“Celibacy of the clergy has always been *our* motto”: The clergy house of St Luke’s

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In chapter one of *A Glass of Blessings* Wilmet explains the term “clergy house” to James, Rodney’s friend from the Ministry.

> “I suppose the arrival of a new clergyman must be rather exciting for the ladies. Would he be a celibate?”
> “I should think so,” I said. “Neither Father Thames nor Father Bode is married.”
> “Do they live together at the vicarage?”
> “Well, it is called the clergy house,” I explained. “It is a rather Gothic-looking building in the same style as the church. ...”

Father Marius Lovejoy Ransome, the newcomer, does not live at the clergy house but at the Beamishes. When Fr Ransome tells Fr Oswald Thames, the vicar, that he is going to marry Mary Beamish, the latter is terribly upset and blames himself. Had Ransome lived at the clergy house, this would never have happened – he thinks! Wilf Bason, live-in cook and housekeeper, comments on the shock this has caused at the clergy house. “*We* had hardly envisaged such a thing,” said Mr Bason grandly. “Celibacy of the clergy has always been *our* motto.”

In *A Lot to Ask* Hazel Holt states that Pym originally wanted to call *A Glass of Blessings* “*The Clergy House,”* which shows that she intended the plot of the novel to revolve around the parish of St Luke’s and its clergy house.

Wilmet has chosen St Luke’s because the church nearest to her is very low. St Luke’s with its Anglo-Catholic tradition is more to her taste. In a nutshell, one may define Anglo-Catholicism as the more advanced High Church movement of the Church of England. It has its roots in the Oxford Movement, which stressed the continuity with Catholic Christianity. In the course of time, Anglo-Catholics introduced Roman Catholic ritual and ceremonial into public worship, even going as far as the abandonment of prescribed Anglican forms. Inevitably, Anglo-Catholics had to employ new words because the services and devotions they introduced were new: benediction, adoration, the rosary, holy water stoup, acolyte, thurifer, and so on. Instead of rectory, vicarage, parsonage they used the terms clergy house or presbytery.

In the Church of England the obligation to celibacy of the clergy was abolished in 1549, but Anglo-Catholics have always advocated celibacy. Both Father Thames, the priest, and Bason, the layman, are staunch supporters of the celibacy of the clergy. The strong, ideological norm that Catholic-minded clergy should not marry is expressed in the Anglo-Catholic phrase “committing matrimony”, suggesting an act not far short of adultery. In John Henry Newman’s novel *Loss and Gain* the protagonist Charles Reding, who converts to Roman Catholicism at the end of the book, encounters a young clergyman and his pretty bride. He “had a faintish feeling come over him: somewhat such as might beset a man on hearing a call for pork-chops when he was sea-sick.” And *Punch* in 1929 captures the Anglo-Catholic attitude towards married clergy.

> Fiancée: “After we’re married, dear, you won’t mind if I don’t come to your church, will you?”
> Curate: ”But why ever not, precious?”
> Fiancée: “Well, you see, I don’t really approve of married clergymen.”

Robert Liddell, Pym’s life-long friend, says that “Pymdom, if one may coin the word, is a predominantly Anglo-Catholic country.” Hazel Holt confirms that the Anglo-Catholic ritual, “the fascinating names of the various kinds of incense, the celibate clergy with their cloaks and birettas, the days of obligation, ... provided richness indeed to someone with an observant and ironic eye.” Pym was a devout Anglican who – like her heroine Wilmet – preferred elaborate Anglo-Catholic services to plainer Low Church services. “The Anglican Church,” Janice Rossen in her book *The World of Barbara Pym* contends, “forms a pervasive background in Pym’s novels as it formed one in her life.”

AGOB is richly churchy indeed. Wilmet, who lives in an unbelieving world, is an Anglo-Catholic. She may have been brought up so, for her Christian name comes from a novel by Charlotte M. Yonge. At the beginning of the book she is at late mass at St Luke’s church on its patronal festival, which is also her thirty-third birthday. She is struck by the ringing of the telephone.

> I suppose it must have been the shock of hearing the telephone ring, apparently in the church, that made me turn my head and see Piers Longridge in one of the side aisles behind me. It sounded shrill and particularly urgent against the music of the organ, and it was probably because I had never before heard a telephone ringing in church that my thoughts were immediately distracted, so that I found myself wondering where it could be and whether anyone would answer it. ... The ringing soon stopped, ... then a different bell began to ring and I tried to collect my thoughts, ...

The first scene of the novel sets the three different narrative strands in motion. The first strand is Wilmet’s domestic life with her husband and mother-in-law. The second strand is the story of Wilmet’s involvement with the life of her parish. The third strand is the story of her mild experiments in extra-marital romance.

A telephone rings during a church service, Wilmet is surprised, she turns and sees the handsome brother of her best friend, she speculates on the phone call. Who might have called? Who will answer the phone? Even after the telephone stops ringing, Wilmet continues her speculations and decides the caller is “one of Father Thames’s wealthy elderly female friends inviting him to luncheon or dinner.” A little later she wonders whether Father Bode never got any invitations from ladies. When talking to Father Thames after the service Wilmet learns that the new assistant priest Father Ransome has chosen this highly inappropriate moment to call.

Initially reserved, Wilmet gradually makes the acquaintance of the three clergymen of St Luke’s. In charge of St Luke’s is the oddly named Father Thames. Pym had toyed with the idea of calling him Father Neptune. He is “a tall, scraggy old man with thick white hair and a beaky nose.” He is assisted by Father Bode, who has an “eager toothy smile” and weak, kindly eyes magnified behind his thick glasses, and by the newly arrived, much younger Father Ransome. A new addition to the clergy house is Wilf Bason, a man of aesthetic interests and a gourmet cook for the priests.

Pym uses physical space as a tool to illuminate character. In the course of the novel Wilmet and her husband Rodney visit the clergy house with its three contrasting quarters for Father Thames, Father Bode and Wilf Bason who shows them over the house. Father Thames's study reflects his love of beautiful things, including Dresden china and a Fabergé egg. In contrast, Father Bode inhabits a study whose personal touches are of "the simplest and cheapest". "Of course he hasn't Father Thames's artistic tastes," said Mr Bason, perhaps unnecessarily. "Or his private means," added Rodney in a dry tone. Wilf Bason's room is of chintzy elegance with fresh flowers and a lace tablecloth crocheted by his mother. Father Ransome lodges temporarily with the Beamishes though there would be plenty of room in the clergy house. Bason points out the affinity between Father Thames and the curate Father Ransome, noting that the austere guest room at the clergy house would not have suited Ransome, that "he and Father Thames are in some ways too much alike – they would have vied with each other." Wilmet "imagined the two priests feverishly amassing Fabergé objects and Dresden china."

Food and drink are brought into play to juxtapose Father Thames and Father Bode. In the first scene of the novel Wilmet decides that the caller is one of Father Thames's female friends inviting him to a meal. A little later she speculates on the menu for this imagined meal and comes up with salmon and grouse. She thinks of Father Bode as the kind of person who would prefer tinned salmon though she is ashamed of the unworthy thought because she knows he is a good man. Wilf Bason has prepared a list of menus for Lent: fried octopus, scampi, escargots, "not to mention all the delicious ways there are of doing quite ordinary fish." He trusts that Father Thames will appreciate this gourmet Lenten fare but has no doubt that Father Bode was perfectly satisfied with their former housekeeper's boiled cod. Bason approves of Father Thames's continental breakfast of coffee and croissants and speaks contemptuously of Father Bode's preferring cornflakes. Adam Prince, the gourmet critic in *A Few Green Leaves,* reminisces several years later about the Father Thames set-up at St Luke's and highly endorses Bason's talents. Father Marius Ransome, as his Christian name suggests, - think of Walter Pater's novel – has epicurean leanings. When he contemplates following his friend's example of going over to Rome, the influence which deters him from taking the irrevocable step is a low-class tea with egg and chips "at some rather ghastly help-yourself place" on the occasion of his friend's admittance to the Roman Catholic Church.

Tea is portrayed as a staple of the Pym world. Pym actually goes so far in her use of tea as a tool to illuminate character that she distinguishes between those who drink China tea as opposed to those opting for Indian tea. The first carries the association of a refined and noble taste, whereas the latter, being much stronger, is slightly lower class. Bason is pleased that Father Thames "likes his Lapsang, which he takes correctly without milk or sugar." In the post-Bason era there will be endless cups of Indian tea in the clergy house. "Bode can have Mrs Greenhill back and welcome to her – tea after every meal with two spoons of sugar in it, except in Lent. It's a real penance for *him* to give up sugar, I can tell you."

The aesthetic Father Thames takes pride in his *objets d'art* but is unperturbed by Bason's periodic "borrowing" the valuable Fabergé egg. "It seems selfish to keep one's possessions too much to oneself, doesn't it, when they give so much pleasure to others."

On the other hand, Father Thames is a comically digressive talker, who seems preoccupied with his creature comforts. In his letter in the parish magazine he calls for "Prayers, please, and practical help. Isn't there some good woman (or man) who would feel drawn to do really Christian work and look after Father Bode and myself?" The letter is rather confused. "Spiritual and material matters jostled each other in a most inartistic manner, so that the effect was almost comic." In the sermon announcing his retirement he loses his audience with his garrulous digression. He tells the congregation that he will begin another phase of his life in Italy.

> We think of Canon Vesey Stanhope and his villa on the shores of Lake Como – or was it Maggiore? Not Garda, I think – I forget the details. As I was saying, we remember that, and it might be thought that there was a parallel there.

Pym seems to imply that his taste for luxury, elegant objects, and foreign travel render him similar to Stanhope of Anthony Trollope's *Barchester Towers.* Father Thames looks forward to his retirement in style. The Villa Cenerentola (Cinderella) is "*da affittare*", to let, and Thames will have an extra bathroom put in with a bath of Carrara marble.

Wilmet's first impression of Father Thames's new assistant priest is of a tall and dark-haired man. His Christian names – Marius Lovejoy – had led Wilmet to expect somebody handsome but

> ...even so the impact of his good looks was quite startling. He was certainly very handsome indeed, with his dark wavy hair and large brown eyes. The bones in his face were well defined and his expression serious.

Like Father Thames he is a man of taste, but he is no intellectual – we learn that he took a third in theology – and is an uninspired preacher, limping platitudes pouring from his lips. However, "his good looks amply compensated for his shortcomings in the pulpit." It is hard to imagine Ransome with his poor sermons, his cynical air and his flippant remarks being an effective clergyman. When old Mrs Beamish is gravely ill Wilmet finds his "charming, almost intimate smile" out of place, even shocking. After Mrs Beamish's death he must move and thinks the whole situation rather overwhelming. Wilmet is indignant "for it sounded very much as if he had turned out to be a broken reed."

Father Thames thinks that Ransome is not very stable and has leanings towards Rome being influenced by his friend Father Sainsbury who is much disturbed by the question of inter-communion with the Church of South India, and in fact goes over to Rome in consequence. As already mentioned, Ransome resists the temptation to convert to Roman Catholicism. His marriage to Mary Beamish will stabilize his life, and Mary's money will provide additional comfort.

Father Bode emerges as Pym's image of an ideal clergyman. In his quiet way he is the best of the three clerics at St Luke's. The Church of England has always prided itself on maintaining a pastoral ideal of caring for its parishioners from birth to death. For the priest, this means that he must actively circulate in his parish, visiting the people where they live and work. Father Bode does a great deal of visiting in the afternoons. In the evenings people are watching TV and do not like to be interrupted. Ransome feels that – as he puts it – Father Bode "is always so much better than the rest of us." After Mrs Beamish's passing away he is

full of practical sympathy. He finds Mary a job in a retreat house. When Father Thames is ill in Holy Week, Bode "battles gallantly" to keep the church running smoothly.He is a man of great humility. Though he would be honoured to succeed Father Thames as vicar, he thinks the Bishop could so easily find a better man.

An important factor that ties Pym's novels together is the appearance of characters from earlier ones. In *Quartet in Autumn* Edwin reflects on the days when Father Thames, and later Father Bode, attracted a crowd of office workers at lunch time services on St Luke's Day.

AGOB is the most Christian of Pym's novels. Wilmet moves from vanity, egotism, and isolation to self-awareness, humility, and integration into her community. St Luke's and its clergy house play an important role in her passing through several stages of enlightenment.

> It seemed as if the church should be the place where all worlds could meet, and looking around me I saw that in a sense this was so. If people remained outside it was our – even my duty – to bring them in.

The marriage of Sybil and Professor Root forces Wilmet and Rodney to search for a place of their own. There are a number of tempting advertisements. Wilmet thinks she must have invented the one which advertised "disused clergy house – would convert". In the end, they buy the lease of a flat a good hundred yards nearer the clergy house than Sybil's home. St Luke's clergy house is central to the very end of the book indeed.

We know that Pym's own experiences very much influenced her writing. She herself wrote: "I prefer to write about the kind of things I have experienced and to put into my novels the kind of details that amuse me." In her talk (typescript in the Bodleian Papers), *The Novelist's Use of Every Day Life,* given in Barnes in the 1950s, Pym emphasises that the writer is a watcher and observer doing fieldwork in church vestries and cafés. When he comes to record his findings in short stories and novels he must select and imaginatively recreate his data. Indeed, the literary notebooks that she kept for many years show that she frequently observed a detail or scene in her daily round, and then worked it into the novel she was writing at the time. A number of details in *AGOB* show that Pym's life and novels are linked in complex ways.

In his talk *Exploring London Churches with Barbara Pym,* presented to the Barbara Pym Society in London in 1996, Pym's friend Robert Smith talked about his church crawls with our author. He identified All Saints, Notting Hill, as the model for St Luke's. The church was built by William White in the mid-nineteenth century. All Saints was badly bombed during World War II. It was re-opened in 1951, resplendent with new shrines in honour of the saints, and painted gold-leaf altarpieces by the famous designer of church furnishings, Sir Ninian Comper.

Smith called it "a home to advanced Anglo-Catholicism", and it sparked off Protestant demonstrations of protest at the Re-Dedication service. Pym writes about All Saints:

> All Saints is splendidly Catholic - ... We began with Asperges (later at tea Hilary asked what was the connection between Asperges and asparagus). The three priests in their lime green vestments with bands and birettas look like dolls bobbing up and down.

A couple of years ago, I attended Sunday Solemn Mass at All Saints. I can assure you that it is still splendidly Catholic, firmly upholding the Catholic tradition in faith and worship. It is now a Forward in Faith parish, which means that women priests are not permitted to minister there and – as stated in the Forward in Faith directory "where those opposed to women priests can worship in confidence."

Smith also described the neo-gothic clergy house which provided the model for that of St Luke's. In the 1970s the ancillary buildings to the church were redeveloped to provide new units of accommodation together with a vicarage flat, curate flat, etc. However, the nobly proportioned tower of the church is still perhaps the most beautiful object in North Kensington.

The flamboyant Father John Herbert Cloete Twisaday, who died in 1971, was vicar of All Saints from 1932 to 1961. He gave Pym lots of material for Father Thames. In one of her notebooks she describes him as an "elderly celibate, irritable and tetchy". Like Father Thames he was a poor preacher.

> He fidgets in the pulpit, times things alarmingly with pauses so that one wonders if he's just forgotten what he was going to say and will fall down in a fit. The sermon, urging us to keep Ascension Day as a Day of Obligation, was quite good. Then he remembered a notice about a meeting in the Albert Hall and began talking about that, all mixed up.

His parish letters are reminiscent of Father Thames's rambling letter to his congregation. "My own plans are rather in the melting pot," he writes. Father Twisaday had great taste. His retirement flat is described by William Mason in a book on the Anglo-Catholic shrine of Walsingham in Norfolk.

> The visitor – and he welcomed so many – will remember the curiosity of each singular ornament in the house, from the vintage visiting cards in the hall, next to the large collection of snuff-boxes, to the letter of one Bishop Roncalli still displayed above the chimney-piece in the drawing-room.

The letter of Bishop Roncalli, the later Pope John XXIII, testifies to the attraction Rome has always had for Anglo-Catholics.

As a result of developments in connection with the Church of South India a considerable number of Anglo-Catholic priests went over to Rome. Father Ransome comments on those defecting to Rome: "They've been coming so thick and fast lately – the converts, I mean – I suppose they couldn't welcome each one individually." Father Thames keeps promising "to go very thoroughly into the South India business," but the study groups never materialise.

Wilmet thinks that perhaps "the study groups would be too dangerous and send half his congregation over to Rome." The Church of South India was born after long negotiations in 1947 through a coming together of Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists. No re-ordination of the non-Anglican clergy had been required but all the church's bishops shared in the Anglican succession, and future ministers were to be episcopally ordained. In 1955 a state of "limited intercommunion" between the Church of England and the Church of South India was achieved.

Pym's worries about the Church of South India are reflected in our novel and in her notebooks for 1955/56.

> In the office 3.55 p.m. Even at this moment some dreadful thing may be happening – a husband deciding to leave his wife, ... somebody dying ... or quarrelling about the Church of South India in the Edgware Road as I nearly did with Bob on Sunday.
>
> A clergyman in a duffle coat – what an abomination! And he would probably think the Church of South India "a good thing".

One of the other celebrants was Father Sean MacAteer, a friend of Robert Smith, who provided the inspiration for Marius Ransome. Pym notes: "He has charm, wrinkles his nose when he smiles. Such a display of charm is surprising, even a little shocking." In her notebook Pym writes about Father Ransome: "Once Fr. R. is married, settled, clamped down – no more shilly-shallying. He can leave the Anglican Church, but not his wife, unless he wants headlines in the cheap press."

Smith wrote to Pym that a Father Morcom was to be instituted in July 1955 but to everyone's surprise would get married first. Pym turned those events into Father Ransome's marriage and installation. In another letter Smith mentioned a selfish vicar who would not put up a fellow clergyman, a story that Pym turned into Father Thames's refusal to house Father Ransome in the vicarage.

The induction of Father Ransome is based on two induction services Pym attended with Smith. Pym and Smith attended Sean MacAteer's induction at Holy Innocents Church, Hammersmith. Pym took advantage of the occasion not only to note the forms and ceremonies but also the gathering of the congregation afterwards for tea and refreshments in the Church Hall. The induction of Father Ransome to his first incumbency owes as much to a similar service at St Cyprian's Church, Clarence Gate, when Archdeacon Morcom – as he soon became – was made vicar of that beautiful church. Father Ransome's church is not beautiful but "Marius's looks made up for the shortcomings of the church." As Smith and Pym entered St Cyprian's they overheard the following conversation: "Are you robing, Father?" ... "Rather!" came the enthusiastic answer from his colleague. This clerical conversation was related afterwards in our novel.

St Mary Aldermary, Queen Victoria Street, was another venue for lunch-time services. Here the priest was Father Freddie Hood, known to Smith and Pym from his years in Oxford as principal of Pusey House, an Anglo-Catholic centre for undergraduates. They recalled his invitations in Oxford to "sherry and Compline", "sherry" pronounced as "shewwy" with Father Hood's strange lisp on the letter r. St Mary's was the church where Pym heard a tele-

phone ringing in the vestry during the service, speculation about which provided the opening pages for *AGOB.*

In his essay *Remembering Barbara Pym* Smith complains about "the endless bullying homilies from the pulpit offered on seemingly every occasion about social issues and the Third World." Pym writes in her notebook:

> The dreadful bullying and exhortation that goes on in sermons – to go to Confession, to attend weekday Masses – and the old ladies are driven on. One can sympathise – though it is a view repellent to me – with those who worship God in the open – to the whirr of the lawnmower or the swish of the hose on the car.

Pym's critical comments are reflected in *AGOB.* Father Ransome preaches "about visiting the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and trying to be kind to coloured people in various unspecified ways." Ransome's friend, Father Sainsbury, is one of those preachers who, on coming to the end of what they have to say, find it impossible to stop. Sentence after sentence seemed as if it must be the last but still he went on. Wilmet felt as if she "had been wrapped round and round in a cocoon of wordiness, like a great suffocating eiderdown."

In a letter to Smith Pym writes:

> You thought perhaps that I might have retained some idealized vision of the clergy and in a sense I still do. ... But I am under no illusion about church people, on the whole, and the dullness and pettiness and dreariness of all the things a clergyman would have to do.

However, when Pym examines the Anglican priesthood, she treats the subject with her usual blend of detached humour and subtle irony. She is quite restrained in her criticism and states: "I suppose I criticise and mock at the clergy and the Church of England because I am fond of them." And Robert Smith insists that Pym "lived her life and wrote her books within a serious but never, never a solemn religious framework." I agree.

Dr. Eleonore Biber *has delivered papers on Barbara Pym at various gatherings of the Barbara Pym Society and the English Speaking Union in Austria, England and the U.S. Doing research on Anglo-Catholicism for her doctoral dissertation "The Modern Anglo-Catholic Novel", Eleonore went church-crawling in London in the footsteps of Barbara Pym – from All Saints, Margaret Street to All Saints, Notting Hill, the model for St Luke's* in A Glass of Blessings. *Eleonore, a born and bred Viennese, lives in a small village in the heart of the Vienna Woods with her husband. Her most recent research interest is international crime fiction.*