

**Wisdom on the Way: 11th July
Douai Abbey**

Companion Georgie Heskins writes:

Douai Abbey is set in mown lawns and spacious beds of variously-coloured lavender, which wafted its scent towards us as we arrived for Wisdom on the Way. We were greeted by the Guestmaster, Father Finbar Kiely, who told us that **St Benedict**, the founder of western monasticism, merits two feast days: one was today, 11th July, the other always falls in Lent, a welcome break from fasting. Body and spirit: today, he says, we will primarily be nourished interiorly.

Brother Christopher Greener gave us an absorbing overview of the book, *Western Mysticism* by Dom Cuthbert Butler, originally published in 1922. For Brother Christopher this is an excellent introduction to three great spiritual masters: **Augustine, Gregory and Bernard of Clairvaux**, incorporating much primary material, allowing them to speak for themselves. He spoke of the influence of Pseudo-Dionysius in forging a new way of thinking about God, by linking beyond-beingness with unrestricted being and God's transcendent love seen in vulnerability. All Christian mysticism and contemplative life comes to us via Pseudo-Dionysius. Bernard and Gregory typify this in their insistence on Jesus Christ at the heart of life – and on the practice of *Lectio Divina*.

The argument of Butler's book is that **Gregory (540-604)** and **Bernard (1090-1153)** – influenced by Cassian - take western mysticism into a more devotional

direction – less bookish, more a 'holy life' – in which intellectual knowledge was seen as a distraction. To illustrate this, he introduced a clip from the film '**Brother Sun and Sister Moon**' (1972) directed by Franco Zeffirelli, saying that because Zeffirelli's research was so painstaking, the scenes show the strong influence of these masters of prayer. For instance, in Francis' experience of conversion and his running through the countryside 'like a hart' from **Augustine's** commentary on Psalm 42, 'light' and 'light through clouds' from **Gregory**, 'the gift of tears' from **Desert Fathers and Mothers**, and 'the prayer of poor people' – showing 'devotion' as the way to divine union from **Bernard**. As the film moves from church to countryside, so God is experienced in the wonder of creation.



In discussion afterwards: on sentimentality in the presentation of nature, we spoke of **RS Thomas** on the darkness of creation; and of pain, loss and powerlessness as models of devotion. We considered, with Brother Christopher, that the film is one interpretation of the Franciscan interweaving of the traditions of western spirituality with 'the Sacrament of the Book of Creation'.

Now/Here walk: we moved through the monastery garden for the Lord's Prayer, in action and chant, in a grove – and before the crucifix. Philip asked us to reflect, as we walked, on power and powerlessness. On – and out of the monastery grounds – where our attention was caught by a red kite swooping in flight on the warm air. After recent reading of Hopkins' *Windhover*, I was immediately struck by our morning's reflections on prayer and creation.



The poet goes out one morning and sees the kestrel hovering on the wind – and is transfixed by its beauty. The windhover sits, suspended in a moment of concentrated attention. Something amazing is described when body, will and action are brought into alignment in prayer – and especially as we see them portrayed in the life of Jesus: '*a billion times more lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!*' – the one who dives with consciousness and total control, becomes

dangerous; and of course they/we go after him. The bird becomes the prey; there is bloodshed. Nature is not sentimental.



(Douai Abbey)

After lunch we headed for the library. The '**Wintour Vestments**' exhibition commemorates 400 years of the Community since its foundation in Paris in 1615. The extraordinarily intricate designs were thought to have been embroidered about 1650 by Lady Helen Wintour, daughter of one of the Gunpowder Plot conspirators. This is now disputed by the Broderers Company – on the grounds that she was a woman! Considering the formidable portraits of nuns looking down on the exhibition, this seemed a brave challenge. We saw an impressive sculpture of '*Christ amidst the Flames*'; it caught the attention of those of us from Contemplative Fire.

We ended our day together reflecting more generally on developments within CF, some silence - and further sharing of our wrestling with issues of 'power and powerlessness' within CF, on behalf of the wider church and in the world. Philip suggested the titles of two books:

McGilchrist, Iain (2009): *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*. New Haven/London: Yale University Press

Laloux, Frederic (2014): *Reinventing Organizations: A Guide to Creating Organizations Inspired by the Next Stage of Human Consciousness*. Brussels: Nelson Parker

**Quotes from Western Mysticism by
Cuthbert Butler (1922 and 2012)**

“In slanting or splayed windows, that part by which the light enters is narrow, but the inner part which receives the light is wide; because the minds of those that contemplate, although they have but a slight glimpse of the true light, yet are they enlarged within themselves with a great amplitude. For even the little they see, they are scarcely able to hold.” St Gregory the Great

“As soon as the mind begins to raise itself, and to be inundated with the light of interior quiet, the turmoil of thoughts soon comes back and it is thrown into disorder...” St Gregory the Great

“There are two kinds of transport in holy contemplation: the one in the intellect, the other in the heart; the one in light, the other in fervour; the one in discernment, the other in devotion.” St Bernard

*“For by unceasing and absolute withdrawal from thyself and all things in purity, abandoning all and set from all, thou wilt be borne up to the ray of the divine Darkness that surpasseth all being.”
Pseudo-Dionysius*

*“Seek the sweet perfumes of virtue...and endeavour to employ yourselves in them... that your conscience may everywhere be fragrant with the perfumes of piety, of peace, of gentleness, of justice, of obedience, of cheerfulness, of humility.”
St Bernard*

“When shall the mind experience affection like this, so that, inebriated with divine love, forgetful of self, and become to its own self like a broken vessel, it may utterly pass over into God, become one spirit with Him?” St Bernard

**Reflections on the CF North
Pilgrimage to Now/Here, Longshaw,
Derbyshire 20th June**

Companion Jacky Stride shares:

We were delighted and privileged to have Susan Fogarty, a Companion from North Wales, with us to share her knowledge and insightful reading of RS Thomas' poetry both indoors and in the wild landscape around Longshaw. I have always been familiar with one or two of the poems of RS, but Susan opened up a whole new world, telling us about his life, interspersed with readings of poems which brought everything to life for me.



In the morning we sat amongst the huge boulders gazing at the view across the moor while she read *“The View from the Window”*, as the view of the moor, framed by our vision, shifted and changed with the wind and passing clouds, even revealing a Bright Field to us in the distance:

*“All through history
The great brush has not rested,
Nor the paint dried; yet what eye,
Looking coolly, or, as we are now,
Through the tears' lenses, ever saw
This work and it was not finished?”*

In the afternoon we walked out to an area of wonderfully twisted and shaped ancient trees, rubbed with wool from the sheep, while Susan read again to us and we drank in the words, rhythm and sights around us.



At the end of the day someone requested *“The Other”* with which I was not familiar but absolutely loved. I reproduce it in full here and the line “letting our prayers break on him” will remain with me for ever:

*“There are nights that are so still
that I can hear the small owl calling
far off and the fox barking
miles away. It is then that I lie
in the lean hours awake and listening
to the swell born somewhere in the
Atlantic
rising and falling, rising and falling
wave on wave on the long shore
by the village, that is without light
and companionless. And the thought
comes
of that other being who is awake, too,
letting our prayers break on him,
not like this for a few hours,
but for days, years, for eternity.”*

Thank you so much, Susan, for a very different and very wonderful day.

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Thank you to Diane Rutter for offering to link with the four Canadian Companions – Rev Myrna Gadsby, Phil and Manuela Cheney and Hugh Crosthwait - coming to the Community Weekend.

Early years of CF

Over the years, a number of people have suggested to Philip that, as founder of Contemplative Fire, it would be good if he could tell the story of the early years of our community. He and Jill have been mastering the art of editing recorded interviews/ conversations. Having been “interviewed” by Gill Greenwood on the roots of CF whilst in Sheffield, Philip is inviting a few others who have been involved in CF from its launch to record with him their own stories of inspiration and engagement. Philip and Jill hope shortly to send out an email to all Companions with a link to the first of these interviews. We hope that the interviews will subsequently be available on the CF website.



St Non's Retreat, July 2016

“Coming home to yourself and God” led by Jacky Stride & Paul Arnesen

“Paul and Jacky's leadership was very gentle and spacious. A much appreciated recuperation and spiritual ‘bath’.”

“I always enjoy the silence of retreats and ... the views were stimulating. However for me the major value of the retreat was the Mixed Threes group which was formed on the first night and met for 2 hours...(and) Compline every evening.”

“Having the retreat take place at St Non's is also a great blessing for us.” Sr Anna

Contemplative Fire 2016 Whole Community dates

Wisdom on the Way:

Saturdays 12 March, 14 May, 9 July, 12 November 2016; 9.30 for 10.00am till 3.00pm. Unless otherwise notified, these will be held in our usual venue of Waltham Place apart from Saturday 9 July which will again be held in Douai Abbey, near Reading, Berkshire.

CF Retreat:

4-8 July in Parcevall Hall, Appletreewick, Skipton, North Yorkshire, BD23 6DG www.parcevallhall.org.uk co-led by Jacky Stride and Ali Dorey, both Companions from CF North.

Community Weekend:

10-11 September at Felden Lodge, with the option of staying on the night of Friday 9 September.

