



# STANBROOK BENEDICTINES

*Consolamini, consolamini*



NO. 18 ADVENT 2020



ABOVE: Tobermory on the Isle of Mull, Inner Hebrides  
BELOW: Iona Abbey, founded by St Columba in 563  
Both photos by D. Andrea on her sabbatical (see p. 18)



# Stanbrook Benedictines

No. 18 Advent 2020

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Front Cover: NEW STATUE of ST BENEDICT by Matthias Garn  
Photo by M. Abbess

Back Cover: DD. Hilda and Gunilla examine the statue  
Photo by D. Julian

Centrespread: COLLAGE of the installation and blessing of the new statue  
Photos by M. Abbess and D. Julian

## Letter from Mother Abbess

Christmas raises people's spirits; it is the season of good cheer. Sadly, nowadays, the good cheer rarely comes from joy at the birth of the Saviour. Nevertheless, there is goodness around. Families come together; a wave of giving is unleashed – the annual Children in Need appeal raises increasingly phenomenal sums for genuinely good causes – and, with children in high profile, there is energy, life and the happy prospect of the future. We are reminded that people are inherently good and generous.



For those who believe in Christ, Christmas is more than good cheer. Rather, there is deep joy, founded on true hope. In ordinary English, to say 'hopefully,' usually means little more than 'I would like it if...,' but hope is a theological virtue; it has 'bite' and power. We are filled with hope because we know that God always fulfils his promises, that what he says will be done, not just in the immediate term but over all time. This fills us with joy and peace. Christmas, the birth of God as man, confirms that our hope is justified and our joy real. When we look at the world around us, so extraordinarily dysfunctional as it is at present, we know, despite appearances, that God is still at work, creating, renewing, saving. Our task is to share this good news, like the shepherds, the angels, the Magi; we are to be heralds of the Incarnation too.

The witness we bring to the world as believers in the God who became man is our own peace and joy; we live in a way which shows we believe God is truly with us, Emmanuel, and that the world is being saved through him. We incarnate the hope that comes with the birth of the Child. The birth itself was a silent, hidden affair, known only to a few, but it came as the fulfilment of a promise made centuries earlier. Some doubted the promise and others certainly rejected the fulfilment when it came. But, as Jesus himself says later in the gospel: 'this is being fulfilled today even as you listen' (Lk 4:20). Salvation is ongoing.

At the time of writing (October), it looks as though we shall be struggling with COVID 19 for some time to come, even over Christmas. Earlier in the year we had lockdown, with most of us being confined to our houses. During that time of isolation, so many across the nation looked out for

others; they would see where there was need and do what they could to help. Some – medical professionals, members of the emergency services, carers of all sorts – helped even when there was risk to their lives.

Christmas revives our belief that, despite appearances, God truly is working in the world to save and recreate it. We may not know the overall plan of salvation, but we do know that, made in the image and likeness of the child born at Bethlehem, we are part of that plan – to receive the gift of salvation and to help bring it about.

The prayer of all of us at Stanbrook is that the joy and peace of the new-born Christ be yours in abundance, over Christmas and beyond.  
Happy Christmas!

Sr Anna

## News

In May 2020, due to falling numbers in the community, the Holy See approved the affiliation of St Mary's Abbey, Colwich, with Stanbrook Abbey, as required by *Cor Orans, Instruction of Women's Contemplative Life*. Colwich is a sister community in the EBC, founded on the continent in C.17th, as was Stanbrook. Needless to say, we are delighted and privileged that D. Theresa Mary Hutton and D. Benedict Rowell joined us in community at the start of November. D. Davina Sharp, the former superior of Colwich, is now taking a well-earned and much-needed sabbatical. Our prayer is that this be a time of renewal and refreshment for her. D. Gertrude Baker, the abbess of Colwich before D. Davina, now lives at Oulton Abbey Care Home, as does D. Sheila Kearney, her dear friend and constant companion. May all the Colwich community be blessed at this time of transition.

On 2 June, we learned the glad tidings that D. Stephen passed her Citizenship exam in Leeds. There is general agreement in the community that her knowledge of the British Constitution and arcane matters historical exceeds ours by far!

By early June, D. Julian had completed a major calligraphy project which involved designing and illuminating each letter of the alphabet. The work, commissioned by Peter Hartley, took over a year, each letter carefully researched and skilfully executed. We plan to share this beautiful visual composition with *Stanbrook Benedictines* readers in a future edition.

In October 2020, D. Marian began a Theology degree with Maryvale Institute in the Birmingham archdiocese which offers a variety of distance-learning courses in the Catholic faith. During the pandemic, she will be attending lectures online. We wish her all the best with her studies!

## Erratum

The wood carving monk from Farnborough Abbey mentioned in the Pentecost edition of *Stanbrook Benedictines* (No. 17, p. 12) was Dom Vincent Dapr  – apologies for the misspelling of his name.

## House Chronicle Extracts May-August 2020

**May** has begun cool and showery but the rain has brought on the green especially in the forest which gleams emeraldine. On 1<sup>st</sup> May D. Philippa gave a rich reflection on the intimacy and demands of God’s call to each of us. On 2<sup>nd</sup> D. Petra gave a well-crafted reflection weaving St Athanasius and the daily readings from Acts (Tabitha’s healing) and St John’s Bread of Life discourse. These reflections are most nourishing for us and it is good that we can share them more widely via the website during this time of restricted hospitality.

**4<sup>th</sup>** The ewes and lambs disappeared from the front field but a new contingent of younger lambs appeared in the field near the monastery door.

**5<sup>th</sup>** D. Josephine gave an excellent reflection on ‘Can a Leopard Change its Spots?’

Deaths from Covid-19 have now reached 29, 450 – the highest in Europe. Worldwide, a quarter of a million people have died. R.I.P.

**7<sup>th</sup>** Greg Milner, our ‘tree man’, felled some diseased trees today. Sadly, he diagnosed that several silver birches in the wild flower meadow are half dead due to squirrels ravaging the bark, cutting off the flow of sap. He has ‘pollarded’ them.

**8<sup>th</sup>** 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of VE Day. The celebrations began with the cuckoo calling very early and continued at breakfast with Spanish Snail Bread made by D. Josephine. At our Eucharistic Service there were prayers for peace, for all who gave their lives for our freedom, and for greater world cooperation.

D. Julian gave us a clever dialogue between St Catherine of Siena and Dame Julian of Norwich via an imagined exchange of letters around the troubles of the papacy in their days.

**14<sup>th</sup>** As well as St Matthias, today is the feast of St Corona, an early martyr. Pope Francis has asked people of all faiths to unite in prayer for an end to the pandemic and for a vaccine to be found.

Fr Gabriel gave an inspiring homily linking John 14 and the Benedictine vows: remain in my love (stability), love, (conversatio) and obeying the commandments.

428 deaths today. Total, 33,614, R.I.P.

**15<sup>th</sup>** A Great Spotted Woodpecker has been visiting the feeder regularly lately for quite lengthy visits; long enough for one to be able to see and admire his striking markings.

384 deaths today, bringing the total recorded number to 33,998. R.I.P.

**21<sup>st</sup>** Beautiful May day for our 11<sup>th</sup> anniversary at Wass.

M. Anna and D. Josephine were involved in a BBC 5 Live interview this morning about how we are coping with lockdown. 'Going to Heaven Pie' was mentioned and people have already emailed for the recipe. One way to evangelize!

**25<sup>th</sup>** St BEDE: the first feast we kept after our arrival in 2009.

**29<sup>th</sup>** This has been the driest May on record and the sunniest spring with well over 500 hours of sunshine recorded in April and the first 3 weeks of May: welcome balm amidst so many horrors.

**30<sup>th</sup>** More glorious sunshine tempered today by a cool breeze.

There were a further 215 Covid-19 deaths recorded over the past 24 hours, bringing the official total to 38, 376 though it is thought that the actual figures could be higher, perhaps even 60,000. The UK has a higher COVID-19 death rate than the USA though of course the actual numbers in the States are higher – over 100,000 thus far. Lord, have mercy and send us a vaccine.

## **JUNE**

**17<sup>th</sup>** This afternoon there was a community discussion on the recent Zoom talk from Fr Michael Casey OCSO. One aspect of his talk which seemed to strike many was the need for monasteries at this time of global crisis to intensify their community life.

The ewes were shorn today. During Vespers, as they returned to the field outside the abbey church, there was the most deafening hullabaloo!

A further 184 deaths in the UK from the virus over the past 24 hours bring the official total to 42, 153.

**24<sup>th</sup>** A real midsummer's day for St John the Baptist – hottest day of the year so far.

This afternoon we had a Skype conversation with M. Benedicta at Oulton.

**27<sup>th</sup>** OUR LADY OF PERPETUAL SUCCOUR and D. Marian's first anniversary of profession.

Dramatic storms this afternoon and evening. The Sports Hall is flooded.

Another 100 deaths from the virus over the past 24 hours and a further 890 new cases. The official death total is now nearing 44, 000; R.I.P.

**30<sup>th</sup>** D. Josephine brought some face masks to recreation – skilfully made by our sewing department – and some scarves to be used as face coverings when it is not possible to have clinics outside. We were also shown how far 2 metres (the space for social distancing) is – further than you think!

## **JULY**

**3<sup>rd</sup>** The 3<sup>rd</sup> EBC Zoom Conference. Br Colman O'Clabaigh of Glenstal gave a fascinating power-point presentation on the Black Death and drew some interesting parallels with today.

**5<sup>th</sup>** O. L. CONSOLATION. It was good to hear from D. Andrea in Jamberoo.

**6-9<sup>th</sup>** M. Anna has been involved in a virtual EBC Superiors' meeting each afternoon.

The young rams disappeared on 7<sup>th</sup> – probably taken off to market as it's that time of year. The silence is always poignant.

**10<sup>th</sup>** The oblates are gathering online for an e-meeting this evening and tomorrow.

**11<sup>th</sup>** FEAST OF ST BENEDICT (see p. 12).

**14-15<sup>th</sup>** Much logging activity in the forest near to the monastery. The mature Scots Pines are being harvested. Alas, it has spoiled the beautiful undergrowth and verdant pathways but hopefully the vegetation will re-grow speedily.

**16<sup>th</sup>** This evening, first retreat conference from Fr Cedd Mannion of Ampleforth who has nobly stepped in to replace Abbot Brendan of Glenstal who is unable to travel at present.

Conferences are being held in church to allow maximum space and distancing. We have been given a booklet of extracts from St Luke's Gospel to ponder for each talk.

## **AUGUST**

**2<sup>nd</sup>** Torrential rain during Mass. We could not hear the celebrant for the noise of the rain on the roof. Al fresco was once again indoors!

**3<sup>rd</sup>** A red letter day as our staff return to work for the first time since the lockdown began in March.

At recreation D. Laurentia and Sr Thérèse launched a community conversation about the environment in response to Pope Francis' exhortation that the Church should ponder *Laudato Si*, and especially what practical steps we have taken and can take during this fifth anniversary year.

**5<sup>th</sup>** Prayers for travellers after Lauds to help speed D. Andrea on her way back from Australia.

D. Josephine, armed with a family of home-made cake hedgehogs and a bespoke Peter Rabbit card, visited D. Michaela at Apley Grange – today is her birthday. It was a happy visit, Dg.

**6<sup>th</sup>** The beautiful FEAST OF THE TRANSFIGURATION. D. Andrea arrived back safely from Australia and her travels this afternoon, Deo gratias! Ash collected her from Manchester airport. We gathered in the service yard at the sound of the gong & bell to greet the traveller before she disappeared into quarantine for the next fortnight.

**17<sup>th</sup>** Outdoor parlours are allowed this month – weather permitting – so several people have been welcoming guests for the first time since lockdown began in March. There are 4 designated outdoor locations near benches.

**20<sup>th</sup>** D. Andrea emerged unscathed from quarantine today which was a Cell Day in honour with talking lunch and a glass of wine.

**24<sup>th</sup>** ST BARTHOLOMEW

Quite a day! The professional kitchen hood cleaners arrived during Lauds and took over the kitchen forthwith. D. Petra and Lynn did stalwart work producing a delicious cold lunch in the Guest Kitchen.

The accountant arrived after Mass for the annual audit, staying at a lodge and having all her meals there but based in parlour for the work.

**27<sup>th</sup>** Our poor grocery delivery man's plans were subverted this morning. He was new to the route and managed to turn into the forest rather than onto our drive. One can access the monastery in a normal car from the woods – but not in a large truck! He couldn't reverse either so had to press on right through the woods to the far end where he would have met a barred gate. Eventually, in response to his call for help, the Forestry Commission came to rescue him – and our groceries!

At choir practice, D. Julian had us singing 'Somewhere over the Rainbow' - v. apt on so wet a day and as we continue in hope through these difficult days.



*Faith gained deeper understanding, and, by a leap of the mind, began to reach out to the Son...drawn to touch, not with the hand of flesh but with the understanding of the spirit, the only begotten Son, the equal of the Father.*

St Leo (Sermon II).

'Let us open our eyes to the light which comes from God.'

*Rule of St Benedict, Prologue 9*

## Prayer of Blessing for Statue of St Benedict

*Lord, we bless you for you alone are holy,  
and because in your compassion for sinners  
you sent into the world your Son, Jesus Christ,  
the author and perfecter of holiness.*

*He sent the Spirit  
to sustain his newborn Church,  
a voice that teaches us the secrets of holiness,  
a breeze that strengthens and refreshes,  
a fire that sears our hearts in love,  
the seed of God that yields a harvest of grace.*

*Today we praise you  
for the gifts of the Spirit bestowed on Saint Benedict,  
In whose honour we dedicate this image.*



Fr Kentigern Hagan OSB (Ampleforth) blessing the statue of St Benedict 12 July 2020  
(see p. 12 and centrespread) Photo by D. Julian

*May we follow in the footsteps of the Lord,  
keeping before us the example of Saint Benedict,  
and grow to a maturity  
measured not by nature, but by the fullness of Christ.*

*May we proclaim his Gospel by word and deed  
and, shouldering our crosses daily,  
expend ourselves for others in your service.*

*As we carry out our earthly tasks,  
may we be filled with the Spirit of Christ  
and keep our eyes fixed on the glories of heaven,  
where you, Father, receive those who will reign with your Son,  
for ever and ever.*

*Amen*

*(Adapted from *The Book of Blessings*)*

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

*‘Never despair of God’s mercy.’*

*Rule of St Benedict 4: 74*

*‘May he bring us all together to life everlasting.’*

*Rule of St Benedict 72: 12*

Raven in charcoal  
by John Green



## St Benedict and the Raven

No icon or statue of St Benedict is complete without its hallmark raven. The one at the foot of the statue in the Old House at Stanbrook, Worcester, had a copious, open beak into which prayer requests could be deposited – and were!



The origin for the raven symbol, like almost all the iconography that surrounds the saint from Nursia, derives from the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great, Book II which is entitled 'The Life and Miracles of the Venerable Abbot Benedict'. Written 593-594, c. 50 years after the death of St Benedict, the 'Life' is not meant to be a factual biography but abounds rather in fantastic stories and miracles of rescue and healing.

So what was St Gregory's motive in writing such a work? This question is too broad to be answered adequately here but perhaps the raven can give us a few hints.

At the time of St Gregory's papacy – the end of the sixth century – Rome (and the entire peninsular of 'Italy') was constantly under threat of, and sometimes subject to, invasion by barbarians. As the Roman Empire had become increasingly weak, it must have seemed that the very existence of civilisation was threatened. Christianity, too, which had enjoyed freedom within the Empire since the early 4th century, must have felt the shock waves of this disintegration which came also from its own ranks as many of the barbarians were Arian Christians (those who did not accept the divinity of Jesus Christ).

In writing the *Dialogues*, St Gregory seems keen to give hope to the Roman Christians in this situation by portraying for them, in vivid stories, holy figures from their own land – people like them. St Benedict is one of these.

We can see in the raven a resonance with the cycle of stories about the prophet Elijah who lived out in the desert and was unafraid to take on the might of Ahab, Jezebel and the pagan prophets of Baal. You will remember how the Lord promised to send ravens to minister to Elijah's needs for bread and meat in the wilderness (1 Kings 17: 2-6). Surely, we are meant to see St Benedict as an Elijah figure.

Yet St Gregory builds on this and, in a way, reverses the dynamic. The raven in the *Dialogues* (Bk II, 8) is more of a companion to St Benedict. The bird comes to eat bread from the saint's hand – indicating perhaps St Benedict's harmony with creation – and, when Benedict detects that a priest, a false friend consumed by envy, has sent him a poisoned loaf, the raven, at Benedict's bidding, eventually disposes of the adulterated bread safely so that no one is harmed.

Unfortunately, the hatred of the envious priest does not subside and various other measures have to be taken (I won't spoil the story – but just to assure you that he eventually gets his comeuppance without Benedict having to intervene directly.)

A key point which St Gregory seems to want to get across is that the holiness of Benedict prevented his – pardon the pun – 'crowing' over his enemy's downfall. This contrasts somewhat with Elijah's attitude to his foes in the 1 Kings' account. Benedict shows a magnanimity like that of King David towards his rival, Saul, and this he can do because the true King, Christ, of whom David was the prototype, has come into the world preaching forgiveness of enemies.

There is a further layer of associations. The Latin for raven, *corvus*, is found in a proverb in Classical Latin derived from the punishment of crucifixion which would almost certainly have been known to St Gregory the Great: *in cruce corvos pascere* meaning literally, 'on a cross to feed the ravens/crows'.

Through Christ, the Crucified and Risen one, Benedict finds the power to live the Gospel teaching: he is not drawn into retaliation for insults nor even for attempts on his life. The saints are heralds of peace and harmony among all people and with creation: Advent and Christmastide usher in this new age.

Sr Laurentia

## St Benedict's Statue and Farewell to Sr Christine

**11<sup>th</sup> July** The event of the day was the arrival of St Benedict! The statue a copy of the old one but with its own character and a work of art in its own right was delivered by crane this afternoon and manoeuvred into position. Sadly, this has destroyed a swathe of the wild flower meadow which, Dv, will recover in time.

Sculpted by Matthias Garn and team in his studio in York, the statue, set on a stone plinth, is made of a hard sandstone. The hands are finely carved and the face has a compassionate gaze.

**12<sup>th</sup> July** Fr Kentigern Hagan of Ampleforth blessed the statue of St Benedict after Mass today. As it was outside we were all able to attend – and to be liberally blessed with holy water ourselves!

**6<sup>th</sup> Sept** The fifth anniversary of the Dedication of the Abbey Church. Vespers was at 5.30 to allow for fêting our Good Samaritan, Sr Christine Manning, who hopes to fly home – 4 months later – on Tuesday. Supper was in the calefactory, followed by a Quiz and Charades on a Yorkshire theme. M. Anna thanked Sr Christine for all she had brought over these months, especially her prayerful, discreet presence and wisdom which we shall miss.

Sr Julian had designed and created a special letter 'C' for Sr Christine, illuminated with memorable moments from her sabbatical. In turn, Sr Christine spoke gracious words of thanks to community for the warm hospitality received and gave each of us an attractive coaster and bookmark with images from her own community's chapel.

It was providential that today's farewell should have fallen on the Dedication feast since it was Archbishop Polding of Downside and Sydney, founder of the Good Samaritan Sisters, who had procured for the Stanbrook community, in 1847, the relics of St Fulgentia which were to grace the altar at the Dedication of the abbey in 1871 and were re-sealed into the new altar at Wass in 2015.

Finally, Sr Christine read us some words of a Pastoral by Archbishop Polding written in 1874 on the theme of gratitude to God for all his gifts and how such gratitude stirs us to help others, particularly those disadvantaged in any way (see p. 17).

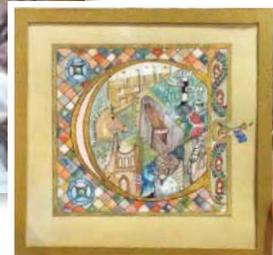
Compline in church in the glow of the Dedication candles ended a day of blessings. Deo gratias.



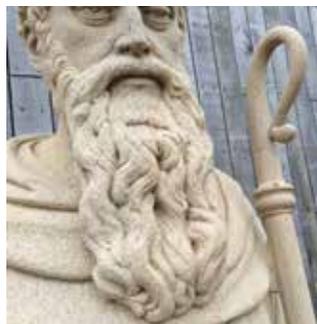
Above: M. Abbess presents Sr Christine Manning sgs with a parting gift after her extended sabbatical at Stanbrook, Advent 2019-Sept 2020

Below: Sr Christine with her personal illuminated letter 'C', designed and scribed by D. Julian

Photos by D. Andrea









### KEY WORKERS

Knitted by D. Stephen  
Photos by M. Abbess

## On Gratitude: from the 1874 Pastoral Letter of Archbishop John Bede Polding OSB

'Who is there amongst us who has not much to be grateful for?...Does not the voice of the natural heart itself cry out that some acknowledgement should be made for so many benefits, some token of thanks be offered for so many blessings shed with so large a hand upon yourselves and upon your families?

...All that we have is God's gift, be it body, or soul, or land, or the wealth of this teeming world. The leafy woods, the everlasting mountains, the pearl at the bottom of the sea, the gem hidden in the rock, the metal in the mine, the marble in the quarry – all that is fair and bright, all precious substances, are God's, and were made by God, and have been lavished upon us, to lift us to our Creator, whilst they proclaim the beauty and wealth of the All-powerful and All-wise.

And if Christ has done so much for us, and has poured out so many benedictions, redeemed us with His Blood, fed us with His Body and clothed us with Himself; if He, against whom we have so often transgressed, has thus visited us who are sinners with the mightiness of His compassion, what does He not expect us to do for the poor and for the ignorant whom He loves above all others in the world? Does not a desire rise up within us in the midst of our prayers...to do something for His honour, and for the reparation of our sins: Does not the fullness of our heart proclaim within us that as He has generously dealt with us, so should we deal with the widow, the orphan, and those who are in sorrow? Do we not feel a call to become the ministers of Christ's mercy – the messengers of Christ's compassion?'

Drawn from *The Eye of Faith, The Pastoral letters of John Bede Polding*, Lowden Publishing Co. Kilmore, 1977, p. 194.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

'We must run and do now what will profit us for all eternity.'

*Rule of St Benedict, Prologue 44*

## **Sr Andrea's Sabbatical: Part One**

On 20 July 2019, three days after I completed my term as abbess and the community joyfully elected Abbess Anna, I left Stanbrook to begin my sabbatical year. After twelve eventful years I knew I needed a complete rest as well as spiritual, physical and mental renewal.

What a year it was to prove – yet another case of ‘Man proposes, God disposes!’ The first part was spent mostly in Scotland, the second with communities connected with Stanbrook. I owe a great debt of gratitude to all who hosted me: my family, Mother Mary Elizabeth and the community of St Scholastica's, Petersham, USA; the Manquehue Movement, especially the communities of St Jerome and St Hilda, Chile; and finally Abbess Hilda and the Jamberoo community, Australia, who got me for a lot longer than the three months originally planned!

Time with my sister Clare and other family members, mainly in Scotland, allowed me to relax completely, to eat, sleep, walk and simply ‘be’ in order to prepare for the next stage at the Redemptorist Centre for Spirituality in Kinnoull, Perth. The 7-week course which began on 21 October 2019 was designed for religious making the transition from a leadership role to whatever God has next in store. The input we received met each of us where we were on arrival and moved us on to the larger Church; we moved from the inside out.

After getting to know each other we moved swiftly to the spirituality of self-esteem led by Fr Jim McManus C.Ss.R., who has written extensively on the healing ministry, and Maria Hogg, the presenter of the whole spirituality course, an educator involved in the retreat and mission apostolate. Low self-esteem blocks our ability to grow as people whereas good self-esteem allows us the inner freedom to grow and mature. The course helped us to see that self-knowledge includes recognising that each of us is made in the image and likeness of God and that he loves us. We were given many opportunities for sharing with each other and making our own what we were learning.

Jim and Maria continued in the second week with ‘The Ministry of Healing in the Church Today’. We looked at healing in Scripture and in the history of the Church, and in particular at the Sacraments of Anointing and the Eucharist, recognising that all of us need inner healing.

In the third week Fr Ronnie McAinsh, the Provincial of the Redemptorists in Britain, took us through 'Transitions in Life'. This was one of the topics which decided me, and I think many of the other participants, to choose the course. Ronnie's range of topics covered the ecclesial, social, sexual, personal and spiritual. This time we moved inwards from changes in the Church and society in general to the more personal level.

The theme of the fourth week was 'Go, Rebuild My Church: the Vision of Pope Francis for the Future of the Church'. The talks were given by Fr Paul Rout, an Australian who taught at Heythrop College for many years. In examining Pope Francis' theology, themes of faith, mercy, joy and the environment came up repeatedly. We looked at Pope Francis' writings and his vision of the Church of the future as one where laity, pastors and bishops all listen to one another.

At the end of the fourth week the group made a pilgrimage to Iona. For me as a Celt, a Scottish Christian and a nun who follows the Rule of St Benedict it was going back to the roots of my faith. We were visiting the home of Columba, the Irish monk who travelled to this little island off the west coast of Scotland in 563 and with his companions founded a monastery there, which became a place of learning – the Book of Kells is thought to have been produced there – and played a central role in the conversion of the Picts to Christianity.

The fifth week, on 'Jonah and Jesus', was led in a highly entertaining way by Fr Denis McBride C. Ss.R. He brought the Scripture alive and helped us to see the connexion between Jonah's story and our own. He also referred to Thomas Merton, the prolific Cistercian writer. Fr Denis led us into the belly of the whale and back into the light.

The sixth week's input on 'Catholic Moral Reasoning: Living the Gospel Today' came from a Canadian Redemptorist, Fr Mark Miller, and was very challenging for us all. He took us through moral and ethical dilemmas which face us in the Church today, from the very beginning of life to the end and in between. Most of us in the group have tried to help people in distress with life and death decisions. We looked at the basic element of moral reasoning, the morality of the Christian, and at marriage, family and sexuality.

In our final week we brought everything together and tried to express it in our small sharing groups. The large group had come together and gelled in a very special way and now for many it was time to step out and use what we had learned in the next stage of our varied and different ministries. There were lessons not just for us but also to be shared with our communities, the Church and the world at large.

Sr Andrea



## Alchemy

Silver birch  
a wand  
of wax  
showers  
golden sparks  
to ground  
vestiges  
of Autumn past  
and makes  
the land  
a lighted torch  
a path of flames  
to mark the way  
this Advent.

©Laurentia Johns OSB

From *Seeking Byland: Poems through the Seasons from Stanbrook Abbey*,  
by Laurentia Johns OSB with a Foreword by Bishop Hugh Gilbert OSB,  
pub. Gracewing, 2020.

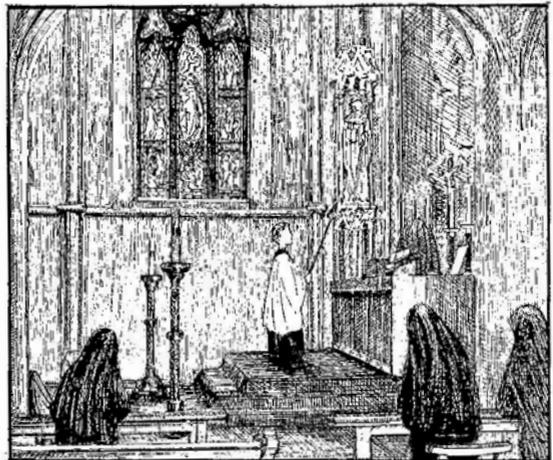
Available from the Stanbrook Abbey Bookshop, £10.00 plus p. & p.

## From the Archives

*Extracts from House Chronicle referring to the Spanish Flu of 1918/19*  
[original spellings and punctuation have been retained]

**November 7, 1918:** The Chaplain of the camp at Blanford where our little Acolyte Frank Wilde is, wrote to say that the boy was very ill with Influenza – he became so ill that his Father and Mother were wired for & had to travel all night to get to him. They found the boy had double pneumonia, but the crisis came while they were there, & he took a good turn after taking some Lourdes water which Lady Abbess had sent – he is being well looked after. The Influenza followed by pneumonia had been very severe in this camp, as many as 20 deaths have occurred in one day. It is prayer that has saved the life of our little Acolyte.

**March 3 1919: Ash Wednesday:** My Lady [Abbess] gave a short Conference before distributing the books & spoke as follows: “Our life ought to be a continual Lent as Our Holy Father tells us, but we know that cannot be done. This year however we shall be able to observe it more strictly than during the last four years. Fasting has been dispensed for the world on account of the Influenza, but as Our Lord has been so merciful to us, by sparing us this epidemic that we need not take the dispensation. Let us then be fervent in our observance, in order that we may do away with the faults of other times as Our Holy Father tells us, & carefully avoid them during this holy time.



The original St Benedict statue, on which the new one is based, may be discerned on the high altar, Stanbrook, Worcester (in the corner beyond the server)

## Publications and Media Contributions

'Louis Massignon and Mary Kahil: A Spiritual Encounter' by D. Agnes Wilkins has appeared in the Spanish Journal, *Horitzo*, No. 1 2019, p. 55. On 6 March 2020 D. Agnes took part in a Day Conference at St Benet's Institute, Oxford:

'Catholic Engagement with Other Religious Traditions in the World Today: Explorations in Theological, Political and Ecclesiological Thought'.

She contributed a paper entitled: 'Spirituality, Dialogue and Conversion: the Itinerary of Fr Jean Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil'.

D. Agnes recorded a talk on her thesis for the Oblates' e-meeting in October.

D. Laurentia was invited to contribute the 2020 Lenten Reflections for *The Tablet*, and for Easter Sunday.

She also supplied a foreword for *Poems and Counsels on Prayer and Contemplation* by Dame Gertrude More, edited and introduced by Jacob Riyeff. Pub. Gracewing, March 2020.

D. Laurentia contributed a blog to CAFOD: 'Staying at Home: a Benedictine Perspective', Eastertide 2020.

Her first full book of poems, *Seeking Byland: Poems through the Seasons from Stanbrook Abbey* with a foreword by Bishop Hugh Gilbert OSB was published by Gracewing in November 2020.

DD. Philippa and Julian contributed to an article in *The Times* of 20 April 2020 by Joanna Moorhead: 'Good Habits: Surviving lockdown, by nuns who do it 24/7'.

DD. Philippa, Andrea and Petra contributed testimonies to a Manquehue project on lectio divina, May 2020.

D. Josephine was interviewed by Blanche Girouard for an article on religious life which appeared in *The Tablet* 26 September 2020.

Since the March lockdown members of the community have been writing reflections which have appeared on the Stanbrook website News and Archives Page: <https://www.stanbrookabbey.org.uk/site.php?id=4>

## Refectory Reading

*Pardon and Peace: a reflection on the making of peace in Ireland* by Nicholas Frayling; SPCK (1996); pb; pp. 171; ISBN 0 281 04933 5.

The Northern Ireland Peace Process has recently been in the news as the UK seeks to navigate a post-Brexit future that will not undermine or – heaven forbid – undo, the Good Friday agreement. The suggestion of any kind of border or trade check-points would be to reopen a wound that has yet to be fully healed.

An Anglican priest with strong ties in Ireland, Frayling has a palpable desire to see a deeper peace in that land emerge and sees dialogue as essential if this is to become a reality. He interviews many people on both sides of the argument and shares their powerful and honest insights as well as, at times, the frustrating blindness and prejudice.

This book conveys that the ‘peace’ which emerges from conflict and war is a mere starting point. The wounds, lasting pain and suffering often endured over many years, even centuries, can only begin to heal when the desire for something better becomes greater than the hurts endured. Frayling explores what hinders this process and is of the opinion that unless we as nations and individuals take responsibility for our part in creating division, any rebuilding of trust is undermined.

This powerful book should encourage us all to reflect on the external influences that have shaped our lives. It demonstrates how a nation is shaped by its history and has its history shaped by the decisions of others. From this reality come the hurts we nurse that then become the prejudices we perpetuate.

Sr Josephine

*Syria's Secret Library* by Mike Thomson; Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2019; hb; pp. 305; ISBN 978 1 4746 0590 8.

This book tells of a group of young men who start up and run a lending library in the besieged and war-torn town of Daraya in Syria. It describes life in Daraya from just before the siege, in 2011, until the town's evacuation in 2016, and concludes by following the subsequent lives of some of the survivors. The difficulties of life without supplies of food,

water, medicines, fuel and electricity are recounted, along with the terror of constant bombing and fighting. Against this troubled background runs a narrative of hope, describing how these brave and committed young men seek out books in the ruins of destroyed buildings, sometimes risking their lives, and take them to a hidden basement oasis of calm and quiet where the volumes are stored and loaned out. The author was in touch via email and phone calls with a number of men, women and children in Daraya and tells personal tales of their lives, examines their motivations for fighting or refraining from fighting, for running the library and reading the books, and how they stay alive and active in such adverse circumstances. The book is very moving and led to several bidding prayers for the people portrayed. Although it can be disheartening to hear of the conflict and devastation, the touching nature of the stories of both the individual's lives and of the library itself bring light into the narrative.

Sr Thérèse

*The Splendid and the Vile: A Saga of Churchill, Family and Defiance during the Blitz* by Erik Larson; William Collins 2020; hb; pp. 585; £20; ISBN 978 0 00 827494 8. (also available as an audio book on Audible)

When the title of this book was announced by the reader my first reaction was: another boring doom and gloom political book. How wrong can you be! Don't judge a book by its title. We had not read very far when I, along with everyone else, was listening eagerly. The book covers one year of the war, 10 May 1940 to 1941, Churchill's first year as Prime Minister. The author not only deftly weaves politics, society, family (mainly the Churchills), and the ongoing war but gives us insights into what was happening in Berlin with Hitler and his main supporters. This is one of the aspects of the book that makes it so interesting. As a refectory reader it was wonderful to read a book to an audience (admittedly captive) who were really listening. Often the bell rang just when we were reaching the climax of a passage, and not a few looks were directed towards the abbess' table! When we reached the end of the book I wished that Larson had covered the whole war. He writes engagingly, although at times, given that it was being read at mealtimes, the reader had to edit a few gory descriptions. It is well worth a read, or a listen.

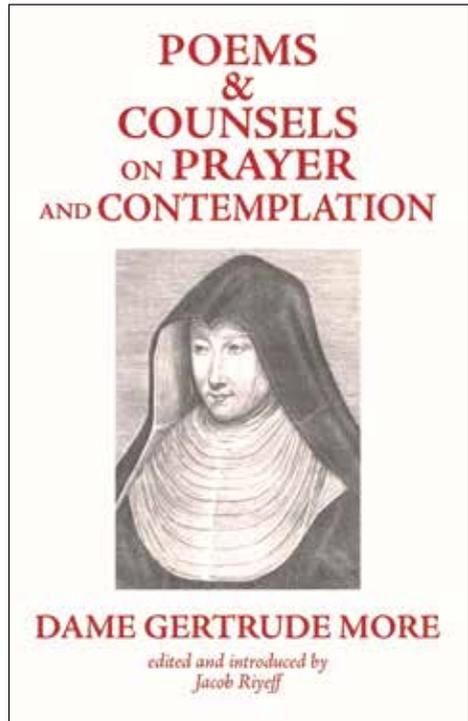
Sr Benedicta

## Book Review

*Poems and Counsels on Prayer and Contemplation* by Dame Gertrude More, edited and introduced by Jacob Riyeff; Gracewing 2020; pb; pp. 150; £12.99; ISBN 978 085244 943 1.

'If a soul but give herself to prayer, she shall have an hundred enemies'. So wrote Dame Gertrude More (1606-1633) in her 'Apology', one of her writings collected here by Jacob Riyeff, poet and scholar of Marquette University. He first read D. Gertrude with his students when teaching a summer seminar on Women Mystics and Visionaries at Marquette. Thus the project began. The collection includes the spiritual notes found in D. Gertrude's cell after her death, and some of her poems. None was intended for publication; the poems would have circulated in manuscript in her community, while the prose writings related her spiritual struggles in finding her contemplative vocation and the fulfilment she experienced under the guidance of Fr Augustine Baker OSB (1575-1641). These works have both human and spiritual interest.

Dame Gertrude More was one of the nine founder members of the Benedictine Monastery of Our Lady of Comfort in Cambrai, Flanders (founded 1623) now Our Lady of Consolation at Stanbrook Abbey, Wass. Initially, the community was trained in formal meditation, the wrong spiritual diet for them, and they petitioned the Abbot President, Rudesind Barlow, for guidance in contemplative prayer. He sent Fr Augustine Baker whose teaching is in the tradition of the medieval mystics and remains the foundation of prayer in our community to this day.



In the post-Reformation period prayer was a political matter. Formal meditation was considered safe, while contemplation was distrusted as dangerous and likely to lead to heresy. The historical background of this situation, its causes and consequences, is treated clearly and fairly by Jacob Riyeff in his Introduction. Any reader new to D. Gertrude should begin here to find the bearings essential to understanding her writing and its significance.

The heart of the collection is her 'Apology' containing much of the material submitted to General Chapter in 1633 to defend Fr Baker's teaching. This is not the testimony itself but written, 'for my own private comfort and help' and 'mine own remembrance'. It is a moving testimony to her soul's suffering, her misery and 'more than ordinary tears' when in what was, for her, the wrong spiritual course. She cannot find her way until the novice mistress directs her to Fr Baker who teaches her the 'way of love by exercise of the will'. All is changed once she knows that 'God and none but he is the true and immediate teacher in the way of contemplation'.

D. Gertrude notes Fr Baker's spiritual principles: 'I must give all to God, without any reservation...or any inordinate affection to any creature. This I found myself willing to do. I must use prayer twice a day. This I found myself capable of.' We recognise here traditional guidance in contemplation.

For the rest of her life D. Gertrude followed the course of obedience to the Divine Call as revealed in prayer. It taught her humility of heart and gave her great joy. But it tangled her in difficulties with Fr Hull, the Chaplain of the monastery, who considered Fr Baker undermined his own spiritual direction. The 'Apology' details the painful clashes and misunderstandings ensuing, and D. Gertrude's fidelity to her Divine Call. She believed 'God will prosper us by those exercises he thinks good and not by our own invention. Otherwise we shall be blind as beetles'. Of the Chaplain she wrote: 'He in all things misunderstood my case.' She observed, with some wit, that she coped with Fr Hull by giving him due respect, treating him with reserve and so 'kept myself out of his fingers.'

The essential matter of the 'Apology' is not this painful conflict but the defence of spiritual prayer as the only valid course for contemplatives. There must be congruence between the individual and her prayer. For the contemplative, D. Gertrude wrote, 'Religious Profession is valid only in response to the Divine Call. This is according to the intention of our Holy

Mother the Church, by whose warrant these professions receive their validity'. Fr Baker's Way, as we now call it, was approved by the 1633 EBC General Chapter and we at Stanbrook continue to be formed by Fr Baker's counsels and twice daily personal prayer.

The shorter writings on Contemplation derive from the 'Apology', though shorn of the disputes and concentrating on the principles and effects of interior prayer. They affirm, with thanksgiving, that responding to the Divine Call 'for a soul capable of the interior life, is all in all'.

These texts are closely cross-referenced by the editor and footnotes point out implicit biblical allusions. The themes centre on God's prevenient grace and obedience, humility and love as the soul's response.

The same themes structure D. Gertrude's poetry which is written in quatrains for the most part. It is the poetry of devotion and personal consecration, without artistic device or flourish.

*And henceforth let me draw no breath  
but to aspire by love  
To thee, my God and all my good  
By whom I live and move.*

Allusions are personal or biblical and express her soul's stability. Both Jacob Riyeff and D. Laurentia (who has supplied the Foreword) make helpful appraisals of her poetic style. Interestingly, Jacob Riyeff considers her plain style to be consonant with her Benedictine simplicity.

*God grant I may observe thy Rule/For in that all doth lie.*

Once D. Gertrude had found her way in prayer, her life became increasingly hidden with Christ in God. She died of smallpox, aged only 27, but her calm and fearlessness in the face of death was for Fr Baker a testimony to her sanctity.

This collection traces the formation of our community in contemplative prayer. It portrays the experience of a highly favoured soul. It includes the principles by which the life of prayer can be lived in any time or place. A book list suggests helpful further reading. For all these good things, many thanks to Jacob Riyeff and to Gracewing.

Petra Simpson OSB

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**Our POSTCARDS & CARDS** are much admired. They include photos taken by the nuns, as well as our printed selection.

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**Tel:** 01347 868900 [www.stanbrookabbey.org](http://www.stanbrookabbey.org)

**Emails:** [secretary@stanbrookabbey.org.uk](mailto:secretary@stanbrookabbey.org.uk)

Sr Benedicta [friends@stanbrookabbey.org.uk](mailto:friends@stanbrookabbey.org.uk)

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