

ENGLISH BENEDICTINE CONGREGATION  
HISTORY COMMISSION  
SYMPOSIUM

Oulton Abbey, Friday 9 September 1977

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The conference began with a paper from **Fr Placid Spearritt**, Ampleforth's librarian, on 'Prayer & Politics among English Benedictines at Brussels' in the early Stuart period. His thesis turned on the distinction between Jesuit spirituality, which interlocked with papal ecclesiology, with its features of obedience and centralised control; and monastic spirituality, which was rather anarchic, God-directed, controlled ecclesially by the monastic and local superior and devoid of interest in Church politics. It was the age-old problem, institutional orientation with systems of prayer versus personal orientation with prayer flowing forth from *lectio divina*. The mixture is still with us, in confrontation; there are many ecclesiologies afoot in any one congregation, often any one community.

Fr Placid's illustration of this thesis began with the daughter of the 7th Earl of Northumberland, who died a martyr/rebel in 1572 at Knavesmire. Lady Mary Percy became a foundress Abbess after being educated in Flanders and turning to Fr John Gerard SJ and Fr Richard Holt SJ, with Fr Robert Persons SJ behind both. Benedictine as the convent founded was, it was Jesuit inspired and controlled, Jesuit financed and topped up. In the quarrels between Jesuits and seculars, the Jesuits lost the right to direct convents but retained the right (till 1773) to be nuns' confessors. Those differences were of course reflected in the cloisters, occasioning the crises of 1609, 1624 and 1631 which issued in houses being set up in Ghent and elsewhere by groups of idealists, Jesuitist or anti-Jesuitist. (Cambrai had been founded with the help of Brussels in 1623). Curiously the general spirituality of the Benedictine houses remained unspoiled, a gentle amalgam of sympathy for the Rule's enclosure and for the world's involvement.

INFLUENCES WHICH HAVE HELPED TO FORM OUR SPIRITUALITY

Dame Veronica Buss, *Oulton*,

May I begin with a quotation from Professor David Knowles' Introduction to the Life of Lady Lucy Knatchbull. He compares Dame Gertrude More and Dame Lucy) he writes:) 'Dame Gertrude More, nourished on the austere teaching of Father Baker . . . (appears) a contrast to Dame Lucy with her warmly coloured meditations and moments of ecstasy and union. The difference is probably in part superficial and temperamental; for the lives of both show a struggle . . . and a renunciation of affection . . . But so far as there is a real difference of path, and not merely of grace, it may form interesting material for a comparison of [the Benedictine] Fr Baker's methods and those of the Jesuit directors, who were apostles of Carmelite spirituality in the Low Countries. The latter, with Lady Lucy and her Community behind them, could face any such comparison with equanimity.'

The Foundresses of our Monastery at Ghent, Lucy Knatchbull, Eugenia Poulton, Magdalen Digby and Mary Roper<sup>1</sup> were anxious to continue to enjoy Jesuit direction, which seemed threatened to be cut off by Archbishop Boonan, no friend to the Jesuits. Lady Mary Percy too, as was 'well known was not partial to the Jesuit direction.'<sup>2</sup> The Jesuits, and particularly Dr Norton Knatchbull, Lucy's brother, who had been Confessor in the Brussels Monastery in 1616, and had entered the

<sup>1</sup> Abbess Neville's Annals, CRS Vol V p.12

<sup>2</sup> Ibid p.8. Gillow, Vol IV p.62; Brussels Annals p.139

Society of Jesus in 1618<sup>3</sup>, and who realising the likelihood of this appreciated direction being cut off, were very active in promoting the Foundation.<sup>4</sup> There seems little doubt that Ghent was chosen because the Jesuit Tertian House for the English Province was in that city.<sup>5</sup> Abbess Lucy therefore without difficulty procured the Jesuits as Extraordinary Confessors and directors for her Community.<sup>6</sup> (We, being under the Bishop, our ordinary Confessors and Chaplains were Seculars, right down to 1926, when Abbot Clement Fowler became our first Benedictine Chaplain.) In 1625 Fr Norton Knatchbull was himself the third Rector of the Ghent Tertian House.<sup>7</sup>

However, by 1632, the Jesuit General, Mutius Vitelleschi, perhaps on account of the troubles rampant in the Brussels Monastery at that time, had curtailed the Jesuit services to our Monastery, and Abbess Eugenia Poulton wrote to him, expostulating about his restrictions. We have his reply, dated 5.2.1633 in our Archives: he writes:

In regard to moderating a little the offices, which our (Brethren) were accustomed to confer on this very religious monastery, more frequently and more freely than many approved of, (this) was done by me . . . because I thought it incumbent upon me to see that all was done in order and moderation, so that there should be nothing that the malevolent could censure, or even the Prelates of the Church deem excessive.<sup>8</sup> Curtailment of personal influence perhaps may have resulted, but a long-lasting effect seems to have been the result of these early days. The Exercises, judging from fairly frequent mention in old papers, were often gone through, at least individually, and we learn from Foley and the 'Annual Letters' that in 1676 'many English nuns of Ghent made the Spiritual Exercises this year with great fruit.'<sup>9</sup>

In 1652, Sir Tobie Mathew was living at the Ghent Tertian House and had completed his *Life of Lady Lucy Knatchbull* begun in 1642, the original of which we possess;<sup>10</sup> from the text he was evidently her Director for some time, and in our tradition, a Jesuit, though secretly for political reasons.<sup>11</sup> It seems unlikely that Lucy Knatchbull would have, at the time, confided her intimate personal papers to any but a Jesuit. (In passing, it is interesting to note that this *Life* is the only place known where Sir Tobie is actually named as of the Society of Jesus; that he actually was a member is of course contested by modern Jesuits.<sup>12</sup> After the Suppression in 1773 the Jesuits of the Ghent Tertian House seem to have joined the staff of the School at Liege, known as 'The English Academy', the future Stonyhurst<sup>13</sup> and no doubt from this time our contacts would have been much diminished or even ceased.

Alongside the obvious Jesuit influence on our Community there must also have been a growing Benedictine influence. To make it more easily available, Dame Alexia Gray, in 1632, made a translation of the Holy Rule, amusing to read, as it had been feminised throughout! (I think this was the first printed English edition since the Reformation.) Another source of Benedictine influence came from the Great Abbey of St Peter's the Abbot of which exercised a kind of feudal right over our Abbey, it being in the domain of St Peter's; each year on the feast of SS Peter and Paul a wax candle of 2lbs weight

<sup>3</sup> Gillow, Vol IV p.64. Foley Vol V p.423.

<sup>4</sup> Abbess Neville's Annals, CRS Vol V p.10

<sup>5</sup> Foley's Records, III p.393

<sup>6</sup> Ghent Annals p.9

<sup>7</sup> Foley's Records III p.393; Brussels Annals p.140

<sup>8</sup> Oulton Archives, G9

<sup>9</sup> Foley's records VII; *Annual Letters* p 1202

<sup>10</sup> Oulton Archives, G13

<sup>11</sup> A.H.Mathew, *Life of Tobie Mathew*, 1904, pp ix & xiii

<sup>12</sup> Letter in archives, Fr Newdigate 1922; Fr Chadwick

<sup>13</sup> Ghent Annals, p.67; Cath. Encycl. XIV p.99

etc had to be presented in recognition of the Abbot's over-lordship!<sup>14</sup> As early as 22nd May 1625 an agreement had been drawn up between the two Monasteries regarding mutual prayers for the departed.<sup>15</sup>

Very friendly relations with the monks seem to have been maintained until our departure from Ghent in 1794.<sup>16</sup> We had taken the Brussels Constitutions with us to Ghent. They had been drawn up in 1610 for 'the better observation of the Rule of O.H.F. St Benedict,' by Mathias Hovius, Archbishop of Mechlin, and, Abbess Neville tells us of 'many Abbots of learning and sanctity.'<sup>17</sup> When Father Rudisind Barlow went to Brussels in 1623 to obtain help for the foundation at Cambrai, he 'perused our Statutes and gave our constitutions most high prayse, and that they were more conforme to the Rule than theirs.'<sup>18</sup> When Bishop Ullathorne revised these Statutes in 1880 he considered them 'conspicuous for their prudence and wisdom', he thought much too of the long test which they had stood, and the value of old traditions and experience generally.<sup>19</sup> We continued to observe them until about 1947, leaving them aside with regret.

The Community left Ghent in June 1794, via the Duke of York's army waggons and Antwerp.<sup>20</sup> In 1795 they reassembled in Preston, 'the most Catholic town in England,'<sup>21</sup> in a house in Chapel Street, opposite the Church of St Wilfred, which had been opened in 1793 by the ex-Jesuits, Frs Dunn and Morgan,<sup>22</sup> there the Community were obliged to go for Mass and the Sacraments until a Chaplain, in the person of Fr Robert Blaco was appointed in 1797 by Dr Gibson, the Vicar Apostolic.<sup>23</sup> As far as our records go we seem to have had little or no community contacts with Jesuits after their restoration in 1814 apart from one or two retreats.

In 1811 the Community removed to Caverswall Castle near Stone in Staffordshire and so came under the jurisdiction of Dr Milner, then Vicar Apostolic of the Midland District; we were, as our Annals record: 'thus provided with an Ecclesiastical Superior, whose personal piety, enlightened wisdom and fatherly kindness were unsurpassed in any of the excellent prelates under whose jurisdiction it had hitherto flourished.'<sup>24</sup> His influence was necessarily a powerful one; he had great zeal for the spiritual and temporal welfare of the Community. We have a number of spiritual directives and commentaries written by him for us, religious books given to members of the Community; he drew up plans,<sup>25</sup> even to the minutest details for the Chapel and interested himself in every aspect of our life ) even to sending a large roll of blue flannel for petticoats for the cold nuns! Husenbeth, in his Life of Dr Mimer says,

He always took a kind and paternal interest in the Convent at Caverswall. There he felt himself in the reviving atmosphere of holiness and religion, and that he had escaped for a while from the turmoil and distractions of the world. It was often said that to see Dr Milner in his real character one should see him at Oscott or Caverswall. He was free from restraint, safe from invidious observation, and surrounded by friends in whom he could repose entire confidence. Then, all the

<sup>14</sup> Ibid p.10.

<sup>15</sup> Ghent State Archives.

<sup>16</sup> Letters Oulton Archives, 1843.

<sup>17</sup> Abbess Neville, CRS Vol V p.4.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid p.9.

<sup>19</sup> Ghent Annals. p.140.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid p.80.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid p.86

<sup>22</sup> Ibid p.86

<sup>23</sup> Ibid p.91. Ward. 'History of St Edmund's', p.84.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid p.102.

<sup>25</sup> M55 Oulton Archives, Section C.

amiability of his real character came forth and he was easy, cheerful and affable.<sup>26</sup> Bishop Milner died in 1826; he seems to have had a marked influence on the Community at this period, and none later seems to have been as strong and beneficial as his.

In the early 1840s we came to know Blessed Dominic Barberi C.P., who acted as our Extraordinary for some time, and gave the Community two Retreats, one in September 1844 and another in May 1847.<sup>27</sup> Bishop Walsh, Milner's successor, dying in 1849, Bishop Ullathorne became Vicar Apostolic of the Midland District and first Bishop of Birmingham, and so, 'we enjoyed the benefit of his fatherly care and enlightened government for 40 years afterwards,' as our Annals state,<sup>28</sup> and for the first time in our history under a directly Benedictine influence. In 1853, Caverswall Castle having become too small for our needs, it was he who suggested a move and found the property at Oulton for us, and consecrated our Church in 1854.<sup>29</sup>

When in 1876, the German monks were forced, on account of the Kulturkampf, to leave their country, Bishop Ullathorne gave them the church and property at Erdington;<sup>30</sup> by 1879 he had put us in touch with them.<sup>31</sup> From now on they acted as our Extraordinaries, gave us retreats and helped us in many ways) among them Frs Hildebrande de Hemptinne, Placid Wolter, and Leo Linse<sup>32</sup> were outstanding and influential in Community matters, such as when Bishop Ullathorne suggested the adoption in 1879 of the Benedictine Breviary and Missal, and also when the English Benedictine Congregation kindly consented to our using their Ordo: we had hitherto used the Roman Breviary according to our old Constitutions, and our own Ordo from Ghent.<sup>33</sup> From this time on, over a hundred years, we have always had Benedictine Extraordinaries, and with but few exceptions retreats, and for the last twenty years a Benedictine has been delegated by the Archbishop to be our Ecclesiastical Superior, and when obtainable, (which is unfortunately rare!) a Benedictine Chaplain.

Remnants of Jesuit influence may be seen I think, down to recent times in some extra-liturgical devotions, as for example a special love of Our Lady Immaculate. It is known that Fr Norton Knatchbull had a marked devotion to the Blessed Virgin conceived Immaculate, and that he was the third Prefect of the Sodality of the Immaculate Conception.<sup>34</sup> Our monastery was dedicated to Our Lady under this title, and we were known into the nineteenth century as 'Benedictines of the Immaculate Conception'. To the various groupings in the monastery were assigned the mysteries in our Lady's life ) the School, the Presentation; the Noviceship her vocation at the Annunciation, the Community her Dolours, and to the Infirmary her Assumption. There were special devotions on each of these feasts: newcomers to the School received a silver ring on which was engraved Ave Maria; postulants intending to persevere, made an oblation to Our Lady; a novena was made for the Assumption for a happy death for the next to die. The Abbess (accompanied by Our Lady, according to an old tradition) communicates each Saturday for the spiritual welfare of the Community. We still keep up these devotions in a modified manner; our children still return wearing their rings! I attribute numbers, (maybe wrongly!) to Jesuit influence, and in our Community we certainly 'lisped in numbers'! There were 7 Saturdays in honour of Our Lady's Dolours; 10 Fridays in honour of St Francis Xavier;

<sup>26</sup> Husenbeth. 'Life of Milner' XV p.265.

<sup>27</sup> A. Devine, 'Life of Father Dominic Barberi', p.168. Ibid by Urban Young, C.P. p.291. 28Ghent Annals, p.127.

<sup>28</sup> Ghent Annals p.127

<sup>29</sup> Ibid p.133

<sup>30</sup> MS Annals by Lady Laurentia Ward, Bk VII p.18.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid Bk VII p

<sup>32</sup> Ibid Bk VII p.18) 30.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid Bk VII p.29

<sup>34</sup> Foley's Records, Vol V p.423.

1 000 Paters, fortunately said privately, for a happy death for the next to die. 'The Hours of the Passion' said hourly in Lent;<sup>35</sup> 10 Tuesdays in honour of O.H.F. St Benedict accompanied by many Litanies, (this though of Bene- dictine origin) all these latter are now obsolete, and I think we are all grateful for this!

#### OTHER PAPERS

The remainder of the conference can be quickly told. **Dom Philip Jebb**, Archivist of Downside and Annalist of the Congregation, gave an amusing anecdotal account of his visit to Australia for the Polding Centenary (Dom Bede Polding, monk of Downside before his episcopal leadership of the Church in Australia). **Dom Alberic Stacpoole** gave a presentation of J. C. H. Aveling's book *The Handle & the Axe* to show the conduct of life of the Catholic recusants in England from Reformation to Emancipation (1535) 1829). **Dr David Rogers** took up the theme of the morning with a bibliographical lecture, of the kind he is such a master at, on books written for, or by, or dedicated to, members of the foundation movement of Brussels. It was exact and detailed. Books such as the *Imitatio Christi* and *The Art of Dying Well* figured prominently.

<sup>35</sup> MS Oulton Archives, G40