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THE ALPHONSIAN MISSION IN BRITAIN AND IRELAND
IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

SUMMARY

The Pioneering Spirit of the Belgian Redemptorists in Britain; – The Role of Britain and Irish Missions within the Process of Catholic Restoration; – The Irish Immigrants and the Parish Missions; – The Redemptorists, Prophets of the Ultramontane Roman Catholicism; – Dissemination of Alphonsus's Works.

There is an English saying, «Faint heart never won fair lady». In other words, all great enterprises, be they wooing a lover or establishing a religious order, require unflagging courage and persistent determination. No one was more aware of these requirements than Alphonsus Liguori as he struggled to establish his fledgling Institute and promote its work among the rural poor of the eighteenth-century Kingdom of Naples. These same requirements were needed a century later by his spiritual sons who sought to bring their missionary work to Britain and Ireland. One essential difference was that in England and Scotland, as in Ireland to a lesser degree, it was not in the countryside but in the cities and towns that Catholics were concentrated. Here there were

«more souls destitute of spiritual aid than in the whole of Italy; so that it may be said with truth, that in the designs of Providence, St Alphonsus founded the Congregation of Missionary Priests for the whole world, but more especially for this country, since here are found *en masse* in large towns and cities what he saw scattered abroad in the whole of the kingdom of Italy in small villages and hamlets».¹

¹ Fr de Held in A.M. TANNOIA, *The Life of St Alphonso Maria de Liguori*, edited and translated by F.W. FABER, *The Saints and Servants of God*, 5 vols (London 1848-49), IV (1849), p. xvii. Fr Heilig wrote to Fr Lans that in the countryside «le mouvement religieux est nul», Archives of the London Province C.Ss.R. [hereafter, ALP], Cb42b, 26 February 1848.

Great enterprises, if they are to be successful, also require visionaries, more far-sighted than their contemporaries. In respect of an English foundation, it is not unfair to contrast the bold and pioneering spirit of the Redemptorists of the Belgian Province with the more timid and overcautious attitude of their Neapolitan brethren. The Rector Major, Camillo Ripoli, saw only difficulties and problems ahead, whereas the Belgian Provincial, Frederick de Held, grasped the opportunity presented to him.²

Although de Held's presence in England from 1847 until 1852, his angularity and maladroit obstinacy, led to deteriorating relations with the bishops which threatened the Institute's continued presence in England, it was his energy and drive that led to the Redemptorists coming to, and remaining in, the country. The acceptance of the missions of Falmouth and later of Hanley Castle was for de Held merely the creation of a bridgehead, establishing a temporary foothold for the Congregation as a prelude to the work of parochial missions. His bad relations with the bishops were occasioned by his determination to abandon the mission stations and chaplaincy work, which the Redemptorist had hitherto undertaken, in favour of the two houses at Clapham, London and Bishop Eton, Liverpool. It is not too much to say that it was de Held who preserved the Redemptorists as a congregation of missionaries, rather than an association of small communities administering parishes, the fate which befell the greater number of religious orders in England.³

It was only with the establishment of the Redemptorists in Clapham in 1848 that they were able to begin the specific work of their Congregation, while the house at Bishop Eton (1851) made possible the first missions in Ireland. So successful were these that within two years a house was opened in Limerick, which promised to be «une des stations les plus importantes de toute la Congrégation».⁴ Further foundations followed at Kinnoull, Perth in Scotland in 1867,

² When, in 1843, after five years of negotiations and visits, de Held undertook the mission of Falmouth in the Western District and informed Ripoli of «una piccola Colonia di Missionarii in Inghilterra», he brushed aside all of Ripoli's objections, General Archives C.Ss.R., Rome [hereafter, AGR], XII, C84, de Held to Ripoli, 30 July 1843; C86, Ripoli to de Held, 6 September 1843 (copy); C87 & C88, de Held to Ripoli, 23 September & 6 October 1843.

³ ALP, MS «Mémoires sur la Vie de Mgr. Robert Coffin, C.Ss.R., Évêque de Southwark, par le R.P. Lubienski», p. 100 makes the same point.

⁴ AGR, Provincia Angliae, I, 1, «Mémoire du P. Bernard sur la Congrégation en Angleterre et en Irlande», 1855.

Teignmouth, in Devon, southern England as a house of studies in 1875, Dundalk, Ireland in 1876 and Clonard, Belfast in 1896. These foundations meant that the whole of the British Isles and Ireland were accessible to the Redemptorist missionaries.⁵ By the end of the century, it could be said that hardly a town or village in Ireland had not been visited by the Redemptorists at some time for the preaching of a mission or confraternity retreat.⁶ No major city or town in England, and few in Scotland, did not have a Redemptorist mission, and their activity extended to the Western Isles and the Channel Islands. Fr Stebbing wrote in 1899 of the Clapham fathers, «sallying forth in twos and threes to give missions in the slums of East London, and in the quiet villages of Sussex and Kent, and even further afield to the busy human hives of the North».⁷ Between 1848 and 1900 the Redemptorists gave 3,215 missions and renewals, ranging from a yearly average of 21.5 in the 1850s to 112.3 in the 1890s.

An English Oratorian described St Alphonsus as «the very doctor and prophet of missions [who] has reduced mission-giving to a regular art, and compiled the most particular rules for each exercise of the mission.»⁸ In the light of such a commendation and of the proven worth of his methods, techniques and preaching style, the Redemptorists in Britain and Ireland were encouraged to preserve intact the type of mission and pulpit oratory which Alphonsus had evolved. Believing that these could not be improved, and that the spiritual wants of British and Irish Catholics «called for very little change, if any, from the soul-stirring topics and the wise methods pursued by St Alphonsus»,⁹ the members of the Congregation were bidden to show «no desire for useless and wanton innovations, but to preserve and apply zealously the principles and methods of St

⁵ Ibid, V, 3, «*Visitatio Extraordinaria*, 1894», however, contains the comment that «some of our houses seem badly situated, far away from the scene of our labours, thus entailing great expense and useless fatigue».

⁶ *Fifty Years at Mount St Alphonsus, Limerick* (Limerick, 1903), p. 35. In his long memorandum to Fr Raus, dated 21 April 1896, Fr Geoghegan claimed that the Redemptorists had given few missions in the Province of Tuam - in the fifty three parishes of the diocese of Tuam itself, for example, only two missions in over forty years, AGR, *Provincia Angliae*, VII 1, 2.

⁷ *A Half Century's Jubilee in St Mary's, Clapham* (Southwark, 1899), p. 28.

⁸ F.W. FABER, *An Essay on Catholic Home Missions* (London, 1851), p. 31.

⁹ C. A. Walworth, «Reminiscences of a Catholic Crisis in England Fifty Years Ago», *Catholic World*, 70 (1899/1900), 59-69, 239-52, 412-19, 506-13, p. 64.

Alphonsus.»¹⁰ Certain of Alphonsus's practices, however, were never introduced into the British and Irish missions since they were deemed more suited to the Latin temperament and climate. When the overenthusiastic Fr Hall compiled extracts from the works of Alphonsus and sent them privately to six other priests of the Province with a covering letter in which he advocated the full adoption of the practices in the Province, he was severely reprimanded.¹¹ Practices such as the barefoot procession to the church, the public pronouncement of the solemn curse, the penitential licking of the church floor, and the pictorial representation of the fires of Hell were never part of the stock in trade of the English Province. Nor, after a few early examples, was street preaching much used and was replaced by house visiting, without which «we could never reach the most abandoned souls».¹² With the exception of these few examples, which were the result of cultural differences, the basic pattern, course and content of the missions and renewals in Britain and Ireland was the same as in other Redemptorist Provinces. This standardisation was reinforced by the publication in 1877 of a Directory of the Missions. Among Victorian Catholics, the Redemptorists had a reputation as straightforward, no-nonsense preachers of the Eternal Truths, especially of the dire consequences of mortal sin. As an Irish Redemptorist remembered, «the more terrifying the sermon, the more the people liked it».¹³ Even antagonists were forced to recognise the Congregation as

«the most aggressive order the Church of Rome can produce... [its] members are reputed as great preachers, holding and teaching the most subtle and obnoxious doctrines of the Church. Being disciples of Liguori, you may know that they are a most dangerous

¹⁰ ALP, Cb22, circular letter of Fr Coffin, 1 March 1867.

¹¹ ALP, MS «St Alphonsus on the Missions» by Fr Hall.

¹² Archives of the Dublin Province C.Ss.R., Domestic Archives, Clonard, MS Reminiscences of Fr Patrick Sampson», 2 vols, vol. 2, p. 156.

¹³ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 173. This reputation continued well into the present century. Paul JOHNSON, *The Quest for God: a Personal Pilgrimage* (London, 1996), pp 1624, recalls his schooldays at the Jesuit school, Stonyhurst College in Lancashire, England: «Liguori's Redemptorists created a tradition of putting the horrors of Hell before the public... [they] were still going greatly in my youth, and still specialising in bringing Hell-fire to boys... Each year, an expert Redemptorist Hell-fire sermoniser was invited to the school to give the four eschatological sermons... [which] were remarkably popular. We boys thought of them as out-of-the-ordinary, unsubtle perhaps, but vivid, even entertaining in the same way as a horror-movie... [They] initially impressed, but the images soon faded...they left nothing».

class of men in any country».¹⁴

More charitably, the Redemptorists were «well-known for their piety, zeal and humility in preaching the truths of the Gospel. Their names are now almost a household word throughout the Catholic world».¹⁵ One reporter thought that they had «the secret of true eloquence; they feel themselves, and can make others feel. They are convinced of the importance of their mission, and carry with them the zeal of their great founder».¹⁶ Within five years of their first mission in Ireland, the Redemptorists were hailed as

the most laborious and ascetic Order of the Church... To estimate the value of their Apostolic Labours too highly would be impossible; wherever they have reared their missionary cross in Ireland, thousands have been brought into permanent connexion with the sacraments, among whom, perhaps, the local clergy would have long laboured in vain.¹⁷

The fortunes of the Congregation were inextricably linked with the general drive in the Catholic Church, both in Ireland and in the cities and towns of Britain, to reclaim and recall the Irish masses to the practice of their faith, as defined and approved by the institutional Church. In Ireland, the arrival from Rome in 1850 of Archbishop Cullen inaugurated a full-scale programme of reform and renewal aimed at the reevangelisation of the masses. This involved a «devotional revolution», the deliberate cultivation of an uncompromising, exclusive spirit of religious triumphalism, included in which was the restoration of a Catholic sense of pride and cultural self-identity against the predominant culture of the Protestant Ascendancy. Within this regenerative process, parish missions played a crucial role in recapturing many for the faith, in fostering piety and devotion and in introducing the people to new forms of spirituality from the Continent which, it was hoped, would consolidate their reintegration into the fold.

¹⁴ *Perthshire Courier*, 2 July 1870.

¹⁵ *Ulster Examiner*, 30 September 1879.

¹⁶ *Tablet*, 26 June 1858, p. 403. Interestingly, Sampson, «*Reminiscences*» vol. 2, pp. 162-3 thought that this was more true in the early years: «The old foreign Fathers delivered their sermons slowly and impressively and with great unction... [they] were full of St Alphonsus who seemed to speak by their lips». Once the priests ceased to train on the Continent, at Wittem, he argues, they were not as imbued with St Alphonsus, with the result that their sermons were less successful.

¹⁷ *Tablet*, 12 January 1856, p. 27.

Although the Redemptorists were intoxicated by the success of their early missions in Ireland, and some questioned the desirability of continuing work in England,¹⁸ it was important to avoid the impression that «we were merely in England for the sake of Ireland».¹⁹ In fact, work in both countries was of a piece. Like the Church in Ireland, the Church in England and Scotland during the 1850s and 1860s was involved in a subtle plan to convert the residual Catholicism of a folk-religion type of many Irish immigrants into strong, firm habits of participation in the complex of religious acts and observances which had characterised Catholicism since the Counter-Reformation. This was the main missionary endeavour of the Catholic Church in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century and was typified by Cardinal Manning's remark that he had worked for the Irish occupation of England.²⁰

The great wave of Irish immigration from 1840 onwards confirmed the demographic change of Catholicism in Britain from a predominantly rural to a predominantly urban phenomenon, stretching the resources of the Church beyond its capacity to cope. In their new and bewildering environment, many Irish Catholics, even if they had the opportunity of attending Mass, joined the «leakage» from the faith bemoaned by Catholic writers. On the other hand, since many of these immigrants from rural Ireland were not «practising» Catholics in the ecclesially-accepted sense, were ignorant of the fundamentals of their religion and had probably received none of the post-baptismal sacraments, it was less a question of stemming the «leakage» than of converting an innate sense of Catholic identity into an acceptable level of membership-commitment.

This task was greatly facilitated by the agglomeration of the Irish, the maintenance of group solidarity in their marriages, by their close historical identification with the Church and the indigenous opposition to the Irish on religious, social, economic and national

¹⁸ De Buggenoms, for example, wrote that «it is only since we have been established in Ireland that I have felt at home as a Redemptorist. Our two other houses at Clapham and Bishop Eton appear to me more than ever two artificial foundations, which have cost and will continue to cost large expenses, yielding little or nothing comparatively to what the same would have yielded in Ireland»; AGR, XLVII, 2, de Buggenoms to Douglas, 29 September 1854.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, XLVII, A6, Reyners to Douglas, 10 March 1855.

²⁰ E. S. PURCELL, *Life of Cardinal Manning*, 2nd ed., 2 vols (London, 1896), II, p. 677.

grounds. The Church sought to capitalise on these assets by striving to create and consolidate strong, urban Catholic communities; self-contained, almost self-segregated communities in which the values of sobriety and solid good behaviour prevailed, and which stood in marked contrast to the prevailing «pagan» or «Protestant» culture where religious indifference was seen to reign supreme. It was, of course, impossible to abstract Catholics from their social milieu, from the squalid housing conditions and appalling social problems, which sapped the energies and destroyed the motivation and religious sensibility of many an immigrant, who sought solace and relief in drink. Efforts were made, however, to combat the detrimental social milieu through a programme of church building, the creation of a system of Catholic schools, and the sponsoring of a whole gamut of social, recreational and educational societies, often mirroring existing working-class organisations, in order to mould and to hold the faithful together. Equally important, the Church sought to remould popular Irish culture to its own interest by the application and inculcation of an ideology which defined Catholics over against their Protestant neighbours, and so helped to consolidate the Catholic community. This ideology was an idealisation of certain elements of proletarian culture as a near approximation to Catholic holiness; holiness was to be sought in the daily lives of Catholics, not in abstraction from their lives. The ideal of Holy Poverty was one manifestation of this concept, which gave shape and form to the practical work of building up the life of the Church and compacting the Catholic community. The creation of «integral Catholicism» was itself an outgrowth of the Ultramontane ideal, characterised by a highly dogmatic, antirationalist theology, a warmly emotional, clerically-directed and clerically-controlled pietistical devotion, and a preference for life in the Catholic ghetto, where the Faith could be preserved from contamination. Yet it also served to attach its adherents firmly to the Church.

As the spiritual sons of one of its major prophets, the Redemptorists were committed to the Ultramontane ideal. As this programme of reconstruction and renewal gained ever greater support throughout the Universal Church, until it came to characterise and define Catholicism in the pontificate of Pius IX, so the Redemptorists reflected in their apostolic work the aims and ideals of the wider movement of Ultramontane Catholic revivalism. In

consequence, one Redemptorist could say of England that «S. Alphonse est comme un Sauveur pour ce pays. Je crois que dans aucun pays, peut-être, notre S. Congrégation n'est appelée à faire plus de bien».²¹ Missions helped to build parish communities; they were intended to attract together large numbers of lapsed, nominal or desultory Catholics, provide them with an unforgettable demonstration of Catholic holiness, suitably adapted to their circumstances, with which they were encouraged to identify as the first step in their full participation and integration in the life of the Church. Although the «orgy of emotionalism» to which people were exposed during a mission stood in marked contrast to the low emotional key of normal worship and preaching,²² it was an intended and expected feature of the missions. The basic thrust of a mission was to convert sinners by shaking them out of their complacency and instilling them with the fear of death and eternal hell fire. Equally important was the need to induct people into a sacramental piety which was designed to assure their perseverance by strengthening their resolutions and the control of the institutional Church over the lives of the faithful. Missions were meant, then, to consolidate the converted within a closed cultural world. Herein lies the significance of the exuberant forms of devotion which marked the various stages of the mission and the devotional practices which were commended as the means of persevering in the good resolutions made during the mission.

In the early years there was a novelty in some of these forms of devotion, and they are sometimes seen as an expression of the «Romanising» tendency of the Redemptorists and other foreign orders against the native, «old Catholic» tradition.²³ Yet such devotional practices were seen as good in themselves, as expressing Catholic belief, and also as the means to consolidate the hold of Catholicism upon the people by providing a substitute cultural expression and identity that would help to banish any pagan or Protestant cultural influence. Liturgical extravaganzas, for example, were a means of raising the spirits, confirming people's allegiance to, and dependence upon, the Church, and provided an emotional spiritual outlet that was

²¹ 21 AGR., Provincia Angliae, IId, Van der Aa to Mauron, undated [1861?].

²² The term is used by J. KENT, *Holding the Fort: Studies in Victorian Revivalism* (London, 1978), p. 243.

²³ This is one of the «received ideas» refuted in MARY HEIMANN, *Catholic Devotion in Victorian England* (Oxford, 1995).

refreshing in the humdrum of ordinary life. They were also community celebrations, helping to form, as much as to express, community-sense and identity. So too did the commendation by the missionaries of the *vita devota*. This did more than merely attach its practitioners more closely to the Church, providing a unifying bond and affirming allegiance, for the extension of the rituals, artefacts and bondieuserie of the Church into the daily lives of Catholics. It was intended to assist the development of a way of life that was wholly informed, inspired and defined by a given Catholic model and marked the Catholic out from his non-Catholic neighbour. The mission strove, not just to revive faith, to lift people out of a sinful state by providing an initiation into a new and elevating realm of holiness, but to create and confirm feelings of uniqueness, of spiritual superiority that spilled out of the walls of the church and the hearts of the faithful into their attitude and behaviour towards the society in which they lived. The practical measures that were taken to isolate Catholics within their own cultural, religious and social world - the establishment of confraternities, the regularisation of marriages, the removing of children from non-Catholic schools, the disbanding of secret societies, the administration of the pledge and the closing of beer-shops, etc, - were the counterweight to the fostering of this piety which helped to seal the identity of Catholics with their Church and ensure that it became the controlling interest in their lives against the world, the flesh, the devil, and other Christians.

The Redemptorists had a high expectation that the Irish, whether in their native land or among the diaspora, would avail themselves of their missions. Certainly, from the outset large numbers were attracted to them. At St Finbarr's Cork, for example in October 1854, thirty confessors were kept busy from five o'clock in the morning until eleven o'clock at night for over three weeks. Twenty thousand people received Holy Communion during the mission, «the altar rail being crowded [daily] from early morning until midday».²⁴ Many would have waited for up to three days without food to make their communion. Large numbers attended the sacraments for the first time, or after a lapse of many years, while it was not uncommon to come across people of fifty, sixty, or even seventy years who had never received the sacraments, not even baptism or marriage, but

²⁴ Redemptorist Fathers, Clapham, Domestic Archives [hereafter, ADC], D25, *A Printed Account of the Mission in the South Parish Chapel, Cork* (privately printed, Cork, 1854), p. 6.

were eager to do so. Such scenes were not uncommon in the missions in Ireland. At Kilmallock, Co. Limerick in 1883, described prior to the mission as being in a «not remarkably flourishing» spiritual state and the people satisfied to approach the sacraments only at Christmas and Easter, the men climbed over the walls and gates of the chapel-yard in the middle of the night and entered the chapel through the windows to get a place in the queue for confession the next day. After a while, the church was left open all night and the men remained after the evening sermon until the next day. To keep themselves awake, they marched around with lighted candles in their hands, reciting the rosary. Those who did not make the sacrifice of their night's rest, it was said, had very little chance of getting to confession that day.²⁵

In Britain also large numbers were attracted to the missions. The closing sermon at a mission in St Mary and St Michael, Commerical Road, East London in 1857 attracted so large a number of people that it was said that St Paul's Cathedral would have been insufficient to accommodate them.²⁶ Catholics came in such numbers to the first Redemptorist mission in the diocese of Menevia and Newport, at Brigend in 1863, that the parish priest said that he had no idea there were so many in his parish.²⁷ A «really glorious mission, probably the most successful one ever given in Liverpool», at St Anthony of Padua in March 1875, resulted in ten thousand communions and 2,587 confirmations. On St Patrick's Day, four thousand people crowded into the church and two thousand had to be turned away and the doors locked.²⁸ Only fifty-five of the five hundred Catholics in Abersychan, near Pontypool, went regularly to Mass before the mission in 1893, which raised the number to 430.²⁹ Such accounts could be multiplied many times and show that the missions were successful in drawing large numbers of Catholics, some of whom may have had little or no previous contact with the Church, or had lapsed for some time. Whether old loyalties were rekindled or new ones evoked, the missions assisted in the work of constructing and consolidating strong, local Catholic communities and halted the

²⁵ Redemptorist Fathers, Limerick, «Apostolici Labores», vol. III, p. 117 & 120.

²⁶ *Tablet*, 11 April 1857, p. 227.

²⁷ ADC, «Chronica Domestica», vol. I, p. 102.

²⁸ *Catholic Times*, 25 March 1875.

²⁹ ADC, «Apostolici Labores», vol. I, inset between pp. 144-5.

drifting away from the faith of many who might otherwise have become religiously indifferent. This was clearly the intention of children's missions which accounted for between one-third and one-half of the total apostolic labours of the Redemptorists in the 1850s. They were seen as the essential means «of bringing up to their duty a large number of grown boys and girls who had never been to their duty and would have ended by losing their faith altogether».³⁰ Certainly, priests recorded a large increase in Mass attendances for several years after a children's mission, and many adults were reclaimed for the Church through their children. Many of the children would subsequently lapse for one reason or another. What was important, however, was to have made «most deep religious impressions on the minds of children, at an age when the mind is most susceptible to those impressions which last through life»,³¹ to have provided childhood memories and an initiation into the cultic life of the Church which could later be re-invoked, when opportunity afforded, and a return to God made possible. The impressions were meant to be lasting and the influence of the Church inescapable, ensuring the local Catholic communities continued existence and sustained growth in succeeding generations.

By their very nature, missions were periodic, extraordinary events in the life of a parish, which they helped to build. The responsibility for continuing the good effects of a mission lay with the parochial clergy, some of whom singularly failed in this regard. The mission accounts often record such failure, especially in regard to the confraternities that had been established during a mission. The Redemptorists had a responsibility for the branches of their archconfraternities and, whenever possible, preached the annual retreat that was supposed to be a feature of the confraternity calendar. These retreats became an increasingly important feature of their apostolate, but at the expense of missions. In Ireland especially priests often preferred the week-long retreats, which they turned into quasi-missions for the whole parish, to proper, regular missions. Familiarity soon bred contempt. It was reported that «when [the people] know that they are having one of these big retreats or retreatmissions next year, they easily let slip the opportunity they

³⁰ Redemptorist Fathers, Bishop Eton, Liverpool, Domestic Archives [hereafter, ADBE], «Chronica Domestica et Apostolici Labores», vol. I, sub anno 1854.

³¹ J. FURNISS, C.Ss.R., *The Sunday School* (Dublin, n.d.), p. 282.

have now».³²

More worryingly, the traditional mission, an assault on individual souls and a whole parish, suffered as a consequence of the quasi-missions: «lots took no notice of it or treated it as they would the annual retreat: hear one sermon, go to confession and never appear again».³³ Elsewhere, priests had a preference for short missions where the church «was filled with but comers and goers for the day, who, when they had heard a few sermons, 3 generally, and their confession over, went home to let their friends come for the day».³⁴ This was to reduce the mission to a large station, an opportunity to bring up (preferably large) numbers of people to the sacraments, in the reception of which they might be somewhat neglectful but in the efficacy of which they had no doubt. Such «hullabaloo missions», it was argued, «give less trouble to the priests of the parish than real missions and satisfy their consciences; but in very many cases they do harm to the parish, and certainly injure the real missions which follow them. Would to God they were abolished».³⁵

The Redemptorists were caught in a cleft stick, hoisted on the petard of their own earlier success. They were dependent on the secular clergy for their apostolic work, and the clergy wanted shorter missions of a particular kind on a frequent basis. Although this was destructive of traditional missions, the Redemptorists had to accept the terms that were dictated to them, whatever their misgivings. The missions were no longer large-scale evangelistic exercises directed to those outside the normal confines of parochial life but more a general stirring-up and confirming the faith of existing Mass-goers.

This realisation that the missions were not appealing to ever-growing numbers of nominal Catholics highlighted both the shortcomings and limited nature of the missions themselves. Although the mission accounts tell of many successful missions, it was also increasingly admitted that they could not reclaim those lost to the Faith. A mission in the Redemptorist's own church at Clapham in

³² Redemptorist Fathers, Dundalk, Domestic Archives, [hereafter, ADDk], «Apostolici Labores», vol. I, p. 258.

³³ ADL, «Apostolici Labores», vol. III, p. 394.

³⁴ ADDk, «Apostolici Labores», vol. I, p. 150.

³⁵ Redemptorist Fathers, Kinnoull, Domestic Archives, «Apostolici Labores», vol. III, p. 400.

1891 was thus well-attended, but «by those who were already regulars. It does not seem to have in any way reached the careless and indifferent».³⁶ Elsewhere, it was admitted that «outside the circle of ordinary church-goers, we did very little».³⁷ In many parishes where previously there had been great success, it was noted that there were no longer the large numbers of those who had been indifferent or neglectful of their religious duties, and the missions often resulted, as at the Cathedral in Nottingham in 1889, in little more than «a slightly better attendance at Mass on Sundays».³⁸ In the face of adverse social conditions in the cities and towns of Britain, where Catholics increasingly, and it seemed irresistibly, shared the *mores* of their unchurched non-Catholic neighbours, the missions had ceased to have the moulding and controlling effect of earlier days. The Visitation of the Province in 1894 decried the almost total neglect of children's missions, which had been such a feature in the pioneering days,³⁹ while one Redemptorist was prepared to express the unthinkable:

«It often seems to me that the old missions in England at least have almost run their day. The circumstances of the parishes, priests and Catholics generally are so much changed from what they were 40 or 50 years ago. And now in most places the priests call in the Fathers only to bring up the outstanders every 3 or 4 years to their Easter and annual duties, whilst in some parts of England the Fathers give hardly any missions».⁴⁰

There is no suggestion that such sentiments were widely held. Indeed, there was no reduction in the number of missions and renewals given in the last decade of the century. Even the undoubted acrimony and increasing hostility between the Irish and non-Irish members of the Congregation, which led to the division of the Province in 1898, is not reflected in the mission statistics. The reduced English Province, with four houses and thirty-six priests, making it the smallest in the Congregation, undertook sixty-five missions and eight renewals in 1898 and seventy-one missions and sixteen renewals in 1899. At the same time, it was admitted that some

³⁶ ADC, «Apostolici Labores», vol. I, p. 117.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

³⁸ ABDE, «Apostolici Labores», vol. II, p. 318.

³⁹ ALP, «Additional Notes on Missions in the English Province written by the Visitor of 1894».

⁴⁰ AGR, XLVII, H1, Livius to Douglas, undated fragment of letter.

priests were sent on mission «not because they were fit but because there was no other work for them to do».⁴¹ This remark was occasioned by the possibility of a new foundation in Bristol in the west of England to replace Teignmouth, which was sold in 1900. The intention was that those assigned to a new house would do «home work», and this became the pattern of a series of foundations in the early years of the new century.

The first was at Bishop's Stortford, Hertfordshire, undertaken at the instigation of Cardinal Vaughan. There were said to be only twelve Catholics in the town, although by the end of the year their number had increased to thirty-six, including several convert Anglican clergymen. A church was built in 1903, and the Redemptorists continued to serve the parish until 1995. Also in 1900, the mission of St Benet's, Monkwearmouth, Co. Durham was accepted «ad interim» for three years. It was boasted that «we had almost a monopoly of the diocese [of Hexham and Newcastle] as a missionary field» and that «there was a very general desire to see us established permanently in the diocese».⁴² The Redemptorists set about turning St Benet's into a model parish, celebrating High Mass at Christmas for the first time ever in the church, which seated eight hundred and served a district containing about five thousand Catholics. Other foundations involving pastoral care followed at Kingswood, Bristol (1901-11), Norden in Rochdale, Lancashire (1904-09) and Edmonton, London (1903-26). The Redemptorists in England had come full circle, accepting that parochial work was the key to consolidation and re-organisation, as it had been a way of establishing themselves in the early years. The Rector Major, Matthias Raus, like his predecessor over fifty years earlier, expressed his disquiet. He feared that smaller communities might lead to a decline in the zeal and commitment to the Redemptorists' common life, and that «the missions might be neglected».⁴³ Whatever his fears, it says much for the English Province that it was sufficiently strong by 1912 to contemplate a foundation in Pretoria, South Africa, thereby opening another chapter in the Alphonsian mission.

Although any consideration of that mission must inevitably

⁴¹ ALP, Ba 151.60, Magnier to Bennett, 11 December 1899.

⁴² *Ibid.*, «Chronicles of the English Province», vol. II, p. 571.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, Ba 151.93, Magnier to Bennett, 19 May 1901.

concentrate on the main, public work of the Redemptorists, it must also include a brief mention of two other important areas: the dissemination of Alphonsus's works; and retreats, especially to clergy and seminarians.

Making known the theology of Alphonsus, especially through his devotional works, was a sacred trust which his spiritual sons used every opportunity to promote. Translations of the saint's works into English began to appear from 1833 onwards, particularly in Ireland, where they did «the work of a mission all over the country. The clergy used them, the people read them, even the young boys and girls. And so thousands and thousands learned to love God and lead holy lives».⁴⁴ We might question this pious estimate, but it is true that these cheap editions sold well, were often re-issued, and were distributed in large numbers by the Christian Brothers and others in their campaign to nurture the somewhat languid faith of many Catholics and as a complement to the new forms of devotional life which were being introduced. So much was this the case that in the early 1850s Fr Harbison expressed to his mother «the very confident belief that St Alphonsus will yet do much for Ireland by means of his Congregation, as he has done so much by his pious books».⁴⁵

In 1854 an ambitious project was undertaken to translate all of Alphonsus's works into English, under the editorship of R.A. Coffin. Regarded as one of Coffin's primary legacies to English Catholicism in the nineteenth century, the projected series was welcomed as hastening the time «when every Englishman will be able to contemplate the devotional system of the saint in all its completeness».⁴⁶ In the event, only six volumes, containing twenty-seven of the saint's ascetical works, had appeared by 1868, when the series was terminated. This was largely because they were too expensive for the people for whom they were intended: «The people who would buy and value the works of St Alphonsus and his sons are, as a rule, poor people, not the middle class. Cheap popular editions could be sold to any number on our Missions without the Fathers having anything to do with the sale».⁴⁷ When a translation of a further series of *Select Works* was undertaken by John Magnier at the end of

⁴⁴ SAMPSON, *Reminiscences*, vol 2, p. 94.

⁴⁵ Archives of the Dublin Province, MS «Life of Fr Harbison, C.Ss.R», p. 26.

⁴⁶ *Tablet*, 11 April 1885, p. 583 and H.E. MANNING, «St Alphonsus and the Christian Remembrance», *Dublin Review*, 37 (1854) pp. 326-355, at p. 326n.

⁴⁷ AGR, XLVII. MacDonald to Douglas, 21 February 1883.

the century, care was taken that they should be reasonably priced, and they appeared in *Duffy's Penny Catholic Library*.

It is impossible to know how many people read Alphonsus's works or were influenced by them either directly or through the many extracts and adaptations that found their way into prayer books and collections of prayers. What is certain is that some of them have had an important and abiding place in British Catholicism. The Visits to the Blessed Sacrament and to our Lady, for instance, has been «a well known and much used book»,⁴⁸ as has Alphonsus's version of the Stations of the Cross, and some of his hymns in their translation by Fr Edmund Vaughan are still sung today. In this way, the works of St Alphonsus had a major influence on, and passed into the mainstream of, Catholic devotional life in Britain and Ireland.

The Redemptorists were also associated with the successful attempts to establish the dominance of Alphonsus's moral theology. They were not directly involved in the theological struggle to dispel the spirit of Gallicanism which was said, perhaps a little unfairly, to infect the seminaries of Ushaw and St Edmund's, Ware in England and Maynooth in Ireland. They did, however, contribute through the retreats they gave to seminarians and priests as part of their continuing spiritual and theological formation. They thus continued an apostolate to which Alphonsus himself had given much prominence. Throughout Britain and Ireland between 1850 and 1900, the Redemptorists conducted over six hundred retreats for clergy and seminarians, a figure unsurpassed by any other religious order. In a telling description of his intention in giving a clergy retreat, Coffin said, «A vrai dire, je ne leur enseignais rien d'autre que de vivre en vrai bon Rédemptoriste comme nous dans le monde».⁴⁹ The influence wrought by a retreat underpinned the work of the missions, since the missions themselves depended upon the sympathy and cooperation of secular priests who shared a common belief in their efficacy and necessity. In addition, a noted feature of the Province's apostolate were retreats for religious sisters as well as the encouragement of individuals to make private retreats in Redemptorist houses. It was thus intended to imbue as many as possible with the same ideals and outlook, derived from Alphonsus, as the Redemptorists themselves. Again, it is difficult to quantify this aspect of their mission, but it was

⁴⁸ *Tablet*, 30 June 1887, p. 1043.

⁴⁹ ALP, Lubienski, «Mémoires» p. 129.

undoubtedly significant.

«The missionary work of our Congregation in these countries during the last fifty years has been vast, growing, and, moreover, unmistakably and eminently successful».⁵⁰ This optimistic assessment, intended for public consumption, contrasts sharply with the private, cynical remark of another Redemptorist: «Our missions», said the Father, «do good at the time, but afterwards the people fall away and some of them become worse than ever before».⁵¹ A case could be made for either statement, and the truth probably lies somewhere between the two. If the measure of the success of the Alphonsian mission in the last century is the dedication and devotion of those who carried it out, then it can be said to have been fulfilled abundantly. Public esteem for the Congregation and its members was maintained throughout the period and found eloquent expression in formal addresses made to the missionaries and in the Catholic press. Few paens were as laudatory as this:

«There is now scarcely any Order better known in these countries for the excellence of their public missions to the people, and for their spiritual influence, exercised unobtrusively, and invited and courted by, rather than obtruded upon, the clergy. A Congregation which is notoriously still in its first fervour, and which confines itself closely to the special work to which it is consecrated, could not fail to win the confidence of the clergy and laity alike».⁵²

That Redemptorist priests, individually and collectively, were not always equal to the magnitude of the task before them, does not detract from their real achievements. Nor is the success and effectiveness of their mission diminished by the increasing difficulty of reaching and affecting greater numbers of «abandoned souls», who otherwise were lost in the social turpitude and secularising environment in which they lived. Had those sons of St Alphonsus not attempted and accomplished what they did, the story to be told would be wholly different.

⁵⁰ *A Half Century's Jubilee in St Mary's, Clapham*, p. 42.

⁵¹ SAMPSON, *Reminiscences*, vol. 2, p. 65, quoting an unnamed Redemptorist in 1862.

⁵² *Tablet*, 15 April 1882, p. 565.