

Devout and Religious Souls!

We have a large and excellent library in Redacre, our guesthouse, and you are all welcome to browse or borrow. From who knows where, a little book published in 1821 was discovered on the bookshelves. It is almost 200 years-old. The price was 2 shillings and 2 pence (2s.2d. for those who remember the old money). We must confess that it was brought to Bethany, where the Sisters live; it was such a treasure and never went back to the library. The title is, 'The Spiritual Director of Devout and Religious Souls'! This conjures up an image not quite us, but it was the author that caught our eye, St. Francis de Sales, Bishop of Geneva. Some of us have long loved this gentle Saint.

One of the dangers of Advent is that we are so busy that Christmas comes and goes without any meaningful awareness of the wonder of the Incarnation. In his little book, St. Francis proposes a spiritual retreat. The word 'retreat' has been hijacked by those who go away for a day, or longer, to be alone with the Lord. This is helpful but we can have a retreat in our own home, a church that we pass, or in some quiet spot outdoors, if the weather permits. It need not last long although we would say at least, fifteen to twenty minutes.

One Sister gives a helping hand, when she is able, with the chaplaincy at the Cancer Centre. There was a time when she ran up and down the stairs to the ward on the top floor without even thinking about it but those days have gone! That leaves the lift. On Sunday mornings there is often no-one around. The lift seems very large with just one person in it. Nothing would persuade her to enter that lift unless she was certain that after its smooth glide upwards it would stop at her floor. All of us would refuse to enter a car if the driver did not know how to use the brake.

Yet in our busy, hurried lives we find it incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to stop for even twenty minutes. There is always something important to be done, or we are restless for more and more. Sometimes we are driven by a sense of guilt. We pay dearly spiritually for this inability to apply the brake. The poet, R. S. Thomas, wrote

Life is not hurrying
on to a
receding future.

nor hankering
after an
imagined past.

It is turning aside,
like Moses,
to the miracle of
the lit bush.

In our hectic lifestyle we miss the miracle of an encounter with the God of Love. He is always there, but we are not always there for him. There is no way that we can grow in holiness without making that space in our busy lives. Where do we begin? First of all, relax. God is there whether we feel him or not. He loves us and accepts us whatever we might think of ourselves.

Gently contemplate the nativity – Mary, bowing her head to a future of disgrace and humiliation replying to the angel Gabriel, ‘I am the Lord’s servant’.



St Francis de Sales suggests, ‘Admire him (the little Christchild) in the crib, in extreme poverty, and desire to imitate him’, and, ‘Consider how the angels and shepherds adore him; and joining your devotions with them, offer him your most prostrate adorations.’

We can take these three little vignettes, or pictures, from the

gospels, one for each week leading up to Christmas Day. If we faithfully remain close to the Lord Jesus this Advent, Christmas will be different and possibly the best that we have ever had.