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COMMUNITY NOTES

Dear Friends,

I am beginning to write these, my first Community Notes since my Installation as Reverend Mother, on a wet and blustery November day. The remnants of leaves are hanging onto the trees in the garden, and the orchard is covered in windfall apples and fallen leaves. I find it hard to believe that we are already approaching Advent; it feels like only five minutes since we were preparing for Christmas last year!

A lot has occurred for the Community over the past year, including the Installation of myself as Reverend Mother and Sr Avis Mary as Prioress. Both Sr Avis Mary and I are in the process of settling into our roles, and we are both grateful for the prayers and support which we have received from so many friends and associates of the Community. In the meantime, Sr Margaret Theresa has been enjoying a well-earned Sabbatical, which has included walking the Ridgeway and the Thames Path. We look forward to her return to the common life at the beginning of December.

I hadn't long been installed as Reverend Mother when Sr Jane Frances became ill and had to be admitted to hospital. As many of you will know, Sister had experienced a long period of diminishment and poor health, and she died in the John Radcliffe Hospital on 31 July. So it was that one of my first tasks as Reverend Mother was to be alongside her as she passed through the gate of death and into new life. I was able to be with her right at the end as she took her final breaths; the mystery of death and resurrection breaks through all our ordinary experiences and expectations, and a small hospital room became the gateway to heaven. While we continue to miss Sr Jane Frances, the thought of her free of the pain and limitations of her final years is a great joy. The funeral itself was a moving occasion, with her sister and other family members able to be present. The tribute to Sr Jane Frances, given at the funeral by Sr Judith, is included in this *Chronicle*. To be alongside someone at the end

of their lives is a great privilege, just as it is to be present at the birth of a child. The mysteries of birth, life and death become vividly present, both when you hear the first cry of a new-born and as you sit and watch the final breaths of the dying.

Another death was that of Oblate Sister Joan of the Annunciation on 20 August. Oblate Sister Joan had made her Life Promises as an Oblate in 1989, and it was moving to hear from her family how important her life of Oblature had been to her, a reminder to us of the commitment shown by our associates and friends to a life of prayer and reconciliation.

Many of you will know that Fellowship House has been closed since last Easter undergoing renovations. After a number of unforeseen delays (including discovering that the floor in the dining room was rotten!), Fellowship House, looking very smart, was reopened just in time for the first Associates Retreat to be held at Fairacres. Sr Stephanie-Thérèse gave the retreat addresses, the final one of which is included in this *Chronicle*. The Retreat seemed to be very well received and we plan to have the Associates' weekend retreat here again next year, with the second retreat at Llangasty, as in previous years. Details of both can be found on page 6. Fellowship House retains its charm and simplicity, but is now graced with showers—something for which we have been asked by a number of guests—and slightly larger bedrooms. We hope that many of you will be able to come and experience the new facilities in Fellowship House in the coming years.

While on the subject of Associates, in 2016 we hope to hold a Priest Associates Day. The planned date is Saturday, 10 September. Priest Associates please put it in your diary! Details will follow later.

That is a rundown of some of SLG's events this year, both happy and sad; the Christmas season is often a point when we look back on the past year. When we look at world events in 2015, what we see can worry and concern us. The ongoing refugee crisis in Europe, the continuing violence in Syria, the rise of the so-called Islamic State, and, as I write, the aftermath of the Russian plane disaster in the Sinai Desert make it

seem that the world is on some sort of slippery slope towards disaster as we near the end this year.

The Christian message reminds us that the truth is otherwise. As we approach Advent again, we begin our cycle through the liturgical year as it recounts the mysteries of our salvation. The events of the year—new beginnings as well as death—remind us how intimately connected with the mysteries of the Incarnation we are, with the birth, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We live somewhere between birth and death, somewhere between baptism and resurrection; the experience of our daily lives gives us some sense of the Incarnation of our Lord in our flesh with its weakness and fragility.

Likewise, with its mix of great beauty and intense suffering, our world lies somewhere between death and resurrection. In the section on the 'Mysteries of Christ' our *Way of Life* document says:

> The mystery of the Incarnation, with the person of Christ at its heart, crowns God's self-disclosure to us, and is the means of our redemption. From him the faith and sacraments of the church derive; and she sees the Risen Lord drawing all creation to a point of completion and transcendence. Those who are baptised orient themselves to this end and enter into a new kind of life, sealed by the Holy Spirit and nourished by the Eucharist.

Due to the growth and ubiquity of digital media, the needs of the world seem to press on us ever more stridently. We can see the results of violence almost instantly on our screens and feel overwhelmed by a sense of our total inability to do more than help a few victims of these situations. I spoke to a rather angry young woman recently, who demanded that I explain exactly what I was doing to help the poor, the sick, refugees and victims of violence—indeed to help her, someone obviously deeply troubled. It is not an easy or comfortable question, or one to which I could give an easy and pat answer. The truth is that we can't solve the needs of the world. Yes, we can give our best efforts in compassionate service in union with our Lord, but the world requires

much more than we can give. Our trust has to be wholly in God and his sending of Our Lord Jesus Christ to be our Saviour.

The best we can do is to enter as deeply as we can into the baptismal life, and, as the *Way of Life* says, *orient* ourselves into the life and prayer of the Church in its offering to God, while opening ourselves to his will day by day to engage in loving service in the place where we are. As we celebrate one particular refugee family and a child born into poverty two thousand years ago we hold in our hearts the thousands of refugees and children in poverty, and we implore God for them.

As we head into Advent and Christmas let us continue to hold to God the many needs of our world, but with grateful and trusting hearts, aware of the blessings that we have received, and, even more importantly, aware of God's compassion for our broken and fallen world. I invite you to join the Community this Christmas in praying for the peace and well-being of the world.

With prayers for a blessed Advent and Christmas.

SISTER CLARE-LOUISE SLG

ASSOCIATES RETREATS 2016

20th - 24th July 2016

Llangasty Retreat House
Llangasty, Brecon,
Powys, LD3 7PX
www.llangasty.com

Cost £278.00

Deposit £70.00

Retreat Leader to be confirmed

Forms & Information :

Judith Lloyd Thomas
32 Holcombe Drive
Llandrindod Wells
LD1 6DN
Tel: 01597 823020

21st - 23rd October 2016

Convent of the Incarnation
Fairacres, Parker Street
Oxford, OX4 1TB
www.slg.org.uk

Limited places available

We aim to provide comparable facilities to a 'Bed and Breakfast'; we would therefore recommend a cost of £35 – £40 per night.

Retreat Leader to be confirmed

For more details, contact:
Ferrol Brown
(details below)

To book a place, please forward all application forms and payments to:

Ferrol Brown
Bursary Office
Email: bursary@slg.org.uk
Tel : 01865 241849 (Option 2)

WHAT IS GLORY?*

DAMIAN FEENEY

χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας
full of grace, and truth
(John 1: 14)

IT WAS SAID of the late Michael Ramsey that you couldn't get very far in a lecture or sermon of his before he warmed to the theme of glory. How apposite, of course, for one whose life was itself such a doxology. The author of the Fourth Gospel warms to the same theme this morning, as we hear again some of the greatest words written at any time and in any language, concerning the Incarnation of God, his becoming flesh. And glory—unless you are Michael Ramsey—can be a hard thing to articulate. We connect the word 'glory' to God's presence, an inseparable part of God's being; but further elucidation can be complex. So I find the end of the gospel this morning helpful. Glory, we are told, is 'full of grace and truth.'

If the glory of God in Jesus Christ is full of grace, then it is an attribute which does not merely live in and of itself. God's glory is never for show. Its very nature is gift. Gift to us, the children of God, who are reminded this day to feel love and joy and blessing because that is God's desire, expressed most fully in His birth among us. The glory of God is never an end in itself, but always directed to us, to guide us home to be united with that glory forever. We are reminded of St Athanasius' words, that 'He became as we are, so that we might become as he is.' This morning, we do not merely behold His glory; we are invited to share it. 'Grace is but glory begun, and glory is but grace perfected,' said Jonathan Edwards, the American Puritan theologian. Grace and gift reach out, so that they might be gloriously fulfilled in us through Christ.

Not only this, but we are told that this same glory is full of truth. Here is one whose feet do not stray, not because he is in some sense pre-programmed to take away the frailty which is the lot of all humanity, but

* Homily given in Fairacres Chapel at the Daytime Mass of Christmas, 2014.

because this life is a perfect abandonment to the will of God, and a perfect self-giving. Nothing here that is not of God—and yet human, frail, crying for nourishment, warmth, the love of a mother. The perfect, truthful human life is begun, the tether which attaches us to the life which God longs for us to have, a life bought with his life, a truth comprehended in his.

The opening of the Fourth Gospel—so weighty in significance, so powerful in language and meaning—glosses over one thing. This eternal and glorious Word, full of grace and truth, starts his visible journey today like every other human: frail, just about able to exist outside his mother whilst still so dependent upon her. He will grow, in stature, in wisdom, of course he will. But for now, for this moment, we recognise that God's plan of dependency upon the human condition is total. Into your hands, O Mary, God commits His Spirit.

No child ever occasioned such love. No child occasioned such joy. No child occasioned such fear, and trembling, or inspired such good among God's people, or such horror among those who would pit everything against him. But for now he is still a baby, and all that will unfold in his earthly life is for later. Today we are left with as much wonder as we have human capacity. It is the wonder that God could really do this thing, this way. You see, the New Atheists are right. Our belief in the God-human is a senseless belief, because there is no sense in the agony and the ecstasy of true, headlong love. And because he loved us first, and we long to love him more, believe it we do. God has become human in Jesus, and because of that we can face Jesus' future, and our own, with assurance, confidence and joy, because this morning 'we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.'

SISTER JANE FRANCES OF THE ASCENSION SLG

(Averil Jane Tomlinson)

5 June 1931 – 31 July 2015

ADDRESS AT THE REQUIEM MASS
12 August 2015

SISTER JUDITH SLG

I AM HESITANT to speak, for many in this chapel have known Sr Jane Frances for a lot longer than I have. But I to do so simply because I love her and it is one last thing, apart from praying, that I can do for her. So I dare to speak, and pray that I may do so to the glory of God and hope that Sr Jane Frances herself will forgive me; I suspect she would be characteristically bashful with my drawing attention to her remarkable qualities.

I choose as a theme for these reflections a verse from Psalm 126: 'They that sow in tears shall reap in joy.' She told me on more than one occasion when I was finding life hard, that this verse was being sung when she came back into chapel after being clothed as a novice, how true it had been for her and how she hoped it would be for me too—that my tears would turn to joy. She had found coming into and adapting to community hard, especially leaving her family behind and knowing how upsetting her choice had been for them. But joy had come in fulfilling the calling of her life.

I cannot adequately trace the course of her life, as there is too much of it I do not know; but I would like to paint a word picture of her, highlighting her qualities and skills, those things that we associate with her and make us smile as we think of her.

She began her Christian journey by being baptised in water that her parents had carefully and hopefully brought back from the River Jordan. They had met in Cairo where her mother had gone to visit her twin sister Averil, whose husband was posted there. Her sister, Mary, recalls Jane always seeming to have a lot to say at bedtime prayers and kneeling

beside her bed for a long time, so her commitment to prayer seems to have started early.

Aunt Averil, who later became an Oblate Sister of this Community, played an important role not only in her sister's life, but in her nieces' lives as well, not least in Jane being called after her. During WWII, Jane and Mary, along with their cousin Rosemary, were evacuated to Aunt Averil near Bath. There they had a governess who took them for long country walks and taught them a lot about wildflowers. Here seems to be the origin of another life-long love. Many of us will remember Sr Jane Frances returning from a walk with a handful of flowers, particularly red poppies when they were in season, and making exquisite arrangements which adorned chapel or refectory or guest accommodation. She never lost her eye for balance. The Easter before last, when she was no longer able to go and pick flowers herself, she very graciously advised me on how to enhance the arrangement I was trying to do in Chapel. Somehow it wasn't quite working, until she turned up and could see instantly how to make a small adjustment that made all the difference.

After school Jane went to Eastbourne and studied to become a great cook, seamstress and manager of a household. All these gifts and skills she used pretty well life-long in Community. She spent many years running the kitchen here, so a great number of us were taught to cook by her. Her skill was legendary, and when several of us called in to see her on her last afternoon, we found ourselves recounting and being thankful for what she had taught us. It was her cooking that she used most during her employment working for a school, the London Hospital, and a Christian organisation for girls.

She worked in our workroom making habits and always had some form of needlework with her at Recreation. My recollection is of some beautifully covered blocks that were used in Fellowship House when the Bishops' Cells came and we joined two tables together for their meals. Only, the tables were not of the same height, so Sr Jane Frances had made some blocks for the legs of the lower table to stand on, covered with brown fabric and invisibly sewn. This attention to detail and perfection

were also characteristic, as was her gracious hospitality. She employed this skill both here at Fairacres with our guests and also when she was the Sister in Charge at Boxmoor and Burwash.

She was also a dab hand with a screwdriver and a wrench. Our maintenance drawers are still full of meticulously sorted screws, nails and tacks labelled in her handwriting. Again she came to my rescue when, on my very first mission as maintenance sister, I was called to a leaking wastepipe of the sink in one of the cells. The washer had gone on the U-bend and the plumbing cupboard had every size but the right one. She led me to a box of assorted elastic bands in the flower cupboard, selected one that did the trick and helped me put the whole thing back together again. Impressed at her prowess, I asked her where she had learnt her maintenance skills. She told me that her father had been an electrical engineer in the Army, Navy and Air Force. She had often followed him around with his tool box, and he had taught her. He had wanted to pass on his skills and for her to learn them. She told me then of John, her brother, and I suspect that she lived a bit in the shadow that his short two-hour life cast over her parents. She found peace in discovering his earthly and heavenly birthday and always carefully remembered him on 5 January, which seemed an appropriate season for the date to fall when we celebrate the birth of the Saviour as a baby.

Today in some circles is St Jane Frances de Chantal's day, after whom Sr Jane Frances chose to be named. The saint had a maxim: 'Ask for nothing, refuse nothing:' a taxing counsel, but one which she did try to live out. She suffered a lot from anxiety, of which she was aware and tried her hardest to overcome; but it could sometimes get the better of her. She always tried to use it to increase her prayer and faith and trust. This leads me to the most important of her characteristics, her faithfulness. Psalm 92 says:

> It is a good thing to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most High;
>
> to tell of your loving kindness early in the morning and of your faithfulness in the night season.

She did just that, always, no matter what. And she died holding her wooden cross, the symbol of God's Love and her Life Profession. She took the dedication of the Ascension; for that reason we had Luke's account of it as the Gospel at this Requiem. Christ ascends to fill all creation, the creation that induced in her wonder and delight. But as Ephesians 4: 9 tells us, 'He who ascended is also he who descended into the lower parts of the earth,' into the pain and suffering of human existence. He descended into her pain from osteoporosis and anxiety, into the pain of the situations in the world for which she prayed so faithfully, so that he might bring even this pain back to the Father, to 'the steadfast love of the Lord' as Lamentations puts it (Lam. 3: 22), that this suffering, too, should be part of the 'all things' that He fills, leaving no dark corner beyond his reach. She gave herself utterly to her part in that through her faithfulness to her life of prayer.

At Matins the morning after her death we heard, so aptly, part of Father Gilbert Shaw's homily for the anniversary of the dedication of this chapel and convent, preached in 1967. He reminds us:

> The meaning of the word Dedication is to proclaim solemnly that a place, thing or person is set apart for God. We may sum up the dedication of our lives as set apart in this place that we may stand before God, at the cross, at the point where God gathers all things into the final harmony … standing in Christ's reconciliation of all things.

We are gathered here today to remember with thanksgiving the gift of Sr Jane Frances' earthly life and for the way her life has touched and enriched ours; and to commend her mortal body to the earth as God gathers her into the 'final harmony … of all things:' the consummation of her life of dedication.

Dear Sr Jane Frances of the Ascension, thank you for all you have given us, for the precious memories we will hold dear of you, for your faithfulness to your calling and for your love. And may you who have known what it is to sow with tears now reap with songs of joy.

SENT INTO THE PLACE OF PRAYER[†]

SISTER CLARE-LOUISE SLG

> Turning continually to the gaze of God as we meet it in Jesus is the heart of our contemplative vocation.
>
> 'Contemplative Life', *SLG Way of Life*

THE SCENES we have been witnessing on the news and seeing in the papers, of migrants and refugees fleeing Syria and other countries in an attempt to reach Europe, must be in all our thoughts and prayers at the present time. For some time we have been aware of the refugees gathered in Calais; but who could erase from their minds the picture of the body of a small child lying on a beach that was on the front pages of our papers a few weeks ago, or begin to comprehend the human misery behind the pictures we have seen on our television screens. The countries of Europe are facing major decisions regarding how to deal with the crisis, overwhelmed by the sheer numbers involved, while they make efforts to bring peace and stability to Syria and other parts of our world. The hospitality and concern of the countries receiving migrants can be undermined and turned to hostility with the drain on resources which result, and we see potential fractures between the EU countries being revealed.

In today's Gospel (Luke 9: 1–6), Jesus sends out the twelve disciples, telling them to proclaim the Good News and heal the sick. On our news channels we hear of many who have felt called to go to places like Calais and the borders of Hungary to try to bring aid to the refugees in those places. When we see something like the refugee crisis, we can feel helpless in the face of what is occurring. The best efforts of individuals and organisations, vital as they are, seem a drop in the ocean. A human solution to the underlying problems is an unattainable or far-off dream. This is not to say those efforts are a waste of time—they are vital. So what about us, what should we do?

[†] Homily preached in Fairacres Chapel, 23 September 2015, on a Companions' Day.

As Sisters of the Community, as Companions and as people of prayer we also have been called and sent. We are called to the place of costly prayer for those in need, and for the issues, moral, economic and spiritual, underlying the problems of our world. When they are received, Companions make the following commitment:

> I desire to bear witness to the glory of God and to participate in Christ's reconciliation of the world through a life of prayer in fellowship with this Community.

We have been sent into the place of prayer. The disciples were told to take nothing for their journey (as is the case for many refugees). Likewise, we go naked into the place of prayer, without reliance on talents and gifts of our own. We go to prayer in the realisation of our poverty; but as the SLG Rule says:

> The power of the prayer will depend not on any intimate knowledge or detailed exposition of the subject matter, but rather on a comprehensive and penetrating sense of the majesty and mercy of him to whom the prayer is made, and of the merits and compassion of him through whom it is pleaded.
>
> (Ch. 18, 'Intercession')

And we do this not alone, but in Christ and in Community. The Companions unite their life of prayer with the aims of the Community, and while the Community itself is supported by the prayer and fellowship of those associated with us, all prayer is in and through Christ. The SLG Rule reminds us that

> To participate in Christ's reconciliation means to open the whole being to God in the common life to which he has called each one. (Ch. 3, 'Reconciliation')

Prayer becomes the unifying principle of life, whatever the outward circumstances. The whole of our being is offered and given to God, so that the work of reconciliation can take place.

As we descend into the heart in prayer, we find that we are not separate from the need and sin of the world, for as the Fathers of the

Church maintained, we are a microcosm of the macrocosm of the world. So we learn to dwell in and from the heart, holding the needs of the world to the love of God. As we turn continually to the gaze of God, we bring with us these needs and hold them before him. To quote the SLG Rule again:

> For it is through Christ in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit that the wholeness of spiritual power proceeds for the healing of the ills of humankind and the world's disorders.
>
> (Ch. 3 'Reconciliation')

The lovely prayer prayed when a Companion makes or renews her Promise puts it very well:

> Almighty God, in Christ you make all things new. Transform the poverty of our nature by the riches of your grace, and in the renewal of our lives make known your heavenly glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

PUTTING ON CHRIST[‡]

SISTER STEPHANIE-THÉRÈSE SLG

> Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light, let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day … [and] put on the Lord Jesus Christ.
>
> (Rom. 13: 12b, 13a, 14a)

BUT HOW do we go about 'putting on Christ'? St Paul is a good place to begin, especially with his epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians, more specifically in Ephesians 4: 2–5: 20 and Colossians 3: 1–17; 4: 2–6.

Colossians 3 begins with 'seek the things that are above, where Christ is' (v. 1), and 'set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth' (v. 2). This echoes something St Paul says in Philippians: 'Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, … if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things' (Phil. 4: 8). Set your mind on things that are above. Think on these things. The beginning of putting on Christ is a mindset.

Once your mind is in the right place, Colossians continues to urge you to

> Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. (3: 12–14)

And above all these put on love. This reminds us of St Paul's hymn to love in I Corinthians 13: 'So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love' (v. 13). How do we put on love? And if God is love, is this not putting on Christ? Let us go back to I Corinthians 13:

> Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not

[‡] Final talk given at the Associates Retreat, Sunday, 25 October 2015.

> irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (vss 4–7)

Test yourself against this passage. Substitute your name for the word love. Stephanie is patient and kind; Stephanie is not jealous or boastful, etc. How do you do in putting on love? Putting on Christ?

The beginning of 1 Corinthians 14 exhorts us to 'make love your aim' (v. 1). That the whole Gospel is love can be a bit overwhelming, at least for me. All this talk about love and loving your neighbour. It can make me feel such a failure. But in taking this to God in prayer, I found what God was asking of me was, yes, love; but how to do it? And God came back to me with the very reassuring words, 'all I ask is that you are kind to one another.' What a relief. Kindness is doable. I could do kind, whereas love seemed a bit daunting. As Baron von Hügel wrote to his niece, 'Kindness is important. Kindness matters most.'

The other scripture passage I mentioned, Ephesians 4: 25–5: 20, is similar to Colossians, and one that yields the clue to putting on Christ. St Paul, again, makes quite a long to-do list:

- speak the truth
- be angry but do not sin
- let no evil talk come out of your mouths
- be kind to one another
- forgive one another as God in Christ forgave you
- walk in love … as children of light
- learn what is pleasing to the Lord
- always and for everything give thanks

Right in the middle of this passage (5: 1, 2) he says, 'Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love … ' If you want to imitate God you must know God, and you get to know God in four ways—in scripture, in prayer, in the Eucharist, in fellowship. Getting to know God in order to put on Christ.

Putting on Christ with Scripture: St Paul says in Colossians 3: 16, 'Let the word of God dwell in you richly.' Read your Bible. I cannot emphasise this enough. If you want to imitate Jesus, imitate love—get to know Jesus by reading the Gospels. If you want 'applied Jesus', read the Epistles. 'Let the word of God dwell in you richly.' Let the words of scripture captivate your mind and let it percolate down to your heart where God dwells with you. As St Paul says in his letter to Timothy, 'All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the person of God may be complete, equipped for every good work' (II Tim. 3: 16, 17).

Putting on Christ with Prayer: 'Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving' (Col. 4: 2). If you want to put on Christ, get to know him by talking to him and listening to him. 'The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words' (Rom. 8: 26). As the Word of God slowly drips into our hearts through reading and pondering the scriptures, we will pray with our hearts and not our heads. We will pray in the Spirit who dwells in our hearts, and we will be drawn closer to God. And the closer we draw to God, the more we put on Christ.

Putting on Christ with the Eucharist: 'Do this in remembrance of me.' It is what Christ himself commanded. Almost every word or phrase of the Eucharistic prayers is based on scripture. Listen and learn what sacrificial love is, its power and its glory. Listen and learn what God is teaching in this memorial of his Passion. Listen and learn what God is asking of us. Put on Christ in this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. Don't just go to Mass; participate with every fibre of your being, with heart and mind and body.

Putting on Christ with Fellowship: We are the Body of Christ. We are not on this journey alone. 'We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love'

(Eph. 4: 15, 16). Here it is again—love. An active verb. Engagement with one another. Kindness. Meet Christ in your neighbour, in friend and in stranger. Look for him there, and you will find him. In the SLG Rule it says, 'The Sisters shall remember the presence of God and his indwelling in any to whom they may be speaking.' Put on Christ by welcoming the other person, and remember that Jesus never turned anyone away.

So, we begin with our minds. Acknowledge God. 'And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and improper conduct' (Rom. 1: 28). It is really all about thoughts and conduct, and God will leave you to your bad choices. But we can make good choices. It is a matter of will. 'I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil … choose life' (Deut. 30: 15, 19). We all have a little bit of 'base mind' in us, even the best of us. But we can choose life.

> So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 2: 1–5)

Choosing life is a work of constant conversion. 'Do you presume upon the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?' (Rom. 2: 4). Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand. Here. Within reach. God will respond to our least little effort to turn to him, turn back to him. He is ready to welcome us. Are we ready to welcome him?

We all have need for repentance, 'since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. [We] are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus' (Rom. 3: 23, 24). We have all fallen short. We all need grace. Grace is a gift—God's gift to us—and as with all gifts it must be received. We receive grace through prayer and scripture, through the Eucharist and fellowship. We have to make

ourselves available to God if he is to give us his grace. We are called to be holy, but it does not just happen—we must work at it. Constant conversion. Repent. Turn to prayer, scripture, the Eucharist, fellowship. This is how we make ready to meet God in Christ Jesus. This is how we put on Christ.

Putting on Christ is not an intellectual feat. As St Paul says in Romans, we must be 'obedient from the heart' (6: 17). An Eastern monk has said, 'Every morning put your mind into your heart, and stand in the presence of God all day long.' Let what we know about Jesus, read about Jesus, understand about Jesus penetrate our hearts and manifest itself in our actions. Think Jesus. Do Jesus.

The heart is the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. Let the mind—this mind which is yours in Christ Jesus—enter into the heart. 'And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts'—abide in your hearts—'and be thankful' (Col. 3: 15). Let the Spirit lead us, guide us in prayer, in scripture, in the Eucharist, in fellowship. 'For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God' (Rom. 8: 14). And to put on Christ is to become a child of God. Are we ready? Have we clothed ourselves with Christ?

EUCHARIST

"Do this in remembrance of me."

We are the remembrancers;
in a moment of mystical stillness
we become arms and legs,
eyes, ears, mouths,
hands and feet
of Love.

Sister Helen SLG

ASSOCIATES

New

Companion

Diana Tear
2 July 2015

RIP

Oblate Sister

Joan of the Annunciation (Joan Jones)
20 August 2015

Priest Associate

Revd Canon Alan Freeman
17 July 2015

Reverend Dr Kenneth Leech
12 September 2015

HALLUCINATION AND VISION

Medication and Spiritual Experience

JAMES RAMSAY

[*A few days before Christmas 2012, James Ramsay had emergency major abdominal surgery, prior to which he had suffered a cardiac arrest and was resuscitated. This article is from a chapter of a book he is writing, in which he reflects on this experience*. – EDITOR]

PEOPLE who have a 'near death' experience, such as cardiac arrest, sometimes report paranormal experiences, seeing a beautiful light or feeling a remarkable sense of peace. I had no such vision or feelings. The six minutes or so that I was 'clinically dead' were a complete blank. Remembering back is like a film where a section has been deleted and there is no continuity. However, the wider experience, of which the cardiac arrest was just one part, had an intensity I find hard to describe.

As a parish priest I have visited many hospitals, and am familiar as a visitor with most kinds of ward. I have met specialists, administrators, doctors, carers, and workers at many levels. So the hospital environment and some of its ways were not totally 'abnormal' to me. Yet entering as a patient was entirely different. Pain was the controlling reality. The external world was, relatively speaking, unreal; its procedures and delays were nightmarish, its technology subsumed into trust and hope. Empirical phenomena were secondary to the personally-shaped, psycho-spiritual experience, determined by physical pain. The unquestionable reality of that experience raises questions about the primacy of empirical reality as 'normal'—and, too, about the nature of 'para-normal' experiences that, being expressible within the terms of normality, are in a sense merely the reverse side of 'normal'.

Materialism, Materiality, and the Spiritual

Does spiritual experience only cover the heavenly lights, the mystical feelings of peace? It includes that dimension certainly, but is by no means confined to it. When 'spiritual' is confined to the non-material, it

is merely, as with normal/paranormal, the flip side of that which it is not. Move beyond the stereotype of 'spiritual', and the distinction becomes unclear. Spirituality becomes more interesting, beautiful, and powerful, while absolutist empirical materialism resolves to a more nuanced materiality. Blake's 'World in a Grain of Sand'. Gerard Manley Hopkins's 'instress'.

The language of spiritual writing is often intensely physical, not disembodied. The *Spiritual Canticle* of St. John of the Cross is suffused with erotic imagery. The Song of Solomon, on which it is based, may be explained by modern commentators as a secular erotic love poem supposedly included in the canon to show that divine love embraces *even* the erotic, but this is an instrumentalist view, implying a conceptualisation of divine love prior to erotic embrace. It is fearful of the uncontrollable truth that the language of sensuous desire is itself a primary, indispensable revelatory expression of knowledge of the divine. It reflects continuing embarrassment, particularly in Western Protestant cultures, at the sensuous nature of humanity, a conflation of the sensuous and the sensual that amounts to a failure to accept fully, let alone joyously, the doctrine of the Incarnation.

Sin and Innocence of the Flesh

The fear that anything to do with our physical senses (the sensuous) is automatically sensual (sexually stimulating) accounts for much self-distortion and hypocrisy in Christian circles. 'Sins of the flesh' come to be thought of merely in terms of disordered bodily desire—this can even, grotesquely, extend to bodily functions being judged intrinsically sinful. The 'fleshly' sinfulness of what we broadly call the mind (*psyche*—the 'life' which, as followers of Christ, we must lose) exemplified in avarice, envy, anger, etc., is less easy to assess empirically than sins of the body (*soma*). This commonly leads to an equation of sin with bodily actions, often judged in a crude, complacent way by our masterly *psyche*. In a puritanical society such 'sins' can even include actions that amount to little more than infringement of codes of politeness. This is not to say that surrender to disordered bodily desire is not sinful, i.e. ultimately

destructive of all that makes life gracious and joyous. It is to observe that such surrender arises at the level of will, in which our physical body is a constituent member rather than chief villain. A normative *psych*-ologising articulacy that assumes superiority over the articulacy of *soma* can and does block spiritual life. Only when we are prepared, or persuaded by experience, to move beyond this can we acknowledge the supreme revelation of God who 'is Spirit' (John 4: 24) in the Word 'made flesh'.

My entering A & E was entrance into a world of spirit in this sense. Coming to the very edge of physical existence—indeed stepping over it and being hauled back—brought a new realisation of something beyond physical existence. Yet it was, and is, only 'realisation' by virtue of continued physical existence. Had I died, I would perhaps have entered that beyond, but would not have 'realised' it.

In the overall experience of this crisis I felt an underlying spiritual reality. Forensic analysis of this can be useful, but what matters, in terms of human rather than purely laboratory understanding, is the whole psychosomatic, neuro-chemical imaginative event as drama, enactment of something definitive of words like 'purpose' and 'meaning' which in the end only make sense experientially.

Hallucination and Identity

A few days after my operation, I lay in bed in the surgical ward looking up at the roof of a cave of glistening pink granite. It was encrusted with huge spider crabs. Occasionally a claw stirred. I was aware this was hallucination. No doubt an effect of the morphine and whatever else was being pumped quietly, steadily into my body. Had my self-aware mind been absorbed into the experience it would have been terrifying. As it was, like other delusory experiences I had, it was curious, beautiful, intriguing, and I was glad my consciousness had not been so drawn in that the hallucination became reality. Yet what was this 'I' that was 'glad', distinct enough from my own mind to apprehend consciousness, while also distinct from the self that was experiencing the hallucination?

There was some evaluative, more than purely analytical identity, at the heart of 'me'. The crabs on the cave wall had no relevance to that 'me', might as well not have existed (they did exist, within the limited, but often powerful, realm of reality we dismiss as fantasy). Yet other out-of-the-ordinary experiences at the time very much had relevance to 'me'—to all that gives me a sense of meaningfulness, of joy, of the good, of moral choice, of worthwhile living. These I would describe as visions. Rather than potentially drawing me into their own realm of insubstantiality, they gave positive nourishment to all within me that needed healing and restoration of coherence at a time of extreme inner discontinuity.

Visions and Bodily Weakness

My 'visions' were undoubtedly influenced by Julian of Norwich. Once well enough to feel bored, I had asked for things to read. Our younger daughter, Iona, in her first year at university studying theology, brought me Julian's *Shewings of Divine Love*. Earlier that year I had been rereading Julian, looking for passages that might be suitable for the funeral of a friend who had died of cancer. Now after my own catastrophe and with plenty of time—though in short bouts, followed by exhaustion and imperceptible renewal of energy—to spend on her meditations, I was, no doubt, additionally predisposed to spiritual experiences in which my mind could catch up with the horrific adventure of the dysfunction of my body.

Because it was constantly busy on the surgical ward, and some patients would be crying out for hours at a time, sleep was difficult, tiredness a problem. I was continuing to receive large doses of morphine. Nevertheless it was painful to move, and I would lie still until the pain of moving became preferable to the discomfort of not moving. Meanwhile as I gained strength day by day, that intensity of perception, in which everything appeared vivid and extraordinary simply by virtue of the fact that I was alive to see it, grew ever greater. This itself was exhausting. At the same time, in the process of establishing a viable regime of parenteral nutrition to sustain life there was trial and error, and I became

dehydrated. This occurred over New Year when I did not see the consultant and dietician for a couple of days. My lips and palate felt like sandpaper. But I had been told that due to my condition, the more I drank the more dehydrated I would become, my gut no longer having the ability to reabsorb the water used by the body in processing fluids. In addition I had bouts of nausea. I asked for something to reduce the nausea. As the nurse administered the liquid through the catheter in my jugular vein, he said, 'This may make you feel dizzy.'

Shewings

The nausea subsided. I did not feel dizzy. But the dryness in my mouth was extreme, tongue stiff as a board. My wife, Celia, had closed the curtain round my bed when she left. I closed my eyes, but could not pretend that I was asleep. I opened my eyes again.

Poking through a gap in the bed curtains was a large fresh-cut branch … olive? aspen? eucalyptus? Not a tree I knew. Silver-white, grey-green leaves. Motionless, imperceptibly trembling, showering me with water, a drenching mist, which I took in through every pore. Then at the corner, where another curtain did not quite join, I noticed a supermarket trolley brim-full of similar fresh-cut branches.

It disappeared. The dryness remained, but thirst had subsided.

After some time, above my bed, suspended in the air above where the surgical dressing had yet to be removed, I saw a spray of the same leaves. Like the crown of an invisible baldachin hanging over me. It also disappeared. I wished it back, to no avail.

Then, to the left of the foot of the bed, at the same height a single long leaf, immobile, in a nimbus of gold, energy arrowing toward me.

That was replaced abruptly by a clipboard—the clipboard carried by the nurse on the morning round no doubt. Mundane, incomprehensibly beautiful, practical, a rectangular mandala of light.

This in turn changed to a large nail, outlined in pinpricks of light in the dark. Static, it transfixed me. Then began slowly to rotate, in a

multidirectional way impossible to comprehend, vanishing finally in the perspective of St John of the Cross's view of the crucified Christ.

I thought the procession of images had ended. Then a figure walked past the gap between the curtains. A nurse? Back the other way. Back again. Silently. No activity on the ward. A gliding figure, forth and back, fending away the things of death.

I seemed to wake, to find my bed against a stone wall. The stones were dank and roughly squared. Growing from the wall at head height, a branch with leaves. The same leaves as before.

The curtain at the end of the bed became undulating stone. Faded back again to curtain. I was half asleep.

No further manifestations. But I knew someone was standing beside me, a female presence. Out of the corner of my eye before I fell into deeper half-sleep, I was aware of coarse-woven clothing, gathered and tied.

How Real Was Any of That?

The play ended, sleep was the usual dull wakefulness of hospital sleep. From which I woke with a start, the nausea gone, my body feeling more alive. I recalled my 'shewings'—how could I presume to call them such?—and made a conscious effort to remember each one, making verbal sketches in my mind, to secure the strangeness in my memory, to be written down as soon as I had strength to hold a biro.

Drug-induced? Sympathetic? Mimetic? Inspired? Certainly I was in a state of acute physical weakness, mentally in a condition of shock that I did not recognise, and dosed with morphine, antibiotics, and whatever was in the anti-nausea fluid. Do such factors invalidate the experience? Some of Mother Julian's thoughts on bodily experience are disturbing, albeit easily read in an unself-critical way by modern readers. Yet one important lesson from her writings is the unapologetic way that physical weakness and illness are integrated with spiritual experience. Experience in its wholeness, the body in the wholeness of its nature, is not something extraneous to spirituality. Debility and sickness are acknowledged for

what they are, yet this does not reduce them to chaff to winnow from the spiritual wheat. They are integral to our humanity in its essential, original, and redeemable loveliness.

The crabs on the cave wall had been void of communicative power, like the temporary, unmemorable impress of grass on skin after sitting on the ground. These 'shewings' by contrast were masked actors appearing and disappearing on a complex stage. Even the leaves were not ones I could identify. Wonder-working, they had an impact at a deep level, which I felt changed my condition, effecting an alteration of awareness that was at once revelatory and understood. At a more conscious level they had the force of encounter, were a challenge to cerebral meaning, with a beauty of control and a logic of their own, at a time when my rationalising mind could make no sense of what had happened to my body or what this meant for the future.

Interpretation

Julian's 'Revelations' are the fruit of years of meditation, prayer, reading, and radical simplicity of life. What I experienced under her wing, at a shadow time of my own being, was vital to securing my reconnection with life, albeit in itself of a relatively trivial order. My 'visions' had the intensity of a liminal moment. And I do not know whether perhaps at that point I had, in fact, been at a stage of potential physical reversal, or at least confusion of will. At some stage around then I had needed a further blood transfusion.

The images were not merely a vehicle for a spiritual message. They remain irreducibly a well of reference, reorientation, suggestion, form and sensory stimulus reminding me, in a world where everything must have its equivalence in money or 'meaning', of the uniqueness of all that is—and of the commonality of every particle of being in the sustaining Energy (*dynamis*, Breath, Spirit) of existence.

I felt refreshed and enlivened in my body by the vibrancy of the 'theatre'. Spiritually it was like a bell reverberating with associations, giving voice to an inner freedom that nurtured my mind. The leaves did

not simply evoke, but were for me the olive branch after the catastrophe of the deluge—and at the same time also the unspecified, uncreated leaves 'for the healing of the nations' in Revelation. They spilled in superabundance from the banal cage of the supermarket trolley. They dangled in festive disorder like mistletoe at the Feast of the Nativity, raising an invisible canopy of healing, a weightless firmament where the surgical dressing pressed on memory and flesh. The leaf arrowing toward me in a cover of glory redirected me to my own being, when existence had almost ceased to have value. Affirmation of individuality leading on to the ludicrous clipboard, the commonplace transfigured, a constellation of beauty and function at one—submitted in turn to the searching, inexorable logic of the Passion. A time of repose, then the angelic guardian, again co-existent in the ordinary. The strange sight, the promise, the bush growing from stone as I came back to confinement in the reality of hard facts. And of a different quality, more sensed than seen, that presence beside me, human warmth in the prison cell.

The Validity of Liminal Experience

Any liminal state, marking the border of reality, is dangerous. We can (really) lose touch with how things are. Yet just as borders define the territory of a country, liminal experience defines what is knowable. It would be impossible to live permanently in such a state, yet the moments in life that take us there are definitive, for better or worse.

Those moments may be judged by some as delusional. Only through 'the folly of the cross' are truth and delusion genuinely differentiated. This differentiation may come about through experiences and insights deemed wrong, mad, or unacceptable by conventional wisdom. My distinction between hallucination and vision was promptly summoned before the judgement bench within my own psyche that not only pronounces on intelligibility, but also allows or censors. Questioning the authority of the superego, of the structure of understanding by which certain experiences are censored as not 'normal' or 'correct', was a response sanctioned for me by Christ's response to Pilate, 'You would

have no authority over me unless it had been given to you from above' (John 19: 11).

Within the reality of Pilate's world this is laughable. The cross is folly. In confronting injustice and abuse of power, those who live by its vision may face persecution and martyrdom. In societies where injustice and abuse are less in evidence, where there is no politically motivated psychiatric abuse, but where abuse is condoned by social conformism and indifference, and mental problems are taboo, the risks of challenging conventional authority are less obvious. But the damage is real enough when individuals are ridiculed, vilified, and ostracised, or when retreat into being 'misunderstood', or into reductionist religion, consumer spirituality, or virtual fantasies, becomes the way to finding one's true self.

The truth of our deepest inner convictions is incommunicable except through love. Only by 'the fruits of the Spirit' can it be discerned, and ultimately God alone is its judge. 'God is love' (I John 4: 8). Those liminal experiences that define the borders of the self relate awkwardly, if at all, to the heartland of the self, our self-understanding. The person we consider as our 'self' may distrust, resent, or fear them. Alternatively, living on the edge can feel more authentic—we may resent or be bored by the centre ground where the ego becomes over-protected and complacent. Only in the all-informing, all-sustaining, all-comprehending love of God is wholeness realised.

In hospital I experienced, as many do, heightened perception followed by depression. 'The folly of the cross' defies that see-saw pattern—the psychotic imbalance of liminal experience and restrictively cocooned security, the dualities of worth and worthlessness, excitement and futility, threat or opportunity—that make ordinary life and values seem insipid and futile, and life at the edge mad or compulsively attractive. The cross is a fulcrum where human norms and exceptions, and opinions as to weirdness and normality, are equally relative.

Hallucination, delusion, falsity inhabit the worlds of relative judgement. Vision reflects, through a quality of peace and wellbeing, that

point of balance that is both inward and personal and outward and social. If there is such a thing as right religion, it is surely one of its tasks to hold together the conflicting, yet mutually necessary, extremes within us. The balance it strives to achieve takes into account not only what is visible and communicable, but also what is visible to the eye of trust and compassion alone. It is the work of love.

The Communication of Love

In calling my visual theatre 'shewings' I mean to express gratitude for the spiritual gifts of Julian of Norwich and the work of love she undertook centuries ago in recording and exploring her experiences. Although Mother Julian's 'Shewings' are starkly different from the poems of St John of the Cross in focus and imagery, yet the theological vision is congruent in the matter of love and suffering. St John's *Nada, nada, nada*—the 'nothing' that is the way of transcendence, transcending even itself—is communicated through the most intimately sensuous poetry. Julian too, in quite a different vein, engages wholly with the sensory world of flesh. And despite the horror and pain of Christ's agony, which is the suffering of the whole world—from which she refuses to look away, upward, in search of conceptual relief—she arrives at the non-sensical revelation that human anxieties and fears are as nothing: 'All shall be well.' This consolatory assurance is neither emotional nor philosophical, nor evocative of paradise through sensory analogy. It has dogmatic absoluteness without the rigid abstraction of dogma. A quality of *nada*.

The hidden poetry in Julian's writing, creatively voiced afresh six hundred years later by T. S. Eliot in 'Little Gidding', becomes manifest in occasional images that break from the text, reinvigorating meditation. Holy Church 'shall be shaken in sorrow and anguish and tribulation in this world, as a cloth is shaken in the wind'. 'God's son fell with Adam, into the depths of the virgin's womb—who was Adam's fairest daughter.' The essential dynamic of the poetry, however, lies with the drama of the theology and a distinctive use of language that is personal, yet at the same time almost liturgical.

Courteous Truth

Reading Julian of Norwich in hospital, I found the mysterious connection between pain and healing directly relevant—at a personal level because of my own situation, but more significantly at the level where the discipline of theology interacts with sensory knowledge. At times I felt repelled, almost angry, at Julian's longing for a personal share in Jesus's torture. Yet recalling the times in which she lived—the Black Death, poverty, unemployment, bad harvests, high taxation, war, and religious persecutions—I saw it in a different light. What she desires is not insulation from the sorrows of the world through self-induced masochistic neurosis, but deeper awareness of the suffering of the body of Christ, the body of suffering humanity of which she is part. It is intercessory compassion grounded in a realisation, against all odds, of hope, love, and joy. Reflecting on her writings in the context of the modern world, I wondered how far affluence anaesthetises those in the developed world against systemic injustice and suffering, and whether views that we judge as arising from 'unbalanced' and 'unhealthy' obsession may have something vital to teach us in terms of truth.

Evolved technology inspires pride in the achievements of humanity, is the boast of progress, viewed as desirable and inevitable. Alternative views are dismissed as utopian or regressive. Progress must be embraced, anything else is unrealistic. Yet it is hard for the beneficiaries of progress in the affluent world to be other than partially realistic about technologies that enrich them, but leave the poor still vulnerable; which provoke drastic decline in global biodiversity, threaten the sustainability of human life on the planet, and preserve 'peace' by threat of mutual assured destruction. In a society partially sedated by affluence, the realism of hallucinatory apocalyptic scenarios is played out safely in the contained genre of fiction. The idea that all human perception and claims to certainty have an aspect of fiction is not to be entertained, other than as 'post-modern' theory. Mother Julian's shewing of 'a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand' that is 'all that is made' has a remarkable tenderness and confidence altogether different from the

aggressive assurance of tone so often encountered in judgements about what is real and what is not.

Paradoxically, it is that confidence and tenderness that lead to her extended meditation on suffering. Her writing has moments of *chiaroscuro* where they surface unexpectedly, grief becoming in an instant turned to bliss. The vision of Christ's agony, graphically expressed, is almost a description of stigmata (perhaps influenced by accounts of St. Francis of Assisi receiving the stigmata nearly two centuries earlier—the first known instance of this troubling holy phenomenon). But realisation of the love of which such suffering is the sign makes her merry and glad, as she is granted startling new insight into the heart of 'our courteous Lord'.

The Art of Belief

Through my own 'shewings' I felt a healing, communicative energy that opened up for me a different understanding of truth. A presentation, on the stage of my own traumatised, pain-disturbed consciousness, of a larger reality shaping life. Not discontinuous with the existence of the hospital bed, the ward, my physical state, but connecting it to a greater logic, or beauty, of meaningfulness that no amount of explanatory meaning can account for.

The gift of this drama in the dry facts of my condition gave me a perspective on reality that made normal conventions of seeing appear not false, but lacking in truth. In her pre-modern directness, Mother Julian offers a means whereby we can reconcile fragmented, aperceptive modern consciousness with our deepest affective and imaginative intuitions. An openness of understanding that, for me, linked the affirmative mystery of *nada* with the absolute blank. A richness of reflection that triggers a desire to see more clearly beyond the world of problem-solving and dogmatic criteria.

What I saw in the theatre of the surgical ward that evening was slight, yet Julian herself tells us not to undervalue what is of no regard. Perhaps what I experienced was, so to speak, the after-light of my time of

existential *nada*. I tell myself not to be so pretentious, yet Julian chides me for dismissing something that is 'mine', however small. The power of her meditations over years of focussed reflection and austerely dedicated life help me to know the sustaining authority of love, and the world's need for that love.

Recovery was a long road, and will never be complete. But I have gained a new, more conscious awareness of the Communion of Saints, of how belief undergirds knowledge and is itself undergirded by a greater apprehension of love that is no mere abstraction but an actuality of contacts across time and temporal boundaries. To say that the presence at my bedside was Julian herself, in spirit, might be fanciful. But to say that my sense of presence, closeness of a healing and comforting power, was a grace of intercession, a spiritual energy mediated by her loving focus upon the divine love, is as true as anything I can call true.

The reception technology at the Pearly Gates is out of this world. Do not worry about trying to understand it; it is not in the least scary. With a look of inexpressible sweetness and mischief, the seraph said, 'We weren't expecting you yet.' The return journey was ticketed rather in the way the breast of St. Teresa is punched with that dart in Bernini's sculpture. Sometimes the expression on the nurse's face as she (almost invariably she) attends to my line reminds me of that smile.

PATTERNS OF VOCATION

DUNCAN FORBES

NOW IN MY SEVENTH DECADE, I have spent most of my life working out my vocation. 'Working out' in this context certainly has some flavour of the working out of a mathematical or logical puzzle: but it is not restricted to that; and besides, I am not sure if there is a right or final answer to this puzzle. No: it has more of the sense of wrestling with tough and intractable material, rather as a sculptor chisels away at difficult stone, trying to express a new shape.

Some people seem to be blessed, or cursed, with a specific calling from their earliest days. Musicians and some priests and religious, possibly tennis players—people who have never doubted what they wanted to be when they grew up. Most of the rest of us have no such strong sense of direction. We puzzle it out as we go along, and it may only be by looking backwards that we can see any shape to it. What follows is a sketch of some of the patterns that I have discerned. It is necessarily partial and very selective.

My own faith-story has developed from my teenage years through a varied plot which it is unnecessary to recount here. It has included, and still does, a practice of contemplative prayer, together with an interest in the Christian theological tradition, a largely self-directed study. From the outset church, in the sense of the organisation encountered week by week, felt secondary to me. That is to say, attendance at church services and involvement with parish life was something expected of me as a result of my faith; it was not experienced as the primary source of faith or of truth. I have never felt entirely at home in a particular church, which is not to deny that I have been shaped by, and appreciated, the experience of worship over many decades.

How then do I now understand vocation? The very word carries a lot of baggage, of course. Whether used in a religious or secular sphere, it implies some sort of calling that is external to the person hearing it. It has nothing of calculated self-interest. It is a response to something that

feels greater than immediate or even postponed satisfaction, and often demands uncomfortable effort and apparent sacrifice without any guarantee of return. The hours of practice required by the musician or dancer, both at the outset of their careers, and thereafter, are a striving towards some kind of fulfilment which can only be glimpsed rather than known, and which indeed may never be realised. Part of what motivates this effort may also be a sense of obligation, of recognition that to turn aside is to deny a significant part of one's own truth.

As mentioned, I have hardly had a strong vocation as a calling towards a particular role in life, apart from my last paid post of working in a Hospice. Whilst I would say that my choice of job and career changes were motivated by the desire to be socially useful, for me it is the practice of prayer that has come closest experientially to the description of vocation sketched above. Vocation has been sensed primarily as a calling towards truth, the pursuit of which requires daily practice and a certain amount of healthy self-discipline.

Despite the apparent lack of a role-specific vocation, this call towards truth, and the response to it, has nonetheless proved to have been inseparable from my various jobs, and, crucially, worked out through them rather than alongside them. All of the paid ones were administrative or managerial, in the public or charitable sector. They involved leadership, a vital strand of which for me was the building of communities of integrity and openness. Truth in these spheres of work, whilst necessarily requiring probity and right judgement as far as possible, has as its centre the quality of human relationships. If people feel respected and their contribution honoured, this will enhance their own flourishing, and also help them to respect and honour those whom they serve.

I well remember, a long time ago, when the phrase 'priesthood of all believers' came alive for me. It immediately seemed to validate and clarify my desire to live a dedicated life. The recognition that all Christians have a priestly identity which is rooted in that of Jesus brought with it a sense of responsibility which was also a privilege. In

my particular circumstances that responsibility was to be discharged in how I related to the individuals in the communities of which I was a member. This was not about converting people in the lunch hour or urging them to come to church. It started with the conviction that everyone is rooted in God. Therefore, we are not just interdependent through our common humanity, but also share within us that which is divine. It went on to the realisation that the gift of a community and of its members to love and to hold was a call to a priestly role.

In relationships the inner meets the outer, and the practice of contemplative prayer is in continuous dialogue with the interactions and events of daily life. Prayer brings with it the knowledge, beyond experience and direct awareness, of the *point vierge* of the divine at the deepest part of the self. Here are the unseen roots which sustain all being, which to cut would mean a cessation of existence. The intention to pay attention to the other in the communities of which I am a part—a matter, very often, of the exercise of the will rather than of natural inclination—has the same motivation and the same 'feel' as the intention to be open without precondition to the Real in prayer. Time and again it can result in a vital moment of awareness: a recognition of unity with the other which derives from our having our being from the same source, of being rooted in the same ground. This unity is far beyond mere agreement or disagreement on matters which are the subject of rational—or irrational—argument. It may be mediated through a tacitly acknowledged exchange of glances or of words, or through nonverbal communication of which we are only partly aware; sometimes it is only seen in hindsight. Such communion is enriching and sustaining. In it there is mutual giving.

Human community is only possible because we all draw our being from an ultimate reality which is in some sense personal. Hence the priestly vocation includes alertness to the opportunities to build community through the nurturing of mutual respect and by giving value to those moments of connection, seeing them as the basis rather than the by-product of living or working together. Of any organisation, including

the apparently entirely secular, it must be said that good leadership and committed membership tap into and feed off this truth, whether consciously or not. Seeing it in the specific context of the Christian story, though, takes it further.

The human need to be accepted is met much of the time, for most of us, through our interpersonal relationships. It is in them that we can know that we are heard and understood, or, conversely, know that we are not. To go further, and to value another inherently and not because of what they can do for us or how they make us feel, is hard work, for it involves a loosening of our attachment to the ego. In attempting thus to value the other, however, we are aiding her or him in the vital and long-term work of self-acceptance which must parallel the self-surrender to the love of God.

What I have described so far might be characterised as an active response to vocation, corresponding to the active ministry of Jesus. It all sounds very sunny and positive. But as a spiritual director once said to me, 'Where is the cross in all this?' The authentic Christian vocation will somewhere and at some time be marked by the cross. Almost inevitably it will lead into pain and suffering as we seek to participate in the work of redemption. Sooner or later the leadership task and many others will involve an encounter with interpersonal conflict. Sometimes, if this seems to be irreconcilable for the present, then the way ahead may just be a holding, a bearing with, the tension. This may appear to be simply a passive role which absorbs anger without retaliation; but in such absorption, whilst there is pain, there is also an echo of the creativity of the cross through which there is the hope of new life. Of course, the risk here is of a morbid self-preoccupation, of an exaggerated and over-subjective response to what may be a relatively trivial matter. Sometimes the direct challenge may be the most loving course. In assessing what to do, a sense of humour and an awareness of one's own pathology are vital!

I spoke above of the work of building communities of integrity and openness. Anyone who is committed to such a course will soon

encounter something more than clashes of personality. There will be a strong resistance, a 'push back' from the negative and disintegrative forces which are endemic not just in individuals, but also, more powerfully, in all human institutions and beyond them.

I find it useful to think of evil as the absence of God. Where God is in some way not present, there is inevitably irrationality and meaninglessness. Nothing makes sense here, nor should we expect it to. Following the Christian vocation in any sphere of human endeavour, we will be drawn unwillingly into places of meaninglessness and futility of greater or lesser significance. The old language about spiritual warfare may seem anachronistic or embarrassing, particularly if we are anxious to avoid military analogies. Nonetheless, it points to a persistent feature of our tradition which insists that a confrontation and struggle with 'the powers of darkness' is inherent in all Christian discipleship, whether we are called into the thick of the battle or engaged in minor skirmishes at the fringe of it.

To stand for the right, for the truth, in such situations can feel very threatening. This is partly because with our vision obscured by our own lack of integrity we are unsure of our judgement, partly because our own self-destructive tendencies can feel very powerful. More profoundly, though, the sense of threat may also arise from a fear of losing our identity if we become swallowed up by the darkness we encounter. The fear has some validity because to be completely lost in the darkness of evil is indeed to be swallowed up. It is the same fear of non-being which stalks the abyss of death, and arises from the same source—an apprehension that the force of evil is towards separation, disintegration, nothingness.

Finding ourselves called to be true in these dark places is to find ourselves participating in the work of redemption. Here again the inner and the outer are one. The work of our own individual growing into God is inseparable from the salvation of the world. Inwards, the practice of prayer leads us towards the darkness, and towards the surrender of what we think we know of God because that is only ever of our own making,

our own construction of reality. We find that we have to lose our identity, to surrender the ego-construction by which we habitually and inadequately characterise ourselves. In prayer we learn by degrees to live with a lack of concrete meaning, and find that it is not only bearable, but most truly where the Divine dwells. And where God is there is meaning, purpose, and love known obscurely in the heart beyond our rational knowing. We can let go into the nothingness the selfhood we think we possess, because we have faith beyond faith that, despite all appearances to the contrary, the nothingness is God. Outwardly, and in parallel with this, we may find ourselves in external circumstances which are apparently overwhelmed by darkness. What we have learned on the inner road may then give us the courage to remain in our personal Gethsemane and not to run away.

The parallels with the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus are clear. The overcoming of death, a central claim of the Christian tradition, is his plunge into the abyss of evil, of not-God, from which meaning was brought out of the darkness of futility and separation. Thus the sting is drawn from the non-being which death signifies for all of us. From now on there need be no place where God is not.

The good and bad news of the Gospel is that the only way to the radical re-making for which we and the creation long is through this darkness. The seed really does have to die. We have to recognise that we are offered no assurance that in exchange for a commitment to the truth, our lives will turn out as we wish. Not to run away, therefore, is to embrace—however reluctantly—the dying through which the world is to be reborn. It is to remember and to repeat, however faintly and inadequately, the pattern of our salvation.

As we seek to discern the working out of this pattern through the specific circumstances of our own lives, it will, in the divine economy, necessarily guide and shape each one of us in our own unique vocation.

IN MEMORIAM

A PERSONAL TRIBUTE TO KEN LEECH

SISTER EDMÉE SLG

Ken Leech, who was born on 15 June 1939 and died on 12 September 2015, first visited us when he was training for the priesthood at St Stephen's House in the early 1960s. He thus came under the spell of Mother Mary Clare, and later he was admitted as a Priest Associate—one of our earliest. When Bede House was opened in 1967 he became a constant visitor, often bringing groups of one kind or another with him. One Sister remembers Ken bringing a group from Soho. At the end of the day, when they were asked what they had liked best about it, the implications of two comments in particular convey the blessings Ken's work brought to many young people of inner city London. One said he had enjoyed taking off his shoes and walking on grass, and another said he had enjoyed eating food that wasn't out of a tin (they had been given home-made soup, home-made wholemeal buns, cheese, and lettuce from the garden). Another Sister's chief memory of Ken from the Bede House days was of seeing him often sitting in prayer in front of the Blessed Sacrament, 'a profoundly contemplative presence'.

My own experience of Ken was of an aspect not much touched on in the many excellent obituaries he has received since his death on 12 September at the age of 76. In the years 1983 to 1986 I was living at our house in Boxmoor, Hemel Hempstead, just up the hill from where Ken lived at that time with his wife Rheta and son Carl. For a time we had the privilege of Ken as our Sunday celebrant. We were never more than about half a dozen, but the homilies he prepared for us were always of a profundity, both theological and spiritual which, I think we all felt, were more than such a little group deserved. After the Eucharist it fell to the Sister in Charge to have coffee with the celebrant.

Ken evidently regarded *this* Sister in Charge with some reserve at first as obviously being irredeemably middle class. But when he made a joke, and I responded with an appreciative laugh, the atmosphere improved. He soon discovered that I unfailingly responded to his jokes, and the more I laughed the funnier he got. He would have made a brilliant comedian. He was never malicious, nor did he ever caricature anyone. It was the *accuracy*, the *objectivity* with which he mimicked a voice, a style of theological thinking, or any kind of humbug, which revealed whatever it was in them that fell short of truth. He enabled one to see what was false or bogus in a position taken, not by discussion but by the illuminating nature of humour. But it was not, I should say, only 'foes' he mimicked. He knew and loved Michael Ramsey, somebody whose distinctive speech and waggling eyebrows were easy to imitate. But Ken somehow captured and conveyed the whole man so that, while his imitation of Ramsey was incredibly funny, it increased rather than diminished one's respect and affection for that great man.

About this time Ken gave the annual Julian lecture at the Julian Shrine in Norwich, always held on the Saturday after 8 May, the date of the Shewings. Ken begins the lecture by quoting Thomas Merton: 'There is no doubt that Lady Julian is the greatest of the English mystics. Not only that, but she is one of the greatest English theologians in the ancient sense of the word.'[1] Ken goes on:

> I want to consider three very positive, creative and abiding contributions Julian makes to our theological understanding: simplicity, optimism, and earthiness. … But I want to suggest that alongside the positive insights are some corresponding dangers …[2]

These 'corresponding dangers' are set out in three sections, 'False Simplicity', 'Pseudo-optimism', and 'The Romantic Cult of Nature'. The

[1] Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, New York, Delta, 1967, p. 140.

[2] The lecture is available from SLG Press, in the publication *Julian Reconsidered* (FP104), which contains also the Julian lecture given in the following year (1988) by Sister Benedicta SLG.

exposition of these 'dangers' of interpretation reveals a depth of insight into our human capacity to go off the track which is expressed with an impressive authority.

These two aspects of Ken, his humour and his profundity, belong to my personal experience of him. But I was, of course, very much aware of that aspect of him on which the obituaries rightly focused almost exclusively: his extraordinary work with drug addicts and every kind of homeless or marginalized person. Another aspect, not sufficiently noticed, is the influence of his books such as *True Prayer*, and *Soul Friend* on people who, through them, were brought to Christianity, often from anti-Church backgrounds.[3]

After I left Boxmoor I lost sight of Ken until his collapse in 2010 followed by the long period of unconsciousness in hospital from which he was not expected to recover. Two of our associates kept us informed, and I was grateful for a telephone call from Julie Wood with whom Ken had been house-sharing in Mossley, Ashton-under-Lyne, since 2004. Julie had been drawn to Ken by reading his books and had, in 1999, taken a temporary job at St Botolph's in order to meet him. Thus began a friendship which culminated in marriage in October 2014 (Ken and Rheta had been divorced in 1993). Cancer took him from her less than a year later although, as we agreed in a recent telephone conversation, their marriage meant that he could never, in the most important sense, be taken from her.

After Ken's return to consciousness in 2011, and during his time in the care home, Sandon House in Mossley, until the development of cancer took him into hospital, he sometimes telephoned me for a chat. Once again, much laughter. But this last phase of Ken's life was truly purgative—with the exception of the happy moment when he and Julie Wood were married. It seems to me that he was being prepared for

[3] This failure to focus adequately on Ken's writings was foreseen and provided for by David Bunch and Angus Ritchie who compiled an excellent anthology of Ken's writings in a book, *Prayer and Prophecy*: *The Essential Ken Leech,* DLT paperback, 2009.

immediate entry into his heavenly home which his ministry to the poor of every kind had surely earned him.

One of the jokes which remains in my memory from those telephone chats was his reminiscence of being in St Botolph's one morning. There was no service in progress but a few people were milling around, and one of them was carrying a newspaper. Ken said to him, 'Would you like me to hear your confession?' 'No', said the man, rather startled, 'Why?' 'Well', Ken replied, 'you've got the *Daily Telegraph* under your arm!'

When I was gathering obituaries of Ken, a friend who had been brought to Christianity by reading *True Prayer*, sent me the obituary in the *Daily Telegraph.* Hearing that it contained one, she wrote, she had gone out and bought a copy 'for the first time in my life'! It is a nice irony that it probably contains the best description of Ken himself:

> A quietly-spoken, somewhat shy man, Leech could never have been mistaken for anything but a priest. There was a deeply spiritual, contemplative element in his character that sustained his demanding ministry, and attracted others for counselling and help with prayer.

BOOKS

Alcuin, His Life and Legacy, Douglas Dales, James Clarke & Co., 2012, £20.50. ISBN 978-0-227-17346-6. eBook, £12.75 + VAT.

Alcuin, Theology and Thought, Douglas Dales, James Clarke & Co., 2013, £25.00. ISBN 978-0-227-17394-7. eBook, £16.13 + VAT.

In these substantial volumes Douglas Dales has brought a lifetime of scholarly interest in the Anglo-Saxon period and church to fruition in a comprehensive survey of a Northumbrian deacon whose long and productive life left a rich legacy. In no small measure Alcuin cleared the path for what became western medieval Europe. The word 'survey' often indicates a light-weight introduction for beginners. This study (for the two books, in fact, form one continuous narrative) is no such thing. It does indeed survey Alcuin's life and times as well as the intellectual, theological and spiritual worlds of the eighth century before his death in 804 AD. But the surface discussion, readable and at points demanding, sits upon a remarkable ground of scholarship. There are a few important studies of Alcuin in English, to which Douglas Dales pays tribute in his interpretation, but the advance of Alcuin studies, and research into the Anglo-Saxon and Carolingian period, is largely continental. This unique study brings that enriching field of insight to English-speaking readers.

The volumes are conveniently divided into titled parts and chapters. This is useful, since a reader may well wish to move directly toward an area of particular interest: Alcuin's abbacy in Tours or his gifts as a liturgist, for instance. The first volume places Alcuin in his intellectual world as an heir of Gregory the Great, Bede, and the impressive missionary thrust through the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and beyond in which York and the Northumbrian church played so strong a part. We come to appreciate the bonds of connection between England and Europe; the importance of Rome and the papacy for those at the edge of 'Europe'; and the dynamism of Charlemagne in reviving *romanitas* as both a political ideal and as an instrument in the maintenance and missionary spread of Christian, and very much Roman, orthodoxy. The

close relationship between the learned Northumbrian deacon and the Frankish king makes any sensitive reader wonder how Britain could ever be 'out of Europe' and still be true to itself.

While *Life and Legacy* could be read on its own with benefit, it sets the scene admirably for the lengthier second volume, *Theology and Thought*, where Alcuin's genius as an interpreter and synthesizer of the Christian tradition and of Latin classical humanism is revealed. Significant space is given to the major challenge of Alcuin's age, the Spanish Adoptionist heresy, advanced by Elipandus of Toledo and Felix of Urguel. Alcuin played a crucial role in articulating the cause of a robust, orthodox, Johannine Christology. The author leads the reader into the issues, debates and outcomes with assurance, and conveys effectively why this doctrinal deviation arose and the various motives, theological as well as political, which drew the firm and successful response from Charlemagne, Pope Hadrian I, and several Frankish church councils.

But the coverage of Dales' second volume is wider than church controversy. Alcuin's theology of mission is poignant, and in relation to that this reviewer found Alcuin's theology of baptism and baptismal praxis striking and relevant in our increasingly 'neo-pagan' world. Alcuin is clear that faith-engendering catechesis and baptism must go hand-in-hand (an interesting counter-point to the mentality of the recently-published revised rites of baptism.)

Alcuin's literary and poetic skill, his philosophy as a Christian educator, and the other departments of his work, ministry and relationships, are handled in a way that builds up a three-dimensional picture not just of the man, but of the age as a whole. We learn to see Alcuin as a major link by which the inheritance of Benedict, Gregory the Great, Bede and the missionary Boniface lead on to St Anselm and the 'high middle ages'. True to the man, and in explanation of his influence, the second volume ends with the theme 'Alcuin's Theology of Friendship'. These two volumes are indeed worth befriending.

CHARLES MILLER

Towards A New Day: A Monk's Story, Ralph Martin SSM, DLT, 2015, £16.99. ISBN: 978-0-232-53163-3. eBook, £14.14 + VAT.

In the *Church Times* of 21 August 2015, Sister Dorothy Stella OHP remarks in the back-page interview: 'I would like to be locked in a church with Ralph Martin SSM, to discuss his recent book. He is a holy man, full of wisdom, and he always makes me laugh.' A good description of Ralph, and a reader can expect to find holiness, wisdom and humour in his book.

As a young Canadian priest, Ralph came to England in 1957 to test a vocation to the Society of the Sacred Mission at Kelham. His early years with SSM encompassed a decade of change that led to refounding of the community in 1973 at Willen, in the newly-built city of Milton Keynes. After this move, he also led the community as Provincial Superior until 1981. His recollections of, and insightful reflections on, these years are interspersed with extracts from 'The Principles', written in the very early days of the Society by Fr Kelly, the founder. In a telling analogy, Ralph likens these years of change to croquet as played in *Alice in Wonderland*. The adventure that Alice progressed through left her, at the end of the game, 'ready to move on to the next day, which would doubtless bring equally amazing games to play' (p. 76).

The next quarter-century of his life reminds me of a friend who says 'join a religious community and see the world'. Ralph lived in Japan, Ghana, Teesside, Kuwait, Rome, Lesotho and Australia, returning to the UK in 2006. Descriptions of each of these places are followed by excerpts from Ralph's log. This contains journal and letter excerpts written at the time. They read as if he is talking to a friend and highlight his gift of friendship, as well as his ability to relate to, and be alongside, all sorts of people, in all sorts of conditions.

I would have enjoyed this book without knowing Ralph. The photos and general production are attractive, and enhance a rich text. The introduction reminds us that whether we actually travel the world, or just

do this in mind and heart, the journey is with Jesus. The vocation to the religious life is like a falling in love.

> Only love enables us to transcend our limits and move into the open exposed country beyond our barriers, and it is Jesus our companion, the one who dwells, and has always dwelt, within our hearts who shows us what his love is and invites us to participate in it. (p. 8)

Ralph's life journey with Jesus witnesses to love and bears many fruits. It is imbued with the Spirit that leads towards a new day.

SISTER CATHERINE CSC

Practicing Silence: New and Selected verse, Bonnie B. Thurston, 2014, Paraclete Press, £12.99. ISBN: 978-1-61261-561-5,

A Place to Pay Attention, Bonnie B. Thurston, Cinnamon Press, 2014, £8.99. ISBN: 978-1-9090-7739-3.

Bonnie Thurston encountered Christian monasticism nearly forty years ago, and describes herself as having lived 'more or less as a Solitary' for over twenty years. It is out of this tradition and experience that the poems in *Practicing Silence* are clearly formed; they reflect the challenge to live monastic spirituality in the world.

As she says, this is a book about the spiritual life in poetic form. The poems are less obviously connected with the Benedictine tradition than is suggested by either the individual section headings, or the quotations from the Rule of St Benedict used to preface each section. These are not poems written by an observer of the Benedictine tradition, they are written from her lived experience of that tradition. This gives the poems a unique feel of both rootedness and movement. There is a solidity and strength, an honesty and vulnerability that makes it difficult to imagine how they could not appeal in some way to every reader. They become an experience common to all, considering the questions that life poses to any serious spiritual seeker or curious bystander. These questions are not always comfortable. Many of the poems face us with the awareness of,

and confrontation with, our inner void or ‘dark abyss’ as in ‘Offering’; or the empty silence that matters most ‘just at the edge of perception’ of ‘What do You do?’. But Bonnie does not leave us there. In ‘Offering’ she returns, ‘blinking in wonder at the world’s bright beauty’ I think this must be one of my favourite verses from the book.

In the section entitled Vocation, the poems examine more closely how she has come to see things as they are. ‘Late Vocation’ acts as a summary of these poems. In it her challenge to us is ‘… to dispose/of the extraneous,/to focus desire’s flickering/until it flames/at the incendiary point/of an undivided heart.’ This ‘incendiary point’ is a recurring theme in this collection.

Though rooted in the Benedictine tradition, these poems go beyond it, resonating with voices from the whole history of Christian mysticism. Themes of darkness and light are explored. There are images of unfathomable depths and kenosis; as she tells us in ‘Veil of Tears’, ‘the invitation/is to shrink the self’. Indeed, later on, in the section headed Horarium, she writes: ‘these and other absences/clarify and create space,/invite deeper kenosis … at the heart of absence is fullness of Life’ (‘Absence and Emptiness’).

The themes that Bonnie introduces in the first two sections are further explored in Horarium. The poems here feel much lighter, the *via positiva* rather than *via negativa*: ‘Your presence/fills my silent room,/ lightens my darkness’. Through exquisite imagery Bonnie introduces us to the rhythm of monastic life and prayer. Anyone who has experienced the Great Silence in a monastery will relate immediately to the sense of the world hanging ‘between the passing/and the coming to be’.

As we move into the section on Lectio Divina’, the poems feel different again. Apart from ‘Jonah’ and ‘Job’, all the poems are headed with the particular scriptural text she is reflecting on. This requires of the reader a familiarity with scripture, in order to locate meaning. The theme in many of these poems is one of journey or transformation from barrenness into life: ‘Take me, dust and death, make me fertile, new’ (‘Sarah’). ‘These are poems of liberation and restoration, reminding us

that our struggles are perennial human struggles told throughout salvation history. In reading them we are again invited to continue our own inner journey, to search 'for [our] own hidden/and secret name' ('Precious Rocks') and, like Thomas, to put our hand 'in God's dark places' and 'feel our own darkness' and 'find light' ('Thanksgiving for St Thomas').

In many of Bonnie's poems, particularly in the next section on Interior Prayer, I find echoes of R. S. Thomas. For instance, 'flinging [words] like stones/at the windows/of ineffability' in 'Prayer' is strongly reminiscent of his 'Folk Tale': 'Prayers like gravel flung at the sky's window'. But whatever similarities there may or may not be in content and themes, Bonnie's poems are markedly less desolate. In 'Za Zen in Gethsemani Abbey' she finds emptiness 'inhabited'; and in 'Darkness at the Edges' God is described as a 'comforting challenge' that is 'at the core of everything'. The poems in this section explore more fully the themes of woundedness and inner chaos, fears of 'going deep', and the resistance encountered on the way. But overall, they are an exploration of life, as in 'Supplication': 'deliver me/from the evil/of resisting life,/refusing the abundance/that is everywhere,/in everything,/even death.'

There are only four poems in the final section, Anchorites, Hermits and Solitaries. Two are very different in style, taking the form of sequences. 'Little Rule for a Minor Hermitage' reads as a list, culminating in the profound imperative to 'trust the darkness'. Here we are once again invited to 'think about what matters' and in 'Hermit Lessons' to 'Live simply./Simply live./Rise from the dead.'

In these poems Bonnie has achieved what she hoped for in her Authors Note to the volume: to have communicated 'something of the mystery and spiritual depth of Monasticism and the sweetness and sustenance of Christianity'. These poems are brave, beautiful, raw. Through them one glimpses 'God's stark,/searing beauty' ('Offices'); and the reader is 'restored [and] return[s]/to the weary world rejoicing' ('Strays').

In *A Place to Pay Attention*, Bonnie takes us on another journey, through the physical landscape of her home territory, the mountains, people and history of Appalachia, West Virginia, as well as her own inner landscape. These are the songs by which she communicates to us the 'profusion of wonders' ('How to Cross a Mountain') in the world around and within her. It soon becomes clear that we are being invited to join in the music. In fact, I found it impossible to not. By the third poem, 'Over Mountain Men', I was completely absorbed. Without quite knowing how, I had ceased to be a tourist; unwittingly, I had become a pilgrim.

Through the fifty-five poems in this collection Bonnie shows us how to be present to the world and to what is present in it to us. She shows us a way of 'looking at what is right here', lamenting in 'Legacy of the Dutchman's Pipe' those who only have a taste for life's 'flashy rewards:/big cars, big cigars, big jewels,/huge gadgety houses'. Her poems function, in part, as a prophetic critique of contemporary culture; however, this is no vitriolic rant. Instead she is grieving a loss of tradition and nature, and our connectedness with it. In 'The Last Farm' she is aware of standing 'between here and gone', the precarious balance that is in danger of being 'forever tipped'. This fragility is picked up again in 'Disconnect'; the destruction of trees is 'killing connection to a past/now buried deep in rings' and she 'hears the trees weeping,/ lamenting a loss/lifetimes will not replace.' Her descriptions in 'The Eyes Have it', 'Toad' and 'Tempters' remind me of a way of seeing the world that I first encountered in the writings of Annie Dillard. Bonnie knows her landscape intimately, and her 'awakenings' cause her to 'turn again toward the light/at the core of all [her] longing' ('All These Awakenings').

This poetry is passionate, prophetic, and hauntingly beautiful. It functions both as a cultural celebration, and as a cultural critique. It is deeply personal too, as she movingly describes in 'The Old Ways': 'I married late;/my husband died early./We had no children./Now that I am gray (sic)/I worry about the old ways./…/To whom will they/pass when I

pass on'. This is more than simple nostalgia. It is about salvation, for 'every single one of us/links past and future./Every culture is fragile'. Above all, these poems are poems of identity; discovering and honouring where we have come from, and where we are going. In this they have a universal and abiding quality and their self-implicating nature should not be underestimated. They demand—and deserve—our full attention because they preserve and communicate a landscape, tradition and culture in danger of being lost. They show us another more 'natural' or 'native' way of being. They are deeply spiritual without being overtly religious, something which distinguishes them from those in *Practicing Silence*. However, curious onlookers should be warned that they will soon find themselves feeling that they are trespassing on sacred ground. Take off your shoes, then, when you read, and be prepared, with her, to see every common bush afire with God.

In these verses there is a sense of returning whence we started and 'knowing the place for the first time'. As she says in 'Country Roads Take Us Home', it is 'knowing that somehow/origin is destination,/that the road makes us/what we will become, and, however circuitously/will take us home'. With these masterly poems she claims her place not only in the landscape, but among other great contemporary spiritual writers and poets. In 'Driving to Chapel' she reflects:

> I know with gratitude
> the blessing of invitation,
> the mystery of entering
> the inmost life
> of a place and a people.

Through her poetry she extends to us this same 'blessing of invitation'.

SARAH WEBSTER

BOOKS RECEIVED

From Bloomsbury

Contemplative Prayer, Dom David Foster, 2015, £12.99 PB.
ISBN: 978-1-4081-8710-4

I Am With You, Katherine Greene-McCreigh, 2015, £9.99 PB.
ISBN: 978-1-4729-1523-8

Pope Francis: Untying the Knots, Paul Vallely, 2015, £16.99 PB; eBook £14.99. ISBN: 978-1-4729-1596-2

Stations of the Cross, Timothy Radcliffe, 2015, £9.99 PB; eBook £9.99.
ISBN: 978-1-4729-1676-1

The New Asceticism, Sarah Coakley, 2015, £14.99 PB.
ISBN: 978-1-4411-0322-2

From Teresian Press

Praying with St Teresa, Jerome Lantry OCD, 2015, £5.00 PB.
ISBN: 978-0-947916-16-9

St Teresa and the Our Father, Aloysius Rego OCD, 2015, £6.00 PB.
ISBN: 978-0-947916-17-6

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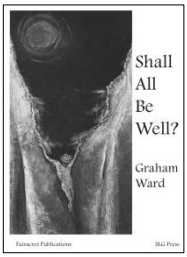
DUNCAN FORBES lives in retirement in Oxfordshire. He remains committed to reducing the fear surrounding dying and death.

REVEREND DR CHARLES MILLER is Team Rector of Abingdon-on-Thames.

REVEREND JAMES RAMSAY is Vicar of St. Barnabas, Manor Park, East London, a parish where Christianity is a minority faith. He seeks to serve Christ in interfaith community work.

SARAH WEBSTER is a palliative care nurse in Oxford, with an interest in theology, spirituality and literature.

NEW FROM SLG PRESS



SHALL ALL BE WELL?

Reflections for Holy Week

Graham Ward

Graham Ward invites us on a journey to discover how God's love enfolds even our inner darkness. He recasts as a question the oft-quoted words of Jesus to Julian of Norwich, thus articulating a deep perplexity, familiar to anyone who confronts the realities of our human condition. Readers are not spared a truthful examination of the workings of sin, fear and shame, but the author sets these things in the context of our creation out of nothing and our life ultimately 'hid with Christ in God'. This in turn leads to fresh understanding of the Cross and Passion of Christ, the depths of the redemption he offers, and the hope and freedom available to us.

GRAHAM WARD is Regius Professor of Divinity in the University of Oxford.

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Legacies: If you wish to remember SLG in your will, please make the bequest in favour of SLG Charitable Trust Limited. Bequests to charities are entirely free of inheritance and capital gains tax. There are two main ways. **A residuary legacy** gives SLG a proportion of your residual estate after debts and specific bequests, and usually maintains its real value over time. **A pecuniary legacy** gives SLG a specific sum of money, but does not change with time or take into account the effects of inflation.

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

Convent of the Incarnation
Fairacres Parker Street
Oxford OX4 1TB

email: charityoffice@slg.org.uk

FAIRACRES CHRONICLE

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Sisters of the Love of God

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COMMUNITY OF THE SISTERS OF THE LOVE OF GOD

An Anglican Contemplative Community

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