

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE ORATORIES TO THE LITURGICAL LIFE OF ENGLAND

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Introduction:

We have just witnessed the grandeur of a Pontifical High Mass in the beautiful setting of the Church of the Birmingham Oratory. Shortly we will solemnly sing the Office of Vespers, and receive the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. For many of us present here today, such liturgical splendours are, sadly, a comparatively rare event. Yet, on the whole, I do not think that we would say that they are strange to us. Moreover, I think we would agree that, however infrequently we experience it in practice, the solemn Latin Liturgy of the Roman Rite is, in the purest sense of the word, “normative”. It sets a standard by which all practical celebrations of the Liturgy should be informed or judged. However much that may be more honoured in the breach than in the observance, we still maintain that what we are taking part in today is fundamentally the Roman Rite in its current form. In order to appreciate the significance of this, and to introduce to you the theme of this address, let me recall to you the historical context in which the English Oratories were founded by the Venerable John Henry, Cardinal Newman just over 150 years ago in 1848.

Background to the English Oratories:

19th Century English Catholicism: its liturgical character

At that time, English Catholicism was undergoing great changes. Only twenty years earlier, nearly three centuries of direct persecution of Catholics had finally come to an end with the Act of Emancipation in 1829. During those centuries the adherents of the Catholic religion had been subjected to grave social and economic disadvantages. They had nonetheless sometimes remained surprisingly strong, particularly in those areas where wealthy landowners had remained steadfast in their Catholic Faith, and had given employment and protection to poorer Catholics. With the advent of the Industrial Revolution in the middle of the 18th Century, a new industrial class sprang up, often close to rural Catholic strongholds. Thus, many of the new industrial towns had fairly large Catholic populations which grew steadily throughout the 18th and 19th Centuries, both by reason of the natural growth of the native English Catholic body, and also through immigration, chiefly from Ireland.

What kind of liturgy was being celebrated in England in the early and mid-nineteenth century? In general, one can say that for most Catholics, of diverse backgrounds and origins, the hardships of celebrating Mass and the Sacraments under the penal Laws discouraged the elaborate celebration of the Liturgy. Of course, there were notable exceptions. We know that some of the old Catholic families celebrated the Mass with quite elaborate ceremonial.¹ Nor should we overlook the important London Chapels of the Embassies of the Catholic powers, as was explained by Philip Olleson in his address to the AGM of this Association in 1996. Interestingly, these chapels provided a rare opportunity for English Catholic musicians to practise both their religion and their art, and a safe refuge for English Catholics in the Capital to practise the faith with some freedom and style. However, it must not be forgotten that the Embassy Chapels remain an exotic curiosity when seen against the very plain backdrop of English Catholicism in those days.

¹ E.g. see. Dr. M. Rowlands “Education and Piety in Staffordshire in the 18th Century” quoted by J.D.Crichton in “Worship in a hidden Church”, Columba Press, Dublin 1988 p.115

What had begun as a necessity became a virtue. For instance, to take a local example, a Catholic School was established by Bishop Challoner at Sedgley Park, near Wolverhampton, in 1761. This was an area in which the Faith had remained strong throughout the penal times, and typifies the transition of English Catholicism from the domination of the country gentry to the large urban congregations of the nineteenth century. The school was large, with a roll of over 200 boys by 1800, serving the needs of the increasingly prosperous Catholic middle classes in the towns. A new chapel was built for the school in 1800, which remained largely unchanged in appearance for over sixty years. It made no pretence to architectural merit, though it had three windows described as ‘almost Gothic’, which were thought daring at a time when it was typically considered rash to make Catholic chapels in any way conspicuous from without.² However, it should be added that the school was set in a large park, so it was hardly likely to attract the attention of hostile passers-by.³ The altar had an antependium of painted and gilt leather, which was certainly still there in 1856, and probably until the school transferred to Cotton, North Staffordshire, a few years later. This type of antependium was to be found in many Catholic chapels at the time. Over the altar hung a painting of the Last Supper. The tabernacle was carved and gilded, and surmounted by an ebony crucifix with ivory figure. Three plated candlesticks, shaped like Corinthian columns, stood on either side. On each side of the sanctuary stood a credence table with fluted white muslin cloths. There were no statues or ‘objects of devotion’.

So much for the setting, but what was the liturgy like that took place here? It is unlikely that there was any ceremonial when the chapel was opened in 1801. At the time, and for some years afterwards, there was no singing. Interestingly enough, we are told that one of the lay masters began to train a choir in singing Gregorian Chant in about 1808, but for some reason it never performed in the chapel.⁴ The character of the services seems to have been similarly plain: the vestments were neat, the only trimming being silk lace. The boys wore their ordinary clothes, with neither cassock nor surplice.

On Sundays and Holy Days the principal Mass was preceded by recited vernacular prayers.⁵ Then the epistle and gospel of the day were read in English, and a sermon preached. After the Mass, which was ‘Low’ in every respect, there were more vernacular prayers. In the afternoon Vespers were said, not sung, with the boys reciting the alternate verses of the psalms and responses. Benediction was given very rarely and then without cope or humeral veil. The *O Salutaris* and *Tantum Ergo* were, of course, recited, as were vernacular hymns from Challoner’s much loved and constantly revised collection ‘the Garden of the Soul’. You will be relieved to learn that in the midst of such spartan austerity there was one concession to ceremonial: a server who wielded a thurible, brought specially from the kitchen by the sacristan, and handed, rather unceremoniously, over the altar rail.

Two miles away in the centre of Wolverhampton stands the Church of St. Peter and Paul, where Bishop Milner lived as Vicar Apostolic from 1803 until his death in 1826. This is the oldest surviving Catholic Church in the Midlands, dating from 1726, and so even in Milner’s day this church maintained long-established liturgical practices. Although discreetly situated at the back of a still impressive Queen Anne town house, it was hardly secret since it was frequented by an ever-increasing Catholic population. Milner had been one of the first churchmen to attempt a revival of Gothic art and architecture in his chapel at Winchester before becoming a bishop. He understood both the contemporary continental character of Catholicism, and the significance of pre-reformation art. He was most certainly not a ‘ghetto’

² See the description of the chapel in ‘A History of Sedgley Park and Cotton’ by F. Roberts and N. Henshaw, 1985, pp.40-41.

³ As noted by J.D.Crichton, op. Cit. p.118

⁴ Roberts and Henshaw, op. Cit. p.41

⁵ J.D.Crichton, op. Cit. V. ch 5 passim for the vernacular prayers frequently in use at this time.

Catholic, if by that term we mean someone whose world was exclusively contained within the narrow confines of his immediate religious community. He was the first Vicar Apostolic outside London to move away from the orbit of the landed gentry into one of the populous centres of urban Catholicism. It would perhaps be going too far to say that he aimed to manifest a 'high profile', but he did encourage singing and was himself tolerably good at it.⁶ But even into this century, despite his efforts, the style of worship at this ancient recusant chapel remained much the same as that at Sedgley Park. Given the large numbers of people that they served, both Sedgley Park School and St. Peter and Paul's Church, Wolverhampton, would seem to be typical of the kind of liturgy with which the majority of Catholics in England would have been familiar in the early nineteenth century. One feels that any major change of character in the style of English liturgy would have to come from other sources.

This, then, was the kind of Catholic milieu into which Newman introduced the Oratory in 1848. The ordinary Catholic Episcopate in England had not yet been restored. Only after two more years had elapsed did the Authorities in Rome and England feel confident enough to restore the hierarchy, in 1850. Neither should it be forgotten that this Restoration provoked a furious outbreak of anti-Catholic prejudice, never far below the surface of English society. Fear of provoking this kind of backlash had strengthened the tradition of secrecy and discretion among Catholics, so that even after the Penal Laws had been relaxed somewhat, Catholics in England continued to perform their religious duties undemonstratively and in relative haste. In fact, old habits die hard, especially where religion is concerned, and it remains generally true to this day that liturgical singing and ceremonies are unpopular with the majority of Catholics in England.

Revival of interest in Catholicism

However, in addition to the gradual, indeed spectacular, growth of the Catholic body in the industrial towns and cities, another important factor was to influence the development of English Catholicism; namely the conversion of a considerable number of well educated, sometimes wealthy and influential, Anglicans to the Catholic Faith. The revival of interest in Catholicism coincided in England with the Romantic Movement of the early 19th Century. As we have noted, Bishop Milner had already initiated a tentative revival of Gothic art forms at Winchester. The novels of Walter Scott also represented a new appreciation of the Middle Ages, and of the religion which had inspired its Art and Architecture. Enthusiastic Catholic Converts such as the brilliant architect and designer Augustus Pugin and the wealthy squire Ambrose Philips de Lisle were inspired by the vision of beauty that they perceived in mediaeval English Catholicism. They were to be instrumental in turning this interest into a new reality, by designing and building Gothic Churches for Catholics in Town and Country alike.

The Oxford Movement

But the revival of interest in the High Middle Ages was not the only motive for conversion to Catholicism among English Protestants. There was also a renewed interest in the Theology of the Church Fathers in the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. Especially in Oxford, a group of intellectuals, dubbed the 'Oxford Movement', attempted to catholicise the Church of England by publishing theological Tracts, from which they also became known as 'Tractarians'. In these they argued that the Anglican Church, far from being a new creation of the Reformation era, was truly a 'branch' of the Catholic Church. They claimed that even though not now in communion with Rome, the Church of England was in direct continuity with the Church of the First Millennium, like the Orthodox Eastern churches. However, the establishment saw the Tractarians as a threat to the Protestant character of the Church of

⁶ F.C.Husenbeth "The Life of the Right Rev John Milner, DD" J. Duffy, Dublin 1862 p.553

England, and fiercely opposed their doctrine with its emphasis on the sacramental nature of the Church and its authority to teach in Christ's name.

John Henry Newman

One of the leaders of the Oxford Movement, and arguably the most able and influential of all, was John Henry Newman, Fellow of Oriel College. In the course of his study of the Fathers, he began to doubt that the Church of England was the modern representative of the Church of the first centuries, as he and the other Tractarian theologians had believed. He was drawn inexorably to the belief that the Catholic Church in communion with the Pope was the same body as that to which the Fathers had belonged. Finally, in 1845, Newman was received into the Catholic Church by the Italian Missionary, Blessed Dominic Barberi. Newman, himself an Anglican Clergyman, was living at the time near Oxford in community with other Anglican clergymen. Together with some of these who also converted to Catholicism, he wished to become a Catholic Priest and offered himself to the local Catholic Bishop, Nicholas Wiseman, who sent Newman to Rome in 1846 to study for the priesthood. They brought with them a tradition of religious worship far removed from the secrecy and plainness of the native English Catholics. Moreover, being men of learning, they found themselves ill at ease with those Catholics who, because of the Penal Laws, had hardly had the same opportunities to study as themselves.

Bishop Wiseman, later Cardinal, was a flamboyant Churchman of mixed English and Irish parentage who had been born, brought up and educated, mostly outside England. While still young, he had been appointed Vicar Apostolic in the English Midlands, and immediately set about trying to raise the profile of English Catholicism. Wiseman was almost entirely out of sympathy with the stark low-key plainness of the English Catholic tradition. He desired a 'triumphal' display of the Catholic Faith in contrast to centuries of a hidden, almost 'catacomb' mentality. For Wiseman, the conversion of Newman represented a very important step in the process of converting Protestant England to Catholicism. He believed that Newman could become a vital influence both in revitalising the very insular English Catholics, and making the Catholic Faith more acceptable to the hostile Anglican establishment.

Meanwhile, Newman sought a vocation which would enable him to continue to work as closely as possible with those of his Oxford disciples who had converted to Catholicism with him. He believed that his gifts would not be best employed in the body of the secular clergy, since he and his friends would in all probability be separated from each other. Moreover, he was not attracted to any of the existing forms of religious community life. As early as June 1846, therefore, Newman sketched out a plan for his own order, the projected "Congregatio de Sma. Trinitate".⁷ This was to be involved in the work of Catholic apologetics especially in an environment as hostile to Catholicism as England was. Of Liturgy, all he proposed was: "As to music, no choir service ordinarily – but on festivals vespers, besides High Mass."

Newman and St. Philip Neri

However, a decisive direction was given when he consulted Bishop Wiseman about this question of a suitable vocation. Wiseman had lived for many years in Rome, and had been a member of the Little Oratory (*Oratorium Parvum*) of St. Philip Neri, a confraternity devoted to prayer and good works, attached to the Oratory. He suggested that Newman and his disciples should investigate the possibility of an Oratorian vocation. Consequently, Newman began to consider the possibility of introducing the Oratory to England. By the time Newman

⁷ v. Newman's 'Oratory Papers' No. 1, 15 June 1846; in Placid Murray "Newman the Oratorian", Fowler Wright, Tenbury, 1968 pp.149ff.

came back to England as a Catholic Priest, he and several disciples had also been clothed as Oratorians. Thus Newman founded the first English Oratory in Birmingham in February 1848.

At this time, in contrast with his earlier ideas, Newman begins to mention music as one of the instruments of the apostolate, following the example of St. Philip, who had ever been aware of the attractive and expressive power of music. Considering the small part which music had traditionally played in English Catholic worship, this change of emphasis was to become significant.

Oratorian Architecture; the Roman Tradition

Interestingly enough, Newman's attraction to Catholicism had little in common with that of Pugin and the Romantic Mediaevalists. For Newman, the Church of the First Millennium was more attractive than that of the Middle Ages. This attraction was grounded in his love of the Fathers, but it extended also to Architecture. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to imagine that Newman was drawn only to an ancient ideal, or that he was unmoved by the expressions of contemporary Catholic devotion and worship. Writing to friends from Milan in September 1846, he says that he liked the classical style of architecture "more than some of our... friends would approve", for he had to admit that he preferred the "brightness, grace and simplicity of the classical style" to Gothic architecture. "It has such a sweet, smiling, open countenance – and the Altar is so gracious and winning – standing out for all to see". However much Newman's reason might go with Gothic, "my heart has ever gone with Grecian... There is in the Italian style such a simplicity, purity, elegance, beauty, brightness, which I suppose the word 'classical' implies..."⁸ He recalled the love that he had always felt for the chapel of Trinity College, where he had been an undergraduate. That chapel is built in the classical style. He wrote about Milan Cathedral, which he described as 'overpowering', "...a Catholic Cathedral is a sort of world, every one going about his own business, but that business a religious one; groups of worshippers, and solitary ones – kneeling, standing – some at shrines, some at altars – hearing Mass and communicating – currents of worshippers intercepting and passing by each other – altar after altar lit up for worship, like stars in the firmament – or the bell giving notice of what is going on in parts you do not see – and all the while the canons in choir going through Matins and Lauds, and at the end of it the incense rolling up from the High Altar, and all this in one of the most wonderful buildings in the world and every day..."⁹ No-one could say that the man who wrote this was a cold intellectual, or that his love of what he called 'Grecian' Architecture was purely rational, and devoid of emotion. Curiously enough, despite his rhapsodising simultaneously over Classical architecture and Milan Cathedral, Newman fails to mention that Milan Cathedral happens to be one of the greatest *Gothic* Churches in the world, albeit in a Mediterranean rather than a Northern European guise!

On his return to England as an Oratorian Priest, therefore, he chose for his church not the Gothic style which Pugin had made almost synonymous with Catholicism, but rather the Classical, or 'Grecian' style. It was not long before his espousal of the Classical style came to Pugin's notice. Pugin was not only a gifted architect, but an enthusiastic apologist for the Gothic style. He went so far as to canonise Gothic as 'Christian' art, as opposed to the Classical style, which he dismissed as 'pagan'. Not surprisingly, Pugin found the city of Rome a scandal, since it is virtually devoid of Gothic Churches, and had the Pope allowed it, he would dearly have loved to gothicise St. Peter's! Newman, on the other hand, loved the architecture of Rome, especially the ancient basilicas so reminiscent of the Church of 'Primitive Times'. 'Man of Primitive Times' was a phrase Newman used of St. Philip in the litany he composed in his honour. Newman's Oratory Church in the Classical style was

⁸ LD xi 249-50, 232-3

⁹ LD xi 253

dubbed a “Mechanics’ Institute” by the disgusted Pugin. Newman, writing to Ambrose Phillips de Lisle, who was an enthusiastic Convert and supporter of Pugin, said “But was it not somewhat exclusive to call Grecian or Italian Pagan, as you do?” And moreover, “If it is Pagan it is popish too, for I suppose the Pope has given quite as much sanction to it as he has to Gregorian music, which by the bye seems to be Pagan in the same sense that Italian architecture is.” The comment on Gregorian Chant is interesting, in that Pugin had delivered a lecture in 1850 entitled: “*An Earnest Appeal for the Revival of Ancient Plainsong*”. Its basic premise was that plainsong was the complement of Gothic architecture, and like other worthy ancient arts of the Church, should be revived. For Newman, the Church’s liturgy, which was always changing ‘according to the times’, required a ‘living architecture’, whereas Gothic was ‘now like an old dress, which fitted a man well twenty years back but must be altered to fit him now’ - an instance of his principle that change is inevitable in a living system.¹⁰

Newman thought that Pugin’s mediaevalism was an anachronism. Long, narrow chancels and Rood Screens, though very beautifully crafted and authentically Catholic from the Middle Ages in England, were considered by him to be unsuitable for the modern age. Visibility and audibility were the qualities needed in the 19th century. The gothic style had not enjoyed continuous development up to the present day. It had been superseded by the Classical revival of the Renaissance and baroque eras. For Newman this was not simply a matter of taste; he would never have elevated such a matter into a principle. What was significant rather was the way in which the altar stands out in Classical churches ‘for all to see’. In the nineteenth century, English Catholicism needed architecture that would enable people to take a more intimate part in the sacred rites. We should not infer from this that Newman was an advocate of ‘active participation’ or of simplification of the rites to make them more intelligible. He was far more concerned with devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. He believed that the most suitable model for a Catholic Church in England after the emancipation was not to be found in the Gothic revival, but in the great Churches of the Roman Baroque, where the Altar was close to the congregation, and easily visible; where the tabernacle was prominent and the Blessed Sacrament was the focus of attention throughout the building. Notwithstanding his love for the Early Church, Newman felt a great affinity with the spirit of the ‘Counter-Reform’, and the preaching orders like Jesuits, Barnabites and Oratorians, because of their espousal of devotions centred on the Blessed Sacrament, especially Benediction and the Quarant’ Ore.¹¹ Interestingly, one might note that the second generation of Gothic revival architects, so to speak – men like the Hansom brothers, readily adapted these principles to their own designs, devising wide-naved churches unencumbered by columns and rood-screens, focussed on enormously imposing Gothic retables with elaborate thrones for the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, quite unlike the pure mediaevalism of Pugin.¹²

There was, moreover, another consideration in Newman’s preference for the Classical over the Gothic: that of cost. Gothic churches were notoriously expensive to build. Ironically, it was the Anglicans who could afford to build the grander Gothic Churches when the fashion spread to the Established Church. Catholics had more limited resources. Pugin was frequently frustrated in the execution of his grandiose designs by his patrons’ lack of money. When proposing the establishing of an Oratory in Oxford, Newman favoured Byzantine architecture over Gothic. Byzantine architecture, he argued, would be cheaper than Gothic, which was unsuitable for a small building anyway and would turn what he called a “real working Church” into a “mantel piece ornament”. “Our contracted limits demand simplicity; and gothic, when simple, is bald.” It is interesting to note that, after Newman’s death, Cardinal

¹⁰ LD xii 216, 220-2

¹¹ cf. LD xi 249-54, 232-3

¹² E.g. Joseph Hansom’s great Jesuit church of the Holy Name, Manchester, or to take a nearby example, his brother Charles Hansom’s large church of Ss. Mary and John in Wolverhampton. Screenless, and with very wide naves and chancels, these are almost ‘Counter-Reformation’ Churches in a Gothic style.

Vaughan also chose the Byzantine style when he was looking to build a truly imposing Cathedral with relatively limited means. Vaughan also wanted both to avoid unfavourable comparison with the nearby Westminster Abbey, and to provide a suitable arena in which to celebrate all the ceremonies of the Roman rite with impressive magnificence.

Newman and Faber; Birmingham and London

Soon after the establishment of the Birmingham Oratory, Wiseman persuaded Newman to aggregate to his nascent Oratory a group of recent converts who had gathered around another ex-Anglican clergyman, Frederick Faber. At first it might have seemed reasonable to suppose that Newman and Faber had much in common. They both wished to live a community life, and both were attracted to the charismatic figure of St. Philip Neri. Both preferred Greek or Italian architecture to Gothic. But Faber's personality and tastes contrasted greatly with Newman's. Faber was more extravagant than Newman. Whereas Newman was not inclined to mimic those aspects of Catholic devotion that he had experienced in Catholic, especially Italian Europe, Faber was almost aggressively eager to exaggerate everything that made Catholicism different from the Anglican religion that he had left behind. Where Anglicanism was moderate, he would be extreme. Where Newman saw the simplicity and directness of the ancient Classical style, Faber saw the theatrical possibilities of the High Baroque.

It was not long before the difference in character between Newman and Faber suggested that they each should lead his own community. Later in 1848, therefore, Faber left Newman with some of the fledgling Oratorians in order to found the London Oratory. Newman was to write to Faber that "we must avoid everything extreme",¹³ but it was not advice that the exuberant Faber was likely to take. It is important to remember that Oratories have no centralised authority or principle of government. Each Oratory is an autonomous community of secular priests living together without vows, united only by the bond of charity and affection. Therefore, soon after the foundation of the London Oratory, Faber and his community became completely independent of Newman and his.

Hymnology; Contributions of 19th Century Oratorians: Caswall & Faber

It is useful to consider the contribution made by Newman and the Oratorians to the devotional life of the English Catholic Community before turning to Liturgy strictly understood. There was greater scope for devotion and vernacular singing at non-liturgical Services, and both Newman and Faber identified the need for a repertoire of congregational hymns. As we have already observed, singing in church was in any case a great rarity among English Catholics; so there was hardly an existing repertoire on which to draw. Newman therefore set his Birmingham Oratorians the task both of writing suitable texts for congregational hymns, and finding or composing suitable melodies for them. He himself contributed to this work in several ways: as an accomplished Latinist, he wrote translations of hymns from the Breviary, and as an accomplished musician, he composed melodies where no suitable existing ones could be found.

In this work he was ably assisted by one of his disciples in the Oratory, Edward Caswall. He, too, wrote many fine translations of Latin hymns, and was also a poet in his own right. Many of these compositions are still sung in Catholic Churches throughout the English-speaking world. His style is characteristic of Newman's own taste: it is straightforward and clear, and has not become old-fashioned as has much other 19th century verse. Typical of Caswall's output are such well-known original compositions as "O Jesus Christ, remember when thou shalt come again", "See amid the winter's snow", and "This is the image of the Queen". Yet Caswall is justly famed for his far greater output of translations, for the quality and durability

¹³ LD xii 197

of which no-one can match him. Such fine examples as “Hark, a herald voice is sounding”, “Jesu, the very thought of thee”, and “Glory be to Jesus” bear witness to his skill.

Similarly, Faber’s own contribution to English hymnody must not be forgotten. Faber was a learned theologian, and well-versed in mystical theology. He, too, was a poet of ability, and many of his devotional hymns are still well-known by English congregations. Typical of Faber’s original compositions are “Jesus, my Lord, my God, my all”, “O come and mourn with me awhile”, “O purest of creatures”, and “Sweet Saviour, bless us ere we go”. His writings typically are intended to arouse deeper devotion in the hearts and minds of the congregation singing them. We can contrast his style with that of Caswall in the form of their translations of the 18th century Italian hymn “Viva, viva, Gesù”. Caswall’s “Glory be to Jesus” is masterfully restrained, rhythmically compact, but with an unmistakable crescendo of devotion towards the final stanza. Faber’s “Hail, Jesus, hail” employs a rhetoric of repetitive exclamations, is highly florid in its use of adjectives, and rhythmically dance-like.¹⁴

Liturgical Character of the English Oratories: Music

Within this context we can place the contribution of the Oratories to English liturgical life in detail. From their foundation, High Mass and Vespers have been sung on Sundays at the Birmingham and London Oratories. It is clear that this was a novelty to most English Catholics. Nevertheless, the new atmosphere of post-Emancipation freedom and confidence encouraged by churchmen like Wiseman saw in the full panoply of Catholic Liturgy a wonderful instrument for bringing about the conversion of England.

Essential for the celebration of High Mass and Sung Vespers was the formation of a good choir. In the early days at Birmingham Newman himself directed the choir for a time. His hand-written rules are still to be found in the Choir Gallery. As regards the repertoire of those days, Newman was wary of Plainsong and Polyphony, believing them to be too difficult for 19th century singers to understand and sing well. He certainly approved of their spiritual and musical quality, but believed that most choirs would be better off singing music by the Viennese masters; especially Mozart, Haydn, Cherubini, Hummel, and, of course, his personal favourite, Beethoven. Newman’s attitude is probably quite typical of his time. This was the era of orchestral Masses, even though they were usually accompanied on the Organ.

At Birmingham, the Choral tradition inaugurated by Newman was ably directed by several distinguished musicians. It is sufficient to mention the most important of these: First of all, in the last decade of the 19th Century and the first decade of the 20th, William Sewell directed the music. His ‘Mass of St. Philip Neri’, whose *Kyrie* and *Gloria* we heard sung at Mass, proves that he was one of the ablest composers of Catholic Church music in his day. On his departure from Birmingham, he became Sir Richard Terry’s assistant at the recently established Westminster Cathedral.

At London, too, liturgical music was similarly cultivated. When the magnificent new church was solemnly dedicated in 1884, the Director of music was Thomas Wingham, who wrote a ‘Te Deum’ for the occasion. A good idea of the kind of general musical fare provided at this time is found in a magazine article dating from 1902, “It is the custom here to give the beautiful compositions, so rarely heard, of Palestrina and his contemporaries during Advent and Lent. On Good Friday, Palestrina’s ‘Reproaches’ were given. These were sung antiphonally by two choirs placed in different parts of the building. Gounod’s setting of the ‘Lamentations of Jeremiah’ was also sung. The music during Passiontide was sung

¹⁴ Caswall: “*Glory be to Jesus, Who in bitter pains, Pour’d for me the life-blood, From His sacred veins. Grace and life eternal in that blood I find: Blest be his compassion, infinitely kind.*” Contrast Faber: “*Hail, Jesus, hail! Who for my sake, Sweet blood from Mary’s veins didst take, and shed it all for me: Oh, blessed be my Saviour’s blood, My light, my life, my only good, To all eternity.*”

unaccompanied, as all such music should be and was, in every case, finely rendered by a highly-trained and efficient choir. The correctness of tone and pitch, the delicacy of the light and shade and, above all, the purity of the boys' voices were remarkable."¹⁵ Wingham was followed by Arthur Barclay, who remained in post until as late as 1935.

But all was about to change. The 'Liturgical Movement' of the 20th century emerged into the light with the publication in 1903 of Pius X's *Motu Proprio* on Church Music. The Pope encouraged a return to the purity of plainchant and 16th century polyphony, in place of what he termed 'modern music'. As with Newman's espousal of Classical architecture, it would be a mistake simply to interpret this as a question of taste. It was a matter of spirituality. The Pope explained his purpose thus:

*"The Church has always recognised and encouraged all progress in the arts, and has always admitted to the service of her functions whatever is good and beautiful in their development during different centuries, as long as they do not offend against the laws of the liturgy. Hence, more modern music may also be allowed in churches, since it has produced compositions good, serious and dignified enough to be worthy of liturgical use."*¹⁶

Were Viennese and nineteenth century orchestral Masses to be lost from the liturgical repertoire? A recent Director of music at the London Oratory, Henry Washington, here describes the way in which the Oratories interpreted this papal policy:

*"At a time when papal representations concerning musical propriety were being widely respected the Oratory musicians continued to specialise in the masterpieces of the Classical period. Not that they were defiantly wayward. There is evidence to show that sweeping – if misguided – efforts were being made to conform to Papal authority so long as the classics were not to be abandoned. The Masses of Beethoven, Schubert, Cherubini and the rest were drastically dismembered. These great masters thought nothing of setting a single word to a whole page of musical re-iteration; or, having reached the half-way mark in a movement, of reverting to an earlier phrase of the text. Thus the prayers of the Ordinary of the Mass were often quite unintelligible to a devout worshipper."*¹⁷

It was, of course, this kind of mutilation of the liturgical text against which not only Pius X, but many other reformers before him had inveighed. If one could render these works more liturgically pure, could they perhaps still conform to the spirit of the Pope's wishes? Washington continues: *"And so and Barclay in London and Sewell in Birmingham altered the underlaying of the texts – not to mention the note values to match – and ruthlessly abridged these works so as not to hinder the action of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass."* Not to hinder the action of the liturgy was clearly a desirable end. Yet such a solution could not be regarded as satisfactory in the long term, though it is to the credit of the Oratorian musicians that they made a valiant attempt to be faithful both to the Church's growing liturgical sense, and to the intrinsic musical value of the Viennese tradition.

Despite seeming to fight a rearguard action, however, the Oratories actually proved that they were in the vanguard of the recovery of plainsong and polyphony. At Birmingham, from 1916 until his death in 1941, an extraordinary work was achieved by Henry Bird Collins, arguably the most illustrious Director of Music Birmingham had had. Collins, together with Sir Richard Terry at Westminster pioneered the recovery and performance of vast quantities of long forgotten 16th century polyphony, both English and continental. As Henry Washington says: *"Thanks to Fr. Robert Eaton and H.B. Collins, the Oratorians of Edgbaston were many years ahead of Brompton; while not entirely forsaking Cherubini and his contemporaries,*

¹⁵ Quoted by Henry Washington in his article: "The Musical Tradition" in "The London Oratory Centenary 1884-1984" ed. M. Napier and A. Laing, London 1984, p.163

¹⁶ Pius X *Motu Proprio* 1903 section 5

¹⁷ Henry Washington, op. Cit. P.165

they nevertheless gave precedence to Palestrina-style and the stream of Pre-Reformation compositions Collins was tirelessly recovering.”¹⁸ Collins’s obituarist in the Birmingham Post on January 22 1941, wrote that

“he was recognised among musicians as one of the greatest authorities on the music of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. His researches in this field have thrown much light on early polyphony (notably his work on the Old Hall manuscripts at St. Edmund’s, Ware); and his editions of the music of Palestrina, Byrd, di Lasso and others are accepted everywhere as authoritative. Such achievements could only be brought about by endless patient study, and Mr. Collins was indefatigable. In London, all his leisure hours were spent at the British Museum; and every holiday found him among the manuscripts of old music at Oxford, Cambridge and Tenbury.”

Much of his work was published, and because no other editions of these same works have ever been issued, some of it is still to be found in music shops, although no longer in print. A review of the series “Latin Church Music of the Polyphonic Schools” in 1930 stated:

“Whether the returns in public appreciation warrant it or not it is to the eternal credit of the firm of J. & W. Chester of London and likewise to the credit of the editor H.B. Collins, that new light is being cast on the polyphonic compositions of the English, Spanish and Roman Schools by the publication of these masterworks of these schools...Among the Composers represented are William Byrd, Dr. Robert Cooper, Robert Johnson, Peter Philips, John Shepherd, Thomas Tallis, John Taverner, Dr. Christopher Tye, Thomas Wright, Georg Aichinger, Jacob Handl, Orlando di Lasso, A. Lotti, Luca Marenzio, G./P. dal (sic) Palestrina, and F. Suriano.”

That tradition continues to this day. It is a great pleasure to be able to report to you that works by all but two of these composers have been sung at the Birmingham Oratory in the last year, and many from H.B. Collins’s editions.

Henry Washington, whom I have quoted above, was choirmaster at the London Oratory from the 1930s until the 1960s. He did much to improve the standard of Plainchant not only at the Oratory but in England generally. This was because the BBC began frequently to broadcast from the London Oratory during Washington’s long period of office, and so his repertoire and style of interpretation became well known throughout the country through his implementing the researches of the monks of Solesmes, particularly Dom Mocquereau and Dom Pothier. In fact, Washington was headhunted from St. Chad’s in Birmingham in 1935 by Fr. Clement Bevan of the London Oratory because of his reputation as a practitioner of chant and polyphony.¹⁹ He had been trained here in Birmingham by Henry Collins in organ, piano and musicology. Washington, by his own account, at first clearly met some stiff opposition to his plainchant performance style from his own choirmen, and to his 16th century repertoire from his congregations in London. Although as we have heard Palestrina’s music was sung unaccompanied at the Oratory even as early as 1902, before Pius X’s famous ‘*Motu proprio*’, it was almost exclusively limited to penitential seasons. Washington describes his first Easter Day in London in 1935 thus:

“I was directed to produce Palestrina’s glorious ‘*Missa Papae Marcelli*’. The performance at that short notice could not have foreshadowed later triumphs in Palestrina style; but in that hour I was blissfully ignorant of the appalling impact the choice of programme must have had upon an ‘audience’ (Washington puts the word in inverted commas) anticipating a soul-stirring execution of, say, Beethoven’s *Mass in D* (sic!) or Mozart’s ‘*Coronation*’.”²⁰

¹⁸ *ibid.* p.165

¹⁹ *ibid.* p.152

²⁰ *ibid.* p.155

Washington also continued Collins's work of bringing further polyphonic music to light and making it readily accessible in popular new editions.²¹

Since The Second Vatican Council:

Continuity

Along with all other congregations and orders, the Oratories in England have been profoundly affected by the years since the Second Vatican Council. Yet it is also true to say that the older Oratories, and the newer Oxford Oratory founded since the Council, have developed a distinctive response to the call that the Council made for the Reform of the Liturgy. I would characterise that response as implementation of the Reforms contained in the post-conciliar liturgical books and norms, interpreted in continuity with the historical forms of the Roman Rite. Under this heading I will particularly deal with the place of choral music, with the fostering of the liturgical use of the Latin language, and with the orientation of the Altar.

High Mass

As I mentioned earlier, High Mass and Vespers continue to be sung in Latin at the Oratories in Birmingham and London every Sunday. This practice has now also been adopted by the recently founded Oxford Oratory. As regards the Solemn Mass, the Missal of 1970 is always used. There has never been any resistance to using those rites approved by the Church's legitimate authorities. Even though there is now a greater freedom given for the use of the Missal of Pope Pius V, there has been no attempt to restore its use for the Solemn Liturgy at the English Oratories. Nevertheless, there is a strong character of continuity between the former rites and those now in use. The Oratories take their lead here from *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, which states that 'Liturgical Worship is given a more noble form when the divine offices are celebrated solemnly in song with the assistance of sacred ministers and the active participation of the people'²². In the first place, the use of Latin, not simply for the sung Ordinary, but for all of the Mass except the Scripture Readings and the Prayer of the Faithful, guarantees the dignity and *gravitas* that characterise the ancient Roman Rite. Secondly, the Choral Music, especially plainchant and the polyphonic music of the 16th Century adds splendour, and expresses all the different aspects and movements within the progress of the Liturgical Action. Thirdly, the proper participation of all according to their orders and ministries is fostered wherever possible; so that the Celebrant is always assisted by a Deacon, and an Acolyte, who are always vested in the Roman style of Mass vestments, and they, too, are assisted by a Lector, Thurifer, and other servers as necessary. In accordance with the ancient custom of the Universal Church, characterised as 'laudable' by the Pope, only men and boys minister in the Sanctuary. Communion is received kneeling at the Altar Rails. On greater feasts only, it is also customary for the whole community to assist in Choir. At the Birmingham and London Oratories the Celebrant stands at the Altar facing with, rather than towards, the congregation. The Oxford Oratory has inherited a Church whose Sanctuary had been reordered with Mass *versus populum* as the principal aim, and they continue this practice, though in all other respects their liturgy resembles that of the older Oratories.

Vespers

As regards the public celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours, the Oratories are probably unique in England in celebrating full sung Latin Vespers every Sunday. Birmingham and London have celebrated Sunday Vespers since their foundation 150 years ago, while Oxford has also established the tradition. In this respect, the Oratories can claim to be putting into effect the recommendation of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, that 'It is fitting that whenever

²¹ *ibid.* p.165

²² SC §113

possible the Office should be sung, both in choir and in common²³, and that 'Pastors of souls should see to it that the principal hours, especially Vespers, are celebrated in common in church on Sundays.'²⁴ The Constitution continues, 'In accordance with the age-old tradition of the Latin rite, the Latin language is to be retained for clerics celebrating the Divine Office in Choir.'²⁵ In order to facilitate the participation of the Faithful, booklets have been prepared containing all the Latin texts and music, parallel translations, and explanatory notes. The lack of a revised official Latin Vesperale has, of course, made it difficult for any Church or community wishing to celebrate solemn Sunday Vespers to do so in Latin. All three Oratories, therefore, continue the ancient practice of singing the five psalms, 109 to 113 every week. Yet it is probably true to say that the Oratories are not sorry to be effectively obliged to continue to sing the traditional arrangement and number of Sunday psalms as heretofore. After all, this remains closer to the continuing pattern of the monastic Office. The disadvantage of relying on the Liber Usualis, however, as the Oratories do, lies principally in the loss of connection between the Magnificat Antiphon and the Gospel of the Sunday. In recent years at Birmingham, however, a three-year cycle of Magnificat Antiphons has been arranged so that every Sunday the Antiphon is related to the Gospel of the day.

Music

As I have explained, both the Birmingham and London Oratories have lavished great care on Church Music from their foundation to the present day, and this tradition has also been established in the Oxford Oratory. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* states that 'The treasury of sacred music is to be preserved and cultivated with great care. Choirs must be assiduously developed.'²⁶ The Oratories have been at pains to preserve this treasury of Sacred Music within the context of the Liturgy, and have not followed the same route as many churches and religious orders who have abolished choral music in favour of exclusively congregational singing. The Oratories recognise that without the contribution of trained musicians, the greater part of the Church's corpus of Gregorian Chant and polyphony, both given special mention in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*²⁷, could no longer adorn the Sacred Liturgy, but would be banished to the Concert Hall.

Many of those who have mistakenly dismantled choirs have justified this by appealing to the call for *participatio actuosa* in the reformed liturgy. Yet the Oratories do not agree that *participatio actuosa* demands that everything should be sung by the congregation, or else not be sung at all. The true understanding of 'active participation', as this is translated into English, is to be found in a paper given to the ALL by the English Benedictine monk and distinguished liturgical musician, Dom Bernard McElligott, in 1970 and published by the ALL in 'A Voice For All Time'²⁸. This interpretation, distinguishing *actuosa* from *activa*, and defining the former as 'sincere' rather than 'active', is shared by the Oratories. In order to promote a full, intelligent and inner participation of the congregation in the Liturgical Action, the riches of the Church's musical heritage are a valuable aid. The contribution of choral music to the Liturgy is never exclusive of the People's part in singing, but complementary to it. In accordance with the principles of the Liturgy, laid out in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the congregation are always encouraged to sing those parts of the Mass which pertain to them²⁹, especially the Creed, the Sanctus, the Responses, and not infrequently, the entire Ordinary in Plainchant, for which notation is always given to help them.

²³ SC §99

²⁴ SC §100

²⁵ SC §101

²⁶ SC §114

²⁷ SC §116

²⁸ 'Active Participation', Dom Bernard McElligott, in "A Voice for All Time"; ALL, 1994; pp.18ff.

²⁹ SC §114

Finally, in this context of Sacred Music, it is worth recalling that the Council Fathers singled out one musical instrument by name, which they described as *'the traditional musical instrument, the sound of which can add a wonderful splendour to the Church's ceremonies and powerfully lifts up men's minds to God and higher things'*³⁰. The Oratories continue to maintain organs that are renowned throughout the land, and they play a vital part in the celebration of the Sacred Liturgy. The training of good Church organists has also long been a task undertaken by Organists at the Oratories. The current Director of Music and Assistant Organist here at Birmingham have recently inaugurated a school for, among other things, the training of organists for the Liturgy.

Latin

Naturally, the preservation of the immense riches of the Catholic choral tradition is inseparable from the preservation of the Latin tongue in the Liturgy. Once again, we base our practice firmly on the foundation of Sacrosanctum Concilium, which famously states that *'The use of the Latin language...is to be preserved in the Latin rites'*³¹. While it is of course possible to sing Latin texts in the context of a vernacular Liturgy, the English Oratories are equally committed to the weekly celebration of the Principal Mass, and the Office of Vespers, in Latin. At a time when few Churches in England celebrate any parts of the Liturgy in Latin, the Oratories have countered the fashion for an exclusive use of the vernacular. This is based on two important principles: that of continuity with the historic forms of the Liturgy already mentioned, and fidelity to the clearly stated wishes of the Ecumenical Council.

The Altar

In addition to the abandonment of Latin, the other single greatest change in the liturgical arena has been the reordering of sanctuaries so that the Mass may be celebrated *versus populum*. The Oratories of Birmingham and London have not adopted this almost universal practice. Oxford Oratory has, as I said, inherited a Church already reordered in this way. Why then have Birmingham and London, while remaining steadfast in their fidelity to Liturgical Reform, chosen such an unusual path?

A clear answer to this question is also to be found in a Paper given to the ALL in 1971 by the then Provost of the London Oratory, the late Fr. Michael Napier.³² He explains the background to the call for Mass to be celebrated *versus populum* by leading figures in the preconciliar Liturgical Movement. He then shows that such a radical departure from the almost universal practice of the Church (be it noted, in both West and East alike), was falsely justified from the existence of Altars, apparently used *versus populum* from the earliest times in the Roman Basilicas. Napier shows that this is a misinterpretation of the evidence. He points out that the arrangement of those Roman Basilicas referred to was never copied outside Rome, and proves that even in those Churches the celebrant did not face the congregation across the Altar. The simple and compelling reason adduced for this claim, against the appearance of the evidence, is that it was a universal practice in the celebration of the Liturgy that all, Celebrant, ministers, and congregation faced East together whenever addressing God in Prayer. Thus, in those ancient Basilicas where the celebrant appears to face the congregation, Napier points out that the celebrant is always facing East at the Altar, and so would the congregation. But although Napier wryly makes the point that had the congregation been standing where we would expect, i.e. before the Altar, this would mean that they would have had *their* backs turned to the Altar. However, it seems more likely, as he himself points out, that the congregation would never have put the Altar between themselves and the

³⁰ SC §120

³¹ SC §36

³² 'The Position of the Altar in the Contemporary Church', Fr. Michael Napier, in "A Voice for All Time", ALL, 1994, pp.98ff.

Celebrant. In summary, Napier argues that, far from being a *sine qua non* of the reformed Liturgy, reordering of Sanctuaries for celebration *versus populum* was neither historically accurate, nor necessary. Instead, he claims, the Reform of the Liturgy requires that the Celebrant at the Altar be *close* to the People, not necessarily facing them. He also points out that the rubric recommending that the Altar be free-standing is first and foremost intended to restore its dignity and integrity of form, so that it should no longer be dwarfed by reredoses and gradines, and to allow the ministers to walk round it at the incensation. In all these respects, the Churches built by the Birmingham and London Oratorians already fulfil the requirements of the Liturgy. Even if the Altars are not technically free-standing, nonetheless they are dignified, not dwarfed by reredoses, and relatively close to the congregation. These were some of the considerations that led Newman to oppose the long, narrow chancels, closed off by rood screens, so fashionable in his day.

You may be interested to note, however, that there has been some experimentation with Mass *versus populum*, at least at the Birmingham Oratory. As early as the late 1960's, a temporary free-standing Altar was constructed and placed in several positions around the Church. Eventually, after consultation with the congregation the decision was made to return to the use of the original High Altar. The Fathers justified this decision on the grounds that they had consulted several liturgical experts who agreed that any permanent reordering would adversely affect the character and proportions of so fine a building. The Fathers quoted two directives from Cardinal Lercaro, then Prefect of the Consilium for the implementation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. In the first, the Cardinal, while himself of the opinion that Mass *versus populum* favoured a '*living liturgy and popular participation*'³³, nevertheless decried any reordering of sanctuaries that did violence to the character of the existing building, and urged those responsible to bear in mind that the Mass need not be celebrated *versus populum* in order to be pastorally effective. In the other he opposed the quasi-permanent use of temporary altars, pointing out that the '*whole of the Liturgy of the Word was already celebrated versus populum*', and that '*for the eucharistic liturgy the installation of microphones is a sufficient aid to participation*.'³⁴

Concluding Remarks; Resistance to Fashion a Constant in English Oratories.

In conclusion, I think one can characterise the particular contribution of the Oratories to English Liturgy as fidelity to the Roman Liturgical Tradition in its full historical richness. Not surprisingly, perhaps, this means that we have often found ourselves at odds with prevailing trends and fashions. I do not wish to suggest that this is necessarily a matter of deliberate and co-ordinated policy. As I explained earlier, each Oratory is autonomous, and indeed guards its independence jealously. If there is a certain similarity of outlook among the English Oratories, I would suggest that this is due to a number of factors. In the first place, as a community of priests under a democratic rule, there is no likelihood of an individual member's gaining a monopoly of power or influence over common affairs. Where opinions differ, it is more likely that the *status quo* persist, than that a departure from established custom to be allowed. Secondly, since an Oratorian makes a lifelong commitment to his community, there is a strong vein of continuity in the formulation of practice and policy. Thirdly, in England particularly, the Oratories retain the sense of fidelity to their founding fathers, and the principles they espoused, not out of blind prejudice, but in recognition of the particular charism they offered to the Church; for instance, they adopted classical architecture and fostered a high standard of church music at a time when these were far from common among Catholics.

³³ Giacomo Card. Lercaro: 'Epistola ad Praesides Coetuum Episcoporum', 30th June 1965, Notitiae, fascicle no. 9/10 Città del Vaticano, September/October 1965 p.261-2

³⁴ Giacomo Card. Lercaro: 'Epistola ad Praesides Coetuum Episcoporum', 25th January 1966, Notitiae, fascicle no. 18 Città del Vaticano, June 1966 p.160

In the 20th century, the Oratories have continued to stand against the vagaries of fashion by maintaining fidelity to the express wishes of the Second Vatican Council, against those who would argue that even the Council itself has been left behind by the Church! Accordingly the Oratories consider the maintenance of the full choral repertoire of Sacred Music within the Liturgy as a pastoral, and not just an aesthetic, priority. Moreover, and perhaps most controversially, the Birmingham and London Oratories, followed recently by the Church of the Holy Name in Manchester, have concluded that the reform of the Liturgy is not best served by the reordering of the Sanctuary for Mass *versus populum*.

Although the Oratories are justly renowned for their fidelity to the Latin Liturgy, they neither oppose nor eschew the use of the vernacular. There is, of course, an urgent need for the current liturgy to be englished in a way that better arouses a sense of worship and expresses its mystery, while remaining faithful to the Latin original. In our bilingual service books for Holy Week here in Birmingham, we have taken the opportunity to place a parallel translation (not a paraphrase) which is closer to the Latin original in structure, in richness of expression, and in hieratic style, than the ICEL texts are meant to be.

With the foundation of the Oxford Oratory in 1990, and a well-founded hope that a fourth Oratory will soon be established in Manchester, a new era of growth would seem to have begun for the English Oratory. At the dawn of the third Christian Millennium, we believe that many people in England, seeking the authentic contemporary expression of the Roman Rite in accordance with tradition and sound liturgical principles, will look to the Oratories to find it there as a living reality, in all its historic fullness.