

St Pambo

SISTER FELICITY, P.C.C.

It is a pity we know so little about a holy man with such a quaint name as Pambo, commemorated on July 18. Pambo strikes a frolicsome note among the renowned and dignified names of the Fathers of the Desert with whom he worked: Antony, Palladius, Isidore, Macarius. It may be that the sound reminds us of Jumbo or Sambo and if so the sooner we stop our ears to this skittish euphony the better. Pambo was by no means reminiscent of the nursery.

He was born round about the year 315, of whom and why he was called Pambo there is no record, but he became one of the founders of the Nitrian monasteries in the Egyptian desert and in his youth a disciple of St Antony. His life was the same as that of all the monks of the Thebaid, with severe fasts, long hours of prayer and the inevitable mat-making. The Nitrian monks are said to have worked also at linen weaving, but while it is not certain that Pambo produced any linen, he did make baskets and mats from strips of palm-leaves. What he did with all the mats at which he laboured so assiduously is not clear. He might have clothed himself with them but he would probably have considered them too smart.

It is said that he wore only rags which no-one else would deign to pick up and with only slight knowledge of the austerity of life in the desert one might well wonder if he were sufficiently clothed to be decent. Nevertheless, the majesty of his bearing and the striking dignity of his holiness was such that his rags went unnoticed or even, it may be, added to the startling effect of his personality. He must have been as impressive as St John the Baptist, but Pambo was not a 'voice crying in the wilderness' for he was a man of very few words and 'spoke by silences'.

Control of the tongue was his special mortification. Firstly he kept silence, and secondly he gave every consideration and the deepest thought to any question before replying. When at length he did answer his words were so few and so concise that they shocked by their unadorned bluntness. To the more polished he seemed brusque to the point of discourtesy.

It is related that he began at his first reading lesson to practise the

asceticism of silence. His teacher happened to begin with Psalm 38. No sooner had he heard the first verse: 'I said I will take heed to my ways that I sin not with my tongue', than young Pambo said without ceremony, 'That will do for today'. He would seem to have been an abrupt youth and not over-burdened with loquacity from the start. Wasting no time in words he went off to consider the text in all its aspects and to meditate on its implications. We are not told who the instructor was or even what he said when Pambo returned after six months to continue his studies, a stern and dignified figure with his mouth shut like the lid of a sarcophagus.

For all his taciturnity, apparent lack of amiability and common courtesy, Pambo acquired with the years a reputation for wisdom. Many notable people sought him out and it must have been a worthwhile journey or they would not have endured its hardships more than once. The elder St Melania, the rich and noble Roman widow who founded a convent in Jerusalem, went to visit Pambo several times. On one occasion she took three hundred pounds weight of silver as a present to the holy man. He said it would be distributed to the poorest monasteries as he himself was in need of nothing. He added no word of thanks, neither had he prefaced his statement with any exclamation of gratitude or pleasure. Melania, naturally enough, was a little crestfallen. Thinking to administer a mild reproof or perhaps to remind the saint of his manners, she said, 'There is three hundred pounds of silver here, my father'. Pambo replied after some moments of silence, 'He to whom you have offered this gift does not need to be told the amount'. Being a saint, Melania must have swallowed her medicine nobly and profited for ever by the tonic of its unanswerable wisdom.

It is to be hoped that the two men who came to Pambo seeking an assurance of salvation on account of their alms-deeds and penances, which they apparently recounted in some detail, profited equally well. When Pambo had listened to the enthusiastic recital poured out by these men concerning their fasts, their scourgings, their beneficence to the poor, their prayers and vigils, he said, 'I do the like and I am not thereby a good monk. Seek never to offend your neighbour and you will be saved'.

For all his lean austerity and his astringent severity to himself Pambo was not scornful of weaker men, nor did he hold that his way of life was more meritorious than one less outwardly and materially perfect. 'There is more than one road to heaven than that of a monk', he said when called on to settle a certain argument. Even in the desert

it seems the monks enjoyed an occasional academic wrangle.

Two monks were discussing two men: one had spent a fortune to become a monk, though presumably not in riotous living; the other had given away a considerable patrimony to the poor. Which was the more perfect? Pambo said that before God neither was the more perfect, as each had followed the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to the utmost of his ability, and implied that a monk need not congratulate himself on his vocation.

St Athanasius asked Pambo to help him in his battle against Arianism and while the latter was in Alexandria on this mission he happened to see an actress. She was dressed up ready for a performance, much painted and bedizened, *in tortis crinibus* and probably trailing behind her more than she had on her person. At the sight of her the old monk from the desert burst into tears. 'Alas for both our souls, hers and mine', he said, 'for I take less trouble to serve God than she does to ensnare virtuous men'.

For the sake of hagiography it is a pity that the lady was not converted by this outburst, but as far as we know she remained in the city and continued her snaring and the holy man went back to his desert. And here he died about 393 while busy plaiting a basket for Palladius his disciple.

Even in his failing strength Pambo allowed himself no respite from work because he said he had never eaten anything he had not first earned. Looking back over his life he said, 'I cannot remember that I have ever said anything I should be sorry for afterwards'. This sounds like Pambo's own trumpet but there was no smugness or vainglory in him. When next he spoke it was to say, 'Nevertheless I must now go to God before I have begun to serve him'.

St Melania, with the ubiquity of those redoubtable Christian matrons who always seem to be at hand when a holy man needs to be tidied away into his last resting place, was there at Pambo's death. She provided everything necessary for his burial and no doubt he would be better clothed for the grave than he ever was for the desert. Poor Palladius besides losing his beloved friend and counsellor lost his basket as well, for Melania with the unscrupulous simplicity of holy women regarded it as a lawful perquisite and took it away with her as a precious relic.