

NINETEENTH CENTURY

ENGLISH CISTERCIAN SPIRITUALITY

Dom Hilary Costello, OCist, Mount St Bernard Abbey

DURING THE NINETEENTH CENTURY Mount St Bernard abbey, founded in Leicestershire, near Loughborough in 1835, was the only male Cistercian monastery in the country. Caldey was founded in Wales in 1926 and Nunraw in Scotland in the 1940s. For the first few years of its existence, Mount St Bernard's was subject to an extensive building programme which left little time for literary activity. In 1852, however, Fr Robert Smith published a work entitled *A Concise History of the Cistercian Order*. Between this date and 1882, members of the community published about 35 other books, the majority of which were the work of Fr Austin Collins who entered the monastery in 1861. It is the work of these two men which is our particular concern here.

The so-called Strict Observance of La Trappe had been established by Armand-Jean de Rancé in 1663 when he was already commendatory abbot of La Trappe: 'In 1662, six monks who were monks in name alone, lived as they pleased in the half ruined monastery. At his death in 1700 Rancé left a community of between eighty and ninety monks whose regularity, fervour and sanctity made La Trappe famous throughout Europe¹. In 1790 all the Cistercian monasteries in France together with all other monasteries, were suppressed by the French National Assembly. By the following year most of these houses had been sold, pillaged or closed, and during the next few years almost all the other houses in Europe were to suffer a similar fate.

At the time of this suppression, the novice master at La Trappe was Augustine Lestrangé who went into exile with a few of his followers to Valsainte in Switzerland. Since he believed the Cistercian life would not be secure for very long there either, he began sending out small groups of monks to make new foundations elsewhere. He was particularly interested in making a foundation in Canada and for this purpose a small group left Valsainte in 1794. This group eventually came to London and ended up at Lulworth in Dorset, having missed the boat to Canada. The monastery at Lulworth came to an end in 1817 but not before three Englishmen had joined the community: Stephen Hawkins (1795), Bernard Palmer (1808) and Benedict Johnson (1813). These three found their way to the monastery at Mount Saint Bernard soon after its foundation in 1835².

At Mount Saint Bernard's, a monk's spirituality was in large measure determined by the traditions and customs of the house which were enshrined in the 'Usages'. This customary, a new edition of which appeared in 1854, was extremely detailed and required the monks to rise early, abstain from meat and practise strict silence amongst other forms of asceticism. While the regime might appear somewhat daunting from the evidence of the 'Usages', one should nevertheless be aware of the humanity, affability and humour found in the monks who were educated in it.

Two notable writers who emerged from this Cistercian form of religious life in the

¹ A Religious of Holy Cross Abbey, *La Trappe in England*, London 1937, 52-53; A.J. Krailsheimer, *Armand-Jean de Rancé, Abbot of La Trappe*, Oxford 1974.

² J. Gell, 'The Return of the Cistercians to England', *Hallel* 10, Summer 1982.

nineteenth century were Fr Robert Smith O. Cist. and Fr Austin Collins O. Cist. Fr Robert (Henry) Smith was the author of two books³ and the translator of four others. He was born in February 1807 in Preston and at the age of 29 became a secular priest. Between 1844 and 1848, he was president of Sedgley Park, later Cotton College. On 28th of January 1848 he entered Mount St Bernard's, and by 1852 had published his book *The Concise History of the Cistercian Order*. This was followed by a translation of Jerome Drexelius' *Nine Considerations on Eternity* which appeared in 1856 and was a translation of the Bavarian edition of 1629. In 1858 he published his translation of St John Climacus' *The Holy Ladder of Perfection*, which runs to nearly 500 pages.

It should be remembered that during these years, Fr Robert had also been appointed Superior of 'The Colony', a reformatory school for young Catholic delinquents founded at Mount Saint Bernard by Abbot Bernard Burder in 1856⁴. The first Superior of this institution had been Brother John McDonell who was in charge for a very short time. He seems to have been followed by Fr Robert Smith who was acting as Superior under Abbot Bartholomew Anderson, the successor of Abbot Burder in 1858. Doubtless, Fr Robert's experience at Sedgley Park helped in his appointment. He lasted until 1861 when a secular priest, Canon Ward, took over. In 1862, after attempts to close the reformatory had failed, Fr Robert again became Superior. Troubles multiplied and growing chaos helped take the reformatory from the monks. At the end of 1863, Fr Robert retired from his office and returned to the monastery. In 1866, as chaplain to the Bishop of Nottingham, he died quite suddenly.

Fr Robert's translations of Climacus together with those of Cassian's *Conferences* and Louis Blossius' *Mirror for Monks* show him as one of the initiators of an English Catholic movement to return to the Fathers of Christian Spirituality which took place in the nineteenth century. While his *All for Heaven* does quote extensively from Augustine, Bernard, Aquinas and Gregory the Great, the work comes much closer to the romantic flights of Father Faber than to the sober spiritual reflections of the Fathers. Fr Robert does not seem to have known Bernard's important *Sermons on the Song of Songs* nor does he include any references to other great Cistercian writers like Aelred, Gueric of Igny, Gilbert of Hoyland and Isaac of Stella.

All for Heaven deals with the various joys of heaven, twelve in number according to Fr Robert, which he calls the 'twelve fruits of the promised land'. There will be, he says, 'the five senses: sight, taste, smell, touch, hearing, the qualities of the glorified body: the joys of intellect, will and memory: the locality and society of the blessed: the concentration of all delights with the security of their enjoyment: the vision of God, and the eternity of happiness'.

This account of Fr Robert Smith does not perhaps do full justice to a man who must have been a trusted partner of the abbot, since he was given a great deal of responsibility. One might argue that his translations were inclined to be paraphrases, so free was he with the text, but his main aim appears to have been to introduce his fellow Englishmen to the

³ Fr Robert Smith was author of *A Concise History of the Cistercian Order*, 1852, and *All for Heaven*, 1865 (2nd ed.).

⁴ For the Reformatory see: B. Elliot, 'Mount St Bernard's Reformatory, Leicestershire, 1856-81', *Recusant History [RH]*, 15 (1979) 15-22; J.L.G. Tucker, 'Mount St Bernard Reformatory', *RH*, 15 (1980) 213-17; B. Elliot, 'Mount St Bernard's Reformatory: A Reply', *RH*, 15 (1980) 302-04.

great riches of the Catholic tradition, and if his own writings were over-romantic to our way of thinking, his ‘vision of heaven’ and the next life were essentially drawn from the traditional teachings of the Church.

Our other author, Fr Austin (Henry) Collins was born at Barningham in Yorkshire in 1827. After education at Rugby and Durham university where he read law, Henry was ordained in the Church of England and worked as an Anglican priest in Leeds and London. He became a Catholic at the age of 30 and became a Catholic priest two years later in 1859, becoming chaplain to Ambrose Lisle Phillips who lived at Grace Dieu Manor near Shephed. As chaplain he came to know Mount Saint Bernard’s, and entered the community, making his solemn profession in 1869.

Soon after becoming a Catholic he had written *Difficulties of a Convert* and published in 1861 *The Life of Rev. Fr Gentili*. He was to become a prolific writer and translator. Even before solemn profession, he had published *The Spirit and Mission of the Cistercian Order*, centred on the life of St Robert of Newminster who had introduced the Order into England in the 12th century. The book also included a short life of St Robert of Knaresborough. It was through such hagiography that Fr Austin outlined the principles of the original Cistercian reform and its ascetic practices, though he was rather uncritical of his sources. Two books stand out as fully his own work, *Spiritual Conferences* (1875) and *Heaven Opened* (1880). In 1882 he was appointed chaplain to the Cistercian nuns at Stapehill, Dorset, where he lived for the next thirty years. In 1913 he returned to Mount Saint Bernard’s, aged 85, and died in January 1919. His literary career, however, had come to an end by 1882.

When he joined the community at Mount Saint Bernard, Fr Austin was entering a community renowned for its asceticism, especially in matters of food, silence, early rising and hard manual work. If however we seek to discover the ideals that fired him to become a Cistercian, we need only read what he writes about them in his *Spirit and Mission of the Cistercian Order*, which deals chiefly with the beginnings of the Order in England at Fountains in the 12th century. One suspects that the author was more than half suggesting that the monastery at Mount Saint Bernard was a replica of early Fountains and it was this that encouraged him to exaggerate the ascetical ideals of the monks. The rhetoric of his expressions chimed in perfectly with the spirit of the age in which he lived.

His *Spiritual Conferences* is a collection of forty sermons and perhaps retreat conferences, some presumably given to the community on the main feasts of the year. The collection contains 22 sermons on the Song of Songs as well as a couple of sermons he preached at funerals. Here Fr Austin was following the medieval Cistercian tradition of writing commentaries on the Song of Songs. St Bernard, William of St Thierry, Gilbert of Hoyland, Alan of Lille, John of Ford, all wrote commentaries, whilst Aelred of Rievaulx, Gueric of Igny and others used verses from this text for individual sermons. Whilst Fr Robert owed a debt to these medieval writers, the influence of St John of the Cross is particularly strong in his teaching on prayer and mysticism.

I asked Fr Benedict, a monk of Mount Saint Bernard’s, now aged 90, whether he had known Fr Austin as a young monk. He replied, ‘He was a very holy man with a long white beard, very eccentric. When Fr Louis (the Superior) was away, he used to give talks in Chapter every morning. He used to go on and on. Fr Hilarion used to get terribly impatient and would start shuffling his feet and banging them up and down on the floor, but Fr Austin would take no notice’. ‘What did he talk about?’, I asked. ‘Oh, it was always mystical stuff: nobody could understand what he was on about. I remember asking one of the laybrothers

after Chapter what he had been talking about, and he replied, ‘Well, it was something about apples and apple-trees. I don’t know what he meant’. Perhaps Fr Austin was here repeating a sermon he had given in the 1870s on the verse from the Song of Songs, ‘As an apple-tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved amongst the sons’ (Sermon 18: The Apple-tree).

Whilst Fr Austin therefore followed the allegorical method of the medieval writers, less emphasis was put on some of the great spiritual themes beloved of such writers. Of St Bernard’s ‘image doctrine’, there is only one passing mention to it as far as I can see on p 37 of the *Spiritual Conferences*, God formed the first Adam to His own image and likeness. Great therefore was glory and beauty, but the Second Adam was from all eternity the image of God, Who was His Father not by creation but generation’.

Besides his original works, Fr Austin was a well-known translator. *The Cloud of Unknowing* was translated and published by him in 1871 under the title of *The Divine Cloud*. He translated *The Revelations of Divine Love* in 1877, Cardinal Bona’s *The Easy Way to God* in 1876, Benet Canfield’s *The Holy Will of God* in 1878 and in 1880, *The Life of Venerable John Eudes*. Many of these again show the strong interest of nineteenth century English Catholics in the English mystical tradition.