

**THE ENGLISH BENEDICTINE CONGREGATION AND THE  
ESTABLISHMENT OF EALING ABBEY IN LONDON.**

**On 12 March** 1997, Right Reverend Dom Laurence Soper, O. S. B., Abbot of Ealing Abbey, opened the centenary celebrations of this London Benedictine monastery with a ceremony in the monastery cemetery and a procession to the abbey for Conventual Mass. The centenary programme of Ealing Abbey notes that '12 March 1897 was the day Dom Bernard Bulbeck arrived from Downside to be the first parish priest in Ealing. He took up residence in Castle Hill House which used to be on the site of the lawn above the present Cemetery. ?The opening of the centenary celebrations also emphasized the Benedictine roots of this London monastery: 'For the first fifty years Ealing was a dependent house of Downside Abbey, near Bath. On 19th December 1947, Ealing was

established as an independent Conventual Priory. It was raised to the status of an Abbey on 26th May 1955. The Benedictines of Downside set up this monastic foundation in London at the request of Cardinal Herbert Vaughan, who wanted the monks to take charge of the Divine Office at Westminster Cathedral. In the deliberations surrounding the decision to accept Vaughan's proposal, however, members of the English Benedictine Congregation never minimized or lost sight of the monastic character of this new adventure.

At the end of the nineteenth century, many English Roman Catholics believed that a cathedral in central London would provide a testimony, as well a place of worship, to the respectability and achievements of their religion. Cardinal Herbert Vaughan, who became the Archbishop of Westminster in 1893, strongly supported the construction of a new cathedral for his large urban archdiocese. 'When Vaughan became Archbishop, he immediately decided as his major project, to build a cathedral which would be a liturgical, pastoral and intellectual centre for English Catholicism.' In June 1895, Vaughan blessed the foundation stone for his new cathedral, and at the celebration following this ceremony, the Cardinal pointed out 'that the Catholic body must have a cathedral in which the sacred liturgy of the church should be carried out in all its fullness day by day, and many times a day, as it was of old in Westminster and Canterbury.'

If Vaughan wanted to re-create the glories of pre-Reformation England, especially in respect to his new Westminster and its liturgy, he could not ignore the English Benedictine Congregation. And the monks were eager to return to London. Vaughan, whose brother Jerome was a monk of St. Gregory's, Downside, revealed that this 'anxiety with regard to the Cathedral was allayed by the readiness with which he found the English Benedictine Fathers, full of life and energy and numbers, ready to come back to Westminster. St. Gregory's would supply the monks, and the London suburb of Ealing, approximately ten miles from Hyde Park Corner, would provide a suitable home for the Benedictines who would travel to central London from Ealing to perform their liturgical duties at the cathedral. Vaughan's plan seemed simple: 'while safeguarding the position and rights of the chapter, to hand over the whole working and management of the cathedral to the monks.'

Benedictine monks had settled at Downside, near Bath, in 1814, and by the end of the century the community had increased in size. London could become a centre for their missionary work and the eventual conversion of England to Roman Catholicism. On 5 May 1896, Cardinal Vaughan wrote to the superior at Downside, Prior Hugh Edmund Ford, about the possibility of the Benedictines moving into London, and suggested a piece of land in Ealing as a possible location. Owned by the Visitation Sisters, the Cardinal told Ford that the property could be purchased for under £4,000. Prior Ford responded and told Vaughan that he would inspect the property during an upcoming visit to London. But

Prior Ford had already developed his own plans about a Benedictine foundation in London: ‘Your Eminence would I suppose wish us to try and do more than merely take charge of the mission, when I see the property I will call.’<sup>5</sup> On the same day that Prior Ford responded to the Cardinal, he also wrote to Abbot Benedict Snow, then living at East Dulwich, and asked him to inspect the property at Ealing.

Snow played an important role in the foundation of Ealing Abbey.<sup>6</sup> The titular Abbot of Glastonbury, Snow had been living in East Dulwich since 1894. His contemporaries described him as pragmatic, cautious, and conservative in his approach, and Prior Ford valued his advice and judgement. Abbot Snow visited Ealing shortly after the letter from Prior Ford. He emphasized the residential aspect of the suburb and the location of two nearby railway stations, and described the prospective site for the new foundation, Castle Hill House, as an attractive and substantial dwelling. Snow ended his report to Prior Ford on an optimistic note: ‘*I think it is a promising place in a rising neighbourhood but the difficulty is to get a return for the £4,000 purchase price - a deal and no church.*’<sup>7</sup>

Because of Abbot Snow’s optimistic report and encouragement, Prior Ford moved ahead with the plans to establish a monastic foundation in London. After it became apparent that the Visitation Sisters were ready to reach an agreement on the sale of the property, Ford began negotiations with Cardinal Vaughan. Again Prior Ford turned to Abbot Snow for advice.

He urged Ford to exercise caution, and pointed out certain

problems and difficulties which the monks might encounter in Ealing:

uncertain prospects of [a] school; uncertainty of means of support; burden of interest; and the erection of a church. The prospects of a monastic foundation in London had clearly captured the imagination of the two Benedictines. Moreover, additional work and a source of income must supplement any liturgical duties at Westminster Cathedral. Abbot Snow, like Ford, believed that the monks at Ealing must be involved in parish work in addition to their duties at Vaughan's cathedral.

On 5 June 1896, Prior Ford responded to Cardinal Vaughan's invitation to send Benedictine monks to London. Ford's reply was guarded and pragmatic, and reflected Abbot Snow's advice and suggestions. 'I cannot but express to Your Eminence our grateful acknowledgement for offering us the work that you suggest at Ealing,' Prior Ford informed the Cardinal, 'and our appreciation of the confidence placed in us by entrusting it to us.' A source of work, however, must be secured for his monks. 'Your Eminence will recognize the dangers of establishing a religious community without sufficient occupation for its members and the consequent difficulty in maintaining a religious spirit. He stated that he felt 'a scruple in sending a religious anywhere without assigning a definite work that he could and would do.' Ford suggested the possibility of a Benedictine school associated with the Ealing foundation, but 'the prospects of a school can only be tested by further acquaintance with the existing neighbourhood, and some data to forecast its future development.'

Ford clearly did not want to limit the work of the Ealing Benedictines to liturgical responsibilities at Westminster Cathedral. Parochial work must be part of any arrangement with the Cardinal, and a five year trial period would test the feasibility of this idea. Prior Ford, therefore, asked Vaughan for permission to send a monk to Ealing 'at once to get things together and attend to the spiritual wants of the people [and] shortly after

I have little doubt that I could give him a companion....?A parish and the possibility of a school, Ford believed, would help to guarantee the success of the Ealing foundation. 'If this meets with Your Eminence's approval I should be willing to take the risk of purchasing the property, which will be a substantial earnest of our intention to carry out your wishes.' Ford concluded his letter to Cardinal Vaughan by pointing out that pastoral work would not detract from any liturgical duties or responsibilities at the cathedral. 'I would add that the establishment of a house at Ealing would not render it more difficult to find men for the Cathedral, on the contrary it would I think render it easier by providing another community from which to draw when the times comes.

In addition to this formal reply to Cardinal Vaughan's invitation, Prior Ford enclosed a more personal letter. Ford revealed to the Cardinal that the question of the future relationship between the monks working at Westminster Cathedral, those living at Ealing, and the founding community at Downside had already surfaced in conversation, but he thought it 'would be better to let these work themselves out as time goes

on.<sup>70</sup> Prior Ford also believed that the interests of Downside might be harmed if definite conditions or plans were drawn up at this early stage of the negotiations. Nonetheless he suggested that the Ealing foundation might develop into an independent Benedictine monastery within a decade. Ford admitted that he was a novice in such undertakings as the establishment of new monastic foundations, and confessed that he had sought more experienced counsel. He concluded by expressing his desire to explore the Ealing proposal, and asked for an interview with the Cardinal to discuss these matters more fully.

Cardinal Vaughan replied and agreed to Ford's suggestion about a meeting. In this letter, however, the Cardinal expressed a serious reservation about Ford's preliminary plans for a foundation in Ealing. The establishment of a school in the London suburb, according to Vaughan, would create problems, but this could be discussed when the two met in London. The meeting between Cardinal Vaughan and Prior Ford took place on 11 June at Archbishop's House, and after much discussion the two reached several agreements about the new foundation at Ealing. Vaughan later enumerated these conditions in a letter to Ford. The Cardinal promised to authorize a Benedictine foundation at Ealing 'provided that the consent of the Holy See can be obtained.'<sup>71</sup> Vaughan also expressed strong reservations about the possibility of a school operated by the monks: this foundation 'is not to include the opening of any School other than a Public Elementary School.'<sup>72</sup> Any changes, moreover, would require permission of the ordinary of the archdiocese. But the Cardinal

did make some concessions to Prior Ford's requests. According to Vaughan's letter, two elements must constitute the life and work of this new urban monastery: 'the serving of the mission in the usual way, and the 'establishment of a Religious Community of your Order and the observance of Common Life according to your rule, within five years of your going to Ealing. Moreover, if after the five-year period the community had not grown to six monks, Vaughan claimed the prerogative to repay the Benedictine Order for the money expended on the purchase of the land and building, and he could then take possession of the Ealing property. Cardinal Vaughan's main motive for inviting the Benedictines to open a monastic house in London could be found in the conclusion of his letter to Prior Ford: 'one of the principal reasons inducing the Cardinal Archbishop to invite the Benedictines to open a house at Ealing is that they may be sufficiently near to Westminster to contribute to the Choral service of the Cathedral.'

Ford thought that Cardinal Vaughan's conditions were too restrictive, and some compromise had to be reached before he could send monks to Ealing. Prior Ford believed that the application to Rome would be for permission to establish 'a domus [i.e. a monastery] at Ealing with the care of a mission attached.'<sup>2</sup> Ford wanted it clearly understood that when a sufficient number of monks resided at Ealing, the community could then apply to seek 'the full ecclesiastical position, rights and privileges of a Benedictine monastery.' Moreover, the Cardinal's limitations on an education apostolate run by the Ealing Benedictines 'would not prevent us

...from having private pupils, as it is permitted to any mission. The ban on a secondary school did not seriously upset or disturb Prior Ford. According to Ford's biographer, 'He anticipated that when the parish at Ealing began to grow there would be many parents desirous of having a Catholic day school for their boys, which would secure their not having to attend non-Catholic establishments. '13 Consequently, Prior Ford believed that Cardinal Vaughan would eventually soften his prohibition on the monks operating a secondary school in Ealing. In general, the Downside Prior also believed that Vaughan's conditions might frustrate and hinder any future expansion and growth for the Ealing foundation, and he maintained that the monks 'ought to be free to deal with the land we buy for ourselves in the way most advantageous. Another meeting between Cardinal Vaughan and Prior Ford occurred at Belmont on 29 June 1896, and during the discussions Vaughan agreed to include compensation for any buildings the monks might build for the purpose of the mission if the foundation failed to succeed and he exercised his option to purchase the property. But, in spite of Ford's initial optimism about a school, Vaughan would not change his mind.

After these two meetings with the Cardinal, Prior Ford wrote Abbot Snow, who had never lost interest in the Ealing project, and again asked for his advice and counsel. Ford told the Abbot that the Cardinal 'would not modify the wording of his proposal about a school at Ealing'<sup>4</sup> According to Prior Ford, Cardinal Vaughan expressed a fear that even a dozen students at an Ealing school 'would take the cream of the

neighbourhood and leave St. Charles [in Bayswater] the rest ... Vaughan obviously wanted to protect the interests of St. Charles, but did agree that if the monks wanted one or two students to help financially, he would not refuse permission. When asked by the Cardinal to comment on the responsibilities of the monks for singing the Divine Office at Westminster Cathedral, Ford told Abbot Snow that he remained silent on this issue. Ford, however, admitted to Snow that he wanted to act on the Cardinal's proposal immediately. 'The nuns are getting impatient,' he wrote, and

we shall have to be ready with a proposal for getting the money to purchase the property. Ford concluded his letter by emphasizing his dream of a Benedictine community in London with 'the full ecclesiastical position, rights and privileges of a Benedictine monastery,' His argument to Abbot Snow was clear: 'We had better get this while we can; the time when it would take effect would depend on ourselves.' Another Archbishop, Ford reasoned, 'might oppose us in this.'

Snow's response again indicated his optimism and the strong commitment to the Ealing scheme. 'As far as I can judge I think Ealing is a very desirable locality for a Settlement,' he replied to Prior Ford, and 'it is a growing place within easy distance of London and as good a situation as we are likely to get in the Suburbs in the Westminster Diocese.'<sup>5</sup> Abbot Snow told Ford not to worry about finances, and even suggested that he should begin to draw up plans for the construction of the church and think about the organization of the parish. He also commented Cardinal



Vaughan's conditions for the Ealing foundation. Vaughan's prohibition against a school, Abbot Snow believed, was unrealistic and impractical.

the neighbourhood seems to be such that a school somewhat higher than an elementary one will become a necessity to prevent children going to private Protestant schools, and as soon as this evil can be demonstrated it will be very difficult for the ecclesiastical authorities to refuse a higher grade school for boys to rescue them from Protestant hands.

Without a school of this character, the Cardinal's demand that there be six priests within five years might be difficult to meet. Like Ford, Abbot Snow was not smitten by Cardinal Vaughan's romantic dreams about the monks singing plainchant at Westminster Cathedral. 'The Choral Service at the cathedral might be a blunder,' Snow informed Prior Ford, and 'this is so worded that it can scarcely be held to as a condition sine qua non.' The success of the monastic foundation at Ealing took precedence over the monks' liturgical responsibilities in central London. Before negotiations on the sale of the property or talks with Archbishop's House could proceed any further, however, Prior Ford had to secure the necessary permission of the Abbot President of the English Benedictine Congregation, Anselm O'Gorman, and his advisors.

Supported by Abbot Snow, Ford wrote to Dom Anselm O'Gorman and his Council, the

Regimen, on 17 August and presented strong arguments in favour of sending English Benedictines from Downside to Ealing. He told O'Gorman that Cardinal Vaughan had invited 'us to open a house at

Ealing and offered us the Mission with the hope that we may later on have a community there.

<sup>16</sup> Ford also asked the Abbot President to begin the process of securing the necessary permission from Rome to establish a monastic foundation in Ealing. On the following day, Ford sent O’Gorman and the members of the Regimen copies of Cardinal Vaughan’s offer and conditions, Abbot Snow’s favourable opinion, and his own arguments for accepting Vaughan’s invitation. Prior Ford argued that the monks could live the monastic life in Ealing, conduct an urban parish, and at the same time be close enough to Westminster Cathedral to sing the Divine Office there. Moreover, Ealing ‘is said to be one of the best districts near London still unoccupied as a parish [and] the district is rapidly developing and will have the character of a high class suburb.’<sup>17</sup> The future of the Benedictine foundation in Ealing now rested with the Abbot President and his Council.

President O’Gorman responded immediately and thanked Ford for the information concerning the Ealing proposal. O’Gorman suggested that Ford visit him, but he declined the invitation and promised to see him if any problems arose. The President immediately began to contact members of the Regimen. Dom Alphonsus Morrall replied and told the President that the Downside council had already approved the plan. Dom Alphonsus saw some difficulties, namely, the time schedule set by Cardinal Vaughan and the means to support the monks at Ealing, but the proposal enjoyed the support of other monks. ‘I submit my judgement to theirs,’ he informed President O’Gorman, ‘although not without

misgivings. In his letter to Dom Romuald Wood, O'Gorman's chief concern surfaced: the Ealing foundation at Ealing would put a great strain

on the Downside community. Nonetheless, he wrote, 'all the Gregorian President ended his letter with his views on the family wants it. The Pres question.

As for myself, I feel inclined to grant the permission. The money question seems safe and if they cannot carry Ealing on, they will have to drop it, or some other establishment in London [i.e., East Dulwich or Great Ormond Street]. It will be extremely advantageous to have one or more sites near London for recruiting purposes and for a proper display of our life and liturgy.

In response, Dom Romuald told President O'Gorman: 'I do not make any objection to the project.' Finally, Dom Cuthbert Doyle told O'Gorman that 'St Gregory's ought to be very chary about venturing upon any new undertaking, but nonetheless he was 'quite ready to acquiesce in the generally expressed wish of its members [Downside] and say, by all means let them take Ealing.'

With the approval of the Regimen, Abbot president O'Gorman wrote to Prior Ford: 'In a few words the whole Regimen consents to accept the new establishment at Ealing.' O'Gorman told Ford that he would petition the Holy See as soon as possible for the necessary

permission to make a foundation at Ealing. He advised him to ask the Cardinal 'for permission.

..to erect a college and monastery?in addition to serving the

mission. 'We must take every precaution,' the President continued, 'for future development.'<sup>21</sup> In another letter to Ford, O'Gorman gave the Prior a free hand in his dealings with Cardinal Vaughan, and told him that 'whatever modifications the Cardinal and yourself may make, I suppose they will at least be the framework for any future documents.'<sup>22</sup> And by the end of September 1896, Prior Ford received the official document from the office of the President of the English Benedictine Congregation which stated:

According to our Constitution I have reported the question to the Reverend Definitori of the regimen. After mature consideration, we decided unanimously to accept the foundation which was offered as well as the monastery to be built successively, and eventually the mission of the place called Ealing, subject to the conditions requested by the Bull Romanos Pontifices concerning the permission of the Holy See.<sup>23</sup>

After the approval by the President and the Regimen, plans for the arrival of the Benedictine monks in Ealing began to progress quickly and smoothly. Abbot Snow was overjoyed about the actions of the English Benedictine Congregation, and he continued to negotiate for the purchase of Castle Hill House and also investigated other nearby sites. In respect to the necessary petition to Rome, Snow also urged Ford to seek permission to establish a proper Benedictine monastery in Ealing. On 1 October 1896, 'nor Ford informed Cardinal Vaughan that the Benedictines of Downside were eager to go to Ealing. In this letter, he enclosed: the formal petition

! f the English Congregation to the Holy See; permission of the Abbot

President and the Regimen; and the list of conditions under which the Cardinal would welcome the Benedictines into the archdiocese. The formal petition which Ford sent to Cardinal Vaughan for the Roman authorities stated:

After obtaining the permission of the Superiors of our Congregation, as well as the assent of His Eminence the Cardinal Archbishop, [the petitioner] humbly implores of the Holy See the faculty of founding a new residence in Faling as well as of building a monastery later on and eventually of accepting from the same Cardinal the mission of the same place, Ealing, under the following conditions stated by His Eminence the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster.<sup>24</sup>

Ford asked Vaughan to present the petition to the Roman authorities as soon as possible so that he could proceed with the purchase of Castle Hill House.

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On 20 October 1895, Propaganda Fide granted the Cardinal's request, and a week later Cardinal Vaughan informed Prior Ford that he had received 'the necessary permission from the Holy See for you to take Ealing; the conditions being those we agreed upon.'<sup>25</sup> The Chapter of Westminster Cathedral was also informed, and Archbishop's House soon asked Downside for the names of the monks who would be assigned to Ealing for inclusion in the new archdiocesan Directory. In December 1896, the Downside Review announced that 'Dom Bernard Bulbeck and Dom Aidan Howlett have been selected to start our new mission at Ealing,



which promises to become an important railway centre in the new future.<sup>6</sup> Dom Bernard Bulbeck arrived in Ealing on 12 March 1897 and took up residence in the recently purchased Castle Hill House. One hundred years later, on 12 March 1997, the Abbot and monks of Ealing Abbey commemorated this event and opened the centenary celebrations of this London monastery.

Ealing has indeed grown during its first century, and there have been some modifications or changes in Cardinal Vaughan's original plans. In spite of Vaughan's romantic dreams about the Ealing monks singing the Divine Office at Westminster Cathedral, the secular clergy were entrusted with this liturgical responsibility and sang the Divine Office at the cathedral for the first time in 1902. Despite Vaughan's original misgivings about a school at Ealing, one was started in 1902. One element, however, remained constant during the first hundred years of Ealing's monastic history: a strong commitment to Benedictine principles emphasized by Prior Ford, Abbot Snow, and Abbot President O'Gorman has remained

consistent.

J. D. Holmes, More Roman Than Rome: English Catholicism in the Nineteenth Century (London: Burns and Qates, 1978), 201. See also P. Doyle, The History of Westminster Cathedral (London: G. Chapman, 1995). For the early history of Ealing Abbey, see R. Kollar Westminster Cathedral: From Dream to Reality (Edinburgh: F&L Publications, 1987) and The Return of the Benedictines to London: The History of Ealing Abbey from 1896 to Independence (Tunbridge Wells: Burns and Oates, 1990).

<sup>2</sup>The Tablet, 6 July 1895.

Ibid.

I. G. Snead-Cox, The Life of Cardinal Vaughan vol. 1 (London: Herbert and David, 1910), 347.

~ Ford to Vaughan, 6 May 1896, Ford Papers, Ealing Abbey Archives, London.

<sup>6</sup>See 'In Memoriam: Abbot Snow,' Downside Review Spring, 1905, 1-18.

~ Snow to Ford, 12 May 1896, Ford Papers.

<sup>s</sup>Snow to Ford, 3 June 1896, Ford Papers.

Ford to Vaughan, 5 June 1896, Ford Papers.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Vaughan to Ford, 17 June 1896, Ford Papers.

<sup>12</sup>Ford, 'Notes: Ealing,' 28 June 1896, Ford Papers.

B. Hicks, Hugh Edmund Ford (London: Sands, Co., 1947), 76-77.

~ Ford to Snow, 6 July 1896, Ford Papers.

Snow to Ford, 7 July 1896, Ford Papers.

<sup>6</sup>Ford to O'Gorman, 17 August 1896, Ford Papers.

<sup>7</sup>Ford to Benedictine Fathers, 18 August 1896, Ford Papers.

O'Gorman to Wood, 26 August 1896, Faling Abbey Papers, Downside Abbey Archives, Downside Abbey.

<sup>8</sup>Wood to O'Gorman, 28 August 1896, Ealing Abbey Papers.

<sup>20</sup>Doyle to O'Gorman, 1 September 1896, Ealing Abbey Papers.

<sup>21</sup>O'Gorman to Ford, 3 September 1896, Ford Papers.

<sup>22</sup>O'Gorman to Ford, 9 September 1896, Ford Papers.

<sup>23</sup>O'Gorman to Ford, 29 September 1896, Ford Papers.

<sup>24</sup>Petition of Prior Ford to the Holy See, Ford Papers.

<sup>25</sup>Vaughan to Ford, 28 October 1896, Ford Papers.

<sup>26</sup>'Odds and Ends,' Downside Review, December 1896, 314.