

## Liber Pluscardensis 2: December 1949

As the publication of this number will coincide with our second Christmas in Scotland, Fr Prior and the monks of Pluscarden wish their many friends and benefactors a truly holy and happy Christmas. We shall pray that the Child Jesus may bestow upon them a liberal supply of choice graces and blessings in the Year 1950.

A hope was expressed in our first number that some things might be said of what we are doing and hope to do in the future towards the material restoration of the Priory. Continuity is as good in architecture as in religion. It seems to be our job to forge new links in the broken chain of Pluscarden building. So much was done by the late Marquess of Bute towards the restoration of the Church, and with such purpose, that our thoughts turn inevitably to the next steps to be taken. The gables of the North and South transepts were rebuilt, and the wall copings renewed, and to a slightly lesser extent the same was done in the choir. All this appears to be a preparation for re-roofing both choir and transepts. There is absolutely no trace left of roofing timbers, and in fact no **medieval** work of any sort, except for the desiccated end of a beam and the casing of an old lock. As in the case of most ruined monasteries, much material has been carted away during the centuries and used for neighbouring buildings. One wonders what happened to the choir-stalls and other furnishings. Perhaps Dom Thomas Ross, the last surviving monk, could have left a record, or otherwise. Good solid woodwork does not easily disappear, less deliberately destroyed or allowed to rot. The evidence so much fine woodwork surviving in England is proof enough of that. The Pluscarden transepts had open timber roofs, as had also the cloister walks. Probably we shall have to be content with such a roof over the choir for some considerable time. This would be oppressive because of its height – about 70 feet. We had

hopes of acquiring a dismantled roof, until traces of woodworm were found in it. Given good material and liberty from restrictions, willing craftsmen could be found to raise a roof over the choir in a **comparatively** short time. Maybe we would not even wish to see it exchanged for stone-vaulting at a later period. After all, the last flourish of fan-vaulting in England was no more impressive than the **contemporary** timber roof, a unique glory of our island.

### **Towards A Monastic Humanism**

Our brethren the monks of Pierre-Qui-Vire in France publish an excellent review entitled TEMOIGNAGES. It is devoted to the work of Christian and monastic Humanism and is far surpassing any such periodical of the English-speaking countries.

Now, granted that such an intense study of humanism as the sons of Père Muard are making is out of reach of most communities, it yet remains true that we ought to derive profit and encouragement from their example, and in a small, too, we should imitate them.

The Benedictine community is a community of men. It follows a mode **of life** eminently suited to men, in the form of a Rule which contains no hardship beyond the capability of ordinary men, and with the result – so our good friends tell us, that this group of men becomes much more human, not less, by virtue of this mode of life. The old idea that monks hated the world and fled from it as from something evil was either a lie or half-truth worse than any lie. We have only to take a glance at Miss Waddell's *Beasts and Saints* to see that St Anthony and his pig, St Jerome and his lion, St Benedict and his raven, are not these clear signs of the love of nature among monks? They loved birds, they loved beasts, they loved men still more. The Lives of the Fathers abound in stories of kindness towards men. There is even an occasion in Cassian of a certain Abbot shortening the solemn psalmody in order to explain something to his guest!

Who has not visited the ruins of a Cistercian abbey in Scotland or England or Wales without admiring the taste of those monks who chose such lovely sites for their dwellings and gave them such beautiful names, Strata Florida, Kinloss, Merevale, Rievaulx? Men who fled the world of cities came to know the world much more, the real world, the world as seen through the eyes of God. It was in St Aelred's Abbey, built in a vast solitude, that charity and friendship for men reached its high-water mark.

**Sermons in stones, books in the running brooks:** if anyone will say that this turn of mind is inimical to Christian culture, to Humanism, to the life of letters, has he ever tried to write verse and prose in the open air, by the riverside, in the silent cloister with no sound but the song of birds at early morning. How easy it is to create **then!**

But monks must have books. They cannot always be creating or getting their material from sunsets: indeed St Benedict prescribes several hours daily to be spent in reading. Their reading consists especially in Scripture and the works of the Church Fathers. And the Church by her legislation for sacred studies has determined the nature and extent of monastic reading. There has to be "reading around the subject". Some monks again will be artists and craftsmen – most communities can boast of at least one or two – who will need special, technical and instructional books connected with their work. And all in the community experience the necessity of an adequate reference library. All this is an essential part of monastic humanism. "The proper study of mankind is Man", Pope wrote. Maybe his superficial meaning is opposed to seeking God alone. But when we have found God alone, in this desert into which He call us and speaks to our heart, then it is that we begin to be truly human, loving man and the things of men with a divinized love, for God's sake; then we become lovers of beauty and of goodness. In that sense Pope is right. And in another sense, too, he is right: the proper study of Christians is a God Who is MAN.

## OPUS DEI (Life of Abbot Marmion by Dom Thibaud)

“The more we advance, the more we become into relation with God, the more do we understand the greatness of the Divine Office. There is no other work which comes near this praise; encircling the Holy Sacrifice, which is its centre, it constitutes the purest glory man can give to God, because it is the closest share the soul can have in the canticle which the Incarnate Word renders to the holy Trinity.”

“For some weeks chanting the Office has been an almost insupportable penance ... to live in this state, to work, to pray, to be gay, is worth more than the greatest austerities” (from a letter).

“The Divine Office is the surest means, apart from the Sacraments, of union with God. This only is **Opus Dei**: all else is **opera hominum**.” (*Christ the Ideal of the Monk*) “There are no other hours when we can do more for God's glory than those we spend in choir, **pernoctans in oration Dei**.”

Some 50 years ago, in another land than this, there was a Bishop of whom this story is told. In his diocese was a contemplative monastery. Driving past there one day he remarked to a friend: “There are 20 priests in that place, and not one of them is any use to me. Was he right? Is there in fact a sharp cleavage of either/or in this separation between the active and passive vocation? Is there no apostolic value to the diocese that burdens itself with a community totally devoted to prayer? The answer of the monk to the Bishop might easily run: “Because I know you were hard-pressed I came here!” Let us examine his claims.

It must be sent immediately, at risk of damaging the monk's case, that the contemplative life is essentially a hidden life, and that therefore it cannot be assessed in this life. There are no statistics to show how many new churches have their foundations set in hidden lives. We must build any defence of contemplatives on the foundations of our faith.

What was the Bishop striving to do for his diocese? A Bishop's **raison d'être** is to feed his flock. For this reason he

builds schools and churches, parish halls and cathedrals: to this end he will, if he lives in some parts of the world, become like St Paul in all things, even to his bond. He feeds his flock that they may live for ever. With Christ he can say on any visitation: “I am come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly.” Now, what is this life, to the nourishing of which he gives his own life? “This is eternal life ... Jesus Christ.” Eternal life isn't a thing, it is a Person. When the Bishop places his hands on his children, to give them the Holy Ghost, it is the Spirit, the Soul, of Christ which he imparts. It can be truly said that all the Bishop's work, no matter how outwardly material, is inwardly his constant imparting of the Divine Spirit of Christ.

Where in all this is the monk's part? What is the monk's **raison d'être**? Let us go back to the first coming of the Holy Ghost. You remember how after this imparting, those first Bishops, the Apostles, went out, led by Peter, and began their very active life. The impetus of that divine storm the flow drove them restlessly through the world building churches everywhere. What was the immediate preface to the storm? “All these were persevering with one mind in prayer ... There came a sound from heaven as of a mighty wind.” In that upper room during those 40 days between Christ's promise to send his Paraclete and that Strong One's coming, here there was assembled literally the whole Church. When the confirmed Apostles preached, the Church was no longer in one place. The cleavage had come. “Persevering in one mind with Mary.” We do not find Mary standing beside Peter. We find no trace of Mary's apostolic footsteps. Or do we not? When we trace the path of grace that marks the journeying of Paul, do we not find some traces of Mary the Mother of Divine Grace? Was Mary unconscious of Paul's sufferings and Peter's anxieties because she had but rare news of them?

I began by saying that a monk's **raison d'être** is prayer. Perhaps here in this picture of the early Church we may find the answer to the question – were the monks of no use to the diocese?

(To be continued)

## Carol for Homecoming

“O Dawtie, hush!” she cries out-bye,  
Forfochen ‘mid the snawy drift:  
*By Pluscarden the lang roads lie*  
*Mune-white ane’th the cauldribe lift.*

Milder the grace she wears than May  
Dreamin’ amang the sunlit howes:  
Clearer her voice than burns that play  
Singin’ atween the simmer knows:

“Ance warmth, an’ biield an’ kinly wyes,  
This Scotland kept for me an’ mine!”  
*By Pluscarden the Aves rise*  
*As leal, as fain, as in langsyne.*

“O Dawtie, hark! They bid us ben:  
They cry us welcome, ilk by name!”  
*Wide staun’ the yetts o’ Pluscarden*  
“Dear he’rt, dear he’rt, we hae won hame!”

M.W.S.