

DOMINICAN LETTERS¹

I—*St Pius V and the Nuns*

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THE story of the exile and extinction of the Dominican nuns of Dartford has been told elsewhere.² It will be enough here to recall that by the intercession of the Spanish ambassador at London they were allowed by Elizabeth I to leave England as a community. They numbered nine nuns and a postulant, together with two Dominican priests. They sailed for Antwerp with the Bridgettine nuns of Sion and the Carthusians of Sheen in June 1559. They were assigned a part of a ruinous monastery occupied by a small community of Dutch Dominican nuns at Leliendael on the island of Schouwen in Zeeland.

The plight of these exiled contemplatives aroused considerable compassion. They were granted pensions of twenty crowns each by Philip II of Spain, who was the ruler of the Netherlands. The trouble was that these pensions were paid only fitfully, as the money had to be raised by local taxation and the Flemings were already heavily over-taxed to provide money for the war against the Dutch Calvinists who were devastating the country. There was also an annual donation of five hundred crowns from Pius IV, and the nuns had their share in this. There was however much delay and uncertainty in the payment of the papal alms.

The Dominican nuns were the object of special compassion because one of them, Elizabeth White, was half-sister of Bishop John Fisher whose martyrdom twenty-five years before had sent a thrill of horror through Europe that was still remembered. At least something might be done for her. The papal alms were delivered to Giovanni Morone, Cardinal-protector of England, and were distributed by his agent in Brussels, a certain Abbate

¹ The letters to appear in this series have three things in common. They were written by Dominicans; they are concerned with English affairs; they have never been printed before. They have no other unity. They span nearly three centuries and are written from various countries in various languages. They are here presented in translation or in modernized spelling, but have not been otherwise modified. They will appear at roughly three-monthly intervals, and subsequent titles will be: II. A Chaplain to the Forces, 1632; III. A Letter from London, 1641; IV. A Royal Chaplain, 1685; V. A Letter from Spellikens, 1689; VI. The Province in 1745; VII. 'Our Transatlantic Brethren', 1822.

² *A Hundred Homeless Years*, ch. I.

Vincenzo Pargaglia. As early as 13th October, 1560, when the nuns had been scarcely a year at Leliendael, this agent reports to his master that he has just received the five hundred crowns for the poor English exiles.

'Above all', he adds, 'I had in mind the sister of the Bishop of Rochester who is living on an island in Zeeland in a very poor monastery and a most unhealthy spot. I sent to her some time ago, hoping to persuade her to leave the place and come hither away from the sea, but she was unwilling to do so because she would not abandon the company of the other eight English nuns who came with her.'³ He goes on to speak of the difficulties in obtaining the annual Spanish pension owing to the presence of three thousand Spanish troops who had to be entirely supported by the local inhabitants. Hence the papal money had come at an opportune time. He also tells us that in the distribution of this money he had the advice of the English exile, Dr Maurice. This is evidently Maurice Clenock who was to become first president of the English College in Rome.

For nine years the nuns lived in their crumbling buildings with their equally impoverished Dutch sisters. Once they were raided by Calvinist freebooters who left them in even greater misery.⁴ In 1566 Pius IV was succeeded by the Dominican Pope Pius V, and in 1568 the new Pope sent a visitorator to Flanders with full pontifical powers to reform the various orders of nuns, who were scarcely living according to their rules, especially in the matter of enclosure. The visitorator was Vincenzo Ercolano, a Dominican of Perugia, who was to end his days as bishop of his native city.⁵ He did not visit Leliendael but he heard of its deplorable condition and ordered it to be closed. The property was given to the Dominican fathers at the nearby town of Zierickzee, with the obligation of supporting the Dutch sisters who had by now dwindled to three. Other provision had to be made for the English nuns. They were removed to a house at Bruges. There were not more than six of them left.⁶ Their arrival at Bruges was the

³ Bib. Vat., Vat. Lat. 6409, f.58.

⁴ Arch. Gen., O.P., XIV, lib. K, f.970.

⁵ The *Acta* of this visitation are still preserved at Naples, Bib. Naz. Cod. IX, C.89.

⁶ A petition about a year later (8 September 1569) gives the following statistics for all the exiles in the Spanish Netherlands. The numbers include the 'familia' or servants: Carthusians at Bruges, 20; Nuns of Sion, 25; Dartford nuns, formerly 15, now 9; Fratres Minoritae (scattered in various houses), 8; Other religious, 7; Doctors of Theology and other priests, 53; Students, 41; Laymen, with their wives and children, 57.) B.M. Add. Mss. 28386, f.216.)

occasion of our first Dominican Letter, written by Ercolano to the Pope's nephew, the Dominican Cardinal Bonelli:

YOUR EMINENCE,

When I was on the point of setting out for these parts I went first to kiss the feet of his Holiness, and he commended to me in a special manner a monastery of English nuns of our Order banished and exiled in Zeeland for our holy faith and Catholic religion. He commanded me to tell them that if the alms which had been given to them in the past were not sufficient they were to send him word and they would be increased. Because by our permission and precept they have now been transferred to the mainland and settled here at Bruges, I have visited them personally and given them such comfort as I could, being ignorant of the English language and in no position to relieve them with alms in their calamity and exile. They were greatly consoled that his Holiness should think of them and they have decided to write to him and tell him that the regular alms have not been received for the past two years. Their wants today are greater than ever before because they can no longer get any help whatever from England. Most stringent laws have been made forbidding anyone to send help to those who are in exile for the faith. In my judgment, your Eminence, there is no more appropriate object for the alms of his Holiness, and I hope this letter of mine will help convince him.

All these sisters are of good family and most constant in faith and observance. That is why they have spent so many years in exile. There was among them the sister of that holy bishop and martyr of Rochester, but she died last year so that I was unable to speak to her. However they have with them still living a sister of one of those holy Carthusian martyrs who are also remembered in Italy, and I have been very happy to speak with her.⁷ I beg your Eminence to have the heartfelt charity to take them under your particular patronage, because God alone knows how much these virgins and martyrs have suffered.

In this province there is not a single friar who understands English, and they are thus deprived of the consolation that an English chaplain would give them. The prior of the Carthusians,⁸ an exile like them and a holy man, has a special care

⁷ Sister Elizabeth Exmew.

⁸ Maurice Chauncey.

for them. There is also an English priest, an exile and a learned man, who hears their confessions and has spiritual charge of them.⁹ I have written of them before, but only *ex auditu*: now I have seen with my own eyes and I cannot remain silent as to their needs. If his Holiness would be good enough to see that they get the alms for the past two years (which have not been received) and a little bit more if possible, it would be an enormous help. And as their needs are pressing, help must be prompt.

I will say no more of myself than that I remain here at Bruges waiting for the war to die down and for my recall some day to a place where I might perhaps be more usefully employed. Then I will be in a position to send you more reliable news and my recommendations for reforms. I obey as an obedient son, ready *usque ad mortem*.

I kiss your Eminence's hands and the feet of his Holiness. May God preserve both of you for us and for his Church.

FR VINCENZO DI PERUGIA

Bruges, 26 November, 1568.¹⁰

⁹ Henry Joliffe, Dean of Bristol.

¹⁰ Bib. Vat., Barb. Lat. 3615, f.72.