys something of his reverence for the Our Father: 'For nearly two thousand years *people have prayed this payer* [author's italics]. When you take these words on your lips you stand on hallowed ground' (p. 4). He addresses the reader directly, almost one-to-one; a helpful approach, since the longing to be 'taught to pray' by someone who knows is as sharp now as it was at the time of Jesus.

Tom Wright takes the Lord's Prayer verse by verse, in six chapters. His insights are imparted so simply and skilfully that one barely notices their depth. He considers that it takes boldness to follow Jesus in addressing God directly as Father. If we take this risk, then, '… we are called to be the people through whom the pain of the world is held in the healing light of the love of God' (p. 21). It is a recurring theme.

It is not easy to find a book to put into the hand of the person who is starting to say, 'I'd like to learn more about prayer…', yet this is surely such a book. Many books contain too many words and are too inaccessible in style and content for someone unused to 'spiritual reading', or to spiritual or theological jargon. In this context, it is helpful that there is not a single footnote in the book, and that it has no bibliography or index; biblical quotations are carefully referenced within the text. It is particularly suitable for a

parish library or bookstall; as a confirmation gift; as material for a retreat; for recommendation as Advent or Lenten reading.

SISTER AVIS MARY SLG

Desert Movement: Fresh Perspectives on the Spirituality of the Desert, Alexander Ryrie, Canterbury Press, 2011, £16.99.
ISBN: 978-1-84825-094-9.

In the past forty years there has been something of an explosion in the study of the desert tradition, and in translations of the major writings of the monks of the Middle East about their lives and spirituality. These have been published in editions accessible to the 'ordinary' reader, most of which Alexander Ryrie seems to have read, judging by the extensive bibliography to this book. He has not, however, blinded us with scholarship, but, rather, has absorbed the tradition in its totality. This results both in a very readable account of monasticism as it was recorded in the fourth to sixth centuries, and indications as to how we might appropriate some of the ethos of the desert fathers into our own lives. It is, too, a useful book for students of the desert tradition, for it serves as a basic history of the movement, as well as putting into context the major texts recording it. The author quotes extensively from the Apophthegmata Patrum, Athanasius's Life of Antony, and the writings of Evagrius, Cassian, Barsanuphius and John, and John Climacus, closely relating them to the history of the movement as it expanded. We move from the Outer Desert of Egypt to the Judean Desert, into Gaza, and end at St Catherine's monastery on Mount Sinai.

Following a survey of the early development of the monastic tradition, Sandy Ryrie sums up the features this way of life in a handy table (p. 120). He expands the headings in a chapter entitled 'The Way of the Desert', which also concludes the first part of the book. The second part relates how the tradition spread through the writings of the later monks, Evagrius and Cassian in particular. Their writings are still used as touchstones for the living the religious life, both for solitaries and those who live in community. The writings of

Cassian were, for instance, made accessible by Sr Mary Margaret Funk OSB in *Thoughts Matter: The Practice of the Spiritual Life*.[1]

The subtitle of *The Desert Movement* is *Fresh Perspectives on the Spirituality of the Desert*. At first reading it is not entirely evident what new things are being put before us. However, the last chapter, 'Epilogue: Through Modern Eyes', begins to redress this. Some of the themes of the literature, particularly the accounts of miracles and demonic activity which we meet in the histories of the monks, are given a modern context. And earlier in the book Fr Ryrie has reflected on the curious phrase 'pretence of rights', which is an attitude of mind to be avoided and abhorred by the monk:

> In accordance with the words of Jesus, [the monks] had to 'lose their lives' in order to find new life in him. They were to live as people who had no rights—no right to be heard, understood, or respected, or to possess anything. (p. 129)
>
> A monk is seen as someone who, by renouncing and leaving the world, possesses no rights in this world. … Assuming that one has rights of one kind or another is, however, an insidious temptation. In their life in the monastery and in their relationships with others, monks were continually in danger of behaving as if they had rights. (p. 190)
>
> This meant taking a radical view of oneself as a person without rights. The monk had no rights to possessions, to comfort, to the respect, attention or admiration of others, or to a position of importance in society or the monastic community. To regard oneself in this way and to live accordingly was always extremely difficult and demanding. There was always a temptation to insist on one rights, if not outwardly at least secretly within one's own mind, and to resent any usurpation of them. (p. 222)

In a world where our legal rights are upheld and consistently fought for, such teaching is almost incomprehensible unless seen as the way of entering into the fullness of life in Christ.

In our secure society we often struggle to find the path of simplicity and renunciation of the gospel, so it is encouraging to

[1] Continuum, 2009.

hear Fr Ryrie urging us to use aspects of the teaching of the desert tradition as a measure of our response to Christ's call to us:

> The desert movement was and is subversive. By introducing into the world a bit of the life of heaven, it contravened and challenged the conventional assumptions about the ultimate meaning of life and the fundamental values of society. By anticipating the kingdom of God it stood at odds with much of common life. It was not a movement designed to be popular, to attract many followers and to become an accepted part of human society. It was not proposing a way of life which could be followed by people generally. It stood out as radically different, pointing to a different reality, and in doing so it challenged and still challenges ordinary people, not to follow it precisely, but to rethink their lives in the light of it. (p.223)

SISTER CHRISTINE SLG

A Way in the Wilderness: A Commentary on the Rule of St Benedict for the Physically and Spiritually Imprisoned, James Bishop, Continuum Books, 2012, £12.99. ISBN: 978-1-4411-5115-5.

There are on the market quite a number of books which seek to interpret the monastic way—or sometimes, more specifically, the Rule of St Benedict—for people who are not living a traditional monastic vowed life, but who are looking to that tradition for guidance in the circumstances of their lives. This book has more than one USP ('unique selling point'), and can be warmly recommended. Those living the traditional religious life may also find its lively insights beneficial.

The author, James Bishop, writes from an unusual perspective. He was brought up as a Roman Catholic in the USA, but has studied other religious beliefs and has also concentrated on the practice of meditation. Whilst in prison for serious offences, he discovered the Rule and absorbed it into his own life. He became a Benedictine Oblate of The World Community for Christian Meditation, a monastery without walls. Fr Laurence Freeman, an Olivetan Benedictine and the Community's Director, received the author's final oblation in prison. He writes in the Foreword:

> They say some of the best commentaries on the Rule have been written in hotel rooms. Here is one that was written in a room while on parole. When I first read it I did not expect to find the tone of clarity, compassion and intelligence which makes it, for me, one of the best commentaries I have read. I recommend it to our meditating oblates but also to anyone who seeks God—as St Benedict says the true monk does as the first priority—and who has found in Benedict's wise and compassionate spirit a way to be free, to be fully human (p. xiv).

James Bishop's experience of living in a total community (prison) has given him profound insights into the monastic life about which St Benedict wrote, the monastery being another kind of total community. Now a free man, he likens living in a physical prison to living in prisons in a more interior sense, and says:

> The time we spend in our prisons is intended to help us heal from the troubles that may have caused us to hurt others or ourselves. Living the Rule provides some catharsis in that respect, and I hope this commentary will help provide some insight into the subtler meanings of the Rule (p. xvi).

Although the book might appear from its subtitle to be attempting some kind of up-to-date 'psychological' assessment of the Rule, it is in fact much broader, and of wider appeal, than that. The author tackles the Rule in considerable detail and does not shirk those chapters which could at first sight seem less obviously relevant to daily life. He writes colloquially and directly, yet with great depth and discernment, and with humour and commonsense. I enjoyed the author's comparison of the purpose of the Novitiate time of testing in the monastery with both the testing of loyalty utilized by a street gang and the testing whether a recruit is 'ready for combat' employed by the army (pp. 178-9)! This is a book deserving of respect.

SISTER AVIS MARY SLG

Precious Thoughts: Daily Readings from the correspondence of Thomas Merton, ed. Fiona Gardner, Darton, Longman & Todd, 2011, £10.99. ISBN: 978-0-232-52883-1.

The title of this book is derived from a quotation from Boris Pasternak, who wrote of Thomas Merton (1915-68) that his 'precious thoughts and dear bottomless letters enrich me and make

me happy'[2] (p. 9). Pasternak was one of the countless people with whom the Trappist monk and spiritual writer corresponded. Many who were not personally in correspondence with Merton, yet have encountered him through his published writings, can identify with what Pasternak has said.

These carefully-referenced 'precious thoughts' are selected from the five published volumes of Merton's letters, currently out of print. They are arranged by date, with a thought for each day of the year. Some are quite short; some are over 100 words. They are chosen, as the editor, Fiona Gardner, says, 'to provide a way into both silence and contemplative prayer' (p. 11). In them Thomas Merton reveals something of his inner search, through silence and contemplation, to find the true self, and thereby to find God, who is closer to us than we know:

> But Christ Himself is in us as unknown and unseen. We follow Him, we find Him … and then He must vanish and we must go along without Him at our side. Why? Because He is even closer than that. *He is ourself*[3] (15 April, p. 56).

The selected thoughts can also provide a sense of being addressed by a skilful guide—that a compassionate Thomas Merton has been there and understands our human situation. For instance, the selection for 29 December includes these words:

> I know it must be awfully hard and lonely. But there is no other way to heaven than the way of hardship and loneliness. … Bear with the misunderstandings that come your way. People are nervous and their nerves are sick, sometimes it is not their fault if they seem to be hard on us[4] (p. 153).

This paperback Merton reader is to be welcomed.

EDITOR

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[2] Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon, Collins Flame, 1989, p. 384.

[3] To Daisetz T. Suzuki, 11 Apr. 1959, *The Hidden Ground of Love, op. cit.,* p. 564.

[4] To Freida (Nanny) Hauck, 22 Dec. 1960, *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy, Collins Flame, 1989, p. 68.

God Save the Queen: The Spiritual Heart of the Monarchy, Ian Bradley, Continuum Books, 2012, £12.99. ISBN: 978-1-4411-9367-4.

This is a substantial, but readable, book of 336 pages. It is a revised and expanded edition of a book first published in 1999 by Darton, Longman & Todd. Any sense that it might be an ephemeral publication simply for the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II was dispelled as soon as I opened this scholarly book.

Ian Bradley, writer and broadcaster, is Reader in Practical Theology and Church History at the University of St Andrews and a minister in the Church of Scotland. In his book he traces the religious dimension of the monarch and argues for its importance as a spiritual force in British life, as well as exploring what this might mean in a society which is both multi-faith and increasingly secular. He points out that the United Kingdom is just about the only country in the world which has as its national anthem a hymn addressed to God, invoking a blessing directly on the sovereign, rather than on flag, fatherland or political principle (pp. xxiii-xxiv).

One of the book's strengths is its breadth of vision and mastery of the sources—evident, for instance, in the fact that that not until the completion of the third of the nine chapters do we even reach the end of the Middle Ages! In the first chapter the concept of monarchy in the Old Testament is explored, and we are taken in the second chapter to monarchy in the New Testament, which, of course, centres on Jesus. The third chapter encompasses Celtic, Anglo-Saxon and Medieval Britain. Other chapters cover: the period from the beginning of Tudor rule to the present day; the Coronation service at which the Queen was crowned; the Victorian legacy of duty, discretion and dignity; a survey of the last 60 years; current debates; looking to the future. This review cannot begin to do justice to the breadth of material covered, which also reaches into the literary heritage: William Shakespeare's play 'Hamlet', for instance.

Throughout the book the author is anxious to stress the spiritual dimension of kingship and queenship. He does not skate over some of the difficulties which the present Queen has encountered during her long reign, including, of course, the complex issues presented by the circumstances of the life and death of Diana, Princess of Wales,

and her marriage to, and divorce from, the Queen's son, Prince Charles, Prince of Wales.

Leaving aside that issue and looking to present and future, of particular interest to me was Bradley's sympathetic depiction of the Heir to the Throne, saying that Prince Charles 'harks back to a more primal understanding of the monarch as representing order and taking on the forces of chaos, and, indeed, to the tragic, sacrificial dimension of royalty' (p. 192). Bradley even sees the Prince of Wales as an 'heir of sorrows', concerned with the deep disintegration of the modern world and the need for it to be rebalanced and reordered. As Charles himself has said:

> I have come gradually to realise that my entire life so far has been motivated by a desire to heal—to heal the dismembered landscape and the poisoned soil; the cruelly shattered townscape, where harmony has been replaced by a cacophony; to heal the divisions between intuitive and rational thought, between mind, body and soul, so that the temple of our humanity can once again be lit by a sacred flame; to level the monstrous artificial barrier erected between tradition and modernity and, above all, to heal the mortally wounded soul that, alone, can give us warning of the folly of playing God and of believing that knowledge on its own is a substitute of wisdom.[5]

There is much of interest in this book, which I can highly recommend.

SISTER AVIS MARY SLG

Simply Jesus: Who He Was, What He Did, Why it Matters, Tom Wright, SPCK Publishing, 2011, £9.99. ISBN: 978-0-281-06479-3.

This paperback sets out to answer the three questions in the title and its by-line (where 'simply' means 'solely', not 'simpleton'). Tom Wright is certainly a considerable scholar of the New Testament, but his style of writing, at least here, is 'popular' and has journalistic flare. His pen is the tongue of a ready, colloquial writer. Although dealing with a profound issue, he writes in a thoroughly down-to-earth, colourful manner. So the book need not

[5] 'A Time to Heal', *Temenos* 5, Spring 2003, p. 15.

be beyond anyone interested to gain insight into the sub-title's implied questions.

That said, these are not questions quickly answered. Wright reveals the considerable depth and breadth of his scholarship in the thoroughness and detail of his approach, which is rigorous, well-informed and logical. Readers will encounter startlingly new ideas, and may be prompted to re-think many of their residual Sunday school thoughts, beginning to see a new understanding of discipleship. The author writes with assurance: 'in fact' (i.e. 'in my opinion') crops up quite a lot; or even, '[that's] a complete misunderstanding', he says (p. 195), referring to a school of thought mentioned earlier.

The book is in three sections. The first opens up the question of who *Jesus* thought he was—and here Wright challenges many of the usual assumptions with what may seem startlingly new possibilities. The second section begins to lay down the lines of an answer by looking critically at what may again be new ideas for most readers. But do not be put off! Some of these ideas will seem very exciting! A key question for Wright is, *why* did Jesus die as he did?

The final section—just one chapter—offers a conclusion which will surprise many, but which need not shock or frighten. Indeed, it may well begin to bring faith to life in a totally new way. I hesitate to outline what this conclusion is, for Wright has painstakingly and slowly laid the ground for it in the previous section, and it is only after reading *that* that the surprise will, or will not, ring bells. As Wright would be the first to agree, his suggestion and belief is not what would come first or quickly to the mind of many, or even most, believers. Suffice it to say, he turns many commonly-held (if unexamined) beliefs on their head. And, yes, to this much less scholarly reviewer, there were still some awkward bits sticking out. But Wright certainly sets the gospel very much in our own time, applicably.

JOHN ARMSON

BOOKS RECEIVED

From Continuum Books:

Jesus the Christ, Walter Kasper, new edition, T & T Clark International, 2011, £14.99. ISBN: 978-0-567-20964-1.

Through the Year with Newman: Daily Readings, ed. Bernard Dive, Burns & Oates, £10.99. ISBN: 978-0-8264-3919-2.

Healing Agony: Re-Imagining Forgiveness, Stephen Cherry, 2012, £14.99. ISBN: 978-1-4411-1958-4.

Take the Plunge: Living Baptism and Confirmation, Timothy Radcliffe OP, Bloomsbury, 2012, £9.99. ISBN: 978-1-4411-1848-6.

Love Unknown, Ruth Burrows OCD, (Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent Book 2012), 2011, £9.99. ISBN: 978-1-4411-0372-7.

On Retreat: A Lenten Journey, Andrew Walker, Mowbray (Mowbray Lent Book 2012), 2011, £9.99. ISBN: 978-0-8264-3169-1.

The Dominican Way, ed. Lucette Verboven, introduced Timothy Radcliffe, 2011, £10.99. ISBN: 978-0-8264-4277-2.

In the Grip of Light: The Dark and Bright Journey of Christian Contemplation, Paul Murray OP, Bloomsbury, 2012, £10.99. ISBN: 978-1-4411-4550-5.

Fear & Friendship: Anglicans engaging with Islam, ed. Frances Ward & Sarah Coakley, afterword by Archbishop of Canterbury, 2012, £14.99. ISBN: 978-1-4411-0149-5.

Queen Elizabeth II and Her Church, Royal Service at Westminster Abbey, John Hall (Dean of Westminster), 2012, £12.99. ISBN: 978-1-4411-2072-4.

From Gorgias Press:

John of Dalyatha, Mary Hansbury, 2006, List price £43.00 (available more cheaply from online sellers). ISBN: 978-1-59333341-6.

From SPCK Publishing:

The Greatest Prayer: Rediscovering the revolutionary message of the Lord's Prayer, John Dominic Crossan, 2011, £10.99. ISBN: 978-0-281-06417-5.

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For further information or assistance, including suggested wording of legacies, contact the Charity Office at:

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