

# The Life of the Spirit

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## FATHER DOMINIC BARBERI THE MISSIONARY

By

DENIS GWYNN

Father Dominic Barberi's name is always associated particularly with that of Newman because it was he who received Newman's submission at Littlemore in October 1845. He arrived there (apparently by accident but actually as the result of years of constant vigilance and sympathetic correspondence) just at the moment when Newman had decided to take the final step but knew no Catholic priest in England to whom he could turn without feeling tongue-tied. But although the immediate reason for the recent petitions to Rome to hasten the cause of Father Dominic's beatification is his connection with Newman's conversion, it is probable that Father Dominic's preaching as a missionary pioneer in England will be the chief subject of interest to the authorities in Rome. Undoubtedly it was his missionary labours in the English towns that made Newman regard him with so much personal veneration both before and after their first meeting. For it was he who first provided the convincing answer to that challenge which Newman had unconsciously formulated when he wrote to Ambrose Phillips nearly five years before he became a Catholic. At that time Newman was still convinced that the Catholic Church did not possess the marks of sanctity by which the true Church was to be recognised.

"This I feel most strongly and cannot conceal it," Newman had written, to warn off Ambrose Phillips at the beginning of 1841, when Phillips desired to meet him in Oxford to discuss the possibilities of union between the Church of England and Rome, "that while Rome is what she is, union is impossible. That we too must change I do not deny. Rome must change first of all in her spirit. We must see more sanctity in her than we do at present. Alas! I see no marks of sanctity, or if any, they are chiefly confined to converts from us . . . I do verily think that, with all our sins, there is more sanctity in the Church

of England and Ireland than in the Roman Catholic bodies in the same countries. I say not all this in reproach but in great sorrow . . . Their great object is to pull down the English Church. They join with those who are further from them in Creed to oppose those who are nearer to them. They have to do with such a man as O'Connell. Never can I think such ways the footsteps of Christ. If they want to convert England, let them go barefooted into our manufacturing towns—let them preach to the people like St. Francis Xavier—let them be pelted and trampled on, and I will own that they can do what we cannot. I will confess they are our betters far. I will (though I could not on that ground join them) I *would* gladly incur their reproach. This is to be Catholics, this is to secure a triumph. Let them use the proper arms of the Church and they will prove that they are the Church by using them."

To anyone who studies the letters<sup>(1)</sup> of Father Dominic to his superiors in Rome during the eight years of his mission in England it will be clear not only that Newman was aware of Father Dominic's missionary preaching in the Potteries but that he regarded him from a distance as a symbolic figure. That Newman should have recognised his personal holiness and his superb courage in those lonely missions is not surprising. Much more surprising is the fact, which becomes very evident in Father Dominic's letters to Rome, that the Protestant people in the towns where he preached were definitely eager to attend his services, even though he had great difficulty in making himself understood. His preaching began when he went to Aston Hall in Staffordshire in 1842, after Wiseman had obtained that property for him as the first Passionist house in England. The story of Father Dominic's sufferings there is well known. The Protestant clergy organised opposition to him by every means they could. They encouraged the local children, and even the most undesirable elements, to jeer at him in the streets as he walked about with bare feet and wearing the habit of the Passionists, with its conspicuous sacred heart and cross. He was often stoned, and to the end of his life he bore a deep scar where a large stone struck his head. But physical violence of this kind did not affect him so much as the relentless ridicule and insult to which he refers repeatedly in his letters, though he never gives even one detail of the ill treatment which tried his spirit so severely. Everything seemed against him. The Catholics, whom he had expected to assist his missionary efforts, were dismayed by the provocative appearance of his religious habit. They resented the intrusion of a foreign priest who not only made their religion appear un-English but went about

(1) See *Ven. Dominic Barberi in England*, by Rev. Urban Young, C.P. Burns Oates, 1935 (out of print).

preaching openly, to the exasperation of Protestants who had hitherto treated Catholics as inoffensive neighbours. He had the utmost difficulty in pronouncing English, though he could write it fluently and well before long. Postulants kept on arriving but seldom stayed more than a few days. His companions were constantly falling ill, and they found even more difficulty than he did in preaching in English. There were times, as he confessed in very poignant letters to his friends in Rome, when he had broken down and cried aloud.

Yet even at Aston and the neighbouring town of Stone he had attentive audiences from the start, though he made very few converts. He arrived at Aston late in February and by April 26th he was reporting, "So far I have received three Protestants into the Church, and shortly I am to receive more." A month later he said that, "since Good Friday I have received seven persons into the Church, and had I nothing else to do I might possibly receive from four to five hundred converts a year. One needs time and patience, however, as they are very ignorant. One has to begin by making them understand that there is one God in three distinct Persons. They have no objections to bring forward as a rule. The real obstacles to be overcome are the extreme ignorance and even indifference to their salvation which they display. Endless patience and charity, and above all good example, are the great needs. It is these things that arouse their interest and stir them up to think about their eternal salvation. I have many under instruction, but I am alone—alone."

His sufferings had been intense; and, in beseeching the help of another priest, he had written, "Please send me a priest who is ready to suffer much—much—for the divine glory." Opposition was becoming more organised when the success of his first efforts became apparent. In September he was reporting that, "There has lately been a stirring of the waters among the Protestants, who come in great numbers to hear me. Their ministers are alarmed and busily occupied in opening churches near us by way of opposition. But God will be our aid and support. The converts so far number only fourteen, but I have several under instruction and have hopes of an increase." His campaign began in earnest before the end of the year, when he hired a room at Stone for a pound a month and started saying Mass there for the first time since the Reformation. He reported to Rome that on the first day he "had the consolation of seeing the place filled with Catholics and Protestants", and that he had begun to preach "a series of polemical discourses on points of controversy".

Stone at that time was only a small town of perhaps two thousand people; and it is astonishing to read Father Dominic's conscientious estimates of the numbers who came to hear him

preach. He certainly never exaggerated his own success or took any pride in the sermons and addresses which he found so difficult to deliver. Yet before Christmas he was reporting that "the concourse of people is immense, especially in the evening, when they come to hear the controversial lectures. The other evening there must have been four to five hundred Protestants listening to me with the closest attention. About fifteen presented themselves for instruction in the teachings of our holy religion. These poor people are well disposed, and perhaps many Protestants are even more desirous of becoming Catholics than we missionaries are anxious to convert them!" No wonder the Protestant clergy took fright and began to pursue him in the streets. They encouraged the children to call him "the Barbarian" and "Father Demonio" or simply "The Demon" as they followed him in his daily walk from Aston to Stone. He reported even before Christmas that the ministers were holding services at the times he had chosen, "to keep people from coming to hear me. They have started house to house visiting with the sole object of exhorting people not to come to me. They have opened a new church close to our own and placed a new minister in charge." Yet the crowds thronging his church were steadily increasing, and he reported in all solemnity that if his hired room could only hold more people "the whole town would come to listen to me." If only there were English priests as missionaries, who "know this most difficult language", he was sure they could do far more. "The language," he wrote again, "is my great obstacle for I find it hard to express myself in English and make myself understood."

Evidence from other sources confirms fully this difficulty he had in talking English. At one of the convents where he was to be best known in later years the nuns could hardly understand a word he said on his first mission to them. Even a year later, when he had almost finished building the new church and school at Stone, he was writing, "I do what I can but find English difficult, above all preaching in the language". The Protestant opposition was more intense than ever, and he was reporting that "insults and mockery of every description are our lot", while conversions were still few. But the Protestant clergy were not only hostile but thoroughly frightened, and Father Dominic himself wondered at the consternation he had provoked. He could not understand why he and his few Italian priests, labouring under such difficulties, should cause so much more apprehension than the Franciscans had done when they had occupied Aston Hall in former years. "What is it that makes them fear?" he wrote to Rome from Aston in April, 1844. He had fully satisfied himself with his own explanation. "It is our observance of strict rule and the sandalled feet. These things, it would seem, make them tremble for their

Church by law established”.

He was paying less attention to controversial subjects and modelling his missions directly on the practice in Italy, preaching “on the Passion in the morning, on the duties of a Christian life in the afternoon, and on the eternal Truths in evening”. And he and his young colleagues had by this time begun boldly preaching in the Passionist habit, with crucifix on breast and wearing sandals, even in places far from Aston Hall.

It was these missions that had been reported to Newman at Littlemore and that made him realise that the Catholic Church in England was definitely giving proof of the apostolic spirit which he had failed to discern hitherto. Here was no sheltered preaching to the converted, but a bold uncompromising apostolate. And the response was astonishing. In June, 1844, Father Dominic arranged to hold the first full Corpus Christi procession in the grounds of Aston Hall and “there were present fully a thousand people, half of whom were Protestants”. The experiment was repeated a few days later, and over a thousand Protestants came, besides an equal number of Catholics from all parts, for the Catholics were being awakened and gaining new confidence with these unexpected manifestations of zeal. He was going farther afield, and his terse summaries of his activities make vivid reading. “Last month,” he wrote in July, “I preached in a hay loft somewhere near Oxford to about five hundred Protestants.” What brought them to hear this un-gainly foreign missionary one cannot remotely guess. But to Father Dominic the explanation was always the same. “You could not believe the impression our habit makes when we go to preach anywhere. The people kneel down in crowds just to receive my blessing. We do more preaching here with the bare feet and religious restraint and modesty than with the tongue. Somebody told me once that they had been converted at my first sermon although they did not understand a word I said. Protestants and Catholics alike come in crowds”.

It was on this very journey which brought him to “the hay loft somewhere near Oxford”, that he boldly presented himself at Littlemore on the afternoon of St. John the Baptist’s day and there for a few moments made the acquaintance of Newman himself and of the other inmates of the hermitage. For four years he had been corresponding regularly with J. D. Dalgairns, though they had not yet met, and through Dalgairns Newman had been hearing direct news of Father Dominic’s apostolate. But when he visited Oxford on that June day he did not wear even his sandals nor any part of his Passionist habit; for he was always most scrupulous in adhering to Wiseman’s ruling that they should dress as secular priests except when they were actually conducting their missions. Ever since his arrival in England he had been insisting that there should be no compro-

mise on the question of wearing the habit and sandals. He had fought incessantly for the strict rule, even against his own superiors in Rome who had argued repeatedly that it was unwise to challenge hostility in a Protestant country. He, who had borne the full weight of that hostility himself, would never yield an inch over it. He knew that Wiseman shared his view and wished that they could wear their habit openly and all the time, no matter how much offence it caused among the timid Catholics and the angry Protestants. "We never wear it in towns," he explained to Rome at just this time, "but only in country places near the house, for short walks. When we leave home on a preaching expedition we wear the ordinary dress of priests as we go through the streets. When we arrive at our destination the habit is put on, and you could scarcely believe how much the Passionist habit impresses people here, as I think I have remarked before. During missions the mere sight of the habit and sandals is a moving sermon."

Experience undoubtedly confirmed his view. The demands for his services as a public missionary, and still more to give retreats to the clergy and in religious houses, became far beyond his capacity to do all that was asked of him. "I preach three times a day," he reported a few months later, "and hear confessions from seven in the morning till ten at night. The people swarm like bees round the confessional—more even than in the kingdom of Naples—and it seems impossible to get to the end of them." Before the end of 1844 he was reporting that he and his ardent young assistant, Father Gaudentius Rossi, were now going on missions in turn. "The churches are always too small for the crowds that come to the mission from every direction. I have known cases where people came thirty miles to attend a mission. They take lodgings for the time, and are there for the one purpose of hearing the sermons and making their peace with God. Protestants also are always present in good numbers, and if not always convinced are at least edified. We never say a word on matters of controversy during these missions but preach the Passion of Christ, the Eternal Truths, and how to receive the Sacraments, etc. Three sermons are preached each day and the church is always full, above all in the evening."

Through it all, his attention never flagged in watching each phase of the developments concerning the Oxford Movement. It had been an inspiration to him ever since his first exchange of letters with Dalgairns, when the letter from the "young member of the University of Oxford" had been published in the *Paris Univers*. His superiors in Rome found difficulty in following his eager references to the approaching crisis, which he believed must bring Newman into the Catholic Church. "Dr. Newman, of whom I spoke in my last letter," he wrote at the end of 1844, "is not the head of the University but of a religious House—

Littlemore by name—near Oxford. Many vague rumours are flying about concerning him and his possible movements. I am full of hope and keep up continual correspondence by letter with the said house at Littlemore." And a little later he mentioned again that he took good care not to allow this precious correspondence to drop. He was thrilled to hear of the commotion caused at Oxford when convocation assembled to pass judgment on W. G. Ward's *Ideal of a Christian Church* and deprived him of his degrees. But the intermittent letters he received from Dalgairns, as he hastened from one mission to another, showed that the hermits at Littlemore declined to follow these riotous proceedings with more than a minimum of notice. They, and Newman particularly, were striving always to find their true path in silence and in prayer.

As the summer passed Father Dominic was preaching to far larger congregations in Liverpool and Manchester. There he found that an enormous increase of Catholic population in recent years had left the few clergy quite unable to cope with all the demands upon them. The scope of his mission was changing, and his last years were to be consumed with overwhelming labours attending to the immigrants from Ireland, who were fleeing from the famine and ravaged by typhus which they brought with them in their desperate search for work and bread. To the end he was still responsible also for the Passionist house in Belgium which he had established when he was first sent northwards with a vague hope of reaching England. He was due to carry out one of his periodic visitations there in October 1845, and his time was fully booked up until that date. He was to give yet another mission in the last week of September, when he received an urgent letter from his friend Dalgairns at Littlemore. It told him that Dalgairns had at last decided to become a Catholic himself and begged that he might be allowed to come to Aston Hall and be received quietly there. Father Dominic replied immediately, cancelling his impending mission and sending one of his Italian colleagues to take his place. Dalgairns came and was received on the following day, and he went back as a Catholic to Littlemore. On his return there he found Newman as determined as ever to refrain from any discussion of his personal position, but there were plain symptoms that he was on the verge of taking the final step. Dalgairns knew that in a few weeks Father Dominic would be coming south on his way to Belgium, and once more he wrote urgently to him, asking him to break his journey, as "there might be something for him to do" if he would stay the night at Littlemore as their guest.

Father Dominic came at once, and the sequel was the submission of Newman, the centenary of which is being celebrated all over the English speaking world this autumn. He could only spend one day more with his converts before he hurried on to-