

An Unholy Communion

By the same author

A Very Private Grave
A Darkly Hidden Truth

AN UNHOLY COMMUNION

THE MONASTERY MURDERS

Donna Fletcher Crow



LION FICTION

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With deep gratitude to my sisters in crime

Sally Wright

and

Dolores Gordon-Smith

Without whom it wouldn't have happened

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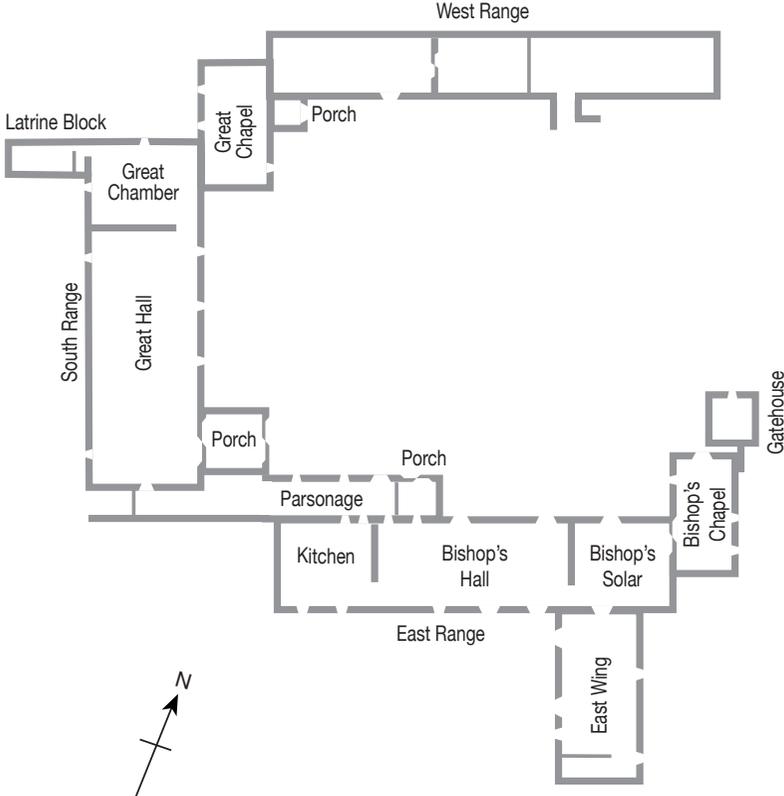
And to Dolores Gordon-Smith, who did lead me through Wales in sun and driving rain. And to Sisters Alma and Nora for their gracious hospitality at St Non's retreat house and for giving me the room with the stunning view which later became Felicity's.

You can see pictures of all our adventures at www.DonnaFletcherCrow.com

TIME LINE

304	Julius and Aaron martyred at Caerleon
500 (c.)	Non gives birth to St David
546	St David preaches at the Synod of Brefi, is named Bishop of Caerleon
1150 (c.)	Cistercians establish Llantarnam Abbey
1188	Gerald tours Wales
1203	Llantarnam establishes manor at Penrhys
1328–47	Henry de Gower is Bishop of St David's
1538	Shrine of Our Lady of Penrhys destroyed
1904	Welsh Revival
1953	Statue of Our Lady of Penrhys erected

The Bishop's Palace



Glossary

Arcade: A succession of arches
Argentiferous: Rock containing silver
Ascension: Feast commemorating the bodily Ascension of Jesus into heaven, fortieth day after Easter
Aspergillum: Liturgical implement used to sprinkle holy water
Aurochs: Ancient type of wild cattle
Barbour: Exclusive waterproof jackets for country wear
Camlan: King Arthur's final battle
Cairn: Manmade pile of stones, usually for ceremonial purposes
Caractacus: A first century British chieftain of the Catuvellauni tribe
Castra: Roman word for fort
Clerestory: Windows in an upper level to bring in light and air
Compline: Final Office of the day in the canonical hours
Coney: Rabbit
Corpus Christi: A joyous feast celebrating the presence of Christ in the Eucharist
Crockford's: Clerical directory of biographies of Anglican clergy in UK
Croeso: Welsh for welcome
Cwm: Welsh for valley
Cymru: Welsh name for Wales
Dolomitic: Sedimentary rock containing calcium magnesium carbonate
Epipen: Instrument for injecting allergy medication into outer thigh

Frigidarium: Cold pool in Roman baths
Frontal: Altar cloth covering the entire front of the altar
Garth: Celtic word for field
HobNob: British biscuit (cookie) made from oats
Hollow way: A road which has over time fallen significantly lower than the land on either side
Ipecac: Syrup used to cause vomiting
Kyrie eleison: Lord have Mercy (Greek)
Lemsip: Brand of lemon-flavoured hot drink for colds containing paracetamol
Llan: Welsh for church
Malefice: An evil deed
Menevia: Ancient name for St. David's
Metaled road: Road built on a bed of crushed rock
Miter: Liturgical headdress worn by bishops and abbots
Mithraism: Religion popular in Roman army worshipping the sun-god Mithra
Mizzle: Drizzle; light, depressing rain
Motte: Mound topped with structure known as a keep in castle construction
Nightwish: Symphonic metal band from Finland
Ordinand: One studying for ordination
Pelagius: Fifth-century preacher who denied original sin as well as Christian grace
Paracetamol: Analgesic similar to aspirin
Paraments: Liturgical hangings around the altar, altar cloth
Parapet: A wall-like barrier at the edge of a roof
Pediment: Low-pitched gable surmounting the façade of a classical building
Pilum: Javelin used in Roman army
Pinny: Wrap-around apron, cover-all
Piscina: Place near the altar used for washing communion vessels
Portico: Porch leading to the entrance of a building

Potholer: Spelunker, a person who explores caves
Pulpitum: Massive screen, usually stone, dividing choir from nave in a cathedral
Refectory: Dining room, especially in a monastery
Renesmee: Child of hero and heroine in Twilight vampire series
Reredos: Screen or decoration behind the altar
Rood Screen: An ornate partition between the chancel and nave of a church
Satnav: GPS
Satsumas: Small, loose-skinned orange, seedless Mandarin Orange
Scrynne: Used to contain precious writings or sacred relics, forerunner of a shrine
Sidesman: Usher
Silures: Celtic tribe occupying much of present Wales
Snogging: Vernacular for kissing
Spatha: Longer sword used by the Roman cavalry
St. John Ambulance: First Aid charity in UK
Stations of the Cross: 14 prayers and meditations on scenes in the passion of Christ
Summer Solstice: June 21, beginning of summer in the northern hemisphere
Swot: Vernacular for study
Tepidarium: The warm room in Roman baths
Thelemic: Occult mystical system to achieve understanding
Thurible: Metal censer suspended from chains in which incense is burned for worship
Titania, Oberon: Faeries in Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream
Triangulation: Process of determining the location of a point by measuring angles to it from known points
Tump: Hillock
Tussock: A small mound of coarse grass
Tyburn: Historically the principal place for execution in London,

near present Marble Arch
Vallum: Earthwork rampart around a Roman camp
Versicle: A short sentence spoken by a priest and followed by a response from the congregation
Viaticum: Latin, "food for the journey" reference to Communion
Volturi: Coven of vampires in Twilight series

The Dawn of Promise

Non is old now. Old and frail, her skin white and thin as gossamer. The stones are warm behind her head. She can feel the heat through her veil. It warms the fine silver hair that was once a cascade of gold, longer than her veil is now. She smiles. Thin, pale lips that were once the lush red of cherries curve in soft remembrance. Her blue eyes are still clear, yet it is not the scene before her that brings a smile to her lips and softness to her face, but the scene in her mind.

Non is old now. Old and frail, her skin white and thin as gossamer. But when her skin was smooth and golden as thick cream, she was loved by a king and a great thing came of that love.

It was her favorite walk atop the cliffs above Whitesands Bay in her faraway, beloved Wales. The waves crashed on the shore below her, spewing white foam on the black rocks. The bay beyond was blue, bluer even than the sky swept free of clouds by the wind that tossed her hair in the sunlight and billowed the skirt of her grass-green gown. She had been listening so intently to the call of the seabirds wheeling and diving over the bay that she had not heard the approach of the horseman.

It was a lifetime ago. It was yesterday. Sandde leapt from his horse and would have taken her that moment in his urgency had it not been for her maidenly insistence on her virtue. She was horrified. Sandde was not old; he was barely half again her age. Sandde was not without position; of the

family of Cunedda Wledig, descended from Bran the Blessed, he ruled the neighboring canton. Sandde had not come with the intention of taking her in dishonor; he was just come from forming a liaison with her family. Yet she would not. Could not. She had made her choice.

It was a lifetime ago. It was yesterday. Non was to be vowed to the religious life. It had been in her heart and her prayers, always. The nearby convent at Ty Gwyn was the home of her choice, not the castle of Ceredigion. But Sandde would have her. So in the end, it was a matter of force. And the rejected suitor rode back to his people and left Non to go on alone. Yet not alone, for she carried the marvelous child within her.

Three months she had carried her child that day when she went to church as usual. And as usual the priest Gildas, a lemon-sucking man with deeply furrowed brow, declaimed his scowling sermon. “Know ye not, oh ye wretched, that it is God’s will that ye be slaughtered and enslaved by the Saxons? The puerile progeny of our leaders are sadly degenerated from the excellence of our ancestors. And now the hangdog enemy—” He was struck dumb mid sentence.

Non smiled as she felt again the child leap in her womb. Did ever infant announce himself with such violent quickening since John the Baptist leapt in his mother’s womb at the sight of the Mother of our Lord? Gildas fell to his knees before her, silent like the stricken Zechariah, making known by gestures and hasty scribblings that Non’s child was to excel all religious teachers.

It was then that the holy Nonnita knew that she must go to the house of Sisters above Whitesands Bay, for in her deepest heart of hearts, she had never left her desire for the vowed life. She would make her profession now. Six months later it was there that she was brought to bed.

Nothing could have been a greater contrast to the day of David's conception than the day of his birth. No place could the sun shine brighter and the breezes blow more sweetly than on the green peninsula thrust so far into the sea at the westernmost edge of the land, and no place could the black clouds hang lower or the winds beat more violently. And so the storm raged. Hour after hour, as black as night in the middle of the day, the sound of the howling wind and crashing sea pounded in Non's ears with increasing ferocity as the intensity of her pains grew. The noise of the storm, the shaking of the conical thatched roof over her head and the relentlessness of her gripping pains were so all-consuming that she was not aware of the ministrations of the nursing Sisters, but hung all the more tightly to the large, smooth stone beside her pallet, giving her something to push against in her labor.

The peak of the storm and the peak of her labour climaxed together. "A son." "It is a son." "A fine, strong, prince of a son." "Praise God for a miracle."

"And another miracle, holy Mother. Look." Little Sister Bryn pointed at the stone to which Non had clung. In sympathy for her pain it lay crumbled, the fragments bearing Non's fingerprints.

And yet the wonders were not ceased. Sister Elspeth, blind these many years, rushed into the room like a romping child. "A well, a holy well." She pointed across the field just beyond the wall encircling the clutch of convent huts. "New sprung. I heard it bubbling forth and felt along the turf until my hands came away wet. I wiped them on my eyes, and I can see!"

At that moment the infant in Non's arms wrinkled his face and gave a great howl. Miracles or no, David would not be ignored.

Non took her son to Aberaeron in Ceredigion that he might be baptized by his cousin Eilfyw and educated by the

most learned, most holy men in the kingdom: Colman, Illtud and Paulinus. And so Non returned to her convent and gave over the nurturing and educating of her son into other hands. But she did not give over the praying.

Non is old now. Old and frail, her skin white and thin as gossamer. She has lived these many years in Brittany, a nun professed. And every day for all the years of her son's life hers has been the deepest joy of all. The joy of praying for the holy child that was born to her in the midst of that great storm on that rocky cliff edge so far away. She sits now in a sunny corner in the cloister and thinks long thoughts. And smiles.

Chapter 1

Thursday, Ascension Day

The Community of the Transfiguration, Kirkthorpe

The thickened light engulfed her. Fighting the heaviness, she opened her mouth. But no sound came out. The black figure plunged over the edge of the tower and hurtled toward the earth. Then, as the skirt of his cassock flared like a parachute, the scene changed to even more horrifying slow motion. Falling, falling, falling,

Would he never reach bottom? Felicity screamed. But still the figure fell. She screamed again.

And woke up. “Oh, no!” She grasped her alarm clock and groaned. How could she have overslept this morning of all mornings? She had looked forward to this day so much. In Oxford it had been May Morning when she had stood below Magdalen’s Great Tower to listen to the college choir singing up the sun. And Ascension morning at the College of the Transfiguration was going to be just like that only better, because she would be up on the tower with her fellow ordinands singing “God is Gone Up on High” and all the wonderful Ascension hymns she only got to sing once a year.

But now it was all wrong. And the phantom of her nightmare hanging over her like an incubus was the least of it. She had so carefully set her alarm last night. Then failed to switch it on. If her scream hadn’t wakened her... Sunrise at 4:49, *BBC Weather* had said. That gave her twenty minutes.

She thrust her tangled duvet off, splashed water on her face and pulled on her jeans. Still clumsy with sleep, her fingers tangled as she struggled to do up all the thirty-nine self-covered buttons of her long, black cassock—a task which it never paid to rush. How could she have made such a stupid mistake? What was the point of all this scramble if she was late? Her frenzy increased when she had to waste time searching under her bed for her second shoe.

The moment she flung open her door, however, she found herself engulfed by the fresh, golden air of an early June daybreak. The spirit of the day that had seemed to have fled now captivated her. The first shafts of sunlight pierced the trees and an exultant dawn chorus rang in her ears as she raced up the hill toward the tallest building in the grounds.

She would surely have made it on time if the slick-damp stones under her feet hadn’t brought her to disaster in a border of lady’s mantle, coral bells and creeping geranium. She picked herself up, brushed impatiently at the stains on her cassock and raced on.

As she started up the steep green mound that led to the tower, a triumphant shout and enthusiastic clanging of handbells told her she was too late. Her fellow ordinands had already ascended the tower of Pusey Hall to sing in Ascension, celebrating the fortieth day after Easter by hymning Christ upward as He ascended to heaven. Felicity would be relegated to observing from the ground rather than singing from the top of the tower herself.

Putting her frustration aside and determining to make the best of the experience, even though she was by nature a doer rather than a watcher, Felicity sought a reasonably secure footing on the slope of the precipitous embankment. At least her presence on the ground provided an earthly audience for her fellows as well as their heavenly one. With one more burst of

tintinnabulation they began the hymn “Hail Thee, Festival Day.”

Felicity stood alone in the peaceful garden, gazing upward just as that band of disciples must have done on the hill outside Jerusalem on the first Ascension morning. Trying to picture what that first day would have been like, Felicity’s mind scrolled through the artists’ interpretations she had seen all the way from full-length paintings of a ghostly, white-draped Christ floating in the air, to a silver gilt plastic cloud with just the nail-pierced soles of Jesus’ feet poking through. Her favorite depiction of all, though, was one she had seen in some cathedral with Christ looking back down through the clouds, His hand raised in blessing, appearing for all the world as if He were waving to her.

Felicity wasn’t sure whether she was gesturing to the ascended Christ or to her fellow ordinands as she flung her arm upward. “Blessed day to be hallowed forever;/Day when our risen Lord/Rose in the heavens to reign.” At the end of the song the jubilant singers leant over the parapet shouting and ringing their bells until Felicity wanted to shout at them to be careful—a warning that she herself needed to heed, as her vigorous waving almost caused her to lose her footing on the steep hillside covered with wet grass.

*See, the Conqueror mounts in triumph; see the King in
royal state,
Riding on the clouds, His chariot, to His heavenly palace
gate.
Hark! the choirs of angel voices joyful alleluias sing,
And the portals high are lifted to receive their heavenly
King.*

The next hymn was as much shouted as sung, but the words were almost drowned out by the crashing of bells in a determined

attempt to rouse any of their fellow students who might have been so foolish as to think they could sleep in that morning. The sunrise exuberance continued with a shouted versicle from the tower: “The Lord is gone up on high, Alleluia.”

And Felicity cupped her hands around her mouth to shout the response: “And has led captivity captive, Alleluia.”

The tower-top choir began, “Hail the day that sees Him rise ... Christ, awhile to mortals given, Alleluia!/Reascends His native heaven, Alle—”

The final Alleluia never registered in Felicity’s ears. It was extinguished by a much nearer shriek. Her own.

The piercing scream tore a second time from her throat as she watched in horrifying slow motion a cassock-clad figure from the back of the choir catapult across the parapet and arc over the side of the tower.

The singing must have continued, as no one on the tower appeared to have seen the terrifying spectacle. But Felicity heard no music, only the shuddering thud as the body hit the earth. Then, appallingly, rolled down the steep hill to come to rest at her feet.

Too shocked to run, Felicity stood frozen, staring with unbelieving eyes. This wasn’t real. It was her morning’s dream replaying in her subconscious. She squeezed her eyes shut so hard they hurt. The ghastly specter would be gone when she opened them.

But it wasn’t. This was no dream. Somehow the earlier chimera had translated itself into flesh and blood—a slow trickle of blood oozing from blue lips and trickling into a matted black beard.

Felicity pulled her mesmerized gaze away from the staring black eyes and followed the line of the out-flung arm to the hand that was almost touching her foot. She jerked her foot away and moaned when she realized she had kicked the white hand. It

opened to release a folded scrap of paper.

Felicity bent to pick it up with fingers so stiff they could hardly grasp the paper. Shaking, she unfolded it and glanced at the strange emblem drawn there. Then shrieked again and flung it from her as the paper burst into flame.

Chapter 2

Thursday, continued

“Are you talking about literal fire? Just *pouf*, like a stage magician?” Detective Inspector Nosterfield made no attempt to keep the skeptical tone out of his voice. “Sure you didn’t flick it with a lighter?”

“I don’t even own a lighter. I wish I did. I wish I had some explanation.” Felicity looked around as if one might appear.

“You use a lot of candles up ’ere,” Nosterfield suggested.

“There were no candles!” Felicity sounded desperate.

Antony knew she had had enough of Nosterfield’s badgering. “Inspector, I don’t know anything about stage magic, but even I have heard of flash paper.”

“You can be assured we’ll test the ashes. I expect we’ll find nitric acid. But that still doesn’t explain—”

Antony stepped forward, determined to shift Nosterfield’s focus from Felicity. “I thought you wanted to know more about the victim.”

The stocky inspector in his crumpled suit turned to the priest still clad in the white alb and stole he had donned in preparation for the mass that was to have followed the singing from the tower. “Knew him, did you, Father?”

“Shall we, er—” Antony indicated the chairs in the classroom. Father Clement, principal of the college, had offered to the police to use as an incident room.

“Oh, yes. Yes, sit down.” Nosterfield sounded as if he were