

Comment

Bede Jarrett O.P. (died 17 March 1934) ...and the constant vision

Enemies of all anniversary-keeping do not know what is good for them, for surely anniversaries can teach us a lot about ourselves. Father Bede Jarrett's anniversary, for example. "He seemed destined to do greater work even than in the past", said Cardinal Bourne, Archbishop of Westminster, fifty years ago, when that English Dominican, the most distinguished one since the restoration of the Dominican Order in Britain, died at the age of 52. If he had lived, would he have been Bourne's successor? Perhaps. (Remember, though, that the Catholic Church in England was different in the 1930s from what it was in the 1970s, when another religious, an Abbot of Ampleforth, got the job.) But what matters to the writers and readers of this magazine is what Bede Jarrett has to say to them. For among his very many achievements was the founding, in 1920, of *Blackfriars* (which became *New Blackfriars* in 1964, when it merged with *Life of the Spirit*), and from 1932 until his death he was editor himself.

"Did you know Father Jarrett?" is a question old ladies in all sorts of corners of the English-speaking world go on asking moderately young Dominicans. His reputation as a popular historian or as the author of a brilliant short life of St. Dominic, or as a gripping preacher or imaginative administrator, or as a man with a wonderfully high idea of the importance of friendship in religious life, lingers on even among some people who are not English speakers. But few are now clear what exactly he was trying to do overall.

One of his most important aims during the sixteen years 1916—1932 when he was leading the English Province of the Dominicans was to strengthen the specifically English (or, more accurately, Anglo-Scottish) character of the Province, and to involve its members more and more in the life of the country as a whole. So, for example, he brought the Dominicans back to Oxford after a 400-year absence...and he founded *Blackfriars*. It was not a popular aim at the time. It would be another forty years before really big swarms of Britain's Catholics would be deserting the ghetto.

By temperament, though, he was no revolutionary, not "a man before his time". He grew up in the last decades of Victoria's reign, son of an Indian Army colonel and given an appropriate upbringing in the depths of rural England. And the man who succeeded him as Provincial said he was "extraordinarily ordinary". Inevitably his world view was in

some ways very different from ours and the Britain he wanted Dominicans to be very much part of was certainly a different Britain.

It is precisely because of this, though, that it is such a surprise to read the *Blackfriars* of his time.

In some obvious ways those early numbers are unlike the present-day *New Blackfriars*: on average articles are shorter, much less space is allocated to theology, much more to gossip (not all of it well-informed). It is the slant on political and social issues in those early numbers which is surprising. Ever since about the time *Blackfriars* became *New Blackfriars*, in the days of Vatican II, it has been quite common to hear that this periodical may have its dazzling moments but it seems to have fallen—alas!—into the hands of editors tainted by communist ideas or ideas suspiciously similar, and so it is not any more the journal founded by good Father Jarrett.

The voices of good Father Jarrett and contributors of his time refute that.

In 1919 Bede Jarrett had said that he wanted to found “a periodical fearless, outspoken, zealous for truth”, but in its first number the famous preacher, Vincent McNabb wrote: “We shall hope to tell the truth with such a fine sense of time and person as to leave no men our enemies except such as are the enemies of truth.” Clearly McNabb did not realise what a high percentage of “enemies of truth” read religious periodicals. When the magazine’s twenty-first birthday arrived in 1941, Joseph Clayton, who had been a member of the original editorial board, said about the early days:

Some of our articles—I recall a number I wrote on ‘Economics for Christians’—provoked dislike. They are the merest commonplaces today, these economics of social justice, but twenty years ago they were hailed as ‘rank bolshevism’, and I am sure did the review no good from the circulation manager’s standpoint. And if it comes to that, some of Father Vincent’s contributions were described as ‘outrageous’. Efforts were even made at Rome, so I was told, to get *Blackfriars* suppressed. Father Bede was the last person to be disturbed by the criticisms of foolish and timid men.

In the next decade, during the Spanish Civil War, *Blackfriars* was one of the few major Catholic reviews in the world which had no brief for Franco. (“That a Catholic *esprit de corps* should induce us to side with the insurgents and have no sympathy whatever with the ‘rabble’ in their resistance to what they believe—and their opponents seem to give them plenty of reason to believe—to be the threat of an oppressive, murderous and reactionary tyranny is fundamentally un-Christian.”)

Bede Jarrett himself—according to Bede Bailey OP, who knew him—had been a regular attender at Fabian Society meetings before World War One and was on the side of the Labour minority in the General Election of 1932. And critics of his last radio talk said it was

“red socialism”. But we have to look further than Jarrett’s voting habits, or even the influence of people like Eric Gill and G.K. Chesterton, to find the origins of the magazine’s controversial slant. Just after his death the new Editor said the magazine’s policy was honest discussion of a multitude of current issues from a Catholic Christian standpoint, a policy “not in fact so presumptuous as might at first appear, for our review leans for its support in these matters against the solid structure of Thomist synthesis”. He no doubt wrote this partly to reassure old men in Rome, yet he certainly meant it. We cannot presume quite as breezily as he could that the metaphysics of St. Thomas Aquinas can be taken to be a “given”—no, not even the metaphysics of St. Thomas rescued from Thomism. Yet none of the very varied set of Dominicans who have edited this magazine have done so altogether without St. Thomas. They have shared in common the insight that whatever is human has some relevance to humanity’s final goal and is interrelated—“spiritual life, family life, social life, political life” (to quote that editor of fifty years ago). The whole human bundle, in fact. And where can human beings stand politically who believe that really seriously *and* believe in consistency as well?

Today, though, all this sounds almost too familiar to be worth repeating. And that is partly because of this magazine of Bede Jarrett’s.

A whole new generation has grown up since the years of the Council, when *Blackfriars* added *New* to its name. For it, the world of Bede Jarrett is long gone, remote. Nevertheless, how successfully *New Blackfriars* is going to respond to fresh needs and change will partly depend on whether we who write and edit it can capture and retain something of the spirit that Bede Jarrett possessed and that Bernard Delany OP, the first Editor of *Blackfriars*, wrote about in 1934:

He faced life as an adventure courageously and cheerfully with the keenness of a youth who could not be disillusioned. In 1920 he asked me to help him start this review. Armed with introductions I went round and interviewed all sorts of people—publishers, journalists, priests and others who I judged would be interested. The more persons I listened to, the more depressed I became. On every consideration, financial, journalistic, etc., etc., my scheme was condemned almost unanimously as unsound and foolish. On all sides I was sprayed gently but firmly metaphorical with cold water, and I came to Father Bede and said: ‘Everyone tells me the thing will fail.’ He said immediately: ‘*Let it fail!* Anyhow, get it started first. I would much sooner attempt it and fail than not attempt it at all.’

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