

Catrin Taylor (strictly SAEs only please!)
25 The Valls
Bradley Stoke
BS32 8AW

Lizzie Allen-Williams
St Mary's Convent
Wantage
Oxon
OX12 9DJ

Summer 2006

Dear Friends,

I owe so many folk letters or cards that I am writing a round robin again. I love hearing from you. I have a retreat day a month (plus community retreats) and my offering is not to read or write letters. But I do check out the postbox and it's like having chocolates in the cupboard!

Reason for unusual reticence is... time (and one should never be seen to hurry). I have space in the afternoons – space to be filled – singing (x2), weekly interview with Novice Guardian (or Mother in her absence), preparing special liturgy/meditations, gardening (my choice), study (Desert Fathers), translating a book from Taizé (my choice) – early in my prison career I found I'd forgotten a lot of French, so, sat down and mugged up medical French, then 'Discipline' French (have you committed rape, arson, or murder?), adjudication French (bullying) and later, deportation French. It's not very useful for translating a devotional book on encountering Jesus, using icons!! – also spiritual reading, cleaning chores, haircut and shops for necessities, making all cards (profession anniversaries etc), visiting speakers – a Quaker, Laurie Michaelis, who wrote that he was 'excited to find a part of the Anglican church I could relate to spiritually', from Oxford – on Ecology, and Joanna Cotteril on Luke (both superb), plus family take precedence of course. Both girls & my father come here. And I went to Catrin's lovely, cheerful, prayerful, loving wedding (for those of you with a computer, photos are at <http://wedding.fluffles.com>).

I've been here 6 months. When I first stepped into the Novitiate pew we were five. Now we are two. The discernment process by the community and by those of us in the Novitiate is constant. Reflection on whether we are flourishing, growing into God, growing in love, suited to this rather traditional Community... it has little to do with competence & skills.

And, because we're human, it ain't easy and maybe not perfect. I remember an exercise on a course where we were put in pairs. A made a statement to B, B reflected it back, A said whether B had understood accurately. In that ideal situation we were a bit wrong nearly all the time... and as God is "immortal, invisible...hid from our eyes" it isn't easy! All complicated by the mystery of vocation, 'mysterious because we cannot explain how the sense of it comes, or the strange conviction it can bring'.

As a Postulant I've only reiterated baptismal promises. I hear the Rule daily and have a 'Customary' (it is our custom to...). Of course I try to live the life but I've made no promises (so technically I could go and buy that bar of chocolate. So far the freedom to do so is enough and I bet when I lose that freedom I'll DREAM of chocolate!). Postulancy is about a year and if it is thought to be right, I would then be 'clothed in the habit', deprived of my cheque book and become a Novice.

You may be wondering how come I'm still here. I'm not very religious, actually, in the conventional sense - we were doing something tonight and I said "Do you want a candle?"
Reply: "It's the tradition."
Me: "I didn't ask that."

We didn't have a candle!

- and I'm woefully ignorant besides this lot. Nowhere else ever have I heard extempore prayer in Latin! And I've been told to learn the Greek alphabet! That was because I met chunks of untranslated Greek and Latin in my book on the Jewish background to Christian liturgy. Knowledge isn't encounter, but finding that virtually all our liturgy is of Jewish origin has helped me understand the particular form of worship here. Handy, since I spend a fair bit of time doing it. I learned to my surprise that all but one phrase of the Lord's Prayer is Jewish (and also one of my favourite sayings.. 'When two or three are gathered together..'. And the feeding of the 5000 is a repeat of an Old Testament story, even the baskets of leftovers. But the use made of old symbols is wonderful. The Sacred Heart was not a favourite, but the liturgy shines :) (We use a lot of flame and fire images and they speak to me deeply);

"As Moses in the bush aflame
First learned the mystery of God's flame
We, in the furnace of the heart
Behold, O Jesus, what thou art"

"What can we do to become flaming souls..."; "Inflame our hearts with love."; "The well of life and fire of love."

I have learned a few foreign words, because I meet them so often, one being 'Kenosis', absolutely central here – self emptying (of Jesus also) – put bluntly: trying to clear the rubbish out of the way so God can work through us. Sounds easy, sounds boring – actually it's neither. Life here is totally absorbing, exciting, fun and simultaneously results in cries of 'ouch'. Such is the paradox of Christianity anywhere, or perhaps of any life really lived.

It has been fun seeing how different strands meet – I remember my sister-in-law Liz saying (in Church) she and I had come along totally different routes & seem to have arrived at the same place.

Mother Maribel: It is only through this self emptying that we can become really empty enough for God to fill

David Watson: Fellowship begins when we meet at the point of weakness..finding ourselves at the foot of the Cross

Mother Maribel: 'God doesn't need us to be adequate.' Just as well, but actually difficult to accept. I've just rung the Angelus very badly and undercooked some of the potatoes. Oh well, I drew a picture of the offending bell flying away! And there were spare, beautiful potatoes.

Plainsong actually represents something of the ethos (but not the bit about not needing to be adequate) – as well as being, for me, a totally new skill (not yet acquired)! You can sing anything to it, even this letter, if you divided each sentence in two and gave a Sister two numbers, say, tone 8, ending 1, and away she'd go. Unfortunately there are a good many possible endings to the various tones, several dozen, so I can't learn to associate a given melody with the words – it might be tone 5 ending 2 another day. Even hymns are sung to different tunes on different days. Feast days mean lovely singing now as well as cake for tea!! And a sermon, and they are all great to listen to (and printed, in case we doze off?!). Plainsong is prayer not performance, sung in unison as we are united. The essential skill, very much in keeping with our life, is to listen. With no instrument you listen for pace, note, pauses, everything, in order to stay together.

This attentive listening, and recollectedness, flows through everything. So if you were here at midday as the silence time ends, you wouldn't notice. We continue working carefully and quietly, focused. One is supposed to 'keep custody of the eyes' – especially in chapel and the refectory, yet be aware of the needs of the people around you which really does require concentration – good peripheral vision is a help too, and sharp hearing.

I always was reflective, but certainly not 'recollected', very scattered in fact. But I'm learning. It affects everything from the way we hold our books in chapel, the way we sit, eat stand, walk and work, to tidiness (!!!!!) and punctuality. Mair has also tidied up and, finding a ticket, remembered giving the police who thought she was running away, my work number. She forgot to tell them I was known just as Liz Williams, and forgot to mention where it was... "Lincoln Prison, nobody of that name here...!"

So, bit by bit – haven't got to my drawers yet! However, when I bumped into a door the other day I actually noticed. That's new! It's all about Living the life, and the issue is not what we do but how and why we do it. So there is space, perhaps for God to get a word in edgeways.

I hope in these two things, afternoons and plainsong, I've given some insight into two very different aspects of community life. Thankfully at the moment those who are in a position to do so feel this is where I should be even if I'm not traditional. That doesn't mean it's always sunshine and roses. I'm a lot less trusting than most of the Sisters. Nevertheless it was a CSMV Sister who wrote a poem that expresses what I often feel, so sometimes the Sisters too must wonder. She addressed it to Mary... (smile, Oblates)

“...our request shall be to share
Your single heart,
And silence, and your readiness to bear
The burden of the unexplained
By which we are perplexed and pained
Right from the start.”

Last time I mentioned 'Knowing Jesus' by James Alison. I said I'd been looking at it for 20 years. Actually it's more like 40, I think, and with it an idea so logical that only stupid me wouldn't have thought of it. A sister said that in the early days she was aware of her sins, but later should be considering her sinfulness. I've always wrestled with this 'white as snow' business, having been forgiven, knowing the problems stem from what I am and after confession I'm still that. It is also possible I hurt someone who is still hurt. I know I have friends who have a far deeper understanding of all these things, liturgy, spirituality and Bible; perhaps that's why I got sent to a Convent. But I've written one thing that has been helpful for one.

Hiroshima day (when I wrote the first draft of three). Quakers will have been having similar thoughts to our Chaplain, who preached, although the Anglican church celebrates the Transfiguration at the same time, and he did bring in all the lectionary readings. Poignantly the news spoke of children of different religions being taught to hate each other. We haven't got far in the last two thousand years. Archbishop Rowan's statements get printed out – a few more people with his fantastically astute prophetic vision and real compassion would be a Good Thing. We recently had a Burmese bishop staying. Some of his diocese is 3 weeks walk away. He is allowed an elephant but there weren't any where he grew up so he doesn't know how to, and anyway he'd be lonely as it's only the Bishop who gets one!

We come from a huge variety of theological backgrounds and varied approaches to the Bible. But with such quantities of information available one is obliged to consider – we meet bits of it

at least 6 times a day and get all biblical scholarship. We do not 'feed our enemies to the dogs,' but we do sing 'break their teeth O Lord' – so Quakers will know why I volunteered to lead *that* discussion! The lectionary has thrown up a lot of Old Testament. Ahab sinned, God threatened him with dire punishment, Ahab repented. God forgave him and said he'd punish his son instead... Occasionally a Sister will substitute 'Lord have Mercy' for 'This is the Word of the Lord' at the end of the reading.

Both girls get about; since I've been here Catrin has managed a dance show (organising, choreographing, teaching, dancing), finals, graduating, moving house, taking cousin to the Dales, Paris, Taizé (I am so glad to be absorbing the wonderful warm, welcoming and loving Taizé spirituality from the book I'm translating. Reminds me of the old story that Australians keep their cows in by building wells not fences).. and getting married & going to Mauritius. Mair too: Scotland, Germany, Holland, Annecy, cycling to Geneva (& Meeting there), Swiss mountains, ringing, and doing some exciting cooking involving painting over blackberries on the ceiling [ed: Not her fault!], and carrying 82kg+herself on her bike – and rehabilitating home made bread out of the bath (!!), finishing her 9 month report and passing her Viva. They do a fair bit together too; Shakespeare, friends, beach walks...

So here we are. My first leave in late Autumn will be spent with my father, and I won't be going anywhere else. The girls will come there, and my father is already planning the menu!

It was gorgeous to see some of you at Catrin's wedding. Thank you Catrin & Peter. Postulants are not normally let loose during the first six months! (I wasn't allowed to an art exhibition, on the other hand I live in an art exhibition!) We've had a very festive week in fact, courtesy of St Mary. Barbecue, picnic, our own exhibition, DIY entertainment including circle dance – "I didn't know someone so large would be able to move so beautifully", said several Sisters. Um, well, the large bit perhaps not helped by 8 days of honey, cake and chocolate biscuits! :) (And no, it wasn't 'grand allegro!')

A lovely image: A not very tall elderly Sister grew some amazing sunflowers, twelve foot tall, my father reckoned.

Picture one: Sister standing beside them looking up and saying 'they've grown to heaven.'

Picture two: Sister with a saw cutting one.

Picture three: Sister walking into the convent using it as a walking stick!

Enjoy! (I've got to pick the last two myself!)

And I always love to hear your news – was particularly touched to have 3 letters from the younger generation recently (not my daughters [ed: but we do write to her too!]) Re said daughters, one Sister to another: "She's been well trained by her daughters" !! My very favourite address is:

'Sister Lizzy (in training)
Community of St Mary the Virgin (CSMV)
WANTAGE
(10 miles from Didcot Parkway?)'

That had to be a cyclist. It was :)

- Lizzie

PS. I got in a muddle so if you missed the last and would like to see it, it's on www.allen-williams.com/lizzie, or ask me directly.