



Novice Sister Elizabeth  
Society of the Sacred Cross  
Tymawr Convent  
Lydart  
Nr Monmouth  
Gwent  
NP25 4RN

Dear Ffriends,

A Sunday evening in November; a silent convent, hard pears cooking all night in the Aga. Predictably Catrin set this letter up on her last visit here, and did the photo sheet. (You should have seen the time it took me to add five extra photos in a very unsophisticated manner to this letter, but I couldn't resist them!) Unless stated 'photo' refers to the photo sheet, the one Catrin did.. Mair came recently, on her bike, (could we live further down the hill?) fitting in a visit in her busy gap year which has taken in all corners of Britain, three bits of France including a fortnight in Taize, Lebanon (photo), Syria, Shetlands (photo, dancing), Sweden, Norway, Finland, Belgium – and the Scillies, nearly all of it working on the land, having got her doctorate early in the year. She has also had two silent retreats, in Taize and in England with Carmelites, and a couple of Quaker events, one in the Middle East. Catrin is up to her eyes in ballet exams – 8 classes a week this term (photo). So both are extremely fit, and Pete too who has been involved in sport, tap and running and cycling. Catrin and Pete both had a wonderful week in Taize (photo), and on walking breaks (photo) and Catrin had another wonderful week at Iona Abbey. Mair said firmly when she visited, that she thought I would get more nun like, but I only got more 'me'! She visited some absolutely amazing monasteries in the Middle East, built into the sides of sandstone mountains in the desert; she actually got to stay in one run by Jesuits who welcome Muslims too in the place of prayer. See below in this letter for photo of desert monastery and Mair in Syrian mountains.

As you will see from the postal address I am still here and now in a habit (photo; and note that if I am holding two plates of cakes I am not also eating them!). Sr Veronica Ann said I looked as if I was **born** in it, 'but not in a veil,' said Pip promptly! Novices don't wear veils, and I have come to see that as a bonus: I can enjoy looking up at the peregrines on the roof of Lincoln Cathedral without the veil falling off! Other photos include two of Novices, a motley crew which includes five nationalities, four men, three parents, two priests and one wimple. We had a week full of joy, and also with many stories of Tears and Packing ones Bags! My fellow Novice, Rosalind, is second from left. And of Tymawr, the view down from the guest house, summer and winter, and the Society. The photos indoors include the wider family which is such an essential part of the whole set up, in one Sr Veronica Ann is talking to an associate priest who comes for a long weekend a month, and with another priest, the one who sent me here; a nun is talking to an associate who made my habit and gives us talks on art and spirituality, once showing us a few of the 1300 pictures of 'The Prodigal Son', an oblate is there who comes every fortnight, an associate who represents the community on various things. In another picture Lois is sitting, she comes for a week every month, and does mountains of work in the office. As well as living the life. Below on this letter itself is the view from my bedroom in winter – I love sitting by my window. The chapel photo isn't very old but sadly several of those Sisters have died. We live in the shadow of that crucifix which the sun lights up sometimes. The nun in the brown habit is one of very many nuns (and monks) who come here, for holidays, in retreat, for quiet days, to visit ... enclosed nuns are allowed to holiday here and others have their community retreat here, one wrote her MA thesis here, one convalesced ...

There is something quite extraordinary about this place. The community is tiny and could well get tinier. We don't do guided retreats, in theory, (I have), or spiritual direction, we see very little of the visitors, almost nothing of those who come for the day to what used to be the print house and is now a lovely chalet with glorious picture windows. And yet, and yet, we get letter after letter after letter from people who have come and been blessed and healed, for whom the visit has been so life-giving, even (literally) life saving. Tymawr is so much bigger than the people living here. And that itself is a very variable number in various ways, for a start, apart from the core community, two live at the lodge and run the vege garden and much besides, there is Jack, a ((chatty) anchorite in a caravan, then a number of people who just come and live here for weeks, or months for every variety of reason, including at the Community's request. For me, then, community life is not just living with my Sisters, but also with all the others who come for their differing reasons and live and work in the enclosure. That means two groups trying to live together, with different

ways of life, Rule and expectations and assumptions. Perhaps one of the most disconcerting, for both groups, is the way communities, even this one, have a hierarchy, and also a system of people doing their own jobs, rather than just helping out when and where they see the need. And of course normal people working together round a kitchen table chat! It is not new; this community once ran a project for a year where Sisters and non Sisters lived together - prophetic. Now it isn't exactly planned: and just as some, mostly Evangelical, groups don't know where the next loaf of bread is coming from but live in faith, so we don't know where the next pair of hands is coming from (and also live in faith and for today!) It exciting, enriching, and difficult! And all that too for those who come and stay here, so if you feel like being excited, enriched and challenged – young or old, male or female, married or single – get in touch. This community has undergone and is undergoing so much pain and grief and yet the joy is just wonderful!

Meanwhile I am a novice, one of two, and continuing to learn to live the Religious Life. There have been some difficult times, of course, as everyone has, but unless I am otherwise required, (I have nursed two dying Sisters,) my job is to give myself wholeheartedly to living the day to day life. Someone commented it consisted largely of 'puddings and teas', well yes it does, (and mops and cleaning-up-after-cats) but the very intense internal journey is something other. And the numbers for puddings and teas go up and down right up to and even during the meals! However somehow I managed to do the work and study necessary, with the guidance of a senior nurse, to maintain my nursing registration. (I did my PREP on 'the Liverpool Care Pathway, multidisciplinary document for the last days of life', which we have used here.)

So the themes here are of loss, trust and joy; of being a (very) round peg in a round hole, and of relationships, relationships and relationships. One of my favourite images was: 'Moses took off his sandals in God's presence because he was encountering the Divine and the ground he was standing on was holy. We too are called to remember that we encounter the Divine in each other and our interactions are 'holy ground,' a fact which may be obscured in the moment, but which is none the less fundamental to our existence.' Trouble is, when someone is driving me up the wall it doesn't feel one bit divine, I just get angry! (I expect when I am driving *them* up the wall it doesn't feel divine either!)

'I love people so terribly because in every human being I love something of You' wrote a young woman, a Jewess who suffered every indignity heaped upon her race, from having to walk miles because not allowed to cycle or bus, just because she was Jewish, to not being allowed in greengrocers, to living in a crowded and degrading transit camp witnessing endless horrors, to dying at Auschwitz. Yet she really did keep on seeing meaning and beauty in life, and the Divine in others, wanting to find a home for her beloved, God, in as many souls as possible. I defy anyone to read properly the diaries of Etty Hillesum and still believe Christianity is the only way. While in a horror camp she wrote 'You have made me so rich, O God, please let me share out Your beauty with open hands...' She also LIVED her certainty that if you respond to evil with violence you just make the world worse, and the only way of making it better is to deal with, all the time, the violence within ourselves, which we project on to others and then condemn. Unsurprisingly her writing is not as popular as Anne Frank's. Our community retreat was based on Charles de Foucauld, whose first mature understanding of the reality God came from seeing Muslims living their faith.

On the 'head' end, it seems for me to have been the Bible. We read a lot of it for a start, 5 or 6 long readings daily in chapel. And a read 'homily' normally on the Gospel, several times a week, a spoken homily on the Gospel, plus the meditation 'Lectio' also on the gospel. Since we get at least one reading from Matthew, Mark, Luke or John per day, often two, and the gospels are quite short, we hear them often with many rich and varied sermons and interpretations of them, complementary, not alternative interpretations. And constantly more accurate translations, some important changes, never complete of course. Stunningly rich. Sadly I can only remember a fraction of what is said, but even then, so many ideas. Did you know Jesus couldn't have said 'Be ye perfect', the word doesn't exist in Aramaic. The local bishop did a 5 week Lenten course on St John, giving his hearers the tools with which to think intelligently about the meaning of those ancient words to us now, how we could respond to them now. A tiny taste of the hundreds we have heard: the sower – God – pointed out one priest, was very prodigal, just throwing out seed wherever! (We had 3 totally different sermons on that passage in a week) Or the shepherd who left his 99 sheep will in fact have been with a group of shepherds; or the one about leaving father and mother, which clearly means something quite literal to a Hindu convert, was taken by a very well known writer to mean finally learning, decades later, to stop doing things in order to please his internalized parents, or the bit about the lion lying down with the lamb taken to be integrating the aggressive and peaceful bits of ourselves, or the man who buried his one talent could have been sacrificing gain for integrity: usury was illegal, and the nobleman in the wrong. Etc etc. I wish I remembered more. Every time our

Warden comes he asks how my studies are going – and gets a wry smile ... (The Sisters of course have been getting this input for decades and are still listening with open hearts and minds.)

My particular book of the year, and I am re-reading it, actually spoke not to my head but straight to my heart, the writings of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, 'Come be my Light'. The reviews I had read put me off, but no review did it justice and I can't either. It is deeper than its Catholic theology, than its proselytizing, than its pain, than everything I can put into words, so I won't! But like Etty, like Jean Vanier, like Richard Wurmbrand, she loves God, and God in each of us, loving without miracles or ecstasy, or anything to explain it. No 'cupboard love'. That to me means so much. Everything in fact. "If ever I become a Saint," she wrote "I will surely be one of 'darkness.' I will continually be absent from Heaven – to light the light of those in darkness on earth."

Here at Tymawr, the Society of the Sacred Cross, we live 'with Mary, at the foot of the cross', and have to learn ever more deeply the meaning of this. Mother Teresa wrote "**It is not really how much we 'have' to give – but how empty we are – so that we can receive fully in our life and let Him live His life in us.**" And *that* is the only way, I find anyway, it would be possible to love those I cannot love myself, to see them through his eyes. And that is a long long journey. So when I set about painting two parts of a prayer: 'Christ take my emptiness, may it be a space for you' and 'and may I encounter you in everyone I meet,' both parts actually are saying the same thing, because it is only Christ in me that sees the divine in every one I meet. (So I only did one painting in the end.) Ironically I found it much easier to see 'that of God' in my inmates than in ordinary folk that drive me up the wall in the ordinary way! I wonder whether at the jail there was a bit of 'them and us' involved that made it less threatening?

As I write, our beloved Superior has been very ill for some time. We, the community, have had the pain of watching her suffer while her expressed needs have not been met. Pity and helplessness are very painful emotions. I knew from early on that my job was 'to give myself entirely to my Rule (the Life) in the circumstances in which God has placed me (which is here in these circumstances)' and that is what I have tried to do, have done in fact, but with inner struggle and failure that are shown up by Sr Veronica Ann's lived holiness. So I did glow a bit when Mother wrote in her Advent letter "It is so good to know that the Life of prayer and total commitment goes on here faithfully day by day."



Missing from the photo collection is also this picture of my father's 96<sup>th</sup> birthday lunch, with Betty, myself, Helen and Anthony, (who took the photo), and friend Lorna. But now, rising 97, he is finally aging, and struggling rather and Helen has found him help. And predictably I have the anguish of divided loyalties. With the computer Mair cobbled together for use in his house, I must have shown him hundreds and hundreds of photos of all sorts, his son, his grandsons, his great grandchildren, Mair's travels, Catrin's travels – she shows him videos of her dancing too. We gave him Obama's autobiography and he commented that "every man of stature wants to be the most powerful man in the world." I said that I meet some men of stature that don't. Then we went to see some friends in the village and Julian produced a book of Jean Vannier's writings. There is a man of stature who doesn't want to be the most powerful man in the world, and whose life is devoted to sharing his appreciation of the gift we could each receive from disabled, rejected and vulnerable people, a gift that only they can give us. Son of the Governor General of Canada, trained for the British navy at Dartmouth, accompanying the Royals to South Africa; a man of stature; he founded L'Arche, homes where healthy and disabled people live together in community, and it is the Assistants who are on the receiving end. Jean Vannier wrote "**We discover how we can be healed by those who are the most vulnerable. It's not a question of going out and doing good to them; rather, receiving the gift of their presence transforms us.**" And "Their presence is a sign of God, who has chosen 'the foolish in order to confound the strong, the proud, and the so-called wise of our world.' And so those we see as weak or marginalized are, in fact, the most worthy and powerful among us: they bring us closer to God. They turn our world upside down!" The other Novice

here has worked in L'Arche Brecon, and a friend, who is staying here for a month at a time while on Sabbatical, has worked for L'Arche for 30 years, a good many latterly in India.

CSMV have had another difficult year, but survived, and introduced a pretty new website, very romantic. I can hardly believe I lived there for two years. Their former Novice Sr Helena is now Sister Bernadette, N.OSB, in Benedictine black (in the States). I don't know about her but I still use all the time everything I learned there, with gratitude. And pray for them.

I have managed to see quite a few of my friends, some here, some elsewhere, though we only get two weeks leave here annually and no post-Christmas break, but I do still get a full free day off a week; I try to use one a month for a retreat day, and one or two to visit my father. One goddaughter got married and went to New York, one moved to a nice house in the country, one has been very ill but is hopefully slowly recovering, my godson hasn't moved but has trained in horticulture and has grown into a sensitive and friendly young man, in spite of having to cope with some big difficulties. Pip has been here, and I have been to her, and she fits a month of living into every week, and is enjoying a gorgeous grandson. Her home remains home to my daughters (as well as hers) and me when I am not here. Always welcoming, always.

The liturgy slowly slowly I think does bring about change, and I have learnt a few more favourite bits that I cling to, I put them in because you just might see something that speaks to you, and I have the rest of this piece of paper!

**So, with that, this comes to wish you many many blessings at Christmas and in the year to come,**

with love from Lizzie/Elizabeth

#### **From the liturgy:**

Let us pray with one heart and mind...  
As we rejoice in the gift of this new day  
so may the light of your presence, O God,  
set our hearts on fire with love for you.

As we stand at the foot of the cross of your Son,  
Help us to see and know your love for us,  
So that in humility, love and joy  
We may place at his feet  
All that we have and all that we are

Set me as a seal upon your heart  
As a seal upon your arm,  
For love is strong as death,  
Passion as fierce as the grave,  
Its flashes are flashes of fire,  
A raging flame

God of truth,  
We have seen with our eyes and touched with our hands the bread of life.  
Strengthen our faith so that we may grow in love for you and for each other.

Lord God we give you thanks for all your saints  
Who sought the trackless footprints of your feet;  
Who took into their own a hand unseen  
And heard a voice whose silence was complete.

The call is the enabling gift  
That fires the life of charity

**And from the Rule:**... receive with thankfulness whatever God sends through joy and suffering.