

## Book Reviews

*The Elusive Father Brown: The Life of Mgr. John O'Connor*  
Julia Smith  
Gracewing: Leominster, UK,  
2010  
ISBN 978-0-85244-698-0

Father (later Monsignor) John O'Connor (1870-1952) was the priest after whom G. K. Chesterton created the character of Father Brown, the detective and hero of the numerous Father Brown mysteries. He was a friend of both Gilbert and Frances Chesterton, in fact the priest who received Chesterton into the Church, and well-connected to many others in the English Catholic intellectual community between the wars, including Eric Gill and David Jones. He was highly regarded by his friends, and Hilaire Belloc wrote that he "considered Father O'Connor to be one of the most intelligent men he had ever met." Although born in Ireland, Father O'Connor became a priest of the

diocese of Leeds in the north of England and spent most of his priestly life as pastor of St. Cuthbert's parish in Bradford, Yorkshire. He was an avid collector of books and works of art, well-known in art circles, and was an important translator of the works of Paul Claudel into English.

Both as a friend of Chesterton's and in his own right Father O'Connor certainly deserves to be remembered. But there are two ways one can write the life of someone. If his life is outwardly sufficiently varied, then it is easy to know what to write about. On the other hand, if someone's external life has fewer compelling incidents, then a biographer should probably focus on his inner life, on the life of the mind, for example. And Father O'Connor presents enough material for this latter to be done. Appendix I of this work lists Father O'Connor's writings and translations, and while not

---

Looking down from the hill fort onto Abbotsbury

extensive, they would seem to offer sufficient matter for interesting analysis, especially on the two subjects which I will note below.

Unfortunately, however, Smith does not take this approach, and instead largely fills her book with accounts of meetings, dinners, entertainments, friends, friends of friends, and so on. We learn, for example, something about Father O'Connor's procuring of vestments, about the advice he gave on gardening, about which members of the Steinthal family played what roles in a birthday masque that Chesterton wrote, about the bacon and wine that he and Eric Gill dined on one fine March day, about the "sardines and beer or something tasty and Bohemian, perhaps meat pie with oysters in it with beer or stout to drink" which Father O'Connor suggested for a club dinner and about many other similar matters. Although the author touches on some of his possibly controversial writings, she does little more than touch on them and does not give the reader enough information to make a judgment of his own.

The two topics that Smith brings up that might have been treated more fully are Father O'Connor's ideas about liturgical reform and his relations with

Eric Gill. Around 1928 Father O'Connor had written a booklet with the title, *Why Revive the Liturgy & How*. The author says it "was only circulated privately, probably because of the somewhat radical views expressed between its covers." Although Smith claims that Father O'Connor supported the idea of the priest facing *ad populum* during the liturgy and implies that he favoured celebrating Mass in the vernacular, we do not get any detailed examination of Father O'Connor's booklet, which presumably might have given more of his ideas on the liturgy and his rationale for them. We get the statement that "his suggestions included many of the changes regarding vestments, language, the times and manner of communion, that would have to wait almost forty years to be implemented," but not enough to know exactly what he meant or wanted. When he built a new church in Bradford in 1934-35, it was a "round church," that is, with the altar in the center and pews around three or four sides. The photograph of the church's interior in the book shows it after it was remodeled in the 1960s, so it is not clear exactly what Father O'Connor's own arrangements were. But what is intriguing and worthy of discussion is to what extent Father O'Connor anticipated or would have favoured the chang-

es in liturgical practice introduced after the Second Vatican Council. The liturgical movement of the first half of the twentieth century is currently a subject of study, and the extent to which its ideas did or did not lead to the reforms of the 1960s and 70s is a matter of research and debate. If Father O'Connor truly supported such things as the priest celebrating *versus populum* or the use of the vernacular, this would be valuable material for understanding the early liturgical movement, and it would be worth investigating as well how and where his views were formed, and to what extent they were shared by others within the English Catholic Church. But here we get only a small glimpse of what he thought and did, and even less on why.

The second matter Smith discusses more fully, but again without giving sufficient information as to what Father O'Connor really thought or said and why he did so. This matter is Eric Gill, his erotic art and in general his sexual life, including his behaviour toward his own daughters. Of course there is a fundamental difference in how we should evaluate Gill's erotic drawings and his sexual misdeeds. The first can be a matter for debate, the second hardly so. According to Smith, Father O'Connor figured in both matters.

Father O'Connor was apparently close friends of Gill and his family, the two frequently visiting each other, as well as Gill's favoured confessor, although it is not clear if he was his regular confessor. Gill carved several statues for St. Cuthbert's Church, including a set of stations of the cross. On his part, Father O'Connor supplied the text for the edition of the biblical Song of Songs that Gill illustrated (1925), and for the later (and less known) *The Song of the Soul* (1927), with text that he translated from St. John of the Cross. The first of these "caused something of an outcry in certain religious circles," Smith notes (108), because of "Eric Gill's somewhat explicit engravings of conjugal love between Christ and the female figure of his bride, representing his Church. ... " Someone of the stature of Father Bede Jarrett condemned it and "wished to have the book suppressed." Obviously the question of the portrayal of the nude and of sex in art is both complex and of perennial interest and importance, and one would like more discussion of Father O'Connor's thinking on the matter. Unfortunately Smith does not give us much of this, and says very little about the two of Father O'Connor's writings that might shed some light on his views, a 1930 article on Gill in

*The Bookman* and a 1943 review of his *Last Essays in Blackfriars*.

Smith does devote more space to Gill's sexual misbehaviour and Father O'Connor reactions. She herself seems intent on exculpating Gill, writing, for example of Gill's somewhat unusual attitude to sexual matters..., his incestuous relations with his sisters, his sexual experiments with his daughters, his naked cavorting with house guests. ... Gill is quite explicit in his *Diaries* about in what he and his daughters indulged, which was more in the nature of satisfying his curiosity rather than his passion," and "Gill's constant desire to know why something should be so was, according to his *Diaries*, often the reason for his visits to his daughters' bedrooms." One finds Gill's claim that he was motivated by "curiosity" or a "desire to know why something should be so" unconvincing. He already had more than ample knowledge of female sexuality, so we can hardly regard his attempt at self-vindication as anything more than white-washing. But, Smith assures us, "Father O'Connor was not only Gill's friend but a friend to all the family who would not have stood by and done nothing if any of them had shown signs of distress..." But can one really suppose that a Catholic priest at that time

would have said or done nothing about incest, unless of course his knowledge had been obtained under the seal of confession?

Thus how much Father O'Connor really knew and what he might have learned only in confession is not clear. The author asserts that Father O'Connor was involved in Gill's decision to send his daughter, Elizabeth, to Switzerland for a time, Gill's main motivation being to "distract her from the attentions of [Hilary] Pepler's son. Gill disapproved of this on the grounds of their youth, but it also removed temptation from her father, as Father O'Connor no doubt pointed out." According to Smith, "Father O'Connor evolved his own apology for Gill's behavior and told both Gill himself and David Jones that those who led only a sheltered life were in no position to condemn the nude in art." This is a non sequitur, however, for the question of nudity in art is hardly the same as that of Gill's sexual wrongdoings, but Smith seems somehow to conflate the two. In any case, one would like to know more than Smith tells us of Father O'Connor's relations with and opinions both of Eric Gill's artistic project and of his personal behaviour.

Julia Smith has broken new ground by writing a biography of Father John O'Connor. It remains now for her or for others to probe some of the more interesting questions that will help illuminate his thought and at the same time shed further light on English Catholic life in the first half of the last century.

Thomas Storck  
Westerville, Ohio

\* \* \*

*The Essential Belloc, a Prophet for Our Times.*

Edited by C. John McCloskey,  
Scott J. Bloch & Brian  
Robertson  
Saint Benedict Press: LLC,  
Charlotte, N.C., 2010:  
ISBN 13: 978 1935 302 360

In the Introduction to, perhaps, his most contentious book, *Europe and the Faith*, Hilaire Belloc wrote:

I say the Catholic "conscience of history—I say "conscience"—that is, as intimate knowledge through identity. ... For a man's way of perceiving himself (when he does so honestly and after

a cleansing examination of his mind) is in line with his creator's, and therefore with reality: he sees from within. Let me pursue this metaphor. Man has in him conscience, which is the voice of God. ... So it is with us who are of the Faith and the great story of Europe. A Catholic . . . understands (the story of Europe) from within. He cannot understand it altogether, because he is a finite being; but he is also that which has to understand. The Faith is Europe and Europe is the Faith.

In a letter to a friend, Hilaire Belloc confessed that he "was used to Insult, as I combine in one person three natures, all of them targets for insult in this country: a) Poverty, b) Papistry, c) Pugnacity." Probably those who insulted him did not much care about his poverty, and, when the thought seized him, he was quite capable of turning his pugnacity on his Papistry. "The Catholic Church," he remarked, "is an institution I am bound to hold divine, but for unbelievers, here is proof of its divinity, that no merely human institution run with such knavish imbecility would have lasted a fortnight." Clearly, Belloc thought that, as one critic put it, "far from denying the universality of the Ro-