8TH AUGUST DOMINIC – 1170-1221

BACKGROUND

St Dominic and St Francis are venerated as the founders of the two principal orders of friars almost simultaneously in the early C13. Everyone knows about St Francis, and the immense foundation at Assisi built in his name, although perhaps against his wishes, proclaims that ‘This was a very great saint.’

Visit San Petronio, the most prestigious church in Bologna, on the other hand, and you’ll find the tomb of St Dominic half-way along the south wall; beautifully worked, but somehow not particularly striking, and perhaps even something of an anti-climax.

Dominic has a serious public relations deficit thanks largely to the myth that he founded the inquisition, whereas it wasn’t until ten years after his death that the Pope set it up in Italy, and later in France. There is a painting of Dominic supervising public burning of a heretic, which has nothing to do with reality. Additionally, it was soon realised that a pun on ‘Dominicans’ almost translated the Latin ‘Domini canes = Dogs of God. ‘

Both Dominic and Francis responded to God’s calling in their own fashion; Francis confirms the stereotype that the Italians are a nation of actors of whom only the least talented end up on the stage. Dominic, by contrast, besides being intelligent, visionary and ascetic, had his feet firmly planted on the ground and this additional ability to deal with reality and respond to God’s calling in any given situation comprises a formidable spiritual ‘skill set.’

Just a moment’s reflection on the Dominican tradition, however, should put it fairly and squarely on the intellectual and spiritual map: Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart, and more recently Matthew Fox, are stars of the order: St Catherine of Siena was a 3rd-order Dominican, though her seniors didn’t always know what to do with her! It was the Dominican Order that introduced the rosary as an aid to prayer: Bartolome de las Casas and Gustavo Gutierrez [he of Liberation theology] arose from the Dominican Justice tradition: Fra Angelico the painter was the prior of San Marco in Florence.

[Also at San Marco lived the charismatic Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola, who, it turned out, had imbibed this order’s preaching spirit rather too well for his own good. His rants not only hoodwinked the good citizens of Florence into heaping their treasures onto the regular ‘bonfires of the vanities,’ but his castigations of ecclesiastical and political corruption, even permeated the leathern hide of the infamous Borgia Pope Alexander VI. Savonarola’s ’Taliban’ regime in Florence was bound to end once the Florentines came to their senses, and Alexander was happy to authorise his arrest, though Savonarola rang the bell intending to summon help from his supporters, nobody came, except to witness his public hanging in 1491, after which his body was burned, and the Medici returned to power.]

There is more than enough literature about Meister Eckhart, but in 2018 Penguin brought out a study by Joel F Harrington called ‘Dangerous Mystic:’ which, whilst giving a useful resume of Eckhart’s life and achievements, affords a step-by-step account of the Dominican training and way of life 50 years or so after the order’s foundation. … … …

LIFE AND ACHIEVEMENTS

DOMINIC de GUZMAN was probably born around 1170 in the small Castilian village of Caleruega, where his father was the ‘squire.’ His mother, who was beatified, had a vision whilst carrying her son, of a black and white dog with a fiery torch in his mouth; something that has become one of Dominic’s attributes. The legend was meant to show that he would set the world alight.

Round about the age of 7 Dominic was entrusted to an uncle who was an arch-priest, for basic education; and at 14 he was sent to the University of Palencia to study the liberal arts and theology: he distinguished himself there not only academically, but in charity: during a famine in the town he sold everything, including his precious manuscripts, to help the starving poor, telling his fellow students ‘How can I read from dead skins when there are living skins dying of starvation?’

Having come to the notice of Bishop Diego de Acevedo of Osma, Dominic joined the community of Augustinian canons at the Cathedral, becoming Pryor before the age of 33, when, in 1203, he was chosen to accompany Diego on a diplomatic mission to Denmark. On their way they encountered three senior Cistercian monks who had been deputed by Pope Innocent III to supress the Albigensian heresy and its adherents, who were spreading rapidly.

In addition to the flurry of monastic reforming orders of the 11th and 12th centuries there arose a lay response of various sects whose aims were to return to the spiritual way of life they imagined to be that of Jesus and his apostles: There were many such, and this explains why Francis ran into opposition in his early days. It’s the old established principle of extreme groups splintering into fragments, of which the Albigensian sect [based around the city of Albi in southern France] was only one of many. A group of well mounted and richly clad prelates with their attendant servants were unlikely to find sympathetic converts among such people, and on their dispirited way back to Rome it took Dominic and his bishop to act as image consultants advising them to dismiss their retinue, give their clothes to the poor and travel on foot!

Diego had to return to his diocese, but he left Dominic to organise the small band of preachers whom the young man had attracted around him into a cadre, but without very much success, except that he managed to set up a convent for the few women whom they had been able to re-convert. When one of the original papal emissaries was assassinated, however, Pope Innocent lost patience and called for an armed crusade to supress the Albigensian sect by force and appointed as leader the father of Simon de Montfort [also named Simon,] who was a friend of Dominic, who often worked from de Montfort’s castles. Dominic and his band were entirely against this move which totally compromised their mission.

Bishop Diego had intended to return to Dominic’s aid, but in 1207 he died, while the Cistercians withdrew, leaving the small band high and dry. The military campaign went on until 1255, decades after Dominic’s death, but in the meantime, he had managed to gather a few more followers, and two more bishops, notably Fulk of Toulouse, who assigned the fledgeling order a house for the converted women, and a church to use as HQ.

Having failed in his original mission, Dominic had, nonetheless, taken courage, and come to understand that there was a crying need for a group such as his, to preach and teach in the diocese, but when Fulk accompanied Dominic to Rome to seek papal licence, Pope Innocent shocked both men by suggesting they should carry their work throughout the whole of Christendom, rather than confining it to the diocese.

With these various new sects arising – not all of them heretics – at the 4th Lateran Council of 1215 the bishops, seriously concerned about losing their power and influence, passed a resolution strictly prohibiting the foundation of any new orders whatsoever: Francis only just made it and you may recall that he had to hang around the Papal court for some time before Pope Innocent would see him.

A renowned preacher, and probably the most powerful pope since Gregory the Great, Innocent was open to church reform, and, unable to license any new orders, he simply instructed Dominic to choose an existing one to adapt suitably, and he would licence it straight away.

 For ten years Dominic had lived contentedly as an Augustinian canon at Osma, so he persuaded his followers that this was a flexible and democratic rule. The original Augustinian community had been a group of the saint’s friends living informally in his home. There was a rule of prayer, but the order was not enclosed, and, while a version of the monastic hours was kept, contemplation, study and preaching replaced the manual labour normal in a Benedictine house. The principal adaptations subsisted in that the Dominicans took vows of poverty and chastity.

On Dominic’s return to Rome, he found Innocent had died, and his successor, Honorius III, knew nothing of his predecessor’s promise, but after several visits to Rome, Honorius licenced the order at the end of 1216, not yet known as the Dominicans – simply ‘an order of preachers, dedicated to mission and the salvation of souls.

Dominic then did something completely off the wall, which could have brought the whole project to a juddering halt: quite against the protests of his followers, he ordered them to disperse across Europe and set up satellite groups of their own; he was quite sure what he was asking them to do, despite their understandable astonishment and disbelief. In Paris nobody wanted to know, but things were far mor promising in Italy and Germany. Pope Honorius assigned the new order facilities in Rome, where they settled, until moving to Bologna, to replace Reginald, one of their star missionaries who was now free to move to Paris, where he finally made a break-through on behalf of the new order. Dominic was offered a bishopric but declined: his experience with the Cistercians had taught him his priorities as a missionary.

Dominic died aged 51 in 1221, apparently exhausted by his arduous work and his ascetic lifestyle; but by now he had set up an order of cloistered nuns; another of women who supported the preachers; a third order of lay men and women oblates; and by the end of the century Dominican Order had been established not only in Europe, but the ‘black friars’ had made it as far away as Baghdad.

The Dominican ‘nine ways of prayer’ can be found on several websites but are too long and complex to quote here.

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9TH AUGUST MARY SUMNER [1828-1921]

Mary Sumner married a young curate at age 20, nephew of Archbishop Sumner who himself became Bishop of Guilford. She was encouraged to set up THE MOTHERS’ UNION in her husband’s parish near Winchester in 1876, after the birth of her first grandchild, mindful as she was of her own difficulties around motherhood.

Nowadays perhaps we think of the Mothers’ Union as the acme of Victorian piety, but there was an aching need for support for the individual mother, even if, perhaps, it may not have been as explicit as today’s TV ads.

With TV adverts portraying a young mum being unaware that motherhood might bring on incontinence as the result of giving birth, it’s hard to believe that in 1876, the appalling Maggie Smith character in ‘Downton Abbey’ could advise her daughter, mother of an illegitimate child, that: ‘In my day women only experienced sexual feelings when ordered to do so by their mothers!’ Of course, that’s an inspired comic line, but the fact remains that the ideal of motherhood imposed by men on women, found it expedient to pass over inconvenient emotions such as post-natal depression or the occasional absence of ‘maternal’ feelings altogether, and many women seemed content to acquiesce in, and even promote such a state of affairs.

It was the Women’s Institute that regained a bit of street cred by taking Tony Blair apart some years ago, but the Mothers’ Union, whose membership is not exclusively mothers today – male single parents welcome – campaigns against domestic violence, and for employers to adapt working hours and conditions increasingly to accommodate the needs of working mums.

 ‘Sumner wanted to bring mothers of all social classes together to provide support for one another and to be trained in motherhood, which she saw as a vocation’.

In 1885 Roland Wilberforce, the first Bishop of Newcastle, was preparing to address church-going women at the Portsmouth congress. Realising that he had nothing relevant to say to them, he contacted Mary Sumner and asked her to stand in! She was nervous but found herself addressing the women passionately about the power of mothers to change the nation for the better. Some women felt encouraged to return to their parishes and set up similar meetings, and the Bishop of Winchester who presided over the congress, declared that the mothers’ Union had become a diocesan organisation.

In 1893 annual general meetings of the Union were instigated and in 1896 a General Council was set up, with Mary Sumner appointed unanimously as president a post she held until her 90’s. She lived to see the first overseas conference of the movement in 1920.

‘The growth of the movement beyond the diocese of Winchester was due to the emphasis in Victorian British society on morality, and contending with social ills, as well as the growth in Anglican mission throughout the British empire. By 1892 there were 60,000 members in 28 dioceses which grew to 169,000 by the end of the century.’

The website will continue by telling you that the vast majority of members of the Mothers’ Union now reside in former commonwealth countries, particularly India and Africa, and it’s encouraging to know that part of the modern business is micro finance, but other projects include literacy and development; Mothers’ Union is part of ‘Make Poverty History. It is also represented nowadays at the United Nations, where it speaks out on gender equality, among other issues.

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10TH AUGUST LAURENCE

ST LAURENCE was a deacon in the service of Pope Sixtus II both of whom were martyred within a day of each other in the year 258.

By the end of the 250’s governors and magistrates empire-wide were ordered to ferret out Christian bishops and elders, and this is how Sixtus and Laurence met their fate in Rome.

One of the outstanding qualities of deacons in the early church was impeccable financial probity; another was authentic love and practical care: even enemies of the church couldn’t get over the way the Christian leaders and elders took care of the sick and poor in their congregations, when ‘bread and circuses’ was the best one could hope for from the state, and philanthropy more often expressed itself through large-scale building and engineering projects than through charity.

It is very likely, then, that converts, particularly the less well-off, could easily have been tempted, in the first place, to join the church for motives primarily of security, both social and financial, so that disposing of leaders and administrators was an efficient way of breaking up the fellowship, though with limited results. As a footnote, Emperor Valerian, who had started this wave of persecutions was subsequently captured by the Persians and used for the rest of his life as King Khosrow’s mounting block: a few years later Decius was killed by the Goths, and his successor put an end to the persecutions PDQ.

Laurence, already captured and quite aware of the fate that awaited him, was on a hiding to nothing. He was known not only as a Christian but as a deacon, so that when his captor demanded that he produce all the church’s treasure in the forum by the following day, Laurence sold it all off, distributed the profits among the needy, and kept his appointment by shepherding all the poor and the walking wounded he could find, and presented them as the church’s treasure.

The old English tag that ‘I might as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb’ would have obtained if hanging had been the only means of execution around. Kathleen Jones suggests that the hoary old legend that Laurence was roasted alive on a griddle is blatantly untrue because as a Roman citizen he would have been killed with the sword, but in the first place we are not to know that Laurence was a Roman citizen, and secondly it is impossible to imagine that pulling a stroke like that on a magistrate would not have elicited a far less dignified and efficient mode of death.

Tradition has it that his executioners seemingly placed one limb at a time over the grill to make his death as lingering as possible. We shall never know whether, as tradition further reports, Laurence called out after a while: ‘I’m done on this side: you can turn me over now,’ but it would have been typical of his spirit.

St Laurence seems to come in well after the more famous achievers and heroes, but he surely must be counted one of the most attractive of all the saints with a sense of humour that Jesus himself must have smiled at.

 CLARE OF ASSISI 1193-1253

CLARE of ASSISI - Clara Offreduccio - was born around 1193 into rich feudal aristocratic stock several cuts above even Francis’ up-and-coming merchant family.

An important event in her life was the early death of her father, which eventually transformed the family – servants and all – into something like an informal community of lay women, famed locally for their works of charity. It is worth repeating that such informal associations of women coming together in community for a common purpose, or living together under one roof goes back a long way in history, at least to the Romans: Clara’s mother, the Blessed Ortolana, made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, a major achievement for anyone, let alone for a woman, but in time she, and Clara’s sister Catherine, later re-named Agnes by Francis, joined Clare’s order in time.

This background should clear away any impression we may have had that Clare somehow fell under Francis’ spell from a place of spiritual cold, as it were: to the contrary, it seems far more likely that she already had a considerable spiritual formation that her encounter with Francis and the brothers answered. Moreover, to understand this is to realise that Clare’s response to Francis was by no means a total conversion experience, but one of her own, for which the brothers were an essential part, fulfilling an equally essential practical, as spiritual role.

Assisi is so beautifully appointed, and with such holy associations that it is difficult to believe the violent class feuds that were tearing its society apart in the early c13. At the top of the hill, around San Ruffino cathedral and square, were 20 aristocratic ’palazze,’ of which the Offreduccio family was one. Further down the slope would have been the houses of the merchants, such as the Bernardone, Francis’ family, living over their shops around the Commune square.

All over western Europe merchants were getting rich on money from aristocrats, whose endless craving for luxury and status was totting up bills that could only be settled by selling of their estates, of which they were likely to own several at a time. ‘Entitlement’ is a buzz word nowadays, but feudal aristocracy lived without the least restraint, until challenged economically by the rise of the urban craft guilds, and the habit of nouveau-riche merchants who aspired to live as though they were noble themselves; a trend that was deeply resented. The only distinction the aristos could count on was ‘honour.’

There were seven knights within the Offreduccio family, brothers and uncles - whose honour depended on how effectively they could protect and manage their women which mainly came down to deploying them to advantage in the marriage market, to secure the best family alliances and more estates. That Clare and her sisters may not have been susceptible to romance should not surprise us.

Real life in mediaeval times had nothing whatever to do with chivalry, which is, in any case, a literary trope, and very largely a French one at that. In places where it was impractical or impossible to enforce the law from a central authority these men were merely hoodlums with only the power of other hoodlums to restrain their lust and greed. Clare and her family were burned out of their home and had to take refuge in Perugia at the time that Francis had been imprisoned there. Is it even conceivable that some of the women may have visited him there?

Pietro Bernadone was proud to accoutre his son out as a knight, but after a skirmish with Perugia and a year as a prisoner, Francis suffered poor health and mental and emotional consequences, which his family and friends must have experienced as some kind of break-down, but which, in reality, resulted from the sense, born in on him during that year in a dungeon, of the utter futility and vanity of the path his father had been mapping out for him. Even in the supportive environment of the other Offreduccio women, some part of Clare may have viewed her future with similar bleakness.

Whether or not Francis knew in advance, on Palm Sunday of 1211 a family servant assisted Clare to seek some kind of asylum with the Friars Minor. By the time Clare reached the age of 18, Francis and his ‘brothers’ had already been licenced by Pope Innocent III to preach, and the little company had set up small houses of pious women who would offer sustenance and encouragement, seemingly with or without a formal rule, although it seems likely that some such little communities must have already existed.

At the church of Santa Maria degli Angeli After Clare had cut off her hair, Francis gave her a tonsure, which, incidentally, as a layman, he had no authority to do, but the tonsure gave her the church’s legal Protection which the family couldn’t very well challenge. As a temporary measure, he had her installed in a wealthy Benedictine monastery of San Paulo in Bastia, which had its own force licenced for its protection, not to mention powers to excommunicate anyone who molested its nuns. But there was no sense in Clare’s breaking out of her family home just to become a Benedictine, which she could have done easily enough by legitimate means, once she could convince the male relatives.

When the Offreduccio knights discovered where Clare was, they wrote, initially to the convent, but then tried to force her back to the family home: Clare then revealed her tonsure, and the men gave up and disowned her: a woman without her hair had no commodity value in the marriage market.

Francis, Bernard and Philip then had Clare installed in a small beguine-like house, San Angelo di Panzo, near San Damiano, where a few poor single women lived together as a religious community, but without a rule. It is likely that Clare may have undertaken the cleaning and internal preparations, at San Damiano, while the brothers remodelled the chapel.

16 days after Clare’s flight from the Offreduccio household, her sister Catherine joined her at San Angelo di Panzo. The following day Clare and Catherine’s uncle, together with 12 knights, descended on the small defenceless monastery, and when Catherine refused to return with them, they beat her senseless and dragged her by the hair, leaving her for dead. In time, however, Clare nursed her back to life, and Francis re-named her Agnes.

Francis installed Clare at San Damiano, created her prior, and gave her a temporary order of life, and Clare lived there with her community until her death. Her mother Ortolana joining her two daughters together with other women from Assisi and the surrounding area.

Clare desired to expand the Franciscan charism, but she had no wish, even had it been possible, to live as the brothers lived, working as day labourers when and where they could, and sleeping rough; so the question was: how to create an order that would live the Franciscan charism without simply being Franciscans, Clare wanted her own Franciscan order with her own rule of life.

Firstly, the women remained cloistered: They would live in Franciscan poverty, but not with the instability of his itinerant lifestyle: throughout her life the biggest problem Clare had was that of people, and the Pope in particular, wanting to give the order property. For perfectly understandable reasons it was generally felt that the only rule of life suitable for women religious was the Benedictine: As a Benedictine order, the women could have derived income from property that they owned in common, which would have secured their daily necessities and paid for repairs etc. Clare wasn’t having property in any shape or form because she wanted the order to live both in individual and communal poverty.

In total, the order of the ‘Poor Clares’ was offered no less than five different rules of life, but Clare wrote her own rule; the first time a woman had written a rule for women, but she had to struggle to get the pope to sign off on it, and it wasn’t until two days before her death in August 1253 that Pope Innocent IV visited Clare at San Damiano and bestowed his approval on her order.

The way it functioned was the women made things, often embroidered cloths for church use, and agents took them to market and traded them for the necessities the order needed, so that whilst they lived on the fruits of their labour, they never needed to use money.

As prior, Clare took on the most menial of the work and cared so little for her body that her health began to suffer, and she was unwell for a good deal of her life at San Damiano. The path of an itinerant preacher that Francis was able to follow was not available to Clare, so that she, in her pursuit of God, prioritised our Lord’s life of humility and service as her principal guiding light.

Clare gave spiritual direction to her sisters, and by her humility and determination to be their servant, they felt free to confide and trust in her; she was, after all, leading by example. At all events, it’s possible to discover from her letters to Princess Agnes of Prague, daughter of the Bohemian royal family, the wisdom and sensitivity of her spiritual direction. King Ottokar and his queen supported their Agnes’s wish to set up a house in the manner of San Damiano, but despite reams of correspondence with the Pope, for royalty to voluntarily go into radical poverty was unseemly; neither was she permitted to found a hospital along these lines. The two women corresponded with great affection and wisdom on Clare’s side, though the letters from Agnes are lost. Just before her death, the final letter reads as a very affecting blessing.

In her writing Clare uses a lot of striking imagery: at one point she writes of taking milk from Francis’ breast, and various equally intimate and even erotic images are used to try to express her love of God in words that ‘will never stay in place,’ as Elliot puts it.

The rule itself is partly taken from that of the Franciscans in 1223, which, of course, was radically re-modelled by BONAVENTURE half a century or so later. Much of the nitty-gritty, however, is Clare’s own, and some of it is from Pope Innocent IV, rigorously edited by Clare. Much of it has to do with discipline, as does the Benedictine, but a good deal of conscientious thought and wisdom has gone into the role of men in any spiritual role, as visitor; Cardinal Protector, the administration of the sacraments; chaplaincy, and the practical business of the heavier manual work such as digging graves for deceased sisters and repairs and upkeep of the house.

As an aristocratic woman, Clare was by no means protected from emotional abuse and control by men, particularly in her family, but also from prelates who thought they knew better than she did what was good for her and her fledgling order. The only men she would permit to enter the house were to be Franciscans of proved holiness of life, and their visits only to take place between sunrise and sunset.

The sad but altogether predictable outcome of all this was that as the years rolled by the brothers and other men pledged to support the order rather lost interest, but this can be seen in context with the increasingly serious conflicts and vicissitudes of the Franciscan order as a whole throughout the remaining decades of the thirteenth century and beyond. The order splintered in time so that there are now many and varied versions of ‘Poor Clares’ around the world, but still living and sharing her charism and heritage.

At her Canonisation, Clare was described as ‘the mirror’ of Francis, but she was a great deal more. Her writings, few as they are, reveal her as a competent spiritual director and mystic; with a mysticism decidedly different from that of Francis. Her relationship with Francis itself is important, inasmuch as she knew him for longer than most of his own followers and committed a great deal of time and energy supporting him.

One other odd fact: towards the end of her life Clare was so ill that she couldn’t be taken to Mass; when the sisters returned to her cell, she assured them that she’d actually witnessed the Mass by watching it on the wall, and, as a consequence of this anecdote Pope Paul VI made Clare the patron saint of television!

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JOHN HENRY NEWMAN [1801--90] is the colossus of 19th-century English church history.

For many of the people in the Anglican canon, however holy, it is possible because of a paucity of factual information, to write a neat pen portrait in a few paragraphs. Newman lived a long and very eventful life, and his legacy and achievements are varied, so that by far the best way of getting to know something of him is probably to read a book.

 Websites such as Wikipedia give facts; not always entirely accurately, but usually without too much ‘side and with most of the relevant art. The best Catholic websites usually require donations before you can access their material, which is sometimes heavily redacted. This could be particularly unhelpful to an Anglo-Catholic congregation, because at the end of the ‘Apologia’ Newman Absolutely obliterates that position. If you can find an edition of the ‘Apologia’ with commentary you will realise that Newman wrote it only half-way through his life, and for a very distinct purpose.

Roderick strange is a Catholic priest, but his book, ‘John Henry Newman, a map of a mind’ covers both Newman’s life and touches on his many achievements and is thoroughly fair as to his motives and occasional lapses.

Newman’s most immediate legacy to today’s church are his hymns, ‘Firmly I believe and truly’ and ‘Praise to the holiest,’ both taken from his poem ‘The Dream of Gerontius,’ the musical setting of which Elgar’s masterpiece. Another hymn, ’Lead kindly light’ derives from Newman’s poem ‘The pillar of the cloud.’ Strange suggests that Newman’s own literary masterpiece is his ‘Grammar of Assent,’ because it was the only work of his that didn’t arise from necessity.

YES, the Pope IS a Catholic! and this one, Paul VI, speaking at the beatification of the priest who received Newman into the Catholic church, took time out to describe Newman as ‘Someone who:

‘in full consciousness of his mission, “I have a work to do,” and guided solely by love of the truth and fidelity to Christ, traced an itinerary; the most toilsome, but also the greatest; the most meaningful’ the most conclusive, that human thought ever travelled during the nineteenth century, - indeed one might say – during the modern era, to arrive at the fullness of wisdom and of peace. ‘

That is the official Catholic take, of course, but it is Newman’s own theological and spiritual truth.

Briefly strange maps out three stages in Newman’s life which should be helpful for someone encountering him for the first time:

1 Until 1833, as an evangelical, in search of himself

2 Between 1833-45, in a kind of crucible, fully embracing the Anglo-Catholic position, and

3 In 1845, After becoming a Roman Catholic, the consequences of his decision were played out.

Newman passed through seemingly endless conversion experiences\’

• In 1816, at the age of 15, having been brought up as an Anglican, he was given some Calvinist books, and experienced a conversion, believing that he was ‘elected to eternal glory.’

• Having overworked at Oxford in 1820, he only scraped through with his degree, so he couldn’t take up law as he had wished. He decided to be ordained: deacon in 1824, priested the following year.

• Meanwhile, despite his poor degree he stood for election as fellow at Oriel college, and in April 1822 he was successful: not even a good classical scholar, yet in mind and powers of composition and in taste and knowledge decidedly superior to other competitors. So, Newman found himself a fellow of Oriel, and in the company of some of the most brilliant minds of his time, honing his own forensic logical gifts.

• In 1827, however, overwork brought about a break-down and the following year his much-loved sister Mary died. He had already become acquainted with Edward Pusey and John Keeble, but when one of his mentors, Edward Hawkins, was elected provost at Oriel, he had to resign his cure of St Mary the Virgin, the university church, and Newman took it on. Hawkins also relieved him of teaching responsibilities, so that when the Oxford movement got fully underway, Newman could give it all his energies.

On 14th of July 1833 JOHN KEEBLE [remember him?] preached his Assize sermon, which is normally the point at which church historians take as the foundation of the Oxford or ‘Tractarian’ movement. The fundamental issue was that parliament had reorganised the Irish church, which, while actually being quite a sensible administrative reform, smacked of state interference in spiritual affairs so it was at this point that Newman and several others started writing initially brief articles ‘summoning the church of England to an understanding of itself based on catholic principle.’ These were the ‘tracts,’ that gave the Oxford movement its other name.

Originally Newman printed these articles himself and rode around parsonages distributing them! Eventually there were 90 of them, not all his own work, but increasing fearfully in length, and even Newman suspected that people might be getting bored, but he had miscalculated: during the next three years, and quite unsurprisingly, one bishop after another to a total of 24, condemned them with ferocious exasperation. The last of the tracts, written by Newman, had equated the 39 articles of Anglican faith with those of the Council of Trent!!!

The intentions of the Oxford movement were honourable enough, wishing to remind people of the rich catholic heritage in the Anglican church. The Tractarians, Newman himself, John Keeble, Edward Pusey [coming up soon!], Charles Marriott, who edited many translations of the works of the early church fathers; Harold Froude, Robert Wilberforce and William Palmer, were concerned at the tide of liberalism [read Arnold’s ‘Dover Beach], affecting doctrine, while Evangelicalism and the ‘High and Dry’ parties were impoverishing liturgy and beauty within both church buildings and the conduct of worship within them.

Newman made an exhaustive study of doctrinal developments in the early church, and the result was that the ‘Branch theory’ fell apart. The theory was that Anglo-Catholicism was an authentic middle road, shared with Rome, between eastern Orthodoxy, on the one hand, and Protestantism on the other. Having already maintained that the 39 articles and Tridentine doctrine were co-terminus, Newman’s position, and that of many other Tractarians who converted to Rome, becomes perfectly understandable, though the fact that such a position seems to pass over obvious developments in 16th-century English church history is puzzling.

What hurt Newman chiefly was that it was the bishops, who were at the very heart of his conception of church order, who had opposed the tracts so fiercely. Meanwhile he was attempting to restrain some of the young bloods in the Oxford movement from converting to Rome, so he must have felt misunderstood and let down by those he expected most to support him.

We surely can’t discount the impact on Newman’s brilliant theology of his own experience and emotional investment; something he himself would probably have been happy to concede in debates other than those in which he had personal interest. He always maintained that a purely intellectual conversion is of little or no value unless it moves the convert to action, and the reality seems to be that by 1845 Newman had sustained so many and varied blows from quarters that he had taken to be his allies that he had nowhere else to go but to Rome.

He writes:

‘I saw, indeed clearly, that my place in the movement was lost; public confidence was at an end; my occupation was gone: it was simply an impossibility that I could say anything henceforth to good effect when I had been posted up by the marshal on the buttery hatch in every college of my university after the manner of discommoned pastry cooks, when in every part of my country and in every class of society through every organ and opportunity of opinion – in newspapers; in periodicals; at meetings; in pulpits; at dinner tables; in coffee rooms; in railway carriages, I was denounced as a traitor … ‘

Once his conversion got out, Newman might have expected some flak from his erstwhile friends and allies, if that’s what they were, but for the next quarter century any hopes of a peaceful resolution of his quest for God were dashed by a series of mishaps that engendered suspicion from all sides of the Roman Catholic establishment. He lost a libel action against a former Dominican who had taken it upon himself to rubbish the Anglo-Catholic position on behalf of the Evangelical alliance: he was happy to take over the editorship of a leading Catholic magazine only to be forced to resign after he had hardly started: his insistence that the laity might have something to say concerning Catholic dogma got him into trouble in Rome; a situation that was made worse because Nicholas wiseman didn’t forward questions to Newman that he was expected to answer, so his apparent silence placed him under a cloud.

As if all this weren’t enough, Newman was invited to set up a university in Dublin, resulting in serious misunderstandings with Dublin’s Archbishop, who just wanted a Catholic college, instead of something more akin to Oxford, that Newman had in mind. He was invited to co-edit a new translation of the bible, but the whole project disintegrated before it could get going.

Perhaps the greatest trial for Newman was his desire to set up an oratory [remember St Phillip Neri?] in Oxford, having founded one in Birmingham and in London. Catholic families regarded Oxford as bitterly anti-Catholic and didn’t want to send their sons there, whilst there were constant struggles for precedence between the London and Birmingham foundations.

Eventually misunderstandings in Rome were cleared up, and in 1879 a new pope sought to create him cardinal. Even now Newman realised that a cardinal would normally be expected to reside in Rome, and at age 78 he wouldn’t leave his home in Birmingham, but, once more, it was [Cardinal] Manning who had slipped up, and as soon as he realised his mistake, Newman received his cardinal’s hat and in his own words, ‘the cloud was lifted from me.’

Newman is not everybody’s spiritual or theological role-model, and yet he was celebrated as a brilliant preacher, particularly once he took over at St Mary the virgin. He was also known all his life for his pastoral heart and skills. His many controversies seem to have been conducted with courtesy even if his arguments were frequently forensic and brutal. His writings, both poetry and prose, survive and can still stimulate discussion, debate and reflection. He had a gift of friendship, for all that his journey necessarily led to some alienations: when his apologia came out, he was able to acknowledge his debts of influence and affection to some of these, which resulted in many old breaches being mended with great affection on all sides.

Once again, though, what is evident in his life is brokenness; a break-down in 1827; the loss of his beloved sister a year later, and the series of horrendous disappointments and misunderstandings that dogged his first quarter century as a Roman Catholic, and which kept him humble and close to God: mercifully he lived long enough to be able to spend the last eleven years of his life in the fame and regard he had worked so hard and unselfishly to deserve. … …

One of the totally unlooked-for results of bishops refusing to give livings to clergy sympathetic to the Oxford movement was that many of them took work in the slums, which, in time, led to the beginnings of ‘social Christianity’ with the Social Christian Union, of which some bishops were proud to become members.

Looking back over the previous two centuries of church history in England, Newman may have concluded that churchmen with a Catholic leaning had more often than not been both socially and politically conservative, supporting the more dysfunctional monarchs such as Charles I and James II, whereas it was the Evangelicals who seemed to be on the side of the angels, campaigning to abolish slavery, and to improve conditions among the poor whenever and wherever they could.

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13TH AUGUST JEREMY TAYLOR 1613-67

 JEREMY TAYLOR was perhaps the most significant and greatest of the Caroline divines; distinguished royalist clergy whose careers were influenced to one degree or another by King Charles I’s Archbishop William Laud, who sought to impose the king’s version of high churchmanship on the country at large. Shortly before the beginning of the civil war Charles was compelled by parliament to release his archbishop to trial and subsequent beheading. Though a royalist to his fingertips, Taylor had not been entirely happy with aspects of Laud’s position or his methods.

Some weeks ago, we looked at Richard Baxter, who distinguished himself on the puritan side, bringing people in his own conscientious way to a holy life, and gaining respect by his hands-on ministry and generosity of spirit. Taylor operated differently; expressed his pastoral gifts differently, and was illuminated along a different spiritual path, but both men worked hard and sacrificially to bring ordinary people to God and his Kingdom.

Learned as the Caroline divines were, most worked outside their universities, and it is perhaps for this reason that they seem more accessible than those in previous centuries many of whom were writing for the guidance of those in religious orders.

Taylor exhibits a humanity and a deep understanding of the complacency and parsimony into which Anglican piety can descend when we merely ‘work to rule.’ At the same time his spirituality is integrated, complete and in no way diminished by its insistence on a lack of outward show. He believed that the Book of Common Prayer contained ‘everything necessary for salvation.’

In the age of Donne, Herbert and Milton, - a truly golden age of literature, historians and writers on the spiritual life seem to agree that Taylor’s prose, in its clarity etc is unequalled then or now.

Jeremy Taylor had a difficult life. Educated at Cambridge, in 1636 he became a fellow of All Souls Oxford; In 1638 Rector at Uppingham and married the following year; but in 1642 he was ejected from his living by parliament because of his royalist sympathies.

During the civil war he was attached to the royal household as chaplain, but in 1645 he was captured by the parliamentary troops and imprisoned for a while.

On his release he went to live with Lord Carberry’s household at Golden Grove, in Carmarthenshire, for nearly ten years, and it was here that he wrote the two books for which he is justly celebrated; ‘The Rule and Exercise of Holy Living’ [1650] and ‘The Rule and Exercise of Holy dying [1651.] both designed ‘To sustain afflicted members of the church of England’ after the execution of Laud and Charles I.

In 1658 he was given a lectureship at Lisburn, and two years later became bishop of Downe and Connor, to which the cee of Dromore WAS subsequently added. He combined his episcopal duties with the vice-chancellorship of Dublin university. Neither task was easy: in his diocese many clergy were Presbyterians and ignored him whilst others were Catholic and quite opposed to him as Protestant. Atwell adds that he treated both sides harshly. He is buried in the cathedral at Dromore, which he was, himself responsible for building.

He writes:

‘If god is glorified in the sun and moon, in the rare fabric of the honeycombs, in the discipline of bees, in the economy of pismires [ants!] in the little houses of birds, in the curiosity of an eye, God, being pleased to delight in those little images and reflexes of himself, from those pretty mirrors, which like a crevice in the wall, through a narrow perspective, transmit the species of a vast excellency; much rather shall God be pleased to behold himself in the glasses of our obedience, in the emissions of our will and understanding; these being rational and apt instruments to express him, far better than the natural, as being nearer communications of himself .’

[Creation is only a starting place for the spiritual life.]

Gordon Mursell, author of ‘a two-volume survey of English spirituality, remarks that: ‘For Taylor reason and revelation balance and fulfil one another: ‘God’s spirit does not destroy reason but heighten it.’

‘Want of learning and disability to consider great secrets of theology does not at all retard our progress to spiritual perfection; love to Jesus may be better promoted by the plainer understandings of honest and unlettered people, than by the finer and more exalted speculations of great clerks, that have less devotion.’… ‘God requires of us to serve him with an integral, entire, or a whole worship and religion.’

He continues;

‘Reproving a sinner pompously or giving to the poor while not forgiving our enemies; or praying all day and behaving intemperately at night. Faith and charity are mutually inseparable … Those who never seek to bring about in action what they asked for in prayer are “deceitful workers”’

Mursell goes on: ‘Religion, in short, has to become the mainspring of the business of our lives, and Taylor’s entire work was consecrated to helping people make it so.’

‘The act of believing propositions is not for itself, but in order to certain ends; as sermons are to good life and obedience. …

‘’Justification and sanctification are continued acts; they are like the issues of a fountain into its receptacles; God is always giving, and we are always receiving.’

Of sin Taylor writes:

‘It is so little we spend in religion and so very much upon ourselves, so little to the poor and so without measure to make ourselves sick, that we seem to be in love with our own mischief, and so passionate for necessity and want, that we strive all the ways we can to make ourselves need more than nature intended.’

Mursell writes;

‘The luminous and ordered vision of life, the clear-headed emphasis on human free will, the refusal to separate theology from ethics, and the unadorned beauty of the prose, are all characteristic of Taylor and they underpin his understanding of the spiritual life.’

Of creation Taylor writes;

‘God is in every creature; be cruel towards none, neither abuse any by intemperance. Remember that the creatures and every member of the own body is one of the lesser cabinets and receptacles of God. they were such which God hath blessed with his presence, hallowed by his touch, and separated from unholy use by making them to belong to his dwelling.’

Of prayer, he writes:

‘our prayers must be fervent, intense, earnest, and importunate, and prayer without a deep inner affection is worthless … If you can once obtain to delight in prayer, and to long for the day of a communion, and to be pleased with holy meditation, and to desire God’s grace with great passion, and an appetite keen as a wolf on the void plain of the north; if you can delight in god’s love, and consider concerning his providence, and busy yourself in the pursuit of the affairs of his kingdom, then you have the grace of devotion and your evil nature shall be cured.’

He goes on to talk about the hard work of prayer; and not to expect to be overflowing with joy and cheerfulness at it every day, but, very much like Thomas Merton, Taylor suggests that our prayers will be heard according to the sincerity with which we make them.

‘Intercession for others requires ‘A great stock of personal piety… He that prays to recover a family from an hereditary curse, or to reverse sentence of God to cancel a decree of heaven gone out against his friend; he that will heal the sick with his prayer, or with his devotion prevail against an army, must not expect such great effects upon a morning or evening collect.’ [Wonderful!]

If a man goes to his prayers as children go to school, he acts a part which he cannot long personate, but will find so many excuses and silly devices to omit his duty; such tricks to turn from that which will make him happy: he will so watch the eyes of men and be so sure to do nothing in private; he will so often distinguish and mince the duty to minutes and little particles,, he will so tie himself to the letter of the law, and be so careless of the intention and spiritual design, he will be punctual in the ceremony and trilling in the secret, and he will be so well pleased when he is hindered by accident not of his own procuring, and will have so many devices to defeat his duty, and to cozen himself, that he will certainly manifest, that he is afraid of religion, and secretly hates it; he counts it a burden and an objection, and the man is sure to leave it when his circumstances are so fitted. If we delight in it, we enter into a portion of the reward as soon as we begin the work … but this delight is not to be understood as if it were always required that we should feel an actual cheerfulness and sensible joy … ‘How well he understands!

Mursell concludes:

‘No one in the life of the church of England commands greater eloquence and sensitive, pastoral scholarship: in so doing, he did more than offer a rich and sustaining spirituality for his own day; he also laid enduring foundations for the modern age. Taylor’s work is the quintessence of Anglican piety, and every word of his oeuvre was chargeable with his passionate longing to renew the church he loved.’’

Jeremy Taylor was, perhaps, the most outstanding in that he wrote some of the most influential devotional works to emanate from the church of England in that, or any other age. He exhibited a greater beauty of style than any other of his contemporaries, and he displayed an unrivalled loyalty to the national church. In his masterpieces, ‘Holy Living’ and ‘Holy dying’ we see clearly his erudition, as he quarries from obscure and exotic as well as traditional mines. His distinction as a casuist, his gift as a preacher, his magnificence of style, and his subtle combination of sympathy and imagination with practicality, were all directed by a pastoral heart. In his expression of tender devotion, he avoided ecstasy and posturing. He also exhibits that sobriety and moderation which the Caroline divines thought should mark a Christian life. He recaptures the spirit of mediaeval devotion, and ‘like the metaphysical poets and other Caroline divines he ‘sees through a transparent world to its creator.’

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14TH AUGUST OCTAVIA HILL 1839-1912

OCTAVIA HILL was an English social reformer whose main concern was the welfare of the inhabitants of cities, particularly London.

She was born into a well-off family; the 8th daughter of a corn merchant, who, however, went bankrupt in 1840 and suffered a breakdown. His second wife, Caroline [nee Southward-Smith] was the daughter of a doctor who occupied himself with matters of public hygiene. Southward-Smith supported the family financially as well as taking on part of the role of father. Caroline, Octavia’s stepmother, educated her at home there was no formal schooling.

A co-operative guild providing employment for distressed gentlewomen. Took her on as a glass painter at age 13: At age 14 she commenced work making toys for poor school children and was soon left in charge of the room and became aware of the dreadful conditions the children under her care were suffering.

 At this time, also, she was serving as secretary to the women’s classes at the working men’s college in Bloomsbury, and, by working in her spare time as a copyist for John Ruskin, made his acquaintance and gained his confidence.

She became a moving force behind the development of social housing, and this early friendship with John Ruskin enabled her to put her theories into practice when, on inheriting some money, he was able to purchase three cottages with six rooms in each, which they let out to poor people, but administered them with prudence which made possible a return of 5% per annum, as she had promised Ruskin.

She made it a key part of her system that she got to know her tenants personally, and with the weekly rent collection she or her assistants would inspect each dwelling and take care of anything that needed seeing to. She maintained that she needed to get to know the residents personally so that the visits became an early version of social work. Initially she felt that volunteers could undertake this work more successfully than professionals, but by the end of her life they were paid, and through her influence, there is now an association for housing managers.

Octavia was keen that each tenant should be enabled to help themselves, and she was very opposed to simply handing out charity. And became associated with the Charity Organisation Society, which was described as ‘a contentious body which deplored dependency fostered by kindly but unrigorous philanthropy: Support to the poor had to be carefully targeted and efficiently supervised. Later in life Octavia began to think that the C O S line was rather harsh.

In consequence of her prudent management, however, she was able to attract new backers, and by 1874 she had 15 housing schemes with around three thousand tenants.

Octavia was opposed to government intervention in housing, aware that indiscriminate demolitions and poorly planned re-housing schemes had the effect of breaking up communities; a truly prophetic insight from somebody who viewed tenants as more than mere ‘occupiers.’

In time her influence grew and in 1884 the Church Commissioners were so impressed with her ideas that they made over management of their own scandalously run-down and disreputable properties in south London which Octavia turned round and administered profitably.

She was an Anglican, and at a meeting of the Church Commissioners in 1875 Fredrick Temple, bishop of London heard her speak for half an hour, commenting afterwards that he’d never had such a beating in his life before! An American admirer described her as ruling her project with a rod of iron wreathed with roses. She was clearly a tough cookie, whom the London County council’s housing committee preferred to do without as a member.

At the weekly rent collections there were inspections of the premises and Octavia insisted that she needed to get to know the tenants personally. This policy was, no doubt, administered and understood not only as a landlord taking care of maintenance issues, but additionally showing concern for the welfare of the tenant. If that had been as far as Octavia took it, all well and good; but, for example, she once gave notice to a man merely because he wouldn’t send his daughter to school, as if that was likely to improve her educational prospects!

There is a line to be drawn here which may vary within its parameters according to the needs of vulnerable tenants who may require on-going practical assistance to live lives of personal autonomy and dignity. No doubt Octavia viewed her poor tenants as vulnerable, but the line between offering care and usurping a tenants’ responsibility for their moral choices, as long as these do not impact on other tenants, is a step too far.

It is difficult not to fear that the best chances to create equal opportunities in housing has long passed us by: Parker-Morris standards of housing builds have gone to the four winds, and a younger generation is being effectively priced out of either ownership or secure tenancy by greedy landlords, developers and even local authorities. For all the faults of paternalism and sanctimony that emanate from charitable housing trusts, there are, no doubt, cohorts of homeless and inadequately housed people who would gladly tolerate unwanted interference from busy-body housing managers – charitable or other – simply to enjoy their God-given right to a decent home, and this is what Octavia Hill was about.

In 1859 Octavia created the Southwark detachment of the Army Cadet Force, the first independent one of its kind, which went down so well that she had to limit membership to 160, because participation was more like the real thing than other youth organisations around at the time.

Octavia’s other principal interest was the provision of open spaces so that the public – especially poorer people, could find rest and recreation. She fought several plans to build over parks, including Hampstead heath and parliament hill, and you may recall that her friend and protegee Henrietta Barnet set up Hampstead Garden Suburb.

As an extension of this interest in the preservation of open spaces, Octavia was one of the three founding members of the National Trust. In 1905 she served on the royal commission on the poor laws; and by this time Octavia’s reputation was such that other projects both in England and abroad were set up and run along her lines. It can be fairly said that her insistence on home visits and getting acquainted with tenants personally was one element that brought about modern social work.

Octavia may have been a tough cookie; short and round with a very deep voice, but an enormous force for good whose best principles could and should inspire planners and managers of housing and social services today and in the future.