BIOGRAPHY OF FATHER BEDE JARRETT (III)[1]

In the summer of 1904 Brother Bede's theological studies were interrupted. If he had followed the normal course he would have been ordained priest soon after his twenty-first birthday in August, and continued to study theology either at Hawkesyard, or, more probably, with the Dominicans at Louvain or in Rome. Instead of that he was sent to Oxford in the autumn for a three years' course of modern history. During his first term there he was a deacon, having been raised to that office on the 19th of September.

This interruption of sacred studies for a secular course in a non-Catholic University was quite without precedent amongst English Dominicans, and though Brother Bede in every way justified the exception made in his favour, the experiment was not repeated in the case of anyone who followed him. Even when he himself became Provincial, students taking a University course in the humanities or secular sciences did so either before joining the Order or at the end of their full course of ecclesiastical study.

Many claim to have had a voice in sending Brother Bede to Oxford, but the deciding factor was clearly his own ardent desire. Though he neither said nor did anything to urge it, everybody knew that he yearned not merely to go there himself, but to see the English Dominicans restored to the position they held in the University from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century. His ambition was so consistent with his unselfish zeal for the spiritual welfare of his Order and his country that it turned obstacles into stepping-stones.

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[1] A third selection of extracts from the forthcoming *Life of Father Bede Jarrett* by Father John-Baptist Reeves, O.P.

During his first vacation from Oxford, on Sunday, December 18th, 1904, he was ordained priest at Woodchester by Mgr. Burton, the Bishop of Clifton. He was now Father Bede.

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At Oxford Father Bede had matriculated on the 18th of the previous October as a member of the Benedictine Hall, which was then at 9 Beaumont Street, and known by the name of the Master, Dom (now Abbot) Sir David Oswald Hunter-Blair, O.S.B. It has since been transferred to St. Giles', and is now known as Benet Hall. The present Master, Dom Justin McCann, O.S.B., was a student at Hunter-Blair's Hall when the young Dominican came to reside with the Benedictine Community. When Father Bede died, Dom Justin wrote of him in *The Oxford Magazine:*

The first impression that he made on me was one of absolute devotion to his religious vocation and of enthusiasm for his Order. His life was exemplary and he displayed already that courage and buoyancy of spirit which marked him throughout his career. He was an industrious student, unremitting in his application, though never obtruding his work on the notice of others or becoming at all unsocial . . . He made it a practice, no matter what his other work, to read every day an article from the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas; he would have liked to have been allowed to go to lectures in his Dominican habit. As one Dominican in a community of ten Benedictines he was the centre of some friendly raillery and discussion, he would hold his own stoutly, and with his characteristic mixture of good humour and conviction yield no inch of ground.

Though of a healthy and vigorous habit of body, he was no athlete, and took little part in such modest sports as were within the reach of the members of a small private Hall. I believe that he had made himself a rule of abstinence in regard to such things, and that his course was part of that régime of personal austerity which he had very definitely chosen. But he would join in afternoon walks in and around Oxford, and I have memories of many such walks in his company. We talked of current politics, of our respective studies and of the many un-

important trifles that form the substance of undergraduate talk at all times. I can remember little of those talks; but I remember that he never spoke of himself. Then and always, I think, he practised a deep reserve and refused to speak of any personal troubles or anxieties, though ever ready to give the most patient hearing to the troubles of others. So one was allowed only fugitive glimpses of his own inner life. I can remember one talk that we had which perhaps deserves record for the sidelight it throws on his general attitude to life. We came somehow to be discussing the *Imitation of Christ*. Father Bede, while not disparaging its value and power, was definitely critical in his admiration. He considered that the author's outlook on life was altogether too pessimistic. He maintained that life was a more joyous thing than he portrayed it, and to be met in a more joyous spirit. For himself, he said, that book 'gave him the blues' . . . .

In later years he always had a host of friends amongst lay undergraduates, especially at Oxford. But during his own undergraduate years he seems not to have allowed himself much freedom of intercourse with the young laymen amongst whom he was working. From the Religious and other ecclesiastics of his own faith, though entrenching himself firmly within his own Dominican way of living and thinking, he made no attempt to stand aloof.

'The young Dominican,' says Abbot Hunter-Blair, 'came as a guest and a stranger, all his immediate associates being young Benedictines trained in a different school and under different traditions from his own. It is not too much to say that from the first he won the unbounded respect and affection of us all . . . His University honours sat lightly upon him, and he remained, as he had always been, the same simple, humble, cheerful, unaffected and truly pious Religious.'

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He was very happy and at ease in his relations with the senior members of the University, especially those with whom his work brought him into contact. It was not simply his sense of duty and keenness on his subject that

took him off eagerly to every lecture bearing on his work; he was stimulated also by his intense human interest in the person and accomplishments and even the mannerisms of the lecturers. Though he was older by some five years or more than the average undergraduate, he was as deeply impressed by reputations for learning and exhibitions of talent, and as easily tickled by idiosyncrasies, as are most young men who go to Oxford very young, and ardent, and innocent. All his life long he was rather apt to over-rate the intelligence and ability of others, and in particular of those of whom he heard his friends and cultured acquaintances speak highly. In his own subject, however, he became less and less a blind admirer of those who professed it showily.

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During his terms at Oxford and his vacations in London his pen was busy as always. Most of his serious writing was work set him by his tutor. Amongst his note-books he preserved some of the test papers he wrote by way of rehearsal for examinations. He is happiest when given a legitimate opportunity of justifying historically his Dominican vocation and ideals. In one test, for instance, the question asked for an explanation of the effect upon English political history of the intellectual renaissance of the thirteenth century.

'In the thirteenth century,' came the ready reply, 'the Universities became the centre of national life. They took the place of modern Parliament. For it was in the Lecture Halls, in the disputations, in the defensions, that the theories of life and government were established. The whole question of teaching was based on a design to cultivate memory and quickness of wit. The ready answer, the puzzling question, the rapier stroke of the *distinguo*, the paralysing *atqui*, were all employed to a degree in which nimbleness of mind was bound to attain its supremacy. The press was not existent, but its place was taken by the professor and the preacher. Public opinion might take longer to act, but it spoke, though slowly, with no uncertain sound.'

He goes on to show that it was through the clergy that the intellectual life of the University disseminated itself throughout the country.

'The new Orders of Friars,' he continues, 'came to effect a revival. They were organised to restore health to the Church, and warmth to the blood that through dissipation had grown cold.'

Next, with a good show of knowledge he praises the work done by Dominicans and Franciscans in philosophy, theology and the natural sciences.

'Treatises began to be written on questions relating to diseases and sanitation. It was a practical line of thought which went hand-in-hand with the scholastic subtleties. Disputes on plurality of forms, or the modes of the universal existence, raged side by side with the inquiry as to the cultivation of foreign flowers in glass houses and the possibility of the construction of talking automata.

'Theories of government were expounded in lecture-halls and carried by itinerant preachers up and down the country. The Oxford Parliament of 1258 was held in the Priory of the Black Friars, and the King and many of his nobles dwelt with the brethren.'

His account of the direct influence of Friars Preachers and Minors on the formation of political theory is worked out with a full knowledge of historical fact. In this paper, as in all his later work, he spoke with admiration of the contribution made by the Jews to Christian civilisation, and of the close bond of sympathy which united them with the Dominicans in the pursuit of natural and religious truth and justice. There follows a well-informed account of the seal set by the Friars upon the college system of Oxford. The history of Merton and Balliol are cited as examples.

'It must be remembered,' concludes the paper, 'that in those days the position of country and town was the reverse of what it is now. The country was better regulated, better instructed, quicker-minded, wealthier, more commercial. The towns were only beginning to rise from their squalid poverty and their ignorance and neglect. Religion had held aloof from them. The

great monastic bodies for the most part saw the stricken body on the roadside and passed by. It was the Friars who gave a spiritual baptism to the growing cities, and enabled Oxford to take its place among the regenerating influences of the country. It may seem a paradox, but a paradox which is verifiably true, that the Friars paved the way for the more spiritual followers of Wycliffe, and by their capture of Oxford started a movement that was to rend their own vitals.'

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Except for his annual holiday with his family, his yearly retreat and rare events like two funerals, his life of study at Oxford and in London continued uninterrupted during his three years as an undergraduate. But, immersed though he was in the work for his degree, he never neglected his duties as a Religious or any opportunity of preparing himself for his future work as a priest and pastor of souls. Hunter-Blair's Hall was a religious house as well as a house of studies. The Benedictines had their own chapel and diminutive choir, and maintained all the essentials of their religious Rule, of their Liturgical Office and daily round of monastic duties. As Father Bede's Dominican Office and way of life differed considerably from theirs, and as he always adhered faithfully to the rubrics and ceremonies of his own Order, he had to live his religious life for the most part alone. He did so with as much regularity and precision as if he had been in a community of his own brethren.

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In the summer of 1907 he was examined for his Bachelor's Degree at Oxford, and secured one of the very few Firsts awarded in Modern History that year. It was a fitting conclusion to three years well spent. He came away from Oxford enriched with all that Oxford has to give, and with his health, his innocence and his devotion to his ideals all intact. Still as deeply attached as ever to his family, to the friends of his school-days and to the brethren of his Order, he had made friends in other Orders, amongst

the élite of the secular clergy and the Catholic laity, and amongst virtuous, learned and cultured men of many other creeds and of none. In the same paradoxical sense as it may be said that God loves a sinner more than a saint, he valued his friendship with unbelievers more than his secure hold upon those of his own religion; and that precisely because he loved that religion so much. He had not yet formulated his maxim, 'The art of perfect living is the art of perfect giving': but his life already exemplified it. His love of his religion was not a mere love of its truth or of its beauty, but a love of living it; and to him to live it meant to give it. For that reason he loved to have friends to whom it still remained to be given. Once they had accepted his friendship he had hopes that they might accept from him, or rather through him, a much more precious gift—his faith.

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To be in Oxford was to him itself a consummation, for all he found good and loved in it was Catholic, both in origin and, he believed, in present tendency. He thought of it as a 'city of old buildings and young men.' In his eyes every young man was at least a potential Catholic; he saw youth as an embryo of all the virtues and knew of no virtues that were not Catholic. By old buildings he meant more than dreaming spires and stones breathing hallowed memories. He meant living institutions and immortal traditions and a past still vital in the present. And the presence which, after God's, he felt most powerfully all over Oxford was that of his older Dominican brethren who from the thirteenth century to the sixteenth, by their learning and their Christian example, enlivened the University and through it the whole of Catholic England. He never thought of himself as the only Dominican in Oxford, and never gave others the impression of being a lonely one. The daily recitation of his Dominican Breviary and his observances of the customs of his Order came easily to him

in a place where Dominican choral and cloistral life ought still to be going on, and soon would be in full swing again, if he had any influence or say in the matter. Newman's pessimistic phrase that the Order of Preachers was a great ideal extinct was one which he could never admit to be true. In Oxford it was merely suffering an eclipse that could not and must not last.

His vivid sense of a Dominican presence in Oxford made him feel as much at home in its halls and quadrangles, and even in its streets, as if he were in the immediate precincts of his own cloisters. To show how little centuries of absence had estranged the Friars from Oxford ways and Oxford eyes, he would laugh at the warnings of his Benedictine hosts, and walk of an evening in his white habit to the end of Beaumont Street to post his letters in the box facing Worcester College gates. Elsewhere, whenever he went out of his cloister, some traces of his early shyness and reserve always remained perceptible; but wherever he went in Oxford he moved entirely at his ease, conscious of being by right of his Dominican profession an integral part of the place.

In his desire to bring his brethren back to a settled and full monastic life in Oxford once more, there was no notion of enriching the modern University with something new. Rather he desired to revive in it something that, in an unhappy hour, it had allowed interfering and low-minded politicians to suppress, and without the full functioning of which it could never be its complete self, educationally or in any other way. But what he desired still more was to enrich the life of his brethren, enfeebled by centuries of persecution and ostracism, by bringing them back to their first home in England for an infusion of the spirit and traditions of the English Dominican Province at their source. His ultimate ambition was that they should resume the teaching of the teachers in Oxford which had been the duty and the privilege of their brethren from the beginning. But he hoped that before that they themselves

would quietly settle down for a long enough time to learn, first what Oxford had to teach them about their vocation as English Dominicans, and then, as a result of that, just what teaching modern Oxford did need from them. To his way of thinking, if the English Dominican Province were ever to be itself again, its revival in Oxford was not merely desirable, but a primary necessity.

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To those of his contemporaries and seniors at Oxford who were not of his faith his attitude while an undergraduate was both a yearning to share faith and friendship with them and a joy in sharing the good things he and they had in common. His habit of looking for the good in everything and everybody disposed him to enter eagerly into their minds and sympathise with their ideals, approving the truth and goodness he found there, and disentangling it from whatever his faith as a Catholic did not approve. Amongst the very few letters addressed to himself which he preserved is one written to him on May 10th, 1905, by Dr. H. Rashdall, of New College. Father Bede had offered to edit some notes by Father Raymund Palmer, O.P., if the Oxford Historical Society would publish them. On behalf of the Society, Rashdall, who had himself written on Dominican history, asks to see the manuscript, inviting Father Bede to tea at his rooms or, alternatively, proposing to call on him. At appropriate moments in later years he would acknowledge with obvious satisfaction having received this or that morsel of wisdom in private conversation with such men as Rashdall, Canon Driver, Professor Firth, and others eminent and learned.

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Most important of all, his years in Oxford determined finally the method and temper of his future work for the English people as a Friar Preacher. They left him intransigent only in matters of the highest principle and

tolerant even to the point of apparent weakness in everything else. With the English prejudice against nationalist colouring of Catholicism in many foreign countries he had always felt some sympathy. But now, from Oxford, he had learned to survey Europe as a whole, humanity as a whole, history as a whole, the Church as a whole. Peculiarities of particular times and places, however much they invaded the Church and extended through it into other times and places, no longer embarrassed him. He could excuse what was human and engage the humanity of others to excuse it with him. He could disentangle what was holy in the Church, and, by showing how this divine element had made England and other countries better than themselves, could bring his countrymen, individually and in crowds, to bow their heads to it at least in reverent silence. His aptitude for this work of reconciliation he owed to nature and to grace. His competence for it he owed to his Dominican training and to Oxford.

(Further extracts will follow)