

ENGLISH DOMINICAN SANCTITY (II)

THE dominant note of English Dominican life from the accession of Elizabeth to the end of the Penal days was heroism. Often with a prison for a convent and a dungeon for a cell the friars suffered all cheerfully for the salvation of souls. They kept alive the Province not for the sake of the Province but for the maintaining of Catholic Faith in their native land. Reduced to the rank of a Congregation for want of a central house, they sent their recruits to foreign Provincials who in splendid charity trained them for the religious life and apostolate.

Heroism of the highest order is seen in the life of the martyr, the Venerable Robert Nutter, the English Dominican nearest to the supreme honours of the Church. He, and his brother John who was beatified in 1929, were Lancashire men and members of Brasenose College, Oxford, and both were admitted to the English College at Rheims, where Robert, though reputed the younger, was ordained priest on January 6th, 1582, nine months before his brother. Immediately following his ordination he set out for England and landed on the south coast, probably at Portsmouth, from whence he made his way into Hampshire where he worked until his first arrest, February 2nd, 1584. After a year's imprisonment in the Tower during which he was twice confined in the Pit, on the first occasion for forty-seven days and then for two months and fourteen days, loaded with irons for forty-three days, and twice crushed in the horrible "scavenger's daughter," he was placed on board ship with other priests and threatened with death if he dared return. Nevertheless he came back within a year, but was captured at sea, and thrown into the Marshalsea prison. He seems to have been transferred for a short period to Wisbech Castle in Cambridgeshire then serving as a concentration place for Catholic priests. In 1588 he was again in Newgate but was sent back to Wisbech, from which he escaped in the spring of 1600; but after a short course of work in his native county he was arrested by the

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Sheriff of Lancaster, Thomas Hesketh, and barbarously executed in the county town on July 26th, 1600, in the company of that lovable character the Venerable Edward Thwing. In a contemporary poem preserved in the British Museum is commemorated:

Nutter's bold constancy with his swete fellow Thwinge,
Of whose most meeke modesti Angells and Saints may singe.

Doctor Champney, their contemporary, says that "Nutter was a man of strong body and of stronger soul who went to the gallows before his fellow sufferer, the venerable Edward Thwing, with as much cheerfulness and joy as if he were going to a feast." The same characteristic of strength and courage can be gathered from a government paper of 1587 which describes him as "a very perilous man and desperate to attempte any mischiefe and therefore especially to bee regarded." The sheriff on August 17th wrote to Cecil that Nutter in his examination "confessed that he was professed a friar of the Order of Saint Dominick during the time he was a prisoner in Wisbech, when in the presence of divers priests he did take his vow, the which was certified to the Provincial of that Order at Lisbon and by him allowed." The year of his admission is not stated, but when imprisoned in Newgate in 1588 he is referred to in a government communication as "monastically vowed." As he is mentioned as a prisoner in Wisbech in 1587 we can thus fix his profession in that year. This registration of his vows at Lisbon would be owing to the absence of a central house for the English friars. We hope that in a few years the cause of his Beatification will be complete; he has already been declared Venerable.¹

Other English Dominicans at this same period were Alexander Rigby, William Lister, George Foster, and Henry Clithero, son of the martyr of York, Blessed Margaret. At present these are only names in our history, but perhaps patient research will reveal their activities.

In the reign of James I, also a harrowing time for Catholics, we get more light on Dominican life and work. In 1616 there

¹ Catholic Record Soc., v. *passim*; Gillow Biog. Dict., s.v.; R. Devas, O.P., *Dominican Martyrs of Great Britain* (B.O.W., 1910); Hatfield MSS., Vol. X, *Historical MSS. Commission*, p. 283-4.

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was resident in London as chaplain and confessor to the Spanish ambassador a friar of great note in his day, Diego de la Fuente. The English clergy wanted him for their bishop whilst the English Dominicans sought him for their superior, but he refused both positions and suggested to his brethren that they should ask for Father Thomas Middleton, *alias* Dade, and accordingly this Father was appointed Vicar-General by the Master-General, Father Serafino Secchi, in 1622. Father Middleton had come on the English mission in 1617, and ruled the Province, or English Congregation as it is still ranked, until 1655, spending many of these years in a cell in the Clink. In 1651 he was again arrested and this time stood trial for his life at the Old Bailey in company with Blessed Peter Wright of the Society of Jesus. The latter was condemned, but Father Middleton was acquitted because the witness, an apostate named Gage, although he swore to his being the superior of the Dominicans, would not swear to his priesthood, pointing out that St. Francis of Assisi was head of the Franciscan Order without being a priest. During the earlier portion of Charles I's reign there were twenty Dominicans working in England and Father Middleton obtained permission from Rome, June 24th, 1636, to establish a noviciate house in this country, but the beginning of the struggle between King and Parliament ruined the project.²

Whilst Father Middleton during his intervals of freedom worked in London, two Dominican brothers named Robert and Thomas Armstrong laboured strenuously in the north country. Thomas, the younger, began the mission at Stonecroft in Northumberland which was served mainly by Dominicans until 1830, whilst Robert established the first Catholic settlement at Hexham. Both did much for the northern Catholics, and Thomas was a zealous and saintly missionary, greatly revered and reverently remembered, but Robert's sanctity was more than outstanding; it seems such as one reads in the lives of the canonized. In the Chapter Roll of the deceased brethren, which was daily read in choir at Bornhem and is now preserved at Woodchester Priory, he is

² Raymund Palmer: *Life of Cardinal Howard*, 1867, pp. 76, 77.

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commemorated under the date May 5th, 1663, in these words: "*Apud Plebem Sanctitate insignis, Daemonibus terribilis, plurimas Familias ad Fidem Catholicam ab Haeresi reduxit. Adhuc in hiis partibus nomen ipsius suavem spirat odorem et Memoria in benedictione est*"—"Renowned amongst the people for his sanctity, terrible to the demons, he brought back from heresy to the true fold many families. To-day in those parts [Northumberland] his name still breathes forth a sweet odour, and his memory is held in benediction." Father Worthington visited the district fifty years later and found his memory still venerated and his sanctity remembered. He adds that he dwelt in a tiny house busied with the care of the very poor. Certainly we can consider Father Robert Armstrong amongst the most holy friars the Province has produced.³

Whilst he and his brother were thus evangelizing the north of England there was living at Ghent an English Dominican Father Gregory Lovel, where he had been professed in 1637. It is said he never broke the rule or constitutions. He was the first and last at the divine office both night and day. He loved poverty so dearly that he would wear only the worn-out habits cast aside by others. A crucifix, the works of Thomas à Kempis, the Spiritual Exercises, and a bed and little table were the contents of his cell. He was most austere and given to severe penance, yet he ever showed a cheerful and pleasant countenance to all. He used to say to the younger religious: "If you only knew, dearest brethren, how delicate is divine grace, you would carefully guard against the least transgression of the rule even by a single breach of silence." After an almost angelic life he passed to his reward on November 30th, 1673. The above account is from a short sketch of his life by Father de Jonghe, in his *Belgium Dominicanum*, published in 1719.

Towards the end of Father Middleton's long government he had the joy of receiving as a recruit Philip Howard who lived to put into execution his own long cherished design of a noviciate house. This however could not, as Father

³ C.R.S., Vol. 26, pp. 108, 109; Palmer, *ibid.*, 77, 78.

Middleton had once hoped, be established in England, but a place for it was found in friendly Flanders, and on April 17th, 1658, Father Howard as Prior entered on the possession of Holy Cross Priory at Bornhem in the name of the English Province and of Father George Catchmay, the Vicar-General. The convent of Bornhem was but one of many good works Cardinal Howard did for his beloved Province. In 1675 he opened another house, SS. John and Paul in Rome, having already established the sisters of the Second Order at Vilvorde in Flanders in 1664, and at his death left money for the erection of a house of philosophical and theological studies in Louvain, which was opened in 1697 three years after his death in Rome on June 17th, 1694. He persuaded the Pope and the Master-General to permit the English Vicar-General to assume the title of Provincial, and to restore the English Congregation to the rank of a Province.

Whilst the Cardinal was occupied with all these works there arose in England in 1678 a storm of persecution unequalled since the reign of Elizabeth, and Titus Oates attributed to the Dominicans a place second only to the Jesuits in his fictitious Popish Plot. Several by a timely flight escaped arrest, but seven members of the Order were thrown into prison to be tried for their lives. Of these, two escaped condemnation on account of their foreign birth, Father Alexander Lumsden, a Scotsman (the Act of Union had not yet been passed), and Father Dominic Maguire (afterwards Archbishop of Armagh), born in Spain. Father Martin Russell, member of an old Herefordshire family, was thrown into Hereford Gaol in company with another friar "who afterwards died in the convent of SS. John and Paul in Rome." The only English Dominican who died in Rome whilst the Province possessed SS. John and Paul was Father Dominic Pegge whose death occurred there in 1691, three years before the house was abandoned. Father Pegge was not brought to trial; he either escaped or was dismissed, but Father Russell though indicted as a priest was acquitted by the action of the local gentry, who out of respect for his family themselves went on the jury and threw out the bill of indictment after first hindering witnesses from coming in

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against him.⁴ Father Russell spent thirty-two more years on the English mission and died at Stanton Lacey in Shropshire on September 8th, 1711, being in his eightieth year. He is commemorated in the Bornhem Chapter Rolls as one who "had suffered much for the Faith." Father David Joseph Kemeys was arraigned at the Old Bailey on the charge of his priesthood on January 17th, 1680, but being almost at death's door owing to his imprisonment in Newgate, he could not stand his trial and was remanded to prison where he died ten days later. The Bornhem Rolls record his death "*in carceri propter fidem.*" As he died in prison for the Faith we may hope that one day he too will be numbered by the Holy See amongst the beatified English Martyrs. Father William Collins, brought to the bar of the Lords for the treason of being a priest, was sent back to the Gate House prison until further information could be brought against him. He was eventually set at liberty and died at Bruges in 1699. Two Fathers, Albert Lionel Anderson, *alias* Munson, and Peter Atwood were condemned to death on a like charge on January 17th, 1680, the same day Father Kemeys was brought to trial. Father Anderson, we are told, "heard his sentence with great firmness." He was known personally to Charles II, who had "sometimes enjoyed his pleasant conversation," so that a reprieve was obtained by some of his friends and he was returned to prison, where after the lapse of a year he petitioned the King that his sentence might take effect, whereupon he was condemned to perpetual exile. Pardoned under James II he came back to England, where he worked until his death in 1710 at which he was attended by the Provincial, Father Thomas Worthington, who in his notes on the Province relates his happy and saintly end. Father Peter Atwood was actually stepping on to the hurdle to be drawn to Tyburn when a similar reprieve arrived from Charles II, who was too attached to the Order to allow a Dominican to die, risking on their behalf the anger of Parliament when he durst not do so for others. So the fatal friendship of the Stuarts robbed the Province of several martyrs. Father Atwood burst into tears when his friends

⁴ C.R.S., Vol. 26, *passim*; Palmer, *ibid.*, 190-193.

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brought him the reprieve. "To-day, my friends, they have bereaved me of the Kingdom of Heaven; the crown of martyrdom has fallen from my head." Again in 1698 he was lying in prison in London under sentence of death, but by this date the government had ceased to inflict on priests the supreme penalty and Father Atwood died at liberty in 1712, two years after his fellow confessor of the faith Father Anderson, at whose side he was buried in St. Giles in the Fields.⁵ Space will not allow of the mention of all the English Dominicans who suffered imprisonment for their priesthood, but one name will suitably close the list, that of Father Edward Bing, Provincial. He had a varied career as an officer under Cromwell, and then lieutenant in the royal bodyguard. In 1661 he joined the Order, and in 1672 was military chaplain to the English troops in Holland. In 1694 he was imprisoned in London and sentenced to death, but this sentence was commuted to perpetual exile and he returned to Bornhem, where he died in 1701 aged eighty years. He was Provincial from 1695 till 1698 when he resigned.⁶

Other friars underwent persecution without however falling into the clutches of the enemy. In 1733 Father Dominic Williams, Bishop of Tiberiopolis and Vicar-Apostolic of the Northern District, was reported to Rome by the Internuncio at Brussels as being in grave danger and had been obliged to fly to escape prison and torture, "as the Pseudo-archbishop of York had issued a mandate for his capture." He, it appears, had received into the Church a Protestant minister of some importance.⁷ Bishop Williams died at Hazelwood Hall, in Yorkshire, on April 3rd, 1740, and is described in the Bornhem Roll as one "whose ministry had been blessed with much fruit and as a lover of the poor." His companion for many years was Father Thomas Worthington, already mentioned, a remarkable man who was four times Provincial, the first occasion being in 1708 when he was thirty-seven, the last when he was seventy-eight years of age. He died in office, February 25th, 1754, being styled in the

⁵ Palmer, *ibid.*; C.R.S., Vol. 26, p. 173.

⁶ C.R.S., *ibid.*

⁷ M. Brady: *Episcopal Succession*, Vol. III, p. 254 (Rome, 1877).

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Chapter Roll: "*Rosarii Cultor, Vindex, Propagator multo maximus.*"

On the occasion of the '45 rising Father John Greene was imprisoned in York Castle and Father Hansbie, many times Provincial, was arrested in London, but when the fever of that time had subsided they were given back their liberty. As late as 1785 Father Norton to escape arrest as a Catholic priest had to retire into Yorkshire from Hinckley. In or near this latter town he worked nearly all his Dominican life and was the founder of the house which after the invasion of Flanders by the French Revolutionaries received the novices from Bornhem. To achieve this foundation he lived a life not merely of poverty but of positive hardship, being reduced to live on the proceeds of his little garden from which he sold "halfpenny-worths of vegetables." It is on record that in one day he walked fifty-two miles to administer the last Sacraments to two dying persons, one at Leicester, the other at Coventry, being too poor to hire any kind of conveyance.⁸ He died at Hinckley on August 7th, 1800, and lies buried in the parish churchyard of Aston Flamville where his tombstone still shows, bearing this quaint inscription:

Blessed with an amiable disposition
he spent his days with the
Strictest Honour and Integrity.
To the accomplishment of the gentleman
And scholar he united the virtue
and piety of the Christian.

A man equally heroic in his poverty was Father Albert Underhill, *alias* Plunkett, founder of the Leeds mission now represented by St. Anne's Cathedral. Not only did he establish Catholicism there on a firm basis but also educated at his own expense some youths who had vocations to the Order. He did this to frustrate a movement advocated by some to abandon the English Province altogether and to help Father Fenwick (afterwards the first Bishop of Cincinnati) to establish the Order in the United States. Thanks principally to Father Underhill's opposition the measure was dropped. In order to support his recruits he almost starved

⁸ Placid Conway: *The Mission of St. Peter's, Hinckley, 1908.*

himself, living on the poorest kind of food. His house was "a miserable dwelling in a yard behind the public shambles," and there he dwelt "with often nothing better to eat than potatoes mashed with buttermilk, and the scraps of meat and bones he bought, or which sometimes the butchers gave him on Saturday nights." As Father Norton by his great self-denial provided the building for the future novitiate, so following in his footsteps did Father Underhill provide for its future inmates. In his seventieth year he resigned his charge at Leeds and was appointed Prior of Hinckley in August, 1814, but died on October 24th following, and was buried in the middle of the nave of the church.⁹

A great Dominican family was that of the Leadbitters in the north of England, of whom five became priests of the Province and a sixth a nun of the Second Order. The youngest of the priests was Jasper, in religion Father Damatius, who after guiding the parish of Hexham forty-eight years was found dead, kneeling in prayer, on July 1st, 1830, being aged eighty-one. A great worker in the Midlands was Father Benedict Caestryck, whose holy life was so much admired by Mother Margaret Hallahan. Of him the well-known convert Ambrose Philipps de Lisle said, "he was one of the holiest and most venerable priests I ever beheld," and after conversing with him the great missionary Father Ignatius Spencer felt all the difficulties keeping him from entering the true Church completely disappear.

It would be impossible to mention in so small a compass as this paper all the holy Fathers and Brothers who sanctified the Province in the last century; we can but glance at them as they pass through our minds in procession and single out perhaps the saintly figure of Father Augustine Procter, the first superior of Woodchester and several times Provincial, who at the age of seventy cheerfully undertook the twofold task of chaplain to the Dominican Sisters and parish priest of Marychurch. On the occasion of his death four months later, January 8th, 1867, sudden but not unprovided, Mother Margaret Hallahan said to her daughters: "We are left here desolate enough as regards ourselves, but for him it must be

⁹ *The Leeds Mission*, by Rev. Norman Waugh (London, 1904), pp. 8-26.

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bliss indeed. . . . It is truly a hard cross, for we know not what to do and we shall not easily find his like again. . . . Pray that God may send more of these virgin souls, who present God to the people and keep themselves out of sight." These beautiful words of one who is esteemed by all a great saint may with equal force be applied to Father Cyril Bunce who died at Leicester in 1893 aged only fifty-two, after a life hidden in the poverty-stricken parish of St. Patrick's, which he himself had founded and loved because of the personal hardship it entailed, a hardship so fruitful in the ministry of souls. The *eulogium* given him in the Provincial Chapter of Woodchester in 1894 describes him as "A man altogether humble, and admirable for his innocence and his mortified life."¹⁰

Of the laybrethren who worked at Bornhem for two centuries with so much profit no mention has yet been made, but the Province owes much to the memory of Brother Hyacinth Coomans, an energetic Fleming who was Cardinal Howard's right hand man in many of his undertakings. Brother Hyacinth was a very gifted person and acted as procurator for many years at Bornhem, and then at Louvain where he died in 1701 aged sixty-six. He left in writing a full account of the foundation, the rents, property and revenues of the Bornhem priory, and a descriptive account of the fields and woods pertaining to the use of the community, and he also wrote in Flemish a genealogical history of the Howard family. The Cardinal also trusted much to the help and companionship of Brother Henry Packe, who had formerly been his butler at the time he was Lord Almoner to Queen Catherine, consort of Charles II. He died at Brussels at the great age of eighty-eight in 1716. Since the opening of Woodchester in 1850 the laybrethren have truly been a glory to the Province, and many members of the Province living to-day can call to memory a series of devoted and saintly Brothers, who, having won their crown, will not be envious if we single out one or two names only. Speaking of Brother Francis Dutton who died at Woodchester on October 25th,

¹⁰ Of Mother Margaret, and of the saintly lives of the Sisters of the Second Order, I hope to write in the near future.

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1901, the prior who attended him at death writes: "shortly before he died I asked him, 'Brother, is there anything I can do for you when you are gone?' He said in his emphatic way, 'No—Father Prior—nothing. Except a few pictures in my room, you could give them to the children.' He used to keep the few sweets or cakes we got on feast-days. He would give them all to the children. I never saw greater poverty in a cell." How Gerard de Frachet would have liked that death-bed account.

More than one Father of the Province has assured me that Brother Simon McDonald who died at London in 1906 was an outstanding case of holiness of life; and many of us can still see in memory Brother Antoninus McMichael, the big ex-policeman, going round and round the Woodchester cloisters saying the Rosary interminably for the good work of the Order. This he did particularly during the last three years of his long life when old age had laid a restraining hand on his active work. His holy death happened in 1917.

The great holiness of Father Bertrand Wilberforce who died in 1904, with the memory of his work amidst intense suffering, is still fresh in English minds, but still more so is the memory of one whom both the Order and Province alike remember with admiration, veneration, and deep gratitude, Father Bede Jarrett, whose death occurred on March 17th, 1934. In the list of saintly friars whose cause of beatification is to be contemplated, which was submitted to and approved by the recent General Chapter at Rome, we read:

"*At Oxford*, in the year 1934, died in the odour of sanctity the Servant of God, Bede Jarrett, Priest of the Order of Preachers, a man full of wisdom and most esteemed for piety. Great undertakings, and those of the holiest kind, he brought to a happy completion for the good of the Church of God as well as of our Order."¹¹

WALTER GUMBLEY, O.P.

¹¹ "*Oxoniensi* Servus Dei Beda Jarrett, Sacerdos O.P. 1934, vir plenus sapientia, atque pietate commendatissimus obiit in odorem sanctitatis. Magna opera eaque sanctissima pro bono Ecclesiae Dei atque Ordinis nostri feliciter explevit."