



Dear Pilgrims,

When I became Prior of Aylesford, I did not envisage that in my first edition of the Pilgrims' Newsletter I would have to give notice of the death of my predecessor.

Fr Francis Kemsley was born on 30th December 1954 to Frank and Ada. He was a local lad—hailing from nearby Chatham; he was to form a strong connection with Aylesford, having visited here from his childhood. The bond was perhaps made stronger by his mother's membership of the Third Order Carmelites and meeting Fr Malachy Lynch, who seemed to attract and inspire others with his own love for Aylesford.

Francis was educated at St Michael's Primary School and then St John Fisher Catholic Comprehensive. He left school with a keen desire to be of service to others and went to work at Leybourne Grange, where he cared for those with special needs. However, this was to be a short-lived experience, as he responded to the call to Carmel and joined the novitiate in September 1973 — a few months short of his 19th birthday. However, the time spent at the Grange instilled in him a great love and respect for those who are differently gifted.

Francis had a very capable novice master in Fr Piet Wijngaard, who had a reputation as a hard worker, both in the classroom and in the priory's extensive grounds. Francis would often recall that when there was still some daylight left, Piet would have the novices out in the grounds with him, ensuring that Aylesford was well-tended at all times. Francis gained a City & Guilds certificate in Horticultural Studies and he knew as much about the many trees and plants at Aylesford, as he did about its long history as a Carmelite friary and a private house. Indeed, history became a particular passion over the years and his memory for facts and figures was very impressive. Known as an ardent royalist, he could talk at length about some of the more obscure details of our own monarchy and the royal houses of Europe.

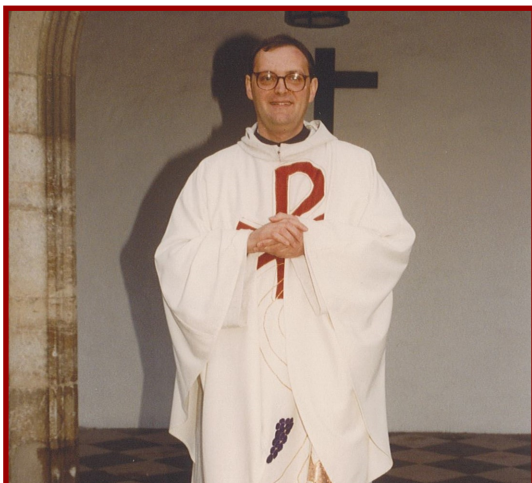
Francis studied for the priesthood at the Milltown Institute, Dublin, during which time he lived in Gort Muire, the retreat centre of the



Fr Francis Kemsley, O.Carm. (1954-2023)  
Prior of Aylesford (2005-2008; 2017-2023)



Solemn Profession of Vows (1980)



Ordination to the Priesthood (1992)

Irish Province of Carmelites. He made many life-long friends among the friars there. Returning to the UK he was assigned to the parish of English Martyrs, Walworth where he was ordained a deacon. I remember attending his ordination to the priesthood here at Aylesford on 5th December 1992. I was a novice at the time and neither of us could have predicted that over the three decades that followed, we would live and work together, on and off, for sixteen years. We got to know each other quite well.

Over the years Francis was to serve the Province as its formator; as parish priest in Faversham and Walworth; Prior of Aylesford; and sat on a number of the Province's committees and commissions. Throughout his Carmelite life he was looked on as friendly and approachable, and was seemingly at ease with people from any walk of life or background. He was spiritual director to a number of clergy and used to good effect his knowledge of Carmelite writings on prayer and spiritual development. He often said that his MA in Marian Studies had given him a good foundation for preaching on Mary's feast days and in giving retreats.

Sadly, Francis was to suffer from several major problems with his health, to which his response was always "I'm going to fight this." However, this last battle was beyond him and he slipped away peacefully in Maidstone Hospital on 8th October 2023, with our Province Nurse, Patricia Golledge at his side. May he rest in peace and rise in glory.

### **Carmelite News**

At the beginning of August we welcomed Br Michele Silvi, an Italian Carmelite, who came for a month to improve his English. A quiet man, he nonetheless established himself as a friendly presence.

Some of you will remember Fr Damian Cassidy and Fr Paul Jenkins, who served here as Prior and Sub Prior respectively (2014-2017). In more recent years they have been ministering in the Northeast—Damian in Stanley, Dipton & Byermoor and Paul in Berwick-upon-Tweed and Lindisfarne, in the Diocese of Hexham & Newcastle. On 14th September they moved into the parish of St John Vianney, West Denton, five miles from Newcastle's city centre, to form the Province's new 'urban friary'. Please pray for the success of this mission.

The last week of September saw members of the Institute of Our Lady of Mount Carmel at Aylesford for their annual retreat. This coincided with their electoral assembly, at which they chose a new leadership team, that will serve for the next four years. Known as 'The Leaven', it is a secular institute of women consecrated to God in the Carmelite spirit but living in the world to which they have a special mission. Some are single, others widowed, but each one brings a wealth of experience to the task of bringing Christ into the ordinary affairs of life, whether at home, in the workplace, and other social situations. I would ask you to pray for all the members of the Leaven, particularly the new leadership team members: Josephine Alexander (President), Helen O'Brien (Vice-President), Jo Jackson (Formator), Judy Ring (1st Councillor), and Elizabeth Nginya (2nd Councillor).



Jo Jackson, Helen O'Brien, Josephine Alexander, Fr Michael Cox, Judy Ring, Elizabeth Nginya



During the retreat a Mass was celebrated in memory of Ann McGee, one of their former Presidents. Afterwards memories were shared of a person who was well-loved and respected for her dedication to her family and her mission as a member of the Institute. May she rest in peace and rise in glory.

Aylesford holds a special place in the history of the Leaven, as it was here that it was founded by Joan and Winifred Swinger (biological sisters) and Elizabeth Young, under the direction of Fr Malachy. No sooner had the friars returned to Aylesford in 1949, than the Leaven had also been established, taking up residence in the Priory's distinctive gatehouse. Over the years the Leaven has reevaluated its mission according to the 'signs of times', so that it can continue to nurture seeds of the gospel wherever its members happen to be. For further information please contact [leavensi@yahoo.com](mailto:leavensi@yahoo.com).

### **Pilgrimages**

The Pilgrimage of the Sick took place on 13<sup>th</sup> August and was led by Archbishop Kevin McDonald, Archbishop-emeritus of Southwark. The season continued with the usual schedule of pilgrimages: Divine Mercy Apostolate, Caribbean, Tamils, Keralan, Polish Association, Goan, Filipino, and Polish Scouts and Guides. The Little Flower Pilgrimage was led by our own Fr Ged Walsh. This was the first time we have held this pilgrimage since the Society of the Little Flower closed. However, as our Prior General, Fr Míceál O'Neill, noted recently, Carmelites will always find ways to promote devotion to St Thérèse.



**Fr Ged Walsh with some of the many pilgrims who attended the Little Flower Pilgrimage**

From September onwards we usually have a number of visits each week from different primary and secondary schools from around Kent and, occasionally, even further afield. Most of them ask for either a welcome or a tour from a friar. These are opportunities to tell something of the Carmelite story and explain how Aylesford fits within that long and varied history. It is not uncommon for us to meet people in their seventies and eighties who tell us that their first visit to Aylesford was through a school pilgrimage. Some of them became regular visitors as a consequence; others had not been here again for many years but had cherished the memory of their pilgrimage. It is particularly gratifying when these older pilgrims have stories to share about the Carmelites from the earlier days in Aylesford's modern history, especially Fr Malachy Lynch, the first Prior.

### **Advent**

The season of Advent begins with an earnest prayer uttered by the Prophet Isaiah (63:16-17; 64:1,3-8). This heartfelt petition begins and ends addressing God as 'father'. Israel may be wayward children, who ignore their father's voice, but he cares for them, and will not abandon them to their self-destructive behaviour. He goes on to describe God as both 'redeemer' and 'potter' — two quite distinctive roles. As redeemer, God has the

power to changes the people of Israel's circumstances, by liberating them from the sin that keeps them at a distance from him. As a potter, he reshapes them - almost as if he were beginning Creation again and fashioning Adam afresh. Isaiah may have a rather bleak view of the people but his description of God is filled with faith and hope.

In the reading from Isaiah assigned to the Second Sunday of Advent (40:1-5,9-11), God is described by two more quite distinctive roles: He is a victorious warrior, who has triumphed over his foes and a shepherd who cares for his flock. In the first image we are presented with God's awesome power - the Prophet mindful, perhaps, of the many occasions when God had showed himself as the Lord of Hosts, and defeated those who invaded or enslaved Israel. However, Isaiah contrasts this with the second image which depicts God's great tenderness.

Our two sets of readings from the Prophet remind us that God cannot be reduced to one description only. This is a valuable lesson for us—we cannot put God 'in a box' and imagine we know all there is to know about him. Similarly, it is important to remember that this is also true of ourselves and the people around us: we are more than the sum of our actions; there is always more to others than simply what they have said and done. God spoke one Word and through him all things were made and when the Word became flesh, salvation was born. God will never cease to amaze us and perhaps we may be open to allowing other people to surprise us too, when they do us some unexpected kindness.

Thank you for your continued support of our ministry here at Aylesford. Please be reassured of the daily prayers of the Carmelite Community for all our supporters, their families, and friends.

May the peace and love of God reign in your hearts this Christmas.

*Michael Cox, O.Carm.*

Prior



**The Christmas Prayer Tree**

### *The Friars Christmas Prayer Tree*

If you would like a decoration placed on our Christmas Prayer Tree, please write your special intention or the name(s) of your loved one(s) on the back of the enclosed decoration and return it to The Friars with your donation. The Carmelite community will be praying throughout the Christmas Season for all those whose names are placed on the Prayer Tree.



### ***The Book of Friends***

*The Book of Friends is a special book currently displayed in the Carmelite Saints Chapel. For a minimum donation of £75 you may commemorate a loved one. It can be for a happy event such as a birthday or a wedding anniversary, as well as an anniversary of a death. You will be able to see your entry each year on the appropriate date. All those entered in the books will be remembered at special Masses to be offered each year in May and November. For further information or an entry form please write to the Prior's PA or email [cabbotson@thefriars.org.uk](mailto:cabbotson@thefriars.org.uk).*

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