

DOWNSIDE REVIEW.

APRIL, 1881.

MEMOIRS OF DISTINGUISHED GREGORIANS.

No. II.—THE MOST REVEREND JOHN BEDE
POLDING, D.D., O.S.B.,

FIRST ARCHBISHOP OF SYDNEY.

(Continued from page 102.)

IN the year 1833, the Holy See desired to nominate some learned and pious ecclesiastic to the Vicariate Apostolic of Madras, and the choice of the Propaganda fell upon Father Bede Polding, who was then novice master at St. Gregory's. The matter was urgent, and the briefs were sent to Bishop Bramston, of the London district, with orders to proceed at once to the consecration of the Bishop elect. Father Polding, feeling probably that providence had designed him for other Apostolic labours in a harder post and in a more desolate portion of the Church's vineyard, made an earnest representation to the Pope. He had good grounds for his "*nolo episcopari*" since the doctor he had consulted told him that his health would not stand the climate of India. The Holy See accepted his excuses, and he was thus left another year at Downside.

The Bulls for Father Polding's consecration to the Vicariate of Madras, under the title of Hiero Cesarea, *in partibus infidelium*, were still in the hands of Bishop Bramston, when his services were asked from the Holy See for the Church in Australia—a mission to which, even in his boyhood, as will be remembered,

as to a tender and affectionate parent, and such he has ever proved he had always considered he would be sent. For some few years, one who had been a novice under Father Polding at Downside, Dom. Bernard Ullathorne, the present illustrious Bishop of Birmingham, had been struggling almost single-handed to keep the Lamp of Faith alight in the British Colonies of Australia. In 1834 he found himself obliged to forward to England an earnest appeal for assistance. Australia was at that time included in the vast Vicariate of the Mauritius, over which Bishop Morris, O.S.B., then presided. Dr. Ullathorne had gone out to Australia as Dr. Morris's Vicar, but so immense was the distance between Port Louis and the Australian Continent that intercourse between the two countries was practically impossible. Abbot Birdsall, President-General of the English Benedictines, to whom Dr. Ullathorne's appeal for help in the first instance came, represented to Rome how difficult it must be to work in any satisfactory manner the Government of so large a portion of the globe. He expressed his willingness to send out some Benedictine religious to the assistance of Dr. Ullathorne, but endorsed the opinion of that experienced missionary that some one of those he proposed to send should be consecrated Bishop. This proposal was adopted, and orders were immediately sent from Rome to Dr. Bramston to proceed with the consecration of Dom. Bede Polding, under the old title, not for the Vicariate of Madras, but for the newly-made diocese which included New Holland and Van Dieman's Land. To this new order Dr. Polding made no demur, and on the Feast of SS. Peter and Paul, 1834, he received the unction of Episcopal consecration in Bishop Bramston's private chapel in London.

Father Polding's loss was deeply felt at Downside. Not only had he by the force of his character endeared himself to all the religious and the students, but he had for many years been the mainstay of almost every department of college and monastery. On him, as a counsellor and friend, many, especially among the younger members of the community and the elder boys, relied. We have evidence of this in a letter written at this time by one of the young religious, Brother Charles Davis, who afterwards followed his friend and master to Australia, as Bishop of Maitland.

"I suppose," he writes, "that you have heard of Dr. Polding's consecration. His loss will be felt greatly by our entire community; but, perhaps, no individual member of the College will experience it more than I shall. He has been my spiritual director and my fast and best of friends. I have always looked up to him

himself to be in my regard. I assure you that were it the will of my superiors I would with pleasure accompany him to New Holland."

The community of Downside did not allow Dr. Polding to be taken from them without making an effort to retain his services. The Prior, Father Turner, forwarded a petition to the Pope, Gregory XVI., asking that his appointment should be reconsidered, and that he should be left to do the great good he was effecting at St. Gregory's. In this document it is related how Downside had, within a very few years, sent four of her sons to Colonial Missions, and with a strength so reduced it was impossible to meet this new call. It added that Father Polding was "the column and the mainstay of the establishment." The petition concluded with an earnest appeal to the Holy Father to reconsider the question and "leave him on whom the entire studies of the College depend, and who fills so admirably many of the offices of the house."

This petition did not receive any direct answer from the Holy Father, but Cardinal Weld, who had always shown himself a sincere friend to St. Gregory's and the Benedictines in England, and who had been asked to present the petition, wrote in reply that it was too late for the Holy See to consider the matter. His letter concludes by reminding the community that the truth of the Gospel saying, "*Date et dabitur vobis*" is never better exemplified than in the case of those religious orders who generously send their members to the Foreign Missions."

It is not to be supposed that the tender heart of Dr. Polding could tear itself away from all the old ties and associations of his life without a struggle. Downside was to him everything in the world, and nothing short of a belief that he was destined for the Apostolic work of planting the Church in Australia, and the distinct call of obedience would have nerved him for the painful ordeal of bidding good-bye to all he loved most on earth. "This, the last letter"—he writes to Dr. Brown, then Prior of Downside—"This, the last letter I shall write in England, will convey to you, my dear brother, the deepest wishes of my heart. It is almost exhausted by these painful partings, yet whole and sound to its purpose. May God bless you, and may my dear *Alma Mater* ever rejoice in the holiness of her children. Gentle, good, and kind may the spirit of our Holy Father, the Great St. Benedict, rest in joyfulness within her walls. Accept for yourself and all at Downside my fullest blessing and dearest love."

The Bishop, together with several of his religious brethren, set sail from Liverpool at the beginning of the year A.D. 1835. In those days the journey to the Antipodes was not accomplished with the rapidity of modern steam ships, and it was not till he had spent many months on this long but what he describes as "very pleasant voyage" that he landed on the shores of a land which henceforth was to be the country of his adoption. During the long period he and his party spent on the ocean, "We live," he says in a letter written whilst still at sea, "in some sense *conventualiter*. We meet three times each day for the office, and have our meditation and spiritual reading together. I have commenced a course of Moral Theology with the young men, and priests and myself hold conferences three times in the week; Tuesdays and Thursdays are half recreations, as at Downside. This mode of life we have never interrupted one day since we recovered from the first unpleasant novelty of being at sea. . . . Such queer things sometimes happen which make us laugh at most awkward times. For instance, I was giving the blessing at Prime on Easter Sunday, and just as I said the word '*disponat*,' the ship gave a lurch, and seated me on the floor in the middle of the little choir. By the same roll Bede Sumner was thrown to the opposite side of the cabin and no sooner was there than another lurch sent him back to his first position. This made us laugh so continuously that we were obliged to give up the attempt of saying the office at that time."

We will now briefly interrupt the narrative of Dr. Polding's life in order to give the reader some idea of the country to which he was about to devote the energies of his life. The social and religious state of the whole of the vast Vicariate placed under his charge was disheartening in the extreme. Towards the close of the last century the British Government made the colony of New South Wales into a penal settlement, in place of the North American Colonies, which had then finally separated from the empire, and up to the year 1810, Sydney was very little more than a place for criminal transportation. The very name of Botany Bay given to the district became associated with convict imprisonment, just as now Portland and Dartmoor are synonymous with penal servitude. The first priests who landed in Australia came thither in 1802, when Fathers Harold, O'Neil, and Dixon were sent there for suspected implication in the Irish disturbances of 1798. Two of these Fathers, Harold and O'Neil, were subsequently pronounced by the Home Government to be innocent of

the charges made against them, and were allowed to return to their native country.

Father Dixon, the third priest we have mentioned, was conditionally emancipated, and remained at Sydney to carry on labours of instructing the poor, and comforting his unfortunate countrymen and fellow Catholics in the great hardships to which they were exposed in great measure on account of their religion. This work he carried on single-handed and with true Apostolic zeal for above ten years, when, in 1817, another priest, Father Flinn, a voluntary exile for the sake of the poor Catholics of Australia, landed at Sydney. He had been appointed Archpriest by the Roman See, and came possessed of powers to confirm. "He was a man of meek demeanour," says Bishop Ullathorne, in a soul-stirring pamphlet,¹ from which we shall take leave to quote freely:— "He was a man who speedily won the deep love of his people, and by his ardent zeal did much in a short time." Indeed, so great was the influence he from the first began to exercise, that a petty jealousy prompted the Government authorities in the colony to take occasion of his not having received the sanction of the Home Government to enter the penal settlement, first to cast him into prison, and then to order him to leave by the next ship. Fortunately for his flock the sailing of ships from Sydney was not very frequent in those days, and he was thus able to minister to its wants for a brief space longer. The time, however, came only too quickly for his zeal and his people's love. On the eve of his departure, for the last time he assembled the Catholics in the house of one of their number in Sydney for Mass, and there moved by an inspiration of Divine Providence he left the Blessed Sacrament in a tabernacle as a spiritual safeguard and a lamp to keep their faith alight. For two years after his departure the faithful were wont to gather round that sacred tabernacle, and offer up their prayers that God would send them help in their desolate and pitiable state.

Their supplications and sighs were heard, and wonderful to relate, in 1820, when the English Government were at last shamed into sending out some priests to minister to the Catholic population of the growing colony, Father Connolly and Father Terry, the priests who first reached Sydney, found the Sacred Species still worshipped at the house of the same good Catholic, preserved almost by a miracle. "It is mournfully beautiful," says Dr. Ullathorne (p. 9) "to contemplate these men of sorrow gathered

¹ "The Catholic Mission in Australia," 1837.

round the Bread of Life—bowed down before the crucified—no voice but the silent one of faith—not a priest within six thousand miles to extend to them the pledge of pardon and repentance.”

In 1829 two more priests, one of whom was “that great missionary,” Father McEncroe, came to the assistance of the Catholics of the district of Sydney; and four years later, in 1833, Dr. Ullathorne arrived in the colony with three secular priests. Dr. Ullathorne, as already noted, had gone out as Vicar-General of Dr. Morris, then Bishop of Mauritius, whose vast diocese comprised not only the “Isle de France” but the colonies of South Africa and Australia. For a short time the present Bishop of Birmingham laboured almost single-handed to ameliorate the condition of the Catholics of Sydney, and to mitigate in some measure the horrors of the convict system which then prevailed. Soon, however, he perceived that nothing of lasting importance could be effected without more assistance and without immediate episcopal supervision. He thereupon forwarded a petition from his flock to the Holy Father, that he would grant Australia a Vicar Apostolic, and sent an earnest request to Father President Birdsall for more help. The Pope, Gregory XVI., upon this caused the President-General to be consulted, and very shortly afterwards orders were sent for the consecration of Dom. Bede Polding. As of old a Boniface left the quiet of an English Monastery to carry the torch of faith into Germany, as a Willibrord forsook his cloister to preach the Gospel in Holland, as Anschar to evangelize Sweden, so in the 19th century the same scenes have been renewed among the successors of the old English Monks, and an English Monastery among the the Mendip Hills has sent forth its sons to be the Apostles of a New World.

Bishop Polding arrived at Sydney about the middle of the year 1835, and his coming was signalized by a remarkable event. The country had been greatly afflicted by a drought of three years’ duration, and the people were almost driven to despair by this long continued trouble. Relief came to their temporal wants at the same time that their spiritual needs were being supplied by the arrival of Dr. Polding, for quite unexpectedly, and to the great joy of all, a small cloud was seen and the long-wished for rain began to pour itself on to the thirsty land at the very hour of the new Bishop’s first appearance amongst them.¹

The ship which carried Dr. Polding and his companions called on its way to Sydney at Van Dieman’s Land, which was a part of

¹ “Saturday Magazine,” April 8th, 1837, p. 134.

the new Bishop's vast diocese. During a brief stoppage every effort was made to instruct and reclaim the numerous Catholics on that island. Numbers embraced the opportunity thus afforded to them, and the Bishop laid the foundation of a Church at Richmond, and opened a school chapel at Hobart Town. In this latter place there were at that time upwards of 2,000 Catholics, who had hitherto no priest to minister to their spiritual wants. Here Father Ambrose Cotham, O.S.B., one of the Benedictine priests who had accompanied Dr. Polding from England, remained to take charge of the Catholics of the colony.

On the arrival of the party in Sydney, the Bishop found only three priests in New South Wales and one in Tasmania, and the first accounts he received as to the prospect of his mission cannot have been of a cheering character. Though some of the many grievances under which the Catholics of these colonies laboured had been removed, still there were a sufficient number remaining to frighten any but a brave heart, such as Dr. Polding possessed, when duty was in the question. How he laboured to humanize as well as Christianize the mass of the people; how he strove to ameliorate the condition of the convicts; and how he gradually revived in the hearts of these poor fallen men the memories of the religion of their childhood which their bitter lot and absence of instruction had combined to obliterate is known fully to God alone. Space would be wanting to narrate, as they deserve to be told, the missionary labours of this noble-hearted Bishop. Those who knew him best in the first years of his life in Australia have declared that he was undoubtedly the greatest missionary of his age. For many years, indeed during the great part of his episcopal life, he worked as a simple priest, saying Mass daily, preaching, teaching the Catechism, hearing the confessions of multitudes, and attending by the bedside of the sick and the dying. "The way in which he multiplied his energies," writes Dr. Ullathorne,¹ "struck the colony with amazement. What above all things enkindled his zeal was the state of the convict population. Assisted by one or two priests, he raised his altar one day in a gaol, another in the convict barracks, another at the penal settlement of Goat Island, another at the great female house of correction, another at the establishment for juvenile convicts. He preached to them, taught them their Catechism, wept over them, poured the overflowing tenderness of his heart into them, heard their confessions from morning to night, then, after

¹ "Tablet," March 24th, 1877.

all were prepared, would some early morning say Mass for them, and after some last most moving appeals administer to them the Holy Communion. After that he seldom failed to give them solid advice touching their position, the perils that surrounded them, the way in which the disciplinary rules affected them, and how they might most effectually soften and even shorten their period of punishment. But it was when a ship arrived with some three or four hundred fresh criminals that the Bishop put forth his whole powers to the utmost. He had permission from the Government to have all the Catholics put at his command for a few days after their arrival. Under their superintendents they were kept at the Church the greater part of the day. Then would you see the Bishop, helped by his clergy and students in divinity—but himself the foremost—working such a change in these unhappy men that they went to their several destinations changed in heart and completely instructed in their duties. It was a touching sight to see the Bishop with one of his criminals kneeling by his side in the Sanctuary, and by word and action instructing all through one how to make their confessions or how to receive the Holy Communion.”

It is stated, on good authority,¹ that between the years 1836 and 1841, no less than seven thousand convicts had passed at least ten days retreat in these pious exercises so well calculated to confirm, and in many instances to form, their religious habits. One very obvious good which resulted from these exercises, and one which the officers of the Government were not slow to avail themselves of, was the greater docility and good behaviour which the Bishop's earnest exhortations produced among the Catholic convicts. We can, perhaps, form little idea of the incessant labours Dr. Polding and his devoted clergy underwent during these days of abundant harvest. While there were souls to be saved the Bishop seemed to feel no fatigue, and certainly he sought no rest. “On Sunday his confessional was crowded by the convicts who could not come at other times, until he had to be drawn away almost by force, still weeping, to celebrate Mass or to preach, after he had been long waited for. He would say as his apology, ‘Others I could leave to another time; but these poor creatures who have no one to care for them, I cannot.’”

“Wherever they” (the convicts), writes Bishop Ullathorne,² “are gathered together in numbers, as in barracks, prisons, chain gangs, hulks, &c., there, beside the usual attendance, the Bishop, with two

¹ “Sydney Mail,” March 24th, 1877.

² “Catholic Mission of Australia.”

or three priests, is to be found at intervals, when by a succession of instructions, exhortations, and religious exercises, many are brought to repentance, and finally to the Sacraments. The hospitals, where one-half of the diseases are the direct offspring of crime, are daily visited. The prisoners in barracks are assembled on a week-day evening, as well as on Sunday. Where we have not time to be, our few ecclesiastical students are called in aid, and proceed two and two to catechize, instruct, and prepare the way for us. Every opportunity is embraced to bring back the poor lost ones to a sense of duty. The penitent is joyfully received at any hour of the day or night. We know of no rest but in the heart of the afflicted. Alas! how many that are now aliens would embrace the faith were there but pastors to instruct them; and how many returning prodigals, were there but fathers to receive them. Even from those of other opinions, I have known, out of forty-five condemned to death, no less than two-and-twenty, who have in their last hours, embraced the faith and died with all the signs of fervent repentance for their sins."

"The effect of these labours where they have reached has already (1837), with the grace of God, I am happy to say, become visible—so much so, that the superintendent of the convicts urged the fact, grounded upon the evidence of personal observation, as a motive for supporting our religion. The acting Chief-Justice, I am informed, has stated that since the arrival of the Bishop a very visible diminution has taken place in the number of police cases."

In constant and never-failing toil, such as has been here described, Dr. Polding passed the first years of his episcopal office. The morning labours gave place only to fresh work in the afternoon. Often, after midday, he would mount his horse and ride off to some chain-gang or other band of prisoners at a distance, and to them he devoted the afternoon till night-fall. He might be seen mixing among them whilst they were at work, instructing them in the faith and gently winning their confidence by his kindness. Whenever the men got into trouble, which they frequently did in those rough times, it was to Dr. Polding they went to help them out of it, and he never failed to stand by them. And whilst he thus toiled as a missionary, with no other thought but how to gain souls to God, no one knew better than he did, how on proper occasions to uphold the dignity of the episcopal office, and no bishop could have been more solicitous for the becoming splendour of the Divine worship.

At times Dr. Polding went on a missionary tour through the

interior, and often these visits to distant stations partook of the nature of a triumph which made the humble Bishop feel much out of his place. The Catholic settlers, who were very numerous in some parts, would come together and ride out to meet him some miles from the town to which he was journeying, and then forming in long lines would accompany him on his way. Arrived at the front of the house he was going to stay at, they would dismount, greet him with a hearty welcome, and kneel for his blessing. After the missionary labour was over, which generally occupied the Bishop several days, attended as on his arrival by a troop of horsemen, he visited the house of every settler in the district who was sober, and the steady father of a family, but passed over unnoticed any whose life and character he could not approve. It is said that there is hardly a family in any part of that vast district which has not treasured up the recollection of some such visit, and which cannot recall some kind words spoken on those occasions to young and old.

Of these labours there are of course many interesting details to be found in the letters which from time to time he sent to Europe. "You did not receive a letter from me by the last mail," he writes to one very dear friend, "for I was away up country—far away among the hills—not thinking of mails, or indeed of anything but missionary duties in which I was then engaged. I sent, however, some papers to you which contain detailed accounts of our reception and doings in the Maneroo Country. A glorious campaign we have had, and a great and abundant harvest of souls, but perhaps more remarkable even for thoroughness than for numbers. I was six weeks absent and kept all my appointments to the day and hour."

In another letter he writes, December, 1844:—"After confirming about fifty here and performing many other duties, we took horse and rode about 200 miles to Port Fairy and Portland Bay, taking the different stations *en route*. I myself baptized between forty and fifty children, and received a great number to the Sacraments. Three weeks were consumed on this journey—and a wearisome journey it was through bogs and marshes, miles and miles amidst snow and sleet and cold driving rain and wind, such as I never before experienced, or dreamt to be possible. The spirits which hold dominion in high places seemed furious that we had invaded their domain."

We will quote but one more of these letters which describes a fearful storm he and his party encountered on a missionary

enterprise :—" It is astonishing how very successful we have everywhere been. At the three stations upwards of 600 have been confirmed. How fast our missions grow. Only six years, and nearly 1,700 presented themselves for confirmation. Temperance and virtue seem to me to be on the increase. A most fearful storm overtook us before we crossed the Murray. I was driving in a 'buggy,' and providentially took shelter in a small inn whilst the worst was passing, otherwise I am sure my hand would not now be writing. When we went forward again we found that a hurricane, what they call a '*vein of wind*' in this country, had passed over the track and prostrated every tree, whirling like leaves or feathers large branches fifteen or sixteen inches in diameter, so that we could not possibly have escaped.

" At the gold fields we had a very great harvest—thanks be to God. I remained there ten days—the place is all huts and tents. Four of these ten days I spent alone in the Weddin Mountains, in the hopes of coming on a gang of bushrangers who resort there. Unfortunately seven troopers had come across them, and they scampered off in all directions, so that I was unable to find them. I, however, managed to instruct several members of the family of one of them who might be tempted to join them. I never met with any persons so ignorant of the first truths."

(To be continued.)

SOME ACCOUNT OF THE MONASTERY AND COLLEGE OF ST. GREGORY THE GREAT.

CHAPTER II.

EARLY DAYS.

FATHER AUGUSTINE JOHN BRADSHAW, with the mention of whose name we concluded our first chapter, was born at Worcester in 1576, and commenced his education in his native town. But as the circumstances which we have already narrated, made Catholic, and especially ecclesiastical education impossible in England, he was obliged to seek abroad what was denied him at home, and he completed his studies at St. Omer's and Valladolid. When at Valladolid, he fell dangerously ill, and he made a vow, that if it pleased God Almighty to restore him to health, he would enter