

DOM PAUL NEVILL, O.S.B.

BEDE BAILEY, O.P.

FEW things would have surprised, or indeed amused, Father Paul Nevill more than that someone should think it suitable to write about him in the pages of *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*. And that is a clue to the sort of man he was. During his thirty years as Headmaster at Ampleforth, Father Paul met many thousands of persons, very few of whom will not have been struck by the impact of his personality. He has been called the greatest of modern headmasters. Certainly it is true that his prestige not only among the senior officials of the Ministry of Education but also among his fellow members of the Headmasters' Conference was very great. Yet his position as Headmaster of Ampleforth had little to do with the influence he attained. With his fine presence—great height, magnificent head, and natural grace—he was made for fame; but natural gifts of themselves achieve little. It was the union in him of grace and nature that won him the unique place that was his in the educational world of this country.

It is revealing that, as boys, we never thought of him as the Headmaster, and, in my time at Ampleforth at any rate, he was very rarely given the title. He was just Father Paul, the monk and priest who, so it happened, was also headmaster. So we took him just as he was, and most of us were at home with him.

To a chance acquaintance he might easily have seemed proud—he had something of the air and poise of an eighteenth-century grandee—but to those who knew him he was a very humble man. There was no need, either for monks, lay-masters or boys, to make an appointment to see Father Paul; he was always at everyone's disposal. And I remember his making an arrangement that some of us should use his room—room, not study—for convalescence after a bout of 'flu when we were twelve years old or so. During those ten days he was our host.

He quite unconsciously did jobs that, at first sight, might more suitably have been done by a servant. Every morning

he used to sort the letters and take them round during breakfast to the various house refectories. And I suppose we all saw him moving desks or filling inkpots, and heard of him strap-hanging on the last 'bus from York after the long journey from London. He has been seen on his knees scrubbing the floor after a boy had dropped and broken a bottle of ink, and it is not long since he was found, quite by chance, freeing a blocked w.c. Other people might think these things to be odd, but he never did, and neither did we, while, all unknowing, we were learning from his unthinking humility.

Our first sight of him in the morning was going from the Lady Chapel to the sacristy after his carefully said Mass. He then used to kneel among us, and often would help with the giving of Communion. He was a priest serving us. I never remember being afraid of him, or even ill at ease, and that means a lot when one remembers his physical characteristics and his grand manner. I think we all recognized unconsciously that he was a just man, who was wholeheartedly concerned for our welfare, and had no personal axe to grind. And so we trusted him, and in his dealings with us he was straightforward, calling everything by its right name.

He taught all the time he was headmaster—he had a weekly General Knowledge class for Fourth Form boys, and he taught Higher Certificate history. These classes were very good value, humorous, vivid, filled with interest, truly educative. He could talk of the great figures of history as though he had known them personally, a gift that perhaps he owed partly to that remarkable woman who was his mother. As a result his classes were a pleasure to attend, something to look forward to. After twenty years the impression of them still remains.

During the thirty years of Father Paul's headmastership at Ampleforth, the school more than trebled in numbers, the buildings grew, and the work was raised to a very high standard. But he did not think of this as his own achievement. At the dinner during the celebrations of his twenty-five years as headmaster, he made a speech the main theme of which was that he must not be given the credit. It

belonged to the Community, and perhaps especially to those that the world had never heard of, to invalids among the brethren who offered their sufferings for the good of the house.

His enthusiastic simplicity gave rise to many characteristic stories—standing on one of the cricket fields, sniffing the air and surveying the landscape, and announcing to his companion, 'You know, these are the finest playing-fields of any school in England.' And of course everyone knew that he was firmly convinced that Ampleforth was the best of schools, that it contained more than its fair proportion of the most brilliant boys, that its staff was the most excellent, and that, in fact, there was no place like Ampleforth. At the same time he was ready to give advice and time to any schoolmaster who might seek his help, and he himself was always on the alert to learn from other schools and different traditions. It is interesting, in passing, to remember that his historical sense did not allow him to forget that Saint Edmund's at Ware is the premier Catholic school in this country.

The secret of Father Paul's life is to be found, I think, in the combination of the natural virtue of magnificence with the supernatural virtue of humility, which is a rare and most powerful union. His ideas, driving power, and enthusiasms were on a par with his physical proportions, while his character was kept gentle in its strength, with a fine sense of humour linked with determination, by the saving grace of humility. And let it not be thought that humility came easily to him. He could easily have developed differently, he must so often have been tempted, so that he might have become autocratic, filled with a personal ambition, ruthless in dealings with others. But, thank God, his last words, spoken over the telephone were characteristic of this splendid monk who is so fine an adornment of modern English Catholicism. He was trying to get the doctor to come and see him. When he found that he was no longer in the house, Father Paul rang up the doctor's home, only to discover that he was not there. When asked if it was important, he replied, 'Oh no, it is not of the least importance.' About five minutes later he was found dead.

It was the feast of the Conversion of St Paul, the day he kept as his own feast. Some fifty years before, Father Paul had vowed stability—that is, faithfulness to his monastic home—conversion of manners, and obedience. He never lost the enthusiasm, or the boyishness, of his first days in the monastery that he entered as a novice when he was seventeen years and three days old.



ALTER CHRISTUS

M. B. KOLB

THE possession of an immortal soul opens up such wonderful possibilities to man that a thinker, overwhelmed by the greatness of life, once exclaimed: 'However great things a man would say about the meaning of life, he would always say too little.'

These marvellous possibilities begin to be realized as soon as a soul is received into the bosom of the Church. 'O marvel of Baptism', a convert joyfully exclaims. 'If only we had faith, we should be wrapped in joy whenever we assist at a Baptism, if we remember the spiritual greatness of the neophyte, who becomes the living tabernacle of the Holy Ghost.'

All without exception can happily become temples of the Divine Spirit; in everyone the consoling word of Christ can be fulfilled: 'The Father and I will come and take up our abode in him.'

Indeed, the Christian faith shows us glorious summits that merge into the region of the Divine. What happiness to long for these summits even in the world such as it is, though only in the full light of eternity shall we fathom how ineffable is the grace to reach them, and how all the steep roads on which we walked in the heat of the day were roads of salvation and eternal bliss.

Now, among these summits that are accessible to the faithful, there is one—the most luminous of them all,