

THE STRANGE MARIOLATRY OF
BROTHER BERNARD

P. Julian

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of Brother Bernard

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For Nev
Stella Maris
and
Our Lady of Good Counsel

In dangers, in doubts, in difficulties, think of Mary, call upon Mary. Let not her name depart from your lips or leave your heart... with her for guide you shall never go astray; while invoking her, you shall never lose heart; so long as she is in your mind, you are safe from deception; while she holds your hand, you cannot fall; under her protection you have nothing to fear; if she walks before you, you shall not grow weary; if she shows you favor, you shall reach the goal.

- ST. BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

The world is a vast forest with which she merges at will.
She will arrange and rearrange the world until all is in order.

- VERA DI CAMPLI SAN VITO

1.

There are books whose impact exceeds the ambition of their authors, and even books whose reach passes any apparent readership or acclaim. The work of any author - even the least self-aggrandising - is simply a way for the Logos to express itself more perfectly, one further path by which the Word projects itself into the world.

2.

If you are reading this story you probably already know who Brother Bernard is, and that he only ever published a single book: a slender and austere volume entitled Psalms to Her.

3.

The book is a collection of stark and beautiful love poetry devoted to someone that Brother Bernard simply refers to as Her. In a short preface he explains that the work represents a simple extension of his devotion as a Marist Brother towards the Blessed Virgin, although that claim becomes less and less convincing the more you study his writing. The poems are expressive whilst remaining intensely linear, borrowing from the poetic language of the Old Testament: the dense interiority of the Psalms, the devotion and longing of Song of Songs.

4.

I first chanced across the book in a public library in Singapore during my student travels. I was desperate to escape the tropical heat and so I took refuge in the cool building for a few hours in the middle of the day.

5.

To say that the book made an impression on me would be an understatement. I was hooked from the moment I started reading the preface, and I ended up copying whole swathes of it into the travel diary I was keeping. Although I never held a copy of the book again I still catch fragments and phrases from it sneaking into my own work, especially my more speculative pieces on religion and religious renewal.

6.

My failure to secure another copy of Brother Bernard's book was not for any want of trying. Despite regular searches through libraries and book catalogues and more recently the internet I never managed to get my hands on a copy again, and I would predict the same outcome for anyone else engaged in the same search.

7.

Psalms to Her is frankly devotional but one surprising part of it is an addendum or appendix where Brother Bernard sets out what he refers to as Her Names of Power. The names are all standard devotional names approved by the Catholic Church but when you read them collected together with such intense devotional poetry they leave a very definite impression.

8.

I copied some of Her Names directly into my notebook.

Ark of the Covenant.

Mystical Rose.

Gate of the Dawn.

Stella Maris.

Regina Mundi.

Our Lady of Good Counsel.

Salus Populi Romani (Salvation of the People of Rome).

9.

The book contained some reflections on these Names of Power and there was a whole poem with a title originating in the Greek tradition: Container of the Uncontainable. Again that title is completely unobjectionable from a doctrinal point of view but I understand that it was this poem that initially sparked the Church's concern.

Plate 1: Francis' Travel Notebook

PSALM TO HER

I am waiting for you
Here at the end of all things
I wait keenly but I know that there is time
For you to hear me
For you to come

I know that you've suffered
In cities and by seas
In the dank press of commerce
Whose bitter fruit so nearly breaks your heart

You are the One who was foretold
You Our Lady of the Straitest Gate
You the True Tower of the world to come
You the fallen Queen who will rise instantly
to save us

10.

So I found a beautiful book and I copied out whole swathes of it and it has come to instruct my own work in a strange and persistent way. That would have been the end of it had it not been for an unexpected event that occurred just over a week ago. A small envelope arrived in the post with an inscription on the front that said: *card only*. The back of the envelope bore a hard wax seal stamped with a device identifying some religious order although I was not familiar with heraldry.

11.

I sliced open the envelope to find a small votive card illustrated in the Mexican folk style. It showed a smiling older man wearing a medallion of Our Lady holding what looked like a gardening tool. Unlike most saintly depictions this man was wearing hardy working clothes, although he did bear the usual halo of radiant light around his head. The inscription on the front of the card read *Hermano Bernardo* and the reverse of the card bore a neat inscription in fountain pen that said *San Remo* followed by a landline number. There was nothing else in the envelope.

12.

At a decent hour the next morning I called the number and although the phone rang out a couple of times I did eventually find myself speaking with Brother Bernard. He sounded very friendly even before I introduced myself although he did seem a bit surprised when I told him my name. He asked me whether I had a confirmation name and I told him that I did and from that point on he insisted on calling me Francis. As strange as that was it seemed like a gesture of respect, that he would call me by the name that I had chosen for myself and not some other name that had been imposed on me.

13.

Brother Bernard already seemed to know me quite well. He spoke as though I had rung to set up an interview that would result in some kind of article about him and I was happy to go along with that. He said he was happy for me to write something quite detailed and quite personal, although he thought there might be limited interest in the way his life had turned out.

14.

The only thing that Bernard was stern about was the secrecy of his location. He asked me not to disclose anything about that apart from the place name *San Remo*. He said this name might resonate with a few people brought up in the local Marist tradition and he was happy for some of them to find their way to him. Otherwise he wished to be left alone and undisturbed.

15.

I arrived at San Remo in the middle of a sunny afternoon. A light sea breeze was pushing up off the ocean as I got out of my car. I wandered around and called out a few times but Brother Bernard was nowhere to be seen. I sat down on a wooden bench at the edge of a flourishing netted vegetable garden, its deep green foliage contrasting with the yellowing couch grass that struggled in the sandy soil around it.

Plate 2: San Remo



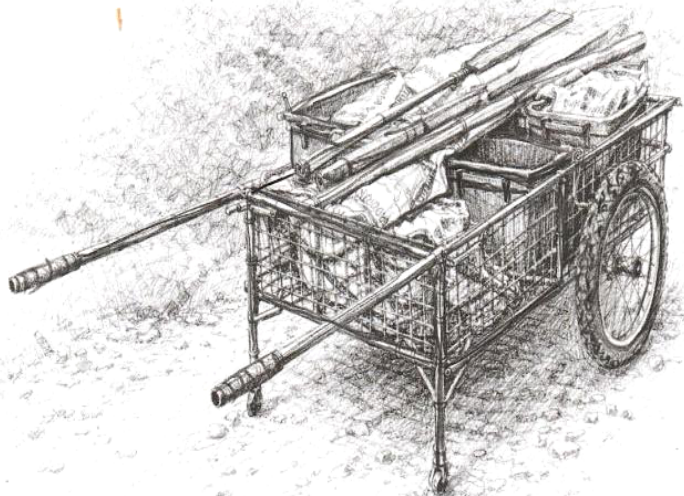
16.

I sat on that bench for about half an hour before Brother Bernard appeared, pulling some kind of improvised rickshaw trolley up the rutted driveway that led down towards the sea.

The rickshaw had been welded up out of old bicycle tubes, some of which still bore the decals of the original bicycle brand. It was formed around a large steel mesh basket and Bernard pulled it by two hollow steel poles that slid loosely past his hips. There was cork handlebar wrap where he gripped the poles and the wheels were matching heavy-gauge bicycle wheels that looked as though they had come off a mountain bike.

The basket was heaped up with all kinds of gear. Wooden oars and folded sails along with a roughed-up heavy-duty plastic tub my father would have called a bait box. The box contained a number of fish of different species that Brother Bernard had caught that day. If I told you that the whole contraption had a distinctive merged smell of fish and fish oil and saltwater and steel and that it smelt like something from my childhood there would be many of you who would know exactly the smell I was describing.

Plate 3: Improvised Rickshaw Trolley



Brother Bernard reached the concrete pad in front of the main shed. He eased the rickshaw down and stretched himself in a few directions while emitting audible groans. When he saw me walking towards him his face lifted up into the most tremendous smile, as though he were welcoming back some long lost brother who had been given up for dead. It felt as though he knew me in the instant that he saw me, as though he had known exactly how I would look even though we had never met.

I half-expected Bernard to rush over and grab my hand or perhaps even embrace me but he retained that ingrained restraint against physical contact that Catholic clergy tend to have. Instead he kept smiling that terrific smile as I wandered over towards him, thanking me for coming and asking whether I was tired or hungry or would like a cup of tea. He asked for a few minutes so that he could deal with the fish he had caught. I asked him whether he needed any help and he smiled broadly and said: thank you Francis but I will manage. I have done this once or twice before you see.

21.

We were soon sitting at the Laminex table in the sprawling kitchen drinking strong tea. Once our conversation began it remained more or less continuous for the rest of my stay. We talked into the early evening as the tea gave way to a glass of cold cask wine and some light dinner. Bernard crumbed a bit of the fish he had just caught and pan-fried it in butter, dishing it up with steamed greens over a bed of rice while apologising for the simplicity of the meal. I don't eat much else these days, he said. I told him that the food was delicious and that the fish tasted so much better than frozen and he said with a smile: fresh fish is the one thing I can promise you, Francis.

22.

After dinner we shifted to the stately leather chairs beside the fireplace in the common room, and after Brother Bernard set the fire going we settled in to talk. He asked me a few questions but the thing he was most intrigued by was how I had managed to come across his work. I told him that it was a long story and he said: in front of this fire, Francis. On this blustery night? Time is the only thing that is not in short supply.

Plate 4: Armchairs by the Fire



I told Brother Bernard how I had discovered his book so many years ago as I sought refuge in that library from the hot Singapore sun. I described how immediately his work affected me and the strange way that influence had persisted. I told him that his lines seemed like the lines of some compelling song that once heard could never be unheard. I also described how curious it was that a single reading over a single afternoon could have such a lasting impact, both from my careful transcriptions and the many parts I left untranscribed.

Bernard told me about it from his side. He had been circling around what became Psalms to Her for many years, scribbling a few things down and having regular daydreams about the shape of the work to come. Right down to the typeface, the spare typography of its cover. He was kept busy by his teaching work but there eventually came a few days of unstructured retreat in a centre up towards the Snowy Mountains. One quiet morning that merged into early afternoon he began to write and over the rest of the retreat he ended up setting the whole thing down.

It was not difficult, Brother Bernard said. The entire book just fell out of me without any need for corrections or edits. Even the basic order of the poems. To this day I cannot believe how little time and effort it really took me to set the book down, although the deep preparations for it had no doubt been building within me for decades.

Once Bernard returned to his teaching post he used his evenings to type up a few proofs for circulation and comment. This process provided him with genuine pleasure and consolation: to read the material back over again, to feel himself deeply instructed by the words he had set down. He showed the proofs to a number of his fellow brothers and he also sent one to his local superior and they were all warmly supportive of the work.

27.

They love Her, Bernard said. They are single men with a sole legitimate feminine devotion and even other clergy can't imagine how deep their love goes. And because of that love they could not see anything wrong with the work. They understood that the voice giving praise to Her was not necessarily my voice, although subjective echoes were bound to creep in.

One of my brothers heard the voice of a youthful Jesus in the work, praising the Mother who had brought him into the world. One very pious brother heard them as love songs between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. I found these to be beautiful and encouraging reflections on the work and even now I think back to those happy days when my book was celebrated amongst my brothers and not thought to be objectionable at all.

The book eventually found its way to one of the small Catholic presses in the middle of the city. They have since disappeared but in their heyday they were always searching for new material, especially humane and accessible devotional material that might sell a few copies. It was not difficult to get the proofs in front of them and because the book was so slender - and as poetry so abstract - no thought was given to the doctrinal consequences of it.

The objections began slowly but they eventually arrived from every quarter. The first one that reached me came from a well-heeled parishioner living deep in conservative grazing country. His objection was quite strident and although I could see that the man's parish priest felt less offended he did support the man's views. And once that complaint came in more people read the work in the light of the objections and it became quite clear how serious my predicament was.

31.

Do you believe it was Mariolatry? I asked. Is that what you intended?

Bernard paused for a long time before he answered the question, and when he began to speak his answer proceeded through a number of similar pauses. He spoke hesitantly and he backtracked a couple of times as though the words coming out of his mouth were perilous things, as though they might have severe consequences if he were to utter them rashly. Like some kind of incantation or spell which by some careless utterance might turn towards being a curse.

The whole concept of Mariolatry is obscure to me, he said. How it differs from proper devotion to Our Lady. I know the general point they make but trying to draw that line in terms of your own personal devotion? This is something that a true devotee cannot do.

34.

Feeling is not like thought, Francis. Feeling surges out of us in so many directions at once and there is never any threshold where it passes from being one thing to another. All things in the felt domain remain completely analogue and integrated with one other, although I had to accept that my devotion had been pushing hard in a hazardous direction.

In the end I could not corral or constrain my work because it was the devotion itself that called me towards it. Do you understand? Some kind of future transcendental truth pulling me onwards and upwards, without any need for me to strain or strive in that direction. And for better or worse that transcendence dictated my eventual response when the whole thing got too hot for my Provincial Superior to ignore.

I was just a lowly brother, Francis. No more powerful than you find me now. I could have saved myself and my vocation by simply accepting the correction that was offered to me and electing to withdraw the work. I could have bent my head to whatever mild admonition would be meted out to me. And I considered it, Francis, I really did.

The difficulty was that I believed in the work. And much more importantly: I believed then as I believe now that the work had been directly revealed to me by the Blessed Virgin. Even the disapproval of the most senior men within the Church hierarchy could not alter that fact. I was very frank with my spiritual director and I was referred to various kinds of help including the diocesan psychiatrist but no part of that process disturbed my faith in what I had written, or perhaps I should say: what I had written about. I saw my work as absolutely correct in its devotional position and I still see it that way.

I tried to explain this to the men who were tasked with helping me and although I have no doubt they were well motivated they had no help to give. They could not understand how I could maintain faith in something that the whole weight of my order and the broader Church were telling me was a perversion and a lie. I learned a lot about the Error of Mariolatry and how it differs from True Marian Devotion but the more that I learned the less I knew where I should draw the line.

In the end all I could do was thank them for their efforts and then respectfully re-state my genuine conscientious position: that what I had written was profoundly devotionally true. I also told them - and this may have been the death-knell - that devotion like mine might help Mother Church find a new direction and perhaps even reclaim the souls it had alienated through its recent abuses. I suppose these things were the kicker, Francis, even though I meant no disrespect. When I said these things and others in the same vein the decision against me was sealed.

40.

I don't like to complain about it Francis but the consequences of my obstinacy were far more profound than I had imagined. This is perhaps the main reason why clergy backpedal so readily from their objectionable views: just how unmotherly Mother Church becomes when she decides you are surplus to requirements.

41.

I had been living and teaching at the seminary. Teaching English literature, ironically enough. I had all of my meals and my bedding and my laundry completely taken care of. All of this is a genuine species of luxury although we profess to vows of poverty.

The poverty really came when I found myself standing alone on an empty street outside the seminary. I had a small suitcase filled with ill-fitting clothes and \$50 in my pocket. I had no phone, no bank account, nowhere to live. My family helped a little but they are devout Catholics and it was a matter of tremendous shame that I had been expelled from the order, especially over such a public matter. They took me in and gave me food and shelter but they made it very clear that I was not welcome to stay for long.

The real world is a terrible shock for ex-clergy. Brothers never want for food, they always have shelter, their transport is provided if they need to go anywhere. To experience actual deprivation in the harshness of the outside world is something altogether different. It taught me that the most important thing in this world is to be considerate of those in need, to be generous and hospitable and attend to their basic needs. If you don't remember any other thing that I tell you Francis please remember: be kind, be hospitable, give alms to anyone who asks.

The poverty was a shock but as I have come to learn: there is no comfort in luxuries extended by one hand when they would rob you with another. Seeking dominion over your soul, although I suppose that's an inflated way to put it. I was lost and destitute for a very long time but I had put myself under Her loving protection and that is something She has in inexhaustible supply. Even my life here, Francis. It is sometimes challenging and I suppose also quite tenuous but have no doubt: once you are under the power of Her protection there is nothing that can harm you again.

Our conversation was long and detailed and it spooled out deep into the night. Brother Bernard had many things to tell me but despite his longing for company he did not dominate the conversation. He asked me with great interest about my life and the writing I was doing and whenever I gave an answer he bent his head and listened. I told him that things were currently a bit of a mess for me and he nodded and said: that's not such a bad thing, Francis. Especially at your age. I told him about one or two failed relationships that had knocked me around a bit and he listened surprisingly intently for a man who had little experience of this kind of love.

At one point I told Bernard that I had something to confess to him and he looked at me quizzically and said: well you better go ahead and do it. I said that if he read my writing he would recognise parts of it and when he asked me to explain I said: you would recognise some of the words. He smiled at me and said: is this a confession of plagiarism, Francis? I told him that I was not a deliberate copyist but that fragments of Psalms - a phrase or two, a sentence at the most - had a strange habit of turning up in my work.

47.

Sometimes the phrases are verbatim, I said. But more often they appear slightly changed. Shifted just a little into something similar but also genuinely different. I hesitated a bit before I said: perhaps they become more beautiful too. I'm sorry if that sounds puffed up but I am just telling you the way I see it.

Bernard began to smile as I confessed these things to him. You know this is a feature of Psalms, he said. It is set down in one of the poems, the one addressed to those readers who will truly intercalate the Word. To those Alchemists of Her Infinite Perfectibility. He sat quietly for a moment as his face grew grave again, before he started to nod intently and say: this would be why they arranged for you to come. They saw the phrases set amongst your work, they wanted you to learn why.

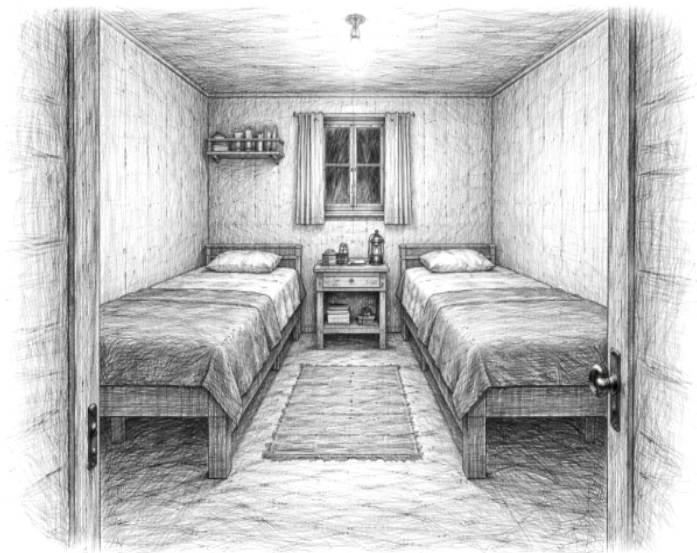
Bernard asked me about my family and how I liked living in the city and whether I had ever thought of moving somewhere quieter. I told him that it was on my list and he said: good. Human beings are sensitive creatures, some of us more than others. Your environment will always speak to you but in so many environments today there is nothing but garbled speech. Bright lights and billboards full of junk signifiers and junk messaging, trying to disorient you into buying worthless things.

I can safely say Francis that if you want to write - and I mean really write, not just for reward - you need to find a place where all the junk speech dies down. A place with trees and rivers, a place by the ocean although that is only for seafaring souls. Somewhere that country still knows how to communicate, where you will not be unseated if country speaks to you. If I told people some of the things that I have talked to this coastline about, if I described my endless conversation with the ocean. I don't think I would remain a free man for very long.

Brother Bernard sat up as he noticed the time. He apologised for his rudeness and he stood and said: come on Francis. Let's show you to your room. I grabbed my bag and we headed down a broken concrete path towards a pod of three compact fibro cabins. He pushed open the door of the middle cabin and reached around the door frame for the light switch. A single unfurnished globe lit the cabin up.

There were two single beds pushed against each side of the cabin without much space between them. The room was clean if a bit spartan and I had to smile when Bernard said: this is the most luxurious room I can offer. I asked him what time he needed me in the morning and he said: are you coming fishing? I said sure and after he warned me that he heads out early he said: get yourself some sleep. I'll let you know when breakfast is ready.

Plate 5: The Most Luxurious Cabin



53.

I had come down to San Remo with a very specific intention. I wanted to interview Brother Bernard about his book, and perhaps get some pointers on my own writing in return. As it turned out the major part of my time there - like the major part of Brother Bernard's life - was completely taken up with fishing.

In the morning I woke to Bernard banging on my door at some ungodly hour. I dragged myself out of bed and walked through the pre-dawn gloom to the kitchen where he sat waiting for me. He had made breakfast: a few pieces of white toast on a toast rack, some butter and jam scooped out onto small platters. He had also brewed up some good strong coffee in hot milk which quickly chased off my grogginess, and when we had eaten he smiled at me and said: ready as you'll ever be?

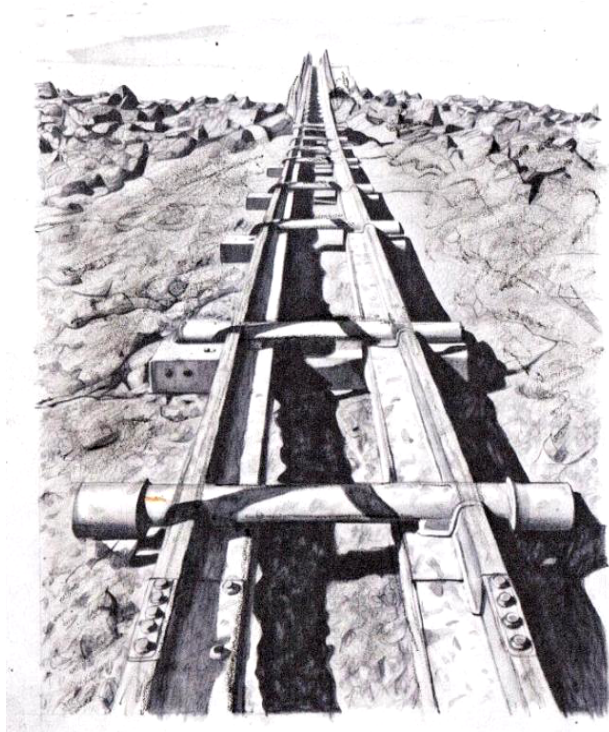
Brother Bernard had already packed up his strange rickshaw trolley with sails and coils of rope and his battered poly bait box. I didn't see any rods or reels but that mystery would be solved as soon as we got down to the water. He set off at a brisk canter despite his heavy cargo and I jogged behind him down the rutted track, across the coastal road and down through the coastal heath towards where his boat lay on an improvised slipway. A rickety arrangement of twin galvanised rails sloping down across the rocks towards the beach, built to raise the boat up away from the heavy seas when the winter winds stormed through.

The boat was a broad-beamed clinker dinghy painted in blue and white. It had a corroded brass nameplate on its transom bearing the name Wimoweh. The port of origin was painted in black letters on the timber beneath: Capel Sound. I asked Bernard what these names meant but he just shrugged and said that the previous owner must have named the boat, or perhaps some owner before that.

Plate 6: Clinker Dinghy Wimoweh



Plate 7: Improvised Slipway



Bernard manoeuvred the craft along the slipway by means of a hand winch that he operated by working the handle backwards and forwards. By reversing the gear he was able to back the boat down along the galvanised rails, over the concrete pylons that held the railing up above the surrounding rocks. When the boat descended to a certain point he knocked a pin out of a bracket in the bow and the craft slid smoothly down a few metres before splashing gently into the water. I worried that the boat would get away from us but I noticed Bernard holding a length of orange nylon rope attached to the bow, to haul the boat back before it could drift too far.

The dinghy was fitted with a pair of steel rowlocks and two long timber oars. It also had a stubby wooden mast that fitted into a reinforced socket towards the bow. Brother Bernard raised the mast and then hoisted up an ancient-looking gaff rig that gave the boat its sail power.

Bernard told me that the boat had come to him with a much more powerful rig with wire stays. He had found the bigger sail uncontrollable in gusty weather and the stays got in the way of his rowing and fishing. This powered-down rig was much more useful to him and in any event the oars remained his chief means of propulsion. Rowing kept him in strong shape despite his advancing age, and although I offered to take a turn at the oars a couple of times he emphatically declined my offers. Smiling at me and saying: surely you would not deny a bit of fitness to an old man!

To watch Brother Bernard fish is to watch a man exercise his cardinal vocation. A calling he would respond to in his dreams if he lived nowhere near the sea. On windy days when the wind is offshore he stays close to the coast, trolling for salmon or sometimes casting amongst the rocks for reef species. He punts around sheltered coves with sandy bottoms half-covered with seagrass, picking up whiting and sometimes the odd flathead that went past size. There was a steel ruler set into the side of one of the painted bench seats and along its line you could see different scratch marks and erasures indicating how the legal lengths of fish had ebbed and flowed. With the freshest marks showing how long certain species of whiting must be, the allowable lengths of snapper.

On calmer days Bernard was always keen to head out further off the coast, trimming his sail to get as much speed as possible out of the light winds. Sometimes he would furl the sail completely and row his sturdy craft out towards the calm depths of the ocean. On these days he would make great headway out into the endless blue water that stood between him and the huge glaciated continent of Antarctica, rumoured to have harboured ancient civilisations before there were any later civilisations to speculate upon them.

I sailed out with Brother Bernard on two consecutive mornings, starting very early when the sea was like glass. On the first day after thirty minutes of still weather he pointed to tiny ripples that were being whipped up across the mirrored sea, saying: you must watch for these when they come, Francis. If you are even a little ways out you must head back in. The ripples were so slight that I was sceptical of his concern but within fifteen minutes the wind was gusting past 20 knots and I felt quite glad for Bernard's understanding of these waters.

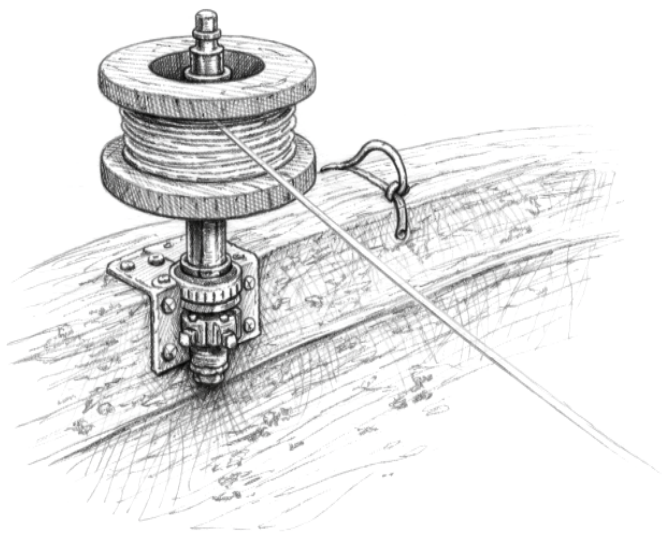
On that first morning we mostly puttered around close to shore. I was amazed to see Bernard pull up fish after fish using nothing but a monofilament hand line wound around a worn wooden spool. He gave me one to use and he baited it for me but I failed to get a bite. It's not your fault, he said. You just haven't acquired the right touch. You have to feel it, he said. You have to make that bait look inviting and the only way to do it is by feel.

As the wind got up we furled the sail and rowed around to the most protected of the nearby coves. With lighter tackle and lighter lines we baited up with sandworm and even I managed to catch a couple of good sized whiting. Bernard could tell by sight which species had size limits and he flipped the undersized ones back expertly. He threw out a couple of heavier lines for flathead and after a quarter of an hour he pulled in a lovely fat fish that would keep him fed for days. Flathead is the best eating fish there is, he said. And this one is an absolute beauty.

The next day was calm and hot and once we launched Bernard began to pull hard on the oars towards the deeper water. The sea turned dark blue and then almost black and when we got to the right spot he dropped his anchor overboard and told me we were looking for snapper. He had brought some pilchards and some frozen squid and over the next two hours I watched him pull in a couple of nice pinkies and one beautiful big red.

Bernard wore a pliable leather square over two fingers of his left hand so that he could play the line. He had a couple of strange metal spindles welded up from bicycle hubs secured to the gunwales, and once the line was cast he would push the spool of his hand line down over them. This worked as a primitive drag system and he would let the mechanism work quite hard on the hooked fish before he lifted the wooden spool and began to play the line by hand.

Plate 8: Spindle for Hand Reel



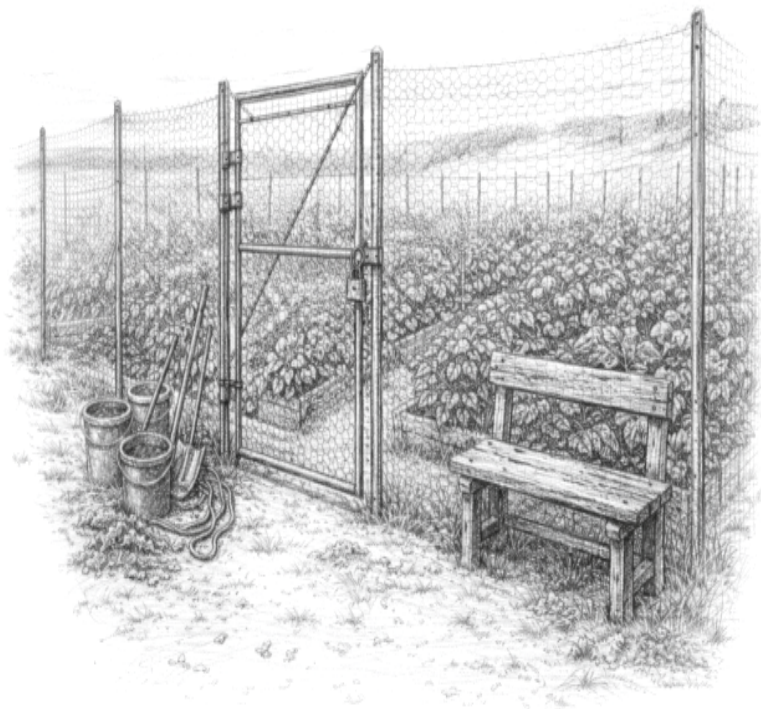
Each time Bernard took up the fight against these fish he looked strangely like he was dancing. Standing up in the bow to pull in the fish hand over hand, letting the line spool out a little if the fish wanted to run. His feet flashed as he led the fish this way and that, and although he asked me whether I wanted to try landing one I did not feel that I was any kind of match for that fight. Without dropping his attention from the line he said: there is some humility that is well-placed, Francis. In this matter you are probably quite correct.

These days catch and release is compulsory for internet fishermen but Brother Bernard was not out to make videos. When he had caught a decent feed he would ferry his catch all the way back to San Remo, cleaning and filleting the fish at a purpose-built outdoor sink. He would crumb and fry the fillets in butter and olive oil while he sautéed greens and vegetables out of his garden, stowing a few night's worth of packed dinners for himself in the freezer. The rest he would box up in clean take-away tubs and deliver free of charge to various local people in need. These were older widows and a few single men who had scarce money, whose nutrition depended on the food containers he would regularly deliver to them.

I have not really spoken about Bernard's garden. I lack the expertise to do that properly but it might be worth mentioning that the trimmings from the fish did not go to waste. The bony material would be buried in one or other of his raised beds, slowly releasing nutrient to the garden over the next couple of years. Bernard also made what he called fish tea by soaking the rest in plastic buckets of water for use as a liquid fertiliser. He also dragged back other fertiliser in his rickshaw trolley: kelp and other kinds of seaweed and chalky aragonite cuttlebones. All of these were washed and chopped up and fed into the garden.

The deep green foliage of the garden looked completely out of place in the harsh country where it was growing, its lurid deep green in a locale where the soil was generally parched and nutrient-poor. Bernard told me that sandy soil is the best kind of soil if you have a lot of inputs, and now he had built it up this soil was obviously paradise for plants. The nets kept parrots and other hungry birds out of the garden and away from the gleaming tomatoes and vegetables that grew amongst the potatoes and the basil. The whole thing seemed rich and strange: how it was the sea that sustained this garden in a way that most people could never imagine.

Plate 9: The Garden at San Remo



I hadn't come to San Remo to write fishing or gardening reviews but our days of talk on the open water did feel like a kind of preparation. A gateway through which we needed to pass in order to approach more serious things. I didn't feel like Bernard was testing me or anything like that. It felt more like he was testing himself: whether he could trust his restraint if he showed me the things he was thinking of showing me. The one time I tried to discuss his work while we were on the water he laughed and said Francis it is imperative that you realise: I am a fisherman first.

Bernard was so reticent that I began to wonder whether we would ever come around to a proper discussion of his work. I was careful not to push the point and so we discussed almost every other conceivable subject until suddenly after dinner on our third evening Brother Bernard looked at me and said: Francis I think it might be time.

He pulled out a dusty bottle of port from behind some cookbooks on the kitchen shelves and poured us both a decent glass. To fortify ourselves, he said. It was not exactly Vin Santo but it was close enough and it hit me in a warming and soothing way. Bernard went quiet as we sipped at our glasses but as soon as we were finished he slapped his thigh and stood up and said: well Francis this is what you came for. You have been very patient to wait so long without pestering me. So if you will come this way? I will show you what you came for and perhaps even a bit more than that.

I followed Brother Bernard out of the main buildings and up the slope past my cabin. We skirted the food gardens and the workshop and the shed. I had guessed that the back of the shed was the boundary of the property but we pressed on past an ancient cypress windbreak to a timber cabin that was pushed right up against the fenceline.

The cabin turned out to be Bernard's writing room. It contained a desk that was plain but solidly made, and a rough old public service chair with a heavy timber frame and green linoleum cushioning on the seat and backrest. On the desk was a tidy green Olivetti typewriter, one of those portable models which today would be considered anything but portable.

Plate 10: Brother Bernard's Writing Desk



76.

The only object that was not strictly utilitarian was a framed picture shaped like a small grotto hanging on one wall, with a couple of candle stubs on a small ledge in front of it. It bore a stark image of a woman that I can still see clearly if I close my eyes.

The woman is young, perhaps not even twenty years old. She sits in the shade of a walled courtyard with her back against a sturdy tree, bowing her head as though she were in dire need of rest. She is clad in a well-made suit of armour, finely detailed all the way to the articulations around her shoulders and her elbows. She wears heavy leather gauntlets and boots and the only part of her that is not protected is her head and her bent nape. Her golden hair is pulled back over her ears and cascades down against her armoured shoulders.

There is a small nameplate painted directly on to the canvas which tells us her name, and as I read it out loud - The Maid of Orléans - my memory is jogged and Bernard nods at me and says: you know who she is. What they did to her. I said that I knew some of the story although my knowledge was a little sketchy and he said: if you know even some of the details Francis you know quite enough.

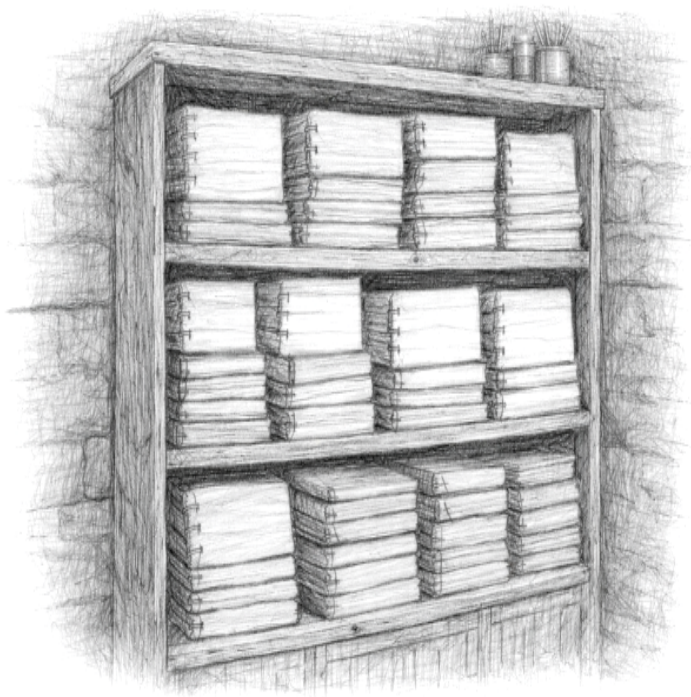
Plate 11: The Maid of Orléans



On the desk to the left of the typewriter there was a neat stack of what looked like A4 paper. It was a bit heavier than ordinary paper, as though it might have been cut out of a visual diary. The upper page was covered in loosely-spaced typewritten text and from what I could see the pages beneath were similar. There was also a stack of clean A4 paper to the right hand side of the machine.

At the far end of the room there stood a tall wooden bookcase containing neatly stacked bundles of similar paper. There might have been something like 40 or 50 bundles and there could well have been more. The ones I could see each bore a handwritten title page on the front inscribed in a thick calligraphic hand. The spine side of each bundle was stitched with olive-coloured thread that I guessed was fishing braid. The needlework on each one looked secure if a little crudely done.

Plate 12: The Codices



81.

I looked back towards Bernard in a growing state of alarm and I asked: are they what I think they are? Bernard smiled and nodded and said: it depends on how deranged your imagination is Francis. But yes, I believe that's exactly what they are.

82.

But there must be fifty manuscripts here, I said.

Something like that, he said.

Although I prefer the name Codex.

And this one on the desk? I asked.

In progress, he said.

I always have one in progress.

As the scale of this discovery hit me I felt completely at a loss. I wanted to express my astonishment and my admiration and of course my eagerness to read every Codex immediately but I was paralysed by the thought that none of this work had made it into the public domain. Brother Bernard waited patiently as I grasped for the right words before saying: I know some of the things you would ask me, Francis. And they are fair questions to ask. But you don't need to worry yourself. There is not a single Codex here that has gone to waste.

84.

I finally found the words to say: Bernard you must publish. For God's sake, if these works are anything like your previous work... I mean unless they are no good, are they no good? Are you just freewheeling? Have you lost your gift?

They're good, he said. They could hardly be otherwise. She comes to us through our feeling for beauty, Francis. You would have been taught that. She's not going to waste Her time, or string me along with some rubbish.

86.

I knew he meant to reassure me but this speech just stoked my distress. For the love of God, Bernard. For all of our sakes. You have to get these out there. They can't just be allowed to moulder on your shelves. One way or another you have to get them moving.

87.

They move, he said.

What? I said.

They move.

When I am out fishing, mostly.

Sometimes on my food rounds.

They move and that's when I know.

It is time to bind them up.

Then I stack them there.

And I move on to the next one.

88.

Brother Bernard eases back against the desk and as he slips into one of his descriptive reveries I don't dare interrupt him.

I sit down most evenings, he said. Any evening when I don't have the pleasure of company. Sometimes I sit here well into the night if that is what She requires. Whenever words come to me I type them out and on most nights I do receive a few lines. Any work that comes I just set down there on the desk to my left, and once the pile reaches a certain size it never takes very long.

One evening I will come in and notice the pile has been moved. They never shift them around a great deal, just enough to let me know they have been seen. That's how I know, Francis. I know that particular Codex is finished and I can take it as read. I stitch it up with braid and I place it on the shelf with the others. That is the way my work is transmitted.

91.

You're serious, I said.

Absolutely, he said.

You know what the rumours are.

You know how powerful is Mother Church.

92.

Brother Bernard, I said.

Just for the moment.

Just pretend I don't know.

What are you trying to tell me?

He raised his eyebrows in the same gentle reproach as the Marists at my school often used. Francis you know very well what I am saying. You have heard the rumours about the Church moving towards greater recognition of Her and you should not forget that I am much more sewn into these things than you are. When you take vows like the vows I took, when you publish the way I did. People will reach out to you with notice of things you might be better off not to know.

Mother Church has prodigious reach and history. She has endured for the last two thousand years and that makes Her completely unique amongst institutions on this planet. She takes many and varied forms both in public and in secret and you would be astonished to know how many people are sympathetic to Her cause. Celibate men who do not have the consolation of women in their lives, whose devotion to Her is much more intense than the hierarchy likes to admit. Even profane people will tell you that She moves in mysterious ways and this does not even scratch the surface of Her mysteries.

95.

My head was spinning. I told Bernard very directly that I could not make sense of what he was saying. Even whether you are referring to Mother Church or Mother Mary, I said. You keep saying She and Her and I cannot tell which one you mean.

Bernard smiled at me and said: very astute, Francis. If you think about it even for a moment you will see that there is no difference. She is the Church, She is Mother Church. All those creeds and observances are just a kind of Ark for Her Covenant, the armour She has taken upon herself to survive the savagery of the last two millennia. This is not obvious to every priest but it penetrates very far into the College of Cardinals where She moves with great deliberation and majesty. And even if this is merely my own delusion? Then it is a dream-led delusion of which She is the sole architect.

He smiled at me as he said: there are no wrong moves, Francis. She runs the game. She is behind every decision that you make and She adjusts Her Way accordingly. Your bad decisions and your better ones all integrate into Her plan, there is no space to the outside of Her where anything of substance can happen.

I stood there for a while gazing at the Codices. I had been thinking that Brother Bernard might have been a bit crazy, but although I now had better proof of that it seemed a trivial matter compared to the enormity sitting right in front of me. I also saw that any speculation about whether these Codices had been read or not was very minor compared to the question I had not yet asked.

99.

Can I read them? I asked.

Sure, he said.

I had planned on leaving you with them.

For a couple of hours, at least.

100.

But Francis you must promise me.

On your life you must promise.

You must not copy or transcribe a word of them.

Not a single letter.

Not in any form.

Neither overt nor concealed.

101.

And you must also promise me, he said.

And I mean promise, Francis.

Once you have seen the work?

You must not return.

You must go and never come back.

You must not seek to contact me.

You must progress your own work alone.

I assented to these things immediately. I would have made any crazy promise that Brother Bernard required as a condition of reading his work. And so we come to the point of my true confession: this story you are reading can never be properly completed. It must always remain stalled at this unsatisfactory point where I go on to read and explore the codices, knowing that my readers have been permanently barred from doing so.

There might be some things I can legitimately say. Regarding the quality of Brother Bernard's later work: he was not just stoking his ego when he said She speaks through beauty, when he said the work was not just him idly spinning his wheels. The Codices felt like such a congruent extension of Psalms to Her that I would guess it would bear the same title if Bernard did go on to publish. The same name for these 40 or 50 volumes as the single tome I chanced across so long ago.

There is another thing I can fairly say. I believe that Brother Bernard gave me time with his Codices so that I could perform the kind of alchemy that I had performed with his earlier work. This may even have been the reason my visit was engineered in the first place. My confession to Bernard that first night over dinner was not made with any specific intent, but it may have convinced him to show me the work, and perhaps to guard against any excess of my talent by forbidding me to take his words down. Even writing this article I find his phrases emerging half-hidden from his later work, even in this brief piece and the words I have chosen to set down.

There is one last thing I can legitimately say about the Codices. I left San Remo without any insight into whether Bernard was correct about the covert transmission of his work. The property where he lives is under the direct control of the Catholic Church, which is a broad Church containing many zealous people who have a taste for radical theology. Bernard was not delusional when he talked about the power and reach of various Church factions, its many flavours of devotion including devotion to Her.

For me personally? I would not be at all surprised if some faction of the Church was developing an entirely new scripture and liturgy. Seeking to exalt Her as superior to the masculinist constructions of the Father and the Son, knowing how little liturgical change would be required to bring that about. Bernard's work might plausibly represent one deep core of this movement and that is the thing which saves my opinion of his sanity: his humility to believe that he was not the only person working towards this end. They might be separated for secrecy - just as Brother Bernard asked me to progress my work alone - but there could never be a single person burdened with the whole of this work.

The next morning I was surprised to wake up in full daylight with a stiff southerly buffeting the cabin. I guessed that the weather was too squally for fishing and that Brother Bernard had allowed me the mercy of a sleep in. When I did make it down to the kitchen he was waiting to make me a hearty breakfast of eggs and beans on toast, with some cherry tomatoes from the garden fried up in butter and his usual strong coffee with hot milk.

Over breakfast we engaged in various pleasantries. There was no mention of the Codices or the strict rules he had set down as a condition of me reading them, although there did seem to be some sadness around the fact that we would not see each other again. I knew that Brother Bernard was serious when he laid down those rules and that they applied strictly. Even referring to this as our last meal together would have been a genuine breach on my part, let alone telling him my reaction to his work. Even to mention formal aspects of it such as his transition from free verse to thicker slabs of text you might call prose poems.

That was the end of my visit. After breakfast I walked back to the cabin and packed up my things, and as I stowed them in my trusty hatchback I looked up to see Bernard watching me from under the verandah. He looked reflective and sad but he also radiated something that felt like fatherly pride, averting his gaze a little when he saw me looking at him.

When we said our goodbyes Bernard shook me by the hand, keeping his eyes slightly lowered so they didn't quite meet mine. He told me what a pleasure it had been to have me stay and he expressed his sincere regret that we would not meet again. I could have pressed him on that or tried to resile from my promise but when he spoke in such cadences there could be no doubt that Bernard was speaking the truth, even though the source of that truth and its final arbiter might be hidden from view.

Bernard gave me some brotherly advice for repairing the torn aspects of my life and it turned out to be sound, sensible advice. He said that if I walked in love and tried to give as much as I could and to help people wherever I found the opportunity things would gradually resolve. He reminded me how important hospitality was in particular, and that if I made an effort to feed people or just to make them a cup of coffee then I could never go far wrong.

Bernard also said something very strange to me, something that was strange even for him. She takes no chances with this world, Francis. When She comes back into the world She means to do it once and well. This is the only world She has ever wanted, the world coveted by every dire spirit that opposes her. This is why we say it has no beginning, why we pray it will have no end.

Bernard avoids violent language even in metaphor but as he stared at the ground intently he said: when She comes back into the world She will come with such force that She will absolutely bury them. Flooding the world with such heartbreaking beauty that nobody could ever think of raising a false God before Her again.

And you are a part of it, Francis. I had no doubt of it from the moment you were alerted to me and even those fragments of your work you have disclosed. You have learned I hope not to be surprised by anything and so you already understand: what I see in you has most definitely been seen by others. The talents you bring, the potency you harbour. All you have to do is keep going. Set down the things you are instructed to set down whenever the time comes for it. Even after you break through, in fact especially after you break through. You must keep on writing, keep building upon the work you have already created.

Become the glacier, Francis. Let your work build to the point where the result is inevitable. Don't bother with worldly praise or admiration, your business is with Her and your success or failure will be judged through Her eyes alone. We Marists aim to be a hidden and unknown presence in the Church, mirroring Her discreet and humble ways of fostering growth and creating change. But that is only one aspect of Her, that aspect of gentle humility. Do not forget the explosive power that hiddenness and humility can build up in the world.

He looked at me very intensely and it was my turn to avert my eyes. That is the only accusation I should have confessed to, Francis. How foolish I was to put my name to the work when it could have been disseminated under other names, even other traditions. I should have submitted when they accused me of arrogance and sought forgiveness for my error. But what is done is done and it cannot be undone without insulting Her holy name. And perhaps coming down to this life was already ordained for me, perhaps the mistake I made was not really a mistake at all.

Brother Bernard asked me to wait for a moment as he ducked back into the kitchen, and he came back with a little basket of fresh fruit along with a corrugated paper cup of coffee. I thanked him for his kindness but he waved that away. I told him how sorry I was that we would not meet again and he nodded gravely and said: me too Francis. Me too.

That is pretty much the end of the story. As I drove back towards the city I had some time to think things over, and the intervening weeks have helped me to put some of the strangeness of my visit into context. Writing out this draft of the story has also helped me contextualise things a bit better, although the story has perhaps run on a little too long.

In telling this story I keep running up against a completely impenetrable barrier: Bernard's total prohibition against me transcribing or reproducing any part of his later work. I have wondered whether I should abandon the story altogether but I believe it may be an important story to tell, especially for the many refugees from the Catholic Church whom it might encourage to make their way back to Her.

Having had some time to reflect I can confirm that there is no discernible rupture between Psalms to Her and the massive amount of poetic speculation contained in the Codices. This would be the hope of anyone familiar with Bernard's first book and it is easy reassurance to provide. The only perceptible change is that any doctrinal guardrails around his veneration of Mary have now completely collapsed. His devotional tone has turned towards absolute devotion although - as with Psalms - it remains difficult to know whether he is addressing a motherly figure or a sister or perhaps even some kind of lover.

The collapse of these categories was the thing that got Bernard defrocked in the first place and I think I can say that they have now undergone an almost total collapse. He does not give a single nod to either the Father or the Son and that may be the real reason they expelled him in the first place. Not for his devotion to Her but for his total disregard of Them. He was always a devotee of the Goddess and the idea that he might share Her majesty with some tinny elevation of the male ego would be an unthinkable retrograde step.

As for the idea that the Codices are being secretly accessed by some kind of underground Church hierarchy? I have come to realise that even Brother Bernard did not quite make that claim. I think he may have been making a lesser but even stranger point: that somehow She was personally accessing and reading these works. And that to have this one very singular reader was more than sufficient for him. When he said that the work moved - as he said quite a number of times - he may simply have been referring to the ways in which She moves, Her many and mysterious ways.

It sounds extravagant when a simple fisherman is telling you about it but you wouldn't flinch to see the idea in some bestselling book. The creation of some radical New Scripture that might sweep everything before it, the power of Her true covenant erupting once such secrets are revealed. Changing the nature of spirituality on this planet forever and for all time, ushering in an age of Love that will completely cleanse the world. It sounds so extravagant but I would say to anyone who has devoted even part of their lives to Her: can you shake the deep conviction that this story might actually be true?

There is one last bit of strangeness that I would like to recount. As I drove up the snaking coastal road towards the freeway I had a vision of something seen through the eyes of Brother Bernard. I saw Jesus walking upon the water towards him as he sits there quietly fishing, calling out his crazed invitation to abandon that life and follow Him into the desert and into death. I saw Bernard smile and gently invite this wild man to descend from his high place in order to become a fisherman again. To set aside the sharp hooks of his parables in favour of ordinary conversation, to set himself shoulder to shoulder with other men in the task of feeding the hungry people. Trading his godly power for the magic of simple skills, multiplying endless fishes out of the hand-line dexterity that Brother Bernard would teach to him.

Of course Jesus would make his special contribution to that life. He would know which side of the boat the lines should be cast from, he would say where the best fish were to be caught and he and Bernard would in this way become brothers. Out on the water again, bent to the serious task of catching fish in order to fertilise the garden and more importantly to sustain the hungry people. Who have no need for their meat or bread to be multiplied supernaturally. And how much more would Jesus enjoy his life in this way, and how little would he be tempted to exalt himself over his brothers again.

There are books whose influence belies the obscurity of their authors, and even books that surmount the usual impediments of remaining unpublished. From those rare authors who remain completely in love with the world despite its total rejection of their work. A battered and bruised kind of love, the humble downtrodden love that She cherishes more than any power. In saecula saeculorum. World without end, amen.



PSALMS TO HER



Brother Bernard



IMMACULATA PRESS, MELBOURNE