

NOTITIAE BIBLIOGRAPHICAE

JOHN SHARP, *Reapers of the Harvest. The Redemptorists in Great Britain and Ireland, 1843-1898*, Dublin, Veritas Publications, 1989, 321 pp.

Mention of the parish missions must inevitably arouse a sense of nostalgia in many a Catholic heart. They were a familiar and quite exciting feature of Church life until very recent years. The missionaries, and the Redemptorists were by no means the only ones, appeared in a locality almost like prophetic figures of Old Testament times to shake the populace out of a lethargy, a cold or lukewarm religious practice that had become routine. There was much drama in the preaching and solemnities that one expected, not without a certain pleasurable trepidation; and it was hard indeed to hold aloof from those seemingly interminable confessional queues. The missions that so many Catholics remember were even more spectacular and more startling in their impact on Europe of last century. Long familiar in Italy, by about the third decade of the century they were introduced into northern lands, awakening in the Catholic revival from a long slumber during the years when Gallicanism and the Enlightenment had dulled religious sentiment. In the Low Countries, Belgium and Holland, the Redemptorists were drawing enthusiastic crowds numbered at times even in their thousands, before they came to England in 1843.

The present work is a study of the Redemptorists in Britain and Ireland and their apostolate, which was, as is well known, principally the parish missions. It is a study of the impact of a religious body on the Christian life in nineteenth century Great Britain. It would have been possible, no doubt, to have made a similar study in the context of denominations other than Catholic. One thinks, for example, of Peter F. Anson's *The Call of the Cloister. Religious Communities and Kindred Bodies in the Anglican Communion*, London, S.P.C.K., 1956. In choosing the Redemptorists the author has

been able to focus on their most characteristic occupation, the missions. The result is a welcome source of information, not only about the Institute itself, but also about a feature of Church life that may soon be forgotten.

Dr. Sharp is a priest of the Hallam diocese. In addition to his studies in the University of London for his doctoral degree he has had considerable pastoral experience, including the chaplaincy of Queens' College, Cambridge. In preparing his work on the Redemptorists he has had free access to provincial and domestic archives in Britain and Ireland. He has used his opportunities to such effect that one is gratified to find the finished work very much alive with personalities who are allowed to speak for themselves. The investigation has been searching and most thorough, such as one could desire, but what has resulted is far from being a coldly analytical or statistical presentation: it is a story that lives in the men and their works. Both are very real, objectively and critically presented as they lived or happened. In addition to Redemptorist sources Dr. Sharp has used to excellent effect other pertinent archives, those of the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide, now of the Evangelisation of the Peoples, as well as those of the various dioceses that were most relevant. It is a thorough study enhanced by a wealth of colour and activity.

The strong emphasis on the parish missions, inevitable in a study of the Redemptorists, makes for a valuable contribution to recent studies of evangelism in English-speaking lands. J.P. Dolan in his *Catholic Revivalism: The American Experience, 1830-1900*, Notre Dame, 1978, has drawn attention to the part played by the parish missions in American Catholicism; and Richard Cawardine has done a similar service for preaching other than Catholic in *Transatlantic Revivalism. Popular Evangelicalism in Britain and America, 1790-1865*, Westport and London, 1978. With its more restricted field of study the present work is able to emphasise more concretely the missionaries, their labours and the assessment of the efforts. And the greater precision makes it possible to flesh out the more general surveys, bringing them so much closer to life.

In the first three chapters Dr. Sharp introduces the Redemptorists and traces their history from their coming to England in 1843 until 1898, when they divided into two provinces, English and Irish. The account is necessarily succinct, not quite sixty pages, but in that short space there is much to claim one's interest. It is intriguing, for example, to learn that Fr. Friedrich de Held, that doughty disciple of St. Clement Hofbauer who as Belgian provincial had sent a small com-

munity to Falmouth in 1843, had his knuckles soundly rapped for his pains. His Superior General, Fr. Giancamillo Ripoli, administered a sharp reprimand for his having proceeded without due authorisation. The early foundations like Falmouth were burdened with parochial duties; but after a directive issued in 1850 the scattered men were gathered into two larger communities, Clapham, founded in 1848 and Bishop Eton, Liverpool, 1851. It was now possible with the concentration of manpower to develop the missions. It was a happy coincidence that 1850 also saw the coming to the Institute of seven men, all destined to play important parts in the future of the Redemptorists, men of the stamp of Coffin, Bridgett and Furniss, the renowned children's missionary.

It was really from this date, 1850, that the Redemptorists began to make their impact on Catholic life in Britain and Ireland. It was especially in Ireland, from the first mission, that of Limerick in 1851, that they fully realised the effectiveness of their apostolate. Among a mainly Catholic population it was possible, as it had been in earlier days in Belgium, to reckon the attendance in the thousands. With so many immigrant Irish in England the work in Ireland assumed the greater significance. Fr. Reyners, Belgian provincial, declared that "it was principally for the poor Irish Catholics that the Congregation was able to develop its work in Great Britain" (p. 20). That was in the nature of a surrender on the part of a superior who had avowed himself unwilling to accept an Irish candidate without having examined him at least ten times. From the beginnings in the fifties the Redemptorist missions went from strength to strength, amassing an impressive total by the end of the century, as can be verified by the statistics offered on p. 148.

What is particularly gratifying in this story of the Redemptorists is the number of fine character sketches of personalities who have figured prominently in the Institute. Fr. Mauron, Superior General for thirty-eight years, Fr. de Held, whom the English bishops saw as of an uncomfortably prickly temperament, Fr. Furniss, thought by an admiring and fascinated child to be at least 107 years old, and many another are all presented briefly but so very much true to life. Special mention must be made of Fr. Coffin, that long-serving English provincial. One of the first members of Newman's Oratory, he came to the Redemptorists in 1850 and quickly won the regard of higher superiors. What is remarkable is the extent to which he also won the esteem of the English hierarchy. It seems that he played a much more significant role in the Church affairs of the country than has been recognised. It surprises us, perhaps, to learn that a contem-

porary said of him that "few ecclesiastics are held in greater esteem or affection" (p. 39). Throughout the work, especially in treating of the missions Dr. Sharp brings to life the men who preached; and this is one of the most gratifying features of the study.

The Redemptorists working in England and Ireland would naturally not have escaped the common experience of these lands, the tensions between English and Irish. The story is familiar enough in any circumstances; and it is no different in the case of religious. Relations among the Redemptorists became increasingly strained, as is evidenced by complaints that came to Rome expressed in language that heroically tried to be understanding. The division in 1898 took nobody by surprise. It did, however, put an end to a significant phase of the apostolate and gave occasion for a laborious fresh start at least in England.

An interesting and enlightening chapter treats the attitude of bishops and the secular clergy. In this respect the beginnings had been anything but auspicious. The decision of the Redemptorists to withdraw from parish work angered such formidable critics as Wiseman and Ullathorne; and they were by no means appeased when Fr. de Held defended himself in what they considered too cavalier a fashion. The Irish bishops from the start were for the most part more friendly. Credit for winning over the English hierarchy must go in greatest measure to Fr. Coffin. When the Southwark clergy appealed to Propaganda to make him their bishop they described him as "the chief counsellor of all our bishops" (p. 45). By that time, 1883, the English bishops were most favourable to the Institute on account of the well proven worth of its missions. Much the same is to be said of the clergy both in Britain and Ireland. It was the success of the missions that won the support of the clergy, and that in turn was no small factor in the continuation of the good done by the preachers in their 3,215 missions during the period (p. 147).

The earliest Redemptorists in England were of the Belgian province, and from 1855 belonged to the newly created province of Holland and England. From an early date personnel began to be recruited in Britain and Ireland. Fr. Edward Douglas, of the redoubtable Scots family, took his vows in 1849, but he was soon whisked away to Rome, where he remained until his death almost half a century later. The first Irishman to enter the Congregation was Fr. William Plunkett, who was one of that distinguished group that came in 1850. Dr. Sharp devotes a chapter to the training of candidates. The process is still familiar with strong emphasis on the person and writings of St. Alphonsus, and in the insistence on fidelity

to the religious rule, a common feature among religious of last century. It is not superfluous to spell out the training programme, as it is here. It goes far towards explaining the type of men who preached the missions.

The missionaries are described in a chapter entitled "Workers in the Vineyard", and it is reading that entertains as well as enlightens. There is ample occasion here for presenting personalities who never fail to interest. For the most part the Redemptorist preacher was expected to conform to a type, which can probably be recognised by many a missionary living today. Perhaps there is more interest, however, in those whom their contemporaries viewed with mistrust as not conforming as they should to the common pattern. Fr. Petcherine, the Russian scholar who became such a passionate Irish patriot, could not be forced into any pre-existing mould; yet he was probably the best known of the earliest Redemptorists in Ireland. And superiors tended to speak of Francis Hall very much as they did of Fr. Petcherine. Even though he did not fit the pattern of the ideal, his sermons have provided models for more than one succeeding generation of missionaries. Even Fr. Furniss, the paragon of such a specifically Redemptorist apostolate as the children's mission, was seen with scarcely veiled suspicion, when the work in which he excelled seemed to set him apart from his companions. It would be quite unjustifiable, however, to give the impression that only the men who refused to conform were worthy of admiration. Fr. Henry Harbison, for example, one of the earliest Irish vocations, embraced the Redemptorist way of life with enthusiasm that found expression in brilliantly successful missions and made him warmly acceptable to his companions, English as well as Irish. In the end we can scarcely disagree with the conclusion. "Whatever the shortcomings of their religious formation, of the rigid ideal to which they were expected to conform, it remains true that the Redemptorists managed to maintain a high level of esteem on the part of the Catholic public" (p. 123).

The remaining four chapters are devoted to a thorough treatment of the Redemptorist missions. In their vigorous assault on irreligion the popular missions were typical of that dynamism that was so characteristic of the counterreformation. When the Rosminians, the Passionists and the Redemptorists began to preach their missions in Britain they found a new challenge in a Catholic population living in an environment that seemed and not rarely showed itself to be in fact hostile. In Ireland it was an impoverished people, disheartened to find themselves sorely disadvantaged in the face of a small privileged minority and too inclined to find solace in drink or

in the violence of the societies like the Hibernians or the Ribbonmen. The remedy, as was stressed in reports of bishops to Rome was to build up a sense of Catholic identity and a pride in the heritage of the faith. It was, of course, meant to go somewhat deeper than the zeal of those Limerick children, moved by the magic of Fr. Furniss, who gathered outside Protestant homes to sing "Daily Daily Sing to Mary" (p. 174). If the process tended to generate a sort of ghetto mentality, it also developed a strong awareness of the parish community with pride and involvement in its activities. Preachers, Redemptorists and others, insisted on a continuing sacramental life with frequent Confession and Holy Communion. For this purpose the Redemptorists especially attached great importance to establishing confraternities to maintain the good effects of the mission. They had to hand the Archconfraternity of the Holy Family and that of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour. Both had proved themselves on the continent. It was this sort of involvement in parish life shown especially through Mass and the Sacraments that marked the most important difference between the missions and the Protestant revivalist meetings they so much resembled in the fiery preaching and resultant emotional manifestations of repentance.

The Redemptorist mission programme is carefully and accurately analysed; and it is no small gain to trace once more that process that has so often proved its worth. The sermons, the most memorable feature, were carefully planned in four stages: the motives for conversion, the obstacles to conversion, the means of conversion and perseverance in conversion. In an appendix the author has provided plans of Redemptorist missions of various lengths according to the topics of the sermons and instructions. It is obvious that there was ample scope for drama in the earlier part of the programme, as the preacher strove to persuade the people to turn from evil. This element of theatre reached a climax in the sermon on reparation to God offended by sin, the *Amende Honorable*. Preaching before the Blessed Sacrament exposed, the missionary treated of many evils besides sacrilegious Communion, and he was frequently rewarded by the loud cries and expressions of grief of a penitent people. The mission proceeded to deal with those things that might hold back the person moved to amend his life; and the treatment of evil culminated in a further moment of high drama, the sermon on hell, "the last direct call to conversion" (p. 170). This determined attack on sin should not be seen as nothing but vehement denunciation. True to St. Alphonsus, their teacher, the missionaries made the peroration, even of the most terrifying sermons, an invitation to come to God, Whose

love offers pardon. And it was followed by an act of contrition led by the preacher, a fervorino which often enough produced a flood of tears (p. 165).

The sermon on hell marked a watershed. The remaining days were devoted to topics suitable to people who had been won from evil and who wished to remain firm in the good. Like St. Alphonsus the Redemptorists invariably preached on prayer, the *Great Means*, as he described it in his best seller of that title. And also like him the Redemptorists never failed to preach on devotion to Our Lady; and that was one more occasion for theatre. This time it was much different from those earlier scenes. There were now flowers and candles in abundance with little girls dressed in white, as the missionary in the name of all solemnly consecrated the parishioners to the Mother of God. At the end of it all there was the concluding sermon on perseverance. Not everyone had Fr. Hall's gift of the precise, telling phrase, but all would have left the people at least with sentiments like his. "Love your faith, be proud of it, love all it teaches you to love, Pope, priest, Church » (p. 174).

In face of the excitement and glamour of the great sermon Fr. Coffin no doubt found it hard to convince his men when he wrote in his *Directory* that the morning instruction was « perhaps the most important part of our missionary labours » (p. 175). Instruction was certainly needed, as the Fathers discovered when they so often had to explain in the confessional the most basic Christian truths. In the appendix with the mission plans Dr. Sharp has given the instructions that might be given in a mission. Delivered less formally, often enough from a seated position, they aimed at guiding the people to good Christian living with topics like grace and prayer, the commandments, the Mass and the Sacraments of Confession and Holy Communion.

Whatever about the importance of the instruction, and the glamour of the sermon, there can be little doubt that the work of the confessional was the most demanding, occupying all the spare time of the missionaries. Naturally, it is not to be expected that one pierce the *sigillum* and analyse these mission confessions; but there is evidence enough that the Redemptorists honestly tried to follow the perennially valid guidelines of St. Alphonsus's *Praxis confessarii*. What was to be seen by all was the at times overwhelming weight of the work. Confessions began early in the morning and continued until late at night; and often during the earliest years the Redemptorists reluctantly had to call on help from the diocesan clergy. There are many stories of people crowding eagerly to the confessionals, of

men climbing into the churches through the windows during the night in order to have a good position in the queue next morning. It was rare that a missionary found it necessary to resort to the methods of the one who, finding it hard to persuade the penitent to give up his secret society, proceeded to beat him soundly about the head until he meekly made his confession "with every sign of true repentance" (p. 180).

The early missions in Britain and Ireland tried to be faithful to the renewal prescribed in their religious rule. Returning after a short lapse of time, they checked the fidelity of those to whom they had preached and confirmed them by a fresh course of exercises. The whole programme then concluded with the final piece of drama, the renewal of baptismal vows, the people, holding lighted candles, pledged themselves to renounce sin and remain loyal to faith and Church.

In assessing the good done by the Redemptorist missions the author cites in addition to addresses of parishioners and flattering reports of Catholic papers the impressive records of confessions heard during the missions. Generally, the preachers themselves tended to be more restrained than others in their judgement of the good achieved. They looked to such things as decline in drunkenness, the secret societies and other social evils they had to combat; and by these standards they had on the whole reason enough to be satisfied. A very precise indication that their efforts had borne fruit was the establishment of the confraternities and their continuing fervour. In this respect the missionaries found much comfort.

On the other hand, Fr. Livius, one of those gifted writers among the English Redemptorists, voiced misgivings towards the end of the century, fearing that the missions had "almost run their day" (p. 117). That is a thought serious enough to call for closer examination. Dr. Sharp has found that at times the missionaries had occasion to complain of lack of cooperation by local clergy. Some took too little interest in the course of the mission; and others failed to maintain the good achieved, neglecting the confraternities and other practices introduced into the parish. To some extent the very success of the early missions undermined the effect of later campaigns. Some enthusiastic pastors demanded them far too frequently, while others favoured retreats to the confraternities a convenient substitute for the turmoil of a regular mission, and there were those, too, who liked to make a display and so tried to induce neighbouring parishioners to come along and fill the churches to overflowing, making it impossible for the missionaries to judge what effect they

were having on the people they had come to evangelise. There was, moreover, on the part of the Redemptorists themselves a certain staleness as so many of them became tired, exhausted by the heavy burden of trying to meet the many demands made on them. These considerations and others besides are carefully weighed to assess the qualms expressed by Fr. Livius. In the end, however, the author concludes that "it is not so much their partial retreat in the face of overwhelming odds that is the cause of surprise but real achievements and the distinctive ... contribution they made to the Catholicism that survived in Great Britain and Ireland down to the Second Vatican Council" (p. 236).

That conclusion is amply justified by this excellent study of the missions. What is said and so amply illustrated in the course of the work may well apply to other lands where the parish missions have made themselves such distinctive features of Catholic life. It may be that in this era after Vatican II Catholic life will change considerably. In that case studies like the present will be much valued by historians.

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