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A SERMON PREACHED AT THE BURIAL OF
FATHER JEROME RIGBY, O.P., AT HAWKES-
YARD PRIORY, 8TH APRIL, 1948.¹

BY

GERALD VANN, O.P.

Unless the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it.
(Ps. 126).



HERE is a verse from the New Testament which begins with that same word, Unless: 'Unless the grain of wheat falling into the ground die, itself remaineth alone; but if it die it bringeth forth great fruit'. We have been stricken in recent times with especially grave losses, the deaths of those who in a special sense could be called the builders of the English Dominican Province of today: Fr Bede Jarrett through his years of provincialate, Fr Vincent McNabb through the leadership and inspiration of his teaching and his personality, Fr Hugh Pope through his work for the studies of the Province. Grains of wheat. They died in God as they had lived in God; and so from their deaths as from their lives new life is given to us. And now another builder is taken from us, and taken at a time when his wisdom and strength and prudence were most urgently needed, so that those of us who lived with him and depended upon him feel very lost; and yet his building too is not in vain but will go on, because Christ lived in him, and when he built the house it was the Lord that built it.

In one way it is difficult to speak of Fr Jerome, because one thinks of how his own deep humility and matter-of-factness and reticence so deprecated homage. A man of outstanding strength of character, he hardly ever spoke of himself. With complete selflessness and objectivity he gave himself to the work which God had given to him; and through a life-time he identified himself with the school—as generations of boys learned to identify the school with him. Apart from six months' parochial work, the school was his life: first as master, then as prefect and virtual head here at Hawkesyard, then as founder (with Fr Bede, his life-long friend) of Laxton, and as its Headmaster. And it was completely characteristic of him that when he ceased to be headmaster and superior and became bursar, his loyalty and humility and support were so perfect that one took them for granted. No man ever carried a

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weight of wisdom and experience more lightly. It was Fr Jerome who guided the new and struggling school at Laxton and put it in the end on a secure financial basis; and when he was taken from us he was engaged on doing the same thing for the new junior department of the school at Llanarth.

But if any superficial observer had thought of him as more interested in property than in persons he would have been entirely wrong; nothing could be more untrue. It would be, in the first place, to forget his deep and warm humanity: the qualities which made so many generations of boys love him, the qualities which endeared him to so many people outside the school. The gardeners at Laxton, who are not Catholics, asked if they might give a wreath and might come to the requiem; the villagers came to honour him, and to many others far afield his death came with a sense of personal loss. And as, when you think of the dead, the most poignant memories are the memories of little things, so we who lived with him, the Fathers and boys and Old Boys, think of the human qualities that were so much a part of him: his love of trees and care for them, his love of cricket and railways, his mimicry, his humour and his grand ringing laugh. We think too of his carefulness and his rigid conservatism over little things, his hatred of waste and carelessness in little things, which went with a startling magnanimity—a greatmindedness like the rashness of St Dominic sending out his first disciples—where great issues were concerned. And not only the *magnanimitas* which can face great ventures without fear, but the *magnificentia* which can face great expenditures without niggardliness or timidity; and again it is completely characteristic of him that when he died this man who dealt in hundreds and thousands of pounds should have only a few shillings in his desk for his personal use. We think too of his ability to live with people much younger than himself as one of them: it was an aspect of his humility and his charity. And it was that charity, in the last resort, that made him so totally different from the mere man of affairs: and that made all his actions, and all his judgments of men and things, a living part of his deep inner life with God.

Of that inner life too he was completely reticent. He spoke of God not in words but in all that he did. His inner life was characteristic of him, first of all, in its regularity: every morning you would see him at the long period of private prayer on his knees after the Mass; every Sunday morning at the same time you would find him saying his Office of the Dead; every year, in retreat, he read again the book he must have known almost by heart, the volume of Bishop Hedley which was among his few treasured per-

sonal belongings. And from that deep and simple spiritual life there flowed the deep spirituality and charity of his judgments, the working in him of the Gifts of the Holy Ghost.

But there is one thing of essential importance that must be said of that spirituality. Fr Jerome did not belong to the tradition to which the technical word 'thomism' comes easily; but he was a dominican through and through, and his judgments were dominican judgments. You saw it in his humanity, his breadth of mind, his love of the earth and the animals and the human beings that God has made; you saw it in the delicate balance between the value he set on the human personality and his constant reference to the common good; and last but not least, you saw it reflected, reproduced, in the minds and personalities of the boys he trained.

The purpose of Laxton is twofold. First, to foster vocations for the Order; secondly, and very important, to form an active body of laymen, living and working in the everyday world, but bringing to that life and that work a dominican, a thomist, mind—a mind formed by, and expressive of, thomism in the narrower and more technical sense where possible, yes, but at any rate a mind which in fact would judge about ordinary things, things of the world as well as the things of religion, in a dominican way. Since the last Provincial Chapter. Fr Jerome bore the proud title of *Pater Provinciae*—a father of the Province; and in his case there is a special richness of meaning in the phrase, for it was he who gave so many of the present province their first training in the dominican spirit. But these are only a few of the children of his spirit; his family was far larger than that. This too was a building of which the Lord was builder; and a building far more lasting than any of brick or stone. Far more lasting; and far more rewarding. *Vivis ex lapidibus*: these living stones are the reward spoken of in that same psalm with which we began: *ecce hereditas domini filii*—for the inheritance of the Lord are children, a strong support, an armoury like the arrows in the hand of the warrior, a defence against the enemies in the gate. He who has built as Fr Jerome built, making living stones for the Order, has a strong defence in the gates of death—the defence of the great family he has given to God.

In his youth he gave his youth to God, with all its gifts—and among them his striking personal beauty, and his lovely voice. And as in his last years the beauty changed into the rarer and sweeter loveliness of an old age beloved of God; so the voice too, robbed of its power and richness, nevertheless acquired a new quality from the gentleness of his spirit; and when a little before

his death he sang for the last time the lovely invocation at Compline, *ne projicias me in tempore senectutis*—cast me not aside in my old age—the prayer, for him, was already heard: he shall not be confounded when he shall speak to the enemies in the gate.

Fr Jerome died as he had expected, and as he would have wished: very quickly and quietly, and working right up to the end. Impatient as he always was with his own physical ailments, and strong in bearing pain and discomfort, he would have hated an enforced inactivity. He died at his job. And the work that he accomplished goes on, and will go on: a building durable with all the durability of work that is done in the hand and will of God.

May his spirit guide and strengthen those who, with heavy hearts, must continue to work for the school he loved and the Province he loved: and for him, may he be taken very swiftly into the arms of the God he served so simply and so well.

THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING

BY

CONRAD PEPLER, O.P.



JUST as any person's career becomes more individual and outside species and classes the more developed and specialised he becomes, so in the spiritual life the holier a man becomes the less easily will he fall into any preconceived categories. The first stages of the life of the spirit are easier to follow, just as a man's career begins with his schooling when he learns the same subjects and undergoes the same discipline as all his schoolfellows. When he has left school or university and has begun to live his own life, then he should tend towards uniqueness until, rising in his profession, he has fewer and fewer men with whom he may be identified. So as the soul rises from the schooling of the purgative way and the night of the senses she begins to live the divine life in her own unique way, until passing into the night of the spirit she emerges into the unitive way where only the most general characteristics are shared with others who are yet in the same 'way'. 'Star differeth from star' among the saints as well as among the angels. Similarly the writings of the great mystical authors, while preserving a fundamental identity, are extremely diverse in their descriptions and analyses of the workings of grace. We have only to compare the writings of St Catherine of Siena with those of St Cathérine of Genoa, of St Teresa with St John of the Cross, of Mother Julian with the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*.