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## R. A. COFFIN'S DEPARTURE FROM THE ORATORIAN

In previous issues of *Spicilegium* we have followed the progress of a disciple and admirer of John Henry Newman from the Church of England to Catholicism and eventually to the newly founded English Oratory<sup>1</sup>. The figure we have seen emerging is fairly representative of the churchmen who were prominent among the Catholics of England during the decades after the Oxford Movement and the restoration of the hierarchy. Coffin, superior of the English province of the Redemptorists and later Bishop of Southwark, was a cultured gentleman such as one meets so often in Establishment circles of Victorian times, very much at home in academic and professional company and a staunch upholder of existing authority in the Church.

At the same time he was not untypical of those younger disciples who had followed Newman into the Church and to the Birmingham Oratory. He, and in all likelihood his companions as well, were rather too dependent on Newman. One cannot disregard the fact that of his first six companions three, Coffin, Penny and Bowles, left the Oratory within just a few years. Sooner or later it can so easily happen that dependence on another can find itself faced with a disagreement which it cannot survive. That is what happened in Coffin's case, at least, and for him the crisis was the more difficult in that he was a man who relied much more than might another on a spiritual guide; and he reached a point where neither from Newman nor among his Oratorian companions could he find the advice and support he had always found so necessary.

Just at the time when he realised that he could no longer find satisfaction in the Oratory for his spiritual needs, he had made the acquaintance of Father Lans of the Redemptorists, recently established in England<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> *Spic. Hist.* 27 (1979) 355-374; 28 (1980) 147-174. As in the previous articles we depend principally on material contained in the archives of the London province of the Redemptorists, quoted ALP. In particular we have once more drawn largely on the two manuscript biographies of Coffin: the anonymous *Life of the Right Rev. R.A. Coffin. First Part*, quoted *Life*, and B. Lubienski, *Mémoires sur la vie de Mgr. Robert Coffin C.S.S.R., évêque de Southwark*. — In addition to these references given in the previous articles mention must be made of an excellent article recently brought to our notice: Alfred C. Rush C.S.S.R., *Oxford Convert: Bishop Coffin C.S.S.R.*, in *The American Ecclesiastical Review* 113 (1945) 401-412.

<sup>2</sup> Concerning John Baptist Lans cf. *Spic. Hist.* 27 (1979) 365.

To this kindly and experienced director he turned as he made his way to the decision to break with the Oratory and his old friends; and it is not surprising that it was among the Redemptorists that he sought a new refuge. The correspondence covering these few months is in the archives of St. Mary's, Clapham, and it is offered as an appendix to this article. It was surely a painful and uncomfortable experience; but the letters up to the final personal farewell Coffin made to Newman at the insistence of Father Lans, show a restraint and a courteous spirit that one must admire. Unpleasant as it all must have been for everyone, the incident if anything does credit to all concerned.

The English Oratory, inaugurated in February 1848 at Maryvale, « Old Oscott » near Birmingham, expanded so rapidly that within a year it had to be divided. It was not, however, only the numbers that made new foundation desirable and even necessary: ever since Faber and his community had come early in 1848 it had become increasingly apparent that there was a diversity of mentality and religious attitudes<sup>3</sup>. Newman and Faber spoke together a great deal early in 1849, discussing the division of personnel, and it soon became a painful topic to the former. Writing to Faber in February, he spoke about losing both his old friend, Dalgairns, and Coffin as well and suggested a bargain. « In exchange for Father Bernard », he asked that he be « allowed to keep Father Robert for a time »<sup>4</sup>.

By April all the talk had resulted in an equitable division, which Newman was able to announce to Coffin<sup>5</sup>, informing him that he was to hold the post of minister in the London Oratory. A postscript added « I am giving in your name as *pro tempore* Missioner at St. Wilfrid's: I suppose I am right ».

St. Wilfrid's, the former home of Faber's Brotherhood near Cheadle in Staffordshire, had proved an embarrassment from the start. For a time in 1848 the whole Oratorian community had lived there, but in January 1849 they had begun to move to Alcester Street in Birmingham. Coffin as minister had remained to look after the place, and now it looked as though some sort of justification for his presence was found in the pastoral care of the Catholics in the neighbourhood. They had become quite numerous, in fact, during the past year when famine had driven so many from Ireland to England

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Wilfrid Ward, *The Life of John Henry Cardinal Newman*, London, 1913, I, 224.

<sup>4</sup> Newman to Faber, 13 II 1849 in Charles Stephen Dessain Cong. Orat. and Vincent Ferrer Blehl S. J., *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, London, vol. XIII, p. 45. The collection is quoted in this article *Letters and Diaries*.

<sup>5</sup> Newman to Coffin, 15 IV 1849 in *Letters and Diaries*, XIII, 1963, p. 114.

and elsewhere. Coffin, at any rate, gave himself to his work among the immigrant Irish labourers with great energy and satisfaction<sup>6</sup>.

His connection with the London Oratory in King William Street near the Strand and with Faber, his superior, must have been scant in the extreme. He was present and was the celebrant at the High Mass on 31st May when the Oratory was solemnly inaugurated in the presence of Bishop Wiseman<sup>7</sup>. After that there is little evidence of his relations with his London community, but there was a constant correspondence with Newman in Birmingham.

St. Wilfrid's was very much on Newman's mind. He suggested to Bishop Ullathorne, Vicar Apostolic of the Central District, that it should be abandoned<sup>8</sup>. When the Bishop raised objections, the harried superior began to think seriously about something that had long been on his mind, a delicate subject and a controversial one among his companions, using the large house at St. Wilfrid's as a school. The author of the *Life*, who doubtless depended on Coffin's memories of the event, says that the latter was one of those who opposed the plan, telling Newman frankly that he considered schools unsuitable occupation for the Oratory<sup>9</sup>. This, he went on to say, brought about a coolness between the two.

Judging from the correspondence on the matter, of which there is quite a good deal, one has to say that this account has all the appearance of looking at the incident in the light of Newman's later ventures into the schools. In the present instance Coffin went along with the project, apparently without making much difficulty. In the event, moreover, the school at St. Wilfrid's had such a brief existence that it could hardly have occasioned such a grave problem as a breach between the two old friends. It was in July of 1849 that Coffin heard of it in a letter from Newman<sup>10</sup>.

« I am going to write to you on a subject on which I would rather talk than write. [He goes on to speak of the need of caution with the others, particularly with Faber].

« As I feel intensely the need of an educational system for those who are to address themselves to the *ordo doctior, honestior, splendidior*, i.e. the creation of a *gentleman*, which they can get nowhere at present

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<sup>6</sup> *Life*, 24.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Newman to Ullathorne, 3 V 1849 in *Letters and Diaries*, XIII, 1963, p. 137.

<sup>9</sup> *Life*, 25.

<sup>10</sup> Newman to Coffin, 8 VII 1849 in *Letters and Diaries*, XIII, 1963, p. 206.

except at Protestant schools, I am very much disposed, if I could, to set up or attempt such a thing at St. W's. Now what would you say to being *Rector of St. Wilfrid's*, i.e. the head of such a prospective system? We should take such children as were *not unlikely* to be Oratorians — e.g. the Ryders<sup>11</sup> (as I proposed at Maryvale) ».

Newman himself on the same day explained his plans to Faber<sup>12</sup>. It was something to which he long remained attached. One gathers that Newman all his life had deep down a nostalgia for the traditions and associations of the English public schools and universities whose air he had breathed so long. He said about this time: « I should like St. Wilfrid's to be the Eton of the Oratory — a place where the Fathers would turn with warm associations of boyhood or at least youth — a place where they wish to be buried »<sup>13</sup>.

During the closing months of 1849 a few boys were sent to St. Wilfrid's together with one or other master to teach them, and Coffin assumed his positions and titles of Rector and Headmaster<sup>14</sup>. His duties in the « Eton of the Oratory » did not prove sufficient to take him away from the care of the Irish immigrants. By the end of the year it was clear that the school could not continue much longer, as Newman glumly explained to Father Hutchinson of the London Oratory<sup>15</sup>.

« I have been wishing to write to you about St. Wilfrid's, but how could I write about nothing?

« You know how important it has been in my heart to keep up an Establishment there — and various plans I have thought of. They have all come to nothing for the present. The College plan follows the others. There is no one to work it ».

Ever since the London Oratory had been founded there had been a constant flow of letters between there and Birmingham, which Wilfrid Ward found tedious to report<sup>16</sup>. Much of it had to do with

<sup>11</sup> Of the sons of George Ryder, convert son of the Bishop of Lichfield, one did become Father Ignatius Ryder of the Birmingham Oratory.

<sup>12</sup> Newman to Faber, 8 VII 1849 in *Letters and Diaries*, XIII, 1963, p. 208.

<sup>13</sup> Wilfrid Ward, *op. cit.*, I, 222.

<sup>14</sup> *Life*, 25.

<sup>15</sup> Newman to Hutchinson, 6 I 1850 in *Letters and Diaries*, XIII, 1963, p. 367. William Anthony Hutchinson (1822-1863) was a student of Trinity College, Cambridge, who was received into the Church in Birmingham in 1845 by Faber, whom he joined at St. Wilfrid's and whom he followed to London, remaining close to him until his early death. Cf. *Letters and Diaries*, XII, 1962, p. 433.

<sup>16</sup> Wilfrid Ward, *op. cit.*, I, 225.

the unending discussions, plans and worrying over St. Wilfrid's, as Newman summed it all up in a long letter in July 1850<sup>17</sup>. He had always tried, he said, to see that the burden was fairly shared by the two Oratories. A big problem right from the start had been to find a suitable man to look after things there, and Coffin had seemed to be the one « who would *do* there ».

And there Coffin remained through the unsuccessful venture with the school. There was much that was unsatisfactory in his position. He had practically nothing, it seems, to do with his superior in London and was constantly involved in the interminable business of maintaining and justifying the large house he was occupying. His life, just the same, seems to have been pleasant enough through most of 1850, mainly because he was kept busy with pastoral duties, and that always made him happy. Even as an Anglican he had shown his ability to lose himself in the works of his ministry among his people. So now he went on until at the end of June he made a retreat under Father Lans.

The Redemptorists had been at Hanley Castle in Worcestershire since 1844; and their house had become for the Oratorians a favoured refuge for retreats, as Father Stanton told the new convert, Thomas Edward Bridgett, urging him to go there himself<sup>18</sup>. Coffin was happy to find in Father Lans a congenial and reassuring spiritual guide. He spoke freely with him and asked him: « Do you think I am in my right position as an Oratorian? » The affirmative answer he received satisfied him completely at the time<sup>19</sup>. Very soon Father Lans began to appear to him as just the sort of spiritual director he had been seeking since his Anglican days. And he needed a man like that before long, as a series of events shook his attachment to the Oratorian life.

A short while after his return from Hanley Castle it had become at last too plain to be denied that the school, the « Eton of the Oratory », simply would not work. Even Newman had to see it, and he began to think of offering St. Wilfrid's to either the Passionists or the Redemptorists<sup>20</sup>. For Coffin this meant that he must now relinquish his position of some independence and return to his com-

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<sup>17</sup> Newman to Faber, 22 VII 1850 in *Letters and Diaries*, XIV, 1963, p. 17-20.

<sup>18</sup> Cyril Ryder, *Life of Thomas Edward Bridgett C.S.S.R.*, London, 1906, p. 28.

<sup>19</sup> Coffin to Lans, 30 IX 1850, ALP Db 66; Coffin to Newman, 3 X 1850, ALP Db 69.

<sup>20</sup> Coffin to Lans, 30 IX 1850, ALP Db 66. There is evidence that the Redemptorists for a time considered Newman's offer, hoping to make St. Wilfrid's the house of studies for their English clerical students. Cf. Cyril Ryder, *op. cit.*, 29-30.

munity in London with Faber as his superior. And all of a sudden that presented problems.

Right at the time there was so much talk about closing St. Wilfrid's Coffin read Faber's latest publication and found that he thoroughly disagreed with it<sup>21</sup>. In May Faber had delivered three lectures entitled *The Spirit and Genius of St. Philip Neri, Founder of the Oratory*<sup>22</sup>. The lectures were quite injudicious, especially the second one, in too sweepingly and harshly criticising the Middle Ages and proposing an extreme ultramontanism. Predictably enough, Coffin's new friends, Pugin and Phillipps, were indignant, as also was Ullathorne. For Coffin, as he explained to both Lans and Newman, it made it almost impossible for him to live subject to a superior whose views he found offensive.

His anxiety when talk of the two Oratorian communities came to his ears was considerably increased. It was said, doubtless without being very seriously intended, that he had come from his retreat « much less a community man » and that he had « lost his vocation »<sup>23</sup>. The gossip itself does not seem to have troubled him greatly, even though one has to suspect that, good-natured and jocular as it may have been intended, it was also somewhat irresponsible, as it was carried even to Mr. Richard Schofield, who had been one of the teachers at St. Wilfrid's<sup>24</sup>. The real problem was further talk he heard from the London Fathers, that it had been decided there that in future permission would not be given for retreats outside their own house. And before long he heard formally from Faber himself that it was indeed so. In the circumstances of the rumours he had heard he decided, justifiably enough in all truth, that the prohibition was aimed principally at himself.

For Coffin this was much more serious than it would have been for another. For a long time he had recognised his dependence on a spiritual director; and now this regulation would place beyond his reach such help as he had just experienced in his retreat, « the greatest

<sup>21</sup> Coffin to Lans, 30 IX 1850, ALP Db 66; Coffin to Newman, 3 X 1850, ALP Db 69.

<sup>22</sup> There is a brief but clear description of the lectures in *Letters and Diaries*, XIV, 1963, p. 30. In time Newman, who had at first supported Faber against Coffin, the former's subject, in time came to regret the trouble caused by the unfortunate « triduo ». Cf. Newman to Dalgairns, 5 V 1851 in *Letters and Diaries*, XIV, 1963, p. 286.

<sup>23</sup> Coffin to Lans, 30 IX 1850, ALP Db 66.

<sup>24</sup> Coffin to Newman, 3 X 1850, ALP Db 69. Richard Schofield (1792-1892) had been received into the Church by Newman, who sent him to St. Wilfrid's as a tutor. He became friendly with Coffin, remaining warmly attached to him until the latter's death. Cf. *Letters and Diaries*, XIV, 1963, p. 552.

gift and consolation I had ever received since my conversion »<sup>25</sup>. He did not at all relish the alternative facing him, choosing one of his own companions, « all young converts, brought up at school and College in the same way and with very little more than book knowledge made Priests without any regular training, and Confessors with as little »<sup>26</sup>.

His own lack of training since becoming a Catholic had been a frequent source of anxiety, and he simply saw the same defect in the others, so much so as to have considerably irritated Newman in the early days of the Oratory. Whether or not he was justified in his worry on this score, and it is not clear that he was, it weighed heavily on Coffin's own mind.

Just at the time when he was so much preoccupied with these problems that had followed his retreat, he had with him at St. Wilfrid's the very man to whom he had long been accustomed to bring his troubles, Newman. But now his confessor opposed his speaking to Newman about his present difficulties<sup>27</sup>. The confessor was Father Darnell of the London Oratory<sup>28</sup>. Others of the community who were also on hand gave him the same advice. And in that state of uncertainty he would have remained even longer had not a fortunate chance given him the advice of a man whose sound judgment was widely respected.

Shortly after Newman's departure Bishop Ullathorne, the Vicar Apostolic, came to St. Wilfrid's for confirmation, and Coffin asked him what he thought of the by now notorious lectures of Faber's. Ullathorne replied in plain terms that he roundly disapproved. Then in answer to Coffin's further question as to what he should do in his own present dilemma, the Bishop told him that the sensible thing to do was to explain the whole matter to Newman<sup>29</sup>.

Before doing that Coffin appealed to Father Lans for advice. He spoke also with Father Darnell, who urged him to remember that he had been one of the foundation members of the English Oratory.

<sup>25</sup> Coffin to Lans, 30 IX 1850, ALP Db 66.

<sup>26</sup> Coffin to Newman, 3 X 1850, ALP Db 69.

<sup>27</sup> Coffin to Lans, 30 IX 1850, ALP Db 66.

<sup>28</sup> Nicholas Darnell was the son of the man who had been Keble's tutor in Corpus Christi College. He was himself a student of Exeter College and later a fellow of New College. Becoming a Catholic in 1847, he joined Faber's community, passing with him to the Oratory. He left the Oratory in 1861 after a dispute with Newman over the Oratory School at Edgbaston. Cf. *Letters and Diaries*, XII, 1962, p. 430.

<sup>29</sup> Coffin to Lans, 30 IX 1850, ALP Db 66.

In spite of everything, Coffin had to admit that he really did not expect much to result from his going to Newman<sup>30</sup>.

Quite evidently at this early stage of the foundations authority was somewhat confused. It was not until half a dozen years later that the Oratories were completely separated, and then in circumstances that Newman found painful. For the present he was attempting, not very successfully it has to be admitted, to control everything. In the previous year he had written to a friend: « An eye must be kept on the London house [...] and St. Wilfrid's must not be forgotten. You will understand then that visions of reading and writing, except sermons, do not appear in the offing »<sup>31</sup>.

To Newman, then, at the recommendation of Lans, Coffin put his problems concerning Faber, his superior<sup>32</sup>. The amiable and obliging Father Darnell took to Birmingham a carefully prepared statement which was « almost word for word in substance » what he had written to Lans a few days earlier. Just before his good confessor left Coffin had a sudden inspiration, a new solution that he asked Darnell to put to Newman. A possible remedy for his own inadequate training could be that he spend some time in one of the Italian Oratories. His more thorough grounding in his vocation might make him useful in England, as for example by helping to set up the Oratory in another location.

After reading Coffin's statement Newman wrote to him at once, and he put his finger on the real problem together with the best means of solving it, a remedy Coffin himself had not as yet mentioned<sup>33</sup>. Newman suggested that if what Coffin really wanted was the religious life, he should try the Jesuits or the Redemptorists, « for I don't suppose *what you seek, a tradition of spiritual direction*, is to be found in England anywhere else »<sup>34</sup>. If, however, he wished to remain an Oratorian, then he advised a stay in the Oratory of Florence to satisfy the « want of training and theological reading ». After two or three years he might return to England with companions to found an Oratory « in Clifton, Brighton or Torquay or Exeter or other suitable place ».

A further letter the next day explained why he had suggested

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Wilfrid Ward, *op. cit.*, I, 226.

<sup>32</sup> Coffin to Lans, 3 X 1850, ALP Db 68.

<sup>33</sup> Newman to Coffin, 3 X 1850 in *Letters and Diaries*, XIV, 1963, p. 88.

<sup>34</sup> The emphasis is Newman's.

Florence<sup>35</sup>. The Oratorians there had expressed a wish to make a foundation in England. Clifton, he suggested, would be the most suitable place for Coffin's new Oratory, and there he would not have to live under Faber. On the same day he wrote to Faber, telling him of Coffin's troubles and apologising for having possibly encroached on the London superior's jurisdiction<sup>36</sup>.

It was a neat way out of what looked like being a troublesome problem, and there is an air of relief in Newman's mention of the Florentines. Unfortunately, the weeks went by and no word came from Florence. The waiting was too much for Coffin. After six weeks he wrote again to Lans, in a mood now to look for another way out<sup>37</sup>.

What Newman had suggested and what he had considered for a time before deciding to become an Oratorian now appeared to him as the only thing that would meet his own spiritual needs. The Florentine plan became less attractive as he considered that it would seem to amount to bringing a rival Oratory into England. For himself he thought it far better that he look for a religious life with stronger bonds and traditions than the loose association he had known among his Oratorian friends. He put it in terms of « leaving the world altogether — to give up everything to God and to seek perfection in that state where it is most surely and easily to be found ». There is little doubt, though, that what he meant was that among religious he would be more likely to find « a tradition of spiritual direction » than among the new converts who were then the only English members of the Oratories.

His mind was sufficiently definite for him to ask Father Lans if he could be received among the Redemptorists. Lans must have had some misgivings when he learned that, though Coffin had not yet mentioned his resolution to anyone else, he was about to do so to Dalgairns, « my most intimate friend ». From this point events moved with an extraordinary swiftness.

Before he had received a reply from Lans Coffin wrote to both Newman and Faber informing them of his present state of mind and asking to be released from the Oratory<sup>38</sup>. In reporting to Lans what he had done he added that he had received « a very kind answer from

<sup>35</sup> Newman to Coffin, 4 X 1850 in *Letters and Diaries*, XIV, 1963, p. 91.

<sup>36</sup> Newman to Faber, 4 X 1850 in *Letters and Diaries*, XIV, 1963, p. 92.

<sup>37</sup> Coffin to Lans, 19 X 1850, ALP Db 73.

<sup>38</sup> Coffin to Lans, 23 XI 1850, ALP Db 75.

Father Newman, approving as far as he could ». What Newman had written was a kindly wish that Coffin's undertaking the religious life would be successful. « I am sanguine in thinking that the obligations of the vows may exert the most beneficial effect on you »<sup>39</sup>. The editors of the *Letters and Diaries* add the note that Coffin in writing had asked for « one line from you that I may leave the world with the knowledge of your good wishes towards me ».

On the same day Newman wrote to Faber: « Coffin's resolve surprises me. I suppose he has been in correspondence with Father Lans »<sup>40</sup>. Two days later he sent on a lengthy and very accurate summary of Coffin's troubles over his vocation, adding at the end: « From what I have said you will see that I do *not* think him acting rightly and have told him so »<sup>41</sup>. He wrote a short note to Coffin himself the same day to insist: « You must not take me as *approving* what you are doing »<sup>42</sup>.

Faber, who was Coffin's superior, had acted at once on receiving his information. He wrote, ordering him under obedience to come at once to London<sup>43</sup>. This peremptory command was handed to Coffin one Saturday afternoon while he was in the confessional<sup>44</sup>. Waiting only to write a hurried note to let Father Lans know what was happening, he set off to see his superior. Faber was evidently impatient, as he wrote also to Lans asking him to have Coffin come to London without going by way of St. Wilfrid's<sup>45</sup>. Since Coffin was at St. Wilfrid's at the time the letter seemed pointless, though it offered the suggestion that a further trial with the Oratory would be favourably considered if Lans himself should agree.

Coffin arrived at the London Oratory late in the evening<sup>46</sup>. The interview with his superior was far from being calm enough to allow of a reasonable discussion, and Coffin thought it well later to explain himself in writing<sup>47</sup>. Father Lubienski gives a vivid description of

<sup>39</sup> Newman to Coffin, 22 XI 1850 in *Letters and Diaries*, XIV, 1963, p. 135.

<sup>40</sup> Newman to Faber, 22 XI 1850 in *Letters and Diaries*, XIV, 1963, p. 136.

<sup>41</sup> Newman to Faber, 24 XI 1850 in *Letters and Diaries*, XIV, 1963, p. 137-139.

<sup>42</sup> Newman to Coffin, 24 XI 1850 in *Letters and Diaries*, XIV, 1963, p. 140.

<sup>43</sup> Coffin to Lans, 23 XI 1850, ALP Db 75.

<sup>44</sup> *Life*, 28.

<sup>45</sup> Faber to Lans, 23 XI 1850, ALP Db 74.

<sup>46</sup> *Life*, 28.

<sup>47</sup> Coffin to Faber, 26 XI 1850, ALP Db 76.

the meeting, no doubt as he had heard it from Coffin<sup>48</sup>. Understandably enough, Faber was quite upset to find himself so unexpectedly faced with an unpleasant decision, and it is more than likely that he did not choose his words as he tried in turn anger, scorn and pleading to turn Coffin from his resolve. It lasted two hours, leaving both exhausted; but late as it was, Faber insisted that Coffin go and talk with his old and dearest friend, Dalgairns. It was already after midnight, and Coffin had to endure two further hours even more distressing than those that had gone before, and then at last he was able to get a little rest<sup>49</sup>.

He had arranged with Faber that he go to Hanley Castle and put his case to Father Lans, promising to abide by his decision. Accordingly, he set off next morning. Being Sunday, the rail service was far from the best; and since it was also miserably wet, he had to endure cold and discomfort as well as slow trains and bad connections before reaching Hanley Castle late in the afternoon. His kindly reception, unannounced though it had to be, provided a much needed measure of encouragement after a very bad couple of days.

The advice Lans offered after two days of consideration was not at all agreeable to poor Coffin. He was apparently relying on what seemed to have been suggested by Faber's letter to himself. Coffin, he said, should write to his superior and, after asking pardon for the trouble he had given, petition that he be allowed to make a further trial of the Oratorian life over a period of two years<sup>50</sup>. It was not easy for Coffin to write as he was directed, but he duly made the suggestion of a compromise and was about to put his letter in the post when a communication arrived from Faber which made it pointless.

Faber had allowed Coffin to go to Hanley Castle in order to be guided by Lans; and now he spelled out the terms according to which the decision was to be taken<sup>51</sup>. It was a formal statement entitled: *The Question for Father Lans to Consider*. The question amounted to how deeply rooted were Coffin's difficulties with the Oratory and were they so strong as to preclude his continuing peace-

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<sup>48</sup> B. Lubienski, *op. cit.*, 72-73.

<sup>49</sup> *Life*, 29.

<sup>50</sup> *Life*, 30.

<sup>51</sup> Faber to Lans, ALP Db 78. The paper is undated, but it must have been sent in time to allow of an answer acknowledged on 27th November, so probably it was written on the 25th, given the extraordinary efficiency of the new penny postage.

fully in the institute. A further comment made with some emphasis excluded the further trial that Lans had already suggested.

Leaving Father Lans to answer the question put to him, Coffin wrote his own letter to Faber<sup>52</sup>. It was carefully worded and offers the clearest statement of his spiritual needs. He had not really been able to explain himself during that stormy interview in London, and he asked that things he then said should not be taken too literally. His problems were entirely in his own personal spiritual requirements. He needed a thorough break with the past, because « my real conversion has still to take place ». The retreat with Father Lans had seemed at the time to be the very thing he had been seeking. After that experience everything else that happened served merely to strengthen his conviction that he should be a religious in some such institute as that of the Redemptorists. He made it plain that his attachment to the Oratory had been too much influenced by his sense of dependence on Newman.

« As far as I knew I had the intention of remaining an Oratorian to the end of my life. External circumstances and my own faults led to the breaking of the tie which bound me to Father Newman, and when that was gone I found nothing in its place. Then came my retreat here last summer. Then for the first time I saw myself as I really was ».

The end came at once. Faber wrote to Lans on 27th November thanking him for his help and assuring him of continued friendship<sup>53</sup>. He wrote also to Coffin a friendly letter to accompany the formal release from the Oratory and wishing him success among the Redemptorists<sup>54</sup>.

On the previous day Newman had written another long letter about the Coffin affair<sup>55</sup>. He told Faber: « I do earnestly hope you will get rid of Coffin », going on to explain that « the Baron has given an imaginary intellectual basis to this moral disease ». The letter continues in very much the same harsh-sounding strain, but in the end Newman concluded quite generously that he thought « it is decidedly for his good that he should become a Redemptorist. I do earnestly think nothing can be better for him ».

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<sup>52</sup> Coffin to Faber, 26 XI 1850, ALP Db 76.

<sup>53</sup> Faber to Lans, 28 XI 1850, ALP Db 78.

<sup>54</sup> Faber to Coffin, 27 XI 1850, ALP Db 72.

<sup>55</sup> Newman to Faber, 26 XI 1850 in *Letters and Diaries*, XIV, 1963, p. 142-144.

The Baron who now appears in the correspondence, cast in some sort of villain's role, was the German Gottlieb Heinrich von Schroeter<sup>56</sup>. Born at Langensee in 1802, he had studied in the university of Berlin and then had become a Catholic during a long sojourn in Rome some time before 1827. An indefatigable globe-trotter, he lived for a time in Moscow as a teacher of art, and from there went to Belgium and then on to Austria, where he made the acquaintance of the Redemptorists with whom he seemed to retain a long friendship. After a time spent in America in 1847 he came to England in 1849, when Newman gave him a home in Alcester Street, Birmingham. He spent much time in St. Wilfrid's, where he was particularly friendly with Coffin.

After Coffin had been sent his release Newman wrote directly to the Baron a very blunt letter, complaining that the latter had abused the hospitality of the houses of the Oratory<sup>57</sup>. Von Schroeter had simply taken occasion from his living among the Oratorians, wrote Newman, « to do your utmost to ruin the Institution of St. Philip, to make its subjects despise it, to fill them with suspicions against it and against each other, to prejudice externals against it. I am not simply speaking of the instance of Father Coffin, but of the general action of your presence amongst us on all who have come near you ».

Whatever foundation there may have been for complaining about the Baron's imprudence and discourtesy towards his Oratorian hosts, there does not appear to have been any reason for suspecting that he had in any way influenced Coffin. In particular, he had hardly provided that « imaginary intellectual basis » for the decision he took in the end. Coffin's turning to the religious life was rather as he described it calmly to Faber a much more pragmatic decision as to what would best meet his own spiritual needs. It was the security he had been looking for ever since his Anglican days, and it was as Newman had written both to himself and to Faber that « nothing could be better for him ».

The whole business must have been most trying for Newman. The first year of the Oratory had brought him worry enough and disappointment in the failure to start his school, the division of his companions and the numerous departures of aspirants. Coffin's long

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<sup>56</sup> Information about von Schroeter can be found in *Letters and Diaries*, XIV, 1963, p. 518.

<sup>57</sup> Newman to von Schroeter, 28 XI 1850 in *Letters and Diaries*, XIV, 1963, p. 146-147.

hesitation had irritated him in the earliest days of the venture in Rome; and then they had appeared again a couple of years later. It was his impatience and doubtless some measure of despondency that dictated letters like the one that told Faber to « get rid of Coffin » and voiced suspicions of the Baron's interference and mischief. And it must be remembered that it was not until after the final separation of the two communities some six years later that the Oratorian life in England assumed some more settled existence.

As for Coffin, he was quite discernibly relieved when all was over and he was launched on his Redemptorist career. He retained some regret, of course, over the break with Newman on whom he had so long depended for advice and friendship. There was a break of some sort, due as he told Faber to « external circumstances and my own faults »<sup>58</sup>, and that seems to be as much as one can say. It is hard to see how it could have been due to such a forthright confrontation over the school at St. Wilfrid's as suggested by the *Life*, as Coffin accepted his duties and continued to discharge them as long as the attempt lasted. As it happened, his life as a Redemptorist was right from the start so busy as to leave no time for regrets.

Coffin was a valuable recruit for the Redemptorists, then only beginning to make themselves known in England; and Lans must have been conscious of that to the extent of being acutely embarrassed. Coffin had already attracted the notice of the Redemptorists on the occasion of the preaching organised by Wiseman during the Lent of 1848<sup>59</sup>. He preached in St. George's, Southwark, where he was heard by Father de Held of Clapham, who reported to his community that this convert preached like a Redemptorist<sup>60</sup>. Father Lans was faced with a delicate task when Coffin brought his troubles to him; and he showed himself correct in every respect, as Newman wrote to him at the end of the year when the whole business was over.

« I have been going to write to you for some time, could I have found an hour to do so in, to thank you for your letter to Father Faber about our dear friend, Coffin, which I thought very sensible and considerate, if I may take the liberty of saying so »<sup>61</sup>.

<sup>58</sup> Coffin to Faber, 26 XI 1850, ALP Db 76.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Wilfrid Ward, *op. cit.*, I, 205.

<sup>60</sup> *Life*, 26. Father Frederick de (von) Held, a disciple of St. Clement Hofbauer, was a man of considerable influence among the Redemptorists and was associated with their beginnings in America as well as in Belgium and in England. Cf. C. Dilgskron C.S.S.R., *Friedrich von Held*, Vienna, 1909; Maurice de Meulemeester C.S.S.R., *Frédéric de Held*, Jette, 1911.

<sup>61</sup> Newman to Lans, 28 XII 1850 in *Letters and Diaries*, XIV, 1963, p. 176-177.

He went on to make it clear that he still considered that Coffin had been at fault. « It does not do for members of a community to live out of the community ». And yet after all, « under the circumstances nothing else was to be done but what he did ».

It comes as a surprise to reflect that the busy flurry of correspondence from Coffin's letter to Lans on 19th November to his being released from his obligations to the Oratory on the 27th took just a week. England's new postal system, only ten years old, was certainly efficient; and by its means Coffin's worries had been tidily handled. There it might all have rested, had it not been for Lans, careful to see that all should be correct. He had to overcome considerable reluctance on Coffin's part in order to persuade him to go to Birmingham and personally take leave of Newman, because « you owe too much to Father Newman »<sup>62</sup>. Father Lubienski who relates the incident says that the interview was extremely painful to both.

Only a couple of weeks later Newman mentioned to Faber what was the end of Coffin's search for his spiritual home. « Have you heard Mr. Vaughan<sup>63</sup> of Oscott is gone with Coffin to Belgium? And the report is that Macmullen is to follow. Macmullen would never do for us, but I suppose Coffin has taken care he should not »<sup>64</sup>.

Coffin's old friend of his Anglican days, Macmullen, was a priest of the newly established archdiocese of Westminster. He does not appear to have considered joining the Redemptorists. The mention of him in the terms used in the letter is to be seen as no more than another indication of the hurt and worry Newman experienced over Coffin's departure.

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<sup>62</sup> B. Lubienski, *op. cit.*, 78.

<sup>63</sup> Edmund Vaughan was to give distinguished service to the English province of the Redemptorists. Cf. *Spic. Hist.* 25 (1977) 250-271.

<sup>64</sup> Newman to Faber, 8 XII 1850 in *Letters and Diaries*, XIV, 1963, p. 162.

## DOCUMENTS

## 1. - Coffin to Lans, 30 IX 1850

My Dear Reverend Father,

The time seems now come for me to ask your advice and direction under the following difficulties.

In my retreat I asked you: « Do you think I am in my right position as an Oratorian? » You answered: « Yes ». I had *then* no doubt about it, but simply asked to have your opinion on the matter.

I returned here then from my retreat with the desire to carry out my resolutions and to go on here as long as my superiors thought fit to keep me in my position as superior of this place and Rector of the College which was just commencing.

So I went on for a few weeks. Then on a sudden the College plan from circumstances was abandoned or rather ceased of itself, and the Superior made up his mind to give up this place, offered it to the Passionists, then to your Reverence's Congregation, which at present seems likely to take our place. These changes made me at once realise that I should before long have to go to the London Oratory, to which I already belonged.

About seven weeks ago I read the Lectures on the Spirit and Genius of St. Philip Neri written by Father Faber, my future superior. On the first reading of them I did not like many things. A friend at the same time spoke to me very freely about them and assured me that they were not Catholic and extremely dangerous. This led me more and more to think of the position in which I should be placed with regard to Father Faber, and doubts at once presented themselves most keenly to my mind, which since have increased day by day, as to my being able to co-operate with one whose opinions and views about our Holy Founder and our Congregation generally were both so distasteful to me, and which at the same time I believe would not be responded to by the Catholic body generally.

Upon these doubts came others from a different source, but of a more serious character. On my return from Hanley several of the London Fathers came here for recreation and through them, though I do not know how it was, a notion was prevalent through the community, both in Birmingham and in London, that I had returned from my retreat much less a « *community man* », as it was called. It was even said, though perhaps not altogether seriously: « *Father Coffin has lost his vocation* ». The result was that, without consulting me, a rule was passed by the London Fathers that in future « no one was to be allowed to make retreats out of his own house ». This was communicated to me in course of conversation by Father Faber, who did not allude to me in particular, though I saw that the intelligence was meant for me.

This then led me to see at once our position with regard to spiritual direction. My retreat at Hanley had already presented a new world to me. Your Reverence's direction was the greatest gift and consolation I had received since my conversion. I saw plainly we had nothing like it amongst ourselves; and by this rule, if it is carried, it becomes most certain that we shall remain without direction, that is real, Catholic and traditional guidance. Hence arises my second difficulty. How can I go to a community feeling generally the need of good direction and knowing that circumstances might arise in which I should particularly require it, in which such assistance is cut off from me?

Besides these things I have found that in many other matters I do not sympathise, as a member of the Oratory must do, with the general line pursued by Father Faber. In short, I seem to have lost my confidence in him as a superior and as a Director, and until I can regain it or am told that the whole thing is a delusion or a temptation I do not see how I can go to London. I may be summoned there now any day to vote in the appointment of offices and to be appointed myself to certain most important and responsible ones; and humanly speaking I should be obliged to go and reside there for good, as soon as this place and our Mission here is transferred to our successors.

Father Newman has been here for nearly three weeks, during which time, had I been left to myself I should have told all this, both as my duty and because my natural feelings would have led me to do it, but I was prevented by my confessor from doing so, and advised not to do so by others.

Father Newman returned and then the Bishop came to confirm<sup>65</sup>. Feeling in a great state of embarrassment and perplexity, especially with regard to the Lectures of Father Faber, I determined to ask the Bishop in the strictest confidence his real opinion about them and to tell him somewhat of my own position.

He assured me 1st that the Lectures *were* extremely dangerous, and that such a view of things was likely, unless stopped, to lead to very serious consequences, 2nd that had they been written by an old Catholic Priest, they would have been censured immediately by authority, that they had created a general outcry, and that they were looked upon as a manifesto on the part of the Oratory. As to my own duty, he said it was clear that I must lay my whole mind open to Father Newman. This I intend to do as soon as I have received your answer.

I ask you, then, to tell me as soon as you can (for any day I may be called to London) what you think of my state of mind.

What of my laying it before Father Newman? Whether, if he tells me to go to London, I am to go? And what am I to do if he gives me no direction and has no view but simply leaves me to myself, which from my experience of him in such matters I think the most likely? I may add that I am not the only one in the Congregation who thinks in this way, though

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<sup>65</sup> That the Bishop was Ullathorne is stated by Father Lubienski, *op. cit.*, 69. He was still Vicar Apostolic of the Central District, as the Papal Brief restoring the hierarchy in England was signed 29th September and was not announced in England until early in October.

in the London house I have every reason to believe I should stand perfectly alone.

It is almost certain that my present state of mind would not be in any way responded to by my superiors, and therefore I rely entirely upon you for guidance in the matter. I feel that with God's grace I should be able to do whatever you tell me. So speak most openly and freely, as you have hitherto done.

My present difficulties and embarrassments arise from the extreme probability that in a few weeks I must find myself in the London house.

My confessor has suggested to me: Whether I am not bound to take into consideration the fact of my having been one of those sent by the Holy Father at Rome to begin the Oratory and having received from him for this purpose many privileges and dispensations with regard to ordination, training for the Priesthood etc.

I need scarcely mention that as I spoke to the Bishop in the strictest confidence, his opinion of the book should not go beyond yourself.

## 2. - Coffin to Lans, 3 X 1850

My Dear Father Lans,

Your letter was a great consolation to me: I have acted upon it and today Father Darnell has gone to Birmingham to see Father Newman, and as my confessor to lay open the whole state of my mind to him. He carries with him a written statement from myself, which is almost word for word in substance what I laid before your Reverence, those things being omitted about the Bishop etc. which it was not necessary for Father Newman to know.

Since I wrote to you a fresh idea has come across me, which approved itself to Father Darnell and which if Father Newman asks him what is to be done with me he intends to suggest to him, namely that I should go abroad to some Italian Oratory for more training, study and religious improvement, so that some time hence I might be of use in setting up another Oratory in some other large town. This has come out of my desire not to leave the Oratory unless it be absolutely necessary, as I feel as much attached to an Oratorian life as ever, and for many reasons if it were the Will of God, it would be better for me not to leave it.

So things are. I await with some little anxiety for Father Darnell's return tomorrow. Meanwhile I am praying, as you bade me, to St. Joseph. Do you, my dear reverend Father, do the same for me and for our Father Newman. I had a little confidential talk with Father de Held today and was much consoled. He left with Father Darnell at midday for Birmingham to see the Bishop and Father Newman.

Your obliged and sincere,  
R. A. Coffin Cong. Or. Presb.

## 3. - Coffin to Newman, 3 X 1850

*For the Father Superior*<sup>66</sup>

When I made my retreat under Father Lans in June last, I asked him: « Do you think I am in my right position as an Oratorian? » He answered: « Yes ». I had then *no doubts myself* about it, but merely asked to have his opinion after I had opened my whole soul to him.

Since then the following difficulties have been coming upon me more and more.

About the Assumption it was virtually settled that this place was to be given up, and I then had before me the prospect of going to the London community for good.

At the same time Father Faber's Lectures appeared. On my first reading of them I disliked many things. I then heard the serious and settled opinion about them of another person<sup>67</sup> whose judgement in Catholic matters I greatly respect. Then I found others whose opinion I equally respect thinking in the same way. I read them again and thought of them more, and they grew more and more distasteful to me until the question forced itself on me: how can I have confidence in Father Faber as my superior and it may be Director after this? I may mention, too, that the Lectures brought up many other things with which I found that I could not sympathise, and I saw that unless I changed my opinion about them I should only be an incubus in the London house, besides being very wretched and unhappy.

But in addition to this difficulty another arose more serious. On my return from Hanley some of the London Fathers were here. Through them, I suppose, though I am not aware how I gave rise to it, a notion became prevalent in the London community, and as I have since heard, reached Birmingham also and which was also mentioned by Hanmer<sup>68</sup> to Mr. Schofield, that I had returned from Hanley « much less a community man ». It was also said « Father Coffin has lost his vocation »; and on Father Faber's return after the ordination, he told me, in a way by which I saw his meaning, a rule had been made that henceforth no one was to be allowed to make retreats out of the house.

Now then the whole truth came before me. How was I to get direction if I wanted it? What I had learned from Father Lans and the direction I had gained from him were what I had never tasted of elsewhere, much less in our own Congregation. Henceforth it was as plain as possible to me that we had no regular Catholic, traditional and experienced direction.

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<sup>66</sup> The superior, of course, was Newman. Coffin was a careful person, who made drafts of important letters and kept copies. This is a copy in his own hand of his statement.

<sup>67</sup> The « other person » must have been Ullathorne. Coffin took care not to compromise the Bishop nor to embarrass Faber unnecessarily by appealing to such formidable opposition.

<sup>68</sup> Anthony John Hanmer (1817-1907) was a student of St. John's College, Cambridge, who after being received into the Church in 1849 tried his vocation with Faber's London Oratory. Cf. *Letters and Diaries*, XI, 1961, p. 342.

How should we? Where we were all in London more or less of an age — all young converts, brought up at school and College in the same way and with very little more than mere book knowledge, made Priests without any regular training and Confessors with as little.

The next question, then, was: how can I commit my soul to a community where I am precluded from seeking, if I require it, the guidance of men of God, who have been trained from their infancy in the Catholic Church and whose very business has been to learn for years and years by going through a regular system themselves under trained and experienced directors the guidance of souls. These two things, but especially the latter, have made me lose all confidence in the London Oratory, so far as I individually am concerned<sup>69</sup>, and the more I think and pray about it, the more do I see that unless I can regain my confidence, it would be hopeless for me to find my place there. I may mention that Hanmer expressed to me his dislike of the rule about retreats, and said he thought it a very bad rule; but I made no reply, as I knew he was unsettled, but it is quite impossible that others should not see it in the same light sooner or later.

I may mention that I should feel all this even with Father Faber as my delegated superior, that is if the houses remained connected as at present, but much more were they separated. My own feelings about the Oratory, such as it is described in the Lives of the Companions of St. Philip<sup>70</sup> and of the Blessed Sebastian<sup>71</sup> and others remain unchanged, and had I again to chose, I should select the Oratory. At the same time I feel convinced that if it is God's Will that I should cease to be an Oratorian, my earnest prayer would be for the grace to enter a religious life, and I should take steps for doing so immediately.

I ask now from my Superior, and looking on him simply as Superior: What am I to do?

1. Am I to go to London?
2. Am I to leave the Oratory?
3. If neither of these, can I serve the Oratory or continue in my vocation as an Oratorian in any other way?

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<sup>69</sup> At this point Coffin himself referred to a note he placed at the bottom of the page: « I do not in any way wish to refer to the external works of the Oratory ».

<sup>70</sup> Coffin and his fellow Oratorians were familiar with P. G. Bacci, *Vita di Sto Filippo Neri*, Verona, 1710, a translation of which was published by Faber in his *Lives of Modern Saints* in 1847.

<sup>71</sup> Blessed Sebastian Valfrè (1629-1710) was an Oratorian of Turin. He was beatified in 1834 in which year a life appeared in Rome with the title, *Vita del beato Sebastiano Valfrè della Congregazione dell'Oratorio di Torino dedicata alla Santità di N. S. Papa Gregorio XVI*. A translation of this work, too, appeared in the series *Lives of Modern Saints*.

## 4. - Coffin to Lans, 19 XI 1850

My Dear and Reverend Father,

I again require your kind assistance and direction. My last letter to you was to tell you that I had accepted Father Newman's proposal to go to the Florence Oratory<sup>72</sup>. That was six weeks ago. No answer has arrived from the Fathers at Florence, and I have a kind of presentiment that they will not enter into the plan.

However, meanwhile I have been drawn more and more to the religious life. It came again upon me, unexpectedly almost, about ten days ago, and for the last week it seems as if God had settled it for me. Even if the Florentine Oratory would take me, there are many difficulties in the way. I should be a guest to them, not a novice, and that would probably preclude me from the training I desire. Then, on my return, supposing I did return, it would be like an opposition, beginning another Oratory, as I should wish to see it very different from the present Institute as it appears to me in England now. But what weighs with me most of all is a voice within me urging me to leave the world altogether — to give up everything to God and to seek perfection in that state where it is most surely and easily to be found. I feel I am taking a great step, a very serious one; but still, if I take it in reliance on the grace of God with the sound advice and guidance of others, I cannot but hope that God will lead me through it and give me strength to make the sacrifice.

I ask you, then, as my Director, and not as a Redemptorist Father, and having either before you or in your memory the exposition of my difficulties with regard to my position in the Oratory, and with your knowledge of my character, past life and antecedents:

1. Do you think I am called to and fitted for a religious life?
2. If I am, will the Congregation of the Redemptorists suit me? Shall I make a good Redemptorist Father?
3. If so, then, when I have finally settled, *what steps must I take, to whom* offer myself, in what way etc.?

I must now tell you that the Fathers in London are not at all aware of my intentions. They think I am going to Florence, and it is a curious thing that today I am expecting one of them here, one who happens to be my most intimate friend<sup>73</sup>. He is coming for change of air, being unwell; and it is rather an embarrassment to me, as it is most probable I shall have to enter with him on the subject and it will distress him greatly. But I trust in God and my intention is pure. All this is in the strictest confidence, as you will easily understand; and I therefore beg you not to *hint* it even to your Rev. Superior or any of your Rev. Fathers

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<sup>72</sup> There were two letters of Newman suggesting the suitability of the Florentine Oratory, on 3rd and 4th October. Cf. *Letters and Diaries*, XIV, 1963, p. 88 and 91.

<sup>73</sup> Coffin's warm friendship for Dalgairns is described by Lubienski, *op. cit.*, 16. It seems likely that on this occasion Coffin refrained from revealing his plans to leave the Oratory, as the painful discussion between the two on the subject seems to have occurred in London.

until I write to you again. If it is the Will of God and He gives me the grace to carry out my design, my wish would be that *you* should make it known *when* the time comes to the proper authorities.

Meanwhile, give me your opinion and your prayers. I may tell you that I feel very peaceful on the whole, and the thought of what may happen does not for the most part bring any agitation with it. At times a little fear oppresses me, and I have the common temptation to think I am doing wrong, that it is perhaps an illusion, that I shall not succeed etc.

Will you give my love to good Mr. Schofield<sup>74</sup> and tell him I had intended to have written to him to tell him of the death of Father John Cooke<sup>75</sup>, which he will probably have heard of now. He died at Birmingham on the 12th almost suddenly though he had been more unwell than usual a few days before. May I recommend him to your prayers and those of the community.

Your obliged and grateful,  
R. A. Coffin.

#### 5. - Faber to Lans, 23 XI 1850

My Dear Father Lans,

If you should decide that Father Coffin should return to us for a time of trial before he proceeds to carry out his vocation as a religious, I will ask you to signify to him very affectionately that it is my wish he should return here, that is to London, *without on any account going on to St. Wilfrid's*<sup>76</sup>, and this on obedience. If you decide on his at once quitting the Oratory, then he will return to wind up his affairs at St. Wilfrid's. If you are unable to give a decision at once, then I should like him to remain with you at Hanley or return here. His returning to St. Wilfrid's will imply his having ceased to be a member of the Congregation.

Begging your prayers, I remain with much respect,

Very faithfully yours in Jesus and Mary,  
F. W. Faber Cong. Orat.

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<sup>74</sup> Schofield remained a friend of Coffin, and through him of the Redemptorists.

<sup>75</sup> John Peter Cooke (1818-1850) was of an old Catholic family, one of the first such to join the Oratory. He had been a student at the English College in Rome, where he made the acquaintance of Newman and his disciples. He was a member of the Birmingham Oratory only about a year before his early death. Cf. *Letters and Diaries*, XIII, 1963, p. 510.

<sup>76</sup> Coffin must have been still at St. Wilfrid's, as is clear from his own letter to Lans of the same date.

## 6. - Coffin to Lans, 23 XI 1850

My Dear Reverend Father,

Circumstances and being obliged to write to Father Newman about the Florence plan<sup>77</sup> seemed to oblige me to anticipate and presume on your answer to my letter, so I wrote to Father Newman and to Father Faber, who is my superior, to acquaint them of my determination and to beg my release from the Congregation.

Today I have had a very kind answer from Father Newman approving as far as he could<sup>78</sup>, and also one from Father Faber ordering me on obedience to come up to London without delay, which I am going to do, believing that nothing if God so wills will now alter my determination, and looking on it as one of the trials I must encounter before I can gain the end in view.

Pray for me very much that I may act to God's glory while in London. I hope to return here on Monday if possible to wind up matters and then if all be well to come to you. I do hope I have looked at the sacrifice of this change of life; and even had the Florentine Fathers been willing to receive me, I do not think I should have gone: indeed I think I may say I certainly should not. I will write again soon. Meanwhile I am

Your very obliged  
R. A. Coffin.

P.S. Excuse haste. I am just starting for London.

7. - Coffin to Faber, 26 XI 1850 (copy)<sup>79</sup>

My Dear Father,

Being here quiet and alone and free from the influence of external circumstances and impressions, I wish to write to you what I believe to be my real motives for thinking that I ought to become a religious.

I am the more anxious to do this, because I think I did not make you aware of these motives sufficiently when in London. I am aware that I dwelt there for the most part on objections which I felt against the

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<sup>77</sup> It would appear from Newman's correspondence on the matter that Coffin had explained himself in terms similar to those used in writing to Lans.

<sup>78</sup> Coffin is referring, obviously, to Newman's letter of the 22nd expressing the friendly hope that life under vows would be good for Coffin. Cf. *Letters and Diaries*, XIV, 1963, p. 135. In later letters to Faber, Coffin and Lans he protested that he had not intended to give the impression that he was approving.

<sup>79</sup> In addition to this copy in Coffin's hand there is in the archives also a draft, Db 77. The letter, written at Hanley Castle, is carefully worded as well as prudent and restrained after the turbulent scene in London.

existing state of the Oratory<sup>80</sup> and therefore may naturally have left the impression on your mind that I was simply criticising and finding fault, setting myself up over others, and in short saying that I was too good for the Oratory or that the Oratory was not perfect enough for me.

I wish you, then, to believe me when I now tell you that I believe it is the knowledge of my own miserable state, my need of a thorough breaking down, my utter ignorance of the first principles of an interior life, withal my conviction that my real conversion has still to take place. I mean change of heart and conduct and of the whole man, which have led me to think that in order to get at all right I required a stricter rule and a more thorough separation from everything that could flatter my self-love or foster the mass of human affections and feelings which so overwhelm and keep me down than I could possibly expect to find in the Oratory under its and my own peculiar circumstances at this present time.

It is most certain that up to the present time I have had no training, no novitiate, no breaking in. I joined the Oratory in Rome without knowing what it was, chiefly from my previous connection and desire to be still connected with Father Newman.

As far as I knew, I had the intention of remaining an Oratorian to the end of my life. External circumstances and my own faults led to the breaking of the tie which bound me to Father Newman, and when that was gone I found nothing in its place. Then came my retreat last summer. Then for the first time I saw myself as I really was.

In speaking as I did of leaving « the world » I never for a moment intended to slight the Institute of the Oratory. I meant cutting myself off from friends, pleasures, bodily comforts, which I thought I should do more effectually as a religious.

In my conversation with Father Dalgairns I spoke of its being a more difficult and therefore a more meritorious thing to gain perfection as an Oratorian; and from a conviction of my own miserable weakness, consequent on a past very sinful life I thought of taking, if it was the Will of God, the easier road, where I should have greater helps and means.

When the thought of going to Florence first suggested itself to me and was then proposed to me by Father Newman, the same idea was uppermost in my mind, of regular training, novitiate, discipline etc., but during all that time of anxiety and perplexity, before I wrote to Father Newman, the thought of religion kept continually presenting itself to me; and it was only at the last moment as it were that the thought of going to another Oratory came up.

I have now written shortly, but I hope simply and truthfully, what I much wish I had said to you on Saturday. But I was so distressed and at the same time bewildered and frightened at the view you took of what I was doing that I was not in a condition to say anything at all.

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<sup>80</sup> If in the heat of discussion, he had brought up his complaints against Faber's publication of the lectures and his prohibition of retreats outside the Oratory, he would have given the impression of an extremely critical spirit indeed.

8. - *The Question for Father Lans to Consider*<sup>81</sup>

Whether, considering that the Institute of the Oratory is free and without vows, and that its basis is mutual trust and confidence as the Rule says, no one is to come *sine animo perseverandi usque ad obitum vitae*, Father Lans is of opinion that Father Coffin's feelings are only temporary disgusts and temptations, and that his confidence in the Institute will be restored: if not, then certainly he ought not to return, as it would be a serious injury to us as well as to himself. If, then, Father Lans considers his objections either to have such deep roots or to be of such a nature as to interfere with his being a cordial member of St. Philip's Institute, trustful, uncriticising and sympathetic, we will at once grant him his release.

We deprecate *strongly* his returning to us for a few months of trial, merely to make matters smooth with us, or if there is not a fair prospect of its ending in the *perfect re-establishment of his Oratorian vocation*, and with a good will on his part honestly to endeavour to make his position good in our Congregation.

## 9. - Faber to Lans, 27 XI 1850

My very dear Father Lans,

We all thank you very much for your kind and explicit letter. You have answered our questions most clearly — 1. That the Institute of the Oratory is not suited to the personal needs of Father Coffin and 2. that if he returned here with ever so good a will, you think he would not persevere. Under these circumstances, and acting on his own letter this morning, I have proposed to the General Congregation his release from his obedience, which was passed unanimously, and which I enclose to him. May God and our dearest Lady prosper it!

Why, my dear Father Lans, should you express a hope that that will not impair the good understanding between the two Orders? You know what confidence we have reposed in you and your direction; and I am sure we all believe that in the whole of this matter you have acted with a single eye to the glory of God. There is not a vestige of uncomfortable feeling in our minds about your share of the matter; and I hope and believe that we who are the least of Congregations and the most unworthy in our Congregation, shall ever look up to the sons of St. Alphonso with admiration and love. Pray our blessed Mother, your Foundress and ours, that I and all over whom God has made me the unworthy Father may realise more and more the favorite maxim of Frate Egidio: « *Une seule âme à un seul Dieu et cela immuablement* »<sup>82</sup>. Begging your blessing, believe me, very dear Father Lans,

Your unworthy brother and servant in Jesus and Mary,  
F. W. Faber Cong. Orat.

<sup>81</sup> This paper is in Faber's own hand. It must have had an accompanying letter, which is no longer extant.

<sup>82</sup> Faber is quoting the *Fioretti* in French!

10. - Faber to Coffin, 27 XI 1850

My dear Brother,

May God's blessing go along with the release which I enclose you<sup>83</sup>! I forwarded Father Newman's letter to you at St. Wilfrid's. I should not wish you to preach any farewell sermon: I think it would unsettle people, and it might raise human feelings and self-love in you at an hour when you should be most free from them. Let all be for God, sternly and exclusively. We all trust you will find in the holy bondage of vows what you could not find in the liberty our dearest Lady bade St. Philip leave to her children in the Oratory. May St. Alphonso obtain for you all the graces of which he sees you to stand in need.

Yours affectionately in Jesus and Mary,  
F. W. Faber Congr. Orat.

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<sup>83</sup> The release dated 27 XI 1850, and signed by Faber and Stanton is in the archives at Clapham, Db. 79.