BISHOP THOMAS JOSEPH BROWN OSB (1798-1880) AND BELMONT[1]

Alban Hood OSB (E)

It seems appropriate as we gather here at Belmont to remember its founding Father, Bishop Thomas Joseph Brown, who has tended to be overlooked by historians of Nineteenth century Catholicism in these islands. The story of how Belmont came to be established is inextricably tied up with not only with that of Brown, but also of the English Benedictine Congregation in this period, and the challenges it faced in the years leading up to the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy in England and Wales.

Born in Bath in 1798, Thomas Brown was educated by the monks of St.Gregory's in Acton Burnell, Shropshire, and it was here that he entered the monastic community as Brother Joseph in 1813, the year before the move to Downside, where Brown was professed on 28th October 1814. Among his near contemporaries were Bede Polding, the future Archbishop of Sydney. After ordination in 1823 Brown taught theology in the monastery, where his future episcopal colleague, William Bernard Ullathorne, was one of his students. Brown showed early promise, for only three years after his ordination, he was elected by his brethren as their delegate to the General Chapter of that year. In 1829 his abilities came to the notice of the future Pope Gregory XVI, when Brown was sent to Rome with the President General of the English Benedictines, Father Richard Marsh, to defend his community's case against Bishop Augustine Baines. Brown was elected Prior of Downside in 1834, a post he held until 1840 when he was appointed Vicar Apostolic of the newly- created Welsh district.

Thomas Joseph Brown's early Benedictine background provides a significant exception to the norm of his time. Unusually, he had no direct experience of the

[1] This paper is largely based on my earlier article, "'Stirring Up the Pool': Bishop Thomas Joseph Brown OSB (1798-1880) and the Dispute between the Hierarchy and the English Benedictines," *Recusant History,* Vol 25, No2, October 2000, pp.304-324

English mission after his ordination and his formation equipped him with a sharp and quick mind that was capable of debating with the leading Anglican apologists of the day. His learning and his experience of these debates in the 1830s ensured that Brown was the only English bishop capable for instance of arguing with the celebrated John Henry Newman, whom Brown was to delate to Rome in 1859 over an article in the *Rambler.*[2]

Brown more than most was therefore equipped to deal with three challenges facing his Congregation: Firstly, the movement for a restored English Catholic hierarchy which was gaining momentum after the granting of Catholic Emancipation in 1829, and which posed a threat to the independence and autonomy of the English Benedictine missions; Secondly, the preaching tours and building of new retreat houses in England in the 1830s and 1840s by newer religious orders such as the Rosminians, the Redemptorists and Passionists which were to force the English Benedictines to adopt a clearer definition of themselves. The presence of these newer orders posed no threat to the Vicars Apostolic and secular clergy, under whom they demonstrated a willingness to work, but in doing so they highlighted the anomalous situation of the English Benedictines, whose regular status vis-à-vis the hierarchy was not obvious. Unlike these new religious, who were attired in clerical costume, the only habit worn by English Benedictines of this period was "blue stockings, knee-breeches, and a long dark blue coat.[3]" Finally the English Benedictines had to take notice of the wind of Benedictine revival that was blowing through the continent, thanks to Prosper Guéranger's new monastic foundation at Solesmes in France and the Wolter brothers establishing a new monastery at Beuron in Germany. There was an increasing tendency for the Holy See to play down any national singularities and treat all Benedictines as identical and conforming largely to a conventual, rather than a missionary, model.

---

[2]   cf Vincent Blehl SJ, 'Newman's Delation: Some Hitherto Unpublished Letters, ' *The Dublin Review* No. 486 (Winter 1960-61) pp296 - 305

[3]   Denis Gwyn, *Father Luigi Gentili* (Ireland 1951) p.105

The dispute with Bishop Baines had highlighted all too clearly the anomalous position of the Benedictines whose missions represented a threat to the authority of the bishops.The warfare over rival jurisdiction was to carry on for the next 50 years. Baines was an early advocate of a restored English hierarchy, and envisaged a Church controlled by episcopal authority, providing proper episcopal support and direction for the missionary work undertaken by religious orders such as the Benedictines. In 1838 Baines wrote to Bishop Griffiths, Vicar Apostolic of the London District: "we bishops must really speak out – make the real state of our ecclesiastical government, as connected with the regulars, fully understood, and insist upon certain points being fixed as essential to the exercise of our office." He asserted that to allow the regulars "to establish new parishes, wherever they pleased, without the consent of the bishop," was "repugnant to all canon law."[4] Brown at this time would have likely disagreed with this view. In 1838 as Prior of Downside he worked to ensure that the English Benedictines were "no longer at the mercy of marauding Vicars Apostolic[5]" who were recruiting members of the Congregation to serve the new missions abroad.

Given this background, it is hardly surprising that when Brown was appointed Vicar Apostolic of the newly created Welsh district in 1840, great hopes were placed upon him by his fellow monks. News that he was considering declining such an appointment was followed by a number of letters from various Benedictines urging Brown to accept, expressing the hope that he would "counteract the anti-regular spirit of the bishops" and "defend the monks.[6]" These hopes however failed to take account of the fact that since the 1830's Brown had been profoundly unhappy with the current state of the English Benedictine Congregation. Only a few months after becoming Prior at Downside, Brown wrote to Father Augustine Birdsall, the

---

[4]   *AAW*, III.C.vii, Baines to Griffiths, 11 Nov, 1838
[5]   Frances O'Donoghue, *The Bishop of Botany Bay: The Life of Australia's first Catholic Archbishop*
        (London, 1982) p.16
[6]   *Downside, Birt*, K381, Fr. R. Pope to Brown, 30th May 1840,
        K382, Fr. R.M Cooper, 30th May 1840, K 419, Fr. Cockshoot to Brown, 24th August 1840.

President General. to petition him against sending English Benedictines on the foreign mission,[7]because of the difficulty of finding sufficient suitable men for the missions at home. Neither was Brown altogether happy with many of the monks on the home missions. He criticised their poor monastic observance, and attempted to bring back missioners to the monastery, a practice which earned him a stiff reprimand from the President.[8] Furthermore, he opposed the practice of English Benedictines running schools, which both Downside and Ampleforth did[9].

It was not long after becoming Vicar Apostolic that Brown became deeply involved in relations between the regulars and the bishops . At first, he tried to be the peacemaker and bridger-builder. He had every reason to maintain friendly contacts with the religious orders. In his first Pastoral letter he highlighted the problems he faced: only sixteen missions in existence to serve the needs of a rapidly expanding population, no proper Catholic schools, no seminary for the training of clergy, and only nineteen priests. He desperately needed priests, and he approached several of the religious orders, and was successful in getting limited support from both the Rosminians and the Jesuits. He soon realised he needed the support of his Benedictine brethren, and in 1842 he addressed the General Chapter of the English Benedictines. At that chapter it may have seemed to his Benedictine brethren that the bishop was now in the guise of 'poacher turned gamekeeper', for he asked them not only to withdraw from the Australian mission so that they might provide priests for his vicariate, but also, more radically,he proposed that they should allow him to send to the Benedictine monasteries men who wished to become monks who would be trained for service in the Welsh district. They were to be subject to their own Superiors, but the bishop was to have power to appoint them to any mission in his district. This latter proposal was rejected by the monks, as deviating from the English Benedictine constitutions. It may also have evoked painful memories of a similar proposal in 1823 by Bishop Baines, a plan to which it must be remembered, Brown

---

[7]   *Downside, Birt,* I.297, 28th September 1834, Brown to Birdsall,
         I.435, 8th June 1835, Brown to Birdsall.
[8]   *Downside, Birt*, I.422, 28th May 1835, Birdsall to Brown

himself had been a vociferous opponent. In the event, Brown backed off, but the die had already been cast.

Five years later, with the movement for the restored hierarchy gaining momentum, the Rosminian Luigi Gentili, in England to compile a series of reports for Propaganda asserted that in the restored hierarchy

> the new bishops would have to call to their synods
> the heads of the religious orders, and that would help
> to break down the barrier between regular and secular.
> As it is the Benedictines and Jesuits have their own meetings
> as if they were two other vicariates... in the early days the
> Benedictines and the Jesuits were real missionaries
> and laid down their lives for the faith, but now they just
> run missions and often not as well as the seculars, nor are they a
> help to the bishops, for they have the rich missions or the best
> endowed, and they do not obey bishops…[10]

Gentili highlights Brown's potential importance in the issue by continuing:

> Many of the young Benedictines would like to see their
> order flourish once more and if Mgr Ullathorne and Bishop
> Thomas Brown, both Benedictines, had authority, they could
> soon build up the Order with a fine Abbey and novitiate,
> which could become the seminary of Apostles of Great Britain,
> as in the days of St.Augustine…there would be concord and unity
> and charity between them and the secular clergy, instead of jealousy
> and the present constant dissension.[11]

Brown's former pupil and fellow Gregorian, William Bernard Ullathorne, became Vicar Apostolic of the Western District in 1846 and later transferred to the Midland District. In 1848 he was in Rome, to speed the process of the restoration of the hierarchy. Gentili recommended Ullathorne as the most suitable candidate to lead the new hierarchy,[12] but in the event the job went to Nicholas Wiseman, Vicar Apostolic

[9] *Downside, Birt*, H.249, 3rd May 1831, Philips to Brown

[10]

[11] Claude Leetham, <u>Luigi Gentili: Sower for the Second Spring</u>, (London, 1965) pp290-1

[12] Ibid p. 328

of the London District, who in the autumn of 1850 became Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster.

Brown was appointed Bishop of Newport and Menevia in the new hierarchy. The six northern Welsh counties became part of the new diocese of Shrewsbury, while the southern Welsh counties, together with Herefordshire, formed the new diocese of Newport and Menevia. Despite the upbeat Pastoral Letter Brown wrote to his subjects in the autumn of 1850, he did not share Ullathorne's enthusiasm for a restored hierarchy and even tried to resign. He believed that his large vicariate was not ready to form part of a restored hierarchy, for the distances involved and the shortage of priests made it impossible to form a chapter of secular priests.

In July, 1850, some three months before the publication of Nicholas Wiseman's flamboyant pastoral letter 'Without the Flaminian Gate' that announced the restoration of the English Catholic Hierarchy Brown warned the English Benedictines gathered at General Chapter:

> there are some [secular clergy] whose zeal for the re-establishment
> of the hierarchy is said to have been fanned by hositility to missions
> run by regulars…In most large towns it is probable that upon their
> division into parishes, the Parish Church will be the secular mission and
> the regular clergy, serving within such parishes, will not be allowed to
> confer parochial sacraments nor to exercise parochial duties.[13]

Brown's warning went unheeded, and the Chapter failed to prepare the Congregation for important changes in the English Catholic Church that lay just around the corner.

In November 1851 Brown attended a meeting of the new bishops to prepare for a future Synod. Immediately after this meeting he wrote to the President General of the English Benedictines, Dom Alban Molyneux, what was to be an historic letter, suggesting that the chapter of his new diocese should be entirely composed of monks and that the country might have a monastic chapter which had been so distinctive a feature before the Reformation. Brown declared that

> if diocesan chapters be appointed and the recommendations of Bishops
> originate with them, moreover, if Regulars be excluded from all the chapters,
> they become thereby reduced to a sort of inferior position, and the EBC loses
> all its peculiar distinctions. In a few years hence the result may become very
> serious…the only means of preserving some portion of your ancient privileges
> is by constituting Regular Chapters…one may benefit the Order and all Regulars
> in England. That one is naturally the Chapter of the united sees of Menevia
> and Newport…If you agree to this and establish yourselves at Newport and
> perform the choral duties, the eyes of the Catholic body will be fixed with
> admiration on you and the EBC will gain much before God and Man[14].

The scheme was approved, with some reservations, late in 1851. The proposed site for the new cathedral and chapter was Newport, but the offer of Francis Wegg-Prosser, a wealthy convert, to give land at Belmont , near Hereford led to the cathedral being established there, on the condition that nothing but Plainchant was to be sung in the new cathedral.[15]

Brown's warnings to Molyneux proved not to be short of the mark, for the First Provincial Synod of Westminster of 1852 considered various concerns about the regular clergy.Whilst the bishops asserted that nothing would be done to interfere with the privileges and exemptions properly belonging to religious congregations, five controversial statutes were established: the bishops were free to make formal visitations of missionary and public churches served by religious; provincials and superiors of orders were urged to consult the bishops before removing their priests; faculties to preach and hear confessions were to be granted by bishops only; regulars were encouraged to live as their vocation demanded, and finally, no new religious houses were to be built without the express permission of the bishops. More controversial still was the proposal that an instruction, issued by Propaganda in 1848, should be appended, even though it had not been intended for England. The document required religious to submit to the authority of the Vicars Apostolic in all matters, including financial bequests to their missions and whenever controversial questions arose among religious,they were to be settled by the bishops,the direct

---

[13]   Allanson, *Records,* Vol V, p.135.

[14]   *Whelan, Annals,*, vol I pp32-33

[15]   *Downside, Birt,* N18, 21 November 1855, Brown to Rolling.

representatives of the Holy See. Finally, religious missionaries could not be removed from their posts without the consent of the Vicar Apostolic who exercised jurisdiction over the area. The religious superiors vehemently opposed the inclusion of this instruction with the Synod's decrees, pointing out, correctly, that it had not been issued for England. The affair was eventually settled by Cardinal Fransoni, the prefect of Propaganda, who stated in a letter that the instruction had been written for China and only with a certain proportionate application was it to be applied in England.[16]

Opposition to Brown's plan for a Benedictine diocese came not only from within the EBC, but also from thirteen secular clergy in his own diocese, who signed a petition against the proposal in August 1852, declaring that they not only felt"aggrieved in being made the exception" to the practice of other dioceses, but were also opposed to the plan on the grounds that "the administration of their affairs" would be "placed in the hands of a chapter whose interests must on some points be at variance with those of the secular clergy."[17]

Both monastic reform abroad, and the continuing war between the regulars and the bishops at home must have preyed on Brown's mind for both issues are clearly underlined in the letter he wrote to the English Benedictines at their General Chapter of 1858. Although Brown's proposal for Belmont had been accepted at the previous Chapter of 1854, four years of differences of opinion between Brown, the Congregation and the donor of the land provoked Brown to present a stirring reveille to the Congregation to reform itself. Firstly, Brown underlined the threats to the Congregation from outside, particularly from Rome , where it was regarded as being "beyond hope of reform," and hinted that the favoured solution by the Roman authorities was to force the English Benedictines to unite with the Italian Benedictine Subiaco Congregation. Furthermore, he alerted the Chapter to the view that "all the

---

[16]   *AAW*, 130/1, box 140, Fransoni to Wiseman, 21st September 1853.
[17]   *NLW, Brown*, box 10. Camarthen, 5th August 1852

religious orders in England do actually rank above us, because they have a prestige of fervour, of discipline, of reformation." Secondly, "on the missions, the English Benedictines are commonly said to have laid aside the observance of Poverty…and a most mortifying contrast in this particular is made between them and every other religious order in England."Thirdly, Brown proposed the solution lay with "the restoration of a Benedictine Cathedral Priory by the ancient EBC," which would also form a common house of studies, for

> the solid, profound learning which used to be identified
> with the Benedictine name, and the Spirit of our holy founder,
> are no longer recognised in us, that in turn there is a deficiency
> of both…the wisdom of past times and of other existing orders
> which realise the virtues of their state, will at once tell you that
> there is one thing to which they attach the highest importance
> for securing these blessings: a common House of novitiate
> and Higher Studies.

Brown believed that the poor discipline of monks on the mission had its origin in

> the defective training of novices and juniors…on the
> other hand, if habits of solid piety, religious discipline
> and profound study be formed under the guidance
> of the very best masters who can be culled from the whole
> Congregation…we may confidently
> expect that the spirit of the Missioner will
> develop the spirit of the Conventual…

He concluded by urging the Congregation to grasp the nettle, for "such a work must be undertaken now or never…now an opportunity is pressed upon us, which centuries past could not have been looked for, and which if not seized can never return."[18] His strident voice was heard, for in 1860, St. Michael's Priory, Belmont opened its doors to its first students. Brown proudly declared: "there exists in it the most exact religious observance in the Church, Cloisters and Cells – I do not think it possible that a better Spirit and practice could exist."[19]

---

[18]   Letter of Brown to General Chapter, 3rd July 1858, quoted in Whelan,
       History of Belmont Abbey (London, 1959), pp36-45
[19]   *Downside, Talbot,* Brown to Talbot, 21st September 1860.

Although Belmont served a useful purpose to Brown as both Cathedral and Chapter, its foundation led to yet more disputes between the bishop and the English Benedictine Congregation. If Brown had thought that Belmont would give him greater control over the English Benedictines, he was sadly mistaken. He was far from happy when junior monks were withdrawn from Belmont before they had completed their studies. He complained that "the sacristans, assistants at functions, Cantors and Organists, Librarians are suddenly called away to the great discouragement of the Superiors of St.Michael's." He believed that "Downside and Douai and the great majority of their members on the Missions are approvers of St.Michael's but Ampleforth is I apprehend mostly adverse as yet."[20]and frequently Brown threatened to withdraw his financial assistance. He lamented that "St.Michael's puts forth most promising blossoms but cannot ripen its fruit."[21]

Brown's continual complaints to the President of the Congregation, and Dr.Smith, the Procurator in Curia in Rome were not well received. In 1863 Smith had reprimanded the bishop in these words: "I request you not to press the case about St.Michael's. If you bring it before the Holy Father you will…regret it and the case will end badly."[22] The Congregational *Annals* for this period record that

> Bishop Brown caused considerable trouble in the Congregation
> and particularly at Belmont…he had always possessed a sharp tongue
> and this, combined with a weakness for somewhat fussily interfering
> on every possible occasion, even in matters which did not
> directly concern him, made him an often inconvenient neighbour...there was
> plenty of underhand work going on and Bishop Brown proved himself
> a first-class mischief maker.[23]

A taste of the 'underhand work going on' can be gained by perusing the correspondence[24] spanning the decade 1858-69 between Brown and Monsignor

---

20   Ibid, 10th September 1864.
21   Ibid, 25th November 1864.
22   Ibid,
23   *Whelan, Annals,* Vol I p141-2
24   *Downside, Talbot; NLW, Brown*, Box 5

George Talbot, the convert English priest who was Papal Chamberlain to Pope Pius IX, and confidant of the Pope and his adviser on English Catholic affairs for some twenty years.[25] Talbot supported the Ultramontane aspirations of both Cardinals Wiseman and Manning but was very unpopular with other figures in the English hierarchy. Bishop Ullathorne regarded Talbot as "the pest of the bishops."[26] Brown repeatedly called upon Talbot's "charitable, zealous and powerful influence"[27] to press Pius IX and Cardinal Barnabò to issue rescripts to the English Benedictines, for

> the good fortune of the EBC depends entirely on my persuasion
> on all the rising generation being trained in exact observance…
> it is most important that limits should be as early as can be put
> upon the authority of any one local superior…[28]

Unknown to Brown, Cardinal Barnabò was not well disposed to him, and was "disgusted" that the Brown and Ullathorne, the two Benedictine bishops on the hierarchy were the "greatest enemies"of the Congregation.[29]

It was not merely at Belmont that Brown found fault with the English Benedictines. In December 1868 he explained to Talbot that

> The Bishops in England feel that they cannot discharge properly
> their duty to the Congregations of the several Missions under their
> charge, unless at Visitations they are informed what amount is yearly
> contributed by those Congregations, and how it has been employed.
> This is resisted by some of the Regular Superiors and notably
> by the English Benedictines…[30]

Brown also complained about the lack of discipline on the Mission, especially about Missioners absenting themselves without express permission from the bishops. By 1868, his disillusionment with the Congregation was so great that he admitted to

---

[25]   On Talbot, see Odo van der Heydt OSB, 'Monsignor Talbot de Malahide,' *Wiseman Review* Vol.238 (1964), pp290- 308

[26]   Cuthbert Butler, *The Life and Times of Bishop Ullathorne*, (London, 1926) Vol I p 228

[27]   *Downside, Talbot*, Brown to Talbot, 22nd May, 1865

[28]   Ibid, Brown to Talbot, 10th September, 1864

[29]   *Whelan, Annals*, Vol I p. 142

[30]   *Downside, Talbot*, Brown to Talbot, 9th December 1868, p318

Talbot: "sometimes it occurs to me to petition that I may join another order or be secularised.[31]"

By 1873 his disillusionment with Belmont led Brown to withdraw his financial aid to the monastery. He had paid an annual sum in consideration of Belmont aiding the secular clergy of the diocese by acting as a seminary where training would be cheaper than that given abroad, a retreat centre for the clergy's annual retreat, and a pool of supply priests on the missions. "It is manifest," he wrote, "that my purpose and hope of finding St.Michael's a quasi seminary, such as was agreed upon, have become a total failure."[32] Belmont may well have been a failure as regards the Bishop's diocesan plans, but it was successful in fostering a unity of spirit within the Congregation and in changing perceptions of the nature of English Benedictinism by providing intellectual breadth in an atmosphere charged with reform and revival.

The battle Brown fought with the Benedictines over Belmont certainly sharpened his determination to resolve the anomalous position of the Congregation once and for all. In 1874 he advocated sending a delegation to its General Chapter led by his fellow monk bishop, Ullathorne, but the latter demurred, arguing that

> It would be utterly impossible for me to undertake any delegation such as you propose for at least two years to come…I think it would be impractical to visit the Congregation without causing a great deal of misunderstanding and anger which it is not expedient that one in my position should incur.[33]

In 1877 Brown and Ullathorne supported a motion at the Bishops' Annual Meeting that the Holy See should be petitioned "to frame a Constitution for determining the relations which ought to exist between the Regulars and the Episcopate…"[34] Four years later, in May 1881 the Holy See responded with the document *Romanos*

---

[31]   Ibid, p. 323
[32]   Belmont Abbey Archives, MS 132
[41]   *NLW, Brown* , Box 12, Birmingham, Ullathorne to Brown, 24th February 1874.

Pontifices which upheld the claims of the Bishops by declaring that the missions conducted by the regulars were on the same basis as all others. However, Brown did not live to see this declaration, for he died in April 1880.

At his funeral, his auxiliary bishop, Cuthbert Hedley noted that in all the bishop's dealings "there was a certain 'combativeness.'"[35] It was ironic that Brown had acquired this trait in the cause of defending the very Congregation he ended up fighting. Both Brown and his Benedictine brethren proved too entrenched and inflexible in their own positions to permit them to combine forces and respond adequately to the challenges that faced them after 1850. And yet in establishing Belmont, Brown had given a new lease of life to the EBC and provided the very resources that were to ensure its survival and enable it to face more serious internal dissensions later in the century.

ABBREVIATIONS:

AAA	Ampleforth Abbey Archives
AAW	Archives of the Archbishop of Westminster
BAA	Birmingham Archdiocesan Archives
Downside, Birt	Downside Abbey Archives, Birt Collection
Downside, Talbot	Downside Abbey Archives, Tracts 65, I.A (Varia MS Cong Ang) Letters of Brown to Talbot
NLW, Brown	National Library of Wales at Aberystwyth, Catholic Church Records,Bishop Brown papers.
Whelan, Annals	Basil Whelan OSB, *Annals of the English Congregation of Black Monks 1850-1900* (2 vols) ,1971 edition

---

[34]   *Acta, Bishops Meeting 1877*, p.2

[35]   Bishop Cuthbert Hedley, *A Sermon preached at the funeral of the Right Rev. Thomas Joseph Brown OSB April 16th, 1880*   (London 1880), p.11