Dear Friends,

As those of us in the UK and worldwide absorb the enormity of the death of Queen Elizabeth II after 70 years on the throne, it is hoped that this issue of the newsletter may work to provide a note of creative calm. Coming amid huge change and one of the most challenging and unsettling periods in recent history, we seek out means to maintain the ways in which we perceive the world and our place within it by (re-)directing our focus on word and image.

In this issue of the newsletter, we are introduced by Professor Ben Quash to the VCS (Visual Commentary on Scripture), a beautiful online resource in which the scriptures are illuminated by works of art by theologians, biblical scholars and art historians (including two embedded examples by art historian Anna Gannon who also serves on MBIT’s Council). We also visit an archived page from Bishop Erik Varden’s online newsletter, Coram Fratibus entitled, ‘Silent Poetry’ which intriguingly challenges us to ‘listen’ to paintings – while Fr Columba McCann OSB, a monk at Glenstal Abbey in Ireland walks us through the ancient meditative reading of the word of God in what is called Lectio Divina.

Elsewhere, MBIT research associate, Melanie-Prejean Sullivan continues our exploration of Lady Margaret Beaufort with a book review of Nicola Tallis’s acclaimed historical biography, Uncrowned Queen. We also have two excellent contributions to our ‘Letters from …’ series – this time from the Margaret Beaufort Institute’s first principal, Sr Bridget Tighe, FMDM who writes to us from Jerusalem where she served as Vice-Rector of Tantur Ecumenical Institute and more recently, Director General of Caritas Jerusalem. Alongside this is a reflective letter from Karen Turner, an alumna of MBIT who shares her experience of working as a chaplain to university students in Bath. And on a final poetic note, Br Paul Quenon, who is known as resident poet and photographer at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, invites us to consider the angelic in a new light.

Hoping that this finds you in good health and having had a break of some kind over the summer as we move forward hopefully and prayerfully towards autumn and the new academic year.

With warmest wishes,

Susanne

Susanne Jennings
President of the Margaret Beaufort Association

Editorial team: Susanne Jennings, Pavlína Marie Kašparová & Margaret Sallis
Bringing Forth Treasures Old and New: Introducing the Visual Commentary on Scripture
By Professor Ben Quash

The Visual Commentary on Scripture (TheVCS.org) is a free, open-access, online publication, aimed at a global readership. It is written principally by scholars working in three academic disciplines: Theology, History of Art, and Biblical Studies, and my daily task (and joy) is to edit it. The scale of the project means that I am dependent on the dedication of a small team whose combined expertise covers just these three disciplinary areas. The project occupies most of my daytime thoughts (and often my nocturnal ones too!).

The public launch of the site took place at Tate Modern in 2018, with views across the Millennium Bridge towards St Paul’s Cathedral, and that couldn’t have been a more appropriate venue for a project that seeks to be a bridge between the world of art and the world of the Bible; to put cultural literacy at the service of biblical literacy, and vice versa; to foster conversations between Scripture and visual artefacts in the conviction that images are one of the most important shared languages of the 21st century.

The best summary I can give of what the VCS is all about is to say that it provides theological commentary on the Bible through the selection of works of art. In this way, it seeks to increase levels of public engagement with the sacred texts of Christianity and Judaism, harnessing art’s power to transform our relationships with canonical texts today. It seeks especially to resource those in Christian ministry, museum curators and educators, the shapers of cultural literacy in journalism and other media, and teachers at both secondary and tertiary level.

Each passage of scriptural text is treated as the centre of an online exhibition with its own small set of linked webpages. The academic contributors are the ‘curators’ of that exhibition (i.e., they select the artworks, and write short accompanying texts). There are three artworks per exhibition, combining focus with contrast. This allows a conversation to open up between the artworks, the text, and the audience. Four written commentary texts feature in each exhibition, three (of c.350 words each) accompanying each of the three artworks individually, and one (of c.700 words) discussing their combined effect. When our contributors write their comparative commentary on multiple images, we want them to show how the side-by-side consideration of images opens up further dimensions of the biblical passage.
Selected works can be from any historical period and any geographical region in the world. The artists whose work is selected need not be (or have been) professing Christians; they may be associated with other religious traditions or identify with none. We have had a big push for more international and cultural range in both our curators and our artworks in the last two years, and it has been gratifying to see that whereas most of our visitors in the first year were UK-based, the USA has now outstripped us by some way, and our site analytics show Lagos, Accra, Singapore, and Kuala Lumpur among the locations from which people most frequently logon to the VCS.

We ask our contributors to work in a way that is in sympathy with the canonical status of these passages as ‘Holy Scripture’ for living communities. This does not require commentary to be homiletical in character so much as to be imaginatively sensitive to the dynamics of the texts’ role in Christian worship, belief and practice. Commentary might choose not to adopt an indicative, imperative, or exhortative mood of speech, reflecting instead one of the other moods of speech (some of which have closer analogies, perhaps, with the way that works of visual art ‘speak’):

(i) the subjunctive (imagining possibilities; what could or might be other than it presently is);
(ii) the interrogative (asking why things are like this and not that, and whether it must be so); or
(iii) the optative (expressing desire).

All such moods are, of course, widely found in the Bible as well.

We also ask that artworks be selected on at least two of three grounds:

(i) their quality of attention to the sacred texts to which they relate;
(ii) the power of insight they bring to these texts and/or their themes; and
(iii) their capacity to generate lively dialogue, both with the passage and with the other works of art.

I am a deep believer in ressourcement (a drawing from the deep wisdom of religious traditions) as something capable of reparative renewal in the present. That is close to the heart of our vision for the VCS. The project might be harnessing the best of contemporary technology (it is a sophisticated website, both technically and aesthetically, with the capacity to enable close-up exploration of its 900 or so high-resolution images in extraordinary detail with the help of a zoom function). But at the same time, it is simply the renewal of ancient prototypes: the illuminated Bibles of medieval times; the biblia pauperum facilitated by early printing techniques; the Christian catenae which (in a very similar way to the Jewish Talmudic tradition) gathered the voices of multiple commentators to open different perspectives on a shared sacred text, so as to promote richness of conversation about Scripture’s many meanings in later generations. This conversational approach also has continuities, I think, with the ‘symposium’ tradition of the ancient Hellenistic world: typically, in an ancient symposium, three couches were arranged to create a space for reflection, exchange, imagination, and learning. In our ‘mini-exhibitions’, our curators arrange three artworks with the same goal.

In all these ways, we seek to combine treasures both new and old.

[1] Another recent revival of this latter is our sister project, the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture.
Combining Treasures Old & New: a case study

Three exhibitions curated by the Cambridge-based art historian Anna Gannon—well-known to many at MBIT—will help me illustrate one last continuity with ancient precedent. It’s the classic defence of images advanced by John of Damascus in the eighth century. The VCS is written and edited with an eye to all three of the main purposes John sets out.

First, it seeks to instruct those with little knowledge of the Bible about its contents. We hope this will be part of the strategic ‘impact’ of our project.

Anna’s exhibition on The Altar of Incense in Exodus 30 works beautifully to impart biblical literacy to contemporary readers of what might otherwise be a confusing, and even alien, text. Exodus 30 is full of technical terminology and ritual instructions, all premised on assumed knowledge of the layout of the ancient Israelites’ Tabernacle in the desert. The exhibition gathers an illumination from an 8th-century Northumbrian manuscript (depicting the layout of this Tabernacle) together with a 2000-year-old Yemeni incense burner, and an 8th-century Anglo-Saxon coin decorated with a fragrant plant, so as to bring alive in readers a renewed appreciation of the role and rationale of olfactory experience in the worship of God. We are helped to understand the importance of smell in the Hebrew Scriptures—and thus, I think, to understand the Bible better.

Anna Gannon’s exhibition Blessed is the Mother is on just two verses: Luke 11:27–28. As he said this, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, “Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked!” But he said, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!”

It is more transhistorical in its selection of artworks. Anna’s specialism in Anglo-Saxon art ensures a place for the 8th/9th-century Breedon Virgin, but alongside it come a 19th-century Italian oil painting of a farming family pausing in their work (midway through their transportation of livestock across a lake) to pray the Angelus, and a startlingly hyperrealistic contemporary sculpture of Mary in Uppsala Cathedral, ‘returning’ to this Protestant space rather like a refugee. This exhibition invites something very interesting of its visitors: a ‘going deeper’ into the meaning of Mary’s motherhood as a model for believers (ancient and modern, Catholic and Protestant), who are to ‘hear and keep’ the word as she did, making in themselves a womb in which Christ takes shape.

This exhibition’s intensive focus on the implications of the Incarnation thus makes possible something that John of Damascus advocated in a second aspect of his defence of images. John used the warrant of the Incarnation to affirm that sensory experience can be a pathway to spiritual insight:

When you see the Bodiless become man for your sake, then you may depict the figure of a human form; when the Invisible becomes visible in the flesh, then you may depict the likeness of something seen. Just as [through] words perceived by the senses we hear with bodily ears, and understand what is spiritual, so through bodily vision we arrive at spiritual contemplation (John of Damascus In Defense of Icons 1.16, 3.12).

Mary’s ‘bodying forth’ of Christ is repeated and extended in the ‘bodying forth’ of these artworks which simultaneously incite us to ‘spiritual contemplation’.

And finally, to John’s third defence of images. He affirms that images are made ‘to be gazed upon, so that we might glorify God and be filled with wonder and zeal’. Likewise, the VCS aims to refresh viewers and engage their affective responses as well as their intellectual ones, and this is well-exemplified in a third exhibition by the same author: A Song of Thanksgiving, which has Psalm 147 as its focus. King David and his musicians burst vibrantly off the page of the 8th-century Vespasian Psalter, and are able to hold their own even when juxtaposed with Van Gogh’s celebrated, and dazzling, The Starry Night of 1889, and the jubilant stained glass of Marc Chagall’s Joseph made in 1962 for a Jerusalem hospital. The ways in which the political, the environmental, and the humanitarian spheres are inextricably entwined with each other are displayed here under the promise that all, together, are destined for glory in God’s purposes. The first and last word of Psalm 147 is ‘Praise the Lord!', and this exhibition itself becomes a sort of visual ‘Alleluia!', of which the Damascene would have approved.

Professor Ben Quash read English as an undergraduate at Cambridge, and then, while in training for ordination at Westcott House, theology. Doctoral work on the theological dramatic theory of Hans Urs von Balthasar combined these literary and theological interests. He was Chaplain and Fellow of Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge, and a lecturer in the Cambridge Theological Federation from 1996-1999, then returned to Peterhouse as Dean and Fellow until he came to King’s College London in 2007 as Professor of Christianity & the Arts. From 2004-2007, he was also Academic Convenor of the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme in the University of Cambridge’s Faculty of Divinity, developing research and public education programmes in Judaism, Christianity and Islam and their interrelations — and indulging a delight in Scriptural Reasoning.

Lectio Divina: a Monastic Tradition of Meditation
By Fr Columba McCann, OSB

What does the word ‘meditation’ evoke? Calm, perhaps, stillness, reflection, silence? The word has been used in a variety of ways in different contexts, but it often refers to some kind of focus of the mind and body. There are, for example, meditations that focus on our breathing, or on the sounds around us, or on bodily sensations; there are meditations that involve the repetition of a sacred word. In this article I would like to focus on a way of meditating that is part of the Western monastic tradition and, practised regularly in Benedictine monasteries such as the one where I live. Meditation in this context is part of a larger spiritual practice called lectio divina, often translated as ‘holy reading’ or ‘sacred reading’ though I prefer a more literal translation ‘divine reading’ because, even if it sounds strange, it emphasises that God might be a player in the process. The focus in this form of meditation is on a sacred text, normally from the Bible. Its goal is love and, ultimately, eternal life.

Christians view the Bible as a collection of inspired texts. This doesn’t mean that the books of the Bible are perfect, or even factually correct in every detail. Nor does it exclude the possibility that, while some texts seem particularly illuminating, others may exhibit more primitive stages in the process of God’s self-revelation to us, examples of divine pedagogy suited to human capabilities of a particular time and place.

Not only do Christians say that the Bible is inspired; they also call it the word of God. This doesn’t mean that every word was literally dictated to the human writers by God. It does mean that, when we approach the text with an attitude of prayer and humble openness, the Spirit of God can inspire us to perceive a message that is just right for us in our current situation. The divine word is not so much the word on the page as the inspired message given to us by the Spirit as we read and pray.

The word on the page is the medium through which God works with us, and this is why lectio divina involves giving focussed attention to the text. Lectio is a meditative process that flows naturally from reading the text and connecting with it personally.

What might happen as a result of lectio divina? I find inspiration in the gospel according to Matthew, where Jesus criticises his hearers, using words from the prophet Isaiah. His negative judgment shows, in reverse, what could happen in a positive way when lectio goes well: “This people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn – and I would heal them” (Mt 13:15). In the light of this, lectio could be seen as a process that involves an open and listening heart, ready to see, ready to hear God’s word, ready to turn to a different way of living, ready for the healing that Christ is offering here and now.
The Dynamic of Lectio Divina

The prayerful encounter with the word of God begins with reading a biblical text. Later in this article I can suggest how we might choose that text. The goal of reading is not to become an expert on the Bible, though this may eventually happen as a by-product. Nor is it primarily to work out the exact historical circumstances of the text or what actually happened. Knowledge of the original context can be helpful, but only insofar as it helps me to clarify what the meaning of the text might be for me today. The biblical texts come out of particular historical moments, but their purpose is to help the reader awaken to the presence and action of God in their own time and place. Study editions of the Bible can include helpful notes that give a minimal historical background, and explain difficult passages. The meaning of some passages can seem obvious when in fact they are not, because they were written for a very different culture. Notes in a study edition can help avoid basic misunderstandings.

After an initial reading of the text I can move into a deeper engagement with it, as I begin to search for a sense of its meaning for me in my own life here and now. This is what is often called meditation. As we meditate, we ‘mull over’ the text, we spend time with it, taking care to notice what is really there. It may involve re-reading it a few times. I will be giving some practical advice about this important part of the process. What normally happens is that I begin to notice things that are interesting, significant to me, or even inspiring or challenging. The text has connected with me personally. A particular line, or idea, or image, begins to stand out. It may happen frequently enough that we will notice for the first time some things in passages with which we thought we were already very familiar. Even a rather secondary idea or a connecting phrase can, in the hands of the Holy Spirit, bring light into our lives. On some occasions the Holy Spirit may move us very deeply by what we have read, and enlarge our horizons, leaving a lasting impression. On other occasions what we notice may be of more modest significance. A very natural progression at this point is for the meditation to give way to prayer: I speak to God about what I have noticed. The text has brought me to the point of self-expression before God. If thinking is rather like ‘talking to myself’ about a topic, it takes just a little adjustment to turn it into ‘talking to God’.

Prayer that has come from my reading becomes very personal and is at the same time occasioned by a word that has come from God to me via the bible. This is a real dialogue. It's my reaction to what is being revealed. Depending on what I have seen in the text, I may express joy, love, sorrow, doubt, dismay, even anger, or a cry for help. The text may often touch a raw nerve that requires attention. The divine physician can have a way of putting a finger on that part of my life where growth is ready to happen. There is no formula here; I am myself before God in the light of what I have read. The time of prayer need not be long, in fact St Benedict suggests it normally be short unless it is God who prolongs it in us.

When prayer has been intense, and when I really sense that I have been touched by what I have read, there may be a lingering sense of my connection with God. It is as if our relationship has ‘gone live’. This is a moment to savour. I can rest in the presence of God, in the presence of the One who loves me. I don't need to say anything or ‘hear’ anything. The silence caresses me and I sense it is a divine caress. This is a kind of contemplation and I can rest in it as long as it lasts. The silence comes as a gift and is not something that I have tried to achieve by techniques to still the mind (though these can have their place in other contexts). If I find, after a certain interval, that the contemplative phase has passed, I can either conclude my time of lectio divina, or else go back to some more
reading and start the process afresh. This may involve looking at the same passage again; sometimes a passage has a lot more to give than I realised at first. Or it may be a matter of moving on to the next passage. When I have become accustomed to lectio, I may even find that just sitting down and opening the book is enough for a contemplative connection with God to open up. When this happens there is no need to begin reading; for the moment I just rest in this experience. I can take up reading, prayer and meditation when this moment passes.

Meditation in lectio is a central moment in a process that flows naturally back and forth between reading, prayer and contemplation. I don’t have to stop and ask: ‘Which am I doing: Reading, Meditating, Praying or Contemplating?’ The elements flow into one another and overlap to a certain extent, and sometimes they will naturally occur ‘out of sequence’. There are times when the experience may not be particularly moving or enlightening, but it is not worthless. We can sometimes be bored, even with the people we most love! But if I have made myself available to God through a process of reading, meditation and prayer, then I can be assured that it will bear fruit, even if it is just like a very small seed that has been quietly planted in the heart.

Some Practical Advice

1. **Preparation.** It’s good to find a quiet place where you can sit undisturbed. If you have a mobile phone, switch it to silent. If you set a timer on your phone then you won’t have to keep looking at your watch or at a clock. You can forget about time for a while and just enjoy the present moment. You can also claim this time and space for God visually, for example by setting up an icon or lighting a candle.

2. **Entering into Silence.** Take a moment just to be silent. You could spend a few moments gazing at an icon. Or you could just close your eyes and listen to the sounds around you: your breathing, sounds in the building, sounds outside. Enjoy the silence!

3. **The Presence of God.** A first short prayer to God could be along these lines: ‘God, I believe you are truly present here with me, whether I perceive it or not.’ Then just pause in that presence, be it perceptible or not.

4. **Asking for God’s help.** Before actually reading, ask God to help you so that you will indeed listen, perceive, understand and be changed by the divine word.

5. **Reading.** The question arises to what text to read. One possibility is to read a particular book of the Bible from beginning to end, a little each day. It’s not about getting through a lot of text – you have your whole life to read the Bible! Some books of the Bible are easier to start with, for example the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, the Book of Exodus. Another approach is to read passages that have been preselected for liturgical use. For example, Catholics could decide to meditate on the readings chosen by the Church for Mass the following Sunday, or those chosen for Mass on a particular weekday. One advantage of this approach is that passages which are particularly difficult or prone to misunderstanding are less likely to be chosen, and the passages chosen will be there according to a coherent plan. There is, furthermore, something to be said for picking passages that in some way express a harmony with the praying Church throughout the world at this time.
6. Meditation. Sometimes the significance of a passage for us seems to jump right off the page. Then the thing to do is to savour these words. I can repeat them a few times, allowing them to sink deeper into my mind and heart each time. I can learn these lines off by heart so that they may become a source of prayer and inspiration even at other times outside my meditation period. I can treasure the message by writing down the relevant lines in a spiritual notebook. Above all, I can transition from thinking and ruminating into prayer where I express to God my personal reaction to what I have seen. The dynamic of lectio divina is towards this important moment.

Sometimes there seems to be no obvious message for me. I just see words on a page, lines that make sense, but they don’t touch me in any real way. In this situation there are ways of slowing down with the text in order to notice more carefully what it is saying. Sometimes the deepest, most important message is so simple that I don’t see it even though it is plainly stated. Here are various options: reading the text out loud can give a new perspective; writing it out by hand is often very revealing; comparing different Bible translations can bring important things to light. Or I can ask a few simple questions about the text: “Does anything here remind me of events in my own life?” “What do I see of Jesus Christ in this text?” “Does this remind me of anything else in the Bible?” Trying to answer such questions will often be a good gateway to personal insight and to spontaneous prayer.

There may be ideas in the text that I think are wrong and shouldn’t be in the Bible. Getting worked up about that is a distraction from finding what God may be saying right now. Wrestling with such ideas is for another time and place. Unless one is quite proficient at lectio, it is better to stay with those ideas that have some personal appeal. Other, unattractive ideas may have some surprising things to teach me some other time.

If I have a sense that through my lectio God is calling me to do something unusual or dramatic or with far-reaching consequences, it’s advisable to share the experience and get advice from some wise spiritual person I can trust. We can be mistaken in what we hear. The Bible was put together by the Christian community for the Christian community. So we need to be cautious about messages heard in isolation if they have serious consequences. I may need help from someone else to discern the truth in a given situation.

7. Prayer. Be yourself with God. With other human beings we sometimes need to be careful about what we say, for fear of misunderstanding, of wounding the other person or destroying a relationship. God is big enough and wise enough to deal with any nonsense I may say. God likes to hear us speak even if he already knows what we are going to say.

8. Contemplative Rest. Don’t try to force this. If a sense of mutual presence between yourself and God descends during your meditation and prayer, enjoy it and rest in it as a gift. But don’t try to make it happen, or try to prolong it artificially.

Fr Columba McCann is a monk of Glenstal Abbey, Co Limerick, Ireland. A musician by training, he has degrees in music, theology and liturgical studies. He was ordained to the priesthood in the diocese of Dublin in 1988, where he worked in parish ministry and liturgical renewal. In 2004 he joined the monastic community at Glenstal, where he is currently novice master.
Book Review by Melanie-Préjean Sullivan, DMin


As I am writing from “across the pond,” I begin with gratitude for this, a great privilege to be asked to reflect upon a book about one of the greatest figures in English history, Margaret Beaufort. Despite decades of my interest and study of English history, I was ignorant of this amazing “uncrowned queen.” I knew about her notorious grandson (Henry VIII), his church reforms for personal and political purposes, and his dissolution of the monasteries for economic gain. But I had no idea about his amazing grandmother until 2016, when I was encouraged to apply for the Cardinal Hume Scholarship at MBIT. I immediately began my research on Margaret Beaufort and read books and monographs featuring her or mentioning her. None compares to the latest one by Nicola Tallis. It is remarkable.

Having completed an MA in English history in the 1970’s, it is easy for me to recall nearly falling asleep reading dusty tomes by eminent historians. All were filled to the brim with facts, but many were “dull as dishwater.” I yawn just thinking about those long days in the library. Not so with Tallis. I stayed awake well past my bedtimes reading her lovely prose. Tallis tells history with vivid details, making the time-period with its villains and heroines come to life on each page. She interweaves documentation and logical speculation of what Margaret was experiencing with the political intrigue of the time. Tallis encourages readers to picture the powerful characters, the background, and subsequent segments of the War of the Roses with cinematic detail while including the precarious positions of Margaret throughout.

Recall for a moment what you were doing as a 13-year-old while Margaret, already a widow, was giving birth to the future Henry VII. “Edmund’s death left his pregnant wife alone and vulnerable. Her residence in Wales rendered her completely isolated from her family in England, with no one to turn to for support. she was also about to embark on the most perilous experiences of her life—with no guarantee of survival.” (58) Margaret did survive the perilous journey of childbirth, but the turmoil and strife did not end there.

Tallis helps readers understand the personalities of the players in this significant stage of English history. We are introduced to the Dukes of Lancaster, York, Somerset, and Buckingham. We are transported to castles like Pembroke, Fotheringhay, and Ludlow. Readers witness the horrors of the time, when women and children were no more than political pawns. Without regard for the importance of love and parenting, Margaret was separated from her child. Her grief must have been immense, but she persisted.

Not only did she persist she thrived. Even when separated geographically, Margaret never stopped communicating with her son. Their close relationship became a significant part of the first Tudor King Henry VII’s administration. She was practical in finance and political negotiation; she became a confident and advisor to His Majesty. From these chapters about Henry’s reign, readers come to understand the comprehensive meaning of title of the book, “Uncrowned Queen.”
Melanie-Préjean Sullivan, DMin is an MBIT Visiting Lecturer. A 2017 Cardinal Hume Scholar, Melanie also served as a Research Associate 2018-2021. She retired from campus ministry and now serves as an inter-spiritual chaplain in Louisville, Kentucky. Her 2022 book, An Apartment Next to the Angels: Interfaith Imagination, Discernment, Spiritual Legacy was dedicated to MBIT and is featured on her website, www.mysticperegrine.com.

Margaret understood the politics and economics of her arranged marriages. She survived all her husbands before obtaining control of her destiny. This destiny included the founding of colleges at Oxford and Cambridge. In the later, “On 1 May 1505, she was granted a license to expand and rename Christ’s College. In 1508, Pope Julius II issued a bull confirming its foundation.” (270) As we know, her presence in Cambridge did not end there. She also endowed St. John’s College. The “Lady Margaret” is remembered in both a lane near the Woolf Institute and the home of the Canonesses of St. Augustine which became the home of our Institute.

Tallis gives us a glimpse of the direct attention that Margaret paid to her foundation. Her visits to Cambridge were greeted “with almost royal ceremony” (271) and her patronage became what modern readers recognize as astute opportunities for public relations. She issued statutes to make it clear what she expected of her Cambridge scholars: to worship God, increase the faith, and cultivate the highest moral principles. She encouraged “gentleness” in the use of corporal punishment and expected her scholars to pray for her soul and those of her family (272). The Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology is part of that same legacy, living up to her expectations.

When I first learned how to write a book review, I was taught that objectivity demanded we find the flaws and write critically. In that sense, this is not a review. I found nothing wanting in this book. Tallis prefaces the story with an extremely helpful Dramatis Personae and a Timeline. Following her text that reads like the finest novel, Tallis provides almost 90 pages of references and a comprehensive index. It is a scholarly work, made accessible to the layperson by a fine writer. In my opinion, her work is the finest study of the mother of the Tudors that I’ve encountered. It is a must-read for those of us associated with the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology who carry her name as our model. I recommend it with enthusiasm.

Melanie-Préjean Sullivan, DMin is an MBIT Visiting Lecturer. A 2017 Cardinal Hume Scholar, Melanie also served as a Research Associate 2018-2021. She retired from campus ministry and now serves as an inter-spiritual chaplain in Louisville, Kentucky. Her 2022 book, An Apartment Next to the Angels: Interfaith Imagination, Discernment, Spiritual Legacy was dedicated to MBIT and is featured on her website, www.mysticperegrine.com.

**DIARY DATE**

Nicola Tallis will be giving a talk on her research for Uncrowned Queen, the Life of Margaret Beaufort, Mother to the Tudors and will be signing copies of her book in Spring 2023 as part of the Margaret Beaufort Institute’s Pearl Anniversary Calendar of Events. Details tbc.
SILENT POETRY

The reflection below is reprinted by kind permission of Erik Varden OSCO. It first appeared on the 9th February 2022 in his online newsletter, Coram Fratibus (www.coramfratibus.com).

Lockdown [...] largely kept people out of museums. In a luminous brief essay, Gabriele Finaldi, Director of the National Gallery, reflects on the experience of walking round eerily empty rooms listening to the paintings (see pp 6-7). He writes:

‘A classic early definition of painting is given by Plutarch: ‘Paining is silent poetry, and poetry is painting that speaks.’ He was quoting Simonides of Ceos, a Greek musician and lyric poet of the sixth century before Christ, who wrote verses rich in human empathy. Paintings may make no sound but they have a voice that is able to communicate emotion and meaning across time and space. That is one reason why painting is so important.’

A Cup of Water & a Rose by Francisco de Zurbaran, National Gallery of London. Reprinted here under the terms of the Creative Commons Licence. (See also: nationalgallery.org.uk for a 5-minute guided meditation on the image.)

A Letter from Jerusalem

Dear Margaret Beaufort Friends

Hello from the Holy city of Jerusalem though I’m actually writing from the Gaza Strip where I’m visiting projects implemented by Caritas Jerusalem (CJ). I’ve been working with CJ for more than seven years now and the Latin Patriarch, who is President of CJ, has just announced my successor as Secretary General who will take over on 1st September. As I look back to 30 years ago when I first heard the muted idea of an Institute for Catholic women in Cambridge, I reflect on how the Lord has led me through divine providence and religious obedience to serve in diverse ministries and situations that I could never have dreamed of when, at the age of 22, I made my first profession of religious vows as a Franciscan missionary sister.

In his Testament, St Francis of Assisi reflecting on his conversion wrote:

The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, thus to begin doing penance in this way: for when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. The Lord himself led me among them and I showed a heart full of mercy to them. When I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body. Afterwards I tarried a little and left the world.

I had no such seminal experience but what St Francis describes as bitterness being turned into sweetness has often resonated with me as I’ve been led to serve God’s people, mostly the poor and marginalised, in unexpected and transformative ways. I would like to share some of my journey with you on this Pearl Jubilee of the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology as I reach another crossroads in my life.

30 years ago about this time I had graduated from the University of Cambridge as a “mature student” where Professor Janet Soskice, one of my supervisors, had mentioned the idea of establishing an Institute for Catholic women within the Cambridge Theological Federation (CTF). From Cambridge I went to the London School of Economics to read for an MSc in Health Planning and Financing expecting to return to the Middle East in some capacity. With a background in nursing and midwifery and experience of working with Palestinian refugees in Jordan it seemed reasonable that my Congregational Leaders would re-assign me to that region. However, during the 30 years since then reasonableness has never been a dominant feature in the ways the Lord has led me through circumstances and religious obedience! I had completed the MSc, was in the final weeks of a counselling training course, and in communication with Palestinian leaders following the Oslo Accord while helping in a small retreat centre in London when Janet Soskice called me to ask if I had ever heard of the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology (MBIT). As a member of the original group that conceived the idea of a Catholic Member of the CTF Janet was given the task of finding a Catholic woman as a potential Founding Principal for the fledgling Institute where Ms Debbie Jones was working as its Administrator along with her other commitments. Janet explained that the Institute had a great vision, warm welcome and support from the Principals of the CTF, committed Board Members and Directors, but no money, no students and no premises! Would I consider the post of Founding Principal, Janet wondered, and would my religious congregation, the Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood, support me financially for a few years. I remember that I was peeling potatoes for lunch for a group of retreatants when Janet called. I don't remember much else except that I told Janet I was going back to the Middle East. Suffice to say that I accepted the challenge and the risk involved, and that my religious sisters supported me in every way during my years in Margaret Beaufort as well as later in other ministries including my current one to which I was called in an equally unexpected manner.

From its earliest days in Wesley House to the purchase of the beautiful Lady Margaret property in Grange Road and what, for me, was the seal of approval of the Catholic Church on the MBIT when Cardinal Murphy O’Connor celebrated Mass in Westminster Cathedral on the 10th anniversary of its foundation, the Institute has been blessed. Like the biblical image of a house built on rock, the vision, faith and courage of its early foundresses and founders inspired others so that 30 years later the MBIT is blessed with dedicated staff and students, Board Members and Directors, and benefactors some known to us, some anonymous, some deceased, many still with us, and I’m confident that with such a solid foundation and ongoing support the MBIT will continue to serve the People of God in ways appropriate for each generation.

When I left the MBIT in 2005 my Congregational Leader asked me to join our sisters in Zambia and I said yes. I needed a rest and I went to Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem for a short break. Towards the end of my time there the rector told me they had been looking for a vice-rector for a while and asked if I would consider the post. For a second time I told my Congregational Leaders about a request vastly different from what they had in mind. I had agreed to go to Zambia and I would honour my commitment so I left the decision to them. They decided that I should accept the Tantur post. I spent a privileged five years there that included welcoming people from all over the world to Tantur’s renewal programmes and research facilities, acting as Pilgrim Guide for these groups, lecturing on Desert Spirituality with a focus on the Desert Fathers and Mothers and accompanying groups to St Catherine’s Monastery on Mount Sinai as well as throughout the Holy Land. I visited the Gaza Strip on a few occasions with a small group of academics from Christian organisations who
supported the work of a local sister there. One of these visits was immediately after the 2008/9 war and I saw the devastation of war and blockade, the poverty and suffering of the people and I heard some of their stories. Mostly I sat with them in a silence that spoke louder than words, the memory of which is still with me. After Tantur I served my community in England and Scotland for a few years in a leadership role. It was a real privilege for me to spend time with my religious sisters many of whom had served as missionaries in Africa and the Far East and sisters from these regions then studying and serving in the UK.

During the 2014 war on Gaza as I watched the news in the safety of my religious community in the UK, and knowing the region, I longed to help in some way. In discernment with my Congregational Leader I decided to offer my service as a volunteer in Gaza. In October 2014 I visited Jerusalem and Gaza and met different organisations and groups that provide medical and humanitarian aid, as well as religious leaders in Jerusalem. Caritas Jerusalem, a humanitarian and development organisation that represents the socio-pastoral services of the Catholic Church in the Holy Land, was serving some of the poorest and most marginalised people in the Gaza Strip and on my return to Jerusalem, after meeting the General Director of Caritas and a senior person in the Latin Patriarchate, I decided to offer my service as a volunteer to Caritas. In early January 2015 I went to live in Gaza where I remained for three years taking responsibility for Caritas work there. Life was not easy but I loved the people and the work and I felt accepted and loved in return. In December 2017 the Latin Patriarch who is President of Caritas Jerusalem asked me to take over as its Secretary General.

From offering to help as a volunteer in Gaza in 2014 to being Secretary General of Caritas Jerusalem 2018 -2022 was beyond anything I ever imagined or desired. During those years I’ve seen the work of CJ develop and expand with highly professional and committed local staff and amazing support from donor organisations and individuals. Together we experienced many challenges including the Covid lockdown and its effect on the people of Jerusalem and Bethlehem who depend heavily on the pilgrim/tourist industry, war and its aftermath on the people of Gaza in 2021 and the lack of progress, even of interest, in reaching a just and lasting peace between Israel and Palestine.
We also experienced blessings too many to enumerate. To mention just a few: how our staff of committed Christians and Muslims, currently about 150, respect and support each other, work together as colleagues and embrace the mission of CJ to serve the poor and marginalised regardless of race or religion; the joy on the faces of a group of senior citizens on a recent day trip to Jericho helped and entertained by Caritas Youth, after months of isolation due to Covid; in Gaza the excitement of 900 poor families who, through a CJ project, were able to choose their own new warm winter clothes in a good store in Gaza city, something the children, even some of the adults, had never experienced before, and the relief on the face of a poor man, father of 5 children, when he received a small donation to buy a domestic gas cylinder and ring on which to cook their simple meals. The oldest of that family, a girl about 12 years of age who apparently is very intelligent, wants to be a dentist. Schooling above the age of 15 is not free in Gaza and as I looked at this intelligent child I wondered what her future will be and what will happen to her dreams. A bitter-sweet encounter, one of many such experiences with the people I’ve grown to love.

I will remain in the Holy Land for a while, after my successor takes over, to monitor projects funded through my religious congregation. I look forward to having time to read, to re-visit favourite places, to sit in silence by the Sea of Galilee or in a cave in the Shepherd’s field near Bethlehem, to have space and time and inner freedom, to do nothing for a while after an intense 8 years overlaid with emotions, thoughts and questions. Or is this a dream from which I could be awakened by another unexpected call?

Sr Bridget Tighe FMDM
Jerusalem
For the last 5 years I have worked as a lay university chaplain in Bath. When, 25 years ago, I started as the first of many MBIT Tripos students and the first non-Catholic student, I had no idea that I was learning things that would prepare me for something so far down the road. I am so grateful for the opportunity, the community, and the challenge that being a part of MBIT brought all those years ago.

My role in Bath is sponsored by the Methodist church and is envisioned to offer chaplaincy to students, not to institutions, which means that, like a detached youth worker, I spend a lot of time wherever I find students (rather than waiting for them to find me) and that providing food for hungry young adults is also part of my weekly routine.

You may have seen in recent months the sobering results of a study showing that almost a quarter of university students feel lonely most or all of the time. Of course, isolation can affect all age groups and demographics but it seems particularly acute among young adults at the moment, and this is despite there being hundreds of shared-interest groups and societies on most campuses, as well as countless on-line opportunities to connect. What are people looking for?

Out of the blue the other day, a student without a faith background asked me what it felt like to be part of a Christian community. She said, 'I assume that you all feel an individual connection to God and that you all have that in common with one another and that must be quite nice.'

I replied that it was, but that it wasn't the whole of the experience. What I tried to explain was that when we are at our best there is a sense of being part of a ‘found family’ more than a group of people with something in common. In that context of difference there is a sense of something more bubbling up amongst us that is hard to explain: creativity, deeper understanding, profound love, prayer. A sense of God with us.

Each year, the new university term provides the opportunity to chat to bright young adults arriving in Bath from all over the world. I’ve come to realise that most students arriving here have little or no experience of chaplaincy. In my encounters, most have never even heard the word before. I often feel a bit at a loss to explain what it is that we do, trying to find ways to communicate that make sense.
Recently my answer has been crystallised into two words: with you. The role of a chaplain is to be ‘with’ people. For Christians this is because of the incarnation and a profound sense of God being with us. In A Nazareth Manifesto,\(^1\) Sam Wells explores in depth the idea of God with us, and how we are called to be ‘with’ one another. We can so easily get caught in a pattern of doing things for other people that we forget that being with them is really what love is about, as the ministry of Jesus shows us in encounter after encounter.

As part of his exploration, Sam Wells puts forward a minority reading of the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10. One way of understanding Jesus’ story is to see it directed at Israel. It is Israel who has been robbed, beaten and is lying in a desperate state in the gutter. Who will help it? Will the priests and the teachers of the law? It is Jesus, as the despised Samaritan in the story, who offers practical assistance, healing and hope and takes Israel into the city, at considerable risk to himself, promising to return at a later time.

The way that we normally read this story and teach it to our children is about being a good neighbour and being kind to strangers, putting our faith into action, unlike the priest and the Levite. It is this reading that gives me a nudge every time I walk past someone begging, and plagues me the times I see myself ‘just walking by’.

Before coming across this reading, I don’t think I’d ever considered putting myself in the story as the person desperate and vulnerable, lying on the side of the road. That changes thing considerably. Although in global terms, some of us may be rich, we are also needy, longing for relationship, forgiveness, reconciliation, life.

* We would be happy to accept these things from the priest or the Levite. They have security. They have social esteem. They have resources. But the story is telling us those people cannot help us. They cannot give us what we so desperately need.\(^2\)

The person walking down the road to help us is the last person we would expect; and not someone we would ever have anything to do with. The answer to the question of ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ is not a moralistic story about avoiding hypocrisy, but instead a recognition that we are desperate. As Sam Wells writes,

* Open your eyes to the form Jesus takes in coming to save you. Swallow your pride and accept that your salvation comes from the ones you have despised. And let your heart be converted and your life be newly shaped to receiving the grace that can only come from them.\(^3\)

One of the privileges of sharing life with young adults is the potential for conversion that they offer to me with their questions, their recommendations, the way that they care for one another. Chaplaincy is very much about finding myself on the road to Jericho, and yes, trying to have the awareness and courage to offer help to those on the wayside, but also recognising that I am sometimes there, too.

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\(^1\) Samuel Wells. A Nazareth Manifesto (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2015).
\(^2\) Ibid. p. 93.
\(^3\) Ibid. p. 97.
How can this change the way that chaplaincy is offered? Though intensified by the pandemic, I’ve begun to realise how much time students spend off campus in university cities like Bath. Our own family lives in a ‘studenty’ neighbourhood where about half of the houses are student lets.

Although there is a chaplaincy centre on campus and places where more traditional forms of chaplaincy thrive, it has felt like the opportunities for being ‘with’ students where they live have been unexplored. I am beginning to explore what neighbourhood chaplaincy might look like. How might chaplains help to change local attitudes and culture so that students and long-term residents are able to be ‘with’ one another in meaningful ways?

With others, I’ve been involved in setting up an ecumenical Christian community house in Bath, where, each year, 8 students live and commit to pray together daily, share a meal once a week and remain connected to their own churches. Though it might seem like a small thing, for these students, the potential power of being ‘with’ one another for a year could change the course of their lives.

Each week we offer a meal and time of conversation in our home, which attracts a wide variety of students. Over the years, we have read something from the Bible or another book and had open discussions about a variety of topics. Initially, it may be the free food that is the draw, but I think people return because of the community that grows around the table and the comfort and challenge that journeying ‘with’ other people brings. It isn’t about me. It’s about being with one another.

It is my hunch that enabling people to be ‘with’ one another is what chaplaincy is all about. If what people are most looking for is the knowledge that they are not alone, it is in God’s ‘found family’ of real relationships, shared meals and honest conversation that they might have the courage to reach out and take Jesus’ hand. This isn’t a community that has necessarily chosen one another. It isn’t a shared-interest society (or assumed-ideology) group. It’s just people who know they’re desperate enough to be ‘with’ one another, hoping that they will discover that God is with them too.
On the Womb of Angels

I don’t know any angels, because I’ve never met one, or none went out of its way to meet me. Perhaps going out is something angels never do, and going in is the only way they go.

Angels must hide inside one another and need no outside, for all hide inside God who is invisible. If I ever do meet an angel I will already be inside it. And there I will see all other angels, as though peering through a series of concentric crystal spheres, so perfectly fitted they appear as one.

Photo: Br Paul Quenon OCSO
Angels begin inside one another, containing and contained. An unborn angel is one that is lost until another finds him in herself where he always was, but never knew himself to be until that other thought herself different.

So, an angel never leaves his womb: his womb-angel is no different from himself but merely not the same. Generator and generated know the other as self. Two mirrors face to face reflecting, in unending series, mirrors within mirrors.

An angel is a coincidence, a metaphysical coincidence. Only in another does it exist. In truth, an angel does not exist. No. an angel in-sists. Its being is to be not outward but inward

One angel decodes another, order within order unending, sameness within samenesses, a proliferation of implicit totalities.

I don’t know any angels, unless it could be, That is all I have ever known.

Brother Paul Quenon OCSO
The Pearl in the Oyster:
30 Years of the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology

January
Vespers followed by drinks reception to toast 2023 & the celebration of 30 years of the MBIT
Announcement of Essay Competition: Title: ‘Women’s Rights are Human Rights.’ (Madeleine Albright). Discuss with reference to the ecclesial and secular spheres.’

February
Talks & events centred around Lady Margaret Beaufort I:
Visit to the Old Library at St John’s College to view LMB’s illuminated and inscribed MS Book of Hours, her translation of the Imitation of Christ and Bishop St John Fisher’s funeral sermon for LMB’s requiem, as well as relevant material from the archives.

March
Deadline for Essay Competition entries at end of Lent Term.

April
Announcement of 1st, 2nd & 3rd prize–winning essays. Prizes to be funded via sponsorship
May

Talks & events centred around Lady Margaret Beaufort II:

Talk by Nicola Tallis (historian and author of well-received biography on LMB, *Uncrowned Queen*) on her research into the life of Lady Margaret Beaufort followed by book signing.

June

Gala fundraising concert in the Chapel at Fitzwilliam College by Hannah Roberts (cello) & Simon Parkin (piano) in aid of MBIT & the *Susanna Roberts Bursary Fund* (10th June), founded in honour of the late Susanna Roberts, alumna of both MBIT and Fitzwilliam College.

August

Walking Tour of Medieval Norwich culminating in a visit to Julian’s Shrine. *Leader to be confirmed.*

September

Talk on Giotto’s Florence, Assisi & Padua by Dr Donal Cooper (Senior Lecturer in Italian Renaissance Art, University of Cambridge)

*In Giotto’s Footsteps: A Life in Colour* (art historical (including workshop led by Dr Roberta Lapucci (Firenze), theological & gastronomic tour of Florence, Assisi & Padua).

Participation in the annual Cambridge Alumni Festival with a simple tea in the garden at MBIT for alumnae with membership of both MBIT and a Cambridge college.

October

Taizé evening with instrumental accompaniment. *Venue TBC.*

November

Thirty Years of Interfaith Dialogue among the Abrahamic Faiths: A Panel Discussion by Dr Edward Kessler, MBE (Woolf Institute), Rev. Dr Michael Barnes, SJ (MBIT) & Dr Tim Winter (Cambridge Muslim College). *All speakers confirmed. Venue: Faculty of Divinity.*

All Saints & All Souls: 30th Anniversary Mass for the Margaret Beaufort Institute

December

Pearl Anniversary Lecture by key speaker to be held at the Faculty of Divinity.

Gala Buffet. *Venue TBC.*

The year’s celebrations to end with Compline.

*Dates to be confirmed.*
OPEN CALL
The Susanna Roberts Bursary Fund supports

As a meaningful way of honouring her late mother, MBIT alumna Susanna Roberts, the internationally renowned cellist, Hannah Roberts has initiated a bursary in Susanna’s name. The Susanna Roberts Bursary Fund is intended to provide financial support for gifted young cellists who would not otherwise have the means to attend the Hannah Roberts Summer Cello Classes which are held annually in the beautiful setting of Malvern College (https://summercellocourse.co.uk/).

Founded in 2004 by Hannah, together with Leandro Silvera, the Master Classes are intended to provide a stimulating and intensive summer course for aspiring professional cellists. The course now attracts some of the most talented cellists, internationally and from the UK, with past attendees including cellists now enjoying successful careers at the top of the profession.
A donation of any amount would help towards enabling a financially constrained aspiring cellist to attend the Master Classes. As a guide, the following sums would provide:

- £100 can cover UK travel for a student to and from the course
- £200 can significantly enable a student to travel from abroad
- £300 would represent a half scholarship
- £600 would represent a full scholarship
- £800 could cover full fees and a contribution to travel

For further information on how to donate funds as a legacy to Susanna, please contact Hannah at hannah@hannahroberts.com.

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**DIARY DATE**

As part of the MBIT Pearl Anniversary Calendar of Events in 2023, there will be a joint fundraising concert given by Hannah Roberts (Cello) and Simon Parker (Piano) in aid of the Susanna Roberts Bursary Fund and the Margaret Beaufort Institute. The concert will be held in the Chapel of Fitzwilliam College on the 10th June 2023. Please watch for further announcements for further details on this and other Pearl Anniversary events.
'In Giotto’s Footsteps: a Life in Colour’ (11th -16th September 2023)

‘In Giotto’s Footsteps: a Life in Colour’ (11th-16th September 2023) - a tour open to current and past members of the Margaret Beaufort Institute of the key sites where the ground-breaking medieval Italian painter Giotto lived, worked and died. Flying into Pisa and returning via Venice, the nucleus of the tour will take place in Florence, Assisi and Padua. Here, there will be an opportunity to experience the theological, art historical and gastronomic elements that influenced Giotto’s astonishing output. The Florentine part of the tour includes visits to Santa Maria Novella (where Giotto’s monumental crucifix hangs in the nave) and Santa Croce’s Peruzzi and Bardi Chapels. There will also be a workshop led by art conservator, Dr Roberta Lapucci in her studio in the Florentine hills. There, Dr Lapucci will demonstrate how to grind the colours that made up Giotto’s palette from precious and semi-precious stones in preparation for the chance to create a small work of art of one’s own ‘in the style of Giotto’.

In Assisi, there will be time for a guided tour of this loveliest and unspoiled pilgrim site, for contemplation of Giotto’s cycle of frescoes depicting the life of St Francis in the Basilica of San Francesco and for enjoying a wine tasting lunch at Spello. The third and final visit in Giotto’s footsteps will take place in Padova, the highlight of which will be an evening visit to the Scrovegni Chapel with its series of frescoes depicting the lives of Joachim and Anna, the life of Our Lady, and the life of Christ, followed by a wine reception in the atmospheric cloister. The tour will conclude with a free day spent in Venice before an evening departure to the UK from Marco Polo. Intended as a journey in the footsteps of Giotto, an artist of unparalleled influence, the tour will combine an opportunity for seeing these works of art in their original religious context, and in the cities and towns that formed and influenced their creation.