FAIRACRES CHRONICLE

WINTER 2019
Vol. 52 No.2 £3.00

ISSN: 0307-1413

Cover photo: The Chapter House and St Mary's. The Chapter house will be demolished to make way for the new range.
(credit Pinky Severn)

Printed by Joshua Horgan, Oxford

CONTENTS

COMMUNITY NOTES

Dear Friends,

When the time comes for me to write the Notes for the next Chronicle I am always given a deadline by the SLG Press Editor. This time the deadline was Friday 8th November. This happened also to be the date by which we hoped to have moved out of the convent and into our temporary accommodation, so as I write I am surrounded by half-packed boxes, piles of paper and not very much furniture! I am beginning to wonder how the Israelites coped when they were sent out of Egypt after the plagues:

> The Egyptians urged the people to hasten their departure from the land, for they said, "We shall all be dead." So the people took their dough before it was leavened, with their kneading bowls wrapped up in their cloaks on their shoulders. (Exodus 12: 33–34)

We are not being driven out the way the Israelites were, but however much time you are given to prepare it never seems quite enough! In fact, we have been faced with circumstances that have delayed the start of the building work until the beginning of next year but, having already leased properties, we have decided that carrying on with our move according to the timescale we had planned would be less disruptive than delaying.

Sunday 3rd November was our final day in the Convent chapel, and we processed after Mass from there, with the Blessed Sacrament, to our new temporary chapel in St Michael's. Fr Andrew Teal, Warden SLG, blessed the new chapel, installed the Sacrament in its place and we sang *Love Divine, all loves excelling*. Later that day, at Vespers, Margaret Leeke received the Oblate Habit as Novice Oblate Margaret of Bethany, our final Community ceremony in the Convent chapel until after the building work is complete. Our last days in the chapel included All Saints and All Souls and we were glad to be able to celebrate those great November feasts in familiar surroundings before closing the chapel up for the duration of the work.

The Sisters are all moving into small houses in the neighbourhood, including four Sisters in Fellowship House. Because of the distance between the different houses, we will not be able to worship together at every Office, though we will continue with our near-daily Eucharist. We hope to eat our

main midday meal together, but other meals will be eaten where we are living; each of the houses has its own prayer room or oratory.

Sr Adrian and Sr Raphael have made the decision to live with other communities for the duration of the work and we are grateful to the Community of St Mary the Virgin at Wantage and the Society of the Sisters of Bethany at Southsea for their generous hospitality to these two Sisters.

As you will imagine, this change in our circumstances leaves us with all sorts of both problems and possibilities! We will lose all the familiar props and prompts that our Convent buildings provide for us and will need to discern how to live our life under very different circumstances. How will we live out Community while in dispersion? How will our ideas of Enclosure change while we live in small houses and travel between those and the Convent? We are already experiencing the challenges and opportunities of worshipping in a new space: our temporary chapel is much smaller than the Convent chapel and we will need to re-think many of our liturgical practices as we look towards Christmas.

It is amazing the number of questions and issues which have cropped up for us to solve, from postal addresses (you will continue to be able to reach us using our ordinary address), to how we are going to organise supplies of toothpaste while we are dispersed, and where we will meet together. Sisters have been hard at work on areas as diverse as the handling of leases, provision of computer access, moving or storage of furniture, the planning and setting-up of a new kitchen, not forgetting the needs of our two cats—whilst at the same time packing and moving their own belongings.

This brings challenges as I have said, but also opportunities. It is very easy to fall into a pattern of doing things through habit and familiarity because 'we have always done it this way'. Under new circumstances even the day-to-day basics will need consideration. My personal hope will be that living for a period under very different conditions will enable us to rediscover the core elements of the Community vocation as well as helping us to discern how we are being called to live out that vocation in the 2020s and beyond.

I find it can be tempting to worry anxiously about this, that and the other, most especially at times like this, as if it is all up to us to get this right. Life has a way of throwing up issues with which we must cope; not just moves but relationships, work, illness and bereavement; of course, we hope and

expect that we will give our very best with the situations we face. As a country we continue to struggle with the issues of division and disunity that the Brexit debate has revealed. As Christians we are not left in this all alone. I have been struck by a letter written by Edith Stein (St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross OCD) in which she addresses this issue. At the time she was working as a teacher, but was also writing and giving lectures, and so would find herself with mountains of work to encompass. She writes:

> The duties and cares of the day ahead crowd about us when we awake in the morning (if they have not already dispelled our night's rest). Now arises the uneasy question: How can all this be accommodated in one day? When will I do this, when that? How shall I start on this and that? Thus agitated we would like to run around and rush forth. We must then take the reins in hand and say, "Take it easy! Not any of this may touch me now. My first morning's hour belongs to the Lord. I will tackle the day's work which He charges me with, and He will give me the power to accomplish it."[1]

In the changes that we all face at different times in our lives we can have the confidence that our past, our present and our future lies in the hands of God. Edith Stein reminds us that putting God first in our lives means that we are not left alone: whatever the situation we can not fall out of the hands of God. Edith of course lived that out right until the end at Auschwitz; few of us will have such calls made upon us, but neither is any thing too small to be of concern to God. God goes ahead of us, just as he did for the Israelites during the Exodus. As Scripture reminds us:

> For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.
> (Jeremiah 29:11)

As the Community makes this move into the future please may I ask the prayers of all of you, our friends and Associates, and may I assure you of our prayers for you.

Wishing you every blessing this Advent and Christmas,

SISTER CLARE-LOUISE SLG
Reverend Mother

---

[1] From Edith Stein, *Essays on Woman*, trans. Freda Mary Oben, vol. 2, The Collected Works of Edith Stein (ICS Publications: Washington DC, 2012), 144.

SERMON FOR THE FEAST OF THE HOLY NAME

3 JAN 2019

DAVID BARTON

One might think that the biblical background to the naming of Jesus was a straightforward business, but unfortunately it is not quite that simple. There are two different takes on it, and a difference of fact: Luke gives us a long birth narrative, seventy-five verses in all, and it is essentially enclosed by the name *Jesus*. Jesus named at the beginning by the angel, privately (and note, it is to Mary), and then publicly proclaimed at the end, at his circumcision. In between lies the great narrative of Jesus' birth, with its journeys and shepherds and angels and the heavens shining with glory. The name is important, but what Luke really wants to tells us is the story of the birth. Luke wrote for the Graeco-Roman world, where famous people, the doers of mighty deeds, always had impressive, often miraculous back-stories.

Matthew is brevity itself: seven verses compared to Luke's seventy-five. In Matthew the angel names the child to Joseph, not Mary. And the way it is written puts far more emphasis on the naming than the birth. For Matthew it is as if the name carries all that matters. The birth is almost casually mentioned in half a sentence, before, again, he tells us that Joseph names Jesus at his birth, as instructed. Matthew was Jewish and his audience a Jewish, Eastern world. In that world names mattered. Names resonated down the ages of Jewish history. And people were remembered, not just for their mighty deeds, but because what they did built up the nation. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and on into the Prophets: Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah. The list could go on. And the name Jesus goes with that litany of names. It is linked to the name Joshua, the warrior leader who conquered the promised land. Matthew's careful explanation of the name: 'He shall save his people from their sins', is there to make sure we understand just exactly what kind of mighty deed this child, named by God, will do. He will not battle against

the Romans, but against the drag of sin and wrongdoing; all that stops us from standing freely, openly and joyfully before God.

In the end, I think, it is Matthew's sense of the resonance of a name that connects most appropriately to the feast of Holy Name. A name conjures up a person. In a split second our minds flash up an image and a whole series of events clustering round that particular name. The name of Jesus conjures up our mental image of him, whatever that may be for us, along with the events that are so familiar; from the overflowing compassion of the Galilee ministry to the torn body on the cross. Names of historic figures are always limited by human frailty. But the name of Jesus leads always into mystery. The cross is not the end, and neither is the resurrection. That is even true of Jesus's teaching; koan-like, he puzzles the mind. How are the first to be last and the last first? How could I turn the other cheek, go the second mile? These things are indelibly tied to that particular name.

What is interesting about this Feast is that it is a late one. It was only promulgated in 1530. At that point the first waves of the Protestant reformation were sweeping into the English Church so you might have expected it to be thrown out with all the rest of the popish stuff. But there it is, in the calendar of the Book of Common Prayer, as a festival to be observed in the new English church, and it stayed there until it was dropped by Common Worship. Perhaps it was the reformers' obedience to the angelic command (cf. Luke 1:31). But it is more likely, I think, that this Feast actually resonated with what they held dear. Statues and pictures and visual icons were out. But this word, *Jesus*, is a kind of verbal icon. Exactly what the Reformation wanted to establish.

This word celebrates what belongs closest to our faith: from the very beginning of Christianity people have held onto this name. They have shouted it in thanksgiving and died with it on their lips. Speaking this word is a way of being in Jesus' presence, a way of walking with him in Galilee or standing at the foot of the cross.

It is the intimacy that you notice. Paul was responsible for giving Jesus that second name, *Christ*, and it was of the greatest importance that he did so. In itself it is simply a translation into Greek of the word 'Messiah'. But it had the effect of opening the Church up, freeing it for the Graeco-Roman

world. As a word it looks West, not East, making possible the westernising of the Christian faith almost more than anything else. But I suspect that for Paul none of that was in his mind. Rather, it was a way of signifying the cosmic dimensions he had begun to understand about the rule of Jesus, all part of that mind-blowing vision that drove his mission. And yet, for him, the name Jesus remains the intimate name. And he never forgets the intimacy of the name he heard on the Damascus road: 'I am Jesus' (cf. Acts 9:5).

That is the clue to our use of this name. It is a word of love. I have always remembered coming here to the Blessed Sacrament Chapel one evening in Lent, nearly thirty years ago, to share in the Jesus Prayer Group. First the whole sentence, 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me a sinner', said by everyone, and then trailing into silence, broken by its repetition (sometimes in a different language) and then silence again, broken from time to time just by the name 'Jesus … Jesus … Jesus'. The word dropped into the silence.

It is all that needs to be said in the end. We have no other way of standing before the awesome mystery of God but in Christ, in this Jesus. Abhishiktananda, to whom the prayer of the Name of Jesus mattered hugely, says that it takes us inwards, becomes the prayer of the heart. He says rather simply 'This holy name will do its work, by itself, in its own time'. When we make it our prayer it is, I think, the one-pointedness of it that matters: the need to put all our trust there, because it is, and he is, in the end, all we have. This name will take us where it will if we let it, deeper into the silence, into the emptiness and beyond, to the point where we may seem to sleep but our heart is awake. We need to remember the record of this name, that eyes are opened in this name; our new seeing leads to a rediscovery of the ground of who we are, and a simple knowing of all that truly matters.

The Revd David Barton is a former Warden of SLG in Oxford.

SERMON FOR THE FEAST OF SAINTS PETER AND PAUL
29 JUNE 2019

Who do you say that I am?

SIMON JONES

Hester lived in a bungalow round the corner from the curate's house in Tewkesbury. As one of my home communicants, I would take her the sacrament on the first Wednesday of each month. Opening the door, she would greet me on each visit as if we were strangers meeting for the first time. My cassock and collar alerted her to the purpose of my call and allowed me entry to the living room. As we passed the kitchen she would tell me that I couldn't stay for long because she was cooking lunch for her parents, and they would be home from work in about half an hour. Sure enough, the kitchen table would be set for three, with several saucepans bubbling gently on the hob.

Hester was in her seventies. Her parents had, in fact, died almost a quarter of a century before, yet the Alzheimer's disease with which she had lived for the previous five years locked her into an unreal past identity. Our monthly conversations covered the same safe topics: her childhood in Birmingham during the Second World War, the family's move to Tewkesbury, her involvement at the Abbey. Yet when the time came for her to take communion, the familiar pattern of prayers and devotions which had nourished her throughout her life somehow allowed the painfully confusing truth of the present moment to break into the prison of the past reality, often bringing a tear to her eye.

Who do you say that I am?

At the heart of the gospel for the feast of Saints Peter and Paul is a crisis of identity (Matt. 16: 13–20). Peter's confession at Caesarea is unusual in many respects, not least because it is one of the relatively small number of events reported in each of the four Gospels and, as such, is a crucial turning point in their accounts of the identity of the one who reveals salvation on a cross and in an empty tomb.

Jesus' question of his disciples is dramatic and direct. Their first attempt at answering—'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets'—simply won't do. 'But who do you say that I am?' Jesus persists. And then comes Peter's simple and yet startling confession, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God'.

What makes Matthew's account of Peter's confession different and distinctive compared with the other Evangelists is Jesus' response to this statement of faith. For it is only in Matthew that we find: 'You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it'. Here Jesus' words connect Peter's confession to the identity of the Church and show that, for Matthew, the declaration of who Jesus is has special significance for what the church is called to be. The identities of the Saviour and of his people are inseparably linked.

So let me outline just two points of significance: first, that the identity of the Church is rooted in the confession of Jesus as Messiah and Son of God. What makes Peter and the Church so special is nothing that either has earned, worked for or deserved: not their intelligence or their faithfulness or their courage or their cunning. For in ten short chapters, this same Peter will deny the one whose hidden identity he has just confessed; we deceive ourselves if we claim the Church to be any more faithful than Peter. Nevertheless, what makes Peter and the Church distinctive is that it is Jesus who gives us our identity, an identity which is rooted, lives and grows in him who is the Messiah and the Son of God. 'On this rock I will build my Church', says Jesus, which is surely cause enough for us to rejoice today.

But second, and no less important, we need to remember that this startling insight about Jesus' identity is not the work of human intuition but an act of divine revelation; it is a gift from God. In verse 17, Jesus says to Peter, 'Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven'. Peter does not reason his way to the acknowledgement of who Jesus is. Sound logic could never be so foolish as to conclude that the Son of God would set his face towards Jerusalem, there to be humiliated, tortured and die a criminal's death. Such knowledge comes only as a divine gift. And what was true for Peter, the rock, is true also for us who are part of the body which stands firm upon this foundation of his God-given faith.

A church which confesses that Jesus is Messiah and Son of God is animated by nothing less than God's grace. Our uniqueness is derived from a God who always begins the divine conversation which is the life of discipleship, who graciously initiates his self-revelation and who, in every generation, and even now never ceases to disclose to the church the truth about who Jesus is.

Who do you say that I am?

For my home communicant Hester, whose lifestyle in many ways seemed to connect very little to the reality of the world in which she lived, the liveliness of her faith bore eloquent testimony that it was, indeed, God-given, God's gift: a faith that remained constant even during her illness, enabling her to catch brief glimpses of her own confusion as she opened her hands to receive God's life-giving grace in the vulnerable fragility of a tiny piece of bread: her brokenness a cause of sorrow, Christ's brokenness the source of healing.

What about us? The question 'Who do we say that we are?' is a real one for us as individuals, for the community of sisters as they prepare to move temporarily from the familiar convent into a new way of living together and, indeed, for our whole nation, at a time of political uncertainty and instability.

When, three years ago, the Archbishop of Canterbury discovered that his biological father was not the man he had always thought him to be, the Archbishop said this: 'I know that I find who I am in Jesus Christ, not in genetics, and my identity in him never changes.' In the weeks and months ahead, as the Church seeks to be an agent of reconciliation and hope in a time of uncertainty and change, may we not lose our confidence that, like St Peter, our primary identity is in Christ, and our eternal homeland is in heaven.

Let us put Peter's confession of faith at the centre of our lives. May they continue to be built upon that rock, and may everything else that we are and do flow from it. May the faith which God has given us be celebrated and shared joyfully, confidently and compassionately, that we may bring healing, hope and reconciliation to one another and to all who are broken, having the insight to see in ourselves and in others the brokenness which knows its need of God and finds healing, wholeness and unity in him.

Who do you say that I am?

As we come face to face with our broken, risen Saviour, let us ask God for the faith and insight to say with St Peter, and with Hester: 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God'.

The Revd Canon Dr Simon Jones is Chaplain of Merton College Oxford and a member of the Faculty of Theology and Religion. He was installed as an Honorary Canon of Christ Church in 2015 and a Wiccamical Prebendary (Honorary Canon Theologian) of Chichester Cathedral in February 2016. He is a member of the Church of England Liturgical Commission and the Oxford Diocesan Liturgical Committee.

THE SPIRITUALITY OF COMMUNION

Talk given at the 21st International Interconfessional Congress of Religious at Montserrat, 13th–18th June 2019

SISTER JUDITH SLG

This title is so broad that even attempting to define it was a complex issue. The root of the word 'spirituality' is clearly 'spirit'. The Spirit in the Bible has several roles: it creates, hovering over the water in Genesis, it speaks through the Prophets, it descends on Jesus driving him out into the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry and it sends and guides Paul on his missionary journeys. Creation, prophesying, going into the wilderness or marginal places and struggling there, working in mission, are all elements of the Religious Life with which we are familiar. They are something we hold in common and the ethos of each of our different communities will probably place a slightly different emphasis on each one, which is something that gives our community its distinctive spirituality. What the Spirit does in each case is to make connections.

Communion, for an Anglican, is what many of us call the service of the Eucharist, but that is a technical, specific use of the word; it can have broader meanings, the first of which in the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* is 'Sharing or

holding in common; participation; community'. The dictionary definition proceeds to 'fellowship' and only later gets to 'an organic union of persons united by common religious faith and rites'. Those who meet as part of the International Congress of Religious (CIR) are in limited communion: we are actually 'a union of persons united by our common Christian faith' but sadly limited by our different rites and that, as always, is painful. Maybe the title 'Spirituality of Communion' then can look at ways we are deeply united, 'in communion', which will perhaps in time lead us to a place where we can have a full rather than a limited communion. I note in the places of tension world-wide between people of extremist Islamic views and those they term 'Christian', which Christian rite you belong to is irrelevant. And in those places, such as Iraq, there is a much greater degree of unity than in relatively peaceful Europe.

The aim of our religious Vows is to bring us into union/communion with God, and for some this is expressed by the image of Spouse. This is true up to a point: our seeking union with God excludes marriage to another, we live for God alone. But this union with God is not exclusive like marriage to a spouse, it brings us into a deeper relationship or communion with all, not separating us off. As the blessing of a Sister at her Life Vows in our Community puts it, 'Grant that she may live by faith, rooted in hope, loving the whole world with a never-failing charity'. My vow of chastity binds me to God, but through God to the whole world. St Dorotheus of Gaza (6th Century) has a good image for this:

> Imagine that the world is a circle, that God is the centre and that the radii are the different ways human beings live. When those who wish to come closer to God walk towards the centre of the circle, they come closer to one another at the same time as to God. The closer they come to God, the closer they come to one another. And the closer they come to one another, the closer they come to God.[1]

I imagine it like the hub and spokes of an old-fashioned cartwheel, or sometimes when I am praying, more like a globe; as I burrow down deep into the centre, going down into the centre of the earth, my solitary act of

[1] Dorotheus of Gaza, *Discourses and Sayings*, trans. by Eric P. Wheeler, Cistercian Studies Series, 33 (Kalamazoo: Image Books, 1977), 138, Instructions VI.

being before God connects to any part of the globe, being a channel for God in the places and situations I cannot reach or do anything constructive towards, but somehow enabling God's energy to flow there. And that is the most constructive thing I can do, far more than being in the one specific place my body could be, where maybe my actions could make a difference. In that sense I have a 'spirituality of communion' through prayer.

This prayer can lead to creative forms of life, life just lived together which is its own 'Spirituality of communion', much as we experience every two years when the CIR conference comes together and deliberately lives as community. Sometimes that sharing of life together can be prophetic or reconciling. Two specific examples come to mind; the first is of Blessed Brother Charles de Foucauld and his life with the tribes in the Algerian desert. His practice of simply sharing the lives of his neighbours led Abba Moussa to write to Charles' sister on his death saying 'he died not only for you, but for all of us'. And when

> Algeria asked the French to exhume the bodies of their fallen soldiers who had been buried in Algerian soil and take them back to France. No such request was made for the remains of Charles de Foucauld. Somehow they understood that he belonged to them, a witness to a God whose love is a house where there is room for all.[2]

That form of a life of presence with, and sharing in, the life of another group could be called a 'Spirituality of Communion' and is perhaps something that we can learn and imitate.

The other example is from the shared work in Northern Ireland of Father Alec Reid, a Roman Catholic Redemptorist priest, and the Reverend Harold Good, a Methodist minister. A few days after being asked to give this talk I read the address by the Reverend Good given at the funeral of Father Reid. As I read it I thought, 'If this isn't the Spirituality of Communion I don't know what is! It says it all better than I can.' Father Alec was born in the Republic of Ireland and came to minister in Clonard monastery, Belfast, on the divide between the Falls Road and the Shankil estate, during the Troubles (the eruptions of violence between 1969–98 which were the most recent

[2] From little sister Kathy, 'Death of Charles de Foucauld' <http://www.littlesistersofjesus.org/Death%20of%20Ch%20de%20Foucauld.html> (accessed 10 October 2019).

phase of 800 years of sporadic conflict). He played a crucial part in initiating talks that eventually led to the peace process and the Belfast Agreement of 1998. Harold Good was the Moderator of the Methodist Church and together they worked tirelessly for Peace, most famously (though their role was only revealed some time after the event) on verifying the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons. This involved them being taken to secret locations and witnessing the weapons being put beyond use. The two clergymen were the people the paramilitaries chose to be the independent witnesses to the destruction of their weapons, and the only ones they trusted. Following their work in Northern Ireland they were invited to help build peace in other conflict areas, including the Basque region.

Harold Good entitled his reflection, 'Fellow Traveller':

> For me it is a very special privilege to be asked to share a personal tribute to my very good friend and brother in Christ.
>
> Fr Alec and I may have appeared to come from very different directions, as indeed we did. Geographically, he was a Tipp man [Tipperary in the centre of Ireland] while I a Derry Man [northernmost tip of Northern Ireland]. Churchwise, we came from two different denominations. But we soon discovered, and took delight in, what we had in common. We were not too far apart in age; we enjoyed the same sort of humour and banter. And we shared a love of travel. Travelling with Alec was always an adventure!
>
> Ironically, the best known of our shared journeys was a highly secret one. Like a couple of Old Testament patriarchs, we set out not knowing where we were going or, more correctly, where we were being taken. But, for Alex, that journey was to be a culmination of all that he had longed for, prayed for and worked for. I shall not forget that moment when he whispered in my ear 'There goes the last gun out of Irish politics'. What a moment, for him, and for all of us!
>
> … But Alex and I were fellow travellers on what for us was the most important journey of all—our journey of faith, two fellow pilgrims often stumbling, seeking to follow in the footsteps of Jesus; the same Jesus who had called each of us to follow him and who, when we were not much more than schoolboys, had called us into ministry, a ministry of reconciliation, in which each of us rejoiced.

> This is not to say that Fr Alex and I were not aware of the historic doctrinal differences between the two traditions from which we came. Of course, we were. One could not grow up in any part of this island without being aware of those differences. But for Fr Alex and for me, difference was not about division, fear, bitterness, hatred or bigotry. We had simply been born into and lovingly nurtured in two traditions within the Christian family, two traditions from which each of us brought something which enriched the faith of the other. We were like two fellow travellers with their packed lunches, each of whom had brought food to share with the other.

The spirituality of communion which these two men shared enabled them, despite their differences, to work together to bring about a communion of sorts between their bitterly divided people, might give us a clue as to how we ourselves might live a Spirituality of Communion. Harold Good does not ignore the issue of division and difference. He has looked deeply at his own roots (the founding of the Methodist Church) and those of his travelling companion (the founding of the Redemptorist order) and has found a rich commonality, as historically Redemptorists and Methodists have much in common.

> Both of our movements were founded in the mid-eighteenth century, one founded by Alphonsus Ligouri, the other by John Wesley, both of whom shared a passion for social justice and the practical application of the Gospel. So, in the tradition of the founders of our respective orders, Fr Alex and I discovered that we brought this same passion to our shared journey. For us, a passion for peace with justice; for an end to bigotry and bitterness that invades and destroys the human soul; for the sanctity of each and every human life; for an end to violence; for the healing of our land; and a passion for a Christ-centred solution to our conflict wherever it existed.
>
> So, I have to confess, on our shared journey of faith, Fr Alex and I did not spend precious time and energy debating academic, theological issues. … For us, the pivotal question has been: 'In the harsh reality of our broken, divided world, what does it mean for us to live in obedience to the mind and will and purpose of the Christ who has called us to follow him?'
>
> Of course, as many of us discovered, these journeys were not always easy. There were many twists and turns, diversions, obstacles

> and roadblocks. Inevitably, there were those who did their best to discourage and divert us. At times it was a lonely journey, at others a weary one. But for Fr Alex in such moments, his standard response was 'Leave it to the Holy Spirit'. To which I would often respond 'Be careful, Alex, don't push him!' But how right he was, for he knew we had to wait on God's timing.[3]

I think that encapsulates each of the elements I mentioned at the beginning about what the Spirit does: it creates, is prophetic, drives into the wilderness, sends and guides on mission and above all makes connections that lead ultimately to reconciliation and peace. Harold Good looked deeply at his own roots (the founding of the Methodist Church) and those of his travelling companion (the founding of the Redemptorists) and drew out what they had in common. That enables both of them to be utterly true to themselves and their respective traditions, recognising and rejoicing in those elements expressed in a different way in the other tradition. Being willing to honour the 'other' tradition and the blessings it may have to teach us seems to me to be an important and essential step in the Spirituality of Communion. It is one which the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission have used in their latest statement published in July 2018 dealing with the ways in which each Church organises itself and makes decisions at the local, regional and global level.[4]

This describes what they call 'Receptive Learning'. The report is prefaced with a 'Usage of Terms' which defines this as:

> that process whereby each of our traditions asks itself whether instruments of communion and other elements of church life found in the other [my emphasis] tradition might suggest a way of furthering the mission of the church in one's own tradition. … the term suggests a positive openness to study and evaluation of what seems to work in another tradition, with a view to adapting it to one's own. Receptive learning is the way in which ARCIC III has appropriated the approach of receptive ecumenism.

---

[3] Reproduced in Fr Martin McKeever CSsR, *One Man, One God: The Peace Ministry of Fr Alec Reid CSsR* (Alton:Redemptorist Press, 2017), 81–3.

[4] *Walking Together on the Way: Learning to Be the Church—Local, Regional, Universal: An Agreed Statement of the Third Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC III)* (London: SPCK, 2018).

And in the Preface expresses its work as

> a tangible expression of the joint commitment to walk together the path of ecclesial conversion and renewal so that, as traditions, we might grow into the fullness of communion in Christ and the Spirit.

Indeed the report is entitled *Walking together on the Way. Learning to be the Church—local, regional, universal*.

In their common declaration of 2016 Pope Francis and Archbishop Justin Welby said current differences and obstacles to unity

> cannot prevent us from recognizing one another as brothers and sisters in Christ by reason of our common baptism. Nor should they ever hold us back from discovering and rejoicing in the deep Christian faith and holiness we find within each other's traditions. These differences must not lead to a lessening of our ecumenical endeavours.[5]

In a General Audience in January 2014 Pope Francis said:

> It is beautiful to recognize the grace with which God blesses us and, still more, to find in other Christians something we need, something that we could receive like a gift from our brothers and our sisters.[6]

And the official Anglican commentary on ARCIC III states that:

> Dialogue is itself a means of reconciling grace, and of discovering what fresh gifts the Holy Spirit has in store for each to receive from the other.[7]

All these statements might indicate a way to explore and experience a Spirituality of Communion. The goals defined in section 1 of the report begin:

> The goal of the Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue … always recognized as a gift rather than a human product, has been succinctly expressed as: the restoration of complete communion in faith and sacramental life and visible unity and full ecclesial communion.

---

[5] 'Common Declaration of Pope Francis and Archbishop Justin Welby' <https://www.anglicannews.org/news/2016/10/common-declaration-of-pope-francis-and-archbishop-justin-welby.aspx> (accessed 10 October 2019).

[6] Pope Francis, 'General Audience of 22 January 2014 | Francis' <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20140122_udienza-generale.html> (accessed 10 October 2019).

[7] The Revd Dr James Hawkey, 'Walking Together on the Way: Learning to Be the Church—Local, Regional, Universal. An Anglican Commentary', 4 <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/331675/Anglican-Commentary-on-ARCIC-III-Agreed-Statement.pdf> (accessed 10 October 2019).

However, the document offers an unflinching analysis of those matters that pose difficulties to the two churches, noting the ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate and the decisions made by some Anglican churches about human sexuality as difficulties for the Roman Catholic church. From the Anglican perspective the centrality of decision-making and limitation of participation of the laity in that process, along with the establishment of the Ordinariate, are difficulties from their perspective. Section 5, 'The distance still to be travelled' concludes:

> Despite such serious questioning and criticism, neither the Anglican Communion nor the Roman Catholic Church has deviated from their commitment to the goal of visible unity.

In section 161, 'The call to deeper unity at every level of Church life' the writers state:

> We do not yet, however, share partnership in the Eucharist (see 1 Cor 10.16). What we as yet lack drives us on in search for deeper reconciliation and fuller unity at the local, trans-local, and universal levels of the Church. While we do not yet fully share in the Eucharist, we are already in a real yet imperfect communion which impels us towards deeper and fuller reconciliation at the local, trans-local, and universal levels of the Church. We are pilgrims together walking on the way of penitence and renewal towards full communion. On this pilgrimage, Paul's exhortation to the Ephesian church is most apt: 'I … beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' (Eph 4.1–3). These characteristics capture the necessary spirit of our ecumenical journey, and offer us a vision of how we are to continue walking together on the way towards full communion.

A step on the way was symbolized on 5 October 2016, when Archbishop Justin Welby and Pope Francis jointly commissioned nineteen pairs of Anglican and Catholic bishops from Asia, the South Pacific, Africa, Europe, and the Americas to work together in ecumenical mission and witness. The bishops make up the International Anglican–Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission (IARCCUM). In April 2019 Pope Francis and Archbishop Justin together welcomed the political and religious leaders of

South Sudan to the Vatican for two days of retreat at which both addressed the gathered people in an attempt to provide a means for reconciliation and peace in that very divided and warring country. It was an unprecedented collaborative effort and witness, illustrating perfectly what ARCIC III describes in section 21 as 'Walking together'.

> Walking together means that, as travelling companions, we tend each other's wounds, and that we love one another in our woundedness. This journey that we undertake, which is a walking together into increasing degrees of communion despite difference, bears powerful and urgent witness to the world as to what it means to live difference well for mutual flourishing.

What we attempt to do at the CIR conferences is for that powerful and urgent witness to the world. For the reason that, as Austin Farrer, a wonderful Oxford theologian, put it,

> Our religion is not a simple relation of every soul separately to God, it is a mystical body in which we are all members of one another. And in this mystical body it does not suffice that every soul should be embraced by the thoughts of God; it has also to be that every soul should, in its thought, embrace the other souls. For apart from this mutual embracing, it would be unintelligible why we should pray at all, either for the living or for the departed. Such prayer is nothing but the exercising of our membership in the body of Christ. God is not content to care for us each severally, unless he can also, by his Holy Spirit in each one of us, care through and in us for all the rest. Every one of us is to be a focus of that divine life of which the attractive power holds the body together in one.[8]

Here again is a description of the Spirituality of Communion which creates, speaks, drives to the wilderness, leads in mission and makes connections. I will leave the last word to Archbishop Justin who, speaking at the 50th anniversary of the Anglican Centre in Rome about a prayer used at Lambeth Palace each day, said,

> It is a prayer that recognises the past and present, our sin—and yet comes back to God, who calls us to be one, because to be one is the only way to lead a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called. The difficulty which the prayer faces full on is that the habits

[8] Austin Farrer, *Said or Sung* (London: Faith Press, 1960), 135.

of the centuries render us comfortable with disunity—even more so when there is the apparatus of dialogue. Dialogue can be an opiate, dulling the pain of separation; or it can be a stimulant, confronting us with the need for repentance and change.[9]

The text of the prayer is:

Lord Jesus, who prayed that we might all be one, we pray to you for the unity of Christians, according to your will, according to your means. May your Spirit enable us to experience the suffering caused by division, to see our sin and to hope beyond all hope. Amen.

(Written by the Chemin Neuf Community)

---

[9] Cited in *Walking Together on the Way: Learning to Be the Church—Local, Regional, Universal: An Agreed Statement of the Third Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC III)* §155.

ASSOCIATES

New FLG

Suzanne Muir Scott	18 July 2019

New Priest Associate

Tim Hillier	16 July 2019

RIP
Companion

Mrs Rosemarie A. Bannock	30 Sep 2019

WONDER
AND THE RADICAL VISION OF FRANCIS OF ASSISI

A Closer Look at the 'Canticle of the Creatures'[1]

JON M SWEENEY

The following is an exploration of Francis of Assisi's rediscovery of the divine connection to creatures and creation, and his wonderment at the world. Historians, hagiographers, and writers of spirituality have been probing Francis of Assisi since the day he died in October 1226, but three aspects of the Poverello's oeuvre still remain mysterious: his ungodly view of God; his visionary, borderline heresy; and his sense of wonder, all as they relate to his one great poem—the first poem in the Italian vernacular—the 'Canticle of the Creatures'.

i. Ungodly View of God

'Every artist is an unhappy lover', says the narrator in one of Iris Murdoch's best novels.[2] This is to repeat the ancient idea that poets and painters and sculptors create beautiful things out of personal anguish. Artists create from an open wound, like the legend of the pelican that pecks at her breast in order to feed her children. But there is more to Murdoch's idea than that. There is also a spiritual anguish (she calls it 'unhappiness') when the artist knows her object of love, but also knows that ultimately there is a profound separation between herself, the lover, and what is loved.

This is a central tension in Francis of Assisi's imagination. It lies behind the scenes in what he does and does not say. At the heart of Francis's poetry is this anguished understanding—or a willingness not to understand—and a tension between the God who is revealed in experiences of the world but who is also concealed as a mystery to be protected, even hushed. There is

[1] This article began as a keynote at The Power of the Word IV conference, Sant'Anselmo, Rome, June 2015. My thanks go to joint organisers: Heythrop College, University of London; the Pontifical University of Sant'Anselmo; and the Institute of English Studies, School of Advanced Study, University of London.

[2] Iris Murdoch, *The Black Prince*, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 2003), 2.

no understanding the 'Canticle of the Creatures' without realizing that Francis wrote it only six months after he experienced the stigmata on Mount La Verna. This tension, of essential separation between lover and loved, opens new ways of understanding the sense of wonder in Francis's poem.

His theology (and for good reasons we never actually call it that) was unlike anything taught in medieval schools. There is no Anselm of Canterbury or Peter Lombard in Francis. Francis never read them; in fact, he disdained the reading of them. His view of God was principally subjective, based on his own experience. By the standards of the day, then, it was thoroughly ungodly.

A better term than 'anti-intellectual' might be to say that he had an 'anti-theology'. Rowan Williams recently used this to describe the writings of Julian of Norwich. He said, 'Julian's immense appeal to most readers is that she represents in some sense a theology that leads into contemplative awareness; uninterested in winning arguments and consolidating formulae, she speaks repeatedly of what she sees and what is "shown"'.[3] Williams goes on to say that Julian's writings are full of theological themes, that she was aware of doctrine, and that she was much more than a poetic or devotional writer when she spoke and wrote about God. But Julian is anti-theological in that she never sets out to settle conundrums. In fact, the very puzzles and paradoxes of theological discourse are perhaps 'the result of our failing to grasp that the entire logic of salvation depends on the basic fact of unconditional and unconstrained love', to quote Williams.[4]

The same might be said of Francis. What was theology for him was an assured sense he shared with the desert fathers and mothers of direct God-experience. This makes theologians, as well as keepers of the magisterium, uncomfortable, in direct proportion to how it excites interest among the faithful. Sometimes Francis's theology comes through as revealed, sometimes it comes through as an optimistic sort of praise, and sometimes it is simply expressed as silence. Those are three qualities of great poems in every era.

---

[3] Rowan Williams, 'The Anti-Theology of Julian of Norwich', 34th Annual Julian Lecture (Norwich: Friends of Julian of Norwich, 2014), 1.

[4] Ibid., 4

Surely, to sense something as revealed had to have been as rare then as it is now. Francis often seems to have heard God's voice so intimately. But how dare he? Most of us have an easier time understanding Seamus Heaney's sense of resignation at the total lack of divine communication: 'Silent, beyond silence listened for'.[5] And yet, in his writings, Francis remains, like a psalmist, separated from the object of his love and praise. He may have 'heard' what the rest of us have not, and do not, but that is not the subject of his poems. Never, for example, does he praise Sacred Wounds or six-winged seraphs, despite that stigmata experience—but he praises Brother Wind and Sister Moon.

The 'Canticle of the Creatures' came to Francis as a revelation born in awareness. Like the stigmata experience just before it, composing the Canticle was a mystical moment that was not unfamiliar to him. Perhaps revelation always works this way: the already-receptive-and-attuned are the ones who receive. This is how a Jewish mystic friend of mine interprets the miracle of the burning bush: causing a bush to burn without being consumed is not such an amazing trick. It is no parting of the Red Sea, certainly. However, imagine what it took to receive it. It took patience and attention. For how long does it take to notice that something is on fire and yet not being consumed? Perhaps God was checking to see if, in Moses, there was someone who could stand still and pay attention for at least five minutes![6] Likewise, perhaps Francis received the Canticle because he too was ready.

William Blake said, 'As a man is, so he sees. As the eye is formed, such are its powers'.[7] Francis's life was filled with discovering the revelatory, incarnational, ways of God. What was 'ungodly' about the Canticle passes us by today because we no longer live with the dualism that he did, when life was understood as a battle of good versus evil, which usually meant

---

[5] Seamus Heaney, Sonnet 8, 'Clearances'. In *The Haw Lantern* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1987), 32.

[6] Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, *God Was in This Place & I, i Did Not Know: Finding Self, Spirituality, and Ultimate Meaning*, The Kushner Series (Nashville: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1993), 24–5.

[7] William Blake, 'Letter to Revd. Dr Trusler, 23 August 1799', in *Complete Poems and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 702.

that things spiritual were valued and things material were to be, at best, denied, and at worst, demonized. Into this darkness came the revelation to Francis: an ungodly vision that every aspect of the created world was singing God's praise.

We see a similarity to Francis's incarnational ways in Dante's vision in the final scenes of the Divine Comedy. Just as the Pilgrim struggles to take his eyes off the beautiful Beatrice even as he reaches the point of the beatific vision, also for Francis, the beauty of the world mediates best what can be known of the Divine. The revelation, if it is that, comes through creation. In contrast I do not see in Francis any of the blinding-yet-illuminating light that graces Socrates when he falls deeply in love in the Phaedrus. There is no madness or otherworldliness to the love that Francis sees, experiences, and depicts in the Canticle. When madness and otherworldliness had overcome him six months earlier after he was transformed by the stigmata, he was a poet left dumb by what he could neither process nor share. Then, the man of vision and imagination was a different sort of lover and poet: one who allowed himself to be seen by his Lover, in silence. Perhaps this is why Oscar Wilde said, 'Christ's place indeed is with the poets'?[8]

In light of these things, the Canticle is surely the real, true, lost miracle in Francis's life, overshadowed by the less important, but more tantalizing, stigmata that preceded it. The suffering of those mysterious wounds does not have to be more important than other aspects of Francis's life. In fact, Francis and his first followers seem to have found whatever happened to him on La Verna to be less important than many of the other miraculous moments he was privileged to have experienced. Perhaps that is why he never spoke of it. In both instances—the stigmata, and the reception of the Canticle—Francis was like a man who, in the words of Pope Francis on the Feast of the Sacred Heart a few years ago, understood how 'more difficult than loving God is letting ourselves be loved by him'.[9]

---

[8] Ian Small et al., *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde: De Profundis, 'Epistola : In Carcere et Vinculis'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 174.

[9] Pope Francis, 'Morning Meditation in the Chapel of the *Domus Sanctae Marthae*: The Difficult Science of Love'. *The Holy See*, 7 June 2013. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2013/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie20130607science-love.html (accessed 7 Oct 2019).

ii. Heretical Sense of Wonder

With this, we turn to the visionary, borderline heresy in Francis's Canticle. This is where people have the most trouble with the saint; they miss how his poem expressed an almost heretical sense of wonder. They have trouble because they too-easily miss why the vision was so radical in 1225, when it was written. If we grasp this, we are forced to see Francis as much more than a saint.

Up until his time, saints were renunciates. If they wrote anything with poetical intentions, it was divine praise. The single exception is probably St Gregory Nazianzus, the fourth century archbishop of Constantinople, who not only wrote verse, he wrote some 17,000 poems. The majority of these were on theological and moral topics, but Gregory also wrote a handful about his own life and even one in iambic trimeters on the subject of how to write a poem. Francis surely never heard of St Gregory, nor read him.

As far as Francis's contemporaries were concerned, poetry was an irreverent tool of the troubadours and Goliards, singers and dramatists of love, lust, and the unspoken, darker aspects of life. As a teenager and a man in his early twenties Francis envied these troubadours (not so much the Goliards, I believe he would not have understood their cynicism). He imitated them and was, like many of them, like Adonis and Narcissus, in love with love.

There is an evolution in Francis the man, as well as to Francis as poet, that is rarely recognized. The two almost, but not entirely, track together. Francis too began his religious life as a rather simple renunciate until, a few years on when he began to embrace, as before, his now-converted sensuous approach to the created world. It was only in about the fifth year of his conversion that Francis began to receive the charism of what would become the Canticle. He was grabbed by the Spirit that challenges and consoles, but also inspires with vision that is not just uncommon, but dangerous.

The Canticle is not his only poem: there are at least two earlier works, even though they bear marks more of liturgy than lyricism. Less well-known than the Canticle, Francis wrote a series of Latin 'Admonitions', and the twenty-seventh of these ('Where there is charity and wisdom, / there is no fear or ignorance. / Where there is patience and humility, / there is no anger or

disturbance …') rises to poetic form. It, in fact, inspired the most famous prayer-poem ever attributed to a saint that was not actually composed by one. This is, of course, the so-called 'Prayer of Saint Francis' ('Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace; Where there is hatred, let me sow love …' and so on), which can only be traced back to the year 1912, and was anonymously written.

Also from his Latin writings are Francis's 'Praises of God', written almost immediately after the stigmata experience. Different from the example from the 'Admonitions', 'Praises of God' is a weaving together of phrases from the Hebrew Psalter, and can easily be sung. 'Praises' is also special in the writings of Francis for we have them in his own hand, on a small piece of vellum that contains the other only extant writing we possess. This document was addressed to Brother Leo, his confidante and confessor. From the time that Francis gave it to Leo in late 1224, Leo carried it on his person for thirty years, until gifting it to the Sisters of San Damiano. We cannot help but hear the *Te Deum* in its phrasings. *Te Deum laudamus*, 'Thee, O God, we praise'. Notice the repetitions in these praises to God:

> You are the holy, Lord God who does wondrous things.
> You are strong; you are great; you are the most high,
> You, the Almighty King, our Holy Father …

As with many poets, Francis was not concerned with being original.

iii. Wonderment at the World

This brings us back to the Canticle. It was the late winter of 1225, and Francis's health was deteriorating rapidly. Brother Elias took him to the hermitage in Cortona that they enjoyed, but their stay was brief. Then Elias began to insist on medical treatments for Francis's eyes, which were constantly swollen and full of fluids, but Francis was insisting on being near Clare in San Damiano. So, like an anchoress in a cell attached to a church, he spent some fifty days and nights beside the convent of San Damiano. It was then that he wrote the Canticle. He begins,

> Most high, almighty, good Lord God,
> to you belong all praise, glory, honour, and blessing!

So far, so good. But then, the radicalness of its world view startled. Had Francis not been of unimpeachable personal character, had he not already been considered a living saint when he wrote it, he would surely have been subject to scrutiny, or even condemnation. Many were considered heretics for far less. He went on to exhort and praise as divine what many considered trapped in evil:

Laudato si …
Praised be you, O my Lord and God, with all your creatures,
and especially our Brother
Sun,
who brings us the day and who brings us the light.

He begins to sound almost like someone who is remembering the ancient pantheon. But then we see that he is praising what is holy, God incarnate in the world around him,

He is fair and shines with a great splendour:
O Lord, he signifies you to us!
Praised be you, Most High, for Sister Moon and the Stars,
you set them in the heavens, making them so bright, luminous,
and fine.
Praised be you, O my Lord, for our Brother Wind,
and for air and clouds, calms and all weather through which
you uphold life in all creatures.
Praise the Lord for our Sister Water,
who is useful to us and humble and precious and clean.
Praise the Lord for our Brother Fire,
through whom you give us light in the darkness.
He is bright and pleasant and very mighty and strong.
Praise the Lord for our Mother Earth,
who sustains and keeps us, and brings forth the grass and all
of the fruits and flowers of many colours.

This was the beginning, which Francis then taught to his companions, asking them to sing it. The Canticle reveals one of our first lyric poets of the natural world. Francis's subject is divine, but the metaphysics are in created, mostly earthbound, particulars. One hears Umbria in this poem, as Francis expresses his life and experience with these ancient-yet-new 'siblings'.

He was probably remembering the 'Song of the Three Young Men'

from the apocryphal portion of the Book of Daniel, and its imperative mood. We know from his personal breviary, which was also gifted by Brother Leo to the Sisters of San Damiano and is still kept in Assisi, that he sang this biblical text that most Christians do not even realize is in their Holy Scriptures:

> Let the earth bless the Lord: praise and glorify him forever!
>
> Bless the Lord, mountains and hills, praise him forever! Bless the Lord, every plant that grows … springs of water … seas and rivers … whales, and everything that moves in the waters … every kind of bird … all animals wild and tame … all the human race … Israel … priests … his servants … spirits and souls of the upright … faithful, humble-hearted people, praise and glorify him forever!
>
> (Dan. 3:74–87)

It is interesting to consider how Francis's was an awareness highly-tuned to only four of the five senses—and not only in the Canticle. He clearly uses sight and sound. He uses smell when he insists that the friars always use some small portion of their garden for flowers. He uses touch always, demonstrating its importance when embracing a leper and feeling its necessity when he wants to feel the ground under his naked body. But notice: Francis leaves out the sense of taste. He always leaves out taste, because he follows the position of St Jerome who believed that Adam and Eve did not eat of the forbidden fruit in the Garden simply or primarily out of pride for knowledge, but for gluttony. Taste, then, the basest of all the senses according the medieval mindset, is what led our Original Parents to sin of other kinds, including lust, for they immediately noticed their nakedness. This is the remnant of Francis the renunciate (and a reminder not to make him into a twenty-first-century man): those fruits are praised for their colours, but never their taste.

Returning to the sense of sight in the Canticle, Francis seems to suggest that one can only see order and patterns in the created world, while disorder and chaos are invisible or unperceivable. If so, Francis's wonder at the natural world, what he suddenly seems to 'see' in the Canticle, was again a gift. The patterns he identifies were foreign to everything he had learned

from others. No school, teacher, or priest taught him that Wind, Water, and Fire were his siblings. The creation account in Genesis, as redacted by the Gospel of St John, says that the Word was what brought creation out of nothing. But perhaps it was also sight. In the beginning was Sight, a new understanding of balance, order, and harmony.

The final leg of the triad of meaning in Francis's Canticle lies in his sense of wonder. 'Where does religious feeling come from? From the fact that there is a world', said Simone Weil, a woman not unlike him.[10]

Most avid readers of poetry today were raised on the modern lyric poet for whom the interior world is tenaciously observed and true, replacing a once-true metaphysical world. Self-consciously lyricizing, yet never believing he is an artist doing the creating, Francis remains far from what one knows as modern. Just as he once insisted that his friend Brother Bernard leave the cell that he adored, where he enjoyed contemplative experience with Christ, to go to the city and preach the Gospel—just as every friar had to be, in this way, 'little' to himself—Francis would have viewed what we know as modern poetry as indulgent. At least it was not the way of salvation revealed to him.

Sometimes a religious will opt out of poetry in an effort to steer clear of the inherent hubris. Reacting to the pull of self-interestedness in his art led a young Thomas Merton, for instance, published as a poet years before he ever wrote theologically as a monk, to beg his abbot to allow him to quit verse. The young Trappist believed that otherwise he would never be able to take his mind off himself.[11] Francis, too, surely stopped reading and listening to secular poetry (probably poets of southern France) after his conversion. When he turned again to verse years later, his conversion had taken a deeper course. He required a voice for wonderment that traditional ecclesial language cannot express.

---

[10] Quoted in Lissa McCullough, *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil: An Introduction* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 1.

[11] See Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and a Writer*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo, vol. 2, The Journals of Thomas Merton (London: HarperCollins, 1997), 41–2.

Randall Jarrell said that a poet is one who stands outdoors in a storm hoping to be struck by lightning.[12] One can imagine Francis doing this. He wrote a poem as one might record a traumatic experience, or rapidly record the feelings of an exuberant occasion. There is an 'obedience' of a poem to the one who writes it, said another American poet and critic, Robert Duncan, making every poet a derivative writer, being obedient, whether he knows it or not, to the world that nurtures him.[13] This would mean that when Francis turns to the Canticle he is being obedient to the world he lives in—as different from his contemporaries as from us eight centuries distant—not speaking so much in metaphor as in experienced particulars. In other words, a poet does not so much *make* meaning, as *uncover* it. This is why, for Francis of Assisi, the characters Brother Sun and Sister Moon were indeed like siblings, where for us, who read of them today, they usually come across as simply quaint.

What was radical to those who first heard the Canticle—the voice and the message of it—was Francis's wonderment at the world given to him. This was a late vision, composed eighteen to six months before his death, and a rediscovery of the divine-human connection to creatures and creation that had been lost by the Church. Anti-theological, the locus of praise was the mystery and sanctity of the given, the created, what is experienced now, not the as-yet-to-come.

Francis knew that what he saw was not what others see, that it was surprising, and that it was true. With a certainty that unnerves today's reader, God had given it to him. What his senses and experiences could confirm were the subject of his great poem. To write about those other things, the divine experiences about which he remained silent, would have been *unseemly*. That which is truly mystical, is best left *aphasic*, unspoken.

There are good reasons why I can more easily quote or sing you lines of The Smiths or The Kinks, than I can from Tennyson or Geoffrey Hill. Music makes verse memorable. No one knew this lesson better than a medieval man. Francis composed simple tunes for his verses. Thomas of Celano, his

---

[12] Randall Jarrell, *Poetry and the Age* (New York: Knopf Vintage books, 1953).

[13] Robert Duncan, *Robert Duncan: Collected Essays and Other Prose*, ed. J. Maynard, vol. 4, The Collected Writings of Robert Duncan (Oakland CA: University of California Press, 2014).

first biographer, depicts this in a way that reveals Celano to be a poet himself: 'When the sweetest melody of spirit would bubble up in him, he would give exterior expression to it in French, and the breath of the divine whisper which his ear perceived in secret would burst forth in French in a song of joy'. Celano describes what often happened next: 'He would pick up a stick from the ground and putting it over his left arm, would draw across it, as across a violin, a little bow bent by means of a string; and going through the motions of playing, he would sing in French about his Lord'[14]

Of course, the Canticle's wonder is not all about creatures that can be seen. Some of Francis's vision was toward other aspects of creation that were lost, such as community and accountability in human relationships. These were as fleeting in the late medieval world as was an intermingling of the spiritual and the natural.

So, months after praising Brother Sun and Mother Earth—and after he and his friends had sung those words all over Umbria—he needs to add another verse. The need strikes him, again, as in the middle of a rainstorm, when Guido, the bishop of Assisi, is arguing with a local governor so fiercely that Guido excommunicates the governor and the governor then forbids his citizens to enter into any contract with the bishop. The *Mirror of Perfection* tells us that Francis is grieved when he hears of their bickering.[15] But, it says, 'most of all he was grieved that no one had gotten between them to try and make peace.' So he writes this additional verse, speaking to the need for mediating justice and peace between the powers of the world:

> Praise be you, O my Lord, for all who show forgiveness and
> pardon one another for your sake, and who endure weakness
> and tribulation.
> Blessed are they who peaceably endure,
> For you, Most High, shall give them a crown.

---

[14] Celano, Second Life of Saint Francis, 127 in Marion Alphonse Habig OFM, *Saint Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983), 467.

[15] Jon M. Sweeney, ed., *The Complete Francis of Assisi: His Life, the Complete Writings, and The Little Flowers*, trans. Jon M. Sweeney, Paraclete Giants (Brewster MA: Paraclete Press, 2015).

Then, a few more months on, Francis is inspired by death. He begins to see her as his sister. Adding the final verse to the Canticle he shows himself not only to be ahead of his time, but perhaps ahead of even our own.

He did not understand death the way philosophers do when they speak of the immortality of the soul, the prison of the body, and the blessedness to come when things are overcome. Miguel de Unamuno might as well be Plato when writing:

> Death is our immortalizer … The sudden and momentary lighting up of obscure matter is a dream; life is a dream. And once the passing brilliance is extinguished, its reflection sinks to the dark depths, and there it remains until a masterful jolt one day rekindles it and lights it up again forever.[16]

It is impossible to imagine Francis preaching such words, and not simply because he never spoke of death as an abstract idea.

Life was never imaginary or theoretical, and it was never simply prelude. Life was the main event of the present, and Francis always lived in the present. He wanted to know, experience, and express the love of God right here, and now, each day. In fact, I suspect that Francis was one of those fortunate souls who, had he been informed that his death would come in a year, would not have felt the need to change anything he was already doing over the next twelve months.

This is where he reveals his heart as part troubadour, part shepherd, and part ascetic. Such a strange combination it was, but it all made sense in his life. Francis lived in an age that was still captivated by storytelling and orally transmitted poetry, an age when even the words of Holy Scripture were known almost entirely in how they were pronounced out loud. There were hardly any books, let alone quiet, personal reading outside the thick walls of a cloister. So, he sang of his own impending death as a sibling. In those last days, he sometimes referred to his body as Brother Ass, for the troubles it gave him. We all feel that way from time to time, wishing that we would not get tired so easily, or could do more. Francis would prod his body along, speaking to it as if it were a stubborn ass. *The Legend of Three*

[16] A. Kerrigan, ed., *Selected Works of Miguel de Unamuno: Our Lord Don Quixote*, Bollingen Series (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), xix.

Companions, a biographical account written twenty years after his death, tells us that on his deathbed Francis confessed as sin the way that he had mistreated the body God had given him.[17] He realized only then that he had gone too far in forgetting what the body needed as he focused on the work it needed to do. I marvel at the realization, as if he knew that he had hastened Sister Death unnecessarily. Never mind, a few months before he died he sang to her.

Like one who puts pen to paper in order to realize what needs to be said, Francis sang in order to know what was in his heart, and he sang in order to understand what was happening to him, beginning with this famous line: 'Praise to you, O Lord, for our Sister Death.'

Sun, Moon, Wind, Water, Fire, and Earth have been addressed as his brothers and sisters, co-creatures of the One God, before Death too becomes a sibling. What simple symbolism, but what power in it! Those who heard Francis compose and sing these words must have done a double-take, for never before had death been portrayed as anything other than a source of terror and dread or, in the hands of medieval preachers, a taunt like a stick. Here was Francis welcoming death as an intimate.

In his homily preached at the Great Vigil of Easter in 2015, Pope Francis asked Catholics to truly 'enter into the great mystery' of what God has accomplished for us through divine love. He said:

> To enter into the mystery demands that we not be afraid of reality: that we not be locked into ourselves, that we not flee from what we fail to understand, that we not close our eyes to problems or deny them, that we not dismiss our questions. To enter into the mystery means going beyond our own comfort zone, beyond the laziness and indifference which hold us back, and going out in search of truth, beauty and love. It is seeking a deeper meaning, an answer, and not an easy one, to the questions that challenge our faith, our fidelity and our very existence.[18]

---

[17] Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellmann, and William J. Short, *Francis of Assisi—The Founder*, vol. 2, Early Documents (New York: New City Press, 1999), 76.

[18] Pope Francis. 'Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis, Vatican Basilica, Holy Saturday'. *The Holy See*, 4 April 2015. https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150404_omelia-veglia-pasquale.html (accessed 7 October 2019).

Francis of Assisi was surely doing just that—entering into that unknown, by singing his Canticle. I do not believe he was one to wear masks; in fact, that may even be the source of his sanctity. But he did hide somewhat, and his silences illuminate his singing. What were hidden were the unreal experiences of divine intimacy. To him, those remained private and unspoken—because they did not come to him in the way that he met the world. So, just when the modern poet would write of self we see Francis (after a stigmata, no less!) turning instead to what may be spoken of: the world he encountered, in his great poem.

Jon M. Sweeney is the Publisher and Editor-in-Chief at Paraclete Press of Brewster, Massachuetts and author of several books about St Francis of Assisi.

THE REFINER'S FIRE[1]

SISTER CHRISTINE SLG

i. Unconsuming Fire

All of us have experience of fire. In the classical world, along with earth, air and water, it is one of the basic elements which both sustain and destroy life. We know that the sun is pure fire, that fire gives us heat and light and that it has the power to melt rock. It is, indeed, essential to our continued existence. We are probably more inclined to remember the destructive power of fire: the wildfires that devastate thousands of acres of land around the world each year, its deliberate use as a weapon of war and criminality, the house fires that leave so many homeless. But used with respect it becomes a tool to further our welfare: to cook our food, to heat our buildings, to manufacture the tools and transport we take for granted.

[1] Based on talks given at the Associates Retreat, 20–22 October 2017.

So, what *is* fire? In the classical world, fire was regarded as one of the four elements because it could be touched and smelled. However, earth, water and air are made from matter, from atoms, which can be weighed. Fire, on the other hand, is a transformative chemical reaction which produces by-products that can then be weighed. This happens when a fuel is heated to a high degree point. This can most readily illustrated by what happens when wood burns. As the generated heat decomposes the wood, volatile gases are released which separate out the residue as char. This is a pure residue with no gases which we know as charcoal. The remainder is ash, containing those chemicals so useful to gardeners, potassium and phosphorus.

There are two other interesting aspects to fire. One is that the dominant colour in a flame changes with the temperature. In a wood-fuelled fire for instance, near the ground where it is burning hardest and giving off most heat, the fire is white or yellow. Above the yellow region, which is cooler, it changes to orange, then red where it is cooler still. Above the red region there is no longer any combustion and unburned carbon particles (soot) are visible as smoke.

The second aspect is that a flame needs gravity to burn upwards. To me this is counterintuitive! This effect is caused by convection, for all the hot gases in the flame are much hotter and less dense than the surrounding air, so they move upward toward the lower pressure. In an environment such as outer space, where there is no gravity, convection no longer occurs, and the flame becomes spherical, with a tendency to be bluer, and the fuel burns more efficiently. The next time you light a candle or watch the Paschal candle come to life you can ponder this phenomenon; or perhaps just continue to wonder at the miracle of the flame that occurs when a match is held to a piece of string dipped in wax.

With this sketchy information, let us turn to Scripture. Fire appears often, both as an agent of destruction and as a friend. For instance, fire destroys Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 13–14) as a means of purifying a sinful place; it burns the animals and cereals offered as sacrifices within the Tent of Meeting in the desert and in the Temple in Jerusalem. In the many battles and intrigues that establish Israel in the Promised Land, fire is repeatedly

used to burn cities and destroy enemies.. A pillar of fire stands before the Tent of Meeting by night to show both that this is a place of God's presence and as a guiding light to prevent the people inadvertently trespassing into the Holy of Holies. This same pillar goes before the people whenever they move camp to remind them that God moves with them. What this fire was, no one knows, though it is likely to have been a natural phenomenon of some sort. It is, however, the modern mind that has been trained to expect a scientific explanation for everything, something that did not concern the Israelites. For them the pillar of fire was a sign that God was with them as defender and guide, and that sufficed.

Let us turn to the account of Moses and the Burning Bush, another description of God acting beyond the scientific and known habits of fire.

> Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up'. When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am'. Then he said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground'. … But Moses said to God, 'If I come to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your ancestors has sent me to you", and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?' God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM'. He said further, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I AM has sent me to you."' (Ex. 3: 1–5, 13–14).

To digress slightly: my father spent the whole of his working life in the field of electronics. A few years ago he admitted that though he knew how radio waves worked, he did not know what they were. In fact, probably no one knows what they are and where they originate, though we can harness their power. We can speculate, but there comes a point when scientific expertise stands on the threshold of the infinite and bows down before the God who is. It is more than an admission that science does not have all the answers, it is a recognition that our finitude cannot articulate infinity.

So it is with Moses before the burning bush, which burns but is not consumed. He knows what fire does and how he can make fire, yet here is something that goes beyond any recorded experience. Here is a bush giving out heat and light and energy, but continuing to be a bush. Naturally he stops to look at this phenomenon, and when God sees that he has Moses's full attention he speaks, calling Moses by name. Moses realises that he is in the presence of someone beyond human being, in the presence of a divine being who can be followed, trusted and obeyed. His reply reminds us of God calling Samuel in the night (1 Sam. 2–9); of Isaiah hearing God say, 'Whom shall I send, who shall go for us?' (Is. 6:8) 'Here I am', they both reply. The totality of Moses's attention and disposition to hear is echoed and expanded in God's reply to the question, 'If … they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?' God says to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM'. As well as there being no past nor future in the answer, there is the assurance of the totality of God's presence; the God whom the Israelites serve is faithfully with them.

This incident in the life of Moses confirmed and affirmed his vocation to lead his people out of slavery. The passage continues with Moses protesting his complete inability to do this, even though God gives him many signs that he is perfectly able. Poor Moses; his obedience is sorely tested. And poor God, who gets so exasperated that he eventually declares that Aaron can do the talking for both of them. I wonder how often God has to adapt plans when we jib at what seems to be asked of us?

To return to the unburnt bush: in Orthodox theology the bush is both a manifestation of the essence (*ousia*) of God, of 'all that subsists by itself and which has not its being in another', of who the divine is; and a manifestation of the uncreated energies (*energeia*) of God, the divine 'activities as actualized in the world'. It is a symbol of the completeness of God which we do not normally know in this life. However, through our incorporation into Christ, who shows the fullness of essence and energy in one person, we have the potential to become fully human. For each of us there will be moments when we experience what this fullness of humanity means, or could mean. Then we know that we are on holy ground.

I suggest that we reflect on our own burning bush experience, of a time in our lives when we knew we were on holy ground, that place where we met God in a life-changing way.

ii. Consuming Fire

In my childhood, a family friend worked as a geologist exploring the Canadian wilderness for mineral deposits. For several years he was contracted to a big nickel-producing company in northern Ontario. One summer when we visited, we were shown around. After a tour of the ore crushers and the vats where chemicals separated the nickel from the rock we were conducted to the viewing gallery of one of the smelters. An enormous vat of liquid nickel was being poured into troughs to form ingots for the next stage in the refining process. The heat seemed intolerable and I wondered how the workers could work there day after day. They wore trousers and protective helmets, goggles and gloves, but not much else. Health and safety were not so strict in those days! I suspect the smelters were coal-fired as it was a cheap and easily available fuel in that part of Canada, and gave the required degree of heat to melt the nickel. The residue of these furnaces, the slag, glowed night and day from high heaps around the perimeter of the town. Molten rock retains its heat for a long time.

This memory arose as I investigated how gold and silver were refined in biblical times, for the processes were similar. I will consider specifically how silver was refined, as most of the references in Scripture are to being refined like silver. Both gold and silver require careful oversight from the smith, who sits next to a hot fire, up to 200°C, watching the molten metal as the impurities rise to the top to be skimmed off. Before this stage is reached the ores would be crushed and metals separated, in a process known as cupellation, as in modern ore refining. They would then be heated to high temperatures and the noble metals (gold and silver) separated from the base metals (lead, copper, zinc, or arsenic) present in the ore. Cupellation is based on the principle that precious metals do not react chemically, unlike the base metals. When they are heated at high temperatures, the precious metals remain apart and the other metals react to form slag or other compounds.

Most silver is found in lead-bearing ores, and the lead left from the refining would be used to make a glaze for pottery.

Silver seems harder to refine than gold. It requires enormous concentration. The silversmith needs to observe carefully as the heat does its work on the molten metal, never taking his eyes off the action for a moment. Timing is everything. Leaving the silver on the heat seconds longer than the ideal damages it, seriously diminishing its value. How does the silversmith know that the molten silver has been heated for the optimum time, to the optimum temperature? Well, there comes a magic moment when the silversmith can see his image reflected in the precious metal. Only then is it time to take it off the fire.

There are a few references to the refining of silver and gold in the Old Testament: Zechariah 12:9; Psalm 12:6; and Malachi 3:2–3. They refer to the purity of God, to the purity required of God's chosen people or to the purifying of the people to be worthy of God's promises. Psalm 12 refers to silver being refined seven times, a very pure metal. In this context, this may be a metaphorical use of the number seven, which in Jewish thinking stood for completion. God rested on the seventh day; Joseph interpreted the Pharaoh's dream in which seven years of famine followed seven of plenty, to cite a couple of instances.

Another story of fire, of purification, of completeness, is the account of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the Burning Fiery Furnace. You will remember that Nebuchadnezzar had ordered all his subjects to worship a golden statue, but these three young Hebrew slaves refused to bow down to other gods. They were condemned to death in a fiery furnace stoked up to seven times hotter than usual—yet another purifying fire. But they are seen to be walking unbound and unscathed by the flames, with a companion who 'has the appearance of a god'.

The three men entered the furnace in trust that the God whom they served would look after them. In some early manuscripts of the Book of Daniel, the Song of the Three Young men is inserted here, the Benedicite which we recite at Mattins, a trusting response to their affliction. Their faith is rewarded, for someone 'like a god', 'like a son of god', 'an angel' (depending

on the translation) is present with them, protecting them from the fire. Indeed it is almost as if they are having a stroll in the garden as they walk around the furnace with this being.

The early Church described the person with them in the furnace as Christ, reminding believers that he sustains the Church in times of persecution. For those of us given to a life of prayer it is a comforting image, and a true one. The SLG Way of Life document specifically states that 'it is normal to experience solitude sometimes as a refuge from other people, and sometimes as a burning fiery furnace.' (Solitude). For those called to contemplative prayer solitude is attractive and something for which the spirit yearns. It is wise to give in to that yearning, to find a place where you can be alone with God. This can be as simple as favourite chair where you read or think; it can be a study or a room set apart for prayer; a favourite place in a garden or park; it can be going for a walk on your own. Any means of being with God will do.

As we grow in our relationship with God we will experience times of dread, of struggle to be still and peaceful. Times when we bring to our prayer some huge difficulty or sadness in our lives. Times when our faith is tested through a situation not of our own choosing. All we have is our trust that God will look after us as we pray. This is to enter truly into the burning fiery furnace which could consume us but does not. We must expect that Christ will manifest himself in some way to accompany us in our time of affliction.

There is a fresco in the catacomb of Priscilla in Rome which depicts Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego praising God in a very lively manner in the midst of the fire. Indeed, they seem to be dancing. Hovering over them is a dove with an olive branch in its beak. This detail brings the painting straight into the Christian tradition. In a traditional image of the Holy Spirit which bridges both the Old and New Testaments we are reminded that the saving power of God the Trinity is with them. The dove that Noah sent out from the Ark is a precursor of God's promise that there will never again be such a flood, however much people turn away from God. Similarly, this sign of the Holy Spirit is God's promise to those who believe in the salvation brought by Christ. Both Jews and Christians attest that the divine presence will always be with us, however well or badly we live our faith.

All of us will have experienced times when our lives have 'fiery furnace' aspects. It is useful to reflect on them to rediscover how we found God present with us in them.

iii. The Fire of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is the holy fire that consumes us but does not destroy. You will remember that

> When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

The astounded crowds said,

> 'we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power'. All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'
>
> (Acts 2:1–4, 11–13)

There are several things to note in this passage. The first is that the apostles, and by tradition Our Lady, were gathered together in one place. This gathering together is an essential element in allowing the Holy Spirit into our lives. We cannot be complete as persons or as the Church without others. It is a hard truth to appropriate in our society, where we are encouraged to cultivate individuality and gain it at other people's expense. Eventually we realise that our own fullness of personhood must include other people, otherwise we become crabbed and narrow-minded. This narrative illustrates that there is a unifying power given when all have their hearts looking Godward.

The second thing to note is the 'tongues of fire' that rest on each head. This is such an unusual phenomenon that it can only be that Luke must have been told this is how it was. The Spirit appeared as fire and visible to each. I have met someone whose description of what sometimes happened during her prayer reminded me of the Spirit blessing the disciples that Pentecost. I think some of us are still blessed in this way, perhaps those who have a keen

sense of the unity of creation, which she did. But it was not exactly the same as the original experience of the Apostles, who were given a particular power which they needed to carry out a totally new work for God.

With the fire came the gift of speaking in other tongues. What this gift means, other than that the disciples began to speak intelligibly in other languages to the crowds outside, is that the grace they received through the gift enabled them to preach the Resurrection with confidence, and to be witnesses 'to the ends of the earth', as Jesus had assured them would happen when the Spirit came. We have the same share in this legacy when we receive the Holy Spirit. We are given it first in baptism, blessed with it in confirmation, claim it again whenever we renew our baptismal promises at Easter and rely on it for guidance and strength in our prayer lives.

Some of us may experience the gift of tongues in some form, perhaps as a facility to learn languages; although this facility does not seem to be much counted as a gift of the Spirit these days. Anglicans are rather suspicious of the Pentecostal Church's teaching on tongues, but from my own slight experience of attending a Pentecostal church many years ago, I would say it is a gift which expresses the unity of a praying body. Most of us know this unity in other ways, especially those of us who live in religious communities, for we begin to recognise that God does work when we are gathered 'together in one place'. This is a gradual discovery for each of us as we live out our Christian lives over many years. St Paul himself was chary of proclaiming it a necessary proof of Christian affiliation; it is one of several gifts listed by St Paul in 1 Corinthians 12, in the passage describing and defining the body of Christ. He is clear that 'there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit' (1 Cor. 12:4).

From these gifts fellowship with a group, the 'fire' of the Spirit, the confidence to be witnesses to the Resurrection—flow the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity (some texts translate this as goodness), faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22). Sometimes it is useful to base our confession on them, both to examine how we have failed to cultivate the virtue, the fruit, of living from and through the Holy Spirit, and to give thanks for the occasions when we have used the grace they give.

The third thing to notice is that when the apostles addressed the crowds, each person hearing the message in his own tongue, there were some who thought the apostles were drunk. For whatever reason, they did not understand the foreign languages; therefore the babbling must mean these fishermen and tax collectors, unholy and unclean, had started their Pentecostal celebrations early in the day. Pentecost, or Shavuot, is an important Jewish feast fifty days after Passover, commemorating the giving of the Torah. It is a time of cheerful celebration, of remembering the faithfulness of God to Israel.

There will be times when it is hard to believe in the power of the Spirit, to keep the flame alive, either when we do not know how to respond to situations, or when prayer no longer seems valid or empowering. It is then that we must believe that

> the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Rom. 8:26–27)

There is another reference in the New Testament which links us directly with the Old Testament dispensation, Hebrews 12:28–29:

> Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe: for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

We have come almost full circle back to the burning bush. God is fire, a fire which can consume us, before whom 'we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe'. We offer our worship from a place of awe, a word that can carry both fear and dumbstruck wonder in its meaning. Perhaps our earliest understanding of God arises from fear, from imagery of a strict father whom it is almost impossible to please. But this is an incomplete comprehension. God loves humanity enough to rescue the three men from the fiery furnace, a fire made by humans. Ponder, however, on the consuming fire we call God, whose power is beyond anything we can exercise or manufacture.

Moses experienced this power in the sight of a bush afire which was not reduced to charcoal and ash. Through this phenomenon God could speak,

could demonstrate power and compassion beyond anything Moses had hitherto encompassed in his thinking.

So what is our response to knowing that 'our God is a consuming fire'? We know that fire purifies as well as destroys. Most of us who pray come to a place where we recognise our need of purification, and that only God can do this to and for us. This is 'all God's work' as Father Gilbert Shaw would have said, and only as we let God do this work of transformation will the results be seen in our lives. We know we cannot claim any of the glory; the work is God's through the saving power of Christ's resurrection.

Perhaps this is best illustrated in the story of one of the Desert Fathers, Joseph of Panephysis. Abba Lot paid him a visit, asking for advice:

> 'Abba, as far as I can I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace and, as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?' The old man stood up and stretched his hands towards heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire, and he said to him, 'If you will, you can become all flame.'

Let us enter into the transforming fire of God's love confidently, knowing that we are entering into the everlasting life promised by Christ's Resurrection.

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your people, and kindle in them the fire of your Love.

BOOK REVIEWS

H. A. Hodges, *Flame in the Mountains: Williams Pantycelyn, Ann Griffiths and the Welsh Hymn. Essays and translations*, edited by E. Wyn James (Aberystwyth: Y Lolfa, 2017), 320pp (£12.99) ISBN 9781784614546

In the midst of writing this review I had a haircut and my hairdresser, as is his wont, asked me what I was doing for the rest of that day. When I told him I was writing a review of a book about two eighteenth-century Welsh hymn writers, he murmured a polite acknowledgement and changed the subject. H. A. Hodges, the author of this collection of essays and translations was acutely aware of the difficulty of bringing to wider attention the work of those who '[write] in a language which no one outside [their] own small country understands, and never [find] a competent translator', but did much to redress that balance for Williams Pantycelyn and Ann Griffiths, aided by his close friend and collaborator, A. M. ('Donald') Allchin, a fellow Englishman. Within Wales Pantycelyn and Ann Griffiths are hailed not only as that nation's finest hymn writers but also two of their greatest poets and authors. As Wyn James outlines in his editorial introduction, the hymn is 'one of the great highlights of Welsh literature'. It was a genre of writing that began to develop in earnest during the Methodist Revival of the eighteenth century, a spiritual movement whose significance for the culture and history of Wales cannot be overstated.

James sketches the very different scope of the lives of Williams Pantycelyn and Ann Griffiths: he a leading figure in the early Welsh Methodist movement who lived throughout much of the eighteenth century and spent more than forty years travelling the length and breadth of Wales, preaching and teaching; she a farmer's daughter and later wife, with little education, living only 29 years at the turn of that century, all those years spent in the same farmhouse nestled among the Berwyn Hills of mid-Wales. Their literary output is also greatly contrasting: Williams wrote over eight hundred hymns, two epic poems, thirty elegies and several prose works which, as well as expressing his own emotions and convictions, sought to

give voice and substance to the spiritual experience of the communities he served. Ann's output, however, amounts to around seventy stanzas and eight letters, none of them written initially for a wider audience, but rather to distil her own thoughts and meditations.

That said, the essays collected here show us much that they share, including the way in which the Bible and the distinctive Calvinistic form of Welsh Methodism informs their work. In his essay on Welsh Free Church Hymnody, Hodges opens for the reader a wider perspective on the Calvinist doctrine that inspired them and finds in it 'a vision of the majesty of God … a metaphysical intuition of the sheer Godness of God'. Hodges is also illuminating on the centrality of the doctrine of the eternal Covenant made between the Persons of the Trinity and conceived within that Primal love before the world began, the contemplation and praise of which 'shaped an attitude and an atmosphere which subtly pervades the whole tradition … [embodying] the distinctive way in which [it] apprehends and experiences the relation between human life and the timeless reality of God'. Hodges suggests that it gives to faith an element of stability and assurance because God's action for the salvation and ultimate glorification of humankind flows from the pre-temporal will of the changeless Trinity; rather than it being some kind of emergency divine rescue plan, we were loved and provided for before we were even created. This prompts joy and a wondering gratitude in both hymn writers. 'Sweet it is to remember the covenant made yonder by the Three in One' writes Ann Griffiths, and Pantycelyn calls on God to 'Forget not thy precious faithful covenant, that was made firm before the world's foundations were laid; there thou gavest me a great unfailing treasure …'. The timeless intersects with human life lived in time.

The assurance that the Covenant brings doesn't prevent the natural alternations of light and dark that are part of any Christian life, and in the second essay of this collection, Hodges presents Pantycelyn as a 'poet and analyst of the spiritual life', one who saw himself as a pilgrim rather than a theologian, and who '[i]n poetic narrative, in prose dialogue and in lyric expression … gives us a graphic portrayal of what it is like to live the Christian life' with all its vicissitudes. Hodges traces in the development of Pantycelyn's

verse the maturation of a Christian soul and explains that in his epic poem Theomemphus (conceived and executed in conscious rivalry with Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*) Pantycelyn was at pains to portray a real Christian man living in real circumstances, struggling with the internal conflicts that can beset the soul—not only his own, but also those many to whom he ministered on his travels.

Ann Griffiths opened her own spiritual condition in letters to John Hughes, the itinerant preacher in whom she found a trusted soul friend and kindred spirit. The second (and larger) part of this book contains Hodges' translations of those letters and her hymns, and also of a celebrated essay by Saunders Lewis, preceded by a short introduction written by Hodges. Ann's letters reveal her to be acutely aware of her own perceived shortcomings and at times beset with doubts about the veracity of the 'visitations' she sometimes experienced through her meditations. They are the anxieties of a lover, and no less real and painful for that. She longs to be free of what she experiences as her own inconstancy: 'this is my grief: failing to abide—continually departing. I see my loss is great; but the dishonour and disrespect to God is greater'. God's glory is her foremost care, even in distress.

Lewis, in his essay, quotes John Hughes' statement that 'the way to give the greatest honour to God is to venture upon his mercy according to his plan' and suggests that this is 'what Ann Griffiths learned from him and made the chief point of her poetry'. Lewis further suggests that it was Hughes' gift to Ann of 'the deep things of theology' which turned her into 'one of the greatest poets of Wales'. Ann at times found herself excited beyond containment by her contemplation of the mysteries of faith, and dwells often on the wonder of the divine and human nature contained in the second Person of the Trinity: 'O to gaze upon his Person as he is both God and man'. Profoundly grateful as she is for the work he wrought in salvation, it is his very being that chiefly delights her—she loves him above all for who he is, and for giving us in his Incarnate being 'an object worthy of [our] whole mind' to worship. Thus, when she comes to contemplate the Passion, what chiefly occupies her is not the suffering, nor the salvation it effected, but 'who was on the cross: he whose eyes are as a flame of fire piercing heaven

and earth unable to see his creatures, the work of his hands'. The dominant note in her poetry is wondering love and in more than one hymn she longs to 'look with the angels above' who can perceive and adore fully the wonders of the divine mysteries.

For her, and for Pantycelyn, who writes lyrically of Jesus as 'the great beauty of the world and the highest beauty of heaven', the Incarnate one has not only captured their hearts, but 'widened' them, and the only response can be adoring worship.

Saunders Lewis writes of the friendship between Ann Griffiths and John Hughes as 'intellectual … the discovery in one another of a passionate interest in the same manner of understanding religion', and perhaps something similar drew Hodges and Allchin together. James refers to Allchin as 'a constant background presence in this volume' and Hodges' granddaughter, who has contributed a short biography to this book, also writes of the importance of their working partnership and friendship. My own introduction to Ann Griffiths came through Allchin in 1994, and I knew of his hopes, first to publish the 'big edition' of Ann's works that had been forestalled by Hodges' death, and then this collection of Hodges' essays and translations. I longed for its advent, but had abandoned hope of it once he also died. The publication of this volume now feels nothing short of miraculous, and Wyn James is owed a great debt of gratitude for finally effecting it and adding greatly to its scope by his skilful inclusion of some of the unpublished notes that were to accompany Hodges' and Allchin's edition of Ann's work, his own critical edition of the Welsh text of her hymns, and notes on her scriptural references and allusions. It is of immense value for any serious student of Ann Griffiths, and provides an illuminating and inspiring guide to anyone new to the riches of the Welsh hymn and its two greatest exponents.

NICOLA MASON

The life and work of Ann Griffiths (1776–1805) are also the subject of Llewellyn Cumings, *Ann Griffiths and Her Writings* Fairacres Publications 168 (Oxford: Fairacres Publications, 2012) and Donald Allchin, *The Gift of Theology: The Trinitarian Vision of Ann Griffiths and Elizabeth of Dijon* Fairacres Publications 146 (Oxford: Fairacres Publications, 2005).

Robert Llewelyn, *Why Pray*? compiled and edited by Denise Treissman (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2019), 128pp (£6.99) ISBN 9780232 533781. Available in eBook format.

Anyone who visited the Julian Shrine in Norwich in the late 1970s and the following decade was likely to find Robert Llewelyn praying in that tiny chapel. As chaplain to the Shrine he knew that his first task was to be a praying presence in that place, and to be available to the pilgrims who visited. Many of the papers and essays collected here were the result of those encounters and the hours of prayer in that chapel; they bear the marks of an authentic life spent before the Lord to whom he had given his life as a young man. His years teaching at Westminster School, then at Sherwood College in India, as chaplain at Bede House (the SLG house in Kent), before accepting the post in Norwich, came to fruition there. His pastoral care for any who came to him is particularly reflected in his teaching on the rosary, especially as an aid to prayer in times of depression. But he was, above all, a wise teacher instructing people how to pray contemplatively. I was pleasantly surprised to find the text of a talk he gave when I was in First Vows at Boxmoor, 'Prayer is Offering'. It helped me greatly back in 1973, and still carries the authority of good teaching and it was refreshing to meet it again.

Father Llewelyn wrote many books to encourage and guide people in their prayer. This volume is both a valuable postscript to those volumes, and a springboard for anyone enquiring about, or embarking on the way of prayer.

Robin Daniels, *The Virgin Eye: Towards a Contemplative Life*, edited by Katherine Daniels (Watford: Instant Apostle, 2016) 416pp, (£9.99). ISBN 9781909728523. and **Robin Daniels, *Listening: Hearing the Heart*** (Watford: Instant Apostle, 2017), 192pp (£8.99) ISBN 9781909728745.

Robin Daniels was a Jungian analyst who had originally trained as a counsellor through the Westminster Pastoral Foundation. At the time of his unexpected death in 2012 he was a supervisor at the St Marylebone Centre for Healing and Counselling, and these two volumes were in preparation for publication. The final editing fell, therefore, to his widow, Katherine.

Listening is written primarily for those who engage in pastoral counselling, and recognises that listening to the other is of primary importance. A good counsellor or therapist who does not pretend to have the answers to the client's problems, may need a way of addressing them to enable the person to make sense of their life and experience. Listening is essentially a contemplative stance and for Daniels was underpinned by his habit of praying. The book is written in an approachable manner so that the non-specialist reader, especially someone wondering how to live in what I would term 'disengaged engagement' with others, will find it useful.

The Virgin Eye has its origins in a retreat he gave in the 1990s examining the interface between psychology and spirituality. Over the succeeding twenty years he expanded the talks to book length, so that this volume has become a statement both of his understanding of that interface and of the person he was. It is a text which reveals a widely-read man who used quotations from authors and poets as foundations for further expansion of his own thoughts on living a life of prayer. He takes us from a consideration of the challenges of contemporary living to our response to God, ourselves and others. Each of the five sections has short reflections to support the main theme. It is an ideal spiritual reading text but it needs to be read slowly to absorb its richness.

SISTER CHRISTINE SLG

ASSOCIATES RETREAT 2020

22nd–26th July 2020

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

Led by : Canon Andrew Teal &
Sister Clare-Louise SLG

Cost: £322.00 Deposit: £35.00 (non-refundable)

Forms & Information:
Judith Lloyd Thomas
32 Holcombe Drive. Llandrindod Wells. LD1 6DN
Tel: 01597 823020

There will not be an Oxford Retreat for Associates this year due to building works.

BOOKS RECEIVED

From: Bloomsbury

Alive in God: A Christian Imagination, Timothy Radcliffe, 2019,
£12.99. ISBN: 978-1-4729-7020-6

Faith Finding A Voice, Cardinal Vincent Nichols, 2018,
£12.99. ISBN: 978-1-472-950444

Key Words of Pope Francis, Joshua J. McElwee & Cindy Wooden, 2018,
£10.99. ISBN: 978-1-472-95577-7

With Him, Bruno Cadore, 2019,
£12.99. ISBN: 978-1-4729-7015-2

World Without End, Thomas Keating & Lucette Verboven, 2017,
PP: £10.99 ebook: £9.99. ISBN: 978-1-4729-4248-7

From: Canterbury Press

Incarnational Mission, Samuel Wells, 2018,
£14.99. ISBN: 978-1-786-22036-3

Where Prayer Flourishes, Sarah Coakley, 2018,
ISBN: 978-1-78622-061-5

From: Dartman Longman & Todd

The Naked God, Vincent Strudwick with Jane Shaw, 2017,
£12.99. ISBN: 978-0232-53256-2

From: Franciscan Media

The Art of Thomas Merton, John Moses, 2018,
£11.56. ISBN: 978-63253-184-1

From: Hodder

Streams of Living Water, Richard Foster, 2019,
£10.99. ISBN: 978-1-47366-212-4

From: Oxford University Press

The Monk's Cell, Paula Pyrce, 2018,
£47.99. ISBN: 978-0-19-068058-9

From: Paraclete Press

Give Love and Receive the Kingdom, Benedicta Ward SLG, 2018,
USD$24.99. ISBN: 978-1-64060-097-3

From: SCM Press

Becoming Friends of Time, John Swinton, 2017,
£19.99. ISBN: 978-0334-05557-0

Church in Life, Michael Moynagh, 2017,
£35.00. ISBN: 978-0-334-05451-1

Melodies of a New Monasticism, Craig Gardiner, 2018,
ISBN: 978-0-33405-720-8

Oneness: the Dynamics of Monasticism, Stephen Platten, 2017,
£19.99. ISBN: 978-0-334-05532-7

Raging With Compassion, John Swinton, 2017,
£25.00. ISBN: 978-0-334-05638-6
The Pattern of our Calling, David Hoyle, 2017,
£25.00. ISBN: 978-0-334-05472-6

From: SCM St Anthony's Greek Orthodox Monastery Press

St Anthony the Great, Father Euthymius, 2019,
ISBN: 978-1-945699-01-6

Supporting the Sisters of the Love of God

SLG Charitable Trust Ltd

Registered Charity Number 261722

The Community is very grateful for the support we receive in so many ways. If you would like to add your support to enable our life of prayer and reconciliation, please consider:

Making a Regular Gift, either by cheque or standing order. Over time these add up to a significant sum. If you are a UK taxpayer you can also Gift Aid your donation. This enables the Charity to claim an extra 25p from HMRC for every £1 given.

Gifts of Shares and Securities can attract tax relief and capital gains tax relief. For further information, please contact the Charity Office.

Leaving a Legacy in your will to the Charity will help support us in our work.

Standing Order and Gift Aid forms are available on the Community's website, together with information about legacies, bequests and other tax-effective ways of giving.

www.slg.org.uk

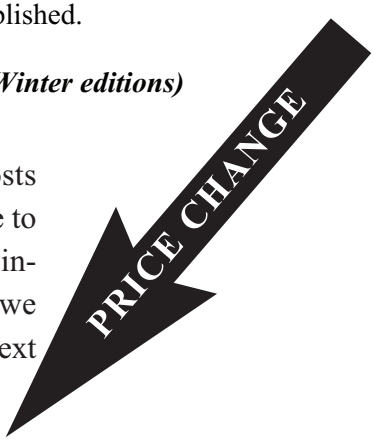
If you would like more information, please contact:

The Charity Office
Convent of the Incarnation
Fairacres Parker Street
Oxford OX4 1TB
Email: **charityoffice@slg.org.uk**

FAIRACRES CHRONICLE

The *Fairacres Chronicle* is the journal of the Community of the Sisters of the Love of God and is published twice a year, summer and winter. The subscription runs from January until December. Customers who subscribe after the publication of the summer issue will receive the summer issue, plus the winter issue when published.

SUBSCRIPTION *(Summer and Winter editions)*



With rising postage and printing costs we have had to make a small increase to the subscription rate. This is the first increase for four years and we hope we will be able to hold this price for the next two to three years.

The subscription rates for 2020 (inclusive of shipping) are:

Area:	£ Sterling	US $	Euros
UNITED KINGDOM	**£ 7.50**		
EUROPE (Airmail)	**£ 9.00**	**$ 14.00**	**€ 10.50**
OUTSIDE EUROPE (Airmail)	**£ 11.00**	**$ 17.50**	

Subscription forms are available from SLG Press and from the website
www.slgpress.co.uk
We also accept orders online.

COMMUNITY OF THE SISTERS
OF THE LOVE OF GOD
An Anglican Contemplative Community
Convent of the Incarnation, Fairacres
Parker Street, Oxford OX4 1TB
www.slg.org.uk

Telephone: 01865 721301 (press 1)
sisters@slg.org.uk
Guest Sister: Telephone: 01865 258152
guests@slg.org.uk

TELEPHONING THE COMMUNITY
Best times are 10:30–12:00 noon; 3:30–4:30 p.m.; 6:00–7:00 p.m.
Messages left on voicemail are picked up regularly.

Sister Anne SLG:
St Isaac's Retreat, PO Box 93, Opononi 0445, Northland,
Aotearoa/New Zealand Telephone: 00 64 9 4058 433

SLG PRESS
Convent of the Incarnation, Fairacres
Parker Street, Oxford OX4 1TB
Telephone: 01865 241874 (press 3)

General matters:	**editor@slgpress.co.uk**
Orders & accounts:	**orders@slgpress.co.uk**
Website:	**www.slgpress.co.uk**

TELEPHONING SLG PRESS
Best times are Monday to Thursday 9:00 a.m.–2:45 p.m.
Leave a message on voicemail if there is no-one in the office.

SLG Charitable Trust Limited
Registered Office: Convent of the Incarnation, as above
Tel: 01865 241849 (press 2)
charityoffice@slg.org.uk
Reg. in England No. 990049; Reg. Charity No. 261722