Gervase Mathew OP

No one, whether Dominican or not, will find it easy to think of Blackfriars in Oxford without Father Gervase Mathew who died on 4 April. Born on 14 March 1905 the son of a barrister, Anthony Mathew went up to Balliol to read Modern History, and shortly after graduating joined the Order in 1928. St Giles remained his home until his death. The respect and affection in which he was held and the strong sense of grief at his loss were apparent at his Requiem when Father Columba Ryan succeeded in expressing the feelings of the large congregation present in Blackfriars chapel, many of whom travelled far to be there.

His life was surprisingly long for a man whose health was so frail. Each winter must have been a struggle to him. Perhaps none would be more astonished than Gervase to hear it said that to his friends he seemed a rocklike figure, always there, always utterly reliable, even if often delightfully paradoxical and unpredictable. His independence of mind and spirit meant that it was not easy to forecast exactly how he would react to a given situation. Yet no one seemed more obviously to represent stability and confidence in a world short of these things. On one side this was a reflection of his unconditional engagement to the Church and to the Order, an engagement fully compatible with explicit regrets about a number of the things that had happened not least during his lifetime. On another side this total reliability was a facet of his rare capacity for deep and loyal friendship with very many people. He was not known to keep a pocket diary, and never visibly made a written note of an appointment to meet a friend; but he was never known to forget to turn up. The impression of drifting vagueness was altogether illusory.

Friends mattered to Gervase and he to them in a degree uncommon among men. One friend and colleague once put it that, if ever he somehow came to commit a murder, Gervase would be the very first person to visit him in prison. He was never heard to speak maliciously of any man; which does not mean that he felt constitutionally incapable of recording disagreement or regret at other men's imprudences of errors. But such regret was ever in sorrow, never in anger, never barbed, and could not imaginably pass beyond the sad confession: 'He is rather a goose'.

Father Gervase's scholarship was of a piece with his eccentric, lovable personality. He did not really think or write like an ordinary professional historian determined meticulously to assess every relevant piece of evidence concentrated in a narrow area of study. Gervase's

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strength lay in the amazing diversity of his interests and information. His published works range over many fields—classical antiquity, Byzantine art and history, historical theology and patristics, fourteenth century English literature and politics. In the University he deserves to be long remembered as a main creator of Byzantine studies at Oxford, at first with the collaboration of his friend Professor John Mavrogordato who held the chair of modern Greek 1939-47. His lectures on topics such as 'Church and State in the Byzantine Empire' or 'The Ravenna Mosaics' used to attract an enthusiastic following not only from junior members but from a group of seniors as well.

As a lecturer he was unusual. He was blessed with an amazing memory for facts, texts, and monuments. There was no script, perhaps at best an elderly envelope or notebook inscribed with a date or two. The style was neither histrionic nor in the ordinary sense enthralling. Yet the structure was carefully articulated. His lectures, like his books, had a striking capacity for bringing sudden illumination to the chosen subject, whatever the field might be, by bringing together things that no one else would have thought of connecting. (Sometimes the connection was tenuous: in a lecture on the Cappadocian Fathers he could digress into a fascinating account of the excavations of the harbour at Corinth. Sometimes it was highly thought-provoking, e.g., 'To understand Byzantine art one must understand Russian Ballet'.) His scholarship, intuitive in substance and allusive in manner, was never the work of an amateur, even though more specialised historians often found him bafflingly silent about some or other essential aspect of the matter in hand. Whether he was writing on the Reformation or on Byzantine aesthetics or on the court of Richard II, his role was to contribute brilliant flashes of light by the originality of his discernment of unexpected relationships. From his intuitions and diffident hypotheses more could be learnt than from more rigorous but duller studies. The book on *Byzantine Aesthetics* stands out as a pioneering work, unlike anyone else's.

His enthusiasm for Byzantine art was first fired by a visit to Ravenna at the age of sixteen. In 1928 he visited Istanbul, Mistra, and Cyprus. In the thirties he became a close friend both of Norman Baynes, and of David Talbot Rice, and also worked for a time with the brilliant and eccentric American Thomas Whittemore ('my master Thomas Whittemore', he used to say), who had succeeded, where all others had failed, in obtaining permission to begin the uncovering of the mosaics of St Sophia. In 1947 he was appointed University Lecturer in Byzantine Studies, a post which he held until 1971 and for which he was never paid. During this period he also undertook far-flung archaeological investigations in East Africa, Ethiopia and southern Arabia. In 1963, with Roland Oliver, he edited the first volume of a *History of East Africa* sponsored by the Colonial Office; to this book he himself contributed an important essay. In 1965 he was Visiting Professor at the University of California. In 1972 a collection of essays in his

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honour appeared as a special number of the *Eastern Churches Review,* which includes a bibliography of his principal writings compiled by Dr Anthony Bryer.

Among those close to him special mention must necessarily be made of the intimate affection between him and his distinguished brother David, and of his regular Monday engagement for a pre-luncheon drink in the parlour of the Eagle and Child with a circle of friends that included Austin Farrer, C. S. Lewis, Ronald McCallum and Hugo Dyson. At Christ Church he found much in common with Claude Jenkins, like him in being both an astonishing polymath and one whose ancient frayed collar seemed to enjoy only the most precarious tenure. Both smoked a peculiarly pungent tobacco. But Gervase did not share Jenkins's passion for collecting books.

Father Gervase's relationships to Christian friends and colleagues belonging to bodies not (at present) in communion with Rome was utterly open and generous. Like Father Dvornik, whom he held in the highest veneration, he was an ecumenist long before ecumenism came to enjoy the blessing of authority. Not that there was anything 'woolly' in his doctrine of the Church; but for him it was simply instinctive and natural to rise above all confessional differences; for he was impatient with narrowness and bigotry and used to regard nothing as clearer evidence of Satan at work than the group rivalry which leads to the denigration of communions other than one's own.

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