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Dear Friends,

"Your consonants are terrible! No they aren't. You don't have any." And finally, after about 18 months in 'choir', it dawned on me that choir means choir! Only it is an unusual choir because naturally not everyone called to be a nun can sing. And some of the Sisters returning from branch houses haven't sung for years. But at the Convent we are all in choir and we are trained as such, both in five-line music and, quite different, in plainsong, which is absolutely about listening, together. A visiting teenager thought Vespers (plainsong) wonderful. "How often do you get to do that?" Every single day, and, now we are accompanied by a zither (harp family) and it is out of this world – every day. (Two of Daddy's friends said 'beautiful, and healing', and that was before the zither...)

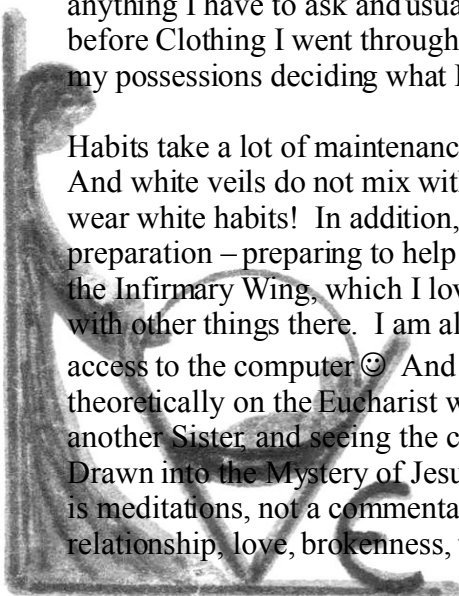
Meanwhile a whole year has gone by, since the last Christmas letter; well it will be by the time this reaches you. I look forward to hearing, if I haven't already, how that year has been for you. And of course I wish you every blessing for this Christmas and for next year.

Last year I wrote three of these about life here, and they are at <http://www.allen-williams.com/lizzie> so I won't bore you with all that again. Instead I am going to try and put some of the changes into words.

Most of these stem from my 'clothing' when I was given a habit – photos attached. (Including one with the author of 'The Choice' laughing at the wind blowing my veil off. (It took 5 months to get one to fit.)) I now have no access to my money, very little privacy, less time and even less control than I did before. In theory one gives control to God but at Clothing it was made clear that the will of God is mediated through the Community – which as you can imagine is not easy if you don't agree with what they decide. It hasn't yet happened to me but it could. In day-to-day terms things are made easier for me by the fact that I don't terribly mind what I do so if I am told to sweep the cloisters at 8.0 on a Sunday morning, that IS what I want to do. (Our bats don't just live in the belfry and they are not 'cloister trained'!). They say everything comes in useful and certainly years of darning ballet shoes means I am now mending vestments and altar frontals, invisibly and very thankfully, in a comfy chair, no sore feet or aching back! Part of working in the Sacristy. Another bonus is that the song room is round there so I hear lots of practising – on that side of the main chapel (not the smaller chapel on the photos) there are two vestries, a candle room, a flower room, the song room, music archives, a retreat room, and the mortuary chapel and access to one of the galleries.

My accounts are all still there but I handed in my bank card and cheque book. Which means if I want anything I have to ask and usually that goes through two people which can be embarrassing. And before Clothing I went through a process called 'stripping' when the Novice Guardian went through all my possessions deciding what I needed and what I didn't. Bang goes any privacy!

Habits take a lot of maintenance: those white collars – they only have to look at chilli sauce! And white veils do not mix with lily stamen! However, I have much to be thankful for – Dominicans wear white habits! In addition, as a Novice, as time goes on, I do more in the worship which means preparation – preparing to help lead the singing takes me all afternoon practically. I am also allowed in the Infirmary Wing, which I love, and as well as the regulation serving teas once a week, I am involved with other things there. I am also time-consumingly involved in chapel and cloister flowers. I have access to the computer ☺ And as well as weekly supervision with the Novice Guardian and classes, theoretically on the Eucharist with another Sister, I am also doing some reflection on the Bible with yet another Sister, and seeing the chaplain fairly regularly too. The book we are using for the bible is Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John, by Jean Vannier (founder of L'Arche). It is meditations, not a commentary, and not like the Temple, Readings in St John, either. Entering a relationship, love, brokenness, wholeness, emptiness, healing, love, fear, love. Very, very good. So I



have much less time. On the other hand I finished translating a Taizé book, and I have an established bed to garden instead of the much busier 'picking beds'.

That's all very easy to describe. Not so easy is the major event which has taken a huge portion of this year to integrate. In April the Community discerned that my beloved and only companion in the Novitiate should really be following her first vocation, to the priesthood, and she is back in the States. She is OK, now, I think, with a Community in America in her own diocese and celebrating and preaching. Huge issues for me, about vocation, discernment, trust, fear, solitariness, and of course grief – I miss her. My own review is due early March, exactly two years after I arrived. At my Clothing I promised to accept the Community's discernment. And I cannot know until that process whether they will think I should stay or not. That's quite hard to live with. Helena was the sixth in a row to leave during the Novitiate, four of them since I came.

Other changes. Well Mother Winsome waited some months before making her appointments and now most people have moved jobs, homes or both. And the willingness and generosity with which they lay down much loved work and move graciously is inspiring – and daunting. Mother has been far far too busy but nevertheless is constantly inspiring Sisters in individual and corporate dedication. Part of that is tightening up the discipline in Refectory and more especially in choir as that is where any problems within the group show up. So while it may not matter in one way exactly when we close our office books or whatever, the fact that we have to be aware of each other so we do so together, does matter, (one heart and mind in God, is how the Rule puts it). Sisters meetings, to which I am not invited, rarely happen now, and we have House Meetings which I do attend, and am constantly in awe at the deep thinking that goes into the decisions, and how Sisters will set their personal preferences aside for the good of the whole. I just listen. Mother Winsome is very open, which is helpful for me being the only non-Sister living here. (I don't get to Sisters' recreation – that's a time when I have the whole place to myself instead! Since there are now a lot of cats and only one mouse, perhaps that has its uses!)

I find one of the things that most inspires me, although I can only dream of emulating it, is the givenness I see, givenness with total humility, I suppose because of the trust in God that goes with it, and this year I have met it in very different traditions. Mother, totally given every minute of the day, was a Baptist and is an Evangelist. The Carmelites are the most amazing contemplatives and have marked influence on the spirituality here. Then my 'book of the year' is Sermons in Solitary Confinement, by Richard Wurmbrand, a Romanian Pastor who was imprisoned for 14 years, 3 of those 30 foot underground in solitary confinement, cold (his only living companion, a spider, froze to death) and hungry (one slice of bread a week). The result, total love. I could quote the whole book – I nearly did to one unlucky person ;) but I will just give a couple. The book is a collection of sermons that he preached at night in the prison to keep himself sane. Having no books or paper he used key words to memorise them with doggerel. He memorised 150, and 20 of them are in one book. If I could I would buy it for my churches and Quaker Meeting. Sisters have met him, he didn't just write, he lived as he wrote:

"For a few days I could not preach to you as usual. The physical pain was too great. Still there was some joy in the pain. Up to now, they have beaten and whipped me. Now they have tortured me, so that visible marks will remain on my body until death, or perhaps even after. Jesus had to be resurrected with marks on his body..... Perhaps my scars also will be helpful. My prayers for my torturers will perhaps be more effective if I can show the Father the wounds I received from them. If I can continue to love them, if I can forgive, why should God exclude them from his love and not forgive them.

There is a blessing in the tortures through which I have passed. We must thank God for everything. The tortures have lessened my desire to go to heaven. What happiness would it be for me to sit in bliss in heaven, knowing that others are being tortured in the meantime on earth. My wish is rather that God's will should be done on earth as it is in heaven. Why not make a heaven out of earth, as Jesus taught us to pray.

I used to dream 'of what I would do if I were a king, a millionaire..... Now I dream more and more about what I will do when I am like you. [Jesus] Will I have to suffer again, even worse than

now..... I would feel like you, and I would come to suffer for those who had rebelled. I would bear the infirmities of others, and take their sickness upon me.

A torturer said, 'How can you look at me so lovingly? How is it that you can obey the foolish commandment of your Christ to love your enemy?'

The Christian answered 'I am not obeying a commandment. It is not that I love you only because Jesus ordered me to. Jesus has given me a new heart... A nightingale cannot sound like a crow because it is a nightingale and not a crow. So a Christian can only love...'

Richard had absolutely no logical reason to be filled with such love, he just was. Likewise we discover, Mother Teresa poured out for 50 years a love she did not feel. (As someone said, if you are a pipe, you don't know what is passing through you.) I have been much nourished to by someone totally different, a missionary in India, Amy Carmichael. Another person who just went on loving and trusting whatever, despite 20 often painful years in bed after an accident. To me that speaks of something far more than human; divine in fact. To Amy too: *"All our love flows from His heart of love. We are like little pools on the rocks, the great sea washing over them and flooding them until they overflow. That is what the love of God does for us."* Many others say the same, and most of the others like her recognize the pain that goes with it – she gives the image of an opal she had that was passed through fire – and the colours shone brighter. As different as possible, St Thérèse of Lisieux, who seems to be the community's favourite saint, the one Mother Winsome added to the calendar (a Baptist choosing a Carmelite.) And she too suffered intensely and simultaneously loved so much she thought she would die of love. (She died in her mid-twenties.)

I was given this recently : by John Ruysbroeck

*He enters
the very marrow of our bones...
He consumes us
without ever satisfying
this illimitable hunger
and immeasurable
thirst ...
He swoops upon us like a bird of prey
to consume
our whole life, that
he may change it
into his.*

If you are wondering why I quote so much, it is because I can barely comprehend these things, let alone put anything into words. A Bishop asked me what I had to offer the Community. "Inarticulate passion", and I don't know if they want that! Whatever else, I am definitely not here because I have anything to offer. 'This is the way, walk in it', that's what I hear, so I am walking in this way as long as I am allowed to. The Rule is old fashioned and not something I would adhere to outside, yet I was overwhelmed, when I first got it, by the opportunity I have been given to try to live it and let it change me. (Just as I was asked, in Retreat, not to 'do' the bible passage, but to let the passage 'do' me. It does indeed feel different. I recommend it!)

Seeing the photos Catrin has put together for this, the ones of the chapel cloister seem to me to pick up the atmosphere, and just recently we were 19 in retreat here all week (with other sisters beavering away to keep the place ticking over), almost total silence, washing up and all (we can't lose that many from the washing up rotas!). The chapel there is a smaller chapel which we use for informal services, praying the Stations of the Cross, private prayer etc. The main chapel is on the website, <http://www.csmv.co.uk>. On the same page is a photo of a bird at its nest in the top of a tent in Taizé, where the two girls and Catherine Duce, (photographed with Mair), went in the Summer; Catrin and husband in Austria; Pip and co on the beach in Lincolnshire; my father with his newest great granddaughter, a mere 94 years

younger than him I am in fact writing this bit on Catrin's computer in his house where I came to stay in January, June and November. In between he visits me and, as a confirmed atheist, knows his way round quite well! Not that my life makes any sense to him, but he's not alone in that. Recently I was shopping with him and his friend Betty. An assistant asked about her husband. "That's not my husband; that's my boyfriend" she said – the 'younger woman', she's only 92!

The girls have the usual ups and downs of life, very different lives for very different people. Mair has just been building dry stone walls on Arran and to a conference in Florida, the Brompton bike went to both (and to Taizé), – which got it wet when she fell in a river in Scotland and surprised folk in America where she went to one of these mega Churches. In Taizé it enabled her to meet people when she got a puncture riding round the countryside! Catrin's money seems to go on ballet classes, ballet tickets and petrol, Pete's on his car too and computer gaming, and they are saving for a trip. But who knows the future. I sometimes think if we could see round the corners of life we wouldn't go round them!

I was given a lovely paraphrase of the Magnificat:

*He shatters my little world
And lets me be poor before Him.
He takes from me all my plans
And gives me more than I can hope or ask for.*

.....

I was also given a sermon in three words: 'Ave' 'Fiat' 'Magnificat' Here I am. Yes. Praise God.

Well, Christmas, Baby Jesus, and Mary saying 'Yes'. I quote once more from someone whose only desire was to help people discover that each person is called to be the 'home of God' (as Mary was). "There are so many empty houses, where I will bring You in as a guest of honour." (Etty Hillsum, a Jewess.)

So I wish you every blessing for Christmas and for next year. Love from Lizzie

