

JOHN O'CONNOR

S. M. ALBERT

WHEN Monsignor John O'Connor slept peacefully in the Lord in his eighty-second year on the day which also saw the death of his late Majesty King George the Sixth—Father John would have chuckled at the coincidence—BLACKFRIARS and the Dominican Order lost an old and staunch friend.

His first contacts with the Order are not known to the present writer, but he once quoted something which had been told him in 1894 by an old novice of Father Tom Burke. Many well-known members of the English Province were his friends, among them Fathers Bede Jarrett, Hugh Pope and Vincent McNabb. Some of them may even have been a little disconcerted and embarrassed by the familiarity with which he spoke or addressed them by their Christian names. Until the outbreak of the last war he used to invite one of the Friars to his parish every second year to conduct a parochial retreat, thus bringing the Dominican habit to a part of the world where it was otherwise seldom seen. It was unforunate that the death or absence of his friends left the Order unrepresented among the hundred-and-fifty priests who attended his funeral.

Though a great admirer of the Order, he never became a tertiary. He was too much of a free-lance for that. And while he held St Thomas Aquinas in high esteem and considered himself his disciple, he could hardly be called a thomist in any strict sense of the word. Nor did he claim to be a theologian: 'reasoning on revelation' was how he described his ruminations and declarations on theological topics. Yet in his passionate love of the true and the genuine, as he saw it, and in his fierce denunciation of everything that seemed to him to savour of cant and hypocrisy and insincerity, he was surely a true Dominican and thomist at heart. Savonarola was one of his heroes (and he was a great hero-worshipper), and his pamphlet, published by Blackfriars Publications, bears witness to his burning conviction of that Friar's innocence and sanctity.

Dominican, too, was his intense devotion to the rosary, though

it doubtless dated back to the family prayers of his Irish home. One often met him strolling along the road, deep in meditation, his rosary dangling in his hand behind his back. He established the Rosary Confraternity in his church and Rosary Sunday always brought the blessing of the roses—not, however, as is usual, for distribution to the congregation, but presented by the children for later distribution among the sick. Whenever possible he conducted the October devotions which consisted in the rosary recited before the Lady Altar, led by himself kneeling in the front bench, after which he turned round and, ‘thinking aloud’ for a while, treated his tiny audience to a glimpse of his own deep insight into the mysteries which they had just prayed together. Unrubrical, perhaps, but *contemplare, contemplata aliis tradere* surely. Most fitting it was, then, that he breathed his last just as those who were kneeling around him finished the rosary.

From the first he was an admirer and supporter of the ideals which BLACKFRIARS set out to popularise and became a ready contributor to its pages.¹ His readiness may sometimes have been rather embarrassing to the editors. ‘I give no theological references just to spite you. Besides, no theologian has ever consented to think such things. If anyone did I should like to hear from him’, was his retort to a Dominican friend’s criticism of a highly original article on the Mass which he had asked her to ‘edit’ and then submit for publication in BLACKFRIARS.

Users of the English Dominican Missal will be familiar with his translations of the *Lauda Sion* and other sequences. All the hymns of St Thomas were very dear to him, and he repeatedly expressed his envy of the Friar Preachers who still have the *Laetabundus* in their Missal. ‘It was a Dominican Pope that biffed it out of our missal’, he complained. His renderings of Latin, French and Italian hymns and carols are to be found in the Westminster and Arundel Hymnals, and in the book of carols edited by Sir Richard Terry as well as among his own poems. His favourite was perhaps *Oi Betleem*, a Basque carol of great pathos and beauty. To hear him sing it was an experience not soon forgotten.

O Bethlehem!

’Tis not the rosebud’s time to open,

O Bethlehem!

¹ His contributions began with a metrical translation of the *Pange lingua gloriosi* in April 1921 and continued for the remainder of his life.

Yet fallen petals haunt thy ways,
 Deep desolation mourns in Rama,
 Rachel bewailing sons that are not,
 Disconsolate, O Bethlehem!

Some of his best translations of Latin hymns were fitted to the plaint chant melodies, for he advocated a judicious use of the vernacular in the Liturgy.

Very often his letters would contain snatches of verse, especially from Dante. 'Here is another bit of Dante, just come:

Lady, so great art thou and of such might,
 That he who would have grace and thee doth miss
 Would have his longing without wing take flight.'

His verses, together with his translations of Claudel's *Satin Slipper* and Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism*, earned him an international reputation. He had a happy knack of capturing the 'feel' of another language, and although he was perhaps at his best when dealing with spiritual and mystical themes, he could employ colloquial and even vulgar phraseology with equal effect. His rendering of one of Horace's *Odes* reproduced in *The Tablet* of February 26th is an instance of this. To hear him sing or recite his own compositions, serious or otherwise, was entertainment indeed.

Literature, art, drama, music, architecture, above all everything pertaining to the service of God—all these and much beside claimed his interest and evoked his highly personal and often controversial observations. Most of the literary productions in which he expounded his views were printed privately, but it was as a conversationalist that he excelled rather than as a writer, and it is a misfortune that no Boswell was at hand to pass on to a wider audience what was not always fully appreciated by the actual hearers.

The world at large may remember and evaluate him for his humanism, and as the friend of Belloc, Chesterton, Baring, Birrell, Gill, Terry and a host of others. But these friends would surely have been the first to admit that they, like the thousands of humbler folk to whom he ministered during close on fifty-seven years of his priestly life, esteemed him most for his worth as a man and a priest.

His personality and attainments could have given him a passport to any society, for he shone in any company and he might

have achieved far greater fame had he concentrated on any one of his many interests. But he chose to live out his life among the 'dark satanic mills' of the West Riding, and so far as one could tell lived it as happily as a king. Sometimes he spoke a little wistfully of an offer of a private chaplaincy which he had rejected when quite a young man, but his face always brightened as he added: 'and yet if I had accepted that I should never have received Chesterton into the Church'. In a life that must have brought many consolations to his priestly heart, that one obviously stood supreme. For the last thirty-two years of his life he was in charge of St Cuthbert's, Bradford, and he was in truth wedded to his parish. Despite old age and ill-health he remained its pastor until the end, and even when at one time there was question of possible retirement, he planned to find a home within the parish. Perhaps it is necessary to know Bradford to realise what devotion that implied.

'Fr John'—his friends never got used to the 'Monsignor'—was not, perhaps, a typical priest. But he was not typically anything. He was, as his Bishop observed in his panegyric, 'unique', uniquely himself. And by a merciful provision of Providence, he remained completely himself to the very end, physically weak, but mentally as alert as ever. On the afternoon of his death he had a long discussion with a fellow priest on a subject always dear to his heart—higher education. Then a sudden collapse, the last rites consciously received and responded to, the rosary and the end. And as he lay in his coffin, clad in a purple Ditchling vestment, in the church which he had hated for its architecture yet loved and served so well as God's house and his charge, there was a look of peace and joy and the stamp of holiness on his face. 'He seemed to say: There, I told you what it would be like, and now I know what it is to see God' was the comment of a friend.

Chesterton has immortalised the portrait, in parts slightly libellous, of the little round figure with umbrella and brown paper parcels, but his friends will surely prefer to remember him as he smiles his impish whimsical smile from his memorial card, clad in surplice and stole, the biretta crowning the genial face and hiding the 'bump of benevolence'.

We all know the 'Secret of Father Brown', but what of the secret of Father John? It was, surely, that he always retained in a vivid degree the utter simplicity, naturalness and humility of a

child. Often, maybe, he was an *enfant terrible*, but always the child serenely at home in its Father's house. And of such is the kingdom of heaven. His innocence—'impregnable innocence' it has been called—was that cleanness of heart which merits even in this life to see God. And so in all and above all he sought and saw God, and having found him, strove to share his discovery with others. His wisdom was that knowledge which is hidden from the worldly wise and the foolish (and how he castigated folly!) but is revealed to God's little ones. That wisdom shone out in his brilliant intuitions on every conceivable subject and lay at the heart of his versatility.

He was a true man of prayer and a real contemplative. Prayer came as naturally to him in the street or on the bus as in his church. His Mass, tranquil, serene, without a trace of mannerisms, was an object lesson in what prayer and the worship of God should be. 'For nearly sixty years', he wrote in a pamphlet for private circulation (*Why Revive the Liturgy, and How?*), 'the Liturgy'—and by this he meant 'essentially and exclusively the solemn sacrifice of the Mass and nothing else'—'has been more dear to me than eyesight, space or liberty, and I have received my reward in millions of ecstatic moments: indeed it has been the bait by which God has hooked me, and the hook endures though the bait has melted away.'

In everything concerning the beauty of divine worship, chant, ceremonies, rubrics (when he approved of them!), vestments, architecture, he demanded what was his idea of perfection and would tolerate the worst more easily than the second best. After listening with appreciation to his views on church music a well-known choirmaster said that he would welcome an opportunity of hearing Fr John's own choir. 'I have no choir', came the unexpected reply. 'Better no music at all than bad music.'

His sermons were often homely, sometimes shocking, never dull. There was something of the prophet in his fearless denunciation of all that seemed to him to merit condemnation. And yet there was no sting in his words and he loved the person even while he castigated mercilessly the thing or quality which he abhorred. No doubt it was his vivid Irish faith which enabled him to face so squarely the darker side of the people and things he loved, and he would have been amazed and unbelieving had anyone suggested that his railing at (or jesting about) sacred things

betokened any lack of loyalty or devotion or respect. 'Piety is only one Gift of the Holy Ghost', he would have said in self-defence. 'Wisdom and Understanding be two more. Yet there be those who try to make Piety serve for all.'

One of his sermons began: 'Is marriage a failure? . . . Yes, if failures marry.' Sometimes when his thoughts ran away with him some of his hearers were out of their depth. 'Me preaching on Trinity Sunday long ago do recall that I said: A person is potential to infinitude, a Divine Person is actual to it. And after, some folk who used to be encouraging said: Ee, Father, last Sunday you did get off the track.'

The children of the parish were his special favourites; they loved him as much as he loved them, especially the little girls. The children's Mass and Sunday school were his preserve. Some of his instructions, if one can use so formal a word, puzzled his young hearers and shocked their elders from whom they sought enlightenment, but many things, remembered though not understood, would be seen in their true significance in later years. Many of his happiest hours were spent in the schools of his parish, entertaining the youngsters with his stories and questions, teaching them the chant, or, in the convent secondary school, coaching for the Apologetics examination or Gilbert and Sullivan operas, declaiming his specially composed translations of Latin odes, expounding his views on Shakespeare.

The poor, the sick, and those in trouble always found the sympathy and understanding, and often more tangible help, which they needed. He often used the various blessings which are found, though too seldom sought, in the Roman Ritual, and cures were so frequent that many people were convinced that he had the gift of the 'healing hand'.

The world of letters has lost one of its lights, but the poor, the sick and the children of his parish have lost a unique friend and consoler and father in God.

And thou, Father loving-kind,
 Ever have thy flock in mind,
 Master-shepherd, pray oh pray!
 At the High King's court above
 Speak thine orphans' suit with love
 While the ages roll away.

(Final stanza of Mgr O'Connor's translation of the Sequence for St Dominic's Feast)