

The Gentili Province

This short essay seeks to provide some insights into the composite parts of the new Gentili Province, which we inaugurate today, 15th June 2010. The founding parts stretch right across the world – England, Wales, Ireland, the United States and New Zealand – and provide a contemporary illustration of the weakness of vocations to the religious life in these parts of the world and yet the growing reality of a globalised world, where cultures are increasingly shared both in particular places and across the world. Ease of communications and travel, emigration and immigration, media and popular culture, more widely shared and greater wealth



The English (Anglo Irish, English and Welsh) Province

The English Province has gone through various name changes over the years – English became, effectively, Anglo-Irish and after 1931 it became English again; whilst in more recent years it has become the English and Welsh Province, reflecting the heavy commitment of the order in Wales.

The Province had its origins in the arrival in England in 1835 of three missionaries: Luigi Gentili, Anthony Rey and Emilius Belisy (the latter two being French). The story of how they came to England is well known: Rosmini eventually agreeing to the earnest requests of the formidable (and erratic) ex Downside Benedictine, Bishop Baines, to send men to teach in his new seminary/school at Prior Park, near Bath.

Rosmini, when he finally agreed to the request, committed himself fully to the new venture, pouring in the slender resources of his new (and as yet unapproved by the Pope) institute into the very strange world of Protestant Britain. Catholic Emancipation had only come about six years previously; although active persecution of Catholics had effectively ceased some decades earlier. There had been a violent outbreak against them in 1780 (suppressed by the actions of George III, when his government showed itself helpless) but this was an isolated, if frightening, incident. Anti Catholic prejudice remained very strong, however.

The Catholicism that the new Rosminians found in England was very different from that on the continent and they found it difficult to adjust. Catholics had tended to survive by keeping a 'low

profile': those who had survived over the centuries tended to be found amongst the aristocracy and their families, which included the workers on their estates; or in relatively isolated parts of the country. Professionally they were very restricted in what they could do – the universities were closed to them and there were very few professions in which they could legally engage. Emancipation itself came about due to pressures from Ireland rather than from England itself.

Gentili in particular found all of this difficult to deal with. Zealous, outspoken and a man of action (and often think later) he was far from impressed with what he found – either in the country or in the observances of the Catholics with whom he worked. But his little group of men were, in reality, indispensable to Baines: they provided all the essential posts at Prior Park. They drew men to the order, such as Hutton and Furlong (several of these early vocations came from ex Ampleforth Benedictines). Almost inevitably, the temperaments of such strong men as Baines and Gentili proved to be incompatible and it was not long before Gentili (shortly to be followed by the others) left Prior Park. Gentili, after a year teaching back in Italy, at Calvario, went to be the chaplain (12th June 1840) to Ambrose March Phillipps (later to add de Lisle to his name), a young, well-to-do convert to Catholicism, living with his young family in the newly built Grace Dieu Manor in the Midlands, near Loughborough.

Gentili was not designed to be a gentleman chaplain and worked long and hard amongst the poor villagers nearby, many of whom were nonconformists. He preached the first public (in the streets) sermon by a Catholic priest since the Reformation in the rather unlikely village of Shepshed, complete in cassock and collar (the Rosminians introduced the Roman collar to England). He provided food for the hungry, a latter day drop in centre for down and outs. He converted several hundred local people and his work is reflected in the noticeable concentration of Catholic parishes in the area.

In 1842 he founded the parish at Loughborough, still in Rosminian hands. He had built a little chapel at Shepshed, replaced as a parish church decades ago and abandoned, but still standing, though not as a place of worship; the present owners have maintained many of the original features and wall decoration. He worked with Lady Mary Arundell to bring the Sisters of Providence over to England: they arrived in Loughborough and founded a school there in 1843: it was the first Catholic day school run by nuns in England in the nineteenth century. In 1844 he purchased the land and started the buildings at Ratcliffe, to act as a novitiate house for the Institute.

What was clear was that Gentili was not the man to run the English Mission; that duty fell on GB Pagani, who was to succeed Rosmini as Father General in 1855. The Province was erected in 1841 and was the first of the Institute – that of Italy was created in 1843. Gentili acted as a vigorous missionary, usually accompanied by Moses Furlong. Gentili preached fifty one missions of a fortnight or more all over the country and in Ireland; he preached fifteen retreats to the clergy of all the Districts (the hierarchy was not restored until 1850) except the Eastern; he gave twenty one retreats to religious, preached 800 sermons in the last sixteen months of his life, was spiritual director to Bishop Walsh (Midlands District) and several of the bishops made their pre consecration retreats under his direction. He was a key contributor to the process that led to the Restoration of the Hierarchy and he was considered as a possible Bishop of Tasmania. He received Lockhart into the church, one of Newman's disciples and whose defection led to Newman preaching his famous (and his last as an Anglican) sermon *On the Parting of Friends*. Gentili exhausted himself and nothing that Rosmini could do could restrain this whirlwind who died in 1848. In his time he was probably the most notable Catholic cleric in the country.

Gentili rather dominates these early years of the Institute in England and consequently others have got lost under his shadow. Gentili was not the only Missioner of the Institute; for many years this was a primary work, with several priests engaged in it at any one time. They operated from Rugby, a new parish to which the Rosminians came in 1847. Ratcliffe became a school in 1847; the novitiate oscillated between Loughborough and Shepshed. In 1852 St Marie's College

was built and this became the novitiate and the residence of the Provincial for a hundred years. It also served as a scholasticate, although Philosophy was often studied at Ratcliffe and Theology at Calvario. Rosmini had found a striking way of ensuring maximum use of manpower – students of Philosophy also acted as Prefects in the schools and this was certainly a contributory factor in Ratcliffe earning the nickname of ‘Moloch’ amongst some of the overworked brethren, an all devouring monster.

The Institute, then, had some parishes early on; but it would be fair to say that much of the early effort went into Mission and into schools, reflecting Rosmini’s own priorities. It should be remembered that the first house of the Order, the Sacra di San Michele (and its ‘twin’ over the border, Tamié) were missionary establishments – mind boggling as that might seem, cut off as they were on the tops of mountains. His second priority was schools - he had some of his novices teaching away at Calvario and in Domodossola well before they were professed.

Whilst there were developments in the Midlands, arguably the greatest impact was felt in Wales. On the surface Wales was a very unpromising territory in which to work. It was famously non Catholic and strongly nonconformist. However, the Industrial Revolution was to change all of that. From a country with so few priests that they could almost be numbered on the fingers of one hand, the situation was transformed within a couple of decades. The ports and the building industry, associated with the social and economic whirlwind that was the Industrial Revolution, called for labourers and they poured in from an Ireland almost overwhelmed by famine and economic hardship. The Irish population of Newport rose from 200 to 3,000 during the 1840s.

In 1847 the first two Rosminian priests went to Newport, one of whom was Signini, who had been Rosmini’s secretary. Within a year they had both departed, victims of the terrible living conditions and were replaced by Fr Dominic Cavalli; he was Rector of St Mary’s Newport for forty five years (until 1892). He gained a high reputation, not least for the example he set during the cholera epidemic of 1848-49. From St Mary’s schools for the local Catholic population were built and in due course parishes established: St Michael’s and St Patrick’s.

In the nineteenth century Cardiff was one of the fastest growing towns in the Empire – in the first eighty years of the century the population increased by 150 times. The Rosminians were asked to go there in 1854 (it was one of the last major agreements signed by Rosmini), taking over the parish of St David’s and the entire Catholic population of 7,000 souls. A restored Signini arrived to work in the City, along with the future Archbishop of Turin, Gastaldi, who supervised the construction of St Peter’s, built in fields some distance away from any population. Signini was a tireless founder of schools and brought the sisters (in 1856) to the town to help in the work. Their arrival caused considerable protests and ‘A petition from the Ladies of Cardiff’ was sent to Queen Victoria, decrying their arrival. In due course this was acknowledged, but with the biting addendum, ‘Her Majesty was not aware that there were any Ladies of Cardiff’. As time went on, large chunks of the parochial work were handed over to the Diocese (including St David’s), but the area around St Peter’s developed and in the 1890s and succeeding years the parishes of St Alban’s and St Joseph’s emerged from it.

In London the Rosminians took over Kingsland, in north London, in 1854. The first Rector was Lockhart and he worked hard to develop the church, presbytery and to establish a school. Lockhart was also a considerable writer, editing several Catholic reviews, translating and publishing works of the Founder, writing a remarkably readable Life of the Founder (with assistance) and acting as a very public face of the Institute. When Lockhart’s friend from his Anglican days, Cardinal Manning, became Archbishop of Westminster in 1865, he asked the Rosminians to consider coming in to central London and working amongst the poor there. Difficult though it may be to believe now, the area around the new parish of St Etheldreda (1876) was notoriously poor and deprived – Dickens sets Fagan’s warehouse just a few hundred yards away. Lockhart was very wealthy (or at least his mother was) and the Institute benefitted greatly from her largesse. He became the Procurator of the Order (a member of Father General’s Curia

or Council) and was involved in audiences with Leo XIII at the time of the condemnation of some of Rosmini's propositions in 1884. He was also on the short list to be Archbishop of St Andrew's (Scotland) and of Sydney, Australia. His public position may well have been influential in saving the Institute from suppression – certainly the English and Welsh hierarchy made clear their high opinion of the Institute at the time.

Other Institute parishes emerged from Ratcliffe – in particular Sileby (though not ours now) and nearby Birstall. In London the new parish of Dollis Hill was given to the Order by Cardinal Bourne in 1927. Bourne was a great friend of the Order, making his Retreat at Wadhurst regularly and he was a frequent visitor on other occasions. Bexhill (1891) emerged from the novitiate at Wadhurst, in Sussex; the Institute built the church and a fine big presbytery – its disproportionate size the result of a decision that it would make a good 'holiday' house.

Wadhurst was opened as the novitiate in 1880 – it was felt that it provided a more suitable environment for forming religious and Rugby was better for scholastics. Fr Cuthbert Emery, who had spent almost all of his religious life at Ratcliffe, was no great lover of Rugby – he was a countryman at heart – and thus bought Derryswood, near Guildford, in the early 1950s, selling St Marie's College to pay for it whilst retaining the parish at Rugby. It made sense in that the diocesan seminary was just at the end of the drive (though quite a long drive, especially on a wet and windy winter's morning).

Ratcliffe was opened as a school in 1847 and gloried in its two pupils. It really took a considerable amount of time to get off the ground as a going concern, with pupil numbers (aged from about 9 to 18) hovering around the hundred mark even at the turn of the century. However, post the First World War numbers and reputation grew substantially. By 1933 there was sufficient confidence to establish a Prep School at Grace Dieu.

Elsewhere the Institute ran Reformatories or similar institutions. These were chiefly in Ireland, though the Province had Market Weighton in Yorkshire between 1857 and 1912. The legacy lives on in Rosminiana around the world, as many of the Institute's publications (such as the Rule Book) were printed there. The Institute also took over the Reformatory at Mount St Bernard's in the 1870s for a while, and two in the immediate post Second World War years, though government cuts meant that these never lasted much beyond their opening date. In France an orphanage was opened at Sainghin (near Lille), but this was closed (along with a novitiate and small school in Belgium) in 1903 as a consequence of anti clerical laws.

Government of the Province was in the hands of Italians until 1906 – the last one, Gazzola, held the office for thirty-one years! At one stage he was Provincial of countries including Ireland, effectively the USA (if anyone could have been said to be Costa's superior), France, Belgium and Germany (a small house in Bavaria) – even Madagascar for a short while. And to think that he did not have a fax, computer or a mobile phone to his name!

The order never got very large – probably the biggest the English and Welsh Province ever got to (if one excludes Ireland) was about 135 members. In 1931 Ireland was established as a separate Province.

Post War.

The immediate years after World War II saw a massive increase in clergy – all the English seminaries were full to bursting point. There was very little room for development in parochial ministry and succeeding provincials saw education as where the demand was – as is testified by the large number of letters from bishops all over the world – from Jamaica to New Zealand – asking the Institute to establish new schools. Cuthbert Emery (1948 – 64), previously President at Ratcliffe for over twenty years, was the Provincial in these years, following on from Dan Hickey, whose background was in the parishes. Thus the fifties were characterised by the foundation of schools in Huddersfield (St Gregory's) and Soni (Tanzania); by the granting of Grace Dieu's

quasi independence from Ratcliffe and, in the early 1960s, by the opening of Rosmini College in Auckland and, at the end of the decade, St Peter's in Gore. The Institute also opened a house of Studies, Rosmini House, in Cambridge, to provide a base for men to get their degrees.

This almost coincided with a rapid – almost overnight – decline in vocations at the start of the 1960s. This was to be most felt in the schools, though at the same time it coincided with an increasingly confident Catholic laity, who were able to take on the mantle of educators and school managers. The withdrawal from education became almost complete by the mid 1990s, although the decision was taken to be more pro-active at Ratcliffe, albeit with a different role, several years back and this was reinforced by the establishment of the Rosmini Centre there a few years ago. In New Zealand the schools were handed over fairly soon after they had been established securely; and it is remarkable how strongly the Rosminian impact on them has been maintained, despite either negligible or non-existent Rosminian clerical presence in them or even in the vicinity.

Men who had done their stint as teachers became available for parish work, and this relative surplus of qualified men led, in the mid 1980s, to the taking on of three contiguous parishes in East Anglia – Whittlesey (and Ramsey), Wisbech and March. In Wales some attempt was made to assist hard pressed dioceses: for a while we had a parish in Swansea, then looked after the Cathedral parish and now have Neath; whilst on the other hand parishes had to be given up.

The giving up of parishes started in the late 1980s, Dollis Hill being the first to go, followed by Bexhill and St Mary's Newport - all traditional 'big' Rosminian parishes and requiring a relatively big clerical staff. The process will inevitably continue, but this will reflect changes going on in dioceses throughout the country, as there is the move to cluster parish churches, in many cases these reverting to an original 'mother' parish church from which others developed.

The drying up of vocations led to the redevelopment of Derryswood at the end of the century, selling off the bulk of the house and refurbishing what remained. The novitiate became movable. Scholastics, such as there were, would be educated in the International Houses of Formation at Porta Latina in Rome or in the Ngong Hills, outside Nairobi, in Kenya; or, possibly, at Wonersh, based at Derryswood. The story of the last forty years, ostensibly, has been one of managing decline in the most gentle and yet effective way possible, intermingled with a certain amount of crisis management. In that regard, of course, the Province has merely been following the lead of the local Church, as it grapples with the issues before it.

The Irish Province.

Luigi Gentili was the founder of the Irish mission, just as he had been of the English one. His time in Ireland (most of which was spent in the area of Dublin) lasted less than five months in 1848, ending in his death; but in that short time he left an extraordinarily deep impression. For a variety of social and economic reasons, the time was ripe for a major development in the life of the Church in Ireland and Gentili, with his enormously powerful personality and missionary zeal, had arrived at just the right time.

Missionary work continued for a number of years, but soon the Rosminians were asked to establish and run what were called industrial schools and orphanages, doubtless a consequence of the work at Market Weighton: the first was at Upton, Co. Cork and the second, opened about twenty years later, at Clonmel, Co. Tipperary. In these first years the novitiate continued to be in England, but in due course a novitiate was opened in Omeath, Co. Lough. Irish brethren served in these houses and in the English Province and some were sent to help Fr Costa, who had begun work in the United States, particularly in Illinois.

In 1931 it was decided to establish a separate Irish Province; again the reasons for this and the time when it came about were many, but surely not least was the changed political reality. There were problems: the new Province's financial stability was a concern, the members were divided

between the provinces (a substantial number of Irish brethren opted to remain in the English Province and some British in the Irish Province) and the new Province was also responsible for the United States as well. The Province started life with forty four members – twenty six brothers and eighteen priests, of whom five brothers and nine priests were in America.

In 1932 the Province established its novitiate at Kilmurry House, Fermoy, Co. Cork. There was a Juniorate at Omeath and in 1938 the body of Gentili, amongst much ceremony, was translated there from its honoured place in Glasnevin, in the Heroic Circle. Training for the priesthood continued to take place in Italy for some years but in 1960 some men were trained in a new scholasticate at Glencomeragh House, not far from Clonmel. The Irish Province could be said to have fully arrived, with its own facilities to receive men and train them to the priesthood.

It took some years for new works to arrive; but in 1945 the Province became engaged in missionary work in East Africa, taking responsibility for the area around Tanga, in Tanganyika. Although all the provinces were involved in this venture to a greater or lesser extent, it was above all men from Ireland who carried out this pioneering Church work. Eugene Arthurs was appointed to run the Apostolic Prefecture and then became the first Bishop of Tanga; a large proportion of men from the Province spent varying amounts of time – sometimes a religious lifetime – working in very difficult circumstances in this missionary field. In time Tanzania became a Vice Province and has extended into Kenya; a postulancy and novitiate and finally a scholastic house were established. At home and in the United States members of the Province worked hard and very effectively (and continue to do so) to raise funds to support the work of the missionaries. In 2009 the Province of East Africa was established under the patronage of St. Josephine Bakhita.

In Ireland it took time to develop new apostolates commensurate with the rapidly rising number of members – sixty-five of them by 1935 and ninety-eight by 1949. In 1969 there were 136 Irish members – of whom seventy-five worked in Ireland, twenty-eight in Africa and thirty in the United States. In the early 1950s an opportunity came to take over responsibility for the running of St Joseph's School for the Blind in Drumcondra, Dublin; over time this led to the establishment nearby of Clonturk House, for blind men. In 1970 the brave and innovatory decision was taken to open Rosmini College, a secondary school, where visually impaired boys could be educated alongside their sighted peers.

With the development and reinvention of Upton and Clonmel and the far greater involvement of the laity, the closure of Omeath and the decline in vocations, new possibilities were opened. In 1983 the Institute took on the new, challenging parish of St Oliver's Clonmel; in 1986 St Brigid's, Faughart, not far from Omeath, was added. Glencomeragh went through various transformations and has now become a very fine and leading Retreat Centre. Brethren from the Province have undertaken key jobs in the rapidly developing sphere of formation, with men working in it in India, Rome and East Africa in recent years.

The United States.

The founder of the United States Province, Fr Costa, was a man almost as notable as Gentili and sharing some of his characteristics – an indefatigable worker, prepared to face all challenges (of which there were many) head-on and not the easiest of people with whom to live. Having spent some time in his native Italy and then in the parishes in Wales, Costa was despatched on his own to the United States in 1864, to work in the diocese of Alton, Illinois. One big difference between Gentili and Costa was that he laboured, right up to his death, for fifty years in this missionary field.

Costa was dynamic: he marshalled congregations of sisters; tussled with prejudices – not least a strong, local anti-catholicism; raised remarkable sums of money; built churches and schools; carried out missions; was forthright in his relationships with bishops; struggled to get brethren

sent to America to help him in his work and largely failed to work well with those who were – altogether, his was a remarkable legacy. The school he established, Corpus Christi High School, Galesburg, never really got off the ground, so that the most notable feature of the Rosminian presence in the States has been pastoral, especially in parishes but also in chaplaincies.

Perhaps because of its unusual status, it took many years before the Rosminian presence in the United States took any form of roots. There was an abortive attempt to establish a novitiate in the 1930s and the country continued to depend almost exclusively on men sent from Ireland to man the growing number of parishes. But a point was reached, at the end of the 1960s, when it was felt that there needed to be local government for this branch of the Irish Province (it had formally come under Ireland at the time of the creation of the Irish Province). The split, as with that between the English and Irish Provinces over thirty years earlier, provided some difficulties (again finance raised its ugly head), but this soon dissipated. The Province established a motherhouse and a novitiate in Peoria, though local members have been rare.

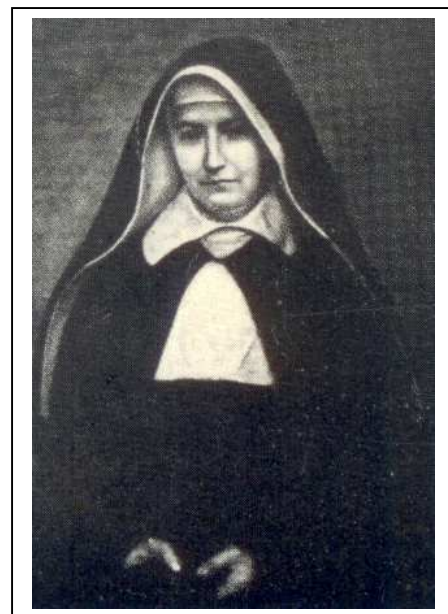
In time the Institute in America settled on two principal locations – Illinois and Florida. This short essay does little justice to the development of the American Mission, a complex and fascinating story – as indeed is the evolution of the culturally and ethnically rich local societies of the areas in which the Institute serves.

Ascribed

Rosmini's vision for the Institute included the laity, in the form of Ascribed Members. The composite parts of the new Province have a varied history in regard to this branch of the Order. Perhaps the most successful in nurturing and developing the Ascribed Membership has been New Zealand, with small but loyal groups in Christchurch and Auckland and where no full members of the Institute work – in the case of Christchurch, for about twenty five years. For reasons that are difficult to understand fully, the Ascribed have never really grown significantly in either Ireland or the United States. Recent years, however, have seen determined efforts to revitalise (in some cases, vitalise!) these important and historically under-rated members of our Congregation; much work needs to be done, but a clear direction has been established.

Sisters of Providence

Similarly the work of mission by our sister congregation, the Sisters of Providence, has not often been recognised by their male counterparts; 'our' sisters have worked in Rosminian parishes and institutions in the UK, Ireland and Tanzania, along with their own particular works (especially in education), almost from the beginning. In recent years this contribution has been more freely recognised and differences and difficulties gradually overcome. The feeling of a 'family' (for want of a better word) of Rosminian religious men and women and the ascribed has become stronger and has been accompanied by substantial efforts to share and develop the charism of Father Founder.



Mother Mary Amherst

The Future

The foundation of the Gentili Province can be seen as the inevitable consequence of declining vocations and the need to make best use of resources; a decline accompanied by disappointment and a feeling of failure, involvement in scandal and as a part of the erosion of religious values in increasingly secular societies. It could be seen as the best means of managing the gradual disappearance of the Institute from the nations of which the new Province is composed. Perhaps – perhaps – this is true. But...

We can look at the often very successful work carried out in parishes across our composite provinces; there are new and potentially exciting developments at Glencomeragh and Ratcliffe (the Rosmini Centre); we have the benefit of brethren from the new Provinces coming to share in our parishes, not only as fellow Rosminians but also with all that their cultures bring to the work of ministering to increasingly multi-ethnic communities; internationalisation of formation, whilst bringing challenges, increases the depth of our common Rosminian heritage, accompanied by a rich diversity of backgrounds; reductions in numbers brings us to an appropriate sense of humility and yet an increasing respect for the value of each individual member; there is a growing awareness of the value of our sisters and the members of the Ascribed; there has been a deepening understanding of the importance to the church's mission of our Founder, Blessed Antonio Rosmini and to his spiritual insights; our situation has revealed the virtue of adapting to apostolic needs and requirements and utilising the capabilities of our members – and the great number of skilled laity with whom we work - more effectively; the further education of our members post ordination has become far more common and moved away from concentrating on Rosmini specialists; the legacy to our schools is being developed through the International Forum of Rosminian Schools. The list is far from complete but should help to illustrate that there is much that our men can be doing and which needs to be done, even though the mechanics of government and the way ahead is not as clear as we, mere mortals, might wish. After all, Rosmini was adamant about the power of Providence; so, whilst this is hardly a call to sit back and wait, it is an encouragement for the new Province to do as best it can in the light of the Holy Spirit – and what more could be asked of it?

