Geoffrey Preston O.P.

Bob Spence

During a recent University Mission we were told that a christian funeral that was not a ritual of rejoicing and exultation was incomprehensible. I felt very out of sympathy and ill at ease in that large uncritical audience. The words of the preacher did not tally with my own experience of the death of family and friends. They had nothing to do with my emotions during Geoffrey's requiem at Holy Cross, Leicester or his burial at Hawkesyard on a bitterly cold Holy Week afternoon. I felt in those two places as I had done a few years before while praying for another brilliant young priest friend from Durham days, Austin McElhatton, suddenly dead. The feeling was numbness, futility, sheer loss. Somehow we have to struggle to mould a faith in resurrection out of such hopeless material.

At Durham there was something of a myth of Geoffrey, the bon viveur, the good Conservative, the intelligent historian, the brilliant President of the Union, the rather improbable captain of the Tennis Club, the High Anglican evolved from Methodism. The Parish Priest of St. Godric's who instructed him in the Catholic faith did not quite know what he had taken on. We always believed that, exasperated by Geoffrey's relentless questions, he eventually in near despair prescribed his dust-laden Summa. Geoffrey, of course, took it away and became a Catholic and a Dominican.

He told me that he became a Catholic so that he could move around in a larger room. It was happy that within the larger room he should have chosen to become a Dominican. As a secular priest, I am always heartened by the variety that religious like Geoffrey so often bring into what could so easily be a boringly monochrome English Church.

What a delight it was for me when he came to live in Newcastle for that short year. For Geoffrey too there was something special about the Northumbria of Cuthbert and Bede as well as the Northumbria of undergraduate and R.A.F. days. One of my first meetings with him after his return was at the licensing of the Anglican Chaplain to the University, another Durham historian. My last was over a couple of pints in the Senior Common Room before he crossed the road to the same friend's church to say farewell. His Newcastle stay was something of a cameo of his sixteen years as a Dominican. The two centres of his life were St. Dominic's Priory and the Central Station. He readily allowed us to use him at the Chaplaincy. He

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gave us a Tuesday night series of lectures on the Church. I remember both his preference for *The Church in the Modern World* over *Lumen Gentium* and the amazement of students in the pub afterwards as he downed a pint of lager as if it were a small sherry. In Newcastle he took part keenly in popular theology courses at the Priory, talked regularly to the sisters at St. Catherine's, discussed and ate in the Deanery, helped to build a liturgy happily shared by sixth-formers, advised sympathetically on inter-church marriage, was a spiritual director valued for sensitivity and insight, cycled amazingly around his district in Sandyford where his gentle, sympathetic understanding of sickness, poverty and unemployment or of happier Geordie experiences made him a welcome visitor.

During the same packed year he was lecturing in London, taking part in sixth-form retreats in Liverpool, telling seminarians at Ushaw about the rosary, giving retreats to nuns and looking forward to the Northumbria Summer School in Alnwick Castle that he knew so well.

Behind all this seemingly feverish activity was the solid calm of contemplation, the nourishment of a liturgy that he loved and helped to make and the radicalism of a profoundly traditional approach to theology. His passion for the sources of a historical religion was visible in his room at the Priory where bed, chair and table just found space in an amazingly variegated library. He always seemed to me to have the good medievalist's distrust of slick theology.

In earlier years he had gone to Israel to learn Hebrew and characteristically involved himself in the life of a kibbutz. He improved his German so that he could read Luther accurately and since his death stories have been quickly surfacing in Newcastle: how he borrowed a book on mathematics from an engineer parishioner and brought it back a couple of days later for close discussion. A colleague writes: "his breadth of intellectual sympathy made him at home with the committed atheist as well as with a wide range of belief; there was no narrowness anywhere in his mind. He who was so much a man of the Council and what followed could help and understand those who had difficulties with Vatican II. To the students he was a loved elder brother, to the brethren a pillar of strength."

Nobody will ever think of Geoffrey without recalling his more than Falstaffian proportions. We will never be tempted to remember him as an impersonal wandering preacher. He had a wide range of friends from R.A.F. days, from Durham, from his time as a Dominican who loved to eat, drink and talk with him. His many friendships were reflected in the large varied company who came to his requiem, led by a Catholic and an Anglican bishop.

As we were bidden there to comfort one another with words of faith, I struggled to assimilate Geoffrey's own calm answer to the anguished question of the psalmist: "Will your love be told in the grave or your faithfulness among the dead? Will your wonders be known in the dark or your justice in the land of oblivion?"

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