

Walsingham

England's most famous pilgrim destination has its origin in the twilight of the undivided Church. In 1061 a godly, generous widow, Richeldis de Faverches, had a vision in which the Blessed Virgin asked her to rebuild the modest house in Nazareth where the Annunciation had taken place. It isn't immediately obvious why as England in the 11th century was full of shrines but if the house is seen as a symbol of the Virgin herself, "the living pavilion of the Glory", then Walsingham isn't a conventional holy place marking a site where something heavenly touched earth, but an icon of the union of heaven and earth when God became man. The Annunciation is the beginning and source of all other feasts, even the Resurrection, in the analogy of womb and tomb, looks back to the principal feast of the Incarnation. At Walsingham this mystery, hidden from the ages, is made tangible for the children of Mary and Eve, and it is possible to stand on holy ground and to see in the house, the gardens and the sacred spring the types and symbols of the mystery.

Walsingham was destroyed by Henry VIII but its place in the English religious imagination was strong enough to withstand iconoclasm, reformation and the indifference of the established church surviving in folklore and song into the early 20th century. In the 1920s the Anglo-Catholic movement was in its heyday, free from the slums and scandals of the 19th century and not yet enmeshed in the ecclesiological controversies of the latter half of the 20th. It was colourful, convinced and confident so much so that in 1921 when Fr Alfred Hope Patten was appointed to the Anglican parish it was inevitable that the shrine would be restored. By 1931, despite a bishop whose

sensibilities were less catholic than his own, Fr Patten had raised enough money to buy land to rebuild the Holy House. There had been some dispute over the exact location of the original shrine but when the men digging the foundations for Fr Patten discovered not only the remains of a mediaeval building but an ancient well still flowing it was believed to be a sign from the Blessed Virgin herself and the Shrine was rebuilt over the well. In 1931 in a grand, solemn procession which included Orthodox clergy (a rare ecumenical gesture in these days) the replica of the original statue Fr Patten had commissioned was translated to the new Shrine and the next day the Orthodox Liturgy was celebrated in Walsingham for the first time in almost a thousand years.

Seven years later in an event attended by Archbishop Nestor of Kamchatka and Archimandrite Nicholas (Gibbes) who had been tutor to the Russian imperial family, the richly ornamented church enclosing the Shrine was consecrated. The Divine Liturgy was served again this time on the eve of War which was to eventually see many Orthodox prisoners of war held at nearby Hempton. Largely due to the efforts of Archimandrite Nicholas a small Orthodox chapel was built upstairs in the Shrine Church for their use and consecrated at Pentecost 1944 by Archbishop Sava of the Polish Orthodox Church. The chapel, dedicated to the Mother of God of the Life-giving Spring, remains today and although tiny has a very dramatic location with a window overlooking the Shrine's high altar.

Something immediately apparent on visiting Walsingham and comparing it to Lourdes or Fátima or La Salette is that it is the Cinderella of Marian shrines. Walsingham has no drama, no secrets

and no debatable doctrine, all it has is a small house built twice with love to show in a homely, tangible way the magnificent news proclaimed by prophets and angels and ordinary men and women throughout the ages: Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a Son. It is this very simplicity that makes Walsingham feel Orthodox despite the grand focal points being Anglican and Catholic. The Theotokos does not pronounce, judge or command, nor does she appear to have her own agenda but as pious Virgin to pious widow she points to the Incarnation, to Christ, as she does in every icon, in every hymn, of the Orthodox Church and, what she said at the wedding in Cana, she says through Richeldis to us, "Whatsoever He saith unto you, do it."

The shrine gardens, designed by Tessa Hobbs, were laid out around the church in 2005 and are probably the most famous Mary garden in the world. Planted with blue irises, Madonna lilies, lavender and columbine it is a reflection of the belief that the Annunciation happened in a garden but, of course, Mary herself is the garden. She is the "garden enclosed" of the Song of Songs and throughout the bible the image of the garden represents the life we have lost and continually yearn for. Some early theologians, including St Maximos the Confessor, Theophanes the Confessor and Dionysius of Alexandria dated the creation of the world to the 25th of March, the Annunciation, the same day that the new heaven and the new earth would become possible because of the faith of the Theotokos. This is realised particularly in springtime in the Shrine gardens with snowdrops (Candlemass bells), primroses (Our Lady's frills), jonquils (Joseph's staff), campion (Mary's candle), and lily of the valley (Our Lady's tears). One year I found a little borage once known as "the virgin's face" and another a few sweet-scented violets or "lady's modesty".

*O Theotokos, thou art the rod whence
budded the noetic Flower
which Hath filled the whole world with
divine fragrance, even
Christ our God, the precious and
inexhaustible myrrh.*

Of course Walsingham has its share of the tawdry, of plastic rosaries, unlovely reproductions of the famous statue and Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI on coffee mugs. The tea shops are plain, the protestant objectors are missing the point and the High Mass is not for the liturgically erudite or those squeamish about cassock albs and unironed linen. Yet Walsingham is tiny and a few minutes walk a little north-west of the bustle leads to Station Road and the Orthodox Church of St Seraphim of Sarov, small and tranquil, adorned with icons by Father David and Brother Leon, and smelling faintly musty like all country churches through the incense and beeswax. Here there is a shortage of gold and scarlet and ochre and High Church Italianate mediaevalism, the only gold is on the icons from which the saints "look with almond eyes" on their humble surroundings. It used to be a railway waiting room and the old fireplace is still there behind the lectern on which the Akathist to St Seraphim is left open with a kindly note to visitors to say a little of it. This is the church consecrated by Archbishop Nikodem of the Russian Church in Exile in Paris when, in 1967, the Brotherhood of St Seraphim was formed to care for the Shrine chapel, paint icons and minister to the poor and homeless. In all of Walsingham, particularly on any organised pilgrimage day, it is the quietest place to pray or to sit and remember the faith of Richeldis who acted on her vision and of Father Patten who recreated it; of Charlotte Boyd, the laywoman who restored the Catholic shrine; of Archimandrite Nicholas and the prisoners of war and refugees who were the first

Orthodox to worship here for nearly a millennium and of Father David and Mother Serafima who kept the monastic cycle of services until 1993.

And to remember most of all that everything that the enemy accomplished in the garden of Eden; both Eve's foolishness and Adam's weakness, was undone in the spiritual garden of Nazareth; in the words of the Virgin, "be it unto me according to thy word", at which moment Christ became incarnate by the Holy Spirit taking His flesh from her whose flesh was the flesh of Eve and Adam.

It needed thousands of years but eventually everything that had become damaged and diseased came together in one place to be healed: the Virgin's womb. Walsingham has existed for a thousand years because of this and to stand in the Holy House and give thanks for it is the point and pinnacle of any pilgrimage.

*And the Word was made flesh
and dwelt among us.*

by Margaret Smythe

Report on the Vicariate Assembly meeting, London, 4 July 2009

Events have inevitably overtaken the business of this meeting, since at the time hardly anyone could have had an idea of Bishop Basil's wish to retire, or have known that this event would take place so soon afterwards.

The meeting itself therefore was on traditional lines according to the agenda, with a number of matters for report. Of these the longest, and inevitably the most contentious, was the outcome of the court case brought by representatives of the Diocese of Sourozh in which judgement had been given in favour of the Diocese in April. At the time of the Assembly meeting no final agreement had been reached on the matter of legal costs. The question of legal expenses also featured in the Treasurer's report.

There were however other and more positive matters for report. Bishop Basil's report included an account of the Presbytery meeting held in February at which Archimandrite Grigorios had been the guest speaker; the work of the advisory panel on ordinations, which was now in place; the two music days that had been held (in Doncaster and York); and the forthcoming (November 2009) Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh Foundation Conference. Presbytery also agreed that each parish should have an official stamp to endorse certificates of baptism or marriage.

Gillian Crow reported on the work of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI): some downsizing had been necessary, following a loss of subscriptions, but its work was continuing and CTBI had held a Lent course, organised in conjunction with BBC Radio 4. A report from Karin Greenhead on the 2009 Vicariate conference was presented, which had been successfully held in the same venue as 2008. The talks were felt to have been the right length, but there was still a wish for more practical themes. The next conference would be held on 28-31 May 2010.

Jessica Rose drew attention to the publication of the liturgical books and the fact that calendars could be ordered from the St John of Kronstadt Press. Earlier, it had been mentioned that individual parish choirs should familiarise themselves with the new standard versions of the liturgical music, to assist on occasions such as the Liturgy held during the Conference.

Dates of the next Assembly meetings: 28 November 2009, 19 June 2010.

Report by Alban (Graham Whitaker)