

# ON DOM JAMES

--by **M. Matthew Kelty, O.C.S.O.**

## **Easter Monday - 20 April 1987**

It is a bit bold to try and say something about a man of the stature of Dom James in a few paragraphs, but I want to put some thoughts on paper under the impact of his passing, in the interval between his dying and his burial. He is at the moment laid out in the choir with monks at his side praying the psalms for him.

The man was totally given to his life as monk, as priest, as abbot, every inch of him was given to God and His church. He took himself seriously, had an awareness of the significance of his life, knew his position, knew his power and authority and used them with vigor, with love. He literally enjoyed being what he was. And it was all pure, unselfish. He was proud of Gethsemani and had a grasp of its place in the church and in the world that was profound.

I think of him as a great leader of men, a shrewd analyst of character. He would pick outstanding men and do what many leaders do not do: give them room to use their gifts for God, the church, the Order, the monastery. He was blessed with fine men and made superb use of them. Just to mention a few who come to mind: there was Father Louis first of all, as best known. Their relationship was a very special kind, often strained, always warm. Merton literally flourished under the man and candidly recognized the fact that he was truly blessed in him. Another was Brother Clement, responsible for an amazing development of the economic side of the Abbey and making it possible for the monks to earn their own living. Even if many areas have since been curtailed because we do not have the numbers we once had, the basic industries of fruit cake and cheese continue to flourish, keeping the place going. Father John Eudes was a doctor and psychiatrist and did much to improve the physical and mental health of the house, besides being responsible, with Father Herbert and Father Flavian, for the formation of a whole generation of monks. Then add Father Chrysogonus and his creation of a new liturgy that made possible a worship of great beauty not only for this Abbey, but many other houses in the Order who used his material. One wonders what the prayer life of



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the monastery would be, had God not provided us with this monk's gifts. It was Dom James who recognized the talents and competence of these men and made full use of them, giving them ample room to be creative. In other words, if the man loved authority, he also loved to share it and did so. That is surely the mark of greatness. There were of course many others, not to say a whole monastery of monks who entered into all this. And that in a time of enormous change in the monastic life. Add to that the fact that the monastery buildings themselves were totally renovated within the same two decades (he was abbot from 1948 to 1968), plus three new foundations made (New York, California, South Carolina) and a house adopted in Chile, not to say the development of two foundations already made by Dom Frederic Dunne (Georgia and Utah), and one begins to appreciate the amazing amount of work this one man did and supervised.

A final note must be made: that Dom James was open to new ideas, new ways, even if they were alien to his own. He truly admired a man who would stand up to him, not with arrogance, for he could not stomach that, but with sincere conviction defend a cause. And if the man could prove his point, Dom James would accept it. One case was the matter of the eremitical life. Dom James was personally interested in it but thought it was not in line with the tradition of the Order. Father Louis, through his study of the sources was able to show that, on the contrary, the hermit life was in our tradition. It was Dom James in General Chapter who persuaded the abbots of the Order to legislate in favor of eremitism. And later, after resigning, he lived himself for some twelve years as solitary. This was a turn-around from his first stand.

He was, then, a man of absolute dedication, a genuine leader of men, one who could share authority and leadership with others, a man open to the Spirit and responsive. That adds up to greatness of a high order. We are much indebted to God that in His Providence such a man was where he was needed, at a time when he was needed. The history of Gethsemani for the years to come will be in great measure profoundly influenced by this wonderful man.

*Praise God!*