

BIOGRAPHY OF FATHER BEDE JARRETT (IV)¹

FROM Oxford Father Bede was sent to Louvain to finish off his Dominican training. He still had two years of his theological course to complete before he could exercise the full ministry of a priest and Friar Preacher. It might have been expected that his earlier ecclesiastical knowledge would have grown rusty during his three years absorption in secular studies and interests in Oxford, and that more than the normal two years would be required if he were to recover lost ground and complete his theological studies satisfactorily. Instead of that he crowded his remaining work into less than one year, and with such success that the examiners who at the end of that time awarded him his degree in theology spoke of him as the best prepared student they had ever examined. In every way Oxford made him, not a worse, but a better candidate for all ecclesiastical dignities and responsibilities.

This was the last of his examinations. He left them all behind him with a sigh of relief. Years later he could write to a young man still at the mercy of examiners:

'I have only two bits of advice: one is never to work in the afternoon, a fatal mistake; the other is never to be angry with one's paper. That is equally fatal. A prayer to the Holy Ghost is far simpler, more effectual, and quiets the nerves . . . Personally I hate all exams so desperately, whether or no I am ready for them, that I can't understand anyone going near them who hasn't got to. Since the year 1896 I have never failed in an exam, and have hated 'em all! . . . Freedom is incompatible with swotting for an exam, and swotting must go on till the beastly things are all over. At least I hate 'em, having done exams year after year from the age of ten to the age of 27, so that I

¹ Further extracts from *The Life of Fr. Bede Jarrett*, by John-Baptist Reeves, O.P.,

have a terror of them. They are cramping, narrowing, inhuman. . . . The only thing that matters is that those who know you think you are capable of going in for them. I do not think that results ever matter . . . Work and orderliness satisfy unfavourable examiners.'

He crossed to Belgium in the October of 1907, a few days after going up to Oxford to receive the Degree he had obtained there. In Louvain he went into residence with the Belgian Dominicans in their Priory in the Rue Juste Lipse. He was free to attend the University, but rarely did so; it was more to his advantage to follow the lectures in his own Dominican Priory.

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Here is his own account of himself written, after two months in his new home, to one of his younger brethren still at Hawkesyard, one of whose hobbies was railway engines:

'I hope you got the "engineous" post-card from the English Province in exile . . .

'Here I am slaving away at the theses. I find the philosophy ones hardest of all in one sense, partly because they are so abstract and come so little in one's ordinary manner of thinking, and partly also because they are such "untravelled seas whose margin fades for ever and for ever as we move." There is so little definite, so little of faith, so little even that Thomists are all agreed upon. Personally I cannot help regarding them from an historic point of view, as showing the medieval way of thinking or as proving to the modern mind its manner of building up its own castles upon the foundations that were laid of old. The Dogma are better, but I find the Moral more tangible—even the speculative part, especially with the notes dictated at Hawkesyard. I don't think I made head or tail of them while I was doing them, but they are very clear now that I come to read them. I used to work sufficiently hard at the class work, and take notes, etc., in England, yet I don't

think (now that I have to study these things) that I could ever have understood what I was talking about *in illis diebus*. I find that having to work at Oxford has taught me much in that way . . .'



His Professor of Moral Theology at Louvain was Père S. M. Gillet, O.P., who was later to become Master General of the Order at an election at which Father Bede was next in favour for that Office. When Father Bede died, writing as Master General to the stricken English Province, he described him as he remembered him at Louvain:

'He was a remarkable student in all sorts of ways. His modesty equalled his intelligence—which is saying a very great deal—and his religious life was an example to everyone. Merely to watch him serenely taking in hand and managing with such perfect ease the dual life of Religious and student gave one the impression that he was always wanting eagerly and cheerfully to take upon himself burdens which he considered too heavy for others.'



The matters he studied with the closest personal interest were the Treatises on Prudence and Justice in the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas, and the problem of 'The Development of Dogma.' He preserved his notes on both these subjects and frequently worked over them during his busiest years of preaching and lecturing. Both in their earliest form and in their later additions they show plainly that his scholastic interest in these subjects was quickened solely by his zeal for the perfect Christian formation of his own mind and character.

For the subject of his notes on Prudence and Justice he has gone, at the direction of Père Gillet, to the works of St. Thomas and his Dominican commentators. But he has digested their matter into a form suited to his own mind and the minds of the English people for whose sake he is studying it. He has made it more concrete than he found it.

He has not yet found the phrase 'the art of perfect living'; but he is moving rapidly, his mind leading the way intelligently, towards his greatest achievement—the synthesis of art and prudence in a life of supernatural charity. It is important to note that it was St. Thomas who led him to this synthesis. All his achievements, however singularly his own, were direct fruits of his docility to his masters.

Amongst other English interludes in these notes—showing how he profited by his scholastic studies to build up his character on them—is the following:

In moral matters it is better to be deceived by having a good opinion of a bad man than by having a bad opinion of a good man; even though the first is much more frequently wrong than the second.

In judging about things it is better to seek correctness; in judging about persons, it is better to seek the better things.

One has no right to judge that a passing beggar is actually a rogue; but one has a right to suppose that he may be, and to act accordingly.

The contents of the note-book entitled 'Development of Dogma, etc.' are only remotely connected with Father Bede's work for his examination. They are materials which he has set one against another to clear his own mind on a problem of great interest and importance to himself personally, and of special urgency to seekers after religious truth in England.

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In its early days the Aquinas Society invited him, as English Dominican Provincial, to lecture to its Members on whatever subject he judged most suitable to them as students of the philosophy of St. Thomas. He chose for his title 'The Holiness of Truth,' and treated the Society to one of the most carefully prepared and most illuminating lectures he ever delivered.³ When he was looking for blank sheets of paper on which to write the text of the lecture, he once more remembered this Louvain note-book on the

³ Published in BLACKFRIARS, January, 1939.

'Development of Dogma, etc.' More than half its pages were still blank. He turned to them as best fitted to receive what he had to say to a society of Catholic Philosophers. What he said concluded thus:

But we must not misunderstand St. Thomas as though he taught us that knowledge matters more than life. On the contrary, in his homily on St. Matthew's Gospel as quoted in the Dominican Breviary for his November Feast there is a delicious sentence which sums up his whole mind: *Præus est vita quam doctrina; vita enim ducit ad scientiam veritatis.* Life is before doctrine, for life leads (or urges) us to the knowledge of truth. What a revelation of his character that phrase shows! What a life must his have been, so vivid, so personal, so fresh and pure and noble, that it urged him into the knowledge of truth. But all life honestly lived must do that. We get pushed and pulled into questions and wonder, and both lead us to truth; yet truth must in turn be holy, for truth is God.

And on the opposite, left-hand page he has written out the prayer used by St. Thomas when he was composing his Tract *Against those who attack the Religious life*:

'Send Thy meekness, O Lord, into my heart, so that I here fighting out of love of truth may not lose the truth of love.'

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In spite of the brilliant examination he passed at Louvain, and the irreproachable theological degree he brought away from there, Father Bede always disclaimed any special ability as a theologian. He never supposed that his success left him with nothing to learn, or that he was immune ever after from all possibility of making mistakes. His education for the priesthood had been an exceptionally good one, but according to common standards it was somewhat irregular, and there were gaps in it. Of these no one was more painfully aware than himself. Because of them though all his life he was busily filling them in, he walked warily in the presence of heresy hunters, and, even when he was sure of the ground, very modestly. There were times when this modesty was misinterpreted.

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His modesty, which concealed so much heroic virtue, concealed also much more and much sounder theological learning than is usually credited to popular preachers. His conception of his duty as a Friar Preacher, and his fidelity to it, ensured that. In everything he strove to be exactly what a Dominican should be, and, by the universal testimony of his brethren, he succeeded admirably. What a Dominican should be in his preaching he describes in his 'Life of St. Dominic,' in a chapter entitled 'The Preacher.' Whereas, he says, the Humiliati 'had unfortunately had no training in the theological sciences' and so had to have 'this limitation put to their powers, that they should in their sermons avoid those subjects that touched the dogmas of the Church, and not venture outside the sphere of moral exhortation'; and whereas St. Francis, 'an unordained preacher without any prolonged study of the sacred sciences, and yet with the very deepest love of God in his heart that drove him on to announce the wonders of the saving mercy of Christ with all the energy and zeal of an apostle, put away from his discourse any doctrinal exposition of the creed and limited himself to calling upon all to praise God, or love Him, or turn away from sin to Him':

'for St. Dominic the vision of what his Order was to accomplish was something utterly different. It was precisely the exposition of the deepest mysteries of the Kingdom of God that he meant to be the exact purpose of his own mission and that of his children. He argued with heretics, he wrote books against them, he confounded their theories by a theological defence of the Catholic Creed. It was exactly to upset science by science that he gathered his disciples around him. Far from avoiding the subtleties of the Schools, he deliberately sought them out.'

Between St. Dominic and himself there were more resemblances than differences. The differences were nearly all superficial, and due to external differences of time, place and other accidental circumstances. St. Dominic had to preach Christianity to heretics whose errors as well as their science were metaphysical, and whose theories could

not be lived out in practice. To them he preached the Gospel in the language and modes of thought that all the thirteenth century understood. But he possessed the Gospel more fully than it could be preached in the manner of any one age. His constant study was the sound form of words in which it was first recorded by the Evangelists and St. Paul; and he was familiar with all the various idioms into which Fathers and Doctors had translated it from Apostolic times to his own.

Father Bede had to preach the Gospel to the English of the twentieth century; the most practical and the least logical or speculative people the world has known since the days of ancient Rome; a people that has been thrown on its own resources for its morals and its religion, and has honestly made the most of them. Their errors and their science are in the domain of positive knowledge, principally history; and in practical and moral life, in which, because they are shut up in their own world, they are very admirable in their own way, but very far from Catholic. Father Bede also possessed the Gospel more fully than he could ever preach it; he possessed himself of it, first in the sound words of the New Testament, and then in as many idioms as he could, especially the medieval and the modern. He preached and wrote it in modern English only. Those who criticised him for this only encouraged him to go on with it. St. Dominic and St. Thomas had to face similar criticism. Father Bede's way of preaching was as great a novelty amongst the Catholics of his day as theirs was in their day. And he meant it to be. From his youth he agreed with Cardinal Howard that one of the chief reasons why the Catholic faith makes such slow progress in England is that those who preach it cannot translate the good things they have learned in a foreign tongue into the only language their countrymen can understand.

(Further extracts will follow).