

An open heart: God "made hearts one by one"

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [November 29, 2003](#) issue

Cloistered monks and nuns rarely make headlines, especially if they are paragons of the hidden life, but the recent passing of Dame Felicitas Corrigan of Stanbrook Abbey near Worcester, at age 95, has caused a stir in the British press. There is something to captivate even a secular society in the story of a contemplative nun who became famous for her 15 elegant and idiosyncratic books, her musical compositions and her celebrated friendships.

When Piers Paul Read wrote the authorized biography of Sir Alec Guinness, he knew he'd find the key to the actor's complicated inner life somewhere in the 832 letters that Guinness wrote to Dame Felicitas, his cloistered confidante. The poet Siegfried Sassoon insisted that the account of his religious journey be written by Dame Felicitas or not written at all.

Novelist Rumer Godden, inspired by her friendship with Dame Felicitas, wrote *In This House of Brede*. The film, starring Diana Rigg, was shot on location at Stanbrook. Dame Felicitas's two books on the friendship of the brilliant Abbess Dame Laurentia MacLachlan with George Bernard Shaw and Sir Sydney Cockerell, *In a Great Tradition* and *The Nun, the Infidel and the Superman*, were the basis for Hugh Whitemore's play *The Best of Friends*, as well as a 1991 film starring Sir John Gielgud, Patrick McGeehan and Dame Wendy Hiller. It may be a coincidence, but my husband, who has visited Stanbrook, tells me that Gielgud bears more than a passing resemblance to Dame Felicitas.

What fascinates most about this cloistered nun, however, is not the many luminaries she met in person or by pen, but the unmistakable evidence her life presents that traditional Benedictine monasticism still flourishes as a storehouse of genuine culture. There is something about "preferring nothing to the love of Christ," in an ordered life of labor and prayer, that unleashes tremendous reserves of intelligence and beauty. In addition to being a prolific writer, Dame Felicitas was an

accomplished organist, scholar of Gregorian chant, translator, biographer of the medievalist Helen Waddell, and liturgical poet. "Liturgical reform," she once observed, "is a disease recurring with rhythmic regularity every 50 years or so," but she accepted the vernacular as the will of the church, composing an English version of the Office of Compline almost as lovely as the Latin plainchant original.

In the 1980s, Dame Felicitas received a visit from Mother Mary Clare Vincent, prioress of the Benedictine nuns of Petersham, Massachusetts, and publisher of the monastic journal *Word & Spirit*. Dame Felicitas recalls the exchange:

Would you contribute an article to *Word & Spirit* on your own personal Christology?

"Please, Mother, would you define 'Christology' in words of one syllable?"

"Yes. Will you write an article on what Christ means to you?"

"Good gracious, how can I possibly say what Christ means to me? He's the very air I breathe, and you don't stop to define or analyze breath, do you, apart from the fact that it is necessary to life?"

"Exactly. Say so, will you? Ten to 12 typewritten pages."

. . . The voice would obviously refuse to take No for an answer. Nothing for it but to trust in God's help and go straight ahead.

But Dame Felicitas never did go straight ahead. Like all her prose, the essay "What Christ Means to Me" (later reprinted in her book *A Benedictine Tapestry*) is more of a meander than a march, picking up bright shards of poetry and reflection along the way. She traces her earliest image of Christ to a bedside picture ("He had a thin face with red-gold hair that led to a beard terminating in two curious curls") which she would gaze upon every night after prayers, trying "to learn him off by heart" and pretending to be betrothed to him as a nun. "It was a sad day," she reflects, "when reason asserted its claims," for the image shattered, and she had to grow up.

In exchange for the shattered image, Dame Felicitas found Christ in his sacramental mysteries, flying below the radar of her senses. When she became a real nun, at the comparatively advanced age of 25, she confronted the "acid test of obedience" with the full force of her strong will and peppery personality. It took all the faith she could muster to accept that however one's superior may err, however one's sisters may

squabble, however one may pine for cigarettes or cream teas, “providence never makes a mistake.”

Her greatest genius was reserved for friendship. “The Stanbrook parlour,” observed her friend Léonie Caldecott in an obituary for the *Independent*, “is never knowingly underused.” *Porta patet, cor magis* (“The door is open, more so the heart”) was her motto, and in her latter days Dame Felicitas went from enclosure to enclosure with an open heart, from cloister cell to hospital bed, as her eyesight shut down and her circulation failed, knowing that she would never return to the cloister (the historic Stanbrook Abbey is about to be sold) and that the next door to open for her would be the jubilee door of heaven, streaming with light.

In exuberant letters to her vast collection of peculiar friends (for a time I had the joy of being one of them), Dame Felicitas often observed that God does not create people by mass production. He “made hearts one by one” (Vulgate Psalm 32:15), and *this* heart he made for eternal Felicity.