

DOM JAMES LAURENCE SHEPHERD'S VISION OF THE EBC

Dame Margaret Truran, Stanbrook

A GAINST HIS WILL, Laurence Shepherd was in the thick of the 'agitation' of the early 1880s¹. The polemics, too vast a subject to cover here, are in any case more happily laid aside on a centenary occasion. For Fr Laurence hated acrimony. Never the one, Bishop Hedley remarked to 'leap into the chariot of battle or seize the reins of trouble and guide it right, as some Hildebrand might do'², he had instead a tenacity born of unchanging simplicity of mind and heart that in the end achieved more. He was a man of one idea, and of one ideal for the Congregation.

In later life, Fr Laurence recalled the sensitive young monk, already betraying latent powers of vision, who was 'appointed Novice Master, and later on, Subprior as well. I did everything in my power to foster a love for the Monastic life'³. It was as master in exactly that field that D. Guéranger won Shepherd's devoted adherence. Yet, though the pugnacious master did so much to widen his disciple's mind, he never changed the man; rather the two of them were kindred spirits fired by the same ideals. The monk of the 1880s, with whom we are concerned, spoke in the same terms, describing his charge at Stanbrook as twenty years of 'doing everything in my power to develope (*sic*) the Monastic Spirit there'⁴. At Downside, when he gave the retreat of March 1882, his opening words were, 'Your Father told me how you...were all determined to be true Monks', and he proceeded to give the community fourteen conferences on the 'Principia Monastica'⁵. No wonder that in his polemical writings he took as his battlecry the line from the Constitutions then in force: *Ardens studium Monasticae perfectionis...in sese excitent foveantque Fratres nostri!*, and commented, 'The Monastic Perfection whose *ardent desire* and *zeal* my Constitutions bid me *stir up* and *foster*, Monastic Perfection for me, a Benedictine monk, is in the Rule of (our) holy Father Benedict. To more than that, I am not bound, with the single exception of fulfilling my *Juramentum* of going on the Apostolic Mission in England, if I be sent thither by my President'. Certain points of the Rule may be dispensed or modified, but 'I am bound to all the rest, especially in all that regards the Spirit of the same venerable and

¹ D. Edmund Ford, *Notes on the Origin & Early Development of the Restored English Benedictine Congregation, 1600/1661*, 1887, Preface, i. In 1881, the Apostolic Constitution, 'Romanos Pontifices', calling on the religious orders in England to bring their missionary way of life into better accord with the letter of their respective rules, was swiftly followed by the decree 'Incluta' which announced an apostolic visitation of the English Benedictine Congregation.

² J. C. Hedley, *Funeral Oration of the Rev. Fr. Dom J. L. Shepherd*, 1885, 7.

³ 'My Defence', 16) 17.

⁴ *ibid.*, 26.

⁵ SA 'Notes of the Retreat given at Downside 1882', 114. 28 February 1882, letter from Shepherd to Cardinal Pitra.

glorious Rule’⁶. To work for the full restoration of this monastic life in the ‘AngloBenedictine Congregation’ of his day was Shepherd’s only ambition. What exactly did he envisage? Fortunately for us, Prior Boniface Krug of Monte Cassino, appointed Apostolic Visitor of the Congregation by Leo XIII in his decree ‘Incluta’ (1881), asked Shepherd for an answer in writing to the same question. Before replying to Krug, Fr Laurence set himself to read Reyner’s *Apostolatus Benedictinorum in Anglia* (Douai 1626), and Baker’s ‘Treatise on the English Mission’ (16356), no mean task. His response on the subject of the Missions (1881), his preparatory notes for the Downside retreat the following spring (two of his conferences are indebted to Reyner) and the *Defence*, penned in the face of exclusion from General Chapter of November 1883, are the primary material for this section of the paper. All three manuscripts are in the Stanbrook archives.

Though he was labelled one of the ‘Reformers’ it would be nearer the truth to describe Shepherd as a ‘revivalist’, not devoid of a certain nostalgia and romanticism. He wrote of his dream in the ‘Defence’, ‘I...long for the happy time to dawn upon our Congregation, when we shall ‘return’ to the whole Spirit (of the Rule) and to as much of the letter as the 20th Century can take up, so as thus to be more like the venerable Tree on which we have been grafted by our Sigebert’ (Buckley, last surviving member of the Marian Westminster community)⁷. A tree is a familiar enough symbol of the Congregation, but, as far as I know, the felicitous imagery of grafting is a fresh thought. Not that it was Fr Laurence’s own; his was not an original mind, as he recognised himself: ‘I have a special devotion towards the Good Thief...my goods are all stolen ones’⁸. In this instance, he had stolen the thought from Dom Gilbert Dolan of Downside a day or two earlier. ‘*Tu dixisti*’, ran Dolan’s letter of 16 November 1883. ‘Our Congregation in its present form is a *graft*, perhaps a wild olive tree of the Congregatio *Vallis oletani* grafted into the old Black Monk stock of the Westminster of Feckenham & Buckley, but a genuine graft. Why do you ask?’⁹.

Fr Laurence asked because he was convinced that the Congregation was not essentially nor necessarily a missionary body, and he wanted to argue from preReformation history, provided it were generally accepted that the tradition and spirit of the old English Black Monks had been transmitted to the AngloBenedictine Congregation of the nineteenth century. ‘History is so gentle a mistress that no one could be wounded by her’, he explained to Cardinal Pitra. So he continued to rely on ‘all these beautiful pages of Reyner’, as he affectionately described them¹⁰; there are over seven hundred of them, twelve inches high by seven and a half inches wide, closely printed in Latin. The more he read Reyner, the more enthusiastic he became ‘for the unsurpassed glories of our Congregation during those first thousand years’ (‘Defence’, page 8), an enthusiasm apparently more than vindicated by Leo XIII’s declaration in ‘Incluta’ that he wished ‘monastic discipline and regular observance

⁶ *Constitutions*, c.8 para. 10; ‘My Defence’, 50) 52.

⁷ ‘Defence’, 52.

⁸ *Benedictine Manual*, xii.

⁹ SA, Dolan, echoing Rom 11:17, refers to Valladolid and the Spanish Congregation.

¹⁰ 1882 28 February, Letter from Shepherd to Pitra (original in French)

in the English Congregation to be restored to its original glory’¹¹. As the disciple of Guéranger turned the pages of Reyner, he saw himself, as he put it, ‘walking in the footsteps’ of the figures who rose up to meet him: ‘St Bennet Biscop...the very Patron of our Congregation, who was continually travelling on the Continent in order to bring back to England the ‘Ideals of Monastic Perfection’’, St Wilfrid, considered by Reyner even more active in that same field than Benet Biscop, SS. Dunstan, Lanfranc and Anselm, who all looked to French monasteries for guidance¹².

When Shepherd spoke of the ‘first thousand years of our Congregation’, as he carefully explained to the Downside community, he was not claiming the antiquity in strict terms. Echoing Reyner, he saw the millenium as a period of organic growth during which the body of English Black Monks had passed through several stages of chrysalis before reaching perfect form (‘ad perfectam formam’) in the thirteenth century legal entity of the *Congregatio Benedictinorum Angliae*. By referring loosely to the Congregation’s thousand years of pre Reformation history, he simply meant that certain ‘characteres et idiomata’, fundamental characteristics and peculiarities, of the Congregation had been present right from the time Augustine introduced monasticism into England. There were four of these characteristics: first, ‘the majestic and solemn celebration of the Divine Office, which no other religious order could equal and which was of the greatest effect in fostering a religious spirit among the English people’; second, hospitality and almsgiving to the poor; third, ‘enclosure according to the Rule; monks never used to be seen in the world except when on urgent business’; and finally, the learning of the monks and their production of books and manuscripts¹³.

The first and third characteristics, in particular, were grist to the mill. Inspired, he declared, in the ‘Defence’, ‘by the wonderful zeal which our English Congregation ever evinced for the solemnity of the Liturgy for the first thousand years of its existence’, he held ‘as a deep conviction that nothing must have a more prominent place with Monks of St Benedict’s Order than the Liturgy’¹⁴. This principle, in conjunction with the teaching of the *Annee Liturgique*, was set before the Downside monks. In Dom Cuthbert Butler’s famous words, Fr Laurence 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’¹⁵. The work of the monk was the ‘Opus Dei’, ‘something too monastic’, Shepherd happily admitted, ‘to be ‘Opus Missionis Apostolicae’’, the work of the apostolic mission. Did he not have St Benedict on his side? ‘My Monastery...is my Of ficina (my Workshop, as my Patriarch calls it [RB 4:78]), out of which it is , says he, [cf 66:71, a sad thing for a son of his to be...I hear

¹¹ ‘...ut in pristinum decorem Monastica Disciplina ac Regularis Observantia in Anglica ditione, quoad fieri potent, restitatur’.

¹² ‘Defence’, 29) 30.

¹³ Reyner, *Apostolatus Benedictinorum*, tract. I, sect. 2, pp 205) 07, 218; cf.SA, Shepherd’s ‘Notes for his Report to Krug’, 67) 139, 185) 221; ‘Downside Retreat’, 110) 13.

¹⁴ ‘Defence’, 36, 53) 4.

¹⁵ Butler’s MS B, quoted by David Knowles in ‘Abbot Butler: a Memoir’, *Downside Review*, lii, 1934, 365.

the Rule I have professed saying to me, that Benedictines should ‘keep to their monasteries’ (in coenobiis degentes) and ‘desire to have an Abbot as their Superior’ (Abbatem sibi praeesse desiderant [5:12])¹⁶. For these reasons, Shepherd held that it was not only undesirable, but highly dangerous for monks to leave their monasteries for the mission. He would quote Baker’s ‘Treatise on the English Mission’ | there are thirty/three pages from it in the memorandum he sent to Prior Krug | to show to ‘what a ‘sea of perils’ the missionaries were exposed as regards their religious spirit’¹⁷, even in the seventeenth century, when persecution fanned the flame of fervour, when, too, monks preparing for or returning from the Mission in England would find full monastic observance in their monasteries on the Continent.

The report to Krug was not a negative affair. A long section is devoted to Shepherd’s vision of an alternative English Congregation, whose monasteries would be abbeys with full monastic observance, Constitutions drawn up as Declarations on the Rule, perpetual abbots and a novitiate in each house. He takes for granted the desirability of such changes and does not go into practical details. The role of the missions was more tricky. Most were served by a single monk at that time¹⁸. Allowing for a period of transition, his first proposal was to withdraw from all missions where priories of at least twelve monks could not be established; these larger establishments would afford the monks serving them the chance to lead a cenobitical life and to celebrate the Divine Office in common. One cannot help suspecting that behind this programme lies Ullathorne’s strongly evinced opinions on the subject. His *Sermon on All Monks* of 1875 is all too reminiscent of Shepherd’s arguments six years later: ‘Wherefore the old English Orders are returning by degrees, as circumstances permit, to that conventual life which is prescribed to them by their Founders, their Rules, and their traditions, as well as by the laws of the Church...I am moved to say: Let that common life be in missionary priories as well as in educational priories | and you will then exhibit the strength of Benedictine stability; ...you will then knit on more strongly to the succession of saints; you will then tell with tenfold force in the Church; when the whole solidity of Benedictine observance at all times embraces every member of the Order’. Shepherd, however, went on to dismiss the ideal on practical grounds, from the prospect of a burgeoning number of priors to urban scarcity of land. ‘If these Priories be in large Towns, as they mostly would be, a sufficient space for Garden, for fresh air, would be hardly procured’¹⁹. He speaks just sixteen years before the founding of the Ealing parish mission.

As for ‘our colleges attached to Downside, Ampleforth, Douai (abroad) and FortAugustus’, Shepherd bewailed their ‘strongly developed element of layeducation’. He proposed that instead of the colleges the monasteries should have the alumnaes envisaged in the Rule, which would still provide financial support and yet at the same time would prove a much more fruitful ‘Seminary of monastic vocations’. Rome might insist that the colleges should be kept, however; if so, he recommended that they should be undertaken

¹⁶ ‘Defence’, 36, 53) 4.

¹⁷ Letter from Shepherd to Pitra, 4 July 1882.

¹⁸ Forty of the sixty) three mission) centres, according to the same letter to Pitra.

¹⁹ ‘Notes for the Report’, 29.

as a form of service to the Mission, ‘in our own immediate neighbourhood, and from the influential Centre of an Abbey...in such wise as not to interfere with Regular Observance’. Such a monastic college, ‘whilst giving a firstclass education’, should be different from similar establishments run by secular clergy, Jesuits and perhaps Dominicans; it should have ‘a character peculiar to itself, quite as marked off from other institutions as its own tone and Spirit and Rule are’, just as ‘the Monastic Educator has, or should have,’ he felt, ‘an almost unconscious tendency to cover science with a something that is not of this world, something of the unworldly fragrance of the Cloister’²⁰.

A difference of outlook, or spirit, can indeed utterly transform what are externally the same institutions, the same circumstances. Baker, in Shepherd’s opinion ‘the holiest man that ever belonged to our Congregation’²¹ had long ago made this point. A monk, he says in the first part of the ‘Treatise on the English Mission’, would be safe on the mission as long as he behaved as if he were still in his monastery, ‘caryeinge his monastery about him where ever he goe, as doth a snaile the shell wherein she is inclosed’²². In the end, everything is dependent on one’s powers of vision (or lack of them). For a monk, argued Shepherd, this power of vision derived from love and understanding of the monastic life. His worst criticism of his contemporaries and opponents was on exactly these grounds. Of Weld the reformer, the man Fr Laurence had been censured for apparently supporting, he remarked: ‘I say now, that I considered Mgr. Weld quite unequal to the task of expressing the requirements, or the essence even, of the Monastic Life. He does not understand our Holy Rule’. And of President O’Gorman, he wrote to Cardinal Pitra: ‘He is a man who makes himself loved...He is not deficient in learning. He has a good intellect. He is energetic, positive, and precise. Alas! he is ignorant of the magnificent beauties of the Holy Rule. Ignoti nulla cupido. He is a man upright enough to do all that he sees it to be his duty to do. Where is he to get this beautiful light?’²³

What Shepherd demanded of the monks at St Gregory’s, Downside, was simply this vision. Playing on the words from Scripture: *Gregoreite kai proseuchesthe* (Watch and pray: Mk 14:38), with which he headed his retreat notes, he told them, ‘You are *Gregorians* and the Scripture bids you be so | *gregoreite*, that is *watch!* You are also Monks, and Benedictine Monks; and, as such, you have adversaries, who hate the Monastic State. Therefore, Watch! *Gregoreite!*

‘I find you engaged in the grand work of Building a House to God, and you are evidently going to make it worthy of our Order. (Work was in progress on the tower and transepts, the first section of the new Abbey Church, to be opened a few months later that year). Now,

²⁰ *ibid.*, 46) 50.

²¹ Anstey, ‘Life of Shepherd’, 30.

²² SA, Baker vol. I, 176, in the transcript by D. Agnes Wood, from D. Barbara Constable’s MS (Downside Archives) copy of 1644.

²³ ‘Defence’, 43; letter of Shepherd to Pitra, 8 January 1884: ‘C’est un homme qui se fait aimer. Je vois clairement qu’il a, par cela, tout pouvoir, dans ses mains, pour le bien. Il est, aussi, pas mal instruit. Beaucoup d’esprit. Tres energique, positif, et precis. Helas! il ignore les magnifiques beautes de La Sainte Regle. Ignoti nulla cupido. C’est un homme assez droit, pour faire tout ce qu’il pense devoir faire. Ou trouvera) t) il la belle lumiere?’

which of you having a mind to build a Tower, doth not first sit down, and reckon the charges that are necessary &c. Lk 14:28|30: Gregoreite! ‘So with your spiritual building | *Gregoreite!* How shall you be thorough Monks of the English-Benedictine|Congregation?’²⁴

Fr Laurence’s ideals were born of his love for the monastic life, his love for the heritage of the English Benedictines, to whom he acknowledged he owed everything, even baptism. That his burning vision for the Congregation should be mistaken for actual rebelliousness, almost treachery | ‘When I long for that to be, am I disloyal?..., If I do no more than *desire* what is my Rule, but be most cordially submissive to what my Congregation disposes?’²⁵ | caused him suffering throughout his monastic life and proved his crown of thorns.

²⁴ ‘Downside Retreat’, 119, 121.

²⁵ ‘Defence’, 54) 5.