

# St Cecilia's Abbey, Ryde Chronicle



**St Cecilia's Abbey, RYDE,**  
Isle of Wight, PO33 1LH  
Registered Charity 1088086

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Sung Mass & the full Divine Office every day.

Usual times of principal celebrations:

MASS : 10.00 a.m. Sundays & Solemnities

9.30 a.m. Weekdays

VESPERS: 5.00 p.m.

COMPLINE: 8.00 p.m.

**Paschal Triduum 2025**

Maundy Thursday, 17<sup>th</sup> April, Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper 5 p.m.

Good Friday, 18<sup>th</sup> April, Actio Liturgica 3 p.m.

Holy Saturday, 19<sup>th</sup> April, Paschal Vigil 10.45 p.m.

Easter Sunday, 20<sup>th</sup> April, Mass 10.00 a.m.

Ascension Day: Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> May, Mass 10.00 a.m.

Corpus Christi: Thursday 19<sup>th</sup> June, Mass 10.00 a.m.

Feast of the Sacred Heart: Friday 27<sup>th</sup> June, Mass 10.00 a.m.

**Front Cover:** *The Sacred Heart statue in the cloister of St Cecilia's Abbey. It previously stood over the entrance to the priory this community occupied at Ventnor before moving to Ryde.*

**Back Cover:** *Sanctuary, St Cecilia's Abbey, 30<sup>th</sup> January, 2025. See Notebook.*

**Illustrations:** *p. 6. Reproduced with the kind permission of Dr Harry H Willis Fleming of the Willis Fleming Historical Trust.*

## *From Mother Abbess*

When our first Prioress, Mère Ambrosia, put a statue of the Sacred Heart above the entrance to our monastery, it must have looked strange to the Protestant citizens of Ventnor. The image of the Sacred Heart, however, is only a development of the devotion to the Sacred Wounds of Christ that once flourished in England. Just over the water, for example, at Froyle in Hampshire the medieval church windows include five almond-shaped cuts, bearing the inscription, Wel of Wisdom, Wel of Mercy, Wel of Everlasting Lyf, Wel of Grace, Wel of Gudly Comfort. At the Easter Vigil the Paschal Candle is beautifully adorned, and treated with honour, and yet the priest marks the cross on it and inserts grains of incense to represent the Lord's wounds. Such a celebration of anyone's wounds seems very odd to the modern mind with its cult of physical and mental health.

During Holy Week we listened in the refectory to Bishop Erik Varden's book, *Healing Wounds*. It is a meditation on the wounds of Christ, built around the thirteenth-century poem, *Salve, mundi salutare* ("Hail, salvation of the world"). The poem addresses in turn the crucified Christ's feet, knees, hands, side, breast, heart and face (the well-known hymn, *O Sacred Head ill-used*, is Ronald Knox's version of one section of the poem). In his usual beautiful prose, Bishop Erik acknowledges the difficulties that are presented both by the very notion of suffering and by the devotional art that comforts some and repels others. Yet he invites the reader to go deeper into the theology of the Incarnation and of the Paschal Mystery:

*Christ's cross exemplifies absolute injustice... At the same time, faith teaches us to see in the cross not just scandal and pain, but the love of which the cross is a sign.* (p.30)

At Easter we exult in Christ who rose from the dead and now reigns in glory; yet we also adore the marks of his suffering which remain as signs of his love and give us hope.

By his holy and glorious wounds may Christ the Lord guard us and protect us.

*L. Eustochium*

***Homily of Dom Geoffroy Kemlin, Abbot-President of the Solesmes Congregation,  
for the seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C).***

*Readings: 1 Samuel 26:2, 7-9, 12-13, 22-23; 1 Corinthians 15:45-49; Luke 6:27-38*

My dear Sisters, during the canonical visitation of your monastery, the Church's liturgy providentially brings us a Gospel that touches us in a special way, because several of its verses are quoted in the Holy Rule.

We know this passage well: "The fourth degree of humility is that, meeting in this obedience with difficulties and contradictions and even injustice, he should with a quiet mind hold fast to patience and enduring neither tire nor run away [...]. Moreover, in adversities and injuries they patiently fulfil the Lord's commands: when struck on one cheek they offer the other; when robbed of their tunic, they surrender their cloak; when forced to go a mile, they go two." [RB 7, 35-36. 42]

This passage is perhaps one of the most demanding in the Holy Rule. And yet Saint Benedict asks of us nothing more than what Jesus asks of all his disciples. In fact, this Gospel is in a way the charter of community life. It reveals to us the secret of making our fraternal life a success, that is to say, that it enables us to taste the joy of Heaven right here below. In fact, our community life has no other aim than this: to enter here below into the communion of the Trinity itself, to live here below in the communion that unites the three persons of the Trinity. It is the liturgy of the Church that tells us this, following the Second Vatican Council and also Saint Cyprian: the Church, and therefore also this small Church that is a monastic community, is a *plebs de unitate Trinitatis adunata*, a people united by the very unity of the Trinity [cf. Preface VIII of the Sundays in Ordinary Time; *Lumen gentium*, 4; St Cyprian, *De Dominica Oratione*, 23].

At the same time, we understand why the Lord asks so much of us, why he is so demanding. If this is the greatness of what he invites and calls us to, then our way of life must also be very high, radically exceeding the demands of our reason left to its own devices.

Some might object that, in a monastic community, nobody has enemies, nobody hates us, nobody curses us, nobody slaps us on the cheek, nobody takes our cloak. In fact, this last example is not even possible, since, having taken a vow of poverty, we possess nothing. And yet, all it takes is a little experience of community life to know that we too are experiencing — in our own way — the trials of which Jesus speaks. We soon learn that fraternal life is a place of great joys, but also of great trials.

Even if we have no enemies in the community, we often have the opportunity to imitate the attitude of David, who refuses to harm King Saul because he is the Lord's anointed. Our sisters are also the Lord's anointed and doubly so: by their baptism and by their monastic consecration. Of course, the temptation for us is not – in general – to pin one of our sisters to the ground with one stroke of the spear, and without having to strike her twice. But every day, probably even several times a day, we have the opportunity to do as much and better than David, by holding back a hurtful word, by doing a sister a favour when she has not done us one, by giving her the marks of respect laid down in the ceremonial when she herself dispenses with them.

By doing so, we will make the monastery a little piece of Heaven come down to earth. Jesus himself tells us: "Your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High." Our reward is, of course, eternal bliss, but it is also that ineffable sweetness of love of which our Blessed Father Saint Benedict speaks in the prologue. From here below, it expands our hearts and makes us run along the path of God's commandments.

Saint Benedict himself gave us the most beautiful description of this path in chapter 72 on good zeal: "Let them give one another precedence. Let them bear with the greatest patience one another's infirmities, whether of body or character. Let them vie in paying obedience to one another. Let none follow what seems good for himself, but rather what is good for another. Let them practise fraternal charity with a pure love."

By acting in this way, we show that we prefer absolutely nothing to Christ. May he deign to lead us all together to eternal life.



## *The History of Appley House: Part 11: The Death of Captain Hutt*

When Captain Richards Hutt drew up his will in June 1817 he gave the impression of a man in cheerful circumstances. Though his wife was dead and his two eldest sons already in India, the other ten children were still at home, and Appley House must have been full of life. He must have had in front of him the will of his late brother Captain John Hutt, for he uses the same opening words: "Like all other mortals being uncertain of the next hour ... counting on the mercy of my Creator to forgive innumerable sins and weaknesses I trust my soul through the almighty clemency may be numbered among the just and virtuous." The Appley Estate had been inherited by Captain Richards Hutt as entailed property, that is, it would pass automatically to his eldest son John. The will therefore does not mention it, but instead stipulates that, after the payment of debts, the Captain's personal property is to be divided equally among the children, "share and share alike". The only exception is Troublefield Farm, which John Hutt is to be given the option of buying for £2,500. It would seem that this farm was not part of the entailed property. The will was witnessed by Isaac Wallis of Ryde, William Parr, gardener at Appley, and William Shirley, servant at Appley.

Three years later, when Captain Hutt died suddenly at the age of seventy, the family were plunged into financial catastrophe. This is summarised in a statement sent by the Member of Parliament for Hampshire, John Willis Fleming (a major landowner on the Island; one of his sons would build Quarr Abbey House), to Lord Palmerston, the future Prime Minister, who at that time was Secretary at War, but who knew the Island, having been MP for Newport.



John Willis Fleming

*Upon enquiry into his affairs, it appears, to the surprise and horror of all who knew him, that he had been gradually eating up his capital... He leaves twelve children behind him, nine of whom are entirely unprovided for – without parents – without pecuniary means – without any hope flowing from rich friends or relatives, without any hope whatever but such as may arise from strong public feeling consequent upon so very singular a calamity. The father leaves a will, the first injunction of which relates to the payment of debts, and these amount to probably five or six times the value of the assets. The eldest son is now in India where he has been a few years only, and the distress is so immediate as to admit of no delay. Of the children it has been noticed that three are provided for – the two eldest boys [John and Benjamin] being sent writers [clerks] to India, and the eldest girl [Elizabeth] being married to a surgeon*

*[William Warden] in the Navy. But as though misery pursued the family in every step, her husband having scraped together a few hundred pounds had entrusted them to the care of Captain Hutt, and his small savings are sunk in the general wreck. Mrs Warden also has two children: the eldest not two years old, and she is on the point of being confined again. Of the remaining children four are boys between the ages of nineteen and twelve years. The eldest [William], a very clever young man of nineteen, has been six months at Oxford; he is now slowly recovering from a state of delirium arising from this terrible shock. Of the five girls, two are still at school, and of the three which are grown up, one is from constitutional illness a burthen upon the rest. It should be added that the last male relative of their name was that Captain Hutt who upon the First of June fell so gloriously in the service of his country, and it may perhaps strengthen their claim to public feeling that this family, so unfortunate in their parent, are also the nephews and nieces of so distinguished an officer, who, had it pleased God to have spared him from the danger of that battle, would have at this moment stood to them in the situation of a father. In a covering letter Fleming added: The case has excited a warm interest in this neighbourhood, and in a very few days a very liberal sum was subscribed to assist the destitute family. Lord Buckingham has undertaken to present a petition on their behalf to the King, and I am to make it known at the Treasury, in hopes that some situation may be obtained for the boys. It is not known what came of these steps, but another Island landowner, Sir William Oglander of Nunwell, arranged for the younger children to receive financial support from the Society of East India Commanders.*

Perhaps Mrs Walker had foreseen that Captain Hutt did not have the skill to manage an estate, and that was why she entailed Appley. As the family's only asset, its sale would do something to salvage the situation, but first they needed to go through the legal process of "breaking the entail", and for this they needed the eldest son to return home. In the days before telegrams it could take months for a letter to reach India. John Hutt set sail from Madras in the ship *Moirra* in January 1821, presumably on receipt of the news. Such a voyage should have taken about six months, but the *Moirra* was grounded on the Little Basses coral reef near Sri Lanka and so arrived at Gravesend only in October. This meant that William Hutt and his siblings had to spend more than a year fending off their father's creditors, dismissing loyal servants such as Parr and Shirley and living on the charity of strangers such as Palmerston. Sixteen years later, William Hutt was an MP and a wealthy man (how this came about will be explained in another issue), and wrote to Palmerston (now Foreign Secretary) on behalf of a constituent languishing in a French gaol: *It is no new character to Your Lordship to be a friend to the friendless, and therefore I conclude my note without apology for the very earnest appeal I wish to make to you on behalf of this unhappy man.* He had not forgotten the kindness shown to him in time of need.

*To be continued.*



***The homily of Abbot Xavier Perrin on the solemnity of Saint Joseph for the occasion of Sr Marie Germain Fiévet's Diamond Jubilee of Profession***

*Much of the original homily for his compatriot has been translated from Father Abbot's native French.*

Dear Mother Abbess, Dear Sisters, Révérende et chère Sœur Marie-Germain,



Yes, you heard correctly. I called you “Reverend.” You deserve it. The jubilee we are celebrating today deserves a very special mark of respect. Sixty years of monastic profession is impressive, at least by our human reckoning. For the Good Lord, we know that “a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like a day”. Everything is present to Him. He is present in every moment of our lives. And it is this presence in your life that we celebrate today. The One to whom you gave yourself totally sixty years ago has been faithful. He has walked with you every day. He has been present in His own way, which you know well, sometimes almost imperceptibly,

and other times, seeming to fill everything.

Let us think of Saint Joseph, who joyfully shares with you his solemnity! God accompanied him throughout his life. The holy man walked in step with God. Even his sleep and his dreams were mysteriously full of God. Let us not be surprised: God comes to us by all sorts of paths. He beckons to us. It becomes a game to recognize Him each time He finds a new way to manifest Himself. It is a game of love, for love is the substance of time. It is what remains when time flies, when the years pass and our bodies remind us every day that we are no longer twenty.

Joseph is a man of great love: for his God, for Mary, for Jesus. He makes a single sheaf of all three. He embraces them with one heart. For them, he is husband and father, he carries out his work as a carpenter, without forgetting his duties as a good, pious Jew. He puts his whole heart into it. He loves, and he takes everything that comes to him from that side, from the side of love. As a result, his life is simple. His life is one. Obeying, working, playing with the Child, or teaching him to pray or how to use a saw—these are a single work of love accomplished in a movement from the depths of his heart.

Joseph does not experience all this in ecstasy but in faith. He has allowed himself to be gently tamed by the mystery. God is present in the flesh of his Child, intensely



present, and yet so discreet that it has been called the “hidden life.” God is present, but in a kind of night. There are these messages from heaven from time to time, but only when necessary. For the rest, Joseph believes and hopes. His heart trusts God, more and more.

Joseph is also the friend of the monk and the nun who, like him, live for Jesus and for Mary, for the community, for the Church and for God, held together in a single love. After more than sixty years in the monastery, you are no doubt a little better at making your life a song of love and remaining in the peaceful expectation of hope. A serene and strong conviction assures you that everything that happens comes from Him. He is there. He is at work. “Do not be afraid!” He often tells us, and we respond to Him: “I believe, I hope, I love you.” The confidence He has in the confidence we place in Him is simply overwhelming. Péguy spoke of the hope of God meeting our hope: is this not the very foundation of our lives?

Like Joseph, we walk with love on the path of faith as pilgrims of hope. You have recognized the theme of the Jubilee that the entire Church is celebrating in this year 2025. Your own Diamond Jubilee is happily part of the great anniversary of the Incarnation. It is the anniversary gift that Jesus and you offer each other. It is as if you were saying together, inseparably united in the same Spirit: “For you I was born, for you I lived, with you I walk towards the Father.”



Dear Sister, you have so much to give thanks for. Of course, you now do less than you used to. You need patience with yourself and more time to do things. You often use the help of a stick, and even at times avail yourself of the commodities of an electric carriage. I hope it is comfortable; and safe, too. Don't forget that in this country you have to drive on the left side of the road. At the crossroads, first look left, then right! Above all, you have your Abbesses and your Sisters, all of them so good, so grateful and so lovingly caring for you. You enjoy every day the privilege of charity which is the great luxury of our community life. The minimum you can do in return is to give them as long as you can the shining example of French *politesse*, French *gentillesse*, the French *sourire* – not to mention our national humility; but nobody will believe *me* on that one!

A last word: Merci! This comes from the bottom of the heart of your Community, your Brethren of Quarr, and your dear Family for whom you are so important. *Livrez-vous avec bonheur à la belle joie de ce jour et, s'il plaît à Dieu, ajoutez-y beaucoup, beaucoup d'autres jours, pour notre joie et celle de Dieu. Amen.*

*Dom Guéranger and Joy: Part 3*  
*by Dom Jacques de Préville OSB, St-Pierre de Solesmes*

Dom Guéranger, as we can see, knew wonderfully how to console, to communicate his joy and his strength.

He wrote to [Dom Fonteinne]: “Don’t be so dark when you finish your letters; do as I do, and shake off all my sorrows as I finish these lines.” These last words are important for a better understanding of the nature and quality of joy in Dom Guéranger. He will say elsewhere: “Cheerfulness takes courage, as does everything else.”

What he seeks to correct in those whom he guides spiritually is the lack of simplicity. The fiancée of his great friend Léon Landeau, Clémence, seemed terribly devoid of it. Dom Guéranger laughs at this in this letter to Léon: “As for your betrothed, I don’t need to recommend her to take care of you. I think she does not have the same solemnity every day; otherwise, when you return to me, you will be so serious as to be baffling.” And in this other letter to Clémence Landeau herself: “Try to take half of his [that of a monk he names] *afflonnement*;<sup>1</sup> it will be much better, and so will you be... May God preserve you, dear child; and believe in all the sincere and affectionate devotion I have forever devoted to your Solemnity.” From Rome, Dom Guéranger, writing to his friends the Landeau family, imagined that one day he would be able to show them around the great city:

How much did I think of you both in the midst of so many pleasures for heart and soul; but I hope that God will someday grant me the grace to serve you as cicerone, when you are all old enough for it. It will be fine to see you go up to the Capitol, dear girl; with your solemn air, the Roman people will think they see a new Corinne who is going to seek her crown.

But Dom Guéranger did not lose hope. A few years later, he wrote: “Farewell, Léon: I wish you *l’afflonnement* and see that next time I find you wide awake, and you, dear Clémence, ever more de-solemnised and good.”

“Il faut aller rondement.” [You must do things “roundly” i.e. straightforwardly.] Dom Guéranger likes this word which conveys simplicity, the absence of complications, of self-reflection, of scruples in the spiritual life, and also conveys trust. “Courage, round yourselves [arrondissez-vous],” he wrote to Euphrasie Cosnard. It’s to be taken in this sense! He wrote to one of his monks: “Know how to be humble, simple and childlike, as you ought to be; this is the only thing that will give you peace.” He thought the

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<sup>1</sup>As explained in Part 1, “*afflonement*” is a word from the Sarthe patois that Dom Guéranger often used, or the corresponding verb. It might be translated as “cheerful resilience”.

young Cécile Bruyère too stiff, shy, and a little sullen. Dom Guéranger would strive in his counsels to get her to open herself more and more to joy. Such advice abounds: “Be kind, gracious, smiling at everyone.”

Dom Guéranger’s joy did not only come from a happy temperament; it was also the fruit of continual asceticism, mortification, detachment, and self-forgetfulness. It is important to emphasize this. Dom Guéranger was a very mortified man and hard on himself. He inflicted painful penances on himself. He often said, we are told, “It is remarkable that the most mortified saints are the most cheerful saints.” We can certainly apply this saying to him.

His joy was even more the fruit of grace in him, the fruit of the Holy Spirit: ultimately, it was this supernatural joy that ruled in Dom Guéranger’s soul. It was already present at the time of the very pure grace of light received at the seminary on the mystery of the Immaculate Conception: “But now I feel imperceptibly led to believe that Mary is immaculate in her conception; speculation and sentiment unite effortlessly on this mystery, I feel a sweet joy in my acquiescence; no transport, but sweet peace with sincere conviction.” He recalled this episode to Mère Cécile Bruyère in 1872: “I was praying, and I was changed in a moment. All the arguments against it were found in favour, and I came out of it entirely opposed to the sentiments I had brought, and happy! happy! you cannot imagine.” The definition of the dogma on December 8, 1854, filled him with inexpressible joy.

This joy in the face of the mysteries was always fully felt by his contemplative soul. We still have this beautiful testimony of Dom Guépin: “On feast days especially, Dom Guéranger was transfigured. He lived the mystery of each solemnity. His heart and mind were then so intimately united with the Child Jesus, or with the glorious Risen One, with the Blessed Virgin Mary, with St. Benedict, or with St. Peter, that all else was forgotten. He was beaming with joy, felt no fatigue, and always had the strength to sing a hymn, a canticle, or a Christmas carol at the top of his lungs.”

He had a special love for the Easter season. He relished his hymns, too; he was particularly enthusiastic about the Christmas hymn *A solis ortus cardine*, and the *Adoro te*. We also know how fond he was of Psalm 102, which was called “the psalm of Father Abbot”. It goes without saying that he felt a very lively joy at the great liturgical celebrations, at profession ceremonies, and consecrations of new church altars.

*To be continued. Translated by Sr MBR*

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## *‘The Saints Whose Relics Are Here’: Blessed Stanley Francis Rother*

Friends (leading lights of the parish) lived on what had once been the main London to Canterbury Road. Thomas Becket must have trotted close by just outside the window. The saints are close to us, even perhaps in our families.

We, here, have recently had the joy of an increase of Americans in the Community. This has prompted us to look more closely at American saints. Where better to start than with Oklahoma-born Blessed Stanley Francis Rother (+ 28 July 1981)? He is invoked by our brothers of Clear Creek monastery as they prepare for final vows. He was born in 1935 and ordained as a diocesan priest in 1963. He had needed perseverance academically in the seminary: exercise for his spiritual muscles to prepare him for even bigger trials ahead. In 1962 Pope St John XXIII had asked the Church in North America to provide pastoral assistance to Central America. Oklahoma’s response was to set up a mission in south western Guatemala, specifically at Santiago on the coast of Lake Atitlán. Fr Rother offered himself for the mission in 1968 and later became its mainstay. He had to learn both Spanish and Tz’utujil, the local Mayan language, into which he translated the New Testament.

At the beginning of the 1980s the Guatemalan Civil War escalated. The radio station he had set up for catechesis was destroyed and its director murdered. Catechists and other parishioners “disappeared” but Rother stood by their families, mostly poor and landless. In January 1981 he learned that his own name was on a death list. He was persuaded to return to Oklahoma but could not stay away from his flock. He didn’t want to die, but he needed to live with his flock, be with them in their travail. He went back in time for Holy Week. His last trip to Oklahoma was for the ordination of his cousin, Fr Don Wolf. He returned to Santiago saying that “the shepherd cannot run at the first sign of danger”. His last big celebration was the Feast of St James on 25 July, the patronal feast of the parish. The church was still decked in feast day decorations when his funeral took place on the day of his assassination, 28 July. He was one of 10 priests murdered in Guatemala that year.

A magnificent shrine was opened in Oklahoma City in 2023. The Rector is Fr Don Wolf. Devotion to Blessed Stanley is such that (in common with our Dom Guéranger) his heart and his body are in separate places: the heart in Santiago and the body in Oklahoma. It was to Fr Wolf that we wrote last Summer. Not long afterwards, a precious packet arrived from Archbishop Coakley (who knows our Solesmes Congregation well). The packet contained a first-class relic for which we are so grateful.

Why else might we, on the Isle of Wight, be interested in invoking Fr Rother’s help? As the series of articles in our Chronicles, Mother Abbess is a keen student of the

history of the house onto which the monastery is built. Being on the seafront it has frequently been an attraction to seafarers. This was the case in the 1830s when it belonged to Marshall Bennett. He was a mahogany prospector in Belize. He extended his activities to Guatemala. Dr Mariano Gálvez, Chief of State, had plans, in 1834, to enlarge the economy, for development through colonization.



*Stanley Francis Rother*

Marshall Bennett appeared on the scene at what seemed an opportune moment. Gálvez altered his original stipulations to suit Bennett and his colleagues. They were given the monopoly of fifteen million acres (more than 6 million hectares) of public lands despite it being obvious that their main interest was in the resources of the lands rather than colonization! Blessed Stanley Rother surely has an interest in the spiritual welfare of us who live in Bennett's house.

Though we do not pretend to know the secrets of Marshall Bennett's heart, it seems reasonable to suppose that he went to Guatemala to make his fortune. In what stark contrast this is to Blessed Stanley, who went there to give himself entirely to a flock he did not yet know, to bring the hope of Christ to the oppressed! These opposite dispositions sum up the two ways open to each of us: to save our lives or to lose them in love. Blessed Stanley wanted, not to die, but to live, to live fully. Dear God, give us their zeal. The saints have hearts, we could desire nothing more. *Gloria haec est omnibus sanctis eius* (Ps 149).

*Sr CN*

*If you would like to find out more about Blessed Stanley Rother, the following sources are especially useful:*

- *The Shepherd Who Didn't Run: Blessed Stanley Rother, Martyr from Oklahoma*, María Ruiz Scaperlanda, Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, Huntington, Indiana, Revised edition 2019
- Website of the Archdiocese of Oklahoma: [www.archokc.org/stanleyrother](http://www.archokc.org/stanleyrother)

“The shepherd cannot run at the first sign of danger. Pray for us that we may be a sign of the love of Christ for our people, that our presence among them will fortify them to endure these sufferings in preparation for the coming of the Kingdom.”

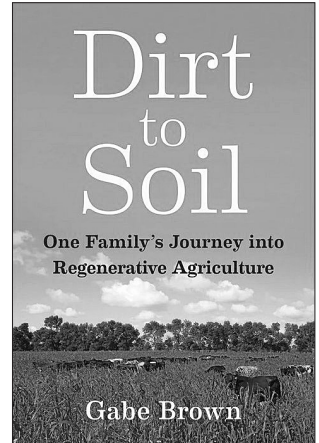
- Blessed Stanley Rother

## *Read in the Refectory*

Gabe Brown, *Dirt to Soil. One Family's Journey into Regenerative Agriculture* (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2018) 224 pages.

We were first introduced to the regenerative approach to agriculture by Sr Margaret's father who gave us a talk on the topic some time back. We were very interested to learn about these methods which avoid or minimise practices that have been, until recently, widely regarded as essential.

The book is divided into two roughly equal sections. In the first, entitled *The Journey*, Gabe Brown recounts the transformation of his small, conventionally-run, low-profit farm into a much more expansive, much more profitable ranch that relies entirely on regenerative cultivation methods. How these methods work is explained in the second section, *The Big Picture*. Brown claims that conventional farming methods – heavy tillage, chemical fertilization, extensive use of pesticides etc. – treat the soil as basically lifeless matter. In a balanced ecosystem, Brown argues, the soil keeps itself healthy and nutrient-rich through a complex network of interacting plant roots, microbes and animals. When this network is disrupted, the soil becomes 'lazy', i.e. it stops regenerating itself and becomes reliant on exterior input. The results are impoverished and erosive soils, crops that do not really nourish, and also enormous costs for the farmers, who now have to provide from outside what the soil should really do by itself. Brown's advice is therefore to minimize disturbance of the soil, especially avoiding tilling. He also recommends keeping the surface of the soil covered with plants for as much time of the year as possible, both to protect it from drying up and to encourage the 'carbon cycle' that vitally depends on living plant roots in the soil. Finally, he strongly promotes the integration of animals (from cows via chickens to bees) into any agricultural operation.



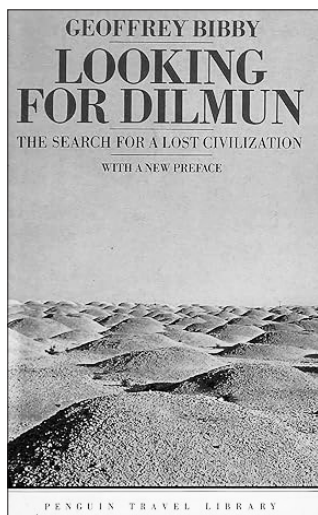
The book provided certain challenges to the refectory reader (how exactly do you pronounce words such as rhizosphere or actinomycetes?). On the whole, however, his argumentation is easy to follow; indeed, his frequent return to his favourite buzzwords ('nutrient-dense food', 'intercropping', 'Go no-till!' etc.) occasionally caused a certain amount of hilarity in the audience. He can come across as somewhat boastful, but we can be sure that this is meant to advertise the – certainly important – message rather than his own person. (The story of his own family is told with admirable reserve.)

Every now and then we read a ‘nature book’ in the refectory to boost our general education with regard to wildlife, ecosystems or geographical anomalies. Gabe Brown’s book falls into that category, yet it also had an eminently practical interest for us: The soils on the northern coast of the Isle of Wight have for centuries been known to be poor and not of itself favourable to agriculture. Our gardeners often have to resort to different kinds of fertilizer to improve the quality of the soil, but a natural way of achieving this goal would of course be very desirable. (And Brown is adamant that his method works on any ground.) So far only a few experimental garden patches have been ceded to this venture, and working with nature means of course being patient and not expecting immediate results...

Finally it should be noted that the book is refreshingly free of any ‘green religion’-slang. Gabe Brown is not so much concerned about saving the planet as about caring for the plot of land entrusted to him. His whole concept of regenerative farming is steeped in a solid Christian faith, which allows him so see the land primarily as God’s creation. “God would not have created an imperfect system” is a conviction that helps him place his work as a farmer within – not against – creation’s well-balanced whole.

Sr CS

Geoffrey Bibby, *Looking for Dilmun: The Search for a Lost Civilization*  
(Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 410pp.



Once upon a time there was an island. It swam (men said) like a fish in the sea of what would later be called the Persian or Arabian Gulf. Its streams of waters nourished date-palms and greenery with such abundance that legend assigned it a place in the favour of the Sumerian gods, as a pure and holy land of health and plenty. It was reputed to be where Gilgamesh, hero of an ancient Babylonian epic, had learned the secret of immortality from the sole survivor of the Flood. Some four thousand years ago, however, the prosperity of those who apparently continued to ponder this story was won by quests much more down to earth than that of Gilgamesh. Solid trade in luxurious but concrete commodities – copper, ivory, carnelian, steatite – was shipped to its port and processed through its customs house, weighed and sealed with the marks of a developed economic and administrative

system. The traffic flowed from the Indus Valley, up and down the Gulf, and into Mesopotamia, where priests of the temples in Ur archived shipping contracts written



on the clay tablets which were the everyday medium of written record. Yet this material success was also, ultimately, as transient as Gilgamesh's hopes: he lost the Flower of Immortality to the wiles of a snake, while the land of Dilmun (for thus was named the polity to which the island belonged) was marginalized in trade and memory, victim to political and environmental change. Its very name was lost to history until nineteenth-century archaeological discoveries uncovered a wealth of background to the slender information on Babylon and Assyria furnished by the Hebrew Scriptures.

Dilmun had been plausibly identified with the island of Bahrain in hypotheses of the nineteenth century. Geoffrey Bibby's book tells the story of the twentieth-century Danish archaeological expeditions, of which he was a leading member, that restored Dilmun to a fuller place on the historical map – and with it, a still wider stretch of the region's history, from the Stone Age to the passage of the Greeks. It is a fascinating tale, conjuring up not only the civilizations of millennia past, but also the fast-changing world of the Gulf states in the '50s and '60s, as oil wealth forced transformations in infrastructure, governance and awareness of the past. The material is complex: besides background information on the appearances of 'Dilmun' in already-discovered records, we need to be told about how one negotiates terms with sheikhs, how to excavate a site, how pottery offers a means of relative and even absolute dating; about the ancient cities of Ur and of the Indus Valley civilization; how to make sense of fragments of streets and walls, of evidence of changing landscapes, of the different forms of seals and weights which appear in soil as it is sifted. Happily, Bibby is a minor genius at combining narrative with judiciously-paced explanation, such that, while the author maintains a conversational style throughout, the reader – and even the refectory listener – finds he has painlessly absorbed a surprising quantity of information, at exactly the rate needed to understand the next stage of the investigations.

Even by the time the first edition was published (1970), the world of the first post-war excavations was already receding into a history nearly as unimaginable as Dilmun's. Geoffrey Bibby died in 2001, and a great deal more had happened in the Gulf by then. In the 2020s, current Gulf archaeological concerns include the reclaiming of information about traditional 'pre-oil' village life. History and memory refuse to stand still.

For the Christian reader, perhaps the greatest mystery is the existence of so many individuals who lived and died in their villages, their temples, their lively, bustling cities, without ever hearing the Gospel. Abraham had surely heard of Dilmun before he walked westwards away from Ur and away from the gods of his fathers. Did he pray, perhaps, for God to remember the men and women of that all-too-mortal world?

*Sr MTB*

## Notebook

This year seems to be filled with significant anniversaries! On the feast of the Epiphany, our community marked 75 years of belonging to the Congregation of Solesmes. With the Church, we celebrate the 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Council of Nicaea in this jubilee year; and as a community under the patronage of the Peace of the Heart of Jesus, we were particularly delighted by the Holy Father's recent encyclical *Dilexit Nos* on the Sacred Heart, prompted by the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the apparitions to St Margaret Mary Alacoque.

With our Congregation, we celebrated the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Dom Guéranger on the 30th of January, who would surely have been pleased with the timing, given his own devotion to the mystery of the

Incarnation and the Sacred Heart. To mark the day, we had a beautiful votive Mass of St Benedict celebrated here by Abbot Xavier Perrin of Quarr Abbey, Abbot Cuthbert Brogan of Farnborough Abbey and Abbot Paul Gunter of Douai Abbey – thus all the Benedictine houses of our diocese were represented – with many other monks of Quarr and Farnborough present also. Festive refreshments were served for the guests with an opportunity for exchanges at the grille before they returned to Quarr for a celebratory lunch. It was a wonderful opportunity to give thanks for all the blessings that have come to us through Dom Guéranger's graced instincts for the liturgy and monastic life and to entrust ourselves to his prayers that we may be faithful to all we have received.





Soon after that, our canonical Visitation opened on the 17<sup>th</sup> of February and we had the pleasure of welcoming Dom Geoffroy Kemlin, abbot president of the Solesmes Congregation, and Mother Benedict McLaughlin, abbess of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Abbey in Vermont, USA, to conduct it. Our visitations take place every five years and are primarily a spiritual work of discernment for the community, aided by an independent perspective from those who understand the nature and dynamics of the enclosed Benedictine life. We were grateful to our Visitors for

their hard work, and were delighted to enjoy moments of relaxation with them too, notably a particularly lively festive recreation and Père Abbé Kemlin's second game of netball here, which was no less lively.

As noted above, Sr Marie Germain Fiévet also celebrated her Diamond Jubilee of monastic profession this March on the feast of St Joseph. She was joined by members of her family who travelled from France to be present at her renewal of vows during Mass. We fêted our beloved jubilarian with cards and gifts aplenty, cell decorations, and a remarkably international festive recreation with items performed in French (*bien sûr*), German, Polish, and Irish. There was even an item or two in English!

We rejoiced with Sr Joseph Marie O'Riordan as she has begun marking her time in vows, having made her first profession last November on the feast of St Cecilia. We are sure time will fly until she has jubilees of



her own to celebrate! She was joined by many friends and family members from Ireland to share in her joy and ours. Fr Abbot's homily for the Mass focused on the spiritual

fecundity of monastic consecration:

*Today, you are the seed and the sower. You give yourself freely.*

*You undergo something like a symbolic death – one could speak*

*of a sacrifice, a complete renouncement, a handing over to Christ of yourself: body, mind, heart. You make your own the noble gesture of the sower. You entrust the seed to the ground with the sure hope of the harvest to come in due time. You choose life in Jesus and, therefore, you imitate his own gift of self. For Jesus Himself is the seed who gave himself up to the mysterious will of His Father so as to recreate the world in the strength of His resurrection. And He is also*

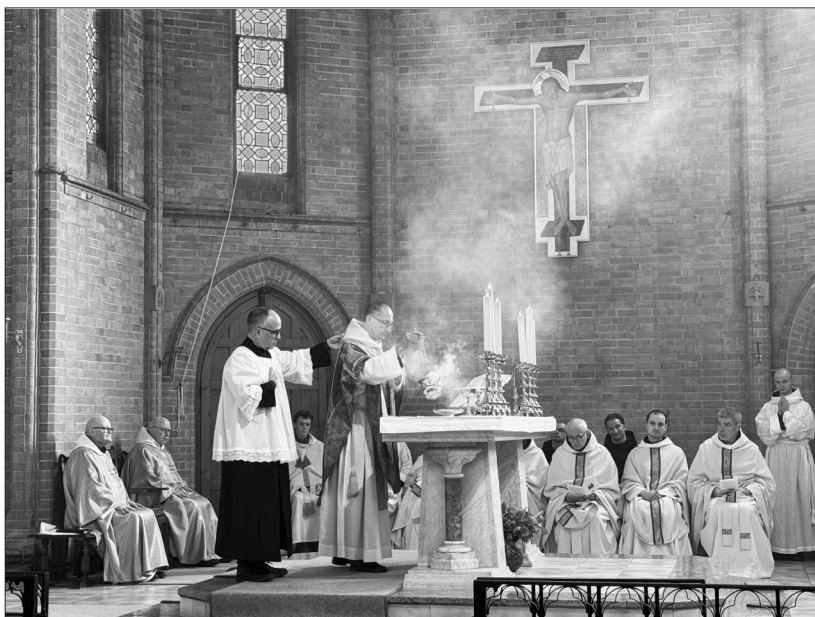


*the sower, a very expert one. Rightly, you put yourself in His hands: He will lead you to life; He will give to your hidden sacrifice the grace of bringing abundant fruit in His Church.*

We have not exhausted our reasons to celebrate: already we look forward to another Diamond Jubilee in September, that of Sr Anne Marie O'Keeffe; and looking further ahead to 2026, we will celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the abbatial blessing of our community's first abbess, Mère Ambrosia Cousin. In fact, we never shall exhaust our reasons to celebrate. The ultimate reason for true celebration is, of course, that Christ has risen from the dead and hence we can affirm that life is good and not absurd, even in the midst of the many challenges of our lives and times. Sr Marie Germain's Profession motto is *Ambulare cum Deo*, 'To walk with God', and her emblem, the Alpha and Omega, tells us again that Christ is the start and end of all that is. We wish for all our oblates, friends and readers His constant companionship on the way.







*Incensing of the altar during the votive Mass of St Benedict,  
celebrated at St Cecilia's Abbey on 30<sup>th</sup> January 2025  
in honour of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dom Guéranger's death.*

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*Lord Jesus,  
You enkindled an immense fire of love for the Church  
in the heart of your servant, Prosper Guéranger.  
Through his example, teach us to join our voice  
to that of the Church in the prayer of the liturgy  
and to listen with confidence to the teaching of our pastors,  
above all that of the Pope, your vicar on earth.  
Through his intercession, grant us the grace [name it]  
which we ask of you  
so that his sanctity may be known to all  
and the Church may swiftly permit us to invoke him  
as blessed and as one of your saints.  
And, united here below with the praise of heaven,  
may we come to the glory of your resurrection,  
through you who live and reign for ever and ever.  
Amen*