

*“Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart
and try to love the questions themselves.....*

*Don't search for the answers,
which could not be given to you now,
because you would not be able to live them.*

And the point is, to live everything.

Live the questions now.

*Perhaps then, someday far in the future,
You will gradually, without even noticing it,
Live your way into the answer”*

Rainer Maria Rilke

*Jesus said to John the Baptist “Let it be so now;
For it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness”
Matthew 3: 15*

**“The Dove and the Raven”
Reflections on a Sabbatical:
Canon Michael A. Hart. Sept 2009**

It was a privilege to have a time of Study leave: to have the space to live with the questions ministry had thrown up and indeed discover some questions hidden deep in my heart that I hadn't been aware of. I added my holiday leave onto the three months sabbatical enabling me to have a month each in Italy, the north of England, the south coast and on holiday.

I've always believed that it is important to be organised, but to allow space for that “*individuation*” (Jung), that “*integral spirituality*” (Donald Dorr), or what we generally call “getting your act together”. Study leave was a time primarily to listen to those neglected and questioning voices, make connections and indeed rejoice in new discoveries.

I have entitled this reflection paper “*The Dove and the Raven*”, because during my time away I was acutely aware of two themes: the Annunciation and the prophet Elijah. Both of these symbolised, for me, the importance for my heart to be open to God's will. In paintings, prints, and stained glass windows the theme of the Annunciation kept appearing: from a planned visit to Florence to observing a church window at 8am one Sunday morning. (1) It reminded me to be open to the unexpected of the Holy Spirit. The Elijah theme I knew to be around: as it was part of the Cathedral Retreat I led at the beginning of the sabbatical at Villa Palazzola, Lake Albano. The Villa faces across the Lake to the Papal Palace at Castel Gandolfo. In giving Addresses about some Italian saints I was aware that Francis and Benedict, along with others, sought to be “before the Lord” in Caves, just like Elijah. After the Retreat I headed to Rome, then Assisi and later Florence. I achieved my intention to visit three churches in Rome containing Caravaggio's paintings.

I had visited Assisi in 1990 on my last sabbatical and wanted this return visit. I stayed with Brother Tom SSF, the Anglican friar/Chaplain and then later, a few doors away, at the Sisters of the Atonement Guest House. It was a joy just to “be” in Assisi: to visit, walk or just soak up the atmosphere. On the Sunday I worshipped in St. Leonardo's, the church loaned to the Anglican congregation in Assisi. Although it is said “All roads leave to Rome” they also seem to lead to Assisi. During my stay +Christopher, also on Sabbatical, and Sister Joyce CSF, (from the Cathedral/St. Alphage's), who was on a Conference, all met in Brother Tom's flat! We have photographic evidence of that!

I consider, whilst in Italy, one of my great achievements to have been to have driven alone. Somehow I avoided the Italian divers, or they me, and managed to get to Pisa in one piece though much later than the Google search predicted, (don't trust their timing!). Leaving my car at Pisa airport I joined others of a group of twelve for a seven-day painting course in Lunigiana. This was a fantastic artistic and culinary experience with a great course Tutor. After the course I made my way to Florence to see Fra Angelico's paintings.

It was after the experience of noticing external light and the way artists illuminate their subjects that I ventured back to England and an Icon Painting course in Hereford. It was there I discovered during long days of work not only that it is hard to be an Icon painter, but

also the wonder of “uncreated light”: that is the light of God that emanates from deep within a holy person and is depicted in Iconography. The course tutor, Sister Petra Clare, was a hard taskmistress: frightening the life out of me with her “No, No, Nosy”: I said to one participant “not even my Bishop speaks to me like that!!!!!!” “You’re lucky” came the RC reply! During the Icon course we wrote an extremely complicated Icon of Elijah: which though blessed once, I still have to finish, before it is place on the Altar at a Eucharist.

Now in mid-sabbatical I had a walking holiday in Pembrokeshire, during which I visited St. David’s Cathedral, only to be confronted by an Icon – of Elijah and the raven!

Before another holiday and a time of reading I went north. Firstly ,to take my elderly parents for a short holiday in Wharfedale, then to the SCP Conference in Newcastle and to stay with friends. The theme of the Conference was “ *Sacred Places/Sacred People*”. As I love the North East this was a splendid time, including a Service in Durham Cathedral. A priest who had been a Pastoral Assistant whilst I was Rector of St. Mary, Newington, as part of the liturgy, anointed me and others. This was very significant as that month, July, marked the 35 anniversary of my Ordination to the Priesthood in that Cathedral! Making connections with family, friends and significant places was very important. I also managed to go to Hexham, Lastingham, Jarrow as well as Hartlepool, where on the headland St. Hilda built her first Abbey – now a parish church!

A short time at St. Deiniols Library at Hawarden reading about “the heart” in Franciscan spirituality prepared me for the last part of my time of study.

I worshipped each Sunday in different places: some bringing tears of joy others of regret that I’d picked the wrong church! In some I found the church hardly present: my title parish church which closes this month along with others to leave one small parish church for a parish of 40,000! Florence however was uplifting, after attending a very traditional Mass I ventured into a Church where a small charismatic music group played and they moved me to stay for the next mass attended by three hundred.

During the sabbatical I met Clergy, professors, tourists and indeed all kinds of people, often in unusual places. There was an interesting event which occurred at St. Leonardo’s in Assisi: a young Italian from an atheist family, who had moved to New Zealand and now thinking of becoming an Anglican Franciscan turned up at that Eucharist!

I was fed, as Elijah’s raven fed him, by the reliable and knows of God. For me it was Eucharistic food enriching the “heart-searching” I was doing for whatever the dove, whatever the Annunciation God had in mind. Yes, it has been a time of connects and answers to long mulled over Questions.

So Annunciation; Elijah, Painting, Icons, Sacred Places and People; Spirituality of the Heart; questioning and discerning the Will of God as I looked back with thankfulness and to the future with faith and vision renewed. “*The dove and the raven*”.