

Christmas Greetings

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Dear Friends,

Firstly, we need to apologise for not having written another letter this past year. The previous one was last Christmas! For those of you who are regularly in touch with us, in one way or another, that's not too bad, but for those who are not, that can be more difficult, and we thank you especially for your faithful support throughout this past year, despite our lack of communication.

As before, the cause has been the excessive amount of work for the two of us running Abbotswick, which continues to see a constant increase in visitors coming for days of prayer and reflection, or just to be. Most weekends have been booked with residential groups or large day groups from different church denominations. At the same time, the number of people coming on their own for days of retreat is also increasing, and we are pleased to see more people joining us for morning and evening prayer, as well as for Eucharistic Adoration.

It has indeed proved to be a very fruitful year for the House of Prayer and the Community. Full of challenges and blessings and, we are happy to say, one that has brought growth and hope for the years to come. In a way, one could say that the winter is over and that spring is on its way, with the possible entry of three new members during 2009. As mentioned in our last letter, we have a relatively long pre-admissions discernment/formation programme and two of our eight candidates are in the process of applying to join COLW - Scott and Katie both hope to join in April. They are both great communicators so you will probably hear more often from us in the future.

Yes, we see your eyes popping out and your ears pricking up! Is this not just a community of sisters, we hear you ask? Well, it has always been our hope to have priests and brothers sharing the charism at some stage in the future – it was only a question of time and being open to God's work in our lives. Yes, we did think that the women's side of things would be more established before a men's branch would take off, but God had other plans – he knows how to surprise us! Last spring, two young men expressed serious interest in joining our community and after consulting with our advisors in the Vatican Offices in Rome and the bishop responsible for us, we were encouraged to enter into this discernment process, to decide which direction COLW was being asked to take in the future.

In June 2006, Ronald Rolheiser wrote an article entitled: '*Be in the world, but not of the world! Great advice, but not easy to follow*'. We posted the following extract from it on the 'Hopes for the Future' page of our own website, because it summed up so well our desires for COLW. We reproduce it here for the benefit of those who don't have access to the internet:

'We need that today. Someone needs to found a religious community with no rules because, for its members, none would be needed. Everyone would be mature enough to live out a poverty, chastity, and obedience that does not need to be externally prescribed and over-protected by symbols that set it apart. Attitudes and behaviour would be shaped from inside and would emanate from a commitment to a community, a vision, and a God that puts one under an obedience that is more demanding than any outside rule. The community would be mixed, men and women together, but strong enough to affectively love each other, remain chaste, and model friendship and family beyond sex and without denigrating sex. The community would be radically immersed in the world. Its members, sustained by prayer and community, would be free, like Jesus, of curfews and laws, to dine with everyone, saints and sinners alike, without sinning themselves. This community would give itself to the world, even as it resisted being of the world.'

Seems like an impossible dream, doesn't it! And yet God always calls us out of our comfort zones to make impossible dreams a reality. As part of our discernment process we have already visited, together with Scott (who we've known for over two years), the Spiritual Life Institute in Holy Hill, County Sligo a religious community of men and women, whom we thank for their recent hospitality and wise advice. After Easter, we will be visiting a similar community in Italy, the Fraternity of Bethany and we look forward to learning even more from them about the joys

and challenges of religious women and men working closely together for the coming of God's kingdom. Well, do keep us especially in your prayers as we follow the workings of the Spirit in our lives.

We had our annual retreat earlier this year – in February - and we are very grateful for the way Sr Patricia from Ware Carmel guided us in such a gentle and inspired way. The community there have always been particularly supportive of our venture and without the Carmelite Order as a whole, we don't know where we would be now. We have hosted two more very successful formation weekends this year, one in May led by Fr William Jarema from Colorado Springs, and another one in October, led by Br Loughlan Sofield from New York. These are now annual events that we will continue to hold here at Abbotswick, an outstanding venue in such close proximity to London... and Stansted. Yes, we've even had one or two retreatants from abroad, who came in by air!

In May, Sr Gabi was accompanied by a couple of our candidates for two weeks of formation work at the Mercy Center in Colorado Springs, and Sr Camilla also went there to do the Spiritual Director's Course, supplementing previous studies in Milan many moons ago. This was well timed, as the number of people approaching us for spiritual direction and vocational accompaniment is increasing noticeably. The Mercy Center, founded by Fr William Jarema, is also offering immense support to COLW, and it is their generous subsidies that make our travels possible – a luxury we will not so easily afford in the future, considering the current credit crunch. In September, Sr Gabi started her second year of an MA in Spirituality at Heythrop, really enjoying the challenges it is bringing, and wracking her brains as she sorts out the theme of her thesis for next year.

During the summer, two of Sr Gabi's closest friends, Gosia and Jola, spent two weeks at the House of Prayer, helping out whilst Sr Camilla was away studying. Then we all had the pleasure of her brother Andrzej's visit with his girlfriend Aldona at the beginning of September. Hence, her trip back home to Poland was cushioned with the visit of family and friends, and this means that her Polish is definitely improving! Sr Camilla had a good rest in Switzerland before welcoming Sandra, an old friend from Italy, for a week's stay at the end of August. Together, we all went to the Youth 2000 festival at Walsingham, and it was great to see how the importance of Walsingham was being brought across by a couple of speakers throughout the weekend. During our visit to Walsingham on the 24th September, we were invited to carry the statue of Our Lady during the opening procession at Mass – something we had last done some three years ago. That was an added grace for us this year.

In October, Sr Camilla was asked to address the National Conference of Vocation Directors in Ireland, and so had the chance to fly to Kerry and stay in a four star hotel in Kilarney – something she hasn't done for many years now. The food and company were fantastic, as was the scenery – although the weather didn't permit any real sightseeing opportunities. The conference itself was a learning experience for Sr Camilla, and she really benefited from the helpful feedback she received. Isn't it wonderful that we can always keep learning in life, as long as we are willing and open to reflect prayerfully on our experiences. So new friends have been made across the waters. We are grateful to Fr Muredach, one of the participants, for giving her, Sr Gabi and Scott a tour of the coast when they all returned to the West Coast a month later to visit the Holy Hill hermitages.

On 6th January, we will be celebrating the fifth anniversary of our foundation. What a wonderful landmark to get to! As it falls on a Tuesday, we will probably celebrate it with our volunteers who usually come on that day each week to help us out at Abbotswick. Without their constant love and support over the years we would never have managed to cope with the expanding workload at the House of Prayer. They are also just as excited as us by the forthcoming growth in the community. We will be re-launching the website that day, so as to reflect these developments, so we invite you to visit it at some stage in the New Year. A special THANK YOU is due here to Peter Wognum who is doing the revamp free of charge as a gift to COLW. As the community begins to grow we will have to think about some serious fundraising, so if you have any ideas or are able to help in any way, or know someone who would be interested in making a donation, please invite them to become a friend of COLW. We are also hoping to find other options of places to go to when hermiting – a cottage, a small self-contained flat in a quiet place but near to a church or convent where there's daily Mass. Any helpful contacts with information about such a place would be much appreciated.

Can we ask you also to keep Sr Camilla's mother, Magdalena, especially in your prayers in the coming months. She has entered the end stage of renal failure and has been referred for palliative care, so Sr Camilla will be visiting home more often. Thank you for that. Please pray also for Scott, Katie and Theresa as they prepare to enter the community, as well as all our other candidates, so that they may be faithful to the graces God is giving them. His word is always 'a light for our path', if only we would listen. That is also our prayer for you. Fidelity in the little things enables us to say 'yes' in the bigger things in life. Karl Rahner said it so aptly: 'To be Christian involves effective listening to the one who calls and growth in freedom for the expected response'. The promotion of this in all people is what our charism is all about. Please God we will be faithful to it as it unfolds in the years to come.

*We wish you all the best for
A holy and blessed Christmas and a happy New Year
Sr Camilla COLW and Sr Gabriela COLW*