

THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT
AN ISLAND TERTIARY

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The Dominican dedication to Truth is capable of infinite expression: most obviously in the First Order with its work of preaching, but no less certainly in the contemplation of the enclosed nuns of the Second Order and in the innumerable activities of the Third Order, both regular and secular. At every level the central inspiration is the same, that passionate love of St. Dominic's for the salvation of souls which led Pope Honorius III, in approving the Order, to prophesy that its members would be *Pugiles fidei et vera mundi lumina*.

Dominican tertiaries, living as they do in the world, have a vocation that is co-extensive with the world. At first sight the variety of their achievement seems united only by a slender thread of Dominican allegiance. But the glorious army of Dominican tertiary saints—whether it be St. Catherine of Siena, a Pope's ambassadress, or St. Rose of Lima with her hidden austerities, or Blessed Louis Grignon de Montfort, the apostle of the Rosary—are one in their service of Truth: the means vary, but the end is the same.

Among modern tertiaries the name of Father Henry Bailey Mary Hughes is too little known. He died, nearly sixty years ago, in poverty and obscurity on an island off the coast of North Wales where he had established a monastery of the Third Order devoted to the conversion of Wales. By all human standards his work was a failure, yet there can have been few who realised so deeply the meaning of a tertiary's vocation. He was born in 1833, the son of the Anglican rector of Rhoscolyn, near Holyhead. He was reconciled to the Catholic Church when still a schoolboy and soon found his way to Lisbon as a student for the priesthood. It was here that he first came into contact with Dominican ideals and it was here too that he first revealed his unswerving devotion to the demands of a vocation with *Veritas* for its motto. At an ordination, when the Bishop made the usual formal charge about the fitness of the candidates, Fr. Hughes publicly raised objection to one of them. This action, naturally enough, gained him many enemies, and he tells us that he was "compelled to hide". Soon after he started on the astonishing travels that were to take him through three continents—as a "missionary apostolic" preacher in Portugal and Spain, Belgium and Italy, and so to Rome, where he is said to have preached before the assembled Fathers of the Vatican Council.

He left Rome for Central Africa, where, after some months of intense missionary work, he was to have been made Vicar Apostolic. But his health failed and he returned to Europe. He is

next heard of in the United States, at Boston, where he was well-fitted to deal with Portugese immigrants. In Boston he founded convents and orphanages (under the direction of Sisters of the Dominican Third Order). There seems to have been no limit to the range of his zeal; he felt a profound sympathy for the Red Indian population of America and soon he was at work among them. He learnt their language, and "followed their habits of life, sleeping in the open air and in wigwams, and sparing himself no hardship if by doing so he could win their souls." (*Tablet*, 28th January, 1888).

But all these years Fr. Hughes had hoped to return to work in his own Wales. He was able to preach in twelve languages and to converse in many more, we are told, but Welsh was his first and last love. The career which had begun with that early conversion in Wales was to end there after the difficult years in Portugal, Africa and the American backwoods. Wales was, indeed, as foreign a mission as any; her need of priests with an understanding of the people was desperate. In 1886, therefore, Fr. Hughes came back to Wales, summoned thither by the Bishop of Shrewsbury, whose diocese at that time included the whole of North Wales. Fr. Hughes, T.O.D. (*sic*) writes (*Tablet*, 7th June, 1887), "The Right Rev. Dr. Knight, Bishop of Shrewsbury wrote to me two years ago last April inviting me to preach missions to my countrymen in Welsh, as being one of the very few priests left alive who can still do so. He wrote at the same time to our Father Master General, who at once sent me an obedience to come . . ." An authorisation of the Bishop's gives "sanction and approval for the work of restoring the monastery on St. Tudwal's Island for the Third Order of St. Dominic and making it a centre for missions to the Welsh of North Wales".

The part islands have played in the religious life of Wales—Bardsey, Holy Island, Caldey—makes an inevitable appeal to anyone with a romantic sense of the past; and most Welshmen have that. St. Tudwal's Island had fragmentary remains of a church, founded by St. Tudwal, a British bishop of Tréguier, in the sixth century. It was fertile but uninhabited, a mile from the mainland of Lleyn in Caernarvonshire. Here Fr. Hughes hoped to set up a community of men living the tertiary life—a *Welsh* tertiary life at that!—who by their prayer and austerities would form the spiritual impetus for the apostolic work of preaching on the mainland. In September 1886 Fr. Hughes arrived from America. "I had only with me one lay brother, one secular tertiary, one other boy, and a little orphan child too young and helpless to be left behind". It proved impossible to start living on the island, so two cottages were taken at Aber-soch, and here on Rosary Sunday Mass was said for the first time

since the Reformation. Fr. Hughes preached every Sunday in Welsh at Abersoch, and once or twice a week at Pwllheli, the nearest town. "There is a wonderful movement in our favour just now. The Methodists tried to raise the country against me on my arrival; but their principal agent here is a stranger in Lleyn, so he found himself unable to cope with the natural clannishness of the people, who said 'Father Hughes is no stranger in this country; he is here by good right, since he speaks Welsh and is our own blood relation'". Fr. Hughes' genius lay in absolute understanding of the people: "The whole religion of this country seems to consist in the tonic *sol-fa*; so I must even go with the tide and get them singing Christian doctrine, as I did with the Abandu in Africa, and so fight Methodism with its own weapons. I believe we shall convert Wales better by singing than by preaching".

But opposition was intense and soon the community was driven to live on the island before it was at all ready for them. "Our life on St. Tudwal's is very simple: we rise at 6 a.m., have morning prayers, Mass and breakfast, and then disperse to our different tasks . . . At noon we recite the Angelus, at half-past five the Rosary and Litany, at six supper, and then recreation or light work till nine, when we have night prayers and bed . . . We are now busy unearthing the ruins of the old convent . . . We cannot spare time for studies just now, till we have a roof over our heads—we are only living in tents as yet . . . I am very desirous of receiving young men. For students I want only those who can speak Welsh, as I find it next to impossible to get others to learn it so as to be practically useful".

A letter of September 21, 1887, describes the hardships of the community. "Money is scarce; we have 1½d. on the island, but even that cannot be spent here, as there is no shop next door. We are going on as usual, trying to repair damages, but leaving the rest to Providence, who has never failed us yet". Again, writing on October 12, "We had three stormy nights this week. Monday the roof was nearly blown off my hut . . . Tuesday the rain made its way through . . . We are pioneers and must expect pioneers' lodgings and rations, and laugh at little discomforts. You cannot break up new lands in kid gloves, nor use silver trowels to found monasteries . . . My young men are full of spirits and laugh at everything; so we will hold the fort, please God". In November he writes that he has decided to go to the people since they will not come to him. His idea was to recite the Rosary in procession, "with a cross borne before us and a bell to mark the mysteries. This will of course gather a crowd, and when we have had an audience I shall preach". Of converts there were few, but in his more optimistic moods (and Fr. Hughes was never despondent) he thought opposition would

gradually give way to a gentler mood.

Poverty, storms, the loss of boats, hostility—the catalogue of failure seemed complete. But Fr. Hughes never complained: “these little involuntary mortifications help us to make up for our shortcomings in other respects”. In December he was taken ill and in a few days was dead, worn out with the hardships of the last year. He was buried in the churchyard at Llanengan, two miles from Abersoch. For years his grave was neglected, but later a stone engraved in Welsh and English was put up by the Hon. Mrs. Herbert, a member of the Catholic family that has kept the faith alive through the centuries at Llanarth. “In respectful memory of Father Henry Hughes, T.O.D., born in Caernarvon, this stone has been placed over his mortal remains by the Hon. Augusta Herbert of Llanover. He died December 16, 1887, aged 54 years. He worked as an apostle in many a land and laboured for the Catholic Faith. He died in his work. R.I.P.”

With Fr Hughes' death, the community was dispersed and the work ended. It had been entirely his, and could not survive him. No failure could seem more absolute. And yet those brief months of heroic struggle were not forgotten. Years afterwards a postman in Pwllheli, speaking of Father Hughes said, “He was the best preacher I ever heard. I remember a sermon of his on the *afal sur*, the sour apple. It was the best Welsh sermon of them all. Indeed he was a good preacher, and such a good singer too!”* He was an apostle, and in that a true Dominican: incomplete his work might be, but the meaning of it is clear. In one of the many Welsh hymns he wrote, Fr Hughes expressed something of his own inspiration. *Gwahoddiad i'r Offeiriad Cymreig i ddyfod yn ôl i Gymru* (“A Call to Welsh priests to return to Wales”) is an impassioned appeal for Wales. “Preaching is good, prayer is better, best of all is holiness of life. Come, like Gideon, to the battle; come, like David, to withstand Saul: come, our Lord has raised the banner: happy the man who has not turned his back on Wales”.

Writing after Fr. Hughes' death, a correspondent in the *Tablet* hoped “the noble Order of Friars Preachers, distinguished in the last century of Welsh Catholicism by Tudur Aled, the bard, who celebrated in majestic verse the praises of St. Winifrede, will do what in it lies to perpetuate his memory and crown the edifice of his work”. At least his name deserves to be remembered with gratitude, and not least by the Dominican Third Order of which he was so faithful a member. In the most absolute way he realised the truth expressed by the greatest of all Welsh poets—*Byd heb ddim yw bod heb Dduw*, “Life without God is a world that is nothing”.

*cf. *Cennad Catholig Cymru*, 1912, p. 476.