

L'ATTENTE DANS LE SILENCE—LE PERE M. JOSEPH CASSANT, by Dom Étienne Chenevière; Desclée, n.p.

It is difficult, on a superficial acquaintance, to arouse any enthusiasm in a British breast for Fr Joseph Cassant. Sympathy and pity are more likely sentiments. For it is undoubtedly true that the austere regime of a Cistercian (Trappist is the more popular name for the order in France) monastery at the end of the nineteenth century hastened his death from tuberculosis at the early age of twenty-five. What writings he left, apart from their testimony to his deep spirituality, are in an idiom which will not appeal to his more phlegmatic northern neighbours. Nor do they reveal, more than fragmentarily, the constant inner struggles involved in any serious effort at holiness.

And yet he possessed in a superlative degree one quality which merits universal appreciation. 'Bulldoggedness' may not be a permissible English. It nevertheless aptly sums up the key characteristics of his life. From childhood almost he wished to give himself exclusively to God in the only form he knew: by becoming a priest. The tenacity with which he grasped his vocation and the determination with which he sought to fulfil it justify the term we have used. In a nature such as his, at once vulnerable, timid and self-effacing, the courage he showed in the pursuit of the call testify to its supernatural origin.

The dice were weighed heavily against him. A delicate constitution and a feeble intellect in someone desiring the priesthood are not conditions likely to gain the favour of even the most unexacting bishop. It was soon evident that the studies of a diocesan seminary were beyond him and the decision to enter La Trappe of Ste-Marie-du-Désert has all the marks of a *pis-aller*.

To attribute questionable motives to Fr Cassant's entry, however, would be unfair. There is no indication that he analyzed the reasons for taking this step. To give himself to God and to be a priest, were, in his mind, synonymous. That the monastic life and the priesthood are two different vocations would just not have made sense to him. The one inevitably led to the other in his day—as indeed, by and large, it still does. The validity of the monk-priest was not really questioned until this decade—although the twelfth century is not devoid of controversies on this point. A spate of articles in modern monastic reviews has made it a familiar problem in contemporary communities.

Whatever the motives which took Cassant to La Trappe his growth in holiness and final ordination nine years later in 1902 set the seal on his extraordinary perseverance. Less than a year after his first mass he was dead. The cause for his canonisation was begun at Rome in 1937.

Dom Chenevière has written a model biography. The available documents have been used with perspicacity and each relevant detail drops neatly into place. Thomas Merton contributes an excellent preface.

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