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# The Society of the Sacred Cross

Advent 2023 / Adfent 2023

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## ***Mother Katharine's Letter***

**Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,**

We stand at the portal of a new liturgical year, watching and waiting, longing for the One who will bring peace and restoration to our broken world. It is hard to be hopeful when there is so much trauma and devastation happening in the Holy Land. Yet that is what the prophets call us to throughout this Advent Season: Watch and wait. God promises that he will be with you, and he will return in mercy, truth and justice. They call us to trust and hope in our God who is faithful, and who is by nature the One who maintains and restores order to our chaos.

God's loving presence shines a light into our darkness and reveals the untruth and the injustice in our relating to one another and to his created order. The prophets cry repent, turn and face your God, align yourself with his loving kindness. And this is our work across Advent to turn towards the face of the One who loves us without limit. Come, let us adore.

The events and encounters that have marked this 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of thanksgiving for the arrival of the first Sisters here at Tymawr on 9<sup>th</sup> February 1923, have sharpened our awareness of our 'work' of intercession. The unfolding events and tragedies of our world demand our ongoing and determined fidelity to this work. The first Sisters made their vows in Chichester in 1914 as the world descended into the chaos of the First World War. They were called to witness to God's Love by giving their lives to intercession for the world, through Our Lord Jesus Christ. The promises made in their vows were not in the surety of their own lives, but as an act of abandonment into the hands of the One whose love is unbounded.

On the front of this newsletter is an icon of Hagia Koinonia – Blessed Communion. It is an image of one brother carrying another. Talking of the vocation to compassionate intercession, Bishop Martin Shaw described the task of intercession as exactly that, carrying the other to Jesus and entrusting him to him, at which point we, the porters, must step back out of the light and trust in the unknowing darkness of love.

At Christmas God places himself into our hands. Love is entrusted to us once more. Let us respond with open hands and hearts, knowing we can only risk this love, this act of communion, because God first risks loving us.

*(Front Cover: Icon of Hagia Koinonia from the Community of Bose)*

## Community News

It hard to know where to start except with a big thank you to all who have made this year rich and fruitful. Especial thanks to our Chaplain, Revd. Dr. Jean Prosser, who worked hard to realise so many of the events of this year as well as supporting and guiding us through them. We give thanks for all our Oblates, Associates, and Companions, for our Bishop Dominic, our Visitor, Bishop Rowan, our Warden and Revd. Jean our Chaplain and for our trustees Vivienne Morgan Jones and Peter Lea.

There have been many highlights during this Centenary year: here are some and news of changes in the Community. In **January**, Novice Sr. Cara returned from Australia to say her farewells. She had discerned that her vocation was to be a priest in Melbourne. She has now finished her studies and will be ordained on 10th February 2024. At the same time, Sr. Gillian Mary took to her bed and so began a slow, but joyous, four months journeying towards her Maker and Redeemer. Throughout this time she was gracious and kind, the Gillian we all loved and knew; friends came to reminisce and to say goodbye. Sr. Gillian died on the **12th April**, having seen us through to the light of Easter. Her funeral two weeks later was a great gathering full of joy and hope. See the obituary by Companion Sister Marion Fry on page 23.

Dr. Bonnie Thurston led the community in a retreat of nine days reflecting on the Cross in Scripture and poetry and preparing our hearts for the coming year. On **9th February** an apple tree was planted in the memory of our dear friend and 'apple tree teacher', Linda Blenkinship, by her husband Bishop David Hawtin. The tree was the last to be planted in the new St Teilo's Orchard, now also graced with its own homemade gate. And so began our year of thanksgiving and celebration. On the **11th February** Dr. Jane Williams led the first of a series of Quiet days which spanned the year exploring the theme of 'Women of Prayer'. Each Day was a gift and experience of shared reflection and prayer – the article by our Chaplain on page 8 has more on all this year's Quiet Days.

After Easter we spent a day with the Cistercian Sisters from Whitland. At the end of **April**, Novice Sister Victoria left the community to return to her vocation as a parish priest in Devon. Then, Gregg Hill took over as cook and later Jo May Thomas joined us as a cleaner, mainly for the kitchen but also the convent. God certainly provides!

**May** was a wonderfully full and celebratory month. On Rogation Day, the community and friends led by Sr. Rosalind Mary, processed around the grounds asking for God's blessing on all that grows or makes its home on this land. On **20th May**, the Cathedral of St Woolos, Newport, welcomed the community and many friends from other religious communities as well as the extended family, to a Service of Thanksgiving. Bishop Cherry preached:

*“It takes us a long time – a life time- to learn and learn again that God works so often and most profoundly through the small and fragile [...] It should be no surprise to us as we look at the vulnerability of Jesus himself, coming to us as a new-born baby, dependent on the love and care of others for all his needs. Or as we gaze at the figure pinned on the cross; weak and exposed , at the mercy of those who would do their worst to him. Or as we hold in our own hand the fragile wafer of bread [...] and taste the smallest drop of wine. This is our God. Who works through the daily stuff of human life in all its minutiae and mundaneness, who is present to us In the moments of prayerful connection and scraps of faith that we can muster, to transform, little by little, both us and the world he made and loves.”* (Excerpt from Sermon)

We felt welcomed into the heart of the diocese, into our Mother Church. Next came a community pilgrimage to the Shrine of St Melangell, led by Bishop Rowan, focussing on what it means to ‘take up your cross and follow me’.

In **June**, the community welcomed the Oblates for their annual retreat led by Revd. Simon Taylor on the Book of Jonah, and the Associates for a day led by Cath Jones on mental health and spirituality.

Linda Campbell, our cook of 17 years, died in early **July** and her funeral was held in the chapel and her ashes buried in the Garden of Remembrance, at her request. Linda was a faithful friend of the Society and of many and will be missed – her Obituary is on page 22. Sisters Janet, Rosalind and Joanna attended the diocesan Day of Prayer held in Cardiff.

In **August**, we joined the Sisters of the Love God, Oxford, for the centenary celebration of their Chapel; and later had a ‘day out’ with the Cistercian Sisters at Whitland. Work to conserve the statue of Our Lady in the Lady Garden was completed and blessed by Sr. Rosalind Mary. At the end of the month, Sisters Janet and Joanna attended an international conference of religious in Sweden, and came back full of stories (see article by Sr. Janet page 10); and the new chapel heating was installed. On St. Clare’s Day Tertiary Franciscans from far and wide celebrated the Eucharist in the New Springs Chapel at Michaelgarth.

In **September**, the community hosted an inter-novitiate programme on Relationships in Community led by Dr. Peta Dunstan and the Revd. Dr. Jane Tillier. Sr. Joanna attended the First Professed conference in Alnmouth (see article on page 17) and Sisters Rosalind Mary and Katharine attended a weekend retreat at Llangasty on ‘Inhabiting the Mystery of Christ’. On the Feast of St. Francis in **October**, we cele-

brated our harvest festival with Gwent Wild Life Trust volunteers who have faithfully supported us throughout the year.

The year has been about going out and coming in. It has been important to give thanks for the welcome the community has received in the diocese over 100 years, and to remind them that we are still here, small maybe, as a praying heart. Many more of you have been able to come and stay and to join us in our life of intercession. And we have welcomed new people. We have also welcomed the oblation of four new Oblates.

Since July we have been working hard to turn about both our finances and our ecological footprint. We shall need your help with this. It is a big, but a right and necessary goal: to reduce our carbon footprint and to become ecologically and financially sustainable – see the article by Trustee Peter Lea on page 6. The task will involve sourcing our own energy, improving insulation, upgrading some facilities including making the chapel accessible, and installing new heating and hot water systems throughout the site. This is complex and daunting but also very exciting. It is another sign that we intend to be here into the future!

Perhaps these notes give you some idea of the width and depth of the last year. There is more I could write! Let us give thanks for all who generously gift themselves, their skills, and resources, in whatever way, for the ongoing life of this house of prayer; and for the Garden Team for their work on the land. We are also grateful for the generous donation of improved lighting for the Chapel and for a grant from the Benefact Trust towards the chapel heating. **Deo gratis**

*Revd. Mother Katharine SSC*



The Centenary Pilgrimage group outside Llangasty Retreat House

## ***Moving towards a Sustainable Future for Tymawr: Peter Lea***

As a trustee of the Society of the Sacred Cross, I have a duty to make sure that Tymawr Convent has a future, which is ecologically and financially sustainable. For the last four months the trustees have been working with the sisters to bring forward and implement proposals during 2024 to reduce Tymawr's carbon footprint and running costs and to ensure that we can balance the books in future. Our accounts show that costs have not been consistently covered since 2009. This was before the financial crash of 2008 when interest rates paid on savings were much higher. Following the crash, Tymawr's investment income dropped by nearly 50%, with the result that the community has relied upon legacies to balance the books. In addition, the budget has run at a sizeable deficit for the last 3 years and this is simply unsustainable.

This deficit is despite costs being under control and increasing by less than inflation during this period. In fact, the actual increase in costs is 34% whilst inflation has been 60%. As an accountant, it is tempting to immediately look to cut costs. However, this is not realistic nor would it be possible to reduce costs to the point where they are covered by existing sources of income. The community has to ensure that it complies with the more stringent regulatory environment, which is in place now, rather than what was acceptable in 2007, so many costs cannot be reduced. After much thought, I recommend that the right strategy is to seek to increase income. All communities need to generate income and there is some scriptural backing for this in the parable of the talents. We must therefore look at increasing existing sources of income and at potential new sources. Whilst this cannot be achieved in one year, we must start by increasing the level of suggested donations offered by guests who come to stay and groups who come for day meetings. If we do not, as each month passes the deficit being incurred means that the Society's reserves are being seriously depleted.

Tymawr provides organic, home-grown food and excellent catering, together with the opportunity to use the grounds and to participate in the monastic worship of the community. In this way Tymawr compares very favourably with other 'retreat' places. The facilities for guests will need to be upgraded in due course and a budget will be set aside for upgrading and for disabled facilities. To cover costs and raise income, from 1st January 2024, the "suggested donation" for guests staying full board in the Convent, will rise to £80 per person per night (now £40); guests self-catering in Michaelgarth £55 per person per night (with minimum stay 2 nights); and day guests using the Old Print House £15 or Michaelgarth £20 per person per day (now £5). The differential between the Old Print House & Michaelgarth reflects the extra running costs at the latter. Alongside this change, we shall designate a

portion of each donation as Gift Aid, subject to the donor being a UK taxpayer and paying sufficient capital gains tax or income tax to cover the donation.

This has been a difficult decision to take and we want to continue to extend a warm welcome to all our guests. We do not want to exclude anyone from coming on the grounds of cost. We are however self-supporting, and rely on the generosity of guests and friends to maintain the life of this community. It has always been the view of the Society that money should not be a barrier to someone coming to Tymawr, so we are setting up a Bursary Scheme for anyone unable to meet the additional cost. The Scheme will be totally confidential and the names of recipients will not be known to the sisters. Briefly, once you have booked to come in the usual way, you can make an application for a Bursary and if accepted, the difference between the previous level and the new level will be sent to you, so that you make your donation as before. We are inviting friends to support the Bursary Scheme, if they are able to, by giving a pledge of £100 or more to be used solely to fund a bursary. Your pledge will not be called in unless it is needed to fund a bursary and these transactions will also be anonymous and confidential. Please write to Kirstie Pope at Tymawr Convent, Lydart, Monmouth, NP25 4RN or email Kirstie on [finance@tymawrconvent.com](mailto:finance@tymawrconvent.com) if you would like to support Tymawr by offering a Pledge for the Bursary Scheme.

At the same time, you will see changes at Tymawr as the Society of the Sacred Cross moves off dependence on fossil fuels and invests in solar panels and improved insulation in the Convent, Michaelgarth, the Lodge and the Old Print House to ensure future financial sustainability.



## Celebrating Women of Prayer: Rev. Dr. Jean Prosser



Throughout this year the Sisters have opened wide the doors to celebrate the Centenary of the Society's arrival in Wales at Tymawr Convent, with a series of Quiet Days. The monastic Offices of Terce and Vespers, together with sharing the midday Eucharist, have given structure to the day and fostered a sense of coming together as people of prayer. And the days have been blessed with good weather, enabling participants to use the chapels in the grounds and to explore Tymawr's gardens and meadows, during the periods of the day given for meditation and prayer. Each Quiet Day speaker was given the overall theme of '*Women of Prayer*' and what a fascinating variety of approaches emerged!

In February, when Tymawr Convent grounds were awash with snowdrops, the first Quiet Day with Dr. Jane Williams, McDonald Professor in Christian Theology at St Mellitus College, was entitled '*Contemplative Prayer and Mission*'. Jane invited us to see that our practice of prayer is deeply connected to the character and purposes of God. Far from being a life-style choice, to be a pray-er is to be drawn into the action of God in the world.

In May, when wild daffodils covered the meadows, the Rev. Dr. Hannah Lewis SCL, a BSL deaf priest in Oxford Diocese, came for a day entitled '*Widows, Mothers and Virgins*'. Hannah used the Gospel story of the widow's mite (Luke 22.1-4), and the lives of St. Monica of Hippo, mother of St. Augustine and St. Frideswide of Oxford, to explore our reliance on the generosity and service of others, the cost of resisting cultural expectations and social structures and the pressure to be anything other than God wants us to be. This day also gave us valuable insights into the practical ways in which everyone can be included in worship and prayer, thanks to advice from the Rev. Mary Moore, who was diocesan chaplain to the deaf community at that time.



By June, our fields were full of Common Spotted Orchids when the Venerable Karen Lund came from Manchester diocese to give us a fascinating insight into '*Teresa of Cartagena and God in the Silence*'. She introduced us to the life of a medieval mystic, whose experience of suffering through the loss of her hearing in her early twenties became the mainspring of her spirituality and whose writing challenged the sexist stereotyping of her day.

In July, when Sr. Gemma Simmonds CJ, a senior research fellow at the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology, Cambridge, and a Sister of the Congregation of Jesus, led a day on '*Mary Ward: a radical contemplative*', Tymawr's large kitchen garden was flourishing. Sr. Gemma challenged us to examine how personal experience of God enables us to find our "voice for God". Through the use of contemporary paintings illustrating the life of Mary Ward, she explained how by contemplating the events of her own life, Mary Ward learned to recognise the inner movements of her heart; to value her experience and have the courage of her convictions; to let go of strongly held positions; to be patient and listen; to dare to walk into an unknown future recognising the value of women's contribution in the world. Her charisma is one that resonates with women across time and in different circumstances.

Then in September, when the apple and pear trees were groaning with fruit, Professor Nicola Slee, a published poet and theologian, inspired us with video presentations of poets speaking their own work on the themes of dying, death and loss. Through the lens of poetry, Nicola led us into an exploration of how by using poetry as prayer, life's limitations may turn into abundant living, and how the stages of life, which may be experienced as "being cut off", can bring an incarnational richness.

November's Quiet Day, led by the Rt. Rev. Mary Stallard, Bishop of Llandaff, introduced us to St. Non, mother of St. David, and invited us to learn from Non's example of self-emptying love, who after suffering devastating sexual violence, found transformation through the birth of her beloved child, Dewi Sant.

Every one of these days has brought a deeper understanding of '*Women of Prayer*' and given insights into our personal and corporate prayer life. Each speaker has shown us how prayer engages our personal experience with the world. We have been blessed by welcoming back people eager to renew their friendship with Tymawr after the lock-downs of the last few years, and by people who have found Tymawr for the first time. It has been a celebration, in every sense, of the legacy of the small band of women who moved from Chichester and arrived in Wales on St. Teilo's day in 1923 to create a house of contemplative prayer, for which we give thanks.

## *Interconfessional Conference of Religious 2023: Sr Janet Ann*



Outside Korsets Kloister (The Monastery of the Holy Cross)

Hej!

It sounds like Hey, and it means Hallo... in Swedish. At the end of August, Sr Joanna and I travelled to Sweden for a conference of monastics from all over Europe. It wasn't as overwhelming as it might sound: I suppose there were about forty of us, coming from France, Germany, the Netherlands, Hungary, Bulgaria, Egypt, England, Wales, and Sweden. The default language turned out to be English, which most people could speak, if only a little: German and French were also useful, and these three were the "official" languages, into which everything was translated. I spent one coach journey sitting with a French Sister, who had about as much English as I had French... so we passed about forty minutes in a very entertaining mixture of the two.

Like any conference, it had a theme (how the treasures of our lives could become our gifts), with speakers giving papers, and discussion sessions. The discussion groups enabled us to take a wider view of the subject of a talk and explore its relevance to our own lives. Also like any other conference, the most useful part was the socialising over meals and as we travelled, where we got to exchange experiences and make new connections.

The conference papers covered a wide range of topics. We learned about the devel-

opment of the Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and all the East (Syriac Orthodox) from its beginnings to today's monasticism, and the founding of and future plans for the local monastery. Another looked at the way in which monastics share the "wounded heart" of Christianity and indeed of all humanity. One paper described the treasures of the Roman Catholic Church and how these could be gifts for other Christians. The next considered that it is difficult for a tradition to recognise its own treasures, and referred to the short-lived but influential Anglican community at Little Gidding, in the seventeenth century. A local Lutheran priest came to talk to us about the development of the Swedish Lutheran church. Another paper described how a German deaconess community with ecumenical membership was able to draw on the various church traditions represented to create a varied structure of worship.

We were accommodated in a retreat centre about fifteen minutes' drive from the "host" monastery, in a stately home converted into a comfortable hotel, with a small modern chapel, where we had Morning Prayer in English each day. The monastery (Syriac Orthodox), by contrast, was the size of a bungalow. Most of the discussion groups were held inside, but for the Vespers service on Friday and the (R.C.) Saturday evening Mass the next day, they had set up a marquee in the back garden. It had no sides so was not really successful in keeping us dry and out of the wind!

For Sunday Eucharist we attended the monks' parish church in another town. This was a huge building, with the first floor taken up by the church, and a big function room and kitchen on the ground floor, where they gave us lunch after the service. The service was entirely in Syriac, but with the words written up on a screen, and underneath both a phonetic version of the Syriac and a Swedish translation; and between the two it was possible to work out where we were in the service. The singing was led by an energetic women's and girls' choir. Later in the afternoon the monks took us across town to a memorial set up to remember those killed in the Armenian genocide, where we said prayers.

The final day was spent in Vadstena, a town where St Birgitta (Bridget) of Sweden lived in the 14th century. She felt called to found a new religious order, featuring monasteries holding both nuns and monks. Her daughter Katarina became abbess of the original monastery in Vadstena: there were several daughter houses founded, and the order continues internationally today, although taking only women. We had a midday Eucharist in the Lutheran church, a packed lunch provided by the retreat house and eaten in a room lent by the present-day convent, and then visited the museum which describes Birgitta's life and the times in which she lived. Back at the retreat house, we finished the conference with a big dinner (they fed us very well every day anyway), and in the morning everyone departed, with new friendships formed and new ideas of the state of religious life in other countries.

Part of the reason for us attending the conference was that in two years' time, we are to host the event at Tymawr! Like the Swedish conference, we can't accommodate all the people, so rooms have been booked at the boys' school in Monmouth... and no doubt we too will have a marquee on the lawn. We'll let you know how it goes...

### ***Restoration of the Statue of Our Lady: Sr Rosalind Mary***



For some time, we have noticed that the statue of Mary and the baby Jesus has been looking 'worse for wear' – which is not surprising as it has been there since 1925. There was an entry in the newsletter for December 1926:

*A Statue of our Lady and the holy Child has been modelled for us by Deaconess Elizabeth Baker in her summer holiday, and a cement cast taken by Mr. Morcom, Sculptor, of Leicester. This will stand in the niche of the wall...*

Discussing with Vijay about what might be done to restore it without being exorbitantly expensive, we discovered that he has a friend, Joseph ('Joe') Stokes, who is an artist and sculptor.

So, Joe came, and over a period of several weeks, he stripped back to the original cement cast – discovering and renovating some cracks and worn patches as he went, and then gave the statue several new coats of lime wash. It was a joy on 15th August, the Feast of Mary, Mother of our Lord, to bless the newly restored statue once again – 97 years after its first blessing. If anyone knows anything about Deaconess Elizabeth Baker, who served in Chichester in the 1920s, we would like to find out more about her.

*Joseph Stokes is a sculptor, stone carver, and artist. More of his work can be found at: [josephstokes.weebly.com](http://josephstokes.weebly.com)*

## ***The Oblate's Retreat, June 2023: Jonah as Comedy***

The annual retreat for the oblates was led by Revd. Simon Taylor. It was a study of the wonderful story of Jonah. Simon invited us to read and enjoy the humour of a story about a prophet who thinks he can run away from God. This seemingly comic text is full of wisdom about the true relationship between us and God and how our acts of rebellion are also opportunities for learning and entering into a more real relationship with God. Jonah was the best and the worst of prophets. Let us see how the text subverts our self-understanding. We hear how Jonah ran away from the presence of God in the Temple (1:10) but in the storm and in the fish, he began to learn that God is bigger than the Temple, and is everywhere in contrast to the 'local' gods of the sailors. We too need to learn and re-learn the truth about God and how God becomes present to us. Was Jonah simply disobedient as is often stressed when the story is told? Yes, but across the story God leads him back to where he started, to the beach, and Jonah is invited to begin again and to learn the long journey to obedience, learning to follow where God is leading him. Was Jonah prejudiced? Yes. Jonah's complaint was that he knew that God was generous and forgiving but he did not want his enemies to benefit from this. Nonetheless, God was insistent and showed 'steadfast love' to the nation who would defeat and take Israel into exile. God is not partial. Was Jonah afraid? Yes. He was afraid of his enemy and did not want to go and preach to them. He was also afraid of God's outrageous generosity; there is nothing you can do to make God love you more, or to make God love you less. It can be difficult to accept that God's grace includes our enemies and those whom we would like to exclude. A further consequence of such love is that we also have to face our own weakness and failure and the fact that God accepts and uses these to his own purpose. We need, nonetheless, to acknowledge that Jonah was also brave: brave to defy and be angry with God and brave ultimately to go and preach to his enemies.

Simon then showed us how there is much in this about prayer and praying and that the events in the narrative are held together by God's creative response to human actions. So, we see the sailors each praying to their own God, whilst Jonah, who knows the true God, falls asleep. Let us not be dismissive of the seemingly 'inadequate' or different prayers of the other. Furthermore, the sailors pray for forgiveness with the result that God answered their prayers and calmed the storm. We see Jonah praying from within the belly of the fish...a genuine prayer of distress, but we do not gain any sense that this was anything more than a prayer of self-pity. There is no sign of Jonah taking responsibility for his situation. He does, however, recognise that 'deliverance belongs to the Lord.' Yet God answered his prayer. Why? Is it because Jonah was at least honest in his prayer? Simon pointed out that the story is universally inclusive of creation, humankind, the beasts of the land and

the sea, the plants , wind and sun. Simon invited us to explore the shape of our own prayers and also to listen out to God’s response whatever the prayer.

Lastly Simon invited us to explore what success might look like. In some senses Jonah was a great success, After all did not the whole of Nineveh repent? In other ways he was walking disaster-area. But even then, things seem to go well. Jonah however, does not bask in his success but complains about it! Our conclusion must be that it is God who brings about all this success. All is grace, and God is generous to pagan sailors, an enemy city and a querulous prophet. Can we recognise God’s generosity to us today? The story ends with a city that is converted and saved and with a prophet thoroughly put out. God uses a whole cast of characters to try to teach Jonah, and you and me, that he loves people and animals and even a pumpkin plant! This is comedy at its best and the question of how we respond to God’s unlimited love is left open. God prefers comedy to tragedy.

## ***Associates’ News***

Associates have kept in touch with each other and with the community in various ways during 2023. We invited contributions to an Associates Magazine which was sent to Associates in February with a variety of contributions: poetry, meditations, articles about what Associates have been doing or reading, and responses to the question ‘What is your favourite Bible passage and why?’. We look forward to more contributions for the February 2024 magazine.

In June the Associates’ Day at Tymawr heard a very interesting presentation about Spirituality and Mental Health given by Associate Kath Jones. She invited questions and contributions , which led to an interesting discussion – so interesting that there was not time for all that Kath had planned. She has prepared a follow-up paper on difficulties within Faith communities: ‘Mental Health and Faith; Potential Problems and How these can be Avoided’. If anyone would like a copy, please contact Tymawr. We also had an hour to get to know each other, either outside with Vijay seeing what had changed within the last year, or in the library talking about books we had recently read and would recommend. We also held a Zoom gathering in the afternoon on Tuesday 17th October. We invited people to talk about their favourite place (excluding Tymawr), and to say a little about why it is special, and that opened up further conversation.

I am very grateful to the Associates’ Planning Group for suggestions and arranging this. There are two new members of this group: Mandy Berry and Angela Berners-Wilson, who join Kay Rook and Kath Jones. We have regretfully accepted Amaryllis Bell’s resignation after 15 years of faithful service.

***The Oblate's Day, November 2023: Contemplative Intercession :  
Oblate Judith***

On Armistice Day, with the Israel and Gaza war raging in the back of our minds, a group of nine oblates (along with two who were making their Oblation that day and another two enquirers), gathered at Tymawr for a study day led by the Rt Reverend Martin Shaw. We were blessed with fine weather and a wonderful display of Autumn colours.

The day commenced with the Office of Terce before Martin led our first session in the library when we were invited to share how we interceded in prayer. Responses demonstrated that there were many different ways of helping us to intercede. Martin also invited us to think about a time when we had been carried in intercession before he introduced an approach through the use of imagination and colours, which could help take us into deeper places based on work undertaken by Carl Jung. This was a new way of interceding to many of us and I'm sure a practice to which many will return.



The Oblates with Sr. Elizabeth

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At midday, immediately following the Angelus, Carla and Judith made their Oblation and were received as an Oblate of the Society of the Sacred Cross in a ceremony officiated by the Chaplain, the Rev Dr Jean Prosser, before the Eucharist was celebrated.

After a silent lunch, Martin led us in a second session. We focussed initially on a passage of scripture, the Healing of the Paralytic, before we engaged in an open discussion on intercession and how we carry people and situations to Jesus, just as the four friends did in the story. We were reminded that when we intercede we acknowledge our own brokenness as people and when we pray for others we take them into the very heart of the Trinity.

Thank you to the Rt Reverend Martin Shaw, Rev Mother Katharine and Sr Elizabeth and the Community for such an enriching day.

### ***News from the Companions***

Companions Lois, Neil, Heather and Jean have faithfully supported the community throughout this last year, serving us in the library, the office, the chapel, and in re-decorating and maintaining the convent. Companion Maisie in Canada continues her work with 'women on the margins' and has been in regular zoom-contact. She has supported Companion Sr. Marion through her illness this year. We have been united with them both through prayer and the exchange of news and prayer requests.

### ***For the communities of tomorrow: reading and reflection with the First Professed Religious Group: Sr Joanna***



One of the great joys of the novitiate, for me, was the experience of fellowship and shared study on the Internovitiate program run between the Anglican religious communities. As Sisters and Brothers in simple vows, we have the blessing – and challenge! – of running our own annual shared formation confer-

ence. Although other commitments and busy lives meant we could not all attend, five of the group – representing SSC, Mucknell Abbey, the Community of the Resurrection and the Society of St Francis – met this September at Alnmouth Friary for a few days of sharing, prayer and discussion.

Our topic was a recently published book called *Abuses in the Religious Life and the*



*Path to Healing*, written by Dom Dysmas de Lassus, who is superior of the Carthusian Order. I admit to some initial trepidation at this rather foreboding title (It is, perhaps, catchier in French), but Dom Dysmas' considered and thorough treatment of the subject is well worth reading. Drawing on the advice of a number of other Religious and the accounts of many who have experienced abuse within communities, he explores the symptoms, causes and consequences of 'cult-like' behaviour within religious communities, particularly drawing attention to specific failures which arise from misunderstanding the purposes of religious life, or manipulation of its structures. There is significant wisdom here, too, which may be applied beyond the specific framework of monastic life to the life of any close-knit community, and to dynamics such as spiritual direction (which is commented on extensively). It is, as you might imagine, not a light read; but it is an important one. The book is underscored by Dom Dysmas' deep belief that community, when lived with faithfulness to the Gospel, is an instrument of hope and gift to the whole body of Christ. For those of us who share his confidence in monastic life, it is vital that we take seriously the task of confronting the structural and cultural weaknesses which can cause or enable abuse. It is a mark of the seriousness of his commitment to accountability and transparency that Dom Dysmas has voided the normal anonymity of Carthusian writers. Equally admirable is his commitment to listening and trusting victims of abuse. I was particularly struck by the dedication found only in the French edition of the text, which Sr Jessica OSB kindly translated for me:

*'For all of you, known and unknown, who had wanted to give your lives to God in a great act of love. To you who have been let down or, yet worse, broken by Religious Life. Even if you no longer believe, God will never forget your desire to consecrate your life to him. Out of regard for you, and out of sadness also, we want to make your cry heard.'*

It may not be easy to engage with such painful material, but the fruit of engaging and listening with it can also be positive. I left our conference with a deep gratitude for the companionship and wisdom of the other first-professed religious, and a lot of hope for the communities of the future. Prophetic action – that is, lamenting sin, criticising structure, calling out power – must always point to a better future; to God's way, renewed and restored. The current fragility of religious communities may in part be a necessary condition of our willingness to be transformed and renewed in our vocations.

Despite sideways rain and serious subject matter, I left with a light and hopeful heart. I am grateful to Fr Charlie CR, who recommended *Abuses in the Religious Life* to the group, to the Society of St Francis for their hospitality, and to my sisters and brothers in first profession, who are excellent companions on the journey.

***The joys of life are the unanswered and mysterious parts of it:***

***Suzie Howell***

I first came to Tymawr in 2019 for the midnight eucharist on Christmas eve. My mother lives in the neighbouring village of Llandogo and I was staying with her for the festive season, away from my home and work in London as a photographer. I had asked her if she'd consider staying up late and driving me to the service at a nearby convent that I'd recently discovered on a map. She was surprised - partly because we are atheists and don't usually attend religious services - but mainly because she had no idea there was a convent so close to where she had lived for the last 4 years. Being the inquisitive and generous woman that she is, she said she'd have a coffee and stay up to take me there.

When we arrived, we were warmly welcomed into the candle lit chapel and sat on the back pew on the right side. Not long into the service, I realised I did not know the rhythm of the hymns and was acutely aware at how unrehearsed my voice was, so I decided to simply sit, listen and watch the rest of the enchanting service. I looked up and focussed on a face opposite. Here was a young nun with her eyes closed, listening to the prayer that an older nun had begun to read from the book. She appeared to be in a deep blissful state with a small, calm smile across her face. I watched her for the rest of the time we were seated and thought to myself that she was embodying something that I really struggled with in life, and something that I thought about a lot - being in and appreciating the present moment.

It was then that I felt I was right to listen to my instincts of seeking out this place, and that there was something special amongst these walls and these women that I wanted to explore further.

You see, I hadn't just stumbled across a marking on a map that showed where Tymawr was - I had actively searched for 'nun convent nearby' on google when I had arrived at my mother's house in Llandogo that week.

For the past few years, I had been trying to explore a troubled feeling through my photography - one of being detached from the here and now, looking at a common struggle of feeling lost and longing to be somewhere other than where you are in life. Up until that point, I had been exploring it in a very fragmented, loose way, and it felt as if it was missing something concrete, like a place or a group of people who could perhaps offer a new way of thinking and being. The idea of finding a nun convent came to me - a group of women who had made a very conscious decision on how they would spend the rest of their lives. I had imagined their world would be full of clarity and peace around issues of the past, present and future.

I have now been to stay at the convent 3 times over the last year and I am preparing for my next visit this December. During my stays, the nuns of Tymawr have graciously opened their lives to me and have encouraged me to take up space with my cameras and questions. They have sat for portraits for me many times and have indulged my attempts at making more abstract images on how I perceive their individualities and their collectiveness.

The work has evolved into an exploration on themes of belonging, choice, feminism, our connection to space, land and time and how much of ourselves we're willing to reveal to other people. It is both a presentation and a performance between myself and the nuns of Tymawr - they reveal to me what they wish, while I strive to capture what I desire to see. The images are often ambiguous and playful in their final form in a way to remain open and inquisitive of what I see and how I interpret it.

The project has been a letting go for me - a way of allowing questions and discussions to flow freely without needing a definite answer about life's big questions. My preconception and desire of finding a place and a person that has 'everything worked out' has been softened - not only does this not exist but I don't want it to - the joys of life are the unanswered and mysterious parts of it.





*A composition of photographs by Suzie Howell who is a photographer based in London. More of her work can be found at: [suziehowellphotography.com](http://suziehowellphotography.com)*

### **Elisabeth Chaffers**

Associate Elisabeth Chaffers died just after Christmas, 27th December 2022 in Nazareth House in Cheltenham, where she had lived for many years. She was 95 years old. In her younger life, she completed a degree in Medicine at the Royal Free Hospital in London, and worked as a GP in Oxford, but soon developed a depressive illness that was to recur throughout her life and involved spells in psychiatric hospitals. Latterly, in Cheltenham Elisabeth gained a reputation as a campaigner to preserve its green spaces. Associate Paul Johnson, who was a close friend, has written:

“Elisabeth was a person of intelligence and humour, read widely and was always interested in current affairs and politics. Although her training as a doctor may not have been fulfilled in the way she had hoped, she did find her unique way in life with great courage and faith. Elisabeth made many friends and was open to all kinds of people, and she taught me a great deal by her example of acceptance and humility in the face of some very hard times. I feel that the Eucharist was at the centre of her life and she lived it by being broken and shared with others.”

### **Di (Diana) Skilbeck**

Associate Di Skilbeck died on 4th March 2023 at the age of 80. She came to Tymawr through her close friendship with Oblate Daphne Luff. For many years the two of them, accompanied by Di's beloved dog Josh, would come every autumn to pick and store the Convent apples for us.

Di had been a teacher and headmistress, and was well known at home on the Wirral for her commitment to save and restore canals and canal boats, something she had been involved in since 1974. She was awarded an MBE in 2009 for her services to Heritage. This was also marked in the send-off she was given at the National Waterways Museum in Ellesmere Port.

Following a memorial service at her local Holy Cross Church, her coffin was transported along the Shropshire Union Canal before a cremation ceremony near Chester.

### **Hugh Anderson**

Hugh was one of our first 'Men Associates' among the group of priests who were admitted together on 19th May 1976. I do not think that I ever met Hugh, for which

I am very sorry as from his emails, which he wrote with the help of one of his sons who lived nearby, I have the impression of a gentle, warm family man, who communicated his own difficulties with a light touch. In answer to my enquiry as to how he was, he replied:

“I am very sorry not to have acknowledged your email sooner and I have very little excuse except to say that I have Parkinsons! This means that my natural indolence is compounded until my conscience gets the better of me...

... When Mother Veronica Ann and I met together to discuss the community's intention of extending the Association to include men we did not think of how the association would develop over time. I personally value the thought of your prayers on my behalf and not a day goes by that I do not recall Tymawr as my association cross lives on my keychain to remind me of you all.”

Hugh died peacefully on 28th April, 2023 at the age of 88 after a short time in hospital, and with family at his side.

*Sr Rosalind Mary*

### **Oblate Linda Campbell**

**1957 - 2023** (Associate 2011, Oblate 2013)

Kind, so kind, welcoming, warm and friendly, generous to a fault, the soul of kindness. These words were said by so many about Linda Campbell, once a novice at CHN, and still faithful at her death, as an Oblate of the SSC – of which she had been an Associate, and long-term cook. And when you visited her she said ‘How kind!’.

Photos came from all directions, as a CHN Novice, which marked her for life and we celebrated the Holy Name each year; sports pictures; Trelleck Teas; Abergavenny food festival; making music; sharing with other members of the SSC family at Michaelgarth. She liked nothing better than cooking for people and making them feel welcomed. She was involved in many, many groups, involved in the council, helping wherever she could.

A fellow Oblate wrote: “Linda may not physically be with us any more – but she still will always be an important part of the life of those of us who loved her.” She was ill when Sr Gillian died but she made a huge effort to come to her funeral, and there her capacity for friendship was evident, and lots of the SSC family saw her for the last time.

May she Rest in Peace and Rise in Glory.

*Sr Elizabeth*

**SISTER GILLIAN MARY**  
**1938-2023**

On my very first day alongside the community Reverend Mother Gillian Mary invited me to tour the grounds with her. As we walked away from the Convent and headed along the border towards the Campo Santo she said: " The Convent is where I shall spend the rest of my life, and it is here that I shall be buried." And so, it was. Sister Gillian Mary was buried in the Campo Santo on April 22, 2023. *(photograph by Suzie Howells)*



Born Gillian Fraser in London in 1938, Gillian was the first of four girls in the family. They were very young children during and in the years following World War II. As their Mother suffered ill health they were in effect brought up by their beloved Auntie Rita, their Father's sister. Auntie Rita was a skilled painter of flowers and landscapes. Some of her paintings can still be enjoyed at Tymawr.

Gillian was educated at Selly Oak College in Birmingham and at Lancaster University. She taught Religious Studies in inner city Birmingham and in London. Having discovered the Community on Iona, and been a Guest there , she took groups of young people to the island to experience its worship and work for themselves. It was on Iona that Gillian first heard the Call to Tymawr Convent, which she had also visited.

In advance of her arrival at Tymawr to test her Vocation Gillian asked the Reverend Mother, Sister Veronica Ann, if there was anything she could usefully do to prepare. She was told to learn to drive a car. She duly took lessons and arrived at Tymawr equipped with a Driver's Licence. She could always be asked to meet Guests travelling to Tymawr by train or bus. So, it was that her many years of living in community at Tymawr began. The Call which had brought her to Tymawr continued to make itself known in the beauty and rich potential of the grounds' shining evidence of God's presence as Creator. The grace and freedom of a bird in flight was always for Gillian a special wonder of God's creation, certainly an inspiration for her poetry.

In July 1986 Gillian was elected Mother Superior, succeeding Sister Veronica Ann. During the next twelve years as Mother, Gillian did not so much run the Community as find creative ways to communicate to her Sisters the kind of inclusive community she was imagining SSC could become. Out of her reflections came the inspiration for the Michaelgarth Year.

It was grief to Gillian that the Michaelgarth Year disrupted the Community to the extent it did. The Sisters who remained in the Convent for the Year all too readily feared the changes they anticipated would emerge from the mixed group of three Sisters and others living, worshipping and working at Michaelgarth. It would take the entire Community some years to recover from the Michaelgarth Year. During that time Gillian's mental health suffered and her poetic inspiration dried up, never to return. It was the Call, persisting through the heartache, which kept her at Tymawr. Always the flight of a bird had the power to alert her to the presence of God in creation and to creative opportunities for the Community.

Despite the apparent failure of the Michaelgarth Year Gillian found courage to make her subsequent tenure as Mother fruitful. For example, with respect to the grounds, she gave her full support to the restoration of the weed-choked, silted up Pond. She also warmly supported establishing a wildflower meadow in collaboration with Gwent Wildlife Trust. In house, her characteristic, warm hospitality welcomed to Tymawr poets, theologians and artists who conducted memorable Readings, Exhibitions, Weekend Retreats and Study Days.

In 1998 Gillian was grateful to be replaced as Mother Superior by Sister Mary Jean. Over the next twelve years Gillian would discern a relaxation of SSC's cherished ideal of self-sufficiency for almost all of its needs. Gradually, well qualified individuals were engaged to provide expertise and practical help on the Grounds, in the Library, Guest Wing, the General Office, Kitchen and for seasonal fruit picking. Oblates, Associates, Companion Brothers and Alongsiders became known as the 'wider community', the Sisters themselves the 'core community'. The inclusive community Gillian had begun to imagine was in effect slowly taking shape.

In 2010, following the death of Sister Mary Jean, Sister Gillian Mary was again elected Mother Superior. She was to remain in that Office until the time was right for the election of Sister Katharine. During those years Gillian presided over the Community's weekly Conferences with grace and compassion, while for the most part refraining from active leadership. SSC would be in a holding pattern until 2020 when Sister Katharine was elected Mother Superior.

Gillian always valued friendship highly. In the closing days of her earthly life she found much joy in the visits of family and friends. She found joy too in the love of



her Sisters in community who cared for her so faithfully and well. Most deeply she knew the Love which had called her to be just where she was, at Tymawr. Gillian was deeply at peace. One day near the end, she happened to glance out her window at the precise moment a beautiful Kite flew by. The wonder of that flight, so evocative of God's presence! Appropriately, Tymawr's 2023 Paschal Candle features a depiction of Gillian's gate and two Kites.

*Marion Fry Companion Sister SSC*

## **Future Dates**

**Closed Periods :** 8th January—13th February 2024  
8th—14th April 2024  
3rd—5th June 2024  
1st—31st August 2024  
18th—25th November 2024

**Quiet Days** “ . . . with the matter of the world.”  
18th April 2024 – Rt. Revd. Rowan Williams  
11th May 2024 – Dr. Jane Williams  
13th July 2024 – Revd. Sue Parfitt  
7th September 2024 – Revd. Dr. Rachel Mann  
5th October 2024 – Revd. Dr. Manon Ceridwen James  
9th November 2024 – The Very Revd. Dr. Frances Ward

### **Deadline for February 2024 Associate's Magazine contributions**

– 31st January 2024.

### **Associates Day 15th June 2024 The Christian theology of Tolkien**

led by Revd. Stephen Tucker, Assoc. SSC

There will be one or more Zoom gatherings, but no date fixed as yet.

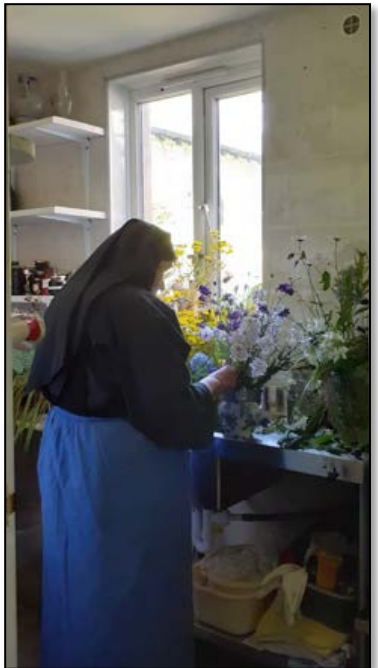
The Planning Group is also considering holding a weekend or mid-week retreat, and also a suggestion of arranging postal links between Associates who would like this. We would like feedback from Associates who would value either of these suggestions.

**Oblates Retreat** 6th—8th June 2024 Canon Mark Clavier, Brecon Cathedral

**Oblates Day** 19th November 2024



**Contact details for the Community**  
**Email:**  
**[community@tymawrconvent.com](mailto:community@tymawrconvent.com)**  
**Telephone: 01600 860244/808**  
**Website: [www.tymawrconvent.org](http://www.tymawrconvent.org)**



*Wishing you the joy and blessings of Christmas,  
with love and prayers from the Community at  
Tymawr Convent*



Mary  
Katharine SSC  
Rosalind Mary SSC  
Janet Ann SSC  
Elizabeth SSC  
Joanna SSC

Society of the Sacred Cross,  
Tymawr Convent, Lydart, Monmouth, NP25 4RN