

## THE INFLUENCE ON THE E.B.C. OF DOM GUERANGER'S REVIVAL<sup>1</sup>

Dame Eanswythe Edwards, Stanbrook

**I** MAKE NO APOLOGY for dealing exclusively in this paper with the influence of D. Guéranger's revival on Stanbrook. Firstly, for the obvious reason that I know more about that, and I do not feel so competent to speak of its influence, except indirectly, on the monks of the Congregation. Furthermore, the impact of this revival was strongest on Stanbrook.

Like all the houses, Stanbrook suffered greatly, as far as monastic observance was concerned, from the expulsion from Flanders in 1795. The old nuns tried to keep the Cambrai tradition alive, but their broken health, as well as the circumstances in which they lived, made it impossible to keep up that observance, much as they longed to. In time, a younger generation grew up who had never known it, and so were unable to appreciate it, and, partly on account of the need to develop our school as a means of livelihood, a spirit contrary to the monastic one threatened to grow before a truly monastic way of life could be re-established. Candidates tended to be encouraged on account of their usefulness in the school, rather than for their monastic aspirations. This does not mean to imply that the running of a school is incompatible with the monastic life, although it can be difficult to prevent a tendency for the interests of the school to predominate. This is what began to happen at Stanbrook about 1845. Young nuns were put straight into the school, and then took little part in community life, even Choir duties, which was quite contrary to the tradition of the house. Some idea of the condition of the house can be glimpsed from two incidents. When D. Magdalen Bick was thinking of entering the novitiate, sometime before 1848, Dom Bernard, who was chaplain at the time, remarked to her, 'This is hardly a religious house, you know, but just a pious, happy little family'. A few years earlier Cardinal Barnabo had said in Rome to Dom Bernard, who was then President, 'As for Stanbrook, the best thing we can do is just to let it quietly die out'.

The fact that it did not die out I would put down firstly to the spirit of interior prayer, as taught by Fr Baker, which had never ceased to be present in a marked degree in several individuals of each generation. Secondly, the community had always had a tenacious love of the Divine Office, even when it was little understood, and a fidelity to its public recitation. Fr Laurence Shepherd was to be responsible for renewing this tradition. After much hesitation, he accepted the post of Vicarius Monialium and chaplain at Stanbrook at the end of 1863, and thus became the channel through which D. Guéranger's reform reached the community.

Before describing Fr Laurence's work at Stanbrook, we need to consider what kind of man he was. From his earliest years, he had been attracted by the beautiful, especially in music, which he loved passionately. His character was simple, direct, but also ardent. In his spiritual life, the direct worship of God absorbed him completely. He was utterly

---

<sup>1</sup> If there were any notes, they have not survived.

unworldly, earnest and rather oversensitive. At the same time, he was of a bright, cheerful disposition, a trait which particularly endeared him to D. Guéranger. At times he could be playful. In his thought, he was not very original, and perhaps for this reason he needed a master whose guidance he could follow. Having found in D. Guéranger one who shared his ideals and aspirations, he followed him with affectionate devotion. As an idealist, Fr Laurence suffered acutely when others did not share or misunderstood his ideals, but his sweet and gentle disposition ensured that he never showed any bitterness. All these qualities can be seen in the last photographs we have of him.

In 1863, he was already well known to the nuns, having frequently supplied for their former chaplain, D. Bernard Short, who was in constant ill health. D. Scholastica Gregson (Abbess 1846/62, 1868/72) was always looking for ways of raising the standard of monastic observance. Soon after Fr Laurence had been sent to the mission at Bath in 1855, she heard from friends about the instruction he gave there on liturgy and church history, the content of which he had derived from his annual visits to D. Guéranger. She was already acquainted with Guéranger's *Annee Liturgique*, and she was beginning to feel that she might find in Guéranger's ideas the help she needed to inculcate the reforms she desired. Her attempt to encourage Fr Laurence to ask Guéranger to give a course about monasticism to the community was not successful. Consequently, she encouraged her nuns to seek Fr Laurence's directions when he visited Stanbrook. Her successor, Abbess Placida Duggan, was also to think highly of Fr. Laurence, begging him to accept the office of Vicarius when it was offered to him. She painted such a black picture of the state of the community, however, that Fr Laurence was at first very hesitant to accept this office, and it was only after reiterated advice from Guéranger that he did so. Guéranger, for instance, wrote, 'As for Stanbrook, my very dear Lorenzo, I am of the opinion that you should go, on account of the good there is to be done there, and which will probably not be done without you'. In later years, Guéranger liked to claim that it was he who had sent Fr Laurence to Stanbrook.

Once the appointment was made, Guéranger sent Fr Laurence some excellent advice: 'Have confidence, dear Lorenzo, O.F. Saint Benedict will be with you, and he will help you. I have three bits of advice to give you. 1. Have great patience. 2. Watch carefully, so as to grasp the whole situation well ('observer attentivement afin de connaitre bien tout votre monde', 27 November 1863, original letter in Solesmes archives). 3. Guard yourself from all precipitation | add to this, frequent and instant prayer, with the offering of all your actions. Always speak gently, praise what is good, encourage what is best from the beginning. Instruct the novices with sound doctrine; recommend to them humility, patience and discretion. God and time will do the rest'.

Fr Laurence acted faithfully on this advice. His first step was to encourage *personal* fidelity to the observance, as it then was, and to the interior life. This was in accordance with Guéranger's own view that no monastic must spring raising the had for the prayer. He by offering expected to each volume reform was ever established on mere legislation alone; it from the community itself. Secondly, Fr Laurence aimed at intellectual standard of the community. Formerly, the nuns most part read only devotional books to help them in their now encouraged much wider and more solid reading, and began to lend books from his own library to individuals. These he be read from beginning to end. As he finished translating of the *Annee Liturgique*, he made a gift of it to each member but also through his that sense

of, and love of Guéranger's life and of the community. Mainly through this work, conferences and conversation, the nuns acquired for, the Church which was at the very centre teaching.

When Fr Laurence paid his yearly visit to Solesmes, he insisted that his primary aim was to 'seek light for this dear monastery of Stanbrook'. Before the monastery of Ste. Cecile was thought of, Abbot Guéranger gave freely of his teaching for the benefit of Stanbrook. The results which were to follow by the time of Fr Laurence's death at Stanbrook over twenty one years later must surely have exceeded the most enthusiastic hopes of both master and disciple. By that time a beautiful monastic church had been built. Within it the liturgy was carried out with care and solemnity by a fervent community, well-instructed in its full meaning as well as in Latin, the Fathers of the Church and in Plain Chant, all of which were the subject of the frequent conferences of their indefatigable chaplain. As well as the church, the first wing of the monastery was completed, and monastic enclosure began to be observed. The foundations of the second wing, with basements, were also built. But above all, the community possessed what they had so long lacked: sound, written Constitutions, which were to remain practically unaltered for the next hundred years, and which were to serve as the basis for a fervent and balanced monastic observance. In 1874 Fr Laurence was able to write to a friend at Solesmes: 'The great work of the establishment of monastic discipline at Stanbrook continues to be my 'grande consolation'...We owe it all to our venerable and tenderly loved Father Abbot of Solesmes'.

The adoption of the Solesmes Constitutions had come about as follows. Early in the century, the surviving Cambrai nuns had looked forward to the day when their former Constitutions would be resumed. However, in time it became apparent that these could never be re-adopted. A few attempts were made, notably by the General Chapters of 1850 and 1854, to impose a Code known as 'Modifications of the Cambrai Constitutions', but they were never satisfactory. The Cambrai Code contained much that was antiquated, and distasteful, even to nineteenth century sensitivities, and so much of it remained a dead letter. One nun, Dame Benedict Anstey, asked before her profession in 1868 if she might see the Constitutions. The Abbess, D. Placida Duggan, replied; 'To tell you the truth, there are none; perhaps something may be done later'.

A few months after this remark was made, D. Scholastica Gregson became abbess again, and hearing that D. Guéranger had just completed his Constitutions for his newly-founded convent of nuns, she thought this might well be a code which Stanbrook could adopt. She therefore begged Fr Laurence to go to D. Guéranger and ask him for a copy. This he did in January 1869. The Abbot was at first reluctant, for he had intended the Constitutions only for his own nuns at Ste. Cecile, and he had no desire to set himself up as a monastic legislator. However, Fr Laurence pleaded so convincingly that he eventually yielded. The Constitutions were brought back to Stanbrook where Fr Laurence translated them and, after discussing them with the Abbess, read and explained them to the community. The result was that a petition, signed by 23 of the 26 Chapter nuns, was sent to President Placid Burchall, asking that the community might adopt them *ad experimentum*. Permission for this was readily granted, and the new Constitutions were put into operation on Easter Day 1869. Two years later, Dame Gertrude Dubois, the young Prioress and Novice Mistress, was sent to Solesmes, with the President's approval, for nearly a year to see how the Constitutions were

carried out in practice. She took with her Dame Mechtilde Knight, recently professed. Having been made abbess soon after her return in 1872, Lady Abbess Gertrude worked in close cooperation with Fr Laurence to establish the new Constitutions. Permission to use them was confirmed by successive General Chapters, and they were finally approved for use at Stanbrook by a decree of the Holy See, dated 14 June 1897. This code of observance continued, with very few modifications, until Vatican II, which called for a further renewal suitable to a different age.

From the subject matter of his conferences to the nuns one can see the influence D. Guéranger had on Fr Laurence. Conferences were, for instance, entitled, ‘On the interpretation of the psalms’, ‘Commentary on the First Book of Kings’, ‘The Last Months of Our Lord's Life’, ‘The Advent Canticles’, ‘The Fathers | who they were’, ‘St Clement’, ‘St Barnabas’, and so on. During his 1858 visit to Solesmes, Fr Laurence was told by the Abbot: ‘Vous n’etes pas un homme de tradition | you are too fond of modern superficiality, instead of studying the Scriptures, the Fathers, the Liturgy’ (18 August, in Fr Laurence's notes). And again: ‘Read the Fathers to imbibe the true monastic spirit, perhaps above all St. Ephrem’. When Fr Laurence asked for a good commentary on Holy Scripture, the Abbot answered: ‘Read the Fathers, particularly St. Austin | and you will learn from him how to study the Scriptures’. The fruit of all this was to be evident in the conferences given to the Stanbrook nuns when Fr Laurence was their chaplain.

In 1882, Fr Laurence composed a book, *Benedictine Manual* which incorporated many of these conferences. In the Preface, where he dedicated the book to the nuns, he admitted his debt: ‘I may truly say that whatever there is of excellence in them, it is not mine; but it is the doctrine of that glorious Son of St. Benedict, Dom Prosper Guéranger. Whatsoever faults, of whatsoever kind, there are in this *Manual*, they are *mine*, and must be attributed to *me*. There is, I own, another portion of it which is mine; it is, | the bringing them home hither to you, like the one who had to bring *Bread from afar*, de longe portans panem (Prov. xxxi,14)’.

Later in the same preface of the book, when speaking of the manuscripts of his works which he would leave to the nuns he said: ‘I can afford to value these gifts of my several *manuscripts*, because they contain (almost exclusively) treasures of truth taken from great minds especially from the Fathers, and from such a man as Dom Guéranger...Gregory Nazianzen..says ‘Steal beautifully!’ Pulchre fraude! (Tom.. 36, col. 652). I have been stealing in all my manuscripts and stealing beautiful things. I have a special devotion towards the Good Thief...My goods are all stolen ones. That gives them a guarantee of soundness. You may trust them’.

D.Guéranger's influence was also seen in the books he procured for the Stanbrook Library, where, on occasion, he had no hesitation in sending the nuns. For instance, commenting on the Book of Judges, he suddenly interjected: ‘If you would understand how it was that St Jerome so energetically urged his spiritual daughters to study the sacred Scriptures, open the 197th vol. of your Latin Patrology, col. 722. Begin with the last paragraph of that Eleventh Vision of the Scivias. You understand me; I am alluding to our Prophetess, St Hildegarde’.

D.Guéranger's influence is evident also in the notes of the famous retreat which Fr Laurence gave to the community at Downside in 1882. Five times he had refused when

asked to give this retreat, fearing lest what he felt bound to say would not be acceptable. However, he yielded in the end to direct order from President Burchall, and he gave all he had learned at Solesmes to Prior Gasquet and his monks, among whom were several, including the Prior himself, who were looking for a more monastic form of life than they had known hitherto.

The future Abbot Cuthbert Butler, quoted by Dom David Knowles in his memoir of Butler in the *Downside Review* of July 1934, made no secret of the effect this retreat had on him, and we know that it had a similar effect at the time on other young Downside monks. Butler insisted that Fr Laurence Shepherd was ‘probably at the time the most forward man in the Congregation in the way of monastic policy...For many years he spent his summer holidays at Solesmes and became saturated through and through with D. Guéranger's spirit and views on the monastic life. This was what he set before us at the Retreat. Especially did he emphasise the fine doctrine of the Preface Generale to the Annee Liturgique. According to this teaching he urged upon us the view that the choral celebration of the Office is not only our great and first corporate duty and public act of divine worship as a Benedictine Community | this of course we held - but also as individual monks, it is our chief means of personal sanctification and of progress in the spiritual life’. After speaking of Fr. Laurence's insistence on the place of higher ecclesiastical studies in the life of a monk | especially the Bible, the Fathers, the Liturgy and Church History - he continued: ‘The retreat made a great impression; nearly all were pleased...I must say, for myself, that I learned more of what has proved to me permanent theory or Benedictine life from Fr. Shepherd in this retreat than from anyone else in all my life’.

The spark of desire for monastic reform quickly spread among the younger members of the Congregation so that when at last, in 1899, the Brief ‘*Diu Quidem*’ was issued, the Congregation as a whole was ready to act upon it.

Stanbrook. 3.ix. 1975.