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A Clare perspective

by Sister Alison Francis OSC

I was expressing my horror at the renunciation involved if I joined the Community of St Clare. 'All you need is generosity,' said Brother Barnabas. When I came to Freeland, I realized that this generosity is exercised in a willing acceptance of the work I am asked to do and of the prayer that God gives, and a fearless openness to information, ideas and opinions in reading and listening.

In my previous employment as a librarian, I had clear ideas about the purpose of what I was doing, with qualifications and aptitude which gave me confidence in my work. At Freeland my obedience to God's irresistible call to this life is fulfilled in my efforts at work for which I have no qualifications and little confidence, so that usually I feel dissatisfied with my performance.

According to our rule we follow the holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ and our work is prayer, but like Jesus we are human beings who need to eat. Consequently we spend more time each day in what we call 'work' to sustain us than in what we call 'prayer', while aiming to pray at all times. Jesus commended Mary who listened to him, but would he have had any dinner if Martha hadn't prepared it?

Our work brings no status, salaries or prizes, and there is no differentiation in the worth of our various activities. We have different talents and physical capacities, but like the labourers in the vineyard we all receive the same food in the eucharist and in the refectory. As we live in a society dominated by expectations of success and personal fulfilment, perhaps there is value in the way we have to accept our imperfections. Yet without a reasonable standard of achievement we can't provide what we need to keep us alive for our prayer. And because we do achieve something tangible in our work it can easily assume such importance that like Martha we are distracted by much serving, anxious and troubled about many things.

Work can be organized, but I can't organize whatever it is we call prayer. All I can do is attend our daily eucharist and divine office, and set aside time each day for nothing but prayer. Although I don't dare to say I am aware of God during either prayer or work, whenever I am not wholly concentrated on anything else I am involved in the quest for God and the question of God, just as I have a background awareness of the weather at any time. I feel close to St Francis in the tension between his desire for active service for others and for complete devotion to prayer, and in our community vocation a tension between intercession and praise and contemplation.

In the lives of the earliest monks in the desert we read of their assiduous daily recital of the psalter, and I notice that even my somewhat inattentive participation in our recitation of psalms – combined with the lectionary readings – provides my imagination and intellect with its daily bread.

As the Christian way begins with the Gospel my study springs from a desire to know Jesus Christ more fully. This leads me to writers who help me to see him in his own time and place in history and theology, back into the Old Testament and forward beyond the New to the writings of theologians in the early centuries of the Christian church. In the Old Testament, especially in the psalms and prophets, and also in Greek tragedy, I find what I want to say to God in my sense of outrage about the appalling suffering in the world, whether through floods or earthquake, or the destruction of cities and removal of people from their homes.

At the present day, observation in our own garden and reading about scientific research stimulate my wonder at the universe and all that is in it. The literature and theology of the past two centuries help me in my own considerations about God and human history, my doubts and questions, and my concern for people for whom God seems absent or non-existent. I hope that this study enables me to receive generously the circumstances of my daily life. *f*