

## FATHER VINCENT McNABB IN THE FIELD

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IN a noble tribute to the late Hilaire Belloc at the Requiem Mass in Westminster Cathedral last year Monsignor Knox spoke in passing of Father Vincent McNabb—the champion-in-arms and inspiration of Belloc and Chesterton and the brilliant group of Catholics among whom they moved; ‘Father Vincent’, he said, ‘who has left us so little record of his splendid gifts’. Some of us could not help wondering what exactly the preacher meant by that little aside. Was it an appraisal of Father Vincent’s thirty-eight published books and the many pamphlets and articles which lie buried in the back numbers of innumerable journals and reviews? Perhaps it only meant that Father Vincent has left us no great massive work of primary importance, accepted as a permanent contribution to knowledge. His acute mind, extraordinary capacity for original thought, and the vital intellectual energy he poured into everything he did would seem to have made such a *magnum opus* possible. His two earliest books on Faith and Prayer (recently republished in one volume) showed promise that his theological writing might have developed on the highest classical level. Those who knew him may be inclined to say that he was too much the poet and artist to be tied down to technical theology and that anyhow his romantic temperament gave another bent to his genius. But whatever the explanation, although there is so much that is profound, original and stimulating in his published writings, he has left us no full-length, sustained study comparable to one or other of the major works of Cardinal Newman. He has given us no *Apologia* or *Summa*.

Another explanation may be found in his system of note-keeping which he began in his early student days and kept up all his life. These notes, comprising for the most part his own ideas, sometimes quotations (with his own comments, reflexions and elaborations) on every conceivable subject, written on loose sheets of paper (and sometimes on scraps and old bills, retrieved from wastepaper baskets) grew to enormous proportions. Carefully filed, numbered and indexed, they enabled him to compensate for the drawbacks of the leaking memory he so often complained

of, to give permanence to the passing thought and to recapture and recall his ideas at will. Those seven great fat concertina files, which occupied the book-shelf on his cell side by side with his Bible and *Summa*, were his personal memorabilia, corresponding to what used to be called a Commonplace Book—so named, as someone has remarked, because it contains the observations which a man thinks are not commonplace. Father Vincent was always working at these notes. They were a daily stimulus to his mind and pen; and they provided the storehouse and workshop from which his sermons, lectures and articles came. They helped to make him the quick and ready speaker and writer he was. I have heard him say that he could put his finger on what he was looking for in his notes in a matter of a few minutes. Some of his later books, which are somewhat hurriedly and erratically put together like gems strung at random, grew out of these notes and bear the obvious stamp of their origin. They are terse, disjointed and epigrammatic, reminding one of the method (or lack of method) of Coleridge in his *Table Talk*, Pascal and Rochefoucauld, an unfinished style, which as Newman says 'wanders from one subject to another as each appears to arise and gives no promise whatever of terminating in the production of a treatise'. The uneven, capricious, unsystematic style, sparkling as it so often was, clearly did not encourage growth into the great monumental treatise.

But I do not think that worried Father Vincent. He was too good a preaching friar to make learning an end or pursue even theology for its own sake. Like Father Hugh Pope, who was also a very learned man and a preacher of renown, he did not disdain to step down from his pulpit and professor's chair to preach in the streets. When advocating outdoor preaching he said: 'To uphold preaching in the street is not to belittle preaching in the pulpit. Indeed, pulpit preaching is not enough in quantity or perhaps not good enough in quality. Far from wishing pulpits to be empty I would like to see them oftener filled by preachers who devoted even greater time to thinking out what and how they had to speak. But it is clear that if pulpit preaching is necessary and even primarily necessary, it is not sufficient. Nothing indeed should supplant it. But other modes of apostolic action are needed to supplement it. Amongst these is outdoor preaching.'

That scholarly Benedictine, the late Abbot Cuthbert Butler,

used to praise the Catholic Evidence Guild as the finest thing produced by modern British Catholics. It is perhaps the most notable contribution of English Catholicism to the life of the Church in our own time: and Abbot Butler used to say in his last years that the work he had done as a speaker on the platforms of the C.E.G. gave him more consolation, when he was weighing up his life's work, than all the books he had ever written. Street preaching is the nearest thing to the catechetical instruction persistently advocated by the Popes. St Pius X said: 'It is easier to find an orator who will speak copiously and beautifully than a catechist whose teaching is in every respect what it should be.'

What a test it would be if we preachers were taken from the comparative security of the nice marble pulpit and put on a soap-box before an audience in the open air where our congregation can answer back and howl us down if we play the bully or quietly melt away if we hand them out sawdust or do not hold their attention!

Outdoor preaching was clearly the practice of our Lord and the apostles. 'St Paul', wrote Father Vincent, 'preached in the market place of Athens, and even on the Areopagus before the most famous outdoor audience in the world. An outdoor sermon of St Paul's led to the conversion of Dionysius, one of the most illustrious Greeks ever captured for Christ. It is surprising how persistent has been the tradition of outdoor preaching. From time to time it seems to fall out of the Church's activities; but after a period of disuse, apostles begin to use it anew with all its old success. Indeed, one might almost say that every renewal of apostolic life is a renewal of outdoor preaching. For instance, after the Protestant onslaught which had nearly severed Europe from the Church, the heroic counter-charge made by St Ignatius and his followers was largely a matter of outdoor preaching. Thus at Vicenza four of the saint's first companions, not yet priests, on the same day and at the same hour in different squares all began to preach, having first uttered a great cry and having waved their hats with their hands to call the people. . . . The people looked with idle wonder on these meanly dressed fellows, stammering bad Italian. But soon the preachers' ardour had its effect and conversions came numerously.'

'If St Ignatius was right in judging that the Catholic countries of Europe needed outdoor preaching in the sixteenth century, we

shall hardly be wrong in concluding that not only the Catholic countries, but still more the non-Catholic countries need open-air preaching in the twentieth century.

'But the primary, if not the fundamental, obstacle to spreading the Catholic faith among non-Catholics is their ignorance about the Catholic Church and Catholics. And the only way to dispel ignorance is by instruction. No amount of prayer is a substitute for the office of a catechist or a preacher. Converts are not taught and do not learn the catechism by a mere prayer that they may learn its contents, but by prayer assisted on the one hand by careful instruction and on the other hand by dogged application. If then, there is no chance of our instructing the ignorance of non-Catholics by pulpit preaching, even when this is carried out with the zeal of a St Paul, it seems clear that there must be a free use of outdoor preaching.'

Father Vincent recommended to our consideration the phenomenon of John Wesley and Wesleyanism. He quoted a few facts from the Life of John Wesley. 'On Sunday he usually preached five times. . . . He preached over five hundred times in the last nine months of 1739, and only five times in churches. . . . In the last fifty years of his life he crossed the Irish Channel over fifty times, and travelled over 250,000 miles on land. His journal records more than one instance of journeys of eighty to ninety miles on horseback in one day . . . by post-chaise 280 miles in forty-eight hours. . . . His saddle was his study. . . . He always rose at four, preached whenever possible at five . . . following his morning sermon by five others. In the fifty years of his itinerant life he preached over 40,000 times, an average of some fifteen times a week.' 'No wonder', says Father Vincent, 'the results of his preaching were marvellous. If those who are keen on the conversion of this country hope for like results they must use like methods.'

Because the ordinary priest has already much more work than he can manage, he will have no time for outdoor preaching. Therefore, said Father Vincent, let us change our methods and adopt a missionary technique by a large use of the catechist system. For practical purposes Great Britain is a missionary country insufficiently provided with priests.

And indeed the ordinary law of the Church seems to point to some such catechist system not merely for the overseas missions but for the Church in general. Thus in Can. 711 §2 it is said:

'Let local Ordinaries see that in every parish there should be established the Confraternities of the Most Holy Sacrament and of Christian Doctrine'. Again in Can. 1333 §1 it is said: 'For religious instruction of the young the parish priest may, and, if he is lawfully hindered, he *shall* seek the aid of any clerics dwelling in his parish; and even, if need be, of upright layfolk, especially of those who belong to the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine or to any like sodality existing in the parish'.

When the Westminster Catholic Evidence Guild was founded on the 24th April, 1918, Cardinal Bourne conferred upon the members the canonical title of Catechists. The C.E.G. in the diocese of Westminster was to be known as 'the Westminster Diocesan Catechists': that was the subtitle which was to justify the Guild's existence, define its status and guarantee its authority and mission. This gave great joy to Father Vincent and he loved to think of the Guild being given this statutory position and to see laymen and laywomen empowered to teach the Catechism and therefore commissioned to give at least elementary instruction in dogmatic theology (the Creed), moral and ascetical theology (the Ten Commandments), mystical theology (the 'Our Father') and sacramental theology (the Sacraments). 'This is all the more remarkable', said Father Vincent, 'when we reflect that as late as the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries there were priests, both secular and regular, who were licensed to preach on moral subjects only, but not on dogmatic subjects.' The theologian has sometimes shown an irrational jealousy and possessiveness and resented the admission of the uninitiated into the mysterious holy of holies, unless he were to come as a lay onlooker and remain meekly silent. There could be no room for this kind of monopoly and imperialism of the spirit when it was a question of fields white for the harvest and the needs of immortal souls.

The young men and women of the Catholic Evidence Guild and their glorious work thrilled the soul of Father Vincent; and as soon as the opportunity offered, he threw himself into the apostolate of open-air speaking with all his well-known vigour and enthusiasm.

He came to London from Hawkesyard in September 1920, assigned to the Priory, Haverstock Hill, where he lived till the day he died. During those twenty-three years, whenever he was in London, he scarcely ever missed a Sunday afternoon speaking at

one or other of the pitches of the C.E.G. and it was his invariable custom to walk from the Priory to the scene of action, Marble Arch or elsewhere, and to return home again on foot. He became a well-known figure and something of a character, reviving the ancient tradition of the Preaching Friar, wearing his habit in public and preaching the word at the street corners and open places. The lean friar, draped in his home-spun black and white habit, the big boots, ancient hat, pack on his back (his McNabb-sack, as he called it) presented a strange picture,—though nothing is really strange to the Londoner: and the people came to accept him as an unexplained oddity whom they somehow took for granted. But it was on the C.E.G. pitch that he was in his element.

A pitch is the place where a street performer takes his stand: it is also the strip of ground between and around the wickets. Father Vincent combined the two in his own mind when he said, referring to a strenuous Sunday afternoon with the C.E.G., 'I've been a couple of hours at the nets'. It was a rare and exciting game in which he played as a skilled batsman at bowling that knew no rules. Question time, intended for the encouragement of the inquirer and the clearing up of difficulties, easily becomes the crank's opportunity. The odd fellow who writes petulant letters to the newspapers and is in the habit of intervening from the body of the hall at public meetings, is always conspicuously vocal before an open-air platform. He is the typical heckler, eager to catechize and cross-examine, to pick holes and put the speaker in the wrong: he is frequently a nuisance and a bore; he is humourless and generally has a one-track mind. Newman describes him as one who 'sees objections more clearly than truths and can ask a thousand questions which the wisest of men cannot answer, and moreover he has a very good opinion of himself.' But there are all sorts of hecklers. There is the fellow who may be described as an addict who takes it up as a hobby and gets bitten by it as one might develop a passion for drink or gambling or opium. Then there is the rude cock-sureness of the half-educated and the irritating Cockney pertness of the omniscient; and of course the out-and-out eccentric 'who is stung into utterance by a bee in his bonnet'.

But not all are hecklers intent on asking unfriendly questions. Even the man with all the noisy bluster may be sometimes concealing his own half-hearted doubts and resisting what he fears

may be true. Many honest questioners, and indeed many who never open their mouths except to laugh at the battle of words, may well be open to conviction; and the C.E.G. speaker is not there to score, but to teach and if possible convince. Now Father Vincent was not naturally meek in argument nor did it come easy to him to suffer fools gladly. Those who knew him can remember his sudden flashes of wrathful lightning. Charity and grace triumphed, it is true; but he must have been frequently sorely tested by the devastating chaff and the superb irony of the Cockney, his scurrility and blatant rudeness. Long practice taught him to take the measure of his audience and he came to love the crowd as the crowd clearly came to love him. Prejudice and ignorance were the evils; and the worst ignorance was the ignorance that was ignorant of itself. He used to say that the man born blind, to whom our Lord restored sight, should be the patron saint of the C.E.G. He was one of the very few whom the gospel mentions as defending our Lord. His eyes were blind; but his mind had most acute and accurate vision; and he knew the extent of his own ignorance. He confounded our Lord's hecklers who lost their tempers and cast him out.

Father Vincent revealed the ideals that guided him in the following words we quote from an article he wrote on *St Thomas as a Controversialist*:

'Were we to ask St Thomas what we must do to become successful in controversy, we can imagine him replying, "You ask me how to become accomplished and winning controversialists; to which, though unskilled in controversy, yet anxious to serve truth, I reply:

"First. Understand your opponent's words; and above all the meaning of his words. Do not minimize anything but his faults. If need be, credit him with more rather than less. Depreciation will harden opinion into error. Fair-play is the first victory over untruth. Set down your adversaries' arguments at their strongest. To shirk objections is a subtle unbelief. Look at the matter in his light for two reasons: first, for truth's sake, lest you take him to hold what he does not hold; and secondly, that you may see the circumstance leading him to hold it. To stand where he stands and see what he sees, may show you the way into his mind and heart; and may move him truthwards by holding up the mirror to his mistakes.

“Secondly. Fully admit every word of truth; remembering that every word, in the mouth of a speaker, has some truth. Falsehood is not in things nor words, but in propositions, theses, opinions, judgments. Remember, too, that men’s words and ideas are infallible as far as they go. Remember, above all, that the greatest part of error comes from a wrong attitude of heart. The peace that springs from welcomed truth can come only to men of goodwill. Take men where they are; that you may lead them where they should be.

“Thirdly. Never utter a harsh word. If uttered, repent of it in the sackcloth and ashes of apology. St Paul spoke sharply. A greater than St Paul rebuked the Pharisees. But they were superiors rebuking vice. You are but a man amongst men, recommending truth to your equals. Never forget the word of wisdom, ‘A soft answer turneth away wrath’; and wrath turneth away most of those who are turned away. Bear in mind that, however parted our minds may be, our hearts may be one in peace. Win your adversary’s heart, and you have set a strong tower in the centre of his soul.

“But above all, tarry not to call upon the Master of truth to pardon your unskilled defence; and upon the Master of hearts to unlock the heart of him whom you would lead to the Truth.”

Father Vincent spoke of Mr Lister Drummond, of the Third Order of St Dominic, who died in 1916: ‘He was the most courteous and unruffled controversialist I ever knew. This courtesousness which made many converts was not merely an endowment but a deliberate principle. He had made a philosophy of it. If you questioned him about it, he would reply, with a smile, “If you looked out of your window and saw someone walking, as you thought, over your choicest flower-beds, you would naturally feel so angry that you would go out prepared to turn the intruder violently out of the garden. But would you do this if, on coming up to him, you found that he was completely blind?”’

The hard work of controversy means that we do not argue against doctrines, but against defendants; not against arguments, but arguers; nor against denials, but deniers; nor against systems, but against persons; nor against theories, but frames of mind; not against statements, but against states of soul. We do not beat the air or speak in the void. We confront an opponent who has to be turned into a friend. To make him a friend we must put ourselves



in his place, as far as possible, see with his eyes, touch with his fingers, feel with his heart and argue with his prejudices; that is, we must find him in a definite attitude of mind and heart—in a certain frame of mind.

There can be no doubt that, as a C.E.G. speaker, Father Vincent was most unusual and of rare originality. One Good Shepherd Sunday in Hyde Park he spoke on the Gospel for the day. He began: 'Year by year Hyde Park which sees so many wonderful things sees its greatest drama in a flock of sheep.' (He apostrophized the sheep grazing thirty or forty yards away from the platform). 'Sheep! Lambs!' (and he pointed towards the sheep). 'There may not be any hirelings for them to fly from; but there is only one they will follow and obey. If the King should come out of Buckingham Palace and invite them in, they would take no heed. Or if Mr Stanley Baldwin' (Prime Minister at the time) 'were to command them in the name of the present government, they would be quite listless. Even if the Head of the Police told them to move on, they would merely bleat back at him. But what cannot be done by all the power of Police, Prime Minister or King can be done by an old stolid, weather-furrowed hill-man with an ash stick or a hazel wand in his hand and lean hound at his heel.

*'There shall be one fold and one shepherd.* Our Lord does not say, "There is one fold and everyone is in it". He does not even say, "There is one fold and some are not in it". Nor does he say, "There is one fold and all good people are in it and everyone else outside the fold is wicked". Our Lord has only once given us the metaphor of the Church's unity and he has expressed it as one Flock and one Shepherd.'

He was very nimble-witted and many of his jokes and repartees have become legendary,—wisecracks, which raised a laugh at the time, that are perhaps spoiled by repetition and in danger of going flat on the printed page. As Blessed Henry Suso says, "There is a great difference between the sweet strains of a harp and hearing another speaking about them; and there is a difference between words received in pure grace that flow from a living heart and a living voice and the same put down in cold print or dead parchment: they are chilled and wither like plucked roses". Blessed Henry is stating the whole impossible problem of the biographer. And he is also summing up the evanescent influence of the spoken word which is 'written in water'.

It is therefore not easy to assess the influence of such a great friar as Father Vincent. His impassioned appeals for social justice led to no result comparable to the campaign of Abbé Pierre or an organization like the Society of St Vincent de Paul. The 'distributist' experiments which grew out of his exhortations to town-dwellers to cut adrift from industrialism and return to the land did not always meet with complete success. He, who praised Ditchling as 'an army in battle array' ('At least Ditchling has done *something*'), came later to speak sadly and wistfully of the 'Ditchling of the old days'—as if he feared it had departed from its first ideals and ancient glory. His life-long devotion to the cause of uniting Christian people did not issue in any practical scheme of 'reunion'. In fact it was his constant assertion that his only plan and purpose was to bring together people who had been separated for three hundred years so that they could discuss their differences and agreements with a view to finding a remedy.

People, who judge by visible results and who look for success, will say he missed the mark; that he was a theorist and a doctrinaire. Your plain, sensible, hard-headed Briton with no nonsense about him will express his suspicion of rhetoric and his dislike for anyone cutting pious capers. Father Vincent's Gaelic addiction to drama was obvious, we all know, and he indulged in the gentle art of exaggeration. Poet and artist? Wild, fanatical Celt? Which was he? Perhaps he was all this. Only he who made the human heart can sound its depths or judge its motives. Transcending all his idiosyncrasies and shining through them all was the clear light of his manifest goodness. As Hilaire Belloc said, 'All, even the most superficial, marvelled at his unmistakable holiness.' There, we have the clue to his greatness and influence: he was prophet and apostle. No need to take fright at the word 'prophet'. We speak in the sense of St Paul's doctrine: 'the prophet speaks to edify, to encourage, to comfort his fellow men' (1 Cor. XIV. 3), and St Thomas, commenting on these words, says the prophet is one who sees things which are far off, one who interprets the words of God in the sense in which they were written.

'Simplicity is the best and truest ornament of most things in human life', said Jonathan Swift: and Father Vincent in the end achieved this simplicity in his love for his human kind. So many people saw him under so many different aspects—Belloc, Chesterton, Phillimore, Maurice Baring and Biddy in the basement

(who knew nothing of his learning and had never read a line he had written, but only appreciated his holiness), his innumerable converts and correspondents, the penitents who flocked round his 'box' and owed their soul's health to his counsel and sympathy, the wise, the unlettered, the great, the simple, young and old—every kind of person was influenced by his amazing personality.

But only the recording angels could tell us the whole story.

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## ANGLO-CATHOLIC SOCIOLOGY TODAY

SIR HENRY SLESSER

**I**T is now some thirty years since a group of High Anglicans, moved by the disorder of the times—the first world war having recently ended and the promises of its ending being unfulfilled—were inspired to study and promote a Christian sociology which would be based on definite doctrinal assumptions. Before their decision, two approaches to the social problem were in vogue in the Church of England, the one an attempt to encourage amity between employers and their men, an endeavour illustrated by the work of the Industrial Christian Fellowship, a cautious movement encouraged of late years by many of the Bishops, and the other, more specifically aggressive and political, a propaganda which found expression in the Church Socialist League by a body indifferent, on the whole, to doctrine, but persuaded that Socialism was not incompatible with, if not essential to, true modern Christian practice.

To neither of these objective did the new 'League of the Kingdom of God' (later to be renamed the 'Christendom' group) subscribe. Its principal inspirer, much influenced by the earlier beliefs of Maurice and his follower, Canon Widdrington, insisted that Christian living postulated a common life in which Christian values are embodied. He criticized what he called the 'Manicheism' of the modern Church in ignoring social justice as