

Remembering Father Bede Jarrett 50 Years After

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This year the English Dominicans are commemorating the 50th anniversary of the death of Father Bede Jarrett (1881–1934). As we noted in last month's editorial, he was—and still is—revered as administrator, author, preacher, friend; above all, as a man who gave a distinct stamp to the English Dominican Province. During his sixteen years as Provincial (1916–32) he founded this magazine, but probably his most important single achievement was to bring the Dominicans back to Oxford after an absence of nearly 400 years. He initiated the building of the new Oxford house of studies, Blackfriars, in 1921—the 700th anniversary of its original founding on the instructions of St. Dominic. On 17 March (exactly fifty years after Father Bede's death) Dominicans from many parts of the English Province met there for a commemorative Mass. Father Conrad Pepler spoke at this, and we print his text here. Born in 1908, from boyhood Father Conrad knew Bede Jarrett; he came to the Order in 1927, when Father Bede was Provincial, and was a student at Blackfriars, Oxford, when he was its Prior (1932–4). Later he was Editor of both "Blackfriars" and "The Life of the Spirit" (now merged in "New Blackfriars"), and then, from 1952 to 1981, Warden of the Dominican conference centre in Staffordshire, Spode House.

“Wisdom has built her house, she has set up her seven pillars.”
(Prov. 9: v.1)

It is not only bricks and mortar, concrete and cement, that construct the framework of a house. One can sometimes tell the character of dwellers of a house by their spirit, which has seeped into the very structure of the building and left themselves in that brick or concrete; they are the pillars that ensure its continued existence.

We can reasonably expect to be aware of the pillars of the spirit of Father Bede Jarrett as we step into the precincts at Blackfriars, Oxford, and no one is more aware of his presence than myself, who have been granted the privilege of speaking of him fifty years after his death, and who had the happiness of living under his inspiration for the last two years of his life. Some of the pillars of Father Bede's

house of Wisdom I shall attempt to describe.

We have assembled to honour his memory at this eucharistic celebration, which is assuredly the first of the pillars. Father Bede designed this Priory firstly to preach by its liturgy even more than by the words and learning of the friars living and studying under its roof. During his first months as Prior, he was almost embarrassingly enthusiastic about the uniformity in voice and action of the whole community in their liturgical praise of the Lord. But soon he was instructing us, chapter after chapter, on the depth of meaning of united action in the Mass. From that time until today, fifty years on, the way of worship has been an outstanding feature of Fr. Bede's community, until today, when we gather so fittingly round the altar in praise and gratitude to the Lord for giving such a firm pillar to Blackfriars from its early days. This church has been a true extension of his apostolic mission for the half century since his death.

Fr. Bede in his earlier years had learnt the secret of the search for Wisdom which was of course the *raison d'être* for founding the Dominican House of Studies in this University. Despite his intensive activity, with his frequent journeys across the Atlantic, his preaching engagements and his anxieties about the financing of this Priory, he would drop naturally into the contemplative groove of quiet study. One of us would knock on the Prior's door to the room there overlooking the racket of St. Giles. Probably this visit would be of little moment, but the student would be welcomed, with that gentle smile, exhibiting a deep personal interest in the visitor. His desk would be clear of all but the one book he was working on at the moment. Not many students would wish to emulate the ideal of the single book, but it reveals the singleness of purpose and unruffled nature of this student, Fr. Bede, who wrote years before of Philip Cardinal Howard's calm, clear-sighted breadth of vision and also quiet humour.¹The world would admire the pertinacity with which he turned out one book after another, while at the same time editing *Blackfriars*. Perhaps we should have tried to deflect this energy for the sake of his health. But who could interfere with the ideals of this man who was acting as he thought every Dominican should act *contemplata aliis tradere*²? To kneel with him in choir one could sense the true source of his activity. Blackfriars ever since has been a pillar, rightly sometimes a troublesome one, with a long list of apostles and scholars. Up to and including the 1980s these men and women headed by Fr. Bede have clothed the name with respect, if at times respectful animosity. Remembering that it was to this University that St. Dominic sent his followers to England, it was at this University that Fr. Bede planned to lay the foundations of a rejuvenated English Dominican Province. This was surely his life's ambition.

Not all the pillars are such prominent features of the building as

liturgy and learning. Some of their nature must be hidden, more in the nature of hidden foundation stones, and humility is of course the most essential of these. It was as members of his community that we should inevitably expose to view the strength of that foundation which gave us the confidence to live securely in a financially uncertain community. A young Dominican student could boldly knock on the Prior's door and be welcomed into the room as though it was for precisely this moment that the Prior had been sitting there. On discovering that the student had come to offer a "correction", he was even more welcome and interested. After an hour and more discussion, Fr. Bede apologized that he was unable to change his plans immediately because the summer holidays were about to begin so that he would not have the attention of the whole community together in order to alter his plans. But, after two and a half months' interval, to the astonished embarrassment of the student, he started to implement the suggestion, chapter after chapter. On another occasion, and in a different style, four students were preparing to cycle out of Oxford for a 'month day'³, when Fr. Bede came shyly to ask the favour of being allowed to join the outing on a borrowed bicycle. It was this freedom from 'airs and graces' that made him such an ideal superior. Remember that that was over fifty years ago, when he had seen four consecutive terms as Provincial followed by the two final years as Prior. In those days authority was the mark of the Church and of all her institutions, but in a groove that was not at once heard in evangelical terms. In fact Fr. Bede's was the authority of superiors who were to follow in a later age, an authority we had the privilege to experience and which has continued to be typical of this Priory. It was, I presume, the unsought, the unconscious virtue of humility that guaranteed the balanced and restrained exercise of authority characteristic of Fr. Bede's rule.

As I have indicated, this characteristic was most clearly revealed in his dealings with the young. I experienced this in 1924, when he preached a memorable retreat to the boys at Hawkesyard School⁴, though later, when I was a student at Hawkesyard, he told us that his confidence in the young was sometimes strained to breaking point—it had been disclosed that we had shamefully treated one of our brethren. The underside of youthful idealism and enthusiasm can be particularly repugnant, but Fr. Bede somehow survived these shocks and continued to build the future of the Province on the young religious. Looking back over the years, I think one can see Blackfriars housing a young community while other communities of the Province have sometimes shown signs of ageing. He did not adopt the false expectations of looking to the young Dominicans to be more perfect examples of observance than their elders who had longer experience of religious life. He was perhaps more tolerant and understanding with

the younger brethren. But age was irrelevant in his sympathy. When one of the older men who had forsaken the Order came to the point of death, Fr. Bede dropped everything and dashed to his bedside at once. Soon after becoming Prior he took me over to see Eric Gill at Piggotts with the purpose, he told me afterwards, of healing the unhappy breach that had risen between my father and the artist⁵. His deep and quiet personality was essentially that of the peacemaker, which encouraged the Cardinal to appoint him as representative on the League of Nations Union Committee. The subsequent history of his Priory, from Victor White and Gerald Vann to Roger Ruston⁶ today, has shown it to be a centre for peace in this country. The Stations of the Cross here on the walls will always speak to me of the eirenic quality in Fr. Bede, who arranged for their sculptor, Fr. Aelred Whitacre⁷, to come for their blessing before sending him to Edinburgh, where he hoped Fr. Aelred would make a valuable contribution to the new Priory—as he planned for the development of the Scottish Province.

In the eyes of many the Dominican ideal of poverty seemed the weakest part of the building in Oxford. Slender and insecure it may have seemed, but it has in fact proved to be the toughest of all the pillars. It caused Fr. Bede, I imagine, acute anxiety, and has done so, subsequently, to all his successors. But poverty, I suppose, is a penance; in itself there is nothing positive about it; it is not a virtue. Yet it is an essential quality of Dominican religious life. It took eight years to build the Priory, as Fr. Bede had to collect the money to pay step by step for its construction. His words from the pulpits of the United States became the stones and bricks of this building, until eventually the community arrived to a house without debt, but with an empty larder. It was the story of St. Dominic over again, when the angels distributed bread to the brethren assembled in the refectory. Fr. Bede was strongly criticized for irresponsibility, for being somewhat simplistic in his reliance on the Holy Spirit. But perhaps the Spirit of Poverty, the Holy Spirit, has greater assurance and greater responsibility than the spirit of man.

Of all the characteristics of this beloved man, one that I hope has stood out in all that I have said is that of courage, a gift of the Holy Spirit often called 'fortitude', which perhaps adds a sense of continuity or permanence, as 'courage' might colour a single act. This surely was a pillar of support as he carried the Province with him for sixteen years, above all as he pressed on with the building of this house. We must remember, of course, that throughout all this outlay of energy and the following of the star of his ideals he had many critics, but I never saw him reveal any hurt or resentment. The only incident that might be said to reflect an opposite tendency was when he took me on one side and said: "They tell me, brother, that you are

stubborn”.

Therefore I would conclude that the pillars which have been outstanding features of the spiritual architecture of this Priory are in my experience the grace-strengthened characteristics of its founder, Father Bede Jarrett. Its liturgy and scholarship, its humble spirit of prayer and its spirit of youth, its championing of peace and poverty, and finally its courage in seeking and defending truth as seen through Dominican eyes, these are the seven pillars that I have noticed in Blackfriars reflecting the wisdom of Fr. Bede’s character. And as, fifty years on, we honour his memory, we might, especially we Dominicans might ask of Wisdom to share in the same strengths she built up in the character of Father Bede Jarrett.

Notes drafted by the Editor

- 1 Philip Thomas, Cardinal Howard (1629—1694); joined the Dominicans in 1645, and was largely responsible for preserving what was left of the English Province, then in exile, from extinction; later Cardinal-protector of England. Bede Jarrett wrote an early CTS Penny Pamphlet on him, *Cardinal Howard*.
- 2 “to give to others the fruits of contemplation” (ST2a2ae. 188, 6).
- 3 the monthly free day.
- 4 “apostolic” school run by the English Dominicans 1659—1967; situated at Hawkesyard in Staffordshire 1898—1924.
- 5 Eric Gill, the typographic designer, sculptor and writer and Fr. Conrad’s father, Hilary Pepler, were the principal founders of the Ditchling Community, in Sussex, the famous lay community (prominent for its artists and craftsmen) associated with the Dominican Third Order. It lost much of its vitality after the estrangement of Gill and Pepler. Piggotts, in Buckinghamshire, was Gill’s later home.
- 6 Victor White (1902—1960), Editor of *Dominican Studies*, foundation member and lecturer at the Jung Institute of Analytical Psychology (Zurich), author of the pioneering *God and the Unconscious*; Gerald Vann (1906—1963), lecturer and author of the best-selling *The Divine Pity*; Roger Ruston (born 1938), lecturer at Blackfriars in Ethics and Moral Theology, and frequent lecturer on nuclear disarmament.
- 7 1882—1945: a rather unconventional man, with such a remarkable range of talents that Rome doubted his seriousness and would not award him the title of Master in Sacred Theology (STM) but only the Baccalaureate; probably Bede Jarrett’s greatest friend in the Order.