

Comment

Cardinal Philip Thomas Howard [1629–1694]

In June 1645 Philip Howard, the son of the Protestant earl of Arundel, met an Irish Dominican friar in Milan who told him all about the glories of the Dominican Order. Deeply impressed, the young man found himself within a short space of time being clothed in the Dominican habit in the priory at Cremona. Obviously, his mother had not warned him about the dangers of talking to strangers.

His admission to the Order provoked a storm across Europe. His father fired off a series of letters to every ecclesiastic who was anybody, and to quite a few who were mere nobodies, complaining that his son had been brainwashed and asking for him back. The Dominican brethren were rather embarrassed by their newest recruit and surrendered him to the Governor of Milan, who put him in close confinement, subjecting him to lengthy interviews with relays of Jesuits and Oratorians who tried to get him to change his mind. When he withstood this ordeal, and in fact seemed to thrive on it, the governor sent him to the Pope, who was a much tougher nut to crack. The Pope confessed himself charmed, announced that he had a vocation and allowed him to make profession in the church of San Clemente in Rome.

Philip's choice was seen as a rejection of his family and of his country. His country was not long in rejecting him either. For most of his compatriots Catholics did not belong. Their adherence to a foreign superstition rendered them mad at best, malevolent at worst and certainly very dangerous to know. Philip's task was to try and show that it was possible to be Catholic and to be English, that these were not contradictory claims. More than that, he struggled to realise the hope that in the restoration of Roman Catholicism in England something would be regained that had been lost. Against this first loyalty, claims of kith and kin, and the ties of the house of Howard, were of a different value.

What surprised many of his contemporaries was that Philip should have chosen the Dominican Order. There were Dominicans working in England, but they were few. They did not have the resources of the Jesuits and neither did they have the advantage of houses and seminaries on the Continent which could train and form recruits to the Order. Philip set about remedying this deficiency. He founded a convent of enclosed

Dominican nuns in Belgium and a number of convents for English friars in Bornhem, Louvain, Rome and even Tangier.

When he died in June 1694 he could look back over a lifetime of considerable achievement. Yet within a few decades all that he had laboured to build was in ruins: the priories destroyed by war, the communities dispersed and the libraries and endowments he had accumulated, devastated. Could his life be seen as a failure?

When Dominicans make their vows they place their hands in the hands of the Superior making a gesture of tradition. They hand themselves over to God through delivering themselves into the hands of sinful men and women; those sinful men and women with whom they live and try to build the kingdom. The vow of obedience is a promise of attentiveness. We allow our stories to be written by God. We no longer struggle to build the secure houses of our own lives, decorated and apparelled with features that we have chosen and fashioned. To hand oneself over in obedience is to promise to hear the truth and to do it in love. There is always a pain which is associated with an avowal of the truth. That pain stems from the deepest impulse of conversion. A conversion which prompts us to take leave of false patterns of belonging so that in becoming free of ourselves we may be free for God.

St Paul tells us in his second letter to the Corinthians that we have a building from God, a house not made with human hands. We have this house from God. We do not build it. He builds it with us. The only way it comes about is by our allowing ourselves to be built into it by Jesus Christ.

Cardinal Howard lies buried in the choir of his titular church, the Dominican Priory of the Minerva, right behind St Catherine's tomb. The brethren pass over his grave when they go to sing the office, to celebrate the liturgy and to hear the word of God. When he was asked where he wanted to be buried St Dominic said, 'under the feet of my brethren'. The friars of the Minerva walk the way of Philip Howard which is St Dominic's way, which is the way of the gospel.

The English Province owes its rebirth to Philip Howard. We walk the Lord's way, as St Paul says, by faith and not by sight. If the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building made from God, a house not made with human hands, a house of living stones and we become right for this building, as Philip Howard learned, when we become true.

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