

# BLACKFRIARS

(With which is incorporated *The Catholic Review*)

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## EDITORIAL

THE TWELFTH CENTENARY of St. Bede the Venerable has perhaps been somewhat overshadowed by the Canonization of our glorious Martyrs, yet it is singularly fitting that these two great events should have so nearly coincided that the octave day of their triumph was the centenary of his holy death. It is not by mere chance that "The History of the Church of Englande, compiled by Venerable Bede, Englishman," was translated into English by Thomas Stapleton and published at Antwerp in 1565. In his dedication to Queen Elizabeth the translator writes: "In this History Your Highnes shall see in how many and weighty pointes the pretended reformers of the Church in Your Graces dominions have departed from the patern of that sound and catholike faith planted first among Englishmen by holy S. Augustin our Apostle and his virtuous company, described truly and sincerely by *Venerable Bede*, so called in all Christendom for his passing vertues and rare learning, the Author of this History." So was the Englishman, Bede, called to bear witness, eight hundred years after his death, to the Catholic truth for which two other Englishmen, Fisher and More, had but recently found it worth while to die.

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This centenary has given more than Catholics an opportunity to recall, or to learn, the greatness and importance of this only English Doctor of the Church; and it is not without significance that a Doctor of the Church and a Saint should be the first known representative of the traditions that have combined to build up English civilization and to produce such men as St. John Fisher and St. Thomas More. Consciously English and Roman, he was the more Roman for being English, and the greater for being both. Yet the carefree wanderings of so many of the Celtic monks find no place in his life of orderly routine passed almost entirely, in choir-duty and teaching, within the walls of the twin Benedictine Abbeys of Jarrow and Monkswearmouth. There is no evidence that he had ever been further south than Yorkshire and yet all that he has written is inspired by a wide conception of the Church Catholic embracing in a visible unity the heterogeneous nations of the civilized world, and by the recognition of his own obligations as a member of it. It is this sense of supra-racial unity that explains why he has been hailed as a good European when he was only a good Catholic; it was this that made him at once so keenly English and so loyal to the Holy See.

Though he did not reach even his three-score of years his prolific mind brought forth an incredible number of treatises; besides twenty-four on Sacred Scripture, he wrote books on History, on Orthography, on Natural Science, and on a variety of other subjects. He was learned, and scientific in his use of learning. His knowledge of Greek must have been something more than ordinary, if we may judge by his "Book of the Life and Passion of St. Anastasius, which was ill translated from the Greek, and worse amended by some unskilful person, which I have corrected as to sense." He was an acknowledged authority throughout Europe even in his own lifetime: as the inscription over his tomb in the Lady Chapel at Durham has it (being translated), he was "a man above all praise concerning whom the most learned men of those times offered this eulogium, that an Englishman born in a distant corner of the earth surpassed the whole earth by his genius, for he penetrated to the most hidden treasures of almost all the sciences and of the whole of theology, as his voluminous works, so well-known to the Christian world, abundantly testify." His

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inspiration is not far to seek: he looked for ultimate truth at its source, and with him, as with the greatest of his kind, Aquinas, his sanctity was the keystone of his genius. Let his own words, ending his famous *Ecclesiastical History*, support this judgment: "And now, I beseech Thee, good Jesus, that to him, to whom Thou hast graciously granted sweetly to partake of Thy wisdom and knowledge, Thou wilt also vouchsafe that he may at some time come to Thee, the fountain of all wisdom, and always appear before Thy face, Who livest and reignest world without end. Amen. Here ends, by God's help, the Fifth Book of the Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation."

St. Bede shows in his writings the calm, imperturbable and balanced judgment common to the scholar Saints. The controlled impersonality of his style is in itself revealing, and individual vagaries seem as distasteful to him as new literary artifice. His restraint was the result of virtue, and "Prudence," as he himself wrote, "is the mother and the nurse of the virtues." The religious exercises he inculcated were "the prescribed devotions"; the very austerities he practised were those imposed by rule and sanctioned custom; and he was content, he says, to teach his disciples "out of the writings of the venerable Fathers or in conformity with their interpretation." He realized that he shared in a great tradition and it was his life-work to perpetuate it rather than to propound novelties. And all the noble English and Catholic traditions which may claim to have been fathered by him passed from him through St. Aelred of Rievaulx to St. John Fisher and St. Thomas More, are notably apparent in such worthy representatives as Challoner and Ullathorne, and will yet, please God, bring their beloved country and ours back to the Truth for which he and they laboured so selflessly and so well.

But (to quote from Archbishop Hinsley's recent address at Jarrow) "where now are we to seek for the continuity of English Education, or for the revival of the Bede tradition? . . . I would fain see the whole of Catholic Education in England placed under the general patronage of St. Bede, with St. John Fisher and St. Thomas More as, so to speak, assessors . . . St. Bede, Father of English learning; St. John Fisher, promotor of English education; St. Thomas More . . . upholder of Catholic tradition." Our Holy

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Father, Pope Pius XI, in a letter addressed to the Archbishop and read by him at the Jarrow celebrations (as published in *The Universe*, June 14), has forcefully underlined the significance of this centenary: "This glorious and precious death" of St. Bede, "like the whole of his life, has handed to the world a solemn trust. But especially can we say that by these celebrations there is shown to the English people a magnificent picture of an age when a common Faith and a common union with the See of Peter was the source of the greatest benefit, not only to the Christian community, but also to the civil order. And . . . We, who have no desire dearer than that the glorious land of England should renew peace and unity with the see of Rome, join from our very heart in these celebrations . . . encouraged by the joyous hope that these . . . will prove an incentive to all the people of England—to the faithful already in communion with the Roman Church, that they will cling fast with all the more firmness and love to this centre of Christian unity; and to all brethren separated from this unity, that they may return with confidence to the true Church."

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