

Love is His Meaning - by Mairi Clunas

Mairi Clunas is a parishioner of St John's and the sole 'consecrated virgin' in the Archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh. Next Friday, 31 May, on the Feast of the Visitation, she will celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of her consecration at the 10am Mass at St John's. In this article, she describes how she was drawn to this unusual but important vocation - although there seem to be a growing number of such hidden 'contemplatives in the world' - and how she seeks to live it out.

'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you'.

I was born on the 4 October 1957, in Inverness, the day Russia launched the first Sputnik into space: while John XXIII was the Holy Father in Rome. Soon he would convene the Second Vatican Council which would usher in a new season of grace for the Church. Although my parents were not practicing Christians I was baptized in the Church of Scotland. Soon, however it became apparent that the baby was 'blue' and her eyes were dull and unresponsive: this was due to a hole in the heart and cataracts on the eyes. So it was that I experienced my first stay in hospital to have the cataracts removed: subsequently it was found that I had no sight in my left eye and only partial vision in my right. In this circumstance, however, can be seen the loving hand of Divine Providence for it was to lead me into the Church and open up the way to a relationship with God. When the issue of my education arose, the Authorities felt that I should attend the blind school. My Mother, convinced that this was unnecessary, wanted me to receive a good all round education: with this in view she approached the local convent. The school for girls was run by the Daughters of Wisdom of St. Marie Louis Grignon de Monfort; they were willing to accept me into the school even though I did not come from a Catholic family. The Director of Education thought otherwise and since there seemed to be no other solution my Mother decided to become a Catholic so that I could legitimately attend the school. This was a great gift to me for which I will always be grateful.

'I have called you by your name.'

So it was that I entered a new and beautiful world – the realm of faith. Every activity was permeated with a spirit of living faith and prayer. It was not so much the imparting of instruction as an experience of the love of God who was revealed to be close at hand and 'interested' in all our activities. In this atmosphere I began to develop a friendship with Jesus in the first stirrings of prayer and was greatly drawn by the mystery of his Presence. Meanwhile the bishops from around the world were gathering for the opening sessions of the Council and the Pope had appealed especially for the prayers of children in support of their discussion regarding the future direction of the Church. The Sisters explained the importance of this endeavour and encouraged us. In addition, the Parish Priest had spent some time on the foreign missions and enjoyed telling us stories about the lives of the children he

had encountered in Africa. In both these ways we gained a sense that the Church was BIG – spread throughout the world.

'Behold the lamb of God'

As I commenced school my physical health continued to give cause for grave concern. In order to enjoy a better quality of life – or perhaps even life at all – I would soon need major heart surgery. In view of the serious nature of the situation and the attendant risks surrounding such an operation the Sisters felt I should be prepared for my First Holy Communion even though I was only five years old. This took place on the feast of Corpus Christi 1963. At the time I knew that a bride also wore a white dress and a veil and I had the 'sense' that I would not be clothed in this way again. The following year, on Good Friday – the day on which the altars are stripped of their coverings – I was stretched out to be anaesthetized prior to the operation which was to last seven or eight hours. I was utterly terrified and with a loud cry yielded up my spirit. Afterwards I was 'buried' for several days in an oxygen tent while a nurse kept vigil by my bedside. This entire experience was truly a gift of Jesus' love, with its close conformity to the pattern of his death. Even now I can only approach this memory and the depths of its mystery in a spirit of humble, silent prayer. One consequence of my long stay in hospital was an expansion of spirit which meant that after my recovery I began to listen to the News and endeavoured to pray for children in places such as Vietnam and China who were experiencing the sufferings of war and revolution. Around this time too, the underlying difficulties at home came to the surface and there was an atmosphere of tension and conflict which was sometimes frightening. I felt very alone and turned instinctively to God. I was confirmed by Bishop Michael Foylan of Aberdeen on Pentecost Sunday 1965: the previous day my Mother and I had left the family home in a sudden dramatic flight, which was very distressing. School however, continued to provide an atmosphere of nurture, stability and above all faith. I began to spend a little time each day in the chapel and gradually learnt to simply rest in God. Essentially, this is still my prayer practice.

'I will lead her into the desert.'

As I approached adolescence my Mother entered into a new relationship with someone who had an existing family. Although life continued to be difficult I discovered a deep interior life of prayer: Jesus was drawing me into a closer communion with his Mystery: to endeavour to live 'through him, with him and in him.' I began to attend daily Mass whenever possible and felt a real hunger for his presence. I also managed to buy a Jerusalem Bible and somewhat tentatively began to read the gospels. This required perseverance but gradually it bore fruit in what would become the practice of Lectio Divina, which I still find very sustaining. The atmosphere at home was very 'disjointed' and there was no real support. In this circumstance however, my spirit was nonetheless being strengthened for the demands of a contemplative vocation which involves a two way exposure. On the one hand there is the exposure to unbelief and sometimes open hostility to faith, on the other there is the daily exposure of the depths of the soul to God in silent prayer. It is far

from a withdrawal into a comfort zone as is sometimes thought. Jesus too, experienced scorn and rejection but also enjoyed nights of prayer in silent communion with the Father.

'And there speak to her heart'

The prospect of leaving school was quite daunting since I was not really ready to forsake this supportive environment. I felt my path lay in the direction of religious life and I was greatly disappointed when this failed to come to pass. However, this was in reality, an intervention of grace. Feeling disorientated and after seeking some wise counsel I entered the university in Stirling to read languages; this was a time of both human and spiritual growth – I met people from different cultural backgrounds and discovered new aspects of myself. In the summer of my second year I suddenly had a detached retina in my right eye – the one with the sight! This meant another operation followed by a recovery process lying quite still in a semi-darkened room. I received Holy Communion most days and since I could not read and there were no other distractions I turned to prayer and made a silent retreat. I was familiar with many gospel passages from memory and the Holy Spirit guided my meditation. I emerged with a renewed confidence in God, greater peace, and a sense that I must still wait – he keeps his covenant ever in mind. Continuing my studies, particularly in German, I soon discovered the writings of the Rhineland mystics and the Beguines, with which I felt a profound resonance. In this way I was first introduced to the concept of a more independent, less structured form of consecrated life, which was sustained by a deep personal relationship with Jesus. The Biblical paradigm for this spirituality is the Song of Songs. But, as I approached the end of my course the strain of academic life, tension at home and the unresolved issue of the vocation led to a sort of nervous collapse. I was exhausted and could do nothing. Recovery was slow and gentle with walks in nature, regular meals and silent prayer – I had to let go and let God heal the depths of my being.

'I will espouse you to myself'

It was around this time too, that I first met Mary, a Sister of the Sacred Heart, with whom I was to remain soul friends until her death in 2005 at the age of 94. This was truly an intervention of grace: with great wisdom, gentleness and patience she helped to nurture my relationship with God; above all, however, she affirmed my sense of vocation. Together we sought a way forward, taking into account all the circumstances, particularly the limitations imposed by my sight and less than robust health. One of the many fruits of the Vatican Council was a revision of the Canon Law and along with it the restoration of the Rite of Consecration of Virgins which had long fallen into disuse. Mary often remarked that I did not need 'a scaffolding to climb up' - ie a particular structure to follow - but a depth dimension with its own identity recognised by the Church and publicly professed. There was not much information available about this possibility, but we continued to pray, 'knock and seek'. Through Mary's community in Aberdeen we learned that there were two blood sisters – a Martha and a Mary – living this vocation there, so we arranged to meet

them. Although quite different in temperament they were both very prayerful and committed to the demands of a relationship with God, a visible witness of the reality of the vocation. After this, with Mary's encouragement, I made a formal approach to the diocese enquiring about the possibility of receiving this consecration. As this was unmapped territory I was understandably met with great caution; however, I was not turned away and over a period of about twelve to fifteen months I met regularly with the Vicar for Religious in a process of discernment. Finally, it was decided that the Consecration should take place. On the Feast of the Visitation, 31 May 1989, I made my public commitment to God in St Ninian's with Archbishop O'Brien. At the time it was very stressful since I still faced opposition and misunderstanding at home, and in addition, the profession of vows is always a lonely and courageous undertaking. Yet, there is also profound joy in responding to the Lord's invitation, ultimately, it is only Jesus who makes this possible with the grace and gift of the Holy Spirit.

'Faithfulness will be your joy'

In 2014 I had the joy of celebrating my Silver Jubilee, which was a beautiful and prayerful occasion as well as a time to reflect and give thanks. While it is always difficult to 'evaluate' a contemplative life, there are some features which characterise it. Above all there is the fidelity to silence and prayer, and an attentiveness to the Word of God, which is lovingly pondered. It is also to cultivate a listening heart, open to the joys and sorrows of others which are then woven into the fabric of prayer. It is important, too, not to overcrowd one's life with too many people, events or things, so that the interior space becomes 'cluttered'. Essentially, it is a return again and again in love to Someone known ever more deeply over time. It is a trust in the permanence of his friendship: sometimes this involves a search and at others it is simply to rest one's head on his Heart. For love is always his meaning.