

## **Abbot Columba Marmion, OSB**

Fr. Hugh Feiss, OSB

Pope John Paul II beatified Columba Marmion on September 3, 2000. Someone told me that Abbot Marmion said there were two kinds of saints: fat ones and thin ones, and he intended to be a fat one. His resolve seems to have paid off.

Joseph Marmion was born in Ireland on April 1, 1858, of a French mother and an Irish father. He went to the seminary and was ordained a priest in Rome on June 16, 1881, for the Archdiocese of Dublin. He was a curate in a parish for one year and professor of philosophy for four years. Then he decided to become a Benedictine. He entered the Abbey of Maredsous in Belgium, since there were no Benedictine monasteries in Ireland. He took the name of Columba, taking as his patron the extraordinary fifth-century Irish monk Columcille of Iona.

In 1899 he was appointed prior of the newly founded monastery of Mont Cesar (now Kaisersberg) at Leuven, the site of a great Catholic University. He spent ten years there, serving as prior and professor of theology, while offering much spiritual direction and many retreats. He served as confessor to Cardinal Mercier. Then, on September 28, 1909, he was elected the third abbot of Maredsous, which then had over 150 monks. He chose to be blessed as abbot on October 3, because it was the Feast of the Holy Rosary and the Feast of St. Gérard de Brogne. Abbot Marmion had a devotion to both. St. Gérard was an important medieval monastic figure (d. 959) who gave his name to a village near Maredsous. Abbot Marmion died in January 1923. Maredsous founded the first monastery of Benedictines in Ireland in modern times at Glenstal.

A pamphlet distributed at the time of his beatification contains a number of striking quotations from Abbot Marmion: "Nothing matters but God and what is done for Him. All other things are trifles." "A man's worth is judged by what he seeks." "If grace does not destroy human nature, neither does it suppress our personality." "Each of us is like a grain of incense, which seems nothing in itself, but when thrown on the fire becomes a fragrant perfume." "Humility sees the divine in everything." "I recommend that you pay great attention to the promptings of the Holy Spirit." "The Life of union with God can only develop in a soul filled with peace and joy."

Abbot Marmion gave the following advice for a Christian disciple:

1. See God only and His good pleasure.
2. Seek God by following the way: Jesus Christ.
3. Look at God rather than at yourself. See everything, even your faults and your weaknesses, in Him. His mercy is an ocean in which they will be drowned.
4. Pray much for Him [Jesus] who never forgets you before God."

Abbot Marmion's retreats were written down and then published by some Benedictine sisters. They were then translated into English by other sisters. He liked to quote the Latin Bible, which in itself would make the conferences difficult to read. More than that, the sisters left out all the jokes and gave the whole a rather unctuous cast. Nevertheless, his books, *Christ the Ideal of the Monk* (1922), *Christ the Life of the Priest*, *Christ the Life of the Soul* (1917), and *Christ in His*

Mysteries (1919), were best-selling books for several decades. What follows is a recasting into contemporary English of one of his talks on the gospel of the Transfiguration which is used both on the feast of the Transfiguration and on the Second Sunday of Lent in Cycle A.

### On the Heights of Mount Tabor: The Second Sunday of Lent

Every aspect of Jesus' life is charged with inexhaustible meaning. A single sentence of the Word is a living fountain which can make each of us bear fruit. This is certainly true of the Transfiguration in which Jesus' divinity shines forth. Let us contemplate it with faith and love, so we can be filled with this mystery's light and flooded with the grace it brings.

Christ Jesus, Eternal Word, you are the splendor of the Father. Grant that we may love you fervently and so know you and your Father more deeply, so that our faith in your divinity, our hope in your merits, and our love for you may be increased.

In Matthew 16 Jesus predicts his passion. Then he takes three of his apostles, Peter, James the first martyr, and John, and goes up a high mountain. These same three had witnessed the raising of the daughter of Jairus. Now they ascend Mount Tabor, east of Nazareth. There, Luke writes (9.29), Jesus prayed and his countenance became like the sun. His disciples have fallen asleep. The dazzling light wakes them up. They see Moses and Elijah at Jesus' side. Peter cries out: "It is good for us to be here" in this peaceful and transforming place away from worry and conflict. A cloud then overshadowed them, and a voice said: "This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased: listen to him." The apostles immediately fall on their knees in adoration. Then Jesus gently tells them to arise. "They saw no one, only Jesus," the carpenter's son who will soon die on a cross.

Jesus is the great sacrament of all the gifts which God gives to humanity. He is "the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth,... and of his fullness we have all received" (Jn 1.14,16). Jesus gives his graces in each of his mysteries. In each mystery Jesus gives a specific grace to help us reproduce in ourselves his likeness. We are given "the capacity to know the mystery of the Kingdom of God" (Jn 17.3). The postcommunion prayer for the Feast of the Transfiguration asks: "Grant that we may apprehend the holy mystery of the transfiguration of your son, which we now celebrate...."

First, what was the significance of this mystery for the three apostles. St. Leo says that the principal purpose of the transfiguration was to remove the scandal of the cross from the hearts of the disciples. It was very difficult for the disciples to understand that Jesus, the Christ, must suffer a humiliating death (cf. Mt. 16). These same three apostles would be with Jesus in the garden of olives. Throughout his life, Jesus' divinity was veiled in weak, human flesh, subject to hunger, thirst, weariness, sleep, conflict, flight. Now the apostles see Christ transfigured; the divine shines out of his countenance and through his clothes (cf. Mk 9.2). Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus. For a faithful Jew, these two summed up the Law and the Prophets. They attest that Christ is the Christ, prefigured and predicted. Jesus respects the Law and is in accord with the prophets; he is the one sent by God. The final climactic moment comes when the Father's voice is heard. The disciples didn't fully understand this mystery, but it did forearm them against the scandal of the

cross. According to 2 Peter (1.16-18), Peter attested "Jesus received from God the Father, honor and glory ... when we were with him on the holy mountain."

The transfiguration also took place for us. The three apostles represent the whole church (St. Leo). The Father's voice is addressed to the church, not just to the three disciples. The collect for the Feast of the Transfiguration suggests three meanings of the Transfiguration for us. The first has to do with faith. "You have strengthened the sacraments of faith with the testimony of our ancestors" in the faith. Faith is a sharing in the self-knowledge of God, Father, Son and Spirit. The Father knowing himself eternally begets the Son, in the today of eternity (Ps 11.7). In this mystery the Father revealed Jesus as his Son, his Word whom he knows in eternal glory. The Father declares that the youth of Nazareth and the crucified of Calvary is his well-beloved Son. It is a very good thing to keep these words before our minds throughout the day: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." We should pray often: "Father, I believe these words, and so I adore Him." When we pray like this, the Father includes us in the love he has for his Son" (Jn 16.27).

The collect for the Feast of the Transfiguration just cited also includes: "You wonderfully manifested the perfect adoption of your sons and daughters by the voice which spoke from the bright cloud." Jesus shares in our human nature that we might share in his divine nature by grace. He made us members of his body, children of God by adoption (1 Jn 3.1). We were born by the word of truth (James 1.18). God gives us many gifts (charisms, graces, virtues), but we are never perfect children in this life, only in glory.

So, the collect for the Feast also prays: "That we may one day be made co-heirs with the King of glory and share in his triumph." The Transfiguration is the revelation of our future greatness, of the inheritance stored up for us. St. Leo said: "In this mystery of the Transfiguration, God's Providence has laid a solid foundation for the hope of the Church, so that the whole body of Christ may know what a transformation will be granted to it, and that the members may be assured that they will be sharers in the glory which shone forth in their Head." Only then will the just shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father (Mt 13.43). Then our humble body will be reconfigured to his glorified body (Phil 3.21).

The Transfiguration shows us that our holiness is our resemblance to Christ, a flowing forth in us of the divine life. Holiness dawned in us in baptism, which transformed us to Christ's image (Rom 8.29). Through our fidelity to the Holy Spirit's action, this image grows unto eternal life, perfect adoption. What awaits us is the glorious state of Jesus, our Head, whose glory shown only dimly at the Transfiguration. The path to this glory is Jesus himself. "Listen to him." Jesus is the light enlightening everyone, revealing all he has heard from his Father. Jesus is the Father's last word. Moses and Elijah disappeared, and there remained only Jesus. Jesus speaks to us in the bible, in the church, in events, in the inspiration of his Spirit. To listen well, we need to go up the mountain often by being quiet inside ourselves and praying. We need to listen in faith, a faith which is put into action, despite sufferings and setbacks. Then we will find happiness, even though it is not yet time to erect a tent where trials cannot reach us. Christ had to suffer in order to enter into his glory. As we follow the same path we need to remain confident. Jesus prays that where he is we also may be to see his glory (Jo 17.24).