



Frank Duff Commemoration 3rd June 2007

The Man with the Feet-on-the-Ground Spirituality

I can recall seeing Frank Duff only once. It was in the Regina Coeli hostel in 1975. I was under the tutelage of Fr Peter Lemass who was getting me to give my first "homily" in a public setting. He told me later that the man sitting in the front at Mass had been Frank Duff but that I needn't worry: he was deaf! In those days too my Spiritual Director was Fr Tom O'Flynn C.M., spiritual director to Concilium. He knew Frank Duff quite well as his booklet shows and it was he who introduced me to De Montfort's Treatise on the True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin. From these few words you will be already realising that I have little personal knowledge of Frank; what I say here today is based on the experience of others and on the limited reading I have done on him. So you are listening more to a neophyte than to an expert.

Recently I have heard that some people at home and abroad have been saying that the Legion of Mary is an extremist catholic group or that at least some of its members are so. What I am attempting to do today is to show how sound Frank was and that if the members of the Legion of Mary are faithful to Frank they will walk a very balanced road. They will however also be very committed and undaunting in their witness which is another matter entirely.

Let me say one thing that jumps out at me from reading his own words and listening to others and that is the impression I have of a man who was psychologically and emotionally very sound, a balanced man who kept an even temperament on the whole. And spiritually it was no different. He was not an extremist nor did he have time for things over the top as they say. As Hilde Firtel says in her work: a man with both feet on the ground. She quotes one of his oft repeated phrases, "Nothing is as good and nothing as bad as we believe it to be". That reflects his even-keel approach. And note these words to an envoy, "Let me once again exhort you to the securing of sleep. Don't regard time in bed as time taken from your mission ... What is going to dictate the issue of the whole contest is stout nerves. If you lose your nerve you have lost the battle ... so for heaven's sake cultivate that nervous system of yours ..."

Even a read of one of his finest works "Can We Be Saints?" makes this clear. For example he asks "What is a saint?" Someone who does extraordinary penances and works miracles? No, he says, rather someone who desiring to please God does his ordinary duties extraordinary well. In this he followed some of the classic saints.

There is another commodity that belongs to Frank which shows him to be a feet-on-the-ground man: common sense. Fr. O'Flynn commented that he was a strong believer in the supremacy of reason and will over unreasonable fear

aided, of course, by prayer and the intercession of Our Lady. For example when dealing with the mentally infirm, apart from treating them sympathetically, his way was to appeal to reason and to common sense seasoned with homely examples.

If he had commonsense at hand to deal with attitudes and illnesses on the extreme of life he equally used it when confronting the challenges of the apostolate. Listen to the wisdom of his own words: "Excitement, novelty, or any other of a dozen merely human things may start something, but they will not keep it going. What is wrong with all those who begin so splendidly and stop so soon? Call for volunteers for any good work. There are many—full of enthusiasm—but hardly one who remains steadfast, hardly one who keeps his hands to the plough till the end." And he asks what is the matter? Answer: lack of prayer. Good deeds and prayer go together; without the latter you cannot have the former. Christ himself says, "Unless you remain in me the vine, you cannot bear any fruit." Or as Frank put it "It is not sufficiently recognised that a proper balance of regular prayer and good works is essential to perseverance in the latter". He refers to the many saints who kept up a healthy diet of prayer and attention to their duties. The great problem of the majority is that they do not pray but he says this too, "He who neglects his work and yet thinks, because he says many prayers, that he is leading a holy life, deludes himself." And he adds, "If it is your duty to work at dishes, do not run off to Benediction instead".

Frank certainly encourages prayer in our lives and insofar as we can to make the effort, without any strain, to advert to the presence of God. And that is where he sees the value of prayers before and after meals, the Angelus and the like. But he rightly observes that so many things in daily life and so many moments can assist us to bring our heart to God. This needs some effort and determination but again he shows his spiritual commonsense when he advises against this being too frequent.

Some people have accused religion of being an escape from reality. Frank's approach answered that in theory and in lived reality. He says, "The conditions of each man's life, as it is, are the raw materials out of which he has to fashion his future ... far from being unfavourable our present life is just the only one which will bring us to sanctity. God, who sees all things, did not choose it over all others for us without ample reason." A sign of wholesome faith is that it helps us deal with the real and not run away from it into escapism.

When he speaks of the grave obstacle that love of human respect is he is confronting a definite human reality. "Human respect may be defined as the putting of the opinions of others in the place of our conscience. It sets up ridicule and unpopularity as the things most to be avoided even at the risk of offending against truth and principle." He challenges us to take a firm stand against human respect when it comes to witness to Christ; he is right when he says we all have it in us to witness to him. Let us find courage to suffer for Christ from reflecting on his sufferings. One way of ensuring we will combat this temptation to human respect, he suggests, is to wear some small token of our faith so that people know our belief. But again his moderation comes through as he says, "Do nothing that will earn for yourself the name of mere eccentricity, for this would destroy much of your influence. To cover yourself with religious emblems or to make an unnecessary show of devotion in a Church is to err in this way".

But if you do stand for your faith you can expect trials. “We shall be sneered at as would-be-saints, milksops, and upbraided with narrow-mindedness and intolerance ... the charge possesses just a grain of truth which will make it hurtful to us. For, to have definite rules of principle and conduct does mean that we shall appear narrow to those who are not similarly hampered. It is part of the penalty of being right.” This reminds me of what Our Lord said: when you have found a pearl of great price you don’t need to investigate or invest in everything else under the sun!

Fr O’Flynn notes that Frank was someone who was not into visions or strange events; more a man who believed in the ordinary workings of grace and living out our Christian lives in faith, hope and charity. Fr. O’Flynn says about him, “No man could be more discerning and sensible about avoiding strain in matters spiritual ...He had something of a horror of manifestations of the supernatural or - better perhaps - the preternatural”. Even with the supernatural Frank would be in complete harmony with the great mystics of the Church who, although being recipient of communications from God, always downplayed the importance of such matters and in effect said that they were not necessary; faith alone mattered. Frank believed that he would see God face to face in eternity; he was happy to live during the earthly phase of life according to the order of faith. And indeed none of us should want anything other than that.

I would like to turn now to something else essential I find in Frank and that is the only proper approach of heart and behaviour before others which again shows him full of balance. Frank starts first from the great example given him by Our Lord himself. Frank says this: “We know that the infinite God became man for our sake: not a king—he wanted love, not fear—but the shivering babe of poor people; a rough-handed working-man; a homeless wanderer—one might almost say an outcast ... and then he was taken and tortured and put on a cross to die, an object of contempt; all that he might win our love or even our pity; which is akin to love.”

From this example of the love of God that reached out to us with such tender love Frank knows that this is the only way we can go. He will emphasise the need of prayer to help us in this. He asks us to reflect upon this loving Lord: “Such mildness, wisdom, purity, patience, tenderness and a love which is true to us in all our waywardness and disloyalty! Look and admire, and seek to draw a breadth of their loveliness into ourselves.”

And so he comes to his approach which is the only one that an authentic Christian can have. In his “Can We Be Saints?” he writes, “For there is one thing that can clothe you with power in your dealings with others - affection for them. This is the great secret of all real influence. To possess it, follow this simple rule: Look only to good qualities in anyone you meet; you will find them. Never look for faults, for you would find them. Act thus and you will easily develop the habit of love. Convince those around you, by deeds, not phrases that you truly have this feeling for them, and you can lead them where you like.” And when speaking on the spirit of home visitation he says, “In our own weak way we must re-produce the quality which Chesterton ascribes to St. Francis of Assisi and which is referred to in the pages of the Handbook. He says that the Saint possessed such an attractiveness that at his words people were drawn to him, were willing to hear him, were prejudiced in his favour. Chesterton says that this was due to the realisation by all that the saint was truly interested in them, in each individual one; that if you met him and he looked at you and spoke to you, you knew for certain that he really was interested in you ... they understood that he loved them and would do things for them. The same is what you must seek to present to those people to whom you go.” And when speaking of the importance of listening—and he emphasises the importance of listening at length before we speak—he says, “Persons who were absolutely reckless, seeming to have no anchor in life, just plunging wildly into waywardness of every kind, finally fell under the influence of a legionary who offered what they recognised as

friendship, who listened patiently to them and tried to enter into their point of view. Almost at once they changed. The hardness melted and the frenzy abated. That true interest was the anchor the poor ship needed.”

My dear friends, in my recent reading on Frank I am amazed to find a man so much after my own heart—allowing that chronologically that has to be the wrong way of putting it. I am surprised to find that so much of what he says seems in complete tandem with my own approach and I wonder why? Maybe it is because Fr O’Flynn had a big effect on me in College. Or perhaps it is because there is such a thing as an essential Dublin spirituality that we are both linked into: the spirituality of the Dub! Or could it just be that everyone who sincerely seeks out Jesus Christ and asks Our Lady to reveal her Son to them is gently guided by the Holy Spirit to the same essential insights?

Finally we all know the place of Mary, the Mother of God, in Frank’s life. It is quite clear that even before he came to understand De Montfort’s doctrine he had a special place in his heart for Our Lady. And indeed what adds to my being very comfortable with Frank is that he found De Montfort hard to accept initially and indeed thought it was an extremist doctrine. Frank as I have suggested was no fool and not a religious extremist but a man who used all his faculties to think through his faith.

He makes much of Mary as the new Eve as his introduction to the Treatise shows. If, as Genesis tells us, God made man in his own image, if male and female he created them to image him, and if the fall was caused by the combined sin committed by the male and the female together who were created to bear the image of God, then the restoration of that image must involve some combined work by the male and female. The work of the man Christ must have somewhere a complimentary woman sharing in this work of redemption. The only woman this can be is Mary and the Holy Spirit has led the Church to this doctrine from its inception. It was his failure to see this that led Dan Browne to make his big mistake and go off on a complete distorted tandem in The Da Vinci Code!

Frank puts it this way: “She administers the various graces ... Our Lord is the Head and provides the elements which make the family life possible, but He does it through the immediate agency of his Mother.”

Mary is a human creature like us all. But since she “is among all creatures the most conformed to Jesus Christ, it follows that of all devotions, that which best consecrates and conforms us to Our Lord is devotion to the Blessed Virgin, His holy Mother; and the more we are consecrated to Mary, the more perfectly are we united to Jesus Christ. Hence it is that the most perfect consecration to Jesus Christ is none other than a perfect and entire consecration of ourselves to the Most Blessed Virgin” (True Devotion, Part 2, Chapter One, Article Two).

With Frank let’s place our whole beings in the care of Our Lady and like the servants at Cana let’s place ourselves at her disposal so that through her intercession the water of this life will be transformed into the plentiful wine of eternal life to the glory of her Son who lives and reigns, forever and ever. Amen.

3rd June 2007

Glasnevin Cemetery

Paul Churchill