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William of Wycumbe, Fourth Prior of Llanthony

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WILLIAM OF WYCUMBE
FOURTH PRIOR OF LLANTHONY

by C. H. TALBOT

THE Priors who governed Llanthony by Gloucester, have been the subject of so thorough and penetrating a study¹ that one might be tempted to think that there was nothing further to be said. Among these persons, however, there is one who has received less than scant justice, not from modern writers, but from his contemporaries, and for this reason it may not be out of place to print a hitherto unpublished letter, which provides us with a more sympathetic appreciation of his character and achievements.

The prior, to whom I refer, is William of Wycumbe, fourth prior of Llanthony prima and second of Llanthony secunda. He is best known for his vivid biography of Robert of Bethune, who was elected Bishop of Hereford in 1131. According to William's own statement, the two men were natives of the same place, were about the same age and lived in intimate and unbroken friendship throughout their lives. Their compatibility of character and tastes is borne out by the fact that William was the bishop's chaplain from 1131 to 1137 until Robert de Braci's death, when William was elected prior in his stead. The chronicler of Llanthony, however, writing, it must be remembered, some time later in the century, though allowing that William was a man 'of upright character and an example to the religious', states that he was hated by the community because of

¹ J. N. Langston, 'Priors of Llanthony by Gloucester', *Trans. B.G.A.S.*, LXIII, 1-144. I may be mistaken, but it appears that no writer on Llanthony has made use of the Chartulary of the priory now preserved among the *Chancery Masters Exhibits* at the Public Record Office. It is contained in two folio volumes, (C. 115, A. 1, A. 2), written in the 14th century and is a mine of information, not merely for Llanthony but also for Gloucester. A cursory examination has convinced me that a great deal more information about the priors could be gleaned from this source.

his excessive austerity and harshness and that some of the canons, taking occasion of his unpopularity with Roger, Earl of Hereford, because of William's attack on his behaviour towards the bishop, brought about his resignation.¹

The chronicler, whose sympathies lay with the canons at Llanthony prima, also inveighed against him for building up Gloucester at the expense of the older foundation, for 'the library was permitted to be despoiled of its books, the storehouse of its silk vestments embroidered with gold and silver, of its deeds and charters and the treasury of all its precious goods. Whatever was ornamental or valuable in the church of St. John was carried away to Gloucester without remonstrance: even the bells, which from their great weight were difficult of removal, were transported'. The troubles which afterwards overtook William were imputed to 'the share he had in taking away the goods from the church of St. John'. Giraldus Cambrensis concurs in this judgment.

If one reads carefully the biography which William wrote of Robert of Bethune, one does not get the impression that the author is an austere man, so harsh in his dealings with others that he would arouse bitter resentment. He seems rather to have been a man of large sympathies, cultured and tolerant, though fully aware of his obligations as a superior and devoted to the ideals for which his Order stood. This impression is deepened by the letter which is printed here. Written by a monk named Ralph (whose identity I cannot establish), its main purpose is to thank William for taking an interest in some nuns whose poverty makes them an object of his charity. As mention is also made of hermits, recluses and impoverished citizens who have also been recipients of his bounty, it would seem that he was generous to all who stood in need, even though they were unknown to him. His character is summed up as pious, learned, a good superior, an able administrator, just, patient, magnanimous, a loyal friend. Not only has he made immense improvements to

¹ Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum*, vi, 1, p. 133; this is merely the first part of the chronicle in MS. Cotton Julius x.

the church committed to his care, so much so that one cannot say whether an old church is being repaired or a new one being constructed, but he takes pains in the building of churches for others and has them suitably furnished. He has provided his priory with meadows and streams, gardens, orchards and vineyards, enriched the library and enlarged the buildings, and amidst all this activity seems to have found time both to write and to devote himself to manual labour.

Whether all this encomium is due to the enthusiasm of a friend and bears little relationship to the true state of affairs, it is difficult to say. But though the writer was living at some distance from Llanthony, he appears to be well acquainted with the place and the activities carried on there, for he had at some time visited William and sought his counsel and help. The least that can be said is that it furnishes us with a rather different picture from that drawn by the chronicler and helps us to assess how far William's resignation was due to the enmity of Roger of Hereford and how much to his own lack of spiritual qualities.

The letter also raises one or two problems with regard to the actual builder of Llanthony. The writer appears to attribute most of this activity to William, whereas it would seem that St. Mary's, Gloucester, was consecrated before he was elected. This is a question which must be left for others to decide. The text is merely brought to light here in order that more competent scholars with a deeper knowledge of the history of Llanthony may study it more closely and interpret its statements in accordance with the facts.

DURHAM, Bishop Cosin's Library, Univers. v, 5, 8, fol. 1-4.

Domino suo et ubique laude eximia predicando Guill[elmo] priori de Lantonia, suus per omnia Rad[ulphus] nouus monachus, peccator antiquus, scientia leui, graui conscientia, quicquid poterit esse felicius.

Dedecet quidem, mi domine, fateor imperitiam meam litteris uobis fari quam silentii loris constringi decet; sed quoniam perfecta dilectio non tam debet recolere quid officiorum soluat quam meminisse quid debeat, hinc ego litteris, qui uiuo ore mallet, erumpo in salutationem, licet exilem, in gratiarum actionem, licet meritis uestris inferiorem.

Et quidem huiusce praesumptionis meae non est erroneus aut fortuitus affectus. Nanque cum ad uos aliquando aedificationis gratia uenirem, tanta apud uos uiuendi exempla inueni, ut uix omnia, non dico in cartula, sed ne in epistola quidem magna ualeant explicari. 'Quaenam', dicitis, 'in me tibi probanda placere?' Dicam libenter et breuiter, quorum unum fieri gratia, alterum cartula compellit.

Veneror in actionibus uestris quod multa bono cuique imitabilia geritis. Oratis ut qui feruentissime, legitis ut qui peritissime, regitis ut qui sapientissime, colitis ut qui solertissime, aedificatis ut qui dispositissime, pascitis ut qui exactissime, iocamini ut qui facetissime, iudicatis ut qui aequissime, suadetis ut qui sincerissime, commouemini ut qui tardissime, placamini ut qui celerrime, redamatis ut qui fidelissime: haec et alia exempla uiuendi praebetis. Aliquis aliquem, ego illum praecipue puto suo uiuere bono, qui uiuit alieno quique fidelium calamitates indigentiamque miseratus, facit in terris opera caelorum. Quorsum ista haec? Vos sententia quam¹ maxima, domine beatissime, petit, cui non sufficit illis tantum necessitatibus opem ferre quas uidetis quique in extimos terminos caritatis suffragatione porrecta, prius soletis indigentium² respicere causas quam inspicere personas. Nullius obest tenuitati debilitatique si uos expetere non possit, nam praeuenitis manibus illum qui non ualuerit ad uos precibus peruenire. Transit in alienas prouincias uigilantia uestra et in hoc curae uestrae latitudo diffunditur, ut longo positorum angustias consoletur. Et hinc fuit ut, quia crebro uos non minus absentium uerecundia quam praesentium quaerimonia mouet, sepe terseritis eorum lacrimas quorum oculos non uidistis.

Omitto illa quae cotidie propter defectionem uicinatorum pauperatorum inquietis toleratis excubiis, precibus expensis. Omitto uos tali semper agere temperamento, sic semper humanum, sic abstemium iudicari, ut constet nobiles indesinenter aduentantes prandia uestra sanctos laudare ieiunia. Omitto uos tanto cultu ecclesiam uobis creditam conuenustare ut dubitet inspector melius ne noua opera consurgant an aliquantulum ueterata reparantur. Omitto per uos diuersis locis basilicarum fundamenta consurgere, ornamenta supplicari. Quapropter, et si ad integrum conicere non possum quantas uobis gratias sancti heremitaе, religiosi fratres, reclusi deuoti, ciues pauperati ex[s]oluant, tamen illarum uberes per quam gratias ago, quibus per me ut succurrere meditaremini, non uos supplicatio, non denique uisa illarum inopia adduxit. Itaque ingentes per me referunt grates ad quas obtigit caritatis uestrae abundantiam per me peruenire.

Ei michi, quanta nos prouinciarum spatia diuidunt! Ei michi, inquam, ut quia dignus non eram quandiu adiuerem³ uel saltem non contingit

¹ qua, sic. MS.

² indigentiam, MS.

³ adiuerem, sic. MS.

me apud uos diutius morari, ut plenius moribus uestris imbutus, uirtutum emulator existerem. Unquamne nos Dei nutu, domine, uná uidebit illa domus uestra, nec tantum uestra quantum amicorum uestrorum et Christi pauperum, quae ciuitati marique, licet non proxima, hospites tamen epulis uos pascit hospitibus.

Praeter haec oculis intuentium cum uos decorus tum quod domicilium parietibus attollitur ad concinnentiam scilicet architectoricam disposite locatis, tum sacrario porticibusque conspicabilibus late choruscans. Ad hoc agris aquisque, ortis, pomariis atque uinetis amenissimis insuper thesauris bibliothecalibus et ornamentis ecclesiasticis large refertus, ubi ipse dum non minus stilo quam uomeri incubitis, difficile discernitur pluse sit cultus ortus an ingenium.

Sed quid ego ista haec garrio, nisi ut noueritis affectum erga uos paruuli uestri? Cuius desiderio egrescenti nulla iocundius quam uestra praesentia, cuius infirmitati nulla salubrius quam uestra oratio medicabitur. Certe si nequeo quas debeo grates ex[s]oluere, uel saltem memoriam me habere frugalitatis et caritatis quas coram posito mihi exhibuistis ostendo. Et quid ego dignum dignationi huic putris et fetida reatu terra respondeam? Colloqui salutaris uestri indigentiam patiens et timorem recordatione uitae plexibilis¹ adducor ut clamem uobis quod dixit Domino uester ille magister: *Exi a me quia peccator homo sum, Domine*. Sed quia timor iste temperatur affectu, uereor ne gerasenorum destituar exemplo et discedatis a finibus meis, uel certe ipse ab hac uita citius sustollar quam uos uidere merear. Nostis enim, ut apparet in illa sancta congregatione et beata societate domus uestrae, ex aduersa acie sauciatos, dux ueterane, colligere et peritissimus tibicen ad Christum receptis non peccandum canere et euangelici pastoris exemplo non amplius letamini si permaneant sani quam si non remaneant desperati.

Vos ergo norma morum, uos columpna uirtutum, uos, si blandiri licet, uera quia sancta dulcedo despiciatissimi uermis, ulcera precum digitis attrectare perutile duxi. Sed orate ut quandoque respiscam ne tantum meas deprimat ceruices massa facinorum. Si enim uos inter me et illum, cui crucifigimini, Dominum nostrum pro scelerum meorum populo, iunior licet et minor Moyses intercessor assistatis, non ulterius descendemus in infernum uiuentes nec per carnalium uitiorum incentiua flammati, ad altare Domini ignem diutius accendemus alienum. Quia quamquam nos utpote reos gloria libera non respicit, satis tamen superque gaudebimus si precatu uestro leuare ualeamus interioris hominis nostri et si non integrum ad remunerationem, certe uel cicatricatum pectus ad ueniam.

¹ plexibilis, sic. MS.

To William, his Lord and prior of Llanthony, worthy to be spoken of in all places with highest praise, Ralph, his friend for all time, now a monk, a sinner of old, slight in knowledge, but heavy in conscience, wishes every possible happiness.

It is unseemly, I confess, my Lord to show my ignorance to you in a letter when it ought rather to be hidden by silence : but since perfect love ought not so much to take into account what dues it pays as to remember what it owes, I send you greetings (slight as they are) in writing, though I would have preferred to give them by word of mouth, and I express my thanks, (though they are less than you deserve). This feeling of presumption is not due to a mistake or to chance. For when once upon a time I used to come to you to receive your counsel, I discovered in you so many instances of godly living that even a long letter (not to say a short note) would be insufficient to describe them. What was it in me, you ask, that you found worthy of approval? I will tell you freely and briefly: freely because your kindness to me demands it: briefly because of the shortness of the letter.

What I admire in your actions is that you do much that is worthy of imitation by all good men. You pray most fervently: you teach most competently: you govern most wisely: you farm most skilfully: you build most methodically: you entertain most carefully: you joke most wittily; you judge most fairly: you persuade most sincerely: you are moved to anger most rarely: you are placated most quickly: you are the most faithful of friends: these and other models of good behaviour you provide. Another man may think otherwise: but to my mind he lives best who lives for another and who taking pity on the misfortunes and poverty of others performs on earth the deeds of heaven. Where is this leading me? This greatest of all sentences applies to you, most blessed Lord, you who are not satisfied with succouring those needs which you actually see and with extending charity to the remotest parts, but who are accustomed to considering the needs of those in want before examining their persons. If a man cannot make his request to you through poverty or weakness, it does not matter, for you come out with open hands to him who cannot reach you with his prayers. Your watchful eye penetrates provinces that are not your own and your broadminded sympathy expands until it brings comfort to those in straits situated afar off. And hence it is that because you are moved no less by the shyness of those who are absent than by the complaints of those who are present, you have often wiped away the tears from the eyes of those you have not seen.

I do not mention those things which, because of the want of your impoverished neighbours, you bear patiently day by day in watchings, prayers and expense. I do not mention that you are always so temperate, so human, so abstemious that the nobles who are continually coming for

hospitality extol your repasts whilst the religious praise your fasts. I do not mention that you have beautified the church committed to your care with such taste that anyone looking at it would hesitate to say whether new buildings have been erected or the old ones repaired. I do not mention that the foundations of churches have been laid in various places through your intervention and that the furnishings for them have been asked for. For this reason though I am unable to conjecture what thanks the holy hermits, religious brethren, devout recluses and impoverished citizens pay you, nevertheless for my part I thank you most profusely on behalf of those women whom you are planning to help through my intervention and whose poverty is not known to you either by repute or sight. Therefore they to whom your generous charity had chanced to come, through me express their deep gratitude.

Woe is me, what a great distance separates us both. Woe is me, I say, because I was not worthy, as long as I came to visit you, or at least could not stay long with you, to copy your way of life and become an imitator of your virtues. Shall we ever, my lord, with God's will, be together under that same roof of yours (which belongs not so much to you as to your friends and the poor of Christ), which though not near town or sea regales your guests with banquets and you with guests.

Besides these things the eyes of the beholders are delighted both because the house has been built with walls aptly placed to produce architectural symmetry and because it is visible from afar off with its remarkable church and arcades. Furthermore it has most pleasant meadows and streams, gardens, orchards and vineyards and is filled with treasures of books and church furnishings, and there you spend your time no less with the pen than with the plough, so that it is difficult to judge whether your garden or your mind is the more cultivated.

But why do I prattle on like this, except to let you know the affection of your little friend towards you? Nothing is more soothing to his anxious longings than your presence, nothing more healing to his weakness than your prayers. If I am unable to express my thanks, at least I can show that I remember the virtue and charity which you have displayed towards me. And what can I say that is worthy of your reverence, I who am rotten and evil-smelling with sin? In need as I am of your healing counsel and full of anxiety at the memory of my inconstant life, I am led to cry out to you as was that master of yours to Our Lord: *Depart from me because I am a sinful man, O Lord*. But because that anxiety is tempered with affection, I am afraid that like the Gerasenes I may be abandoned and you will depart from me, or at least that I shall be taken swiftly from this life before I have been allowed to see you. For as is apparent in that holy community and blessed fellowship of your house you know, as a tried soldier, how to bring aid to those who have been wounded in the fight and how like an expert trumpeter

to sound the alarm against sin for those who follow Christ and like the Shepherd of the Gospel you rejoice no more in those who remain healthy than in those who recover from death's door.

I have thought it useful therefore, O model of good conduct, O column of virtue, O true, because holy comfort of a most despicable worm, to coax you (if that be allowed), to touch my ulcers with the fingers of your prayers. Pray that I may at length be converted so that I may not be weighed down with the burden of my sins. For if you will stand as my intercessor between him (for whom you suffer) and me, like a younger and lesser Moses, between the Lord and the multitude of my crimes, I shall no longer go down living into the nether regions nor be inflamed by the stings of fleshly lusts, but shall light another and a more enduring fire on the altar of the Lord. Because although the glory that is free will not gaze upon me, as being full of guilt, yet I shall be happy enough if by your prayers I am able to raise my interior desires, if not whole for a reward, then at least wounded for a pardon.