

Sowing Earthy Seeds of Evangelisation

I recently attended a Mass at Ratcliffe College in Leicestershire marking the re-organisation of a small but historically important religious congregation: the Institute of Charity (or Rosminians).

The English Province, dedicated to St Thomas of Canterbury, was closing after 175 years and the Rosminians of the English-speaking world were to unite to form a new 'Gentili Province'.

This new province is named after Fr Luigi Gentili, one of the most colourful figures of 19th century English Catholicism, referred to by one biographer as the "Sower of the Second Spring".

Yet Gentili has been overshadowed by those who went to reap the harvest that he helped to sow.

Born in Rome in 1801 and trained as a lawyer, Luigi Gentili's first contact with the English was through teaching Italian to visitors and conducting them around the Forum, the catacombs and the other tourist sites in and around the Eternal City.

He also cultivated friendships at the highest levels of Roman society, being granted the Order of the Golden Spur by Duke Sforza Cesarini, and being bought a vineyard on Monte Mario so that he could boast of having an 'estate', which he hoped to turn into an English-style experimental farm.

Gentili was something of a gallant who had on one occasion declined the invitation to take part in a duel, and he fell passionately in love with the English-born Anna de Mendoza y Rios, then staying in Rome.

One of her guardians was Bishop Peter Baines, the strongwilled Vicar Apostolic of the Western District, who; was then recuperating in Rome and who made sure the young Italian's advances did not proceed very far. Gentili's romantic disappointment matured into a spiritual conversion; he left High Society behind him and met Blessed Antonio Rosmini Serbati, the Tyrolese Count who had become a priest and prolific philosopher.

With the encouragement of St Maddalena di Canossa, Rosmini founded the Institute of Charity in 1828 at the mountain-top sanctuary of Domodossola.

The purpose of the Institute was perfect charity, fulfilled in an almost limitless number of ways, dictated by the local needs of the Church.

Impressed by Rosmini and his vision, Gentili joined the Institute the year after its foundation and was ordained in 1830.

Disappointed in his love for an English lady, Gentili felt inspired to devote his life to preaching the Faith in England and becoming a second St Augustine of Canterbury.

With this in mind, he undertook studies at the Irish College in Rome and was thus able to improve his English.

Soon afterwards, Bishop Baines requested that the Italian teach at Prior Park, near Bath, which was being established as a college and seminary for the west of England, and perhaps ultimately as a Catholic university.

Gentili and his two companions eventually set out for England in May 1835. They not only received the blessings of Rosmini's friend and admirer, Pope Gregory XVI, but also an impromptu visit from the pontiff onboard ship, for the papal court happened to be passing through the port of Civita Vecchia as they were setting sail.

Arriving at Prior Park, Gentili started work as professor of philosophy, but his principal importance

was in introducing the practices of continental Catholicism to the Western District.

Thanks to Gentili, the boys were soon vested in cassock and surplice, then unheard of in England; the ceremonial and chanting were firmly modelled on the Roman usage; and during Passiontide 1836 he preached one of the first public retreats after the Jesuit manner in the country.

Gentili and Baines were both fiery characters and it is perhaps little surprise that their relationship began to disintegrate.

The Fathers of Charity eventually left Prior Park and began work in the Midlands, with the support of the forward-thinking bishop, Thomas Walsh.

They opened a house at Loughborough (1841) and taught at Old Oscott (now Maryvale). Gentili was then sent as chaplain to a zealous convert, Ambrose Phillipps de Lisle, at Grace Dieu, which acted as a centre of Catholicism in the locality.

Gentili's missionary efforts in the Leicestershire countryside were greatly helped by his compassion for the local population, who often lived in dire poverty and felt alienated from the 'respectable' Church of England - indeed, unlike the vicar, Gentili made a point of not charging for baptisms. His technique of evangelisation was based on house visiting and talking to people in the roads and lanes.

As his disciple, William Lockhart, later wrote: "From Grace Dieu as a centre, Fr Gentili, with the zeal of a St Francis de Sales, in all weathers, on foot from the moment he had finished Mass till a very late hour at night, penetrated into all the villages for many miles round, and made acquaintance with the people."

From 1845 he travelled around the British Isles giving missions, especially in the growing urban centres, and such was his knowledge of the country that he was asked to write reports for Rome (amounting to some 60,000 words) in preparation for the restoration of the Hierarchy in 1850. Indeed, these reports give a vivid picture of English Catholicism in the 1840s.

The final act of Gentili's life occurred in Ireland, where he mounted a series of successful missions.

The queues for confession were so great that the priests sometimes had to go without sleep. Worn out by his labours, Gentili caught typhus and died in Dublin on September 29 1848.

He was buried at Omeath and is still regarded by many as a saint, a true "Sower of the Second Spring".

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