



CR

ST MICHAEL & ALL ANGELS, SEPTEMBER 2023

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Life on Mars



Still Life with Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber c.1602, by Juan Sánchez Cotán 1560-1627, San Diego Museum of Art

Whenever there's news about a rover on the planet Mars picking up tiny clues of possible life on the red planet, there's usually much excitement. Little wonder - finding life out there would be amazing. I am however fascinated by the thought that we tend not to react with the same enthusiasm and interest to the abundant life festooned around us on our own planet. I'm reminded of a quote about art, ``What a strange vanity painting is, it attracts admiration by resembling the original, which we do not admire." (Blaise Pascal)

Not only abundance but also variety. Look closely at anything, and there is, as the poet and printer William Blake said, `a world in a grain of sand'. Surely science as well as poetic imagination would bear this out. We live in a world of wonder. And though this may sound a bit lofty and specialised and mystical, in practice I don't think it is. Our emotional reactions to news that there may have been or still

is life on Mars reminds us that we can all wonder at things, we can all see in a wonderful way. At the end of the day it's not what we can see, it's how we choose to see it. As part of the human default system I believe we have it in us to wonder and to nurture a sense of wonder in all areas of our lived experience. We're not merely spectators at a dance or passive consumers. Our sense of wonder connects us to what's around us in a deeply personal way.

All of us can, as Pascal called it, admire. Sometimes that experience of wonder can be immediate, as a spontaneous reaction to something. At other times, we may have to give some time to just looking, whether it's a painting, a flower, or dust on a tabletop. By a happy coincidence I discovered that one of the first rovers on Mars was called 'Sojourner'. Maybe that's something we could do a lot more of. Sojourn. Stay for a while. Wait. Make a station. Look and live in the sheer wonder that something exists. That you exist. That anything exists. As some have said, 'Why is there something rather than nothing?'

And so to the painting of fruit and vegetables by Sánchez Cotán. We know of only seven still lifes by him. In 1603, in his forties, Sánchez Cotán closed his studio in Toledo and joined a Carthusian monastery in Granada as a lay brother. From then on his pictures were religious scenes only, of which he did many. The still lifes I think are very special, they give us a glimpse of ordinary things seen in an extraordinary way. They're almost like invitations to wake up and open our eyes, to sojourn with the ordinary and familiar.

And so to the still life painting we're looking at. We sense a stillness which is sensual and dramatic, and where even the silence shouts, just like the effect created by light and shade in a Caravaggio painting. There's a strangeness in the high definition and physicality of the forms, so that although we're seeing something which is familiar, it feels like we're seeing it for the first time. It reminds me of what St Augustine wrote of God when he experienced a 'beauty so ancient and so new'. The vegetables show us something of the ancient and new. Christianity is a sacramental faith, grounded in earth and atoms, and our experiences of God's creation are also experiences of God, right down to the earth we stand on. In their down-to-earthness a quince and a cabbage are also of heaven. Sánchez Cotán's depiction of everyday objects is a strong statement about the sacramental nature of reality.

All we have to do is give it time and look. On the canvas the artist has done most of the work. Now comes our invitation to play. We complete the act of creation with ourselves, with our awareness. The image and surface of the painting has a quality which is seductive. It calls to be touched and enjoyed. We're drawn in. The light and dark make the objects vivid and rich in texture and weight; standing in front of this still life I'm first drawn towards and then into the sensuality and beauty of what's there, even the dark empty background space to

the scene.

This darkness makes the forms look more solid and defined. They stand out, have more meaning, and so are given to us more abundantly. If it wasn't for the darkness we wouldn't be seeing the forms so vividly. At the heart of faith, in the darkness of the cross, we see pain and suffering, but also life and light, the glory of the divine presence or shekinah of God. The world is of great wonder and beauty and embraces our suffering. In this there is hope. The world we live in is sheer wonder and much more.

Sánchez Cotán's still lifes beckon us to come closer and say yes to life. `For all that has been, Thanks. To all that shall be, Yes' (Dag Hammarskjöld).

Keith Perkinton

An Evangelical at Sacré-Coeur

About a year ago in Spring, Paris, the 'City of Light' dazzled me from the first moment I arrived. I'd been generously invited to come to Paris and stay there for a few months as the guest of an old friend of mine who lived there. As the vicar of a church, he suggested I come to visit him and his wife, spend time in the city, and see if I might be able to help a little among the church community. As it happened, I received the invitation whilst on retreat with CR at Mirfield: it felt like such a gift from God, such an unexpected and unimagined blessing.

Upon first stepping off the train in Paris, I was met at the big central train station Gare du Nord by a friend from the church. As he led me to the place where I was stay, walking through Parisian streets in the lovely light of an April evening, my eyes were wide, taking in the beauty of the city; long boulevards lined with pretty buildings and trees, delightful rows of tall houses with their 19th-century architecture feeling somehow familiar from all the films and pictures I'd seen of Paris - despite it being my first visit. After a very good sleep, on my first morning I quickly put comfy shoes on, bravely stepped outside again, and set out to wander and see what awaited me. Watching over the city with the bearing of a kind mother, Basilica Sacré-Coeur sits at the very top of the historic hill to the north of Paris. It is a tourist attraction, but is also a living place of prayer and worship to Christ, with a community of Religious Sisters who keep a perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. Above the entrance is a sign that reads: 'Here, day and night, for over 135 years, someone has been praying to the Lord.'

As a Christian who would describe himself as broadly having been at home within the Evangelical tradition within the Church of England, it might seem to you strange that during my stay this place felt like my 'home' in Paris. That is not to

say I did not feel welcome with my friends at the church I was staying with; on the contrary, I found it everything I had hoped, and made many dear friends there - it was a huge blessing to me. But in the furious, busy activity of Paris, on days when I had time to simply enjoy myself, I found Sacré-Coeur a place with its arms open, so to speak; a place of peace, refuge and refreshment in the great city, a place where the presence of Jesus was recognised and gently attended to.



Inside Sacré-Coeur

On Friday afternoons I got into the habit of often wandering upwards through the winding streets, slowly climbing north from the centre of Paris where I was staying near the Place de la Concorde. As a person who loves art (and coffee!) I would be drawn time and again towards Montmartre, historically a home for artists, and still today a wonderfully

atmospheric and rustic district resting on the hill at the north of Paris. I would always see something new on the way: a charming café I hadn't noticed before, an old church with an interesting historical plaque to read all about it, a well-hidden but inevitably beautifully kept public garden tucked away to the side of a street. It was so evocative. And everywhere, of course, Parisians unhurriedly sitting at the many 'terrace' cafes, reading the newspaper or a book, enjoying a long lunch and a glass of wine. There are lots of little oases in the busyness of this enchanting city. But the main oasis I kept coming back to was Sacré-Coeur, and I would usually find myself here after taking a meandering stroll through Montmartre. It was like a magnet to my feet, and I didn't have to worry about finding it; exploring freely, I would pretty much always eventually find I was walking towards the Basilica, which in many ways felt to me like a beating heart of Christianity in Paris.

As a Christian today, sometimes - perhaps most of the time - I can find myself feeling lonely and isolated. Seeking to remain a follower of Jesus in today's world often feels like trying to swim against the tide. It can be hard to pray, to keep going, and it can feel like one is alone trying to keep going. But I have sometimes taken great comfort when I am reminded that prayer and worship to Jesus is continuing through many others, apart from me, on and on, through the night and day, without ceasing. I've felt that same comforting feeling many times when spending some time with CR in Mirfield, staying on a retreat, or just visiting. It's such a relief to realise you can lay down your own prayer for a minute and let others carry it for you. Carry you. I think something like this sense of being carried along is what I felt atop the hill overlooking Paris. Being an Evangelical Anglican, I suppose what I am describing might not be news to some of you who may feel

yourselves at home in other church traditions, but for me (and many others like me), I have begun to discover an enriching strength in the 'ancient ways' Jeremiah mentions, which I never realised existed. You could say receiving Communion in a French Catholic Basilica is quite far from my roots! As is the picture of the 'Sacred Heart' of Jesus, a phrase which I was unfamiliar with and felt very alien at first, until someone explained it to me. But the few hours I spent there most Fridays felt like home for me in a very lonely city. And it took the weight off my shoulders.

I found so much to delight in and enjoy during my time in Paris, and found myself quickly falling in love with the place. A friend of mine who also loves Paris told me it can be 'a lifelong love'. I hope, God-willing, it will prove to be so for me, too, as it is for so many. I hope I might be able to return some day soon. But, of course, like so much of modern life, and particularly within our estern society, great cities can paradoxically be full of people and intensely lonely, isolating places. I think this sense of companionship, reassurance, connection - something real to hold onto in the vast emptiness of the (all the same, delightful!) kaleidoscope of colours, tastes, sounds of Paris - is what I found at the Basilique Sacré-Coeur. I think this sense of peace can be nothing other than the unchanging and unfailing presence of the Risen Christ, the one and the same Lord, whose light shines in the darkness, and also can today be seen shining in this place at the top of the hill overlooking Paris.

James Tomba

'The poor you have with you always.'

Middleton, Leeds, 1929 – a Snapshot

Let me show you this:

*A young woman stands at the kitchen sink,
her hands chapped by washing clothes in cold water,
her stomach aches with hunger.*

*At sixteen, she is a virgin made mother
to her sisters who, this week,
she has finally failed to feed.*

*There could be a way, chosen by women
down the ages – a brief surrender
in a dark alley or a forbidden room
to men with money and dirty fingernails.*

Yes, that could be a way.

*Or she could take all her sisters to Paradise
if only she had some coins for the gas.*

*No 'third way' here.
She wrings the wet clothes through a mangle,
carries them to the back yard to drip on a line.
On the doorstep are three cardboard boxes,
delivered unseen, becoming damp.
She is too weary to wonder what they contain
or who has selfishly dumped them there.
She pegs out vests and knickers and socks
like prayer-flags to an uncaring God.
A rat scuttles past her feet ,
nibbles a hole in the packages.
She kicks it away and picks up an envelope
addressed in copperplate to:
'The family who live here', and then:
'When sometime, in years to come,
when life allows, pass this love on.'
'This love' that day is a ten-shilling note
and boxes full of food, tinned meat,
rice, bread, apples, chocolate
and some lotion to soothe sore hands.
Her way is clear now.
Her hands will be healed,
the family will be fed.
They have not been left wanting,
and, when life lets them,
they will pass such kindness on.*

This poem stems from a true incident told to me by my aunt, Netta Bird, who became responsible for her younger sisters when their mother died in 1929, leaving seven daughters in the hapless hands of their father. This act of kindness by a stranger was a turning point for Netta and the sisters of the Bird family who survived extreme poverty and continued to 'pass such kindness on' into old age. My book* 'Seven Sisters' Songs' honours the inspiring lives of these seemingly 'ordinary' women, and the following extract brings their story up to date.

A Sunday in May 2023 was the third time I would visit the churchyard of St Mary the Virgin parish church in Middleton, Leeds.

My first visit was some 60 years previously when my mother took me to find the unmarked grave which she believed held the remains of her own mother (Florence Bird) and those of her sister Alice. My mother remembered being taken

there when she was a girl but had never since returned. It was a long day out then



St Mary the Virgin churchyard

for Mum and I, travelling on buses and on a tram from the city centre to Middleton. We took a picnic to eat in nearby Middleton Park.

As we entered the churchyard, Mum fell silent, summoning up her distant memories of the location of this family grave. Then, 'I'll know it when I see it,' she said, 'because it was next to a grave that had a lovely inscription on the stone.' Mum needed no guidance around the mossy paths between the graves. She seemed to know exactly which part of the graveyard to head for – and there it was – a small grassy mound next to a low, rectangle of grey stone walls marking the adjacent plot. On one edge of these stones was carved: *'Who plucked this lovely flower? I, the Master. And the gardener held his peace.'* – a well-known

quotation often used on memorials around the time of World War 1. 'So, our family grave is alongside,' said Mum, 'to the left.' And there she stood, quietly remembering her mother and her sister Alice who had both died in 1929.

In 2003, some months after Mum had died in December 2002, I came back to Middleton with my two brothers, having decided that this grave, the only one we knew of for the Bird family, would be a fitting place to let go of all that remained of our dearly loved mother. This time, it was for me to remember the route through the gravestones and find the plot adjacent to the grave with the carved inscription. Mum's 'presence' was very much with us as we stood there, sharing memories of Mum and of her sisters, our aunts.

Twenty years later, having completed my book 'Seven Sisters' Songs' which honours the lives of these inspiring women, it felt right to make that journey to Middleton once more, and this time in the company of my niece Emma.

On my third visit, the grave took some finding. All the churchyard was overgrown with weeds and grass that made for quite dangerous treading through concealed, displaced stones, and with neglected headstones obscured by moss and weathering. I was reasonably confident I could remember the area we needed to be in, but an hour's search failed to find the graves we were looking for. The morning was full of sunlight that shone through tall trees and dappled the emerald grass. Bluebells added their beauty, as did a robin and a blackbird who sang as they hopped in front of us. We widened our search, but to no avail, so decided we might have to come back later in the year when the grass and weeds

had died down. We noticed that the main door to the church was open, and stepped inside to look around.

We were immediately greeted very warmly by two women who were sitting at a table near the doorway. They were delighted to welcome us as visitors and asked if they could help with anything. I explained the purpose of our visit and our disappointment at being unable to find our family grave. One woman whooped with delight and said 'Oh, well, you've found just the right person to help you!', and she introduced the other woman as Andrea, the Churchwarden, who had on the table in front of her a hefty, well-thumbed book of church records going back many years. Within minutes, Andrea found the record for the burial of my aunt, Alice Bird, in 1929. Strangely there was no record of my grandmother, Florence, at all. But Alice was definitely buried here in the churchyard in an unmarked plot. Andrea could see the adjacent plots listed and could take us straight there!

It was, as we expected, no more than a slight mound in the grass, with a handful of bluebells brightening the spot. To the right is the rectangle of dark grey stones forming the grave with the inscription remembered by my mother. But now, even this was hard to find, and it took Emma to clear away weeds that were hiding the words carved into the stones.

We thanked Andrea for her help. That she had been in the church, with all the ancient records, just when Emma and I were about to abandon our search, was one of those spine-tingling moments when we recognise that this was just meant to be. I stood by Alice's grave with Emma, as I had done with my brothers and as my mother had done so many years before, pondering our connection to Alice, Florence, and to all the inspiring women of the Bird family.

When Emma and I left the church, we drove a short distance to the street where my grandparents lived with their family. Their house, 31 Middleton Park Grove, has been replaced with a block of flats, but other houses in the street look much the same as the Bird's home would have been. There are clear signs of poverty here. Almost a century since this council estate was built and provided decent homes for families, many people living here *now* rely on Food Banks, and struggle to make ends meet. That there is still such persistent neglect of the poor, such dereliction of care in our country, is, to my mind, scandalous and inexcusable.

There is perhaps today, an even greater need than in the 1920s -1930s, for social justice, compassion, generosity, and the passing on of love. In 2023, 'the poor' are indeed with us, but so too is the capacity to care.

Maggie Jackson

**Seven Sisters' Songs' is available from Amazon. Proceeds will be donated to the Food Bank managed by the church in Middleton.*

More on Julian Allan and Our Lady's statue

A reader of the last issue has asked us to add to what was said in the article about Julian Allan, the sculptor of the statue of Our Lady in the Lower Church, that, contrary to the speculations of the article, she took the name Julian because of her great devotion to Julian of Norwich, who had a very great influence on her. She was an alumna of St Helen's School, Northwood, where there is another madonna of hers, and more information on her can be found on sculpture.gla.ac.uk.

Tolkien Anniversary

The first of a set of two articles.

The 50th anniversary of the death of J.R.R. Tolkien has been observed this September. It seems that several members of CR have been Tolkien enthusiasts, and maybe some readers of the *Quarterly* are too. For instance, in the issue of Michaelmas 2021 there was an illustrated article by one of the novices entitled 'Benedict in *The Lord of the Rings*', in which the House of the Resurrection is compared to the Last Homely House at Rivendell, mentioned in *The Hobbit*. I myself can vouch for that comparison, as CR helped in various ways to set me up on a route to ordination – for 'difficult times'.

I've been a reader of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* for 50 years, and I've almost finished reading a new book called *Tolkien's Faith: a Spiritual Biography* by Holly Ordway, an American literature academic who writes about, and teaches, cultural and imaginative apologetics. She has specialised in J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis and Charles Williams, who in the 1930s and 40s were members of an informal literary group in the University of Oxford, known as the 'Inklings', and who met to read and discuss their work. Ordway is a Catholic convert from atheism.

Why was a new book needed? Since the very readable biography of 1977 by Humphry Carpenter, Christendom has of course become very much less visible – although even 50 years ago the essential dependency of such a popular author as Tolkien on the Judaeo-Christian worldview was not generally grasped. Yet *The Lord of the Rings* has sold 150 million copies in 38 languages. Despite the recession of Christendom and a growing spiritual void, there is evidently much spiritual intelligence in that interesting category we call 'spiritual but not religious'. Many of these are Tolkien fans. At a time when Tolkien seems as popular as ever, his dependency upon the Worldview is due for discussion. For example, Amazon's high-profile television series, *The Rings of Power*, not only misses it but also

subverts it, and the reviews I've seen hardly mention this. Holly Ordway sees an evangelistic opportunity.

This is not a review of Ordway's book, nor a summary, although I have gratefully drawn on it. I've also made use of a recent lecture by Dr Michael Ward, a priest of the Ordinariate, and a literary critic and theologian, who was Senior Research Fellow at Blackfriars Hall in the University of Oxford (2012-2021). Ward is a friend and colleague of Ordway, and in his lecture emphasised his reliance on her work, which he had seen in draft form.

For this article, I've sorted my notes to make three parts:

- (1) Tolkien's Upbringing;
- (2) War and Its Aftermath;
- (3) 'Till the World Is Mended': Catholic Christianity in *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*. The first two parts follow. The third will be for the *Quarterly's* January issue.

★ ★ ★

Part 1: Tolkien's Upbringing

Tolkien was born in Bloemfontein, South Africa, in 1892 and was baptised an Anglican. At the age of four came the unexpected death of his father; and he, with his brother Hillary and his mother Mabel, returned to the family's native Birmingham – and to a life of poverty. After a while they were received into the Church of Rome. When Tolkien was aged twelve, his mother died. The parish priest at the Birmingham Oratory, Father Francis Morgan, became his guardian. Tolkien later recalled how he was blessed with 'the sudden miraculous experience' of his 'love and care and humour.'

In 1907 Pope Pius X produced a strongly anti-modernist encyclical called *Pascendi Dominici gregis* ('Feeding the Lord's Flock'), which took up a defensive position against perceived threats to the Faith, which had been accumulating through the nineteenth century and earlier; and chiefly from what is called *the historical-critical study of the Bible*. Interestingly, Protestants were engaging in a comparable exercise. The Presbyterian Church in America produced a document called *The Doctrinal Deliverance of 1910*, which declared the necessity of a belief in 'the Five Fundamentals'. At the top of the list was biblical inerrancy – which meant that, since there was divine authorship, one must take the text 'literally'. (Hence the later derogatory word, *fundamentalism*.) In that same year, the Pope required signature to the famous Oath Against Modernism from clergy and others, including all religious superiors and seminary teachers.

The matter is complicated, however. Taking the Bible 'literally' was a new and unprecedented way of reading it. Biblical interpreters through the centuries had emphasised different *levels of meaning*, in various blends of *literal* and *symbolic*. Holy Scripture had many voices, and was wonderfully replete with echoes.

Among the words of Christ in the gospels to which one would pay special attention was the eucharistic discourse in chapter 6 of John's Gospel: 'I am the Bread of Life...' etc (John 6.35). And Tolkien, by then, was reading it in such a way that years later, in 1941, he could write to his son Michael: '*Out of the darkness of my life, so much frustrated, I put before you the one great thing to love on earth: the Blessed Sacrament*'.

Part 2: War and Its Aftermath

That darkness came for Tolkien with the Great War, to which he was called up immediately after his marriage to Edith in 1916. He was in the front-line trenches of the Battle of the Somme as a signals officer. Of the three million who fought in that deadliest of battles, one million were killed or injured, including all of Tolkien's friends. A poem he wrote to Our Lady at that time began, 'O Lady Mother, enthroned amid the stars', and he called it '*Consolatrix Afflictorum*' (Consolation of the Afflicted, one of the titles of Mary in the Litany of Loreto).

After the war, Europe began her collective PTSD. There had been the death-toll of some 20 million; and the horrific memories of the trenches – the shelling, the machine guns, the chemical warfare. And then there was the questioning of established religion, followed by its widespread rejection. An Anglican priest I knew, who in 1916 had been a forces chaplain in the Sinai and Palestine campaign, wrote of *how few of the soldiers attended his services*. All of that is with us still – not least, the rejection of institutional religion.

Much had been summed up in the war poetry of the time: such as in these haunting lines of from Wilfred Owen's poem, 'The End', placed in Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* in juxtaposition to the Sanctus (the 'Holy, holy, holy'):

*After the blast of lightening from
the East*

*The flourish of loud clouds, the chariot Throne;
After the drums of Time have rolled and ceased,
And by the bronze west long retreat is blown,
Shall life renew these bodies? Of a truth*



The Hill : hobbiton-across-the Water

Illustration by JRR Tolkien

All death will he annul, all tears assuage?

John Culshaw in his commentary on the Requiem for the 1963 Decca recording says this:

Here is the extreme contrast, the unequivocal opposition of evident reality against the preceding religious fervour, ... the moment when the juxtaposition of formalised aspiration [in the Sanctus] and the poetic vision of despair is at its extreme.

Western culture was changing. In 1921 T.S.Eliot wrote his long and desolate poem, *The Waste Land*. He belonged to the new Modernist genre in Europe (not to be confused with the Catholic modernism opposed in 1907 by Pope Leo X – see above). It includes such writers as Joseph Conrad (notably *Heart of Darkness*), and Franz Kafka; as well as the German Erique Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, (English translation by A.W.Wheen, 1929) – of which a highly acclaimed new film was released in 2022. Tolkien will have read these books – he didn't only read Anglo-Saxon texts. And despite his Catholic upbringing, he himself almost stopped going to church for a while.

Tolkien was a philologist – that's someone who studies languages and how they work. In the mid-1920s he became Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford, and later would be made Merton Professor of English Language and Literature. It was surely while he himself was processing Europe's psychological and spiritual desolation that he reviewed his literary theory – perhaps something like this:

Everything that happens on this earth is a part of a greater whole. The Somme was a manifestation in space and time of the perennial cosmic war between good and evil. But how to speak of this? And how must the story end? My life's work may be to work through these questions.

It was surely in this regard that by the mid-1930s Tolkien was moving away from Catholic exclusivism, finding himself agreeing with his friend and fellow-Inkling, Charles Williams, that while it was one's duty 'to tend the accredited and established altar ... the Holy Spirit may send the fire down somewhere else'. This was long before the Second Vatican Council would declare:

Some, and even very many, of the significant elements and endowments which together go to build up and give life to the Church itself, can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church.

★ ★ ★

We've covered Parts 1 and 2 of this article: 'Tolkien's Upbringing', and 'War and Its Aftermath'. Here we must leave the story until the *Quarterly's* January issue, when you can read Part 3, 'Till the World is Mended: Christianity in the *Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion*'.

I had better give you the context of that title. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Chapter 8, 'Fog on the Barrow-Downs', Frodo is seized by a Barrow-wight – a kind of fallen angel, an agent of darkness – who loomed up as 'a tall dark figure like

a shadow against the stars.' Frodo and his companions are rescued by the spiritual master Tom Bombadil, who dismisses the Barrow-wight with words that end with this couplet:

*Lost and forgotten be, darker than the darkness,
Where gates stand for ever shut, till the world is mended.*

Alastair Ferguson

On a Reading Retreat

In September, we ran a Reading Retreat at CR, and in the publicity, we offered: *'... an opportunity to step aside from 24/7 media exposure and experience words – read, spoken and sung – in a different time-frame and at a different pace ... in your own reading and reflection; in joining in with the prayer of the Community and in those silent spaces where God speaks, that are the special gift of this place – including our spacious grounds with woodland walks, where the colours are glorious in autumn.'* There were no talks or addresses, but an invitation to simply step into the rhythm of Community life in the church and refectory. That said, the programme wasn't entirely void of content and the tour of the Community library on the first morning turned out to be a highlight. Coming together for morning Lectio Divina also proved to be a welcome inclusion. A few people had come intentionally to do reading for study and research, so having permission to use the library was a boon. For some, the attraction of the books here lured them away from the ones they had brought with them, and others were just happy for the chance to be immersed in their own books. So it was a very diverse group of retreatants – and warm thanks go to Librarian, Anisha Christison, and Bruce and Jan Carlin, Charlie CR and Jude nCR, for their collaboration with this event.

One of the retreatants subsequently wrote some thoughts on the week, which are included below. It is always a joy when people come to this place of prayer and both find, and are found by, the God who is at the heart of the ordinary life and liturgy here – so I'm overjoyed if the Reading Retreat enabled this to happen. We are planning another for 2024.

Barbara Clarke, assocCR

Surprise yourself and go on a Mirfield Reading retreat. It looks straight forward, what could possibly go wrong? If you have never stayed in a monastic community, that will be the first surprise and after that it will be about the preconceptions that come with you. They will be turned upside down.

There is a rose garden and pond with hungry Koi carp, a kitchen garden with



In the rose garden

raspberries and nasturtiums, a partly mown field to wander in, and a small cemetery where long-gone brothers rest. From the outside the church looks like a fortress, of the repel-all-borders variety. A closed mystery that turns out to have a shining heart, that waits for you in grace.

Whatever it was you thought you were going to read, whatever it was, you will find yourself being read. And if you pause, you will hear quite clearly what the Lord asks of you.

*Soldiers of Christ arise and put your armour on
Strong in the strength that God supplies
Through his eternal son.....*

Of course, you can close the book. Surprise yourself – try the Mirfield reading retreat – anything could happen.”

Alysoun Whitton

Summer in the Grounds

Just as your window boxes or gardens, so our grounds are shewing evidence of the strange summer this country has experienced. The reports of major floods and of ferocious fires in southern Europe, together with extreme temperatures have struck us as never before and what has been strange here has been devastating elsewhere. They are a sign of how human doings are harming the environment in ways which are not only destructive of so much natural variety but also of human life and society.

Negatively, trees and deep rooted plants have grown prodigiously and compete successfully with frailer growth. Other plants come under greater pressure and will not live as long as formerly. Insects find the increased irregularity of weather either an inhibition to their life or allow invasive species to establish themselves. Certainly, there have been fewer nesting



birds this year – pigeons excepted – and bees have suffered with birds from the

lack of rain at key times in the year. Judging from the scarcity of buzzards and owls, I suspect that there have not been too many small furry creatures around this year. (We do enjoy the occasional company of a large ginger cat called Richard, who sustains well the reputation of cats for being among the most efficient of hunters!)

That said, there is great and varied beauty, delights to all. I have noted five species of ladybird, with oodles of seven spotted ones and hardly any harlequin. At times there has been a swish of insects above the grass and flowers of the meadow (aka 'cricket field'), in studied indeterminacy of direction. Unseasonable temperatures and rain have restrained the harvests of fruit, though the blackberries have been to die for. This has been a national blessing, as many readers will have noted. Indeed this was reported in *The Guardian* in an article entirely devoted to the subject. It is not commonly known that *Rubus fruticosus* comes in very many varieties, in addition to those reared for commercial or gardening use, more than two thousand in the British Isles alone. Technically, the berry is I am told not *really* a berry but – wait for it – 'an aggregate accessory fruit'. This means that the fruit comes from what holds the 'egg' rather than the 'egg' itself. I think this is why on some kinds, the berry seems to fall apart as one picks them.

However, some of the berries have been, as I said, to die for, large, tasty and plentiful. Guests and brothers often comment on the scratches on my arms when I come in from blackberrying. It is hardly a problem, as it is rare I note the



Medlars

irritation caused by the thorns. Perhaps when St Michael hurled the devil into the brambles in hell, the thorns which received him responded so as to give their arrival a fitting greeting. This piece of folklore was applied to the eating of blackberries – the devil allegedly cursed the plant so that after Michaelmas the berry would be harmful to eat (!).

Fungus will be poor this autumn – if the dry earth is owt to go by. On the other hand, there is the promise of a depth of colour, especially the reds, which will cheer us all. Although some of the apples are curmudgeons this year, others crop unstingily. The red of the Discovery and the Katya apples has been deeper than the reddest of flags. Most of our apples indeed incline to red; there is a Greensleeves (much loved by Brother Roy), Crispin (aka Mutsu), Golden Reinette and Helge Klaare which are all yellow. It has been noted that we have no apples which are green, save the Bramley of which

we have five. It would be good to put this right, for diversity's sake, but I am held back by a view that green apples are always lacking in flavour or sweetness. I suspect that this is not true; perhaps a reader might put me right?

Our apples form the largest area of fruit grown here. The orchard goes back to early days at the Community, but there is no tree older than c.70 years. That tree, a four-branched Gascoyne Scarlet is very much the mother of the orchard. There are about 80 trees, most of recent introduction, the Bramleys and the Gascoyne Scarlet being the exceptions. Some of the newbies have been planted and some have been grafted. The oldest variety is a Duchess of Oldenbourg, which was developed in St Petersburg in about 1700, and is a beautiful striped red and yellow apple which is ready for eating in early September. It was quite early this year and indeed most apples are ripening three weeks ahead of normal. The most prolific are the James Grieve, the Discovery and the Kidd's Orange Red, the last being the most abundant. This is a puzzle, as nurseries say that it is not a particularly good cropper. Although the tree is liable to canker, the crop is always overwhelming, no matter how much thinning gets done. It was a variety which owes much to one of its parents, Cox's Orange Pippin, but is far more reliable and less picky. It is also inclined to a pinkish blush which makes it one of the most appealing apples visually. The blush does not last long, however, but is not that the way of blushes?

add a picture also of a medlar fruit, taken this summer. In the next issue I will include something more about these fascinating fruits and how to use them.

Thomas CR

Companions News catch-up

RIP 2022

The Revd Richard Jenkins
John Edward Medforth
Judith Napper
Jean Pailing
Peter Waterhouse
The Revd Canon Alan B Wilkinson

RIP 2023

Michael Middleton
Pamela Gould

New Companions 2022

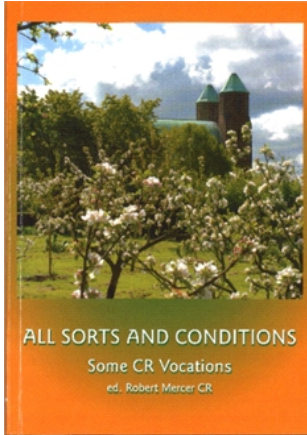
Mark Thomas
Ian Lund
Lee Dunleavy
Natalie Robinson

Book Reviews

All Sorts and Conditions: Some CR Vocations

Robert Mercer CR (ed.)

Mirfield Publications 2023, £7.50 (CR Bookshop price: £6)



This is an unputdownable book: the temptation is to race through it at great speed, galloping from one exciting vocation story to another, marvelling at the huge variety of men called to the Mirfield community, not quite from every tongue, tribe and nation, but from three continents and very different backgrounds, temperaments and life experiences. But on a second reading how many wise sayings there are to linger over, savour and reflect upon.

When God calls you, he calls the whole of you...

You cannot bargain with God...

God the fisherman knows what bait to use for every fish...

Many of these well-chosen baits are in evidence in this book – art, music, literature, theatre, travel to various parts of the world, and family life, both joyful and painful. I was struck by the number of brethren who came to Mirfield relatively late in life, bringing with them the maturity born of long experience in the service of the Lord. Common themes in the stories include the growing love of God through prayer both personal and liturgical and the sacraments.

Read as a whole the book shows powerfully how these diverse men really love one another. This comes across very strongly in the several obituaries of deceased CR members, their foibles described with gentle humour, and is also illustrated by the community's response to the pandemic when all external works were cut off and the community was forced into an unaccustomed closeness – and found that they enjoyed it.

The brief biographies of each monk reveal an impressive sharing of responsibilities.

The Mirfield community has made a real difference to the world in several important ways. Two that strike me in particular are its stand against apartheid, most famously in the person of Trevor Huddleston, but the stories of all the CR brethren in this book, both living and dead, who had or have any connexion with Africa show real solidarity with its indigenous people, though it seems the

realisation of the need for a change of mindset came slowly. Patrick Souter's quotation of Blake's *all must love the human form in heathen, Turk or Jew widens this out to include the whole human race in the human form divine*.

Mirfield's close relationship with the Roman Catholic community of Trier in Germany is a model for ecumenical relationships, involving all the members of both communities, and led to the enormous step of the Mirfield community's adopting the Rule of St Benedict. As a Benedictine myself for over fifty years I've always thought strong individuality, tinged with eccentricity, one of the identifying marks of Benedictines – the Mirfield community seems to have had this in spades long before it had an official connexion with the Benedictine rule.

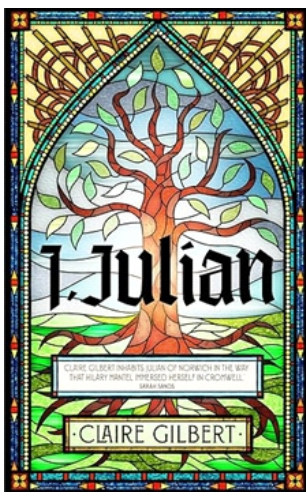
One slight criticism is that many of the photographs are not of the same standard as the writing where the outstanding characteristics shown in story after story are humour, courage, searing honesty, wisdom and the even rarer virtue of common sense – but above all genuine brotherly love. These monks pass the crucial test: *See how these Christians love one another*.

Sr Philippa (Stanbrook Abbey)

I, Julian : The fictional autobiography of Julian of Norwich

Claire Gilbert.

Hodder & Stoughton, 2023, Hbk £17, Pbk £9.99, 280pp,



Almost nothing is known about Julian of Norwich outside the *Revelations of Divine Love* written by an anchoress in Norwich in the 14th Century. Even her name is not certain. Yet Claire Gilbert, who immersed herself in this text while writing a PhD, has produced a beautifully written, thoroughly convincing story of this remarkable woman's possible life.

The story is set in Norwich in the 14th century, a thriving wool city with a powerful church. Like all of England it was afflicted by a series of plagues, one of which carried off Julian's father, another her husband and daughter. Julian's experience of God grows out of these tragedies. The Church preaches a God who is angry with men and women for their sinfulness and so sends the plagues to punish them and frighten them into good behaviour. Some clergy preach this message with vindictiveness, others with a more gentle call to return to God. Julian herself is convinced by this narrative and is consumed by pain. She herself falls sick and nearly dies, and out of this experience comes a series of visions which challenges the teaching of the

Church, offering instead a God who has himself gone down into the pain and offers his people nothing but love.

Julian sees at once this is a dangerous message to speak to a world so dominated by the Church's teaching. It is doubly dangerous as the teachings of Wycliffe are being spread by the Lollards whom soon the Church will persecute and try to destroy. Fortunately, Julian finds a wise and compassionate priest, Thomas, who listens to her tale and writes down her visions. It is he who encourages her to become an anchoress; not a nun, but a lay person, sealed in a room in St Julian's Church. She can speak to people who come to talk with her through a window, and soon they come in droves. She can pray and participate through another window in the worship in church, but she can never leave.

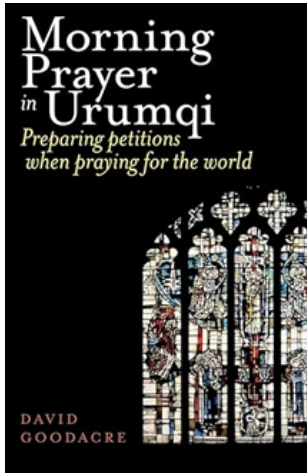
Above all, she can pray. Claire Gilbert gives a beautiful and convincing account of her prayer. Sometimes it is easy, sometimes hard and arid. At times, it flows in waves and storms. Increasingly, Julian does not simply say prayers; she becomes her prayer. That is the great lesson most of us need to learn. Prayer is not something we do; it is something we are when God himself prays in us.

Claire populates the story with a varied and believable cast of characters – mother, husband, journeymen, suitors and Lollards. There is an attractive group of women living in a lay community, whom Julian joins for a while. There are priests. Some narrow-minded and suspicious, some learned, loving and well informed, one who is dotty but lovable, and a bishop who is able but increasingly violent against the heretics. Julian was fortunate with her confessors, who supported her and advised her well. The horror of the plagues dominates the early part of the story; definitely worse than our recent experience of Covid.

Above all, it is a story of love. Not sappy love, but deep, rich, understanding love. “Wouldst thou learn thy Lord's meaning in this thing? Learn it well: Love was His meaning. Who shewed it thee? Love. What shewed He thee? Love.” God understands our weakness, our sin, our foolishness, our longing desire to serve him, our weak attempts at loving him. *I, Julian* left me wanting to read the *Revelations* again and discover more about a God of such love.

Nicolas CR

Morning Prayer in Urumqi:
Preparing petitions when praying for the world
David Goodacre Sacristy Press, 2023, £16.99, 264pp.



n Morning Prayer in Urumqi David Goodacre uses his personal wealth of worldwide experience to remind us of our Christian duty to serve and pray for much wider concerns, not only those related to the Church local and her overseas links, as we pray, 'Your kingdom come, your will be done'. In the preface he states, 'Intercession is an imaginative exercise, a way of thinking about it, to engage with it, so we can co-operate with Christ and God's concerns,' e.g. the Uighur troubles in Urumqi in 2009.

In first two chapters, David leads us into the theology of prayer. Wrapped in the Rogationtide Eucharistic prayers of thanksgiving to God for earthly and sacramental food and drink, alongside the present great ecological problems, 'our intercession becomes wholly interwoven with our thanksgiving'. Then quoting Romans 8.34: 'Christ is at the right hand of God making intercession for us. He calls us to co-operate with Him in prayers.'

David reminds us to Listen in humble silent prayer, 'Pray in the spirit of penitence in accordance with God's will with ... urgency and trust', and 'the way Love defeats evil is to allow it to do everything it can even if that means death and destruction. Only then does Love rise again renewed in strength!'

The Church has a vocation to discern ways to engage with and work for the Common Good. David seeks to encourage the intercessor during the Sunday Eucharist, choosing a particular concern gleaned from international news or their own experiences to that end. It is important to imagine individual living in that area of concern whether political, disaster, poverty: how he/she sees and feels, not how we outsiders may.

To guide us in this way to highlight an area and individual issue in one short paragraph of the petitions, David Goodacre provides fifty-two vignettes, one for each Sunday of the liturgical year, each in a different area of the world; he gives a short but amazingly informative word-picture of the region, its neighbours, population distribution and their religions, followed by an individual experience alongside one he encountered in that region, often remarking on parallel beliefs in different faiths. Each vignette ends with a short apt prayer.

David warns us to keep intercessions short and not preach a mini-sermon!

Silence after each petition is important. His experience as a parish priest and his great skills in spiritual direction – listening, reading body language and silent prayer, alongside whomever he encounters, are very apparent.

Very useful following the bibliography at the end of the book are:

Two sample intercessions for inclusion, using *Common Worship: prayers for the C of E* (pp 281-2).

An index of countries with reference to chapter, and a thematic Index. I believe this book should be available in theological college libraries and on reading lists for all training for ministry and to lead services. It could also be used for a course of sermons, Lent groups, and in other similar ways.

Catherine Hardy

Questioning God

Timothy Radcliffe & Lukasz Popko

Bloomsbury Continuum, 2023, £13.99 ISBN 9781399409230, 224pp.

TIMOTHY RADCLIFFE
and ŁUKASZ POPKO



QUESTIONING
GOD

How curious are we about where those who disagree with us are coming from? On the world stage there seems little amicable disagreement as, to give just one example, we continue the greatest conflict in Europe for three generations. In the church universal we are riven by unfriendly disagreements such as those over the remarriage of the divorced, the ordination of women, same sex unions and for Roman Catholics the status of the Tridentine Mass. These divisions seem hampered by incapacity and reluctance to tolerate yet alone understand where the other side is coming from. Mindful of this breakdown of dialogue in both Church and society two Dominican friars present an intriguing resource built around 18 Biblical conversations between the Lord and humanity entitled 'Questioning God'.

Their introduction reminds readers of the invitation of the Second Vatican Council. 'God's Word does not address us through a celestial megaphone, demanding passive acquiescence. Revelation is God's conversation with His people, through which we become the friends of God. The Second Vatican Council proclaimed that 'by this revelation, the invisible God, from the fullness of His love, addresses men and women as His friends and lives among them, in order to invite them and receive into His own company'... Words of friendship are more radically transformative than orders which demand submission. Even the commandments in Scripture can only be understood aright if we see them as

spoken in friendship, forming us to encounter the one who said to the disciples, 'I call you friends' (Jn 15.15)'.

Biblical Scholar Łukasz Popko from Poland in his 40s and well known UK writer, former head of the Dominican Order, Timothy Radcliffe in his 70s jokingly describe themselves as like Samuel and Eli as they explore scripture together in fruitful conversation. The book is hampered to a degree by its being an email exchange but in this exchange they expound richly Biblical conversations from Adam and Cain to Peter and Paul. I liked the way this conversation with scripture weaves in and out of big issues in society and the Church today as in this quotation from the chapter on Jacob's wrestling with God and seeking his name: 'Might it be that those who must raise the question of God's identity are those who have been somehow searching for their own? Rabid nationalistic or fundamentalist religion cements people sure of who they are to a God made in their own image and likeness'. Or from Christ's dialogue with Pilate: 'The war against Ukraine is a terrible revelation of what happens when the truth is lost. Today there is a battle within Russia, and it is over the truth... George Orwell foresaw this in his novel 1984, published in 1949. He portrayed a world in which the government declares that war is peace, freedom is slavery and ignorance is strength'.

Both writers are allied to the determination of Pope Francis to open up in the Roman Catholic Church what is called the 'synodal path' awkward as that is proving to be with existing internal divisions. 'How can a liberation theologian and a fervent supporter of the Tridentine Mass be at ease in conversation with each other?... painful, challenging conversations must happen if the Church is to be renewed! In our Catholic tradition, a heretic is not someone who has got everything wrong but, usually, someone who has got one thing right at the expense of other truths, like the third-century theologians who so loved the humanity of Christ that they denied his Divinity or the other way around. A heretic is someone who bangs on about something true to the exclusion of other aspects of the mystery'. An illuminating thought on how to both challenge and learn from 'heresy'!

Each chapter starts with a biblical conversation followed by an exchange between Łukasz and Timothy in which they bring Christian wisdom to bear on the scripture especially in a joint summary at the end of the chapter. In their summary reflection on Jonah's disconcerting experience of finding the God of Israel reaching out in mercy to Israel's enemies they quote, via Merton, Allan of Lille's conviction that God is One whose centre is everywhere and circumference nowhere. 'When Thomas Merton became a committed Christian, he wrote: 'Now I had entered into the everlasting movement of that gravitation which is the very life and spirit of God. God's own gravitation towards the depths of His own

infinite nature. His goodness without end. And God, that centre Who is everywhere, and whose circumference is nowhere, finding me.'

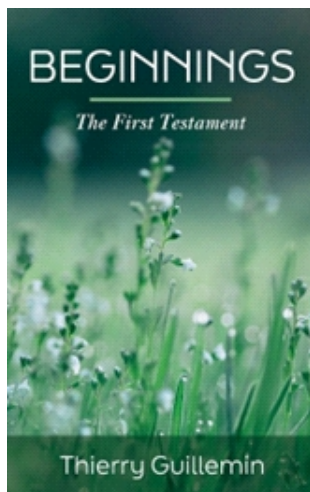
Years back Timothy Radcliffe and I met through our involvement at St John's College, Oxford across from the Dominicans at Blackfriars Hall. I valued his friendship and youthful enthusiasm, which carried many into the orbit of Christian faith, and attended his First Mass. When my vocation switched from Chemistry research to the priesthood I came to appreciate his writings. Reading 'Questioning God' written with Fr Łukasz his young companion and with sad mention of Timothy's cancer I recall him with thanksgiving. He writes how friendly dialogue enriches us and imparts youth in the spirit through its elements of surprise, revelation, discovery, disagreement, self-discovery and the search for common ground. 'When one meets the Eternal, everyone is objectively in the position of a young person. And maybe more, such a meeting can restore one's youth. Talking to God makes us young and ever younger.' It is so!

John Twisleton

Beginnings: The First Testament

Thierry Guillemin

Resource Publications, Wipf & Stock, 2023, £13, 147pp.



*In the incessant canticle of their Sanctus
the worlds remain
we move in their adoration...
witnesses to your mystery
priests forever of your closeness and your transcendence
matter appears to their word like a sacred host
creation is the consecration of their glorygiving*

Such are the angels, and such is the mystical vision of the divine in the material that runs through these poems. To render the whole sweep of the "First Testament" in verse sounds like an ambitious project, but Guillemin moves deftly across this vast mythic-historical landscape. He stops off at key points with the barest of narrative signposts, for the deep contemplation of human nature and divine longing.

From the expectant silence of "chorus of the Three" bursts a kaleidoscopic Creation, full of cosmic, mystical and musical images, the temporal universe resonant with the eternal. Hymns to the heavens give way to the child-like joy of the new-born earth and the unnamed first human. From here the descent begins,

into the ever-darkening history of a humanity at war with its origins, from the poison and worms of Eden to the destruction of Jerusalem and the desolate hope of a defeated people:

*the promise of the stars was now only the glimmer of a moan
repeated all night
every night.*

Beginnings soars high in heavenly glories and digs deep into the soil of human suffering, with the unsparing honesty of a faith that sees the one revealed in the other. It is the product, as we read in the preface, of Guillemin's time as a Carthusian monk, a life steeped in Scripture and meditation. The original French and the English translation are presented side by side, and as the author himself observes, it is the aesthetic richness and strength of emotions that survive translation best. At times the images pile up a little thickly, with some slightly awkward neologisms and syntactical contrivances, but the reflective power of the poetry still holds. There is playfulness and plenty of variety too. Contrast the hushed wonder of a child drinking in the night sky in *He Laughed with the Stars*, with the suspense thriller at the edge of the Red Sea that is *The Passing*. *The Promise*, in which Abraham stands beneath a star-filled sky, "ready to receive the weight of a divine blessing," is a gently profound meditation on faith and old age, while *The Coat* turns a ghastly, guilt-ridden nightmare into an offer of mercy and a direct challenge to the reader.

It is Guillemin's intent that we need not know the Bible to understand these poems, but there are some poignant insights if we do. Just before he dies, far from Eden, Adam laments, "My God, my God, why did I leave you? I didn't understand what I knew." On the bleak mountain-top of Isaac's dread and his father's silence at the brink of ritual infanticide, the stone altar stands, "like a frozen eye staring at the sky, begging for meaning." That meaning is always on the horizon in the shape of the Cross, sometimes explicitly, this First Testament being read very much in the light of the Second. There is no escapism here – victory is love in agony. This seems impossible to accept in *The Mound of Soil*, which sees Adam and Eve in utter devastation, wracked by the murder of one son by the other and tempted to murder in response. But as Jacob discovers in *The Wrestling with the Angel*, the only way to win is to yield:

*Only the wound of the vulnerable
in the confessed weakness
recognized as awaiting a healing
the concession of the limit
lays the end of the fight*

*Victory was in defeat accepted
surrender in the hands of the Dawn Messenger
who renews everything*

This is Christian meditation in all its painful honesty – the faithful struggle to let go of survival and let in Love.

Jude, nov.CR



Please direct all materials, enquiries and comments to the editor, Fr George Guiver CR at gguiver@mirfield.org.uk

Articles for consideration should be sent at least 5 weeks before the issue date.

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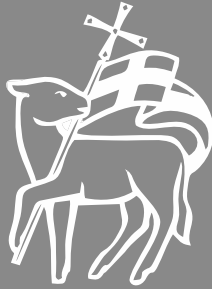
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www.mirfield.org.uk

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