

BENEDICTINE DIPLOMATS

And the Role of the *Procurator in Curia*

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In 1832, Newman wrote of H.H. Wilson, a candidate for the newly created chair of Sanskrit at Oxford, that not only was he “not a Clergyman or a University man, but there was nothing to show that he is a classical scholar, a Hebraist, or a divine, or a literary man in any sense, or that he has any formed religious opinions, or that he is a gentleman, or that he has the temper and judgement necessary for an academical man, or that his qualifications are such as to admit him into Oxford society.”¹ When Fr. Anselm kindly invited me to give a paper to this eminent body, being neither a Benedictine, nor a historian, nor someone with more than a cursory acquaintance with the story of the English Benedictines, I felt about as unqualified as Newman thought Wilson was. Wilson was however appointed; and here I am before you.

Some years ago I was at a Benedictine-sponsored conference in Canterbury at which I was one of four lay people – a judge, a journalist, an artist and a diplomat – who were asked to speak about the relevance to their particular profession of the virtue of *Discretio*, as that word is used in St Benedict’s Rule². This obliged me to reflect on the nature of diplomacy; on the qualities required of a good diplomat; and on the similarities (and the differences) between the monastic life and the diplomatic career³. It then occurred to me to pursue my comparison between the two callings by looking at the personalities of some of the English Benedictines who, one way or another, have been called on to perform an essentially diplomatic function. Hence this paper.

My research, if that is not too grand a word for it, has been mainly limited to trawling through the manuscript of Fr Athanasius Allanson’s *History of the English Benedictines* in the Ampleforth Abbey Library and the typed transcript of his *Biography of the English Benedictines*; and as you will soon detect, I have drawn heavily on Abbot Geoffrey Scott’s *Gothic Rage Undone* and David Lunn’s *The English Benedictines 1540-1688*. So as an amateur venturing into the well-trodden field of English Benedictine history, I ask your forbearance if there is little or nothing original in what I have to tell you.

You may be thinking that any analogy between the role of a diplomat and that of a monk is too farfetched to be useful. If diplomats are to be compared to monks at all, they would seem to fall into the category of “gyrovagues”, who spend their lives

¹ Ian Ker: *John Henry Newman*, p.44

² Chapter 64: *De Ordinando Abbate*

³ A version of this talk was subsequently published as an article in *The Way*, April 2002: “Diplomacy with Benedict”.

“flitting from country to country” and of whom the Rule says that it is better to keep silent than to speak. Moreover, as Macaulay observed, “diplomats, as a class, have always been more distinguished by their address, by the art with which they win the confidence of those with whom they have to deal, and by the ease with which they catch the tone of every society to which they are admitted, than by generous enthusiasm or austere rectitude.” Diplomacy, however, has a harder core than Macaulay’s dictum suggests. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as “the management of international relations by negotiation”; and the keyword here is “negotiation”. The defining task of the diplomatist is to help settle disputes, and to promote the interests of the organisation or government he or she represents, by means of *negotiation*; and it is from this key task that all his other functions derive.

Negotiation does not start or end at the negotiating table. To be successful negotiators, diplomats must understand, and to a degree sympathise with, the culture and attitude of mind of the people they are dealing with and the constraints under which they are operating⁴. They must be sociable enough to get to know those who matter in decision making or who are the most reliable sources of information, and if possible win their confidence. They must represent their own country in a way which will generate respect for it; and they must have the strength of character to give their own government unpalatable advice when its actions are perceived as unfriendly or its negotiating objectives patently unobtainable. They may even have to be prepared, in extreme cases, to ignore or rewrite their instructions. Every good diplomat needs discernment, tact and human sympathy – all important ingredients of what St Benedict meant by *discretio*. So perhaps it should come as no surprise to find that from its earliest days the revived English Benedictine Congregation has had its share of monastic diplomats.

At least two English Benedictines were formally commissioned to act as Ambassadors or envoys from one government or court to another. The first of these was Fr Joseph Sherwood, who was professed at Lamspringe in 1653. Lamspringe is in the diocese of Hildesheim, then a domain of the Archbishop-Elector of Cologne; and Allanson tells us that Sherwood, a former soldier, showed “his great talents for business” as *Cellerarius* of his monastery, putting its finances on a sound footing and regaining the Abbey’s “temporal jurisdiction” over the Lamspringe municipality. In doing so, he made himself “acceptable to the Princes of the country [Germany] so that the Elector of Cologne, the Prince of Neoburg [sic] and the Bishop of Munster employed him in England, sometimes as their agent, and at others as their Envoy at the Court of Charles II”.⁵

In 1681 Sherwood went on to become Abbot of Lamspringe and was responsible for building the abbey church there. His successor, both as representative of the Archbishop-Elector of Cologne in London and eventually as Abbot of Lamspringe, was Fr (James) Maurus Corker. Corker suffered a long period of imprisonment in

⁴ Not to too great a degree, of course. Mrs Thatcher notoriously thought that a predisposition to compromise was the *deformation professionnelle* of the British Foreign Office.

⁵ Allanson, *Biography of the English Benedictines*, pp.104-5

the aftermath of the “Popish Plot”, but was released on the accession of James II, when according to Allanson, he was “appointed by the Elector of Cologne⁶ [to be] his Envoy at the British Court”. When he presented his letters there, “the King ...insisted that he should be publicly introduced at Court in the Habit of his Order accompanied by six other Monks his attendants in a similar dress”⁷ - an example, perhaps, of the provocatively assertive Catholicism which contributed to James II’s downfall.

Corker, a convert from Anglicanism, was highly regarded both as a missionary and as a controversialist as well as for holiness of life. He received John Dryden into the Church, and his tract *Roman-Catholic Principles in Reference to God and the King* went through thirty-eight editions up to 1815, when it was referred to in the House of Commons during debates on Catholic Emancipation.⁸ His diplomatic responsibilities did not end with James II’s departure, since Allanson tells us that he was then “selected by the Consort of James II [Mary of Modena] to negotiate her affairs with some of the Catholic Princes in Germany,” being made titular Abbot of Cismar “to add to his importance in this Mission.”⁹ In 1690 he was elected to succeed Sherwood as Abbot of Lammspringe, but his ideas of the monastic life were too strict for his brethren and he resigned his abbacy in 1696. He returned to England as a missionary, dying at Paddington aged 80 in 1715, “being much esteemed by all who knew him for his virtue and sanctity” (Allanson). He was buried at St Pancras, where his tombstone was inscribed, with the evocative anonymity of a penal age, simply “James Abbot”.

I do not know what business there was between the Archbishop-Elector of Cologne and the Court of St James which made it necessary for the Elector to maintain a resident Envoy in London; but a third English Benedictine who apparently ranked as an Ambassador¹⁰ had a clear diplomatic mandate: namely to maintain the Pope’s support for the Royal House of Stuart after King James II went into exile. This was Fr Philip Michael Ellis, another convert and son of an Anglican rector, who became a Catholic while at school at Westminster (there seems to have been a story that he was “kidnapped by the Jesuits”). He was a member of the monastic community re-established by James II at St James’s Palace, became a Royal Chaplain in 1685¹¹,

⁶ Probably the same Elector who had appointed Sherwood, namely Prince Maximilian Henry of Bavaria who was Archbishop-Elector of Cologne from 1650 to 1688. Dom Aidan Bellenger (*Lamspringe: An English Abbey in Germany*, p.26), says the Elector in question was Prince Ferdinand of Bavaria, but Prince Ferdinand of Bavaria ceased to be Elector of Cologne in 1650. Confusingly, however, the Elector of *Bavaria* in 1688 was Prince Ferdinand Maria of Bavaria.

⁷ Allanson, *loc.cit.*

⁸ David Lunn, *The English Benedictines 1540-1688*, p.134

⁹ Some features of Roman life do not change. A propos Fr Bede Slater (see below), Abbot Edmund Power comments: “It’s certainly true... that wearing a cross and ring facilitates movement in the ambit of the Vatican”.

¹⁰ Geoffrey Scott OSB, *Gothic Rage Undone*, p.66, says that he “had become the Stuart ambassador at the Papal Court after Cardinal Howard’s death”; but in an article in *EBC History1981-5*, he says that he “fancied himself as James II’s personal representative at the papal Court and tried to keep his cause alive there”, which suggest that his “ambassadorship” was an informal one. By the same token, Scott describes Fr Thomas Southcott (see below) as “ambassador for the Jacobite diaspora” (p.194).

¹¹ In 1686, in a sermon in the Chapel Royal on the Feast of All Monks (13 November), “he publicly announced that the English Benedictine Congregation had authorized him to declare on their part absolute renunciation of all titles

and in 1688 was appointed one of the four Vicars Apostolic (of the Western District). After the Revolution, however, he joined James II in exile at St Germain, going on from there to Rome where, as noted above, he became “Stuart ambassador to the Papal Court”, a job he evidently combined with representing the English Benedictines in Rome as their *Procurator in Curia*, a title to which I shall return in a moment. But in 1695, he refused a request from the English Benedictines to support their case for retaining their independence from the authority of the Vicars Apostolic, and they had to turn to the Maurist Procurator for help.

Ellis nevertheless remained on good terms with his Benedictine brethren. He stayed on in Rome, resigned his Vicariate (from which he had long been absent) in 1708, and was made Bishop of Segni in the Roman Campagna. There he founded a seminary and in 1710 “held a Synod in the Choir of his Cathedral which [Allanson tells us in one of his occasional flashes of colourful detail] was hung with red silk for the occasion”. He died in 1726. Whether due to Ellis’s diplomatic efforts or not, papal support for the Stuarts was maintained after James III – “the Old Pretender” – and his court were expelled from France following the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713. They established themselves in Rome (with a papal subsidy), and the Papacy continued, with strong support from the English Benedictines, to recognise the Stuarts as the legitimate Kings of England until the death of the “Old Pretender” in 1766.

Sherwood, Corker and Ellis all belonged to the period of what Lunn calls “Court Monasticism” – the monasticism which flowered briefly under the Stuarts and faded with the Stuart cause. But although no English Benedictines since then have been ambassadors or envoys in the full, technical sense of being the accredited representative of a foreign court or government, they have certainly been diplomats in the sense of persons sent overseas to negotiate on behalf of their Congregation and to represent its interests.

The prime example is the *Procurator in Curia*, the official appointed by a religious Order or Congregation to represent its interests at the Holy See. The English Benedictines inherited this office from the Spanish and Cassinese congregations from which they were re-constituted; and in 1615 Pope Paul required all three bodies to appoint Procurators in Rome to reach agreement on the terms of the union which was to form the revived English Benedictine Congregation. Fr Anselm Beech, the Cassinese monk who had professed Frs. Sadler and Maihew in the presence of Fr Sigebert Buckley in 1603, was already in Rome, acting “as Procurator for the Benedictines generally”¹² and represented the Cassinese; Fr Benedict Jones represented the “Anglo-Spanish”; and Fr Sigebert Bagshawe, a monk of Dieulouard, was commissioned to negotiate on behalf of the embryonic English Congregation - the “Westminster monks”. Protracted and contentious

which might possibly be inherent in them” to their pre-Reformation rights and properties, thereby formally removing the suspicion that the monks still aimed to recover their old abbeys, cathedral priories and estates.

¹² Allanson, *Biography*, p 24.

negotiations ensued, leading in 1619 to the papal brief *Ex Incumbenti*, confirming the union of the English and the “Anglo-Spanish” which formed the revived Congregation.

At the first General Chapter of the Congregation in 1621 (held thereafter every four years), provision was made for the *Procurator in Curia* to be elected, or re-elected, at each Chapter; and at the 1641 Chapter it was agreed that the Regimen be “allowed to tax the Provinces and Convents for the expenses of the President and the Roman Procurator”.¹³ So far as I can discover, no complete list exists of the holders of this important office: but a list which is as complete as I can make it for the period 1621 – 1850, drawn from Allanson’s *History and Biography*, is annexed to this paper.

Nor – surprisingly - have I been able to find any formal job description for the post. The present incumbent, Abbot Edmund Power (who also acts as Procurator for the Ottilien Congregation), tells me that he is answerable to the Abbot President but “has never seen any formal definition of his competences”. It would seem, however, that his role corresponds, on a smaller scale, to that of the Procurator General of the Carmelites, who is described (on the internet) as “The legal Representative of the Order to the Vatican [who] has to go very often to the Secretary of State and the different Roman Congregations....in order to submit the multiple diversity of major issues of our friars and nuns that need the intervention of the Apostolic See”.

Mutatis mutandis, this is an almost exact parallel to the role of an Ambassador overseas in relation to the foreign government to which he is accredited – or perhaps more specifically, the role of an Ambassador of a minor power in relation to the government of a major power on whose support and approval his own government is dependent. One thinks perhaps of a Polish Ambassador in Moscow before 1989, or an Israeli Ambassador in Washington today.

Although the *Procurator in Curia* had (and I presume still has) the usual diplomatic task of keeping his principals in touch with the thinking of the authorities to whom he is accredited – namely the Curia and the Pope – his role acquired special importance whenever rulings were required from Rome on controversial issues which threatened the vital interests of the English Benedictine body. (It must be remembered that until the Restoration of the Hierarchy in 1850, the Catholic Church in England came directly under the authority of Propaganda, so that very little could be decided without reference to Rome.) Intensive negotiation was then required with the Roman Curia, often against sustained opposition from the agents of the Vicars Apostolic and the secular clergy. At other times, when there was less for the Procurator to do, the post was left vacant, sometimes for long periods.

¹³ Allanson, *History*

The monks chosen for this office accordingly tended to be among the ablest of their contemporaries. Most of them had had experience on the English Mission and were former or future priors of their monasteries. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the threats they had to deal with could come either from outside the body, as in the disputes with the secular clergy and the Vicars Apostolic over jurisdiction, or from within, when the Benedictine body itself was divided, for example over the propriety of taking the oath of allegiance to the English king or the attitude to be adopted towards the Hanoverian Monarchy under which the missionaries had to operate, while most senior members of the Congregation abroad were still loyal to the Stuarts. Benedictine resistance to the extension of the Vicar-Generals' authority over the Regulars (and in particular the Benedictines) on the English Mission was a recurring issue throughout the late 17th and 18th centuries (and continued into the nineteenth), as was the Benedictines' involvement with the Jacobite cause and their close relationship with the exiled Stuart court, first in St Germain and then in Rome. In one form or another, these issues dominated the agenda of the *Procurators in Curia* until the onset of the French Revolution brought more urgent and far-reaching troubles.

The first *Procurator in Curia* after 1621 was the same Sigebert Bagshawe who had played a major part in drafting the terms on which the union between the "Westminster" and the "Anglo-Spanish" monks had been agreed. Drafting is a key diplomatic skill, and Bagshawe was clearly both an experienced negotiator and a skilful draftsman. The contentions surrounding the union had not been ended by the Papal Brief of 1619; and a new cause of dispute had arisen between the regulars and the then sole Vicar Apostolic of England, Bishop Smith. So after three years as Prior of St Edmund's, Bagshawe was despatched back to Rome as Procurator in 1624 to arrange matters, and spent another four years there.

Bagshawe was succeeded in 1629 by Fr Wilfrid Reade, who changed his name to Selby because he found the Italians unable to pronounce Reade¹⁴. During his sixteen years as Procurator, he entertained distinguished English Protestant visitors, including John Evelyn the diarist; made himself *persona grata* with the Pope, Urban VIII; corresponded with Charles I's Secretary of State, Sir Francis Windebank, who commended him to Queen Henrietta Maria's agent in Rome as a person to be trusted; and won the approval of Charles I himself by sending to England "an exaggerated report of papal esteem for the King".¹⁵ He dealt with the aftermath of the row over Bishop Smith and – most important of all in the eyes of his fellow Benedictines – he secured from the Pope the celebrated Bull *Plantata*. He also saved the Abbey of Lamspringe from its covetous Lutheran neighbours by the expedient of resigning it into the hands of the papacy.

¹⁴ So Allanson, *Biography*, p.62. Conversely Scott, quoting Gillow, says he was probably the son of William Selby of Newcastle and brother to Sir George Selby of Whitehouse, Co Durham, who called himself "Johannes Rubeus" ("Red") when in Rome because the Italians could not pronounce Wilfrid or Reade. For this and fuller details of Reade or Selby's highly successful diplomatic career in Rome, see: Geoffrey Scott: *Dom Wilfrid Selby: A Gregorian introduces a Friend to the Roman Inquisition*, EBC History Commission 2006

¹⁵ Lunn, *op.cit.*, p 127.

Allanson emphasises that Reade was an essentially humble man, “void of ambition to govern others” (he declined the abbacy of Lamspringe, and was made President later against his own wishes); but he was clearly a consummate diplomatist. There are echoes of Macaulay’s view of diplomatists in the comment quoted by Lunn from Weldon that “by all the persons of that quick-sighted court [of Rome] he was “reputed a saint, while his own thought him a courtier”¹⁶. Selby stayed on in Rome until his death (from the plague) in 1659. His successor, Fr Hilarion Wake, also died of the plague soon after arriving; and between 1649 and 1697 there were ten Procurators, several of whom held the post very briefly. One, Maurus Corker, probably never got to Rome at all¹⁷; another, Fr Augustine Latham, was censured for leaving the city to attend General Chapter without the President’s permission.

From 1697, the post was unfilled for sixteen years. Following the 1688 Revolution, the abrupt termination of the privileged status the Benedictines had enjoyed in England under James II and the nexus of subsequent Jacobite plots (in which Benedictines were implicated), this was a period of some disorder in the monasteries and confusion on the Mission¹⁸. Then in 1713 Fr Francis Moore was appointed Procurator in order to obtain confirmation of the legitimacy of an abbatial election at Lamspringe. Although successful in his mission, Moore seems to have been a surprising choice. Described by Allanson as “this wayward father”, he had only been recently ordained, after an erratic career in which he had twice abandoned the monastic life and narrowly escaped censure at the Chapter of 1710. His stay in Rome was short, since in 1717 - surprisingly again – he was elected Prior of St Edmund’s. In Paris he “lived in great style” and kept his own coach, before returning to the Mission in London at the end of his priorship. There he decided to get married, “assigning for his reason the hopes he entertained of converting the Lady to the Catholic faith.” Two years later he was imprisoned for debt and spent the last eight years of his life in Coventry jail.

In 1717 the factionalism and disorder within the Congregation, exacerbated no doubt by the failure of the 1715 Rising in which Benedictines were also implicated, came to a head in what is known as “the Fenwick schism”. This complicated story is, I think, well-known to members of this gathering and is told at some length in *Gothic Rage Undone*, so I will not rehearse it here. It necessitated the controversial President, Fr Laurence Fenwick, appointing a *Procurator in Curia* in the person of Fr Bennet Lawson to argue his case in Rome, while his opponents had the benefit of the diplomatic skills and influence of Fr Thomas Southcott, a prominent and well-connected Jacobite who succeeded Fenwick as President in 1721. Lawson’s efforts on Fenwick’s behalf were unsuccessful. He then declined to return to his monastery (Lamspringe) and died later at Marseille.

¹⁶ Lunn, *loc.cit.*

¹⁷ “...it appears doubtful whether he proceeded to Rome because he was some time after appointed by the Elector of Cologne his envoy at the British Court.” (Allanson, *Biography*, p.135)

¹⁸ Scott, *Gothic Rage Undone*, p. 51

Lawson's successor as Procurator, Fr Alban Dawney (one of Corker's converts), who had been a zealous missionary at Fonthill in Wiltshire, was sent to Rome expressly to pick up the pieces in the aftermath of the Fenwick affair, and did this so successfully that he was formally thanked at the 1725 General Chapter, made titular Abbot of Rintelin and continued in his post until his death in Rome in 1733. Dawney was followed after a four year gap by Fr Bernard Wythie, another Jacobite. Wythie had "devoted himself to literary pursuits and raised himself to eminence."¹⁹, producing in 1735 *The Creed Expounded*, a work of catechetics which "successfully bridged the gap between the serious spiritual concerns of the 17th century and the more popular devotional attitude of the 18th,"²⁰

The post was then vacant again for 11 years, until in 1754 Fr Charles Walmesley became the first of three Procurators who between them held it continuously until 1808: Walmesley himself (1754-6); Fr Augustine Walker (1757-77) and Fr Placid Waters (also known as Duvivier) (1777-1808). The thirty years or so from 1754 to the onset of the French Revolution represent the high noon of the Roman Procuratorship as well as being the final years of the English Benedictines' entanglement with the House of Stuart. It was also the high noon of *ancien regime* diplomacy, with a small circle of mainly aristocratic diplomatists in each capital focussed on the court, enmeshed in dynastic politics, seeking to ingratiate themselves in high places, accommodating and entertaining important visitors.

The archetype of this school of diplomacy was another cleric, the Cardinal de Bernis, who was French Ambassador at Rome for a large part of this period and operated with a splendour that earned him the soubriquet of "King of Rome".²¹ He was as much concerned with French matters ecclesiastical as with high politics, and close to the exiled Stuarts in Rome. The English Benedictine Procurators must therefore have known and had contacts with him, not least as the French Government (and Episcopate) began to make things progressively more difficult for the three English monasteries in France. Bernis was also a key figure in the protracted and intensive diplomatic manoeuvres which led to the banning of the Jesuits in 1773, of which the Benedictine Procurators must have been, to say the least, keen observers; and it would be interesting to know what attitude they took to this great question of the day in Rome.

Walmesley, Walker and Waters were all in their different ways remarkable men, each of whom deserves a biography to himself and cannot be done justice to here. All three fitted well into upper-crust Roman society. All had strong Jacobite sympathies and were close to the Jacobite court in exile. Both Walmesley and Waters were from an aristocratic background, the former being of an "ancient family" in Lancashire and the latter a nephew of Lord Fairfax. (Allanson does not

¹⁹ Allanson, *Biography*, p.174

²⁰ Scott, *op.cit.*, p.139.

²¹ "He was polite and useful to all, whether French or foreigners; he neglected no matter; he was at the same time the most magnificent of *grands seigneurs* and the most assiduous of diplomats". Frederic Masson, quoted in Sir Marcus Cheke: *The Cardinal de Bernis* p.260

describe Walker's origins except to say that he also came from Lancashire). All three were alive to the intellectual excitement of the Enlightenment (though later disillusioned by it) and all were scholarly connoisseurs of the arts and congenial companions to the artists and fashionable *dilettanti* who flocked to Rome. They were generously housed in the *Collegium Gregorianum de Urbe* in Trastevere, the former house of studies for foreign monks²², where they could accommodate English visitors and English students. They supplemented the allowance they received from the Regimen by selling lemons from their gardens in a neighbouring market and occasionally acting as tutors to young men from Catholic families who were making the Grand Tour; and Waters in particular received financial help from his Jacobite patrons, notably Charlotte, Duchess of Albany (daughter of the Young Pretender).²³

The first of the three, Walmesley, has been described by Dom Adrian Morey as “the most outstanding [English Catholic] figure of the 18th century.”²⁴ He was sent to Rome “to watch over the interests of the [Benedictine] Body and to procure a modification of some of the clauses of the famous Constitution which Benedict XIV had lately issued settling the government of the English Church”²⁵ – presumably the Bull *Apostolicum Mysterium* of 1753, which gave the Vicars Apostolic full authority over the Regulars²⁶. A doctor of the Sorbonne, Rector of the “philosophical” Society of St Edmund and later a Fellow of the Royal Society, by the time he arrived in Rome he was already “a mathematician and astronomer of European reputation”, who had “produced in 1749, at the early age of 27, a correct analytical investigation of the motion of the lunar apogee”²⁷ and “been consulted by the British Government about the introduction of the new Style [of dating] in 1749.”

After only two years in Rome, however, Walmesley left to be coadjutor to the Benedictine Vicar Apostolic of the Western District, Laurence York, whom he succeeded in 1764. In 1780 his library and the new chapel in Bath were destroyed in the Gordon Riots. He consecrated the first Catholic bishop for the United States, took an increasingly pessimistic – indeed apocalyptic - view of the Enlightenment and at the end of his life became a key figure in the controversy with the “Cisalpines” of the Catholic Committee over the oath required by the 1791 Catholic Relief Act.

Augustine Walker, before succeeding Walmesley in Rome in 1757, had been a missionary in Co. Durham and Prior of St Edmund's. He was also a luminary of the philosophical Society of St Edmund, and it is from his poem in praise of the Society that Abbot Geoffrey Scott has taken the title of his book: “Monks undo

²² The forerunner of Propaganda Fide and of Sant Anselmo, established in 1621, the College suffered from lack of financial support and had defied the best efforts of Fr Wilfrid Selby and others to raise funds for it.

²³ Scott, *op.cit.*, pp.199-200

²⁴ In David Mathew: *Catholicism in England 1535-1935*, p.274

²⁵ Allanson, *Biography*, pp.241 et seq.

²⁶ See Scott, *op.cit.*, p.73

²⁷ Professor Sir John Leslie, quoted in Allanson, *Biography*, p.241

what Gothic rage has done". He stayed 20 years in Rome, during which time he was "at the centre of the sophisticated world of Roman *Dilettanti*", close friend of the Scottish architect Robert Milne and particularly of the Catholic Scotsman James Byres, "the Pope's antiquary", acting as host and introducer to visiting noblemen, gentry and artists in the best ambassadorial style, just as Bernis was doing on a grander scale. He collected the baroque fantasies of Piranesi and gave architectural advice to his wealthy English and Scottish friends. At the same time he remained closely connected to the Stuarts and later acted as agent for Charles Edward's French affairs after the death of the Old Pretender.²⁸ (Those who saw the recent exhibition at the National Gallery of portraits by Pompeo Battoni will have the flavour of the society in which both Walker and Waters moved in Rome, the sternly honest faces and plain clothing of James Byres and his wife standing out amongst all the aristocratic flummery).

A doughty (and successful) defender of the rights of the Benedictine body, Walker was made President in 1777. He resided thereafter at St Edmund's in Paris and had to cope with all the troubles which overwhelmed the three English monasteries in France as the Revolution progressed, including disaffection and disorder within his own monastery. "None of his Predecessors," says Allanson, "had to encounter the difficulties which he met with and few...would have passed through the same ordeal with equal credit". Disenchanted with the Enlightenment and its fruits, he endorsed Charles Walmsley's apocalyptic views and urged Trappist austerities on his brethren. In 1790 he retired to be Vicar of the Benedictine nuns at Cambrai, being imprisoned with them. He died in the jail at Compiègne in 1794.²⁹

Walker's successor in Rome, Fr Placid Waters, shared Walker's Jacobite sympathies, his hostility to the encroachments of the Vicars Apostolic and his cultivated interests. Waters's "social graces" brought him widespread respect in Rome, including from Pius VI's 'Cardinal Nephew', Corsini. He made friends with the scholar and collector Stefano Borgia, the Secretary to Propaganda, and he became spiritual director, and apparently also major-domo, to the Duchess of Albany. In true diplomatic form, he successfully cultivated the right people, and Scott tells us that the Benedictines' victory in securing one of their own as coadjutor for Charles Walmesley in the Western District was "largely due to the circles of influence which Walker and Waters...had built up [in Rome]." ³⁰ At the same time, he performed the ambassadorial function vis a vis the Stuarts of introducing distinguished visitors to the Royal father and daughter.

All this, however, came to an end in the fateful year 1798, when the French occupied Rome and deposed the Pope (Pius VI) as Head of State. Waters went into exile with the Pope, who died a prisoner at Valence the following year. When the new Pope, Pius VII, resumed residence in Rome in 1800, Waters returned with him and remained there, despite the continuing upheavals, until his death in 1808. Our

²⁸ Scott, *op.cit.*, p.199 and *passim*.

²⁹ Allanson, *Biography*, p.237

³⁰ Scott, *op.cit.*, p.76. Other details in this paragraph also from Scott.

last sight of him, apparently still comfortably housed, is in 1804, in a letter from Bishop Sharrock to Fr Bede Brewer, quoted by Allanson: “I have heard this morning from Mr Waters. He suffers much from vertigo and cannot work in his garden, so that he grows more corpulent.”³¹

Placid Waters died in December 2008, a few months after Napoleon had reoccupied Rome and imprisoned Pius VII at Savona, near Genoa; and the Pope did not finally return to Rome until June 6, 1815, twelve days before Waterloo. The English Benedictines meanwhile were adjusting themselves to the cataclysmic consequences of the French Revolution for their monasteries on the Continent, and settling themselves into their new homes in England and at Douai. So for 25 years, no *Procurator in Curia* was appointed.

This did not however mean that there were no English Benedictine negotiators in Rome during that time. In 1817 Fr Bede Slater, a monk of St Laurence’s who had earlier been successful in negotiating a deal with the Government of Hanover to provide pensions for former members of the Lammspringe community, was in Rome for his health when negotiations were taking place for a concordat between Hanover and The Holy See. President Brewer authorised him to act for the English Benedictines in the negotiations in the hope (not fulfilled) of obtaining the restoration of Lammspringe. He asked to be made *Procurator in Curia* for the purpose, but his request was turned down. So instead, he assumed an Abbot’s pectoral cross and ring and, to the surprise (and evidently the dismay) of his superiors at home, found himself invited to be Vicar Apostolic of the Cape of Good Hope, based at Mauritius, a vicariate which then included the whole of Australia as well as parts of Africa and (I think) India.

In Mauritius, despite receiving an annual stipend of £1,000 from the British Government, Slater ran up debts of £8,000 and became the subject of increasingly vociferous complaints to Rome. When, after twelve years, he was eventually summoned home, he had to swim secretly out to the ship to escape his creditors. Four days later, he died on board and was buried at sea.³² Fr Placid Morris, who was sent out as Apostolic Visitor to investigate and then took over from Slater as Vicar Apostolic, proved equally unsatisfactory and also had to be recalled after 5 years.

In 1826, Bishop Baines also repaired to Rome for his health, remaining until 1829 and becoming “an habitué of the fashionable salons” and “a great success at the papal court”. He cultivated Cardinal Capellari, the Prefect of Propaganda, with whom he began to negotiate his plans for the future of the English Benedictines; and he apparently gained the confidence of Pope Leo XII³³. As we know, his plans landed him in a major row with the Congregation involving Downside, Ampleforth and the Benedictine Mission at Bath, which was soon referred to Rome. Fr Joseph

³¹ Allanson, *Biography*, p.286.

³² Allanson, *Biography*, pp.428-433

³³ See Bernard Green OSB: *Augustine Baines OSB* in *The Ampleforth Journal*, Spring 1987, Vol XCII, pp. 24-7

Brown (later first Bishop of Newport and Menevia), who happened to be in Rome, was mandated by the President, Fr Augustine Birstall, to represent him, and in 1833 was formally appointed *Procurator in Curia* – the first since Fr Placid Waters' death in 1808. He too succeeded in getting alongside Cardinal Capellari, who was charmed by the spectacle of Brown skipping to keep warm in the evening³⁴. In accordance with the dictum of Lord Palmerston that “the only use of a plenipotentiary is to disobey his instructions”, Brown put aside two “accusatory” memorials which President Birstall had instructed him to deliver to Propaganda, and instead delivered a more emollient Memorial of his own which paved the way for an eventual settlement.

Brown was followed as Procurator in 1834 by Fr Bernard Collier, a former prior of St Edmund's, who had earlier accompanied Bede Slater to Mauritius but evidently not remained there long. During his eight years in Rome, he was instrumental in preventing what would clearly have been another ill-starred appointment to Mauritius, in the person of Fr Richard Adrian Towers, who had been recommended for the post to Cardinal Franzoni, the Prefect of Propaganda, by Lord Clifford. Towers (“Poor Dick” as Bishop Baines called him) had been a spectacularly unsuccessful Prior of Ampleforth after the break-up, and Collier clearly did not mince his words in giving Cardinal Franzoni his opinion of the proposal. Afterwards, when he “informed Lord Clifford of the result of my interview with His Eminence, he [Clifford] hung down his head and said he had never intended to seek Mr Towers' appointment without our approbation”.³⁵ Collier himself was sent as Vicar Apostolic to Mauritius in 1840, at the end of his time in Rome, with happier results: after he had been there eight years, Mauritius was erected into a diocese and Collier became the first Bishop of Port Louis.

Collier's successor in Rome, Fr Ambrose Prest, is the last in my gallery of *Procurators in Curia*. He spent less than two years in the job and his term would have been unremarkable but for the fact that six long letters which he wrote at the time to President Barber, printed without comment in *The Ampleforth Journal* for 1911³⁶, illustrate how much the Procurator's circumstances had changed since the spacious days of Walmesley and Walker and describe with painful vividness the experiences of a very English monk struggling to come to terms with mid-nineteenth century Rome and its clerical bureaucracy.

Prest, “a man of distinguished ability, but of cautious and anxious temperament”³⁷, was in weak health with a racking cough³⁸. Although President Barber tried hard to

³⁴ Green, *op.cit.* p.28

³⁵ Allanson, *Biography*, p.281

³⁶ *Ampleforth Journal*, Vol XVI. Barber's side of the correspondence is in *AJ* Vol XIX, pp.460 et seq.

³⁷ Cuhbert Almond OSB; *The History of Ampleforth Abbey*, p.341

³⁸ It throws an interesting light on 19th century medicine that on his way through London en route for Rome, Prest was able, for a fee of one guinea, to consult Sir James Clarke, personal physician to The Queen and the Prince Consort: “He tells me that my lungs are not diseased...[but] says that the winter is very cold [in Rome]and that I shall feel it very much at San Calisto. He must have visited the monastery; for he told me that they keep a very good table. He desired me to pay him a *friendly* visit, which I shall do tomorrow. I shall get as much as I can out of him for my one pound one.” (Prest to President Barber, 18 November 1842.)

disabuse him of the idea, it would seem that he was chosen for the Procurator's job in the hope that the Roman climate would do him good³⁹. His friends rather tactlessly assured him that a Procurator was needed "more for form's sake than for any other cause, and there would be little or nothing for him to do." He arrived in Rome two days before Christmas 1842, "much harassed" with his journey. The house in which Fr Bernard Collier had lived was rented out, so Prest was to be housed in the monastery of San Calisto. The first sight of his apartment there horrified him: "Never was my heart so chilled on entering the gloomiest prison or vault of the dead" and the bed linen was sodden with damp. "Liverpool Infirmary would have been a much nearer journey and *very much* better adapted to an invalid".

Cardinal Acton (the Cardinal Protector of the Benedictines) was sympathetic, but told him that to obtain permission to reside other than in a monastery required a submission in Latin to the Sacred Congregation of Rites. Clerical dress was mandatory and exceedingly expensive: for the monks of San Calisto, "common buckles" would not do: they had to be silver. He was seriously short of funds and could not pay his quarter share of a servant to look after him. The Italians "(good ones excepted)" were extortioners who "could kiss your hand and pick your pocket at the same time". Pope Gregory XVI (the former Cardinal Cappellari) received him briefly and quite kindly (and recalled the name of Dr Baines, "with whom he had to settle matters when Prefect of Propaganda"), but the officials with whom Prest had to deal were nearly always otherwise engaged. By May 1843, he had still not been able to complete his main piece of business, which was to present a petition for the conferment of four doctorates on members of the English Benedictine Body. Meanwhile fever was prevalent throughout the city – the "Tertian ague" – and the winter cold had given way to steady rain. It is no surprise to learn that by the next year (1844), Fr Ambrose Prest was safely back in England, where he became Prior of Ampleforth.

There is of course a covert as well as an overt side to diplomacy, still vigorously practised today. So before I conclude, let me draw attention to the remarkable career of Fr James Robertson, who, although Scottish rather than English, deserves a place in any record of British Benedictine diplomacy. Robertson was a Scot, solemnly professed at the Scottish abbey at Regensburg in 1778. He served on the mission at Munshes, near Dumfries, and in 1792 published the first Catholic edition of the New Testament to be printed in Scotland. In 1802, during the short lived peace of Amiens, he visited Paris and obtained an interview with Napoleon, at which he apparently persuaded him not to expropriate the abbey at Regensburg. In 1808, on a visit to Ireland, he petitioned the Viceroy, the Duke of Richmond (whom he had met at Regensburg), for employment in the service of the Crown. The Duke referred him to the Secretary for Ireland, Sir Arthur Wellesley, who

³⁹ "How have you got it so deeply fixed in your head that you were made [Procurator] *solely* on account of your health...you have every qualification but one...and that is too great a diffidence in your own abilities. If you have too much honesty for a diplomatist, the example of a Court will correct that Yorkshire excrescence." (Barber to Prest, 2 February 1843)

interviewed him in London. “Tell me, Mr Robertson”, he asked, “Are you a man of courage?” “Try me Sir Arthur”, replied Robertson. “That is what we mean to do”, said the future Duke of Wellington.

Wellesley was at this time planning his Peninsula campaign and hoping to take advantage of the Spanish risings against the French which followed the appointment of Napoleon’s brother Joseph as King of Spain. He also hoped to enlist the help of the Spanish Army under the Marques de Romana, then allied to the French and stationed in Denmark, being kept by the French in careful ignorance of what was happening in Spain. Robertson was tasked with finding his way secretly to Romana - a task which had already led to the death of three or four British agents – explaining the position to him and encouraging him to embark his army in the British Fleet then lying off Denmark. The full story of how Robertson successfully carried out this mission, disguised as a German cigar and chocolate salesman from Bremen, would need a paper to itself.⁴⁰ After many other adventures, he was in Paris after Waterloo, was given a handsome pension by the British Government, and returned to his monastery at Regensburg. There he interested himself in teaching the deaf and dumb, founded Bavaria’s first institute for the blind, and died at Regensburg in 1820. So perhaps one should add versatility to *discretio* as a distinguishing characteristic of a good Benedictine.

I hope I will not be thought vainglorious if, by way of postscript, I remind you that as well as being diplomats themselves, the English Benedictines have produced some distinguished professional diplomats among the alumni of their schools. Sir Edward Tomkins, an Amplefordian who died in 2007, was an outstandingly successful British Ambassador to France, in which capacity he played a key role in the negotiations for Britain’s entry into the European Community. According to *The Times*, “His natural bonhomie and open mind, coupled with his universally acknowledged skill as a diplomat, which did not exclude great firmness in the defence of British interests and calling a spade a spade when necessary, meant that he was able to establish personal and friendly relations with two very different French Presidents, Georges Pompidou and Valerie Giscard d’Estaing.”⁴¹

An even more eminent British diplomatist was the Gregorian Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick, who as British High Commissioner in Germany from 1950 to 1953 was one of the allied rulers of the country after World War II and went on to be Permanent Under Secretary of State at the Foreign Office from 1953 to 1956. As counsellor of the British Embassy at Berlin before the war, he accompanied Lord Halifax to the latter’s meeting with Hitler at Berchtesgaden in 1937. His memorable description of the occasion has always seemed to me a model of vivid and economical reporting and as such a good note on which to finish this paper: “The mention of

⁴⁰ Fr Robertson published his own “Narrative of a Secret Mission to the Danish islands in 1808”, which I have not been able to find. But the story from which these details are taken is told in summary form by H.J. Barnes: “Father Robertson in Denmark” in *History Today*, Vol.XVIII, No. 5, May 1968, pp.307-13. A fuller version is *Baltic Spy* by Carola Oman, published by Isaac Pitman & Sons Ltd (No date).

⁴¹ *The Times*, 28 September 2007

India [where Lord Halifax had been Viceroy] led Hitler to air his views on British policy. He could not understand, he said, why we tolerated disorder or wasted time in parley with Congress leaders. The remedy was quite simple. 'Shoot Gandhi,' he said in his sharp staccato accent, and if that does not suffice to reduce them to submission, shoot a dozen leading members of Congress; and if that does not suffice, shoot 200 and so on until order is established. You will see how quickly they will collapse as soon as you make it clear that you mean business.' During this tirade Lord Halifax gazed at Hitler with a mixture of astonishment, repugnance and compassion. He indicated dissent, but it would have been a waste of time to argue."⁴²

⁴² Ivone Kirkpatrick, *The Inner Circle*, p.97

Appendix
ENGLISH BENEDICTINE
PROCURATORS IN CURIA

From 1621 to the restoration of the Hierarchy 1850

[1608 - ? F. Anselm Beech]

1621-1628 F. Sigebert Bagshawe (L) (1625 First General Chapter of the EBC)

1629- 45 F. Wilfrid Selby or Reade (G)

1653 F. Hilarion Wake or Merriman (G)

1653- 61 F. Bernard Palmes (G)

1661-65 F. Leander Normington (G)

1665 apparently vacant (appointment “left to the President and Definitors”)

1669 Vacant

1673 F. Augustine Latham (E)

1677 Vacant

1681 Vacant

1685-? F. Maurus Corker (Lam)

1690 F. Francis Fenwick (E)

1692 F. Maurus Knightley (Lam)

1693 Vacant [F. Philip Ellis (G) (“Stuart Ambassador to the Papal Court”) “refuses to support the English Benedictines so they find a successor as Roman Agent in Claude Estiennot, the Maurist Procurator in Curia”]

1697 F. Francis Watmough (L)

1701 Vacant

1705 Vacant

1709 Vacant

1713 F. Francis Moore (E)

1717: 1718 F. Bennet Lawson (Lam) sent as “Fenwick’s Procurator”

1721 -1733 F. Alban Dawney (Lam)

1733 Vacant

1737-1743 F. Bernard Wythie (G)

1745 Vacant

1749 Vacant

1754-1756 F. Charles Walmsley (E)

1757-1777 F. Augustine Walker (E)

1777- 1808 F. Placid Waters or Duvivier (G)

1810 Vacant

1814 Vacant

1818 Vacant

1822 Vacant

1826 Vacant

1830 Vacant

1833 F. Joseph Brown (G)

1836-40 F. Bernard Collier (E)

1842-44 F. Ambrose Prest (L)

1844- ? F. Jerom(e) Jenkins (G) (back in England as missionary at Coventry by 1846)

1846-50 Vacant

1850 F. Maurus Hodgson (not obliged to proceed to Rome unless business required it.)