

Editorial

The recent naming of St John Henry Newman as a 'Doctor of the Church' by Pope Leo XIV cast some much-needed light in the midst of a seemingly endless cycle of bad news. Newman's thought on the primacy of truth and the conscience as an 'echo of God' or the 'connecting principle' between us and our Creator is particularly apposite at this point in the history of humanity. The current rise of authoritarian regimes throughout the world, the waging of - and preparation for - war, and the rapid advancement of AI as a technology that requires huge amounts of energy and water to function should serve to stir us all out of any inclination towards adopting the complacency of a 'guilty bystander'.

In this issue of the Journal, a creative and thought-provoking study of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Thomas Merton by Laurentia Johns OSB examines their shared European roots, their impassioned advocacy for peace, and lives infused with strong Benedictine resonances. Intriguingly, she asks if they might be considered with St Benedict, Patron of all Europe, as co-patrons? As hearers and bearers of the Word, she also emphasises both men's shared affinity for Jonah, as one who dared to speak truth to power.

Also featured is the first reprint of the introduction to Philip Berrigan's *No More Strangers* by Thomas Merton, originally published in 1965, which contends that the book 'contains one of the best Catholic analyses of the race question of the US [...] and another on the arms race', both of which serve to 'challenge Christian faith and Christian concern'. This is then followed by a separate article by James Cronin who offers an insightful contextualisation of Merton's introduction.

Among Merton's many correspondents was the Quaker peace activist, Douglas V. Steere who, together with his wife, Dorothy was a special Quaker observer at the Second Vatican Council. In 'Treasures of Spirituality', Ian Randall writes of a friendship founded not only on the common ground of shared concerns over the pressing issues of the day but also one in which the practice of Benedictine spirituality featured strongly.

The second and concluding part of the conversation between Rowan Williams and Bonnie Thurston on Merton as a catalyst for friendship acts as a welcome reminder of the part played by deep listening, respectful dialogue and interesting digressions in the forging of friendships whereby ideas may germinate and fascinating connections made and followed.

One of the connections made in the Williams/Thurston conversation

was mention of Tymawr Convent in Wales which features in each of their lives. I asked a friend who has regularly gone on retreat to Tymawr since the 1990s if she could describe something of what makes it so distinctive. For her, a huge part of its attraction is its location which is 'deep in the countryside connecting it to the natural prayer of creation' as well as in the convent and chapel, both of which give it the austere feel of a gothic Victorian convent with a contemplative feel that is soft and gentle. Similarly, the silence [which] is not formal or imposed [but] natural like the countryside.' Fortunately, we were given permission by the present Reverend Mother of Tymawr to reprint three poems written by two poets (both now deceased) - a nun and an oblate - on the pages of this Advent issue.

This issue also features two very considered book reviews. In *Christian de Chergé: Spiritual Writings*, Stephen Dunhill calls our attention to a work which succeeds in going beyond the grim confines of the abduction and murder of Christian de Chergé and his fellow Trappists at Tibhirine in 1996. This is accomplished by placing his life in a much fuller lived and spiritual context and one which clearly demonstrates his total dedication to interreligious dialogue with the Muslims whom he counted as neighbours. Danny Sullivan's review takes John Mann's *Be Still, Be Silent: Reflections on the poetry of David Scott* as its subject. By organising the book around the key events of the life of Christ, he shows how Mann relates the infusion of Scott's poetry with a theology of presence and mystery that conveys 'that deep awareness of Other, of something beyond the ordinary, yet reflected in it' as in the section on the Nativity which is expressed as 'love meeting Love before the house wakes up'.

Fra Angelico's painting of the *Annunciation* which graces our front cover is the subject of Richard Conrad's beautiful reflection. Taking Merton's journal entry for 23rd December 1949 which refers to a post card of the painting as his starting point, Conrad sets it in its proper context in the Convent of San Marco in Florence. There, its physical placement ensured that the friars would always meet it when going daily to their cells. This positioning of a work of such a singular, and exquisitely executed, encounter conveys how stirred and how anxious Mary was when she heard Gabriel's greeting and what was being asked of her before she uttered her *Fiat*. In the *Annunciation*, not only is all the expectation, hope and fear that Advent heralds communicated but also of its place in our own lives 'where we, too, are charged to be involved'.

With all wishes for a very happy & holy Christmas!

Susanne Jennings