



Dear Friends,

It is that 'in-between time'; Christmas seems a distant memory and Lent is yet to come. Today is the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, known to us as 'Candlemas' - a day when we celebrate the Child Jesus being brought to the Temple to be dedicated to God and to be acknowledged as the Light of the World by the prophets Simeon and Anna. The sky is grey, the ground is wet from several days of rain and there is the prospect of more to come. It would seem unwise to venture out for a candlelit procession. In many ways this is a fitting, if unwelcome, metaphor for our current social, economic, and politic climate. The world feels somewhat dismal - cold and uninviting. Nevertheless, it was into a world that had all the appearance of the death of hope that unseen and unexpected the Lord came among us, God from God, Light from Light: Hope is the darkness. It is with such thoughts very much in mind that I would like to share with you something from a recent conversation I had with the organizer of one of the AA recovery groups that use Aylesford for its weekend retreats. The most recent group brought together 72 people from a range of backgrounds, religious beliefs, and life experiences, and at different stages of recovery from alcohol and/or substance misuse. The leader, who has been organizing the retreats for the past eleven years, said that many of the participants have had spiritual experiences here that have helped to push forward their recovery. At the foundations of AA is surrender to 'a higher power' and so this is wonderful news, as people take a step out of darkness and into a brighter future, where life choices can be different.

Now I would like to take you back to November - equally dark and wet as February but also hope-filled. Although the pilgrimage season runs from Palm Sunday until mid-October, we welcome visitors throughout the whole year. Admittedly, group visits tend to be more modest in size than the summer pilgrimages. During term time we welcome a number of primary and secondary schools, and that gives us an opportunity to get a sense of the Church of tomorrow as it takes shape today. One group which stood out for me was a parish group of fifty children that came with the Missionaries of Charity. It was heartening to witness their attentiveness at Mass and their careful celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation. The day concluded with their enrolment in the brown scapular. It is always a joy for us to welcome more people into the Carmelite Family.

In contrast we also had a visit from a group of nine seminarians from Allen Hall Seminary, Chelsea, along with two of the priest-formators. The seminary is a community rooted in prayer, formation, and a deep appreciation of the Church's living tradition. To help these young men to prepare for priestly ministry, the formators seek to offer not only academic and spiritual formation but also opportunities to encounter the faith as it has been lived and handed on through history. It was with this in mind that they organized a walk from Aylesford to Rochester Cathedral. Two of the students were Discalced Carmelite friars, so it

fell to them to explain to the others something of the history of Carmel and Aylesford's significance. The group remarked on the atmosphere of reverence and peace at the shrine, and appreciated their time in prayer together. After Mass, Fr Richard, Fr Ged and I spent some time chatting with them before blessing them with the relic of St Simon Stock to usher them on their way to Rochester. They messaged me later to say how much they had enjoyed their time of fellowship together and valued the part Aylesford had played in their pilgrimage.

As the Christmas season draws closer we offer a number of ways for people to gather and celebrate friendship and faith. Carols by Candlelight has been running for many years and is a firm favourite. Held in mid-December, the chapel is always full and additional seating is also often required. It is led by the Medway Concert Brass Band and more recently has been held for two nights. The chapel was full on both nights—480 tickets having been sold. We feel confident that there is sufficient interest to extend this to a third night. The Christmas Fayre was held 29th-30th November; it was cold and wet on the Saturday but we still saw a reasonable turnout. Sunday was better, which certainly helped with the morale of our staff and team of volunteers. We had our usual range of stalls and Lennie the Land Train, which ferried children and their parents to Santa's Grotto. This year we had a minigolf course in the Great Courtyard and a Gingerbread Man who mingled with crowds to the delight of adults and children alike. I am delighted to say that after expenses we made £24,001.73, which is a welcome boost to our funds. As ever, we are sincerely grateful to all who supported the event either by an in-person visit or through the Newsletter and our dedicated staff and volunteers, without whom this would certainly not be possible.

A quite different experience is the Christmas lunches. The Pilgrims' Hall was suitably decorated with lights and a fire roars in the old fireplace. Although the space is a mix of thirteenth century ragstone walls and twentieth century timbers, the space has a wonderful atmosphere that seems to transport one back in time. I suppose in marketing parlance, it would be described as a selling point. Over 11 days an impressive 612 diners came from across Kent; some were work colleagues or social groups, sometimes extended families. I was pleasantly surprised when I saw the Pilgrims' Hall was re-dressed in its Christmas attire in mid-January for a group of friends who wanted something to look forward to in the New Year. They had the full Christmas dinner and even had crackers! It seemed kind, wise and sensitive that a group of senior citizens were focused on supporting each other at what can often be a difficult time of year for people who live alone. Saint Paul encourages us to build each other up and that is the daily task of the Christian. Sometimes we need to think creatively as to how we respond to changing and challenging circumstances.

We are mindful that we have a historic priory to maintain but as you know we do not focus all our attention on fundraising for our own needs. As many of you know, it is our custom here to send our crib offerings to the Scottish children's charity Mary's Meals. It is shocking to think that in a world of so many technological advancements we have not solved the problems of child poverty and hunger. We know, only too well, that this is due to political and economic issues that are perhaps not solved overnight but it is a tragedy that we must continue to speak out on. Thanks to the generosity of Aylesford's visitors and 'regulars' we were able to send Mary's Meals £2,200. This means that we have enabled the charity to support 114 children for the whole of the academic year, ensuring that they can receive a daily meal in a place of education. We hope to extend that support into the future. At the end of January I was pleased to be able to meet with Roy Peachey, the Supporter Engagement Officer (Kent, Surrey, Sussex, South London), who asked me to extend the thanks of Mary's Meals to all who have helped the charity over the past year.



Above: The Choir running the Gift Stall
Below: Father Christmas and Elves



*Above: Fr David Murray and Fr Ged Walsh
 with the refreshments tent volunteers*
*Below: Maggie Cascioli and Fr Michael Cox
 meet the Gingerbread Man*



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A Prayer to
 Our Lady of Aylesford
 O Blessed Virgin Mary,
 Mother and beauty of Carmel,
 Patroness of Aylesford,
 pray that God will grant us
 wisdom in times of confusion,
 health when we are
 sick or suffering,
 courage in times of difficulty,
 strength in our weakness,
 and protection from all harm.
 Through Christ, our Lord.
 Amen.

The Glorious Assumption by Michael Clark
 ©The Friars, Aylesford

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I am pleased to announce that in partnership with our liturgical suppliers CBC Distributors, we are now able to make available a 3-day candle bearing the beautiful image of the *Glorious Assumption of Our Lady* carved by Michael Clark. Candlelight creates its own special atmosphere and when accompanied by prayer it is a powerful symbol of faith and hope. It is my hope that you will use the prayer that has been composed to accompany our new candle to be reassured of Mary's gracious intercession in what can often feel like a cold, dark world. All it takes is one light to illuminate the darkness and one person to live by faith and love to enkindle hope. Absence is replaced by presence.

When we fast during Lent we are reminded of absence, of emptiness - a powerful metaphor which invites us to hunger for God, who is the only one can satisfy the deepest longings of the human person. At the end of the season we finally break that fast and feast with delight on the abundance of God's glory in the Easter Eucharist: Christ is Risen! And he offers us life to the full. Filled with his Spirit, love is never far away and that keeps the light of hope blazing with us.

Please be assured of the daily prayers of the Carmelite Community for all our supporters, their families, and friends. Be assured, that through the Holy Spirit, who binds us together in one, we are never truly alone.

May the peace and love of God reign in your hearts

Michael Cox, O.Carm.

Prior of Aylesford



**Fr Richard Copsey with Staff and Seminarians
from Allen Hall, Chelsea**

The Friars Aylesford
Summer Fayre
Saturday 11th July 2026
11.00am-4.30pm

 Mass 5.00pm

 £6 Adult
Under 12s free

Retreats at *The Friars*

GRIEF IN LOSS, HOPE IN CHRIST

Friday 20th —Sunday 22nd March

*Barbara Salamonezyk, Liz Taylor
& Ged Walsh, O.Carm.*

For anyone who has experienced a bereavement, whether recently or some time ago. We grieve, remember, hope and give thanks for our loved ones in the light of the Resurrection of Jesus.

Cost: **£280.00** single; **£250.00** shared per person

For more information or to book please call 01622 717272

or email reception@thefriars.org.uk

Easter Lily Dedications

Every year, the chapels at Aylesford will be adorned with lilies throughout the Easter season. Many of our friends like to dedicate one of the lilies for either themselves, a friend, a relative or a loved one who has died. The names of all the lily dedications are recorded and displayed in a book in the Carmelite Saints Chapel.

If you would like to do this, please fill in the name of the person for whom each lily is to be dedicated on the enclosed Intentions Leaflet. The suggested donation for each lily is £5. The lilies will be refreshed regularly and extra monies raised from the dedications will go towards the costs of floral displays for feast days throughout the year.



Christmas Draw Winners 2025

1st Prize: P. Marks—Maidstone

2nd Prize: W. Wynne—Aylesford

3rd Prize: S. Bairstow—Buckinghamshire

Congratulations

and thank you all for your kind support.

Summer Draw:

The Summer Draw is taking place at our Summer Fayre on Saturday 11th July.

We have enclosed draw tickets with the Spring Newsletter. Please support *The Friars* if you are able, and good luck!

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