

A Visit to Huy

JOHN HOWARD GRIFFIN



The following extracts are from the journals Mr. Griffin kept during his stay at Huy last summer when he was visiting lecturer at Father Pire's University. They reveal added insights into the life and activities of Father Pire.

JULY 17, 1964 – Am finally settled in my cell here at the Dominican priory. Father Pire brought me in only a half hour ago. This ancient building, on top of a hill overlooking the city of Huy, is like the monasteries I used to know in France – truly poor and simple. I am occupying the cell of a Father Leonard, who is away on a trip. It is a small room, large enough only for a desk, cot and washstand. The ceilings are very high, the walls lined with books. A single window looks out beyond poplars to the lights of the village below. No screens, so the room hums with night bugs. A vast surrounding silence of other cells.

In the corner near the window, a large crock wash-bowl covers the washstand; it holds a carafe of wash water. The water faucet and toilet are at the end of the corridor.

I feel immediately at home here. Everything begins to relax. A great contentment born long ago (how many years) in other cloisters returns this silent night in this ill-lighted cell.

Occasionally I hear a footstep. Father Pire never sleeps, so they say. He moves about in his cell across the hall. One of the world's great men, Nobel Prize winner, Doctor of Theology, Lawyer – 36 years he has lived in this building, in a cell like this.

Am torn with the desire to write – to write all of this that is so new and yet so deeply familiar from my past. And at the same time, torn to be still, silent – to allow the experience of simply being here to fill those crusted and calloused places of myself. Great fatigue overwhelms me, comfortable, even pleasant now in this quiet, this poverty, this simplicity.

I bought a bottle of powdered *Nescafé* and take a long time preparing some in a glass of cold water. There is time here – a sudden luxury.

Odd, if I had these accommodations in a hotel, I would be depressed and wretched; as I was when I was a Negro and could get nothing better.

I told Father Pire tonight: "This seems a planet away from Mississippi!"

It is warm tonight, still. Through the open window from somewhere far in the distance below I can distinctly hear an infant squalling. Universal sound, thrice familiar to the heart of any father, familiar to all the nights of men.

All of these hundreds of volumes, many of the large

paper-bound kind of years ago, yellowed. Some mind inhabiting this cell has read them, pressed their knowledge into his own wisdom. Books in Latin, French, English, German.

JULY 18, 1964 – After Vespers, supper in the refectory – bread and butter (one takes two immense slabs of bread which have already been buttered in between), fresh tomatoes, boiled potatoes with raw onion slices mashed into them, a plain omelet, an orange and black coffee.

Even though I learned to eat fast long ago at the Benedictines of Solesmes, I could not keep the pace. I still had a large portion of bread to consume when I noticed the Prior reach for his bell. He waited, watching me. I crammed the bread into my mouth and he rang. I almost choked on it while we stood and chanted the after-dinner prayers.

In the midst of supper the skies turned green, the wind suddenly rose, the refectory filled with a garish glow of lightning. The rain brought a blessed coolness.

The window of my cell is surrounded with some type of large leafed ivy. Rain rattles against the leaves, so near and clear it is as though it were striking my very eardrums.

In the obscurity of the storm, the whitewashed corridors are dark except for the faint light that penetrates from side windows – a beautiful kind of visual repose, visual silence.

Now the wind and rain subside. Thunder rumbles away toward the distant hills.

Two monks converse in loud whispers, shouting whispers down the corridor. A door squeaks on its hinges, closing. Silence.

The principal speaker today at the University was Father Cornelis, O.P. Marvelously clear exposition of the theology of the Fraternal Dialogue.

Father Pire is careful that the University *not* appear sectarian in any way – but a University belonging to all men, welcoming all men of all colors and politics and faiths (or no faith). Today while I was photographing the lecture, he asked me not to publish any photographs of the two Dominican Fathers together. And he deliberately absented himself from Father Cornelis' conferences, as he told me, so as to avoid any suggestion in the students' minds that this might be a Dominican school.

He is most successful. Students from all countries meet, and with no hint of any particular religious or political orientation, learn to dialogue while studying

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the great problems of our times from medical men, lawyers, philosophers, etc.

More and more I am persuaded that we desperately need such a University in the United States, where great numbers of students could come to learn the techniques of dialogue and the impediments that prevent dialogue. Odd, I am called to Europe to help teach the dialogue, and yet I have never even been asked to speak about dialogue in all of the hundreds of lectures I give in the United States.

JULY 19, 1964—Overcast sky and a chill breeze at dawn. Mass at seven in the Chapel downstairs. Birdsongs and stillness. Green trees and distant hills seen through haze.

Nerves gradually come to a profound quiet. I feel almost stunned by this healing process and sit dumbly while the curative forces of peace and security work within me. A kind of muted harmony settles like mist over the clash and blare of this past year.

Nature is fully in it—the trees, the body—the washings and shavings and feedings and sleeps. The soul rests in these things now in an almost somnolent state, abiding, not counting the time, not concentrating but merely being. A kind of felicity is glimpsed occasionally.

JULY 22, 1964—Three days of intense work. Press conferences, radio and TV shows, two lectures. Returned here at ten p.m. with Father Pire, both of us too exhausted to speak; but we discussed again the need for a branch of the University in America.

I do not understand how Father Pire keeps from collapsing. Since the day of the Hungarian revolt six years ago he has suffered a relentless insomnia. He sleeps one or two hours a night. Sometimes he goes for days without lying down. Whenever I go to the bathroom at night, I often see the light under his door, though often he just lies there in the dark to rest.

My admiration for him grows each day. For many years he was a renowned teacher of theology until he began his “works” and, as he says, “abandoned the theory for the practice.” But he is so unassuming and so open one has to remind oneself who he really is, and how many thousands of lives he has saved from despair.

I have heard he reads detective novels to help pass the sleepless nights, to divert his mind from his work. I am reminded of Madame Alexander Grunelius’ remark to me of Jacques Maritain’s penchant for reading

detective novels to distract his mind long enough to allow him to sleep. This lady, whose chateau in Kolbshheim is a resting place, a retreat for the world’s great intellectuals, said she was amazed at how many supremely gifted thinkers read mysteries for the same reason.

“But they must be poorly written,” she explained. “If they are well-written they hold the reader and prevent the sleep.”

AUGUST 1, 1964—A long day’s work. Opening of the new session at the University. Father Pire gave a brilliant analysis of the Dialogue. I jotted down some of his statements:

“To speak without first listening is not dialogue, but monologue.”

“We must distinguish between dialogue between two and a mere double monologue.”

“Unilateral declarations published at the same time are simply double monologues. The greatest error is to make people believe that a double monologue is a true dialogue.”

“Monologue separates. Dialogue unites.”

“To build bridges across chasms that separate us—dialogue.”

“Those who oppose dialogue are fanatics. They want only to hear their own monologue and will listen to no other truth than the one they think they possess.”

“I firmly believe men can get along together—by accepting and frankly admitting their contradictions.”

“Dialogue—to open oneself to the ‘other’.”

“Dialogue—to escape the prison of words and prejudiced ideas.”

“Dialogue—the spirit of honest disagreement.”

“The problem of contradictions—the human cacophony.”

AUGUST 2, 1964—Next Sunday I will be in Texas, a continent away. Here, at six p.m., a cold sunlight streams through the window of my cell. It casts a magnificent glow into every corner of these white plaster walls. Church bells from the valley float up faintly to us—the sounds of sunset. Otherwise, a profound hush is softened only by hints of conversations somewhere in the valley and a breeze rustling the trees outside. Moments of profound peace. Soon supper, then Matins and Lauds and then, at 8:45, I am scheduled to lecture to the monks here at La Sarte.

Another magnificently clarifying lecture from Father Pire this morning.

But everything fades as my awareness concentrates on the peace that overwhelms me after the relentless tensions of the past years. It stupefies me. I feel a tremendous pull toward sleep always. I do not resist it, two hour nap this afternoon, waking from time to time to glance out at the sky and the poplars framed by my window, sensing the benevolence of this place and falling effortlessly into sleep again. At four, coffee and a large slice of bread and a banana, alone in the refectory.

My last Sunday here. I'll return surely, but not again in this cell, not again in this cloister because next year I'll bring my family, God willing, and that will be better but never again the same. So I look at everything with the eyes of a last time, feel everything with that special sensibility.

And my heart looks ahead to the joy of being with my family next Sunday — but with dread of the telephone calls, the constant running in the paths of man's inhumanity to man.

Long, long twilights from about 6:30 to 9 p.m.

Marvelous light here. At the end of the article he did about me in *Figaro Littéraire* this week, Gilles Lapouge caught it, too. He wrote: "Now we are in the monastery at La Sarte. Inside the cloister there is a garden, a bush of red roses, the last brilliance of evening sun. I don't know if John Griffin has told me all he wanted to. I suspect not. We could speak for hours. But in this setting where all elements are reconciled, surrounded by the miraculous accord of light on stone walls, John Griffin feels the need to pause, to stop a while."

Earlier in the same piece, he wrote with extraordinary perception: "Griffin wanders along the banks of the Neuse between Namur and Liège with a metal case containing complicated photographic equipment. What does he photograph? The ancient farms of the region, he says, and I think this is not exactly true. I think he photographs only the gentleness, the peace and the order of these scenes."

In spite of the long sleep and the hours of catching up on rest, one works here; finally much gets done and without great effort. Everything is perfectly organized

to let work flow on its own rhythm, naturally, without force or strain.

AUGUST 4, 1964 — Radio, television and press conferences all afternoon. I returned here this evening to dress for tonight's concert — a recital by Jacques Genty and Lola Bobesco, sonatas by Bach, Mozart and Beethoven, performed by two supreme artists. A moving thing — the students dress informally for all of the lectures, no matter how distinguished the lecturer; but they invariably dress for the music with which Father Pire surrounds us — a homage to music.

While I was here bathing — 186 pounds in two quarts of cold water in a washbowl — three young men from Father Pire's home for refugee children called at the little reception room downstairs. When I went down, they asked me for a conference. One, Jewish, orphaned when his parents were sent to Hitler's ovens, told me that war was declared today between the United States and the Viet Cong. I wait alone now for further news with a great weight in my chest.

Listened to the news on a transistor radio. No war yet. United States accused of brinkmanship in Vietnam to distract attention from growing racial crises in America. Trouble in New Jersey and Philadelphia. Announced also the discovery of the mutilated bodies of the three students missing in Mississippi.

This is the reality. One speaks of men like Father Pire as though they were dreamers, when nothing could be less true, if this implies a lack of reality. Father Pire lived through the nightmare of occupation in a village where for each German slain, 50 local family-fathers were shot as hostages. The same racism, different version, comes to light in Mississippi with the finding of the bodies. This report says James Chaney was severely beaten before being shot. Dehumanization of the racists. This is what I go back to, back to the rooms where I must look into the ravaged faces of James Chaney's mother, or Clyde Kennard's mother and how many more mothers of martyrs before we learn to stop justifying our cheating?

(In the following article, the author discusses his views on a basic problem traditionally confronting newspaper and magazine publishers and editors. In keeping with this theme the text is presented in the form of first galley proofs, an early step in an editor's production of a finished article.)

THE FICTITIOUS FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

by Howard Gossage

Set
bra

Luck

align type

Set
drop cap.
Size larger

OF ALL THE CONCEPTS on which our Republic rests, I should imagine freedom of the press to be far and away the best known. This is hardly strange, since those who are the most vitally interested in promoting freedom of the press are also those who have all the facilities for doing so, the newspapers themselves.

As a space grabber, any real or fancied violation of freedom of the press has it all over even such favorite contributions to our intellectual well-being as axe murders of teen-age girls, what's new with the Johnsons, or the Academy Awards. If there is one single incident which, from a newspaper's point of view, would make the Greatest Story Ever Told, it would be this: Patty Duke, at the Academy Awards, smashes a newspaper photographer's camera with her Oscar; whereupon McGeorge Bundy, enraged at non-administration news managing, attacks her with an axe, and throws her fully clothed body into a swimming pool.

Despite all the venerable sanctity accorded it, and all the publicity—as witness the 1963 furor over White House censorship—as concepts go, freedom of the press is a pretty new thing and for a pretty good reason: until just yesterday in man's history there was no press to be free or otherwise. Indeed, at the time the Constitution was written there were no newspapers as we know them. Then, they were little better than politically-slanted poop sheets which made small effort to separate editorial views from news matter. It may be argued that the same can be said of Time, which is quite unfair, for everyone knows there were no four-color presses in those days. And of course there was nothing to compare with, say The New York Times, which gives us “all the news that's fit to print.” I sometimes wish that more of it was fit to read.

It is doubtful that the founding fathers, for all their wisdom, had the slightest inkling of the extent to which communications media would develop by our time. In spite of this, freedom of the press is still a vital concept today, long after certain other items in the Bill of Rights—such as those protecting citizens from