pagnie, et, ayant lui-même de l'humour, il aimait une 'bonne blague' Doué d'une remarquable mémoire, on le considérait comme sage et de bon jugement. On ne cesse de mentionner son tempérament irlandais: je suppose que cela veut dire qu'il était vif, réactif et sensible. Pour quelqu'un en position d'autorité, il était humble à un point surprenant, prêt à s'en remettre aux autres et à admettre qu'il pouvait avoir tort. Que je veuille l'imiter et l'admirer, c'est certain; mais arriver au niveau de ce qu'il attendrait de moi, c'est autre chose! Derrière un extérieur jovial et sympathique se cachait un sérieux dont on ne pouvait jamais douter. C'était un homme d'un gabarit exigeant tant pour lui-même que pour les autres. C'est un privilège d'être de la famille d'un homme aussi remarquable.

Tom Marmion
Halle, 15 janvier 2008

A Journey to meet a Grand-uncle

Thomas Marmion is the son of Dr. Joseph Marmion and Brigid Hayes, and the grandson of Dr. Matthew Marmion, the youngest brother of Joseph, later to become Dom Columba, OSB. Thomas was born in Liverpool in August 1933. With the outbreak of war in 1939, his family returned to Ireland. In 1961 he married Bernadette Dowling and settled in Dublin where they brought up four sons. After fifteen years in business, of which ten were spent as a publisher, he became a secondary teacher. For some years now he has come to Maredsous regularly to assist the editors of Dom Marmion's letters. He writes of his gradual discovery of the personality of his grand-uncle.

Abbot Nicholas Dayez has a facility for putting his finger on the essential. The day that Dom Columba Marmion was declared Blessed in Rome, he remarked that his predecessor was one of many of the family of Maredsous who were saints: it just fell to him to be chosen. The reputation of the Abbey and its monks makes it certain that Abbot Nicholas is right, but for me to have some grasp of why my granduncle was preferred has taken a journey of nearly sixty years. Born ten years after my granduncle died in 1923, all I

know of him comes from his writings, his biographies and what people have told me. May I tell you something of what it is has been like to have the "Bienheureux" in my family?

Because of the outbreak of war in 1939 I found myself in a boarding school for little boys run by the Dominican nuns in Ireland. My three sisters went to the secondary boarding school next door; families often sent their children away to school in those days of difficult travel. The nuns were strict, excellent educators and devoted to Dom Marmion on whose writings they had cut their spiritual teeth. On occasion they were delighted to have me around and I was produced as a sort of relic, undoubtedly of the fourth class, to visiting priests and bishops. I had not the faintest notion about Dom Columba's writings, nor of his significance, so I stood there trying to look good, while my elders and betters talked over my head about matters spiritual. No one thought it necessary to tell me about the man or his teachings, so I remained in a sort of promotional limbo, happy to be of service. I was regarded rather curiously by my fellows; their fathers did normal things like owning horses that won the Grand National or running prosperous farms. My mother had never met the famous abbot and though she admired him, she could tell me little that meant anything to a young lad. I dipped into *Christ the Life of the Soul* and *Christ in his Mysteries* but found them incomprehensible. Anyway, I was told that I must not touch these books: they were signed copies, as was Dom Raymond Thibaut's *Life*.

My father, a doctor, died when I was three, his health ruined during service in the Great War. With five of us to raise, my mother was not well off. It came as a pleasant surprise, therefore, to be sent for my secondary education to Glenstal Priory, where the Irish Benedictines ran a small, exclusive school. The fees were expensive and I can only guess that some arrangement was made with the monks. Glenstal was the Monastery of SS. Joseph and Columba, the names my granduncle received at baptism and profession, and I soon realised that this foundation from Maredsous, started after his death, was considered the fulfilment of his wishes. For the first time I perceived what it meant to have a relation who was more than a sort of trophy; famous for who he was and what he had achieved. I

met monks who had known Dom Columba and spoke of him with affection and respect.

The most impressive of these was Dom Bede Lebbe. Father Bede had been a young monk during Dom Marmion's abbacy and over the years a friendship developed between this brilliant monk and his abbot. Dom Bede was sent as Prior to Glenstal, but tragically he succumbed to the Irish climate, developing chronic asthma that left him bed-ridden. I was summoned to Father Bede's cell, a rare privilege, and thereafter I made a weekly visit to keep him company, talking about his life, about Dom Columba and going through his collection of postcards. Dom Winoc Mertens and Dom John Baptiste (....) were other Belgians in the community who had known Dom Columba; they had spent the Great War as refugees in Ireland while their abbot went to and fro, trying to maintain contact with his monastery, then behind German lines. There was also Dom Bernard O'Dea, remembered by all who knew Glenstal in those years. Father Bernard was an enthusiastic admirer, becoming the first Irish Vice-Postulator of Dom Marmion's cause. He did more than any other to make Dom Columba known in the country of his birth.

Few in Ireland had heard of Dom Marmion before he died. It was his books that made him known in his native country, but the first was published only in 1917, a wider circulation coming later. Born, educated and ordained in Dublin, he left for Belgium after a short period of diocesan work in his native city. Between 1886 and 1915 he seldom returned and few remembered him except his family, and several contemporaries with whom he remained in correspondence. While his reputation for retreats and conferences spread abroad and in Britain, his name was virtually unknown in his own country, and those who heard him mentioned probably took him to be a foreigner because of his French-sounding name. Marmion is Norman-French, but the family have been in Ireland since the 12th century. In a land only too aware of its tragic religious history, Dom Marmion made little appeal. Most had a preference for dramatic figures: martyrs like Blessed Oliver Plunkett, and missionaries who left to evangelise pagan lands. Ironically, St. Columba, whose name Joseph Marmion received at profession, was just such a figure:

founder of Iona and evangelist to the Scots. In Dom Columba's life there was little to stir the imagination. The only exciting event was his escape in 1914 across the German lines as a cattle dealer, and not much was known about this feat. Belgium rarely figured in Irish headlines other than as a small country bordered, and sometimes threatened, by powerful neighbours. For his heroic work among the lepers of Molokai, Father Damian would have won hands-down in Ireland over Dom Columba!

When a school is attached to a Benedictine monastery, the two institutions usually operate as separate entities. The monks who teach or work in the school come and go; the rest of the community gets on with its life behind the cloister walls. So it was, though rather less than more in those early days in Glenstal. In the monastery, there was a reverence and devotion to Dom Columba; in the school his name seldom came up. I cannot recall any public prayers that mentioned his name. My granduncle seldom entered my thoughts, though I was conscious, deep down, that my presence in this congenial school was entirely due to him. I was a typical adolescent, more concerned with keeping out of trouble, doing as little study as I could get away with, and trying hard to win my place on rugby teams. From time to time, I was still produced to visitors, particularly monks from Maredsous, who usually shook hands in a distant sort of way, with a few words exchanged to try out my French or their English. I got the impression that a faint disappointment hung over these encounters: I was lanky, extremely thin and rather untidy with a head of curly hair – in every way unlike my rotund, impressive granduncle. But my connection with Dom Columba was acknowledged – my nickname was 'Dabbat', a corruption of 'The Abbot' in school parlance.

A new rector, Dom Columba Breen, was appointed in my last years at school. An intelligent, cultivated man, he had come to Glenstal as a late-vocation from the Dublin diocese, thus following in the footsteps of my granduncle. During his formation he had spent a year or so in Maredsous, imbibing its spirit and a devotion to its former abbot. He was the first to demand a better performance from me, scholastically and in attitude, and he expressed confidence that I could achieve more, if I put my mind to it. Against the run of

'form' and to the surprise of some, he appointed me a prefect in my final year: prefects wielded considerable authority and had responsibilities thrust on them well beyond the norm of the times. But Father Columba's great favour was to arrange for me to go to the École Abbatiale in Maredous rather than stay on for an extra year in Glenstal – at sixteen I was too young for university. His decision, undoubtedly due to the influence of Dom Marmion, had a momentous effect on my life and for it I have always been grateful.

In those days Glenstal Priory was a small monastery, lively, growing and remarkably informal. Dom Athanasius rode around the estate on a motorbike, à la Steve MacQueen. Dom Winoc had a hunting rifle of huge calibre in his room in the Art School in the hope that a stag might cross his sights. Dom Peter, immaculate in "whites", was the backbone of local cricket teams, and young monks took on senior boys on the tennis court. Maredsous was quite different – formal, rather severe, tranquil and enormous. And it had an abbot, in fact two of them: Abbot Celestine Golenvaux, the successor to my granduncle and the newly-elected Abbot Godefroid Dayez. I began to appreciate what an important person my grand-uncle had been – the liturgy on Sundays and great feasts was magnificent. The deference shown the abbot was a revelation. I was very impressed.

As it turned out, the École Abbatiale did not have a bed for me, so I was given a room in the Hotellerie, which is really an appendix to the monastery, operating within its own parameters. Suddenly I found myself with one foot in the school and the other in the abbey, a very unusual situation. From this vantage point I experienced both worlds and had contact with each. Glenstal had been intimate, friendly and open, acknowledging all as members of its larger community. In Maredsous, the separation of school from abbey was almost total, most of the community never stopping to wonder whom a new face might belong to. My isolation gave me some idea of how lonely Dom Columba must have been during the tough years of his novitiate; I began to develop a fellow-feeling for the sensitive man Dom Raymond portrays in his biography. My grand-uncle mentions how hard he found the restriction on letter-writing. He also mentions how much he appreciated the smile he got from one

singular monk when they passed. Things were different in the school; there I found the atmosphere friendly.

In autumn 1950 Maredsous Abbey was still recovering from the trauma of the war. There were monks who had been demobbed. Others had returned from captivity. Some had not fully recuperated from the stress and tragedy of four years under Hitler. There was an unsettled feeling in the air. I also realised that, unlike in Glenstal, there was much less of a consensus about how my granduncle was thought of. Many older monks had a deep affection for Dom Columba: PP. Raymond, Sebastian, Idesbald, Norbert, Gerard, Fr. Paulinus spring to mind. For these men, the abbot they had known was remarkable and a saint. Others appeared more neutral in their opinion. But the dismissive, almost hostile, attitude of some, mainly young, monks, came as a shock. For years I had heard nothing but approval of Dom Columba and to have him spoken of critically in this of all places was troubling. I felt affronted, almost resentful. From confident belief I moved to uncertainty in my opinion of my relative.

On the one hand the judgement of men like Bede, Raymond and Sebastian was convincing: they had known Dom Columba. But might not monks who had experienced the hurly-burly of war find Marmion too simple and open, too flowery and personal in his approach to spirituality, too out-of-touch with the harsh realities of poverty, alienation and plain godlessness? Was there not, also, a dichotomy between his reputed jolliness and his seriousness, even severity. Monastic discipline was much tougher then than now. Maybe he had been too autocratic for some? His frequent absences and seeming lack of regard for the vow of stability were cited against him. He was accused of having been a poor administrator, letting his abbey run down while concerned with other things. The respected monk who told me that the third abbot of Maredsous had no chance of canonisation seemed to sum up a not uncommon assessment. My time in Maredsous was of great benefit to me personally, but it did little to make me believe that one day I would see Dom Columba beatified.

During the years that followed, I went to university, started work and married. Meetings with Dom Bernard O'Dea, and occasional

visits, maintained my contact with Glenstal, now an abbey, but I heard little to make me optimistic about the prospect of beatification. From time to time articles appeared in Irish newspapers and journals, but they seemed only to recycle material already well-used, deriving mainly from Dom Raymond's *Life* and few other sources. As a person who had lived and breathed, Dom Columba was still difficult to get to know. I heard that he had been declared Servant of God, a sign of progress in the cause. Then a letter came early in 1963 inviting me to the exhumation of his remains. This was a surprise; exhumation is an integral part of the beatification process, involving the verification of the remains of the person concerned. The invitation did something to restore my faith that, one day, we might have a saint in the family. I joined my brother Fr. Joseph Marmion S.J. at the Abbey on 29th April, not knowing what to expect. An exhumation is not an everyday event in any family.

The morning of the exhumation, expectancy grew as we waited in the open for the process to begin. Tension increased, becoming almost palpable as the dignitaries and lawyers descended to the vault. What would they find? Might Dom Columba's body be incorrupt? Whispers circulated that Frère Paulinus, who had helped coffin my granduncle forty years before, had found the remains recognisable. Someone suggested that I should be present too, and pushed me forward. For an awful moment there was almost a mêlée, then calm returned and, shortly after, the liturgy resumed with the community processing to the Abbey church with the remains now re-coffined and sealed. The ceremonies ended with re-interment of the body at the altar of St. Gregory. Then the mood lightened, becoming almost festive; the lunch that followed confirmed it was an occasion for celebration. Some weeks later an account of the exhumation arrived from Glenstal, expressing hope: it was a matter of waiting and praying for the necessary miracle. It proved a shorter wait than some expected; by the late 1960's there were rumours of a cure in America. Over the years my wife and I visited the tomb several times. Now located in the abbey church, it was more like a visit one might make to a family grave. Later we brought our teenage children to Maredsous during the camping holidays that

were a feature of our summers. These were moving moments, kneeling there as a family, with Dom Columba, recognisably himself, looking over our heads, into the distance.

In 1994 a biography of Abbot Marmion by Dom Mark Tierney was published, giving a detailed chronological account of his life. I found the new account fascinating because it gave information about his life and activities of which I had heard nothing before. The purpose of Dom Raymond's *Life* was to communicate Dom Columba's spirituality and teaching, while telling about the man he had known. Inevitably, an almost hagiographical tone coloured his writing and the mixing of chronology with theme made it difficult for the reader to form a coherent picture of the man, but to write a complete account of Abbot Marmion's life had never been his purpose. Now I could take the biographies as complementary and in doing so began to discover a complete person. The significance of the hidden years in Maredsous after his profession could be guessed at. Later came the challenges faced as Prior in Louvain and the importance of the time he spent there. For the first time I knew what he had had to face as abbot, temporal problems piling one on top of another. Having been a business manager myself, I could appreciate what it meant to run an organisation with 150 monks and so many different activities. How he came to be criticised as a poor administrator was beyond me: the Katanga project, the War, the Dormition Question, the break with Beuron, these were only a few of the headaches he had had to deal with. That he coped with such matters, well beyond his previous experience, while maintaining his spiritual apostleship was a revelation. For me, Dom Columba emerged as a person of remarkable piety, industry and courage, the latter virtue not one I had thought of as an attribute till then. My years in Glenstal and Maredsous helped me create a matrix within which I could place my granduncle. Now he became someone of stature.

The beatification of Dom Columba in Rome on 3rd September 2000 passed off in a whirlwind of impressions and emotions. I was immensely proud of my granduncle but all too aware of the gulf that existed between us. I could not get out of my mind the notion of being a representative without proper credentials. I think all I

managed was to thank God, and Dom Columba, for making so much possible. As for the man himself, I was sure he enjoyed the day; he was a liturgist *par excellence*, and he relished good company. And this was the best! But there was a sad side to things. Meeting Patricia Bitzan, the American lady whose recovery from incurable cancer made the beatification possible, was juxtaposed with my brother Joe's final weeks of the same dread disease. The Jesuits were kind enough to send him to Rome accompanied by his closest friend in the Order, and the audience with the Pope that the Vice-Postulators arranged was a great comfort. I have the happiest memories of our gathering about him *en famille*, when, too weak to go to the receptions, he sat at table with us as Rome swirled past. I'm sure another Joe Marmion joined in our laughter.

The journey to meet my granduncle is almost at an end, with the last stage the most rewarding. The preparation of Dom Columba's letters for publication has been in hand for almost a decade, a mammoth task. So the editors accepted when I offered to help with the checking of notes and indexes. Through this work I came into closer contact with my granduncle because he was an extraordinary correspondent. His letters, over 2000 of them, range from the ridiculous to the sublime: worries about the large appetites of the refugee monks from St André in wartime balance letters to Marie Thérèse van Aerden seeking spiritual guidance; his agony of mind, faced by the demands of his abbacy, weigh against his kindness to those who turned to him for help. His capacity for genuine fondness in his relations with men and women I found heart-warming. Though endlessly involved with the welfare of others, he never lost sight of his own family for long. Above all, throughout the letters there is his amazing awareness of the presence of God.

So what do I make of Dom Columba? I think of a man serious but not stern, jovial but not jolly, spontaneous and open with those he trusted; a person in charge but not challenging. When at ease with people, he warmed to their company and, being humorous himself, enjoyed a joke. Blessed with a remarkable memory, he is spoken of as wise and a good judge. Time and again his Irish temperament is mentioned; I take this to mean that he was quick, responsive and sensitive. For a man in authority, he could be

surprisingly humble, ready to defer to others and admit the possibility that he might be wrong. That I would have liked and admired him is certain; whether I would have come up to his high expectations is another matter. Behind the friendly exterior, there was a seriousness that was never in doubt. He was a man of exacting standards in relation to himself and to others. It is a privilege to be related to such a remarkable man.

Tom Marmion
Halle, 15th January 2008