

BROTHER IVO POUSSIN OF BRICQUEBEC 1902-1928

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BROTHER IVO was a Trappist lay-brother at Bricquebec who died in 1928, aged twenty-six, and seems to join that rare company who reached finished holiness in their twenties. But for us, this so recently dead-and-gone young man of the white-collar class turned Trappist is significant—or a ‘sign’ not to be ignored. For here is one who reached high holiness *via* being football secretary to a Young Men’s Club, *via* clerking before and during his national service, and then by four years as a Trappist lay-brother, first in charge of white rabbits, and then consumptive. There was, indeed, something of the picturesque and even the melodramatic in this young man’s shipwreck and his pilgrimage in the Holy Land, but his sanctity grew straight and fast throughout both the banal and the picturesque. Here is a modern work of art—God’s art and Brother Ivo’s; each, indeed, ‘amalgamating disparate material’ (in Eliot’s phrase about a poet’s mind), each also, ‘surrendering himself to the work to be done.’ (Eliot again.)

Brother Ivo ‘made it’, in another sense of the phrase. His motto was ‘escalade aux cimes’, ‘on and up to the top’, and he reached that terribly accomplished spiritual poise, a mountaineer’s sort of poise that is a very high form of ‘abandon’. This young man is, then, a sign for us in two ways: classically and fast he grew in holiness right in some of the most banal of modern contexts, and—*notably* through suffering—he reached high ‘abandon’, that especial burning-glass of vocation to sanctity in the modern world.

In 1919 a motherless young Breton of seventeen, abounding with energy, from a Catholic home and parish life, indeed, but educationally with only the lay secondary modern school behind him joined the young men’s club—l’Oeuvre St Louis de Gonzague, in Rennes. Young Poussin was interested in religious matters, about which he learnt much and rapidly from the club library and from the chaplain. A keen footballer, he presently became organizing football secretary, and ran the job on interior charity, as

those French scouts and sports secretaries very well understand how. Thus, too, the intensely active life of club meetings, football, rehearsals, study circles and choral practices, all after office hours, was, in fact, so intense because it was high-powered by a life of increasingly steady prayer and self-denial. During these packed, short years young Poussin's ardour was noted, loved and tempered by the nuns of the La Sagesse convent in the town. Then in March 1922 his elder brother became a Trappist at Bricquebec, and two months later young Poussin was called up to do his National Service.

Young Poussin, appointed instructor in an infantry regiment, thereupon spent his leave from the barracks at Bricquebec; and both these disparates, the barracks and Bricquebec, were a dislocation from the usual world, but Marcel Poussin's own vocation had not yet precipitated. A catalyst was needed—and forthcoming, with power. In less than six months Marcel Poussin was sent off to Syria, alone, 'like a tourist!', and then, at six-fifteen a.m. on the 6th December, sailing in the sea of Marmora, a fire broke out on board the troopship and was rapidly out of control.

Marcel was presently in the water, clutching to a raft, gulping water. Publicly there, he vowed himself to God. But this was a little vague. The raft still lurched and dipped and seemed to be going under, and Marcel offered himself as a victim for the peace of the world and promised that he would be a Trappist at Bricquebec if he were rescued. A few minutes later along came an American destroyer. The catalyst had worked.

Now was the way clear. The time not spent at his work at Army Stores, Beirut, Marcel Poussin spent in prayer and study, using the courses given by the Jesuits at the University, and attending Youth Circles also. He also practised that private apprenticeship to the Trappist austerities. There were barrack complications to this; practical jokes, barracking of the meekened 'coq celtique'; night rising passed off as patrol duty, and so on; and there in the barracks, in the mosquito-ridden marshes of Beirut, Marcel studied the Directory of the Trappists, and meditated his unworthiness of the Cistercian vocation as 'jeune homme du siècle'—as a modern young man.

The eight days' leave at the end of the period of national service were spent in a pilgrimage to the Holy Land next door, and are days of a lyrical beauty, of a modern *fioretti* quality. The

young Breton-French soldier, long ago compared for vivacity to an electric battery, already in poor health, already in mind and burningly a Trappist, bumps over the Lebanese landscape in a car with a bunch of nuns. The banal begins to fall away. He went straight to Bricquebec from the repatriation camp, not daring to go home on the way, and entered as a laybrother.

Marcel Poussin plunged, then, into that crucifying tension that is the Cistercian design—perpetual silence observed in a perpetually common life. The silence is absolute so as to ensure that one is alone with God, although perpetually in the presence, if not the society of others. One does not even sleep alone, unless consumptive; one talks only to one's director. This Trappist pattern is cruciform; a most subtle draining of the self-love which might find root-room in either privacy or chatter; a pattern insupportable without a clinging of the drained self to God. And this is the cruciform tension drawn and locked, in peace, and for life.

A photograph of Brother Ivo Poussin suggests, now a young man strikingly impressive and attractive. The head is of beautiful bone structure, broad and deep; the moulding of nose, lips and chin very firm and shapely, the eyes notably alert and grave; the whole very vital and virile, sensitive and ardent. There is no pride in the face, but this Brother Ivo of 'la nature bouillante' recognizes that obedience must be his key virtue. It was a good policy for the swift 'escalade aux cimes', for obedience to one of an ardent nature even uncomplicated by pride, must soon uncover one's contrary fragility. There soon has to be the fall into humility; but 'all is a purchase, all is a prize', and it is all on the way up. So 'littleness' has to be learnt. Brother Ivo decides, 'Mon calvaire à moi, c'est de me faire tout petit'. Deliberately, too, he studies those other specialists in the Way of Littleness—she of Lisieux, Céline of the Presentation, Benigna Consolata and others. They are all of them scandals to our involved contemporary prides. The word 'little' can be very misleading. These 'little ones' are only 'little' because they are not egoists. The real contrast is between the 'hollow men' of pride and egoism and these others, so solidly, if finally incandescently *lovers*. They are apt material, then, both for the sculpting of suffering and for the fire of charity, and thus they learn, perhaps very fast, the art and science of 'abandon', which is one's adjustment to both the sculpting and the fire.

1 *Un fruit de Saint Abandon: Frere Yves Poussin*. By F. M. Bernard, p. 88 (my italics).

The steady sight of humility and much vigour of will are necessary. 'Pray for me', writes Brother Ivo, 'for that humility which will make me mistrust myself, and trust God's Providence more vigorously.'¹ There is already the mountaineer's poise, the balance among risks, the awareness both of the self-mistrust and of the strength needed to proceed by God's will alone, that is 'abandon'. So 'abandon' is rather to walk a tightrope, or an arête; it is not to drift, or even float. Neither is all this mere barren expertise, as the lover needs not to be told, though it was probably with a premonition of suffering that Brother Ivo wrote—'May the cross bring me on again to life—yes, to life to love that springs out of and grows on sacrifice.'

It all happened very fast. Already in poor health, Brother Ivo, unprofessed, was exhausted pushing an empty wheelbarrow going to fetch clover for the white rabbits. There were various and heavy ailments to minimize. And for a long though privately dreadful time 'an Israelite without guile', of candour and a ready smile, a 'quicksilver type' can get away with heroism unsuspected. By 1927 Brother Ivo was riddled with unsuspected T.B., skeleton-thin and still working. Then, after a certain fantastic day of smiling heroism helping with the harvest, there came, that night, the first and violent haemorrhage. His condition was found to be inoperable. He had a year to live—living—or dying the same sort of variable or miscellaneous martyrdom that Thérèse of Lisieux found that T.B. could be—without drugs.

For two hours one night Brother Ivo talked with one of the community about 'abandon'. His Abbot, Dom Vital Lehodey, had written the classic treatise on the subject, but both the old man and the young were experts. There was plenty to discuss in 'abandon'. 'C'est tout simplement de vivre la mystère de la volonté du Père dans l'Esprit du Christ qui l'opère avec nous. Au fond c'est toujours l'oraison de quiétude poursuivie à tous les instants de la journée.'² There it is, but only gradually does life gather to such a richness.

'Abandon' is the tranquillity of perfect order, in which, at its height, each day for the child of God is an adventure of love. This is a height for the holy, of any age. It needs a great suppleness and humility to begin to understand. And yet, perhaps, it is even we who are given such a burning-glass of an idea, we who in the

² *La Mission de Dom Vital Lehodey*. Vallery-Radot. Ed. Cerf. p. 200.

flux of our confusing world need to learn so very various an expertise in Von Hugel's 'maximum attachment and maximum detachment' in the search for the will of God. There may well be a long search for the will of God. There may well be a long search of or pursuit by God, nowadays, of kinds so diversified and perhaps so poignant, that only the secret of 'abandon' will offer an issue.

But it is, of course, an open secret, and can be learnt. It is what made our Lord say, 'My food is to do the will of my Father'. Brother Ivo echoes him: 'As for me, I am content to worship and love God's will, I feed on it all day and lie on it at night. I have plenty of cause to do so.'³ Brother Ivo had become a professional of suffering. And he was far to outstrip and now may properly lead the slower practitioners.

Suffering may be a 'profession', even alongside other 'professions' whether religious or secular and whether the suffering is hidden or not. It is 'professional' if it is dealt with steadily and objectively, whether in the qualified surrender of agony or in the more habitual attitude of the erect and rectified mind and will. The correct relations with the phenomenon pain and its setting in the will of God have been established and are maintained. These relations normally postulating grace, which may be raised to any intensity.

Grace, of course, finds and fires the lover. 'I have come to love and want nothing else', wrote Brother Ivo, 'but this precious state of being utterly crushed,' (*anéantissement*) 'which day by day makes me ready for the more total detachment.'⁴ He meant, surely, the detachment of death. Death is, after all, the logical end of our sublunar suffering; conclusion and goal and seal; and the finished professional may well have something to say about it. Brother Ivo was crushed indeed, in a winepress of agony. His paroxysms shook the room. Death delayed around the corner. The Abbot used to say in these last months, 'One could see him growing, thanks to Holy "Abandon"', and 'he has done more in four years of religious life than many do in forty.'

He died very peacefully early in the morning of ninth March, 1928, aged twenty-six. 'I'm not going to be a "rentier" in heaven,' he had said, 'don't you worry! I shall apply to our Lady and I shall see alright in her eyes if that is what God wants.'

And so, indeed, it seems to be working out.

³ *Un Fruit*, p. 126. (writer's Tr.).

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 131.