

FATHER VINCENT McNABB: PRIEST, PREACHER, DOMINICAN

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The last published words we have from Hilaire Belloc concern Fr. Vincent McNabb:

The greatness of his character, of his learning, his experience, and, above all, his judgment, was something altogether separate from the world about him. Those who knew him marvelled increasingly at every aspect of that personality. But the most remarkable aspect of all was the character of holiness. Everyone who met him, even superficially, discovered this. Those of us who had the honour and the rare advantage of knowing him intimately and well over many years find, on looking back on that vast experience, something unique, over and above the learning, over and above the application of that learning to Thomism, which is surely the very heart of the Dominican affair.¹

Fr. Vincent would have wondered greatly at those words, and no less at those of one of his Dominican brethren, Fr. Gerald Vann, in a recently published memoir:

Perhaps it will be found, when all things are known, that this was after all the greatest thing he did for God and for men: that he showed so many of the poor, in the darkest days, not by words alone, but by ocular demonstration and by the deep realization that stays in the heart, that it was *not* only the communists who stood by them; showed them that *his* master was the best friend they could ever hope to have—and that there was no reason on earth why they should not hope, to have him.²

These lines serve to introduce Fr. McNabb to those who have never heard of him. To describe him fairly, however, to those who have heard only his name or perhaps a quoted remark is something more. It is to convey the vision of a cathedral to one who cannot see, a description of something vast and intricate, yet simple; the task of reducing eternity and the depth of God to the slavery of the written word. Belloc tried to describe the impress of Fr. McNabb's holiness, and then wrote:

We know holiness just as we know courage or the unimportant particular of physical beauty and proportion. When we come across that quality of

¹ *Blackfriars*, August, 1943, Vol. XXIV, No. 281. p| 289.

² *An Old Apostle Speaks*, by Vincent McNabb. Memoir by Fr. Gerald Vann. Newman Bookshop—Blackfriars, Oxford. 1946. p. 10.

holiness permeating and proceeding from the whole Dominican world, we can only be silent as before some rare and majestic presentation, wholly foreign to our common experience. It was not the learning, though it had been accumulated over so many years, not the particular familiarity with the master text of St. Thomas, it was the fullness of being which, as we remember what we have lost, is on a scale that appals and dwarfs all general appreciation. It would have been astonishing in any man to have discovered so profound a simplicity united to so huge a spiritual experience. . . . Never have I seen or known anything on such a scale.³

THE LOOK OF THE MAN

But attempt his portrait we ought, lest his memory and his precious example be lost; lest the lesson he taught be wasted as his remembrance dims in the passing of time.

Some people remember Fr. Vincent McNabb only from what they saw of him. Nearly all London was familiar with him in this way. He was an old man who wore a Dominican habit everywhere he went. Some knew that he was a Friar Preacher; others, unaware that the 13th century was alive in their midst, thought he was a circus man. His spare frame, bony face, and jutting chin, his reedy voice, and his brisk walk were known to the city. His habit, handspun and woven of English wool, and his old boots, handmade of English leather, were a sermon to all on his social doctrine of the importance of the crafts. Some saw him at Hyde Park preaching in the open on social questions, or conducting the Stations of the Cross for a large crowd during Lent. The convents of London knew him as a welcome retreat master, but more often as the persistent beggar of their prayers. London knew him; truly of him: he was in the city, yet not of it.

Catholics knew him better. His preaching and his confessional were popular. Books and articles, of which there is now no accurate count,⁴ came from his pen in a continued stream. They had the clarity and the sureness of an occasional glimpse of the heavens for a mariner in an overcast night. He preached and wrote sermons for the simple and wise; he did articles for social actionists and economists; he published books and articles on Scriptural and theological questions for his brethren in the Church and for Anglicans. He was a champion of many causes: the Land, the Jews, the Union of Christendom, the Papal Encyclicals. His whole vocation was to bring the power and

³ *Blackfriars*, August, 1943, p. 290.

⁴ Perhaps the most complete McNabb bibliography, although unpublished, is in the care of the Librarian, Dominican House of Studies, Washington, D. C. It amounts to nearly ninety books, pamphlets and several hundred articles.

truth of sacred theology to bear on the private, social, and intellectual life of his time.

He was one of the founders and pillars of the Distributist movement, of which G. K. Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc, Eric Gill and Hilary Pepler were the most articulate pundits. The distribution of property to all men, the break-up of the present economic structure, a back to the farm movement, and the cultivation of a more simple life, was its platform. Fr. Vincent's particular office was philosopher and theologian of the movement; it was he, for example, who formulated the familiar theological argument that the modern city should be abandoned by the average man because, in the strictest theological sense of the term, it is an occasion of sin.⁵ The members of the movement came to him for intellectual help and guidance. On their own testimony, he never failed them.

The measured prose of his vital statistics shows something of the man. He was born in Ireland ("I love Ireland as a mother, but England as a wife") on July 18, 1868, at Portaferry in County Down, the son of a sea captain. He was one of eleven children.⁶ At 18 he was admitted to the English Dominican Province, and made profession in 1886. He was ordained a priest in 1891. Sent to Louvain for further studies, he received the Lectorate in Sacred Theology there in 1894, after which he returned to England and taught philosophy for three years at Woodchester. He then did a three year stint teaching theology at Hawkesyard, followed by three years as prior back at Woodchester. Next at St. Dominic's London, he was elected for two terms as prior at Leicester, and returned to Hawkesyard as prior and professor in 1914. In 1916, after a brilliant examination at Rome, he was named Master in Sacred Theology. In 1917, when his term as prior had run out, he was sent to St. Dominic's in London and was named sub-prior in the convent, an assignation and office he held until the day of his death, June 17, 1943. He was buried on June 21, the vigil of the feast of St. John Fisher, a saint who had a large place in his devotion.

His life was one divided between teaching in the studia of his province and preaching in city priories. He was a superior nearly all his life, a prior for 12 years, and a sub-prior for 26. He was a priest for 52 years, a Dominican for 58. When he died he was 74 years old. Knowing he was soon to die, he had preached on the text: "It is ex-

⁵ Cf. *Old Principles and the New Order*, Sheed and Ward, New York. p. xv for one version of this argument.

⁶ One of his brothers now lives in St. Mary's parish, Melrose, Mass.

pedient that I go," preaching, not about himself, however, but about God's dealings with the souls he loves.

THE HEART OF THE MAN

If all London, and all Catholic England had seen or heard of Fr. Vincent McNabb, those who knew him best of all were the brethren. After nearly sixty years of religious life, his life was an open book to them. Of any in England, Dominicans alone knew the full Vincent McNabb. They were amused at his eccentricities as Londoners; they were enlightened and moved by his preaching and writing as other Catholics in the realm; but only they shared his private life, only they knew of the interior life that provided the source for the external activity that made him known to men.

He studied all his life.

Fr. Vincent's own industry sharpened and brightened the keen mind that nature had given him. All his life long he was a student who could marvelously combine close concentration upon study and thought with external active work. He was a true apostle whose Christ-like labors were the outflow and overflow of a mind intent upon God. He gloried in the title given him by his Order, of Master of Sacred Theology. Theology, the queen of the sciences, meant for him the Faith, the Holy Scriptures, God-made man, the Church; it meant his beloved St. Thomas Aquinas.⁷

He prayed always. Even a careless perusal of his sermons will show the depth of his meditation. His was no literary facility that substitutes polish for sublimity; he had a vision of the truth. The thoughts he expressed, even to the first glance, are marked with the clarity and simplicity of divinity. His aphorisms, charged with insight, are quoted everywhere. With unparalleled ease he could strike off a bit of divine truth, and express it in a sharp, crystal-clear phrase.

Few have used the power and meanings of Sacred Scripture in preaching as well as he. His sermons are redolent of the sacred word. He read the Scriptures in Greek, Latin and English, relishing each word, seeking its meaning. He meditated constantly on the sacred page; the Scriptures were the bread of his soul. One who heard him preach wrote:

I noticed that he often did not remember the exact words of his text, or of many parts of the Bible—when he wanted to repeat them—but must find and read them anew. He was so filled with remembering that the actual words meant nothing to him—but their meanings only. Now at last I have heard what I have always longed to hear—a man inspired.⁸

⁷ Bernard Delany, O.P., *God's Happy Warrior. Blackfriars*, August, 1943. Vol. XXIV, No. 281, p. 287.

⁸ D'A.C. *Blackfriars*, August, 1943. p. 284.

Of the austerity of Fr. McNabb's life, the brethren alone knew. His room was bare. In it was a bed on which he never slept (he slept on the floor until he was commanded to take to his bed in his last illness) and a chair on which he never sat (he studied either standing or kneeling). There were copious files of notes, and only four books: his Breviary, his Bible, the Dominican Constitutions, and the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas. For everything else he used the community library, of which he was the librarian, which he swept and scrubbed himself. He had only one habit, the one he wore; and his stock of personal belongings was small. He was poor, and as a result of it, he had a deep love, as the London *Times* reported, for "all who could claim poverty": a love which made people listen to him.

If all this represents a grim and repellent picture to your imagination, dismiss it at once: he was the happiest, least depressed member of the community, and he was the life and soul of merriment when the time for recreation came. Renunciation meant for him foregoing lesser joys for the sake of the supreme real joy.⁹

Fr. Vincent loved the brethren. He told them in a retreat one time: "I don't like to meditate on heaven. I would rather, dear Fathers and Brothers, meditate on *you*. What must heaven be like if it's better than this!"

When all his traits, the attitudes he took, the things he said, the causes he supported, and the way he lived his life are taken in one view, his character is summed up in a phrase: he was a full Dominican. Study and preaching, Thomism and the common language, prayer, penance, community life, the Dominican marriage of contemplation and action ("the dream and the business"), all were there. He showed England and the world that the Dominican affair (in Belloc's phrase) could be carried out. He showed a watching world that the medieval business could be done. For this, if for nothing else, friars, sisters, and tertiaries look to him.

THE INTENT OF THE MAN

But his uniqueness was not that he did it, because there are many who have done it in the past, the saints; and many who are doing it today, quietly, in priories and convents in our land and in the world. Full Dominican life is everywhere. There is no dearth of example; but one must look for it. Humility hides itself to show off God, so it is difficult to place it here or there; and then impossible to bring it

⁹ Bernard Delany, *Blackfriars*, August, 1943. p. 286.

out into the open when once it is found. In living full Dominican life he was one of very many.

But Fr. Vincent McNabb did it openly. His was the work of living medieval Dominican life in the plain view of a twentieth century city. He loved publicity, as one said of him. But he was holy enough not to want it for himself, but for the Gospel, and for the Order. He dramatized as no man in our age has done, and for all to see, Christian virtue, the apostolic life, and the Dominican spirit. If he kissed the feet of a heckling objector at an open-air pitch, if he commandeered an automobile ride by standing in the street and declaring: "I am a Preaching Friar," he did it not for Vincent McNabb, but that Jesus Christ might be better known, that the world might see what a lovely vocation is the Dominican.

He dramatized handicrafts by wearing a hand spun and woven habit; he taught something of the dignity of manual labor by scrubbing his own clothes, by washing the floors in the priory on his hands and knees; he threw poverty into high relief by limiting himself to nearly nothing. He showed the pertinence of the middle ages to contemporary social and individual mores by living as a medieval friar; he brought the middle ages to intellectual life, by bringing the medieval master, St. Thomas Aquinas, to bear on modern problems.

Yet he was real; it was not an act. His study was laborious, his thought and expression clear and true, his doctrine Thomistic. His poverty was a hardship to him; and his fasts and abstinences were aimed at subjecting his flesh to his spirit. His preaching was apostolic; his spiritual advice, priceless. He was a real Dominican; unique about him was the openness in the way he did it.

His memory deserves to be kept alive all over the world. The learned and the poor who knew him and heard him preach love and revere the recollection they have of him. Those whom he worked with in sociology still reprint his work, quote his writing, and talk of him as of a prophet who has left this earth. They find an emptiness in forgetting him. To all of them he still offers something good and something true. And no less to Dominicans.

The second spring of the Order has raised its problems. Sudden new growth in the last century has brought the Order, living and strong with a medieval ideal, into a strange modern world; and has raised anew the perennial quest. How shall we preserve the ideal in all its integrity, and yet do the Order's work in the modern circumstance?

Solutions will be attempted through wise legislation; and the ul-

timate solution will be preserved in this form.¹⁰ But it will be first of all reached in men. Before we know what must be done, we must first of all see someone doing it. One of these who did it, for all to see, was Fr. Vincent McNabb.

Only those who can accept the man as a piece, whole and complete, will be able to see the reincarnation of St. Dominic, the contemplative preacher. The external manifestation, of the Dominican life, the fearless wearing of his habit, the bare poverty of his cell, the booted trudging of the London streets, the careful sweeping and tending of the library, his dramatic acts of humiliation, and in general the regularity of his life within the cloister, all this together with his zeal for the land, the Jews, Union of Christendom, the Papal Encyclicals, all flowed from the union of his soul with God, that union which became more intimate with every Mass when he was daily fed by Christ's Body.

. . . Fr. Vincent has shown that St. Dominic is up to date. The true contemplative is always contemporary. The contemplative applies eternity to his own time.¹¹

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¹⁰ Cf. *Analecta S.O.P.* Anno 54, Fasc. IV-V-VI p. 214 ss. Sermon of Very Rev. Nicholas Gobert, Provincial of St. Rose of Belgium Province, to the electors at the 1946 General Chapter for an official and eloquent pleading of this problem and the need for a solution.

¹¹ *Blackfriars*, August, 1943. p. 282. The tributes and articles included in the issue of *Blackfriars* dedicated to Fr. McNabb were reprinted with several more in a memorial brochure prepared at Blackfriars, Oxford in 1944. Pp. 57 with Portrait and Bibliography.