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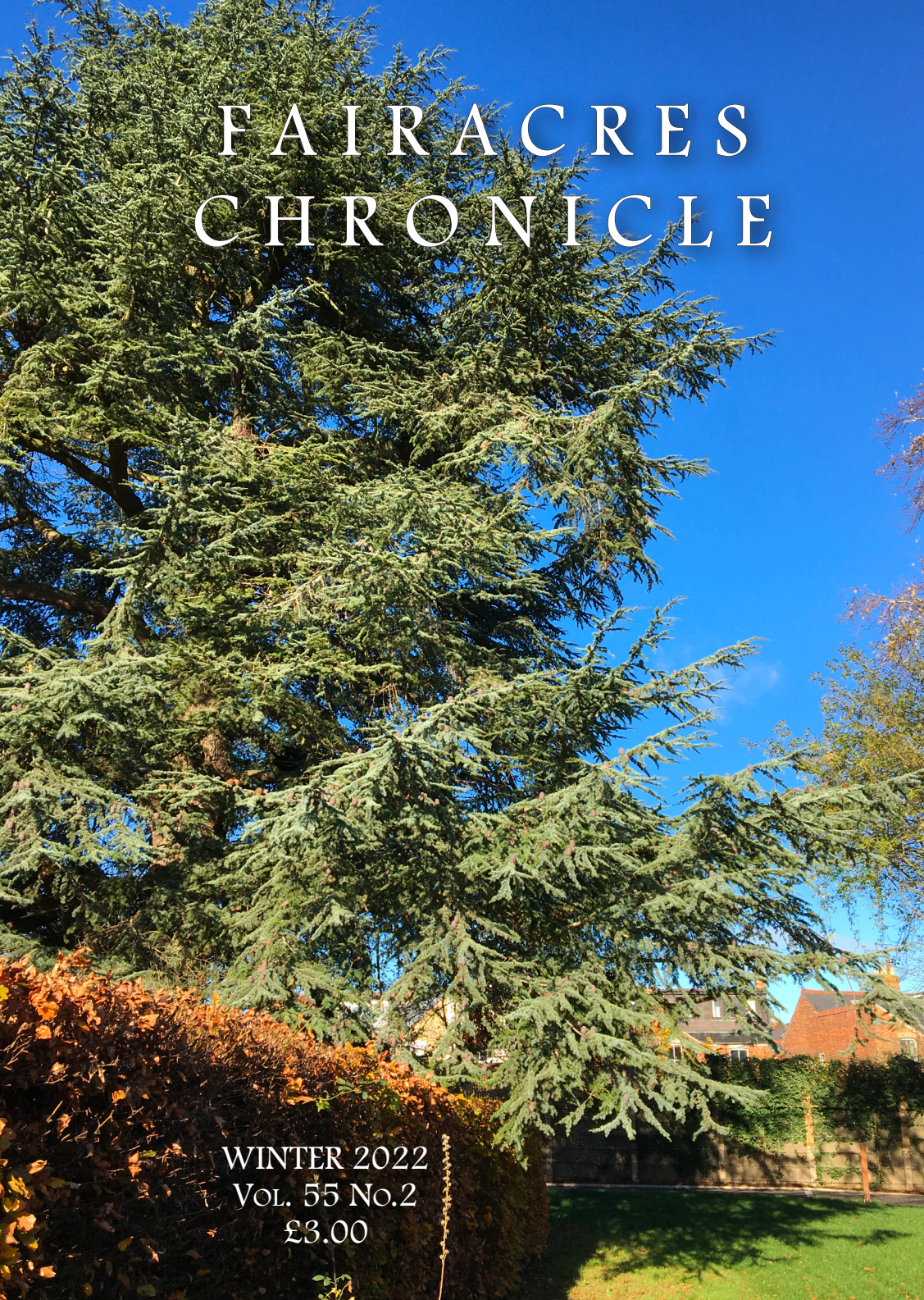

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Cover photo: Blue skies over Fairacres late November 2022
(credit: Julia Craig-McFeely)

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CONTENTS

Community Notes

Dear Friends,

This month I am writing these notes having recently returned from a visit to Sr Anne at St Isaac's Retreat in Aotearoa/New Zealand. St Isaac's is on North Island, on the opposite side to the Bay of Islands, for those who know their New Zealand geography. It was a long journey, but a very worthwhile visit.

I was at St Isaac's for the Feasts of All Saints and All Souls, and I was reminded about the way in which living in the northern hemisphere colours our understanding of the liturgical seasons; All Saints on a warm, sunny spring day is not what I have grown to expect, rather the potential for fog or drizzle. Of course, that is a good reminder for those of us who live our lives in the northern hemisphere of our world: in a sense we have only half of the picture. Advent and Christmas imagery is often wintry: snow and robins. My recollection from a former visit to New Zealand, of picnickers on the beach in Santa hats, reminds me that not everyone has a wintry Christmas.

The other eye-opener came during the journey itself. I like to watch the in-flight display showing where the plane is in relation to the ground below, and as we flew towards Singapore I noticed well-known places from the news marked on the map; Basra, Kabul and Beirut among them. Places known from our television screens and newspapers passing below the plane. Again, it brought home how easy it is for us to become very parochial in our picture of the world, although in a sense that is not surprising. Our lives are made

up of everyday local events and circumstances, but flying over these places I was reminded that, in these days of global travel and electronic communication, we are a lot closer to each other than we might realize. Then there was the sheer scale of our planet: it takes hours to reach Australia from Singapore, and yet more hours to fly over Australia to Auckland. In our small place on the globe, we easily forget the size and magnificence of our world, yet our world is only a pinprick in our universe. There is no light pollution at St Isaac's and the sight of the stars in the night sky is unforgettable.

However, it is not just the global perspective that is broadened by travelling to St Isaac's; the retreat is situated along a gorge road between mountains, and its nearest neighbours are some distance away. The silence is broken only by the sounds of wind and water. Early during my stay I walked the bush walk on the property and found my senses reawakened and heightened by the native plants and birds, so different from the birds and plants at home. Returning and walking in our garden at Fairacres, I tried to bring that newly-reawakened perceptiveness to bear, and was struck by the beauty of our new and old buildings and of our surroundings.

New perspectives and experiences can refresh our awareness of the beauty of the world in which we live and that God created. Psalm 95, which we sing daily at Matins, reminds us to praise the God of all creation:

> For the Lord is a great God
> and a great King above all gods.
> In his hand are the depths of the earth;
> the heights of the mountains are his also.
> The sea is his, for he made it,
> and the dry land, which his hands have formed. (Ps. 95:3–5)

The opportunity to be taken out of my usual environment into a very different place (albeit not an unfamiliar one, as I had lived at St Isaac's before) was a wonderful opportunity to see things anew and to be surprised and delighted by the world around me. It was a great gift, as was time spent with Sr Anne, whom many of you will remember from her time as Reverend Mother. She lives in a cottage named for Julian of Norwich, and her years at St Isaac's have led her to have a deep understanding of the local community.

Sr Anne would soon tell you that there is pain behind the beauty: there are high levels of unemployment, addiction and poor health among the Māori community in the area around St Isaac's, and the local church is in a frail state. Without the resources to offer online worship during the Covid pandemic the local churches closed and have remained closed; there are no local clergy at present to serve in them. Each Thursday Sr Anne sits in the nearest church of St Luke's for an hour of silent prayer for the local church and people and for our world, so that St Luke's at least is used once a week. She sits in solidarity with those around her.

Being able to travel like this was a great privilege, and my prayer was broadened by fresh contact with the particular beauty and needs of Northland, New Zealand. Returning home and beginning to integrate the experience, I found myself turning to the *SLG Way of Life* section, 'A Discipline of Place', in which we reflect on the discipline of Enclosure. Enclosure, we state in the document:

> Far from implying any limitation of God's presence … like the Incarnation itself, is an affirmation that God is in every place and circumstance.

Above I mentioned our tendency towards parochialism. Travel certainly broadens the mind, but it is not something that everyone can do or that any of us do all the time. However, the Incarnation reminds us that God fills all times and places. In one way, the coming of Jesus in a particular time and place is the height of 'parochialism'. But the very fact of the Incarnation transcends all narrow boundaries of place and culture to hold the whole of our world to the love of God. In our prayers we also can hold the world to the love of God. The *SLG Rule* Chapter on Enclosure reminds the Community that the purpose of the enclosed life:

> is to make possible a more complete offering of the whole self, body, soul and spirit to do God's will and to be the means of extending his love in the world.

Enclosure should open our eyes, just as travel does, to the beauty of the world around us and to the needs of those sharing our world with us.

Travelling to a very different place has reminded me that God is in all places, and that our world is full of diversity and beauty. Being at home in our place can also broaden the mind and awaken our perceptions to the beauty of the familiar and the local. In both we find that each of us, wherever we are, can hold the world to the love of God in our own place and circumstances.

Back at Fairacres, the Community continues its work of settling back into life together. Earlier in the year we welcomed Nadine Unger as a Postulant; she has now discerned that the religious life at Fairacres is not the place for her and we wish her well in the next stages of her journey. Sarah Miller was admitted as a Postulant on Thursday 17 November, and we welcome her as she explores her vocation here.

We have been glad to welcome visitors once more to our new guest accommodation and to see both new and familiar faces. In place of Fellowship House we now have four guest rooms in the New Wing of the building, as well as three new guest cottages. We were able to welcome a group of nine postulants and novices from six other Communities to spend a study week here exploring sites in Oxford that were important in the development of the religious life in the Anglican church and, as always, it is good to have that contact with others living the religious life.

We are currently nearing the end of the 'snagging' period in the building work, so once more we have various builders and painters in the Convent dealing with the issues that have arisen over the past year, since the building was handed back to us. Earlier in the autumn the new wing and cottages gained a certificate in the green section of this year's Oxford preservation Trust awards, a well-earned reward for our architects.

Now, as we approach the Advent and Christmas season, the Community seeks to deepen its prayer for the needs of our world: for peace and reconciliation, for justice and merc,y and for healing and restoration. We welcome our incarnate Lord, the Prince of Peace, remembering the promise of Malachi 4:2, 'for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings'. I ask you all to join us as we pray for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

On behalf of all the Sisters I wish you a peaceful Christmas and New Year.

With prayers,

Sister Clare-Louise SLG

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ASSOCIATES RETREAT 2023

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The Theology of Silence in Adam of Perseigne, Letter 29

Basil de Pinto

Adam of Perseigne (*c*. 1145–1221) was a French Cistercian and Abbot of Perseigne Abbey in the Diocese of Le Mans. He was spiritual director to kings, nobles, clerics and nuns, and adviser to Richard the Lion-hearted.

Among the figures that populate the scene of twelfth-century monasticism, the image of St Bernard looms so large that, more often than not, it seems to be the only one of any consequence. This misconception is being remedied today as we recognize that there were many monks, both Benedictine and Cistercian, besides the Abbot of Clairvaux, who contributed to making this period one of the most fascinating and fruitful in monastic history. One of these was Adam of Perseigne. If less spectacularly endowed than Bernard, not so powerfully moving as Isaac of Stella, and certainly not the penetrating theologian that was William of St Thierry, Adam was still representative of all that was best in the Cistercian movement; he played his part in continuing and preserving the tradition that saw the whole meaning of life summed up in the Gospels and tried to live the Gospels as intensely and perfectly as possible. Perhaps it is all the more impressive to see that the essential aspects of this tradition are to be found in an author who is not as well known as some of his peers; it proves that there was one single *élan vital*, one spirit animating the whole body of monasticism, the same spirit that we continue to try to recapture today in its basic and most fundamental outlines.

In *Patrologia Latina* Letter 29 is given the descriptive title 'On Silence',[1] and the word is much used throughout, but it is not so much an exhortation to a certain practice or exercise of monastic life as a miniature treatise on the meaning of the life itself, based on certain fundamental features of revelation. It amounts ultimately to a theological justification of the monk (since he was writing for his brethren) as a man of silence, and the formative role he has to play in the life of the Church.

[1] Jacques Paul Migne, ed., *Adami Abbatis Perseniæ Ordinis Cisterciensis Mariale*, Patrologia Latina 211 (Migne, 1855), 699–780; English version: *The Letters of Adam of Perseigne*, trans. Grace Perigo, Cistercian Fathers 21 (Cistercian Publications, 1976). All citations are taken from this translation.

As far as the structure of its thought is concerned, the letter deals with silence from two points of view. For the sake of convenience these can be dubbed the active and the contemplative, understanding these terms in their ancient and traditional sense: silence as an aspect of the *vita activa*, part of the struggle for detachment from self, and as an aspect of the *vita theoretica* or *contemplativa*, that of union with God in the experience of His love.

In this sense, silence is conceived of as a discipline; the one who practices it being a disciple. Adam is here speaking of silence as a moral force that cleanses the heart of sins and vices:

> The seven gifts of the Holy Spirit enumerated by Isaiah are as it were seven forms of silence, which compel all the forces of evil to cease their activity in the soul and render it silent.[2]

This naturally presupposes the ascetic practice of actually controlling the tongue; there can be no peace and tranquility in a soul where 'the chatter of the lips frustrates the discipline of silence' (cf. Prov. 10:4).[3]

Silence as a catharsis implies much more than abstinence from speaking; it is a fruit of humility and obedience to the will of God whose Word can only be heard in deep inner silence, which in turn produces the true discipleship that loves the truth of the mystery of God.

Closely connected with this is the notion of the sabbath of the heart. This is originally an Augustinian idea and is one of the most characteristic features of Adam's spirituality. He conceives the spiritual as a progress (which is itself rest and quiet) towards the definitive sabbath of contemplation. Hence the whole purpose of silence, especially of interior silence, is to prepare the soul for union with God. The pacifying and liberating effect of silence disposes the soul to be a worthy dwelling place for the Word which comes down from heaven only in the midst of the deepest silence; Wisdom 18:14 is quoted in this connection.[4] It is important to note that there is nothing abstract or simply ascetic in all this; it is conceived of in

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[2] *The Letters of Adam of Perseigne*, trans. Perigo, col. 689A.

[3] Ibid.

[4] [14] For while gentle silence enveloped all things
and night in its swift course was now half-gone,
[15] your all-powerful word leaped from heaven, from the royal throne,
into the midst of the land that was doomed …

closest connection with an essential dependence on the person of Christ and His redemptive activity.

Commenting on the text, 'It is good to wait in silence for the salvation of God' (Lam. 3:26), Adam says, 'The salvation of God is the mystery and the grace of the Incarnate Word.'

It is at this point that his thought begins to take on properly theological dimensions and can be understood in its strictly contemplative sense. Developing the idea of silence as an aspect of the mystery of Christ, Adam shows the presence of silence not only in the various phases of Jesus's historical existence—His birth, childhood, the preaching of the Baptist (which reduced the Law and prophets to silence), the passion, the coming of the Holy Spirit to the apostles engaged in silent prayer—but also in His pre-existence as the eternal Word and wisdom of God, and in His mystical extension in the Church. There is a long explanation of how the life of God himself is what gives silence its whole meaning. We know of the Trinity because Christ has revealed it, but this revelation comes to us when we listen to Christ:

> The teaching office of Christ is not attributable to his power as the almighty will of God, but to his being the Word of God which must be listened to.

It is the will of the Father that we listen to His Word, but in order to listen we must be silent, in this way imitating and emulating the reciprocal attention given to each other by the Father and the Son. The communication of God's Word to the soul is the reflection of the ineffable action that takes place within the Trinity itself, whereby the Father generates or begets the Son: 'The unique transformation of the rational creature lies in the ineffable generation of the Word.'

This knowledge of God which is the sabbath of the heart comes through listening with the ears of the heart: the Father loves this silence because it is identical with His own, having been produced by His grace, and hence within it He is able to generate His Son in the heart of the disciples as He generates Him within His own heart. The Word himself requires this silence of us so He can pour into our waiting ears all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge He has in himself. Finally, the Spirit of the Word looks for

silence in the heart of the disciple for He is the one who is to explain the Word within us (John 16:13–14). So Adam writes, 'You see how the whole Trinity blesses the discipline of silence.' What began, therefore, as an ascetic programme is ultimately seen as the connatural climate for the action of God in the soul and is rooted in the life of God himself as He has revealed it to us in Christ.

It is important to recognize this theological elaboration and to grasp its practical value. In a writer like Adam of Perseigne we see that monastic doctrine is not a kind of caviar for the elite. It is basically biblical and universal. It is concerned with the great realities of revelation and salvation. All that is said here about purification from sin, the opening of the heart to receive God, the ascent through a penitential and virtuous life to union with Him, is rooted in the fundamental mysteries of Christianity: the salvific action of God, man's free response to the redemption and love offered Him in Christ, the ultimate 'deification' of the redeemed and their real participation in the life of God, elevating and unifying all things in himself. It is in this sense that monastic life is contemplative life, and that all those called to lead monastic life are called to a life of contemplation, a life of prayer and love rooted in the mysteries of salvation and finding its expression in the humility and service of the monastic community. Whatever may be the ways along which God chooses to lead the individual into closer union with himself, the monk or nun is called to this life of immersion in the deep things of God, and a constantly expanding experience of His presence in the body of the redeemed which is the Church.

The supreme example of this opening of the silent soul to receive the living Christ is Our Lady. In his sermon on the Annunciation, Adam remarks that the Virgin listened to the angel in the silence of faith. So when the almighty Word leapt from His throne (Wisdom 18 again), He came and found a suitable dwelling place in the Virgin Mary. Mary is the model for the contemplative because her silence exemplifies all that God looks for within us, in order to unite himself to us. Silence took three forms in the Virgin: first, her virginity, which silenced the noise of the flesh; then humility, which removed all possibility of pride in her virtue; finally, her silence was the perfect form of charity, crowning her inner life with the peace that comes from the perfect knowledge of God and His love.

In this passage Adam insists on the humility of Mary because humility is in fact more important than the highest contemplation. However, Our Lady remains the perfect type of the contemplative because her humility paves the way for, and is even an aspect of, her perfect charity. Contemplation is nothing but the gift of charity brought to perfection in a way that God alone can determine. So, in the end, the silence of Mary is at once the sign and the cause of her perfect love of God, and God responds to her love by giving himself to her in the perfection of the Incarnation. Each of us is called to follow the example of her silence so that the Spirit of the Lord may rest in His fulness within us.

In all this, the inner life of the individual seems to occupy the primary level of attention. Letter 29, however, expands its vision to a remarkable universalism, so that the vocation to silence is one for all people simply by virtue of their human nature, and especially for the whole Church.

> There is no doubt that the Word of God imposes a certain silence on every man, since the Lord threatens that all will have to answer on the day of judgment for every idle word.

Adam goes on to explain that silence is not a question of ceasing to speak altogether, but of speaking with due measure and proportion. This is an eminently reasonable approach to silence and one that would be applicable to anyone in any walk of life. It has a notably modern ring about it and calls to mind the appeal of someone like Max Picard, whose *World of Silence* eloquently shows how modern man, plunged into the noise and frenzy of today's world, is desperately in need of silence and repose for the restoration of his simple human integrity.[5] Adam of Perseigne would have been completely in accord with Hammarskjold's observation:

> To be sociable—to talk merely because convention forbids silence, to rub against one another in order to create the illusion of intimacy and contact: what an example of *la condition humaine*. Exhausting, naturally, like any improper use of our spiritual resources. In miniature, one of the many ways in which mankind successfully acts as its own scourge—in the hell of spiritual death.[6]

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[5] Max Picard, *The World of Silence* (Harvill Press, 1952; repr. Eighth Day Press, 2002).
[6] Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings* (Knopf, 1964), 63.

However, according to Adam the Church is called in a special way to silence:

> The spouse of the Word herself, that is, the Church, participates in the silence of eternal rest; she listens all the more lovingly as she hears the voice of God telling her, "Listen, my daughter, and see, and turn your ear." (Ps. 44:11)

The silence of the Church is the expression of her faith and humility; through faith and obedience she comes to the vision of her spouse. Her nature itself is indicated by silence: the Church is essentially the assembly that is called together by the voice of God, but this voice can only be heard if it is listened to in silence. Adam has strong words to signify the role of the Church as one that listens to the voice of God:

> It is not for the voice of the spouse of the Word to indulge in arrogant speech, but to listen and to see … if she abandons silence she loses the grace of the Word and the very dignity of her being.

In this the Church is the true Israel, the continuation of the congregation of God in the desert, which He called to himself and to which He revealed His name (Deut. 6:4). Here again we find the same attitude that we are so concerned with ourselves. One of the great themes of Vatican Council II was the need for the Church to listen, to open itself to the voice of God, especially as it reveals itself in the problems of the world today. The Church has to rediscover itself as the one who is poor, as the one who has to learn, and not only as the one set above the nations to command and rule.

It is for this reason that the message of monasticism has so much to offer the Church and has such an important part to play in its renewal. If the monastic life has any meaning at all, it is surely connected in a very intimate way to its search for roots, for sources, with the attempt to discover authentic values and live them fully. In a writer like Adam of Perseigne we witness the remarkable power of monastic thought to strike at the heart of the whole Christian idea. A treatise on silence might seem to have scant relation to the burning issues confronting Christianity today: the Church is seeking dialogue with the world, even with those elements in the world that seem most hostile to it, atheism and communism, for example. The Church has to make known by word and deed its fidelity to the Gospel, has to witness before the eyes of all that it embraces all people in the redeeming love of Christ.

Emphasis would seem better placed on the power of the word and the urgency of the active apostolate. Certainly these things are needed, but the message of monasticism is that the word, to be fruitful, must proceed from silence. That is why Adam concludes his letter with the text, 'Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks' (Luke 6:45). The contemplative vocation is not a luxury; it is an essential aspect of the life of the Church itself. The monastic bears witness in the heart of the Church to the Church's need to be silent and listen to the voice of Christ, without whom it would not be able to speak; it is only from the abundance of Christ within it that the Church is able to open its mouth to bring the message of salvation to the world.

The question might now be asked, is all this really to be found in Adam of Perseigne, or are modern ideas being read into a twelfth-century author? To this the answer can only be that the texts given above speak for themselves. To this reader at any rate their message seems to resound with peculiar clarity and force. Because it is founded upon and developed from revelation, the monastic view of the world is universal and reaches far beyond the limits of a particular culture or period of time. It is not so much modern as timeless, in the sense of being valid for all times and places, as long as people are genuinely concerned with the search for God.

It is this character of universality in Adam's treatment of silence that merits the name of a theology. It is not merely a pious exhortation about a specific peculiarity of those living a monastic life. It is a genuine synthesis whose elements are drawn from the basic themes of revelation and are seen in a harmonious ordering that highlights an individual aspect of truth without isolating or exaggerating it. A monastic practice is understood in its radical relation to the overall picture of the Christian dispensation, and all its essence is drawn out of this living centre and fused into a single whole. It is this theological elaboration of monastic doctrine which forces us to recognize the enormous responsibility of those called to monastic life with regard to silence. It would be a tragic mistake to see in silence nothing but a disciplinary measure, one which might come in for severe censure from some proponents of monastic *aggiornamento*. It must be understood as the symbol and summary of the whole life of the monastic, the rationale that alone can justify a life of removal from the world in days like ours.

The silent, hidden life of prayer is the dynamism on which the life of the Church and perhaps of the whole universe ultimately depends. If the monastic fails to recognize this, not only will their lives be a hopeless riddle to themselves, but they will fail to contribute their desperately-needed share to the sum total of inner strength that is the only answer to the tensions and problems all around us in the Church and in the world. In an age of noise, anxiety and frustration, monastic doctrine and practice bear witness to the possibility of a life that can rise beyond such things if it is embraced in the faith and fervour of charity. The word of the prophet, which is the word of God, remains true: 'In silence and in hope will be your strength'. (Is. 30:15).

Fr Basil de Pinto, a former monk of Gethsemani, was a Benedictine priest at Mount Saviour Monastery in Pine City, New York. He left the Benedictine Order but remains a priest, serving in Piedmont, California.

Covid, Cassian and me

TONY DICKINSON

It started with a cough on the Friday after Easter 3. Nothing very much, just an irritating tickle at the back of the throat. The next day, though, I was hacking away like a man with a seventy-a-day habit, and if I exhaled with any force, I sounded like a cross between a goose and one of the Costa cruise ships leaving harbour. So I booked a test at one of the local *farmacie* and spent the rest of the day pondering whether I was safe to lead the Sunday Eucharist. I decided I probably was not and prepared material to enable the Churchwardens to lead a service of Ante-Communion in my absence. That meant that our normal service-books could be used and the church, which runs on the proverbial shoestring, would not have the expense of printing more than the normal service-sheet.

It was as well that I did. The test, when I took it on Monday morning, rapidly came back positive, and I was into self-isolation for at least seven days. It was very like my experience of Eastertide 2020, when the whole of

Italy was in lockdown. Except that this time it was not the whole of Italy, or even the whole of Genoa. It was just me.

By coincidence my morning reading during Eastertide was the selection from John Cassian's *Conferences* in the series *Classics of Western Spirituality*, a book that has been on my shelves for a long time, but which I have only recently got round to opening.[7] I came to the Desert Fathers many years ago via Thomas Merton's selection from the *Verba Seniorum* which appeared in the early 1960s and then Sr Benedicta Ward's translations of the Anonymous and Alphabetical Collections of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, but somehow Cassian had always passed me by.[8] Possibly those who first told me of his existence had stressed too much his importance in the history of the religious life and said too little about his contribution to an understanding of the spiritual life that may be of use to those who live outside the cloister.

It was, however, an apt choice for my time of quarantine. During the national lockdown I had been reminding people of the wisdom of Abba Moses, 'Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything',[9] but in those days there were exceptions: shopping for essentials (food, medicines, etc.), exercise, even personal prayer in a church. Now there were none. So, as a Norwich-based friend had written when she was shielding a year or so earlier, 'I got in touch with my inner anchorite'.

Cassian was a very helpful companion in this process. He and his fellow-seeker, Germanus, were asking some of the questions that were being forced on me. Some of the answers that he recorded, albeit they may well have been edited and systematized in order to make them more easily comprehensible to a Western readership, turned out to be very relevant to my situation. Abba Moses's insistence on the importance of routine and the need for a realistic approach to varying or adapting it according to circumstances, made a great

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[7] John Cassian, *Conferences*, trans. and preface by Colm Luibhéid, introd. by Eugène Pichery and Owen Chadwick, Classics of Western Spirituality Series (Paulist Press, 1985).

[8] Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert* (Sheldon Press, 1974); Benedicta Ward, *The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers* (SLG Press, 1975); Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Apophthegmata Patrum: The Alphabetic Collection*, Cistercian Studies Series 59 (Liturgical Press, 1975).

[9] Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 118.

deal of sense.[10] Although I did not feel ill and had no symptoms, apart from the cough which had subsided noticeably by the third day of quarantine and had more-or-less disappeared by the fifth, I found that I was tiring easily and that my return to health was better served by a 'power nap' in the early afternoon than by extra doses of caffeine from the pot on the kitchen stove.

Also helpful was the wisdom of Abba Paphnutius, and especially his comments on 'the call of compulsion' as a basis on which to build the life of the spirit, and in some instances a more sound basis than either a direct vocation from God or the call that comes from human example.[11] Being stuck indoors kept me from meeting congregation members and colleagues, but it resulted in my having more time to pray during that week and to reflect on the counsels of Abba Isaac about structuring prayer,[12] about the importance of the Lord's Prayer as a model for our praying[13] and about the use of Psalm 70:1, 'O God, make speed to save me; O Lord, make haste to help me', as a kind of hybrid between a mantra and an arrow prayer 'to keep the thought of God always in your mind'.[14]

The challenge, now that I have recovered, is to build on that learning process, rather than revert to my previous practice. The signs in the weeks since I tested negative once again have not been entirely encouraging in that regard but, as all the 'old men' consulted by Cassian and Germanus were keen to remind them, the life of the spirit is always work in progress, even for the wisest and holiest (among whom I am definitely not), and the possibility of slipping backwards is always a reality whether through laxity in observance or, as the aged Abba Chaeremon lamented, by reason of physical frailty.[15] We can, however, find comfort in another teaching of Abba Isaac: that there are 'countless opportunities when, with God's grace, the torpor and the sluggishness of our souls are shaken up' and take encouragement from them.[16]

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[10] Conference II, chapters 21–2, 26.
[11] Conference III, chapters 3–5.
[12] Conference IX, chapters 9–15.
[13] Conference IX, chapters 17–25.
[14] Conference X, chapters 10.
[15] Conference XI, chapters 4.
[16] Conference IX, chapters 26.

Chapters of the Conferences *referred to above*

Conference II, https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/350802.htm

21 'The answer concerning the value and measure of well-proved abstinence.'
22 'What is the usual limit both of abstinence and of partaking food.'
26 'The answer how we should not exceed the proper measure of food.'

Conference III, https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/350803.htm

3 'The statement of Abbot Paphnutius on the three kinds of vocations, and the three sorts of renunciations.'
4 'An explanation of the three callings.'
5 'How the first of these calls is of no use to a sluggard, and the last is no hindrance to one who is in earnest.'

Conference IX, https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/350809.htm

9 'Of the fourfold nature of prayer.'
10 'Of the order of the different kinds laid down with regard to the character of prayer.'
11 'Of Supplications.'
12 'Of Prayer.'
13 'Of Intercession.'
14 'Of Thanksgiving.'
15 'Whether these four kinds of prayers are necessary for everyone to offer all at once or separately and in turns.'
17 'How the four kinds of supplication were originated by the Lord.'
18 'Of the Lord's Prayer.'
19 'Of the clause: Your kingdom come.'
20 'Of the clause: Your will be done.'
21 'Of our supersubstantial or daily bread.'
22 'Of the clause: Forgive us our debts, etc.'
23 'Of the clause: Lead us not into temptation.'
24 'How we ought not to ask for other things, except only those which are contained in the limits of the Lord's Prayer.'
25 'Of the character of the sublimer prayer.'
26 'Of the different causes of conviction.'

Conference X, https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/350810.htm

10 'Of the method of continual prayer.'

Conference XI, https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/350811.htm

4 'Of Abbot Chæremon and his excuse about the teaching which we asked for.'

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Christmas

I'd take the sheer expense of it,
The wailing kids in shopping malls,
That sausage roll that you just bit,
Those office girls against the walls,
And all their glasses of prosecco;
I'd take all this, and every gift
That gathers dust, unloved as Echo
By the coming year that cannot lift
Its gaze up from itself, I'd take
Them all, and your anxiety
Preparing lunch, the fights that break
Out eating it, the bad TV,
And pounds of fat you gain in front
Of it, in a state of indigestion
And then a somewhat somnolent
State of boredom; each cracker's question
And plastic toy and paper hat
That crowns old age's dozing off
Into its neck: I'd take all that,
And all such other Christmas stuff
We celebrate today, and bind
It fast, and flee to the heath of a place
As wild as I am, and hope what finds
Us there puts on its kindest face.
But what naked tree is this that grows
In this fresh space? Whose fingers are these
To touch the nose of lowing cows
That shall come in from winds that freeze?
As at the end of history
I hear the theme of a shepherd's song
As great as any mystery
To which all must come before long.

Since the angels went away to heaven,
And cannot come again,
The glory they seemed to take with them
Must still remain
In the shepherds' songs, who broke their watch in the night,
For a thousand years in thy sight.

Long may it be found in the old philosopher's
Question: 'And how do we
Possess the divinity?' who avers
We came to be
Constituted by a union
Of the many and the one.

You said, 'Let there be light', and we came
Thievishly after,
And found our face to be the same
As yours, our laughter
As divine, at seeing it caught in a thousand mirrors,
Or hatched with all our errors.

But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them
In her heart, as the lit-
Up eyes of my sons give now and then
A glint of it:
The true light that shines in these, my long deferred,
Uncomprehending words.

Edward Clarke

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Mystic Mezze

Hetty Kothari

Abba Isaiah, one of the Desert Fathers of the early church, gave some sound advice when he said, 'Until your heart is at peace through prayer make no effort to explain anything to anyone', so I will follow his advice.[17] Nevertheless I do want to share some reflections with a selection of words from our Christian tradition written by people whose hearts were at peace through prayer. Many of these texts will be familiar to readers. Most of these words are about silence, solitude, and contemplation in one way or another. These are words that have spoken to me deeply in ways that I cannot explain, and I hope that they may speak to others.

How do we open our hearts to be at peace? The Desert Mothers and Fathers, the saints and mystics of our rich tradition, have things to say about how to reach into our hearts: not simply our emotions and feelings, but to the very centre or core of our being, where God can, and does, transform us from within. These great teachers tell us, from their own experience, that using our own will power is not the way to bring about this transformation. It is only by the grace of God that our hearts can be opened and transformed. What we *can* do is prepare ourselves as best we are able, thereby creating a quiet space within us in which the Holy Spirit can effect this transformation.

Before exploring that, I want briefly to mention the way our minds work. Anyone who has practised meditation or silent prayer will be all too aware of the way in which the mind is full of thoughts: memories, imaginings, projections, anxieties, chit-chat and gossip. These are just some of the things that go on in our minds to make up what has been described as a noisy cocktail of thoughts. This conjures up the image of a cocktail party, where people do indeed gossip and chit-chat, drifting from one conversation to another.[18] So it can be in the mind: our thoughts buzz around in high-pitched voices clamouring for attention, pushing themselves forward, dressing themselves up, putting on a performance, claiming to be of great importance. However,

[17] Cited in Monk Moses of Mount Athos, *Athonite Flowers: Seven Contemporary Essays on the Spiritual Life* (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2000), 3.

[18] I am indebted to Martin Laird OSA for this image, used in his book, *Into the Silent Land* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2006).

to come before God we have no need to put on a good front or dress up for the occasion, or prove how interesting we are, or even find the right words. Instead, what we need before God is to learn to be quiet and listen. I hope that as you read this you will be able to sit back and listen to the wisdom of our tradition: and that the cocktail party in our minds can settle down and become more like the title of this essay, a mystic mezze.

A mezze is a selection of small dishes usually served as appetizers, and is a regular part of Middle Eastern cuisine. Some of what you will read here comes from that same Middle Eastern region of the world as the very roots of the Christian tradition; however, instead of being offered edible food, spiritual food from our mystical tradition is served in small bite-sized pieces—a selection to taste and savour.

The word 'mystical' has many connotations. I use it in relation to the mystery or hiddenness of our faith; the mystery or hiddenness of God; the mystery into which we enter when we pray in silence. Words and rational thought are of great value but can only take us so far: we reach a boundary beyond which words simply are no longer adequate in the journey of faith. This is where we enter into the mystical realm. Mysticism is not necessarily about visions or revelations from God, or moments of spiritual ecstasy, although these have been experienced by some of our great mystics. As they themselves say, these extreme experiences are not the point at all; they are not the final goal of the mystic. The Christian mystic aims and longs for intimate union with God. As he or she comes into a deeper communion with God, so they also come into a deeper communion with humanity and with all of God's creation. One dictionary definition reads, 'a mystic is one who seeks by contemplation and self-surrender to obtain unity with, or absorption into, the Deity, or one who believes in the spiritual apprehension of truths that are beyond the intellect.'[19]

In mystical theology, knowledge and understanding of God come through experience of God's love rather than from systematic and intellectual study. This knowledge is different from any other form of knowledge and one that cannot be understood in the way we usually comprehend matters. It cannot be pinned down or grasped. It is sometimes called 'unknowing', as in the intriguing title of the anonymous fourteenth-century

[19] *The Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (Oxford University Press, 2nd edn 2005).

work, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. We might say it is knowledge and understanding of the heart rather than the head.

Mysticism is not just for an ascetic elite. Verena Schiller, who has lived for many years as a hermit in North Wales, writes, 'In everyone there is a solitary centre and a silent place that longs for attention and space. Many are aware of this.'[20] Many have a yearning (sometimes a hidden yearning) to find that inner place of mystery where we may communicate with God in a way that is beyond words. One of the most important theologians of the twentieth century, the Jesuit Karl Rahner, said, 'The Christian of the future will be a mystic or he will not exist at all'.[21] A concept cited by many writers. Karen Kilby wrote that 'Rahner drew from that mystical tradition … the notion of an apprehension of God in darkness, and experience of the obscure but immediate "touch" of God.'[22]

I have attempted to select my bite-sized passages of wisdom chronologically (mostly) because this is how the story unfolds. In the same way that Jesus taught us that the Gospel story fulfils the Hebrew Bible, so it might be said that the history of Christianity is an ongoing process of renewal and fulfilment; each generation bringing fresh new life and ways of living out the Gospel story. As it says in Psalm 145, 'One generation shall laud your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts' (Ps. 145:4).

Scripture is the starting point, and my first passage is from Psalm 19:1–4. Jesus would have been very familiar with this psalm as with all the psalms. They were a significant part of his regular prayer life.

> The heavens are telling the glory of God;
> and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
> Day to day pours forth speech,
> and night to night declares knowledge.
> There is no speech, nor are there words;
> their voice is not heard
> yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
> and their words to the end of the world.

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[20] Verena Schiller, *A Simplified Life: A Contemporary Hermit's Experience of Solitude and Silence* (Canterbury Press, 2010), xviii.

[21] Cited in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality* (Blackwell, 1983), 453.

[22] Karen Kilby, *The SPCK Introduction to Karl Rahner* (SPCK, 2007), 72.

This passage is full of paradox. Speech is pouring forth and yet there are no words. According to one commentary on these verses 'this paradox of silent speech is unique in the Old Testament'.[23] It is this paradox of silent speech that I hope to convey. St Paul quotes these four verses from Psalm 19 in his letter to the Romans (10:14–18). By doing so, what he might be implying is that the Word (that is Jesus Christ) is conveyed not only through the spoken or written word, but also through what is not spoken and yet pervades all of creation.

From the New Testament I have chosen a passage from Paul's Letter to the Colossians. It seemed to answer a question I have asked of myself, 'What is it that I want to say here, what is my aim?' This is what Paul says to the Colossians: 'I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself' (Col. 2:2). That is what I hope to convey.

I am taking the phrases 'assured understanding' and 'knowledge of God's mystery' to mean understanding with the spiritual senses rather than with the intellect; an understanding and knowledge that comes through the experience of God's love, inexplicable yet real. For, as St John of the Cross writes, 'mystical wisdom (which comes through love …) needs not to be comprehended distinctly in order to produce love and affection in the soul; it is like faith, whereby we love God without comprehending Him'.[24]

'Mystical wisdom which comes through love' leads us to one particular book in the Hebrew Bible: the great love poem known as the Song of Songs or the Song of Solomon. Although it is written in the language of a human love affair, mystics throughout the ages have interpreted this love poem as an allegory of the love of God for His creation: describing a spiritual union or marriage with God. In ancient Jewish tradition God was the bridegroom to his bride, the people Israel. Among the early Church Fathers (from Origen onwards) it was taken to be an allegory of the relationship of love between Christ and the Church, or between Christ and the believer.

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[23] *The Oxford Bible Commentary,* ed. John Barton & John Muddiman (Oxford University Press, 2001), 373.

[24] *The Spiritual Canticle & Poems St John of the Cross*, trans. Alison Peers, (Burns & Oates, 1978), 24.

There is one passage that is often quoted at weddings and funerals:

> Set me as a seal upon your heart,
> as a seal upon your arm;
> for love is strong as death,
> passion fierce as the grave.
> Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame.
> Many waters cannot quench love,
> neither can floods drown it.
> If one offered for love
> all the wealth of one's house,
> It would be utterly scorned. (Song 8:6–7)

It is easy to see why people would choose this for their wedding or for the funeral of a loved one as it is such a beautiful expression of the power of love: the flashes of fire, the raging flame of love. I will return to that flame later.

I want to look more closely at two other short passages from this poem which are rather more puzzling: 'I slept but my heart was awake' (5:2). This is spoken by the bride herself; and 'Do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready' (2:7, 3:5, 8:4), which is repeated three times throughout the poem and also refers to the bride, the one who sleeps yet whose heart is awake.

Given an allegorical interpretation the phrase, 'I slept but my heart was awake', is a description of a person engaged in deep contemplation, in which the person is asleep to the usual sensations and feelings of waking life, yet in their heart of hearts is alive and awake to the mystery of the hidden God. Many people have written about the Song but I call on only a few to shed some light on it.

The first person is from the fourth century, Gregory of Nyssa. He was not the first person to read the Song as an allegory, that was probably Origen a couple of centuries earlier. Gregory of Nyssa's family background was one of wealth and influence but also commitment to a life of prayer. His sister Macrina was a great influence on his spiritual life. After their father died she converted the family household into a monastery on one of their estates in Cappadocea (modern-day Turkey). Their brother, St Basil, was two years older than Gregory and, together with Gregory of Nazianzen, the three of them are known as the Cappadocian Fathers. According to Olivier Clément, of the three of them Gregory of Nyssa was the most profound mystic and also

the most conscious of the nature of suffering. Here is what Gregory writes about the bride in the Song of Songs being asleep while her heart is awake:

> This sleep is quite extraordinary and different from one's natural habit, for in natural sleep one is not awake. Both are opposed to each other, for sleep and waking succeed and follow one another. We see in the bride a new, paradoxical mixture of opposites: 'I sleep' she says, 'and my heart is awake'. What can we understand by this statement? This sleep is like death. In it each sensory function of the body is lost: there is no vision, hearing, scent, taste, nor feeling, but the body's tension is loosed [we might use the word 'relaxed' here] … Once all these senses have been put to sleep and are gripped by inaction, the heart's action is pure; reason looks above while it remains undisturbed and free from the senses' movement.[25]

This is a clear description of a person engaged in the silence and stillness of contemplative prayer.

If we are to consider silence in prayer we cannot exclude St Isaac of Nineveh, sometimes known as St Isaac the Syrian but, more pertinent here, also known as the Saint of Silence. He lived in seventh-century Syria as a hermit monk for much of his life and his writings were intended to give teaching and encouragement to those who were drawn towards solitude. He has been, and still is, particularly influential in the Eastern Orthodox Church, but is also recognized in the West and much loved by contemplatives. On the subject of silence he writes:

> Above anything welcome silence for it brings forth fruits that no tongue can speak of, neither can it be explained. At first we compel ourselves to be silent. Then from our silence something is born which draws us towards (deeper) silence … After some time delight is born in the heart from the exercise of this service and by force it draws the body towards remaining in silence. … God grant us to perceive that which is born of silence.[26]

There is so much in these words. Although they do not refer to the Song of Songs or to being asleep but with heart awake, it seems to say something very similar, in particular the words about the 'delight' being

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[25] Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, trans. with an introduction by Casimir McCambley OCSO (Hellenic College Press, 1987), 195.

[26] Treatise 65 (450–1) in A. J. Wensinck, *Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Nineveh* (Gorgias Press, 2011), 302.

born in the heart, and then this delight itself taking the person by force to remain in that silence and stillness. Could finding delight in the heart be the same as saying that the heart is awake? I leave that question for you to ponder.

In order to shed more light on our chosen verses I jump forward a few centuries from seventh-century Syria to sixteenth-century Spain and to the famous Carmelite saint, John of the Cross, great spiritual friend of St Teresa of Avila. John grew up in poverty, was educated in a school for poor children, and served as an altar boy at the local monastery. As an adult he worked in a hospital and continued his studies at a Jesuit school, eventually entering the Carmelite Order, which was undergoing a reformation under the guidance of Teresa of Avila. John joined in that reformation and became spiritual director and confessor to Teresa and to many of her sisters. A group of Carmelite friars, who were opposed to the reforms, took John prisoner in Toledo. He was treated with terrible cruelty by the friars and kept in a tiny dark cell with little food and no contact with the outside world.

During his eight years of imprisonment he wrote the most beautiful and moving poetry, including a re-working of the Song of Songs, called the *Spiritual Canticle*. Using the language of human love, the Canticle is the story of the search for the Divine. Later, after he had escaped from prison, he added several stanzas and, at the request of one of the Carmelite nuns who wanted a better understanding of his poem for herself and for her sisters, a commentary. He said that he could not explain his work but could shed some light on it.

Although John's *Spiritual Canticle* is closely attuned to the Song of Songs, it is to another of his works that I turn for some insight into the two particular passages I have cited: that is *The Living Flame of Love*. John was particularly fond of the image of fire to describe the love of God, and that title is a reminder of the 'raging flame' and 'flashes of fire' in the first quotation from the Song. Just as he added a commentary to the *Spiritual Canticle* to shed light on it for the Carmelite nuns, John now added a commentary to *The Living Flame* so that readers could reach a better understanding of his poem and how to apply it to their religious life.

John had plenty to say about what is going on when a person is in a state of contemplation, asleep to the senses yet with the heart awake. He describes

what is happening internally: 'the Holy Spirit', he says, 'is communicating spiritual riches, gifts and graces to the soul'.[27] He uses the image of God as the master artist and the person in contemplation as a blank canvas, and says how vital it is that they remain undisturbed, so that the work of art is not spoiled. The person may think nothing is happening, they may think they should be doing something and want to take some action, but John knows that this is the very moment to remain still. God is recreating the person, transforming them, without them even being aware of what is going on. It is so well hidden that the person often feels more a sense of the absence rather than the presence of God. From the outside it may look like idleness, and indeed it is. John describes it as an 'inner idleness or oblivion or spiritual listening'.[28] He knows that this is to be protected and is very critical of those spiritual directors who encourage the person to stop this apparent idleness and start being more actively engaged in good works. Such a spiritual director, he says, is like a blacksmith with a big hammer bashing at the masterpiece and ruining it.

The second passage from the Song of Songs, 'Do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready', is better understood if I include the previous two lines of the poem:

> I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
> by the gazelles or the wild does:
> do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready! (Song 3:5)

Here I quote directly from John:

> The extent to which God values this tranquillity and sleep, or annihilation of sense, is clear in the entreaty, so notable and efficacious, that he made in the Song of Songs; 'I adjure you daughters of Jerusalem, by the roes and harts of the fields, that you stir not up or awaken my beloved until she please' (Sg. 3:5). He (God) hereby indicates how much he loves solitary sleep and forgetfulness, for he compares it to these animals that are so retiring and withdrawn. Yet these spiritual directors do not want the soul to rest and remain quiet, but want it always

[27] St John of the Cross, *Living Flame of Love*, commentary on chapter 3 (Cosimo Classics, 2007), 40–7.

[28] *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1979), 117.

> to labour and work so that consequently it does not allow room for God's work and through its own activity ruins and effaces what He is doing. Its activities are like the little foxes that destroy the flourishing vineyard of the soul.[29]

John is referring to the little foxes mentioned in the Song 2:15: 'Catch us the foxes, the little foxes, that ruin the vineyards— for our vineyards are in blossom.' The little foxes are like the activities taken up by the contemplative following advice from their spiritual director. The vineyard in blossom is the state of the soul if left alone in stillness and rest with God. The little foxes ruin the vineyard: the activities ruin the process of blossoming and transformation taking place unseen in the depths of the soul.

I would like to quote from St John once more. This is not directly in connection with the Song of Songs, but is about the mystery and the silence of God. 'God the Father spoke one Word, which was his Son, and this Word he speaks always in eternal silence and in silence must it be heard.'[30] This has echoes of the first verse of the Gospel of John: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God', which itself echoes the opening verses of Genesis. It also reminds us of the value of silence in our prayer lives.

Although I have not mentioned the name of Jesus Christ much so far, his presence has been with us throughout, in the bridegroom of the Song. There are several references to this metaphor of the bridegroom in the Gospels. John the Baptist says of Jesus,

> He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase but I must decrease. (John 3:29)

Jesus refers to himself as the bridegroom in Luke when he says, "You cannot make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you?" (Luke 5:34). It is in the incarnation of Christ that the words of the Song of Songs are brought to fruition: Christ becomes the bridegroom and the Church becomes the bride. Each person is invited to enter into

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[29] *The Collected Words of St John of the Cross*, 631.
[30] Idem, 675.

that divine relationship with the mystery of God that is Christ himself. As Revelation 22:17 says:

> The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.'
> And let everyone who hears say, 'Come.'
> And let everyone who is thirsty come.
> Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.

The last person I want to introduce brings us up to the present time, and that is Sister Edmée SLG who died in 2018. Sister Edmée made an in-depth study of the Song of Songs and argued quite fiercely for its mystical interpretation to be recognized again for today's world as it had been in past eras. She writes:

> Mystics have recognized in the language of the Song the language of mystical experience. Although the words may be understood carnally the language exhales another level to the one who has experienced the other level, as we learn from such writers as Gregory of Nyssa, Bernard, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross.[31]
>
> In the contemplation of God in prayer our unknown contact with an unknowable God becomes possible, as the mystical commentaries on the Song have shown, and in which we find encouragement for that contact with God in love which a God of love must intend.[32]

This brings us full circle to the words written by St Paul to the Colossians: 'I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself' (Col. 2:2).

The message of this essay is addressed to the contemplative aspect of our human nature, and asks us to have faith in it. We should not ignore it: we need to give it time and space and respect, even if people around us do not understand and try to divert us from it, even when we do not understand it ourselves and think we may be wasting our time or avoiding life. Even when it seems that nothing happens and it feels boring, it is worth remaining with

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[31] Edmée Kingsmill SLG, *The Song of Songs & The Eros of God,* Oxford Thelogical Monographs (Oxford University Press, 2009), 5.
[32] Kingsmill, *The Song of Songs*, 4.

it; because we do not see or feel what God is doing in us. The mystics tell us that the work of God is done in silence, hidden from others and even hidden from ourselves. As we learn to listen to, and participate in, that silence, that nothingness, we may find a living wellspring of love, the mystery and the peace of Christ: the living flame of love.

Hetty Kothari lives a semi-solitary life of prayer and made her life vow into the Single Consecrated Life earlier this year. After retiring from teaching she studied theology through South West Ministry Training Course, which led to a Durham University BA in Theology.

Climate Change: Responding with Repentance, Lament, and Grief

Duncan Forbes

I would like to begin with two stories. The first comes from the hospice where I was privileged to work for seven years prior to retirement. One of the people who attended our day care unit had been highly successful in business and had given all her energy to her career before being diagnosed with advanced cancer at a relatively young age. During her time with us she came to re-evaluate all her priorities and values, to the extent that she could say to one of the nurses who cared for her, "It has almost been worth having terminal cancer, because hospice care has shown me for the first time what love really is."

My second story comes from Babylon in the sixth century BC. By the river sits a disconsolate group of people who obviously do not belong to that city. Their musical instruments are on the ground beside them or hung on tree branches. Some of the wealthy inhabitants of Babylon taunt them as they pass by: "Come on, give us a tune from where you come from". The taunt is met with silence and looks of despair. Later on, these feelings are expressed in what has come down to us as Psalm 137, with its familiar words "How could we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

Both these stories are, in their different ways, about the collapse of certainties, about catastrophic loss, and about threats to our very identity. These, I believe, are what face the whole world now. You may recall that the former Astronomer Royal, Sir Martin Rees, said in 2004 that in his view the human race had only a 50/50 chance of surviving the present century. Since then, if the science is to be believed, the odds against humanity have worsened considerably. There have been many studies of the psychological roots of our collective failure to take adequate action to mitigate the worst effects of what we have caused, but I do not intend to venture today too far into that field. However, I do want to claim that the situation is already critical, and that deep-rooted anxiety about it is not only widespread but also an entirely rational response.

Catastrophic climate change on a global scale, and worldwide ecological collapse, are completely new in human history. This means, as in any entirely novel situation, that our conceptual grasp of the implications will initially be very limited. It follows that our attempt to come to terms with these massive changes in our world and in our lives will be difficult and gradual. It will also require honesty and courage, as we have to face the fact that the world no longer reliably reflects back to us the meanings and coherence that we have been projecting onto it. If we are to learn how to live in this new reality we will need new ways of seeing things, new concepts, new exercises of the imagination. Fortunately we are not without resources, and I believe that we can indeed learn from the past and from our own life-experience, even though there may be no exact analogies with the new situation. I would like to look at what we can learn from how we face death, then at the Jewish Exile as reflected in the biblical record, and finally how the paschal mystery —the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ—might illuminate us as we tread the path ahead of us.

Since the inception of modern palliative care in the last sixty years or so, a great deal of experience has been garnered on how to reduce the suffering caused by the prospect of death and the dying process itself, and how to cope with the grief of bereavement. These insights can offer ways in which we as individuals, and our societies too, can face what is coming to us through climate change and ecological collapse, and develop ways of adapting, coping, and even perhaps growing through the experience. Some of the possible parallels

include the threat to selfhood and self-worth, a radical uncertainty about the future, the deeply transformative potential of the experience, and a different understanding of what healing and hope might mean. I would like to look at just one of the palliative care insights that might help us to respond, by analogy, to the grave global illness of climate change with which we will all, in one way or another, be stricken. That insight is recognition: honest recognition of the new realities that have come upon us.

At the hospice I was privileged to witness how a few people—occasionally even a young mother—could pass through the deep trauma of facing almost certain death in the near future, confront the loss of cherished plans and hopes, and manage to look the nothingness, the non-existence, threatened by death, in the face: then, perhaps even in the midst of debilitating treatment, attain a place of peace. This is what happened to the lady in my first story. Her words about love were indeed the singing of the Lord's song in a strange land.

If we are reasonably fit and well, getting on with our lives as mortal human beings requires an element of what I call healthy denial: to act for practical purposes as if we are going to see tomorrow, and even next month or next year. On the other hand, the refusal to face a crisis when it does come can constitute unhealthy denial. It is interesting that until relatively recently doctors wrestled with the dilemma of when, if at all, to tell the patient about a diagnosis of cancer. The justification for this was often that the patient 'would not be able to cope', when possibly it was an avoidance mechanism for the doctor as well. Either way, in the times when such a diagnosis was an almost certain death sentence, the refusal to speak its name indicates how intensely threatening it can be to look dying in the face. Not doing so, though, can trigger 'unhealthy' responses such as the desperate search for a cure, the pretence that nothing has changed, anger, frantic activism, or some other recourse to escapism.

Honest recognition of the fact of irreversible, profound loss, is about being open to suffering when it is unavoidable. Such acceptance is almost always accompanied by deep grief, a grief that nonetheless has the possibility to be the soil which nurtures hope.

All this can easily be read across to climate change. The widespread and continuing failure of society as a whole to take the radical action necessary

and, crucially, to grieve, is evidence of a refusal of recognition and of how deeply threatening is the reality of our dilemma. In this case, the evidence piling up does not just point to the end of my own existence but the very existence of the conceptual world that we have constructed, and therefore of any recognisable and safe place to be. It is hard to imagine a graver existential threat. The responses of denial are therefore predictable: a desperate search for a cure, the pretence that nothing has changed, an obscure and deep anger, immersion in frantic activism, or other recourse to escapism. Here is not the place to examine in detail the insights from sociology and psychology that the world in which we live is a social construction that humans put in place, and maintain, to shield themselves from the meaninglessness of their lives in the face of death. Suffice it to say that the threatened and, on current trends, likely dissolution of our present (socially-constructed) world, to which the evidence indubitably points, will be, if and when publicly faced and publicly acknowledged, a trauma of incalculable magnitude.

Whereas end-of-life care has as its focus the single patient in their family context, with climate change we are looking at whole-society, whole-world phenomena. In order to see how disaster followed by radical loss of meaning affects a population, I will now turn to the second of my stories. In 587 BC king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon captured and destroyed the city of Jerusalem, subsequently deporting many of the prominent citizens of Judah to Babylon. The prophet Jeremiah was a witness to these traumatic events and in two books, Jeremiah and Lamentations, gives both descriptive and poetic voice to his experience. The vision is often one of utter desolation (Jer. 4:23–6).

The exile was an event that has shaped the self-awareness and self-identity of the Jewish people and the Jewish faith until this day. At the time, it was experienced not simply as the physical destruction of buildings and property, the loss of home and the bitterness of exile. More than that, it called into question the community's most deeply-held beliefs about the nature of God, and about what being the chosen people might mean. They wondered whether they had disobeyed God to the extent that God's covenant with them had been broken for ever. After all, it was fundamental to their self-image that they had been delivered by their God from the slavery

of Egypt and had been led into the promised land where they would live safely under God's protection for all time. The Jerusalem temple was where God dwelt, but that now lay in ruins. How could they sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

This was an existential crisis, a threat to their self-definition and therefore to their very existence; not only the collapse of meaning but the collapse of the very framework in which meaning can be found. This, I suggest, is analogous to the threats represented by climate change and ecological collapse. I do not think that we in this country fully comprehend how traumatic will be the events that are approaching in this century, many of which are already unavoidable. According to the IPCC Report published on 28 February 2022, allowing global temperatures to increase by more than 1.5ºC above pre-industrial levels, as looks likely on current trends, would result in some 'irreversible' impacts. These include the melting of ice caps and glaciers, and a cascading effect whereby wildfires, the die-off of trees, the drying of peatlands and the thawing of permafrost release additional carbon emissions, amplifying the warming further.[33]

The extent of the losses caused not just by sea-level rise but by extreme weather events, species loss, and so on, mean that we will be in every sense living in a strange land, trying to make sense of it all, just as the Jewish people were in Babylon. How did those exiles work through the disaster and how did they emerge from it with a new and radically-altered faith and hope?

I believe that lament is central to the process, and indeed that for Christians it is a generally-neglected area of the biblical tradition. Lament is a complex and multi-layered medium, encompassing much more than just grief. Western culture, and with it to a great extent Western Christianity, has largely lost the tradition of lament, and has therefore deprived itself of an important contributor to social adaptation and resilience.

The first point to note is that in the context of which I write, lament is not an individual and private activity but a corporate and public one. To consider it as that immediately shifts the focus away from climate grief as

[33] Timon McPhearson (lead author), *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Working Group II Report*, summary: https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/ipcc-wgii-report; full report PDF (3068pp): https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/ (accessed 17 November 2022).

something that I have to face and cope with on my own, towards seeing it as affecting the whole community, and participating in the community's expression of it. My own experience suggests that too many people at the moment are struggling alone with anxiety and depression about climate change, unable to express themselves freely about it to others, let alone to participate in rituals of lament with others. The churches offer almost no help here at the moment. On the other hand, to meet other like-minded people in a safe space that would allow us to be open and honest about our deepest feelings can be enormously reassuring and affirmative.

Corporate lament at its best gives voice to the emotional responses of recognition, grief, hopelessness, protest, repentance, and hope; both reflecting and enabling the expression of the feelings of participants. This is not a neat sequence or formula to be followed. It is a messy and gradual process of personal and public acceptance and denial, of self-examination and discovery.

We have already considered recognition and acknowledged that this can be difficult and threatening in itself. Grief about our plight and the plight of others, in this case the whole earth and all that is in it, naturally follows once our eyes are opened. We should allow this grief to be freely acknowledged, something which again feels difficult in our culture. Hopelessness, like grief, can be difficult to own, especially for Christians. I believe, however, that it is actually widespread, although often numbed by diversionary activity or avoided by false reassurance. Hopelessness, as we have seen, arises from a fundamental loss of meaning, represented most starkly by death. It is terribly important that we do not make the mistake of thinking that hopelessness in the face of climate change is a sign of lack of faith, and therefore castigate ourselves or try to generate hope by force of will. There is ample evidence from the Scriptures that the darkness of despair is a natural response to extreme trauma. Look, for example, at Lamentations 3:16–18, where the prophet describes his response to the devastating destruction of Jerusalem. Talking of God, he says:

> He has made my teeth grind on gravel, and made me cower in ashes; my soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is; so I say "Gone is my glory, and all that I had hoped for from the Lord".

Perhaps in the context of lament and climate change we should speak of desolation rather than hopelessness. Nonetheless. to find ourselves in this kind of darkness, in loss of meaning, with a sense that God has abandoned us, even that God is dead, is an important aspect of the complex process of adaptation to traumatic change. Although it is the last thing that it feels like to the sufferer, it can in a paradoxical way be a sign of hope, because it is an indication that our traditional ways of understanding are being dissolved. Perhaps not fully with our conscious minds we have understood that the ways by which we have found meaning in the world, the old stories by which we lived and made sense of things, are no longer true to things as they are. To use a phrase of Paul Tillich's, our myth is broken.[34] To know that is to know the dark night of the soul, as John of the Cross understood; but it is also, strangely, to be nearer to God, precisely because it is a more truthful place.

If whole communities and societies can acknowledge that their myth is broken, then the task of constructing new communal meanings can begin. This is why communal lament is so important: it gives space for individuals who may have suffered their desolation in silence and tried to carry their burdens of perception on their own, to know that they are not alone, that others see things as they do, and thereby to find enormous affirmation and assurance.

Lament can also be a sign of hope because it is an expression of protest, indicating not a resigned and weary acceptance of how things are, but a public cry of indignation and perhaps anger that things are not as they should be. The protest that we find in the Old Testament is often addressed to God, and I do not think that we should be reluctant, as I myself often am, to be indignant with God when we feel that God has treated us unfairly. If that is how we feel, we should own that feeling: trying to suppress it and to summon up more respectful thoughts towards God is to be dishonest in the one place where we need to be truly open and to drop all our defences. If, with others, we can be indignant or perhaps angry with God in lament, then that is, at the same time, a cry of hope, a reminder to God and to ourselves that the hope of the Gospel is of a world made otherwise, and that we must not settle for anything less.

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[34] Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (Harper Torchbook, 1957), 51–7.

How does repentance fit into lament? Repentance begins with recollection and, again, recognition—acknowledging our ways of thinking and living that have damaging consequences. *Metanoia*, the Greek word for repentance, means turning around, a complete change of mind, a radical transformation. This is the work of a lifetime, as we come slowly to see how entangled we are in unreality, and therefore how compromised are even our best intentions. Particularly with climate change it is hard, truly, to own our individual and corporate responsibility for the destruction that we have brought upon ourselves and the world. To lament at the foot of the Cross is both to acknowledge what we have done and, at the same time, to know that the fact that God suffers with us is ultimately a sign of acceptance and hope.

From the place of lament, if it is doing its work as it should be, we are better able to go out with this characteristic but distinct mingling of acceptance and hope. Acceptance that, yes, this is how it is: our lives are changing for ever and there can be no going back. Hope that says, at the same time, that a better world is possible, even in a place of desolation from which we can at present see no way out.

Coming to terms with the loss of the world that we have known is now, and will be, a complex and difficult process, possibly involving much anguish. However in our own depths, deeper than the depth of our immediate experience, we carry the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. Those strange events recorded in the Gospels are a model and a revelation of the pattern of creation and for our own lives. The Christian vocation, the vocation of the creation as a whole is not without cost, does not take us to the place of peace and new life without first passing through the valley of the shadow of death. When James and John asked Jesus for the best places in heaven, he could give them no such undertaking: instead, he asked them if they could drink the cup of suffering as he was about to (Mark 10:35–7). St Paul reminds us that we have been baptized into the death of Jesus as a prerequisite of resurrection (Rom. 6:3).

I would like to end with some words from theologian Walter Brueggemann. His book *The Prophetic Imagination* concerns the authentic Christian life rather than climate change, but it sums up much of what I have tried to express. Speaking of Jesus's saying, "Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh" (Luke 6:21), Brueggemann writes:

> There is grief work to be done in the present that the future may come. There is mourning to be done for those who do not know the deathliness of their situation. There is mourning to be done with those who know pain and suffering and lack the power or freedom to bring it to speech. The saying is a harsh one, for it sets this grief work as the precondition of joy. It announces that those who have not cared enough to grieve will not know joy.[35]

Much of the thinking in this talk arose from participation in the 'Borrowed Time' project, an initiative of the Green Christian organization. 'Borrowed Time' seeks to offer programmes of support for people of faith, and others, who are deeply worried about climate change and ecological breakdown. It recognizes that new pastoral resources will be required to meet the emerging challenges of our rapidly changing world. Further details may be found at www.borrowedtime.earth.

Duncan Forbes worked in NHS management, as a College Bursar, and ran a Hospice before retiring from paid employment. Since then he has maintained his interest in the non-clinical aspects of care at the end of life, including their relevance to human responses to climate change.

A book on this subject, *Ecology of the Heart: Believing in the Anthropocene* by Duncan Forbes, will be published shortly by SLG Press.

In Memoriam
Metropolitan Kallistos Ware
11 September 1934 – 24 August 2022

Sister Christine SLG

At a recent Sunday tea-time, we were remembering our long association with Bishop Kallistos, with one or two of us having memories of him going back to the late 1960s. He was the celebrant at two Orthodox liturgies held in our chapel in the late 1960s and early 70s, at the suggestion of our then Warden, Canon Donald Allchin. From 1985 onwards he also gave us four

[35] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Fortress Press, 1978), 119.

different and memorable lecture series on aspects of Orthodox theology and the Jesus Prayer. Through them we received the best teaching monastics could wish for: theology lived and taught by a fellow monastic steeped in the tradition of the religious life before the Great Schism. His first love, however, was philosophy, and Father Donald used to tell an anecdote which illustrated this. They were both pupils at Westminster School, Donald some years senior to Timothy, as he was then. As a prefect Donald was supervising prep (homework) one evening when Timothy asked if he could read something, as he had finished his assignments (the boys were allowed to do this while the others finished theirs). 'What are you reading?' Donald asked. 'Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*', he replied.

In the early 1970s he offered a manuscript to the recently-founded SLG Press, which we gladly accepted. This was published under the title *The Power of the Name*, which in the past fifty years has been sold in its thousands and is still at the top of our bestseller list. It reflects his gift of clear teaching and must have persuaded many to use the Jesus Prayer as part of their spiritual practice.

Bishop Kallistos will be remembered for his many gifts: for his dedication to building up the Orthodox community in Oxford; for his support of the St Theosevia Centre for Christian Spirituality; for his ecumenical work; for his untiring work collaborating on English-language editions of the *Philokalia* and the Orthodox service books, *The Festal Menion* and *The Lenten Triodion*. He will be remembered too for his courtesy and sense of humour, which governed all his conversations and interchanges with others. I particularly remember a phone conversation I had with him when I was trying to contact someone he knew. He carefully spelled out the address using references to patristic writers and patristical theology for each of the letters. 'Noetic' for 'n' is the one I recall best.

His graciousness and respect for anyone he met was perhaps best expressed in the context of a talk on theology and ecology, related to me by Sr Benedicta. During it he stated that each human being is an endangered species because we are each unique in the sight of God. Each one of us is irreplaceable. In him we have lost a truly unique specimen of humanity, but someone who has left us a legacy of theology and spirituality from which we will continue to learn in years to come.

SLG PRESS

The Press is offering a Christmas discount of 10% for all our publications (books and cards), from Advent until 6 January. If using the online shop please enter the discount code XMAS22 at checkout. All telephone or mail orders will receive the discount.

There will also be an Easter sale during Lent: enter the code LENT23 to receive the discount.

INVITATION

You are cordially invited to join the community for the official launch of the Contemplative Poetry series of books from SLG Press, and particularly of Volume 10 in the series, *Love will come with Fire*, poetry by Sisters, Novices and Oblates of SLG.

This event will be held on **Thursday, 25 May 2023 at 2 p.m.** at Fairacres Convent. There will be an opportunity to meet and talk with the authors and translators, who will be joining us to talk about their work and read from their books.

Please let us know by **18 May** if you will be joining us, to allow us to organize catering: email editor@slgpress.co.uk, telephone 01865 634800.

✠ RIP ✠

Priest Associate

Kenneth Booth	29 October 2022

Companion

Diana Tear	22 July 2022
Jenny Barbour	12 October 2022

Homage to Stanley Spencer

James Ramsay

When Christ came in glory to Anytown people laughed and started filming the event. There was definitely something in the air.

Mrs Hogg was thrilled when the doorbell went and there stood the Light of Light. “Half a mo,” she said, “let me put my hair straight.” On finding the street empty when she returned to the door, she thought, ‘Must have been a prankster’, and put the chain across.

Many were less polite.

“Push off!”

“Not today, thank you.”

“Anything of that kind,” said one gentleman, “I do online, as a matter of principle.”

A customer was telling Mr Khan how she had just been evicted after asking her landlord to fix the damp in her bedroom. As he listened he was surprised to see a taxi draw up and the lady and her worldly belongings embark into it. But for his family and loyal customers he would have accepted the invitation to board himself. As it was, his corner-shop became known as the Garden of Paradise, with new customers drawn by an unidentifiable fragrance of spices.

“Wicked!” exclaimed Sadie as she encountered the celestial band. “Can I take a selfie?” A number of friends asked why she had posted a photo of herself in an empty street.

Drunk since her midday breakfast as usual, Bev was in the back garden, swearing as she spilt bird seed everywhere, trying to fill the feeder. The flutter of gold, black, blue, and red around her felt curiously unreal. And as she ascended it was as if the years of control, the trauma of miscarriages, the wheedling of her feckless son fell away, and she experienced a lightness of spirit such as she had not felt since before ... that thing happened.

Poor old Stan Levitt leapt from his mobility scooter, lurched forward, and was transported from sight before passers-by on the other side of the road

could react. Mrs Pillai, who everyone said was becoming increasingly confused, clapped and laughed, and cried, "I thought Diwali was months away! I'm so happy!"

And Edward Savage, cross-legged on the pavement with his dog a short distance from the town's last hole-in-the-wall, struggled to his feet and uttered a cry which rang through every lane, boarded-up shop and piece of wasteland, garage, yard, and cellar of the town, causing the earth to shake and (according to the old boy who mowed the graveyard) graves to flip open.

A Sufi gentleman who lodged at Bridie's house invited the visitors in. The police have still not closed the case.

All in all, a memorable day, and one that was not without ire and flame. A day like any other, whose uniqueness, only too clear to see, could never be retrieved, its precise quality never be experienced again.

Published in James Ramsay, *Chancing on Sanctity,* Contemplative Poetry 7 (SLG Press, 2022).

My House

My house was built for two.
People pass by.
They think I am alone.
But I live with something
that makes the watergrass
and the lily grow,
and the lightning speak in the sky.

Anonymous, Japan (c. 800)

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

Brenda Abbott, *Eric Doyle OFM: Hidden Architect of the Retrieval of the Franciscan Charism* (Franciscan Publishing, 2021), 338pp. ISBN 978-1-9151-9801-3. Paperback £15.00.

This is an excellent book in every way and its publication is most timely. It is beautifully written, presented, and carefully documented, though it would benefit from an index. It has a complete list of Doyle's publications and a biographical timeline. The author knew Father Eric Doyle, who died prematurely in 1984, and she has rendered great service to the Church and to the Franciscan Order by so diligently researching and communicating his intellectual and spiritual legacy. This book is of interest because it captures well the optimism and hope in Catholic circles in the wake of Vatican II. It illuminates also the eagerness with which ecumenical contacts were cultivated and developed between Catholics and Anglicans in the 1970s, at the local level as well as by the ARCIC negotiations. It is also a monument to the Franciscan Centre in Canterbury that was sadly closed in 2017.

Father Doyle was born in 1938 into a devout Catholic family living in Bolton in Lancashire. He felt a vocation to the priesthood from an early age and in July 1954, aged just sixteen, he left school to join the Franciscan novitiate. Writing later, in a tribute to G. K. Chesterton's *Life of St Francis*, Doyle intimated that what attracted him initially to the Order was its founder's deep humanity, his affinity with nature, and his compassion for each individual person. Doyle was a cheerful and able novice, but he was formed within the unreformed Neo-Scholastic tradition of Catholic theology, with its regimentation of thought and Thomist ethos. There was little contact with the distinctive spiritual tradition of the Franciscans apart from regular hearing of the *Rule* and the *Testament* of St Francis that underpinned the life of the Order. This helps to explain why, for example, St Bonaventure is still not better known among British Catholics.

Nonetheless, Doyle conducted his own discreet researches in order to bring this rich tradition to life. 'It is his own interpretation of the original sources, always undertaken in the light of contemporary life, which is his own significant and unique contribution.' (43) Doyle wrote later, in 1980, that such was Francis's imitation of Christ that he revealed 'that Jesus Christ

is the most truly human being ever to have existed.' (43) Since Doyle's death there has been a steady stream of good translations of Franciscan sources into English by the Franciscans in America.

For Doyle, Francis was an intensely human person, not a figure of legend, romance or religious sentimentality. As a young friar, writing in 1958, his perception was already prophetic:

> The essence of Franciscan spirituality is in the [human] will … This of course makes the holiness of St Francis seem very easy and simple. But we shall wholly fail to understand it if we do not realize that the things which are outwardly simple are those which reveal to us the stark reality behind the veil which hides it from our view. (44)

This profound and sacrificial truth was most evident at the climax of Francis's spiritual life when he received the stigmata at La Verna. This transfigured his life, but at great cost and real pain to him until his death. The transformation of the human person by Divine Grace also connects closely with the transformation of the created world; Doyle took to heart the affirmative teaching of Francis about this, notably in the famous *Canticle of the Sun*. The vision of the totality of the Divine Purpose for humanity at the heart of creation guided Doyle throughout all his days.

Returning to England from higher studies in Rome in 1964, Doyle was the beneficiary of the great liberation of Catholic theology that flowed from Vatican II. He could now read openly the works of Rahner, Kung, Schillebeecks, du Lubac, Congar, von Balthasar, and Ratzinger. In the midst of this reawakening, it was Doyle's singular vocation to appropriate and articulate the rich tradition of distinctively Franciscan theology, notably that of Bonaventure and Scotus, making it available to his own Order by teaching and preaching, as well as by his own writings and publications. It is this author's contention that Doyle played a decisive role in initiating the steady recovery of this tradition among English-speaking Franciscans across the world to the benefit of the whole Church. Doyle was also one of the first to recognize clearly the decisive significance of St Clare of Assisi as the living link between Francis and Bonaventure. He emphasized 'her love of the Crib, the humility of the Cross, and the silence of the Eucharist, all the places where she sees the poverty and humility of Christ.' (65) Doyle regarded Francis and Clare as theologians as well as mystics.

In 1967, a chapter of Franciscans from across the world was held at Assisi and from it flowed the determination in each province to address the renewal of the Order. The recovery of true fraternity and a bias towards the active care of the poor were to determine unequivocally a renewed Franciscan ethos. Crucial to this vision was the work of education and formation within the rich Franciscan tradition; here Doyle led the way in England. This was the catalyst for the creation of the Franciscan Centre in Canterbury in 1974 at which Doyle taught for many years. This initiative had a definite ecumenical dimension, receiving support and encouragement from the Archbishops of Canterbury. There was also a short-lived Anglican Franciscan house in Canterbury at this time. Doyle was a gifted teacher, and his legacy was to his many pupils, within the Franciscan Order and beyond.

In his theology, Doyle valued the writings of Teilhard de Chardin in a determined attempt to ensure that Christian theology engaged with the unfolding world of scientific research. Doyle looked back to the biblical and spiritual theology of Bonaventure, whom he greatly loved, and also to the distinctive vision of Scotus, with his insistence on the Primacy of Christ and the unique significance of each created being. For Doyle, as for de Chardin, Christ was the key to the cosmos as well as to the redemption of human beings. Both had a commanding vision of the length, breadth, depth and height of the Divine Purpose in creating the world and revealing himself in the Incarnate Person of Christ as its heart and the key to its meaning.

> The doctrine of the Primacy of Christ … is an affirmation of the world's goodness. Creation has its own intrinsic value, and the evidence for this is that it is created [by God]. The Origin, Centre and Purpose of creation is Christ. (196)

The authority for this cosmic and Christocentric vision lies in the Prologue of St John's Gospel and in the first chapter of Colossians; its roots lie deep in the creation narrative in Genesis and in the Wisdom Tradition of the Old Testament.

Doyle threw himself into the fervour of renewal that characterized the life of the English Catholic Church and elsewhere in the first decade after the end of Vatican II. He was active in ecumenical collaboration and committed to ecological causes long before they became fashionable. Many of his writings about both subjects remain prophetic, as for example his insis-

tence on the need for deep spiritual repentance in addressing the ecological crisis, his advocacy of the ordination of women to the priesthood, and his championing of the restoration of the permanent diaconate within the life of the Church and at the heart of the Franciscan Order. Doyle had considerable influence in implementing the mission of Pope John Paul II in England, and also at Assisi. He was a true churchman while remaining a critical friend within reforming Catholic circles. His early death in 1984 was lamented by all who knew him, not least by those who had benefitted from his spiritual direction and capacities as a leader of retreats. He was also well known for a time as a very effective broadcaster and spokesman for Christianity.

This is a rich and fascinating book that repays careful reading. Its lucidity and balance are striking, and the author has done great service to the memory and legacy of a remarkable Franciscan priest and theologian.

DOUGLAS DALES

Bringing Forth Christ: Five Feasts of the Child Jesus, texts by St Bonaventure, translated by Eric Doyle is available from SLG Press, £2.50.

Christine North, *A Kind of Watershed: An Anglican Lay View of Sacramental Confession* (SLG Press, 1990, new edition 2022), 32pp. ISBN 978-0-7283-0339-3. Paperback £4.00.

It is not often that an editor ventures to review something that they have themselves edited, but the journey of a book in SLG Press is one that reaches various termini, and this book, having reached one of those points, seemed to be crying out for someone to notice it and tell other people about it. I had been largely unaware of this title until a request for multiple copies came in and I discovered we had almost no stock left. A reprint appeared to be in order, but this was not as straightforward as it might seem: when we get to this point we usually stop and re-evaluate the title to see whether it is still relevant and worthy of a new edition, but also whether it has sold sufficiently steadily to justify the effort and cost of a new edition. Sometimes we decide to retire the title if it has not sold (as was the case with this book), but I usually take a closer look before making a decision. When reading in editorial mode, I assess a text with a vital part of my brain switched off, otherwise I miss typos or grammatical and layout solecisms.

This one became bedtime reading, for which I re-engaged the relevant part of my brain, and it drew me in immediately.

The text surprised me, not only because it tackled a difficult subject with an engaging writing style, but because it presented a picture of sacramental confession that had simply never occurred to me. As a child attending a Roman Catholic primary school in the 1960s and 70s, I went to weekly confession; the reforms of Vatican II had not yet reached my school. Lacking any sort of theological appreciation, I grew very quickly to hate it. That early experience has coloured my adult life and I could not imagine anything changing that view, nor the overwhelming sense of squirming embarrassment that accompanied even the thought of 'going to confession'.

Christine North's essay describes a very different experience of sacramental confession, one in which she encounters a joy and peace that were at odds with my formative narrative. Quite possibly her view is shared by many reading this, and I envy you if that is the case. I read a few passages more than once as I went through, wondering at how wide the gulf can be between individual responses to the same thing. North admits that finding the right confessor or spiritual director is important (I would say crucial), and that is probably obvious enough not to need further comment. What particularly caught my imagination was the way in which she talked about her internal response to the act of shedding her sins by telling them to another person. She shared with me that squirmy recalcitrance, but she dealt with this by admitting to herself that this is shame for her failures rather than embarrassment. While I was taught to 'confess my sins' (through gritted teeth), she describes her grief at failing in her love of God. Sharing this with someone else helps her to understand why this has happened, and to draw closer again to the love of God by exposing that failure in a situation where she cannot hide from it. She acknowledges the difficulty of exposing these failings to another person, which is so much harder than doing so to God alone in privacy and solitude. For some, she says, the general confession during the Eucharist is enough; but she knows that she needs something more: the opening of oneself to vulnerability, an opening that admits God.

The book explores both the personal feelings we might encounter when approaching sacramental confession and the simple practicalities of engaging with it. The short 'chapters' are entitled 'Confession?'; 'Why go?'; 'How

to set about it' and 'A Kind of Watershed'. The watershed she refers to is the sea change she experiences in crossing the line between unconfessed and confessed. There is more to it though: 'We briefly find ourselves on elevated ground looking out with hope to a different view' (27). She talks of walking backwards into the future, 'harnessed by our habits' (12), but the act of confessing enables her to turn her back on her past and walk forward without burdens. In case the reader is stimulated to look further there are useful introductions to the work of other writers, particularly in relation to the inner peace that she describes following the sacrament, but also to the way in which she feels confession helps us to 'glimpse God's reality' (29).

There are many images here, but the one that comes through the writing most strongly is one that is perhaps not made explicit; that is the way in which North's faith is supported and enriched by confession: 'After experiencing absolution, having momentarily managed to put sin away from ourselves, it becomes clearer what a hard thing it was for Christ, being without sin, voluntarily to take upon himself all our sins …' (29).

It is difficult to write a book like this without sounding sanctimonious, but North succeeds in crafting her text with genuine humility and sympathy. She accepts that sacramental confession is not for everyone, but this book is intended for those who have not experienced it rather than those who have. North's view is one of joy in the vivid experience of God's love and she expresses the hope that the book might encourage others to seek out the sacrament; I wish someone had talked to me about confession in these terms years ago, to get me past the ghastly, foot-dragging burden of my childhood experience, and show me something towards which I could run with willing and eager feet; something that would bring me closer to God and help through difficult times in life. It is not often that a book—particularly such a brief one—can effect a paradigm shift in my thinking and attitudes, but if I say that after reading it I may dip my toe in the water of confession again, you might understand why I decided that it had to be reprinted.

JULIA CRAIG-MCFEELY

Unfortunately, we have lost touch with Christine North (not the same Christine North who is the mother of the Bishop of Blackburn). If anyone can help us contact her, please write to the Editor.

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

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

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

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

If you would like more information, please contact:
The Charity Office
Convent of the Incarnation
Fairacres Parker Street
Oxford OX4 1TB
Email: **charityoffice@slg.org.uk**

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