



### "Nothing Dearer Than Christ"

Oblate letter of the Pluscarden Benedictines

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"Let nothing be preferred to the Work of God" (HR 43:3).

Dom Marmion has left an authentic treasure of spiritual teaching for the Church of our time. In his writings he teaches a simple but demanding way of holiness for all the faithful, whom God has destined in love to be his adopted children through Jesus Christ (Eph 1:5). May a widespread rediscovery of his spiritual writings help Christians to grow in union with Christ, and to bear faithful witness to him." (Pope John-Paul II)

## Monastic Voices

From the writings of Dom Columba (Joseph) Marmion OSB, 1858-1923, beatified 3 Sept 2000

"As everything in Jesus Christ can be summed up in His Divine Sonship, so everything in the Christian can be summed up in his participation of this sonship, by Jesus Christ, through Jesus Christ. Our holiness is nothing else but this: the more we participate in the Divine life through the communication Jesus Christ makes to us of the grace of which He ever possesses the fullness, the higher is the degree of our holiness. Christ is not only holy in Himself: He is our holiness. All the holiness God has destined for our souls has been placed in the Humanity of Christ, and it is from this source that we must draw. God wills our holiness. He wills it because He loves us infinitely, and we ought to will it with Him. But we can only be Saints according to the measure in which the life of Jesus Christ is in us. We shall only be pleasing to the Eternal Father - and is not that the whole substance of sanctity: to be pleasing to God? - if He recognises in us the features of His Son.

O Holy Spirit, infinite Love, proceeding from the Father and the Son, give me the spirit of adoption; teach me to act always as a true child of God. Abide in me, grant that I may abide in Thee so that I may love as thou lovest. I am nothing without Thee. Fill me with Thy love so that I may remain united through Thee to the Father and the Son!" (from: Christ the Life of the Soul)

"We ought to contemplate Jesus in all the actions of His life and death; in all the states of His glory. We should search out the mystery of Christ (Eph 3: 4,9), in order to conform our lives to this Model Who renders God accessible to us, and to draw divine life from Him. We derive our knowledge of Jesus first of all from the Gospel. Happy are they who open it every day! They drink at the well-spring of living waters. Secondly, we know the mysteries of Christ through the liturgy of the Church. Guided by the Church, we pass each year, from Christmas to the Ascension, through each phase of His life. If with faith and love we contemplate Him in this cycle of His mysteries, while seeking to imitate Him and remain united to Him, we can be assured that the constant prayer that He, as our one Mediator, offers for us to His Father will be answered. By His Spirit, He will imprint His living image upon our souls; the Father will recognise us at the last day as the members of the Son of His love, and will make us co-heirs with Christ." (from: Christ in His mysteries)

"If someone asks at the monastery door, 'What do you do here?' he will be told: 'We go to God by following Christ in obedience'. That is the sole end pursued. The monk comes to the Abbey, not to give himself to some occupation that he finds suitable, but to seek God in obedience. It was by the obedience of Christ that the world

was redeemed. It is still thanks to obedience that the world continues to be saved, that souls return to God and are sanctified. So St. Benedict calls obedience a 'good' (HR 71:1). It is for him something we should seek and hunger after. Obedience gives us God, and therefore it becomes for us a precious good. So let us make obedience our 'food', as Christ Himself did (Jn 4:34). Let us ask our Lord for this virtue in all its perfection, this virtue which surrenders the judgement, will, heart, the whole being to God and to His representative. If we are faithful in asking for this grace, Christ Jesus will certainly grant it to us." (from: Christ the Ideal of the Monk)

"You are powerful enough, O my God, to make a saint of me, in spite of my faults and weaknesses. I believe this, because You can work this miracle of mercy, and Your mercy is infinite." (Private notes).

## **Dear oblates and friends,**

On 3rd March 1913 Abbot Columba Marmion landed on Caldey Island, and immediately began the first of a series of conferences preached to our community. His text was from Psalm 149: Cantate Domino canticum novum: laus eius in ecclesia sanctorum: "Sing to the Lord a new song: His praise in the Church of the Saints." His powerful and moving words were never forgotten by those present. And indeed this was no ordinary retreat. The Abbot of Maredsous was there to help our monks enter at last into full communion with the Catholic Church. It was an anxious moment, for no-one could then say how or whether the community would survive. Dom Marmion was determined to do all in his power to ensure that it would. He had formed a good opinion of it some years before, when he read Aelred Carlyle's essay, Our Purpose and Method. He considered this a masterly exposition of Benedictine principles. So immediately after the formal reception he enrolled the brethren as oblates of Maredsous, with the right to continue wearing the habit. He lent two of his English monks, Dom John Chapman and Dom Bede Camm, to guide the community for the time as superior and novice master, while he himself took Aelred Carlyle with him to Rome, to meet the Pope, St. Pius X. With papal permission he then welcomed Carlyle at Maredsous, and oversaw there his canonical noviciate, solemn profession and priestly ordination. The two men then returned to Caldey together for Carlyle's blessing as Catholic Abbot of a Catholic Benedictine monastery. So our early history was deeply marked by the blessing of Marmion's presence and influence. We owe him an incalculable debt. He has been criticised for acting in this matter too hastily: for being too generous to these eccentric ex-Anglicans. I can only say that if he had not acted as he did, I would almost certainly not be writing this letter to you now, because our community would not now exist, and Pluscarden, presumably, would be still merely a picturesque ruin.

Joseph Marmion was born into a large and devout family, with a French mother and Irish father. His parents were determined from his birth that he should be a priest. Accordingly, he wore nothing but black throughout his childhood, and duly entered the seminary of the Dublin diocese at the age of 17. His outstanding intelligence was soon noted, and he was sent for further studies to Rome, where he was ordained. On his return home the young priest was given pastoral, chaplaincy and teaching work. He devoted himself to all of this with the zeal and generosity that always marked all he did.

But Fr. Marmion was not completely satisfied. While at Rome he had visited Monte Cassino, staying for one night. That was enough for him: he felt he never wanted to leave. There was at that time no Benedictine monastery in Ireland. So he asked his Bishop for permission to follow in the footsteps of the Irish Saints of old, and to leave all things, even his native land, in order to follow Christ as a monk.

Two things in particular about the Benedictine life attracted him. One was the priority given to prayer, and especially liturgical prayer, fittingly carried out in a dignified and beautiful manner. But even more important for him was the ideal of obedience. He wanted to submit his own will, to live in obedience, in imitation of Christ, in order to abandon his whole life unconditionally into God's hands.

So it was that in 1886 he entered Maredsous in Belgium. The monastery had been founded, from Beuron in Germany, only 14 years previously. It did not take the postulant long to discover the "hardships and difficulties" St. Benedict promises every newcomer (HR 58:8). Marmion's French was far from perfect, but many in the community then were German or Flemish, whose languages he did not know at all. Perhaps it was the sons of those nations in particular who tended to favour the very formal atmosphere then prevailing in the house, and the rigid conformity to discipline that was expected. The novice master was an austere and humourless man, with a deep distrust of human nature. His whole emphasis was on mortification, abnegation, renunciation, death to self, war on the flesh. Marmion, by contrast, resembled in many ways Pope John XXIII, who would one day be beatified with him. Already then tending to corpulence, by temperament he was jolly, optimistic, impulsive;

a lover of warm human friendships; always ready to see the funny side of things. A lesser man would have run away. Marmion stayed put. One day he was required to state what aspect of life in the noviciate he found most difficult. "You, Reverend Father", was his reply. At his first profession, alone in a strange land, he felt that he was sealing himself into a tomb. Again and again in his life, he would be asked for a similar degree of heroism. Again and again he chose the way of obedience, the Christ way. The fruit he reaped was continual spiritual progress, and an ever-growing interior joy, sensed by everyone he met.

In fact, once he was professed, Dom Marmion never lacked the work he most loved, and did best: "to give God to souls, and souls to God". He was put in charge of the formation, both intellectual and spiritual, of the young monks. He became famous as a preacher, and was much sought after as a spiritual director. He disliked this term, since for him the children of God must be free to follow the direction of the Holy Spirit; but it involved him in an enormous correspondence. 1700 of his letters of spiritual advice survive. He also soon found himself in demand as a retreat giver. This work would absorb a significant portion of his energies for the rest of his life. So much activity: yet through it all, his priority remained the life of prayer, and the cultivation of an intense union with God.

Dom Marmion remained faithful to the habits of piety he formed from the beginning of his monastic life. They were centred on the liturgy, and especially the Mass. He would habitually spend half an hour after Mass in prayer of thanksgiving, maintaining this attitude all morning. At noon, however, he began a period of preparation for his next holy communion. He participated in the Choir office with full attention to every detail, striving to remain recollected in God's presence throughout. In addition, he made the Stations of the Cross and recited 5 decades of the rosary every day without fail.

In 1909 Marmion was elected Abbot of Maredsous, which had grown by this time to about 150 monks. He took as his motto "*Magis prodesse quam praeesse*": "Profit for others, rather than pride of place for self" (HR 64:8). He had no competence as an administrator, but was outstanding as a spiritual father. He responded to his election with obedience, and also with great affection. He loved his community, and had the gift of understanding people, and the tact and sensitivity needed to bring out the best in them. Always ready to encourage, help and console, he could also be disarmingly frank if correction was called for. Each monk had a monthly private interview with him. He was assiduous in nourishing them all with regular spiritual conferences. Above all he led by example. In his time Maredsous gained a reputation as a fervent house of prayer, and school for saints.

When World War I broke out, the monastery was absorbed into occupied territory. The monks of military age had already been called up. Some became PoW's; one was shot by a German firing squad. With the community facing starvation, the Abbot undertook the hazardous journey to England, disguised as a cattle dealer: seeking an alternative home for his younger monks. Without papers of any sort, he could well have been shot by either side. He got through by the grace of God, good luck, bluff and the power of Irish blarney. Having established a community of about 20 monks in Ireland, and in spite of serious health problems, in 1916 he made the reverse trip. From then until his death he faced serious difficulties in the community. The French and German brethren could not live together. Monks returning from the trenches could not settle back into the monastic routine. A group of young monks formed a sort of party of opposition, causing him great distress and trouble. But at the same time, with the publication of his books, he found himself being lauded on all sides as the spiritual master of his age. The first edition of *Christ the Life of the Soul* sold 250,000 copies. It was soon translated into 15 languages. The Pope personally congratulated him on it, calling it "the pure doctrine of the Church".

Actually, apart from the Letters, Marmion he did not write any of the 6 titles ascribed to him. They were collated from notes taken by recipients of his retreat conferences. He spoke directly to his audience, without a script, but with burning faith and love, and all the authority of lived experience. Some of this is inevitably lost in translation, as is all the humour, which would often break through, provoking gales of laughter. The books do retain, however, Marmion's habit of always quoting the Latin text of the New Testament or the Holy Rule, both of which he knew by heart. A modern reader will therefore inevitably find the style somewhat dated; even turgid. Nevertheless, I would recommend all the books to anyone without hesitation. I was given Marmion to read on entry here, and often return to him.

As the titles of his books indicate, Marmion's teaching was completely Christ-centred. His constant guide was St. Paul, in whom he read that Christ is our life (Col 3:4); that we must have his mind in us (Phil 2:5); that we have been predestined into the adoption of sons through Him (Eph 1:5). This last text was central for Marmion.

He constantly preached that all the doctrines of the Church, all the mysteries of Christ point towards this mystery of our divine adoption.

Marmion's thought was firmly undergirded by the philosophy and theology of St. Thomas Aquinas. His favourite modern spiritual author was St. Francis de Sales. But the sources he drew upon most of all were scripture and the liturgy. In this he anticipated the emphasis of Vatican II. His insistence on the universal call to holiness, and the vocation of the baptised to participate in the priesthood of Jesus Christ would also become great Conciliar themes. Yet Marmion was no progressive. He was never tempted to theological liberalism. In the wake of the Council he fell somewhat out of fashion. It is very good that he is being proposed to us again as a model and inspiration. The message of Christ he taught with such freshness and power can never become out-dated. His beatification should be a great encouragement for all Christians, but especially for the sons and daughters of St. Benedict, whom he so ardently followed. We have another heavenly patron, Deo gratias! His feast day is on October 3rd.