

many in his last revision. Such hundreds were known that it was impossible to present a Life without giving specimens.

The work was not done for the future history research scholar. Chronology is not exact. Though considerable space has to be given to the journeys connected with the schism, little is to be learnt about the intricacies of the schism itself. We do not learn much either about the heretics of Languedoc. Hardly more than a passing mention is given to Peter Abelard or even to the second crusade. For the biographers these were the less important things. They wanted to try to tell us why when Bernard came a schism collapsed, when he opened his mouth heresy was silent, when he was at Clairvaux men flocked thither. They could say little more than that these things happened because he was Bernard. Or rather Bernard by himself did not explain such results any more than he accounted for cures and exorcisms. If any man sought to be poor and unknown it was this one who chose a monastery hitherto shunned and perishing with its founders. Such is the instrument which God sometimes uses. As Bernard said himself when he had cast out a devil: 'Was it surprising? We were two against one!'



ST AELRED AND THE ASSUMPTION

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A NUMBER of things have been written of late on the opinion held by St Aelred on the Assumption of Mary. Since an unknown sermon of the saint, found recently and published by Dr C. H. Talbot, contains a decisive allusion to the point, it may be interesting to resume the discussion and set it against its true background. To those who have studied the sources likely to afford some evidence for the belief, the apparent hesitation of the Cistercians seems surprising, having due regard to their outstanding devotion to our Lady. A remarkable study by Fr E. Wellens of the

Abbey of Westmalle (Belgium), throws some light on the real situation.¹

To begin with, a charming legend told by Caesar of Heisterbach will explain the circumstances. 'In a monastery of our Order in Lombardy, there was a noble and well-educated monk named Bertram, who could no longer endure hearing doubts about the bodily assumption of Mary. After fifteen years of religious life, he came to his abbot on the vigil of that feast and declared: "Reverend Father, let me go today to our grange and allow me to stay there tomorrow". "And why do you ask me that?" said the abbot. "Because I could not bear to hear again either that homily of Jerome, or the sermon in Chapter." The abbot agreed and on his way the good monk had a vision which spoke to him thus: 'Bertram, you will hear better sermons than Jerome's here. I know well enough why you left the cloister today. Know then that I am glorified in both substances, body and soul'.²

Now the homily of Jerome referred to was read during the night office in Cistercian monasteries in the twelfth-century.³ In the fourth lection some doubts were raised and the suggestion was made that it was best not to decide anything about the bodily assumption rashly on one's own authority, but to consider it as merely an opinion. This sermon is known today to be apocryphal and is confidently attributed to Paschasius Radbertus, abbot of Corbie (d. 860). However, at the time the sermon was believed to be by Jerome and we can easily imagine the awkward position of the Cistercian abbot, who had to preach on the same subject two hours after the night office. He could scarcely contradict such an authority openly: who would dare to claim more light than St Jerome? In point of fact, all the great abbots, St Bernard among them, seem to have been extremely evasive and ambiguous.

¹ Eduard Wellens. *De Cisterciënserorde en de Tenhemelopneming van Maria*, in 'Citeaux in de Nederlanden', II (1951), pp. 1-20.

² Caesar of Heisterbach. *Dialogus miraculorum*, L. 7, c. 38. The story may have some connection with that of the lay brother of Clairvaux which occurs in *Exordium Magnum*, IV, 18.

³ The old Cistercian breviary is to be found in MS. Dijon 114, which was the prototype to be copied by all monasteries. The sermon of the pseudo-Jerome is printed in Migne P.L. 30, Col. 127-8.

It is therefore noteworthy that two English abbots explained the matter clearly and courageously to their monks. 'It is not at all easy', says Isaac of Stella, 'to find something really fitting to say on this feast. Confined as we are between the boundaries marked by the Fathers, we dare not define anything which would go beyond them. I dare but lay this down that, be it in body, be it in soul, I know not, God knows, Mary rose to the highest heavens.'⁴ A prudent phrase, no doubt, but at least clear and sincere. The argument of St Aelred of Rievaulx, is perhaps even more theologically precise. 'I should like to say, were I bold enough, that the Blessed Mother of God first left her body, and then in that body rose again to eternal life. And though I do not venture to affirm this since, should someone object, I have no authority to convince him, yet I dare to think so. I do however make bold to assert without doubt that today, whether in the body or out of the body, I know not, God knows, the Blessed Virgin went up to heaven.'⁵

The argument is very interesting, for it shows how clearly he distinguished between an assertion and an opinion, and felt the need of proof to meet opposition. We can imagine that every time the feast came round again the devoted abbot was exercised by his problem. But, at last, towards the end of his life, he found an argument of convenience. This is what he says: 'If Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord persecuted even the Lord himself, but afterwards received such mercy that he glorified in the hope of the sons of God's glory, and, whether in the body or out of the body was rapt even to the third heaven, there would be no cause for wonder if the Mother of God who, from the very cradle, remained with him in his temptations, should be assumed in her body into heaven and exalted above the choirs of angels.'⁶ It will be noticed that here St Aelred neatly turns the formula, 'whether in the body or out of the body', from a doubt, into a very persuasive convenience for the Assumption. His pro-

⁴ Sermon LI. P.L. 194, col. 1862.

⁵ Sermon XVIII. P.L. 195, col. 315b.

⁶ In Series Scriptorum S. Ordinis Cisterciensis, vol. 1, p. 162.

found christian feeling was stronger than the authority of a doubtful liturgical text.

The thirteenth century witnesses to a strong reaction in favour of the belief. It is not that the authenticity of the sermon attributed to Jerome is questioned as yet, but some breviaries merely ceased to include the offending passages. And what they lacked in modern critical scholarship they made up for in visionary insight.

Indeed another vision is to be found in the *Life of Abundus*, a monk of Villers-in-Brabant. 'While he was praying in that place he beheld the Spouse, she who is the comeliest among the daughters of Jerusalem, his faithful visitant, the Virgin Mary, suddenly standing there. She, calling him by his own name, said, 'Brother Abundus, my beloved, come here'. As he approached and greeted her reverently the most motherly one said to him, 'Hitherto, my dear, you have suffered anxiety in your heart on my account, wherefore I have thought it well to appear to you, bringing your heart joy and consolation. Although Jerome spoke of my assumption as an opinion, Augustine, who in one of his sermons roundly asserts my glorification in body and soul, gives a clear definition. Yet hear the true and certain explanation of the matter: My most holy Son was conceived of my pure flesh by the holy Ghost. If this be true, and true it is, it would have been unfitting that one part of my flesh should have been in heaven and the other on earth. It was plainly unfitting and unjust that after the body of my Son, and such a Son, had been raised up and glorified in heaven that the body of his mother, and such a mother, should lie in the tomb awaiting its arising until the general resurrection.' Having heard these things the visionary returned to himself and did not fail to give thanks to the Lord of all and his kindly Consoler for what had been revealed to him. Remembering, however, the words of the Blessed Virgin where she had said that Augustine had borne sure witness to her Assumption, he enquired about it of a certain preacher, learned in many things, but he, afraid to affirm what he had never read, took the question off to the masters at Paris.'

⁷ The *Vita Abundi* is in the unpublished MS. 19525 of the Bibliothèque Royale de Bruxelles, fol. 17.

For his inability to find the text of Augustine quoted in the vision, the good Friar deserved forgiveness and even congratulations, since this was probably an allusion to another apocryphal work falsely attributed to St Augustine. It may be remarked that Thomas of Cantimpré reports a similar vision⁸ and points out the opposition between Augustine and Jerome, but owing to his close connection with the Cistercians, he may have been borrowing from Caesar of Heisterbach.

There are many other signs of the slow but sure reaction in the first half of the thirteenth century. We shall quote here only two English Cistercian abbots well known for their literary works. The following is a prose translation of some verses of Roger of Ford (d. 1214) on our Lady: 'The bearing of her body to the stars witnesses to its rest in everlasting peace, that flesh of which God himself willed to be born. Should one so dear be given as food for worms? Should the temple of virtues, the noble house of God, putrify and be subject to corruption? A number of reasons could be brought to bear on the question, but I hold my peace since you, beloved doctor, admonish me to do so.'⁹ The 'beloved doctor' of the last line may have been Baldwin of Ford, who prudently advised Roger not to insist overmuch on the subject of the Assumption. Again, in his 'Meditations', one of the earliest examples of what will later become the Rosary, Stephen of Salley invites us to meditate on the entry of Mary into heaven 'in her true flesh, virginal, glorified'.¹⁰ The faith and devotion of the Cistercians was evidently not to be discouraged by that problematic sermon.

Peter Abelard attributes to St Bernard, among other things, the fact that the Order of Citeaux consecrates its churches to our Lady,¹¹ and we know from a letter of Peter

⁸ Bonum universale de apibus, Lib. II, 30, No. 11.

⁹ *The Verses of Roger of Ford on Our Lady*, ed. C. H. Talbot, in *Collectanea Ordinis Cisterciensis Reformatorem*, VI, 1939, p. 53.

¹⁰ *Les Meditations d'Etienne de Salley*, ed. A. Wilmart, in *Revue d'Ascetique et de Mystique*, X, 1929. See 15a Meditatio, p. 411, and 15um gaudium, p. 413.

¹¹ P.L. 178, col. 339.

of Celles,¹² that this decision of the General Chapter¹³ was emphasised by St Bernard's personal devotion. Now, this dedication was made to the Assumption of Mary, Queen of heaven and earth. The title 'Queen of heaven and earth' is significant. Far from being a passing fashion, this devotion was deeply rooted in Cistercian spirituality. The full eschatological meaning of resurrection was closely linked with the spiritual meaning of the Gospel of the day, of Martha and of Mary. The twofold life, which the Virgin Mary led, caring for her Son and meditating on his mysteries, finds in the Assumption its full accomplishment.¹⁴ Action and contemplation, bodily and spiritual asceticism are glorified, and the monk, practising both lives, contemplates in the Assumption the future for which he longs. However, since a bare fact may seem more telling than visions and theological reflections, we shall close with an entry in an English Chronicle. 'At the Cistercian abbey of Coggeshall (Essex), the high altar was consecrated by Gilbert Foliot, bishop of London, in honour of the glorious Virgin Mary and of St John the Baptist, on the feast of the Assumption'.¹⁵ This is the first mention we have of such a dedication in the Order. As this event took place in 1167, we may well guess that Gilbert Foliot remembered during the High Mass his friend, Aelred of Rievaulx, a convinced believer in the Assumption, who had died a few months earlier.

¹² P.L. 202, col. 618.

¹³ *Instituta Capituli Generalis*, No. XVIII.

¹⁴ cf. Aelred of Rievaulx, P.L. 195, col. 307a.

¹⁵ Ralph of Coggeshall, *Chronicon Anglicanum*, anno 1167.