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Vincent McNabb 1868-1943, an Anniversary Commemoration

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Abstract

This commemorative article, drafted for the 75th anniversary of Vincent McNabb's death in 2018 (it was also the hundred and fiftieth anniversary of his birth), re-tells his story, visits the unresolved question of his sanctity, and, by considering his themes, seeks to point up his *amor intellectualis*, and not just *cordialis*, the generosity of a many-sided man.

Keywords

Donald Proudman, Ferdinand Valentine, Hilary Carpenter, Michael de la Bedoyere, Easter Rising

Background

Vincent McNabb was born in 1868 at Portaferry, a maritime town in County Down some twenty-five miles from Belfast. With his ten siblings, he came from an Ulster Catholic family with naval connexions to Britain to where the family moved when he was fourteen.[1] In the words of his Dominican biographer Ferdinand Valentine, he 'remembered too rarely that he was not an Englishman' and 'most Englishmen forgot (and these included a number of his own brethren) that he was a foreigner'.[2] Valentine was writing in 1954, which was more than a decade after the territory of the Irish Free State had been declared a Republic. McNabb on the other hand had been born into the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Even in 1954, by which date Eire was lost forever, the surviving portions of that Union included County Down. So the word 'foreigner' was hardly in place. But Valentine required it. He needed it so as to say that what English Dominicans forgot in judging McNabb was his 'Gaelic passion

[1] Vincent McNabb, O. P., *Eleven, thank God* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1942).

[2] Ferdinand Valentine, O. P., *Father Vincent McNabb. The Portrait of a Great Dominican* (London: Burns and Oates, 1954), p. 4.

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for drama in all its forms, including pantomime'.[3] That is part of Valentine's explanation for why some of his fellow-friars had no time for McNabb, regarding him as an insufferable poseur. One fairly obvious riposte was forthcoming in a 'Catholic Worker' pamphlet written jointly by a friar and a layman and published at the latter's expense. Agreed, he 'courted publicity'. Yet this was 'not because he loved publicity, but because a sermon is not a sermon unless people hear it. And if one can make the whole world hear it, all the better.[4]'

Valentine's book was criticised by McNabb's admirers for its heavy-handedly psychological approach to its subject. Hilary Carpenter, the English Dominican Provincial who mandated its publication, was aghast when the first of a series of extracts, run by a weekly paper, *The Catholic Herald*, received the headline, 'To Some He was a Mountebank, to Others a Prophet'.[5] Carpenter had appealed in advance to the editor, Michael de la Bedoyere, not to proceed. 'We protested to you that such a piecemeal presentation of this particular book would inevitably lead to misapprehension on the part of your readers'. The predicted outcome, disastrous for the promotion of McNabb as a future saint of the Church, had come about. 'That our apprehensions were well-founded is manifest in the immediate reactions we have received after the first extract with its deplorable and misleading headline.' Carpenter conceded that 'Father Vincent was an enigma to some; the very greatness and uniqueness of his character inevitably made it so, at any rate to those who narrowly saw only one facet of him''. He defended Valentine's effort as 'a living and thrilling portrait', but 'a portrait that must be seen as a whole, not in its first brush strokes'.[6]

I shall return in the Conclusion to the evaluation of Valentine's 'portrait'. But one thing the author was surely right about. That was the significant non-playing – at any rate in the period after the First World War – of McNabb's Irish card. In 1921 the editor of another religious weekly, the *Catholic Times*, asked McNabb to comment on the civil strife then tearing apart the newly founded Irish Free State. 'If, as I have been informed, you are an Irishman [this 'if' was extraordinary in reference to a man who was already the best-known Dominican of his generation in the English-speaking world], I am sure you will be anxious to say something for the old land

[3] Ibid.

[4] Donald Proudman, O. P. and R. P. Walsh, *Fr Vincent McNabb, O. P.* (Wigan: privately published, n. d.), p. 7. Consulted in Dominican Archives, McNabb Papers, Box 27. Proudman was the proposed Vice-Postulator of McNabb's 'cause' for beatification, on which more anon.

[5] *Catholic Herald*, 6 May, 1955.

[6] Letter 9 May 1955 from Hilary Carpenter, O. P., to the Editor, *Catholic Herald*. Dominican Archives, McNabb Papers, Box 27.

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at this great crisis in her destiny.'[7] McNabb adduced a supernatural vocation as the ground for a non-reply. He had been given a mission to pay back to the island of Britain (or 'England' as he called it) the generosity once shown the Irish by St Patrick. He had taken the English people 'to my heart, where God had first written love of my own birthland, and Patrick, the friend of God, had written the love of this land of my choice and of my second birth', i.e. love of England.[8] No further comment transpired except to say that anything tending to separate the sister islands was deeply regrettable.

There was a reason for this elusiveness: a deep sadness born of the failure of his hopes for a solution to the 'Irish Question' within – rather than outside – the British imperial polity. In the summer of 1916, in the wake of Dublin's 'Easter Rising', he had written an open letter to Herbert Asquith, then prime minister of the United Kingdom, in the columns of *The Catholic Times*. The Catholic Church in Ireland, said McNabb, had ensured the law-abidingness of its flock by condemning, during the nineteenth century, a succession of dissident movements, either illegal or of border-line legality. Fenianism, 'boycotting', the Irish National League's 'Plan of Campaign': these were movements that sought to subvert the existing civil order in the island by extraordinary means. The Home Rule Bill placed before Parliament in 1913 was the rightful reward for the historic patience of Irish Catholics: an altogether 'lawful political action commanded by a high religious motive'. How unmistakable the contrast with the challenge to law and order offered by army officers sympathetic to Protestant Loyalism in Ulster – seemingly sanctioned as this prospective mutiny was by no less a figure than Lord Roberts, the Commander-in-Chief. '[F]or the first time the religious elements of Irish Nationalism were unable to restrain the sword' – as wielded by the leaders of the bloodily suppressed Easter Rising. McNabb appealed to Asquith to read the message now 'written in the ruins of Dublin'. Asquith must 'calm the startled steeds of Irish national life and . . . yoke them once more with their fellow Gaels across the seas in the vast empire which is largely the harvest of their force of mind and soul'.[9] McNabb's own life was geographically inexplicable without the Union, if not the Empire. And the English Dominican Province that he joined was itself an imperial venture – with missions in the West Indian colonies and the Union of South Africa, then a dominion of the British Crown.

Back in Ireland, Joseph McNabb had been the youngest and physically the weakest of the boys of his family, but by way of

[7] Vincent McNabb, O. P., 'The Call of St Patrick', in idem., *Francis Thompson and Other Essays* (London: Blackfriars Publications, 1955 [1935]), p. 67.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Idem., 'The Example of Ireland', *The Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion*, 4 August 1916. Consulted in Dominican Archives, McNabb Papers, Box 2.

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compensation he was intellectually gifted – something his educators at St Malachy's College Belfast were quick to realize when he returned as a boarder after the family's migration to the Newcastle area. At home he was devoted to a highly competent mother, who before her marriage headed a millinery department in a major New York store. He was in awe of his father, a disciplinarian who, as a master mariner, was inevitably away at sea for much of the time. Valentine's forty pages on McNabb's childhood and youth are dominated by an attempt at psychoanalysis of his subject, in an effort to explain the sometimes wildly diverse reactions of people to McNabb in later life – and the sometimes breathtaking insouciance he showed towards the communities whose life he shared in Dominican priories. On Valentine's speculative hypothesis, McNabb's 'will-to-community' had been undermined by the strain of a family setting marked by sibling rivalry and the obligation to welcome periodically a father whose intimacy with his mother he resented. The scene was set for outbursts of over-compensatory self-display and a startling level of habitual indifference to the reactions of those around him. Yet Valentine's biography, or quasi-biography, was not a demolition job. Its sub-title ran, 'A Portrait of a Great Dominican'. Valentine considered McNabb 'a brilliant and even a profound thinker', a 'theologian of unusual competence', who impressed by his 'towering personality and his sanctity' of which he 'knew nothing at all'.[10] 'I want to state quite firmly at the beginning of this book, after sifting a good deal of the evidence, that in my opinion, the degree in which father Vincent fulfilled his vows of poverty, chastity and obedience was heroic, and that this was accomplished only after a bitter and lifelong struggle, by persevering self-sacrifice and prayer sustained and crowned throughout by the grace of God.'[11]

Entry into the Order

Seemingly, it never occurred to McNabb to become an Irish Dominican. His decision to enter into the Order of Preachers was triggered on Tyneside. His attention had been caught by the devotion to the parochial poor of a curate at St Dominic's Priory, Newcastle, an establishment founded on the basis of an urban mission of the secular clergy a generation before. In Late Victorian Newcastle, Lewis Weldon was a legendary figure, more than once summoned to the Docks to deal with conflict situations getting beyond police control.[12]

[10] Ferdinand Valentine, O. P., *Father Vincent McNabb*, op. cit., p. xv.
[11] Ibid., p. 16.
[12] Ibid., p. 35.

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A 'preferential option for the poor', in the modern Church jargon, would be second nature to McNabb as friar and priest.

This orientation to the poor was confirmed by the austerity of the Order he joined in its English Victorian incarnation. In 1885, the date of his entry to the novitiate at Woodchester Priory in Gloucestershire's Stroud valleys, the oral memory reached back to that house's heroic age. At a moment when the Dominican Order seemed on the point of extinction in England, a house of regular observance arose, meeting all the demanding criteria of the then Master of the Order.[13] Extreme simplicity of life combined with punctilious observance of the Choir office and other religious duties, was the ideal of Vincent Jandel, and it was also the lesson his Irish namesake now learned. He did not take kindly to signs of emerging *embourgeoisement* in his fellow Religious. His life-style became legendary for its practice of poverty, reinforcing his identification with the industrial poor.

While his ordination studies were carried out within the framework of the English Dominican Province, for higher studies (1891-1894) he was sent to the Catholic University of Louvain, a stronghold of the Thomistic revival. McNabb admired the Belgium of the period, notably for its peasant agriculture, lack of a mega-metropolis, and combined love of its own cultural (especially artistic) past with an openness to other nations.[14] Knowing that a fervently Catholic country, albeit with its measure of anti-clericals, would not appeal to all English observers, McNabb was moved to assiduous activity in raising funds for Belgian war relief. His 1916 appeal to public opinion, *Europe's Ewe-Lamb*, was an apologia, inspired by the prophet Nathan in his challenge to King David (II Samuel 12:1-15), for one of Europe's smallest and most defenceless countries. It was another expression, this time on the international level, of opting for the poor.[15] Somewhat incongruously, he was rewarded by royal bestowal of membership of a chivalric order, with the right to wear the appropriate insignia. In March 1919 Albert I of the Belgians, on the

[13] Bede Jarrett, O. P., *The English Dominicans* (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1921), pp. 201-202. By introducing the name of (Henri-Dominique) Lacordaire, in context a red herring, Jarrett downplayed the Observantine inspiration owed to Jandel. For the ideological rivalry between these two French founders in the nineteenth century revival, see Bernard Bonvin, *Lacordaire Jandel. Suivi de l'édition originale et annotée du Mémoire Jandel* (Paris: Cerf, 1989).

[14] Writing to the Irish magazine *The Leader*, he paid a pseudonymous tribute to Belgium on three counts: intensely practised agriculture, decentralisation, and the moderate character of its nationalism: 'Kintragh' [Vincent McNabb, O. P.], 'Three Years in Belgium', *The Leader*, 12 January, 1901, pp. 313-314. Consulted in Dominican Archives, McNabb Papers, Box 2.

[15] Vincent McNabb, O. P., *Europe's Ewe-Lamb* (London: Washbourne, 1916).

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advice of his government's minister for foreign affairs, enrolled him as Chevalier de l'Ordre de la Couronne.[16]

His theological teaching

When McNabb returned from Louvain, equipped by an excellent Thomistic education in philosophy and theology, he was marked out for the teaching institutions of the Province. During the years 1894 to 1897 this meant giving instruction in Aristotelian logic at Woodchester. From 1898 it entailed lecturing in theology (in effect, commenting on Aquinas' *Summa theologiae*) at Hawkesyard, near Lichfield in Staffordshire, the first purpose-built study house of the 'restored', i.e. post-Reformation, English Dominican Province. In 1900, elected prior at Woodchester, he was not thereby removed from teaching. Hawkesyard had been opened before its buildings were complete. Pressure on accommodation suggested recourse to a compromise formula: at the beginning and end of studies (the first year of philosophy and the last of theology) young friars would be taught at the Gloucestershire priory. During a priorship rich in freshly made West Country contacts,[17] he continued to lecture on theology, along now with Scripture, and more especially, the teaching of Hebrew. Having done well at Woodchester, in 1908 he was elected superior at Holy Cross Priory, Leicester where he remained until 1914, putting the priory on the civic map, and becoming in the process an influential commentator on the local education system – if at the cost of acquiring a reputation for flamboyance and general eccentricity, at least among his brethren. In 1914 he returned to Hawkesyard to teach not only theology but also – a new subject for a Dominican curriculum – 'social science'. These years of the First World War witnessed his espousal of the social philosophy known as Distributism – an offshoot of the social encyclicals of Pope Leo XIII – and a commitment to the (connected but distinguishable) 'Back to the Land' Movement. Both occupied a great deal of his energy through contributions to public debate – though he had to be careful when, as so often, speaking on platforms of the Catholic Evidence Guild to treat Distributism and Agrarianism purely as ethical issues. The Guild, founded in the last months of the Great

[16] Royal warrant conserved in Dominican Archives, McNabb Papers, Box 2.

[17] For one of the most fruitful of these, see the numerous references to McNabb in Giles Mercer, *Convert, Scholar, Bishop: William Brownlow, 1830-1901* (Bath: Downside Abbey Press, 2018). Brownlow's debt to McNabb was augmented in the first biography: Vincent McNabb, O.P., *Bishop Brownlow* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1902). I am grateful to Abbot Geoffrey Scott of Douai Abbey for drawing my attention to Mercer's study.

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War for public preaching by Catholic laymen, and seized on by McNabb as the perfect instrument for his purposes, did not allow political stance-taking by its speakers.

Even before this development, he was becoming known. In the years 1903 to 1904, he gave Conferences on theology and spirituality to undergraduates in the University of Oxford. Written up as two treatises, one on the theology of faith and the other on prayer, they were published as *Conferences on Prayer* (1903) and *Oxford Conferences on Faith* (1904), by a reputable non-Catholic publishing house, Kegan Paul. Re-published half a century later under the title *Faith and Prayer* for the tenth anniversary of his death (this preceded by a year the Valentine biography), they prompted Carpenter to remark that whereas, by the time of his death, McNabb was well known as a popular preacher, justice had never been done to his mastery of theology.[18]

The Oxford Conferences include apologetic accounts of the agnosticism, atheism and scepticism induced by contemporary scientism. They also provide reports on the life of faith that are really as much phenomenological descriptions as they are Scholastic analyses. But in his later theological writing he moved away from intellectual generalities, exhibiting instead a breathtaking confidence in the definitive nature of Thomism as a system of thought. In 'Aquinas and the Common Good', included in his jubilee collection *Francis Thompson and Other Essays*, he wrote, 'Saint Thomas had the supreme genius to give mankind the only intellectual synthesis that has yet been offered to human intelligence'.[19] McNabb's way of dealing with post-mediaeval, indeed post-Thomasian, philosophy, was ruthless. In *The Catholic Church and Philosophy* he had this to say. 'In the same way as philosophy is supposed to be the organised truth about things, any so-called philosophy which misses the truth about things is not philosophy. We can call it "false philosophy" as we say "artificial eggs" or "sham butter" or "dummy man". But eggs are eggs, not sham eggs, and philosophy is philosophy, not false philosophy. To be philosophy it must be true; if it is not true, it is not philosophy'.[20] End of story.

The Scholastic (i. e. Thomistic) philosophy, is, for McNabb not only true. It is also, in a phrase he borrowed from the French vitalist philosopher Henri Bergson, 'the natural metaphysic of the human intelligence' – words originally intended by Bergson as a

[18] Hilary J. Carpenter, O. P., 'Preface', Vincent McNabb, O. P., *Faith and Prayer* (London: Blackfriars Publications, 1953), p. viii.

[19] Vincent McNabb, O. P., 'Aquinas and the Common Good' in *Francis Thompson and Other Essays,* op. cit., pp. 18-22, and here at p. 21.

[20] Idem., *The Catholic Church and Philosophy* (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1927), p. 96.

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recommendation of Aristotelianism. 'Grecian thought', said McNabb and here he rejoined Bergson for he was thinking especially of Aristotle, was 'common sense raised almost to the infinite', and by this token it was 'destined to have dealings with the Word made flesh, who was the Infinite stooping down to human ways of life and speech'.[21] The Church of the Incarnate Word saved Greek thought (so understood) just before that thought became swamped on its own pagan terrain by Epicureanism and Stoicism. The use to which Catholic theology subsequently put this philosophy has ennobled it, not least by guaranteeing its existence with a warrant higher than its own. In McNabb's sweeping words, 'Philosophy came into its own, only when it came into the Catholic Church'.[22] He could be, however, a more careful historian of thought than these audacious comments might suggest. He recognised that Thomism was indebted to Platonism and not just to Aristotelianism, a truth not widely registered by scholars until well into the twentieth century.[23] At one point he comes close to saying that Aquinas used Aristotle's style to express Plato's truths. 'Although not a few of Plato's noble intuitions, overlooked or set aside by Aristotle, were resumed by Aquinas, yet the austere truthfulness of Aristotle's literary style was the unfailing guide of every line Aquinas penned.'[24]

More important than any adjudication of the relative contributions to Aquinas of Plato and Aristotle was the union of what he called 'Grecian philosophy and Catholic faith' – and hence of philosophy with theology. As he explains in deliberately dramatic rhetoric, Hellas, 'betrothed to Christ by the great decisions of the General Councils', sought in vain 'to find a lifemate elsewhere than in the Catholic Church'.[25] Hellenic thought tried mating with Nestorianism, Zoroastrianism, Islam, and Judaism, in that order, ending with Moses Maimonides near to Thomas' own time. But this was not just a story of travelling down cul-de-sacs. Had there been no Arab or Jewish philosophy Scholasticism, i. e. Thomism, would not have emerged. 'Catholics are agreed that their philosophy was a reaction or resistance on the plain of culture to the formidable attack made by the intelligence of Islam and Israel. But it was not merely a reaction or a defence; it was a most courteously and gratefully acknowledged

[21] Ibid., p. 6.

[22] Ibid., p. 15.

[23] The earliest bespoke study arguing for a strongly (Neo-) Platonist dimension to Thomas' metaphysics, is Cornelio Fabro, *La nozione metafisica di partecipazione secondo San Tommaso d'Aquino* (Milan: Vita e pensiero, 1939), but a case has been made for a start-of-the-century anticipation in François Picavet, *Esquisse d'une philosophie générale et comparée de la philosophie mediévale* (Paris: Alcan, 1907, 2nd edition). Thus Marcus Plested, *Orthodox Readings of Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 14.

[24] Vincent McNabb, *The Catholic Church and Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 30.

[25] Ibid., p. 31.

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acceptance of what was good and true in the philosophic activities of Islam and Israel.'[26] What a shame it was driven out by the decline that followed.

The answer to modern pseudo-philosophy – that is, philosophy after Aquinas, had to await the decade of his own childhood, the 1870s. It came in two documents: Vatican I's Constitution *Dei Filius*, from 1870, which affirms both reason and faith in their inter-relationship, and the 1879 encyclical *Aeterni Patris* of Pope Leo XIII restoring the use of the philosophy of St Thomas in the Catholic 'schools' or faculties. McNabb found the teaching of *Dei Filius* and *Aeterni Patris* reflected for the use of seven year olds in *The Children's Catechism*, otherwise the 'Penny Catechism', so called from the modest price charged for that publication by the Catholic Truth Society.[27] Infant pedagogy was not of course the chief aim of the Conciliar and papal documents. Their aim was, essentially, recall to right principles. In his essay *St Thomas Aquinas and Law*, he remarked: 'If [Thomas] states principles with the *naïve* simplicity of an arithmetical table – if indeed he seems to justify those who once called him the Dumb Ox, it will be found that his simplicity is often as consummate a masterpiece as those line-pictures that the artist made by the skilled rubbing-out of elaborate drawings. None but the life-long student of his thought can realize how any one principle of St Thomas, even in Law, may have meant for its almost platitudinous expression the understanding of a hundred principles in Physics, Psychology, Ethics and Metaphysics.[28]'

One claim he made for Thomist principles should be remembered when looking at his social involvement. In *The Catholic Church and Philosophy* he drew from the assertion that, 'Philosophy's first duty is to justify mankind's intuitions' the inference that 'The philosopher is . . . the guardian of the poor'.[29]

Ecumenism

Treating the Penny Catechism as the highest expression of wisdom suggests a rather complacent Catholicism, and indeed in matters ecumenical, McNabb seemed at times a typical Roman Catholic of his period, invoking the English martyrs to bear witness against the betrayal of Christian tradition at the sixteenth century Reformation. In *St John Fisher*, written for Fisher's canonization in 1935, he described Fisher's life and death as the 'greatest tragedy of an age that

[26] Ibid., p. 38.
[27] Ibid., pp. 107-109.
[28] Idem., *St Thomas Aquinas and Law* (London: Blackfriars Publications, 1955), p. 18.
[29] Idem., *The Catholic Church and Philosophy*, op.cit., pp. 3-4.

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wrote *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*'.[30] Writing of Fisher's penitential austerities he explained, 'This quiet scholar from the Yorkshire moors is steeling himself to withstand Tudor Totalitarianism and to give a knight's chivalrous defence to an almost defenceless woman who was "England's Queen and England's guest"' (namely, Catherine of Aragon).[31] Paul III, pope when Fisher died, had called him 'defender of the rights of the Church universal', and McNabb found this 'almost the equivalent of canonization'.[32] But then a surprising note is struck when we go on to read, 'Yet Rome's concern for peace delayed the official canonization until four centuries of misunderstanding had led the severed parts of England to feel the need of reunion through mutual understanding'.[33] For, despite his somewhat over-confident Thomism and his strongly felt attachment to the Catholic martyrs, McNabb believed that *rapprochement* between the Churches of England and Rome was in his own time not far off.

This brings me to his ecumenical activities. McNabb's book *Infallibility* (to begin with that), started life as a set of articles requested by the American Episcopalian Franciscans at Graymoor, New York State, for their magazine *The Lamp*. This led in turn to an invitation to serve up the meat of the articles in the form of a 1905 lecture in Holborn Town Hall for the Society of St Thomas of Canterbury, another Anglo-Catholic body. It was a careful account in which he was obviously aware that, speaking of conciliar and papal infallibility, an Anglo-Catholic audience would be able to follow him in much, though not all, of what he had to say. He began from what he calls, surely following Newman – though he may have gone back to Newman's source, the lifelong Anglican Joseph Butler – 'antecedent probabilities'. There is an antecedent probability that the Word incarnate left behind in the world some source of infallible guidance. As he remarked: 'To our own way of looking at the matter, deep and patient thought on Christ *the* Way, *the* Truth, *the* Life, must lead men to realize that unless active Infallibility is now in the world somewhere, the Christians who saw Christ were better off than we who do not see him, and hence that there is some exaggeration in his words, "It is expedient for you that I go; for if I go not, the Paraclete will not come to you"'.[34] The claim of the apostolic Church, with Peter at its head, to have received that Paraclete, the uncreated Spirit of truth, is precisely what we find in the New Testament, the Fathers and the ancient Councils, thus justifying our initial expectation. McNabb stressed that ecclesiastical infallibility is by its nature only 'assistance', not

[30] Idem., *St John Fisher* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1935), p. 9.
[31] Ibid., p. 38.
[32] Ibid., p. 126.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Idem., *Infallibility* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1927), p. 18, citing John 16: 7.

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'inspiration' as with Scripture. Much less is it 'revelation' as with the teaching of the Saviour. Moreover, it is primarily negative in character. As he put it: 'Neither Popes nor General Councils have taken the lead in thought. They have no mission to lead into new ways, except in so far as they have warned minds off wrong ways. Infallibility has laid down nothing new; it has but safeguarded and explained what was old.'[35] There is no question here of the 'God of surprises' so beloved a century later in the pontificate of Pope Francis. The Constitution *Pastor aeternus* restricts the operation of infallibility to matters of faith and morals, while for any *ex cathedra* definition on those topics there must be, in McNabb's words, a clear 'intention to settle, close, or define the doctrinal discussion' before the faithful are bound to give interior assent.[36] In an appendix for the appearance of the lecture in book form in 1927, he explained there had been misunderstanding of the claim that in such *ex cathedra* definitions the pope does not need the consent of the Church for his judgments to be valid. The pope *does* need the *pre-existent* mind of the Church for his judgment to rest on adequate witness. What he does not need is corroboration from its *subsequent* mind for his judgment to have adequate sanction. This was an intelligent defence of the 1870 'Vatican Decrees', though doubtless he did not convince all hearers.

Between the lecture and the book came the 1920 Lambeth Conference, which concluded with an appeal from the Anglican bishops to 'All Christians' to come together into unity. McNabb's enthusiastic response did not go down well in the Vatican offices. By this time he already had a dossier in Rome, thanks to a report in a Catholic weekly of a lecture entitled 'The Ministry of Women' given some years earlier at Caxton Hall, part of a series of public lectures on the philosophy and theology of Aquinas. In the 1990s the then archivist of the English Province, Father Bede Bailey, decanted the results of his researches at Santa Sabina, the seat of the 'General Curia' of the Order.[37] McNabb had stood in at the last moment for another speaker on a topic prompted presumably by early Feminism. He had spoken spontaneously. A note-taking journalist described him as saying that women have a teaching office at least equal to that of the priest at the altar and while a time might come when there would be no more priests in the world there would never be a time that lacked a Catholic home where women could exercise that office in their capacity as mothers. The Master of the Order, having received a copy of the offending article from the papal Secretary of State, wrote to McNabb's Provincial, Bede Jarrett, that if the report were accurate,

[35] Ibid., p. 33.
[36] Ibid., p. 69.
[37] Bede Bailey, O. P., 'Father McNabb and Rome', *The Chesterton Review* XXII, 1-2 (1996), pp. 125-138.

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McNabb must be 'suspended indefinitely from preaching, lecturing and writing to the public press'.[38] Jarrett replied that the reporter (a woman) was theologically illiterate and the report unfounded, but was told he would be expected to show 'prudence and vigilance' in 'controlling henceforth all Father McNabb's public utterances'.[39] That was in 1921. In 1923 complaint was made about his article 'The Lambeth Conference', later reprinted in McNabb's essay collection *From a Friar's Cell* along with two others on relations between Rome and Canterbury. There was particular annoyance at a comparison of Lambeth 1920 to an Ecumenical Council (actually McNabb had described it as numerically comparable to the Ecumenical Councils but called it otherwise a 'provincial council speaking a modern language', hailing it as the first such on this scale since antiquity).[40] The Irish Dominican Michael Browne, then a professor at the Angelicum, asked to read the article for a doctrinal opinion, noted with disfavour McNabb's view that episcopal jurisdiction derives from sacramental ordination, not from papal authority. This was an anticipation of the discussion on the same issue during the passing of *Lumen gentium* at Vatican II where Browne, by then a cardinal, was among the conservative minority opposed to what were considered episcopalist views of Church order.

The essay on the Lambeth Conference was certainly eirenic. Newman's dire prophecies of the unstoppable decline of the Church of England, said McNabb, had in the event gone unfulfilled. The Oxford Movement, if it had regenerated English Catholicism had done much the same for English Anglicanism and possibly more. Referring to the Catholic Church in England, he wrote that it 'would be impossible to say whether its growth has been greater than that section of the Church of England which calls itself Catholic'.[41] The 'forward movement' of those in communion with Canterbury and York was above all towards regaining the truths, sacramental life and ecclesiastical communion once lost at the Reformation.[42] Had not Lambeth 1920's Committee on Reunion and Intercommunion itself declared that 'no projects of union can ever be regarded as satisfactory which deliberately leave out the Churches of the Latin Communion'?[43] The successor article in *From a Friar's Cell* records how at Lambeth only three bishops voted against receiving this Report.[44] It was extremely

[38] Cited ibid., p. 129.

[39] Cited ibid., p. 131.

[40] Vincent McNabb, O. P., 'The Lambeth Conference' in idem., *From a Friar's Cell* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1923), pp. 39-51, and here at p. 40.

[41] Idem., 'The Lambeth Conference', art. cit, p. 45.

[42] Ibid., p. 47.

[43] Cited ibid., pp. 47-48.

[44] Idem., 'Canterbury and Rome', in idem., *From a Friar's Cell*, op, cit., pp. 52-62, and here at p. 56.

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generous of the Anglican bishops, said McNabb, not to be still smarting at the dismissal of the validity of their ministerial orders in Leo XIII's letter *Apostolicae Curae*. The explanation was that, slowly but surely, they were being emancipated from what he called 'secular and royal pressure' in their outlook.[45] They now had a chance to see that the schism was none of their predecessors' making, but the fault of the Crown. From the Roman side, he went on, consider the tact shown in not using the names of the pre-Reformation sees when the Catholic hierarchy was re-established in 1850. He hinted that in the event of reunion the bishops of the sees created then should give way to the ancient see-holders; the bishop of Clifton had said as much for himself in relation to his separated brother of Bristol, in 1896. Moreover, the new (i. e. 1916-17) Code of Canon Law, by specifically excluding the Oriental Catholic Churches from its provisions, shows what might be available for Anglicans, thanks to 'Rome's traditional breadth of toleration'.[46]

Setbacks in the 1920s did nothing to dispel McNabb's Anglican sympathies. In 1936 he published, first in the pages of the *Dublin Review* and then as a free-standing pamphlet, a controversial piece on 'Causes of Christian Disunion'.[47] It was in fact his own Englishing of Cardinal Pope's distinctly moderate 'legatine address' at the opening of the Council of Trent. What raised eyebrows was not so much the address as the 'Dedicatory Letter to his Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury', then Cosmo Gordon Lang, with which McNabb prefaced his translation. McNabb recalled how 'when the Lambeth Conference first met after the Great War and made its great efforts for Peace, your predecessor, Archbishop Davidson, ensured that his own heart's desire for a United Christendom should be furthered by Your Grace being made chairman of the Committee on Reunion. From that Committee and, as we believe, mainly by Your Grace's personal efforts, was issued the historic *Appeal to All Christian People*.' McNabb found that a reason why it was 'almost a necessity to see Your Grace's name on these pages, as if in these days of God-unguided nation-building two shepherds [he meant Pole and Lang] should cry across the centuries and unite in calling mankind back to repentance and to God'.[48] Across the Thames, another shepherd,

[45] Idem., 'The Lambeth Conference', art. cit, p. 50.

[46] Ibid., p. 49. Unfortunately when what was available for Anglicans was eventually made clear under Pope Benedict XVI, the resultant document *Anglicanorum coetibus* enrolled the Ordinariates for former Anglicans quite explicitly under the Latin Church, rather than regarding them as a tertium quid – a distinctive body analogous to the Eastern Catholic Churches in union with Rome.

[47] *Causes of Christian Disunion. Cardinal Pole's Legatine Address at the Opening of the Council of Trent, 7 January 1546* (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1936).

[48] Vincent McNabb, 'Dedicatory Letter to his Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury' in ibid., p. 2.

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Arthur Hinsley, the recently enthroned archbishop of Westminster, was not so enthusiastic. He wrote to Bernard Delany, the English Dominican Provincial, 'I do not think that the Commission for the censorship of books would pass that Dedicatory Letter', and wondered whether perhaps some explanation might be forthcoming.[49] In forwarding the correspondence to McNabb, Delany added, 'I think the most discreet thing is to make no public reference or retractation. But do you think the reprint ought to be still circulated?'[50]

Vincent McNabb's ecumenical spirit was not exhausted by concern for Anglicans. In his 1913 Catholic Truth Society pamphlet *Our Relations with the Nonconformists*, he went out of his way to praise the Free Churches for their 'informing political life with standards of conscience'.[51] Historic English Conformity, he argued, was 'pleading, not for the separation of Church and State but for the destruction of the feudal and Tudor relations of Church and State' – a very different matter.[52] English Catholics were in many ways indebted to them. 'They were our yoke-fellows in penal days; they were beaten with the same things; they filled the same prisons; they went with us as pilgrim fathers to the great west land.'[53] And McNabb risked annoying Anglicans, normally his preferred ecumenical interlocutors, when he went so far as to say that Free Churchmen 'grew and prospered so undeniably that the law-established Church, in view of their millions, could make no pretence to be the English Church – that is, the sole ecclesiastical organ of the English people'.[54] In an extraordinary step (for the period), a re-printing in 1943 under the title *Catholics and Nonconformists* included a highly approbatory foreword by the then Principal of Mansfield College, Oxford, a Congregationalist institution. Nathaniel Micklem praised the Dominican writer's charity and restraint. And he agreed with McNabb that the Mother Church of both the Protestant and the Tridentine reforms was the same, the 'great mediaeval Church of the West'.[55]

[49] Letter of 4 May 1936 from Arthur Hinsley to the English Dominican Provincial, Dominican Archives, McNabb Papers, Box 3.

[50] Letter of 16 June 1936 from Bernard Delany to Vincent McNabb, Dominican Archives, McNabb Papers, Box 2.

[51] Vincent McNabb, *Our Relations with the Nonconformists* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1913), p. 8.

[52] Ibid., p. 6.

[53] Ibid., p. 3.

[54] Ibid., p. 4.

[55] Nathaniel Micklem, 'Introduction', in Vincent McNabb, O. P., *Catholics and Nonconformists* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1943), p. 4. See further on this aspect of McNabb: Herbert Keldany, 'Vincent McNabb – Pioneer Ecumenist', *New Blackfriars* LX. 712 (1979), pp. 367-370.

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Spirituality

McNabb gained his audience owing not least to his image as a spiritual master with a reputation for holiness. The Oxford Conferences of 1903 to 1904 had not only been an exercise in apologetics and a phenomenological-cum-Scholastic theology of faith. They were also, more simply, reflections on the nature of prayer. As such they heralded a series of later contributions to spirituality. During his long period in St Dominic's Priory Haverstock Hill (now the Rosary Shrine of the archdiocese of Westminster) from 1920 until his death in 1943, the Cenacle Convents at Hampstead, Stamford Hill and Grayshott (on the Surrey Downs) were preferred outlets for communicating his spiritual teaching. Many of these texts were published in his lifetime, including one entire Retreat based on the Lord's Prayer. Such talks would have been attended by a combination of Religious Sisters and laywomen – by far the largest constituencies among recipients of his private correspondence on matters spiritual.

The Conferences entitled *The Craft of Suffering* were given at these centres between 1929 and 1935. In the Introduction he writes of those whom 'the Crucified had invited to His side at the royal banquet of pain' as of all teachers 'the most beloved and the best'.[56] Speaking very directly about both moral and physical suffering was one of his hallmarks. '[S]omething has happened to human beings, so that now [sorrow] is an absolute necessity. Some impurities have to be washed away by suffering.'[57] 'The flowers of perfection which I have witnessed in souls have only been in conjunction with some sort of suffering'.[58] His remarks were often striking. This could be in a prophetic way. 'Some of us expect to see almost regularised official murder as the world's bewildered answer to the problem of suffering.'[59] This was verified with the legalization of euthanasia in various civil jurisdictions in the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, though the issue had been a pre-occupation since at least the Edwardians. The impact could also be, and more frequently was, in a devotional way. On the tears of Jesus at the grave of Lazarus in St John's Gospel, he said: 'This is the Passion in little, the *Compassion* of God for human suffering'.[60] Or again, on the need for religious authenticity, 'Until we feel we need saving, we should not approach Jesus Christ.'[61] Or yet again under the heading 'Standing at the

[56] Vincent McNabb, O. P., *The Craft of Suffering* (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1936), p. X.
[57] Ibid., p. 38.
[58] Ibid., p. 13.
[59] Ibid., p. 3.
[60] Ibid., p. 20.
[61] Ibid., p. 66.

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Cross': 'Then we beseech Him, by His perfection, to give us some mystical thirst towards perfection, a thirst that will be lifelong... We must not dread the thirst. We must rather dread the lack of that thirst.'[62]

In another collection, *God's Way of Mercy*, dedicated to Gilbert Chesterton who had just died, he said of Mary Magdalene, '[Christ] suddenly called her by her name. That was at the moment when He was going to bid her to go from Him – to go from the consolation of His presence to the greater consolation of His will.'[63] And again, on the words from the Lamentations of Jeremiah *Jerusalem, Jerusalem, convertere* as sung in Holy Week, '[O]n Good Friday, when it is sung for the last time, it sounds like God's last prayer to my soul. "Oh, my beloved, turn thou to the only love of thy soul". "Oh, Lover of my soul, turn me, turn me to Thee."'[64] Or less ecstatically, '[W]hat a glorious thing it is when human beings will reason and discourse about God. Then their souls are on the way to God. Even those who are wondering whether God exists have their faces towards God'.[65]

In yet another set of these Conferences, *The Craft of Prayer*, he proved an extreme exponent of the primacy of petitionary prayer. As he put it, in the rather gushing language he sometimes used for the benefit of the middle class ladies who would have formed the majority of his Cenacle audience, 'Our Blessed Lord and our dear Lady may be quite amused at some of our prayers. '"There is that dear child. She thinks she is praying. Really she is asking for nothing at all"'.[66] He explained that 'St Thomas Aquinas is right. The essential prayer is the prayer of *petition',* though he adds that this will be, above all, petition 'for the supernatural'.[67] That assertion indicates a retrenchment of his doctrine of prayer as given in the Oxford Conferences where his reflections on both liturgical prayer and the prayer of Christ required him to paint on a wider canvas. The prayer of praise, the prayer of thanksgiving, could hardly be omitted in those contexts, though even then he went out of his way to insist on the importance of petitionary praying. Christ's own prayer of petition as man did not end, said McNabb, with the 'glorification of his natural body', and has not ended now, since he still has to ask for the 'glorification of his mystical body, the Church'.[68]

[62] Ibid., p. 103.

[63] Vincent McNabb, O. P., *God's Way of Mercy* (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1937), p. 5.

[64] Ibid., p. 31.

[65] Ibid., p. 84.

[66] Idem., *The Craft of Prayer* (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1935), p. 57.

[67] Ibid., p. 59.

[68] Idem., *Faith and Prayer*, op. cit., p. 203.

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His Retreat materials typically included much that, through speaking from a memory that was thoughtful and not simply well-stocked, gave insight into his experience as friar and priest – and indeed as human being.[69]

Bible

Famously, Vincent McNabb's cell contained, as to books, only his breviary, his copy of the *Summa theologiae* and a Bible. Many of his writings rehearse the simplest biblical materials as in, for example, toward the end of his life the 1941 *Some Mysteries of Jesus Christ*.[70] Nothing could be more straightforward as collections of texts with brief explanatory comments than *The New Testament Witness to St Peter* (1928) or *The New Testament Witness to Our Lady* (1930),[71] or the trio of little books, *A Life of our Lord*, *Mary of Nazareth* and *St Mary Magdalene*, all of which appeared in the same year, 1940.[72] Moreover, all the Cenacle Conferences took their departure-point from biblical citations, selected and remarked on in a similar spirit.

It would come as a surprise to readers of these works which combined apologetics and devotion in a *naïf* way, to encounter the exegetical sophistication of his early essays on biblical inspiration. There they would find, if they could follow the philosophical prose, a very subtle account of how the charism of biblical inspiration might be considered compatible with what appear to be errors in historical and cosmological matters in the Scriptural text. Here McNabb synthesized two areas of his teaching: Bible and logic. Thus with reference to Joshua 10:13, he wrote, 'Take the proposition, "The sun stood still". As it stands detached from all context, it may or may not be scientifically or absolutely false in its literal sense. But the quasi-modal proposition, "to all appearances", or "it was commonly held that the sun stood still", may be absolutely true… Now the light of divine inspiration ensures the hagiographer's certitude of what is

[69] See, for instance, the memoir by an intelligent North London laywoman, a civil servant in the War Office, who had attended many of his days of recollection, Dorothy Finlayson (ed.),'*I Well Remember. The Unconscious Autobiography of Father Vincent McNabb, O. P. Pieced together from verbatim records of his spoken words at Retreats during the years* 1928 to 1943', Dominican Archives, McNabb Papers, Box 6.

[70] Vincent McNabb, O. P., *Some Mysteries of Jesus Christ* (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne 1941).

[71] Idem., *The New Testament Witness to St Peter* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1928); *The New Testament Witness to Our Lady* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1930).

[72] Idem., *A Life of our Lord* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1940); *Mary of Nazareth* (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1940); *St Mary Magdalene* (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1940).

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objectively certain. We may argue from his certitude to the objective certainty. If he is certain of the mode of a proposition, then the mode is objectively certain. But in this case it would be a fallacy to argue from the certainty of the mode to the certainty of the proposition, from the quality of the *dictum* to the quality of the *res*.[73]'

These essays occur in the collection entitled, significantly enough, *Where Believers may Doubt*. Sub-titled 'Studies in Biblical Inspiration and other Problems of Faith', it was dated 1903, that is, three years before the gathering storm of the Modernist crisis burst on the Catholic Church with the promulgation of Pius X's encyclical letter *Pascendi* and, in the following year, the anthology of reprobated citations from Modernist writers, *Lamentabili*. It is a moot point whether McNabb would have published the essays defending Père Lagrange of the newly founded Ecole biblique in Jerusalem,[74] and likewise commending Newman's highly controversial 1884 articles on biblical inerrancy,[75] had he been writing in the aftermath of the year 1907. The historian of twentieth century English Christianity Adrian Hastings considered that, along with other eminent clerics, McNabb decided to re-invent himself as a 'man of letters' so as to avoid ecclesiastical difficulties after that date – though he was unable to escape those difficulties entirely.[76]

Social comment

'Man of letters' does not really strike the right note for Vincent McNabb. But if the phrase is to be used then it was as a *belles lettriste* that he chose to call the capital of the United Kingdom 'Babylondon'. London was a spiritual Babylon, like the pagan imperial Rome of the Johannine Apocalypse and the Letters of St Peter which is why people should get out of it, preferably to the land, that is, into the deep countryside, where they could escape the horrors of industrialism and the cynicism of speculative finance and contribute instead to reviving England's declining agriculture and the rebirth of crafts, as in the Tertiaries' community of Hilary Pepler and Eric Gill on Ditchling Common in Sussex. He welcomed the evacuation of children from London in anticipation of the 'Blitz' as the initial stage of return

[73] Idem., *Where Believers may Doubt. Studies in Biblical Inspiration and other Problems of Faith (*London: Burns and Oates, 1903).

[74] See Bernard Montagnes, *Marie-Joseph Lagrange. Une biographie critique* (Paris: Cerf, 2004), pp. 203-264.

[75] J. Derek Holmes (ed.), *The Theological Papers of John Henry Newman on Biblical Inspiration and Infallibility* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979).

[76] Adrian Hastings, 'Some reflexions on the English Catholicism of the late 1930s', in idem. (ed.), *Bishops and Writers. Aspects of the Evolution of Modern English Catholicism* (Wheathampstead: Anthony Clarke, 1977), pp. 107-126, and here at p. 110.

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to sanity, writing in September 1939 to the editor of the Agrarianist periodical *The Cross and the Plough* 'I am inclined to think that with the bombing of townsfolk into the country the first work of *The Cross and Plough* has been done'.[77] Yet paradoxically McNabb loved Londoners as E. A. Siderman's *A Saint in Hyde Park* makes plain in its numerous anecdotes of his good-humoured exchanges with hearers, many of them Cockney, at Speaker's Corner.[78] He would doubtless have said he loved Londoners enough to wish them out of the place. They would repay his affection when they came in droves to visit his body as it lay in the Lady Chapel here for three days after his death, and then filled the church and the road outside at his funeral.

In McNabb's case, 'Back to the Land' was combined with adherence to the wider social movement of 'Distributism'. His conversion to Distributism took place under the influence of Hilaire Belloc, and can probably be dated to a visit to King's Land, Belloc's Sussex home, in Easter Week 1916. Like Chesterton he moved to Distributism from something more resembling Socialism. In January 1914, while still in Leicester, he had started a controversy in the pages of *The Tablet* by seeming to endorse Socialism, an economic theory condemned by the late nineteenth century papacy. A leading Catholic trades unionist, Thomas Burns, wrote in protest that McNabb's article had made life difficult for those of us 'engaged in forming an organized opposition to Socialism in the democratic movement'; McNabb had 'confused Catholic social thinkers instead of guiding them'.[79] In fact there were already bishops, such as Thomas Whiteside of Liverpool, who were beginning to come to terms with what they called a 'new Socialism' represented by the Labour MP Philip Snowden: it might turn out to be in Whiteside's words 'a Socialism with which we can make friends'.[80] Writing to the paper at the end of January, McNabb denied he had ever formally advocated Socialism, but the sense of his remarks was accurately conveyed by an anonymous correspondent in the last issue of *The Tablet* for February 1914. 'Father McNabb suggests that Socialism has at last overflowed the vessel within which it has hitherto .... been stored and he would fain have us, Catholics, lap up the spilth of the precious elixir. But why should we, inheritors of the glorious traditions of the Catholic Church, stoop to drink at that muddied stream?'[81]

[77] Letter of 19 September 1939 from Vincent McNabb, O. P., to Harold Robbins, Dominican Archives, McNabb Papers, Box 27.

[78] E. A. Siderman's *A Saint in Hyde Park. Memories of Father Vincent McNabb, O. P.* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1950).

[79] Cited in Ferdinand Valentine, O. P., *Father Vincent McNabb, O.P.*, op. cit., p. 136.

[80] Cited ibid.

[81] Cited ibid., p. 137.

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Perhaps the vehemence of response played a part in his change of mind. At any rate he became in the upshot a Distributist instead – but the most radical version of a Distributist, a Back to the Land Distributist, a position which combined support for Leo XIII's great social encyclical *Rerum novarum*, with the bucolic Romanticism of the English literary tradition.[82] Disclaiming any competence other than that of a priest and a preacher he nonetheless argued tirelessly for a social vision shared with Belloc and Chesterton in such writings as *The Church and the Land*,[83] *Nazareth or Social Chaos*,[84] and *Old Principles and the New Order*,[85] which span the years 1923 to 1942 and, while it lasted, in the official magazine of the Distributist Guild, *G. K.'s Weekly*. Bernard Delany, prior of the London St Dominic's when McNabb died, summed up the story succinctly enough. 'It was while Prior of Hawkesyard that he made common cause with Eric Gill and Hilary Pepler, whom he frequently invited to the Priory. Between them they strove to work out those principles of social doctrine, work and art, and their relations to agriculture and modern industry which came to be associated with the group known as Distributist. Armed with the *Summa* of St Thomas and the papal encyclicals, especially *Rerum Novarum*, they set out upon a perhaps too idealistic campaign of social justice and economic emancipation. Fr Vincent was the enthusiastic inspirer of the group, its theological adviser, and often the mouth-piece who put its ideals into terse and epigrammatic utterance.'[86] McNabb's social vision was encapsulated in the Latin of his memorial stone in the oratory at Ditchling, long since demolished, *Agri colendi pro foco non foro*: 'Cultivating the Fields for the Hearth not the Market-place'.

He was disappointed by what he considered the feeble response of the Catholic bishops of England and Wales to the appeals of the Catholic Land Movement. From 1930 onwards, a number of 'Catholic Land Associations' had sprung up in different areas of the country, with at any rate nominal episcopal approval. In 1935, the only Association to formulate a major scheme of re-settlement and training, on land at Market Bosworth, in western Leicestershire, sought in vain

[82] See Aidan Nichols, O. P., 'The English Dominican Social Tradition', in Francesco Compagnoni, O. P., and Helen Alford, O. P. (eds.), *Preaching Justice. Dominican Contributions to Social Ethics in the Twentieth Century* (Dublin 2007), pp. 394-441, at pp. 394-441. For the wider context, see Adrian Cunningham, 'Primary Things: Land, Work, and Sign', *The Chesterton Review* XXII, 1-2 (1996), pp. 73-87, and Bryan Keating, 'The Catholic Land Movement in England', in ibid., pp. 89-99.

[83] Vincent McNabb, O. P., *The Church and the Land* (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1923).

[84] Idem., *Nazareth or Social Chaos* (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1933).

[85] Idem., *Old Principles and the New Order* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1942).

[86] Bernard Delany, O. P., 'Father Vincent McNabb, O. P., 1868-1943', a typescript produced for the Dublin journal *Studies*, Dominican Archives, McNabb Papers, Box 6.

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the bishops' permission to make an appeal for funds in the parish churches. The bishops, whose financial focus was concentrated on the building of schools, could be portrayed by Catholic critics of Agrarianism as realistic. English Catholicism was disproportionately urban compared with the nation at large. Contrastingly, McNabb was gratified by the posters put up by the Government of George VI during World War Two: 'Use shanks's mare', 'Grow more food', 'Dig for victory'.[87] Alas, the future lay with scientific farming in ever larger units.

Conclusion

Vincent McNabb had a far more complex mind than some of his more sweeping comments would suggest. Despite his role as a fervent apologist for Roman Catholicism, he was not uncritical of the historic and contemporary Church. He was positively scathing about the financial ambitions of the mediaeval Cistercian abbeys and discontented with the weak response of existing monasteries of men and women in England to the self-support ideals he favoured for the economy at large.[88] As in his essay 'Are Catholics selfish?', he excoriated the unwillingness of Catholics to work on the land which, in his view, was an ethical necessity to help feed an urban population: 'Shall we be blind enough to think that with this selfishness we may hope still, to convert the world?'[89]

For such an austere liver, his liturgical instincts were very High Church. He deplored the contraction of the Western Catholic marriage rite which, he said, had lost the *velatio nuptialis*, the giving of the nuptial blessing under a canopy, and the final crowning with flowers as described by Pope Nicholas I in the ninth century, and for that matter the prostration before the altar and the six prayers and blessings prescribed in the Sarum rite as published at Douai as late as 1604.[90] In 'The Riches of Ritual' he attacks those who having attended high Mass or a feast-day Benediction, said by way of complaint, 'Give me a simple service' any time.[91] On the contrary! The Church, he wrote, 'covets to give God "a worship of supreme perfection", which must involve art, man's 'highest expression of intelligence and emotion'.[92]

[87] From the anonymous obituary in *The Tablet* for 26 June, 1943.

[88] Vincent McNabb, O. P., 'The Mistakes of Monasticism', in idem., *Francis Thompson and Other Essays*, op. cit., pp. 69-74.

[89] Idem., 'Are Catholics selfish?' in ibid., pp. 33-35, and here at p. 35.

[90] Idem., 'The Ritual of Marriage' in ibid., pp. 39-46.

[91] Idem., 'The Riches of Ritual' in idem., *The Wayside. A Priest's Gleanings* (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1934), pp. 122-127, and here at p. 122.

[92] Ibid., p. 126.

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This will mean suitable architectural spaces, iconographic decoration, stately choreography, the use of supernatural-sounding music, and the lavish employment of incense.

In his funeral panegyric, Delany called McNabb's life 'according to twentieth century standards astonishing and even disconcerting, eccentric some will say; but remember, "eccentric" is a relative term: it depends where you place your circle or fix your centre. To place the centre in God and God's eternal truth and glory is clearly to put oneself out of joint with some of the elements of a world that forgets or ignores God or even denies his existence altogether'.[93] Valentine recalled how an elderly friar had said of him while McNabb was still living, 'What that man needs more than anything else is a spiritual director'. Valentine replied, 'You might as well talk of directing St Paul, St Dominic, Moses or a thunderstorm'. His interlocutor said, 'But he would be different and perhaps not quite so eccentric'. Valentine retorted that then he would not be Father Vincent. And he preferred him as he was.

This discussion of his virtues or lack of them did not go away. The London editor of the *Cork Examiner* reported in mid-October 1954 that 'Petition forms are being signed in London this weekend for forwarding to the proper Ecclesiastical quarter, asking for the Church's mark of Holiness on the late Fr Vincent McNabb, O. P., the famous preacher and social teacher, who was the son of an Ulster sea captain'.[94] In early 1955 an enquiry took place into his possible beatification. The Dominican postulator-general required the English Provincial, then Hilary Carpenter, to produce testimony from fifty witnesses.[95] The list of those asked to comment extended eventually to sixty-nine.[96] A questionnaire was sent out from Haverstock Hill. It consisted of a hundred queries, arranged under the headings, Life, Virtues in general, Faith, Hope, Love of God, Love of One's Neighbour, Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance, Obedience, Chastity, Poverty, Humility, Gifts, Reputation for Sanctity during Life, Reputation for Sanctity after Death, Signs after Death.[97] This was a translation of a Roman original, made available to the English

[93] *God's Happy Warrior. A Sermon preached at Saint Dominic's Priory church, London, by Father Bernard Delany, O. P., on the 21st of June, 1943, at the Funeral Mass of Father Vincent McNabb, O. P., S. T. M. who died on the 17th of June, 1943* (Oxford: Blackfriars, 1943).

[94] 'Famous English Dominican. Petition to Review his Life and Work', *Cork Examiner*, 19 October 1954. Consulted in Dominican Archives, McNabb Papers, Box 27.

[95] Letter of 2 March 1955 from David Donohue to Bernard Delany, Dominican Archives, McNabb Papers, Box 2.

[96] 'List of suggested witnesses of Fr Vincent McNabbb's life and sanctity', Dominican Archives, McNabb Papers, Box 27.

[97] Questionnaire, with accompanying letter dated 'February 1955', Dominican Archives, McNabb Papers, Box 27.

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Dominican Postulator of Causes, Kenneth Wykeham-George, O. P., in Latin and French. Not surprisingly, the witnesses found the literary form rebarbative and resorted to informal prose for their replies. The answers received were *in toto* sufficiently contradictory that the idea was soon dropped. Talk of beatification re-emerged around the date of the 50th anniversary of his death in 1993. A couple of years later, a special issue of *The Chesterton Review* was dedicated to him. The articles were overwhelmingly positive, but one that was well-researched, by a former Dominican student, bore the title, 'Was Father Vincent McNabb a Dangerous Crank?'[98]

Delany, who had been his provincial and prior, and had been with him when he died, planned an official biography that remained incomplete and unpublished. Having completed a substantial fragment, Delany was naturally displeased to hear that his successor as Provincial had in effect approved an alternative biography - the work by Ferdinand Valentine described at the opening of this article. 'You say [Valentine's work] has grown to such an extent that it really amounts to a "Life" and will be taken as such and that it will inevitably queer my pitch. Yet you find it difficult to object to its publication (even though it queers my pitch?). Am I to take it that I can save myself the trouble of proceeding further with what I am trying to do?'[99] But Valentine had actually given Delany the chance to say he objected to publishing his 'characterological' sketch: 'I make little attempt to give a life of him or to interfere with the work of writing such a life which has been assigned to you'.[100] Carpenter wrote to Delany the year after publication of Valentine's study, noting Delany's disagreements with Valentine's 'psychological interpretations' and claiming the need for a full biography remained. 'I would ask you to absolve me from any motive other than the desire to meet a pressing need', i. e. in view of the proposals for opening a process of beatification.[101]

Disheartened, and in the hardly convenient setting for such a project of Stellenbosch in South Africa's Cape Province where he was student-master of a Jarrett foundation in the 'Afrikaaner Oxford',[102] Delany had re-read McNabb's books, articles and as much of his journalism as he could access – along with the 'Notes', copiously filled notebooks, that furnished his subject

[98] Hugh Walters, 'Was Father Vincent McNabb a dangerous crank?', *The Chesterton Review* XXII. 1-2 (1996), pp. 101-111.

[99] Letter of 5 April 1954 from Bernard Delany to Hilary Carpenter, Dominican Archives, McNabb Papers, Box 2.

[100] Letter of 7 November 1953 from Ferdinand Valentine to Bernard Delany, Dominican Archives, McNabb Papers, Box 2.

[101] Letter of 12 August 1955 from Hilary Carpenter to Bernard Delany, Dominican Archives, McNabb Papers, Box. 2.

[102] Kenneth Wykeham-George, O. P., and Gervase Mathew, O. P., *Bede Jarrett of the Order of Preachers* (London: Blackfriars Publications, 1952), pp. 67-75.

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with aide-memoires for his own thoughts and reflections on the thoughts of others. The notebooks, Delany inferred, generated much of his later writing. In their terse and disjointed character they reminded him of 'the method (or lack of method) of Coleridge in his Table Talk, Pascal and La Rochefoucauld – an unfinished style that does not always commend itself to English readers'.[103] Yet they left him with a 'strange, inspiring presence',[104] persuading him that the hero-worship McNabb elicited in Delany's own early years in the English Dominican Province had not been deluded or in vain. He could take comfort from Dorothy Finlayson's critique of the Valentine study, from which study the present essay began.[105] In her opinion, it 'just glossed over' such things as 'his glorious kindness to the sick and the poor, his love of little children, his intense love of his brethren and the Order, his *selflessness,* his love of souls *outside the Fold*, the way he inspired others to love the Scriptures and St Thomas', concluding, 'oh, so *many* things'.[106] Though Delany's book was never written his assiduous gathering of data and opinion from those who had known McNabb, now found among the McNabb papers of the English Dominican Archives, as well as his careful preservation of the testimonials sent him, would assist any future evaluation of the person (the saint?) more comprehensive than this brief commemoration can be.

Among the testimonials, I especially liked 'Remarks' made to George Taylor, O. P., in the library of St Dominic's Haverstock Hill, which remembered conversation can probably be dated on internal evidence to 1935. They were three in number. First: 'Mysticism without asceticism is the very devil'. Second: 'I've had no time to read the Fathers: all my time has been spent on St Thomas'. Third: on declining to acquire for the conventual library Henry Davis' newly published *Moral and Pastoral Theology* which was destined to become a standard work on presbytery bookshelves:[107] 'A Jesuit, a *manualist*! My dear Father, everything is in St Thomas if you know where to find it'.[108] There we have his Thomism, in its strengths as

[103] Bernard Delany, 'Vincent McNabb', p. 5, Dominican Archives, McNabb Papers, Box 6. Compare idem., 'Father Vincent McNabb in the Field', *Blackfriars* XXXV. 412-413 (1954), pp. 295-304, which reproduces much of this material. (The Notes, bound in folders and alphabetically arranged, can be found in Boxes 13 to 23 of the McNabb Papers. A ledger with a full index is included in Box 1.)

[104] Bernard Delany, 'Vincent McNabb', art. cit., p. 6.

[105] For Finlayson, see note 68 above.

[106] Letter of 8 September, 1955 from Dorothy Finlayson to Bernard Delany, Dominican Archives, McNabb Papers, Box 2. Emphasis is original.

[107] Henry Davis, S. J., *Moral and Pastoral Theology* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1935), 4 volumes.

[108] George Taylor, O. P., 'Remarks of Fr Vincent', Dominican Archives, McNabb Papers, Box 26. Emphasis is original.

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well as its limitations. It was a biblical Thomism, for he stressed the use of Scripture in Thomas (albeit without reference to Aquinas' biblical commentaries, neglected as these were until quite recently). It was a metaphysical Thomism, concerned, in the face of modern unbelief, with creation ontology and the metaphysics of morals. It was a spiritual Thomism, seeking to exploit the resources of a 'spiritual master' – to use the title for Thomas popularized by the French Dominican Jean-Pierre Torrell.[109] Lastly, it was, if the phrase may be allowed, a 'principial' Thomism, concerned to draw out principles that could be applied in areas Aquinas had barely considered, as with ecumenism and social philosophy. But it was hardly – save for some references to Aquinas the Augustinian – a Thomism of patristic *ressourcement*. The English Dominicans of the next generation, from the 1930s to the Second Vatican Council would seek, at least in part, to make good that lack.

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[109] Jean-Pierre Torrell, O. P., *Thomas d'Aquin, Maître spirituel* (Fribourg: Editions universitaires/Paris: Cerf, 1996).

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