

# WORD FROM THE CLOISTERS

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## Twenty years on the trail of Mary of Egypt

BONNIE THURSTON has always been drawn to those who have pitched their tent outside church walls – early Christian widows, John the Baptist, Celtic saints, Charles de Foucauld, Thomas Merton – the “desert people”, as she calls them. The former professor (“I ran screaming from academe” she tells us) is something of a wandering scholar herself. She “trolled university and especially monastic libraries in three continents for 20 years ferreting out material” for her latest book, a thrilling hybrid of poetry and scholarship, *Saint Mary of Egypt: A Modern Verse Life and Interpretation* (published by Cistercian Publications in association with Liturgical Press).

Thurston tells us she “met” Mary of Egypt many years ago when she read *Harlots of the Desert* by Benedicta Ward SLG (“a beautiful writer and absolutely the best on early monasticism and early English Christian history”). Mary’s is an often-told story in church literature and she is particularly venerated by Orthodox Christians. John Tavener composed an opera devoted to her, with Mother Thekla providing the libretto.



Thurston began her research at St George’s College in Jerusalem in 1993, but she eventually found herself writing at the Bodleian Library in Oxford, “which has everything”. She arranged digs in the SLG convent in Parker Street, outside the enclosure. As she was being taken up the stairs to her second floor flat, the guest sister said, “Oh, by the way, Sr Benedicta Ward is your downstairs neighbour.” Thurston told us, “I nearly fainted and tumbled down the stairs.”

Sr Benedicta was presented with the first copy off the press. Dr Thurston will give the final talk in our first Tablet Lent programme on 14 April. The series of webinars opens on

2 March with a reflection by Laurentia Johns OSB. For full details go to [www.thetablet.co.uk/events](http://www.thetablet.co.uk/events).

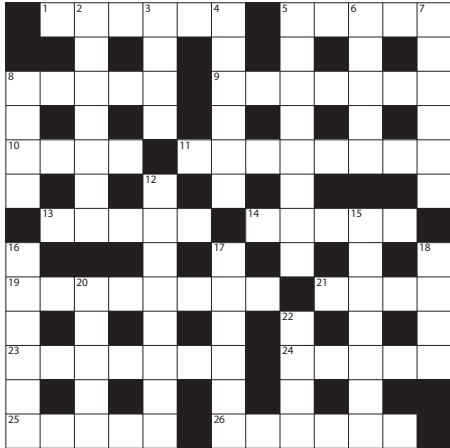
THE PASSIONISTS have a new publishing arm, Lab/ora Press, and in April it will publish a reissue of *Passion for the Inner City* by the legendary Passionist priest Austin Smith.

It comes just over 50 years since Fr Smith’s arrival in Toxteth on detached operations from his monastery: one piccolo of the new wine fermented by Vatican II. When he moved into a tiny flat in what became known – much to Smith’s irritation – as the “inner city” he was accompanied by a confrere, Fr Nicholas Postlethwaite. Looking back on the unlikely adventure a decade after Smith’s death, Postlethwaite thinks the impassioned Passionist was ahead of the curve.

Shedding theological baggage, letting go of clerical power, rediscovering God amidst the “wonderful messiness” of life: Austin’s ideas carry a papal air these days. But back in 1971, the Passionists had a dilemma: how to spend their first evening? The *sensus fidelium* was unequivocal. The two errant priests took a trip to the cinema. Shepherds who smell of the sheep, as the present Pope says. Fr Austin put it slightly differently. “For God’s sake,” he was heard to mutter “simply learn to be human!”

## PUZZLES

### PRIZE CROSSWORD No. 794 Alanus



#### Across

- 1 (& 26 Across): Long-standing Act preventing illegal imprisonment (6,6)
- 5 Italian city Portuguese-born St Anthony associated with (5)
- 8 Morarji -----, peace activist and India’s prime minister in the 1970s (5)
- 9 Dave -----, jazz legend and convert (7)
- 10 St Winefride’s ----, ancient continuous shrine on North Wales coast (4)
- 11 Earlier member of one’s family (8)
- 13 The darkest part of a shadow (5)
- 14 Deceptive schemes to con people out of money or possessions (5)
- 19 Relating to fertile material deposited by river (8)
- 21 Popular Irish girl’s name of Celtic origin,

- as with sister of King Brian Boru (4)
  - 23 High priest son of Zadok, faithful to King David during 2 Down’s revolt (7)
  - 24 Anglicised poet whose works include “Ash Wednesday” and “Journey of the Magi” (5)
  - 25 Wilbert -----, Anglican minister and writer, gave us *Thomas the Tank Engine* (5)
  - 26 See 1 Across
- Down**
- 2 Son of King David, rebelled against his father and died in battle (7)
  - 3 Romantic name for the isle of Ireland (4)
  - 4 Second-century martyr saint with basilica shrine on site of her house in Rome (6)
  - 5 One of the four cardinal virtues (8)
  - 6 World’s first synthetic laundry detergent, produced by Procter & Gamble (5)

- 7 Capital city in the Middle East but with strong European connections (6)
- 8 (& 18 Down): Ethnic name for Welsh national saint, feast day 1 March (4,4)
- 12 Liturgical book used by clergy and faithful for praying the daily canonical hours (8)
- 15 Bohuslav -----, twentieth-century Czech composer, wrote the *Field Mass* and *The Miracle of Our Lady* (7)
- 16 Caribbean capital city with cathedral that once held Christopher Columbus’ remains (6)
- 17 Honoré de -----, French author and lifelong Catholic (6)
- 18 See 8 Down
- 20 Title (not aristocratic) of landowner of large Scottish estate (5)
- 22 King of the stage (4)

Please send your answers to: Crossword Competition 26 February The Tablet, 1 King Street Cloisters, Clifton Walk, London W6 0GY. Email: [thetablet@thetablet.co.uk](mailto:thetablet@thetablet.co.uk), with Crossword in the subject field. Please include your full name, telephone number and email address, and a mailing address. Three books – on Augustine, Christianity and Thomas Aquinas – from the OUP’s Very Short Introduction series will go to the sender of the first correct entry drawn at random.

■ We are processing entries but there may be a delay in notifying winners and sending out prizes. Please keep entering.

### SUDOKU | Beginner

		4						
1			3	7				6
8	2				1			7
								9
				1	2			
	6	8					2	4
	5						1	6
		9						
			9	4		3		

Each 3x3 box, each row and each column must contain all the numbers 1 to 9.

#### Solution to the 5 February puzzle

8	5	6	1	3	7	9	4	2
3	1	4	8	9	2	5	6	7
2	7	9	4	5	6	1	3	8
9	8	7	3	1	4	2	5	6
4	6	5	2	7	9	3	8	1
1	2	3	5	6	8	4	7	9
7	3	1	6	2	5	8	9	4
5	9	8	7	4	1	6	2	3
6	4	2	9	8	3	7	1	5

#### Solution to the 5 February crossword No. 791

**Across:** 1 Tenth; 4 Salaam; 9 Rampage; 10 Frost; 11 Syon; 12 Assassin; 14 Peacock; 19 Yorkists; 20 Ipsos; 22 Facto; 23 Of Avila; 24 The End; 25 Taxes. **Down:** 1 Teresa; 2 Nimrod; 3 Hoar; 5 Affiance; 6 A Horse; 7 Mutiny; 8 Persecution; 13 Demijohn; 15 Fyfof; 16 Creche; 17 Sphinx; 18 Romans; 21 Wart.

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