



Christ et, en Lui, à la personne du Père dont il a cherché à accomplir la volonté. Il a pu, ce faisant, proposer une théologie fondamentalement axée sur l'*espérance* puisque par son souci d'obéir il sort de son ego, de ses limites ; il voit les choses de plus haut. Il a ses détracteurs, les travers de l'existence, la sienne et celle de son environnement. Dans un égal recours à l'intelligence de la foi et au cœur de la consécration, il a encouragé le disciple du Christ à la reconnaissance du Mystère de Dieu en sa propre vie, à l'aventure étonnante d'une filiation divine. Il a proposé et il propose encore un mystère d'*harmonie* où la personne se sent appelée à marcher “sur les chemins de la Paix”, devise de Maredsous.

Luc Moës, o.s.b.

## Dom Columba Marmion

### A precursor and logistical survey for Springtime

#### 1. His Beatification

It seems to me very important in tackling any approach to the understanding of the message of D. Columba Marmion, to give some reflections on the honour which the Church has given him, in proclaiming him Blessed. It may, at the same time, be helpful to recall the ceremony which took place in St. Peter's Square, on 3 September 2000, in front of an immense crowd of people, to beatify three other witnesses to the faith, among whom were Popes Pius IX and John XXIII.

What should we think about the Church proclaiming someone a saint or a blessed? Is she right in acting thus? For Protestants, Christ alone is Holy or Blessed. Moreover, in the Church, especially among the Carthusians, there are those who refuse to press for the canonisation of religious men or women. In Maredsous, for many years, the whole matter hung in the balance. Before even asking ourselves questions concerning the matter of procedure, of the authenticity of virtues and other guarantees, as well as the inevitable competition, which could arouse jealousy over the number of



marvellous things attributed to such and such a person, before even any question of miracles is raised, it is necessary to ask ourselves what exactly it is that God wants to demonstrate in the actual witness of those faithful few, who have shown us in their lives some part of His Mystery, who have, in their special way, given an example which the Christian people can follow, and who by their witness, encourage others to hope and to work for the advancement of the Kingdom of God in this world.

The absolute precondition which one must propose, consists in approaching the matter from the point of view of God, rather than that of men. There is no indication that these are one and the same. In fact, we should recall the saying of Isaiah: “His thoughts are not our thoughts” (Is 55,8) and again we read in Dt 7,7-8: “The Lord did not love you and choose you because you outnumbered other peoples; you were the smallest nation on the earth. But the Lord loved you and wanted to keep the promise that he made to your ancestors”.

God is Love. Thus, let us welcome after the fashion of our fathers in the faith, since time immemorial and, as found in the sacred Scriptures, the account of the trials of the People of God in the desert, throughout the time of the Kingdom and the Exile. Notice also above all the “Holy Anger” contained in the words of Isaiah, when he writes at the beginning of Chapter 24: “The Lord is going to devastate the earth and leave it desolate He will twist he earth’s surface and scatter its people. It will be the same for the priests as for the people, the masters as for the slaves”.

Nevertheless, the philosophers and the metaphysicians knew that in the catalogue of plausible explanations for the existence of God, that of the God of Love is the least legitimate, even though it is satisfying as a reply to the question on the Meaning of Life. The simple mention of Archimedes, of Leonardo da Vinci, Blaise Pascal, Newton, Pasteur, Einstein, of Teilhard de Chardin and others, this simple mention authorises us to think in spite of all the faults, the black holes and other deficiencies of the world, that the vital energy of the universe comes to full bloom in Christ.

Columba Marmion, by his obedience to God, such as it is recognised in the Sacred Scriptures, by the humble avowal of his



unworthiness, even of his vanities, his little foibles, by his acceptance of the abbatial care, by the influence and fruitfulness of his witness and of his apostolate, has put into practice his motto: “It is better to serve than to rule” (*Magis prodesse quam praesse*). His beatification shows him not so much as a superman, or a perfect man, but rather as someone who has been in a special way an instrument of God.

There is no doubt that Dom Marmion, without the sounding of drums or trumpets, has made a very considerable contribution to the renaissance of the universal Church in its mission of saving souls. Between Pius IX of Vatican Council I and its proclamation of the Infallibility of the pope, and John XXIII and Vatican Council II, that proclaimed Collegiality. Marmion played a part in showing the way, even preparing the way for Vatican II.

In what way did he achieve this? He first of all re-established the link or Alliance between God and Man. During his life-time, the faith was withering away, because it only succeeded in teaching the fear of God and the formal practice of the sacraments and the virtues. Columba Marmion helped to restore the interpersonal relationship between God and the believer, a relationship at once paternal and filial, nourished by affection and devotion.

He drew this fundamental theology from the best sources of the Christian faith. He knew nearly all the Epistles of St. Paul by heart, and looked to St. John, the most mystical of the Evangelists, for much of his inspiration. He based his ideas on the vast and solid theological structure of St. Thomas Aquinas. However he enriched this doctrine, by instilling some of the delicacy and humanism of St. Francis de Sales, and notably the testimonies of St. Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Louis de Blois, and M. Olier. It is not by any stroke of luck or chance that the writings of Dom Marmion have sold hundreds of thousands of copies, and are translated into 19 languages, and all this before the days of immediate communication and computer technology. There is every reason to look upon him as a pioneer or pace-maker, in that he proposed a new approach to spirituality. We can thus call him, at the very least, a modest precursor. Dom Marmion’s writings helped



to provide a kind of “springtime” for the church, with a flowering of liturgical, scriptural and theological principles.

## 2. Biography

Joseph Marmion was born in Dublin on 1 April 1858, the same year as Charles de Foucauld. (See *Le Courrier...*, N° 13, 6<sup>th</sup> year, 2007). He had a remote Norman-French origin on his father William’s side, but was utterly French on his mother, Herminie Cordier’s side. He was brought up in a family which was at once stable, united, Victorian, solemn and even authoritarian. There were nine children in all, two of whom died in infancy, both boys. When Joseph was born, he was considered as a gift from God, and was usually dressed in black clothes. Although he was followed by two younger brothers, his upbringing was very much dominated by his mother, an aunt and his four sisters.

He was highly intelligent and mature for his age, of a sweet, though delicate disposition, and by the age of 15 had been chosen by the archbishop of Dublin as a candidate for the Dublin diocese. As a young seminarian, he took as his motto the words of St. John Berchmans: “If I do not become a saint when I am young, I will never become one”. He had a great capacity for making friends, which remained with him all his life.

He spent some time in Rome, as a student in the Propaganda College, and on 16 June 1881 was ordained priest in the church of St. Agatha’s, Rome. It was on a visit to Monte Cassino, that he first became attracted to the Benedictine way of life. However, he was not a free agent, and had first of all to serve as a curate in Dundrum, Co. Dublin, and then as professor at Holy Cross College, Clonliffe, before being allowed, in 1886, to join the Benedictine Abbey of Maredsous, Belgium. He immediately found himself at home, and received the monastic name of Columba, a name under which he has since been known. Almost from the very beginning of his life as a monk in Maredsous, Dom Columba built up a reputation as an inspiring preacher of retreats. He was especially appreciated for his sense of humour and his clear spiritual message.

At the same time, he showed much solicitude for the dying (i.e. the case of Madame Bodart), while he had a special interest in



would-be converts from Protestantism to Catholicism (John Chapman, Bede Camm). The most famous of this last category was the conversion of the Church of England Benedictine monks of Caldey in 1913.

In 1899, Marmion was sent to Louvain, as Prior of a new foundation at Mont Cesar (Kaisersberg). He remained there for ten years, after which he was elected Third Abbot of Maredsous (in 1909). It was a challenging time for the abbot and monks of Maredsous. Asked by the Belgian government to make a foundation in the Congo, Marmion and his community decided to turn down this particular offer. This took courage and much diplomacy, especially on the part of Abbot Marmion.

There is no doubt that the war years (1914-18) proved the most challenging of all times. Marmion decided to take his younger monks to Ireland, to complete their studies, and to escape possible enforced work in labour camps. They found a very suitable place of refuge at Edermine House, near Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford. Marmion himself returned to Belgium in 1916, and remained there for the duration of the war.

After the war, mainly on account of the anti-German feeling in Belgium, Marmion was one of the main architects in arranging the separation of Maredsous from the German (Beuronese) Congregation. At the same time, he was involved in the so-called Occupation of Dormition Abbey in Jerusalem, which had been evacuated by German monks towards the end of the war. Marmion was able to send four of his monks – on a holding operation (1919-1920) – to occupy this famous monastery, until the German monks were allowed to return there in the summer of 1920.

During all this time, Marmion built up for himself a reputation as a spiritual writer, with the publication of three books: *Christ, the Life of the Soul*, *Christ, in His Mysteries*, *Christ, the Ideal of the Monk*. By now, he had worked out in his mind a fresh approach to the spiritual life, with emphasis on the role of Christ in the lives of every Christian. He furthermore, told his readers that they were the “adopted children of God”, which was a new, or rather neglected, concept at the time.



Finally, he offered his readers a theology of *hope*, based on a understanding of God's love for all his creatures. He insisted that each human person was supposed to live out in his own life the Mystery of God. The fact of our being the brothers and sisters of Christ should lead to an amazing spiritual adventure, where we end up in the arms of God. Marmion proposed, and still proposes, that we live this mystery of *harmony*, where each of us feels called to walk "on the road to Peace" (*In Viam Pacis*), which is the motto of the Abbey of Maredsous.

Luc Moës, O.S.B.