



Dear Pilgrims,

I begin with the joyful news that the Carmelite Order has a new leader. During the General Chapter on 19th September 2025, Fr Desiderio García Martínez, O.Carm. was elected Prior General for a six-year term. Fr Desi lived in the British Province briefly in the late-2000s when he was the assistant novice director here at Aylesford. It is now his responsibility to watch over the common good of the whole Order, to ensure that it grows in fidelity to its identity, as well as discerning how to respond to the signs of the times. I hope you will join with all Carmelites in praying for Fr Desi in his new ministry.

The pilgrimage season continued through the summer with the Pilgrimage of the Sick, which took place on 10th August; it is one of our more important occasions to support the sick and those who care for them. We are pleased to host this pilgrimage in partnership with the Society of Our Lady of Lourdes. A week later we welcomed the Tamil community for its second annual pilgrimage of the season, which is always celebrated in honour of Our Lady of Madhu. The shrine in Madhu has been in existence since 1670 and is Sri Lanka's most important shrine. In a country where there was civil war for thirty years, the shrine helped to house thousands of displaced persons, thereby becoming dearly loved and respected across by so many different communities: Tamil and Sinhalese, Catholic and Protestant, Buddhist and Hindu. It reminds us that in a world so often divided, there can be things of common interest that can bind us together.

The season continued with pilgrimages by the Keralan, Brazilian, and Goan communities. The Little Flower Pilgrimage was well-supported with pilgrims from a number of prayer groups from London and from further afield. It is always encouraging to hear how so many people are inspired by the message of St Thérèse and share it with others. This year I was delighted to preside at Mass for the Polish Scouting Movement in Exile at their annual gathering in the absence of their chaplain. In my homily I noted that when scouts or guides work for a merit badge they are given a clear objective and their success can be easily measured. However, the objectives of the Christian life are not so easily measured. We are called by God to exercise kindness,



Fr Desiderio García Martínez
Prior General of the Carmelite Order



Our Lady of Madhu



Polish Scouts and Guides Pilgrimage
Fr Michael Cox with some of the
Scout Leaders and Senior Guiders



Cloister — Eastern Range

patience, forgiveness and generosity, but things do not always go to plan. The challenge is to keep on practising these virtues even if we feel they are not bearing fruit— we are seldom in a position to measure our own spiritual lives.

As many of you know, pilgrimage is not the only reason people visit Aylesford, we host a variety of retreats and courses throughout the year. We are particularly keen to support groups that focus on emotional healing and support, and spiritual growth. A number of AA groups meet here regularly and friars are available to listen to what can often be the stories of people facing many challenges in their lives with great courage. Recently, we hosted for the first time the Positive Faith Community retreat, which was run by Catholics for AIDS Prevention and Support (CAPS). The charity is under the patronage of Cardinal Timothy Radcliffe, OP. Whether people are Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu or have no religious affiliation CAPS offers peer support to help heal the wounds of HIV-stigma and to live with the challenges of living with HIV. The Director of CAPS wrote to me expressing gratitude for the welcome the retreatants had received. Then, on the weekend of the 10th-12th October, Fr Ged Walsh and Mrs Barbara Salamonczyk, ran the 'Grief in Loss, Hope in Christ' Retreat, which supports those suffering bereavement. At Aylesford, the 'Open Door' approach means that we take seriously Jesus' care for all, especially for those who suffer, so that all who come here may feel accepted and supported in a world that so often seems as if it does not care.

On the morning of 21st October I opened the door into the cloister to be met with a scene of devastation. A section of the plaster had come down, presumably in the night and was littering the old Jacobean tiling. My initial concern was that this might be part of a bigger problem, however, a brief investigation by the Estates Team suggested that this might



Thirteenth Century Pilgrims' Hall roof undergoing repairs

not be extensive and the plaster did not damage any of the wooden laths that form the structure of the ceiling. As this is a listed building we will need advice on how to repair the damage.

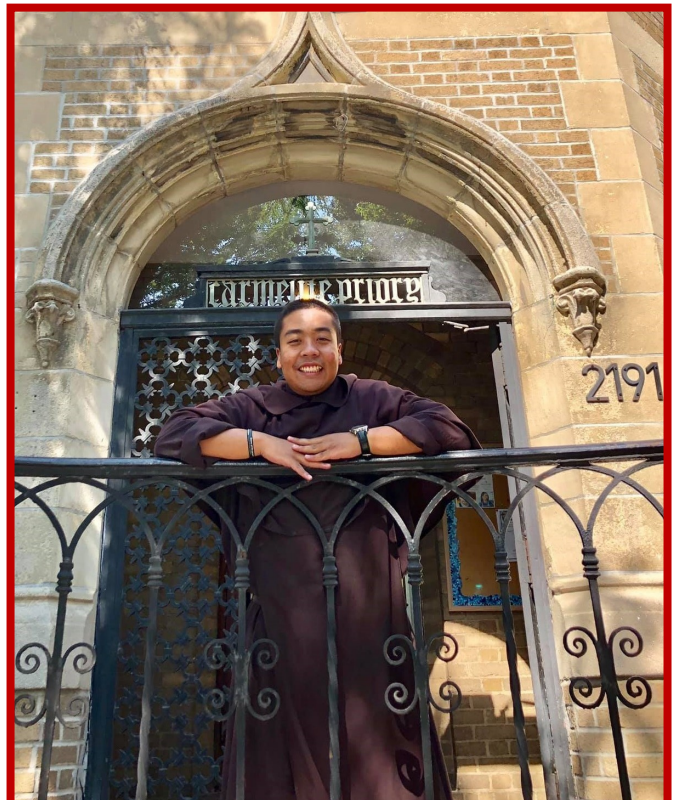
As I am sure many of you will remember, at the end of 2024 we retiled the riverside section of the Pilgrims' Hall roof—the tiles had become very thin and no longer providing adequate coverage. We are now moving ahead with the front. This is part of a much bigger effort at restoration, repair and maintenance across the whole site. A mammoth task, to be sure, but one to which we are committed, so that The Friars can continue to be a place of prayer and hospitality. We hope that you can support us in this endeavour.

The Filipino Pilgrimage is always the last in the season and this year was held on Sunday 12th October. On this occasion the chaplain blessed a new processional statue. Made in the Philippines, rather fittingly it is an image of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, and will serve as a reminder of the Community's connection to Aylesford. Two days later we had a much smaller Filipino pilgrimage in the person of Fr Von Erick Maria Sandoval. A Filipino by birth, he and his family emigrated to the USA, where Von joined the Carmelites of the St Elias Province. He is currently the Parochial Vicar of St Simon Stock & St Joseph Church in the Bronx. It is always good to meet other Carmelites and we were delighted that he felt enriched by his visit.

On 9th October Fr Ged and I went on a pilgrimage of our own when we visited Newman College, Littlemore, for the feast of St John Henry Newman. This is the place where our newest Doctor of the Church lived from 1842 until 1846. A converted stable block, he lived there with some friends who dedicated themselves to quiet study and prayer. It is also where Newman was Received into full communion with the Catholic Church by Bl. Dominic Barberi. The College is now in the care of the Spiritual Family 'The Work', which is dedicated to the love of the Sacred Heart and the love of the Church. We were blessed in having such a kind and knowledgeable guide in Sr Caroline Johnson, FSO, who gave us a detailed tour of the College. We were amazed at the number of personal effects from Newman's life that are preserved there.



Fr Bernie Abiera Luna MHM with pilgrimage organizer, Adela Caguimbal, with the Filipino community's new processional statue



Fr Von Erick Maria Sandoval, O.Carm.



Praying with St John Henry's Rosary
Newman International College Chapel



Sr Caroline Johnson, FSO and Fr Michael Cox
Newman International College Chapel

It was a special moment for us to pray with St John Henry's own rosary - something we had not anticipated before setting out on our pilgrimage. God certainly does have a way of surprising us.

I close now, as I always do, by offering you all our renewed thanks for your ongoing support. Please be reassured of our daily prayers for all our supporters, their families, and friends. May the peace and love of God reign in your hearts this Christmas.

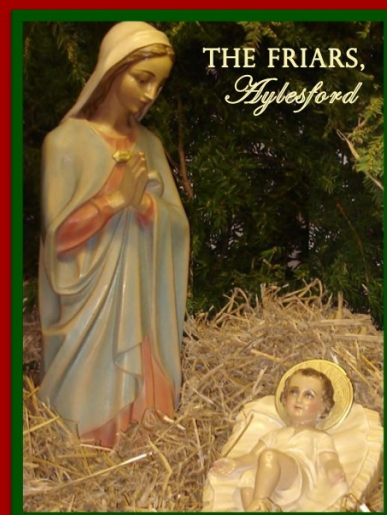
Michael Cox, O.Carm.

Prior of Aylesford



The Friars Christmas Prayer Tree

If you would like a 'Mother and Child' 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 tree, which is situated in the Choir Chapel.



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