

FR. LUKE WALKER, O.P.—AN APPRECIATION

THE name of Fr. Luke Walker, O.P., S.T.M., was not widely known, even in Catholic circles, when he died recently during his term of office as "Regent" or director of studies in the English Dominican Province. How much might be lost if we praised only famous men!

Fr. Luke wrote little. He was not an originator; hardly even a pioneer. But, as has been said of a supreme educationalist in another sphere, a man can "stamp his impress on his generation without being the founder of a school." To be an excellent teacher in any line of thought it is sufficient that a keen mind accept with even criticism the best wherever found and pass it on intelligibly to others. This quality is clearly of especial value in a theologian of a traditional Church.

In his Order Father Luke became above all a theologian. By natural bent of mind he was a classicist, a scholar, and a lover of the Sacred Word, somewhat diffident of abstract thought in any branch other than logic. He remarked once in his brief way: "It often just turns into a comatose state." In his own case this diffidence was hardly justified, for he had a vital mind. His learning was digested and possessed by grasp of principle and was no dead weight. He wished his students' knowledge to be similarly mastered, taking as the ideal the balance between thought and learning sketched by Newman in his *Idea of a University*. The positive tendency, however, and his sense of duty to give his Church students a formulation of faith reproducible at will, caused him to lay predominant emphasis on learning. It was a natural limitation not to know at times how much could be absorbed without indigestion by less powerful minds.

To "pass on" in the Church is to "bring forth old things and new." A course at the Ecole Biblique and wide reading of modern critical research gave him the New. At one time his liberality of mind made him very new: "I suppose, he said once, that all have been through a measles of solipsism." The Old his conviction of the validity of Thomist thought

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ensured. Between the two he achieved a fine synthesis. He saw clearly where synthesis was possible and where to synthesise was to dilute. In those head-waters of thought where to change a nuance is to change a system he accepted no change. But in remote conclusions and applications where reasoning yields to the microscope he cheerfully accepted the new. With regard to the scholastics' apparent naïveté in using the scientific and critical apparatus of their day, knowing their radical independence of it he was content to say: "They had not the knowledge we have, but they would have made better use of it if they had."

His method of teaching theology was as follows: he taught from the *Summa* of St. Thomas with careful reminders that it was only a system of reasonings co-ordinating, expounding and supporting the central thing, the dogmas of the Faith. He would begin as a rule by putting the dogma in the form of an enigma. What is the problem, the "particularis ratio non visi" as St. Thomas calls it, that calls for an article of faith? He would then read the text, taking the whole *question* rather than the particular *article* as the unit of thought. In it he would select the elementary principles into which the others resolved themselves. This, the Thomist method of demonstration, wherein the less universal or intelligible is seen in the more, was his idea of instruction: to solve in the light of principle. And for this a continuity of principle is necessary. His perfect knowledge of his text enabled him to interpret chiefly by cross-reference, the way of the greatest commentators. Other theologians and commentators he used, too, to interpret or supplement. Where historical or critical evidence could aid he brought it forward with obvious interest. At the end of a treatise he would sum up, giving the doctrine and any subsequent developments in easily reproducible propositions, stating what was of faith and what, on the authority of Definitions, Creeds, Scripture, and the other *loci*, approximated to it in varying degrees.

In teaching Fr. Walker laid great stress on words, especially on their derivative meaning, and showed how much in a carefully worded treatise like the *Summa* can be learnt from this. He went in for painstaking grammatical exegesis

of the text. He liked what had been taught to be known with verbal accuracy. Impressed with its necessity for those whom he was teaching, that they themselves might teach an exact faith, he carried this precision into other matters to an entertaining extent. He was not afraid to confess to any inaccuracy of detail. "Perhaps I should say" prefixed more than one correction of himself, as when for example he had erred by a year about some obscure date in the Dark Ages.

It is comforting to remember the limitations of a teacher so recognizedly successful. He seemed at times unable to seize the point of a question or objection. And he would often correct an answer from a student which, though substantially right, did not happen to be thrown into the exact form in which it was in his own mind. A limitation in one direction is often due to an excellence in another. This particular limitation was due to his exact grasp of the doctrine and his ability to express it exactly and in the most accurate words. He found it difficult to understand that the crystal-clear utterances of St. Thomas were not as intelligible to others as to himself, or to accept a statement of the doctrine in less perfect form.

Any lack of immediate personal contact and sympathy with other minds than his own was compensated, too, by a real inspiration in his teaching which sprang from his own contemplative faith and simple piety. This would even appear at times in a certain remoteness of his voice and an openness and lightness on his forehead as he enunciated some far-reaching principle or the fruits of some contemplation of his own, especially with regard to the Incarnation or other high dogma of faith. He would remark, for instance, that while Scripture and tradition give us many analogies by which to conceive the Persons of the Son and the Holy Spirit, the Father seems to be wrapped in a mystery of his own. He would repeat great truths of faith lovingly, almost caressingly.

It would be an untrue picture of Fr. Walker as a teacher were no mention made of the life in which this live faith grew. In the rule of his Order it is said that the test of a true Dominican is whether he is a community man. Fr. Walker, though by temperament a recluse and scholar, became a real

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servant of the community. He accepted responsible administrative office though it went against his natural inclination; he did work that many theologians might have thought very humble, such as editing a parish magazine. It was noticeable, especially towards the end of his life and before his last illness took hold of him, that he was a regular attendant at various community functions to which he was not obliged. And his humour as well as his learning will be missed. Few men appreciated real wit as he did, and his laugh, though perhaps rare, was very contagious. He economized his forces for the work he was given by a rugged simplicity and hardness of life. He would take a lecture in a state of health that would have kept many men in bed. Sufferings, the grave internal troubles that eventually brought on his death, and, one might mention, struggles with the natural irritability of a sensitive temperament, were the instruments of soul purification. In this, fostered by prayer, the liturgy, and study, grew the inspiring faith of which we have spoken. Those who served or attended his Mass will recall a great dignity and calmness about him at the altar. And a picture occurs to the mind of him in his stall at Blackfriars while the *Lauda Sion* was being sung, his head and body slightly thrown back, his right hand resting on the arm of his stall, a look of calm happiness on his face. Here was a piece of perfect "pietas" in which neither the theologian, nor the scholar, nor the worshipper, would find one untrue note.

In a recent issue of the *Rosary Magazine* (of which Fr. Walker was the Editor until his death) we read that, after some discussion of a point of theology with one of his brethren, shortly before his death, he added: "I can't see these things very clearly now. But I shall be seeing them soon in the Beatific Vision, all being well."

May he rest in peace.

O.P.