

Life hidden with Christ in God: Dame Margaret Gascoigne, Dame Gertrude Brown and our monastic inheritance.

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May I thank the Monastic Theology Commission for inviting me to explore ‘Two slices of monastic life’ as part of this Symposium *Touching our Past, facing our future*. Over the past months I have spent many happy hours with my sisters D. Margaret Gascoigne and D. Gertrude Brown, preparing their monastic portraits, and am grateful to have had this opportunity to explore their monastic lives. My thanks also to my Abbess and community for allowing me to be here.

The subjects could not be more different. D. Margaret Gascoigne was one of the earliest members of our founding community in Cambrai, known to us only through a treatise of Fr Augustine Baker whereas D. Gertrude, died almost a year ago (10 May '06) and lives vibrantly in the memory of each member of our community. In every other way they are as different from one another as it is possible to imagine: D. Margaret infirm and timid, seeking to live a life of total abstraction for the sake of contemplation. D. Gertrude, extravert, intellectually questing and confrontational, yet tender hearted and simple in seeking God. D. Margaret earned the nickname ‘Dormouse’, while one of D. Gertrude’s friends said how she often reminded her of a little bull terrier! D. Margaret’s monastic life numbered only eight years, whilst D. Gertrude was a Diamond Jubilarian. Yet despite these differences there is the constant of their Benedictine vocation and the *Conversatio* experienced in each life through their response to the Spirit. It is that ‘shape’ in each life that this paper sets out to explore.

D. Margaret Gascoigne

Fr Baker’s *Life and Death of D. Margaret Gascoigne* was written to introduce her *Devotions* – a collection of writings found on her death in her own handwriting in ‘loose papers’.¹ These ‘loose papers’ are a kind of confessional autobiography – a practice common among the Cambrai nuns at this time, encouraged by Cambrai’s confessors as a way of stirring the affections as a precursor to prayer. Though the writings were conversations between the soul and God, and essentially private, after a nun’s death they might be collected and kept in the library for devotional use. For Fr Baker the importance of these writings lay in the fact that they provide ‘the looking glass of looking glasses’² to her soul, and serve as sure evidence of her good life and ‘also verie much for proving her good and happy death.’³ Such a death was the crown of a spiritual life and Fr Baker’s other biographies of D. Gertrude More and Francis Gascoigne also focus

¹ EBC History Symposium 1998 : *Cambrai’s inprint on the life of Lady Faulkland*: by Heather R. Wolfe, Univ of Cambridge: p 78

² *Life and Death of Dame Margaret Gascoigne*: Downside Abbey ms 26598 (Baker ms 42) Published by Analecta Carthusiana edited James Hogg, Alain Girard. D le BLvec 2006, Institut fur Anglistik und

Amerikanistic paragraph 197 (henceforward references will simply be given as ‘ p ’ =paragraph)

³ *Life op cit* p 197

on the moment of death –a moment of pure faith and trust confirming the working of divine love in their souls. Written in the earlier part of her religious life D. Margaret's *Devotions* express ' petitions, bemoanings, thanksgivings and other pious affections towards God' for the most part upon special difficulties arising ab extrinseco, or arising ' meerlie from within her own selfe'.⁴ Through Fr Baker's interpretation these form the raw material for what is essentially a treatise on the training of the will through prayer and mortification, and the triumph in D. Margaret's life of grace over nature. Dame Margaret, infirm in body, quiet and withdrawn by temperament caused many ' who knewe her but knewe her not wel' to judge by externals and consider her faint hearted, weak minded and wanting in spirit or courage for God's service.⁵ One of the principal purposes of the *Life* is to dispel these misconceptions. Fr Baker, her one-time confessor considered her ' mightie and strong in spirit' - comparable to the Valiant Woman of *Proverbs* – proved by her ' secure and happy end'. D. Margaret's writings of interest in themselves as revealing the workings of grace in her soul , have also objective interest as reflecting the difficulties faced by the community at this time in discerning their way of prayer.

D. Margaret and her community in their historical context.

Daughter of Sir John Gascoigne of Barnbow Hall, Yorkshire, and of his wife Anne Ingleby, Margaret, born in 1607, belonged to a strong recusant family linked by kinship or marriage with many leading Northern Catholic families. The Gascoignes as a family showed a strong interne propension prper for divine contemplation⁶. Of their four sons, John and Michael became Benedictines of the newly re-established EBC.(John was to become Dom Placid, 2nd abbot of Lamspringe) Francis became a secular priest at Douai.⁷ Their eldest brother, Sir Thomas, who married, witnessed to his faith by bearing the financial penalties incurred by his recusancy⁸ ending his days as a Benedictine confrater at Lamspringe. Of the six daughters Catherine and Margaret entered the newly founded monastery of Our Lady of Comfort at Cambrai – while a third daughter fell ill and died on her way to join them. In the next generation their niece, Justina, would become abbess of Cambrai's foundation in Paris, and their nephew , Thomas Thwenge suffer martyrdom for his priesthood at York in 1680. This was a family in which indomitable spiritual courage ran deep. It is significant

⁴ Life : p10

⁵ Life: p 100

⁶ *Life* p 45

⁷ These three were all followers of Fr Baker's teaching: Dom Michael compiled a book of Baker extracts (still extant) and Fr Francis ran into difficulties for promulgating Fr Baker's teaching. Cf *That Mysterious Man*, Three Peaks Press 2001: The present author hath bin driven to this : The Needs Fr Baker was trying to meet by D. Margaret Truran

⁸ When an old man - about eighty - he and his daughter, Lady Tempest, were arraigned and tried for high treason for complicity in the Titus Oates plot, but were acquitted. His comportment under his ordeal was noble and devout. C.R.S. 13 (1913) cf Gascoigne

that martyrdom on the Mission and martyrdom through a life of prayer were often equated at this time.

Margaret Gascoigne entered the monastery of Our Lady of Comfort, Cambrai on St Gregory's Day, 12 March, 1628, aged 21. The community, founded five years earlier by nine young Englishwomen led by Helen More, great, great granddaughter of the martyr Thomas More, had received its formation under Abbess Frances Gaven of Brussels; a house adhering to Jesuit teaching on prayer. The young Cambrai community, knowing this was not their true spiritual path, had petitioned Abbot President Rudesind Barlow for a guide in contemplative prayer - 'I do profess I could never find good by discourse' said Helen, now Dame Gertrude More – and in July 1624 Dom Augustine Baker arrived at Cambrai, as 'a tabler' to hear confessions, give conferences and train the young nuns in the ways of contemplation, Dom Francis Hull being chaplain. In 1629, when the Second general Chapter of the EBC was held – a year after Margaret's entrance – her elder sister Catherine was appointed abbess and Dom Augustine Baker named spiritual director, while Fr Francis Hull was appointed Vicar. Thus Fr Francis had the authority over the nuns whilst Fr Baker directed their prayer and the situation was ripe for problems.⁹ Abbess Catherine is described as 'quiet undaunted Englishwoman'. She had longed for martyrdom for the Church and for love of God, but the active Mission being closed to her, gave herself to a life of contemplation.

The 1600s were years of intellectual and spiritual turmoil. Following the Council of Trent (1545-63) a wave of spiritual fervour spread through the Church, with an especial emphasis on prayer. Great fear of heresy and illusion dogged the practice of prayer – especially in contemplative houses. As the Ignatian way of meditation and spiritual exercises was considered a safeguard against excesses most monasteries of Benedictine nuns had a Jesuit as a confessor. Cambrai is a notable exception. This goes some way to explain Fr Baker's difficulties. When first appointed in 1624 his teaching was welcomed with fervour by the community, but gradually, all except Dame Catherine Gascoigne fell away, finding the training of the will through love disarming in its simplicity: 'To pray is not to talk, or to think, but to love'. The teaching has its classic foundation in Cassian, St Gregory and the mystics, but lacks specific practices as a framework. Like Naaman, non-plussed at being told to bathe in the Jordan to cure his leprosy, some of the Cambrai nuns desired a more complicated and exacting procedure! For some years the community became divided by 'factious partiality'.¹⁰ D. Christina Brent, a future abbess of Cambrai analysed the sad situation and apportioned some responsibility to Fr Hull's jealousy; she described him as a competent pastor 'but not versed in the words of John the Baptist *I am not.*'¹¹ But she considered the nuns must share the blame, for those who

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¹⁰ Sancta Sophia...I cannot trace the reference.

¹¹ In a Great Tradition by The Benedictines of Stanbroom Abbey ; Ch 1 Dame Catherine Gascoigne

followed Fr Baker spoke of their prayer as 'Fr Baker's Way' - a name we still use at Stanbrook - and in those sensitive times this suggested a new devotion and roused suspicion. Fr Hull opposed the teaching with terrifying hell fire sermons frightening nuns of a timid disposition into submission.

It was this spiritual ferment which formed the background of D. Margaret Gascoine's first years in religion and her *Devotions*. Between the time of her entry in 1628 and the 3rd General Chapter in 1633 when both Fr Baker and Fr Hull were called to present their teaching on prayer and to be assessed for orthodoxy- (and Fr Baker's Way given approval) - this spiritual conflict would have formed the undercurrent of daily life at Cambrai. It seems significant that D. Margaret's *Devotions* have as a major theme, her struggle against the temptation of fear and her desire to assuage this by frequent or re-iterated confession. This fear was in part, according to Fr Baker 'struck into her by some others from without'.¹² It created in her 'a an anxious solicitude and fear' with 'a kind of confusion and oppression of soul - hindering all manner of true interne peace'.¹³ Seeing in her fear and confusion evidence of scruples, and recognising that repeated confession would only serve to deepen her fear, Fr Baker, as confessor, bound her by obedience to resist this 'grievous temptation'.¹⁴ Her 'virtuous and courageous resistance' to what he terms this 'stinging and long continued temptation' and overcoming her natural scrupulosity was in his view 'especially and onelie in virtue of much grace from God, and by means of her diligently prosecuted prayer'.¹⁵ During this time she remained 'courageous, constant, resolute and obedient to the end, both to God and man'.¹⁶ We will see when we look at her writings the reality of this struggle and the transformation it effected in her.

D. Margaret and her *Devotions*

Fr Baker introduces D. Margaret by quoting from *Wisdom 8:19*:

*As a child I was by nature well endowed
And a good soul fell to my lot. (Wis 8: 19)*

He described her as naturally *gentle, timorous, yielding, humble. Very modest*, writes Fr Baker, *I maie saie, modesty itself*.¹⁷ Though she had good wit and judgment, and was an exceptionally talented needlewoman, she preferred obscurity, as a state conducive to contemplation. In fact, says Fr Baker, *she was naturally perfect - even before she knew what spirituality and cleansing of the soul meant*.¹⁸ For Fr Baker, being *naturally perfect* meant little, for exterior behaviour is deceptive- all, even the most apparently perfect, are corrupt in nature, having fallen from grace- and even the quietest natures are full of

¹² Life: p 31

¹³ Life p 21

¹⁴ Life p 22

¹⁵ Life p 34

¹⁶ Life p 35

¹⁷ Life p 57

¹⁸ Life p 35

impurity of self will and ‘wholly unapt and unready for God.’¹⁹ But he saw in Margaret one with a natural propensity to contemplation- requiring only spiritual training. He describes her in Tauler’s image as the musculus or dormouse, a little creature so quiet it would rest on a man’s hand in perfect tranquillity- and sometimes even fall asleep there. Such quiet natures, Fr Baker claimed ‘will be the speediest to attain contemplation and to perfection, if they will make the best use of their nature by prosecuting interne exercises and mortification...holding patience in all occurring contradictions, crosses and difficulties without complaining or speaking of it to anie others.’²⁰ Thus, ‘all the glory is to be ab intus’. She was in fact so reticent about her inner life and showed so little in the way of outward good works that many accounted her unprofitable. Her life in religion was brief – just over 8 years in the habit. She would die in her thirtieth year of a brief illness, and it seems bodily infirmity was always her lot. So much the better for Father Baker’s view of the suparnatural nature of grace.

A glance now at her *Devotions*, written in the time of better bodily health, for the evidence of her spiritual struggle. The text is in manuscript at Colwich and I am most grateful to Dame Benedict Rowell of Colwich for her help. If we look at the Second Devotion we will see Dame Margaret conquering her fear of damnation through her confidence in God’s goodness:

Nowwithstanding all the feare and horrou which I find in my conscience, and which urgeth me to confesse or otherwaies to satisfy myself, I will, with thy grace and assistance ne’er give consent thereto. Out of obedience love and confidence in thy infinite goodness, I will choose rather to hazard my soule. It is obedience which strengthens her will: I am content bothe to live and die, to sacrifice myself to thee dailie. The reality of the temptation’s power is conveyed in the final image from psalm 22: Although I shall walke in ye midst of the shadow of death, yet will I not fear evils, because thou art with me.

As time goes on her *Devotions* become less wordy, centring on the act of faith. Thus, in a later Devotion she writes;

*And therefore
I would see nothing, heare
Nothing, feel nothing, know
Nothing, understand nothing,
Be moved at nothing, have nothing,
But to do thy will.*

And in another she writes as might a martyr facing the time of testing, addressing herself and stirring up her courage: *Now is ye time come which thou didst so much desire, wish for, being for occasion and mattere for exercising and shewing*

¹⁹ Life p 116

²⁰ Lie p 66-69

thy love towards him, being occasion to shewe thy fidelitie; now shew it in deed, ells wilt thou show thyself to have been a vain and foolish wisher.

The *Devotions* giving evidence of her constancy through four years of spiritual trial mirror her spiritual growth and revealed to Fr Baker the 'inward quality of her soul, spirit and conscience.' He considered her inner propension to be very great and strong otherwise she had never persisted and persevered in her course to the end 'overcoming tentations, difficulties, some corporall but more mentall, that occurred in the waie, and were finally overcome or transcended by her'.²¹

This supernatural doctrine of divine grace centres on the divine light which is at the heart of Fr Baker's spirituality and is a development of St Benedict's teaching in the Prologue to his Rule- that we should daily open our eyes to the divine light. For the narrow way of obedience that leads to life can only be perceived by those whose 'mentall eyes are enlightened for it by means of their inward conversation with God, which gives grace and strength of will for the heavenly journey. Its end is the fruition of prayer and love in the fullness of eternal life'²². *Train yourself in godliness*, wrote St Paul to Timothy, *for while bodily training is of some vale, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.*²³

Margaret's growth in godliness was aided by physical infirmity- *Love of God does not dwell in robust bodies* says Fr Baker quoting St Hildegarde²⁴- robust good health can deceive us into trusting overmuch in our natural resources. Our Abbess Elizabeth Sumner also asserted that contemplation and good health are incompatible. She was 'mightie and strong in and by the spirit when she was most weak and infirm in body' writes Fr Baker,²⁵ explaining very beautifully: 'Internal livers' do not show much in the way of exterior good works...' Their way is commonly not by doing or acting but by suffering of affliction in some kind or other. The outsider might see the affliction, but does not see the internal devotion and purity of soul with which it is received'²⁶- a process of purification and union with God.

²¹ Life p 99

²² Thus the importance in Fr Baker's teaching of attention to divine inspirations for moving and enabling us to seek the supernatural. Both the Council of Orange in Benedict's time (AD 529) and the Council of Trent in its sixth session in Baker's, stated that ' No work of ours (internal prayer etc) is of any merit for our soul's good or will avail us to our soul's salvation save it proceed from divine inspiration in our interior moving us to the same work.' Our actions are only spiritually fruitful when they proceed from God - who will lead the soul by the way of the cross. Dame Margaret's spiritual courage, which had its source not in physical strength and natural will but in the secret and quiet inward motions of her soul inciting her to fidelity in prayer and mortification effected in her an increasing simplicity and resignation to God's will

²³ 1 Tim 4:8

²⁴ Life p 79

²⁵ Life p 146

²⁶ Life p 148

During her time of trial it seemed to Dame Margaret that God himself enlightened her and incited her to external obedience – She wrote pithy rhymes - to summarise her spiritual path and sustain her : -

Tending and transcending
Bring to good ending
A soul well intending

By *tending* , explains Fr Baker, is implied the movement towards God by which the soul is able to pass over or through all temptations or difficulties (thus *transcending*): with the happy result that the soul is united with God the– *good ending* – our supreme felicity. To *tend* and *transcend* is to pass through or over temptation and difficulties by way of prayer. ²⁷Without such a doctrine Fr Baker considers she could not have persevered in her course. It seems we recognise here Benedict's teaching in the Fourth degree of humility, by which the monk in difficulties or in meeting injustice is counselled to keep his soul in peace and so pass through the contradiction, bearing all for the love of Christ and trusting in God to save him.

Dame Margaret's most testing trial came during her last illness. Fr Baker had left Cambrai four years before this (being sent to Douai in 1633). D. Margaret had persevered in her spiritual course under his successor, a chaplain sympathetic to Fr Baker's teaching, Fr John Meurtisse²⁸ – and, incidentally, one through whose benefactions our monastery buildings were completed.

The test of a Christian's life is his or her death, ' the end that crowneth the work'²⁹ in Fr Baker's phrase. It is the contradictory sign through which the presence of true faith is revealed. Even in good or perfect souls, Fr Baker reflects, some ' fear, trouble, unwillingness or irresignation'³⁰ is often shown as death approaches and our corporal nature experiences dread and rebellion. God does not judge us because of these physical weaknesses, but looks on the free will of the soul and its consent. Trouble of mind, he observes, proceeds from some propriety of will which cannot let go of natural life. The more the fear or the self will, the more will the dying person need the support of human comfort and cling to it.

D. Margaret's last illness lasted a brief eight days, during which she remained in the perfect use of her senses. All who attended to her witnessed that throughout this time she remained in peace and quietness and perfect confidence in God. The real proof in Fr Baker's eyes was the simplicity with which she made her last confession to Fr John Meurtisse, afterwards reporting to her sister, Abbess Catherine that she had made ' an ordinarie confession...not general or of former matters, but as she had been advised to do. ³¹ This obedience of will and heart

²⁷ Life p 129/130

²⁸ Sometimes named Meutisse as in Allanson

²⁹ P. 225

³⁰ P. 119

³¹ Life: p 241

marked a complete triumph of grace in her timorous and scrupulous nature. Fr John, approved her decision and absolved her, exhorting her to be at peace. And so she was, receiving communion during the time of her last illness and viaticum, without asking to confess on either occasion. Her community observed that she was intent on internal prayer and perfectly at peace. A detail is provided which is of much interest, not least because it is the only visual image in the text. As Dame Margaret lay dying a crucifix was held before her eyes beneath which was written a text from the Revelations of Julian of Norwich:

Intend (or attend) to me: I am inough for thee.

*Rejoice in me thy saviour and thy salvation.*³²

Fr Baker comments: 'These holy words had sometime been spoken by God to the holy virgin Julian, clustresse of Norwich...with which words our Dame had ever formally been much delighted,...(they) remained before her eyes beneath the crucifix until her death.'³³ Now books were rare at Cambrai. Indeed, because of the monastery's poverty Fr Baker had written to Sir Robert Cotton appealing to him for books suitable for contemplatives. It has been suggested that D. Margaret brought the book (which was in manuscript) with her to Cambrai on her entrance and used it in preparing her prayer.³⁴ Julian's hope and confidence in Jesus, our Saviour runs through the *Revelations* – and D. Margaret has chosen the most comforting of her words. Also interesting in relation to the text is the image of D. Margaret with the crucifix held before her. You will remember, perhaps, the origin of the *Revelations*; as a young woman Julian had begged God to allow her to become so ill as to be near to death so that she should enter more deeply into the mystery of his passion. During her thirty third year her request was answered; she fell seriously ill and was anointed, crucifix was held before her eyes and during the several hours she was believed to be dying she was given to understand the secrets of our Lord's love for us in the Passion (the substance of the *Revelations*) – before she was suddenly restored to health. Perhaps, if she knew and loved the book so well, it was the great message of her 'even Christian' that inspired D. Margaret to put express her faith by imitating the trustful manner of Julian's ' death' and keeping her words before her eyes in her own dying moments.

' Blessedlie' writes Fr Baker' she rendered up her soul into the hands of God, towards whom she had in this life continually, thirstingly, with and by love aspired.'³⁵

She died on Sunday 16 August 1637, aged 29, having been in the habit just over eight years. Her life, with so few personal details to distract us, speaks to us of the hidden workings of God's grace in an outwardly unremarkable life. ' And such meane and disposition consisteth in a strong and resolute good wille that

³² Revelations: Long Text Ch 36

³³ Life p 235

³⁴ Lamspringe: An English Monastery in Germany. St Laurence Papers VII 2004, pp 70- 81 Spirituality, Fr Baker's Legacy, by Margaret Truran OSB. P 88

³⁵ Life p 263

bestirres itself in the affaire and is serious and strenuous in the business'.³⁶ In Fr Baker's hands the *Life and Death of Margaret Gascoigne* becomes a treatise on the working of divine grace through prayer and mortification; a development of Benedict's Prologue: *We must prepare our hearts and bodies to serve under holy obedience*, adding, *and where our nature is powerless, let us ask the Lord to supply the help of his grace.* *We must make haste to do at once what will profit us for all eternity.* In Margaret Gascoigne's Life we see this transforming grace hidden in the paschal mystery at the heart of her Benedictine vocation.

Life hidden with Christ in God : Part 2 : D Gertrude Brown

Three hundred and eight years after D. Margaret's death in Cambrai, Eileen Brown entered Stanbrook Abbey, Worcester. From the locations alone it is clear that there had been much water under the community bridge— In 1795, in common with many exiled communities, we had returned to England after the French Revolution. Two moves brought us to Stanbrook— Here in the second spring of the Catholic revival full monastic observance restored under Abbess Gertrude d' Aurillac Dubois and the Pugin monastery and church were built. In 1945 the community numbered about 70 sisters – a peak which paralleled by other monasteries, expressing a spiritual response to the horrors of the world Wars. We lived the traditional contemplative life with strict papal enclosure, the Opus Dei recited in Latin and the community divided into Lay Sisters and Choir nuns, but Abbess Laurentia McLachlan, the current abbess, was sensitive to the changes in English society wrought by the bitter experiences of two World Wars, and therefore on incoming candidates and moved with the best spirit of the times. This talk could be subtitled 'The contemplative life and modern woman' for a recurrent theme is the challenge of change in Church and society on a traditional life of prayer. The sources for this reflection on D. Gertrude's long life are principally her own writings and diaries, and the living memories of the Stanbrook community. In contrast with D. Margaret there is much external detail and therefore the narrative approach seems the most appropriate in tracing God's call in the life of Eileen (later D. Gertrude) Brown.

Early life and Vocation

When Eileen Brown Knocked on the Door on 25 March, 1945, she was 31, her monastic life beginning at the age D. Margaret's had ended. Born in Lincoln in 1914 into a devout Anglican family, she had been drawn to the Catholic Church when reading for her degree in medieval and modern languages at Newnham College, Cambridge – Her family was so greatly distressed that her father arranged a an appointment with the Bishop of Lincoln in hopes of dissuading her.

³⁶ Life p 303

D. Gertrude often told the story of how she put on her hat, and rang the doorbell of the Bishop's Palace to be ushered into the Episcopal presence. 'Miss Brown to see you, my Lord!' She sat on the edge of her chair while he talked of being faithful to the Anglican tradition. 'Which one, my Lord? The High, the Low or the Broad?' asked Eileen: the ruthless directness of the killing thrust presented so charmingly were characteristic throughout her life. Eileen was received into the Catholic Church on June 7 1935 and confirmed the same year. In the course of her studies Eileen encountered the Rule of St Benedict which impressed her by its spiritual wisdom and prudence. But the time for vocation was not yet- though it seems to have been in the back of her mind. Writing some forty years later in a retreat conference on Vocation she recalls a conversation at the Cambridge Union. A young woman asked an Anglican theological student 'What made you choose that vocation?'. D. Gertrude writes 'Quick as lightning I butted in before he had the chance to reply and said 'The very word Vocation shows he did not choose it' (The community would recognise this as characteristics too!) She goes on to say that 'a vocation is as inevitable as the most passionate falling in love on the human level.'

Eileen graduated, took a diploma as a librarian and worked as archivist in Lincoln. On the outbreak of the Second World War she entered the Civil Service. Her knowledge of the German language earned her a place in the Intelligence Service where she was recruited into the Postal and Telegraph Censorship Department - a task she described as 'demi-semi-spook, a spy of the mildest kind'.³⁷ Posted to Liverpool during the bombing of the docks, then across the heavily mined waters of the Atlantic, and back to London for the Blitz, she faced the reality of danger and knew the fragility of life. In 1943 she was posted to Trinidad : here at the Monastery of St Benedict in 1943, she witnessed the Rule being lived- and to use her own words : 'I got my vocation'. Immediately she applied for release to enter religious life, visited Stanbrook and met Abbess Laurentia. Always responsive to personal integrity the impression made on Eileen by this *enclosed nun with an unenclosed mind*³⁸ was profound. Known chiefly today as the friend of George Bernard Shaw and Sir Sydney Cockerell, through the success of Hugh Whitmore's *The Best of Friends* – revived last year with Patricia Routledge as Lady Laurentia – Abbess Laurentia combined remarkable gifts for leadership with those for friendship and human sympathy. Gifted in monastic studies, she was both a serious historian and considered one of the foremost authorities in plainsong in English speaking countries. 'She had caught the tide of the nineteenth century liturgical renewal spearheaded at Solesmes and projected to Stanbrook by Laurence Shepherd, and become herself instrumental in that revival.'³⁹ Acutely sensitive to the spirit of the times and in 1931 she was involved in reformulating the constitutions of the nuns of the EBC.⁴⁰ Seeing evidence that monastic life enhanced and developed true

³⁷ Quoted from D. Gertrude's Eulogy given to the Stanbrook community by Abbess Joanna Jamieson ,2006

³⁸ In A Great Tradition by the Benedictines of Stanbrook p 80

³⁹ D.N.B.entry Abbess Laurentia McLachlan by D. Laurentia Johns OSB

⁴⁰ DNB

personality, - an observation she would make frequently in her note books and conferences - Eileen decided monastic life was for her. At her own request she was given the name Gertrude after St Gertrude the Great. There is no trace in Eileen of the Dormouse. Indeed , hers was a vivid , inflammable nature and combative nature and no doubt the years of formation tested her to the utmost as it has tested the professional women who have entered with us since. She disappears for a few years into the traditional round of personal and liturgical prayer, pondering the scriptures, community work and manual labour – which for her as a Choir nun was work in the library, vestment making and other types of sewing. She always had an eye for well finished garments and sewed to perfection. Clothed on 25 March 1946, simply professed 17 April 1947, she made Solemn Profession 17 April 1950. . The prayer she composed for her profession novena revealed her focus:

*Jesus Christ, you created, redeemed and ordained your hand-maid
Gertrude for 'that which is'. You know what you want her to do:
treat her with mercy according to your will.*

As had been her great patron, Gertrude the great, D. Gertrude was imbued with the sense of God's true and transcendent being.

Second Vatican Council

She emerges from obscurity some fifteen years later in the late 1950's– but we shall still know her only by the externals of her monastic life for some while yet. Dame Elizabeth Sumner is abbess (elected in 1953 after the death of D. Laurentia). When Pope John XXIII opened the windows in Rome, a period of upheaval and aggiornamento began- acutely painful for some, stimulating for others- a very difficult time for superiors- though some of our seniors remember this as a 'thrilling time'. Although abbess Elizabeth was conservative by temperament she was attentive to the Spirit and 'listened, prayed and then acted as the circumstances and human material seemed to require.'⁴¹ Following the call of *Perfectae Caritatis* for nuns to rediscover their roots and renew their heritage, Stanbrook, became involved in the various EBC commissions set up in response to the Council. A new and previously unthinkable openness began. The Free Association was launched allowing previously isolated communities to share their monastic vision. The grilles came down; lay sisters were integrated with Choir nuns. (this had actually preceded *Perfectae Caritatis* at Stanbrook as Abbess Elizabeth, born and educated in S. Africa, abhorred discrimination). Monks and nuns collaborated on the now watershed texts of *Consider Your Call, Benedict's Disciples, Eight Monastic Journeys* and a monastic lectionary compiled comprising the two volumes of *Christ Our Light* and the eight volumes of *A Word in Season* – making our Patristic heritage widely available. 'No one, had any paper qualifications, but gained whatever competence they possessed from studies pursued in their monasteries and daily liturgical prayer.'⁴² D. Gertrude, played her part in translating from Latin to English a Breviary for

⁴¹ Times Obituary by D. Maria Boulding

⁴² D. Edith Barnecutt . Eulogy given by Abbess Joanna Jamieson, 1997. Stanbrook archive.

religious and worked with a team translating temporal and sanctoral collects for the community office. She was a perfectionist, constantly reworking her texts.

Her chief work at this time, however was to be in the practical sphere. Appointed Cellarer in 1964 she demonstrated her own hard headed interpretation of reforming monastic life for our times. Significantly, she anticipated our community decision to move and build, deciding, in 1966, that it was necessary for us to move to ensure our future welfare. With the support of Abbess Elizabeth she took a few sisters into her confidence and all began a novena to St Joseph for guidance. The matter went to Chapter and Archbishop Patrick Dwyer and his architect consulted. It was considered that our buildings were so well constructed and maintained that it would be difficult to justify the expense of a monastery for 70+ nuns. So D. Gertrude turned her mind to improving the buildings, making them more practical for modern living. Under her supervision the Printing Room was extended ; the Sanctuary re-ordered; the kitchen and laundry modernised and some new cloisters connected previously isolated monastic buildings around a central garth. In these busy years she loved to recall that immediately after Simple Profession she had been diagnosed as suffering from a weak heart and considered to be not long for this world! She was energetic and forward looking- but could be formidable and it took courage to approach her. Being Cellarer brought out the qualities of the Woman of the World.

Still River, Massachusetts

But next would come a pastoral assignment that would restore the balance. In 1980, at the request of the Abbot Primate, Rembert Weakland, the community undertook to prepare a group of laywomen in private vows at St Benedict Centre Still River, Massachusetts, to become professed Benedictine nuns. Dame Gertrude and Dame Anne Field were sent to see the group through their monastic novitiate. It was not an easy mission. The group had grown up under the charismatic leadership of Father Leonard Feeney S.J. whose literal interpretation of the doctrine *Extra ecclesia non salus* had led to their excommunication in what became known as the ' Boston Heresy Case. For the following twenty two years he and those followers faithful to him formed a community in private vows, grounded in the theology of St Louis- Marie Grignon de Montfort, naming themselves *Slaves of the Immaculate Heart of Mary*. When, after the Second Vatican Council Fr Feeney was reconciled with the Church his community divided on doctrinal grounds – there would ultimately be five separate communities. By 1980 the remnant of the original community was encouraged by Dom Basil Pennington OCSO to investigate affiliation with the Order of St Benedict and the Abbot Primate encouraged them to integrate the monastic spirit of prayer, work and study into their own way of life by becoming Benedictine oblates. They were to remain as a Pious Union under Bishop Flanagan of Boston and change their name, becoming the Still River

Community, initially hoping to form a dual community of monks and nuns, working and praying together.

It was a rocky road, but in the late summer of 1980 fifteen sisters and twenty two brothers began their novitiate; Fr. Vincent Tobin of St Meinrad Abbey as novice master for the men, and Dames Gertrude Brown and Anne Field of Stanbrook Abbey invited to guide the sisters in their formation. Brothers and sisters shared a plot of land and dairy farm, one kitchen and one chapel- but there were serious and ongoing differences regarding the central issue of liturgy. In 1981 Dame Gertrude resolved to keep a diary – which she did fairly faithfully over the next five years, thus chronicling the days of monastic formation. It is fairly impersonal and follows a regular format noting the weather, the topic of her conference - (She taught the Rule, Latin and patristics, while D. Anne, a liturgist, gave conferences on the psalms), then the community discussions –and pastoral interviews which formed the afternoon’s programme. She observed the frankness and openness : ‘ It was impressive to hear the brothers and sisters giving their views on liturgy without fear’ ⁴³ but is discreet about private meetings. These – they included both monks and nuns - must have required all the sympathetic skill St Benedict looks for in his *senpectae* – deep charity, discernment and monastic maturity- not least the gift of perseverance. In the early days she had also to work hard at her own inculturation : ‘ A good talk from Br Leonard – but oh, the jargon!’ – and to prevent herself from exceeding her authority. There are a few lively days when she mentions the stormy effects of inadvertently going over the superior’s head to consult the Bishop on a candidate’s suitability for profession - Several diary entries chart her diplomatic moves to spread oil on troubled waters. She worked hard and resourcefully on instructing them in Benedictine spirituality, drawing them from devotions to explain Benedictine obligation to the Opus Dei, Lectio, enclosure (they went out high-power book selling to raise funds until the Bishop vetoed this as inappropriate for Benedictine s) and the pattern of monastic observance. She comments approvingly on the sound foundation given in Fr Vincent’s homilies - strengthening the values she was attempting to inculcate ‘ Very good. Marks of true Christian spirituality – Trinitarian, Christo-centric, Biblical, doctrinal, liturgical, Catholic ie. hospitable.’

Dame Gertrude’s lasting contribution to this endeavour was the writing of Community’s Constitutions with the help of Fr Richard Yeo (with consultants Fr Kevin Seasoltz and Fr Basil Pennington). In preparation she visited 42 monasteries in the U.S.A. during her four year stay.

Regular letters were sent home to Stanbrook, carefully crafted, clearly intended for the archive, reporting on these visits and on the young community’s progress; expanding to include observations on American life and customs. She has a keen eye and keen sense of enjoyment. But the actual the writing of the Constitutions was clearly hard work – Diary entries report glumly ‘ Working on juridic norms all day...’ or ‘ Hard at work on Constitutions’, or ‘ Constitutions all week end’. But the work paid off. The Community made profession and is now

⁴³ Diary 1981 Jan 17

established at Petersham, Massachusetts. Among tributes on her death were affirmations of this time 'She was a tremendous example to me in the early 80's at Still River...and continues for me as one who 'yearned for everlasting life with holy desire.'⁴⁴ ' So full of life, vim and vinegar!' comes a warts and all appraisal.⁴⁵ And from M. Mary Clare Vincent, Superior 'We owe a great debt to her which God alone can repay. We never forget her conferences on the Holy Rule or her dedication to living it . I pray she will remember us. Knowing her faithful heart, I believe she will.'⁴⁶

In D. Gertrude's life the kaleidoscope of her activities can mislead us to overrate the externals. Her diaries, in conjunction with the meticulous reading lists she kept, provide glimpses into her interior life. Here there is the blend of an acute mind and intellectual pursuits with a simple childlike faith and monastic fidelity. The diary punctiliously noted her times her prayer and lectio: e.g. ' 5 Jan 1985: 5:15 a.m. General leave to rest, but I need this time with the Lord.' She suffered from insomnia and made the night hours opportunities for prayer: ' Woke at 12:00. The Lord gave me much light on Philippians 2: 5-11.' Her reading records noted her immersion in Scripture: ' Finished reading the New Testament in Greek' – ' in Latin' – 'in French' – ' in German.' Then ' Finished reading the New Jerusalem translation of the Bible'...or the R.S.V. or the N.I.V. The terse comments on her spiritual reading are pointers to her deep personal love of Christ and a profound spiritual joy. (Once speaking of her prayer she told of how she had heard the Lord ' singing the Gradual psalms, in a rich voice like a brown sweet nut.')

The record she kept of her reading is phenomenal, not only in its scope, which embraces the expected spirituality and theology but also physics, mathematics, psychology, politics, natural history, biography, to name a few - She read a book on average ever two days, noting title, author, publisher and a few terse comments, being totally concentrated on the subject in hand.

I recall seeing her, as a senior nun in her late eighties, curled up in a chair and so deeply absorbed in Columba Stewart's *Prayer and Community* as to be unaware of all activity around her. And she read exhaustively: at the time of the Charismatic movement, for example, her reading would make a comprehensive list of foundational Charismatic texts from her reading lists. She ended each day by reading from the New Testament. Here is the Centre, the focus of the kaleidoscope. A person, then, both intellectually sophisticated and essentially simple . When in America she wrote of a New Year's custom by which monks and nuns drew patron saints and religious mysteries for the year from a 'bran tub' . She wrote ' I drew St Gertrude, and for the mystery, the Blessed Sacrament. Is it just co-incidence or does the Lord have a hand even in the tiny

⁴⁴ S Johanna Caton

⁴⁵ Sr Mary Elizabeth Kloss

⁴⁶ M. Mary Clare Vincent

and seemingly insignificant things?⁴⁷ Similarly, though quick tongued and sharp, Abbess Joanna recalled that she had the rare gift of humility – often coming privately to acknowledge her faults and ask forgiveness.

It was in 1985 I first encountered D. Gertrude when I was ‘ nibbling’ , having been drawn to Stanbrook through the Year Book entry that focussed on the tradition of prayer and hospitality deriving from Fr Baker and Cambrai. D. Gertrude, recalled from America, her work complete, was in charge of our shop, at that time in our Front hall, and it was she who often opened the door. What I appreciated was that she always allowed me time to browse! As Guest Mistress she was remarkable –welcoming all who came...*with truly loving courtesy* for the sake of Christ Her vitality, combined with a deep seriousness and joy made a deep impression as did the short conversations we had when she spoke very simply of prayer and monastic life- always ending fiercely ‘ We don’t sit around contemplating all day, you know!’ Thus dispelling any illusions! As she approached her nineties she became fascinated by the mystery of eternity – ‘ In one SECOND we shall leave this world of time and all will be changed!’ She held on to this through the years and months when her acute mind began to fail her, causing acute suffering; she became gentler and humbler, and full of gratitude for the life God had given her. So it was that on Easter Thursday last year we suddenly missed her at Vespers. Usually she was there long ahead of time, with books prepared. She had suffered a severe stroke from which she died in hospital three weeks later on 10 May, having been for all that time partially paralysed and unable to speak. In those secret days the Lord prepared her mysteriously in silence for himself.

Reflecting on the lives of these two of my sisters –I experience a great sense of continuity despite such disparity of temperament and monastic experience as if, to use a musical analogy, they are different instrumentalists playing the same melody. The melody is the search for God, the groundrock in our Benedictine vocation, whether past, present or future, and it led both of them on through their fidelity to prayer and submission to God’s transforming power working in their lives and through the community. This is surely the Paschal Mystery glimpsed in these individual sisters and in the pain, transformation and new life which marks our communities when we meet the challenges of a changing Church.

Of course, each one has been shaped shaped by her temperament and historical situation. *Tending and transcending/ Bring to good ending/ A soul well intending* summarised Dame Margaret’ motto. Dom Aidan Bellenger, in an essay on the Catholic community in Fr Baker’s time wrote of it as a world ‘ in which a personal spirituality and faith needed to be rock-hard and private.’⁴⁸ We have seen that to be true of D. Margaret’s life. D. Gertrude’s spirituality was essentially liturgical

⁴⁷ Diary Jan 5 1981

⁴⁸ Aidan Bellenger : Baker’s Recusant and Benedictine Context in *That Mysterious Man: Essays on Augustine Baker* Ed Michael Woodward, pub Three Peaks Press p 53

and ecclesial. From the time we see her in focus she is responding to the challenges of the Vatican Council. But 'the glory of the King's daughter lies within', nevertheless. We do not have the privileged insight of the confessor, but reading her lectio reflections on *Chronicles* – leads us inwards: *In simplicitate cordis mei laetus obtuli universa*⁴⁹. She writes : *simplicitate* – singlemindedness – *laetus* – joy no one can take away : *obtuli* – offering – our gift, no compulsion and therefore with love...*universa* – nothing excluded...nothing our own...not even our bodies (twice Benedict says so)'. She was to offer this sacrifice in her dying. I see in her 'the secret person of the heart' in the lovely phrase of 1 Peter, hospitable in her faith - always ready 'to answer the people who ask you the reason for the hope you have.'⁵⁰ Perhaps both qualities are asked for us in the contemplative life today – the rock-hard faith and the flexibility of hospitality. Truly all our lives are hidden with Christ in God from the moment of our baptism. Through their perseverance in faith these two lives flame forth from time to time with paschal light – and fill those of us who are still on the journey with hope: 'See how the Lord in his loving mercy shows us the way of life'.⁵¹

⁴⁹ 1 Chron 29:17

⁵⁰ 1 Peter 3: 4; 15

⁵¹ R.B. Prologue: 20