

Carmelite Presence in England 1685-1740

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The Dissolution of Aylesford, painted by Adam Kossowski, at The Friars, Aylesford.

Adam Kossowski has painted a poignant picture of the Carmelites leaving Aylesford at the Dissolution of the Monasteries. The picture can be seen by visitors to the restored Priory. The consequence of that event was that from 1538 until 1926 the presence of Carmelite Friars in this country would be fleeting and tenuous. This is a sad fact when we consider how other groups of religious, the Benedictines, Franciscans and Dominicans managed to maintain some sort of continuity. The Discalced Carmelites from the first half of the seventeenth century onwards also achieved some considerable success in their missionary work in England.

It is well worth asking the question why did the Order fail to re-establish itself in any significant way from say 1600 onwards? The Irish Carmelites managed to maintain a presence in Ireland and by the 1730s they were able to re-establish the Province. In trying to come to an answer to the question of the seeming failure, it is important to remember just how adverse conditions were for any religious. Even if Friars were in England they would have had little opportunity to establish communities in the recognised sense. We have to think of missionaries who had to make do and mend under constant threat of arrest and with little to encourage them of any possibility of organising or planning for the future.

It is in this context that I would like to look at perhaps the most positive attempt to restore the Order in England during the Penal Period, namely the London Mission started by the Prior General, Paul of St Ignatius, in the reign of James II. This mission lived on until 1740 and illustrates the difficulties of such an enterprise and also the dedication of certain individuals.(1)

In the years following the Dissolution attempts were made to re-establish the Order in England. During the reign of Mary Tudor, Nicholas Audet, the Prior General at that time, asked the German Carmelites to send men to England. Nothing came of the appeal and soon Elizabeth was on the throne and the Penal Laws were being enforced. We do hear of a certain George Rayner who died in 1613. He joined the Order in the Low Countries around 1560 and worked in England, being imprisoned on a number of occasions. (2) Englishmen are recorded as joining the Order in France and Belgium during the reign of Charles I. These could well have been converts who crossed to Europe where it was safer to live out their new found faith.

By 1636 the General Curia of the Order in Rome was aware of the need to open up an English Mission. Perhaps the success of the Discalced Friars prompted this interest. Thomas Doughty, a student at the English College in Rome, became a Discalced Friar about 1610 and as Father Simon Stock he was to work in England until his death in 1652. He was a remarkable far-sighted character and if his vision had been acted on the Carmelites would have been firmly established in England. He saw the need for an English novitiate to form friars who would work in England, as he realised that the missionaries had to be English. He earmarked St Omer as the site for formation of young friars and had the support of the Nuncio in Brussels, Cardinal Borgliese.

However, the Discalced superiors in Rome failed to see the need for such a project and effectively sealed the fate of any long term success. A singular lack of awareness was to be a contributory factor in the failure of our own mission. Even in our own days the matter of formation and sensitivity to national characteristics has only recently been acknowledged in practice.

Despite such setbacks, by 1635 there were 8 Discalced Friars in England with the Belgium Provincial having charge of the mission. It was this state of affairs that stirred the awareness of the Carmelite authorities in Rome. However, in the end nothing transpired and the only record of a Carmelite of our observance working in England at this time is of Bernard of St Matthew, an Irishman who was in London in the Cromwellian period and died there in 1661.

The Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 marked a period of relative religious freedom in England. Charles, though he only became a Catholic on his deathbed, was well disposed to the Church. The Restoration period was one where there was a great deal of warmth and joy in life in England. The penal laws were not invoked so harshly and Charles II was astute enough to know just how far he could push his personal power. Dryden's poem *Absolom and Achitophel* sums up the spirit of the time:

In pious Times, e'r Priest-Craft did begin,
Before *Polygamy* was made a Sin;
When Man, on many, multipli'd his kind,
E'r one to one was, cursedly, confin'd:
When Nature prompted, and no Law deni'd
Promiscuous Use of Concubine and Bride;
Then, *Israel's* Monarch, after Heavens own heart,
His vigorous warmth did, variously, impart
To Wives and Slaves: And, wide as his Command,
Scatter'd his Maker's Image through the Land. (3)

Religious life was able to flourish at this period in London; a community of Capuchin friars acted as chaplains to Henrietta Maria, the Queen Mother, while Catherine of Braganza, Charles' consort, established a community of Benedictines at Whitehall. These were Benedictines of the newly established English Congregation established through the efforts of Augustine Baker and his contemporaries and carrying on the traditions of the Black Monks of the Middle Ages.

Despite all these auspicious signs the only move from the Order's central government was a resolution from the 1666 General Chapter to seek authorisation from the Holy See to send missionaries to England. (4) The Provinces geographically closest to England, Francia, Touraine and Belgium, were asked to study how best to receive novices from England, Ireland and Scotland. Nothing concrete was to happen until Paul of St Ignatius became Prior General. Paul Gambaldi was a surprise choice for Prior General as he was living an eremitical life at Pino in Piedmont and was not even at the Chapter. However, from the time of his election in 1686 until his term of office ended in 1692 Gambaldi was committed to action in England.

By now James II was King of England - the first Catholic monarch for over a century, bringing a great sense of optimism for the future of the Church in England. James came to the throne with considerable good will, he had shown himself a capable and courageous Lord High Admiral and gave little evidence at this stage of religious bigotry. The by now small Catholic community while optimistic, was by no means arrogant. They had no vision of restoring the old order, rather they desired freedom of worship and easing of penal legislation. Bishop Leyburn who was appointed Vicar Apostolic pleaded for tolerance, asking his flock to be kind to Protestants and not to seek any opportunity to settle old scores. There was a desire to be distanced from any sense of religious confrontation. The Benedictine Bishop Ellis, the newly appointed Vicar Apostolic for the Western District made it clear that the Benedictines had no wish to win back their former abbeys.

Such a statement would also mean that there could be no question of the Carmelites regaining their priories. For instance it would have been virtually impossible to have regained Aylesford. Sir John Banks, who resided at the Friars and had recently spent a considerable sum embellishing the house, was a business colleague of the indefatigable Samuel Pepys, secretary to the Navy and friend of James II. No, the role of the Carmelites would be that of missionaries coming to care for the scattered Catholic communities and perhaps make converts from among those who were seeking a more devout life. John Dryden, in *The Hind and the Panther*, indicates his reason for embracing Catholicism. Talking of the Catholic Church:

"one in herself not rent by schism but sound
Entire on solid shining diamond.
Not sparkled, scattered into sects like you
One is a Church and must be to be true
One central principal of unity as individual
So from air is free is one in faith and one in sanctity." (5)

People became Catholics seeking the sacraments, the sense of the mystical, a deeper spirituality. The Carmelites would then have had something definite to offer in this context.

The immediate opening for the English Mission came through an English Carmelite, Damasus of St Mary or Thomas Fulwood. He was a Londoner by birth and had become a Catholic in his late teens in Brussels. In 1686 he was 32 years old and had been professed 12 years. Damasus wanted to visit his family in London and had written to Cardinal Howard in Rome, the Cardinal Protector of England, to ask permission to make the visit. The Prior General seized the opportunity and began negotiations with the Earl of Castlemaine, James II's representative in Rome. (6)

The Earl of Castlemaine is an interesting figure who was often in his lifetime overshadowed by his wife, Barbara Villiers, Duchess of Cleveland and erstwhile mistress of Charles II. He was a loyal colleague to the King but not popular at the Papal Court. Cardinal Howard belonged to the Norfolk family, one of his forebears was St Philip Howard. The Cardinal was a Dominican who did much to restore the English Dominican Province, he had been a chaplain to Catherine Braganza and was

made a Cardinal by Clement X in 1575. The Cardinal was a shrewd observer of the English scene and gave his support and advice to the Prior General. He warned the Carmelite authorities of the dangers of apostasy and gave them practical hints as to behaviour. The General also wrote to King James, to our ears his letter is quite obsequious:

Your Majesty

Glory of the crown of Britain, which, when it was placed at God's command upon the head of your Majesty, seemed joined to heaven and all the heavenly host, so that it drew applause and congratulations from all who bear the mark of the true faith...

In a very special way my own Order was also affected, an order most fortunately transplanted from the east to the fair land of England where it flourished and grew fruitfully, so that from England many wise doctors, zealous prelates, and men of outstanding holiness spread the Order throughout the world.

We must also mention the bestowing of the singular privilege of the Scapular by the Mother of God on St Simon of Kent surnamed Stock, general of our Order, in this same glorious land. According to the Blessed Virgin's promise, to all those who wore it devoutly the Scapular would be a sign of salvation, of safety in danger, of peace, and of an everlasting covenant; all of which has been proved by countless miracles.

But this joy and exultation has long since been banished. For Carmel mourns for those forty splendid monasteries once so piously built, but torn down or put to profane use at the general violation of the Church. Now the only glimmer of hope of a restoration is that through the benevolent providence of your Majesty's command you should choose to be as it were a second Ezechiah, who made a pact with the Lord God of Israel to open and restore the gates of his house, and should bring back the priests and the Faith to the kingdom, lead the kingdom back to the Church, the holy ones to the Temple, worship to the saints, and honour to God in accordance with the prophesy of Isaiah: "And thou shalt have a crown of glory." And what wonder if God protected and exalted Ezechiah, when in exalting God's glory he promoted and increase his own.

I, the least of Carmelites, and, though unworthy, called to be their supreme moderator, have already offered my congratulation to your Majesty's envoy to the Holy See, and I now make bold to congratulate your Majesty and to testify to the heartfelt joy of my brethren in offering their good wishes and prayers for the success of your reign. I also make bold, prostrating myself at your feet, to beg your most gracious Majesty to deign to take my Order under your most benign and powerful protection.

Its members have long been in exile, and should be the first, or at least among the first, to be admitted as servants and workers in the cultivation of the vineyard of the Catholic faith. Those houses which once were theirs should, if it seems fitting, be given back; so that our religious may not be there just as visitors but as members of your family, and so be enabled, through their prayers, pious wishes, and supplications to obtain the divine protection for the lasting safety and prosperity of your Majesty, to whom with the greatest humility I devote and dedicate my Order. (7)

The next step was to find men who would be suitable missionaries. The Provinces who seemed most suitable were Belgium, Francia and Touraine. The latter provinces covered Northern France and had often received English candidates. The new provincial of the Touraine province, Mark of the Nativity, showed interest in the project and was to become a helpful supporter. However,

because of all the permissions needed to get the project going, it was January of 1688 before the missionaries could set out. They were not to know that conditions in England were soon to change as James II was now on a collision course with the establishment, his military temperament and stubbornness were clouding his judgement. However, they did arrive with the goodwill of Cardinal Howard who had written a generous letter on their behalf to Bishop Leyburn:

Most Illustrious and Reverend Lord:

The Carmelite Order has always been highly thought of in England, so that to say the least it deserves all the praise it receives. Now I am going to add to that praise by signalling the zeal of their Father General, which I assure you could not be greater. In order that his religious should not be reckoned inferior to those of other orders in labouring in the Lord's vineyard he is sending you four workers. Their names are enclosed, and I strongly recommend them to your Lordship.

So if you will oblige me by helping them and being kind to them, and by giving them all they need, know that by so doing you will be greatly obliging myself, &c.

Ever your devoted servant,
The Cardinal of Norfolk (8)

The Carmelites who eventually arrived were a mixed group. The superior was James Fortin - nothing more is known of him. The others were Germain Le Breton who had joined the Order at Tours and had been professed some 20 years. Henry Trent of Irish origin belonged to the Poitiers community where he had taught philosophy and theology. Trent had connections at Court and it was hoped these would prove useful. Thomas Fulwood was already in London but proved to be an elusive member of the group. (9)

The main source of information about the group is to be found in letters sent to Rome. The letters are on the whole quite disappointing as they give little away to indicate where the Friars lived or the people they worked with. The first few months seemed to have been dogged with litigations among themselves and with the Discalced. The Discalced at this time had a house in London not far from Cheapside and must have numbered about eight or ten. The cause of friction seems to have been accusations and counter accusations about who was trying to regain the former Carmelite Priors. On top of this, Fortin and Trent were at loggerheads and it was only Mark of the Nativity's kindness that prevented them from being recalled. Germain Le Breton, in the meantime, had managed to find a patron in the Tuscan ambassador, such patronage was invaluable and other Carmelites were to find hospitality at the Portuguese Embassy. About this time, the General ordered a wandering Carmelite out of England, Modestus Pates, who had found his way to London from Castelnauday in Southern France. (10)

An interesting detail comes in a letter from the General to Fr Fortin giving permission to celebrate Mass according to the Roman rite rather than that proper to the Carmelite Order. Perhaps this was to avoid confusion as the people would be unaware of the Carmelite or Dominican rite, it was also done perhaps to avoid irritating the secular clergy. (11)

Fr Fortin is also praised for sending young Englishmen to the novitiate in Touraine. It was one of the Prior General's chief preoccupations that suitable English youths be recruited to establish a supply of native born friars for England. It was failure to follow this out that led to the end of the mission. Unhappily there was no strong personality to provide the leadership and do for the Carmelites what Cardinal Howard had done for the Dominicans. Another problem arose from national differences when English novices were not given a chance to adapt to French customs. In

1690 Germain Le Breton complained that three young Englishmen had been expelled from Touraine because they had not settled down to the French way of life. This incident caused Paul Gambaldi, the Prior General, to write a fierce letter to Mark of the Nativity, the Touraine Provincial, reminding him that candidates were to be trained in the basic virtues and not to be expected to conform to national characteristics. (12)

In November 1688 the Glorious Revolution took place and with it ended any hope of rebuilding the Catholic community in England. English Catholics were once again on the wrong side of the Law and the Carmelite enterprise suffered as well. James Fortin, the superior, went back to France, Henry Trent gave up the Catholic faith and settled down as a country parson while Thomas Fulwood ended up in jail for some misdemeanour, not as a witness to the faith. Germain was the only one left, and because he had lost his patron he had to eke out an existence teaching music. Fortunately, he was able to obtain a post at the Portuguese Embassy.

Another factor that was added to the mission's problems were the wars that would rage on and off over the next twenty years or more. France was usually the enemy so travel became dangerous and French missionaries had to face a certain amount of suspicion. Fortunately, wars were not as all pervasive as today's so the problems they caused were relative.

Despite the political change in England and the fact that the missions supporters, Paul Gambaldi and Mark of the Nativity, finished their terms of office as General and Provincial of Touraine the mission survived. In 1693 James Mandin, a Parisian by birth, joined Germain, he was to serve the mission well for a considerable number of years. In the next few years three Irishmen joined the Mission - James Finn and Thomas and James Fitzmorris. It seems they had been recruited by the famous William Shea who did so much to keep Carmel alive in Ireland. He was not always highly regarded by his French and Belgium confreres as he had been formed in Spain and not according to the reform of Touraine. However his tenacity and willingness to keep the Order alive speaks volumes as regard his sense of commitment. One only regrets that there was no comparable English friar in the 17th Century. The mission was further strengthened by the presence of Theodoric Devoir who served the mission from 1695-1702. Theodoric was just 30 years old when he came to England. He left a comfortable life in Poitiers where he was a university lecturer to come to an existence that meant uncertainty, hardship and frequent imprisonment.

It would seem that the group ministered faithfully to the Catholics of the London area. Germain translated a book of devotions for members of the Third Order, which would indicate that small groups were beginning to form around the missionaries. By 1700 the Carmelites in London would have numbered nine men. Anselm Jackson, an Irishman, came over around 1697 and in 1698 Stephen Mason, an Englishman, arrived from Touraine, very young but capable. Another Carmelite, Elijah Vansteen, was in London as chaplain to the Count of Auersberg. The group would have numbered 10 if a certain Damien had managed to join them. He was arrested on arrival in England in 1700 and after a year's imprisonment, was deported.

Relations among the friars seem to have been tense at times. Germain, who was now the superior, had no easy task dealing with the Irish friars. Germain was very cautious by nature and he seemed to exasperate the Irish who also were difficult to pin down. It seems they would disappear off the scene and leave Germain in ignorance as to their fate or whereabouts.

About this time Thomas Fulwood finally abandoned his religious vocation and the Church and became a minister in London under the name of Dubois. Fulwood was never reliable and prior to his apostasy his escapades with women had done little to help. The Prior General, Carlo Barberi, asked Theodoric Devoir to mediate between Germain and the Irish and his report in 1701 is a masterpiece of diplomacy.(13) It does emerge that James Finn was an intriguer who needed careful

handling and James Fitzmorris was not that capable while his brother was a known controversialist. What does emerge from the document is a clear recommendation that the Irish and English missions should be separate and that the existing tooing and froing between the countries was unhelpful. Also the Vicars Apostolic had no love for footloose Irish religious. Theodoric Devoir left England shortly after sending his report, he was in excellent standing with Bishop Leyburn and hoped to return to England. Theodoric stayed on in France but wrote a considerable work on Anglican Orders: 'Justification of the Roman Church on the Reordaining Anglican Bishop - Paris 1718. Cosmos de Villiers in his *Bibliotheca Carmelitana* devotes a number of columns to this work which could well repay study in our ecumenical age. (14)

The mission survived the first decade of the 18th Century with Germain struggling on despite ill health. Communication with Rome was fraught with problems but we know that there were seven friars in England in 1705 to congratulate Angelus Cambolas on his election as General. These were Germain, the Fitzmorris brothers, James Finn, James Mandin, Anselm Jackson and Stephen Mason.(15) Germain remained at his post until his death sometime about 1713. He was a man of faith and courage having worked so devotedly for the best part of 25 years in England, the pity is that we have few records that would have enabled us to learn about the day to day details of his life.

George Walker, it seems, was Germain's successor. Walker had studied in Italy and was know to Germain who had recommended him for the post of superior in 1704. The next notable figure to emerge is Victor of St Cecile. He was a member of the Touraine province and came to England in 1713 as an experienced friar having been a novice director and confessor to the Ursulines at Orleans. When he arrived in England he practised as an optician in the Strand but his real skill was spiritual direction and he was also credited with making a number of converts. It would be fascinating to know just where on the Strand he had his premises as in fact he would have only been a stone's throw away from the remains of the London Whitefriars. He was asked by the General, Charles Cornaccioli, in 1719, to purchase a house where the missionaries could live in community, this was to be in *civitate Salmunea* - wherever that was! (16)

In 1722, Alexis de la Mellier took charge of the mission and in 1731 he reports the arrival of Peter Brown in England, after that silence descends. The only other record of a Carmelite from that period is of Stephen Granville who served as a chaplain at the Portuguese Embassy from 1724-1740. There were also two discalced friars, chaplains at this busy Church: Edward Cox and Francis Blyth. The latter was Superior of the Discalced Friars and something of a scholar. He helped Bishop Challoner with his work on the Douai Bible and was a pivotal figure among 18th Century Discalced English Friars. (17)

The mission should not be seen as a failure, that would be an injustice to the courage and endurance of so many. As I have previously said, there was no English Carmelite with sufficient personality to set his stamp on the mission and gather around an enthusiastic group of compatriots who were resolved to face the dangers and deprivations of working in England. The other aspect of the mission's lack of rootedness was the failure of the friars to link up with any of the established Catholic families who provided patronage, safe hiding and vocations from among their younger sons. The Stonors, Petres, Howards and Vavasours all filled that role and Jesuits, Franciscans and Benedictines valued the links.

The mission did make a positive contribution to the English Church of the day and for those of us who belong to the restored English Province we can feel a sense of continuity with confreres who were heroic in the face of every possible discouragement. It is up to us today to keep alive the memory of Germain le Breton, James Mandin and George Walker and realise that they left the security of community to risk everything in their following of Jesus Christ and such a following of Jesus Christ is, as ever, at the heart of the Carmelite Rule.

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1. "*Carmelites in London, a Penal Time Mission*", Wilfrid McGreal O Carm. Aylesford Review 7 (1965). Pgs 66-74.
 2. Kevin Alban has given us a fuller account of Rayner's life in an article in *Carmelus* 1999.
 3. *The Poewms of John Dryden*, Oxford University Press 1962. Pg 191.
 4. *Acta Capituli Generalis II*, 123.
 5. J. Dryden, *op. cit.* Pg 383.
 6. *Arch Ord. II Anglia* Germain Le Breton to Carlo Barberi April 1st 1704.
 7. Copy of letter to the King Arch Ord II C.O.1 (33) f.72v-3v trans McGreal "*Carmelites in London*" 67-69.
 8. *Ibid.*, f424v Text of Howard's letter fr 428v-9v trans McGreal "*Carmelites in London*" 70-71.
 9. *Arch Ord II Anglia* ! Germain to Carol Barberi April 1704.
 10. *Arch Ord II C.O.* 33 f460v Paul to Modestus May 3 1688.
 11. *Arch Ord II C.O.* 33 fr 383v-3v.
 12. McGreal "*Carmelites in London*" pg 72.
 13. *Arch Ord II Anglia I* Theodoric to F de Latenay June 20 1701.
 14. Cosmos de Villiers *Bibliotheca Carmelitana* ed Wessels Rome 1927 pg 784-93.
 15. *Arch Ord II Anglia* Germain to A Cambolas Sept 7 1705.
 16. *Arch Ord II C.O.* I (43) f453v.
 17. *Catholic Records Society Registers of the Catholic Chapels Royal & of the Portuguese Embassy Chapel Vol 1* ed J Cyril M Weale London 1941 pg 170.