

charity outside it; but the essential mode of belonging is to be united to Christ in the Church by charity;

It is also one in apostolic faith (this implies a structure of authority which Augustine took for granted and helped to operate as a bishop of the Church, but never said very much about);

Finally it is Catholic, that is, universal, open to all nations, the heir to promises which cannot fail.

## A SYON CENTENARY<sup>1</sup>

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**I**N 1861 Syon Abbey at last came back from Portugal to England, having been driven into exile, for the second time, in 1558; and this year in their present home, their third since their return, at South Brent in Devon, the abbess and her sisters can look back with especial thankfulness over their long history of trials and wanderings endured for God's glory and the true faith. And in this year of prayers for the cause of the Forty Martyrs, Syon, which gave one of her sons, the 'Angel', Blessed Richard Reynolds, to witness with his blood to her constancy, should be in the minds of all Catholics in England as they thank God for his mercies shown to them.

It is not surprising that an English house of St Bridget's order should have been founded soon after its approval and her canonization in 1391, for England had been long renowned for the great devotion in which the Blessed Virgin was here held, and the Bridgettines were and still are very specially dedicated to her. 'This order shall be founded in honour of my most holy mother': so St Bridget tells us in her *Revelations* that she was commanded by our Lord, and everything possible was done to make this real. Hence the Bridgettine breviary (not at all to be confused with the 'Little Office') which had to be abandoned in the days of Trent, but which, to Syon's great joy, has with other special privileges in modern times been restored.

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'The Monastery of St Saviour, St Mary the Virgin and St Bridget, of Syon', was founded by Henry V in 1415 at Twickenham; and Syon's first claim to fame is that from then until today its line has never been broken. It was the only house vowed to St Bridget of Sweden's rule to be established in this country; and as we examine the complex of events which made this possible, we see that the saint and her rule looked ahead, out of the calamitous days in which she lived, and made the only possible preparations for the troubles which were to come, an austere and dedicated life of prayer and penitence which would call to men and women seeking nothing in religion but God himself. It was Henry's intention to build three new monasteries; and Dom David Knowles has pointed out to us that the king, in choosing for 'Syon' the Bridgettines, for 'Bethlehem' the Carthusians (at Sheen) and for 'Jerusalem' the Celestines (nothing came of this projected third house), showed, as he did by many other acts, his deep concern for a revival and reformation of true monasticism, only to be achieved by a more faithful observance of stricter rules. A century and more later Richard Whitford, one of the greatest names in Syon, betrays something like impatience in considering the general concern of his age for the decline of religious life: there need be no concern, there need be no decline, he says, if only monks and friars and nuns will keep their rules in the spirit and to the letter. He might with every justification have added 'as we do at Syon'; and before long Syon was to withstand Henry VIII and his servants as did no other house in England.

Much—perhaps too much—has been made of the part in the foundation of Syon played by Henry FitzHugh, whose devotion to St Bridget seems to have been inspired in England, even before 1406, when he visited Sweden as one of the suite of Henry IV's daughter Philippa on her marriage with Eric XIII. FitzHugh certainly was a powerful and faithful friend to the Bridgettines, and the chief instrument of their coming to this country; but he was far from being the first Englishman to show devotion to their mother and foundress. One of the first, undoubtedly, was Adam Easton, the Benedictine monk from Norwich who became a curial cardinal, and whose life reads like a highly-coloured 'historical romance' of the older fashion. He was an intimate friend of Bridget's daughter, St Katherine, of Alphonse of Pecha, her spiritual director, and of the rest of the 'family' of holy men.

and women whom she had collected and led during her many years of residence in the desolated city from which the popes had fled. They had seen the return from Avignon and they had shared the determination of the Roman people that Gregory XI's successor should not go back again to France. That successor, the unworthy and ignoble Bartholomew Prignano, had counted on Katherine and Easton as his champions when the validity of his election was challenged and the catastrophe of the Great Schism came about; and for his reward Easton had to endure the horrors of the imprisonment and torments which the pope visited upon the cardinals whom he suspected, without justification, of plotting to depose him. Had it not been for the earthly intercessions of Richard II, Easton would probably have been tormented to the death, as were his brother cardinals; and there are few more moving documents in Bridgettine history than the simple letter which he wrote, when at last Urban VIII's death set him free, to the Abbess of Vadsetena, the first, Swedish house of Bridget's rule, sending a copy of his tract in approbation of the cause of her canonization and telling of his conviction that her prayers in Paradise had upheld him through his agonies. Easton, like Bridget, died in the exile and the city of his choice; and it is only a short walk across the river from his tomb in St Cecilia in Trastevere to St Bridget's house by the Campo dei Fiori. And as today one leaves the house, after visiting the room in which she lived, and received and wrote the *Revelations*, and died, a few steps take one into the Via Monserrato and to the English College, which is situated where in Bridget's day there stood the hospice for English pilgrims. In the troubled years that lay between her death and Syon's foundation, there can have been few such pilgrims who did not learn to venerate her; and we have an affecting account of the devotions of one, the celebrated Margery Kempe, who stayed in the hospice in 1414, and visited the shrine, and talked with people who had known Bridget, her maidservant: who said that 'she was kindly and gentle towards everyone, and had a smiling face', and an innkeeper, 'who had known her himself, but had never thought that she had been so holy a woman as she was, for she was always simple and kindly towards everyone who wished to speak to her'.

Those who find the veneration accorded to St Bridget in her own times and in the fifteenth century exaggerated fail, it may

be, to perceive how perfectly she was a saint of those times and for those times, but this is very clearly shown by the history of her cult and of her order in England. Those who had striven to overcome the many great difficulties in the way of Syon's foundation were the same men who represented this country at Constance, and laboured there, successfully, in the two causes, which were in truth one cause, of the approbation of her canonization and the triumph over anti-popes and conciliarists of the supreme pontiff. And at Syon, from the first, Bridget's own highly individual spirituality, as it was embodied in her rule, formed and dictated the house's whole life. She had been born to great wealth and authority, but she had found Christ in embracing his humility and poverty; and though Syon rapidly acquired great possessions from the Crown and many private benefactors, the administration of which must have been a constant burden to the abbesses and their officials, it is beyond doubt that in this as in all other respects the rule was most rigorously observed, the brethren and sisters in their separate communities living in a harsh but joyful austerity, and faithfully giving each year to the poor the considerable surplus of their income. Her whole life had been one of prayer; and in Syon as in every other Bridgettine house the daily masses and offices were the one essential, to which every other event, private prayer and meditation, study and manual labour, must be subordinated. Bridget in her middle years had laboured greatly to remedy the defects of her early education, to acquire the Latin she needed for her chosen life and work: and Syon was outstanding in what it achieved for the liturgical and general schooling of nuns, as we know still from such introductory liturgical works, produced in the first instance for the Syon sisters, as *The Mirror of Our Lady* and the *Syon Martiloge*. Bridget's house in Rome had been completely international in character, and she and her family were thoroughly conversant with the greatest treasures of European spirituality, including many contemporary works: and today we can still judge, from the numerous manuscripts and printed books, both English and Latin, once owned by individual sisters and brethren, as well as from the great catalogue of the brothers' library, which survives, how zealously 'spiritual science' was pursued in Syon. Though many of its brethren had achieved high academic honours, especially at Cambridge, before their profession (Richard

Whitford is an outstanding example), and though after profession some won renown as writers (we may remember especially Clement Maidstone, the great fifteenth-century liturgiologist), they still, men as well as women, lived in great seclusion and withdrawal. And above all, as we shall see, the life in Syon reflected that of its holy foundress in its devotion to the blessed sacrament of the altar (it will surprise many to know that the daily and perpetual exposition of the blessed sacrament now observed at Syon is no innovation adopted in Lisbon or later, but is enjoined in St Bridget's own rule), to the Mother of God, and to the person and authority of the pope.

Though many women of noble blood, many divines from the universities and other religious houses entered Syon to seek complete refuge from the world, it would be altogether wrong to think of them as living self-centred and self-sufficient lives. Every monastic rule, if faithfully kept, makes such a thing impossible; and at Syon, over and above the heavy obligations of penitential prayer for sinners living and dead, two duties to the world were constantly acknowledged and fulfilled. In an age when preaching, in the parish churches and the great religious houses alike, was once again in rapid decline, Syon was famous for its sermons, and crowds of Londoners would make the journey by land or water up the river to Isleworth to hear them. A few have survived, and one, the 'Syon Pardon Sermon', a standard exposition to be preached on Mid-Lent Sunday and St Peter ad Vincula, when pilgrims gathered from all over England to gain the house's great indulgences, is a remarkable example of erudition and profundity employed with clarity and simplicity to explain the very difficult doctrine of indulgence to the laity. Then, too, the Syon brethren, in addition to their sermons, were constant in their writings for the spiritual improvement of others. Some of the most celebrated spiritual classics of the late Middle Ages can be shown to have been translated into English at Syon: St Catherine of Siena's *Dialogo* for example, known in its English version as *The Orchard of Syon*, St Bridget's own *Revelations*, and, very probably, *The Treatise of Perfection*, one of the two works by Blessed John Ruysbroek to be turned into English. These are all intended for advanced readers, and they reflect the high general standard of education at Syon; the brethren also produced similar original

works (we may here remember Clement Maidstone's life of Scrope, and, later, William Bond's *Consolatory of Timorous or Fearful Consciences*, a remarkably 'modern' disquisition upon scrupulosity written in the first instance for a Denney nun). Yet we must not imagine Syon as indifferent to the needs of the laity: Richard Whitford, himself a famous preacher, is also the author of two most arresting and affecting popular books. The first is the well-known *Work for Householders*, advocating and directing a life of daily family prayer and recollection; and the second, less celebrated, is his *Dialogue or Communication*, a series of devotional exercises and meditations for lay people in preparation for receiving holy communion. Both works contain some of the finest late medieval English devotional writing, such as the paraphrase of *Veni, creator spiritus*; and Whitford, it is clear, was filled with a deep concern for the evangelization of the laity. He was, too, a practical pastor: he saw to it, and he points out, that his works have been often reprinted and that they are very cheap.

The lives of such brethren as Bond and Whitford, of such sisters as Joanna Sewell, the celebrated owner of so many surviving spiritual writings, were lived out in the last decades of peace; but they handed on, unimpaired, the great traditions which formed and fortified those who were to endure the cruel trials of the Dissolution. Blessed Richard Reynolds himself had followed many a Syon monk from Cambridge, where before the age of twenty-five he had gained the distinction of appointment as Apostolic Preacher; and we know from Cardinal Reginald Pole's affecting tribute to the man whom he had revered in life as in death of Reynolds's great gifts as a teacher and orator. How those gifts were employed in defence of the Church at his trial, and how he ministered to his fellow martyrs at Tyburn, is well known: less familiar is the constancy and resolution, fired by his example, which the afflicted community at Syon showed until they were driven out of doors. A lay brother, Thomas Brownall, died at Newgate on 21 October 1537, 'of the filth of the prison, martyred for the Catholic Faith', as the brothers' obit book records. As everywhere else, some of the Syon monks yielded under pressure: the enfeebled confessor-general, John Fewterer, urged the Carthusians from London to do this, and expressed his

remorse that he had encouraged their prior, Blessed John Houghton, to suffer martyrdom. The exact part played by Fewterer and his successor John Coppinger in the dissolution of Syon by the royal commissioners is not clear, but we do know that Coppinger preferred exile and hardship with the community to the security that awaited acquiescent ex-monks in England: he died in 1557 at Termond in the Low Countries. Termond was where the heroic Catherine Palmer had led a nucleus of the community from Antwerp, after they had fled overseas; but it is perfectly obvious that even the nuns who remained in this country, when they were expelled from Syon in 1539, went on living, so well as they could, according to their rule, and that their Order never thereafter has regarded them as having in any way broken their vows or denied the faith. The commissioners had sent to Cromwell very optimistic reports on their hopes of persuading the abbess, Agnes Jordan, to assent to the royal will; but when she was put out of the house she took with her the convent's seal which she should have surrendered (it was in the possession of her successors until the early nineteenth century, and is in this country today, though not, unfortunately, at Syon), and nine of the sisters went with her to a house which she hired at Denham. It is manifest that they continued to keep their rule. Abbess Jordan's gravestone—it still exists—gives her her old titles and shows her in her Order's habit; and when she died in 1546, Catherine Palmer with great courage re-entered England, collected the sisters at Denham, and brought them across the sea to Flanders. Nor was Denham the only English refuge: Elizabeth Yate and nine sisters settled at Buckland in Berkshire, Alice and Dorothy Bettenham and five others in Kent. On his way to England as Legate, Cardinal Pole visited Abbess Palmer and her community; and in 1557 they returned to their old home, they and their neighbours at Sheen being the only religious houses whom Queen Mary Tudor restored in her short reign. Among the treasures still possessed by the community is Pole's deed, bearing his signature, restoring them to Syon and naming Catherine Palmer, whose fervour and devotion are extolled, as abbess. The next document in the present Syon archives, the original of Pius IV's *Exponi nobis nuper* of 1564, bears sad witness to what had happened in a mere six years. This bull is in effect Syon's spiritual passport: for Abbess Palmer had been called upon a

second time to be a Moses to her family. Their house had been seized again, and the new queen had been most reluctant to let the nuns go abroad, but they had sailed under the protection of the retiring Spanish ambassador.

*Exponi nobis nuper* recounts Syon's trials and commends their fortitude, and the pope directs that the Order's customs and privileges are to be preserved to them intact. Many of these customs were unknown outside the Order's few houses, and although not long ago Syon had enjoyed great fame as a centre of spirituality, now in the Tridentine world they must have seemed outlandish. The whole institution of double monasteries, rare and commonly deplored in medieval times, could have little in it to commend it in the late sixteenth century; and though some devout champions of the faith were still to become professed Bridgettine monks (we may recall the son of Ann Foster, Blessed Margaret Clitheroe's friend who died in prison for the faith at York in 1577, and the former Calvinist John Vivian of Dorset), this aspect of Bridgettine life could not survive the changed times. The last of the monks was John Marks, who died in 1697. Neither, for many centuries, were the sisters able to retain their privilege under the double constitution, whereby the monks in their office followed the diocesan use (at Syon, that of Sarum), but the nuns used the special Bridgettine breviary with its liturgical office of our Lady. When, after many years of wandering in the Low Countries and France, the community arrived in Lisbon in 1594, they had great difficulty, despite their credentials, in obtaining any recognition at all; and when this was granted, a condition was that they should use the Roman breviary. Their own use was not restored to them until 1897.

Desituation and danger had driven the nuns to seek refuge in Lisbon: but it is from these darkest of Syon's years that two of its most heroic episodes derive. In the 1570's poverty had forced some of the nuns to return to England, but they had followed the example of Abbess Jordan and her sisters, and were living as a religious community, with all the perils that that held, at Lyford House near Wantage. It was to minister to them that Blessed Edmund Campion went; and it was there that he was at last captured, on 12 July 1581, and brought to trial and martyrdom. But there was in England at that time another Bridgettine nun whose name deserves great honour. This was the fearless



and daring Elizabeth Sanders, sister of the famous Nicholas, who, professed abroad, came secretly to England to beg for alms from English Catholics to relieve the community's distress. She was arrested in 1580, imprisoned at Winchester in the company of several later martyred, and showed herself an indomitable confessor of the faith at her trials. Finally she escaped from prison and left the country by stealth; and she died in Lisbon on 1 August 1607.

Syon was now entering upon a long period of peace in exile. Replenished in every generation by novices from English Catholic families, the Lisbon convent faithfully pursued its vocation, conserving, wherever possible, the Order's ancient traditions and its own special national characteristics, undismayed by poverty and many other hardships. In the early nineteenth century a singular misfortune befell that part of the community which essayed a return—premature, as events showed—to England: they did not prosper, were overwhelmed by debts, and were persuaded to part with many of the house's relics, which are now scattered and in part lost. But in the end the time was ripe for Syon's restoration to this country; and so it is that today, in their modest, peaceful house off the high road from Exeter to Plymouth, the ladies of the Order of the Most Holy Saviour still follow the rule and the customs established five centuries ago and more. To pray in their chapel, in sight of the noble image of their foundress which once stood in their church by the banks of the Thames, and of the pinnacle from that church on which, tradition asserts, some of Blessed Richard Reynolds's butchered remains were exposed, is to feel great awe and gratitude for this tie that binds us to the glorious past of our country and our Church, is to give thanks again to God for those whom William Bond called, in words wonderfully prophetic, 'The strong and faithful servants of God, that had liever have their hearts plucked out of their breasts, than in word, deed or thought they would decline from the true faith and love of Jesus Christ'.