

## MONACHORUM NORMA

### A Sketch of St Hugh of Lincoln

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**T**HE first Carthusian saint to be formally canonized by the Holy See was not their founder St Bruno but our own St Hugh, Bishop of Lincoln from 1186 till 1200. His achievements as a bishop and the historical importance of his resistance to kings have sometimes led writers to underemphasize the fact that he owed to his monastery the training which made him what he was—a saint whose austere and fearless strength was tempered by a gentleness which is one of the finest fruits of charity. The life written shortly after his death by his chaplain, the Benedictine monk Adam of Eynsham, does justice to this fact, and, in spite of its omissions, it is one of the most accurate and detailed portraits in existence of a medieval saint.<sup>1</sup>

Born in 1140 of a noble family at Avalon near Grenoble, Hugh was neither an Englishman nor a Frenchman by birth, but an Empire man. He was brought up from childhood after his mother's death in a neighbouring house of canons at Villarbenoit, where his father had retired to dedicate his last years to the Religious Life. In due time Hugh was professed as a canon, but in spite of marked success in preaching and in the care of a small parish while still a deacon, he followed a call to the monastic life that seemed irresistible and became a monk at the Grande Chartreuse at the age of about twenty-three. His monastic formation was certainly the dominant influence of his life; and the inspiration of his inner life of prayer and self-immolation which bore fruit in his tireless and charitable zeal as a bishop must be sought in the contemplative life of the Grande Chartreuse.

When Hugh joined the community, it was already known for its fervour, its poverty and its fine library. The Carthusian ideal, inspired by St Bruno and codified by Guigo I, consisted in a blend of the eremitical and cenobitical lives that was a new creation

<sup>1</sup> *Magna Vita Sancti Hugonis Lincolniensis*. Rolls Series 1864. Other sources are the Life by Giraldus Cambrensis (R. S. Opera Omnia vol. 7 R.S.) the Metrical Life (Lincoln 1860) the canonization report (basis of the *Legenda*—see Giraldus vol. 7. Appendix) and references in the *Chronicles*. A new edition of the *Magna Vita* is being prepared by Miss D. L. Douie and the present writer.

although composed of traditional elements. The remote situation in wild mountain country assured a separation from the world that was almost complete, ideal for the pursuit of the monastic occupations of liturgical and private prayer, sacred reading and manual work. Each monk lived and worked alone for most of the day in a separate cell, but each day the principal Hours were performed by the whole community in the church, and on Sundays and feasts meals were taken in common. Besides the usual monastic vows of obedience, *conversio morum* and stability, the Carthusian austerities included the use of the hairshirt, complete abstinence from meat, and frequent fasting on bread and water.

Hugh's fidelity to prayer which vivified this austere observance did not prevent him from taming squirrels and birds to share his meals and eat from his hand, and his great interest in books was combined with a tender care for the sick and the aged. Like other authentically 'Incarnational' contemplatives he delighted to serve his neighbour, and although the Carthusians renounced preaching by word of mouth, they nevertheless, in Guigo's phrase, preached the word of God with their hands by making books. The spectacle of a community dedicated entirely to the service of God through liturgical prayer is also an efficacious preaching in every age of the Church's history.

The first Carthusian house in England had been started by Henry II at Witham in Somerset in 1178 as part of his reparation for the martyrdom of St Thomas of Canterbury. Soon after, it seemed to be on the point of failure. The first superior, a holy but impractical man, was not equal to the pioneer work involved, and a second died shortly after his appointment. In addition Henry had failed to provide the necessary and promised funds. At this point, with the small community living in wattle huts and very dispirited by the foreign food and the cold attitude of the local inhabitants, a nobleman of Maurienne recommended that Henry should ask for Hugh to be sent. He was now procurator at the Grande Chartreuse, and his duties included the care of guests as well as the government of the laybrothers' separate house besides all the temporal administration of the monastery. In spite of his protests that he was unfit for such an office, he was sent at once and rapidly transformed Witham into a flourishing monastery that was known throughout southern England for its fervour. The Carthusian life soon attracted such outstanding recruits as the

prior and sacrist of Winchester cathedral priory, who had probably come into touch with Hugh through his generous return to them of the magnificent Winchester Bible which Henry had commandeered as a gift to Witham. Such disinterestedness was typical of one whose first care on arriving there had been the double compensation of its former inhabitants, and his actions verified the nobleman's description of him as one whom 'none would shun as a foreigner but whom all would welcome as a friend and a brother, for he cherishes all in the arms of charity'.

Hugh's care for the needs of the brethren brought him into close touch with the king, but his position of dependence did not prevent him from reproving the king for prolonging episcopal vacancies to the profit of the royal Exchequer and the detriment of the dioceses concerned. Henry's improvement in this respect during the last years of his reign and the unexpected generosity of his will may perhaps be traced to Hugh's influence over him in spiritual matters which was said to be greater than that of any of his subjects. Henry's esteem for the prior of Witham was increased still further when he was saved from death by shipwreck, as he believed, through Hugh's merits and prayers, and he then vowed to make him a bishop.

In 1186 the large and populous diocese of Lincoln, which extended from the Humber to the Thames, fell vacant, and the canons, summoned by Henry to elect at a council at Eynsham, presented three of their own body as candidates. Although each of them was a royal servant, Henry refused them all, and, supported by the archbishop of Canterbury, insisted that the canons should elect Hugh. He however refused to accept an election that seemed so forced, and the canons returned to Lincoln, but so impressed were they by his holiness that they again elected him and quite freely this time. Hugh then appealed to the prior of the Grande Chartreuse, only to be told to accept the charge. It was to be the only time in English history when a Carthusian would be promoted to a bishopric.

Although he was to show the virtues of a bishop to a superlative degree, Hugh remained all his life first and foremost a faithful Carthusian who delighted to continue his monastic life as far as his episcopal duties allowed. He was tireless in consecrating churches and confirming children, and each day he would have read to him the books which he would have read in his monastery.

At dinner he would remain in deep recollection even when he had invited minstrels to entertain his guests; and after telling his clerics and servants to 'eat well, drink well, and serve God well', he would content himself with abstinence fare while they consumed the vast quantity of meat that was customary in episcopal households. On his long and frequent journeys Hugh was often so lost in prayer that his horse, no longer controlled by the reins, followed the horse in front and sometimes took the wrong road. Hugh's favourite journey was his annual visit to Witham in the autumn for a month's retreat, and his face would be radiant with joy when he approached it. By special delegation of the General Chapter he retained jurisdiction over the monastery which owed so much to him.

The example of a bishop whose life was wholly devoted to the service of Christ and his members, especially the poor, the oppressed and the lepers, was particularly needed at a time when bishops were excessively concerned with temporal matters and often remained the royal servants they had been before their consecration. Hugh's vigorous fight against every kind of superstition and simony, like his better-known refusal to surrender any part of the Church's rights to the Plantagenet kings, proceeded from a deep supernatural sense of the stewardship over the church of our Lady of Lincoln that had been entrusted to his care. Inspired by the example of his favourite St Martin and of his old friend St Peter of Tarentaise, he played a notable part in the struggle for the Church's independence of State control which was still such a vital issue of the day. The courage which Hugh displayed when facing unarmed mobs of armed rioters who tried to kill him in anti-Jewish riots enabled him to resist tenaciously such royal exactions as Henry's attempt to obtain the appointment of a courtier to an ecclesiastical office, or Richard I's claims to the patronage of Eynsham Abbey, to the sending of Lincoln knights overseas, or to the services of the canons of Lincoln in the royal diplomatic service. In all these matters Hugh successfully vindicated the rights of his See, and both kings, of whom Hugh was genuinely fond in spite of their faults, found his combination of courage, humour and directness quite irresistible.

Hugh's conduct of these cases was not his only contribution to English history. A permanent achievement of his administrative ability was the rebuilding of Lincoln cathedral which had been

damaged in an earthquake shortly before his election. Hugh chose the new style of architecture for his choir and transepts, which survive in large part, but his unique apsidal eastern end was removed to build the Angel Choir. His canonization report mentions that he actually took part in the building operations, carrying stone and cement in a builder's hod that was instrumental in the cure of a cripple. To help pay the building costs Hugh founded a brotherhood to contribute the considerable sum of 100 marks a year, and he exhorted the faithful to contribute Pentecostal offerings for the same purpose. Detailed accounts of his diocesan administration have not survived, but he avoided temporal business as far as possible, delegating it to stewards, whom he removed from office if they were found to be incompetent.

If he was largely successful in escaping the care of financial matters, he was not able to escape the almost equally irksome judicial duties. Absolutely incorruptible and quite fearless of the powerful, he was specially esteemed by poor clients who knew their cause was just. These qualities together with his keen legal acumen, which was the wonder of trained lawyers, led to his being frequently chosen by the popes in cases of national importance even when the archbishops of Canterbury and York were parties. And Hugh's ability was so much appreciated by Pope Innocent III that when he asked permission to resign his See and retire to a monastery, Innocent not only refused to hear of it but also severely snubbed the messengers he had sent.

Hugh's legal skill was not only the result of intuition but also, as he himself said, of his careful study of the customs of the realm. It is likely that he would have had some knowledge of Canon Law with the Carthusians, whose library lists testify to the great breadth of their intellectual interests. His monastic formation, however, led him towards a greater interest in theology than in Canon Law, and during his episcopate he established a school of theology at Lincoln under William de Montibus, who was one of those clerics of sound learning and good character whom Hugh was at such pains to acquire for his diocese. During his lifetime, according to Giraldus Cambrensis, the Lincoln schools were second only to Paris, where also Hugh was acclaimed as a patron of students second only to St Nicholas. But it is safe to say that the Bible was his book of predilection, and Giraldus, who described him as *litteratissimus*, credited him with the feat of being able to

complete from memory any sentence of the Bible which another had begun.

The only writings of St Hugh that have survived are some official documents, but elements of his teaching have been preserved for us. Unlike certain apologists for the monastic life, St Hugh could not be accused of teaching that it was the only way of salvation. 'When God will finally judge everyone he will not require that each should have been a monk or a hermit, but whoever has failed to be a true Christian will be condemned. Three things are required from every Christian, and if one of these be lacking when he is judged, the name of Christian will be of no profit to him. The name indeed without the reality would rather harm his case because falsehood is more blameworthy in one who makes profession of the Truth. Charity in the heart, truth on the lips and chastity in the body: these are all necessary to be a true Christian in act.' Married people who lived chastely according to their state, he taught, would attain to the same happiness in Heaven as monks and nuns. He would sometimes invite married women to his table and exhort them to a greater love of God 'who had conferred a wonderful dignity and honour on all women; for while no man was allowed to be or to be called God's father, a woman was given the privilege of being the Mother of God'.

In the last year of his life, Hugh visited the Grande Chartreuse and his old home at Avalon and stayed for a few days at Cluny and Cîteaux on the way. He fell ill on his way back in September 1200 and was carried to his London house, where he lingered for two months. Although he was dying he was vigorous to the last, correcting mistakes in the singing of the Divine Office, giving detailed instructions about his funeral, and chiding Archbishop Hubert Walter with his customary intransigence when he tried to make him apologize for their past differences.

After confessing his sins and receiving Viaticum, Hugh said: 'Now let my doctors and my illness fight it out; from now on I care little for either of them. . . . I have received him to whom it is good to cleave . . . he who receives him is indeed safe and sound.' During Compline on November 16, still wearing his hairshirt, he was laid on a bed of ashes according to Carthusian custom, and he died during the *Nunc Dimittis*. At his own request his body was dressed in the simple vestments he had chosen for his consecration fourteen years before, and was buried in the chapel

of St John the Baptist in Lincoln cathedral. In spite of the muddy streets, his funeral resembled a triumphal procession and it was attended by two kings, seventeen archbishops and bishops and more than a hundred abbots; an event commemorated by a thirteenth-century stained glass window in Lincoln cathedral. Such a splendid funeral was appropriate for one who had been so zealous in burying the dead that he preferred to keep a king waiting for his dinner rather than omit or delegate the burial of a poor man.

Partly because of the interdict during John's reign it was not until 1219 that Honorius III appointed a commission headed by Stephen Langton to enquire into Hugh's life and miracles. The canonization was announced on 17th February, 1220, and St Hugh's feast was appointed to be kept on 17th November. On 6th October, 1280, in the presence of the King and Queen and of Archbishop Pecham, the body was translated to a new shrine in the Angel Choir which was a centre of pilgrimage until the Reformation. The most interesting relic of St Hugh that has survived is his long white linen stole, woven with a small all-over pattern but without further decoration, which is a treasured possession of St Hugh's Carthusian brethren at Parkminster in Sussex.

St Hugh is generally represented in iconography with his swan, which was so tame to him and so fierce to all intruders during the saint's visits to his manor at Stow; but paintings are also to be found of him at Mass holding the Infant Jesus in his hands in front of the chalice in memory of a vision seen by a young Oxford student, Edmund, who became a monk at Eynsham where he saw a famous vision of the next world. As St Hugh's feast was of a very high rank in the Carthusian Order, pictures of him are to be frequently found in Continental Charterhouses: among these may be mentioned that at Paris which was often visited in the sixteenth century by the mothers of sick children. The cures obtained there show that St Hugh's affectionate interest in little children which was characteristic of him during his life did not cease after his death. A fourteenth-century statue of him, formerly on the tower of St Mary's, Oxford, is now to be seen in the cloisters of New College.

Such works of art are evidence of esteem and veneration for St Hugh, who should be reckoned as one of the most attractive of our English saints. His character was summarized by his contemporary John of Leicester in these words: *Pontificum baculus, monachorum norma, scholarum consultor, regum malleus Hugo fuit.*