

SAEs only please: (If you want a snailmail letter!)

Catrin Taylor
25 The Valls
Bradley Stoke,
Bristol BS 32 8AW

All other correspondence:

Lizzie
St Mary's Co
Wantage
Oxon OX12 9DJ



Dear Friends,

It is ages before Christmas as I start this, but I am on a week's 'leave' (known euphemistically as 'rest' – I am being wonderfully looked after by my father, but my tongue at least is working overtime! (Gave myself a sore throat, I'm not used to all this talking!)) and Catrin turned up for me with chocolates, a computer and videos, so the least I can do is a draft of a Christmas letter. I am also this week posting off the snail mail copies of the last letter!

This brings love to all, and a hug for some who may find things difficult. I myself will be at the Convent, very uncertain how that will be and delighted to find I am helping get Christmas lunch – not too much time for holy thoughts! They have agreed to let me go on line to write to my daughters during the Christmas post, otherwise I am supposed to wait until I am in a habit. My closest friend of fifty years and her family are grieving, and I didn't know what to say here but Bishop Hardy did... 'Alan was one of the most gifted and creative prison chaplains of his generation.' With others, I 'share in the sadness, grateful for Alan's encouragement, wisdom, ministry, and breadth of vision'¹. We'll be praying and many of you too (one consequence is that once again the Community has, as they did for Catrin's wedding, sent me out with their blessing and once again I will by chance therefore have seen many friends that I cannot normally see).

I have seen the Christmas programme, draft, at the Convent. We have a lot of services every day, so, I think we only get one more than usual over the whole week. We won't have carols until it **is** Christmas, but otherwise we will I am sure do a lot of the traditional things, including party food. And there'll be lots of the rather more florid plainsong we sing at festivals. I love it, not that I can sing it but I sing along with the others, **quietly** (feel in my singing lesson I must hurt the Sister's ears, particularly over one sequence, but she remains patient – said I'd got about half of it right, well she could have said I'd got about half of it wrong!) But something of what it means to me is summed up in a story which isn't setting out to be a Christmas Story, but for me is all about incarnation, bringing God's love into the world. Quoted by Timothy Radcliffe OP, who says

'Raimond Gaita once worked in a mental hospital in Australia. Most of the psychiatrists who worked there were compassionate and conscientious people. He wrote,

One day a nun came to the ward. In her middle years, only her vivacity made an impression on me until she talked to the patients. Then everything in her demeanour towards them - the way she spoke to them, her facial expressions, the inflexions of her body - contrasted with and showed up the behaviour of those noble psychiatrists. She showed that they were, despite their best efforts, condescending, as I too had been. She thereby revealed that even such patients were, as the psychiatrists and I had sincerely and generously professed, the equals of those who wanted to help them; but she also revealed that in our hearts we did not believe this.'

I have been watching 'The Convent' and I think the film shows that people living together with a lot of silence do (despite themselves in that case) become aware really quite quickly of their unconscious feelings. And get scared by that, not surprisingly really because we bury what we don't want to face, obviously: there wouldn't be any point in burying anything else! And doubtless many people neither want nor need to know that part of themselves. In the kind of traditional convent I am in, the word 'stripping' is used a lot. Technically it is for when you become a Novice, and stripping comes first, before you are given the habit, stripping of possessions (the Novice Guardian looks through with you every single thing you have, and prunes as necessary.) But it is also used emotionally, stripping of illusions about yourself, and then stripping of props, anything with which you identify beyond your own being, job success, popularity and lots of friends, knowledge and experience - they aren't wasted ultimately but part of the training is actually to let go of it (and not being allowed on the net is part of that but I terribly miss the girls' livejournals, and quick contact, and will be glad when that particular bit is over). So in prayer one just is before God undefended – well, that's the theory. And this kind of self awareness and vulnerability is one of the ways one

¹ "Canon Alan Richard Duce, who died on 29 October, aged 65, was one of the most gifted and creative prison chaplains of his generation.'(Bishop Hardy, in the Church Times)

somehow comes to see others too through God's eyes of love and compassion - as in that story. One doesn't need to be in a convent of course, and therapy certainly started me on this journey and is playing an important part now as I am asked to go back over some of it. But I think I am where I am called to be and I have to have faith that it is somehow all right for family and friends. Recently Helena and I went to an Inter-Novitiate day. As we drove out of the convent at 06.15 I said 'we have a car, money and good company, where shall we go?' We went to Ham Common. I am not yet in a habit, and it was a sign of our traditional style that Helena was the only one in a veil and I was the only person not on the net! But our training is just right for me. Well, I think it is and I don't drive the Novice Guardian mad all that often, though it has been known.

We now have a website: <http://www.csmv.co.uk>. I think it has been nicely done and is easy to view (I only got the chance myself because I had this computer at my father's!). A photo with this letter is of Novice Sister Helena - she's American and a priest, and we spend a lot of time together - quite a bit of that in silence! The white veil is only worn by Novices on the Convent premises, not even in branch houses when the black veil with white edging is worn. We can choose a blue or black habit. A habit looks like HARD WORK - however does one keep those big white collars clean, and the veil looking ironed (frequently have to scrub black veil off irons), never mind going to the loo! The scapula looks most becoming when tucked up - oops, don't suppose I'm meant to comment! As you see despite our strange ways, I'm still me! I'm not as clumsy though, anything like, though recently when distressed I managed to take someone else's communion wafer OUT of the cup (ciborium, for those who mind), instead of putting mine IN. Mercifully Helena was behind me :)

The Guest Wing is now closed on Mondays, however they stay open on Monday in Holy Week, and Easter Monday so if you want an annual long retreat you can still have it, then! Fasting on Good Friday could be included free of charge :) It's busy - lots of day groups as well as retreats. Folk can hold their own Eucharists. I know, because I get the linen to iron. One enterprising school chaplain had his group's Eucharist in the orchard. Marlborough are bringing, in groups, **80** confirmation candidates.

Parish Advent day for children. Helena and I were freed to go and help the Sister who works at the church (and school).

Intriguing contrasts - well, for me. The day for about 60 small children was built round a Eucharist, themed on 'Christmas round the world'. The big church looked like most others on such a day - small (happy) children, harassed adults, orange juice and lunch boxes, glue and colours and glittery thread, sweet making (sticky!), piano playing, drum and percussion, PowerPoint for songs - onto a wiggly pillar. But - this is an Anglo-catholic church, very, and we had the liturgy. And did it properly, over 5 hours, except the curate, Fr Nicholas, was sitting on the sanctuary steps with a stole over trousers and shirt (and dog collar). And as well as choruses, the proper responses went up on the wiggly pillar; as well as leaping up and down and clapping, the children learned "we make the sign of the cross at the start of worship". Maybe if I'd been taught when I was seven, I'd have been less anxious in chapel here! Everything was there - saying sorry, a clapping song for the Gloria, gentle singing in response to prayers, Gospel, etc. And communion itself - still done from sitting on the sanctuary steps (and he's tall - long legs to tuck away), a tiny table in front of him. Night lights in jam jars decorated by the children; Acolytes - from the group - asked to pass wine and water, and then to help him wash, as you do before a meal (albeit with an impeccably laundered lavabo towel - press the embroidery into felt to bring it 'out' when ironing!); fresh rolls for non communicants to share in their groups.

An intriguing mix of children and reverence. Reminded me of Quaker family gatherings, where the perfectly normal noisy children quite naturally gathered into the silent worship. Children seem so much more flexible than the 'grownups'!

A new Rev'd Mother was installed on 8th December - visitors, flowers, food and lots of dog-collars (& purple shirts) which will change the singing (the visitors, especially the men, not the purple shirts). And the outgoing one gets a well-earned sabbatical. Mother Elect Winsome is young, dynamic, brilliant, involved in Prison work, PhD in Theology, concerned with a particular aspect of criminal justice, an Evangelist of repute in church circles. She is totally 'given', joyous and inspiring. Referring to this 'wondrous vocation' she is the next in a line of continuously amazing Mothers. We are so lucky. And things will change - exciting, perhaps disturbing, disturbing in good ways, an adventure, and probably a series of challenges. But she also refers to embracing 'our wondrous vocation'. These start now as Mother makes her appointments so no-one knows where they will be or what they'll be doing - not comfortable for my J (Myers-Briggs). It's all good fun, and I am having to get used to not having a clue, even if I do complain vociferously. And ask a billion questions. Helena had a book for the train to London. She didn't get to read it.

I'm beginning to have some glimmerings of perhaps why I was called to the Religious Life. I was looking at some of these personality profile things – Enneagram/Myers-Briggs, applied to Gospel figures, and noticed that Jesus met each of them at their weak spot. So I looked at times I get distressed, apart from obvious ones when someone leaves, and sense too that this life hits me at my weak spots. For example someone who plans years ahead was given a vocation which starts out with 14 years of not knowing (from call in 1999 to Profession) and I'm daily in situations where I don't know what is expected of me, which makes it difficult to do! Why I should be so lucky I do not know (and I'm told I never will know). I just hope I don't blow the chance I've been given.

Why this Community – Anglo-catholic, which I'm not... well I wondered that as an Oblate (lay Member). Again, it's the antithesis of DIY Spirituality, very much 'in God alone he is my strength'. Ask the new Mother about anything – PhD viva, preaching at St Paul's – and she'll say 'The Lord undertook....' That was as an Oblate. And now. We've been given a book "Heart speaks to heart": The Salesian Tradition (part of a series – Carmelite, Dominican, Augustinian (that's us, our Rule is Augustinian), Benedictine, (also influence), desert (our roots, please note only one 's'!), Cistercian, Franciscan etc etc). Reflections on falling asleep are included!! The community (The Visitation) Francis de Sales founded with Jane de Chantal – who was a mother too – was the first of this kind of community 'with a flexible enclosure that would allow them, if need be, to attend to family business as well as to the needs of their immediate neighbours... a rule that emphasized interior rather than external discipline'.

"All are invited to a union of hearts that finds its deepest echo in the heart of God."

... Love is the beginning, the means and the end of the spiritual life. In order to give herself over to Love's work (she) must let Love do what it will to strip her of anything else.

All loves, if rightly ordered are capable of leading a person deeper into the mystery of divine love... the living presence of Love is enfleshed in the world (that story I quoted once again).

Also from de Sales – 'Two Wills'. Talking about a group we are hosting, I pointed out no-one would or should expect the wisdom of a nun from me, a postulant. So I can only share, as I did with comments on distinguishing 'sin' from 'sinfulness' what I've found helpful. And the Two Wills was about discernment, the normal kind, trying to discern God's plan for us, through the Bible, meditation, guidance or whatever one uses, and that kind we use to work through a crisis. So I merely share where I am – I can do no other. Francis also wrote 'Introduction to the devout life for all those who want to live the religious life while living at home, normal busy lives.... Same 'heart to heart' spirituality.'

Half this letter is not me but quotes. I've looked in cupboards but found no spare halos lying around. More likely to be found in the infirmary wing, where I am 'not allowed' (too young – now when was I last too young for something?! °°)

Surrounded as I am by loving cards and letters... I've had my first birthday in community too – and nearly set off the smoke alarm (how not to make the Novitiate popular on a Sunday afternoon!)

Catrin is now working full-time, Pete is completing his final year. They get around but perhaps the most fun project recently was Catrin taking part with students and ex-students in a show put on in secret for the principal of her old ballet school in Lincoln. They somehow produced a two hour show with all ages including long since married students. They used previous show items and I just loved the 'Musical Box', designed for tinies, and very sweet when tinies did it, 8 adults danced it, which was superb anyway, but they did it as if they were tinies, waving to Mum, squabbling etc. Brought the roof down! Mair has blossomed (she'll probably take that bit out!) and realized early on that I used to maintain a lot of friendships and if she wants to remain in touch she would have to do it herself, and she has. She has also just been (taking Catrin as a guest) to Buckingham Palace to get her Gold Award from the Duke of Edinburgh – she finally swam her last mile for it in December last year in Australia, ably encouraged by her Mum from outside the pool! Going to an evening on Palestine led onto one with Norman Kember – fascinating. I am very proud of my daughters, and now I have a son-in-law too. I am very lucky. Perhaps they're lucky too not to have me leaning over their shoulders! They're on the photos – Quaker gathering in Spain, here in the orchard, dancing the cancan, Australia last Christmas, and also the Duce family in 2005.

This comes with love and best wishes to you all, from Lizzie. May your Christmas be blessed too – and include sending me your news.

PS – thank you for letters already arriving, lovely to hear from you.