

MARTYRS IN TRAINING

BY

THOMAS HARPER

BEHIND the more dramatic features of the history of the Church in England during Elizabeth's reign—threatened military intervention by Phillip of Spain, the excommunication of Elizabeth, the rise and fall of her many suitors and the rather spectral presence of Mary Stuart beyond the northern border—lies the unfailing influence of the missionary priests. It is probably no exaggeration to say that the fact that Catholicism in England did not suffer the fate it has met in the Scandinavian countries is to be attributed to them more than to any other element of the Counter-Reformation movement. At a time when the ranks of the old Marian clergy were thinned by death, life imprisonment or banishment and the strength of the Elizabethan administration was concentrated with a particular violence against the priesthood, the Mass and the sacraments, Fr William Allen conceived the idea of founding a seminary at Douai.

Born in the year of Henry VIII's marriage to Anne Boleyn, William Allen's career had carried him into the academic atmosphere of an Oxford which was still to a large extent Catholic in practice and outlook, but it had given him no less a deep acquaintance with conditions throughout the country. For his zeal as a kind of lay missionary in Lancashire and Norfolk during the greater part of the years 1562 to 1565 he had received special mention in a writ issued by the Queen as 'Alen who wrote the late booke of Purgatory'. Outlawed, he fled to Malines, where in the latter year he was ordained priest. Three years later he had founded Douai College, the first of a series of English colleges on the Continent and the first seminary to be created and organised on the principles laid down by the Council of Trent. In every detail of its administration he showed an extraordinary ability and singleness of mind.

It is strange now to reflect that the college which we remember almost exclusively as the training ground of missionary priests and martyrs was not created for that purpose. In 1568, when the Dominican Pope, Pius V, gave it his approval within a few weeks

of its foundation, the delusion was still widely shared among English exiles on the Continent that there would soon be a change in the fortunes of the Church in this country—the Pope would bring their heretical queen and her government to judgment, she would die and Mary of Scotland would succeed to the throne, ever perhaps that divine grace would work a miraculous change of heart in Elizabeth or her betrothal to a Catholic prince a change of practice. Accordingly we find Allen in a reminiscent mood writing to the Regius Professor of Canon Law at Douai University several years after the event that his purpose was to establish a college on the Continent which would combine the functions of a Catholic Oxford, a school for boys and a seminary where priests could be trained ‘to restore religion [in England] when the proper moment should arrive’. Douai was to create a reserve of clergy on the Continent and not to maintain an uninterrupted flow of priests to supplement the dwindling numbers of the Marian clergy. ‘It seemed hopeless’, Allen wrote, ‘to attempt anything while the heretics were masters there’. Only six years later, in 1574, when the government were no less, but if anything more, in command in England the first three missionary priests landed from Douai. By 1580, a hundred Douai priests were ministering to the needs of Catholics in England. In the following year forty-three priests were ordained at the College; almost all went on the mission and fifteen were subsequently martyred. The change of policy had come immediately for in the year in which the College was founded Dr Vendeville wrote that its course of studies had been formulated to equip priests ‘for promoting the Catholic cause in England even at the peril of the lives’.

Martyrdom quickly became a major preoccupation in the life of the College. In 1577 Fr Cuthbert Maine, the protomartyr of Douai, was put to death at Launceston and the practice of celebrating a Mass of thanksgiving and singing the *Te Deum* in the College chapel as news of a martyrdom was received began. The three years’ course of study was so arranged that the students might ‘glean therefrom an understanding of the fortitude of the martyrs’ and ‘prepare for the priesthood... at the present time an office contemptible in the world’s eyes and perilous’. Allen had no delusion now about the policy he was to pursue; nor could he have had any doubts as to its success. Already in 1575 he had received from England evidence of the influence which the

missionary priests were exerting: 'He who almost alone holds the rudder of the State has privately admitted to one of his friends that for one staunch Catholic at the beginning of the reign there were now he knew for certain ten'.

Historians have tended to give prominence to events like the Archpriest controversy and the 'stirs' at Wisbeach, the differences of opinion at Douai and in Rome, the political intrigues and the protestations of misplaced allegiance. The same light has not been thrown on the enormity of the sacrifice the missionary priests made for a purpose that would have been meaningless had it been at all self-centred. This was true even of Allen's contemporaries. We find him, in a letter dated 1570 to Fr Chauncey, a former Prior of the London Charterhouse, defending the missionary priests 'whose faults many a man spieth that prayeth not for them as most men mark their misses and few consider what dangers they be in... which pains few men pity as they should do and not many reward them as they ought to do'. Under the circumstances in which they had to work in England, no system of training devised by men could have made the returning exiles entirely immune to the moral dangers of the English mission—to the isolation of their lives so disarmingly in contrast with the community life in Douai; to their natural recoil from physical suffering, actual and anticipated; to the overwhelming strength and power of the heresy they were out to crush; to the accumulated effect upon the people of years of persecution and deprivation of the practices of their religion. Yet when 'the expense is reckoned', the return it gave is an eloquent tribute to the training they had received at Douai. Campion's simple phrase 'gathering virtue and knowledge' expresses the essence of Allen's purpose and no less of his achievement.

In a letter in which he defined his aims, Allen wrote that his students, who were never regarded simply as students for the priesthood but as men specifically 'intended for the English harvest', were 'not required to excel or to be great proficient in theological science... but they must abound in zeal for God's house, charity and thirst for souls'. Elsewhere he writes that 'having burning zeal even though deep science be wanting... [they can] do good work in hearing confessions and offering sacrifice which are the points to which we especially direct our instructions'. And a contemporary wrote of Cuthbert Maine, the proto-martyr of

Douai, that 'none of those whom Mr Maine reconciled to the Church could ever be induced to renounce the Catholic faith which they had learned from so good a master'.

Every day at Douai began with the recitation of the litanies of the Church for the conversion of England followed at 5 a.m. by Mass. Confessions were made and Communion was received every Sunday and on greater feasts. Although this was rather in advance of contemporary practice, Allen never ceased to exhort his students to confess and communicate more frequently. Priests said Mass daily and the whole community fasted on two days out of every week. Thus they acquired that detachment which so impressed Edmund Campion on his arrival at Douai: 'Sixty men and youths of the greatest promise... eating so pleasantly a little broth thickened merely with the commonest roots, that you could have sworn they were feasting on stewed prunes and raisins, English delicacies'. The students' minds had little opportunity to dwell on the lack of English delicacies; every day there were two readings at the mid-day and evening meals, one from the Old and one from the New Testaments, of such a length that in the three years normally spent at Douai the former was covered twelve times and the latter sixteen. After the meal a professor would give a commentary on the passage the community had just had read to them. The study of the Scriptures inevitably held a special place in the training of men who were to meet the English Reformers on their own ground. Every day there was a lecture on the exegesis of a passage especially relevant to the doctrinal controversies raging in this country at the time, papal and royal supremacy, purgatory, the Mass, grace and devotion to our Lady. Greek and Hebrew were taught as a safeguard against 'the sophisms the heretics extract from the properties and meanings of words', but for the sake of the common people the future missionaries were required to learn the Scriptures and to deliver their sermons in the vernacular as their opponents were already doing to advantage. Allen was in many ways ahead of his time, and while (in a letter on the study of the Scriptures) he was prepared to concede that it might have been 'more desirable had they never been translated into barbarous tongues', he suggests that the time for such regrets is past. Now the need is for an authorised translation into English—a recommendation which was to see its fulfilment in the Douai Bible.

'Non in dialectica complacuit Deo salvum facere populum suum' served however to restore a balance which was inevitably displaced only too easily in favour of controversy and 'scientific' theology. Long before the idea of a seminary abroad first took shape, continental printing presses operated by English exiles were pouring out a rich harvest of tracts and counterblasts. The seminaries were founded with another kind of propaganda in mind. Since 'all the labourers we send', Allen wrote, 'are employed in administering the sacraments and above all things in hearing confessions (for the people have hardly any pastors now left but them), we take care that they are most carefully instructed in the whole catechism and in pastoral matters... and that all parts of our religion but especially the marvellous power and authority of the Sovereign Pontiff should be better known and more devoutly and purely honoured than it used to be. All were instructed in the way of using the Blessed Virgin's Rosary with the meditations attached to it... that by understanding these things themselves they may be more fit to explain them hereafter to the simple people.' The Statute of 1571 specifically attacked the wearing of scapulars and the *Agnus Dei*, to which Pope Gregory XIII had attached special indulgences associated with prayers for the conversion of England 'for all places beyond the Alps'.

In 1584 the Act of the 27th of Elizabeth was passed by which it was declared high treason for any priest ordained abroad to come into the kingdom and death was the penalty for anyone who harboured or in any way assisted them. Even though in the decade which followed the passing of this Act the persecution of the clergy reached a level of unprecedented severity, it did not dash the confidence which characterised the Counter-Reformation period. Edmund Campion, the Jesuit martyr who had himself been a student at Douai, wrote in the *Brag* he addressed to the government when he landed in England that 'the expense is reckoned, the enterprise is begun, it is of God, it cannot be withstood'. Individually the missionary priests might suffer death but it was 'their posterity that would never die'. Martyrdom created vocations and every martyr a fresh landing on the English coast so that at the height of the persecution, when the fortunes of the Church were humanly speaking at their lowest, Campion was able to assert with an unusual combination of charity and assurance that 'many innocent hands are lifted up to heaven for you daily

by those English students... who beyond seas gathering virtue and sufficient knowledge for the purpose are determined never to give you [the persecutors] over but either to win you heaven or to die upon your pikes... to the end we may at last be friends in heaven when all injuries shall be forgotten'.



WORDS OF THE MARTYRS

THOMAS MORE (Martyred at Tower Hill, 1535):

Serve God for love, then, not for hope of meed;
 What service may so desirable be
 As where all turneth to thine own speed?
 Who is so good, so lovely eke as he
 Who hath already done so much for thee,
 As he that first thee made, and on the rood
 Eft thee redeemed with his own precious blood:

ROBERT SOUTHWELL, s.j. (Martyred at Tyburn, 1595):

My chiefest delight is to be used as God wills, and to have his pleasure and providence fully accomplished in me, which is the end for which I was created and for which I do live. To attain this resignation, it is a very fit way to debate and discourse with myself, what thing there is could happen to me, though never so much against my liking, which if it should fall out would trouble me, or make me lose that indifferency which I ought to have, in most willingly yielding myself to whatsoever God shall lay upon me; and if I find anything which I think should not well digest, nor accept with due patience, let me endeavour to overcome myself in it, and by prayer and meditation seeke to win the difficulty thereof, that there may be nothing which I could not willingly accept at God's hands, how contrary soever it were to my inclination.