

still remains the pioneer of strictly Dionysian ideas and formulae in our Christian West. Erigena was discredited; and this is another factor which has closed the eyes of many to the undeniable influence he had on the Middle Ages. A bold, somewhat subtle theologian, he was a servant of the Lord with a burning thirst for God and His Truth. And we are moved when we come across his powerful impact in the pages of the great saints and spiritual writers three centuries later. It is proper to invoke his memory.

## 8. ST. BRUNO

*Humphrey Pawsey*

“ABOUT St. Bruno we know very little.” So wrote a recent Benedictine savant who liked to delve into the Carthusians’ past. Though he deplored the dearth of documentation, he pointed out that reserve has always been natural to Carthusians: they speak about themselves and are spoken about as little as possible. St. Anthelm and St. Hugh of Lincoln are exceptions to this rule, because their elevation to the episcopacy brought their virtues to light. They were obliged to live in the world where biographers are to be found.<sup>1</sup>

Benedict XIV spoke in similar terms when he beatified the cardinal Nicolas Albergati; Carthusian life, he said, was calculated to make a man holy, not to make his holiness known. It is one of the marks of all true greatness, and therefore of holiness, that it should tend to be nameless; of every great deed and therefore of heroic self-denial, that its doer strive to remain unknown. “When thou dost an alms let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doth, that thy alms may be in secret.”

Guy I, Bruno’s fourth successor as head of his hermits of Chartreuse, wrote the first account about him, a short unbiased monastic chronicle:

Master Bruno, of German origin, from the renowned city of Cologne; of good family and of great culture, both secular and divine; a canon and master of a church second to none, in Rheims, Gaul; he gave up the world and founded and ruled for six years the desert of Chartreuse. He was obliged by Pope Urban, whose tutor he had been, to join the Roman Curia, to counsel and sustain the Holy Father in ecclesiastical affairs. Unable to endure the turmoil and procedure of the Curia, and longing keenly for the solitude and tranquillity he had left, he resigned his post. He refused to accept the archbishopric of Reggio to which he had been elected

<sup>1</sup> André Wilmart: *Chronique des Premiers Chartreux*, Revue Mabillon, Mars 1926.

at the Pope's bidding. He then retired to a hermitage in Calabria, called La Torre. Here he died and was buried about ten years after leaving Chartreuse.<sup>1</sup>

That was all, and during centuries Bruno remained as nameless to the world as the plain wooden cross over the grave of any one of his sons. A true hermit's desire is to be hidden not only in life but in death. If Bruno is now remembered, it is not for his remarkable culture and high ecclesiastical offices, but because he renounced all this for the solitary life, the life of pure prayer. There are books about him, and they reveal local colour as varied as his portraits: Le Sueur's in the Louvre, Zúrbarán's at Cadiz. One day, perhaps, a St. Bruno whom no one knows, not even his biographers, will be revealed. But this revelation is not a task for a Carthusian, whose solitary life hardly affords the facilities for the necessary research, correspondence and conversation which the writing of a definitive biography would demand.

Bruno is acknowledged by his contemporaries to be an outstanding theologian—"a doctor of doctors." There is a commentary in the Psalms of this period, almost certainly his,<sup>2</sup> which may be taken as representative of his spiritual teaching. It marks him out as learned in all the sacred sciences and filled with the Holy Spirit. In it we catch a glimpse of the Seminary Professor teaching his young students; but with a richness of methodology and a spiritual fervour so often absent from the treatises of the later Scholastics.

No one can attain to eternal happiness by morality alone. They are the blessed ones who walk in the law of God and keep themselves undefiled on their journey, who do not make idle enquiries but examine His testimony closely, who strive in all sincerity after a spiritual understanding of His decrees which are secret, set forth in parable and mystery . . . and rise thence to find Him in contemplation, with all their hearts' affection set on Him. Blessed indeed are they who turn from this world's cares, and gaze longingly upon Him, seeking Him alone with the heart's whole love.<sup>3</sup>

Bruno is here giving forth his reflections on the great Psalm 118

<sup>1</sup> Migne, *Patres Latini* CLII, 12.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. A. Landgraf, *Collectanea Franciscana* VIII, 1938, p. 542. The author adds that this Commentary entitles Bruno to be called the Father of Scholasticism.

<sup>3</sup> P.L. CLII, 1259.

*Beati Immaculati in via*, which, in the view of so many of the early commentators, maps out the course of the spiritual life. In his interpretation, Bruno constantly applies the principle laid down in his preface, of the Patristic three senses of Holy Scripture, the literal, the moral and the mystical or spiritual. The literal sense is to be explained consistently in reference to the spiritual; for this latter is the sense which the Holy Ghost particularly has in view in the Psalms, and which alone gives true understanding of them. Hence we must proceed from the literal to the mystical via the moral, from the moral life to the contemplative life, from earthly things to heavenly. Bruno is at one with all the spiritual writers of his time in insisting that though one may save one's soul by Christian moral living, there can be no perfect living without contemplation:

Thou art my God and my King, Lord Jesus, my Creator and my Guide, effecting and ruling all the good that is in me. I shall exalt Thee ceaselessly in this life by my activity . . . and I shall praise Thee with an everlasting praise: that is, I shall glorify Thee with the glory of the contemplative life—here and in the life to come, according to the Gospel: "Mary hath chosen the best part, which shall not be taken away from her."<sup>1</sup>

In Bruno's age, the problem of relating the active part of Martha and the contemplative part of Mary was, for everyone but the monk, a personal problem of preserving sufficient freedom for contemplation in surroundings not organised for it. For the monk, no such problem existed. The active life, in our restricted sense of the exterior apostolate of preaching, teaching and the press, had not entered into, was foreign to, the monastic ideal. Monks were always active—*ora et labora*; but, at the most, their activity was that which they exercised in the words and works of fraternal charity within their community. A monk belonged not only to, but inside his own monastery—heart and mind. This is the context of such comments as: "and lest contemplatives should deem it harmful to descend from the summit of contemplation to the level of their neighbours' needs, Paul says you are to know that in every one of these you are serving the Lord." Bruno here is not encouraging the monk to go forth from his monastery, and engage in the "active" life. Each must serve the Lord in his own sphere—the cleric and

<sup>1</sup> P.L. CLII, 1396—Psalm 144.

layman in the exterior ministry, the monk, normally speaking, exclusively in his monastery. But we must notice also that in texts such as these, Bruno is not treating *ex professo* of contemplation and the contemplative life. Typical of his period he wrote no technical treatise of spirituality. The spirituals of his day were still what they were in the sixth century—eminent practitioners of the interior life, creators rather than exponents of the tradition from which the spiritual literature of the following century was to flow. The spiritual outlook is to be gathered from the historical background, occasional references, but especially from letters. It is epistolary literature which gives us a real insight into the monastic environment.

Bruno, who was born in 1030 and died in 1101, flourished towards the end of the "monastic age of spirituality," when monks were the more eminent and numerous of the spirituals. At this period the only form of religious life in the West, Celtic monasticism apart, was Benedictine, which had come to colour the whole outlook and activity of the Church in the West. But the new spiritual search, in which Bruno shared, was to lead either to a new realisation of the Rule, as at Cîteaux, to a return to the more contemplative past, as at Chartreuse, or to the birth of an entirely new religious form of life, one which by definition was to fulfil part of its vocation as an apostolate in the outside world, the Canons Regular of Premontré. Just as Cîteaux stands for more than mere discontent with a Cluny become wealthy and relaxed, so Chartreuse represents something other than disappointment with relaxation in general. It is rather a deliberate divergence from Molesme-Cîteaux; yet one which remains within the framework of the cenobitic Rule. Besides, these new founders were men of the superior culture which they had helped to create, Bruno and Stephen Harding, for instance, can compare favourably with Anselm and his contemporaries, masters of that intellectual revival which kept pace with the spiritual rebirth within the Church.

Entries on his bede-roll praise Bruno the master, the defender of the Church; but the majority praise his eremitical vocation: "Bruno the chief hermit," "the model of all those who lead the solitary life." He had sacrificed riches and a promising ecclesiastical career, faithful to a vow he had made to become a monk. He saw but did not accept Benedictine Molesme at the

height of its fervour. And he found at last, in the alpine fastness of Chartreuse, the environment fit for that life of penance and prayer which he and his few followers longed for. Here they arrived in 1084, and here they remained faithful to their eremitical calling. They kept the solitude for which they had given up so much; and the only legacy they bequeathed to mankind was the example of their life of prayer without compromise. They wrote nothing about it.

But Guy I, "the Venerable," Bruno's fourth successor as head of the hermits of Chartreuse, who had lived with some of the Master's first companions, embodied his spirit in the *Customs*—the first official Carthusian document. Guy was prevailed upon by Hugh, bishop of Grenoble, to set the Customs down in writing for other local groups of hermits. He had been a solitary for twenty years when he did so, in 1127. Regretfully, only out of obedience, conscious of the anomaly of breaking the silence to speak about the silent life, he says:

We have put off this task for a long time for motives which seemed reasonable to us; that is, because almost everything of a religious nature we are in the habit of doing here we believed to be contained either in the letters of blessed Jerome, or in the rule of blessed Benedict, or in the other authoritative writings. Furthermore, we considered ourselves in no way fitted to undertake or attempt any such thing. For we held it to be a part of our hidden way of life to be taught instead of to teach, to be a wiser thing rather to proclaim the blessings others enjoy than our own: for Scripture says, "Let another praise thee, and not thy own mouth: a stranger and not thy own lips." Our Lord in the Gospel also bids us: "Take heed that you do not your justice before men, to be seen by them." But since we are bound not to oppose the wishes, the authority, the affection of persons so important, let us recount, with His help what the Lord has granted us.<sup>1</sup>

Bruno and his followers saw the solitary life reflected in the lives of those "Holy Fathers on earth before us"—the great patriarchs and prophets, John the Precursor and the Desert Fathers; but most of all in the life of Our Lord Himself. So Guy writes in a note appended to his *Customs*:

About the solitary life we need say very little, for we know how highly it is commended by so many holy and learned men whose

<sup>1</sup> P.L. CLIII, 631.

authority is such that we are not worthy to be called their followers. . . . And Jesus Himself, God and Lord, whose virtue is not increased by His Hidden life nor diminished by His public life was yet tried, in a manner, by temptations and fasting in solitude. Holy Scripture tells us that He left the throng of His disciples and went up alone into the mountain to pray. And when the time of His Passion was at hand, He left His apostles in order to pray by Himself. By His example He emphasised strongly how very favourable is solitude to prayer; for He was unwilling to pray together with His followers, even with the apostles.<sup>1</sup>

Bruno was remarkable for his friendship. Guy says of him that he was the very likeness of integrity, sincerity, and maturity: of a love that was fathomless. He had made his vow to become a monk with friends, he came to Molesme with friends, and he arrived at Chartreuse with yet other friends; and after his release from the service of Urban III, we find him in Calabria, leading the solitary life with other friends still. It is important to notice that in practice, if not in theory, a certain association of solitaries can often bring an added perfection to the solitary life. The anti-social individual could not stand the society of other solitaries. In an eremitical monastery, where the deliberate control, effected by religious obedience, safeguards the supernatural orientation of the whole personality, he would fail in stability. It was mainly for mutual moral support, in the lonely life of faith which true solitude of necessity implies, that Bruno introduced into the solitary life that cenobitic element borrowed from St. Benedict and earlier models. It is this element which supplies the necessary minimum of juridical dependence for the attainment of Christian perfection: the watchful eye of the master who loves his disciples, the holy rivalry and solicitude of the brethren.

In every new development of Western monasticism, there has been renewed contact with the authentic tradition of the East. Dom Jean Leclercq goes so far as to say that this tradition is to Western monasticism what the apostolic tradition is to the faith of the Church.<sup>2</sup> In Bruno's time, of the twenty-six Fathers regarded as the institutors of the monastic life, only four were Latins; and one of these was St. Jerome, at that time often considered as an oriental.

<sup>1</sup> P.L. CLIII, 769-70.

<sup>2</sup> *L'amour des lettres et le désir de Dieu*, p. 88.

St. Bruno belonged to this eremitical current which drew its inspiration from the tradition of the Fathers of the Desert. And if he did not equal their ascetical performance, he was their peer in zeal for loving contemplation, contemplation in love. The solitary life was never more flourishing in the West than in his time, when the ideal *de contemptu mundi* was driving religious men all over Europe into solitude. Later, William of St. Thierry, in his *Golden Epistle*, addressed to Bruno's sons of the Charterhouse of Mont Dieu, summed up their Father's spiritual legacy, and outlined their vocation in the light of this same eremitical tradition of the desert. He hoped to see them, he says, "implanting in the darkness of the West and the cold of Gaul the light of the East and the ancient religious fervour of the monasteries of Egypt."<sup>1</sup>

At the same time Bruno was a European, not an oriental, and this fact marks the spirit of his reform. The particular accents in which he proclaimed to his sons the eastern teaching is echoed for us in two letters, the only writings attributed to him whose authenticity remains undisputed. He wrote them from his hermitage in Calabria, towards the end of his life. They reveal the old man's exquisite feeling, his heart and soul refined by years of contemplative prayer. Above all, they reveal his qualities as friend and mentor, delicate and guileless, and a love founded entirely in God.

The first of them is written to Raoul le Verd, Provost of the Church of Rheims:

Your loyalty to an old and tried friendship is all the more noble and praiseworthy for being a thing so rare amongst men. Although a great distance and a greater span of time keep us apart in body, yet nothing can separate your soul from that of your friend.

Bruno goes on to describe the wilderness of his Calabria—its gentle climate, the natural charm of the mountains, valleys, trees, fields, rivers and springs. But he had not chosen Calabria for its radiant beauty any more than he had Chartreuse for its cold, bold majesty, but both precisely for the solitude they assured:

Why should I dwell on all this? The things which delight a wise man, the things of heaven, are more agreeable and worthwhile by

<sup>1</sup> P.L. CLXXXIV, 309.



far. Still, these others often refresh the more delicate soul extended by a rather severe discipline and spiritual exercises, and bring it relief. The bow continuously strung tends to become slack and unfit for service. The advantage and delight that solitude brings to its lovers, they alone know who have experience of it.

A solitary is never less lonely that when alone, for he has God the more. Bruno, true to the eremitical tradition, associates silence with contemplation, solitude with the contemplative life, to the point of identifying them. Solitude and silence are not merely negative. They stand for what this self-denial alone can obtain: the complete self-dedication and love which seems possible only in solitude.

Here one learns to look with that serene gaze which wounds the Bridegroom with love: the spotless, undefiled beholding. Here is busy leisure and restful activity. Here God rewards his athletes with the longed-for prize, that peace which the world knows not, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

It is this consuming love of God, this overwhelming desire to possess the Divine Goodness, which is the root of Bruno's vocation, and of every Carthusian vocation; a love, a desire which imposes a sacred obligation:

Recall the day, my friend, when you and I and Fulk . . . afire with divine love promised and vowed to the Holy Spirit to abandon without delay the fleeting things of the world and to strive after things eternal, and to assume the monastic habit. . . . But what is so fair, so beneficial, what so inborn, so becoming human nature as to love the good? And what else is as good as God? Rather, what else is good besides God? Wherefore the chosen soul, perceiving in some measure the matchless grace, splendour and beauty of this good, aflame with the fire of love, declares: "My soul hath thirsted after the strong and living God: when shall I come and appear before the face of God?" O, that you would not scorn a friend's advice nor lend a deaf ear to the voice of the Spirit of God.<sup>1</sup>

In his second letter, to his own brethren of Chartreuse, Bruno elaborates on the high grace of the eremitical vocation, "your blessed lot and God's bountiful grace in you." It is the divine deliverance from the dangers of the world, the heavenly port after raging storm, the longed-for home of the exile and the traveller. In a special message to the laybrothers of the community,

<sup>1</sup> P.L. CLII, 420.

the man of letters shows himself aware of the dangers of the new learning. His praise of the *docta ignorantia* would have stigmatised him, had he lived a century later, as an anti-intellectual.

Of you, my dearly beloved laybrothers, I say this: My soul doth magnify the Lord, for I see the greatness of his mercy towards you . . . for although you are unlettered, yet God the mighty has, with his finger, written in your hearts both love and understanding of his sacred songs. For in your deeds you declare what you love and what you know. Since your practice of true obedience is both careful and keen, it is clear that you have plucked the very sweetest and most wholesome fruit of divine Scripture. Obedience is the fulfilment of God's decrees, the key and the seal of all spiritual discipline. It cannot exist without great humility and an uncommon patience. Chaste love of the Lord and true charity go with it always. Therefore, my brethren, hold the ground you have gained, avoid like the pest that sickly herd of those worthless ones who hawk the world with their writings, and who hum and haw about things they neither understand nor esteem, to which their speech and behaviour give the lie. . . .<sup>2</sup>

A note added to his bede-roll (the obituary letter circulated at his death) says of him: "Bruno deserved praise on many counts, but on one above the rest: his equanimity, the even temper of his ways. At all times his look was cheerful, his speech moderate. Paternal strength and maternal tenderness were joined in him."<sup>2</sup> When the bede-roll reached the Monastery of Our Lady at York, the monks wrote on it: "His fame informed us, even before your letter did, not indeed of the man's death, but of his goodness."<sup>3</sup> Prayer tends to simplify the soul, and the thought of the man of prayer gradually resolves itself into one steady gaze towards God. Its expressions which once were protracted became short and aspiratory. The eastern "Prayer of Jesus" and Richard Whitford's "Jesus Psalter" are examples of this regular respiration of the soul. For St. Hugh of Lincoln it was the repetition, even in sleep, of the mystic word so often on Our Lord's lips, "Amen . . . slowly, silently, pausing, most quietly, at intervals, now more often, now less."<sup>4</sup> For Hugh's father and master, Bruno, it was *O Bonitas*: our exclamation "Goodness." But for him the word was a definition of God,

<sup>1</sup> P.L. CLII, 49122.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 554 C.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 591 C.

<sup>4</sup> *Vita Magna S. Hugonis*, p. 82.

and the meaning of the goodness he saw everywhere and in everyone: the measure of his own.

The vocation of St. Bruno was to a life of pure prayer, one for which he renounced the active apostolic life of preaching and teaching. Pius XI, in his frequently-quoted apostolic Letter *Umbratilem*, declares that Bruno was divinely chosen to reform the contemplative life as such, to restore it to its pristine vigour, and thereby to assert its superiority in the hierarchy of divine vocations. "For no more perfect state and rule of life than this [the eremitical] can be proposed for men to adopt and embrace, if the Lord calls them to it."<sup>1</sup> The importance of St. Bruno in the history of the Church's spirituality is that his life emphasises the degree of inward holiness demanded from those who lead the solitary life, and the effect of their intimate union with God on the body of Christ, the Church.

To-day, it is fashionable to seek out the faults of the saints, to seek to see in them something of our own failings. Modern hagiographers tend to look askance at the hyperbole of Gaubert of St. Quentin of Beauvais who declares: "Bruno was the only man of his time who had renounced the world."<sup>2</sup> Bruno is an obscure figure on other counts as well. It is not certain whether he ever became a priest; and there is no record of what part he played in the Roman Curia, when called thither by Urban. But all this is of minor importance when compared with his providential mission to restore to its first vigour the more perfect form of Christian perfection, the contemplative life.

Bruno, like every authentic solitary, went into solitude for the one end, to grow in greater awareness of, and nearness to God, to God Incarnate, Jesus Christ, and in necessary consequence, in Him, to be more aware of and near to every other Christian, to mankind, on the spiritual plane, in terms of the eternal values of truth and love. The perfection to which all without discrimination are called, "Be you therefore perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect," is absolute only in Jesus Christ, our Head. For us, His members, His perfection is diversified in the several ways and states of the Christian life, that it may be realised not only by each individual, but by us all as a whole, the Church. Our age of specialisation easily appreciates this.

No one of us, no one special way, claims to be more than a

<sup>1</sup> *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 1924, p. 385.

<sup>2</sup> P.L. CLII, 578 A.

part in, an aspect of the perfection of the others. God our Father certainly hears the melody of each one's song, the prayer which is the individual Christian life. But He listens to the beauty, truth and love of the harmony, of the symphony He intends, human-divine, of prayer and activity. The lives of Martha and Mary amount to more than a sum of notes, more than a mere juxtaposition of parts. And if Holy Mother Church, in singling out Bruno's spiritual mission, makes the point of reiterating the hierarchy of vocations, the scale of the ways of perfection, it is also true that the most perfect are not necessarily nor always those called to the more perfect state of life. God, and He alone, if He so wills, can do a better work with a blunt or broken tool, can model better in a poorer clay, and to His greater glory He often does so. No truth is more fundamental in the solitary life than this.

The solitary life, painful to begin with, grows easy as one advances and becomes heavenly in the end. In adversity steadfast, in uncertainty trustworthy, it is unassuming in success. Sober in victuals, simple in attire, circumspect in speech, chaste in its ways, it is greatly to be ambitioned for being unpretentious itself. . . . It is given to study, particularly of the Scriptures and spiritual writings, where the marrow of meaning engages it more than the froth of words. And what will surprise you and what you will praise the more, is that it is a constant contemplative leisure because it is never a lazy one. Indeed, it so increases its service that more often it lacks time than a choice of things to do . . .<sup>1</sup>

About St. Bruno we know very little. In his age "many were the men in search of contemplation, but never has it been so little written about." In our day, the silence is frequently broken, that more may hear about the silent life. Yet in spite of all the wonderful and profound things said about it, its essence, supernatural silence, is not definable by talk. Master Bruno said all that can be said of it, in the lapidary statement, repeated by all contemplatives: "they only know it who have had experience of it." The only possible, profitable, breaking or penetration of this silence, this mystery of solitude, is when the soul itself breaks through its barrier, by grace and courage plunging into a deeper interior silence still, a purer and more powerful and universally efficacious prayer of faith.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. The letter of Guy, Prior of Chartreuse, 1109-27, in *Révue d'Ascétique et de Mystique*, 14, p. 337.