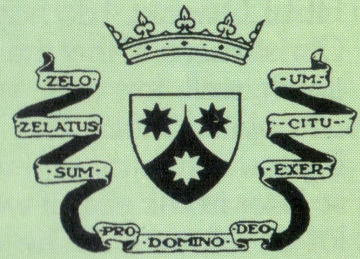


The Carmelite News

February 1990



FLOWER POT

Whitefriars · Faversham · Kent · ME13 7JN

HELLO again. I do hope you had a good Christmas, and that the new year is settling down well for you. We certainly can't complain about the weather here in Faversham, although we might be doing so later in the year if we don't get a good lot of rain soon. The only problem has been that in the damp, our lovely new door into the Shrine has swollen a bit and we have had to keep it locked. But as soon as the winter is really over I shall call in a joiner and get him to fix it so that we can have it open when the fine weather brings the pilgrims again.

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Living only twenty miles from Aylesford and having regular business with Father Provincial who lives there, I make the journey to Aylesford fairly often and the way I go finds me waiting at a set of traffic lights a couple of miles from Aylesford. On the corner by the lights is a public house called The Flower Pot. A year or two ago they put up a new sign-board for it and I see it everytime I pass - or wait at the lights. Now it is presently fashionable to replace the very dull sign-boards that just announce in words the name of the pub by bright new signs with pictures that illustrate the names. I very much approve of this fashion because it provides work for the artists and because the results brighten the place up and makes the world a bit more interesting to walk around in. So I was pleased to see The Flower Pot's new sign, but also a bit disappointed, because the sign of the Flower Pot is a religious sign, believe it or not, and the artist got it nearly - but not quite - right. The sign I am talking about is the illustration on the front of this Newsletter.

But let me begin at the beginning, which was with the ancient Romans. Roman shopkeepers used to hang a picture outside their shops to show what sort of thing you could buy there. Outside a tavern you would find a "bush" made of ivy and holly leaves hanging on a pole. This was a symbol of Bacchus, the god of wine. And when the Romans travelled for conquest, like the Americans today, they took all the bits and pieces of their way of life with them - including the "bush" as a

sign for a tavern. There is still an English proverb which says, of something so good it needs no advertising beyond satisfied customers telling their friends, 'A good wine needs no bush'.

The bush served as a sign for centuries, but as towns got bigger, and travelling became easier (often pilgrimages with huge numbers of people on the move across long distances) there was call for more and more hostels and taverns in a street or neighbourhood, and so new signs were needed to distinguish them and in an age when almost nobody could read the new signs had to be pictures easily remembered and easily recognised. And the signs that identified the hostels, taverns and inns catering for travellers (as well as the locals) became part of the system of licencing premises when in 1393 King Richard II passed a law which said amongst other things: "... Whoever shall brew ale in the town with the intention of selling it **must hang out a sign**, otherwise he shall forfeit his ale." And so the search for simple but memorable signs began in earnest. All sorts of pictures were pressed into service: local events, famous people, commemoration of battles, generals, admirals, ships etc., bits of the coats-of-arms of the local gentry (who may have owned the land on which the tavern stood), tools of the local trades - and religion. Since most people went to church in those days, few would have any difficulty recognising and remembering signs featuring Adam & Eve, Noah's Ark, Dove & Rainbow, King David with his harp, Samson and the lion, St. George and the Dragon, the Crossed Keys (of St. Peter), the Lamb & Flag (a symbol of the Resurrection), and the Seven Stars (of the Apocalypse, but later changed to the seven stars of the constellation of The Plough when religious signs became less fashionable). Religious signs were often chosen by those inns and hostels that were owned by a monastery, and at least originally catered for pilgrims, and those not owned by religious but which were on the great pilgrimage routes - such as the Thomas A'Beckett on the Old Kent Road in south London where pilgrims on their way to St. Thomas's tomb at Canterbury

watered
their horses
(and their
own
throats?)
before
setting off
through the open country.

When you see the lilies spinning in distress,
Taking thought to manufacture loveliness;
When you see the little birds build barns for store,
That's the time for you to worry, not before.
(Cf. Luke 12.27-28)

Because
the general
shape of
the picture
was what
people
recognised,

the landlord might try to keep it. So if the sign is repainted showing a gentleman bowing with a flourish to a lady, the sign of The Salutation Inn is formed. Occasionally it became two men and took the name The Two Citizens.

One very popular sign for an inn with ecclesiastical connections was The Pope's Head. After the Reformation, when too obviously Catholic religious signs became unfashionable, most of them changed their sign to The King's Head. This is why so many pubs with that name have Henry VIII on their sign: he was the king the landlord was flattering to avoid trouble.

But the easiest and cheapest way to change a sign was simply to paint out what you did not want in. So if you paint out the Virgin and her lily, you make a sign found all over the country: The Angel. Later the sign for this often became a coin, called the angel because it had on the tails side the very angel we are talking about, the angel of the annunciation. If you want to get rid of the religion in the sign all together, but still have a picture of sorts, you can paint out both figures, the angel and Our Lady, and leave in the centre of your sign the lily in its pot, and this became the rare sign of the Flower Pot. And this - at last, you may well be saying - is why I was interested in what the artist had made of the sign for the pub by the traffic lights at the end of Albert St., in Maidstone.

Another religious sign that was popular, but which also fell out of favour at the same time and for the same reason was The Annunciation. The Feast of the Annunciation - on 25th March - was particularly popular in England, with its Octave day of All Fools on April 1st. The classic picture of the Annunciation shows the angel Gabriel kneeling to greet Our Lady, with the words "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you." and her reply "Be it done to me according to your word" on scrolls like the 'balloons' for the words in a modern cartoon, and between the two figures was a lily (symbol of purity) growing in a pot. Here is the version of it we had in the Carmelite Breviary for the 25th March:

He had obviously done his homework, and realised that it was a religious sign, but he had put the figures back as two angels instead of one angel and Our Lady. But at least he had the right plant growing in the pot! Perhaps if they repaint in a few years time they might restore it completely, and perhaps even change its name back to the original. But perhaps that might be hoping for too much, even in this ecumenical age.



So, on the 25th March don't forget to water your potted plants and celebrate in prayer the Annunciation of the Lord in the Angelic Salutation to Our Lady:

*Pour forth, we beseech you, O Lord,
your grace into our hearts;
that we to whom the Incarnation of
your Son*

was made known by the message of an angel,
may, by his Passion and Cross be brought
to the glory of his Resurrection.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

AN ANCIENT PRAYER

The Feast of the Annunciation is the celebration of Christ's taking human flesh and that Mary is thus truly the Mother of God. The title Mother of God was made "official" by the Council of Ephesus in A.D.431, but it had been used by Christians reflecting on the relation of the Son of God with the human race for at least a hundred and fifty years before then. How do we know that? Well, the answer comes from Egypt via Manchester. Egypt is a very dry country, and any scrap of cloth or papyrus roll that gets lost can survive in the hot, dry sand for hundreds, even thousands of years, and there is one precious fragment rescued in 1906 from the sands of Egypt and now carefully

preserved in the John Ryland's Library in Manchester. It is only a torn scrap, but on it are a few words in Greek that were written just before A.D.300. At that time the Christians in that part of Egypt were suffering persecution, and the words on the papyrus fragment are part of a prayer - enough of each line survives for the experts to reconstruct what the whole prayer actually said. It is the earliest officially written prayer we have that is addressed to the Blessed Virgin Mary, calling her Mother of God. It was a prayer for help in time of trouble.

It proved very popular because not long afterwards we find it being prayed by practically all the ancient Churches, each in its own language, and each one slightly different, but clearly the same prayer. The original prayer of the Egyptian Christians went like this:

In your mercy we take refuge,
O Mother of God;
Do not turn away our
supplications
in our necessity,
but from danger free us,
O chaste one, O blessed
one.

We know it in the West in its latin version usually referred to like most latin texts by its opening words: *Sub tuum praesidium*, and it is usually translated along these lines: "Under your protection we take refuge, holy Mother of God: do not turn your eyes from our prayers in our need, but ever set us free from all evil, O glorious and blessed Virgin." As we say this prayer we are joining countless Christians down the ages who appealed to Mary, the Mother of God, the Mother of the Church and our Mother.



WORRY

Well, I am done,
my nerves are on the rack:
It was the last straw
that broke the camel's back -
I'll lay that down today.
And I'll not fume,
nor fret nor fuss nor fight:
I'll walk by faith a bit
and not by sight.
I think the universe
will work all right -
I'll lay it down today

So here and now,
the dreadful weight, the worry,
The all-too-anxious heart,
the tearing hurry,
I'll lay it down today.
O eager hands,
O feet so prone to run!
I think that he
who made the stars and sun
Can mind the things
I've had to leave undone:
I'll lay them down today.

(Cf Ps44.22)
(& 1 Pet.5.7)

A FAITH TOO WEAK?

Some of the letters we get ask us to pray for a strengthening of faith. The writers fear that their faith is too weak. They are afraid that God could not possibly accept a faith like theirs - weak, wavering, full of doubts and misgivings. Perhaps you are one of these people, even if you have not written to us about it. If that is how you feel, then dismiss your fears, look up and smile: go out and do a small good deed for someone and spread the Good News, because God's gift of salvation does not depend upon the quality of the faith of the person who receives it. A million pound cheque is worth a million pounds whether it is clutched in the uncertain fist of a child, grasped in the wavering hand of an invalid, or held firmly in the grip of a robust hand of a strong and healthy person. We are not saved because our faith is STRONG, nor are we lost because our faith is WEAK. If that were so we could never know if our faith was strong enough, if we believed firmly enough, or if we trusted deeply enough. We might easily find ourselves falling into the trap that someone I met in hospital in the north of England had set himself. This man had been converted suddenly to Christianity. He said he had "come to Jesus" and had been "born again". He decided that since faith can move mountains, then if his faith was only strong enough Jesus would heal him once and for all. And on the strength of his faith - which he clearly thought was very strong - he stopped taking his medicine. Of course he soon became very seriously ill again (but would naturally not admit it) and after collapsing was rushed to hospital where I met him a few days later. He was in total, black, black despair. He felt that God had not cured him, had indeed rejected him and left him to suffer, because his faith was not strong enough. What a terrible idea of God he had. No, we are saved because God in his mercy chose us; you and me, to be his children: we are saved because God in his mercy gave his only begotten Son into death so that by rising from the death in our flesh transfigured he might redeem us. Upon

To live is to change,
to be perfect is to have
changed often.

that fact and upon that fact alone we rely, not on the strength of our faith. The question is not "How strong is my faith?" but rather "How

great is God's forgiving love?". Not "How deep is my belief?" but rather "How great is Christ's redeeming compassion?" And the answer is that God's love and Christ's compassion are great enough and strong enough to save us all if we will let him into our lives. Isaiah wrote: "A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench." (Isa. 42.3) The prophet is speaking here of the coming Saviour who in his infinite mercy will keep even the faintest faith alive. He will not snap off a damaged reed but rather support and strengthen it. He will not put out a flickering, spluttering lamp, but rather coax it back to full-flame. As members of Christ through our baptism God will accept and use what we have and are, even a broken reed or a smoking flame. He does not expect a faith that can work miracles on demand, as my friend in hospital thought.

So cast off doubt and fear. Thank God that in his mercy he has assured us that even the faintest faith saves. Let us just do our best, however feeble that turns out to be, to reflect God's love for us in our dealings with other people and in our dealings with ourselves, and each time we fail - as fail we will and often - let us pray the prayer of the man in the Gospel who prayed: "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief." (Mark 9.24) and try again.

PATIENCE REWARDED

I have to write the Newsletter some weeks before it is sent out so that we can get it printed and packed in good time, and I sometimes feel a bit uneasy as I write. Sitting here now I can see across the office several boxes of letters (about 2700 letters!) still waiting to be answered from the last Newsletter, and here am I writing the next one. I always fear that we shall be sending the next issue out before we have answered all the last lot. But somehow, we always manage it. But this time I really feel it will be touch and go because we

have had some illness in the office and have been some hands short for a couple of weeks (not to mention the Christmas holiday in the middle of it all). What I am trying to say really is that because all your letters come at once when you get the Newsletter, a lot of people have to wait a long time for an acknowledgement - and at the moment I can't see any way round it if we are to continue our tradition of replying to every letter, and I hope that we can keep on doing that.

So if you have to wait a long time for a reply, please, PLEASE, be patient with us. If we get your letter we will, eventually reply before the next Newsletter.

Well, you say, that is all very well, but I am anxious about the money I sent with the letter. Did you get it safely? Has it got lost in the post? Has it been stolen perhaps? Well, at one time robbing the mail was big business. Stage coaches were often hijacked and robbed. In fact things became so bad that in 1782 the Post Office actually advised people sending banknotes through the Post to cut them in half and send each half separately!!! Things have changed since then - so you don't need to go to that extent to safeguard your money. The Post Office sometimes takes a long time to get them here, and we may take a very long time to reply, but very, very, very, few letters actually disappear. So let me give you the golden rules again. If you can, use a cheque or a postal order (keep the counterfoil). Be sure you put our name on it, and CROSS it large and clear. But however you send it, have faith in the Post Office, and have lots of patience with us. We, the Carmelites, are very grateful for your support in our work.

TWO QUICKIES

1. If you don't write to us, and are only on the mailing list to read the Newsletter

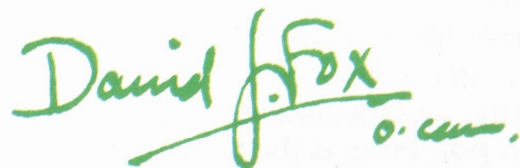
FORTHCOMING NOVENAS

To St. Patrick	9th-17th March
To St. Joseph	19th-27th March
EASTER	15th-23rd April
To St. Jude	15th-23rd May

(and very welcome to do it that way) can I remind you as we begin 1990 of a little something to cover the printing and postage?

2. I love reading crossword clues, especially when I have the answer in front of me and see how cleverly the clue points to the answer and at the same time tries to confuse you. I've always wanted to be good at crosswords, but in fact I am an absolute dunce at them. So, if you are the same let me give you the answer to the puzzle in the last issue. It is an anagram of ARMY. It is, of course, MARY, in whom the Lord pitched his camp - at The Annunciation, of course! But I would never have worked it out if someone hadn't told me.

Keep us in your prayers. Have a good Easter, remembering that The Lord rose to save YOU. And may Our Lady have you always in her care. Until May, yours is The Lord.



David J. Fox O. Carm.

STOP PRESS
Please remember in
your prayers
Fr. Edward Maguire
who, after a long
illness, died peacefully
on Saturday
27th January.