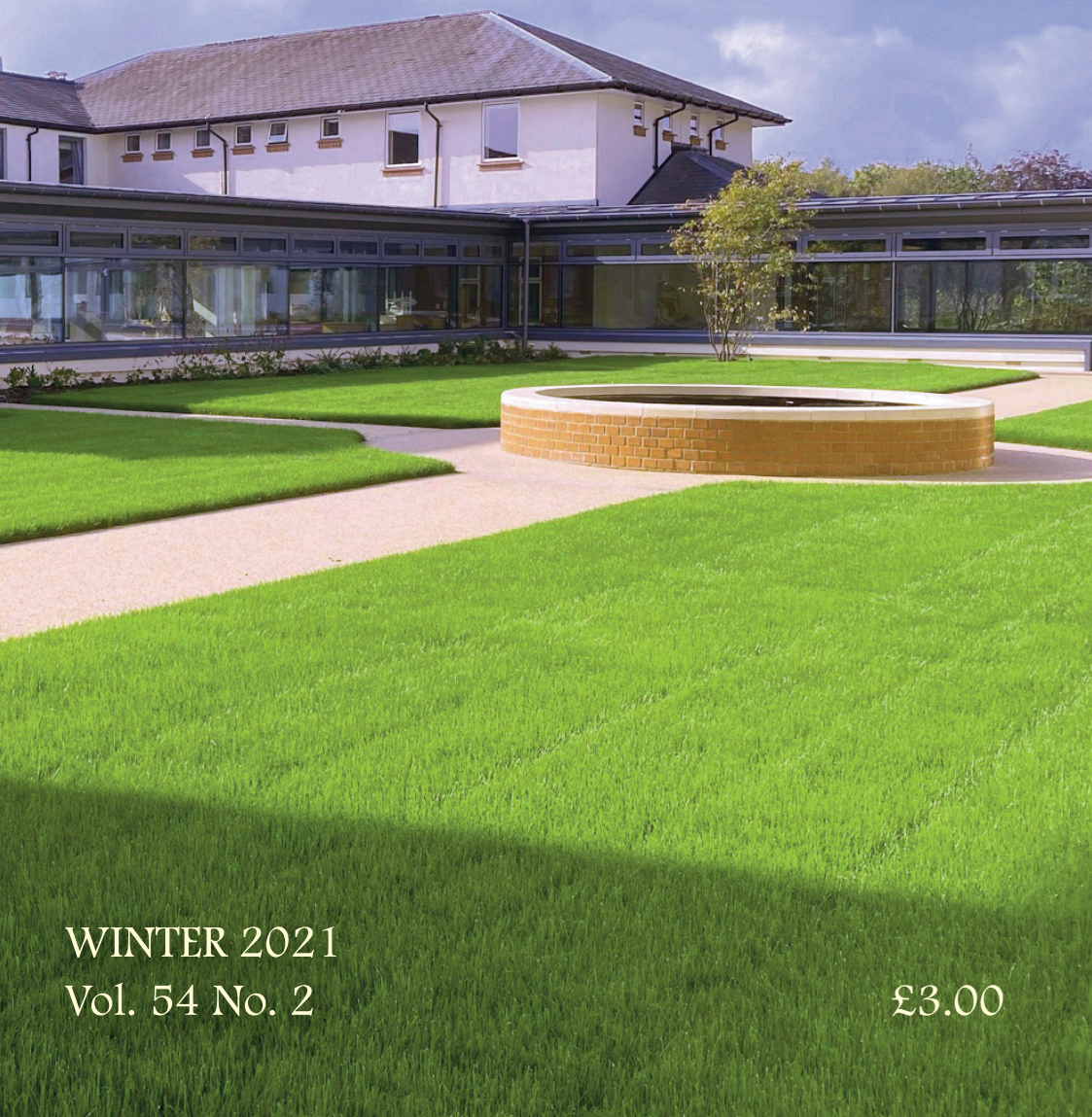


FAIRACRES CHRONICLE



WINTER 2021
Vol. 54 No. 2

£3.00

CONTENTS

COMMUNITY NOTES	1
<i>Sister Clare-Louise SLG</i>	
SISTER TESSA OF THE LOVE OF GOD	
<i>Sister Carol CHN</i> 7	
<i>Sister Christine SLG</i> 10	
DOORS TO OPEN: AN ALPHABET OF HYMNS	13
<i>Sister Raphael SLG</i>	
CONTEMPLATION AND COMTEMPLATIVE PRAYER	14
<i>John Townroe FKC</i>	
DANTE'S SPIRITUAL JOURNEY: A READING OF THE DIVINE COMEDY	18
<i>Tony Dickinson</i>	
INSIGHTS ON HATRED, ENVY AND HYPOCRISY IN GREGORY OF NYSSA'S HOMILIES	33
<i>Jonathan Farrugia</i>	
A BIRD IN THE HAND	38
<i>Sister Barbara June SLG</i>	
SHIELDING	41
<i>Sister Christine SLG</i>	
REVIEWS OF BOOKS	
<i>Serenhedd James, The Cowley Fathers: A History of the English Congregation of the Society of St John the Evangelist and Steven Hawes CR, The Cowley Fathers in Philadelphia.</i> 45	
<i>Pierre-André Burton OCSO, Aelred of Rievaulx: An Existential and Spiritual Biography and Aelred of Rievaulx: The Liturgical Sermons, The Reading- Cluny Collection, 1 of 2, Sermons 85–133.</i> 51	
CHRONICLE SUBSCRIPTION FORM	back page

© 2021 Community of the Sisters of the Love of God, Oxford

ISSN: 0307-1413

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

The publishers have no control over, or responsibility for, any third-party website referred to herein. All internet addresses given herein were correct at the time of going to press. The publisher regrets any inconvenience caused if addresses have changed or sites have ceased to exist, but can accept no responsibility for any such changes.

SLG Press
Convent of the Incarnation
Fairacres • Oxford OX4 1TB
www.slgpress.co.uk

Printed by
Grosvenor Group Ltd, Loughton, Essex

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 25 pence 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.

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

COMMUNITY NOTES

Dear Friends,



I am glad to be able to report that I am writing these notes in my Office back in the Convent of the Incarnation! After a long journey (and though there remains work to be completed and moving in to be done), at last we can see and enjoy our beautiful new surroundings.

As many of you will be aware, the Convent was a long building with several changes in floor level; those of you who have stayed with us for retreats will remember the long, sloping cat-run between the front drive and Fellowship House garden. There were a lot of problems of accessibility, though for the exercise-conscious it did allow for plenty of walking during the day! Now however, though St Mary's itself looks very much the same as before, as you will see from the photograph, it forms part of an enclosed quadrangle with a new wing directly opposite St Joseph's and new glass cloisters around a central landscaped area. Sisters now have access to the library, Chapel, Chapter House and common room all on one level, and the new front entrance is part of the body of the buildings, rather than on one end.

The design produced by our architects, MEB Design, enhances the vision of Paul Waterhouse, who designed the Chapel and St Mary's in the 1920s, and provides us with a building that we hope will enable the life of the Community into the future. A particularly nice touch is the return of the shutters to St Mary's: they had been part of the architect's design in the 1920s, but had been removed in the 1980s when their condition began to





deteriorate. It gives the building a rather continental feel, especially on days when the sky is blue and the sun shining.

At the moment we are in the process of gradually re-inhabiting the buildings and re-establishing our life as a Community after our time in dispersion, but we look forward to the point when we can once again welcome guests for retreats and quiet days. The new guest accommodation consists of three new cottages in the grounds, and a guest area in the new wing of the building.

Buildings provide a very interesting spiritual metaphor! At the beginning of the planning process, we were encouraged to see how problematic areas in the building might mirror challenges in the Community. If areas of the building were not accessible to all, was that a reflection of how we were as a Community? It is certainly significant that important rooms within the Convent were not accessible to everyone except with great difficulty.

A newly renovated building is, of course, only the beginning of the story, and can only be brought alive by the Community living within it. We have almost 100 years of Community history in St Mary's and the Chapel, which will celebrate their centenary

in two years' time, and I am conscious of past Sisters who have lived out their lives and vocations in this place since we arrived on the site in 1911. Not long after the Convent was handed back to us at the end of August the memorial stones in the Shrine for the four Sisters who have died during the past two years, Sister Elizabeth, Sister Alison, Sister Barbara June, and Sister Tessa, were put in place in the Cloister in St Mary's, and it was moving to see their names among those of the other departed Sisters.



On 3 September we were joined by our Bishop Visitor, Michael Lewis, for a simple blessing service of the buildings. We processed around the four sides of our new quadrangle singing 'Christ is Made the Sure Foundation' and celebrating our new home. The memorial stone in the new wing echoes the wording from Psalm 16 put above the Visitors Chapel door when the Chapel was built, which the New Revised Standard Version translates as 'the boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage'.





THIS STONE WAS LAID ON
14th SEPTEMBER 2020
BY THE WARDENS OF THE COMMUNITY
OF THE SISTERS OF THE LOVE OF GOD
THE LOT IS FALLEN UNTO ME
IN A FAIR GROUND
Ps 118



As we re-gather in the Convent, and as we re-establish our life in common as Sisters of the Love of God, St Paul lays a challenge before us:

For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw — the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done. (1 Cor. 3:11–13)

Christ is our foundation stone; the foundation stone gives stability and strength to the structure and to build on this foundation means to build in a way which is Christ-like and in line with the Gospel. That encourages the Community to re-visit and re-imagine how our life as Sisters of the Love of God should be expressed and lived out.

The foundation of our life as church and as community is Christ. What is the quality of our workmanship as we build upon that foundation? At the time of a new beginning, such as the Community is experiencing, it is good to pause and reflect on past, present, and future.

The phrase *retrieve, reclaim and reappropriate* was offered to me recently; what elements of our life as a Community so far would we wish to reclaim and reaffirm, and what new ways and possibilities might the Holy Spirit be leading us towards?

When the Community was first founded in 1906 the world was less than a decade away from the First World War, a war that proved to be so costly in terms of human life and yet did not lead to the promised and hoped-for peace. Those earliest Sisters would have had prayer for peace and reconciliation at the heart of their lives. Now, as the Community begins its return to the Convent, the news headlines are full of reports of the work of the COP26 Climate Conference. Already the arguments about whether enough has been done at the conference to make a real difference are beginning, but I am reminded that what is really needed is metanoia, a change of heart and mind among us all, and that there is a work of prayer and conversion of heart for all to engage in if we hope to reverse or halt the effects of climate change.

Conversion of heart is a core concept for the Christian and monastic life. In our own small ways and ordinary circumstances we can engage in this: practically we can engage in efforts to recycle, shop ethically and seek a life that leaves as small an ecological footprint as possible. Spiritually we can

engage in the work of prayer and conversion that helps our world in the shift of consciousness that will lead us to see ourselves as parts of an interconnected and interdependent whole, part of a creation seen as good by the God who created it.

I have recently come across a description of people of prayer being likened to a network formed from interconnected lights enclosing and cradling our world, and that strikes me as a helpful description of the place of prayer. Just as the events of World War One must have seemed incomprehensible, and indeed unbearable, to the earliest Sisters, now we find ourselves living in a situation where we can feel hopeless and helpless. Yet our foundation stone is Christ; and while that may not prevent us from being pessimistic about our future as a planet, at the same time it leads us to a realization that our hope is firm and in Christ. Fr Gilbert taught the Community that ‘your work is standing’. We stand in the place of prayer, just as the Cross stands at the heart of the world, bringing healing and redemption in the darkest of circumstances.

So, it seems to me that, even as we all stand at a crossroads in terms of the needs of the world, and as the Community renews and re-appropriates its calling in our new situation, the call to prayer at the heart of our lives stands firm and unchanging.

As we approach the Christmas season, I pray that the peace of the newborn Christ Child will bring peace and healing to the peoples and creatures of our beautiful but troubled world. The Sisters join me in prayer for you all, and we thank you for your prayers for us.

God Bless
CLARE-LOUISE SLG



SISTER TESSA OF THE LOVE OF GOD

12 May 1935–22 June 2021

Funeral Addresses

15 July 2021

SISTER CAROL CHN

The Lord came down in the cloud and stood there before him and proclaimed His Name – the Lord.

Exodus 34:5

THE COMMUNITY OF THE HOLY NAME and the Sisters of the Love of God have in common a patronal festival, that of the Holy Name of Jesus; it is celebrated on 7 August and preceded by the Feast of the Transfiguration. God's impeccable timing meant that both communities were movingly represented around Sister Tessa in her dying. It seems that the cloud of unknowing that protects us from being overwhelmed by God's glory is sometimes partly lifted so that we catch a fleeting glimpse of Love's overriding providence and attention to the detail of our lives. We can give great thanks for that.



I learned that Tessa had a particular liking for the Gospel telling of the miraculous feeding of the five thousand, but more particularly for the snapshot within it of that pitifully inadequate offering, but an offering nevertheless, of the five loaves and two fish. All four Gospels recount the occasion; but in St John's version there is an additional detail. 'One of his disciples said to Jesus, "There is a boy here who has five loaves and two fish. But what are they amongst so many people?"'

A comment from Sister Tessa's years with my community came to mind. They struck me at the time and now crystallize around this detail. I had been away on a tough Holy Week engagement in an impoverished area of Leeds. It was a bitterly cold, late March with snow still lying and I had contracted a severe throat infection. Returning to the convent on Holy Saturday I was picked up at Malvern Link station in the convent car by Sister Tessa. Our local chemist was shut so there was no medicinal help on that front. "We

will just have to do what we can with what we have got”, was Tessa’s comment. In the following days, as I definitely missed the Easter ceremonies, she looked after me with what was available.

An earlier episode: this time I was picking up Tessa from Heathrow Airport. She had returned from Africa after working at the Mantsonyane hospital, or medical centre, in the highlands of Lesotho. The resident doctor left but she stayed on for some while with an unqualified African sister and with sporadic visits by doctors flying in from other hospitals in the area. When local people came for help, she did what she could with what she had. She carried out procedures beyond her training as there were no other resources available, using what was to hand, working with what was given. Tessa returned to England partly broken by her efforts. Under God she had offered her loaves and fish at great personal cost.

This pattern is true of much of Tessa’s life. Born into the extreme poverty of the Northeast in the thirties, she seems to have had almost nothing. Separated from her entire natural family, none of whom she was to see again until her fifties, I believe Tessa was for a brief while in an orphanage, before being mercifully fostered. Her first foster mother later died. Yet within that stricken framework was a gifted person with a richly talented personality. Under God, through the Spirit, Tessa worked wonderfully with the hand she was initially dealt. She sat lightly, in one sense, with that suffering, but the early years left their scars.

Tessa had a liking for some of life’s luxuries, notably perfume (rather restricted on that score as a religious!) and good clothes (ditto). She did a little modelling of clothes at one stage, but undertook a nursing training, completing it top of her year. But, in response to vocation, in her late twenties she arrived at the Convent of the Holy Name looking wonderful, so her Novice Guardian later told me, in a red dress and hat. Stronger, deeper than the attraction to the good things of life was her attraction to the good things and the beauty of God. I recall Tessa sharing with me a devotional song that she liked, by Estelle White:

Oh the love of my Lord is the essence
Of all that I love here on Earth.
All the beauty I see He has given to me
And His giving is gentle as silence.

Every day, every hour, every moment
Have been blest by the strength of His love.
At the turn of the tide He is there at my side,
And His touch is as gentle as silence.

Within CHN Tessa had a varied life. She loved her years in Lesotho, despite the cost. She enjoyed her time in charge of the Chester Retreat House, where her capacity for friendship and her love of, and attractiveness to people were evident. But in the mid-1980s, toward her fiftieth birthday, when she was already Novice guardian, Tessa felt the pressure of the Spirit to a different stage of life. Drawn to night prayer she began to perceive that God was calling her to a more enclosed way. She told me she had a particular burden of concern for the imprisoned.

Sister Christine will talk about Tessa's life after her transfer to SLG, but some years after she moved I was able to visit her. Indicating the names of departed sisters on the wall in the cloister she was more than content that her name would one day be there. So far as we are allowed it in this life she felt she had come home. She said, too, how relieved she was that she would not have to do any more public speaking, glad that this part of her life was over. Rather defensively I replied that it would always be integral to mine. Tessa would enjoy it that I am speaking today and I thank SLG for that privilege.

It is entirely appropriate that 1 Corinthians 13 should be the chosen epistle, since Tessa's special dedication was to the Love of God; that open secret at the heart of the Universe. Our offerings, our sacrifices, the laying-down of our lives are valid, says St Paul, only as they conform to Love, to the love of God in Jesus Christ who is the pattern of all self-giving. For us that life of love is to be worked out in the ordinariness of the everyday. I think Tessa had grasped that. Her life was consecrated to God in her own distinctive way; as distinctive as the unusual timbre of her voice. She did not fit into easy categories. God fashioned her through the material of her circumstances and personality. By the power of the Spirit, she offered her loaves and fish, that which was given her to be shared with others. See how astonishingly she did touch the lives of many others, not least through her warmly engaging manner.

'You are to be taken, blest, broken and distributed, that the work of the incarnation may go forward', said St Augustine. This may be truly said of Tessa, whose life was broken at its very beginnings and successively broken

in the course of vocation. But how blest she was in her response to life, to others and to God. How wonderfully she was distributed both in this country and in Africa, through CHN and through SLG, in open and in hidden ways.

I had a lengthy visit to Tessa in St John's Home some months before the pandemic engulfed us. So frail, so imprisoned by her health, she yet spoke of thanksgiving and the thanks she deliberately gave to God at the end of each day. She was truly thankful. This was classic Tessa, as was that winning smile, still there on the day of her death. She had somehow learned to make the best of what life brought, of the loaves and the fishes, however meagre they might seem.

As we move toward the breaking of the bread in her Requiem Eucharist we may indeed also give thanks to God for dear Tessa, for her broken but assuredly blest and somehow victorious life in Christ. We too offer our loaves and fish, the circumstances of our lives, our distinctive personalities, our whole selves; to be taken up into the beauty of Jesus's Name and into the un-failing love of God. So may we be blest, broken and distributed as God sees fit for the life of his world in our times. So may we too, in due course, come to share with our sister Tessa in the glory that awaits us. Amen.

SISTER CHRISTINE SLG

WHEN SOMEONE ASKS TO TRANSFER their commitment to the religious life to another community it is no small thing. It is hard for the Sister to make this move and for the community where she made her Profession to let her go and for her to leave it. And though the new community welcomes the person as a 'sharer in a common hope' (to use a phrase from our Rule), we require the person to become a novice once again to discern whether her vocation is with us. We ask this knowing that she is already trained within a certain discipline and community ethos, and has lived it out faithfully for many years. I have always been impressed by those who commit themselves so simply and humbly to learning how another community 'works', because they believe this is where God is asking them to live, physically and spiritually. We in our turn benefit from the life-experience and firm grounding in prayer and worship that they bring into our community life. So it was with Sister Tessa.

When she committed herself to live under our Rule and Statutes we soon benefited from her many gifts. Her nursing skills were used to care for the elderly Sisters in the infirmary; over time she worked in the Laundry and the Sacristy; did a lot of housework; and looked after guests. Despite her relief at not having to give talks, over the years she led retreat days or spoke to groups about the things of God. She was Prioress at the Convent here, as well as being in charge of Bede House in Kent and the convent at Boxmoor, a suburb of Hemel Hempstead. Her time in charge of the retreat house in Chester had given her the experience of living with a small group of Sisters, guiding and supporting them in their vocation. Her good humour and un-failing courtesy, combined with a gentle firmness, made living with her in the smaller houses a joy. While she was in charge at Boxmoor, the Chapter voted to close the house and sell the property for redevelopment, and she was there until we left. The two years preparing to leave were a saga in themselves, full of incident, including irate neighbours protesting against the change of use and two people from the Badger Trust who came several times to make sure we had no badgers in the grounds. It would have affected the sale of the property if we had. We made our own searches and could find no evidence; indeed, one of the Oblate Sisters who was staying at the time helped Sister Tessa search one evening after Compline. She writes, 'In the twilight we went into the garden to hunt for badgers and look for a sett. We scoured the large garden, but thankfully, no badger setts.' I suspect this may have been something of a tongue-in-cheek exercise which tickled Sister Tessa's sense of humour.

In May 1999 she and Sister Clare-Louise travelled together to St Isaac's Retreat in Northland, New Zealand. In the six months or so that she was there we entered a new Millennium and Sister Clare-Louise remembers a photo taken that New Year's day that is 'full of joy'. She loved the place, and her talent for making friends meant a whole new set were found amongst the local neighbours, both Maori and Pakeha. On the day she travelled to Auckland to return to England, she and the other Sisters were treated to a meal at a restaurant that specialized in fine dining; one of the items on the menu was quails' eggs. Her love of the good things of life was truly indulged that day. These were totally enjoyed when they were on offer; however, when they were not, and the monastic life demanded a stricter discipline, she 'made do', and more than made do, with what was given. If it included a

good book, whether a novel or absorbing spiritual reading, or the opportunity to watch an old film on TV, life was full to overflowing.

I have mentioned Sister Tessa's gift for making friends. It is perhaps this that people will remember about her first and foremost. She practised a gracious hospitality and made guests feel welcome and cared for. Perhaps because of her own experiences she was able to help many people through difficult patches in their own lives and encourage them to explore avenues that would enable them to continue to serve and grow in their understanding of the Love of God. 'Of the Love of God' was the dedication she took when she joined us, reinforcing the Community's general dedication to and pursuit of that same love. A tautology perhaps, but for her there was nothing more she wanted for herself or for others. We are thankful to have known her and lived with her. As the Book of Revelation says: 'His servants shall serve Him, and they shall see His face' (22:3-4). Our hope and prayer are that Sister Tessa now sees God's Love as we find it in Jesus in its totality for her and for us all.



ASSOCIATES RETREAT 2022

20-24 July 2022

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

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

Cost: £350.00 Deposit: £35.00 (non-refundable)
Forms & Information: Carol Richards, SLG Charitable Trust Ltd.
Email: charityoffice@slg.org.uk

Bookings must be made by 17 June 2022.

DOORS TO OPEN: AN ALPHABET OF HYMNS

A Hymn Meditation for every day for a month, excluding Sundays

SISTER RAPHAEL SLG

WORD	HYMN	NUMBER IN <i>NEH</i>
Adoration	O come, let us adore him	30
Blessing	Blest are the pure in heart	341
Cross	In the Cross of Christ I glory	379
Divine	Come down, O Love Divine	137
Eternal	Eternal Father, strong to save	354
Faith	Faithful Shepherd, feed me	282
Grace	God of mercy, God of grace	366
Hope	All my hope on God is founded	333
Immortal	Immortal, invisible, God only wise	377
Joy	Joy and triumph everlasting	229
Kingdom	Thy kingdom come! On bended knee	500
Love	Love Divine, all loves excelling	408
Mercy	To mercy, pity, peace, and love	469
Name	How sweet the name of Jesus sounds	374
Onward	Onward, Christian soldiers	435
Prayer	Father, hear the prayer we offer	357
Quietness	Drop thy still dews of quietness	353, v.4
Rejoice	Rejoice, the Lord is King	443
Silence	Silent night! Holy night!	35
Teaching	Teach me, my God and King	456
Unity	O Trinity, O Unity	54, v.3
Voice	I heard the voice of Jesus say	376
Word	When came in flesh the incarnate Word	17
X	Christ, whose glory fills the skies	234
Ye	Ye servants of God	476
Zeal	With a flaming zeal for right	199, v.3



CONTEMPLATION AND CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

JOHN TOWNROE

NOT FAR FROM THE HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT, behind Westminster Abbey, there was a house of prayer named St Edward's House. The chapel in the house had a plaque on the wall with this inscription:

ACTS OF CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

Stillness of Body

Inspiration by the Spirit

Concentration with Christ

Silence in God

The words came, I believe, from Father Christopher Bryant SSJE, who was Superior of the house 1955–68. I do not know of any commentary on them. The following reflections are offered as lines of thought that have occurred to me, which others might like to pursue for themselves.

'Stillness of Body'

Contemplation in all its forms requires some degree of stillness. To contemplate is to gaze at, to gaze at steadily and with full attention. This cannot be done unless we slow down and keep still.

The capacity to contemplate is a human one, common to all; it is a faculty that grows with use or withers with disuse; it can be applied variously in everyday life at different levels. More often than not we use it without thinking about it. For example, I see people contemplating in supermarkets: they slow down and stand still in front of the shelves, they gaze at what is there, reacting, evaluating, responding and choosing. Or at another level, the scene in an art gallery reveals people either rushing around anxiously trying to see as many pictures as possible, or slowing down and stopping in front of some that attract them, in order to take in (as we say) what is there to be seen. The impressions received by those in a hurry are likely to be superficial. Those who pause a while go deeper, and a strange two-way traffic begins. As they stop and focus on a picture, they will begin to receive impressions or 'messages' of various kinds—visual, mental, emotional—some slight, some strong, and some entirely unexpected. They thought they were in control when they began to subject the picture to their scrutiny,

even to their judgement. But to their surprise they find themselves being subjected to an impact from beyond themselves. New insights, new perspectives on life, new angles of vision may be received. Contemplation in this and many other situations can come alive startlingly, sometimes with life-changing consequences.

What then is contemplative prayer? I believe it is, on its human side, the use in time of prayer, of this capacity or faculty to stop, keep still, look and listen. In this sense, it is open to all. It has to keep the same rules, but it comes about, if it is authentic, in response to an interior call to seek God in this way. It is not self-chosen. If it is attempted as a piece of spiritual self-culture, or following a fashion, or trying to get the experiences which others seem to get, harm is done and disaster may follow. For contemplative prayer also opens up two-way traffic. We need to take care (and perhaps good advice) that what is reaching us 'from beyond' is not our confused ego, but the living and true God.

The use of the contemplative capacity in prayer requires discipline: to learn how to slow down and keep still inwardly as well as outwardly is a demanding discipline in itself. Normally, too, the call to contemplative prayer comes after a considerable time of fidelity in discipleship. Total self-abandonment to God is asked, a surrender in love; for contemplative prayer is love responding to Love, or it is nothing.

'Inspiration by the Spirit'

A genuine desire for contemplative prayer is itself an inspiration by the Spirit. The desire will be tested in subsequent experience. If it is not of God, it will not survive. If it is, it will be strengthened.

What is it that contemplative prayer in the Christian tradition is gazing at? The Psalmist points to the answer: 'You speak in my heart and say "Seek my face". Your face, Lord, will I seek' (Ps. 27:11). A face is the focal point of a person. It is in the face of Christ, says St Paul, that God gives us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God (2 Cor. 4:6). The focus for prayer is God revealed in the face of Christ.

How on earth can our gaze reach so exalted a focal point? It is impossible by and of ourselves. The Holy Spirit alone can achieve in us what we cannot, by energizing our latent capacity, by waking it up, by enlarging it and directing its use. Waiting upon God in stillness implies a cry from the

heart, ‘Lord, I cannot do it. Only you can in me’. By some such words as these, humbly accepting dependence, the door of the heart is opened to the Spirit’s inspiration.

Once the door is open, the initial focal point may well be something material and visible. For example, the preliminary focus may be on a piece of written material (especially the Gospels, the Psalms, or a hymn-book); or on a picture, an icon, music, scenery; so many different things can provide a starting-point. This is good, and we can use our imagination freely to find what suits us best, but it needs to be watched. We can get stuck in the sheer delight of the chosen means. If we rest in the means, we may miss the end. We have to learn how to pass through the means to what lies beyond. In other words, symbols are valuable in time of prayer if they lead us on to the One who is symbolized, the One who is beyond all images.

‘Concentration with Christ’

Notice that this phrase does not say concentration *on* Christ (though it might well). It says ‘with’. The idea here is a dynamic one, of being alongside Christ in the activity of prayer, praying with him as the Gospels show him, full face to ‘Abba, Father’. The prayer of Jesus is like a current of love, a flowing stream, that can catch us up into itself. Our part is, so to speak, to jump into the stream and let ourselves go in the direction of its flow, swimming with it as best we can. Its immense strength will make good our weakness.

I like to think of prayer as any movement of the human heart towards God. This offers a wide enough base to make room for prayer of any kind and for praying people of all religions. On this basis, we can say that Christian prayer is any movement of the human heart towards God, as God is known through Jesus Christ.

Someone may ask, what does this movement feel like? We can answer up to a point from ordinary human experience. For instance, we may say that our heart ‘goes out’ to someone else, in compassion, sympathy, love. The very phrase suggests that our heart ‘moves’ from its self-centre out to the other. Or after a disagreement we say sometimes that we ‘met each other half-way’, implying a two-way movement making peace and restoring unity. We know what this feels like inside ourselves. The ‘feel’ of this experience of going out to another is something like the ‘feel’ of the human heart moving towards God.

However, there is a radical difference from this human analogy to be kept in mind. It lies in this: that God is more than our friend, he is our creator and redeemer, and always holds the initiative. 'Bidden or not bidden, God is present.' We are speaking, therefore, of a movement which God has initiated, for which he gives the energy as well as the desire. The Holy Spirit is the Divine energy. His is the mighty movement active in prayer that brings believers into union with God. We can go to a time of prayer confident in this. The Divine purpose in this means of grace is nothing less than union with God.

'Silence in God'

Contemplative prayer is not to be snatched at, nor can we manufacture it by techniques. Artificial contrivances might be able to induce stillness and silence of a kind, but it would not be silence in God. It is the magnet of God's love, no less, that gradually draws us away from illusions and self-centredness, and evokes the response of love to Love.

The operations of the Spirit take time. Words, thoughts, meditations, acts of will, stirrings of affections and resolutions; all these and much else have their place along the path of a deepening discipleship. They serve their purpose in developing love's response, probably to life's end. It is, however, when words begin to fail, when pictures in the mind begin to lose their appeal, when concepts of God begin to seem cramping and to fall far short of reality ... then it is that silence in God starts to take over. Dissatisfaction with everything else grows in the actual time of prayers. We are struck dumb, as it were, awed by wonder, the wonder of transcendent glory.

As to results, it is a serious mistake to look for them in the course of praying. The time may pass in peace or conflict, in light or darkness, in labour or rest. We may be surprised by joy or surprised by feelings of emptiness. It may feel as if nothing at all is happening. Spiritual work can take strange forms, and the Cross is a strange victory. There is a mystery in the mixture of emotions that can come to us in the time of prayer. What matters in praying is to remain surrendered to the largely-hidden workings of the Divine Providence.

Results do appear later, in the hours and days which follow. They show in things like a little more patience, more gentleness, more kindness in thought and speech, more generosity in service. Occasionally they show in major changes of direction, or profound alterations in attitudes. In any case,

the best test of prayer is greater fidelity to God’s will, with an enlargement in the scope of loving-kindness.

To conclude, I notice that these four phrases are called ‘Acts’. They are a call to action. Contemplative prayer is not mooning around, it is work. God’s grace guides and enables, but does not replace the human will and the need to exert ourselves. Those who believe they are being drawn this way should not hang about, but act. Act to explore, act to experiment, act to make ventures of faith, act perhaps to get the help of a guide who has travelled this road. In short, go for it.

The Revd Canon John Townroe FRC (1920–2018) was Chaplain and then Warden to Kings College ordinands at St Boniface Warminster for 21 years until 1969, before becoming a full-time spiritual director, retreat leader and teacher for the remainder of his life. SLG Press will shortly be publishing some of his longer essays in book form.



DANTE’S SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

A reading of The Divine Comedy

TONY DICKINSON

HISTORIES OF WESTERN CULTURE and civilization in English have a tendency to caricature the Florentine politician, scholar, and poet Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), as the man who put his enemies in hell and his friends in heaven. Apart from the fact that it is not true, it is a very inadequate description of what is not only the greatest Christian poem, but also one of the finest accounts ever written of the spiritual journey, an inward journey along the Way of the Cross, taking us along a path that is linked to the timeline of the sufferings of Christ and treading, metaphorically, in his footsteps as they were imagined in the Medieval West.

Seven centuries ago, when Dante Alighieri recorded his spiritual journey in the poem to which he gave the title *La Comedia*,¹ and that English speakers

¹ I have retained Dante’s original spelling and accentuation of his title; the word *Divina* was added by Giovanni Boccaccio in 1357.

generally known as ‘The Divine Comedy’, he invited his readers to follow him, in their imagination, into the depths of hell, and out the other side. That invitation remains open today. Dante invites us to join him in a descent into the depths and then in climbing the mountain where those on their way to salvation are made ready to experience the unveiled presence of God. In the last part of his poem, he invites us to rise with him outside the realms of space and time and to make our voyage among those who already enjoy God’s presence in Paradise.

I cannot hope to do more than skim the surface of this massive and many-layered poem here, but I am going to outline some of the background to the *Comedia*, provide a sort of ‘sketch-map’ of the journey and point out some of the ‘cairns’ that mark the route, and finally look at some of the characteristics of the three realms through which Dante’s journey takes him: *Inferno* (hell), *Purgatorio* (purgatory), and *Paradiso* (paradise or heaven), the books or *cantiche* into which the poem is divided.

It might be asked what a Tuscan who died seven hundred years ago has to say to us, at the beginning of the third millennium? Where, someone might ask, is the relevance? But that is a question that might equally be asked about events in Palestine nearly two thousand years ago. The answer is much the same: what happened in Jerusalem round about the thirtieth year of our era has had an impact on human lives ever since, and inspired writers, poets and exegetes of all sorts. Dante and his poem are links in the chain through which that impact has been transmitted to us. The *Comedia* is an attempt to explain for his age the consequences of the death and resurrection of Jesus; and although the questions that he tries to answer are expressed, as his answers are expressed, in the language of a different place and a different age, they are questions that still concern us today.

The setting of La Comedia

The journey in the ‘Divine Comedy’ is a quest to deepen understanding of the relationship between Christian faith and human life. That relationship has to include such concerns as commerce and finance, international politics (and their impact on local politics), and relationships of all kinds, between Church and state, between state and state, between individual human beings. Dante was writing in a turbulent world, where tensions in society were liable to erupt into violent conflict between states and within states. In that world traditional

ways of life were being broken up by economic and social pressures. In that world advances in scientific and philosophical thought were undermining long-held certainties and new religious movements were flourishing. At the same time, issues in human sexuality were being discussed as never before and questions were being asked about great issues of peace and justice, about wealth and poverty, about the nature of the state, and about God.

Dante was actively involved in much of this. Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375), who wrote a biography of the poet two decades after his death in exile, says that as a young man Dante gave himself to serious literary and theological study.² Dante's own writings suggest that he had close links with the Franciscans. He had taken part in the wars of Florence against her neighbours—wars that were part of a much greater conflict involving most of mainland Europe—and had held high political office. In the summer of the year in which the *Comedia* is set, Dante was elected (at the age of 35) a 'prior', one of the chief magistrates of Florence, and he appeared to be a man with a bright future. But within eighteen months, the wheel of political fortune had turned and taken Dante the half-turn from the heights of prosperity to the depths of adversity. By Easter 1302 he was in exile, financially ruined, separated from his wife and children, condemned to death by burning if he ever fell into the hands of the new rulers of his native city.

For the rest of his life Dante was a wanderer, picking up a living as best he could in the households of the great as a tame poet and philosopher, as a teacher, or doing odd jobs as a part-time diplomat. There are rumours that during these years he travelled as far as Oxford. It is more certain that he visited the great universities at Bologna and Paris. He read much, and he wrote. He wrote poems and prose works, books of what we might call literary criticism and books about the theory and practice of politics. For some years Dante lived at the court of the great nobleman, Can Grande della Scala, in Verona and for the last four years of his life he found a home in Ravenna, at the court of Guido Novello da Polenta, where he settled with his two sons, Jacopo and Pietro, and his daughter Antonia. His bones are there still, despite

² Giovanni Boccaccio, *Vita di Dante Alighieri, or Trattatello in laude di Dante* ['Little Tract in Praise of Dante'] (1357); title revised to *De origine vita studiis et moribus viri clarissimi Dantis Aligerii florentini poetae illustris et de operibus compositis ab eodem* (Rome, 1544).

strenuous and repeated efforts on the part of the Florentine authorities to reclaim them once the poet was safely dead; the magnificent tomb in the Franciscan basilica of Santa Croce remains empty.

The *Comedìa* was the great work of Dante's exile: the last part of it was written, but not handed over to the copyists, at the time of his death. In it, Dante draws together the many different strands of his life (poet, scholar, artist, philosopher, politician, lover) and weaves them together with a strong, radical Christian faith into a tremendously rich tapestry. In some ways, perhaps, it represents an attempt to work through, and work out, the pain of his own experience and the disappointment of so many hopes, both on the personal and the political level.

Throughout Dante's life he had to come to terms with death. The death, at the early age of twenty-four, of Bice dei Portinari (Beatrice), who always represented for him the love and grace of God, was followed by the death of his political ambitions, and of his hopes: for the emergence of a just ruler in Italy; for peace in the Empire of which the Italian city-states were a part; for holiness in the Church. But, as fire and pressure combine to turn coal into diamonds, so the failure of his hopes and his experience of disappointment and death combined in Dante during the painful years of exile to produce this astounding poem.

It was the discovery of Dorothy L. Sayers' translation of the Divine Comedy when I was a teenager in the mid-1960s that first made me aware that Christian faith was something that mattered; that being a Christian meant much more than spending an hour of not-quite-total boredom in a barn-like Victorian church on a Sunday morning.³ The sense of struggle and adventure in faith; the sense that the Gospel has things to say to the real world of politics and economics, and that they are things that matter, was revelatory, not to say mind-expanding. So, too, was the realization that Christ comes to us in other people and in the events and decisions of our daily life. Through Dante I first began to learn that the Christian life is about joy and not just duty, and that inward attitudes of heart and mind are just as important as the outward observance of rules.

³ The English citations from the poem are all taken from the Sayers translation, left unfinished at Miss Sayers' death and completed by her friend Barbara Reynolds: *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri, the Florentine*, translated by Barbara Reynolds and Dorothy L. Sayers, Penguin Classics (Penguin, vol. 1 1949, vol. 2 1955, vol. 3 1962).

There was, I discovered, a world of wonder and adventure with which the church that I attended in those days seemed to me to be barely in touch, if at all. In a sense, I found that I was being led out of the dark wood of complacency and confusion to embark on the same sort of journey that Dante undertook in his great poem.

The structure of the poem: a sketch-map of the three kingdoms

If you want to know what a book, other than a ‘whodunnit’, is about, it is usually a good idea to look at the first page and the last page: the beginning and the end of the work. The action of the ‘Divine Comedy’ begins on the evening of Maundy Thursday, 1300, in the middle of a dark and menacing wood, ‘where the right road was wholly lost and gone’ (*Inferno* I, 3). It ends outside time, in the contemplation of God, a vision that it is beyond human imagination to recall or human language to record: a blinding flash of insight into ‘the love that moves the sun and the other stars’ (*Paradiso* XXXIII, 145).

The dark wood in which Dante finds himself is the outward expression of his internal intellectual, emotional and spiritual tangle. It is a way of describing the ‘gone-wrong-ness’ of his life; the mess from which he could find no way out except by embarking on his inward journey, going down into the depths and finding the way out on the other side, the way out that leads him, in the end, to God.

Dante does not undertake this journey on his own. The whole of his quest is supervised by Beatrice, the woman he had loved when she was alive and who always stood, in his imagination, for the love and grace of God. Beatrice herself will guide him for most of the last part of the journey; but for the first part she entrusts Dante to the guidance of the great Roman poet, Virgil.

Dante admired Virgil as a writer, and as an embodiment of human reason and natural goodness. But Virgil was a worshipper of the pagan gods of ancient Rome and, as such, Virgil cannot enter heaven. Dante’s heaven is not totally barred to ‘those who know not the Lord Jesus’. In *Paradiso* XX, 43–48 and 67–72 he places two pagans among the righteous rulers in the heaven of Jupiter. One is the second-century Roman Emperor Trajan who was, according to legend, brought back to life after more than four hundred years through the prayers of Pope Gregory the Great and baptized by him.

The other is the legendary Rhipheus, who was killed when Troy fell to the Achaeans and gets in on the strength of Aeneid II, 426–7, where Virgil describes him as ‘iustissimus unus qui fuit in Teucris et servantissimus aequi’ (who was among the Teucris (or ‘Trojans’) the most righteous of all and the most protective of justice). Virgil, however, finds his place, with those other figures from the pre-Christian World who lived virtuous lives, in Limbo, formally part of hell, but a place where there is no torment. When the two poets reach the earthly paradise at the summit of the mountain of purification, Virgil vanishes from Dante’s side and his role as guide is taken by the glorified Beatrice.

This moment, when it happens, is one of the most poignant in the whole of the *Comedia*, but it is inevitable. Human goodness, human reason, are the source and the guide of noble thoughts, noble deeds, noble visions, but they cannot encompass the heights nor the depths of human experience. The joy of heaven is something far beyond Virgil’s most radiant imaginings. Equally, on the journey through hell, Virgil finds himself baffled and distressed on more than one occasion by the evidence of human wickedness that he and Dante encounter.

In the same way, liberal humanism has extreme difficulty in coping with the sheer evil involved in the activity of a serial killer or with the horror of innocent suffering in the aftermath of terrorist attacks. On the international scene, it is clear how uneasy and uncertain the European leaders of the 1930s were in their dealings with the Nazi regime in Germany or with Mussolini and his followers in Italy; and there have been enough examples of ruthless exploitation, political oppression, and ethnic cleansing in more recent years to remind us that Hitler and company do not have a monopoly on the past century’s human wickedness. In more recent times the leaders of the nations have not fared that much better than their predecessors in dealing with genocidal regimes.

The love of God, on the other hand, and the grace of God, not only confront and judge such evil, they can also overcome its worst effects. In the 1980s and 1990s there were some unexpected voices coming out of the ‘Troubles’ of Northern Ireland and out of the struggle against apartheid. The witness of those such as Gordon Wilson, Colin Parry, or Desmond Tutu remind us that, however low we may fall, God’s arms are outstretched below us to support us. And however high we may raise the peaks of human imagination

and achievement, God's self is always immeasurably higher. Virgil cannot save Dante when he is threatened by the Furies at the gates of the city of Dis; he cannot lead Dante all the way to look on God. Only one who lives in God's presence, an angel, can do that. Dante invokes Beatrice and St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) as his angels, but they can lead him only in so far as they are the agents of God's grace, embodying the love that bears and overcomes the greatest evil imaginable, the forgiveness that speaks to us even from the agony of the Cross.

Dante's journey to the knowledge of that love and forgiveness takes him through Good Friday and Holy Saturday. It takes him into, not the cold silence of the tomb, but the frozen malevolence at the heart of hell. There we find, reflected in Dante, the Christian conviction of sin: that knowledge of the darkest depths of the self, far removed from the warmth of God's love. There he finds the corruption of human society, a society twisted away from the fellowship, the communion, that is God's intention for His people.

It is those sins against the integrity of God's people that Dante asks us to take most seriously. The sins of the senses, those failures of self-control that we tend to think of when we hear the word 'sin', lust, gluttony and the like, Dante relegates to the fringes, to the outer suburbs of hell. The central and deepest places in the pit are reserved for those whose malice makes impossible any sort of life in community.

In the lowest depths, cut off from those above by a great cliff of sheer rock, we find those who corrupt the specifically human power to communicate rationally: those who corrupt language by their lies and their flattery; those who buy and sell people as though they were a commodity; those who pervert justice for their own gain; those who destroy trust between individuals and communities. And, at the very bottom of the pit, trapped in the frozen lake that imprisons Satan, those who betray the most basic human loyalties, to family, to nation, to guests, and to their lords. Here, late at night on Holy Saturday, Dante and Virgil discover the lowest depths of corruption to which human beings can sink.

From this point it is possible only to go upwards. So for us—unless we sink into the same frozen despair as the most deeply damned—our recognition of the depths of which we are capable is the prelude to our rising with Christ, to seek (in St Paul's words) the things that are above.

So, on Easter morning, Dante and Virgil emerge at last from the stink and noise and filth of hell into the light and fresh air, as they join the company of those on their way to salvation. These are the people who know themselves to be sinners but, unlike the damned who have cut themselves off from God's grace, they are open in penitence to the work of God's Holy Spirit purifying them. Those in hell have chosen to cut themselves off from God. Those on the mountain have their hearts, in spite of all their failings, set on God. They have chosen life. They follow the sun, that powerful image of the light and warmth of God's truth and love, around the mountain and slowly but surely they ascend to the place that God had prepared in the beginning for humankind.

Throughout the climb the men and women on their way to salvation have their hearts turned more and more fully towards God and, in Him, to all God's creatures. The proud, whose love is turned inward on themselves; the envious, whose love is twisted into seeking others' harm; the angry, whose love creates a blinding fog of impatience and frustration; the slothful, whose love is simply inadequate; and those whose love for created things—food, possessions, other human beings (all of which are good in themselves)—gets in the way of their love for God the creator of those good things: all of these are still on the way to salvation.

In spite of their failures, the basic orientation of their hearts remains towards God, and as they climb the mountain all that keeps them from God is being cleaned away, like a rusty pan under a scouring pad. They know that when all is cleaned away they will enter the garden at the top of the mountain, the earthly paradise—the place from which all human beings would have set out on their journey, had it not been for the primal disobedience of Adam and Eve.

This is as far as Virgil can go. Here Dante will begin a Journey that takes him far beyond the realms of natural reason and natural goodness. He enters the kingdom that is opened for us by faith in the risen Christ, that faith that Virgil lacked. Dante's entry into this realm of grace is described in terms that remind us very strongly of baptism. He is brought face to face, by Beatrice, with his own unworthiness, with his repeated failure. In the depths of his humiliation and shame he is plunged into the waters of the river Lethe, to be restored to his beloved Beatrice on the far bank.

From this point of recognition, forgiveness and restoration, Dante can rise, guided by Beatrice now, guided by the Divine Love of which she is,

for Dante, a human reflection. The experience of restoration, of life after the death to self, is followed by Dante's ascension. He rises with Beatrice into a realm beyond time and space where, as on the last pages of C. S. Lewis's book, *The Last Battle*, their journey takes them all the time 'farther up and farther in', farther into the mystery of God's love. And each successive stage of their journey is more brightly lit by that love.

As Dante rises higher, he grows in understanding. This clearer vision illuminates his own life and calling. It illuminates the moral principles by which the universe is governed; principles that are applied in the poem quite forcefully to the politics and personalities of Dante's own day.

As Dante rises, he grows in understanding of God's providence, in understanding of grace and salvation, until finally he sees all things as they really are, illumined by the light and truth that are in God. Then, at the prayer of St Bernard of Clairvaux, Dante finally beholds God.

Now, at last, he sees the unity of all creation and all times. He sees the mystery of the Trinity, and he sees Christ, one with the eternal Being of Godhead.

The light supreme, within its fathomless
Clear substance, showed to me three spheres, which bare
Three hues distinct, and occupied one space;

The first mirrored the next, as though it were
Rainbow from rainbow, and the third seemed flame
Breathed equally from each of the first pair.

How weak are words, and how unfit to frame
My concept – which lags after what was shown
So far, 'twould flatter it to call it lame!

Eternal light, that in Thyself alone
Dwelling, alone dost know Thyself, and smile
On Thy self-love, so knowing and so known!

The sphering thus begot, perceptible
In Thee like mirrored light, now to my view –
When I had looked on it a little while –

Seemed in itself, and in its own self-hue,
Limned with our image; for which cause mine eyes
Were altogether drawn and held thereto.

As the geometer his mind applies
To square the circle, nor for all his wit
Finds the right formula, howe'er he tries,

So strove I with that wonder – how to fit
The image to the sphere; so sought to see
How it maintained the point of rest in it.

Thither my own wings could not carry me,
But that a flash my understanding clove,
Whence its desire came to it suddenly.

High phantasy lost power and here broke off;
Yet, as a wheel moves smoothly, free from jars,
My will and my desire were turned by love,

The Love that moves the sun and the other stars.

(*Paradiso* XXXIII, 115–45)

Looking at the scenery and fellow-travellers

So far I have focused very much on the journey: a journey into knowledge of ourselves; a journey that takes us through the pain and dereliction of the Cross to the Resurrection and eternal life. As we make that journey, we find ourselves observing the scenery and some of the travelling companions that were encountered by Dante Alighieri as he made the inward journey described in *La Comedia*.

The word ‘companion’ suggests some sharing or unity of purpose. A companion is, literally, someone with whom you share your bread. However, in the first part of Dante’s journey (the descent into hell that takes up Good Friday and Holy Saturday), we find little sharing and no unity. Dante’s hell is, indeed, a kingdom divided against itself. Its chief characteristic is its fragmentation and division. The men and women whom Dante meets on this stage of his journey are eternally isolated, eternally estranged from one another, and from God. As Jean-Paul Sartre put it in his play *Huis Clos*, ‘L’enfer, c’est les autres’.⁴

The gluttons wallow individually in the revolting mire of their own appetite. The counterfeiter in their disease-ridden pit quarrel and fight unceasingly. The panderers and seducers, the profligates, the corrupt politicians, the sowers of discord are preoccupied with the business of trying to dodge their own

⁴ Act I, scene v.

punishment, usually at the expense of someone else. The traitors, desperate to hide their own disgrace, are only too willing to betray one another's guilt. On three occasions only do Dante and Virgil find anything other than this total isolation: the lovers, Paolo and Francesca, remain together in death as in life, tossed eternally on the black gale of their adulterous passion. There, and there alone, is there any sense of companionship among the damned. The two counsellors of deceit, Ulysses and Diomedes, though they are enclosed together in a single flame, ignore one another completely. And in the ice where traitors to their country are buried up to the neck, Count Ugolino and Bishop Roger are locked together, horribly and eternally, in their (literally) devouring hatred.

Hell represents the ultimate in 'privatization'. Each sinner has chosen this state of aloneness, of perpetual purposeless 'being', perpetual futility. Each sinner has chosen his or her own place. "In the Divine Comedy," a friend once remarked, "all of the characters get precisely what they ask for". And in hell, each one remains in the place of their choice, eternally cut off by that choice from God and from their fellows; self-condemned to unending torment in the noise and the stench and the gloom; committed either to frantic, purposeless activity, like the avaricious and the spendthrifts and the violent against nature, or else to a numbing idleness, like the sullen, submerged in the slough of their foul-tempered resentment, or like Satan, immobile and malevolent, frozen in the ice of Cocytus.

On the Mountain of Purification, the second stage of Dante's Journey, there is also activity, and there is also enforced stillness; but there the activity is activity with a purpose and the stillness is born not of eternal frustration but of a patient waiting on God. Both movement and stillness have as their end that moment when a soul moves upward to the next stage of its journey to God, the moment when the whole mountain, literally, jumps for joy. Those who bear their suffering on the mountain do so willingly, even eagerly, because they recognize it as part of their training for heaven. They recognize, with Dante's contemporary, the Franciscan Ramon Llull (c. 1232–1315), that happiness is 'sorrow ... which is borne for Love.'⁵

⁵ Blessed Ramon Llull's *Llibre d'Amic e d'Amat* ['Book of the Lover and the Beloved'] is a collection of mystical aphorisms considered by some to be the first European novel, and the most famous literary work by Llull. The text comes from E. Allison Peers' 1946 revision of his 1923 translation of Llull for SPCK. The edition I use is the 1978 Sheldon Press reissue edited and introduced by Kenneth Leech.

Those who are on the mountain are united in purpose, united in faith and hope and love. There is a great sense of inter-dependence, of togetherness, reminding us of John Wesley's celebrated dictum that 'There is no such thing as a solitary Christian'.⁶

The boatload of souls who arrive at the shores of the mountain early on Easter morning could not be more different from the boatload with whom Dante and Virgil had been ferried across the river that marks the boundary of hell:

God they blaspheme, blaspheme their parents' bed,
The human race, the place, the time, the blood,
The seed that got them, and the womb that bred;

Then, huddling hugger-mugger, down they scud,
Dismally wailing, to the accursed strand
Which waits for every man that fears not God.

Charon, his eyes red like a burning brand,
Thumps with his oar the lingerers that delay,
And rounds them up, and beckons with his hand.

And as, by one and one, leaves drift away
In autumn, till the bough from which they fall
sees the earth strewn with all its brave array,

So, from the bank there, one by one, drop all
Adam's ill seed, when signalled off the mark,
As drops the falcon to the falconer's call.

(*Inferno* III, 102–17)

Charon, the infernal ferryman, makes a striking contrast with the angelic helmsman of the ship of souls 'bound for glory':

And near and nearer as he came full sail
The bird of God shone momentarily more bright,
So that mine eyes endured him not, but fell.

And hard on toward the shore he steered his flight,
Borne forward in a ship that skimmed apace,
Drawing no water, 'twas so swift and light.

⁶ John Wesley, 'Sermon 24, Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, Discourse 4', in *The Sermons of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson (Zondervan, 1872), 296–7.

Freehold of bliss apparent in his face,
The heavenly pilot on the poop stood tiptoe,
And with him full an hundred souls had place.

In exitu Israel de Aegypto

From end to end they sang their holy lay
In unison; and so he brought the ship to.

He signed them with the blessed cross, and they
All with one motion leapt upon the strand;
Then, swiftly as he came, he went his way.

(*Purgatorio* II, 37–51)

On the mountain all work together, encouraging one another, supporting one another. There is a humility, a mutual respect and love that enfolds all the mountain and reaches out, through Dante, to those still living, asking for the support of their prayer in the communion of saints. The living and the dead are here united, not isolated, not cut off from one another. Even the non-Christian Virgil—as much the odd one out in this place as is the living Dante—is treated with immense respect and loving courtesy, as in the gently comic scene where he and Dante meet another Roman poet, Statius, who lived a century after Virgil. Statius expresses a fervent wish that he had lived in the same era as the older poet, who had been his own poetic inspiration. Virgil quietly warns Dante not to give him away, and Dante half-smiles, which Statius notices, and asks him why. Dante continues:

So now I'm fairly caught between the two;
One signals silence, one entreats me speak;
I heave a sigh – what else is there to do?

(*Purgatorio* XXI, 115–17)

At this point, Virgil gives Dante permission to reveal who he is, which Dante does, telling Statius:

“He who gives eyes to me for journeying
Stands here, and he is Virgil, whose high theme
Put power in thee of gods and men to sing.”

(*Purgatorio* XXI, 124–6)

Statius's joy at discovering that he is in the presence of the older poet is truly touching:

Already stooping to my lord, he made
To kiss his feet; but: “Brother, do not so,
For shade thou art and look’st upon a shade.”

Thus he; and the other rising: “Now thou’lt know
How large and warm my love about thee clings,
When I forget our nothingness, and go

Treating these shadows like material things.”

(*Purgatorio* XXI, 130–6)

The mountain itself is an austere beautiful place, all light and air, like early Gothic architecture: immensely high, and steep. Its height is the same as the earth’s radius. Dante, nearly 200 years before Columbus, was no flat-earther! Climbing such a peak, against which even Everest is the merest molehill, is horribly hard going for Dante, who, unlike the others, is still encumbered with the weight of a living body. But, as he climbs, the going becomes easier as the burden of sin drops away, and as the human will is aligned more and more closely with the will of God. Purified and rightly-ordered love flows into the heart as the perverted, or inadequate, or excessive loves mentioned earlier drain away.

The life of the mountain reflects the life of the Church. It is a school for saints: not a place for those who are already perfect, but a place where sinners who have made the basic choice for God can learn to accept themselves as God has accepted them, to live together in love, to be conformed to Christ through their acceptance of suffering, to be open to the working of the Holy Spirit. It is this learning, this acceptance of God’s grace through faith, leading us on together in hope and love, that fits us in the end for the vision of God.

That vision is the climax of Dante’s poem, the end of Dante’s inward journey, as we trust that it will be the end of ours. But in order to speak of heaven, to speak of God in human language, it is necessary to use parables. The heaven described by Dante is, so to speak, an extended acted parable, allowing him to learn, by the slow degrees necessary for the human mind, what the life of heaven is like. It is not until just before the final revelation, described in *Paradiso* XXXIII, quoted above (pp. 26–7), that Dante sees the

blessed as they really are, ‘round the Lord in glory seated’,⁷ as they contemplate the unutterable beauty and goodness of God.

Before he reaches that moment of insight, Dante experiences heaven as light and joy and movement. The blessed souls to whom he speaks glow, quite literally, with love, like living stars or jewels. Heaven is a place of music and of dance, as the saints express the eternal praises of God. In hell, all the noise and activity had no purpose. On the mountain, all activity was directed toward the goal of preparation for heaven. Here, in the glory of heaven, all movement is the expression of ecstatic joy and love: not a purposeless, meaningless, rush and bustle; not a race to win the prize of eternal happiness; but pattern and movement reflecting the ordered creativity of the divine wisdom. The saints dance in the presence of their maker and Redeemer like David, dancing before the Lord with all his might (2 Sam. 6:14), or as the sun was popularly supposed to dance on Easter day for joy at the resurrection.

In God’s presence there is no more striving. This is the place of fulfilment, the place of reconciliation. Those who had been opposed to one another in this life, like the theologians in the heaven of the sun, are united in the supreme bliss of heaven, able now to see their partial truths in relation to the one great truth, the light and love and utter joy that is God. Here at last is the end of Dante’s inward journey and of ours. Not in the fear and insecurity of the dark wood or the horrors of hell. Not even in that other wood on top of the mountain that is paradise regained, but carried far ‘beyond the farthest mortal eye can scan’⁸ to experience the vision of the living God and to contemplate, at the end of all our journeying, ‘the love that moves the sun and the other stars’ (*Paradiso* XXXIII, 145).

Revd. Tony Dickinson is currently chaplain to the Anglican/Episcopalian congregation in Genoa and a Canon Emeritus of Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford. He is a spiritual director and occasional retreat leader. A longer version of this essay (under the same title) has been published by SLG Press in 2021.

⁷ From the hymn ‘Bright the vision that delighted’ by Bishop Richard Mant (1776–1848), *English Hymnal*, no. 372.

⁸ From the hymn ‘Angel-voices ever singing’ by Francis Pott (1832–1909), *Hymns Ancient and Modern Revised*, no. 246.

INSIGHTS ON HATRED, ENVY AND HYPOCRISY IN GREGORY OF NYSSA'S HOMILIES

JONATHAN FARRUGIA

GREGORY OF NYSSA'S CORPUS OF HOMILIES offers very concrete reflections on a number of transgressions that were (and still are) popular in human actions. Three of these are hatred, envy and hypocrisy; they may be analysed together because all three stop people from being happy with what they possess. They are mostly discussed quite early in the Bishop of Nyssa's career, in the *Homilies on the Beatitudes*,⁹ but they are revisited in some of his later homilies and works as well, implying that his reflection on these three sins was spread throughout most of his career as a preacher and a bishop. Gregory, however, does not stop at discussing the causes and the effects of these transgressions; he also offers a solution regarding how they may be healed.

Sin brings disorder in that which God created in perfect order, so the greatest fault in sin is that it disfigures man, God's most noble creature. Gregory implies that this disfigurement comes from the fact that all sin is a form of idolatry: mankind was created to adore God alone, so any idol humans accept goes against this nature. Worse still, through sin mankind creates its own idols and this is the highest form of disorder that may affect us:

... whatever a person submits his reason to, making it slave and subject, he has in his sickness made that into a god, and he would not be in this state if he had not attached himself to evil by love.¹⁰

It is in this light that one needs to read Gregory's comments on sin in general and sins in particular. Healing oneself, through the grace of God, from these disorders brings human nature back to its pristine condition.

⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Beatitudes. An English Version with Commentary and Supporting Studies*. Proceedings of the Eighth International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa (Paderborn 14–18 September 1998), ed. Hubertus R. Drobner and Albert Vinciano, trans. Stuart G. Hall, Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae* (Brill, 2000), hereinafter *Beat*.

¹⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on Ecclesiastes. An English Version with Commentary and Supporting Studies*. Proceedings of the Seventh International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa (St Andrews 5–10 Sept 1990), ed. Stuart G. Hall, trans. Stuart G. Hall and Rachel Moriarty (De Gruyter, 1992), VIII, 428, 6–19, hereinafter *Eccl*.

Three disorders

While discussing who the peacemakers are in his *Homilies on the Beatitudes*, Gregory focuses first on hatred and its effects on the hater:

Each one of you is capable of working out for himself what life is like for those who hold each other in suspicion and hatred, whose meetings with each other are disagreeable, who find everything about each other horrible; their mouths have no words, their eyes are averted, their ears are barricaded against the voice of the hated hater. Everything which is disliked by one is liked by the other, and conversely everything which his adversary's heart is set upon is hostile and offensive.¹¹

This sin, therefore, turns a person into the direct opposite of the other whom he hates. Man is no longer free to choose what he likes, but necessarily starts liking what the other repulses and starts abhorring the things his opponent likes, even if formerly he enjoyed them. As Gregory states some years later in his *Homilies on Ecclesiastes*, hate harms all kinds of love, be it that for others or that for oneself.¹²

The other two sins (envy and hypocrisy) are presented as dangerous evils because they are hidden inside the person's heart, not necessarily perceptible in his words or actions, and therefore are more to be feared. The relationship between these two and hatred is that hatred fuels them. Envy and hypocrisy develop 'when on the inside people have hatred like a fire smouldering secretly in the depth of their heart, while their outward appearance is disguised by hypocrisy as friendship.'¹³ There comes a time, however, when these can no longer be hidden and the outburst will put on display the evil person's true nature:

... envy devours the heart within like a fire, as if it were a heaped-up pile of chaff: it may hide the disease out of shame, yet it is not able to conceal itself indefinitely, but like a pungent smoke the bitterness of envy shows through in the features of the outward appearance; and should some misfortune fall upon the object of envy, then it makes the disease apparent, and takes the injury to him as a cause of rejoicing and pleasure. The secret sickness is evidenced, even while it appears hidden, by manifest signs about the face. The deadly effects of the things denied often become the

¹¹ *Beat.* VII, 154, 19–26.

¹² 'If we do not kill hostility, we shall not heal the loving inclination in us which has become ill through hatred.' (*Eccl.* VI, 383, 17–19).

¹³ *Beat.* VII, 157, 8–12.

marks of one shrivelled up by reason of envy: eyes withered, sunk in the hollow of shrunken eyelids, knitted eyebrows, the shape of bones showing through the flesh. And what causes this disease?—the prosperity of a brother, relative or neighbour!¹⁴

These three sins, as I said above, stop a person from appreciating the good he possesses because in his eyes it seems inferior to what others have. This leads the person to lose many of their gifts, such as tranquillity and taste, becoming selective in what they hear and, worse, presenting themselves as a friend when in truth they curse the one of whom they are envious. The vivid description of the reactions caused by these sins demonstrates this clearly:

You slap your hands together, you knot your fingers, your thoughts are in turmoil, you utter deep groans of pain, you get no pleasure from enjoying the things you presently have, meals are sour, home and hearth a misery, the ear always open to slander against the one who has done well; and if some one says something favourable, your ear is deaf to his words. . . . How can you disguise yourself with the mask of friendship by your outward show of good will? Why do you use kind words of greeting, wishing joy and health, when secretly the curses in your heart mean the opposite?¹⁵

The envious are compared to Cain, who murdered his brother because he was more esteemed in God's eyes. His hypocrisy made him an executioner because as a friend he led Abel away from his family and then murdered him.

Cain was like that when he was furious at the favour shewn to Abel: envy within was urging him to murder, while hypocrisy is becoming a public executioner. He slipped into the guise of friend and companion, and led him out beyond reach of his parents' support, and then brought envy into the open by murder.¹⁶

Envy is mentioned again in the *Homilies on the Our Father* and it is presented as one of the stains that blemish the Divine beauty placed in man: 'the Divine is pure from envy and from all stain of passion. Therefore let no

¹⁴ *Beat.* VII, 157, 16–158, 6.

¹⁵ *Beat.* VII, 158, 20–159, 3.

¹⁶ *Beat.* VII, 159, 3–7; Claudio Moreschini, 'Gregorio di Nissa, *De Beatitudinibus*, Oratio VII: "Beati gli operatori di pece, perché saranno chiamati Figli di Dio" (Matt. 5:9)', in *Homilies on the Beatitudes*, ed. Hubertus Drobner (Brill, 2000), 239–40.

such passions defile you, neither envy, nor vanity nor any of those things that would pollute the Divine beauty.¹⁷

Andrew Louth mentions a further treatment on envy by Gregory found in *Vita Moysis*, which is worth mentioning for clarification purposes, even though this is not a homily.¹⁸ The discussion Gregory makes on this sin in this late work follows what he had previously said in his homilies, but he goes a step further: in this treatise envy is presented as τὸ ἀρχέκακον πάθος (the primal passion), a definition he does not give in the homilies. The denunciation of this sin is notorious:

Envy is the passion which causes evil, the father of death, the first entrance of sin, the root of wickedness, the birth of sorrow, the mother of misfortune, the basis of disobedience, the beginning of shame. Envy banished us from Paradise, having become a serpent to oppose Eve. Envy walled us off from the tree of life, divested us of holy garments, and in shame led us away clothed with fig leaves. Envy armed Cain contrary to nature and instituted the death which is vindicated seven times. Envy made Joseph a slave. Envy is the death-dealing sting, the hidden weapon, the sickness of nature, the bitter poison, the self-willed emaciation, the bitter dart, the nail of the soul, the fire in the heart, the flame burning on the inside. For envy, it is not its own misfortune but another's good fortune that is unfortunate. Again, inversely, success is not one's own good fortune but the neighbour's misfortune. Envy is grieved at the good deeds of men and takes advantage of their misfortunes. It is said that the vultures which devour corpses are destroyed by perfume. Their nature is akin to the foul and corrupt. Anyone who is in the power of this sickness is destroyed by the happiness of his neighbours as by the application of some perfume; but if he should see any unfortunate experience he flies to it, sets his crooked beak to it, and draws forth the hidden misfortunes.¹⁹

This long text helps us to appreciate better why the bishop considered envy to be such a dangerous sin, and therefore why he included it in some

¹⁷ *De Oratione Dominica – De Beatitudinibus*, ed. Johannes F. Callahan, Gregorii Nysseni Opera, 7 (Leiden: Brill, 1992), II, 30, 14–16.

¹⁸ Andrew Louth, "Envy as chief sin in Athanasius and Gregory of Nyssa," *Studia Patristica* 15 (1984), 459.

¹⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (Paulist Press, 1978), 122, 6–123, 4.

of his homilies. It is as if he is saying here that envy is the very reason man defected from God. Envy, therefore, is that vice that is completely alien to God, since God has no need to be envious of anything or anyone, being Himself the creator of all.²⁰

One remedy

These maladies can be healed only by a commitment to peace, because peace promotes good-will which neutralizes hatred, envy and hypocrisy. Ridding oneself of these sins and helping others to keep them at bay is truly working on behalf of God Himself:

Anyone therefore who removes a disease like this from human life, who binds the family together in goodwill and peace, and who brings human beings into friendly harmony, does he not perform a work of godly power, banishing evils from the human race, and introducing instead a sharing of good things? The reason why he calls the peacemaker a son of God, is that he becomes an imitator of the true Son who has bestowed these things on human life.²¹

Some years later, in his *Homilies on Ecclesiastes*, the Bishop of Nyssa reformulated the same suggestion, this time encouraging people to adopt virtues that work directly against these vices, for:

Everyone by participation in what is superior loses all trace of its contrary. Thus the self-controlled person loses intemperance, the just person injustice, the modest person pride, the generous-hearted person envy, the loving person hatred.²²

²⁰ Among Greek authors Plato seems to have been the first who said that envy does not exist in the divine realm: ‘There are many blessed sights and many ways hither and thither within the heaven, along which the blessed gods go to and fro attending each to his own duties; and whoever wishes, and is able, follows, for jealousy is excluded from the celestial band’ (Plato, *Euthyphro – Apology – Crito – Phaedo – Phaedrus*, trans. Harold North Fowler (Harvard University Press, 2005), *Phaedrus* 247A). However, according to Greek myths the gods were envious of human beings: Hera was notoriously jealous of numerous mortals (Semele, Io, Callisto, Leto, Lamia ...) who were seduced by her husband Zeus.

²¹ *Beat.* VII, 159, 8–15.

²² *Eccl.* VII, 402, 18–21.

From Gregory's words we understand that he believes bringing such vices to an end is truly God's will for mankind. Just as light fills a place when darkness is withdrawn, so do the opposite virtues of these sins fill up their place when they are evacuated from the soul:

This is the work he decrees for you, to expel hatred, to resolve conflict, to get rid of envy, to banish fighting, to destroy hypocrisy, to quench the grudge within which smoulders in the heart, and to replace these with what arises in their stead when their contraries are removed. Just as with the withdrawal of darkness light supervenes, so also in place of each of these evils the fruit of the Spirit comes in instead: love, joy, peace, goodness, patience, and all the list of good things which the Apostle compiled.²³

Revd Dr Jonathan Farrugia is a Catholic priest lecturer in Patristics within the department of Church History, Patrology and Palaeochristian Archaeology of the University of Malta. His area of expertise is fourth-century Eastern theology and dogma with a particular interest in the Cappadocian Fathers, especially Gregory of Nyssa.

CHRONICLE SUBSCRIPTIONS ARE DUE!
The subscription form is printed on the back page

A BIRD IN THE HAND²⁴

SISTER BARBARA JUNE SLG

BLACKBIRDS ARE NOTORIOUSLY FOOLISH and improvident nest builders. Their preferred sites are often exposed, precarious and within eyeshot of the most casual passer-by, not least the feline predator. But there it is; no careful planning, no elaboration of construction, nothing any self-respecting ornithological building society would advance the least mortgage on, and if last year's shambly apology for a nest remains for re-occupation this year without too much renovation and repair, so much the better.

Recently, however, I came across an account of one blackbird's unique enterprise in nest location, and the story has set me thinking about prayer

²³ *Beat.* VII, 159, 21–160, 7.

²⁴ Originally published as Fairacres Publications 103 (1988), ISBN 9780728301191.

and Holy Spirit from a quite new vantage point. In a little anthology of prayers and praise from the Celtic tradition,²⁵ I read the following:

St Kevin and the blackbird

At one Lenten season, St Kevin, as was his way, fled from the company of men to a certain solitude, and in a little hut that did but keep out the sun and the rain, gave himself earnestly to reading and to prayer, and his leisure to contemplation alone. And as he knelt in his accustomed fashion, with his hand outstretched through the window and lifted up to heaven, a blackbird settled on it, and busying herself as in her nest, laid in it an egg. And so moved was the saint that in all patience and gentleness he remained, neither closing nor withdrawing his hand: but until the young ones were fully hatched he held it out unwearied, shaping it for the purpose.²⁶

What a deal of authenticity this story holds, as a parable of prayer and ministry, both as widely understood. Consider first of all what St Kevin learnt, and what I can learn from him, about prayer. He had not at all expected that his ‘certain solitude’ would find him branching out quite so literally in an unprecedented new direction, prayer-wise. We can recognize the peculiar sense of honour and tenderness he felt first of all when the blackbird alighted and settled to rest. How gladdening it is when any defenceless creature or small child finds us a place of refuge and falls trustfully asleep in our lap. The blackbird, of course, is totally free from self-conscious calculation. Her whole breeding attention is on her eggs and spring’s mothering fulfilment. St Kevin is hatching a new plot in the conspiracy of creation as the eggs in this nest are warmed from below as well as from above. Not such a foolish blackbird after all!

If the blackbird made a venture of trust in her choice of nest, St Kevin did no less in his accustomed fashion of prayerful contemplation, with this open hand outstretched, the gesture of hopeful supplication. In our day and age how seldom in fact do we experience being *given* something into our hands? Supermarket shopping is a parable of our common whole attitude to prayer, to life and to creation. We reach out and choose, and grasp, and take, and calculate, and fumble for payment. When do we stretch out empty hands

²⁵ *Threshold of Light*, ed. by A. M. Allchin and Esther de Waal (DLT, 1986).

²⁶ Giraldus Cambrensis, *Topographica Hibernica*, vol. ii: 28, trans. Helen Waddell, *Beasts and Saints* (Constable, 1934), 137.

to receive what another will give? Eucharistically, at least, we do that quite simply to receive our daily bread, a gift and bounty more astonishing and lightweight than even St Kevin's blackbird, the Body of Christ.

*Given you are into our empty hands
Which cannot grasp the mystery they hold.*

Sister Catherine SLG

This ungraspingness St Kevin practised too: '... he remained, neither closing nor withdrawing his hand'. Perhaps this remaining open-handed is the hardest part of all, the unending ministry of a hand that is out of action, nailed. Somehow in prayer what matters is to realize and think, 'This is a *blackbird's nest*, ... these eggs are *hers*', not, 'This is my hand; all I hold I'll have and keep'. For to close the hand is to lose the bird and be left with only an egg, soon to grow cold and never hatch, or even a fragmented shell. How difficult it is to be self-disregarding enough to be, in all simplicity, where the prayer is, as it were, taking place—to be 'hand' only, and not possessive head and heart.

More than this; St Kevin's hand is not just passively resigned to being a platform or a shelf. He goes to the loving full extent of making and keeping it a rounded nest, as he holds it out 'unwearied, shaping it for the purpose'. How that simplifies his priorities. There is never any question of being a nest and, at the same time, anything else. That hand is out of action, and what a work of love and discipline it is to keep it so. It could be a source of constant frustration. For us too, it may be that something that from one aspect seems disabling and burdensome, some personal everyday responsibility about which we are tempted to say 'were it not for *this*, I could pray', may be the very place we are held to in prayer, our unwitting welcome to the blackbird. So prayer too is about remaining 'in all patience and gentleness' with a situation we could not have contrived or imagined, and a work that puts an end to all our labour.

The blackbird, after all, has no doubt that the major work is hers. I am told that it is a first principle of community development work that when a task or enterprise is completed, those for whom it was done must be able to say 'We did it.' Once the brood was fully hatched and fledged no doubt the blackbird flew away satisfied that she had successfully done her part. And finding her gone, how did St Kevin respond? I cannot imagine him closing his eyes and dreaming nostalgically about how-it-feels-to-be-a-blackbird's-nest. Still less

would I give credulity to a continuation of the story that made him say to anyone who would listen, ‘D’you know what? A blackbird made her nest in this hand!’—and yet there can be no doubt that prayer could not be quite the same again. Any day may see a like break in the tradition of prayer I have established. Am I going to be ready to welcome a blackbird? Beyond that, to wait and remain ‘in all patience and gentleness’ until the young ones so unexpectedly and undeservedly entrusted into my hand are fully hatched? And let them go? And we empty-handed again? Time and grace will tell. But next time I close my eyes and invoke the Holy Spirit I shall dare to hope and believe that the overshadowing wing may be not white but black. *Veni Creator Spiritus.*



SHIELDING

SISTER CHRISTINE SLG

RECENTLY I HEARD A RADIO PROGRAMME about the hippocampus and how it works. It is the part of the brain that stores memories, though we were warned that the further away in time we are from an event, the more likely we are to misremember it. But one way of retaining memory in its freshness is to remind oneself of the place, the locus, where it was formed. Thus, when someone asks, ‘Where were you when the Twin Towers came down?’ or ‘Where were you when Kennedy was shot?’ we are likely to remember the occasion in vivid and accurate detail. It is with something of this use of the memory bank that I look back on the time we as a community, and I personally, spent in lockdown after COVID-19 was declared a pandemic.

Even before the Prime Minister’s exhortation on 23 March last year to ‘stay at home’, there were signs that the nation was attempting to secure itself against the virus. Everyone will remember the panic-buying and empty shelves in supermarkets and chemists, the ban on communicating from the chalice at the Eucharist and holy water banished because it is a means of spreading the virus. Sanitizers and soap dispensers with instructions as to how to wash our hands were in evidence everywhere. And I thought I knew how to wash my hands!

It is now that the hippocampus's facility for storing place memory comes into operation. For SLG, at a stroke the common life we had been attempting to maintain during our enforced dispersal while the building project went forward on the Convent site was turned upside down. We could no longer meet in Chapel to say the Divine Office and celebrate the Eucharist; indeed, no priest was allowed on the premises. We had to abandon eating together in the house where I was, and am, living, 76 Fairacres Road, the one with the largest kitchen and dining area. All our staff were furloughed, including our cook. Two of us at No. 76 took on the task of providing the midday meal for ourselves and the older Sisters living in Fellowship House. We were also quartermaster's stores for other Sisters dispersed around East Oxford. I became the housekeeper and gardener, as well as acting as (remote) line manager to Julia, the new SLG Press editor. As we were able to leave the house for exercise, I included visits to the temporary Editor's office we had set up to begin a major overhaul of the filing system set up in 1968.

We soon heard the word 'lockdown' applied to this time, a prison term used when all prisoners are confined to their cells for 23 hours a day. Undoubtedly for most people it was exactly that. But we discovered once again that 'strong bars do not a prison make' as our life together in one place strengthened and deepened. One of us told a visitor later that it became a house of love and laughter, precious gifts indeed.

Almost the first liturgical hurdle we faced was Holy Week and Easter, and with a sense of shock we realized each house would have to 'do its own thing'. The three of us knew we could not observe the Week in its totality, so laid some careful plans. We had set up a prayer-room when we moved into the house and were allowed to keep the reserved sacrament there, a great privilege. Our Warden, Father Andrew Teal, had consecrated a large number of wafers for this purpose just before lockdown, so we could take some from that stock. Not knowing how long we would be in strict quarantine we had taken three for ourselves. This meant that we could make our communion on Maundy Thursday and on Easter Day with half a host each time. We watched an online mass both times and communicated when the priest made his communion.

However, we wanted to observe some of the Easter Vigil, so considered what we would be able to do. We had a small pillar candle someone had given us, and Sister Stephanie-Thérèse offered to prepare the new fire. This was made in a small, empty tin and was very successful. We gathered outside the

back door about 5.00 a.m. to say the blessing prayers for the new fire and the Paschal candle, then made three Stations proclaiming, 'The Light of Christ'. This brought us into the sitting-room where we watched an online video of a deacon singing the Exsultet. Then we read several of the lessons assigned to the Vigil, said the Easter collect and went to eat a hearty cooked breakfast. Later in the morning we watched the mass of Easter day online and made our communion from the other three halves of the hosts reserved from Maundy Thursday. It was a memorable celebration of the Resurrection.

Immediately after Easter I received notification that, as someone clinically extremely vulnerable, I was strongly recommended to shield until further notice. My work of sorting files came to a standstill, and there were several other implications, the main one being that I was not allowed to leave the house, except for medical attention if necessary. What a radical change of thinking was required in a matter of hours, in many ways more radical than the government's stay-at-home policy. I was one of the fortunate ones who could get outside for exercise in our small garden. It needed a lot of care and attention which I was glad to give it. We three resident at No. 76 discussed how best to implement the recommendations for shielding. Anyone who has had to observe them knows how stringent they were. It was recommended that I not mingle with others of my household, have my own bathroom, do my own cooking, and eat separately; nor should anyone other than my companions enter the house. We could control the last to some extent, though not entirely, as Sisters had to come to collect food stores. But it would have proved extremely difficult to live a separate life. I said I would take the risk of saying the Divine Office with the others and eating with them.

So began, for me, several months of strict enclosure such as I had not experienced since I entered Community over 50 years ago. There were differences, the main one being the invention of computers and modern social media. I was able to communicate with others in ways that were unimaginable in the late 1960s, and to continue with my share of the work of SLG Press via a laptop.

However, something else began to happen through this requirement to stay in one place. I was able to explore the understanding and concept of enclosure in its most basic form. In the beginning it was a matter of accepting it in obedience to a government decree; 'render unto Caesar' was often in my mind in those early days. Shielding was designed to keep the vulnerable safe, but if one normally goes about life clinically vulnerable—and presumably completely

unsafe—it is hard to accept that further measures might be needed. After a few weeks I began to rejoice in this enforced enclosure. It became a spacious gift and a place where I could be with God without outside demands or the need to go elsewhere to attend meetings or appointments. There was physical and mental space to think and pray, such a gift. And time to spend with my companions, which was uniting for us all. It was such a rich experience I was puzzled as to why we regularly heard on news bulletins how difficult it was for so many and how lonely they felt. It was many months before I realized that the call to live the enclosed contemplative life comes from God and that grace is given to live it in its fullness. An enclosure so constrained is not for all, not even for all called to the religious life, but I suspect anyone who endeavours to pray needs some time and place that mirrors it in some way.

Such strict measures do have their rubs, their times of difficult observance, and I was not exempt. During the summer of 2020 my father died in Toronto, two months short of his hundredth birthday. There was no possibility of either me or my brother, who lives in Edinburgh, travelling to Canada for a funeral and to clear his flat; we had to leave it in the hands of undertakers and good friends to do these ‘last things’. We have been very grateful for their care, but there remains a sense that full closure of his life and our relationship to him in it has yet to happen. The first stage of the grieving process is not finished for us. We are, however, in a similar position to those thousands who have had family deaths these past two years, and the millions more who have lost loved ones through war. So it is good to be aware of our solidarity in adversity and grief.

During the months of quarantine the building project continued. For most of 2020 the work was outside so that social distancing could be maintained, and the team of builders were very grateful for regular work. The result, as you will have seen from the Community Notes, is a lovely building incorporating the old buildings with a new wing and cloisters around a central courtyard. The interiors are either new or revamped, so that moving back into what was once familiar is more like moving into a new home. The greater enclosure this makes visible and tangible is to be welcomed in our lives.

We are often told that life is not static, but the experience of shielding has taught me that there is, too, a stability in God that is eternally at rest, yet totally alive and changing. This stability is offered to us if we wait on God in the enclosures our lives provide.

ASSOCIATES

✠ RIP ✠

FLG

Molly Lambert

29 September 2021

Muriel Woodhead

9 October 2021

REVIEWS OF BOOKS

Serenedd James, *The Cowley Fathers: A History of the English Congregation of the Society of St John the Evangelist* (Canterbury Press, 2019), 640 pp. ISBN 9781786221834. Paperback £45.00; eBook £36.00.

Steven Hawes CR, *The Cowley Fathers in Philadelphia* (AuthorHouse, 2019), 230 pp. ISBN 9781728391021. Paperback £41.99, eBook £3.99.

Two books having as their subject the Society of St John the Evangelist (the ‘Cowley Fathers’) were published in 2019. In scope they could hardly be more different: one covering the entire history (and an excellent summary of the prehistory) of the community, the other focusing closely on the fifteen years when the SSJE Fathers had charge of the parish of St Clement, Philadelphia. This is a good time to be reminded of the beginnings of Anglican religious life: at the November 2020 session of the General Synod of the Church of England the *Instrument of Enactment for Canon DA 1: Of Religious Communities* was signed by the Archbishops, the Prolocutors and the Chair and the Vice-Chair of the House of Laity. It had taken more than 150 years for this degree of recognition and regulation to be given, at a time when new and renewed forms of community are emerging and many established ones are in serious decline. As Serenedd James’s book appeared, the life of the English Congregation of SSJE in effect came to an end, continuing in the charitable work of the Fellowship of St John (UK) Trust Association.

I couldn't resist the temptation to turn first to the index of *The Cowley Fathers*. The Society of St John the Evangelist has been hugely important to our community, which had its beginnings in 'Quis Separabit', a group of women seeking the contemplative life guided by Father George Seymour Hollings SSJE. He became our Chaplain General and gave us our first Rule. After his death in 1914, Father Lucius Cary SSJE succeeded him, and is counted as our second Father Founder. In 1950 Father William O'Brien SSJE took up that position and was followed by Father David Hemming SSJE, so for more than half of our history SSJE has been a major influence. Even after we moved to having secular priests as Warden, as long as there was an SSJE presence in Oxford its priests acted as Extraordinary Confessors and celebrated the Eucharist regularly. Almost equal in importance was Brother Anselm who taught us plainsong for many years. Our history would contain many references to SSJE: in *The Cowley Fathers* there are five entries for 'Sisterhood of the Love of God' spanning the years between 1873 (well before our foundation) and 1967. If you know where to look, there are further references: for example, to the Convent of the Incarnation, to the planned joint venture in the Holy Land, to Mother Mary Clare and to the contribution made by Sister Rosemary SLG to the 1983 book *Benson of Cowley*.²⁷ It was a little disconcerting that we seemed to count for so little when SSJE has been so influential in our history, but it is a reminder that we were one sisterhood among many, and founding or supporting communities of women was far from the chief activity of the Cowley Fathers.

The scope of that activity is impressive, and impressively condensed by Serenedd James into 640 pages. There is a great deal to draw on: published biographies and memoirs, the *Cowley Evangelist*, the community archive of letters, Chapter minutes and papers in the care of Lambeth Palace Library, with collections relating to SSJE in the United States and South Africa, combine in a rich resource.

From early in his time as Vicar of Cowley St James, Richard Meux Benson had been drawn to the idea of gathering men to join him in setting up a Mission College in India. He was, indeed, packed and ready to go when the Bishop of Oxford asked him to oversee the establishing of a new parish where streets of terraced houses were springing up towards Magdalen

²⁷ Martin L. Smith, *Benson of Cowley* (Cowley Publications, 1983).

Bridge. For the next few years this was his focus, alongside establishing the community of Mission Priests of St John the Evangelist, which in time became the Society of St John the Evangelist—widely known as the Cowley Fathers. Mission was at its heart, in parish ministry, conducting retreats and preaching wherever invited. Father Benson's works in the parish (among them three schools, sports matches for the choirboys, a new church building, clothing and coal clubs, a soup kitchen) were such as any energetic incumbent and his curates might have undertaken, but the plans he laid before Bishop Wilberforce included establishing a house in London and, as number five in a list of six, 'Foreign Missions'.

The opportunity for the establishment of foreign missions came initially through the two American priests who were founder members of the community: shortly after making his life profession in 1870 Oliver Sherman Prescott was sent to St Clement's Philadelphia and subsequently to the Church of the Advent, Boston. Later that year Father Benson, with two others, undertook an exploratory tour centred on Boston and extending to Chicago, New York, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, the Bahamas and Canada. Establishing SSJE in the United States was not without conflict within the community and with the American Bishops, especially the Bishop of Pennsylvania. This being a history of the English Congregation, the story of SSJE in the United States is only briefly sketched. An autonomous province was established in 1914 and in 1921 it became the American Congregation. They very quickly set up a branch house in San Francisco (as far from Boston as Boston from Oxford) and soon after a house in Korea, from where work was undertaken in Japan. Father Benson's initial visit to Canada led to a venture in British Columbia at the invitation of the Bishop of New Westminster and to a house in Ontario from which developed the Canadian Congregation.

Steven Haws's study of SSJE's care of St Clement's Church Philadelphia explores over some two hundred pages what James touches on in three or four. It highlights themes characteristic of the Cowley Fathers wherever they ministered: sober teaching, preaching and practising of Catholic faith; spiritual and material care for the poor. This included a pioneering dispensary with evening opening hours to encourage people to attend after their working day. One especially notable work, an initiative of Father Charles Neale Field, was the Guild of the Iron Cross for working men who pledged to 'resist intemperance and the sin of impurity'. It became a national

movement, producing a journal and a range of religious publications, and campaigning successfully for Saturday to be a half-holiday. The organization proved invaluable when disaster struck Johnstown, an industrial town more than two hundred miles from Philadelphia: a dam burst and the consequent flood and fire claimed more than two thousand lives. Father Field heard that the priest there was among the dead and volunteered, with members of the Guild of the Iron Cross, for relief work. I noted that this seems to have been his own decision: Father Maturin, the rector at the time, was away on a lengthy absence required by his health, and Father Field, ‘after informing Father Convers and Father Longridge (the other SSJE Fathers at St Clement’s) of the disaster, sent a cable to the Provincial Superior, Father Hall in Boston, informing him of the tragedy and of their going to Johnstown’. Was this the liberty expected of a mission priest, or the autonomy of parish clergy? And how did such freedom relate to the vow of obedience?

Almost half of Haws’s book is devoted to studies of six SSJE Fathers: their varied backgrounds, contribution to St Clement’s and subsequent doings. I’ve referred to two of these: a further chapter is given to Brother Maynard. Before joining the community, William Maynard Shaw studied art and architecture. While still a novice he was sent to Philadelphia and his skills were at once employed in the decoration of St Clement’s, and then of the chapel of the St Margaret’s Sisters in Boston. As most of the cooking and housework was done by the lay brothers (of whom there were never many) he must have been glad to be joined by a lay postulant, Brother John. Brother Maynard made a brief visit to Oxford to make his Life Profession: when he finally returned to Cowley permanently, it was to play a major role in decorating the new community church, and as co-architect and clerk to the works of the monastery being built in Marston Street. It may be that his is the most lasting legacy, in stone and paint and in the wood of a confessional that survives in St Clement’s.

As a community we have enjoyed the friendship of the American Province of SSJE: Father Paul Wessinger was a frequent visitor (we have a photo of him taking tea with Mother Mary Clare and Father Gilbert Shaw in the 1960s) and contact is maintained through sisters’ visits to the Monastery in Cambridge, Massachusetts, brothers’ visits to the UK, and the beautiful spiritual riches of their website, freely shared.

At about the same time as the North American mission was getting under way, a request for assistance from the Bishop of Cape Town had to be declined. By 1873 increasing numbers in the community made it possible to accept an invitation from the Bishop of Bombay and work was begun there, and subsequently in Poona. As at home, there was a focus on education, and in India SSJE worked with the Community of St Mary the Virgin, and with the All Saints Sisters of the Poor, their near neighbours in East Oxford. In 1883 Father Puller went to Cape Town as chaplain to the ASSP community there, initiating a hundred years of presence in South Africa.

The Cowley Fathers is a weighty work, footnoted, with a good index and twenty-three page select bibliography. James himself says that this is ‘an attempt to sketch out the main areas of [SSJE’s] activity ... over 150 years. There remains much other work still to be done’—for which Steven Haws’s book might serve as a model. James judiciously spices his study with lighter touches. One chapter is headed with a quotation from the SSJE Rule ‘Avoid sitting on sofas’ which made me laugh—and then made me think about the SLG Rule, which is still based on what was given to us by Father Cary. Neither it nor the earlier Rule of Father Hollings contains anything comparable. Perhaps this kind of guidance was to be found in a Customary—or perhaps it was unlikely that, after their entry into the community, our earliest sisters would encounter a sofa?

In SLG we have been working on our statutes as part of the process of registration under Canon DA1: one of the requirements was that we should make provision for the dissolution of the community. Doing this in a time of pandemic has been quite salutary, not least because it has reminded us that, however carefully we plan and however well advised we are, our times are in God’s hands. From as early as the 1950s there was anxiety in SSJE about the future of the community. An appendix shows that from then on deaths outnumbered Professions. In 1963 Bishop Harry Carpenter carried out a Visitation: considering the small number of aspirants, he noted ‘it may be that other communities belong more obviously to the twentieth century’. Outwardly the Fathers’ black cloaks and shovel hats made them conspicuously old-fashioned, as did such practices as not permitting the congregation to receive communion at High Mass on Sundays and not allowing women in the guest house—and certainly not within the enclosure (exceptionally, Mother Mary Clare SLG was given permission to give a talk to the brethren in their common room).

In 1964 Father Triffitt became Superior General, committed to making changes of the kind advised by Bishop Carpenter. In preparation for its centenary the community spent a year giving ‘much prayer and thought and discussion to our vocation as a community and to the fulfilment of what may be God’s purposes for us in this modern world’. They were already withdrawing from India, where the establishment of the Church of South India (which brought together Anglicans, Congregationalists, Presbyterians and Methodists) was regarded by Anglo-Catholics as ‘contrary to Catholic Faith and Order’. In South Africa the challenge came from the rise to power of the National Party and its apartheid policies that threatened especially the community’s schools, and by the end of the 1960s only Father Shrive remained.

At home, changes were made to the liturgy that extended to the removal of the high altar in the community church (to make possible celebration of the eucharist facing the people); a journal, *New Fire*, replaced the old *Cowley Evangelist*; a small house was established in Sussex where insights and practices from SSJE’s time in India were incorporated into the life. The Anchorhold did attract men to the novitiate, but few persevered: in 1978 the decision was made to move out of the Marston Street House. James records without comment that Father Campbell, then Superior General, believed that this should not be taken as ‘a sign of retreat and defeat’. St Edward’s House Westminster did indeed continue a very active ministry and there was a small house in Oxford and, for a time, one in Leicester, but the decline in numbers was inexorable and in 2012 the remaining members of the community went into retirement. The Fellowship of St John (UK) Trust Association, incorporated in 1984 had, since its early days, shadowed the meetings of the SSJE Chapter and administered the community’s funds and charities. This work continues in the form of grants that carry forward the community’s mission, not perhaps in the way that former generations might have hoped for, but let Father Benson have the last word: ‘We must see things born in weakness and perish in death, ere they can live to eternity.’

SISTER CATHERINE SLG



Pierre-André Burton OSO, *Aelred of Rievaulx: An Existential and Spiritual Biography*. Trans. **Christopher Coski**. *Cistercian Studies*, 276 (Liturgical Press, 2020), 612pp. ISBN 9780879072766. Paperback £46.50, eBook £22.36.

Aelred of Rievaulx: The Liturgical Sermons. The Reading-Cluny Collection, 1 of 2, Sermons 85–133. Trans. **Daniel Griggs**. Introduction by **Marjory Lange and Marsha L Dutton**. *Cistercian Fathers*, 81 (Liturgical Press, 2021), 432 pp. ISBN 9780879071813. Paperback £35.99, eBook \$29.99 from the publisher only.

Aelred of Rievaulx is an attractive figure: born in Hexham in 1110, he was educated in the Scottish court of King David and went on to become Abbot of Rievaulx in Yorkshire, dying there in 1167. Abbot, spiritual father, writer and statesman, his many works include the *Treatise on Spiritual Friendship*, *Mirror of Charity* and *The Pastoral Prayer*, as well as numerous sermons. He endeavoured to bring peace and reconciliation following the troubled period of The Anarchy, the civil war leading to the reign of King Henry II. From the accounts of his life and his own writings, the picture we receive is that of a wise and gentle man who grasped the importance of friendship as a foundation for personal, spiritual, and public life.

At the distance of over 900 years how can we discern what made Aelred the man that he was? Pierre-André Burton's book does us the service of looking holistically at the life and times of Aelred and synthesizing from them a picture of Aelred as a person formed by his personal history, circumstances, and his faith. He states that,

Our intention is to portray Aelred's human, spiritual, and monastic physiognomy by focussing on the inmost recesses of his heart. (27)

This is an optimistic intention, but the book succeeds in bringing the figure of Aelred of Rievaulx to life. Burton takes a sweeping view of the times that shaped Aelred ecclesiastically and politically and situates him within the wider context of the world of the twelfth century. From Aelred's time at the Scottish Court as a young man, through his later involvement in the dispute between King Stephen and the Empress Matilda, to the reign of King Henry, Aelred was concerned to promote peace and justice, and wrote several works addressed to kings to this effect.

Most important is Aelred's spiritual teaching as monk and as abbot seen in his writings. By looking at Aelred's life as a whole Burton provides us with a hermeneutical key to understanding his writing. He shows that Aelred's life and teaching is built around his vision of friendship with Christ as its source and model. In his section on Aelred's conception of friendship Burton examines Aelred's teaching, clearing up misunderstandings and showing how, for Aelred, friendship was key to understanding charity and to our relationship with God. As the author writes:

...whether in terms of personal and relational life or in terms of universal history, Christ is in fact established as the absolute end point towards whom all things must tend and who, ultimately recapitulating all things in himself, gives to each its true measure. (43)

This book provides a fascinating insight into the life and works of Aelred of Rievaulx; scholarly and well researched, it is also accessible and provides a way into a deeper reading of Aelred's own words.

As described by Burton, one of Aelred's regular pastoral activities was the preaching of sermons in Chapter to his Cistercian brethren, and the Griggs edition of the first part of the Reading-Cluny collection adds to those available for our use. The introduction by Marjory Lange and Marsha L. Dutton gives background to the sermons in the collection and introduces points of interest within the sermons themselves.

The sermons in this volume span the first half of the liturgical year from Advent to Pentecost and give an insight into the monastic reflective use of scripture in *lectio divina*. The translation is clear and facilitates our reading of the sermons themselves.

I began this review by describing Aelred as an attractive figure; a reading of his works reveals a man of great spiritual depth and pastoral sensitivity. For those in the religious life he provides a model for the monastic life well lived, and for all Christians insights into a spiritual life based on friendship with Christ. Burton's book gives us greater insight into Aelred as man and as monk, and prepares us to read, with greater appreciation, books such as the newly released volume of sermons.

SISTER CLARE-LOUISE SLG



FAIRCRES CHRONICLE
SUBSCRIPTION for 2022
(January to December)

Two issues per year: Summer and Winter

UK	£7.50		
EUROPE (Airmail)	£9.00	USD \$14.00	€10.50
OUTSIDE EUROPE (Airmail)	£11.00	US \$17.50	

Cheques should be made payable to SLG PRESS

Please send the completed form overleaf to the address below:

SLG Press
Convent of the Incarnation
Fairacres, Parker Street
Oxford OX4 1TB UK

Email: orders@slgpress.co.uk

Website: www.slgpress.co.uk

BACS Payment Details:

SLG Charitable Trust Ltd Press Account
Sort Code: 12-20-29 Account 06055244

*SLG Charitable Trust Ltd, a company limited by guarantee, trading as SLG Press
Reg. in England No. 990049 Reg. Charity No. 261722 Reg. Office as above*





Please complete. IF NO CHANGE to your details tick here

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

TELEPHONE _____

EMAIL _____

Please tick if you are a

Member of the Fellowship

Priest Associate

Companion

Oblate

Please tick to receive a publications list

(The publications list is also available on our website)

The information on this form will be recorded in computer format and used for our own mailing list and accounting purposes. It will not be disclosed to any third party. If you do not wish us to hold your name and address on our database please let us know.

For Office Use

Cheque / Cash / Account / PayPal / S.Order / BACS

Date received

Total receipt £ \$ € Donation _____

Post method **1 2 3** (ring) Multiple Subscription Yes/No

Pays for / Paid by (where relevant): _____

Cust Ref Inv. No.

**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

sisters@slg.org.uk

guests@slg.org.uk

TELEPHONING THE COMMUNITY

Telephone systems are currently in a state of flux and numbers change frequently. The best means of contact is therefore by email.

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

General matters: editor@slgpress.co.uk

Orders & accounts: orders@slgpress.co.uk

Website: www.slgpress.co.uk

Please note that the staff may not be in during current restrictions

SLG Charitable Trust Limited

Registered Office: Convent of the Incarnation, as above

charityoffice@slg.org.uk

Reg. in England No. 990049; Reg. Charity No. 261722