

## THE WALSINGHAM CROSS

BY

A PILGRIM



It was in the late afternoon of a perfect summer's day that we set out from the Slipper Chapel with cross-bearer and acolytes to meet the pilgrims of the Cross. We had to hurry as we were rather late. We had arranged to meet the Cross at Barsham, but as we reached the brow of the hill that looks down upon the old manor, we saw the pilgrims marching towards us like a small compact battalion in battle array. We waited for them to reach us. They came as conquerors without slacking speed as they climbed the stiff hill. When they reached us, the Cross was erected and the Chaplain of the Slipper Chapel sprinkled it with holy water. Not a word was spoken; the Cross spoke for itself for it had come into its own. The last rays of the setting sun shone upon the white beams of ash. The pilgrims then went through the normal hourly routine of the stations of the Cross.

*We adore thee, O Christ, and we bless thee*

*Because by thy holy Cross thou didst redeem the world.*

The pilgrims' chaplain then said a few appropriate words on the station they had reached at that hour—brief, telling words, as clean-cut as the Cross against the silent sky—words which sank deeply into our hearts as we knelt in silence before the Cross, heedless of the charabancs that rushed past, carrying their howling cargoes from the sea. Then came the oft-repeated prayer which expressed the whole spirit of the pilgrims and renewed their strength hour by hour:

*O Lord Jesus, may it be our privilege to bear thy Cross. May we glory in nothing else. By it may the world be crucified unto us and we unto the world. May we never shrink from suffering, but rather rejoice to be counted worthy to be suffering members of thy mystical body. O Christ live and suffer in each of us. Amen.*

It might have been written by Paul of Tarsus: it was in fact written by a pilgrim of the 20th century and was a fruit of the cross-carrying pilgrimage to Vézelay in 1946. And as I took my place among the pilgrims, a labourer of the eleventh hour, I knew that the spirit of Vézelay had not been lost. The handful of pilgrims who had been to Vézelay, and those who had rallied to their call to raise once more the standard of the King, lived with one and the same spirit for they had discovered the truth that is both new and old. It was the spirit that stirred the whole of Christendom in the 12th century, when

Bernard of Clairveaux launched the second crusade and rallied crusaders from the four corners of the known world to fight under the sign of the Cross. Vézelay had been their rallying point and it was there that they dedicated themselves to the service of the Cross—the sign of unity and peace.

The occasion of last year's pilgrimage to Vézelay was the eighth centenary of the preaching of the second crusade by St Bernard and it was an answer to the call of the Holy Father in his Christmas message of 1942 urging that crusaders should arise 'in the whole of Christendom . . . who would be prepared to serve and to sacrifice themselves like the crusaders of old'. Vézelay was not only the end of a long and arduous journey, it was the beginning of a new movement. Those who had been privileged to bear the Cross from these islands felt themselves bound to see that the spirit of Vézelay should not die, and they pledged themselves to organise a similar pilgrimage in this country. Our arrival at Walsingham was therefore the fulfilment of a promise and it was with hearts overflowing with gratitude that we sang the *Salve Regina*, the crusaders' battle-song, as we arrived at the Slipper Chapel. Yet this was not to be a resting place, for we still had to follow barefoot in the footsteps of the former pilgrims of old as far as Walsingham itself. It seemed natural that we should remove our shoes as they had done, since we were not starting anything new. This last part of the journey was made in complete silence. It was only broken by the constant murmur of the Rosary like the meditative voice of the doves at dusk. This murmur continued ceaselessly throughout the 220 miles of the journey. Our time was measured by it and we instinctively came to judge of distances in terms of mysteries. It was said by the three pilgrims who walked immediately behind the cross ready to take over the sacred burden when they completed five decades of the Rosary. Mary was leading to Calvary and as we carried our precious burden we felt carried along by her incessant praise on the lips of our fellow pilgrims. Each pilgrim said the fifteen decades several times a day but this was found to be no more irksome than bearing the Cross. The bitter waters had been made sweet once more by the wood (Exodus xv, 25).

We entered Walsingham like a victorious army with firm and joyous step, in spite of sore limbs and sadly blistered feet. When we reached the gatehouse of the old priory which guards the entrance to the ruins of the medieval shrine, we erected our cross and sang the litany of our Lady. The invocations rose loud and clear, like well directed blows of a battering ram against the weather-worn oaken doors of the gatehouse. And as we stood there under the shadow of

the cross, singing the praises of Mary, we felt that she was indeed our mother and that she had not forsaken her Dowry.

The Ark had entered Jericho, the victory was complete. It only remained for it to be proclaimed in the Market Place by a son of St Dominic. He invited all present to rebuild a common city under the shadow of the cross and as he spoke of the scandal of a divided Christendom, we caught a glimpse of the promised land, of the common fold where all who believed in the Cross of Christ would dwell once more in unity. Our hearts were filled with radiant joy. Then the weary bodies of the pilgrims were soon refreshed with a good meal prepared for us by the small Catholic community of Walsingham. The Povorello took special care of these poor lovers of the Cross. The constant charity which was shown to us in all the parishes we visited was a sure sign that the message of the Cross was not lost upon the Catholics of this country. It was that deep charity which, while it does not forget the humble needs of suffering humanity, yet finds its source in the very heart of God. 'When I shall be lifted up; I shall draw all things to myself' (John xii, 32).

Night had fallen by the time we had finished our meal so that we returned to the Slipper Chapel in a torchlit procession through the silent and almost deserted streets and winding country roads. It was a perfect night, not a leaf stirred yet the air was clear and fresh. We sang the litany of the saints and the stars seemed to re-echo our praises in the sky. To the saints in heaven our twinkling torches must have seemed like stars sent down from heaven to lead us along the Walsingham Way.

The cross was taken into the Slipper Chapel for the night and erected opposite the shrine of our Lady. Clustering round our cross and the throne of our mother we sang Compline as was normal throughout the pilgrimage. Solemn benediction followed and then began the all night vigil before the shrine of our Lady. To kneel in silence at the feet of our Mother was all that we asked for as a reward for these labours.

At sunrise we gathered round the altar and sang Mass together. It was our daily bread taken in common which bound us together into one body and gave us the strength to follow in the footsteps of Christ crucified. One day we had to go without Mass and it was a great privation for all of us; it was as if the sun had not risen that day. The morning dew still covered all the growing things when we started off on our return journey to Bishop's Stortford. We were returning by a different route. It was to take us through the pine forests and sparsely inhabited parts of East Anglia, through Swaffham, Newmarket, Saffron Walden, before we reached our final goal on the fifteenth of August.

There was something relentless about the progress of the cross; it went forth like some mighty ship driven by a constant and unvarying wind. It was the spirit of the cross that had taken hold of us and urged us on to carry it with untiring energy. There was no feeling of anti-climax on the return journey for we had discovered a great treasure at Walsingham and we were taking it home with us. Our devotion increased as the cross took an increasing possession of our lives; it left its mark upon our shoulders and we bathed it in our sweat. Its arms and stem bore the marks of our carrying; we knew it better as *our own* as days went by. Only those who have borne this sweet burden can fully understand its powers of healing and consoling. We shall never forget the poor woman who left the fields where she was gleaning in order to touch the cross. She stood before it with tears in her eyes: 'It does one good just to look at it', she said. She was not the only one to be deeply moved. No one will ever know the good that was achieved by the cross in the villages and towns that we went through. Few dared to approach us but when contact was made we roused deep interest and sympathy. Judging by reports received from people who followed some way behind us, its influence was like the wash of a ship which widens as the ship recedes from view. The people saw a group of tired men carrying a cross, saying the Rosary and singing hymns, some gathered further information from the pilgrims. A few seeds were sown—may God give the increase. Christ was proclaimed to all wherever we went; to all men of goodwill in a striking and vivid way. Only God knows the result of these labours. But we who have witnessed the power of the cross in our own lives can testify that we have never known such peace and joy as in its service. This was a common experience which bound all the pilgrims in perfect unity of spirit and filled their hearts with unspeakable tenderness towards each other. It could be truly said of them 'See how they love one another'.

Many people have been suspicious of the value of these cross-carrying pilgrimages because of their spectacular character. They argue that nothing is to be gained by mere feats of physical endurance, and we would agree with them. But the real achievement of these pilgrimages is the spreading of the Kingdom of God through the conquest of self. Here is a unique way of bringing our minds and bodies into subjection and of discovering the liberty of divine grace. It is an ideal way of carrying out the repeated injunctions of our blessed Lady at Lourdes and at Fatima to pray and to do penance for the sins of the world. Those who have witnessed its power will say with David when he was given his sword: 'There is none like that. Give it to me'.

Here is an ideal means of reaching the multitudes who know nothing about Christ because he has never been preached to them. It requires no money, no great cleverness, no reliance upon those things the world uses to extend its power. All that is needed are men who are prepared to become fools for Christ's sake and to leave all things to follow him. The Cross shall be lifted up again, may the generous souls who read these words pray that God may send many labourers to work in his vineyard.

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## THE SPIRITUAL HOMILIES

OF

MACARIUS OF EGYPT

[The fifty homilies printed in Migne's *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 34, have until recently been attributed to St Macarius, an Egyptian monk of the fourth century whose miracles are told in Palladius's *Lausiac History* and Rufinus's *History of the Monks*. But this authorship has lately been seriously questioned; for some of the teaching contained in the Homilies bears a certain resemblance to the tenets of the heretical sect of the Messalians or Euchites, condemned by the Council of Ephesus in 431. G. L. Marriott, in an article on 'The Messalians and the Discovery of their Ascetic Book' (*Harvard Theological Review*, vol. xix, No. 2) claims to find most of the eighteen Messalian propositions reproduced in St John of Damascus's *De Haeresibus* in the Macarian Homilies; but on closer inspection almost all the passages adduced from the latter are capable of a perfectly orthodox interpretation, whereas the condemned propositions are a crude and one-sided exaggeration of their teaching. The right solution of the question of the relation between the Messalians and the author of the Homilies seems to have been given by Dom L. Villecourt, O.S.B. ('La date et l'origine des Homélie's spirituelles