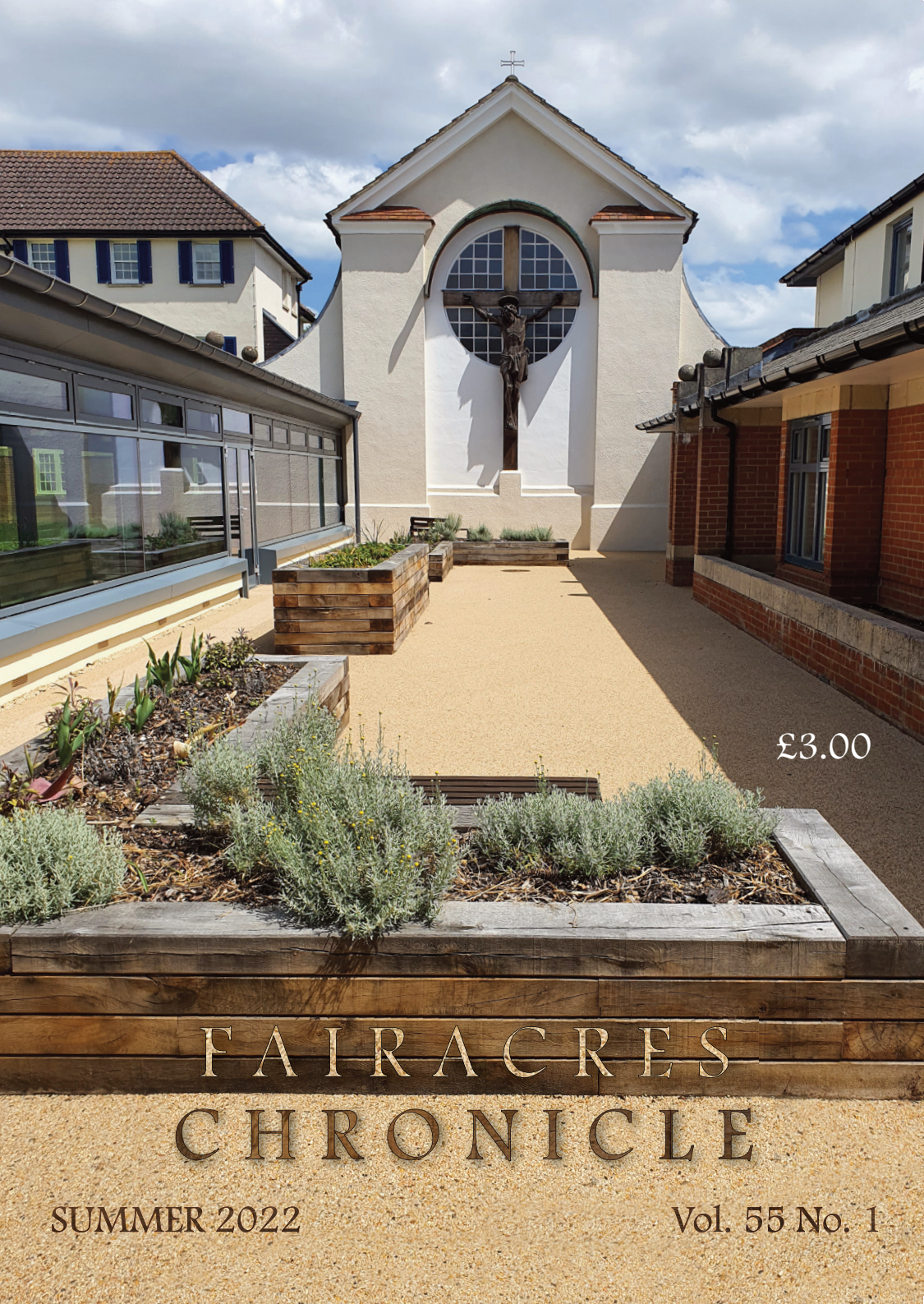

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Cover photo: the Chapel frontage viewed from the new cloister
(credit: Pinky Severn)

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Community Notes

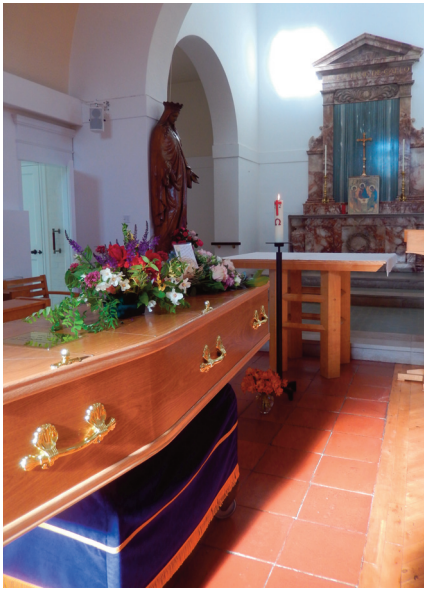
Dear Friends,

Greetings from the Convent of the Incarnation! People often comment that time seems to pass more quickly as you get older; it certainly seems true that the months have been passing very quickly of late. We continue to re-establish ourselves as a community in the new building and hope that we will all be resident in the Convent in the next few weeks.

Blessing of the palms on Palm Sunday

As for most of you, this was our first Holy Week and Easter without the restrictions of Covid as well as being our first Paschaltide back in the Convent; it was good to be able to celebrate the Feast once more together. In order to have as many sisters able to attend the ceremonies as possible, we made the decision to split the Paschal Vigil and the lighting of the new fire and Easter Eucharist. The Vigil was held on Holy Saturday evening, and the lighting of the fire on Easter Day at about 10 a.m., followed by the Eucharist. This was a change from our traditional practice of having the Vigil and Eucharist at 4 a.m. but did enable us all to be together for the Easter celebrations.

Sadly, one of the main events of the past few months was the death of Sister Benedicta of Jesus on 23 May. Sister Benedicta had been unwell for some time and so her passing was not a surprise, although in the end she slipped away quietly and peacefully just before midday. Many of you will be aware that she was well known as Sister Benedicta Ward, translator of the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers,* author of *Harlots of the Desert* and many other publications (a search of the SLG Press website will reveal some of them) and Reader in Early Christian Spirituality at Harris Manchester College, Oxford.



Unlike many in the Community, Sister Benedicta had visibility in the outside world through her academic work. We were amazed during the time after her death at how far afield she was known, and how quickly, thanks to social media, news of her death spread across the world. There was an outpouring of love and gratitude from all quarters. Sister Benedicta spent her life holding the tension of her calling to academic study with her calling to an enclosed, contemplative community. It wasn't an easy thing to do, for her or for the Community, and Bishop Rowan spoke movingly of this in his homily for her funeral. It is significant that in the end she died in her cell at the Convent. A life which, in her work, spanned the centuries, was also able to be present in the still, silent place of the Convent cell.

Sister Benedicta's funeral was held on Wednesday, 15 June at St Andrew's Church, Headington, Oxford. The Convent chapel was not big enough for the numbers expected at her Requiem Mass, but we were able to have her coffin brought back to our Chapel on the afternoon of the day before the funeral for Vespers of the Dead and for the overnight Vigil – the first time we have been able to do this since before our building project began.

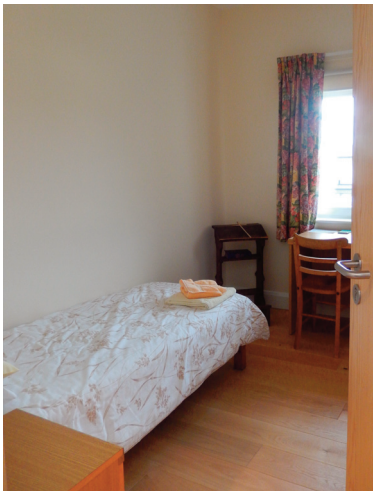
When a sister dies, the Candle that she received at her clothing, that was lit again at her Profession, is lit again and allowed to burn out. The candle symbolizes the light of Christ and our baptismal promises as well as our monastic vows, and is a powerful symbol of our consecration to God as religious. Each of us has a candle stored in a cupboard, carefully labelled with our name and dates of clothing and profession. Unwrapping a sister's candle after her death is always a powerful moment. There, in an unknown hand, is the record of her journey through Community. Our Rule says that, after Profession, our offering of ourselves continues *until it is consummated in death.*[1] The dates of

[1] *Rule*, Chapter 8, 'Profession'.

clothing, profession and death give a bare outline of a life lived in Community, but those of us who have lived with a sister are aware that between those dates a whole life given to God has been lived. For Sister Benedicta that life was marked by her writing and her teaching, and by the many people whose lives she touched along the way. But for Sister Benedicta, as for us all, there was an even deeper level of prayer, commitment and love, which we seek to express in the daily living out of our vocations.

A more joyous event was the Queen's Platinum Jubilee weekend. We arranged our timetable around the televised events, decorated the refectory, and gathered to watch online! The picture shows Sisters blowing up balloons and putting up bunting in preparation for the celebrations.

It is some time since we last welcomed someone interested in exploring a vocation to the Community, and it is a general trend in the religious life that vocations are decreasing. It is of course true that there is only ever going to be a limited number of men and women living the religious life. However, there *are* people making enquiries, and Sister Margaret Theresa and I have been able to meet some of them through an online enquirers group organized by Brother Finnian SSF.



Having said that, during our time of dispersal during the building work we have had contacts from women enquiring about vocations to the Community. In recent months two women have lived alongside us to explore the possible vocations to the Community. One of them, Nadine Unger, was admitted as a postulant at Vespers on the feast of John the Baptist, 24 June. This is a

time of reflection for us, as we inhabit our new surroundings and consider the way that we live our SLG life; the potential of new women coming to join us makes this even more imperative.

Many of you will know that Sister Avis Mary has been the Prioress for the last seven years; she retired from that office on Sunday 27 June (although she will be continuing with her many other tasks). Sister Eve was blessed into office as the new Prioress at the Eucharist that day.

We are also gradually reopening to guests, and it is good to be able to see some familiar faces again. We have the same amount of space as previously, but differently configured. The space formerly available in Fellowship House is now in the new wing of the building (a guest room is shown in the picture at the foot of the facing page), and we have new guest cottages replacing our old ones. The idea is to try to make better use of our space with everything closer together; the new cottages are on the opposite side of the garden to the old bungalows, each with a small area of garden of their own.

The continuity that grounds all this change and development is, of course, our vocation as Sisters of the Love of God, and our work of prayer. Like all of you, we have watched with horror the unfolding events in Ukraine, and we are aware of all the many other places of pain and tragedy in our world. We notice in our own garden the effects of global warming as the seasons shift and the weather patterns change.

It is moving to see the ways in which the work of the architects has brought to the fore the original vision of Paul Waterhouse who designed St Mary's and the Chapel in the 1920s. Even when circumstances and buildings change, and as time passes, I am reminded of the original vision of the first Sisters of the Love of God to live a life of prayer dedicated to the Love of God. A prayer in the *SLG Way of Life* reflects that commitment:

> Draw us by the Holy Spirit
> As you have drawn our Sisters before us
> To enter into the love behind the Passion
> As we engage with this world's pain.[2]

Please continue to pray for us as we continue to pray for you,

CLARE-LOUISE SLG

[2] *Way of Life*, 'Vision'.

Sister Benedicta of Jesus SLG

4 February 1933–23 May 2022

Bishop Rowan Williams

The first word of our liturgy this morning is 'rest'. What comes to our minds when we hear the word 'rest'? Relaxation? Winding down? The absence of pressure, even duty? A set of images that sounds, perhaps, rather passive. And yet when we look at the way in which the 'rest' of the Saints is spoken of in the tradition of Christian writing about Christian destiny, that 'rest' is the condition for love. It is our restlessness that prevents us from loving as we should. When, at the very end of *The City of God,* St Augustine speaks of the rest we pray for in eternity, it is the rest that is expressed in, realized in—and only in—love.

Benedicta was not what you would call a restless person. She conveyed to so many people a sense of almost immobile solidity, dependability; a sense of presence and authority. Yet those of us who knew her, especially those who shared daily life with her, will know perfectly well that she was no more marmoreal than any of the rest of us. She was a person who lived, as human beings must live, with contradiction, a person who lived with many different elements, enriching, intelligent, alive, challenging in her personality. When someone commented that her death fell opportunely just before the commemoration of both the Wesley brothers and the Venerable Bede, they were witnessing to one of the central—not tensions, but rich complexities in her character—that deep, simple, emotionally affective devotion to the Lord Jesus that she inherited from Methodism, and the sense of the equally rich, diverse, complex life of the Catholic Church through the ages.

It was not the only tension that she lived with. Like many of the people she most deeply admired, not least St Anselm, she combined a profound generosity of temperament with an equally profound austerity of judgement. Woe betide those who confused the two and who imagined the generosity

of temperament would simply mean an easy judgement of others! Woe betide those too who thought that the austerity of judgement (intellectual and sometimes, it has to be said, personal!) was not rooted in a fundamental generosity, a fundamental hospitality to the rest of God's world and especially God's variegated and troubling human creation.

There was a tension too between the deep loyalty to community and Church that sustained her throughout her life and the, yes, restless, critical spirit that never prevented her from asking the awkward questions and expressing the ways in which she did not feel easily at home where she had been placed.

All of that, then, woven together and all of that, as in the experience of all of us, never quite coming together. Because all of us live with tensions of that kind until the day we meet our Maker face to face.

The mystery of our human existence is that we cannot put together those fragments by our own resource. Only when we know in the very depths of our being that we are seen through-and-through and held forever in the single, undivided gaze which is the simplicity of Divine Love, only then do we come together. It is significant that many of our nightmares are about tasks that we cannot complete, literally or metaphorically: jigsaw puzzles we cannot finish, bits we cannot fit in, texts we cannot read (I am not the only cleric here today, I am sure, who habitually has nightmares of being unable to find the place in the book). Our nightmares, our fears are so often about not being able to hold it together, make continuous sense, to thread our lives together, to make one thing of ourselves. We cannot do it and our inner restlessness has such a lot to do with that.

When we pray, then, for the 'rest' of the departed, I don't believe we're praying for passivity and relaxation; we pray surely for that sense of being seen in our wholeness and welcomed in our wholeness, being put together not by our effort, our success, our ingenuity, but put together in the singleness and simplicity of the regard of God, the gaze of God upon us, which alone can hold us together. That is the end of our pilgrimage, that is where the journey leads: to the mansions Christ has prepared for us—all those endlessly diverse places where we are at last at home, each one of us in our distinctiveness, and all of us together in the Body of Christ, standing before the single, simple gaze of the Eternal Father. To pray for rest for the departed is to pray that all of us

may find our way to that place where we are laid bare to the simplicity of God, and so healed, put together, *re*solved, *ab*solved in the unity of Divine Love. It is why every celebration of a Christian death is not only also a celebration of resurrection but the celebration of a *community* of resurrection, a shared hope that makes sense of our life together, our restless life together, in the hope that God will put us together again; that God will bring into harmony, into resolution and absolution, what we cannot do for ourselves, what we continue to break apart in our own loneliness, unhappiness and struggle.

Benedicta lived a life of discipleship, learning, contemplation. They do not always fit easily together, yet hers was a life united, brought together in the hope of that final resolution and absolution that is the gaze of Almighty God upon us. Her own witness to that, her own living-out of that hope, her own scholarly reflection on those who shared that hope through the centuries, her own silent presence praying alongside us—all of those remain a gift to our restless selves still struggling on our way, still trying to allow hope to permeate all of our divided lives.

Just about the last book that Benedicta published was *Give Love and Receive the Kingdom.*[1] It returns more than once to these themes of rest, reconciliation and hope. She writes, in the introduction, about the tension that she identifies in a verse of Langland in the fourteenth century:

> I dreamt a marvellous dream,
> I was in a wilderness I could not tell where
> …
> and between the tower and the gulf
> I saw a smooth field full of folk,
> high and low together.[2]

Benedicta reflects on that extraordinary image of living between the tower and the gulf, between the height from which we can see something of the scope of the truth and the depths in which we struggle with our fragmented daily lives. She speaks of how the invocation of Christian pilgrimage in the

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[1] Benedicta Ward, *Give Love and Receive the Kingdom: Essential People and Themes of English Spirituality* (Paraclete, 2018).

[2] William Langland, *Piers Plowman*, Prologue, line 11ff. Translated in Ralph Waller and Benedicta Ward, eds., *An Introduction to Christian Spirituality* (SPCK, 1999).

writings that she is discussing in this book continually confronts us with that journey between the tower and the gulf. She writes:

> We are all engaged in this pilgrimage with them, and there is refreshment in such companionship. We are all Bunyan's Christian and as well as being his giant Despair, we are also his Faithful-unto-Death. We with him will cross over in the loving company of friends, where for us as for him 'all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side'. Between the tower of truth and the gulf of sorrow our predecessors stood, as we do, within a field full of folk with only one rule: 'Give love and receive the kingdom!'[3]

She concludes:

> 'After Christian had let go of his burden of sin at the wicket gate he gave three leaps for joy and went on his way singing.'[4] To recognize the seriousness of the undertaking of *peregrinatio* need not diminish the glory of the end, or prevent it from being reflected in the delights of the way itself. For any journey to be called pilgrimage there has to be a serious element of going 'away from' and 'towards', but it means also a joyful sense of going out freely in good company with shared aim, which is, perhaps, to find that place which is, most of all, home.[5]

The book ends with a verse from her beloved Chesterton:

> To an open house in the evening
> Home shall men come,
> To an older place than Eden
> And a taller tower than Rome.
> To the end of the way of the wandering star,
> To the things that cannot be and that are,
> To the place where God was homeless
> And all men are at home.[6]

To that rest and home may Almighty God bring our beloved Sister and all of us.

Bishop Rowan Williams, theologian and poet, was Archbishop of Canterbury 2002–2012.

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[3] Ward, *Give Love and Receive the Kingdom*, xi.
[4] John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress* (London, 1890), 59.
[5] Ward, *Give Love and Receive the Kingdom*, 190–1.
[6] G. K. Chesterton, 'The House of Christmas'.

Bede and Aldhelm

25 May 2022

Tony Dickinson

> Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; he was the one who had reclined next to Jesus at the supper and had said, "Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?" When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, "Lord, what about him?" Jesus said to him, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!" So the rumour spread in the community that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?"
>
> This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true. But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. (John 21:20–25 NRSV)

Reflection:

Sister Benedicta Ward died just a few days before the Feast of Bede and Aldhelm. She had been moving toward death for a few weeks, held in our prayers, and those of many others around the world. So on that feast day we had an opportunity to reflect on the life of someone who had become so closely associated with Bede. Actually, there is not a lot you can say about Sister Benedicta's life, despite her having reached the ripe age of eighty-nine. She spent most of it in the community at Fairacres Convent in Oxford. Her entry in Wikipedia tells you when she was born and where (February 1933 in Durham) and that is about it.

Then you turn to the list of her writings – and that goes on, and on, and on. Sister Benedicta was one of the most learned and fruitful scholars of the last century. She was a historian and a theologian, with a particular interest in the development of the spiritual life. She wrote books, articles for learned journals, and slim volumes of 'popular' theology for the press run by her community. She wrote about the Desert Fathers and the Desert Mothers, including a study of those rather racy ladies, the 'harlots of the desert', women like Pelagia, the former dancing girl, who gave up their lives in the fast lane

and devoted themselves to penitence and prayer. Benedicta also wrote about medieval prayer and piety. She translated the prayers and meditations of Archbishop Anselm of Canterbury, and, being a Durham lass and a religious, she wrote about Bede. She wrote about Bede as a thinker, Bede the theologian, Bede and the Psalter, even 'Bede and the educated woman'. One scholar with wide-ranging interests and a deep Christian faith sharing her appreciation of another, despite the centuries that separated them.

She wrote more widely, too, about the Church in Anglo-Saxon England, though I do not think she ever wrote, except perhaps in passing, about the other Anglo-Saxon saint we commemorate on the same day as Bede. Aldhelm was another scholar, the first great scholar of the English Church, a generation before Bede, fluent in Latin as well as in his mother tongue. Bede describes him as 'a man of wide learning, with a polished style and … extremely well-read both in ecclesiastical and general literature'.

Like Bede and Benedicta, Aldhelm was a religious: a monk, and later abbot, of Malmesbury. Unlike them, he spent much of his life in the world outside the schoolroom and the monastery. Bede, so far as we know, never travelled further than York. Aldhelm travelled on Church business as far as Rome, and in his late sixties he became Bishop of Sherborne. He was bishop for only four years, but in that time, according to Bede, he 'completed the conquest of Wessex by his preaching'. He toured his diocese, often dressed as a travelling entertainer, with a harp slung across his shoulders. When he arrived in a town or a village he would often give the church a miss and go straight to the marketplace where the people were, grab their attention with a song, or a few jokes and a bit of clowning, and then turn their attention to the things of God.

This brings us back to the end of the Gospel prescribed for this feast day this year, and Peter's question about the disciple whom Jesus loved: "Lord, what about him?" When we look at the lives of Aldhelm, Bede, and Sister Benedicta, we see three people whose life was spent in response to Jesus's answer: "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!" Each of them fulfilled God's will, not by looking round at others, but by following Jesus faithfully on the way He had set out for them.

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.

So, What *is* Truth?

Jeremy Swayne

An occasional meeting of a small group of old, and in fact elderly, university friends always includes, alongside the conviviality, an informal seminar that allows us to explore whatever particularly exercises our minds at the time. In 2017, when the Trump election campaign and the Brexit debate were generating more heat than light, it was suggested that 'Truth' might be a suitably topical theme. In the end, we did not adopt that proposal, but it prompted me to realize that exploring and wrestling with issues of truth has been a theme of my life and work, more or less since childhood.

The famous question of Pilate to Jesus, "What is truth?", came to mind. And challenged me to come up with some kind of answer, for my own satisfaction if nothing else; because it would be ridiculously presumptuous to suppose that I can improve on the largely-futile efforts of philosophers and theologians throughout the ages. Their limited success is reflected in a quotation I heard attributed to Umberto Eco, that 'Truth is the sum of all contradictions'. This chimes with my sense that any real understanding of truth has to accommodate paradox. Another paradoxical statement that I like, and that bears upon this theme, is from Albert Camus, claiming that 'Every blasphemy is a participation in holiness'. And just recently, I came across this splendid quotation from Brian Friel's play, *Faith Healer*: 'An autobiographical fact can be pure fiction. And no less reliable for that.'

Serendipitously, while pondering these matters, I came across a letter from an old friend, written to me forty years ago in response to a paper I had published about medicine and human values. In it, *inter alia*, he wrote:

> I am interested in the whole philosophical tradition of … uncertainty, lack of goal setting, vagueness as a virtue, lack of pre-specification, lack of explanation (Pinter for example), ambiguity as a central human condition and fundamental component of human language. Yet society rewards and seeks certainty, explanation, goal-setting, pre-specification … and scientists bridle at uncertainty.

I can recommend a highly informative and thoroughly entertaining Archive Hour programme last broadcast on Radio 4 on 4 May 2019 called

A Brief History of the Truth.[1] Broadly speaking, its answer to my question, is, 'Sorry, I haven't a clue.'

There are five areas of my life that have involved me in this exploration of truth. They are: personal truthfulness and integrity; truthfulness in healing relationships; scientific truth; religious truth; and rather more remotely, truth in public life; meaning the penumbra of politics, economics, journalism, the administration of justice, etc. that surrounds and permeates our personal and working lives. I suppose I should add a sixth dimension that has permeated my life and influenced my understanding of human values, of which 'truth', whatever we mean by it, is an essential element; namely literature and the arts in general. I will touch upon each of these very briefly, and end with what I make of it all.

Personal truthfulness

First, the matter of personal truthfulness and its relation to integrity: in the usual sense of honesty, straight dealing and consistent commitment to what one perceives to be right; but also in the sense of 'integratedness': a sense of myself as a whole person; the state perhaps that Jung described as 'individuation'.

Personal truthfulness in these senses embraces telling the truth, being honest in relation to events and other people. But it also embraces honest awareness of my failings in that regard; recognising and acknowledging the truth to myself; honest self-awareness and its consequences for one's behaviour and development as a person. All this, of course, underpins our perception of truth in other areas of life.

Truthfulness in healing relationships

The importance of truthfulness in healing relationships is closely related to this. As my medical career progressed, I learned that this quality of truthfulness is essential to a therapeutic relationship if it is to achieve more than a limited remedial solution to a clinical problem. That is, if it is to achieve some measure of real healing in terms of the patient's integrity, integratedness, and quality of life. This requires of the practitioner the truthful self-awareness that I have described if he or she is to be able to give the full attention—unprejudiced by personal pre-occupations, assumptions and emotions—that is

[1] Available at the time of writing at http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/ b08ylphn.

necessary to enable patients to express themselves freely and truthfully, and to discover the resources within themselves to be well. When this is achieved, it can lend a consultation a confessional quality, so that a patient will often say, "This is the first time I have ever told anybody that in the whole of my life." This is not necessarily 'confessional' in the sense that the patient is speaking of something bad about themselves; though that may be so; or perhaps something that they perceive to be bad, but which is not. Rather, patients often reveal themselves to be what I call 'suffering from a wellness' – a wound to the psyche caused by some insult to their essential humanity, integrity, or deepest feelings, that represents not a failing but some personal quality of mind or spirit that has been damaged or denied, and which needs to be affirmed. Truthfulness of this kind can, and perhaps should, give all good relationships a healing quality.

Scientific 'truth'

In the course of my career I adopted homeopathy as an adjunct to my conventional medical repertoire and the psychological and spiritual insights I had acquired along the way, because it helped me to achieve more for my patients than I could without it. This therapeutic method has required me to examine, understand and justify its effects in the face of a degree of sometimes vitriolic hostility that is strangely unique to this country. In the process I have learned about the limitations of science and science's criteria of validity. These include problems of plausibility bias and 'paradigm paralysis', which limit the ability of a scientist, or any thinker in fact, to see beyond the possibilities of their familiar conceptual framework and intellectual comfort zone. The case of homeopathy conforms closely to the philosopher Thomas Kuhn's thesis on *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.[2]

Science is wonderful and thrilling and has achieved great things for humanity; as well as equipping it to do terrible things. But science is not concerned with truth. It is by definition concerned with knowledge (from the Latin *scire*, to know); and scientific knowledge is provisional and contingent. The scientific method, properly applied, is always open to the possibility that the 'facts' may in due course be displaced by 'alternative facts'. The

[2] Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago Press, 1962, R/2012).

endless procession of contradictory pronouncements about what it is good or bad for us to eat is a mundane example of this. And scientific proof is a fragile concept. John Polkinghorne, an eminent mathematical physicist and priest, has stated:

> There is an inescapable circularity in scientific argument. I think we have come to learn that the vocabulary of proof, in that strictly logical coercive and inescapable sense, is actually not a very interesting category. Most things elude it. Even mathematics.[3]

Science is not, as sometimes claimed, value free; nor independent of belief systems. Scientist and philosopher of science Michael Polanyi wrote that 'The rules of scientific procedure which we adopt and the scientific beliefs and valuations which we hold, are mutually determined';[4] and 'No rule of scientific procedure is certain of finding truth and avoiding error.'[5] Many, perhaps most great scientists, have been guided by intuition.

Religious truth

Carl Jung was asked whether he believed in God. To which he famously replied, "I don't believe, I know." Similarly, I have always known since childhood that 'God is; and is as he is in Jesus'. I do not, though, subscribe to an exclusively masculine concept of God, nor an exclusively Christian view of humanity's relationship with the divine. Consequently, I have had to tease out the relationship between belief: intellectual assent to a proposition; and faith: intuitive awareness of a deeper reality. I have had to tease out the relationship between theological and doctrinal truth and spiritual truth; between evidence and discernment; and between religious truth and scientific truth. I readily acknowledge that religion is often a bad advertisement for God, and Christianity too often a bad advertisement for Jesus. In my work with patients I invented the syndrome of 'Doctrine Abuse', for those 'suffering from wellness' as a result of bad religion. And of course, as a Christian, I am confronted by Jesus's statement, "I am the way, the truth, and the life", which I accept absolutely, but with the proviso that it is widely misunderstood and misrepresented by

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[3] J. Polkinghorne, personal communication, 2008.
[4] Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (Taylor & Francis, 2012), 170.
[5] idem, 183.

Christians themselves. I am afraid it would take me too long to unpack that statement here, but what I say later about eternal truth may give you a clue.

Truth in the public domain

Of course we live in a world of politics, 24/7 journalism, community conflict, international affairs, social media, etc., in which any foothold in truth is elusive and often illusory. But it is a world in which we are bound to make choices, decisions, and commitments; a world of personal responsibilities and relationships from which we cannot abdicate, and which constantly test our personal integrity.

Truth in literature and the arts

Then there is the milieu of the arts, formative for all of us, I imagine. For me the writings of Boris Pasternak, Thomas Mann, Herman Hesse, Charles Dickens, George Orwell, to name but a few, have left an indelible resonance in my psyche since my youth, as have the riches of classical music and the paintings of Rembrandt. Here is an absolutely vital world of experience, an essential nourishment to the human spirit and catalyst to personal fulfilment. And it is a milieu, I suggest, in which we come closer to some kind of real experience of truth than any other.

What do I make of it?

I am not at all well read in philosophy, but there seems to be a consensus among philosophers, borne out in the Radio 4 programme, that there are many different manifestations of truth; or that truth is multifaceted. Perhaps unusually for philosophers, that seems to conform to common sense. For we inhabit the manifestly disparate landscape of truth that I have already touched upon: personal truth, political truth and truth in public life, truth in the law, aesthetic truth, ethical truth, religious truth, scientific truth, not forgetting historical truth, and so on. The related philosophical question is whether there is some quality of *truthfulness* that they have in common that underpins them.

My conclusion is that we should *abandon* the concept of 'truth' for all of these. As a commonplace 'for instance', it is quite ridiculous that we still require witnesses in court to 'swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth'. It simply cannot be done. All anyone can ever swear is 'to relate the facts as I perceive them, without deliberately lying'.

I have been helped recently by the suggestion in a book I have found that is actually called *What is Truth?* that there are two categories of truth: Historical Truth and Eternal Truth.[6] Historical Truth accommodates all the facts unequivocally supported by evidence (the earth is roundish; I had toast for breakfast), and everything else whose so-called 'truth' we are concerned with. Everything else, all other knowledge, is contingent, provisional, circumstantial; dependent on personal interpretation of events; subject to the prevailing paradigm, world view, plausibility construct, or belief system; or as yet undetermined. To paraphrase Polanyi, no application of the human intellect is certain of finding truth and avoiding error. And by the same token we must be very circumspect in deciding what we can reliably call knowledge. And to bear in mind T. S. Eliot's well-known stanza from 'Choruses from the Rock':

> Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
> Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

A quotation from one of Hilary Mantel's 2017 Reith Lectures about Historical Truth (the truth of historians) used in the Radio 4 programme seems apt to me for all 'truths':

> Facts are not truths, though they are part of it. And information is not knowledge. And history is not the past. It's the method we've evolved of organising our ignorance of the past. … It's no more the past than a birth certificate is a birth, or a script is a performance, or a map is a journey. It's the multiplication of the evidence of fallible and biased witnesses, combined with the incomplete accounts of actions not fully understood by the person who performed them.

What about eternal truth?

Eternal truth is what I believe we can legitimately call Truth with a capital T. It cannot, by definition, be subject to the vagaries of the human mind. It is THE truth. It is absolute. It is the source of Wisdom and Discernment, which are attributes that are mediated by the intellect and nourished by experience, but which depend upon insights that are intuitive and not intellectual. A good intellect does not guarantee wisdom or discernment or truth.

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[6] John Martin Sahajananda, *What is Truth?* (Luc Editions, 2013).

Truth cannot be comprehended intellectually. It is not an intellectual faculty. It is more like a forcefield. It is not like gravity, because gravity pulls us irresistibly in one direction. We cannot escape it. It is more like Magnetic North, which guides us in a particular direction, or helps us to find our way, but which we can ignore; and which we cannot make use of without a compass.

This Truth will not provide us with answers, but it will guide us in seeking answers. It will not tell us what to do or which path to take, but it will help us feel our way. Examples of its operation in our lives, if we pay attention, are conscience (right judgement of our behaviour) and vocation (awareness of our unique individuality and path in life). Both of which, of course, may be compromised by the imposed untruths of our upbringing, circumstances and culture.

Truth and Wisdom

Truth is essential to Wisdom; and understanding the nature of Wisdom helps us to understand Truth:

> for wisdom, the fashioner of all things, taught me. There is in her a spirit that is intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, mobile, clear, unpolluted, distinct, invulnerable, loving the good, keen, irresistible, beneficent, humane, steadfast, sure, free from anxiety, all-powerful, overseeing all, and penetrating through all spirits that are intelligent, pure, and altogether subtle. (Wis. 7:22–3 NRSV)

That is an extract from *The Wisdom of Solomon*, included in some Bibles in the Apocrypha. It is (in parts) worth a read. And it is worth noting that in the Hebrew scriptures Wisdom is characterised as feminine.

Some people are more naturally 'in tune' with the Truth than others. But we will all be more in tune if we are prepared, at least occasionally, to give it our full attention. We can do so when we employ the mystical and contemplative aspect of our nature. This is not an esoteric attribute or pastime. The mystical dimension of life is in some degree open to all of us; and, in fact, necessary in some degree to all of us, if we are to become fulfilled and integrated people, and grow in wisdom and understanding. In some measure it can be and should be part of the common experience of life, certainly of our spiritual life, considered in the language of the Royal

College of Psychiatrists Spirituality Special Interest Group in a statement on one of their promotional leaflets as:

> an experience of meaning, purpose, belonging, integration and wholeness. Linking the deeply personal with the universal. Not necessarily associated with formal religion, culture or belief in God.

Mystical experience is like being in love, in which, in its truest and deepest expression, we lose our separate identity in a union with our beloved that is beyond words or even conscious thought, but which enriches us and changes us. There are other experiences which, as we say, 'take us out of ourselves'; when we lose ourselves in wonder, or awe—at the beauty of the natural world, for example; in music or poetry; or a work of art. These are a glimpse of the mystical. At times like these, when words and thoughts are displaced by an inner stillness, we may describe ourselves as being 'lost in contemplation'. This is a state of inner silence and stillness when, in the depths of our being, we may gain an awareness of Truth that is beyond words, but which can inspire wisdom and discernment, and inform and direct what we think and do in our active lives.

My wife Clare would say that she is not remotely intellectual or academic, but she has a particular wisdom, insight and intelligence that I value greatly. For her, Truth is simply a circle. If I interpret her correctly this means a sense of the wholeness that embraces, integrates, and reconciles all things. And although I have used up a lot of words getting there, I cannot put it better than that.

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Associates

FLG

Helen Corfield 18 January 2022

✠ RIP ✠

Isabel Ryrie (Companion) 23 December 2021

Anselm of Canterbury: Teacher of Prayer[7]

Sister Benedicta Ward slg

'Give love therefore and receive the kingdom: love and possess'
(Da ergo amorem et accipe regnum: ama et habe)[8]

SOURCES

P&M:ET *The Prayers and Meditations of Saint Anselm*, trans. Benedicta Ward, Penguin Classics (Penguin, 1973).

P&M:BM *Anselmo d'Aosta, Orazioni e Meditazioni*, ed. Inos Biffi, Constante Marabelli, introd. Benedicta Ward (Jaca Book, 1997). These references are to the Latin text as well as the Italian translation.

Letters:ET *The Letters of Anselm of Canterbury*, trans. Walter Fröhlich, 3 vols (Cistercian Publications, 1990).

Letters:BM *Anselmo d'Aosta, Lettere,* ed. Inos Biffi, Constante Marabelli, 3 vols (Jaca Book, 1988). These references are to the Latin text as well as the Italian translation.

'In his prayers and meditations Anselm created a new kind of poetry, the poetry of intimate personal devotion'.[9] Sir Richard Southern not only wrote about and analysed the *Prayers of St Anselm,* but he illustrated their continuing power and influence by using them as his own to the end of his life. Anselm was for him a teacher of prayer and the meditations were, for this most reserved of scholars, not only part of his study of Anselm but a way of learning to pray, to be read 'a little at a time', with 'deep and thoughtful meditation' as Anselm directed.[10] Their use by others also interested him, and one of the most carefully annotated sections of a book he used often, the *Preces Privatae* of the seventeenth-century bishop Launcelot Andrewes, are those that make use of several of Anselm's

[7] An extended version of this article is to be published by SLG Press.

[8] Anselm, Letter 112 to Hugh the Hermit, Letters:ET, vol. 1 pp. 268–71 (Letters BM, vol.1, 341–4).

[9] R. W. Southern, P&M:ET: Preface, p. 9.

[10] P&M:ET: Preface, p. 89 (P&M:BM, p. 118).

prayers and meditations.[11] In this manner, Sir Richard is himself an example of the fact that Anselm was and continues to be, in the deepest sense, a teacher of prayer.

On a more superficial level, Anselm was not a teacher of prayer; he wrote no treatise analysing the theology of prayer like Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, or Pseudo-Dionysius, nor did he explore the states of prayer for the individual as did the Spanish mystics; he offered prayers he himself had prayed and gave some brief, practical advice about how best to use them. After all, how does anyone teach prayer? The answer must be not by analysing but by praying, and praying in such a way as to make others want to do likewise, above all by the gift of self which is love. It is clear from Eadmer's biography of Anselm, as well as from his own writings, that Anselm was one of the most loving of saints, as well as one of the greatest thinkers of the world and it is this central element of attractive goodness that lay behind the wide influence of his prayers and meditations. The fact that he could combine a clear head with a loving heart, so that desire for union with God would seem not only appropriate but also uniquely attractive, made him a teacher of prayer and this is also his real claim to sanctity. I would like to look here at Anselm as a man of prayer. His prayers were used by others, and in that use were changed, but that is not examined here.

Looking back on his long life, Anselm placed his first understanding of prayer very early indeed. Born in 1033 near Mount St Bernard, Anselm was a child of the mountains and it was here that he first learned to be articulate about what was to be his way of prayer throughout his life. When he was archbishop in Canterbury, he used to talk about himself with his friends, such as the monks Eadmer, Alexander and Baldwin, and on one occasion he told them how as a little boy he had believed that God lived on the snow-topped mountains above his home, and how in a dream he had set out to climb, passing on the way some lazy servants of the Lord whom the child blamed for their idle work; going upward, he met the Lord who was attended by one of His servants and was able to sit and talk with Him, beginning with dialogue about his own identity ('who he was, where he came

[11] Lancelot Andrews, *The Preces Privatae* (Methuen, 1903), cf. pp. 61, 154, 158, 169, 180, 247, 255.

from, what he wanted') until he was ready to receive the 'whitest of bread' in peace and communion.[12]

This story contained the whole of the Anselmian method. The sense of something amiss, incomplete, which as a child he saw in the idleness of servants, later became not blame of others but self-accusation and repentance; self-examination continued to be the basis of his prayers; the presence of other servants with him before God was always vital to his understanding of prayer with the saints as his friends; and that early longing for something beyond himself became a lifetime of striving for a dynamic ascent to God. His prayers expressed this pattern of desire, self-knowledge, and repentance, leading into the joy of entering into the presence of God and conversing with Him as a friend. This shape of prayer remained at the centre of Anselm's life and thought. When in 1060 he became a Benedictine monk in the Abbey of Bec, he wrote his first brilliant works, including the immensely influential treatise called the *Proslogion* and also most of his *Prayers and Meditations;* this pattern shaped them all.

The prayers of Anselm were not something separate from the rest of his life either as thinker, monk or statesman. His greatest work of philosophical reasoning, the *Proslogion,* was set in the form of a prayer, and its sub-title is a phrase that encapsulates Anselm's method: 'faith seeking understanding'. His pursuit of ultimate truth involved both his heart and his head, and in his prayers his strict forms of thought were given a human and loving face. In combining thought and prayer with the stirring of the emotions he was not doing anything new; this is the ancient method of *compunctio cordis,* without which there is no prayer for anyone. It forms the basis of the long tradition of Christian devotion, beginning with the Scriptures and articulated by the Fathers. Extracts from the psalter, which were part of Anselm's own approach to prayer at first, had, since at least the eighth century, been arranged so that each selection was in the first person, expressing personal sorrow for sin out of fear of judgment or in loving praise of God.[13] It was in writing new, non-scriptural texts of prayers for this kind of personal meditation that Anselm

[12] Eadmer, *De Vita S. Anselmi,* ed. and trans. R. W. Southern, Nelson's Medieval Texts (Oxford University Press, 1962), Bk.1, Cap. 111, pp. 5–6.

[13] For a discussion of the abbreviated psalter, see Benedicta Ward, *Bede and the Psalter* (SLG Press, 2002).

was most original. His prayers and meditations were the written form of his own passionate prayer before God with the saints who were his friends, with whom he still talked as he had as a child in Aosta, and the texts which he offered were patterns for showing his friends on earth how he prayed in a spontaneous, intimate and personal way. 'The purpose of the prayers', he wrote, 'is to stir up the mind of the reader to the love or fear of God'.[14]

Instead of recommending selections from the psalms, the staple of earlier ways of meditation, he would give to any of his friends who asked, copies of his own words to God, of repentance, self-knowledge, appeal for mercy and thanksgiving. In these prayers he managed the difficult task of combining theological thought with personal devotion without loss to either. It is in this method of withdrawal into himself with new words articulating, in complex rhythmic prose, his own state of mind towards God, that Anselm shows himself as an innovator and a man of his times, making traditional devotion available in the terms of his own day. It is in the prayers themselves, as well as in his instructions for their use, that his links both with the theological inheritance of undivided Christendom on the one hand and with the new twelfth-century movements of thought and devotion on the other, can be assessed.

The fact that his prayers were so immediately and widely copied and imitated is the first indication of the success of Anselm as a teacher of prayer. Some years ago André Wilmart distinguished nineteen prayers and three meditations as the genuine work of Anselm, but what is significant for his influence is the vast amount of spurious material that gathered about them within a few years of his death. Others used them and made them their own. Ralph of Battle, Eadmer, and Elmer of Canterbury were among those in Anselm's immediate circle both to imitate and adapt the Anselmian texts and method.[15] It is worth noting that his first imitators, though not his first correspondents, were monks. This underlines the fact that, although some recipients of his prayers lived outside the cloister, Anselm wrote within the monastic tradition of prayer. The daily use of the psalter for the monastic Office meant that the psalms were known by heart and interiorized and so

[14] P&M:ET, Preface, p. 89 (P&M:BM, p. 118).
[15] P&M:ET, Appendix, pp. 275–86.

formed the basis for Anselm's life of prayer; this was still basic, although his use of them changed in accordance with the new ideas of his times.

When Anselm came north from Aosta to Bec, he had come into a monastic world alive with change. It was the beginning of that critical period in European history called the 'twelfth-century renaissance' and a new sensibility was affecting monastic life, first of all about the importance of an individual response to monastic life which was to colour the new Orders, the Cistercians especially. It was not enough that a monk should simply suffer his lot as a kind of endurance test, passive in a great cosmic conflict; there had to be a deliberate personal choice, a response made out of genuine love. Anselm called monastic life not a heavy burden but a 'weight borne with singing'.[16] To lead the monastic life in externals only, without real conversion of heart, was for Anselm no more than hypocrisy, a failure of which indeed he accused himself:

> I profess to lead a life
> of continual turning to God
> as I promised by taking the name and habit of a monk,
> but my long life cries out against me,
> and my conscience convicts me,
> as a liar to God, to angels and to men.[17]

For Anselm the essence of monastic life was this personal conversion of heart according to the Gospel but it was no less a stable and permanent state, in accordance with Benedictine tradition. The stirring of emotion was never the basis of choice but always a trigger to motivate the will. It was not the case that if emotion died away, another choice was possible. To the monk Lanzo he wrote, for instance:

> Whoever undertakes the vows of monastic life must study with the whole of his mind to root himself with the roots of love in whatever monastery he may have made his profession… let him rejoice at finding himself at last where he can remain for the whole of his life, not unwillingly but voluntarily, driving away all thought of removal.[18]

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[16] Anselm, Letter 101, to Helinand, Letters:ET, p. 254 (Letters:BM. p. 324).
[17] Anselm, Prayer 15, to St Benedict, P&M:ET, p. 196 (P&M: BM p. 370).
[18] Anselm, Letter 37, to Lanzo, Letters:ET p. 135 (Letters:BM. p. 181).

The monk was a rebel against the standards of the world, or against stagnation or corruption in monasticism, but once he was professed, to leave seemed apostasy; love of God meant also a love of the brethren and the place. In spite of the new individual emphasis, this context of a monastic community—in which each day was structured around the Office and the mass, *lectio divina,* the love of the brethren and the plain work of the monastery—was the setting for the new-style prayers and meditations. Anselm wrote the prayers while he was a monk at Bec, within the context of the daily life of an eleventh-century Norman monastery. He was shaped by the recitation of the psalter, the reading of the Scriptures and the daily routine of life, in which life and prayer are brought into union. Anselm followed the *Rule of St Benedict* and found within it that core of Gospel freedom which he developed and expanded in accordance with the insights of his times. In his approach to monasticism and to monastic prayer he was entirely traditional, yet belonged to a new age. Anselm and his contemporaries made the initial breakthrough into the expression of firmly-held theological truths in the language of emotion and personal concern; others quickly took this way of prayer which Anselm had begun to articulate and formed it into a robust and immensely popular movement in devotion. The idea of personal conversion can never be far from any understanding of the Gospel, but Anselm came to it from a starting point which was not that of his immediate predecessors: namely, the starting point of the emotions rather than the will. The inner convictions of the monastic life were his concern, and it was this understanding that Anselm and his circle of followers began to express in their prayers. When this concern with the inner movement of the heart was taken into the wider sphere of monasticism, it became the basis of a great advance in devotion, perhaps greater than any similar movement before or since. It has been said that 'real changes in human sentiment are very rare; there are perhaps three or four on record';[19] this turn in devotion is a part of one of them.

The doctrine of desire, of longing for God, runs through all Anselm's writing and is especially clear in his prayers. He was known to his contemporaries both as a theologian who could be trusted and also as a man of prayer to whom they could look for an example. It is in a few lines in his letters to

[19] C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 11.

friends, in his Preface to the *Prayers and Meditations,* but most of all in the *Prayers and Meditations* themselves (and with them I include the *Proslogion*)[20] that Anselm's teaching about the practical method of prayer is to be found. It was very simple: the one praying was advised to pray alone, to read the texts quietly and make God the aim of the time thus spent, not the reading matter itself; the words were presented as triggers to prayer and invited personal rearrangement and alteration according to the individual. But it was not only in these few directions about the practice of prayer that Anselm was regarded as a master. There was also the inner method used by Anselm himself when praying which was contained within his prayers. This was to use words to make himself aware of, and personally involved with, the theological truths he understood. Thus, the first stage in prayer was for him the realization that man, created in the image of God, is estranged from him by his own choice:

> You fashioned your gracious image in me,
> and I superimposed upon it the image that is hateful.[21]
>
> Alas, what have I made of myself;
> what was I, O God, as you had made me,
> and how have I made myself again.[22]

Such awareness of sin in himself Anselm found intolerable: 'Alas, you cannot flee from yourself, nor can you look at yourself, because you cannot bear it.'[23]

This led him to tears, to compunction, the piercing of the heart by God; in the Prayer to St Mary Magdalene this was again the theme: 'Give me, O Lord, in this exile the bread of tears and sorrow.'[24] It was through this beginning in fear, sorrow and tears that it was possible for him to understand the way of restoration and to come to the other piercing of the heart which is by love and desire, but the first stage in prayer was to shake the soul out of its apathy and make it realize its loss and its need. Always with Anselm this was the essential beginning; and the fact that it was the beginning of each of his prayers seems to indicate that he knew it was always necessary

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[20] Cf. P&M:ET, Introduction, pp. 77–81.
[21] Anselm, Prayer 8, to St John the Baptist. P&M:ET, p. 129 (P&M:BM, p. 244).
[22] Anselm, Prayer 8, to St John the Baptist. P&M:ET, p. 128 (p. 244).
[23] Anselm, Prayer 8, to St John the Baptist. P&M:ET, p. 130 (p. 246).
[24] Anselm, Prayer 16, to St Mary Magdalene, P&M:ET, p. 206 (P&M:BM, p. 390).

to repent. This was not a stage to be left behind; it was rather a continual movement of repentance for sin and adoration of the Lord. Man's continual need of the mercy of God was the basis for his union with God. Anselm did not see the Christian life as progressive enlightenment but as continual conversion of heart. His teaching on prayer was neither an offer of moral exhortation nor an analysis of states of mind, but the offer of insight into a person pouring out his own understanding of his state before God. Perhaps this was the chief attraction of the prayers; that they did not order or advise but simply showed someone praying.

The second stage in this conversion in prayer for Anselm was devotion to the humanity of Jesus, the Saviour, which was to prove to be the main theme of medieval devotion. It was not Bernard of Clairvaux (as is so often asserted) who discovered devotion to the name of Jesus, but Anselm. Bernard wrote many years later:

> My own practice from the beginning of my conversion has been to gather for myself this little bunch of myrrh out of all my Lord's troubles and distresses … to know Jesus and him crucified is my philosophy and there is none higher.[25]

In another well-known passage commenting on the *Song of Songs* Bernard also wrote:

> Hidden in this name of Jesus, O my soul, as in a vessel, thou hast a sovereign remedy against every ill … When I name Jesus I call to mind a man meek and lowly of heart, generous and reasonable, pure, merciful … and at the same time in the same Lord Jesus I see Almighty God; as a man he heals me by His example; as God He strengthens me by His aid.[26]

Anselm had already expressed this new warmth of affection, of concern, of human feeling in his prayers again and again. It had its focus for him, as for Bernard, in the sufferings of the Lord and in the name of Jesus. The passage in Anselm that can best be compared with the fervour of Bernard comes in his First Meditation. After a long meditation on the Judgement

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[25] Bernard of Clairvaux*, Sermons on the Song of Songs*, 15:5 (edition: trans. Kilian J. Walsh, Cistercian Fathers, 4 (Cistercian Publications, 1971)).

[26] Bernard of Clairvaux*, Sermons on the Song of Songs*, 15:5.

and the terror of falling into the hands of the living God, the stern Judge, Anselm wrote:

> But it is He himself, He himself is Jesus; the same is my judge, between whose hands I tremble…. Jesus, Jesus, for your name's sake deal with me according to Your name. Jesus, Jesus, forget the pride that provoked You, see only the wretchedness that invokes You. Dear name, name of delight, name of comfort to the sinner, name of blessed hope. For what is Jesus except to say Saviour… So, Jesus, for Your own sake be to me Jesus'.[27]

In this kind of language Anselm was developing a new genre, the ardent personal desire to know Jesus and His sufferings, expressed in an imaginative and emotional involvement with the details of the Passion. In the *Prayer to Christ* this sentiment was fully explored, and it paved the way for the devotion to the Crucified of the later Middle Ages, from the Latin stanzas of the *Stabat Mater* to the chorales of Bach and the hymns of Watts and Wesley:

> Alas for me that I was not able to see
> the Lord of angels humbled to converse with men.
> Why, o my soul, were you not there to be pierced by a sword of bitter sorrow
> when you could not bear
> the piercing of the side of your Saviour with a lance?
> …
> Would that I with happy Joseph
> might have taken down my Lord from the cross,
> wrapped him in spiced grave-clothes
> and laid him in the tomb …[28]

In this prayer, however, Anselm did not stay with emotion for its own sake; the apprehension of the sorrows of the Lord formed only a part of the pattern of prayer; the way was through contrition to contemplation:

> Your goodness Lord, created me;
> your mercy cleansed what you had created[29]
> …

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[27] Anselm, Meditation 1, P&M:ET, p. 224. (P&M:BM, p. 438).
[28] Anselm, Prayer 2, to Christ P&M:ET, p. 96 (P&M:BM, p. 136).
[29] Anselm, Prayer 2, to Christ P&M:ET, p. 94 (p. 132).

I am like an orphan deprived of the presence of a very dear father,
who, weeping and wailing,
does not cease to cling to the dear face with all his heart.
…
I am mindful of your passion,
your buffeting, your scourging, your cross, your wounds,
how you were slain for me,
how prepared for burial and buried;
and also I remember your glorious resurrection
and wonderful ascension.

All this I hold with unwavering faith
and weep over the hardness of exile,
hoping for the consolation of your coming,
ardently longing for the contemplation of your glorious face.[30]

Anselm's warmth of emotion sprang from serious theological convictions about the nature of salvation, as is clear in the last of his meditations, the *Meditation on Human Redemption.* This was a prayed version of Anselm's greatest theological work, *Cur Deus Homo.* Written near the end of Anselm's life when he was in exile at Liberi it was, as Eadmer said, 'a small work which found favour and gave joy to many'.[31] It placed the atonement theories of Anselm in the perspective of prayer rather than that of argument, combining the reasoning of doctrine with the ardour of vision:

> This is the perfect and free obedience of human nature, that Christ freely submitted his own free will to God … Because of that which was done on the cross, by the cross our Christ has redeemed us. Then whosoever wills to come to this grace with the love it deserves will be saved … I pray you, Lord, make me taste by love what I taste by knowledge, let me know by love what I know by understanding; I am wholly yours by creation, make me all yours too in love.[32]

The new warmth of prayer is here combined with the insights of theological thought.

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[30] Anselm, Prayer 2, to Christ P&M:ET, p. 95 (p. 134).
[31] Eadmer, *De Vita S. Anselmi.*
[32] Anselm, Meditation 3, P&M:ET, p. 234 (P&M:BM, p. 484).

Another deeply Christian theme, that of the unity of souls in the love of God, was also vital to Anselm's understanding of prayer. When Hugh the Hermit asked him for help about prayer, he referred to his own comments in the last chapters of the *Proslogion,* about the unity of souls in love in the perfection of the vision of God as the most essential way of entering into prayer with God, with the saints and with men, adding the phrase that best sums up his approach to prayer: 'Give love … and receive the kingdom; love and possess'.[33] This love of the brethren was another monastic concept that formed Anselm's prayers. He prayed within in a life-long commitment to God with others who had also chosen each other in God. Friendship, first with God and the saints and as a result with others was, for Anselm, fundamental. The fact that this friendship extended outside the monastery to others who, like the Countess Matilda and the Princess Adelheid,[34] were seriously committed to conversion of life and to prayer is another mark of the expanding mood of the times. The influential doctrine of friendship so closely associated with the Cistercians, was present in embryo in Anselm, especially in his early letters and in the *Prayers.* Always practical and realistic, Anselm prayed from his own experience of friendship and therefore first for his own personal friends, 'those whom your love has impressed more clearly upon my heart'.[35] This was the place to start but his theological understanding of love led him to see that friendship was not restricted to those he knew personally; he called 'friends' all those who were joined to him by monastic or Christian profession; and he prayed that any who hated him would also be his friends one day. In the prayers that are addressed to the saints, he appealed to their friendship, as powerful friends of God—in the prayer to St John the Evangelist this is the dominant theme, the love of John for Christ, of Christ for John, and the place of the one who prays within that circle of friendship.[36]

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[33] Anselm, Letter 112, to Hugh the Hermit, Letters:ET, vol. 1, pp. 268–71 (Letters:BM, vol. 1, 341–4).

[34] Princess (later Empress) Adelheid of Burgundy (931–999) and Countess Matilda of Tuscany (1046–1115).

[35] Anselm, Prayer 18, for Friends P&M:ET, p. 213 (P&M:BM, p. 410).

[36] Anselm, Prayer 12, to St John the Evangelist (2) P&M:ET, pp. 163–71 (P&M:BM, pp. 298–315).

In the *Proslogion* it is friendship that is the unchanging bond in heaven: 'they will love God more than themselves, and each other as themselves'.[37] This bond of friendship had for Anselm its origin and end in love of '*dulcis et benignus Dominus Jesus Christus*'. He saw all love as based on the friendship between man and God. It was to be fully realized in the unbroken circle of love in heaven, but on earth 'the monastery should be a school of love', a *schola Christi,* a claustral paradise opening onto heaven. In his letter to Hugh the Hermit this sense of the companionship of the saints is offered as the basis of prayer for the hermit as much as for the cenobite. The stress on solitude and individual withdrawal in the Anselmian method was not the definition of the self in opposition to others but the self always seen as part of the body of Christ and within the presence of 'a great crowd of witnesses' (Heb. 12:1). The servant whom the child had seen with the Lord in heaven was always present to the man of prayer.

Bernard of Clairvaux once said, 'give me a soul who loves God alone and everything for his sake'.[38] He would have found that soul perfectly in Anselm. But for Anselm, as for Bernard, the contrite contemplation of Jesus was not the end of prayer. The end was the piercing of the heart by joy in the vision of God. This longing desire for heaven concluded each of the Prayers, and came to its finest expression at the end of the *Proslogion*: after a meditation on the unity of eternal love in heaven, in the vision of God, Anselm prayed,

> Let your love grow in me here
> and there let it be fulfilled,
> so that here my joy may be in great hope,
> and there in full reality…
> Let my whole being desire it
> until I enter into the joy of my Lord,
> who is God one and triune blessed forever. Amen.[39]

Anselm, then, prayed out of an assured monastic theology, as part of a tradition of prayer, but also as one of the creators of the new age. It is of course impossible to tell how influential his prayers were for the personal devotion

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[37] Anselm, *Proslogion*, P&M:ET, cap. 25, p. 263.
[38] Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, 15:5.
[39] Anselm, *Proslogion*, P&M:ET, cap. 26, pp. 266–7.

of those to whom he gave them but it is clear his prayers were widely known and used. They were imitated in writing during his lifetime by the monks Elmer of Canterbury and by Ralph of Battle. Thomas Becket had a copy of his prayers, and there is a continuous manuscript tradition of the prayers from the twelfth century onwards. In the use made of them, there is no doubt that the original words were changed. The changes, I hasten to say, were part of Anselm's aim: the prayers were his own meditations, and the only point in sharing them was they might help others to find their own voice for prayer.

Anselm never 'taught' prayer: he was known as someone who prayed. He prayed for his friends and let them see how he did it, and when he died in Canterbury in Holy Week 1109, he had ensured the continuation of the traditions of Christian prayer, revitalized, into a new age. To the end of his life he prayed, 'God of truth, I ask that I may receive that my joy may be full'. His search for God was never joyless and it was never static; he stretched his emotions as well as his mind to the utmost in order to come to that 'fullness of joy' which is true humanity. Perhaps it is especially relevant today to return to Anselm's prayers, when in academic circles the concept of God has been so rarified that He can seem not only irrelevant but non-existent and when, among the devout, attention to the humanity of Jesus has dissolved into personal sentimentality. We may remember how thought and emotion were uniquely united in Anselm as *faith seeking understanding* in both his thought and in his prayer. Anselm is an example of prayer for the third millennium; he has been continually used in this way during previous centuries and his work adapted according to the needs of each; now is the moment to return to the authentic prayers of Anselm himself and learn from him again how to pray today. His life of prayer was seen in his own times as a reality, a sincere approach to God, and it was this that drew people to him and it is that which makes him still a man of prayer for Europe, but beyond that, for the world: 'These works show us', wrote Durandus, 'Your devoted tears … and bring forth ours … a stream runs from Your heart into our heart'.[40] Or, as Anselm himself wrote: 'Give love and receive the kingdom; love and possess.'[41]

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[40] Letter 70 from Durandus, abbot of La Chaise-Dieu to Anselm, Letters:ET: vol. 1, p. 193 (Letters:BM, vol. 1, p. 256).

[41] Anselm, Letter 112, to Hugh the Hermit, Letters:ET, vol. 1, pp. 268–71 (Letters:BM, vol. 1, pp. 341–4).

From Oxford to the City of Brotherly Love

Brother Steven Haws cr

In response to a query made from the review of *The Cowley Fathers in Philadelphia* that appeared in the Fairacres Chronicle Winter 2021, I offer my own further thoughts.

The title of the book should have as its subtitle 'From Oxford to the City of Brotherly Love' since several of the first generation of Cowley Fathers migrated from Oxford, England to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in the United States. This detailed account centres around my home parish of St Clement's, Philadelphia which initially began as a low-church congregation of Protestant Episcopalians but in time became one of Philadelphia's most important Anglo-Catholic parishes during the second half of the Oxford Movement. The book, comprising sixteen chapters, including more than forty black & white, colour and sepia photographs is a comprehensive and fascinating record of the ministry—including personal first-hand accounts—of the fathers and lay-brothers who made up the SSJE community at St Clement's from their Mission House.

The Cowley Fathers in Philadelphia is a sequel to Serenhedd James's magnificent and detailed *History of the English Congregation of the Society of S. John the Evangelist,* both books published in 2019. In January 2022, Father Luke Miller's comprehensive study of the life and teaching of Father George Congreve SSJE entitled *A Life-Long Springtime* was published (and is reviewed below), completing the trilogy of books related to the Cowley Fathers.

In October 1874, Cowley Fathers Luke Rivington and Charles Grafton conducted a mission in St Clement's Church, Philadelphia. The success of the mission drew a request the following year for the Society of St John the Evangelist to take spiritual charge of the parish and in February 1876 Father Prescott, who was elected rector, arrived in Philadelphia with two priest-novices from Cowley, Oxford. It was not long before the Fathers organised a number of devotional guilds and societies as well as work among the poor including Bible classes for men, women and children. It was also the beginning of preached retreats for clergy and laity and evangelistic missions in the diocese and beyond. During the 1880s under Father Maturin's leadership, the parish established a Workingmen's Club, Mothers Meetings, a dispensary

and hospital, a boarding house for single women under the care of the All Saints Sisters of the Poor, an employment bureau, a temperance guild and a gymnasium for men and boys.

Some of the brethren (there were as many as six in residence at one time) were also engaged in writing books and tracts as a means of communicating the faith through publications on behalf of the Guild of the Iron Cross established by Father C. N. Field SSJE in 1883. A few years later, a burial guild was set up and funds raised to purchase a cemetery lot for those who had no financial means for their burial, and to provide mourners at funerals to commend the souls of the departed.

One event that had devastating consequences in Western Pennsylvania was the Johnstown disaster of 1889 and Sister Catherine SLG who kindly reviewed *The Cowley Fathers in Philadelphia* in the Winter 2021 issue of *The Fairacres Chronicle* makes an observation relating to the disaster involving Father Field.

The mission priests of the Society of St John the Evangelist took vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience under the authority of the Superior-General Father Benson who lived in England. Father Arthur C. A. Hall was Provincial Superior in America at the time and he would write to Father Benson to inform him of all matters affecting the interests of the Society working in America as well as writing a monthly letter. The Fathers undertaking parochial work as parish clergy in Boston and Philadelphia would have enjoyed a certain amount of freedom within the boundaries of their respective parishes but Sister Catherine raises a point as to how this sense of freedom related to the Cowley Fathers' Vow of Obedience. Was it a liberty of a mission priest or autonomy of parish clergy? When news of the disaster at Johnstown had reached Philadelphia, Father Field wasted no time in responding and felt duty bound to offer his help to the victims of the Johnstown flood. Father Maturin, who was rector of St Clement's and Superior of the Mission House at Philadelphia, was in Cape Town, South Africa and the natural course would have been to cable the Superior and seek his permission. Time was of the essence and for Father Field to await a reply would have taken too long. Having referred the matter to his fellow curates (Fathers Convers and Longridge) he sent a cable to Father Hall. On Whit-Sunday Father Field sent a letter to Father Hall and Father Benson with a detailed account of what had happened

and, in his own words, he had made up his mind to go out to Johnstown at the earliest opportunity to assist in the relief work among the victims.

The old Rule and Statutes of the Society relating to Members of Branch Houses state that 'the permission of the Father Superior must be asked before the Fathers leave the House *except for the performance of some necessary, sanctioned or recognised duty*'. It seems that if Father Field was following the above Rule and Statutes, his motivating conscience that he did not need permission to leave the House 'except for the performance of some necessary, sanctioned or recognised duty' was justified. In this case, it was a necessary duty to help in the relief work of the victims of the Johnstown disaster. In 1884 the statutes and rules stated that,

> no brethren must undertake any work without the permission of the Superior, so that all actions shall not be only regulated but moved by obedience. The Provincial shall be careful to see that the Rules & Customs of the Society are observed in all Houses under his jurisdiction, due allowance being made for any local necessity and any divergence of a permanent character must have the sanction of the Superior-General.

It is worth noting that during the July General chapter in 1885, Father Field asked a question with reference to Statute 3 ('None of the Fathers shall be sent out upon a mission-work beyond the limits of his own country, except with his own consent'), whether an Englishman becoming naturalized in America might claim under this statute to have his consent asked before his being sent on mission work into any other country? The Superior-General was of the opinion that the Statute did not apply to such a case.

According to the General Chapter minutes of 5 August 1889, Father Benson had written about Father Field at the flood at Johnstown:

> We cannot but rejoice in the great work of Father Field with Brother Maynard, and the Men of the Iron Cross at Johnstown. There is much cause for thanksgiving, that the congregation of S. Clement's have kept together as they have, notwithstanding Father Maturin's removal. It is a critical time for them at present and we may hope that it will in the end tend to strengthen them.

One cannot help thinking about Father Field's intention to go out to assist in the flood disaster at Johnstown as one of obedience to the Rule and Statutes. Given the seriousness of the situation, it is hard to imagine Fathers Hall and

Maturin and the Superior-General ordering Father Field not to volunteer to help with the relief work in light of the fact that there was a request from the Red Cross Society's founder asking for Father Field's assistance as Chaplain.

Father Maturin, though he was on a leave of absence, was still rector. Did Father Field's decision to go out with Brother Maynard to Johnstown have any effect on his parochial duties in the parish? Probably not. Father Field was a priest who was willing to offer any help and assistance to those in trouble. His absence from St Clement's lasted about a fortnight. I have not seen any letters from Father Hall or Father Benson indicating an unwillingness on their part to grant permission to Father Field to go to Johnstown. I suspect that given the nature and magnitude of the disaster it would seem that they not only approved his going out but also gave him their blessing.

The Cowley Fathers in Philadelphia is the story of the ministry of the Mission Priests and brothers who laboured for fifteen years in St Clement's parish. For nearly eleven years, they suffered persecution at the hands of the diocesan bishop as well as from other clergy and laity. It was only after the demise of the bishop that opposition to the Cowley Fathers ministry ceased and recognition was accorded to them. Under their leadership, St Clement's resumed its role as an Anglo-Catholic parish without censure. For those who have an interest in the development and work of Anglican Religious Orders, in particular the first stable men's community founded since the Reformation and the part they played in the history of a Philadelphia parish in which they ministered, this book is a valuable resource.

The book retails from AuthorHouse for £41.99; however, it is being offered at a reduced price of £25.00 from Mirfield Publications, House of the Resurrection, Mirfield, West Yorkshire WF14 0BN, UK, or via email: theshop@mirfield.org.uk.

Llangasty Associates Retreat 2022

This will take place on 20–24 July. There are a few places still available for late bookings.

An Oxford Retreat for Associates is not scheduled for 2022

New Publications From SLG Press

As well as continuing our regular Fairacres Publications series of books, the last year saw the introduction of two new series: Contemplative Poetry and Vestry Guides (resources for churches). The poetry series responds to a need for contemplative and prayerful writing that can be read as prayers or as short items for meditation. It owes its inception to an approach from the poet John Gallas seeking a publisher for his translations of some of the religious poetry of the Mexican poet Amado Nervo. Gallas has gone on to provide several volumes of masterful translations of some exceptional poetry, including an anthology of female religious poets spanning a dozen centuries and many cultures. Several more volumes in both series' are in preparation.

Fairacres Publications

Tony Dickinson, *Dante's Spiritual Journey: A Reading of the Divine Comedy*, Fairacres Publications 191 (2021).

Tony Dickinson was born in 1948 in Liverpool. After reading Classics at New College, Oxford he worked in university administration in Durham and then for the Open University. In 1980 he began training for ministry in the Church of England and was ordained a priest in 1983. He has served in a number of dioceses, acting latterly as Anglican Ecumenical Officer for Buckinghamshire and Diocesan European Officer and 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.

This book is the fruit of nearly six decades of engagement with the *Divine Comedy*, a poem that has captured and held the imagination of Christians for seven hundred years. The author describes how Dante's journey through the three realms, *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* maps onto the inner spiritual journey of all Christians. The dark wood in which the poem begins sums up Dante's own mid-life crisis—moral, political and financial—and the beginning of a sometimes-humiliating journey to self-knowledge. The questions that Dante addresses, attempting to explain the consequences of the death

and resurrection of Jesus, are questions that still concern us today. This book accompanies us on our quest to a greater understanding of the relationship between Christian faith and human life.

John Townroe, *Jesus the Undistorted Image of God*, Fairacres Publications 192 (2022).

The Revd Canon E. John Townroe (1920–2018) was educated at St John's College, Oxford and Lincoln Theological College. He was first chaplain and then warden to ordinands from King's College, London at St Boniface College, Warminster from 1948 to 1969, before becoming a full time spiritual director, retreat leader and teacher for the remainder of his life. He was elected a Fellow of King's College in 1959.

The Eastern Orthodox description of Jesus as 'the undistorted image of God' is based on texts such as 'the Gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God' (2 Cor. 4:4). This is the author's favourite statement of belief about Jesus in relation to God and of the mysterious attractiveness of Jesus who draws everyone without distinction to God. Christ's image is inescapable, even when rejected. There seems to be no way of avoiding this person who puzzles, yet attracts, the world. Based on a series of retreat talks, this book may be used for personal private reflection, as material for a group or as a foundation for leading a retreat for others. Each chapter discusses a particular aspect of the personhood of Jesus: His attractiveness, energy, gentleness, fierceness, confidence and steadfastness, and concludes with suggestions for applying the theme to our daily lives.

Sr Susan SLG, *Our Deepest Desire: Prayer, Fasting and Almsgiving in the Writing of Augustine of Hippo*, Fairacres Publications 193 (2022).

Sister Susan SLG read Classics at Royal Holloway and taught for two years before joining the Community of the Sisters of the Love of God. In 2018 she was awarded an MA in Church History from the University of Nottingham. Her dissertation was the starting point for this book. She is at present Garden Sister and Librarian at Fairacres Convent.

This is a book about the practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving as we meet them in the teaching of St Augustine of Hippo. He is generally acclaimed as someone who has had enormous influence on Christian theology and much has been written about him by scholars. However, apart from a

number of translations of the Confessions, few of his writings are accessible to the ordinary reader, even though, as Bishop of Hippo, he constantly wrote and preached for his people.

The first part of this book presents Augustine's teaching on three central practices of Christian living—prayer, fasting and almsgiving—with reference to his sermons and his commentaries on the Psalms. The second part places it alongside some recent authors who demonstrate how this triad continues to be of value to Christians today. Although it has been conceived as a Lent book, this text provides a reflective introduction to these ways of Christian living in whatever season of the Church's year a reader picks it up.

Tony Dickinson, *Lent with George Herbert*, Fairacres Publications 194 (2022).

The poems of George Herbert (1593–1633) have nurtured the faith of countless Anglican Christians, and others, since their posthumous publication in 1633. Described by the poet as 'a picture of the many spiritual conflicts that have passed between God and my soul, before I could subject mine to the will of Jesus my Master', Herbert's poetry weaves together recognition of the glory and diversity of God's creation and of the ingenuity of human beings in their attempts to map and control that creation, awareness of human frailty and sinfulness, and awed realization of the infinite love of God. The themes of frailty and forgiveness underlying Herbert's poetry also mark the season of Lent. In recognition of this, Tony Dickinson takes eight of the poems that tackle these great themes (relevant as much to the twenty-first century as to the seventeenth) and week by week through Lent, from Ash Wednesday to Easter Day, unpacks the language in which George Herbert explores them; language that often appears direct and simple, but whose simplicity frequently conceals a depth and density of meaning that few other writers can match.

Tony Dickinson, *Four Ways to the Cross*, Fairacres Publications 195 (2022).

Most of us live, in our prayers and our worship, and in our understanding of Christian discipleship, with one Passion story. We take incidents from the four Gospel accounts of the suffering and death of Jesus and weave them

into a single 'harmonized' whole. In this short book, Tony Dickinson unravels these four narrative strands to reveal an understanding of the events that shape each one. He also examines how each account is influenced by the sacred writings of Israel, especially the Psalms.

Contemplative Poetry

***Amado Nervo: Poems of Faith & Doubt*, translated by John Gallas , Contemplative Poetry 1 (2021).**

John Gallas is an award-winning Aotearoan poet now living in the UK. After attending the University of Otago he won a Commonwealth Scholarship to Merton College, Oxford to study Medieval English Literature and Old Icelandic. He is a Fellow of the English Association and author of more than twenty collections of poetry. He won the International Welsh Poetry Competition in 2009, and his poem 'Cat' was *The Guardian* 'Poem of the Week' in December 2014. In 2016 he was the joint Winner of the Indigo Dreams Pamphlet Prize and was the Orkney St Magnus International Festival Poet. He has also held the position of John Clare 'The Visit' Poet (2019) and since 2020 has been the Sutton Hoo Saxon Ship Poet. He has published twenty-four collections of poetry, including six anthologies and four collections of translations. He received the National Poetry Library's Brian Dempsey Memorial Poetry Prize in 2022.

Amado Nervo (1870–1919) was a Mexican poet generally considered the most distinguished exponent of the literary movement known as Modernismo. Although he intended to become a priest, he abandoned his studies in 1888 and turned first to journalism and then the diplomatic service, becoming Mexican Ambassador to Argentina and Uruguay in 1918. His poetic and literary works have been collected in twenty-nine volumes. This translation has sought to reproduce the plain, rhymed forms of Nervo's poems to convey the direct, yet complex, ideas of faith and doubt of the original texts. Nervo believed each of his poems—a prayer, an expression of comfort, praise or questioning—to be an act of love. The job of the translator is to hand on, undimmed, that belief to the reader: 'Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones' (Proverbs 16:24).

***Anglo-Saxon: The High Roof of Heaven*, translated by John Gallas, Contemplative Poetry 2 (2021).**

This anthology of Old English poetry brings together sacred texts from two of the great surviving Anglo-Saxon poetic codices: the Vercelli Book, including one of the most famous of medieval texts, the Vision of the Rood, and the Exeter Book, source of the Advent Lyrics, Riddles and Physiologus. The Venerable Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum* is the source for the only surviving work by the poet Cædmon.

John Gallas has not simply translated these texts but has crafted beautiful and accessible contemporary poetry from them, retaining the half-line alliteration of Old English poetic structure, while transmitting the joy in God and exuberant imaginative style of the original authors.

***Middle English: Where Grace Grows Ever Green*, translated and edited by John Gallas, Contemplative Poetry 3 (2021).**

Middle English Lyrics are characterized by their brevity and intensity of expression. They were composed by men and women from both sacred and secular backgrounds and survive in numerous manuscript sources. This collection brings together works that examine and celebrate themes of personal faith and devotion, the mystery of God's love and the hope of redemption, the harsh realities of daily life and personal piety. The poetry opens a window into the subtle and thoughtful world of Middle English literature, in which the impact of faith on daily life is presented with an immediacy and veracity that is deeply appealing.

Edward Clarke, *The Voice inside Our Home: Selected Poems*, Contemplative Poetry 4 (2022).

Edward Clarke teaches English literature and art history at various colleges and the Department for Continuing Education at Oxford University. He is the author of two books of criticism, *The Later Affluence of W. B. Yeats and Wallace Stevens* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) and *The Vagabond Spirit of Poetry* (Iff Books, 2014). His collection of poems, *A Book of Psalms*, was published by Paraclete Press in 2020.

This selection of poetry draws on the author's developing relationship with the Psalms over a number of years, and on the inspiration of the birth and early years of his two sons, culminating in a set of eulogies or sonnets

in prayer. The whole is a personal journey through faith and Scripture, from the hope of birth and new life to the death of loved ones, with vividly-described stopping places on the way.

***Women & God: Drops in the Sea of Time*, translated and edited by John Gallas, Contemplative Poetry 5 (2022).**

This collection of poetry by female authors explores our relationship with God and creation. The collection includes many of the greatest women poets of history, from around the world and across the ages: from a Rwandan housewife to a Japanese princess, from Christian saints to classical Indian mystics. Their shared faith and delight in God, prayer, and the hope of paradise is tempered by their fears of death, loss and loneliness. Here the reader can 'fish the pools of Love' to find God, and encounter a 'stiller peace'.

> **Night**
>
> The stars are out and shine above.
> The eyes of men are shut.
> Lovers lie alone with love.
> The doors of lords are locked. But
>
> Lord, I am alone with you.
>
> *Rabia al-Basri (717–801)*
> *from Women &God:Drops in the Sea of Time*

Vestry Guides

Paul Monk, *The Visiting Minister: How to Welcome Visiting Clergy to your Church*, Vestry Guides 1 (2021).

Paul Monk was a research chemist in the academic sector until entering the priesthood later in life. He was ordained deacon in 2007 and priest in 2008. All his ordained ministry has been spent in Oldham, Greater Manchester, most recently as Vicar of Clarksfield and Waterhead parishes.

There are many reasons why a church may have a visitor coming to celebrate their services for them, and the incumbent is not always available to help if the occasion is unexpected. Anything from illness of the incumbent

to simply awaiting the appointment of a new priest can mean that the priest who celebrates the service might be a visitor who does not know the church and will need introducing to its in-house styles and customs. The group inviting visitors will therefore need to liaise with the visiting priest and prepare the church ready for worship. This short guide is written to help this group in these tasks of preparation. Its simple checklists and images comprise an easy guide explaining, with examples, what needs to be done to support the visitor and help the service run smoothly.

SLG Press books are also published as eBooks, available worldwide from Amazon (Kindle) and Google Play (other devices).

Reviews of Books

Luke Miller, *A Lifelong Springtime: The Life & Teaching of Father George Congreve* SSJE (Durham: The Sacristy Press, 2022), 272pp, hardback ISBN 9781789591981, £24.99.

This is a beautifully written and printed presentation, with illustrations and a very comprehensive bibliography, of the spiritual teaching of Father Congreve, who died in 1918. After serving initially as a parish priest, he became a member of the Society of St John the Evangelist in 1873. Congreve quickly became a leading light in the society and also a foil to the very demanding and difficult temperament of the founder of SSJE, Father Benson. At a critical moment in the life of the society, it was Congreve who managed to persuade Benson to step down from his increasingly divisive leadership. Thereafter, until his death, Congreve proved to be 'the Fathers' father.' His time with SSJE took him to South Africa for some while where their missionary work in Cape Town was under threat and needed strengthening. Members of his own family were actively involved in both the Boer Wars and in the First World War, and Congreve experienced keenly the stresses and losses of those conflicts. The emergence of this account of Congreve's influence complements a recently published history of SSJE.

Luke Miller is the Archdeacon of London and he brings to bear upon his description of life in SSJE a critical and informed eye. It was not an easy

community in which to live and work, especially for someone of Congreve's warm and outgoing temperament. In time, after Benson's retirement, Congreve was able to alter significantly the inner ethos of the society, while at the same time maintaining its strictly religious heart as a community that was increasingly engaged in pastoral mission at home and abroad. The book opens with a masterly introduction that sets the scene of how the Oxford Movement kindled religious vocations and altered forever the character and mission of the Anglican Church.

One of the great merits of this book is the considerable amount of material extracted from the writings of Congreve, which in their day wielded extensive influence but which have long been out of print. Taken together with the lucid and empathetic analysis and commentary provided by the author, these extracts provide a captivating *vade mecum* for the Christian spiritual life today. Congreve represents the finest expression of the Tractarian genius for applying the doctrine of the Incarnation to the common life, in community and also in the wider life of the Church and society. He was respected by and appealed to religious and laity alike, and he was of decisive support to many monastic communities at that time within the Anglican Communion. In many ways his theology and spirituality mirrored that of Charles Gore and anticipated that of Michael Ramsey.

This book is structured around certain broad themes of Congreve's teaching, set in the context of his life and work. It shows how his understanding of what life in community could mean gradually developed and became articulated, to some extent in contra-distinction to that of Benson himself. What Congreve encountered was a chilly and inhumane environment within the Oxford house , which inevitably provoked a systemic crisis that he managed to defuse and turn around. This is no idealized portrait of anyone involved, however, although Congreve emerges as a figure of sanity, kindness, integrity and quiet determination.

These qualities served him well as a spiritual guide to others and as a pastor of souls. There are some wonderful passages by him about the life and purpose of prayer and the inner meaning of the Christian life. Congreve wrote brilliantly in a pellucid style that often borders on the poetic. This is most apparent in his radiant descriptions of nature, in England and also in South Africa. His theological understanding of the significance of creation

remains highly pertinent today. His aesthetic sense heightened his vision of Divine Glory shining through the beauty of nature. It also led him to encourage from the beginning the work of Ninian Comper, who was a family friend.

At the heart of Congreve's Christian vision was recognition that the need for God is the driving force in all human life, and that loving self-sacrifice alone opens the way to union with Christ and true service of others. His sense of the loving presence of Christ illuminated his whole approach to people, and he was a person marked by an unusual empathy. In this quality, he has found a fine disciple in the archdeacon, whose faithful ministry as a parish priest and as a prayerful servant of the Church underpins the wisdom of this book in a self-effacing way. Congreve's rapport with African Christians was especially striking and often moving too. He also had great gifts in nurturing the vocations of women, in convents and elsewhere in the Church: he clearly had a genius for friendship within the love of God.

Perhaps a most significant part of the book is its penultimate chapter in which Congreve's approach to the demands of growing old as a Christian are carefully explored and set forth. As a result, a clear vision of what may be achieved in the declining years of life emerges, as a person is lovingly drawn by a kind of creative passivity more deeply into life in Christ. Congreve practised what he preached, both in his generous encouragement of the young, and in his tender and faithful care of Father Benson in his old age. The concluding chapter paints an evocative and attractive picture of a wise man of God, who was indeed transparent to Divine Love. Congreve's wonderful portrait of St Columba clearly sprang from his own inner spiritual life and experience.

The note that is most heard in the writing of Congreve is one of hope, so perhaps it is time for a book to be composed from his writings that would make his spiritual theology more fully available to a new generation. The words of Father Benson, cited as prefatory to this book, remain true, and in the case of Congreve they still stand the test of time: 'The value of a book is not measured by the large editions which are all sold off, but by the eternity wherewith its teachings may live in some few readers, learners and practitioners.' It is a great work to have restored the reassuring voice and wisdom of Father Congreve after more than a century, in order to give fresh heart and vision to the Anglican Church at a demanding time.

Revd Douglas Dales

Andy Lord, *River of the Spirit: The Spirituality of Simon Barrington-Ward,* Fairacres Publications 189 (SLG Press, 2021), 50pp, paperback ISBN 9780728303126, £6.00.

This short book (just 42 pages of text) introduces the 'spirituality' of Simon Barrington-Ward (1930–2020) who led the Church Mission Society before becoming Bishop of Coventry. It reminded me of the very readable series of 'first words' on a subject published in Cambridge by Grove Books (www.grovebooks.co.uk): easily digested in one sitting but setting a train of thought running that one hopes will lead to further reading, investigation and reflection.

The book makes a great addition to the long list of Fairacres Publications. Looking through that list it seems there are not many, if any contributions from what might be broadly termed the 'Evangelical Anglican' perspective, as this book certainly is. It might also be read alongside a recent and more substantial book on the impact of the whole of Barrington-Ward's life and ministry: *Exchange of Gifts: The Vision of Simon Barrington-Ward,* edited by Graham Kings and Ian Randall (Ekklesia Publishing, 2022).

I should declare at the outset that, as a reviewer, I have several connections to the book. First, I am a Priest Associate of SLG, and second, I know the author quite well as we were priest colleagues in Nottinghamshire for quite some years. Finally, I work part-time on revitalizing UK churches in mission for the *Church Mission Society,* where Barrington-Ward also worked for a major part of his life, including being the General Secretary (1975–85).

Andy Lord knew 'Bishop Simon' (as he endearingly calls his subject throughout the book) well, starting when he was Bishop of Coventry (1985–1997). Lord was called to ministry through the life and teaching of the Bishop and kept in touch over many years. This personal warmth shines throughout the book since Lord's own spirituality has clearly been shaped by the Bishop's, as he soon declares (p. 3).

I placed 'spirituality' in inverted commas earlier on as it is a notoriously slippery term and requires definition. Lord does this well and it becomes a theme of the book since spirituality is about 'our patterns of life with God that bring together experience, prayer, community, theology and mission' (p. 3). Spirituality in this mode is connective between experience and theological reflection, prayer and action, both as individuals and in community.

It seems to me that we have in Lord's wholly-appreciative exegesis of the way Barrington-Ward approached God and his mission an eirenic presentation of the best of Evangelical and charismatic spirituality. Such spirituality draws on a wide range of resources, like the Jesus Prayer (Chapter 5), but never strays too far from the cross and the resurrection in the flow of the river the Spirit (Chapters 2, 3 & 4), hence the title of the book. The breadth of Barrington-Ward's interests and influences is summed up beautifully (p. 23):

> the evangelical focus on the Cross of Christ, the Pentecostal focus on the Holy Spirit in whom we are baptised, the charismatic experience of hungering for God in prayer and healing, the revivalist longing for God's presence, the need for contemplative stillness, the ecumenical importance of *koinonia* (communion and partnership) and the mystical journey from purgation to illumination and union (in the Western traditions) and *theosis* (in the Eastern traditions).

I understand that in a short monograph of this nature any criticism of the subject matter is kept to a minimum. It is probably my issue, but if there was one place I would have liked the author to have noted the limitations of such spirituality it is in the notion of 'exchange' which does seem to be at the heart of the matter for him and his subject (p. 16). What is happening between God, the Holy Trinity and humanity at the cross is surely more complex than only exchange, and has much deeper implications for how we live hospitably together in a post-colonial world, I suggest.

Laying that and two small errors aside (an incomplete sentence on p.1 and naming Victor Turner, Taylor on p. 33), whether you count yourself in any way an evangelical or not there is much to learn and digest from this book. While Barrington-Ward is no longer with us he can continue his episcopal teaching ministry through it long after his death. We should be grateful to Andy Lord for sharing his love and attentiveness for the Bishop's spirituality with us. The book finishes with some useful questions for the reader, some of Barrington-Ward's prayers and a full bibliography.

Revd Canon Dr Nigel Rooms

Prayer and Poetry: SLG Press Contemplative Poetry series.

***Amado Nervo: Poems of Faith and Doubt*, trans. John Gallas, Contemplative Poetry 1 (SLG Press, 2021), 42pp, paperback ISBN 9780728303188, £6.00.**

***Anglo-Saxon Poets: The High Roof of Heaven*, trans. John Gallas, Contemplative Poetry 2 (SLG Press, 2021), 68pp, paperback ISBN 9780728303232, £5.50.**

***Middle English Poets: Where Grace Grows Ever Green*, trans. & ed. John Gallas, Contemplative Poetry 3 (SLG Press, 2021), 56pp paperback ISBN 9780728303263, £5.50.**

Edward Clarke, *Selected Poems: The Voice Inside our Home*, Contemplative Poetry 4 (SLG Press, 2022) paperback ISBN 9780728303294, £5.50.

***Women & God: Drops in the Sea of Time*, trans. & ed. John Gallas, Contemplative Poetry 5 (SLG Press, 2022), 98pp, paperback ISBN 9780728303256, £6.50.**

SLG Press recently introduced into its range of publications a new series titled Contemplative Poetry. Hitherto poetry had not been part of its list, with a few exceptions: some hymns of Ephrem the Syrian, poems by Gregory Nazianzen, Celtic Songs and Blessings and some of the Press's earliest publications, of prayer poetry by Fr Gilbert Shaw. Yet a number of publications were *about* poets, and many touched on the literary borderland between poetry, prayer, liturgy, and theology. Clearly, poetic utterance, form, diction, however one might define poetry, is integral to spiritual language. The Bible itself, now almost invariably printed in 'verses', is at many points charged with a linguistic energy that stretches prose to the limit, bursting out in explicitly poetic imagery and rhythmic power. Where that pulsing energy is absent, such as the recondite deeds of minor kings or the more abstruse commands of the Law, we read more out of 'duty' than with 'joy'. The authority of Scripture does not depend on its poetic *affect*, far less on its rhetorical *effects*, yet perhaps we may say its power to convince is in no small part due to the dynamic of poetic intensity that permeates its texts.

SLG Press's Contemplative Poetry series provides, so to speak, material for exploration of the wider venture of the language of the spirit. The series presents a broad range of spiritual and linguistic expression – not to mention

a rather breathtaking historical and geographical range, from a third century BCE Tamil poem (in the beautiful anthology of women poets, *Women and God, Drops in the Sea of Time*) to Edward Clarke's contemporary wefting of personal experience with the warp of Biblical matter in *The Voice inside our Home*. The three other volumes so far published in the series are *Poems of Faith and Doubt* by the Mexican 'Modernist' poet Amado Nervo (translated by John Gallas) and selections of Anglo-Saxon and Middle English poems (*The High Roof of Heaven* and *Where Grace Grows Ever Green* respectively, both also translated by Gallas).

John Gallas offers fluent and strong modern English renderings of very different styles of poetry. Translation is an art in itself, all too often taken for granted, as if transposition from one language to another were a matter of straight mathematical equivalence. Words have an organic life, being products of creaturely interaction, in which the human dimension of spirit is recognized (verbally) as transcending human expression. Taking seriously the implications of this for Biblical interpretation when it comes to deciding, for instance, 'the intention of the original writer' can be dismissed as academic quibbling by those who are not alive to the instability and irreducible mystery of language. Similarly, much theology and spirituality we read only in translation, and we need to be mindful that languages arise out of, and in turn foster, different sensibilities that cannot be simply shoved into the procrustean structures of our own assumptions. Especially when reading texts from the past or from societies distant from our own, we need to be open to otherness, and not require 'meaning' solely on our own terms. In particular when it comes to spiritual language it is dangerous to privilege cerebral meaning over more holistic experiences of communication in which the performative and imaginative levels of signification (the underlying affective impact of verbalization) may be explicitly part of the meaning.

For me, poetry, however visually formatted, is a kind of translation into words of experience in its wholeness, in its ultimate incomprehensibility and hyper-vivid immediacy. Prose by contrast is a verbal abstraction from experience to give clear meaning, even when that meaning is multi-layered and emotionally charged. Where does prayer fit in this delineation between prose and poetry? Is it a discrete category of language, or does it operate both at

the level of prose and that of poetry to achieve a wholly other level of communication? And what of silence, the underlying pre-condition of all sound?

I must acknowledge that I am writing with a personal interest. Having been invited to contribute some of my own work to the Contemplative Poetry series, I felt I should try to clarify how I myself understand the nature of poetry in relation to prose and most importantly prayer, the supreme act of language.

Poetry realises the musical potential of language, and the musicality of language is central to its deepest 'meaning'. There is something, still not fully understood by neuroscientists, in the way the brain processes music that is vital to how communication works at the most basic level. It has been widely observed that patients suffering from dementia recover a degree of memory and liveliness when they hear music familiar from the past. Conscious communication is processed mainly in the cerebrum, whereas music to an important degree also involves the cerebellum, which deals with rhythm, timing, and physical movement. In poetry the rhythmic, metrical aspect of language, however irregular and individual, is strongly to the fore. Likewise in certain prayers, notably the Lord's Prayer, and liturgical prayer hymns such as the Gloria, affirmations such as the Creeds, and devotional prayers like the Angelus or the Jesus Prayer, the rhythm of recitation is integral to the linguistic act. Involving different neural pathways from rational consciousness, the musical dimension of language communicates at a more primal level than that of re-formulable, deliberate meaning.

In the five slim volumes of the Contemplative Poetry series we are given a fascinating soundscape of the evolution of English spiritual diction over the centuries – from the tremendous hammering alliterative straightforwardness of Anglo-Saxon piety retained so well in the translation ('For the exiled enemy – our unkind kindred – / have cruelly caught us, captives of hate; / the hard folk – the farmers of hell – / have bound us with ropes, rough and unrighteous.'), through the sweet rhyme and elegant lyric of more familiar medieval texts in the Middle English volume ('Adam lay y-bounden / bounden straight and strong'; 'There is no Rose of such virtüe / As is the Rose that bore Jesu.'), to Renaissance and seventeenth-century, then Pietist and Romantic sensibilities ('Our hearts He wants; our hearts we give; / So we, O friends, are doubly blessed. / Give your heart to be his pillow. / There the

Child will rest.'), to contemporary English in which sacred and vernacular fuse in a single register ('As grotesque as a painting of two famous lovers / Who styled themselves the elephant and the dove, / I have an image of you now your days are over, / Passed out with broken legs of chairs and bottles you'd drunk of, / And legs unbandaged on the unvacuumed floor.').

Julia Craig-McFeely's introductions to the Anglo-Saxon and Middle English volumes give a helpful overview of the distinctive features and evolution of English poetry in those periods, and her brief biographies of the poets in the *Women & God* volume make a fascinating, and moving, testimony to the largely under-recognized creative achievements of women down the ages.

These poems are contemplative not in the strict sense of the mystical state beyond the stages of purgation and meditation, but in the sense that they tune our mind and inner ear to a level of receptive alertness from which we can readily step into prayerful silence. Some poems are prayers in themselves, addressing God directly in praise or credal statement or personal appeal. Others are like windows through which the numinous enters our opaque, muffled world. Yet others fulfil Emily Dickinson's injunction in her poem to 'Tell all the truth but tell it slant', releasing us from the tyranny of 'meaning' into a richer meaningfulness of experiential knowledge and unknowing, empathy, wonder and love.

Properly speaking, verse (from latin *vertere*, to turn) is a run of words that *turns* at a precise point to the next run. Technically a group of verses is a stanza, though nowadays the word verse normally means a stanza. It is the turn that determines the rhythm, the essential deep musical structure, of the poem. And however continuous the syntactical meaning, there is at the end of each verse, at the turn, an element of silence. Fractional though this silence may be, it partakes of the original breath of the life of the poem. Similarly in prayer, it is the silence between petitions, and the rhythms of phrases against the rhythm of our breathing, that most powerfully carry our spiritual needs and awareness of Divine response. This silence at the heart of verse is, in the end, more important than any 'poetic' imagery or 'musical' rhyme or assonance. It is where both poet and pray-er encounter and surrender themselves to that which alone sustains utterance of any meaningful kind.

Revd James Ramsay

Douglas Dales: three volumes on the writings of St Bonaventure, published by James Clarke & Co., each volume priced £65.00 hardback, £25.00 paperback, £16.15 ePub.

—*Divine Remaking: St Bonaventure and the Gospel of Luke* (2017), 196pp, hardback ISBN 9780227176535; paperback ISBN 9780227176276; ePub ISBN 9780227906002.

—*Way back to God: The Spiritual Theology of St Bonaventure* (2019), 230pp, hardback ISBN 978022717693; paperback ISBN 9780227176948; ePub ISBN 9780227906866.

—*Truth and Reality: The Wisdom of St Bonaventure* (2021), 257pp, hardback ISBN 9780227177327; paperback ISBN 9780227177334; ePub ISBN 9780227907337.

Saint Bonaventure (1221–1274) was an almost exact contemporary of St Thomas Aquinas. A Franciscan, Minister General of his order, he was named archbishop of York but declined the see: the old *Catholic Encyclopaedia* records that 'the saint, in keeping with his singular humility, steadfastly refused this honour and the pope yielded'. You may make of that what you will. In his stead, Walter Giffard was translated from Bath and Wells.[42] Bonaventure's ecclesiastical career is far from unusual among the doctors of the Church, a designation officially bestowed upon him in 1588 by Pope Sixtus V, a fellow Franciscan. For the breadth and depth of his theological writings, and also because of his Franciscan connections, Bonaventure (the saint) is sometimes known as the 'Seraphic Doctor'.[43]

Douglas Dales has given us a number of volumes to introduce us to Bonaventure's writings, which are in part intended to be read alongside recent editions and translations of Bonaventure that have appeared in the 'Bonaventure Texts in Translation Series' of Franciscan Institute Publications

[42] Since neither Giffard nor, indeed, Bonaventure are especially common names, I wonder whether there was any relation between Archbishop Walter and Bishop Bonaventure Giffard, for nearly half a century one of the papal Vicars Apostolic in England, and for a heady few months in 1688 disputed holder of the presidency of Magdalen College, Oxford.

[43] The adjective Seraphic is sometimes used of St Francis of Assisi, of his followers, and of their particular liturgical and devotional observances because it was after having experienced a vision of a seraph that Francis received the stigmata.

between 1979 and 2010. Dales explains his programme with simplicity and clarity: 'in order that his significance as a theologian and spiritual teacher might be better known and become more widely accessible and appreciated in the life of the Church today' (preface to *Divine Remaking*). This raises two points for the potential reader: first, does he succeed? Second, the not unreasonable objection that almost every proponent, peritus or partisan of a given writer will advance such a claim about their object of study. On the first count, I answer with a resounding yes: these books are engagingly written, wide-ranging in their secondary literature, and are worthy accounts of the works with which they engage, as well as the contexts out of which those works emerge.

I approach the second point from a slightly different direction. One way of encountering the writings of St Bonaventure is in that collection of non-biblical readings in the (Roman) Liturgy of the Hours called the Office of Readings, where you find him on three occasions in the year: Monday in the 5th week of Ordinary Time; on the Feast of the Sacred Heart, and on his own feast in mid-July.[44] By way of comparison, St Thomas Aquinas makes five appearances; St John Chrysostom nineteen (plus another two from Pseudo-Chrysostom); St Leo the Great twenty-five; St Ambrose twenty-six; and St Augustine of Hippo tops the list on an unmatched eighty-two. The Divine Office connection is worth considering: it is a way to imbibe some Bonaventure without specifically intending to, plus the Office of Readings is available online as well as in print. Perhaps most fittingly, though, because the collections of texts with which this section of the Office of Readings fits historically, namely the homiliaries compiled by Bede and Paul the Deacon among others, to be read at Mattins (and surviving, albeit not as separate books, in the post-Tridentine office) served as a gateway to the writings of the saints of previous ages for clerics like Bonaventure himself, and they continue to serve that function—happily not just for clerics—today. Such a curated selection does not imply that this is all that is worth reading of a given author, instead inviting the reader to pursue more by authors they like, or give another hearing to authors they do not.

[44] This refers to the published one-year version, rather than to proposed or realised schemata for a second year of the cycle.

I am duty bound in this review to raise a Catonian opposition to endnotes, and the indexes could, in my view, do with some amplification. While I would not wish to criticise an author for not having written a book he or she did not set out to write, the one weakness of these volumes is that they are, rather in the way that theology developed in the centuries after Bonaventure, Aquinas, et al, inevitably an account of what Bonaventure wrote, rather than the writings of Bonaventure himself, for which you need the Franciscan edition, and if you do not have that you lack the full picture. What would greatly appeal to me, and I hope to a variety of readers and scholars, as a fourth volume to complete the set, is a 'best-of' Bonaventure source-book or gloss. This is another venerable tradition, and one with which Bonaventure himself was very familiar. In this we would have some extended passages from Bonaventure surrounded on the page by Dales's own commentary and that of the other writers on whom he calls. In sum, these books leave the reader wanting to read more Bonaventure, which is precisely what they set out to do.

Fr Daniel Lloyd

Bonnie Thurston, *Saint Mary of Egypt: A Modern Verse Life and Interpretation,* Monastic Wisdom Series 65 (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2021) ISBN 9780879071165; paperback 136pp, £12.99.

In the western church the story of Mary of Egypt is all but unknown. We might come across it if we are reading any of the writings of the early church, especially the desert tradition, and regard it as one of the more extreme forms of Christian asceticism, akin to the curious lives of St Simon Stylites and his followers who lived on the top of towers or pillars, or St Seraphim of Sarov who stood sleepless and upright on a rock for three years.

Mary was a converted prostitute who fled into the Judean desert and lived for forty-seven years without meeting another human being, eating the meagre rations the desert afforded and, when her garments fell to pieces, relying on her long hair to cover her nakedness. Shortly before she died she was discovered by Zossima, a devout monk, during his Lenten fast in the

desert. He heard her history, and at her request brought her communion the following Lent. The next year when he returned to their meeting place, he found her dead and with help from a lion buried her in the desert. His brethren asked him to write an account of these meetings when they saw what a profound effect the encounters had had on his life.

He tells of Mary's remarkable conversion experience which happened in Jerusalem; she had tagged along with a band of pilgrims from Alexandria, not interested herself in the purpose of the journey other than for what she could get out of it by way of sexual favours. However, Zossima's account is also an account of his own conversion; all his religious life he had striven after perfection without understanding that it is only fruitful if the true desire is to love as Jesus loves and to know how unconditional that love is. His meeting with Mary revealed this to him and brought to life the sincere but arid monastic observances that had been his practice hitherto.

To the rational mind this tale sounds both fantastic and unlikely. However, visit any Orthodox church on the fifth Sunday of Lent and you will hear it called both Repentance Sunday and the Sunday of St Mary of Egypt. On Thursday of that week her history is read in full. She is as alive to the hearers as any other saint, with her own teaching and lesson to give the faithful.

In the Christian tradition there are several stories of prostitutes whose conversions were deemed worthy of record, beginning with St Mary Magdalene, probably the woman out of whom Christ drove seven devils, and by tradition a harlot. She was the first to arrive at the tomb on Easter morning, the first to hear the good news that Christ had risen from the dead, the first to meet Him in His risen humanity. It is because of this experience of meeting the fullness of love, of resurrection life that comes with saying 'yes to Christ', that Christian asceticism can drive the individual to apparently impossible feats. The true desire and purpose of life is to find Jesus, and all other desires are subordinate and subordinated to Him. We enjoy stories of spectacular conversions, but they are not limited to great sinners; discovering the unconditional love of Jesus can feel just as spectacular today to the one experiencing it.

Prose versions of the life of St Mary of Egypt have been translated in recent years by Sisters Katherine and Tecla of a small Orthodox women's monastery in Yorkshire for use in their liturgy, and by the late Sr Benedicta SLG,

where it forms a chapter in her *Harlots of the Desert*. From the sixth century until well into the Middle Ages numerous versions of the Life were in circulation, both in prose and verse. We are accustomed to reading accounts of the saints in prose, but versified accounts were popular for private devotion, and perhaps easier to memorise for prayer and reflection than a detailed hagiography. Dr Thurston has chosen to use her skill as a poet to present us with a modern account in free verse, a set of poems highlighting aspects of Mary's history and its impact through the voices of the persons involved, Mary, Zossima, the Lion, a Scribe. They are not intended to be a scholarly presentation of the text, rather they arise from thirty years of her own reflection on and study of the sources.

Fortunately, as well as sharing the fruits of her reflection on the story, the author follows the poems with an interesting and accessible account of the material she has used and her response to it. She draws out the elements of the tale too, in order to introduce us to the many layers of meaning in it. There are the obvious ones that make up its setting, such as the desert, the harlot, the place of our Lady in Mary's conversion. She then examines the deeper theological context of each with some useful thoughts on repentance and humility.

This is a book to use in our own quest into the love of God, and as Bonnie has found, a tale to return to in order to remind us of the centrality and power of repentance in the Christian life. Sister Benedicta puts this well in her Foreword to the book:

> The saints often seem inaccessibly good, not near our own mixed-up lives. But [Bonnie Thurston] presents two lives, each a total mess. The story is non-judgemental. It's about grace working for a man/a woman, a monk/a harlot: all they have in common is that they both want to hear the true word of God to them. … Their meeting is of two sinners … with the mother of God and [with] the all-embracing persona of the desert, the place of ultimate solitude and silence, where the word of God can be truly heard and received. … [W]hat is central is the eternal truth of redemption and mercy for all.

SR CHRISTINE SLG

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