

RCC ANNUAL OUTING - VISIT TO STANBROOK ABBEY, WASS

SUMMARY OF THE PRESENTATION GIVEN BY DAME RAPHAEL FOSTER OSB

WHO ARE WE?

At present we are a community of 22 Benedictine nuns. We have unbroken continuity with the founding group of nine young women who left England in 1623 to establish an enclosed monastery in Cambrai, Flanders. Penal Laws prohibited the establishment of monasteries in England, so English men and women who were called to monastic life travelled to France. At the time of the French Revolution in the 18th century, "we" were arrested and imprisoned in Compiègne with the Carmelites who are portrayed in Poulenc's opera "Les Carmelites". They were guillotined but we were not, and we found our way back to England dressed in their secular clothing.

Then followed a period of wandering; our first temporary home was in Woolton, near Liverpool, 1795, then we moved to Salford Hall, Warwickshire, 1807, and eventually acquired Stanbrook Hall, Worcestershire in 1838. There we built a Church, 1871, and monastery 1891, designed by Edward Welby Pugin, erecting full enclosure and re-establishing full monastic observance.

In the middle of the 20th century numbers peaked at about 75, but subsequently fell. Rising prices of oil-fired heating and ongoing maintenance forced us to consider moving, and a search for a suitable location went on for several years before Crief Farm came to our notice. Planning permission from the N.Y.M.N.P. allowed us to build this eco-friendly monastery, with a wood-chip boiler, harvested rain water for plumbing, reed beds to purify sewage, sedum roofs and solar panels. On 21 May, 2009, we piled into a coach at Stanbrook, Worcester, leaving our 19th century home and drove up to find the first phase of this 21st century monastery! As funds permit, we intend to build the Church, library, parlours and guest accommodation.

BENEDICTINE

We follow the Rule of St Benedict, born in Nursia, Italy in 480.

Monastic life in some form is found in different religions, and was known in the 4th century when Christian hermits went into the Egyptian desert to search for God and to pray. Communities sprang up and certain Rules were written to guide their way of life. The Rule of Benedict is wise and moderate and is followed by monks and nuns world wide, adapted to varying conditions. The chapters on how communities should discuss matters of importance and arrive at decisions are thought to have influenced our Parliamentary system.

Our daily life revolves around the choral celebration of the "Opus Dei" (work of God) that is, services which sanctify the hours of the day. There are times of manual work, such as the domestic chores of any family, in the kitchen, garden, laundry, sewing room, care of the frail and elderly, or work in preparation for the liturgy, such as preparing texts, music or organ practice. Regular times are set aside for Lectio Divina (prayerful reading of the Scriptures or religious texts) and personal prayer.

The day's liturgy begins with Vigils/Matins, a meditative service of psalms and readings, originally sung in the night, as our own foundresses observed it. Lauds/Morning Prayer is sung approximately at sunrise, praising God for the new day, and Vespers, its counterpart, at sunset. At the end of the morning's work we gather for Midday Prayer, and before retiring to bed, we have monastic Night Prayer/Compline. Every day we celebrate the Eucharist in remembrance of the gift of the Lord Jesus of Himself to us as bread and wine.

The Church's year begins with the season of Advent, four weeks of preparation for the celebration of His birth at Christmas. The six weeks of Lent prepare for the high point of the Christian year, the solemn commemoration of the Death and Resurrection of the Lord, followed by His Ascension and the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. This whole cycle spans roughly 6 months and the other six months are lived out in the strength of these central festivals.

The staple diet of our celebration of the hours of the day is the book of 150 psalms, sometimes called the prayer book of the Bible. They express all human experience and broadly fall into two categories: cries for help and cries of praise. At certain times they seem to have been written precisely for oneself, even BY oneself! The people of Israel, and later, the Church, adopted them to mediate their relationship with the one God, and as a response to His having revealed Himself in history. The words of the psalms are frequently quoted in the New Testament, and Jesus Himself prayed them (Ps. 30 & 21 on the Cross).

Today when you join us for Midday Prayer, the first words you will hear are "O God, come to my assistance". This phrase, from Psalm 69 was used by one of the early monks in the Egyptian desert, repeated over and over again as a background to all he did, working or eating, in order to fulfil St Paul's admonition to "pray without ceasing". We still open every Office with these words. After the hymn, the first psalm is part of the longest, Ps.118, in which the words "law, commands, statutes, precepts, will, promise" recur as the singer chews them over, like sheep chewing grass! The next psalm will be Ps. 84 which falls into two parts, first reminding the Lord of His forgiveness in the past, and then expressing confidence in His continued gift of peace. Ps.95 proclaims the glory of the Creator on behalf of all creation.

After the reading, Ps. 98 focuses on the power and holiness of God, recalling God's dealings with Moses and Aaron in the Exodus. The final psalm for today, Ps.131, recalls God's promise to David, the chosen leader of His people who would be the ancestor of Jesus Christ, Our Saviour. So we have here a rich banquet of texts on the Patronal Feast of the Diocese of Middlesbrough, when Mary, the Mother of God is addressed under the special title of "Our Lady of Perpetual Help".

May you all find some word to feed you as we pray together.