

# The Grail Newsletter

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## FIRE IN THE EARTH

It is done.  
Once again Fire has penetrated the earth.  
Not with the sudden crash of thunderbolt,  
riving the mountain tops:  
does the Master break down doors to enter his own home?  
Without earthquake, or thunderclap:  
the flame has lit up the whole world from within.  
All things individually and collectively  
are penetrated and flooded by it,  
from the inmost core of the tiniest atom  
to the mighty sweep of the most universal laws of being:  
so naturally has it flooded every element, every energy,  
every connecting link in the unity of our cosmos,  
that one might suppose the cosmos to have burst  
spontaneously into flame.

(Pierre Teilhard de Chardin SJ)



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## WEBSITE

See for yourself and introduce others to the re-launched website  
of the Grail in Australia at [www.grailaustralia.org.au](http://www.grailaustralia.org.au)

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## NEWS FROM HERE AND THERE

### Sydney

On Saturday, 12<sup>th</sup> December, we held our last public event for this year at the Grail Centre. Activities will resume in February 2016. What can we tell you about the last months since September? Let's start with the regular programs.

As you know, every Wednesday evening in term time, 7.30 – 9 pm, a group meets at the Centre for *lectio divina* – reading together a chosen text, followed by an extended period of silent meditation concluding with a sharing of thoughts and insights. These sessions are open to anyone who wants to come, whether every week or intermittently. The chosen text these last weeks has been Pope Francis' encyclical, *Laudato si'* on *Care for our Common Home*. When we resume in the New Year, we are planning to turn our attention to the Gospel of John. 2016 will be our tenth year of this spiritually nourishing program, which we have called *Food for the Soul*.

Tricia Gemmell has also convened a group on Tuesday mornings, 10 am to 12 noon, every second month, reflecting together this year on aspects of the spirituality of St Benedict. The numbers attending these sessions have grown this year.

On the last Friday evening of every month, our Book Club, now 10 years old, gathers in one or other member's home for what is always an enjoyable meeting that we all look forward to. Over the years the membership has changed a little, but we never fail to have a free and interesting exchange of responses to the chosen book and share food and drink and friendship. At the end of November, Michelle Cavanagh introduced us to *Suspended Sentences*, three novellas by Patrick Mondiano, a French Nobel Laureate in Literature. In January, we will discuss Brigitte Lucey's choice, *Siddhartha*, by Herman Hesse. Occasionally we will read a biographical work but mostly we choose a broad range of fiction which has the capacity to expand and deepen our understanding and perceptions of life in many different contexts.

The *Creative Writing* program that Joyce Kornblatt holds here on a Saturday once a month has concluded for 2015. It's always a pleasure to have her and her group of writers here and we look forward to hosting her 2016 program, which is over-subscribed.

Our day of celebration of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of St Teresa of Avila brought between 80 and 90 friends into the garden of the Grail Centre, named *Avila* after Teresa, on a sunny October afternoon. The majority of Spanish speakers in Australia are from Latin America and it was members of the Peruvian community who joined us that day. Two noted Peruvian musical groups - *La Peña Norteña*, specialists in creole Peruvian music, and *Melodías Andinas*, specialists in Andean music who sing in Quechua – played their instruments and sang and danced through the afternoon with wonderful generosity. People brought drinks and plates of food they had carefully prepared for others' enjoyment and so we spent some hours together. Rosanna Spears, an expert cake maker, brought a work of high art for Teresa's birthday cake. Sonia Mrva-Montoya played a central role in this happy event, with her husband George and son Dushan willing helpers wherever they were needed. Alison Healey gave a short talk about Teresa which is reprinted in this Newsletter.

While on the subject of parties, Isabel McDearmid, once an active participant in Grail programs, celebrated her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday with family and friends in early December. May this year ahead be full of blessing for her. And the Columbans put our 5<sup>th</sup> centenary of Teresa's birth into perspective when we received an invitation from them to join their celebrations of the 1400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of St Columban. We continue our long and valued association with the Columbans through our involvement with the Faith Ecology Network (FEN) which they convene and the Australian Association for Mission Studies (AAMS).

Following our reflections on the papal encyclical, *Laudato si'*, we have set up a reading group to discuss Elizabeth Johnson's recent book, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*, where she explores some contemporary theology that underpins the encyclical. The group first met on 5<sup>th</sup> December, having read the first four chapters. The remaining meetings are scheduled for next year as follows: Saturday afternoons 1.30 – 3pm, on 6 February (Chap.5), 5 March (Chap.6), 7 May (Chap.7-8) and 4 June

(Chap.9-10). All interested are welcome. Contact the Grail Centre if you wish to come.

1<sup>st</sup> November saw the relaunch of the website of the Grail in Australia. We are thankful for all the labour and skills invested in its creation especially from Anne Day, Anne Marie George, Ruth Crowe and Mary Robertson. See [www.grailaustralia.org.au](http://www.grailaustralia.org.au)

On 12<sup>th</sup> December, our Advent preparation for the birth of Jesus was a reflection titled *Out of Empire*, based on the thesis of Wes Howard-Brook, USA Scripture scholar, that throughout the Biblical narrative run two competing religious visions, which he names the 'religion of creation' and the 'religion of empire', and that they can be seen in ongoing conflict with one another throughout human history between and within cultures, societies, institutions and individual persons. It was a stimulating morning, offering some new insights into the Christmas narratives in the Gospels.

It has been a demanding year for the Australian Fair Trade and Investment Network (AFTINET), to which The Grail (NSW) belongs, involving steady campaigning and publicity, writing formal submissions, lobbying members of Parliament and Local Councils. Two bilateral trade agreements with Korea and China and the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement with eleven other countries bordering the Pacific were signed by the Federal Government in 2015, each of them with some provisions AFTINET opposed on the grounds of unjust dealings, all of them negotiated secretly without the participation of civil society. As well, negotiations on PACER-Plus (Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations) continue, as Australia and New Zealand push for a so-called free trade agreement with 14 small Pacific Island nations. In this group of countries, Australia is the largest and most powerful, with a consequent particular responsibility for ensuring a just outcome for all the participants.

Lauren Porter, who has lived in the Grail Centre over the last two years while she worked for her Masters in Clinical Counseling, has successfully completed her course and returned to her family home. Now she is preparing for her marriage to Mark Lockwood in February. Lauren and Mark are Quakers and their marriage ceremony will be held at the Friends' Meeting

House in Surrey Hills. The *Avila* household is already missing her, but we look forward to her participation in the Sydney Grail group in 2016.

In September, family and friends gathered to farewell Marie Tulip, who died after a pro-longed illness. Grail women had known Marie for many years in various contexts: teaching English to adult migrants, the ecumenical movement and the women's movement. We honour her great contribution in all these areas of concern and her capacity for loving care and relationships.

In November, the Grail Singers reconvened to sing at the Mass of Christian Burial for Anne de Graaff, who finally succumbed to cancer after four years. Anne had a lovely soprano voice and regularly sang with the choir until her illness made it no longer possible. She was a person full of the love of life and her generosity of spirit was especially evident in how she dealt with her illness so as not to have it weigh on her friends - always concerned for others and positive about her life. Our deepest sympathy and prayers for strength and peace are with John and the family.

*The Grail in Sydney*

## **Brisbane**

At our September meeting we were delighted to hear Josephine Vidler (Jill's daughter) and Ailsa Paterson (Helen Jeffcoat's daughter) tell of their trip to the USA to attend the *Sacred Activism* retreat at the Grail Centre, Cornwall-on-Hudson, New York State. Both girls really appreciated the opportunity to meet women from so many countries and hear of their very different lives, yet to understand that we all have the same aspirations to improve the conditions and opportunities for women in our communities.

Ann Aboud, Mary Nelson and I were able to attend the International Council meeting in Sydney in October and welcomed the opportunity to meet the International Leadership Team (ILT) and the delegates from all the countries where the Grail is established. At the market stall, I bought a hand-embroidered tunic from Maria Luisa Lagunas (Mexico). I've been wearing it a lot and it is a nice connection between her handicrafts and mine.

For many years we had talked about going away for a weekend retreat, but in this busy world it is hard to find the time. At the start of 2015 we agreed to make this our year and go away for the Feast of All Saints in November. And we did! Six of us travelled to Hilltop Cottage in Boonah, a delightful small country town one hour's drive from Brisbane. We didn't do much but we enjoyed each other's company and the opportunity to pray and reflect together. Mary led us in song and prayer and we read the message from the ILT together. The Saturday night Eucharist was at the local church, appropriately named *All Saints*. We'll make this an annual event.

Some of us have now retired from the work force and some are planning for it. These years offer new opportunities for community involvement and time to do the things we love and be with the people we love. May our Grail sisters be with us during these years.

*Helen Jeffcoat*

## Melbourne

The comings and goings in Melbourne over the last couple of months and the continued ups and downs in health match the usual ever variable weather here. Days over 35 degrees are unheard of in September- October, follow-ed, of course, by a sudden snap back to winter temperatures. Ah, how we love Melbourne weather! Despite this, the gardens this spring have been magnificent, with bursts of pink, orange, white and gold and canopies of green everywhere.

We continued to meet at 'Hesed' through October and November for our weekly *lectio divina* on writings of Hildegard of Bingen. We took up the themes of the International Violence against Women campaign and the First Week of Advent (Mercy) at our last two meetings. We have been pleased to welcome Kevin Dunne into our group recently as he is now at home, still undergoing daily treatment on his arm which will continue for months to come. Irena is a wonderful host to our gatherings. After our most recent reflection, we shared a delicious lunch, overseen by Irena. We look forward to Friday 19<sup>th</sup> December, when we will gather at the Eva Tilley Retirement Centre, so that Joanna Waite can participate in our final reflection and discussion for the year.

To celebrate the Grail's Foundation Day on 1<sup>st</sup> November, we took up the International Leadership Team's reflection and had a most fruitful and inspiring discussion.

In between our weekly gatherings, Dinny Culican Ward and Andrea Venier have been on the road. Dinny spent some time in Canada for a family wedding, followed by a few days in Queensland where she met with some of the Brisbane group for a very cheery lunch. Ann Aboud, Jan O'Donoghue and Dinny also managed to discuss further work on the archives. Andrea took her Mum, Gemma, to Townsville for a short break which coincided with a National Team meeting. Ann, Tricia Gemmell and Andrea had a couple of fruitful days planning and catching up with Sheila Hawthorn. It was great meeting Sheila's friends at the House of Prayer and revisiting St Raphael's (now part of Saints Catholic College) for a presentation to women and students who are either part of, or interested in, the Grail.

In spite of a particularly heavy schedule of work, Genny Grabau has sorted out issues with the 'Hesed' phone and internet connections and continues her meticulous overseeing of Melbourne finances. Genny, Ann Niall and Andrea try to support Pat Sheeran with her day-to-day requests or needs and by regular visits.

Our End of Year Eucharist was celebrated in early December with Michael Mason CSsR at June and Laurie Ryan's home. It was deeply reflective, inspired by the Advent readings complemented by Hildegard of Bingen's words and music. We were grateful to be able to share the warmth of one another's company as several present have experienced serious illnesses this year. We hope that Dawn and Paul McGann, Kevin and June will have healthier months ahead. We were also pleased to have Helen Gomez and Alison Healey with us bringing greetings from the Sydney group and sharing in this happy occasion. Many thanks to our gracious hosts! And our warmest good wishes to those who weren't able to be there.

Many blessings to Grail family and friends around the country for this Christmas season. May good health, peace and joy be yours in 2016!

*Andrea Venier*

## North Queensland

In August, I was very pleased to go to Sydney and be on the fringes of the International Council meeting. It was a special opportunity to make new friends and meet up with several others whom I had not seen for many years, especially from Canada, Papua New Guinea, Portugal, South Africa, Germany and the USA. I appreciated being able to enjoy with all the participants some of the social events of the occasion.

The Valedictory Dinner in October at Saints Catholic College on the University campus was as usual delightfully enjoyable. During the dinner I presented the annual Grail Award to Rhianna Anderson and Alice McCarthy because 'once again the staff had difficulty deciding on just one recipient'. Rhianna is a fourth year Veterinary Science student, while Alice is in her third year of an Education-Science degree. Both are seen as 'excellent role models, always reliable and willing to get involved' and 'great assets to the College'. They joined the group of visitors who welcomed the Grail National Team – Tricia, Andrea and Ann - to Townsville when they came in November.

This visit of the National Team was a high-light of the year for me as well as being an opportunity for a 1<sup>st</sup> November celebration with a difference here. They, of course, held their regular meeting in the ever welcoming House of Prayer. That venue is now a familiar place and space for many Grail people. It was very nice that Andrea's mother, Gemma, also came to Townsville. Gemma and Andrea's late father, Peter, visited St Raphael's in 1988 when Andrea was on the staff of the College while also teaching at St Patrick's Girls' College. Gemma said she also wanted to return to the region where she was born, namely in Proserpine.

Margaret Tranter and Roberta Michna, having driven five hours from their far northern hideaways especially to be here, were among the 30 people who accepted our invitation to meet the National Team in St Raphael's wing of Saints Catholic College for reflection and sharing on the life and work of the International Grail and its current Australian involvements, especially in North Queensland. The Team gave an overview of the Grail's beginnings, their arrival in Australia., the expansion from Sydney to Melbourne to Mackay and Townsville, highlighting just some of the projects and programs

undertaken in the last 79 years in Australia and the women who initiated and carried these. In response, some shared memories of their connections, direct and indirect, with the Grail. Then we talked in-formally around a delicious afternoon tea spread from the College's catering staff. It was such a lovely get together and an opportunity for meeting the National Team who, as one person commented, 'became people rather than just names'. Many thanks to Marie Aitken, Tom Tartellin and other College staff for their hospitality.

Currently, Annual General Meetings are dotted through my diary. The Townsville Multicultural Support Group's AGM was held in October and the Management Committee will have four new members, much to everyone's delight. I remain one of the 'old' members (in more ways than one). The Little Theatre will hold its AGM in December, but, more importantly, is preparing Agatha Christie's *A Murder is Announced*, which opens in the first week of December.

Through the Advent and Christmas seasons may God renew our hope for the journey, looking for messages and signs of hope so that we do not live in fear. Happy Christmas and a peacefully joyous 2016.

*Sheila Hawthorn*

## St Teresa of Avila (1515 – 1582)

*This is what was said in honour of Teresa at the celebration of the 5th centenary of her birth at the Sydney Grail Centre in October.*

Teresa of Avila is very accessible, because she wrote so frankly and generously about her experiences that when you have read her books and letters you feel you really know her. And it's for that reason that I feel sure that she would heartily approve of this party today. Before she entered the Carmel in Avila she was had a lively social life and enjoyed parties herself.

Of course, we have to be cautious when we look for meaning from her life in 16th Century Spain for our lives in 21st Century Australia. The two worlds are hugely different – materially, socially, culturally, religiously. However, so long as we are aware that her words carried meanings in her day that we cannot fully comprehend, this intelligent and deeply spiritual woman has an enormous amount of wisdom to offer us. If you want to read more about her, her first book called *The Book of Her Life* is the best place to start. Rowan Williams (former Archbishop of Canterbury) has written an excellent biography, simply called *Teresa of Avila*. Today I would like just to mention two strong themes in her life that I think will resonate with us.

The first is equality and mutuality in friendship. When we know even a little of the social structures and patterns of behaviour in Teresa's world we realise how revolutionary she was in this. Spanish society then was hierarchical and patriarchal and dominated by a powerful Catholic Church alert to any possible sources of threat to its authority. If you were a noble and male and Catholic you were one of the top elite. Teresa knew personally the impact of these powerful forces. Her grandfather had been a Jew who confessed to the Inquisition, did penance and was baptised into the Catholic Church. This inserted him into the society; he moved from where he was known in Toledo to Avila, where he became a successful businessman; and his son, Teresa's father, accumulated considerable wealth and acquired noble status. But, as the son of a converso, Don Alonso never felt secure in his social position; he kept secret his family's Jewish heritage.

Public honour was a core value in the society. Each social layer expected certain privileges of status and due deference from those at a lower social

level. Failure to observe these requirements of status was taken as an insult, which demanded retribution. Teresa wrote, deploring the absurdity of a man she knew who lost his life in a duel over a trivial dispute – ‘over a few coins’. Having made the judgment that these social values were unchristian, she set herself to founding small communities (18 in 20 years, 2 of them for men) that challenged the honour system with a radical commitment to equality and mutuality in friendship. Whereas religious institutions at that time depended on the patronage of the wealthy, allowed rich women to bring their servants with them into the convent and refused applicants who were conversos, in Teresa’s foundations wealthy and poor, literate and illiterate, born Catholics and converts, were inspired by her to become communities of mutual regard and care, sharing equally what they received from donations and their work, grounding their lives in the Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus.

Teresa herself had very close friendships with both men and women throughout her life and her many, many letters show her affection and care for them. Her relationship with God she also described in terms of friendship. For Teresa, prayer was friendship in action. She wrote: ‘Personal prayer in my opinion is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends... In order that love be true and the friendship endure, the wills of the friends must be in accord.’ And elsewhere she wrote: ‘Christ is a very good friend...and he is company for us’.

So, we see how the mutuality of friendship was a powerful dynamic in Teresa’s spirituality and in her efforts to model an authentic Christian life herself and in her monasteries - friendship with God and human friendship displacing false notions of the rights of status and power. 21st Century Australia is a different society from hers, but we have our own ways of privileging status, wielding power, withholding our hospitality, disdain those we think inferior to us.

The second outstanding feature of Teresa’s life that I think is very encouraging for us, was honoured by Pope Paul VI in 1970 when he proclaimed her a Doctor of the Church – the first woman to be proclaimed with a title normally reserved to scholarly men. And Teresa was not a scholar in the customary sense of the word. Unlike the majority of women of her day, she did have some schooling and was literate in the vernacular,

but not in Latin, the language of theology and Scripture studies. She had wonderful insight and wisdom, but it came not from books. In fact, she was deprived of even spiritual books in the vernacular when Church authorities banned them in 1559. Teresa's doctorate was a doctorate in experience.

She lived her trust in God with all the ardour she could bring to it. She sought understanding and discerned her way forward through contemplative prayer (conversation with a friend) and, because for her, the test of the authenticity of her experiences was their compatibility with the Gospel, she would quite often submit what she experienced to the appraisal of scholars whom she trusted, especially scholars of Scripture. There were times when she was tortured by massive self-doubt: Was the guidance she received in prayer genuinely from God, or was she deluded, and so, deserving of the ridicule she received from many? At other times she felt deep peace in prayer and acted with firm conviction.

It is clear that she prized this way of knowing through experience: 'May it please the Lord to favour me, so that I may understand by repose what repose is, by honour what honour is and by delight what delight is – not the reverse.' (The Life: 25,22)

And those scholars and ordained men she consulted who became her friends, learned from her how to live their faith.

For most of us, like Teresa without formal theological studies, who grow in wisdom and understanding through living - through our experience of God's active presence in our lives and world - she is a great encouraging mentor, and especially for women.

And what of her experience of being a woman? On an occasion when she was complaining that God wasn't listening to what she believed she was justified in asking, she wrote: 'Is it not enough, Lord, that the world has intimidated us, so that we may not do anything worthwhile in public or dare to speak some truths that we lament over in secret – isn't this enough, without you also failing to hear our just requests? For the world's judges – all of them men – there is no virtue in women that they do not hold suspect.' And there is an unforgettable line of hers that rings across the centuries: 'Just being a woman is enough to have my wings fall off...'

Teresa tells us that the possibilities for women to wield influence in the public sphere in her day were virtually non-existent. But – and here’s the lesson for all of us - she did what it was possible for her to do, with courage, even daring. She founded small monastic communities that would give living witness to the Gospel and stand as a visible and radical critique of her society and church. And in doing this, she became one of the great re-forming influences in the universal church. Despite her feeling at the time of being deprived of her wings, she has soared into the hearts and minds and souls of women and men across the world through five centuries. And we are giving grateful testimony to this in our attention to her today.

*(Alison Healey, 15th October)*



## *A personal journal*

THOUGHTS IMAGES AND REFLECTIONS

### **the journal**

This 80 page A5 sized journal contains beautiful photographs and quotations from across cultures and times. Blank pages allow you to record your own thoughts and words of wisdom.

The journal is a work of the Grail in Australia, inspired by the Prison Journal project of Sr Joan Chittister in the USA. For every journal sold, one copy will be given to an inmate in a NSW correctional centre.

This is the second edition of the journal with new photographs and quotations.

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