

LUIGI GENTILI

Apostle and Disciple of Blessed Antonio Rosmini

AA Belsito IC

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Introduction

At the recent General Assembly of the Institute of Charity there was some trepidation about the decision to amalgamate into one the three English speaking Provinces – USA, Ireland, UK; there was, however, unanimous agreement about the name of the newly constituted greater Province: it was to be known as the “Gentili Province”.

It seemed appropriate and fitting that such Province should take its name from Fr. Luigi Gentili. Even from his early days as a theology student in Rome, Gentili had received a pressing invitation to evangelise America from the Bishop of New York Mons. Dubois. He valued the invitation, but he could not accept it since Divine Providence was guiding his steps, through obedience, to the immense apostolic work in Great Britain and in Ireland. His name, however, constitutes a powerful symbolic link of the three old provinces into the unity of the new Gentili Province.

But there is another reason why the figure of Fr. Luigi Gentili is of great importance to the members of the new Province, and of the whole Institute of Charity. He is a powerful source of inspiration, both in his life as a Rosminian religious and in his approach to apostolic work.

He was one of the earliest companions of Blessed Antonio Rosmini and had the fortune of being “formed” into the religious life by him. It was Blessed Rosmini who nurtured his vocation in the Institute from the beginning, encouraging him to develop his exceptional spiritual gifts, and demanding from him far more than he demanded from others. Their correspondence is a classic example of sustained spiritual direction: robust, open, challenging, severe, yet informed by profound spiritual love and fatherly concern. Fr. Gentili venerated Blessed Rosmini, even though the difference in age was slight; he saw in him a true man of God, a holy Founder, a most persuasive philosopher and theologian. Blessed Rosmini grasped immediately the huge potential to holiness of the smart lawyer who had left everything to pursue the Will of God in the religious life with all his energy and talents.

Fr. Gentili died at the age of 47, consumed by his apostolic fatigues and by the severity of his ascetical life. The circumstances of his death provoked extreme admiration, and the word ‘martyr’ was spontaneously applied to him by the people, and by many of the bishops, priests, and religious who knew him well.

Fr. Gentili never committed the mistake of dissociating the contemplative life from the apostolic life. He remained a “contemplative” all through his religious life, even in the midst of his most pressing apostolic endeavours, for he knew that the apostle, to be such, must be truly a man of God, whether in the secrecy of his cell or in the pulpit. He was immersed in his work of personal purification, intense life of prayer, tender love for God while, at the same time, instructing, preaching, organising, leading people on the way to discovering the source of their faith in the depth of their heart.

Yet, he was cast in the mould of the great Apostles of the Church, Paul, Francis Xavier, Augustine of Canterbury. His burning desire, when he first arrived in Britain, was for the conversion of Protestants to the one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church, and he succeeded, with the grace of God, in bringing to the obedience of the faith thousand of people. Conversions to the Catholic Church remained an important dimension of all his

apostolic endeavours, and his missionary success was acknowledged and quoted, by Bishops in England and in Rome, as evidence of the “Second Spring” of the Catholic faith in Britain.

But he soon came to the realisation that conversions needed the fertile soil of a truly lived Catholic faith by the Catholic community, and without losing sight of the first objective, he dedicated all his energy to the evangelisation of Catholics, to “convert” them to a revival of their ancient faith, to help them re-discover the beauty and the power of worship, of the Sacraments, of ethical obedience, of the pursuit of holiness. In this, he was immensely successful, reaching out to priests and religious by means of private and public retreats, and to parishes all over the country by giving Missions.

Retreats and Missions had a special place in the heart of Fr. Gentili, as the privileged means for renewal of the Catholic faith. He often reminded Blessed Rosmini of the providential fact that Sacro Monte Calvario, the cradle of the Institute of Charity, had been for centuries, before the foundation of the Institute, a place for Retreats and for Missions.

Fr. Gentili’s first missionary efforts in Britain were dedicated to the educational establishments at Prior Park. He saw in this calling the hand of Divine Providence, indicating to the Institute the huge value of the education of young people. He responded with great generosity at Prior Park, and for seven years the Institute sent many religious from Italy to the College, working tirelessly for no financial remuneration. It was Fr. Gentili who believed so firmly in the special calling of the Institute to intellectual charity in the field of education, that he put pressure on Blessed Rosmini for the building of Ratcliffe College, in Leicestershire.

This issue of Witness is dedicated to Fr. Gentili, on the occasion of the formation of the new Gentili Province. It was Divine Providence that guided the Institute towards taking this important decision and is guiding now the members of the Province to discover the signs behind the enthusiastic agreement on the name and the figure of Fr. Luigi Gentili.

Fr. Gentili was a faithful disciple of Blessed Rosmini, and a great Apostle. As a disciple, Fr. Gentili is a powerful example of a life committed to the daily purification of conscience and to the pursuit of virtues, through poverty, austerity, humility, obedience, intense love of God, and of neighbour. He loved community life, and he longed for it whenever his duties made it impossible for him to be with his brethren.

He was also a great Apostle, burning with a holy desire to bring people to the full knowledge of Christ and of His Church and to rekindle in the hearts of the Catholic population the power of the faith received at Baptism, in obedience to the Church, by way of the Sacraments, through worship, and traditional devotions.

Fr. Gentili was at the same time on Mount Tabor and on Mount Calvary, to use one of his expressions: a contemplative and an apostolic man, fulfilling at the same time the two commandments of JESUS: “Love God with all your heart, mind and strength; and love your neighbour as you love yourself”.

What are the providential signs to be gleaned from the life of Fr. Gentili? We may perhaps like to reflect on the following landmarks, to guide us on the journey of the new Gentili Province:

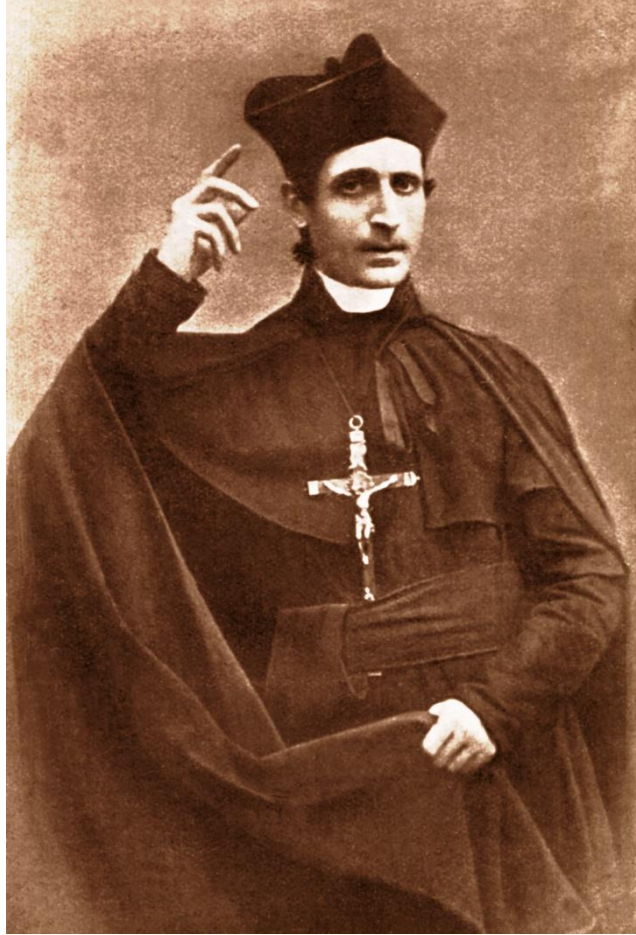
1. Profound personal commitment to holiness, through the contemplative and the apostolic life, Tabor and Calvary at the same time;
2. Intellectual charity, through the evangelisation of culture, and through the formation of young people in Catholic education;
3. Pastoral shift towards more universal forms of spiritual charity: Retreats, both private and public, to clergy, religious, and lay people; and Missions in parishes, with the express purpose of reviving the faith of the Catholic people through instructions, meditation, and the celebration of the Sacraments, especially Confession and the Eucharist;
4. Re-discovery of traditional forms of devotion: to the Blessed Sacrament (Adoration, processions), and to Mary, the Blessed Mother of God;
5. Interest for and nurturing of vocations, following the example of Blessed Rosmini with Fr. Gentili, and of Fr. Gentili with Frs. Furlong, Hutton, Lockhart, and many other.

Fr A A Belsito IC
Feast of the Annunciation 2009
(Re-edited in 2019)



Blessed Antonio Rosmini

CHAPTER ONE



EARLY YEARS

“My parents were saintly parents, to whose care, vigilance, and good example I owe everything under God. May He reward them for the good they have done me, which I did not deserve” (Fr. Gentili)

Luigi Gentili was born in Rome on 14th July 1801, on the feast-day of St. Bonaventure, a Doctor of the Church noted for the depth and beauty of his philosophical writings, and for his great devotion to the Virgin Mary.

His mother, Anna Maria Gnaccarini, was a saintly woman of Roman origins. Luigi was the first-born of her 12 children. His father, Giuseppe Gentili, was from Citta' Ducale, near Naples, and had qualified in Rome as a lawyer with the help of his uncle, a zealous priest and lecturer of theology at the Roman College, by the name of Giuseppe Marconi. The success of Gentili's practice guaranteed a comfortable existence and a good education for the children.

"Luigi Bonaventura Francesco Camillo" was baptized the day after his birth; one of his godparents was a Francesco Brunatti from Rovereto, the birthplace of Antonio Rosmini, a fact which the mature Luigi interpreted as an early providential sign of his future life.

He had a happy and carefree childhood, naturally open to beauty, friendship, and love of learning. His exceptional qualities and diligent application allowed him to win top prizes all through the years of his primary and secondary education. The prize he won in 1815 – at the age of 14 – was explained thus: *"Luigi Gentili is a young man with a bright future, of strong intellectual ability, passionate about his studies, and endowed with great love for honesty and integrity"*.

The young Luigi was a man in a great hurry. He was admitted at the Sapienza University in Rome at the age of 16, to study civil and canon law, and although he was the youngest member of his class he outperformed everyone with his power of thought and the strength of his application. He was 21 years old when he obtained, summa cum laude, the double Doctorate in civil and ecclesiastical law. His wider academic interests had also gained him membership in the two prestigious Academies of Roman society, the Roman and the Arcadian, the first centred on Italian Literature the second on archaeological studies and research. He had a profound understanding of Dante and knew by heart nearly all of the Divine Comedy.

He worked for two years in well-known legal practices in Rome, gaining experience and making important contacts in the profession. He then opened his own legal studio, soon acquiring a good reputation for a series of highly successful legal victories. But he was ambitious and forward looking and succeeded in arousing the interest of the most powerful and influential ecclesiastic of the day, Cardinal Ercole Consalvi, the Secretary of State of Pius VII and well-known leader of the Sacra Romana Rota, the most important ecclesiastical tribunal of the Church.

Luigi began a thorough study of all of Cardinal Consalvi's legal cases, producing tables and annotations of the various arguments and identifying the wisdom running through each case right up to its successful resolution. The study, which was meant for publication, involved meetings with the Cardinal himself, who became so convinced of the outstanding skills of the young lawyer that he promised him the post of judge at the Sacra Romana Rota. Luigi was about 23 years old, and it looked as though he was about to fulfil his dearest ambitions.

The sudden death of Cardinal Consalvi, however, brought to an end all his legal projects and his dream of becoming rich and famous by means of the legal profession. He took the drastic and extraordinary decision of quitting altogether the legal career, to the astonishment of family and friends alike.

His brother, Antonio Gentili, writing a few years later, tried to explain this unpredictable decision, providing, at the same time, an insight into the mind and heart of Luigi. The successful young lawyer was very conscious of his many talents and gifts and burned with the ambition of reaching the top in all his endeavours. He was determined and had little patience; and even failure did not deter him, he simply looked for alternative routes to reach the summit. It will be this “ruthless” quest that will drive, at a later stage, Fr. Gentili to embark with all his energies and talents on the way to personal holiness and to offer himself without reservations to the love of God and neighbour in his apostolate.

One of these alternative routes led Luigi, on this occasion, to lock himself up in his room for one whole year, immersed in the study of three modern languages, Spanish, French, and English. His family and friends worried about his mental stability, but he came out of it at the end of the year with a sound grammatical knowledge and with the ability to speak with sufficient fluency all three languages - quite an achievement!

Luigi then turned his attention to the many foreigners who had made of Rome their residence or who lived in Rome either as representatives of their country or by reason of their office in the many ecclesiastical houses or colleges, or who simply chose Rome as their place of residence during the winter months. Luigi found himself at ease with them all. A lawyer by profession, a fine linguist, a man of wide culture, especially knowledgeable of the many archaeological sites of Rome and surrounding areas, a handsome man, tall, with deep blue eyes, and a captivating voice, Luigi became a familiar face in the many social gatherings at embassies and in the private homes of the rich and wealthy members of foreign aristocratic families.

He soon realised that musical skills would considerably enhance his standing and popularity among the more noble families, and so he made the decision to learn to play some musical instruments, and to sing. One day, his brother Antonio reports, Luigi arrived at the house with three men carrying a piano and had it put into his room. Ignoring the amused comments of the members of his family, he engaged top piano teachers and became quite proficient in a very short time. He took singing lessons at the same time from the best teachers in Rome, who trained his melodious voice both for choir and for solo singing.

He then joined the Philharmonic Society, which gave public concerts, and was soon requested to take the solos, which he did with great satisfaction. The Austrian Ambassador, Count Appony, and the French, Viscount De Chateaubriand, began inviting him to play and to sing at the receptions at their Embassies, and soon his reputation grew among the aristocratic families of Roman society. He attended such events not as a paid musician but as a welcome guest, mixing with the high nobility, joining in sophisticated conversations, and singing when asked by the other guests.

Mixing regularly with princes, dukes, counts, marquises and barons, Luigi looked for a way of raising his own social standing by acquiring a title of nobility, and he was

fortunate to strike a friendship with the Duke Sforza Cesarini who possessed the hereditary privilege of being able to confer the title of "*Count and Knight of the Golden Spur*". The Duke was delighted to fulfil the desire of his talented and noble friend and bestowed on Luigi the written title and its decorations. From that day, as his brother Antonio reports, Luigi appeared at public functions or receptions as often as he could, to have the pleasure of hearing himself announced as "*the knight and count Don Luigi Gentili*".

It is not clear how Luigi managed to support himself financially during this very ambitious period, but he probably had earned a good deal in his legal practice. He mixed with foreign visitors and residents not for the sake of money but because he found the whole experience stimulating and rewarding as far as his own social position was concerned. But good money began to come in, in an unexpected manner.

Some of his society friends asked him, as an expert linguist, to teach them Italian. He refused at first, thinking the task inferior to his social standing, but seeing their insistence he agreed to do it, but not for money. He was a brilliant teacher, and soon the number of people, and particularly English visitors, increased considerably to such a degree that they themselves asked him to accept very handsome fees for his lessons. It was an occupation that took him also to Naples, Sorrento, and other cities where the English-speaking visitors would often spend their summer months.

Luigi was soon able to put aside a considerable sum of money, and decided to invest it in a country estate, buying a farm on Monte Mario, near the Vatican, which included vineyards and also some derelict land which he planned to bring back to cultivation. He was now fired with the desire to bring back among his countrymen the ancient agricultural love of Republican Rome, and he immersed himself into the study of agriculture both in relation to the ancient Roman methods and to modern technology. He began to give advice to his neighbouring farmers on how to cultivate the land successfully, and he learned how to use a plough, with his own oxen, and he spent his days out in the fields, reclaiming the land that had become derelict, and renovating his vineyards.

The experiment could not last long, since the strenuous physical work took a heavy toll on his health and his doctors advised him to give up farming altogether and to return to his more gentle occupations.

He was now 27 and as busy and as popular as ever among the circle of expatriates, especially those from England. He decided that the time had come for him to take a wife, and he set his heart on a young girl, Anna De Mendoza y Rios, whose father had been a Spanish Admiral who had settled in England and who had married a wealthy English lady. Both parents had died, and Anna was still under two guardians, a Madame Chaussegros and Bishop Baines, who was resident in Rome at the time. Luigi had a chance of seeing the girl on a number of occasions at the salon of Madame Chaussegros and it is more than likely that their feelings of love were mutual.

Luigi went to see Bishop Baines, as her guardian, to ask for permission to marry Anna. To his consternation, both guardians refused their consent, and, to give the clearest possible message, they sent her back to England at once.

The refusal of his marriage caused utter despair and seriously shook the self-confidence of the ambitious young man. His sense of dejection extended to all that he had done and achieved over the previous years, and slowly, but surely, he turned to God as the only solid rock of his life. He later referred to this period of the refusal as the time of his “conversion”, centring in on God as the source of all wisdom and the fulfilment of all his most profound desires.

Luigi had always led a simple but sincere religious life. His “saintly parents” brought up their children according to accepted doctrines and a warm devout love for God, for Mary, all the Saints, and the Angels. One of the rooms of their house was used regularly as a prayer room, where the Rosary and other devotions were recited by the whole family, often led by Luigi as the eldest of the children. As a young boy he had joined the Sodality of St. Aloysius Gonzaga, taking part fully to processions and devotions in honour of the Saint. It was at the Sodality that he met the future Pius IX, then a thoughtful boy in charge of groups of younger boys, like Luigi.

Even as a university student, Luigi joined the Sodality of the Purification of the Virgin Mary, faithfully fulfilling all its religious obligations. He had a most striking devotion to Mary since his early childhood, and one custom which was very dear to him all through his life was to recite daily the five Psalms whose initials make up the word “Maria”, in honour of the Virgin Mary. He had inherited this devotion but contributed to its spreading it not only in Italy but also in Great Britain and Ireland.

He had been faithful to his religious practice all his life, approaching the Sacraments with profound love and gratitude to God, and as often as he could. Even during the summer periods in the company of his foreign friends to whom he was teaching Italian, he never neglected his religious duties, as he himself wrote: *“When I went to Naples, I continued to approach the Sacraments and I never neglected any of my religious duties. I was able then to gain much wisdom about the fallacy of all material things, and the permanence of the eternal, in which true happiness is to be found”*.

A singular event happened at about this time, which shows once again the predominance of his Christian convictions over worldly prejudices. He had been seriously offended and had been asked to take part in a duel to have his name cleared. Luigi was horrified at the thought of the possibility of killing someone, even if that someone had caused great offence to him. He was impetuous by nature, and duels were still an accepted part of social life, but he was not prepared to go against the commandments of the Gospels. He went straight to the other person, offering at once his forgiveness and his peace.

CHAPTER TWO



THE MEETING WITH BLESSED ROSMINI

“Father, give me everything” (Blessed Rosmini)

The refusal of his marriage plunged Luigi into a profound personal crisis. But, unlike Lot's wife, he did not allow his despair to take over his life or to curb his aspirations of greatness and success. On the contrary, he put himself resolutely on to the steep and winding path that would finally take him to the great heights of holiness. He used the word "conversion": he opened his eyes to the true values and the true glory, and he sold everything in order to possess the treasure of immense value and the pearl of great beauty of the Gospel.

He withdrew from "the world" and began a humble life of service to God, joining the company of learned and devout priests, attending all religious functions with commitment and dedication, living at home as in a monastery, reading the life of Saints, books on spirituality and doctrine, and visiting the sick and those in prisons.

He joined the Sodality of the Sacred Heart, founded with the purpose of fostering love for the Blessed Sacrament, and the Oratory of Fr. Caravita, whose members met for exercises of piety and devotion and for learned discussions about the faith. It was their custom to walk home late at night saying the Rosary and singing the Litanies in public through the streets of Rome, as a witness of devotion to Mary. His brother Antonio left this witness about Luigi's new attitude: *"All his conversation now was of God, Our Lady, the saints and martyrs, miracles, priests, friars, nuns, hermits, the Holy Bible, and such things"*.

This sudden and unexpected change of life caused a stir in Rome. Quite a few of his old friends thought that he had gone mad, others that he was simply going through the humiliating stage of his failure in love, soon to return to his acclaimed and popular way of life, mixing with the nobility and the expatriates as their most welcome guest, and others finally attributed his current lifestyle to his voluble and unsteady character. But Luigi would insist, *"Let the world say whatever it likes. He who sees the interior of my mind will decide whether this is madness, as the world supposes it to be"*.

He struck a great friendship with two Jesuit priests, Frs. Minnini and Buonvicini, who were professors of theology at the Roman University, and through them he was introduced to many others of the Society of Jesus. It was natural for Luigi to think that the best way of pursuing his vocation to holiness was to become a priest in the Society of Jesus, and he tried to make a formal approach on at least three occasions. However, each time he was about to enter the novitiate he had to return home because of persistent high fever.

He was advised then to concentrate on recovering his health in the small town of S. Gregorio, near Tivoli, where his father had strong connections as the land-agent of the feudal lord of the small town. He settled at the Carmelite Monastery of S. Maria Nova, and the quiet life of rest and prayer restored him fully to good health. Notable was his intervention in the scandalous hatred of two priests for each other, the rector of the Church at S. Gregorio and his curate. The whole town spoke about it, and parish life had come to a standstill. Luigi went to see the curate and spoke to him with passion, reminding him of his duty to be a witness of love and forgiveness: *"I too suffered great injury, he said, and was challenged to a duel, but I was the first to go to my enemy, embrace him, and give him the kiss of peace"*.

He returned to Rome with his mind firmly set on the priesthood. Although still a layman, he obtained permission to attend theology lessons at the Roman College, and it was during this period of preparation to the priesthood that he met Fr. Rosmini.

Fr. Rosmini had arrived in Rome the previous year, November 1828, with the double task of publishing his major work on philosophy (New Essay on the Origin of Ideas), and on spirituality (Maxims of Christian Perfection), and of asking the Pope's blessings on the Institute of Charity which had had its small beginning at Calvario, Domodossola on 20th February 1828.

Gentili knew well what high society had to say about the "abate Rosmini", of his holiness, of his modesty, of his aristocratic family, of his encyclopaedic learning. He had managed to read one of Fr. Rosmini's earlier books, "On Christian Education", about which the famous Alessandro Manzoni had said, "Reading the book one has the impression of listening to one of the great Fathers of the Church".

Fr. Rosmini was recovering from smallpox when he was visited by the young lawyer Gentili. The two got on well, with Gentili asking many questions about philosophy, theology, and about the Institute of Charity. They saw each other frequently, until one day Gentili spoke to Fr. Rosmini about his desire to be a member of his Institute of Charity. Fr. Rosmini gave him the Constitutions to read, and Gentili had the fortune of listening to Fr. Rosmini's explanations of the foundational principles: desire for holiness, passivity and purification of conscience, indifference, contemplative life, universality of love and of obedience, etc.

Gentili felt the power and the beauty of the spirituality of Fr. Rosmini and was attracted to it by the inner consent of his mind and heart. He asked Fr. Rosmini for financial help that would allow him to complete his theological studies before his ordination to the priesthood. He made the request in great humility and in a state of acute embarrassment, given his natural pride. The fact was that he had been forced to mix his studies with giving Italian lessons to wealthy foreigners in order not to be a burden on his family. But he now felt that progress in his theological studies depended on his giving them his total attention.

Fr. Rosmini agreed to assist him and arranged for him to take up residence at the Irish College, where Gentili could lead a religious life and attend his studies at the Roman College. From that time, Gentili considered himself a member of the Institute and he wrote a few letters to Fr. Loewenbruck, the first disciple of Fr. Rosmini, expressing his desire to join him soon at Calvario for the novitiate. This is what Gentili wrote to him on 27 February 1830: *"I feel more and more that it was God's will that Fr. Rosmini should come to my help not only to assist me on my spiritual journey but also that I should become his disciple, and that he should be the star to lead me to the Lord"*.

On the feast of the Annunciation, 1830, Gentili received the tonsure and two of the Minor Orders. Fr. Rosmini was present at the ceremony, and both thanked the Virgin Mary for that great grace. Shortly afterward, Fr. Rosmini left Gentili and Rome and made his way to Calvario, commending the new vocation to God, and speaking about Gentili to Pope Pius VIII, as he went to obtain his blessing before leaving.

Gentili immersed himself in his theological studies at the Irish College. Matthew Collier, one of his companions, described Gentili's time at the College in these terms: *"Gentili's life at the College was the life of a most perfect saint. He loved to teach Italian to the students so that we would be able to read the many beautiful books written about spirituality and theology. He had a great devotion to the Mother of God, and a great desire to inflame our hearts with the same love. He observed with care all the rules of the College, praying at all times and fasting frequently"*.

Fr. Rosmini had left Gentili a "small gift" with their common friend, Fr. Paolo Barola, a gift which Gentili found puzzling at first: it was a letter from Fr. Rosmini containing a "brotherly correction" about the way to speak to others: not with arrogance, as though they knew little, but with humility and almost sharing, as it were, a common truth, so as not to make them feel inferior or ignorant. It is likely that the eloquent lawyer presented his views quite forcefully and at length, lecturing rather than discussing. Fr. Rosmini, who had noticed this aspect of Gentili's personality, had wanted to make his friend aware wishing him to adopt a more humble and modest way of talking to others.

It is surprising to learn from this letter of the great difficulty Fr. Rosmini found in speaking about this to Gentili: *"I felt guilty about keeping it quiet, and yet I could not bring myself to say it openly to you, and even though I did try a few times, I never actually managed to do it. This is certainly a weakness on my part, because between dear brothers and friends as we are, there should be much more freedom and familiarity"*. On the part of Gentili, however, the reply came as expected: *"I thank you from my heart for the advice to curb my foolish chatter. But why didn't you rebuke me directly? Has not the Lord put us together to help each other on the way to holiness? I beseech you in the name of our most beloved Mother to let me know openly all the faults, failings, vices that you see in me, giving me also the indications of how to overcome them, since my only desire is to rid myself of the "old self" and be one with God in holiness. Please, do continue to give me such gifts, not small but big, and as often as you can"*.

Gentili did not know what he was asking! Fr. Rosmini took it as a duty to rebuke him firmly whenever necessary, for small or big mistakes, often imposing on him severe acts of penance as reparation. He did not like the task, as he explained to Gentili: *"You are quite right to reprove me: I confessed my fault in my previous letter — my fault of pusillanimity. And the origin of this, as I said, is my sense of unworthiness, to which I did not want to add the temerity of wishing to remove the mote from someone else's eye while I had a beam in my own. I cannot express to you how great is the unworthiness I see in myself; I cannot even fully take it in"*.

Fr. Rosmini had a clear perception that Gentili was no ordinary person, and he felt the responsibility, as his spiritual father, to guide him gently but firmly into the way to holiness. *"Only great persons can form great persons"*, wrote Fr. Rosmini: we can see the truth of the statement by observing the manner used by him of making of Luigi Gentili, by the grace of God, a great saint.

The occasion for further "gifts" came soon enough. Fr. Rosmini had agreed to help Gentili financially once assured of his intention of joining the Institute at Calvario, Domodossola, soon after his ordination to the priesthood, planned for September of that same year 1830. The day of the ordination came, but Gentili continued to delay his

departure, for various reasons, and it was only after a very strong letter from Fr. Rosmini at the beginning of August 1831 that he finally took the step of leaving his family and Rome for Sacro Monte Calvario of Domodossola, to begin his novitiate.

The period in between was defined by both Fr. Rosmini and Gentili as the period of “temptations”, orchestrated by the devil to destroy the young man’s vocation to the Institute of Charity.

It seems certain that Calvario, an isolated, cold, austere hermitage in a remote part of the Alps, did not have a great appeal at first for the young lawyer, who had spent so much of his time frequenting the company of princes, ambassadors, and members of the Roman high society, and who had enjoyed the cosmopolitan setting of papal Rome. He feared the predictably harsh nature of that place, and, moreover, he expected strong opposition from his family and even the ridicule of friends on account of the fragility of his health.

Fr. Rosmini tried, at times, to entice him by describing the great spiritual work pursued at Calvario: *“I have found things here even better than I expected; everything is well organized, thanks to our dear Don Giovanni Loewenbruck; there is perfect unity, much fervour and humility, both in our good deacon Molinari and in the brethren ... God is clearly present in all this. Divine Providence is blessing the works done in the locality, so that great spiritual fruit is to be seen, and the people show a disposition to advance in perfection. Here there is much going on, there are great expectations, and many demands are made on us. But we are short of workers. Oh, if only you were here too! Certainly, you would be able to do much good, God willing, by working humbly and secretly. Humility is something precious to me, and to be hidden away is most pleasing. The one thing I fear is that we may not be able to continue like this for long. But we must leave all to God and our holy Mother, Mary”*.

“Oh, if only you were here too!” These words expressed both a wish and a worry, the latter more, perhaps, than the former, as it can be seen from another passage of a subsequent letter:

“Still I confess I have some fears for you, since you may face the deceits of the world during this period when you have not yet entirely escaped de laqueo venantium (from the snare of the fowlers). For I have read about (and unfortunately experienced within myself) how great is the subtlety, the craftiness, of the enemy of mankind when it is a matter of attacking and upsetting the things for which he has an unmeasured hatred.

Not that you must suppose this to mean that I have lost confidence in you — not at all, my friend. I simply have doubts about human nature, about myself, about this sinful flesh of ours, our fickle heart, our ignorance of mind, that spirit of presumption that unfortunately we have inherited from our first parents. And this goes for all my poor, wretched brothers and sisters, the rest of mankind. This, then, is why I am apprehensive (I say this plainly) during all this time when you are surrounded by so many relatives, friends and various allurements”.

The temptations that afflicted the young Gentili were of diverse nature and intensity, some easily overcome by his own good sense, others only as a result of very strong words from Fr. Rosmini.

The day before Pentecost of 1830 Gentili became a deacon, strengthened by the many prayers offered for him by his friends at Calvario. He thanked Fr. Rosmini, and wrote to him, *"Woe to me, woe to me should I be slow in taking advantage of the many favours the Lord bestows on me. What will it be of me before the judgment seat of God, without the help of my sweetest hope, Mary?"*

It was at about this time that he found himself under intense pressure to join Bishop Duboy of New York with the purpose of exercising his priestly ministry in that great diocese. The bishop did not know of the promise that bound Gentili to Fr. Rosmini but had heard great things about him and was very keen that he should be part of his untiring apostolic mission in the States. Gentili felt honoured by the insistent request from the Prelate, but he replied explaining his links to the Institute of Charity and the fact that he had never felt a vocation to do his priestly work in America.

Next, there was a letter from Bishop Baines, urging him to join a strong group of his friends at the English College who would be travelling to Prior Park near Bath to work in a College the bishop had built for the rebirth of Catholicism in Britain. The request, this time, was supported by the Rectors of the English and Irish Colleges, and it corresponded to a most profound aspiration in his own heart, to spend his energy and labours in bringing Britain under the obedience of the faith. The conversion of England to its ancient Catholic faith was a burning desire for Gentili, and, looking at his life in its totality and from a distance, we can easily discover it to be the golden thread that bound together all the experiences of his years of formation.

It would have been easy for Gentili to take the pressing call of the Bishop as a clear sign of God's will; but, remembering his promise to Fr. Rosmini, he replied to the Bishop that he was bound to the Institute of Charity, but that he had the hope that in the near future, after the formal approbation of the Institute, Fr. Rosmini may be in a position to send to Prior Park not only Gentili but a few more members of the Order besides. The bishop accepted his words and kept close to his heart this expressed hope of future cooperation.

Gentili felt elated at the overcoming of such powerful temptation, and wrote to Fr. Rosmini in a colourful style: *"Even if the crown of the Chinese Empire should be offered to me, I would never consider it anything before the glory of Monte Calvario: haec requies mea in saeculum saeculi, hic habitabo quoniam elegi eam [here I shall find my rest for ever and ever, here shall I dwell since I have chosen it]. Even if the rule of the whole world should be given to me, I would willingly ignore it. My chosen lot is a life of obscurity, abnegation, suffering, tied to the cross; and not great mansions and riches. Even if the universe should fall, I shall not be moved from my holy vocation".*

Fr. Rosmini received further confirmation of the promising qualities of Gentili from his own friend Count Mellerio, who had been to Rome and had met the young deacon on a number of occasions. He wrote to Fr. Rosmini, praising the loyal and sincere character of the young Roman, his commitment and simplicity: *"He has a most beautiful spirituality, I am certain he will be extremely successful in the religious life".*

The next temptation originated from within his heart, and it was perhaps the most dangerous. To Fr. Rosmini's expressed wish, "Oh, if only you were here too!" Gentili

replied with a puzzling letter in which he produced all sorts of excuses in order to try to delay his departure from Rome until the spring of 1831. He began by saying that the eventual departure from Rome had to be in secret, so as not to be noticed by the many friends who would not understand it and would call it madness; moreover, it had to be after a long period of preparation of the members of his own family who would find his departure a devastating experience; and finally, it could not be done during the winter's months, since he feared for his own health.

Fr. Rosmini replied with a most robust letter, a precious testimony of his strong fatherly affection for Gentili, and a revelation of the way he himself had to deal with a similar temptation brought by his tender love for his mother:

*“My dear brother in Jesus Christ,
The love which I have for you (and I beg you to treat me henceforth in the same frank manner), and the desire you express in your letter, that I should be generous (as you put it) towards you even while we are at a distance by making you not small presents but big ones, and as often as possible, makes me show you in practice that I will not fail to satisfy your holy request; and so I will make such remarks about your letter as seem to me useful, and which I trust will be well received by you, with the same fraternal love in which they are offered.*

So I feel prompted to put you on your guard against the devil, who will certainly do his best to impede all your good resolutions. I fear I see in you a certain lack of generosity, and instead some pusillanimity. There is nothing so contrary to the service of God as this. Notice well, my dear friend, that I say ‘I fear’; and by this I mean that it may not be so; but I want you to make a diligent examination of conscience to see if ever the devil manages to infect you with weakness and faintheartedness, so that (should this be the case) you can immediately banish these things, and instead show the generosity of our divine Master, Jesus Christ the conqueror of the devil. When Satan sees that we are courageous he loses heart, and after a few more attacks he leaves us alone. But if he sees that things are otherwise, that we are cowardly and feeble, this is what he wants: he leaves us no peace, and if we do not at once banish our fear, then he has won the victory.

You show in your letter a great apprehension over the gossip of the world. My dear friend, if we are afraid of what the world says, we shall never do anything that makes for the glory of God. There is nothing I care less about than such chattering. But notice that I am not saying that if one course of action rather than another excites less gossip, we should not prefer it. What I am saying is that we should never neglect even the slightest opportunity of doing good on account of what the world might say. If we took any notice of such things, we should soon be inhibited from doing any good; since the world will always go in for gossip, and even persecution.

You say that if people knew of your departure from Rome, ‘they would regard this as a worse madness than the first, and would take any steps to prevent it, since they would find it incredible that someone who for health reasons had not been able to enter a religious house on the Quirinal [in Rome, where the Jesuits had their novitiate] could ever truly be called by God to a place in the foothills of the Alps, if he knew what he was doing.

Really! Is what the world calls madness truly so? If so, then the cross of Christ is madness too; and so is the gospel; and so is the action of the apostles, who exposed themselves to all sorts of dangers and sufferings among barbarian nations; so is the witness of faith given by the holy martyrs ... all madness. But in reality, how desirable is this kind of 'madness'; would that I had this same madness, and that it were incurable and went to extremes! This divine madness is something I long for, and with tears daily plead to God for. I am certain that you will not really regard this as madness, but rather see it as true wisdom...

So, the world, you think, would compare the Quirinal with the foothills of the Alps. That is its way. But Jesus, on the contrary said: True worshippers adore the Father in spirit and in truth. And as for health: if the world judged as you say, it would be doing so in its usual mistaken fashion, making no distinction between the time when you were ill and the present, when you are well again. And as for coming here, 'not knowing what you are doing': certainly, the world has no idea of what is done in holy retirement. But those who are sent away from the crazy world by the impulse of the Holy Spirit do know.

I am quite sure that when Jesus Christ went into the desert, the world had no understanding of what he went there to do. But Christ did not expect the world to understand. Indeed, how can the world ever understand such things? But we ought to understand them. And if we fail to do so, that is because we too are of the world. 'Not knowing what you are about'? Is it possible that such a verdict can trouble you? I will tell the world very plainly what I have come here to do: to fulfil my vocation; to answer the call of God; to get well away from so foolish a world; to purify my conscience; to save my soul. That is what is to be done here. And this cannot be a small matter — not for you, not for me. Heaven help anyone who does not know what he has to do in the place where he is called by the Lord. How remote from the spirit of our Institute is the world's reasoning. For goodness' sake examine yourself, look into yourself, so that you may not be in the least contaminated by the slightest shadow of worldliness.

I did not let such attractions stop me from coming here; I do not think I was held back by such considerations for a single day. I too have a mother whom I greatly love, and who sent me letters and advice, and ordered me not to leave home. I should like you to see what I replied to her. I have kept copies of some of my letters; and I am sure they would seem to 'the world' too hard — because it does not understand the love of Christ. I told her plainly that she must cease to give me orders or send me requests, because she has no right to do so over such matters; that if I acceded to her wishes I should be doing her will, not the will of my Father, who is my God. Therefore, she should not write to me any more in this fashion. And she has not done so. We have to say, Get thee behind me, Satan to our family, as Christ did to St Peter. You have made me behave foolishly in talking about myself...

Gentili felt the strength of the wise words of Fr. Rosmini and hurried to reassure him that his vocation to the Institute was as strong as ever, and that he had used some exaggerated expressions. In effect, he said, he had no fear of the contempt of the world and was prepared to walk to Calvario with people on the left and on the right making fun of him, ridiculing him, offending him; as for relatives and friends, he was prepared to step over them had they tried to stop his exit from Rome by lying on the road; and,

finally, that he was truly ready to come to Calvario in the autumn if that was the wish of Fr. Rosmini.

This frank exchange had helped Gentili to put aside his difficulties and anxieties, and he began a period of preparation for the ordination to the priesthood. He had to sit the final exams, but in the middle of his preparation and days before his exams, he was taken ill with severe fever, difficulty in breathing, and kidney trouble. His response to the new setback can be found in a letter he wrote to Fr. Rosmini: *“Let the Almighty God be blessed for ever, who deals so tenderly towards me. It has been the Lord’s pleasure to reveal to me not so much the greatness of the priesthood, which is always before my eyes, but the immense unworthiness of His servant, so full of sin and guilt”*.

He attributed to “Mary my Mother” his sudden miraculous recovery to health, just in time for him to pass his final exams and to do his ten days spiritual retreat as an immediate preparation to his ordination.

Gentili became a priest on 18th September 1830, in the Basilica of St. John Lateran, and the ordination Mass was presided by Cardinal Placido Zurla. Like many other priests, Gentili refused to speak about the great spiritual blessings experienced on that blessed day. But he spoke, at times, of a detail that he interpreted as a “sign” from heaven: *“As I lay prostrate during the litany of the Saints, I had a heavy flow of blood from my nose, and seeing the floor becoming red as a result, I meditated upon the precious Blood flowing from the face of JESUS at the beginning of His own Passion in Gethsemani, and I offered my own blood in union with His, burning with desire of a martyrdom of love. I was amazed to see that the flux of blood came to an end at the right time, and I was able to stand up and go to my place with no blood at all on my face or on my white vestments”*.

He celebrated his first Mass at the Convent of the nuns called “Turchine”, to please his aunt, Sr. Clair of JESUS, who was a member of that community. On the following day he offered the Mass for Fr. Rosmini and the community at Calvario.

A few days later, however, he was taken ill again, and the doctors recommended a period of rest on the mountains near Rome. He chose the monastery of Santa Maria Nuova, run by the Augustinians. There, he immersed himself in prayer and in the study of philosophy, learning attentively Fr. Rosmini’s masterpiece, The New Essay on the Origin of Ideas. This prolonged research on philosophical matters would assist him greatly when he would have to teach philosophy to seminarians and priests at Prior Park.

When he returned to Rome, he was asked to take charge of the “Congregazione degli Ignorantelli”, that is, of a large group of children of very poor background who gathered on Sundays for religious instruction and for prayers. Gentili enjoyed the pastoral work with them, and, by means of his various skills he attracted and instructed many on the way of the Lord. Such experience and skills with the poorest of children would be put to good use in his ministry in the poor towns in Leicestershire, and during his later missions in Great Britain and Ireland.

Winter had passed, and Gentili was beginning to make preparations to join Fr. Rosmini at Calvario. He had learned of the humble manner Fr. Rosmini had accepted to be the

Superior of the small community, after repeated requests from both Fr. Loewenbruck and Molinari. Fr. Rosmini had asked them to pray and fast for three days, during which time he had opened his conscience fully to Fr. Loewenbruck giving him permission to discuss his “pitiful and sinful” condition with Molinari.

Fr. Rosmini accepted with reluctance the nomination and began his ministry to the brethren by serving them at mealtime for two weeks. He began his novitiate in spirit of total submission to the spiritual guidance of Fr. Loewenbruck.

Fr. Gentili closely followed the events and wished to join his spiritual father as a novice. But he had to overcome two temptations which would further delay his departure from Rome. The first was brought about by the insistence of a young convert who had come recently to Rome to look for a priest who would accompany him back to Leicestershire to serve a small number of Catholics, and to engage in the active conversion of his country to the Catholic faith.

His name was Ambrose Phillips De Lisle, a striking figure of the period which became known as “the second spring” of the Catholic faith in Great Britain. A son of the aristocracy, Ambrose had converted to Catholicism at the age of 16, and from that time his heart burned with the holy desire of bringing Britain back to its Catholic faith. In his early twenties he had also converted to the faith in an astonishingly brief time a young Anglican parson, the Hon. George Spencer, a son of Earl Spencer and brother of Lord Althorp, who was soon afterwards to become Chancellor of the Exchequer. After his conversion, George Spencer applied to Bishop Walsh for admission to the priesthood, and he was sent to the English College in Rome to test his vocation and to study under young Mons. Wiseman.

Ambrose had come to Rome to accompany his friend and to seek for a “learned, pious and zealous priest” who would return with him to England, become his chaplain and open a mission at Grace Dieu, in a wide district where Catholic life had been virtually extinct for generations. The Rector of the Irish College suggested the name of Luigi Gentili, and arranged a meeting between the two.

It was a moving encounter: the young Ambrose knelt before Fr. Gentili, asking his blessing and beseeching him to take pity on the desperate conditions of the poor Catholics in Leicestershire, and urging him to come to England and work there for the conversion of the whole nation. Fr. Gentili recognised the voice of God in the words of the young aristocrat summoning him once again to a great mission in the land that had become the object of his dearest thoughts.

But he remembered the wise words of Fr. Rosmini about obedience, and limited himself to say that the matter was indeed very dear to both him and to Fr. Rosmini and that he was certain that Fr. Rosmini would welcome his request and would see to it that one or more of his priests would go to England as requested in the very near future. He promised to write to Fr. Rosmini at once.

It was a surprising letter that he sent to Fr. Rosmini, in which he described the meeting with Ambrose and his own words of encouragement, but he ended with the following thoughts: *“Can it be true that God wills me, who am so full of ignorance, misery and vice, and without prudence (I speak sincerely) to go to England? I, who for so long a*

time played the fool among the English in Rome – I, who have given them so much scandal – I, in fine, who am the outcast of the world, what could I do there? Increase the number of sinners?

Ah, my dear Father, the veil of my pride and self-love is at times rent asunder, and my most dear Mother helps me to recognise myself in the mirror of truth. Truly, I once desired earnestly to go to England, and there shed my blood. But although the desire has not, at least the presumption has fallen, of being among those chosen to remedy the evils of that unhappy nation.

I beg always of God to send men of holiness and learning, and not one who, by his ignorance and sin, might do injury to the Lord's cause. Were I among those commissioned, with what reason might I not exclaim, 'Poor unhappy being that I am!' For there, instead of being in an obscure, hidden position, I should be exposed to continual warfare, not only with heresy, but with its effects, consisting in corruption and low degrading vice. And what are my weapons? My own faults. But enough, the prospect is too distant".

Fr. Rosmini read the letter with great pleasure, seeing in the encounter a fresh proof of divine approval of the Institute, and a further sign of divine Providence concerning a possible mission in England. He replied immediately, expressing his keen desire to assist:

"I am not waiting a moment to reply to your letter, in which I find ever new signs of the mercy of God and of our Saviour the Lord Jesus Christ, to whom we must always be grateful, as we are consumed with the desire to suffer something for his sake, and if possible to obtain the greatest grace of all: that is, to spend our life and shed our blood for his glory: he is the object of all our desires and of our will — of our very existence, since we were created for him.

The English Catholics are so dear to my heart that I do not know what I would not do to help them in any way possible: I want to neglect nothing whatever that Providence suggests I could do to their advantage. I would wish even to give my blood for the glory of our Lord, little as my blood is worth.

So I have thought about all that you said in your letter, in order to find some way of acceding to the wish of Mr Phillips at the earliest possible moment as far as is compatible with the prudence required by our Rules (as laid down in the Constitutions), and with the whole spirit of our Institute. So I think that, if you feel in sympathy with the idea of this mission, you might do just one year of noviciate with us, in which to prepare yourself for the work and absorb well our Rules and maxims, gaining an insight into them and putting them into practice; then at the end of this year I should be quite happy to give you two companions from amongst us and send you to Leicester.

There, Mr Phillips will be pleased if you will open a house and take on the care of souls. Glory be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ for ever. And so dear to me is an enterprise of this sort that in order to omit nothing on my part that could help to ensure a favourable outcome to this work of the Lord, I should be ready to part with my dear Loewenbruck, who is at once my support and my chief adviser, and to give him to you as one of your companions. I would do this so that you could have with you a man who

is wise and reliable, intelligent and well-versed in our affairs, as well as being inflamed with a tremendous zeal solely for the things of God — possessed too of great physical robustness, and equal to hard exertion and demanding activity.

Ponder on all these matters before God, in great tranquillity and peace, using long and fervent prayer. And if you feel resolved and ready, get in touch with Mr Phillips who, I am sure, will feel bound to favour this work. Please let me know your feelings about this as soon as possible, because I have the idea much at heart. In the meantime we shall all pray as usual, asking God to give us the light by which to know his will and to grant us the uprightness of soul to wish for and do nothing other than this. I put this matter, together with all the rest of our little activities, into the hands of our dear Mother, so that she will look after them in her own fashion”.

Fr. Gentili was delighted with the reply and went to seek the young Ambrose Phillips to announce the good news. He found him surprisingly cold. After repeated requests Ambrose Phillips finally explained that he had been warned by a number of ecclesiastics in Rome to be cautious about Fr. Rosmini, whose ideas and writings were under suspicion of heresy, and whose Institute had, apparently, political and other dubious purposes. As a result, he was thinking of withdrawing his invitation unless Fr. Gentili abandoned his decision to join Fr. Rosmini and his Institute of Charity.

It was not difficult for Fr. Gentili to produce in a short time plenty of evidence about the high regard Fr. Rosmini and his Institute had in the highest places in Rome: he showed Ambrose Phillips a brief from Pope Gregory XVI to Fr. Rosmini in which he expressly praised the holiness of the founder and gave his full approval to the Institute of Charity, and other references from Cardinals and Bishops. Ambrose Phillips de Lisle was reassured, and, on his way back to England, he went to meet Fr. Rosmini in Milan, starting with him a strong and faithful friendship. Fr. Rosmini remarked to Fr. Gentili: *“I appreciated greatly the warm and good personality of Phillips! In the brief time we were together we initiated a strong friendship which I hope it will never end. He opened up his heart and declared his most profound desires. May the Lord bring them to fruition”?*

The thought of going to England provided Fr. Gentili with a much-needed boost to leave Rome finally and enter the noviciate at Calvario. He wrote to Fr. Rosmini telling him of his intention of “walking without staff or purse” all the way from Rome to Calvario, like a pilgrim. He hoped to have as companion for the journey a young Irish seminarian, Andrew Quinn, who had often expressed his desire to enter the Institute of Charity.

But it was at this juncture that Fr. Gentili was caught up once again in a final “temptation”, caused by circumstances hurriedly and imprudently interpreted by his vivid imagination.

He had received the blessing of Fr. Rosmini for his pastoral work with the poor children of the “Congregazione degli Ignorantelli”. He was asked now to preach a retreat to another large group of poor and destitute children who were part of the “Opera degli Esercizi”, a well-known charitable organisation that prepared such children for their First Holy Communion by means of regular instructions and exercises of piety. The “Opera” had won the support of Popes and Cardinals who had seen the need for it and

had first hand knowledge of its beneficial influence on young people. Canon Muccioli, in particular, had toiled hard to provide good priests who would preach, instruct, and pray with the children; and such was his zeal that he adapted one of his houses for the benefit of the older and more difficult children, making it an “Oratorio” where they could continue to receive religious instruction and engage in exercises of piety whilst, at the same time, finding in the large garden of the house a safe place for recreation and games.

Fr. Gentili preached the retreat with outstanding results and was consequently begged by Canon Muccioli and by Cardinal Zurla, the Vicar General, to think about the idea of dedicating himself fully to such a worthwhile work of spiritual charity. Fr. Gentili enjoyed the pastoral care of young people, and, seeing the demand and the appreciation of so many in authority, he began to think that he may become the tool in God’s hands bringing the Institute of Charity right to the centre of Rome with works of charity demanded and supported wholeheartedly by Popes and Cardinals.

He spoke at once with Canon Muccioli and Cardinal Zurla, asking their views about his idea of placing both the Opera and the Oratory into the hands of the Institute of Charity. They were both delighted at the prospect, since it would have meant that their valuable works of charity would be assured of a future, in the hands of well known and highly respected priests, like Frs. Rosmini and Gentili.

Cardinal Zurla arranged for Fr. Gentili to be granted a meeting with the Pope. The Pope in person assured him of his support, asking Fr. Gentili to make all the necessary arrangements and to get the agreement of all interested parties before manifesting the whole plan to Fr. Rosmini.

Fr. Rosmini had not been consulted at any of the various stages of the process; he got mysterious letters from Fr. Gentili in which he hinted at “grave matters”, “silence imposed by the highest authority”, “benefits to the Institute in Rome”, and similar expressions. He did not know what to think, whether Fr. Gentili was going to receive some honorific title, or some important appointment; it never crossed his mind that Fr. Gentili was trying to create a new work of charity for the Institute in Rome!



Pope Gregory XVI

He expressed his fears and concern to Fr. Gentili. He did not know, but he suspected that Fr. Gentili's imagination was carrying the day. When, at last, he was informed of the whole business, he had his doubts confirmed and wrote immediately to Cardinal Zurla and Canon Muccioli thanking them for the trust they had expressed in the tiny Institute of Charity but declining their offer for a number of reasons; then he turned to Fr. Gentili with the following letter:

Trent, 1 July 1831

*"My dear friend and brother in Jesus Christ,
Your last letter caused me great pain: I see from it that you let yourself be ruled by your imagination. What illusions and deceptions you have fallen into! You say that just when you were about to leave for Calvario as a result of my call, you were held back by your desire to do a pious work. But however pious this work may be, it was not one which you could carry out while you had the call to begin to form yourself in the Institute of Charity. If this is your vocation, then this is the one pious work that at present is incumbent upon you.*

The rest is an illusion that distracts you from your proper aim. If someone wants to make a journey but allows every small byway to draw him from his route out of a desire to see where it leads, he will never arrive at his destination. I find in you a lack of seriousness, and (I fear) a facile presumption, in that you let yourself be attracted to works that are not for you at this stage —that is, if you have a vocation to the Institute of Charity.

Did not the Cardinal Vicar give you leave to depart? So why are you still there? You say that you felt an inspiration to act like this. Well, what I want from you is fewer inspirations and more firmness, and especially more obedience. I am very displeased by the way you let yourself be guided by your fancies, paying heed to goodness knows

how many interior voices, all of which distract you from getting yourself to where your vocation summons you and your superior invites you. You give me much cause for fear.

You ask me to pray to God so that he may give you a little humility, since you feel you have none. My answer is that I am very willing to do so, for you seem to be greatly in need of this virtue. You speak as if you were a man inspired — you must think highly of yourself! You speak of doing heroic things and say that you have decided to come here like a pilgrim, on foot, without staff or purse. My dear man, mere words do not satisfy me: I look at the facts. And the facts are that you have not come, and that you have built up all sorts of castles in the air and committed a mass of serious mistakes.

You jumble up so many things in your letter, introduce the names of so many people, that I hardly know where to begin to show you your faults. So I will content myself with saying that your talking about our affairs, your blowing the trumpet on my behalf... it is all totally against the spirit of our Institute — which prefers to remain hidden, humble and content within itself.

You add also that you asked audience several times of the Holy Father, from the moment he took office, to congratulate him in the name of our Society. Who gave you this commission? Who made you our ambassador? It was nothing but your imagination which put such ideas into your head — to the point where you made yourself the representative to the Pope of a Society which you have not even consulted, from which you received no authorization. How many blunders there are here! Consider how they humiliate me: think of the fine reputation you create in Rome, for me and for the poor Institute, pretending to be an ambassador plenipotentiary! But God's will be done. I have brought these things on myself by my sins.

Let me speak plainly to you. I will not accept any more excuses, but I want you to admit your faults. Moreover I enjoin you, if you have not been deceiving me up to now and if it is true that you have a vocation to the Institute of Charity, to set off immediately for Domodossola — not on foot (since you have not the strength for that, and it would be tempting God), but comfortably, by carriage. I am fairly certain that the Cardinal Vicar will give you leave to depart, knowing that I wish this, for he is very well disposed towards me.

I must tell you clearly that if you disobey me again this time on the pretext of some other inspiration or some other mysterious business, I shall conclude that you have not been chosen by God to be one of our number. Here we are in the habit of acting quite differently, and the Lord in his mercy leads us safely in everything. At present we are far from being in a position to accept the proposed foundation in Rome — it is a mere fantasy. Instead we must consolidate the two foundations already made and give no thought to spreading ourselves until we have struck root and completed our formation.

I await your reply, and from this I shall be able to see what the Institute can expect from you. Goodbye, and may God and our Lady bless you."

Fr. Gentili understood that Fr. Rosmini meant business. The frank and clear words dispelled once and for all his doubts and he was able to see through his innermost fears and self-deceptions. He resolved to leave Rome, and his family and friends and to

withdraw to the solitude of Calvario to seek holiness through the daily purification of his soul.

It had not been an easy resolution for him: he loved Rome, he moved with confidence and pleasure among the various communities that made of Papal Rome a unique cosmopolitan centre, full of life, of international news, of influential visitors who had the destiny of nations in their hands. The power of God's calling had directed him from a comfortable and ambitious life to the simple status of a priest, but now it had demanded even greater sacrifices, the giving up of family and friends, the abandoning of Rome, and the going into the desert, to seek hardship, purification, personal holiness.

He wrote at once to Fr. Rosmini expressing his sorrow and his decision, and he got a consoling reply from him:

"I am very pleased by what you say, that you wish to recognize your faults with sincere humility, all excuses set aside. This is the right path to take, and God will fill you with his blessings if you so act, as I greatly hope you will. Given such a disposition, my dear friend, you need have no fears of failing the test in the cloister; rather, you must put your trust in God and in Mary our Mother, and believe that you will certainly win the victory and find a holy retirement far sweeter than you ever imagined... Courage, then! Let our loins be girt and be on your way at once. May Jesus and Mary bless you".

Fr. Gentili left Rome and "was on his way" without further delay, without even informing his family and friends. He travelled to Civitavecchia, and from there he took the boat to Genoa, and on by coach to Domodossola, where he arrived on 26th August 1831. He was welcomed by Fr. Lowenbruck, Molinari, Alvazzi, and two lay brothers. Fr. Rosmini embraced him in the evening of the same day, after a long journey from Trent, and his joy was as great as his long waiting for Fr. Gentili had been.

CHAPTER THREE



NOVICE AND NOVICE MASTER AT CALVARIO

“Blessed the day I heard about the Institute of Charity, blessed the day when I decided to be part of it, blessed the day when I arrived here and the time I spent in here. For, whether through periods of abandonment or of temptations, I find myself like in a castle, in paradise, immersed in a most profound peace that prompts me to love God more and more; and this is truly my constant occupation”. (Fr. Gentili)

Fr. Rosmini remained at Calvario for the next two months and had the opportunity of personally guiding Fr. Gentili during the period of preparation called “first probation”. He received him officially as a novice of the Institute of Charity on 16th October 1831, full of admiration for the great prospects and talents of Fr. Gentili, as can be seen from some of his letters written at about this time:

“I have Gentili here with me, and I am most pleased with him”, he wrote to P. Orioli in Rome; and to Count Mellerio, *“Gentili is a marvellous man”*; and to Card. Morozzo, *“Gentili is a most promising subject. He is an outstanding man, both for the great power of his intellect and, most of all, for the holiness of his life”*.

Fr. Rosmini valued him so greatly, that he had no hesitation in appointing him Novice Master and Assistant to the Vice Superior, Fr. Lowenbruck, when he was barely a few weeks into his novitiate. Fr. Rosmini, called urgently by Divine Providence to Trent, entrusted to his care five novices, soon to increase in number, and two seminarians from Novara, soon to become four, who had been sent to Calvario to study philosophy and theology.

In typical fashion, Fr. Gentili gathered at once the small community and confessed to them his own sinfulness, ignorance, and inexperience, begging their forgiveness, forbidding any sign of honour towards his person, and urging them to dare to become great saints with the help of God and of the Blessed Mother Mary. The first obedience they received from him was to report to him without fear any defect and fault they should discover in him.

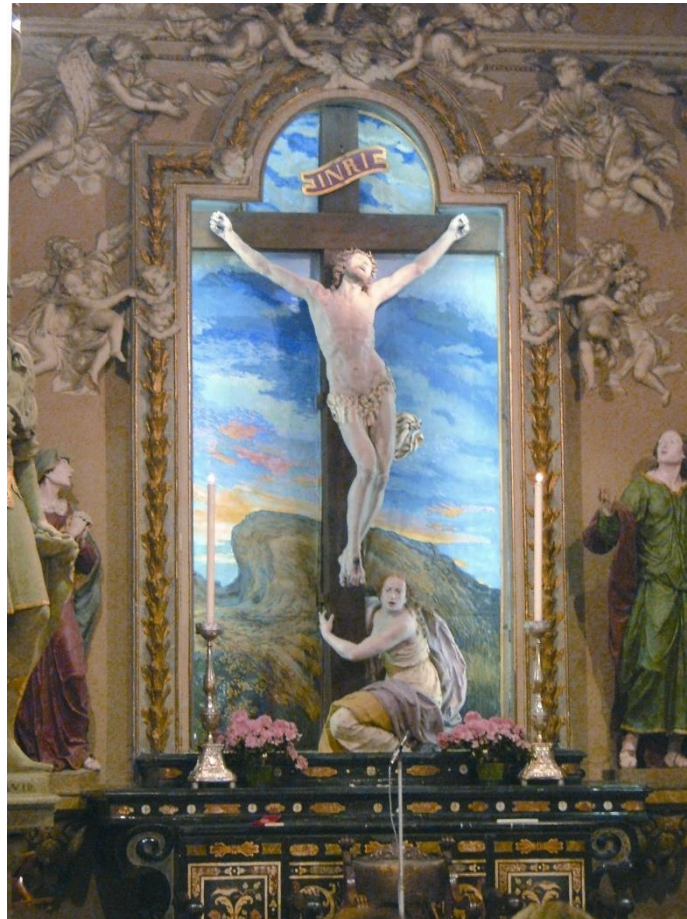
Always a man of ideas, Fr. Gentili made changes almost at once in the internal arrangements at Calvario. He bought furniture, linen, household items, and insisted on tidiness and order. The daily routine was demanding, with prayers, meditation, instructions, manual labour, reading of the life of Saints. He guided his novices both by example and by individual and collective teaching. He was outstanding in his life of prayer, animated by a burning love for Christ and for His Mother. The austerity of his penance was a source of awe, admiration, and emulation. He never took a rest in the afternoon, and at night he slept for four hours at most, often less, and occasionally he spent the whole night in prayer, a pattern which he carried for the rest of his life.

He was severe towards himself, and gentle with the brethren. He imitated the fasting patterns of the ancient fathers of the desert, and he mortified his body so harshly, that even Fr. Rosmini had to recommend to Fr. Lowenbruck to try to restrain him. On one occasion, as he was flogging himself without pity in the refectory before the whole community on account of his “terrible sins”, the brethren had to stop him in fear that he may collapse under the strokes. He often took his meagre meals on his knees, as the last and most sinful member of the community.

The time at Calvario was a blessed time for Fr. Gentili, who, writing to his aunt, Sr. Claire Gnaccarini, said, *“It seems to me that I am not on Calvary but rather on Mount Tabor!”* And writing to Fr. Rosmini, he said, *“Blessed the day I heard about the Institute of Charity, blessed the day when I decided to be part of it, blessed the day when I arrived here and the time I spent in here. For, whether through periods of abandonment or of temptations, I find myself like in a castle, in paradise, immersed in*

a most profound peace that prompts me to love God more and more; and this is truly my constant occupation”.

It was his holy aunt, however, who warned him to be prepared to expect troubles and suffering ahead: *“I am sure that you will soon descend from Mount Tabor to climb Mount Calvary, where, like Christ, you shall be put on the cross”.*



Main Altar at Calvario

His time at Calvario prepared him well for the tasks ahead. He kept the same pattern of intense prayer, especially at night, of fasting, and of other forms of penance for the rest of his life. But he was also trained by Divine Providence for his future mission by other activities, like the long hours in the confessional in the Sanctuary, the frequent visits to the poor to whom he brought his love and his help, the long hours spent in instructing in the faith the poorest of the children of surrounding villages.

Providential was his meeting with a young English woman, whom he prepared and brought into the Catholic Church. Her name was Letizia and she was the grand-daughter of Sir Henry Trelawney, the English baron who had converted to Catholicism and had become a priest. Her two daughters also had been accepted into the Catholic Church; but his son William had remained a member of the Church of England.

It was now the turn of the bright Letizia, William's daughter, to embrace the Catholic faith, and she went to meet Fr. Gentili at Calvario asking him to prepare her. Fr. Gentili, who was familiar with the Trelawneys from his time in Rome, engaged her in profound theological discussions, praying for her conversion day and night. She was a most learned young woman, who knew Latin and Hebrew, and three other European languages. Fr. Gentili had to produce for her all the commentaries of the Fathers of the Church and other Church's documents to prove the Catholic doctrines of Purgatory, devotion to Mary and to the saints, the importance of tradition, the supremacy of the Pope, and the biblical foundation of each of the Sacraments.

The more she learned about Catholic doctrine the more she was persuaded, until on 7th October, on the feast of our Lady of the Rosary, she asked to be received into the Church. It was Cardinal Morozzo who presided over the splendid ceremony at Domodossola, welcoming the young English woman into the Catholic faith. Fr. Gentili regarded her as his first English convert.

The hallmark of Fr. Gentili's missionary work in Great Britain and Ireland would be public missions to large crowds in their parishes and spiritual retreats for priests and religious, men and women, in their monasteries, convents, and seminaries. Divine Providence prepared him at Calvario from 1831 to 1834 for that future great and successful work. He began by preaching retreats to priests and religious, and although he often preached public retreats to large groups, his favourite form of retreat was the private one, in which he followed carefully the method and the themes suggested by both St. Ignatius and Fr. Rosmini.

He would welcome to Calvario small groups of priests and guide them through an intense programme which they had to work out by themselves under his constant supervision. It was from such private retreats that the Institute of Charity gained priests of profound spirituality, like Pagani, Toscani, Ceroni, Gilardi, and others. Fr. Gentili reminded Fr. Rosmini that Calvario had been established by Divine Providence, much before the Institute had been founded, as a place of retreats for the clergy, and that, perhaps, it was the Will of God that the Institute should take a special care of such important pastoral mission. He directed many priests at Calvario, but he was also asked frequently to preach retreats in various religious houses and seminaries, all over the region of Piedmont.

Fr. Gentili preached only one mission in Italy, during November 1833, at Pieve Vergonte near Domodossola. It was a very successful mission, and it had some of the structures that would later contribute to a great spiritual awakening in English and Irish parishes, in particular a methodical and sustained preaching on the important doctrines of the faith, on Scripture, on the life of the Saints, combined with powerful liturgical celebration of the Sacraments. Many requests from parishes followed immediately, but he had to refuse them, since he was now beginning to prepare for the great missionary work in England which had been the golden thread recurring more and more forcefully at various stages of his life.

Divine Providence was summoning the little Institute of Charity for missionary work in England through the urgent requests of English people who had been acquainted with both Fr. Gentili and Fr. Rosmini, from whom they had managed to obtain the promise of future cooperation and help.

It was Ambrose Phillips de Lisle, who first set things in motion in Leicestershire to have Fr. Gentili as a permanent missionary in Loughborough. He had obtained the permission of Bishop Walsh, and together they charged Fr. Hulme, a secular priest, to start collecting funds to set up a church and a house in Loughborough for the Institute of Charity. Fr. Rosmini went along with the project, but with the arrival from Rome of Fr. George Spencer, it all came to an abrupt end since he referred to Bishop Walsh the slanderous accusations against Fr. Rosmini and his Institute made by the highest authorities of a respected religious Order. Fr. Spencer, a very good priest and great friend of Ambrose Phillips, did not know what to think; Ambrose Phillips, who had earlier overcome similar accusations against Fr. Rosmini, rejected them at once, whereas Bishop Walsh asked for time to investigate the matter thoroughly through the good services of Cardinal Weld in Rome.

In the meantime, Sir Henry Trelawney approached formally Fr. Rosmini to secure the services of Fr. Gentili as the chaplain of his castle in England, which included various villages over a wide area. It had been his dream since the time of his conversion and ordination to the priesthood to see Britain a Catholic nation again, and his project envisaged a beginning from his own castle and surrounding areas, which he could imagine as the centre from where fervent Catholic missionaries would bring the fire of the Spirit to the whole nation. He knew well the fiery religious spirit of Fr. Gentili, and he saw in him the ideal priest for his great design.

Fr. Rosmini encouraged the elderly priest, who lived in Italy for most of the year for health reason, but he insisted that he should obtain first permission from the local bishop who happened to be Bishop Baines. He also insisted that the bishop should know and approve first the Constitutions of the Institute, so as to make a well-informed decision. It was during this time of negotiations that the elderly Sir Trelawney died in Italy, comforted by the fact that Fr. Rosmini was considering his request with great interest.

Divine Providence guided bishop Baines to make his bid, and this time the project came to a successful end. Bishop Baines had to spend time in Rome to deal with his controversial stand against some of the religious Orders in his vast territory, and took advantage of this time to remind Fr. Gentili of the promise made a few years earlier by both himself and Fr. Rosmini to send priests of the Institute of Charity to Prior Park near Bath. He studied the Constitutions and gave his formal approval on 15 August 1834 stating his desire to have and to favour the Institute in his own District. He then went to Calvario for a meeting with Fr. Rosmini; he had a meeting instead with Fr. Gentili, since Fr. Rosmini was still dealing with urgent matters in Trent.

The agreement made by them was fully approved by Fr. Rosmini, and it included the sending of three religious from the Institute of Charity to Prior Park, to teach a variety of subjects: Fr. Gentili would teach Italian and Philosophy, Fr. Antonio Rey would be professor of Dogmatics and Ethics, and the deacon Emilio Belisy would teach French and some other subject. The bishop agreed to pay all expenses for their travel to Prior Park, and to provide them with food and lodging, with no other remuneration.

Before sealing the deal with Bishop Baines, Fr. Rosmini insisted on having the approval of Pope Gregory XVI, who wrote a "Brief" on 17th December 1834 congratulating Fr. Rosmini for the blessing of Divine Providence in wanting the little Institute spread as

far as England, and leaving it to the wisdom and prudence of the Founder to find men suited for this great work of charity.

Fr. Rosmini began by asking Fr. Gentili for a definitive and clear commitment: *“Put yourself in the presence of God and provide me with a clear answer: are you ready with God’s help to lead the English mission, and to suffer all difficulties and opposition for the love of Christ and of holy obedience to the point of death?”*

Fr. Gentili was not slow in replying: *“I have no other wish but to go to England, and indeed to fly there if only I could! It is true that my selfish love seeks to object to it since I have learned during my recent retreat that it will be there that it will find its death. But, should the Will of God demand of me that I should die there I will be most happy.*

I shall go there alone with my guardian Angel and endure all the suffering God will wish me to endure, even on to death. Our Blessed Mother will not abandon me in the land that was known once as “dos Mariae”, her property, and I shall go and claim it back for Her. And should I fail to convert the whole of that most unhappy nation with the help of Her divine Son, I will at least start the fire of JESUS Christ in as many places as possible, letting Him do the rest”.

It was the desire of Fr. Rosmini to have Fr. Gentili with him at Rovereto for a few months of further preparation for the mission. There, Fr. Gentili had a chance of witnessing the great pastoral zeal of his spiritual father who was at that time the parish priest of St. Marco, and full of admiration he wrote to Fr. Lowenbruck, *“Father Superior is truly performing miracles here, he is indeed a great Saint. He is totally taken up with hard work for his flock, ‘et opportune et importune arguit, obsecrat, increpat in omni patientia et doctrina’ and thus he removes disharmony and scandals, brings peace and serenity, reconciles sinners to God, in a word, he is doing a great deal of good”.*

The time came, at last, for the long journey to England. In the mind of Fr. Rosmini the mission had to begin from Rome, and so he asked the three missionaries to see Pope Gregory XVI, seeking his blessing and his mandate, no doubt in remembrance of the other Pope Gregory who many centuries earlier had sent the first missionaries to England.

Writing to his friend Mellerio, Fr. Rosmini manifested his pain at the departure of Fr. Gentili from Rovereto: *“The departure of our dear brother Gentili has truly broken my heart”*; and to Gentili, *“I felt with intensity the pain of our separation, and I still do; I hope it is not too human a feeling, which still persists, but I am trying my best to overcome it”.*

Fr. Gentili replied in similar terms, *“I thank you so much for the love and care I received from you during the blessed six months I spent with you. God will give you His blessing. For my part, I pray to God daily to raise you to such degree of holiness that we may one day venerate you as a Saint, like many Holy Founders”.*

It was with great joy that Fr. Gentili, with his two French companions, returned to Rome after four years of absence. He had a chance of being with his family and friends, and he visited the many prelates and old acquaintances, manifesting to them his joy and also

his anxiety for the work ahead “among heretics”. Like pilgrims, they prayed in all the main Basilicas, committing to God and to Mary their apostolic work, and they were received by Cardinal Weld who assured them of his wholehearted support which he had communicated to Bishop Walsh and Bishop Baines.

The most memorable event was their meeting with Pope Gregory XVI, who expressed his unfailing love and esteem for Fr. Rosmini, and who granted them his special blessing for their mission: *“May the Lord open for you the door for great missionary work. On your part, keep faithful to sound doctrine and preach sound doctrine. May the Lord bless you, may He help you, and may He make you prosper”*.

Pope Gregory had a chance of repeating his blessing when he met them again by chance at Civitavecchia, on the boat that was going to take them to Livorno. Fr. Gentili was overwhelmed, and wrote to Fr. Rosmini: *“Let thanks be given to JESUS Christ and to our Blessed Mother, who, during the month dedicated to Her, has given me the grace of seeing again the holy city, and the tombs of the Apostles, and the many other holy shrines, and, moreover, has given me the joy of receiving twice the blessing of the Holy Father for the work of spreading the truth and the faith among the heretics in England”*.

Fr. Gentili and his two companions left Calvario on 5th June 1835, on the 11th they were in Paris, where they stayed for three days as guests of Niccolo’ Tommaseo, a friend of Fr. Rosmini, and they arrived finally in London on the 16th of June 1835.

CHAPTER FOUR



1ST MISSION IN ENGLAND AT PRIOR PARK 1835–1839

“Education is either religious or is no education at all”
(Blessed Antonio Rosmini)

“We seemed to be really entering the City of Pluto: black houses, a black sky, black ships, and black looking sailors – filthy to an extreme degree – the waters of the Thames were tinged with a colour between black and yellow, and emitted a highly offensive stench; on land there prevailed a confused noise, with horses, carriages and men of every condition running and crossing each other’s path – in fine, to make a long story short, here the devil is seen enthroned, exercising his tyrannical sway over wretched mortals”.

This first impression of London, communicated by Fr. Gentili to Fr. Rosmini, has become well known, for its melancholic vein and the feeling of a most difficult task ahead in a foreign country. Although animated for most of his earlier life by the strongest desire to convert that “most unhappy” nation to the Catholic faith, he knew only too well that the number of Catholics had dwindled to little more than 60,000 by the middle of the 18th century, and the few were still subject to many restrictions and strong prejudices, even after the recent Emancipation Act of 1829.

It was true that a “second spring” of Catholic revival was in the air, with a renewed interest on the part of some prominent members of the English high society to ask for the help of foreign missionaries to evangelise the Catholic population and to dedicate themselves openly to the conversion of protestant England by means of sustained apologetics of Catholic doctrines and a return to the ancient traditions and devotions that had been so dear to the English population up to the time of Henry VIII.

The Oxford Movement, started by Edward Pusey and Henry Newman, had initiated a most profound study of Catholic doctrines on the basis of the writings of the Fathers of the Church, and of the doctrinal definitions of the various Councils that had the task of keeping in check the many heretical tendencies of the early centuries. The declared purpose of the Oxford Movement was not the return to the Church of Rome, but rather a doctrinal strengthening of the Church of England, seen as the “via media” between the two extremes of Protestantism and Roman Catholicism.

The result, however, of such close and deep study of the early history of the Church was often the full recognition of the validity and power of all Roman Catholic doctrines and the conversion of honest enquirers to the Catholic faith. Henry Newman became the most famous of such honest seekers after truth who embraced the Catholic faith, but before and after him many others had done or will do likewise.

Fr. Gentili came to England with the double purpose of strengthening the faith and the piety of the Catholic population, and of converting as many of the “protestant” population as possible to the Catholic faith. He came well equipped philosophically and theologically, and with his heart and mind full of the sacramental practices and the many devotions popular at that time in Rome, in Italy, and in all Catholic countries. His appearance in England, with the black priestly cassock and the white priestly collar, brought immediately more than fleeting glances.

Pope Innocent XI had divided the English Church into four Districts during the period of the oppression of Catholics: the London Apostolic District, the Western District, the Central District, and the Northern District – and these Districts were still in place at the time of Fr. Gentili’s arrival in 1835.

He presented himself to Bishop Bramston of the London District with letters of presentation written by Fr. Rosmini, and the bishop welcomed him and his companions and kept them with him for three days before sending them on to Bishop Baines of the Western Apostolic District. They arrived at Bath on 20th June, and were warmly welcomed by Bishop Baines, who, however, had made arrangements for them to stay for a month at Trelawney Castle, since construction work at Prior Park made it impossible for them to reside there.

Fr. Gentili, who knew well the efforts of the deceased Sir Henry Trelawney to have him there, saw it as a sign of Providence that he should begin his missionary work, albeit for only a little while, in that part of England. His two companions immersed themselves in the study of the language, while Fr. Gentili began his apostolic mission by administering with great zeal to the pastoral needs of the people in and around the castle. He preached for the first time in the English language, and it became clear that his deep and melodious voice and the perfect knowledge of English grammar helped him to convey the truth of the Gospel with compelling force and clarity.

Solemn Masses were celebrated at the castle with more and more people attending, and Fr. Gentili asked to be taken to the surrounding villages to meet the Catholic families and to instruct their children in the sacraments of Confession and the Eucharist. During that brief month of residence, he managed to bring to the Sacraments many lapsed Catholics and had the joy of welcoming into the Catholic faith a young woman who had followed his instructions with great perseverance.

Writing to Fr. Lowenbruck, Fr. Gentili confessed: *“What an abundant harvest is to be found in here! But it demands the work of many priests, not just of three. How many conversions we could have, if only we could provide more instructions and more preaching”*.

A newly refurbished Prior Park welcomed Fr. Gentili and companions on 21st July 1835. Bishop Baines gave them three adjacent rooms in his own quarters, a splendid mansion at the centre of the great building, flanked by the two Colleges on either side. The College of St. Peter was the wider one and set to welcome up to 100 students; the College of St. Paul, instead, was smaller and meant to be the Seminary of the District, and it could take up to 50 students of philosophy and theology.

Fr. Gentili and companions prepared themselves for the scholastic year ahead with a retreat preached by their Superior. Their way of life at Prior Park was not much dissimilar from the way of life at Calvario, with a common timetable, meditations and prayers together, and frequent community activities.

Fr. Rosmini followed them very closely with letters full of advice and encouragement: *“I beg you to become more and more “English” in all things but sin, so that you also may say with St. Paul, ‘I have become all things to all men’. You must not oppose anything except that which is sinful: each nation has its own traditions which are good in the eyes of its people. You too must adopt the traditions of the nation you are in and you must respect them out of the love which is in your heart. It is a great fault in a servant of God to be attached unduly to Italian, French or Roman customs, since our true homeland is Heaven”*.

It was not at all easy for Fr. Gentili to follow the advice to “become more and more English in all things”. He started the year quietly, concentrating on teaching Italian and philosophy, but causing a stir with his passionate explanation of “Rosminian” philosophy over and against the predominant philosophical views of the empiricists Locke, Hume, and Berkeley. His arguments were delivered with such colour, depth, and clarity that even teachers asked for permission to attend his lessons.

It was in the liturgical and the spiritual that Fr. Gentili brought in very quickly a quiet revolution. He could not understand the virtual banning of any reference to Mary and to the Saints, the lack of devotions, of novenas, of sacred objects like crucifixes and statues. The Mass was rarely celebrated, and always in a mechanical manner, without warmth and real participation.

With the full support of Bishop Baines, Fr. Gentili introduced at Prior Park the kind of liturgies that one could see in Roman churches, and the celebration of Mass became a solemn liturgical moment for the whole school, with splendid processions, well prepared singing, large number of altar servers, incense, bells, and candles. He preached often about Mary, the Mother of JESUS, and distributed among students, scapulars, rosaries, and other similar religious objects. His purpose was a warm piety towards God, Mary, and the Saints. He introduced at Prior Park, and subsequently in Britain, devotions to Mary during the month of May.

It was during his first Lent in Britain that Fr. Gentili was asked by the bishop to lead the whole school into a period of spiritual retreat. Towering above students and teachers from a desk which had been raised and with a Crucifix by his side, Fr. Gentili delivered his sermons and instructions with the same passion and eloquence than he had used when he was at Calvario. Not everyone appreciated his style, and some of the teachers resented at first such innovations; but, as the retreat went on, even the most obstinate had to admit that there was such power, holiness, solidity, and true Christian faith and love that touched the hearts and minds of the whole school community. Two of his listeners, Peter Hutton, a deacon, and Fr. Moses Furlong were so impressed by the profound spirituality of the preacher that within a couple of years asked to be received into the Institute of Charity.

The reputation and the responsibilities of Fr. Gentili reached the highest point during the second year at Prior Park, from September 1836 to August 1837. Bishop Baines had come to rely on him on so many matters that he had planned to put Fr. Gentili in charge of the whole establishment. He began by appointing him Superior in charge of the College of St. Paul, prefect of studies, and vice president of both Colleges. He charged him with preparing formal Rules for the Seminary, as close as possible to the Constitutions of the Institute of Charity, which he admired greatly. He asked him to teach ethics, sacred eloquence, and logic in addition to Italian and philosophy.

Bishop Baines wrote to Fr. Rosmini, praising his men: *“I want you to know of my deep satisfaction for having the three members of your Institute here at Prior Park. They have become a model to everyone for their zeal, piety, and virtues, and for the perfect fulfilment of all their duties and obligations. Gentili, in particular, is a real treasure, and I am planning to confer on him great authority over the College of St. Paul”*. Fr. Gentili knew that the bishop had already hinted at his intention of asking the Institute of Charity to take full charge of the whole establishment.

It was because of the great expansion of their role at Prior Park that Fr. Gentili began to insist with Fr. Rosmini to send more men. Fr. Rosmini, partly because of the insistence of Fr. Gentili and partly because he himself felt the urgency of the mission in England, sent a first group of five men, guided by Fr. Loewenbruck as the official visitor. The group included Fr. Pagani, Fr. Bonnefoix, and three lay brothers. Fr. Gentili was not too happy with this small group, because apart from Fr. Pagani the others had very little to offer in respect to teaching and instructing students and seminarians. With the return to Italy of Fr. Bonnefoix after only a few weeks, Fr. Gentili insisted again with Fr. Rosmini, begging him to send more men better suited to intellectual and spiritual charity. Fr. Founder agreed and sent two excellent religious, Fr. Rinolfi, and the young and promising Signini. It was a very wise choice, since both became true pillars of the Institute of Charity in England for the rest of their lives.

Two years had already passed since the arrival of Fr. Gentili at Prior Park, and he could say with St. Gregory of Nyssa that it had been an “ascending from glory to glory”: the small Rosminian community had marked profoundly the whole establishment with solid spirituality, and it had taken charge of many aspects of the life of both Colleges. The new arrivals had strengthened further their position and it looked as though the Bishop would not wait much longer before asking Fr. Rosmini to take charge of Prior Park.

But it was not to be, and within a very short time, the fortunes of Fr. Gentili at Prior Park took a dramatic turn. It all began with the arrival of two English priests from Portugal, engaged by Bishop Baines as teachers. They almost immediately became outspoken critics of the work of Fr. Gentili, starting a fierce campaign against him and his methods. They felt that the two Colleges had become more like monasteries than schools: the discipline was too severe, continental devotions too obvious and frequent, liturgical celebrations too time consuming. Fr. Kavanagh, in particular, often spoke to the Bishop about the foreign innovations in moral and religious matters that did not suit the “English” frame of mind, which was alien to fanaticism and pious practices.

Bishop Baines listened with growing concern, and soon he sided openly with the new priests, issuing a number of new rules which were meant to reverse the direction Fr. Gentili had given to Prior Park: he began to forbid novenas, distribution of religious books and objects, talks on Mary and the Saints, reducing at the same time the number of liturgical celebrations for the students, and asking Fr. Kavanagh to prepare a new book of regulations instead of the one which Fr. Gentili had successfully written and implemented.

At the start of the new scholastic year, the third for Fr. Gentili, the prophecy of the two priests that Prior Park would soon be abandoned by parents worried about its open “Catholicism” and by students who resented the austere discipline seemed to have been fulfilled by the fact that more than 30 students failed to return for their studies. Bishop Baines panicked and confessed to Fr. Gentili that he had spent many sleepless nights over this.

The panic was soon over when not only the missing students made their way back to the College, but 16 new students joined Prior Park on the strength of the presence of Fr. Gentili. Bishop Baines, who had kept him at a distance, congratulated him, but continued to favour the stand taken by the two priests. They ruled Prior Park for the

first six months of the new scholastic year, destroying the patient work of Fr. Gentili not only in the spiritual and religious formation of students and seminarians but also in the general organisation of discipline, application, methodology, and curriculum.

The result of this lax attitude and superficial approach to work, to authority, to moral and spiritual formation soon became evident. The students became unruly, difficult to teach, more interested in their own pursuits than in academic success, performing very poorly in all internal examinations. This obvious dropping of standards worried the Bishop who had to give an account to the parents, and he took the decision at last to dismiss the two teachers and to ask Fr. Gentili to do what he could to help students in their summer examinations.

The relationship, however, between the Bishop and Fr. Gentili never recovered and remained distinctly cold. Although this third year at Prior Park had been so humiliating for Fr. Gentili, stripped of all authority and forbidden even to preach without first showing his sermons to the Bishop for approval, he never raised a voice of complaint, never lost his peace and serenity. His letters to Fr. Rosmini expressed his joy at being able to suffer for his “great sins” and for the good of the Institute. Fr. Furlong was so impressed by the true holiness of Fr. Gentili that he took the decision to join the Institute of Charity, causing the Bishop to take a rather drastic action against Fr. Gentili.

During the summer break of 1838, Fr. Gentili accepted an invitation from the Trelawney family to stay with them for a while, to help them achieve reconciliation in their squabbles. His fervent words about forgiveness, the living example of a man of God immersed in prayer and austerity, his great love for all worked wonders in the hearts of the members of the family, and they were soon at peace with one another and more determined to carry out the great missionary expectation of the late Sir Henry Trelawney. But, in the middle of it, Bishop Baines asked Fr. Gentili to act as his delegate to bring peace in a convent of nuns at Stapehill, in Dorset.

Fr. Gentili had developed great skills in bringing peace to troubled waters, and once again he was so successful in helping this community of nuns of different nationalities to mend their ways and to rediscover their vocation to love God in humility and prayer that he was venerated as a saint and corresponded with many of them for many years afterwards.

He returned to Prior Park to resume his duties, and it was soon after, that he approached Bishop Baines with a request to allow Fr. Furlong to join the Institute. The Bishop baulked at first at the thought of the loss of one of his best priests, fearing that others may follow. When he got assurances from Fr. Rosmini that he would leave Fr. Furlong at Prior Park for at least 5 years, he allowed him to join, but soon after he removed Fr. Gentili from Prior Park and appointed him chaplain of a convent of Augustinian nuns at Spetisbury, quite a distance from Prior Park. It was the end, in practice, of the work of Fr. Gentili at Prior Park, even though he returned there as often as he could, to be with his brethren as their Superior.

The move to Spetisbury was a hard blow to Fr. Gentili, who only one year earlier had been considered the saviour of Prior Park. The rift with the Bishop had a most profound cause, which was revealed openly a little while later, on the occasion of a pastoral letter from the Bishop, in which he strongly criticised the new converts to the Catholic faith,

claiming that they were trying to impose on the others traditional devotions popular on the continent but alien to the British people. He ordered that all prayers for the conversion of England should stop at once since they caused offence to Protestants, and that no money should be raised for Propaganda Fide, the body in Rome that had the responsibility of helping the spread of the Catholic faith. He seemed to dismiss statues and prayers to the Sacred Heart and to the Immaculate Conception as being distasteful and tactless.

The letter caused great concern, and the Bishop was called to Rome and was asked to repudiate what he had written as contrary to the official position of the Church. He did obey, but once back in Britain he continued with a sustained attack along the same lines, to the point that Gregory XVI had to intervene again warning the bishops of the Districts of the unsound doctrines of Bishop Baines.

Fr. Gentili had been sent to Spetisbury in the middle of December of 1838. His gloom turned to joy when the news arrived in England shortly after Christmas of the solemn approval of the Constitutions of the Institute of Charity on 20th December. A jubilant Fr. Rosmini had issued a letter asking all his priests and brothers to prepare to make their perpetual vows on the feast of the Annunciation. In Rome, the Pope himself had embraced a profoundly moved and tearful Cardinal Castracane, who had fought hard for the approval, kissing him on the forehead as a sign of his own deep joy. As for Fr. Gentili, he went straight to the chapel and recited 9 Te Deum, one with each of the choirs of Angels; he then sang the 10th with the nuns who had come to the chapel to congratulate him.

On 25th March 1839, gathered at Calvario, at Prior Park, and at Spetisbury all the members of the new Order made their perpetual vows, at the same hour, and with great joy and spiritual fervour. Fr. Rosmini made his vows first and then received the vows of the others at Calvario; Bishop Baines was delegated to receive the vows of the members of the Institute at Prior Park; and Fr. Gentili made his vows before Fr. Pagani and vice-versa, at Spetisbury, in the presence of the nuns.

At the request of Bishop Baines and for practical reasons, Fr. Rosmini took the decision to appoint Fr. Pagani Superior of the growing community of Rosminians at Prior Park instead of the distant Fr. Gentili, and he communicated the appointment to Fr. Gentili giving him the task of notifying the brethren at Prior Park.

Fr. Gentili, who had gone through all sorts of painful humiliations, bearing them all with utter inner peace and joy, met his brethren to communicate the news to them. He began by kneeling before each of them asking forgiveness for all his failings, kissing the feet of each. He handled the whole transfer with edifying humility and cheerfulness, but back in Spetisbury he confessed to Fr. Rosmini his great sadness at the thought of being so far from his brethren, deprived of community life.

Summer of 1839 was coming, and Fr Rosmini issued orders to Fr. Gentili and other priests at Prior Park to make their way to Rome to make a special fourth vow of obedience to the Holy See. According to the Constitutions, by this vow one became a “presbyter” of the Institute of Charity.

Thus, the first period of Fr. Gentili's apostolate in Great Britain came to an end, four years of hard and inspiring work of spiritual and intellectual charity in an English College. Months later, Bishop Baines, realising the great loss, tried his best to get him back to Prior Park, begging Fr. Rosmini with letters that exalted the great gifts and abilities of the humble and holy priest, but it was not to be. Divine Providence had other plans for Fr. Gentili.

It was very important for Fr. Rosmini that the first "presbyter vows" should be taken in Rome, the centre of Christendom and the See of St. Peter. It was to Rome, therefore, that the small group of the chosen eight made their way from Stresa to Genoa and then, by boat, to Civitavecchia and on to Rome. The eight priests were: Frs. Rosmini, Pagani, Belisy, Gentili, Puecher, Setti, Toscani, and Gilardi.

They arrived in Rome on 14th August 1839, and were received by the Pope on the 16th, accompanied by Card. Castracane. The Pope was delighted to see them and spoke at length with Fr. Rosmini and Fr. Gentili whom he knew very well.

They made their vow in the catacombs of St. Sebastian on 22nd August, a place dear to Fr. Rosmini, hallowed by the blood of the early Christians, and by the frequent and fervent night prayer sessions of St. Philip Neri and St. Charles Borromeo. During the Mass, very early in the morning, they offered their blood in union with the precious Blood of JESUS and made the vow of total obedience to the Holy Father.

It was soon after his profession of the presbyter vow that Fr. Rosmini communicated to Fr. Gentili the decision not to send him to England, but to Domodossola to teach philosophy to the students at the College. It was a most difficult obedience, since it seemed to shatter all his expectations of great missionary work in that country; and a most humiliating obedience, since the opening of the English mission had come about at the insistence of many, and of Bishop Baines in particular, to have Fr. Gentili at Prior Park. Fr. Gentili's reply was, *"I do not wish nor desire other thing than to do always and everywhere until death the most holy and most amiable Will of my Father in Heaven"*.

The next three days, in Civitavecchia and Livorno on his way to Calvario, were the most difficult days of his religious life. He felt the heavy cross of obedience, his heart in turmoil, his mind restless. He spent sleepless nights worrying about what the Pope, Card. Castracane, other ecclesiastics in Rome and in England would say at the news that he had been removed from the prestigious mission in England. He tried to find peace by spending hours of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, but as soon as he was out of the church all his troubled thoughts began anew.

It was while praying before the icon of our Lady in the Armenian church in Livorno that he finally found lasting peace and inner joy. There, remembering that devotion to the Sacred Heart of Mary had been established in Rome by his father's uncle, Fr. Marconi, he prayed thus: *"O my dearest Mother, you know how this feast in your honour came as it were from my family, I humbly beg you to take pity on me and to free me from all temptations, since you know that my only and dearest desire is to fulfil the Will of your most beloved Son"*. The prayer was accompanied by abundant tears, and it achieved a perfect healing of mind and heart. He arrived at Calvario, and in no time he

found himself immersed in a strenuous schedule of teaching, preaching, and conducting retreats, in complete abandonment to Divine Providence.

The news of the definite departure of Fr. Gentili from Prior Park had reached one of the outstanding converts of the Second Spring, Ambrose Phillips De Lisle. He was well acquainted with the zeal, the gifts, and the power of the preaching of Fr. Gentili, and he began to make repeated requests to Fr. Rosmini to obtain from him the services of Fr. Gentili in and around his mansion house at Grace Dieu in Leicestershire:

“If the conversion of England will one day become a reality – as I firmly believe it will – it will be accomplished by the work of holy priests from Italy. Daily I pray our most blessed Mother to send me such priests burning with holy zeal, true priests of JESUS Christ, who will make conversions by the thousands... I beg you to give me Fr. Gentili, truly a holy man of God, who is capable of bringing the faith ‘apud gentes, coram regibus et principibus’; I ask this for the love of JESUS, for His most precious Wounds, for the most pure Heart of Mary, for the love of St. Joseph, of St. Philomena, and for the sake of our poor England”.

Fr. Rosmini saw in the persistent request of the young convert from England a clear sign of the Will of God for Fr. Gentili. It was true that the previous engagement at Prior Park had ended up in apparent failure, but he knew well that Fr. Gentili had the heart of a great missionary and was willing to send him back to England, a second Augustine, to revive the Catholic faith and to bring Protestants to the true Church of JESUS Christ. He wrote to Ambrose Phillips:

“My dear friend and brother in our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be honour and glory for ever. Amen. Our dear Gentili is at last coming to you. Receive him with your usual love, the love with which I send him to you. May he be for England a new St Augustine: the Lord’s arm is not shortened, and his mercies are infinite. If we pray, we shall receive, we want only God’s will and his glory. I entrust to your care also Gentili’s health, which is not robust. In this connection, and also to proceed with due prudence, it would seem to me necessary not to burden him with too many commitments at the start, but to take things by degrees, restraining his zeal”.

After nearly ten months of absence, Fr. Gentili was finally on his way back to England. Even the journey seemed to him easy and “*perfect in every way*”, with no hassle from custom officials; he even managed to find his spectacles lost in a hostel on his way to Italy the previous year. He arrived at Prior Park on 21st May 1840 and made a short retreat under the direction of Fr. Pagani, who wrote to Fr. Rosmini: “*Don Luigi is no ordinary man, he is endowed with extraordinary gifts, and he breathes through his whole person holiness, intelligence and gracious manners. I am but an infant compared to him, and God knows that I speak the truth*”.

CHAPTER FIVE



2ND MISSION IN ENGLAND

GRACE DIEU, 1840-1842

“I do not wish nor desire other thing than to do always and everywhere until death the most holy and most amiable Will of my Father in Heaven” (Fr. Gentili)

Ambrose Phillips welcomed Fr. Gentili at Grace Dieu with great joy, as the chaplain of his household. The beautiful chapel in the house had been built to hold a large congregation, but at the time of Fr. Gentili's arrival the total number of worshippers on a Sunday was about 25 Catholics. Mass on Sunday was a most solemn and splendid ceremony, with aspersions, processions, and singing of Gregorian chants carefully prepared and conducted by Ambrose Phillips himself. On Sunday evening they had solemn Vespers followed by a sermon on the Gospel of the day.

On weekdays, the family started the day with the litany of Our Lady and with Mass, and in the evening they met again for Rosary and other devotions. Thursday was a special day, with prayers for the conversion of England and solemn Benediction.

For the first two months at Grace Dieu, Fr. Gentili fulfilled his duties as chaplain of the Phillips with his usual dedication, spending his time in the chapel and in a small room adjacent to the chapel which had a window from which he could see the tabernacle. There he studied, prayed, and had his meals. The house-maid often found his bed untouched, Fr. Gentili having spent all night in prayer.

This initial routine did not last very long. His apostolic zeal soon led him out into the three villages that were part of the great estate of the Phillips: Shepshed, Belton, Osgathorpe, with a combined population of about 7,000. The Catholic population was of 15 souls: 4 at Shepshed out of a population of 4,600; 9 at Osgathorpe out of a population of 800; and none at Belton out of a population of 1,300. If we add the 12 Catholics of the Phillips household, and the 2 from the countryside we reach a grand total of 27 Catholics in all.

Ambrose Phillips, burning with the desire of the conversion of England, saw his own house as a centre from which the Catholic faith would spread far and wide. He had established at Mount St. Bernard the first contemplative Cistercian monastery since the Reformation, and he had persuaded Bishop Walsh to open a parish at Loughborough for active ministry, with the intention of having the Rosminians to minister to the Catholics and to engage in missionary activity.

Fr. Gentili began his apostolic work in the villages in a small way. He started by visiting three of his Catholics who were ill, taking advantage to gather a few people in their houses to instruct them about the faith; soon he developed his ministry by visiting more and more people, especially the most poor, comforting them and instructing them, often in the presence of Protestants. This form of apostolate spread widely in the three towns, and already groups of Protestants had begun to ask to be received into the Catholic faith. One of them was a dying young man, whom Fr. Gentili visited almost daily, praying with him and instructing him in the Catholic faith. He died reconciled with God and a full member of the Catholic Church.

His daily routine had become by now very demanding. He would rise from bed at about 4 am and, after hours of prayer, he would look after the spiritual needs of the household, have a small breakfast and then begin his walking from town to town covering many miles each day, in good and bad weather, in the mud or in the dust. He would visit and instruct, aiming at reviving the fervour in the Catholic faithful and, at the same time, inviting Protestants to come to the fullness of faith in the Catholic Church. He would

return to the house late in the evening, retire to his room, have a small meal of bread and eggs, immerse himself in prayer, and finally go to bed at midnight.

It was not long before both Fr. Gentili and Ambrose Phillips decided that it would make more sense to hire a large room in each town to gather the people and to instruct them together. The apostolic work at Shepshed was marked by remarkable success, and within weeks the hall had become too small for the great number of Catholics and Protestants who took part in the instructions and preaching of Fr. Gentili, who was forced to ask permission from the Bishop to preach in the square whenever necessary. By the end of 1840, during the Christmas festivities, Fr. Gentili had the joy of receiving into the Catholic Church 52 Protestants, and of baptising many children both of Catholic and of Protestant families. But many others were still under instruction, and the whole town felt the powerful presence of Fr. Gentili, who had only begun his work at Shepshed from September 1840.

The mission at Belton and Osgathorpe followed the same pattern, with considerable success. Fr. Gentili visited each town, preaching and instructing many, and baptising Catholic and Protestant children. The chapel at Grace Dieu was rapidly filling up with converts, to the point that the need was felt to build a church at Shepshed.

Evangelisation, however, was not without setbacks and opposition. At Shepshed, the local Anglican minister mounted a fierce campaign against Fr. Gentili distributing literature against “popery” and the perverse doctrines of the Catholic Church. It did not get very far, even when he set up rival catechism classes: the people preferred to listen to the true “man of God” Fr. Gentili, with his passionate love for JESUS, Mary, and the Saints, and his true feeling of compassion for their poverty.

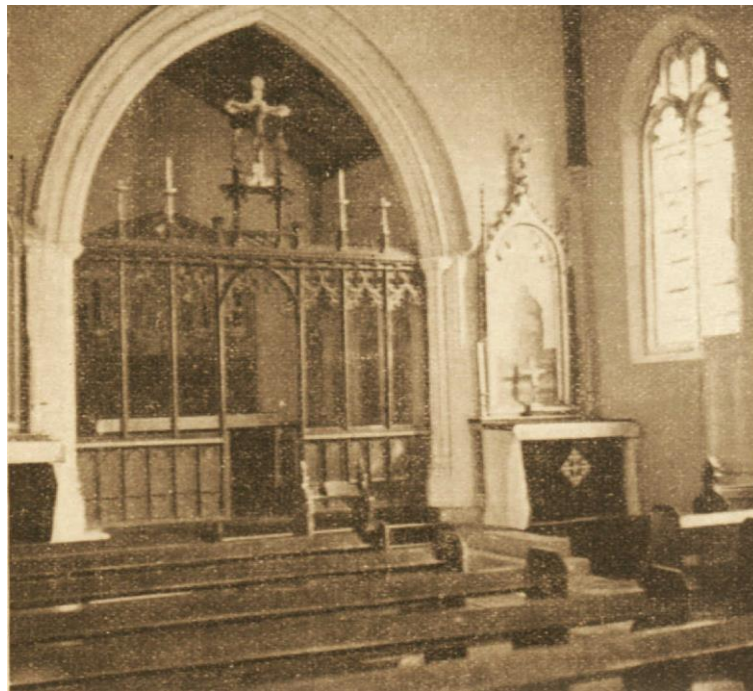
It was at Osgathorpe that opposition to Fr. Gentili was at its strongest, and people there decided to make up an effigy of Fr. Gentili, parading it in the streets of the town at the sound of drums and flutes, and then, after firing at it a barrage of shots, burning it in the square and throwing the ashes into the river from the bridge. Fr. Gentili heard about it, and the very next morning he went alone to Osgathorpe, walking the streets, and talking about God to the people he met.

The reaction was surprising: out of shame, perhaps, or of admiration for the courageous priest, most people treated him with more kindness than before, ready to receive his words and showing interest in his instructions. The following Sunday the people of Osgathorpe were treated to the view of a solemn procession that came all the way from Grace Dieu, preceded by the Cross. It rested in the main square, where Fr. Gentili sang with over 200 people the Our Father before and after preaching them a powerful homily. The event was so successful that it was repeated on many other feast-days.

It was Ambrose Phillips that, with some exaggeration perhaps, claimed that Fr. Gentili converted to the Catholic faith more than 1000 people over the period of about two years in which he remained at Grace Dieu. There is no doubt, however, that Fr. Gentili brought the “fire” of JESUS Christ in the area, a fire which continued to burn brightly for many years. But the mission at Grace Dieu had its moments of depression, as we can gather from some of the letters that Fr. Gentili wrote to Fr. Rosmini:

"I suffer because I cannot help everyone in their poverty. Many of them cannot even come to Grace Dieu to be received into the Catholic Church or to receive the Sacraments, or to hear Mass for lack of shoes, or hats, or clothes, being almost naked. Once received into the Church they have no booklets to help them prepare for the reception of the Sacraments, or to follow Mass as they should. I do what I can, but at times the devil tries his best to discourage me. I feel I cannot last long unless I get the help of others of our brethren. One thing is to sow, another is to bring to fruition; one priest can manage the former, many priests are required for the latter. Shepshed is where most of my converts are, yet they have no church, no priest to say Mass for them on Sundays, no instructions, no sacraments. Feast-days should be the best occasion for them to revive their souls, but no one can be with them, hence you'll find children roaming the streets, youngsters in complete idleness, the more devout sad and discouraged for not having a chapel for their devotions".

The building of a chapel at Shepshed became a priority for Fr. Gentili, and he began a campaign to raise the necessary funds, helped by Ambrose Phillips and by another of the great aristocratic Catholics of the Second Spring, Lord Shrewsbury. Ambrose Phillips provided the land, and the project was consigned to another convert who was making for himself a reputation as the finest architect of gothic buildings, Augustus Welby Pugin. He built the church at Shepshed in record time, and considered it his "little miracle", not only for its beauty, but for creating with a mere £ 700 a stone-built gothic church with a nave and two aisles and sanctuary, three altars, three rood-screens and three stained glass windows, and a crypt.



Chapel at Grace Dieu

It was clear that the Central District, which stretched from the Midlands all the way to Oxford, was fast becoming the centre of what was termed the "Second Spring" of the Catholic faith in England. The driving forces were people like Bishop Walsh and his assistant Bishop Wiseman, Lord Shrewsbury, Ambrose Phillips, Augustus W. Pugin,

and Fr. Gentili. The three lay men, animated by powerful Catholic convictions and wishing to restore England to the Catholic glories of the times before the Reformation, used all their possessions and talents to build catholic churches, monasteries and schools, and displayed a great spirit of enterprise in obtaining for England apostolic men like Fr. Gentili and the Passionist Fr. Dominic Barberi.

Whereas Bishop Baines had tried to pour water over the fire of the renewal of the Catholic faith to the point of forbidding prayers for the conversion of England, Bishop Wiseman in particular was employing all his energy and connections both in England and in Rome to bring about the Second Spring, relying on men like the ones mentioned above. Fr. Gentili provided the “evidence”, since news about his indefatigable missionary apostolate and the hundreds of conversions spread far and wide.

The home of Ambrose Phillips was the ideal place to get all the latest news about Catholic progress everywhere in Britain and to meet the major protagonists of the Second Spring, including some prominent men of the Oxford Movement. It was at Grace Dieu that Fr. Gentili had the opportunity of discussing over a few days the great hopes and the difficulties of the renewal of the Catholic faith in England with another fervent Italian missionary, Fr. Dominic Barberi, who only recently had managed to fulfil his dream of engaging in missionary work in England at the request of Bishop Wiseman.

Fr. Gentili’s direct involvement with some of the prominent men of the Oxford Movement came as a result of the conversion of the Anglican clergyman Francis Wackerbarth, a friend of Newman and Pusey. He had come to Grace Dieu during the festivities of the Assumption of Our Lady and was profoundly moved by the solemn ceremonies and the powerful preaching of Fr. Gentili. He opened his heart to him, and soon after he made a private retreat under Fr. Gentili’s direction. When it was over, he asked that Fr. Gentili should receive him as a Catholic; Ambrose Phillips asked at once that bishop Wiseman should come to Grace Dieu to receive him personally, and the Bishop came, bringing with him another clergyman of the Oxford Tractarians, Mr. Sibthorp, who had recently converted to the Catholic Faith.

On 2nd December 1841, Bishop Wiseman received Wackerbarth into the Church and conferred the sacrament of Confirmation to both Wackerbarth and Sibthorp in the chapel at Grace Dieu, in the presence of Fr. Gentili and Ambrose Phillips. The opposition of both Pusey and Newman to such individual conversions was well known; in their view such conversions would create more resentment against the Catholic Church impeding real progress towards a future reunification of the two branches of the same Church. But the Spirit was at work in the hearts of many of the Tractarians, people like Bernard Smith, Boxam, Bowles, Dalgairns, W. Ward, the young Lockhart, and finally Newman himself, who came to the realisation that the fullness of the Church of Christ subsists only in the Roman Catholic Church.

Fr. Gentili was a docile tool in the work of the Holy Spirit: he met most of the Tractarians, corresponded with them, had profound discussions when they met either at Grace Dieu or at Oxford, prayed with them, and offered them guidance during private retreats. On 19th October 1842 he went to Oxford with Ambrose Phillips, and in the house of W. Ward he met William Lockhart, who was staying with Newman, Dalgairns, and Bowles at Littlemore, where they lived an austere monastic life. On that occasion,

Fr. Gentili had the opportunity of visiting Pusey, a most learned and humble man, with whom he had a long discussion on the mystery of Transubstantiation; he met also Henry Newman, and this is what he wrote to Madame Bolongaro: *"The one in charge of the Movement [Newman] asked me to give him some instructions on giving retreats. I sent him the book written by Fr. General [Rosmini] entitled, "Manuale dell'Esercitatore", which is being used by the people who live together at their Monastery [Littlemore]"*.

Fr. Gentili had also sent to each of them a copy of the Maxims of Christian Perfection, which they found "extremely beautiful, edifying, and unobjectionable in every sense"; and books on philosophy by Fr. Rosmini, which they read with great admiration.

Fr. Gentili stayed at Grace Dieu for a period of two years. Fr. Rosmini had to make an exception to the rule of the Institute that its members have an obligation to live a community life, to help each other on the way to holiness; but he knew of Fr. Gentili's longing for community life, and was looking for a way to achieve this without damaging his great missionary work and even his relationship with Ambrose Phillips.

Fr. Pagani had already started the mission at Loughborough at the pressing request of Bishop Walsh. He had arrived at Loughborough with some of the brethren who were with him at Prior Park in May 1841, and the small but vibrant community was already engaged in the care of the small Catholic population in a town of about 13,000 people. It was natural to think that Fr. Gentili would soon join the community of brethren, but it was important, for Fr. Rosmini, that the move should happen without upsetting Ambrose Phillips.

Notwithstanding the deep admiration Ambrose had for Fr. Gentili, it happened at times that his aristocratic and social position caused him to act in an abrupt and imperious manner towards him, occasions which his long training in humility absorbed with little consequence. But it was one of such moments of tension that finally brought to an end Fr. Gentili's permanence at Grace Dieu.

With permission from Bishop Walsh, Fr. Gentili had begun to celebrate a second Mass at Shepshed in the house of Thomas Fox, for the benefit of the many who could not attend Mass at Grace Dieu. On the last Sunday of May 1842, Fr. Gentili celebrated Mass, as usual, at Shepshed, with such a number of Catholics present that a second Mass Ambrose had arranged at Grace Dieu with a secular priest was poorly attended, a fact which caused him distress and humiliation.

Ambrose Phillips called Fr. Gentili, and after a heated exchange of views, forbade Fr. Gentili to say Mass at Shepshed on a Sunday. At Fr. Gentili's clear and firm words about the spiritual damage such command would cause, Ambrose replied, "From today you are no longer my chaplain". He did not mean it, and it was not long before he apologised to Fr. Gentili; but Fr. Gentili took him on his word, and wrote at once to Fr. Pagani and Fr. Rosmini who agreed that the time had come for him to leave Grace Dieu and to join his brethren at Loughborough. After exchanging letters with both Fr. Rosmini and Fr. Pagani, finally Ambrose Phillips was persuaded and gave his support to the move, counting on the continued friendship with Fr. Gentili.

An entry in his little diary marks two sad moments of the last period of his mission at Grace Dieu: "Wednesday 27th April 1842: the death of my good father Giuseppe

Gentili: requiescat in pace. Amen. Saturday 8th October 1842: the death of my good mother Anna Gentili: requiescat in pace. Amen. Two truly holy parents, to whose vigilance, care, and good example I owe everything, after God. May the good Lord reward them for the good they have given me, which I did not deserve”.



Grace Dieu

CHAPTER SIX

A.G.C.

la mattina Regola 401
e quindi leggerò i ricordi, i punti dell'
esame, ed una parte dei proponimen-
ti. Dopo la messa leggerò un pezzo
dell'Imitazione di Cristo. Ed un capo
de' vangeli: alle 2. sarò in camera e
leggerò le regole comuni, o partico-
lari; e le orazioni, e se mi avan-
zerà tempo alcun libro di ascetica o
vita di santi. Dopo vespere farò la
visita all'Aniò: camminando per ca-
sa o in chiesa, o per le stes terre
gli occhi bati, e dirò i 7. pater all'
addolorata, i 3. a Maria. Una della
mercede, ed i sette Be. proffondò, e ad
ognuna delle med. preghiere mi ri-
corderò della meditazione: la sera
prima di coricarmi invoglierò Dio
dei benefici fattimi nella giornata
leggerò nel vade mecum. le orazioni
per la sera, e quindi rifletterò come a
voti voluto parlare quel giorno se avessi a

Nella mensa, degnarvovi, ⁴¹⁴ ~~se~~ ^{la mia} ~~se~~ ^{coverta} ^{è come}
 Vere nelle mani di sì gran
 pastore, & unirvi di un cuore
 si scampare ed ingrato!!!
 Ma che cosa ho io fatto in
 consiglio di tanto amore? Ah non
 altro che sempre offendervi, e
 strapazzarvi!!!
 Ah non mia tie, che sei quel
 lume, che illumina ogni uomo, che
 viene in questo mondo, illumina
 faciem tuam super servum tuum,
 illumina semina mea, illumina
 oculos meos ne unquam obdu-
 raver in morte, fac ut videam
 fac ut videam = Ma che me vor-
 ra ~~non~~ ^{io voglio} ~~non~~ ^{mi}
 ne di tanto ^{guardare in} ~~contra~~ ^{grazie}
 grande la mia miseria, ^{quanto}
 la mia colpa, la mia ingratitudine.

(Fr. Gentili: Hand-written Prayers and spiritual thoughts)

MISSION AT LOUGHBOROUGH, 1842-1845

Fr. Gentili was welcomed with great joy by the small community at Loughborough and found himself easily at home following a routine very much similar to community life at Calvario, with common prayers, meditations, and instructions. The mission extended beyond Loughborough, and it included Barrow on Soar, Hathern, Thorpe, Quorn, and, after Fr. Gentili's arrival, also Shepshed, and other smaller centres. Fr. Gentili and Fr. Pagani, with the help of the young Fr. Signini, had succeeded in purchasing a stretch of land near Ratcliffe, with the intention of building a College and a Noviciate and had already obtained the good services of the great architect A. W. Pugin.

Soon after the arrival of Fr. Gentili, the vice-provincial Fr. Pagani had to make a trip to Italy and left Fr. Gentili in charge of the Mission. He was helped by Fr. Ridolfi, Fr. Ceroni and by brother Zencher, but, given his experience, he became the driving force behind a sustained effort at reviving the faith among the Catholics and at converting Protestants to the Catholic Church. The approach was the same as the one he had employed so successfully in the towns of the large estate of Ambrose Phillips, only a few miles away from Loughborough: it consisted in the celebration of Sacraments in a solemn and well prepared manner, involving as many of the faithful as possible; in preaching strong sermons about practical issues of doctrine and morality, animated by evident conviction and a warm feeling of love for God, Mary, the Saints; in instructing both adults and children in the faith; and in helping in every way the long line of poor people in their homes and at the Mission.

The results of such methodical apostolic approach soon became evident, with real fervour and conversions developing in all the places the Rosminian Fathers operated. The celebration of Mass at Loughborough, Shepshed, and Barrow on Soar was always a most solemn occasion, with aspersions, incense, processions, beautifully decorated altars, and plenty of candles. The homily was carefully prepared and given with great eloquence and authority. Yet, the practical love for the poor, the preferential treatment of them made everyone feel welcome whatever their state or condition.

Sunday school for boys and girls became so popular that many Protestants sent their children for instruction. The Fathers taught catechism in a way that was not threatening or boring: Fr. Gentili, in particular, enjoyed his meetings with the children and provided entertainment as well as sound doctrine. It was Fr. Gentili who introduced a special day in the year when children would be competing before priests and parents for many prizes on the basis of their knowledge of the catechism. For the occasion, clothes and food, religious objects and holy books would be given as prizes to the children. At Shepshed, such days would normally be taken in the square with over 1000 people in attendance.

Religious instruction was the means to achieve the dual purpose of reviving the faith and of converting to the faith. The instruction of children at Loughborough soon went beyond the Sunday catechism classes, becoming a daily occurrence for boys and girls separately. With the arrival of the Rosminian Sisters in 1843, at the insistence of Lady Mary Arundell, it was they who took charge of the religious education of the girls on a daily basis, strengthening in a substantial way the pastoral work of the Fathers at the Mission.

Instruction of the adult population took place in the morning, at Mass, and in the evening. The evening sessions became popular, and Fr. Gentili provided his Catholic

and Protestant audience with a methodical explanation of the doctrines of the Church, doing away with the slanderous myths and distortions spread around by Protestant ministers and other people jealous of the success of the Catholic priests.

It was not controversy, however, that Fr. Gentili had in mind; his intention was to confirm the faith in the hearts of his listeners, whether Catholic or Protestant. He wanted them to know their faith, to taste the beauty and the power of the doctrines they had received, and to live accordingly.

The need, therefore, to start “preaching missions” developed out of this urgent desire, and he started this new and successful approach at Loughborough, where the very first official Mission in England was preached by Fr. Gentili in March 1843. The Mission lasted 8 days, and it was closed by Bishop Briggs, Apostolic Vicar of the District of York, with a solemn Benediction with the Blessed Sacrament. During the Mission, 63 Protestants were received into the Catholic Church, many children were given the Sacrament of Baptism, and the faith of many was made alive by the reception of the Sacrament of Confession and the Eucharist. The success of this very first Mission at Loughborough was repeated soon afterward at Shepshed, where the Mission lasted 11 days as a result of public demand. The converts at Shepshed were 65, and it pleased Fr. Gentili to witness the intensity of the faith of the large congregation made up of people who had been brought back to their faith by his patient missionary work when stationed at Grace Dieu.

Equally successful were the private retreats given by Fr. Gentili to the many bishops, priests, and lay people who came to him for guidance and spiritual direction. Bishop Walsh had chosen him as his confessor and spiritual director and came often to Loughborough to see him. Bishop Mostyn of the Northern District, Bishop Wareing of the Eastern District, Bishop Briggs, of the Yorkshire District, Bishop Wiseman of the Central District, and many others paid him frequent visits, either for private retreats or for advice. He also directed A.W. Pugin, Lady Mary Arundell, and Mary Amherst who became later a Rosminian Sister.

In August 1843, Fr. Gentili had an unexpected visit from the aristocratic young man whom he had met at the house of the prominent Oxford Tractarian W. Ward, and who was staying with Newman, Dalgairns, and Bowles at the little “monastery” of Littlemore. William Lockhart had been allowed to join Newman, only after the promise that he would stay at Littlemore for three years and would not “convert” to the Catholic Church alone but, if truth should lead them, as a group.

Life at Littlemore was austere: they rose at midnight to pray the Divine Office, they had one-hour meditation each day, and then, instructions, reading at meals, weekly confession, daily Communion, and intense intellectual work. Lockhart liked the monastic lifestyle, but he was deeply troubled by doubts about the Anglican Church. On one occasion, after going to confession to Newman, he demanded of him abruptly, “But are you sure you can give absolution?” to which Newman could only reply, “Why do you ask me? Ask Pusey!”

After their meeting at Oxford, Fr. Gentili received two letters from Lockhart, who had wished to keep in touch with the man of God who had made a deep impression on him. Lockhart was now at Loughborough, and Fr. Gentili caught at once the anxieties, fears,

and doubts in the young man's heart, and invited him to stay for a private retreat. It was at the end of the retreat that Lockhart reached certainty about the Catholic Church and asked Fr. Gentili to receive him, feeling that such glorious and commanding divine truth could not be subjected to the promise he had made to Newman. On 26th August 1843, Lockhart made his entry into the Catholic Church at St. Mary's, Loughborough, and, three days later he was admitted as a novice in the Institute of Charity.

Newman was truly taken aback by Lockhart's submission to the Catholic Church, and a few days later he took the decision to resign from his little parish of St. Mary's in Oxford, and shortly afterwards he preached one of his most famous sermons, on "The Parting of Friends", alluding in it to Lockhart. After Newman himself was received in 1845 he visited Lockhart at Ratcliffe, where he was studying. He called on Fr. Gentili also, at Loughborough, to "renew their former friendship". And when Lockhart was ordained, he went to see Newman at St. Wilfrid's and Newman there insisted on serving his Mass.

All direct connection between Prior Park and the Rosminians had come to an end in December 1842, when Fr. Pagani, Fr. Belisy, and Fr. Lorrain had gone to Oscott as teachers, at the insistence of Bishop Walsh and Bishop Wiseman. Two other talented priests, Fr. Moses Furlong and Fr. Peter Hutton, who had had various important positions at Prior Park, had left the College in the summer of 1842 to go straight to Fr. Rosmini at Domodossola, and in the following year they both came back to England to assist the new Rosminian foundations at Loughborough and Ratcliffe.

It was Fr. Gentili who had put pressure on Fr. Rosmini and Fr. Pagani for the building of a College and a Noviciate at Ratcliffe. He had experienced the immense value of the education of young people at Prior Park, if only it could be based on solid Catholic principles and traditions. His vision of a Rosminian College encompassed all the good things that he had implemented at Prior Park, and much more, given that the ultimate responsibility now rested on the members of the Institute of Charity who had profound inspirational principles to guide them on their work of "intellectual" charity.

Many were the benefactors approached by Fr. Gentili to raise funds for the building, among them the Phillips, Lord Shrewsbury, Madame Bolongaro, Count Mellerio, and many of the English Bishops. A special mention is due to Lady Mary Arundell, who helped with great generosity both for the building of Ratcliffe College and for the setting up of the school for girls at Loughborough under the direction of the Sisters of Providence, the first two of which had arrived with Fr. Furlong from Italy in October 1843, after insistent requests from her to Fr. Rosmini.

The Novitiate opened at Ratcliffe on 21st November 1844, with a simple ceremony conducted by Fr. Gentili who preached about the future of the Institute in England, safe and secure in the loving hands of Divine Providence. The first name of the place was "Calvary", which was changed in 1847 to "Ratcliffe College" when it opened also as a College. Fr. Hutton was appointed Novice Master, and Fr. Furlong the first President of the College.



Ratcliffe College

If it is true that during the first year of his missionary work at Loughborough Fr. Gentili had limited his wide range of activities within the local area, which included, as we have seen, Barrow, Quorn, Shepshed, Whitwick, and the smaller villages around Loughborough, it soon became impossible for him to refuse pressing invitations to preach retreats and to give homilies in a far wider area. Accompanied often by Fr. Furlong, himself an exceptional preacher, he travelled to Derby, Liverpool, Coventry, Leicester, London, Manchester, York, and even Dublin. The reasons for such journeys were often celebrations of special feasts for parishes or for various Catholic groups, or fund-raising events to alleviate poverty, or, more often, spiritual retreats for priests of the various Districts, or for religious, men and women, of many Congregations.

In July 1845 he preached a retreat to the clergy in London, and on that occasion, he began his custom of seeking out the Italian immigrants in the big cities of England, putting aside some time to preach to them and to revive in them the fervour of their native faith. Whenever he came to London, he gathered them in the chapel of the King of Sardinia.

In September 1845 he crossed the sea to respond to an invitation to preach in Dublin, to raise funds on behalf of the Christian Brothers. His sermon, based on the feast of the day, the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, moved from the presentation of years of persecution and suffering of that courageous island to the means given to us by the Cross of Christ to alleviate the sufferings of others and to transform our troubles into redeeming moments in union with the Blood of Christ. His first impression of Ireland and of its people was one of great empathy and admiration.

The year 1844-1845 witnessed a considerable shift in the missionary activities of Fr. Gentili. He was still the priest in charge at St. Mary's, Loughborough and still

committed to the great apostolic work of which that parish was its centre. But his apostolic endeavours were being marked more and more by the frequent preaching of retreats to the clergy and to the religious in many parts of the country, and by an increasing number of “public retreats” or missions in many parishes across Britain.

Fr. Gentili’s first public mission outside his area was at Nottingham, in the church of St. Barnabas, designed by his friend A. W. Pugin. The invitation to hold a public retreat at Nottingham had come from the Benedictine Dom Willson, who had witnessed the power and beauty of the preaching of Fr. Gentili and had seen the Catholic revival taking place as a result. He had insisted on this mission, as the parting gift to his parishioners before taking his post in Tasmania as the first Bishop of Hobart.

Young Fr. Furlong had developed outstanding gifts as a popular preacher, and he became the faithful and worthy companion in all subsequent missions. The duration of such missions varied according to the will of the bishops or of the parish priests, but they usually lasted from 10 to 15 days; the later missions, however, lasted for about a month and even more on some occasions.

In September 1844, Fr. Gentili and Fr. Furlong travelled to Alton Towers, at Lord’s Shrewsbury’s invitation, and there gave a week’s retreat with striking success. Writing to Fr. Pagani, Fr. Gentili said, “The mission went sufficiently well”, but Lord Shrewsbury, writing to the same, extolled the two missionaries and called Fr. Gentili “the soul of everything”. They made three converts and baptised 15 children. Lord Shrewsbury booked the two of them for three other missions in other places under his control and at Cheadle, where a newly built church was nearing its completion.

From Alton Towers, the mansion of Lord Shrewsbury, they went on to Liverpool, and to Banbury and to Grantham, displaying a tireless zeal in their work. They preached to adults early in the morning and in the evening, giving instructions to the children and to the adults during the day. The demand for confession was so high that they had to spend many hours in the confessionals, frequently beyond midnight, to the point that they sometimes had no time even to say Mass or to recite the Divine Office.

In all three places they received converts into the Church, baptised many children, and prepared and administered the Sacraments of Confession and of First Holy Communion to many young people. There is written evidence from parish priests confirming that such increase in faith and devotion was not a temporary phenomenon but something that lasted in time, and on which they could build better Catholic communities.

At the beginning of Lent 1845, the two missionaries began a series of missions in Yorkshire, invited by Bishop Briggs who had booked them the previous year at the end of a very successful retreat preached to the priests of the District by Fr. Gentili. They started at Hull on 9th February, then at Leeds and at Sheffield, for about 12 days in each place, with no interruption with the exception of the time for moving from place to place.

The truly admirable Bishop Briggs was there to open the three missions, preparing the people to welcome God’s grace, preaching to them on Sunday, and always ready to give advice to the two missionaries concerning difficult cases. He would also open the strong liturgical ceremony of the Forty Hours of Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament,

which took place during the last three and a half days of the mission and conduct the solemn procession and Benediction at the end of each day.

In all three cities there was a great presence of people, to the point that the crowds often could not fit into the church. At Leeds, the more populated city with over 120,000 and the city with the greater number of Catholics, the vast church of St. Anne was always full, and the four priests in the confessionals had to administer the Sacrament till 3am nearly every night. At Sheffield, with 100,000 people, the participation of the people was equally strong, and over 1,000 received Holy Communion during the final days of the mission. At Hull and Sheffield, Fr. Gentili met two strong Italian communities, and preached to them, urging them to keep faithful to their Catholic traditions.

Although the missions were directed at the revival of the faith among the Catholic population, in nearly all missions there were converts, 5 at Hull, 7 at Leeds, 23 at Sheffield. It is true to say that Fr. Gentili, who had come to Britain with the intention of “converting the heretics”, was lead by Divine Providence more and more to concentrate on the reconciliation of Catholics with God and on making of the Catholic population in the various cities a light of burning faith and love at the service of God and of neighbour. Yet, there were many conversions even during the short time of a mission.

At the end of the three missions in Yorkshire, the two missionaries gave a fourth mission at Leamington, in Warwickshire, once again blessed with great spiritual success; after which they returned safely to their own parish in Loughborough, ready for the Easter services in the main church and in the out-stations.

When the Easter celebrations were over, Fr. Gentili and Fr. Furlong went to Newport in Shropshire, at the invitation of Lord Shrewsbury, for their next mission. There they had the joy of baptising 34 children, mainly from Protestant families, and 3 adults, one of which was a Methodist minister; 10 other Protestants were listed for instructions after the mission ended and were received into the Church some time later.

From there, they made their way back to Yorkshire, this time to Huddersfield and to Bradford, welcomed by the untiring Bishop Briggs. There was a slow start to the mission at Huddersfield, until the sudden death on the road of a local lapsed Catholic merchant who had chosen to conduct his business rather than to attend the mission and had had to be buried in a Protestant cemetery. This event was taken by many as a sign of divine anger, and the Church filled up in no time!

There followed the usual rush to the confessionals, the return to God with their heart, the celebration in great splendour of the Catholic Mysteries. 81 Adults who had never in their Catholic life approached the Eucharist, came forth to receive it, and the number of children attending instructions was so great that the parish had to hire and then buy a new hall for catechism lessons. Fr. Gentili introduced in the parish the May devotions in honour of our Lady, and a special chapel was dedicated to Our Lady of Mercy.

At Bradford, the mission was hugely popular, attended by a great number of people, and Bishop Briggs stayed with the missionaries for the whole duration, helping as usual. The crowd waiting to go to confession was so great that two lines of stewards had to be employed to keep order, and on a number of nights the two missionaries had to spend

the whole time in the confessionals. 30 Protestants were received into the Church and the number of children attending instructions was so great that once again the local priests had to hire another hall for catechism lessons. The mission was such a great success that Bishop Briggs ordered that a Te Deum be sung at the end of the Forty Hours and of the mission.

After Bradford, it was the turn of Coventry, a town of 30,000, renowned in the distant past for the many convents and for its strong faith, expressed especially during the festivities of Corpus Christi, with splendid processions and mystery plays, with the presence of members of the Royal Family and of many visitors. After the Reformation, the Catholic processions were abolished, and soon afterwards obscene processions and festivities took their place once every three years. The legend of Lady Godiva was made the object of celebrations, which included the riding through the town of a naked lady, with the streets lined with people cheering and enjoying all sorts of amusements.

Fr. Gentili opened the mission on the feast of Corpus Christi, when the city was in a state of excitement over the imminent celebration of the legend of Lady Godiva. The Protestant Bishop had written a strong letter of condemnation of the celebration, and the local Catholic priest, Dom Ullathorne, later a Bishop and an outstanding friend of Fr. Gentili, invited him to preach a mission to coincide with the pagan festivities.

During the first three days of the mission there was a poor attendance, since people's minds were occupied with the preparations for the pagan festival. On Sunday, however, the Church was full and Fr. Gentili preached with such eloquence and passion against the pagan rituals so unworthy of a Christian country that many were persuaded to attend faithfully all the services of the mission. Children, in particular, were promised a great day with Fr. Gentili if they attended the mission rather than lining the streets to watch the ride of the naked lady.

Moreover, Fr. Gentili asked the congregation to pray earnestly for bad weather and heavy rain, not at the start of the ride – in which case it would have been postponed – but in the middle of it, so that it would have to be cancelled for the year. The prayers were answered, and heavy rain soon after the start forced the authorities to cancel the event. Fr. Gentili kept his promise to the children, entertaining them for hours by acting and telling stories that had the children moving from utter fear to the happiest laughter. Dom Ullathorne, who was present with the children, wrote that it was truly a magnificent and brilliant spectacle.

Fr. Gentili asked the congregation to give thanks to God, and then he added, *"They have had the procession in honour of their lady, we shall have a procession in honour of our Lady!"* It was a daring challenge, since no processions to Mary had taken place at Coventry since the Reformation, and Fr. Gentili had to overcome the hostility of magistrates and Protestants. But he got the people involved in preparing a splendid baldacchino richly decorated with flowers and, having obtained a statue of our Lady from a holy woman, Mary Margaret Hallahan, he presented the Blessed Mother of JESUS to the veneration of the crowds and they had a procession through the streets of Coventry that had nothing to envy to the more elaborate processions he had seen in Rome.

The mission had to be extended to three weeks, due to popular demand. Bishop Walsh, who had managed to attend for a day only, was so impressed by the spiritual results that he urged all parishes of his vast District to offer a mission to their congregations. He booked Fr. Gentili at once for missions at Birmingham and Nottingham.

It had become evident by now that there was a conflict between the responsibilities Fr. Gentili had as the priest in charge of the mission at Loughborough, and his increasing commitments with preaching missions and retreats everywhere in Britain. Fr. Rosmini had kept a keen interest in the progress of each mission, and he knew therefore of the great blessings of God on the various congregations reached by the intense spiritual charity of Fr. Gentili and Fr. Furlong. He took the decision, therefore, to free Fr. Gentili of his rectorship of Loughborough, and with a decree of 9th September 1845 he appointed him “itinerant missionary”, giving him Fr. Furlong as companion.

It may be appropriate at this point, before embarking on an account of the last four years of Fr. Gentili’s life, to highlight an event which caused him great distress in his relations with Fr. Rosmini and Fr. Pagani. It was perhaps one of those humiliating moments allowed by the Lord to help him keep his feet on the ground.

Since November of 1843, Bishop Walsh, with the support of Bishop Wiseman, had asked the Rosminians through Fr. Pagani to take charge of the Church of St. Peter at Birmingham. It was indeed a most generous offer since the church had been the main church in town before the opening of the Cathedral of St. Chad, built by Pugin. Fr. Rosmini decided to take up the offer and urged Fr. Pagani to take the necessary steps.

When the news reached Fr. Gentili, he became very anxious fearing a near collapse of the pastoral activities in and around Loughborough, and a cessation of his fruitful missionary endeavours. He mentioned his fears to Ambrose Phillips who reacted in a truly unpredictable manner, writing a strong letter to Bishop Walsh threatening him with the withdrawal of all financial help, and another to Fr. Pagani with a similar threat about his help to Ratcliffe College and saying openly that he would also return the badge of Ascription to the Institute of Charity.

The ploy worked, since Bishop Walsh had no intention of offending one of the most generous benefactors in his District, and he wrote to Fr. Pagani withdrawing the offer. Fr. Gentili wrote at once to Fr. Rosmini, describing the series of events and asking his forgiveness if he thought he had acted wrongly. What he got from Fr. Rosmini was a firm letter that brought to mind a similar one he had received years ago in Rome when he had presumed to act on behalf of the Institute without any authority to do so:

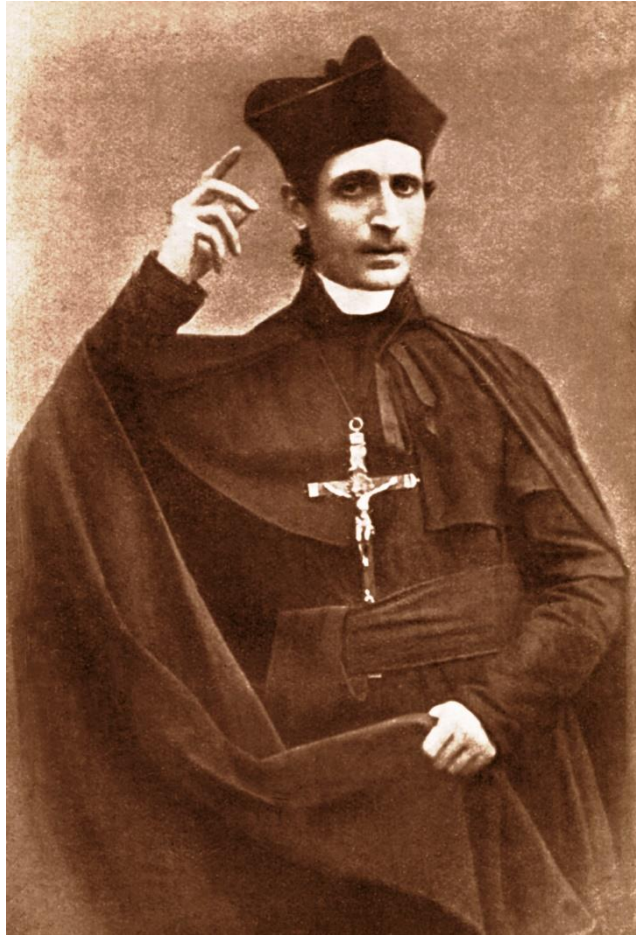
“I have received your letter of 3 April, in which you tell me what you have done and said with regard to the negotiations over the Birmingham mission, for the discharging of your conscience, so that if I find you at fault I may give you an appropriate penance. But unfortunately, my dear Luigi, I find you greatly at fault, to my immense regret. The substance of your letter is that, for the good of our Institute in England, you have manipulated things in such a fashion as to bring to nothing a work that was arranged in its entirety by your Superior.... How could your conscience allow you to fight against the work of your Superior? You reply that you acted so as to ward off a grave danger which threatened the Institute.

But had you the authority to act in this way? Why is it that you did not hold firmly to the principle of faith which assures you that the man who obeys is never mistaken? Ah, my dear Don Luigi, open your eyes: recognize how imprudently you have acted, how you have gone against both the virtue and the spirit of your vow of obedience. Ask God's forgiveness and promise him sincerely that you will amend your ways..."

Fr. Gentili was truly shaken by the reply, and he wrote at once expressing his deepest sorrow: *"I acknowledge all the faults you mention in your letter, begging the mercy of God. I let myself be deluded by the devil with the thought that had you known the real problems of our present situation you would not have allowed matters to progress. I did not think even for a moment that I was doing something against holy obedience, but now I can see how low I have fallen... What I want is true holiness, and I am aware that I will never achieve it without perfect abnegation and deep humility: this is my wish, not to go against my Superiors... Believe me, I acted the way I did not to go against my Superiors, but as a result of being miserably deluded by the devil that you would have approved of what I did..."*

Fr. Gentili felt the heavy weight of his guilt to the point that he did not dare say Mass for two days, nor had the courage to approach God in prayer, nor had a desire to preach; it was only after going to confession and corresponding with Fr. Rosmini that he found peace and serenity. He humbled himself without seeking excuses, without pursuing a line of justification; he accepted that he had acted wrongly, and, with a humble and contrite heart, he put his trust entirely in God and in his superiors. To many who, today, would see no fault in what Fr. Gentili had done, the sincerity and depth of his humility is the truly outstanding feature of this unfortunate event.

CHAPTER SEVEN



ITINERANT MISSIONARY, 1845–1848

“O send us Your heroes; O send us Your heroes”

(Blessed Antonio Rosmini)

It was Bishop Ullathorne who wrote about a private conversation he had with Fr. Gentili, which showed his profound apostolic longing for the good of Britain:

“One idea ruled Fr. Gentili’s mind, that England wanted an Apostle. He observed that almost all great restorations of faith and charity which had taken place in the different provinces of the Church had their origin in some individual. Raised up by God, filled with His Spirit, and endowed with apostolic force, such men came forth unexpectedly, shook their fellow men out of their day-dreams, forced their way on through contradictions, criticisms, and the amazement and anger with which the world received them, and gave a new life both to clergy and people. Such an Apostle, he felt, was wanting to the Catholics of England before we could think of doing much service to those beyond the pale. Earnestly speaking in this way, he more than once said to me: “Pray to God that He may raise up an Apostle”.

Those familiar with the short prayers of Blessed Rosmini may recall the one that goes in a similar vein, “Oh send us Your heroes, Oh send us Your heroes”. There is little doubt that, without knowing it, Fr. Gentili was describing his work and his calling to be the Apostle of God for Britain, a title which becomes fully justified as we read through his untiring apostolic work during the last five years of his life.

One could say that if it is true that Fr. Gentili worked tirelessly day and night for the sake of the Kingdom of God, without a moment for leisure or distraction, all through his apostolic endeavours at Prior Park, at Grace Dieu, at Loughborough, his unflinching concentration on his apostolic work seemed to make the last years of his life an unbroken line of retreats to clergy and religious, and of preached missions to the Catholic population in Britain and Ireland.

He followed a similar pattern for retreats and for missions, knowing to perfection the *Manuale Dell’Esercitatore* of Fr. Rosmini, from which he borrowed both the method and the content. His primary purpose at the beginning was to enlighten the understanding, by taking the mind to discover the powerful truths about God and man, natural and supernatural truths; once the intellect had been drawn to see clearly, then the second stage was to inflame the will to embrace and love the known truths, causing man to act morally, in accordance with reason and revelation. Fr. Gentili was in perfect agreement with Fr. Rosmini that “pragmatism” without “knowledge” is totally blind and leads to confusion; and that “knowledge” without “actions” is empty and sterile: the two dimensions are essential to each other, both in the natural and in the supernatural order.

As to the content, taken from the *Manuale*, it was not dissimilar to that of the modern Catechism of the Catholic Church: the destiny of the Christian person, the last four things – death, judgment, hell, heaven – the mystery of the Incarnation, the main events in the life of JESUS, the worship of the Humanity of Christ in the Eucharist and in the Sacraments, the devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary and to the Angels and Saints, the mystery of the Church, one, holy, catholic, apostolic; and then, the Ten Commandments, the precepts of the Church, the particular duties of the Christian in relation to the special calling to each by Divine Providence.

“Feeling” had also a most important part to play, especially during the last days of retreats or missions. Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, the Forty Hours, solemn

processions, Confessions, Holy Communion, the renewal of Baptismal vows were all intense moments of faith and of commitment to JESUS Christ and to His Church, and signs of true conversion to God.

As a trained barrister, Fr. Gentili had learned to perfection the art of eloquence and of persuasive speech. The evidence from his listeners was overwhelming on the power of his delivery, on the beauty of his expression; someone said that each of his movements on the pulpit deserved to be represented in art form, and a Mr. Patterson, director of a school of Art sent his pupils to the Catholic Church to watch and to draw the fine gestures, the precision and grace of his preaching. Fr. Gentili himself confessed to Bishop Ullathorne: *"There was a time when I would make beautifully prepared sermons, but I realised that people would not understand them; now I go straight to the hearts and minds of my listeners"*.

His listeners saw in him the man of God, fervent in his love, and austere in his way of life. In effect, he slept three, four hours at night and occasionally less, he ate very little, mainly bread and water, and he used other means for mortifying his body. During missions, he asked to be lodged in a room attached to the church, if possible, saying that he was "on call" day and night.

The decree issued by Fr. Rosmini on 9th September 1845 making Fr. Gentili and Fr. Furlong "itinerant missionaries" came into effect immediately, and on 21st September both were at Leicester for a 10 days mission at the Church of Holy Cross, called by the Dominican Provincial. There they revived the faith of the Catholic population, received into the Church 4 Protestants, and had the joy of converting an ex-Trappist monk who had caused grave scandal by his disorderly life. The poor man was truly shaken by the words he heard, and humbly asked Bishop Walsh to allow him to go back to his monastery, no longer as a monk but as a mere servant.

On 5th October they were at Worksop, in Staffordshire, to preach a mission in the chapel of the Duke of Norfolk. They had a fruitful start, with 7 Protestants asking to be received into the Church, and a Catholic who had turned Calvinist asking to be readmitted into the Church. The sudden death in the night of a man who had just been to confession prompted the Catholic men to hurry for the Sacraments, and 5 more Protestants embraced the Catholic faith.

From Worksop, Fr. Gentili rushed to York, invited by Bishop Briggs to preach a three days retreat to the nuns and to the girls of their school; and from York he reached Fr. Furlong at Birmingham on 19th October, to preach a mission in the Cathedral in the presence of Bishop Wiseman. It was at Birmingham that Fr. Gentili began the custom of separating men and women in church, as aid to modesty and concentration, a custom which found later some opposition. The mission was very well attended, and very fruitful, with the confessionals in constant use till the early hours of the morning. 33 Protestants made their submission to the Church, and 44 children of Protestant families were baptised. Bishop Walsh closed the mission with a Te Deum, moved by the outpouring of God's grace on his people.

On 1st November, the two missionaries were in York, called by Bishop Briggs who insisted on being part of the work by opening and closing the mission, by spending hours in the confessional, and by preaching on Sunday. There was at York a strong

party of Catholics who opposed any form of devotion to the Virgin Mary. Fr. Gentili, with the approval of Bishop Briggs and of Bishop Riddell, who was also present, delivered a powerful sermon on the greatness of the Mother of God, and even though he was being interrupted all through the sermon with the occasional shout, “Blasphemy, blasphemy”, he extolled the virtues and power of Mary with burning words coming from the heart. There followed anonymous threatening letters, and open discussions with members of the party, who claimed that it was the worship of Mary that had caused so many heresies in the Church.

Fr. Gentili, who had a most tender devotion to Mary, came to the conclusion that the party had to be taken on without mercy. Over a few days, he gave the most detailed explanation of the role and place of Mary in Scripture, in the Councils of the Church, and in the veneration which the Church has always given Her, claiming finally that devotion to Mary has always been considered a bulwark against heresies. His clear and irresistible evidence brought confusion among the members of the party, which was soon dissolved. A beautiful statue of Mary was then placed in the chapel for the veneration of the faithful, and Fr. Gentili started the practice in that Church of the recitation of the Rosary in honour of the Blessed Mother of God. At the end of the mission 11 Protestants asked to become part of the true Church of Christ.

On their way to Scarborough, Fr. Gentili made a quick visit to Melton for a three days mission; even so, he received 4 Protestants into the Church. From there he went to Scarborough to start the mission on 16th November, invited by Bishop Briggs. Abundant fruits were the results of their work, and 15 Protestants were converted in the process and received into the Church.

The mission at Scarborough had ended on the morning of 30th November, and in the evening the same Bishop Briggs opened the mission at Whitby. They worked hard, preaching, instructing, and spending hours in the confessionals reconciling sinners to God. 7 Protestants were received into the Church, and 117 Catholics constituted the Confraternity of Our Lady of the Rosary.

Once again, they finished the mission at Whitby in the morning of 7th December, and in the evening they opened the mission at Egton Bridge, without the assistance this time of Bishop Briggs who had been called to the bedside of his dying mother. This mission was particularly difficult on account of a very deep division between the parish priest and a large group of lay people of his congregation who had practically taken control of the parish and were trying to force the priest to do what they wanted. The efforts of the priest to restore his authority over spiritual and sacramental matters had been met with slanderous accusations, non attendance at religious functions and refusal to contribute financially to the upkeep of the church.

The mission was a most welcome event, and it gave the people the opportunity of understanding the hierarchical nature of the Church, and of the need to work together towards unity and peace. The clear and firm instructions of the two missionaries produced the desired result, and the priest and his congregation were reassured by the promise of another mission in the following year.

On 14th December, the two missionaries went to Newcastle, a town of about 60,000 people, in the Northern District. The mission took place in the new Cathedral, and it

was the turn of Bishop Riddell to display his fervent zeal by becoming one of the missionaries and helping in every way, often staying in the confessional till the early hours of the morning. The town was afflicted by many vices, drunkenness, hatred, divisions, and rampant immorality, favoured by immodest dancing in the squares and in many halls of the city. Fr. Gentili, urged by Bishop Riddell, spoke strongly against such perversions, and the fruits of this mission were truly outstanding, with a huge participation of people day and night, and a sincere conversion of most manifested by the long queues at the Confessionals and by the sincere participation in the Eucharist. 53 Protestants were received, and over 40 children from protestant families were baptised.

Moreover, the faithful made generous donations for the refurbishment of the Chapels of the Blessed Sacrament and of Our Lady in the new Cathedral. Fr. Gentili had the additional joy of preaching in his native tongue to a strong group of Italian immigrants who had made their home in Newcastle.

The mission in Newcastle closed on 1st January 1846, and, in the evening, they were already at Sunderland for their next mission. It may be helpful, at this stage, to provide a table of the missions preached by the two outstanding missionaries from 21st September 1845 till 1st January 1846, to see at a glance the immense apostolic work performed by them in many parts of Britain, for the benefit of so many Christians.

Missions from 21st September 1845 to 31st December 1845

21 September 1845	Leicester	14 days Mission
5 October 1845	Worksop	10 days Mission
15 October 1845	York	3 days Retreat
19 October 1845	Birmingham	12 days Mission
1 st November 1845	York	12 days Mission
13 November 1845	Melton	3 days Mission
16 November 1845	Scarborough	14 days Mission
30 November 1845	Whitby	8 days Mission
7 December 1845	Egton Bridge	8 days Mission
14 December 1845	Newcastle	18 days Mission

1846

The year 1846 witnessed again an unbroken line of Missions and of retreats, taken on by the missionaries with unflinching determination and great apostolic spirit. It may be helpful to provide a table of such activities for the year, and to concentrate on giving details of some of the more striking ones. As a rule, Missions did not take place during the two months of July-August, since many activities in parishes took a break for summer. There was no break, however, for Fr. Gentili who spent the summer months in preaching retreats to the clergy of the various Districts and to the religious of many Congregations.

1 st January 1846	Sunderland	12 days Mission
14 th January 1846	Durham	10 days Mission
25 th January 1846	Breword	12 days Mission
8 th February 1846	Middlesborough	7 days Mission (Furlong)
8 th February 1846	York	7 days Retreat (Gentili)
15 th February 1846	Manchester	14 days Mission
1 st March 1846	Newport	17 days Mission
18 th March 1846	Aberford (York)	14 days Mission (Furlong)
18 th March 1846	Vavasour Castle	14 days Mission (Gentili)
29 th April 1846	Nottingham	12 days Mission
12 th May 1846	Ugthorpe (York)	10 days Mission
23 rd May 1846	Egton Bridge	7 days Mission
31 st May 1846	London	14 days Mission
June 1846	Loughborough	10 days Retreat (Gentili)
5 th July 1846	London	10 days Retreat (Gentili)
19 th July 1846	London	10 days Retreat (Gentili)
30 th July 1846	York	10 days Retreat (Gentili)
9 th August 1846	London	10 days Retreat (Gentili)
23 rd August 1846	Darlington	10 days Retreat (Gentili)
17 th September 1846	Dublin	Preaching (Gentili)
20 th September 1846	Waterford	Preaching (Gentili)
27 th September 1846	Manchester (St. Augustine)	14 days Mission
11 th October 1846	Manchester (St. Patrick's)	32 days Mission
14 th November 1846	London	7 days Retreat (Gentili)
22 nd November 1846	Liverpool	14 days Mission
November 1846	Manchester	Preaching (Gentili)
November 1846	Manchester	Retreat (Furlong)
13 th December 1846	London	10 days Mission

Memorable were the three missions at Manchester, a large city with over 200,000 people and many Catholics of Irish descent. The first Mission, at St. Augustine's, encountered a problem with a strong group of people who had heard of the firm stand taken by Fr. Gentili against indecent forms of dancing and had organised purposely a Grand Ball just a few days before the mission. But Fr. Gentili was not deterred, and he was helped by the coincidental death of a Catholic woman who had set out for the Ball and had unexpectedly died without Sacraments on her way to the hall. The news spread,

and the Church began to fill up, and in a short time the queues outside the confessionals engaged 15 priests continuously well into the early hours of the morning. Fr. Whittaker, one of the priests, wrote to a friend, *"The results brought about by Dr. Gentili were extraordinary. Inveterate sinners who had stayed away from the Church for 30, 40, 50 years and more left their work to queue patiently from early morning until midnight waiting for their turn to go to Confession. Some of them had to wait two or three days for their chance, often begging to be admitted to the Sacrament with tears and true sorrow"*. 127 Protestants were received into the Church, and communicants during the last days numbered 5600 in the church of St. Augustine and 3000 in other adjacent churches. The faithful people offered more than 3000 candles for use during the Forty Hours.

The second Mission at St. Augustine was equally impressive. The number of participants grew so large that the sermons on Sunday had to be given in the square, before an audience of over 6000 people. 69 Protestants asked to be received, and the account of this Mission appeared in The Tablet, whose editor Frederick Lucas was following with deep appreciation the apostolic work of the Italian missionary.

The third Mission at Manchester was the longest and the most difficult of all missions so far. St. Patrick's Church was the parish with the greatest number of Catholics in Manchester, but it was being torn apart by the open rebellion of many against the Bishop who had appointed a new priest, Fr. Roskell, after the removal of the Irish priest, Fr. Hearne, a very popular figure among the Irish of the parish. Fr. Hearne, whose political views and activities concerning the independence of Ireland had the support of many, had left the city but had kept in touch with the leaders of the movement hoping to be re-instated in the parish.

The new parish priest had written a letter to Fr. Gentili begging him to preach a Mission to heal the wounds: *"The Rev. Mr. Hearne has left the town and my poor congregation is in a most fearful state of excitement. The first Sunday I attempted to preach, the whole congregation rose up in tumult after the first words and broke forth into curses and imprecations and cries of" pull him down, away with him, we will have none of him, we will have none but Mr. Hearne", so that it was quite useless to proceed in my discourse... I knelt for a few moments and quietly gave them my blessing. "We don't want your blessing", was the indignant reply..."*

Fr. Gentili confronted the problem at once, and his first sermon was centred on the story of JESUS sending out His disciples two by two with the injunction to announce peace at every house they went. He asked the congregation to pay heed to God's warning, and to accept His divine peace in a spirit of repentance and sorrow. His sermon was interrupted again and again by protests and loud comments; the same rebellious attitude was evident over the next two days.

On the third day, from his usual platform raised high in the Church, Fr. Gentili addressed the congregation with fire in his eyes, and the Crucifix in his hand: *"I came among you with this sign of peace [showing the Crucifix], the image of your crucified Saviour, whose Blood was shed for your salvation. If you do not wish to make peace with Him, I have no other alternative than to substitute, for the symbol of peace, the emblem of penance"*. He then dramatically took off his black cloak and the cross, and

put on a purple stole, the sign of penance. He then proposed three days of solemn fasting, in atonement for the sacrilegious behaviour of the previous days.

His action was resented fiercely by the opposing party, and violent and disruptive behaviour continued on the following evening, with shouts before and during the service, and quarrelling of women in the Church. When one woman struck another, uproar broke out and the Church was flooded with noise of shouting and fighting. Fr. Gentili remained standing on his platform, refusing to leave, and calling to order, until silence prevailed. At the end of the service, he called the police and one of the two women had to appear before a magistrate for unruly behaviour.

A sense of shame prevented any further disorders, and the Mission had to be extended for weeks to build on the achievement and to satisfy the crowds that poured into the Church day and night. 14 priests were kept extremely busy at their confessionals by swarms of people flocking to be reconciled with God. It was during this second period that over 100 Protestants asked to be received into the Church; and the mission closed with crowds still flocking to the confessionals and with many being turned away at the end because it was impossible to hear them all, even with continuous confessions throughout the night.

In gratitude, the entire clergy of Manchester signed a memorial which was presented to him on the last day:

“Very Rev. Father, sensible of the great benefits which have resulted from the missions which you have given in Manchester, we cannot suffer you to go from amongst us, without endeavouring to acknowledge the favour which you have conferred upon us, in devoting so much of your time to the spiritual welfare of the souls committed to our charge. The immense multitude of degenerate Catholics who have been reclaimed, and the still more remarkable number of converts who have been received into the Church convince us that the hand of God is with you, and that the practice of giving missions, which you have recently introduced into this country, is one of the greatest blessings which has accrued to religion in modern times.

When we reflect on the profound learning, the practical skill, the prompt decision, and the invincible courage with which you have encountered and overcome the peculiar difficulties which surrounded the mission of St. Patrick’s, we feel that a still more ample tribute of admiration and gratitude is due to you for your charitable and most disinterested exertions.

We are aware, Rev. Sir, that these difficulties were of no ordinary magnitude, and that consequently a more than ordinary call upon your zeal and charity has been required to overcome them. We know how forbearingly you watched the storm of rebellious opposition with which you were threatened by a party of undutiful children of the Church... and alas, for this unhappy town, the storm which had been for a long time brooding, and gradually gaining strength, soon burst upon it, and displayed a most melancholy schism in the Church.

In this sad emergency, it was, Rev. Sir, that we so effectually experienced the powerful assistance of your talented exertions. By means of them, the influence of the factious opposition has been nearly destroyed, and peace and reconciliation are once more

beginning to gladden our hearts. Though the people are still suffering from the effects of their own folly, yet, we hope, by the judicious counsels which you, Rev. Sir, have suggested, we may be able to complete the work of reconciliation which you have so happily begun; and that in a short time they may all return to the one fold from which they have strayed...”

In September 1846, Bishop Briggs invited Fr. Gentili to visit Ireland with him. On this second occasion, he had the chance of meeting Archbishop Murray, Archbishop Polding of Sydney and Bishop Murphy of Adelaide, and he joined them in the celebrations in aid of the Society for Propagation of the Faith. His greatest pleasure, however, was meeting many of his old companions from the time when he was a student at the Irish College in Rome. He wrote to Fr. Pagani, *“I renewed old friendships. I found myself among friends – more intimate and familiar than I had yet experienced anywhere else”*.

He heard much of the famine conditions, which had worsened terribly since the potato crop failed again completely that year, and of the desperate need for relief from all sources. He promised to obtain subscriptions from friends of the Institute of Charity in Italy, and was soon able to produce remarkable results. Fr. Rosmini helped him wholeheartedly, making public appeals in the Press of Piedmont, and organising the collection of funds at Turin, Milan, and Vercelli. Mons. Cullen in Rome wrote enthusiastically about the Rosminian Relief Fund by which about £1,000 in all was raised.

1847

The Missions preached by Fr. Gentili followed approximately the same format, both in the style and order of the functions and in the content of sermons and of instructions. Yet, they were all different, and it is interesting to read the account of each to gain a full understanding of the problems and of the outstanding success. Alas, it is not possible to provide here such detailed accounts, since the purpose of this booklet is to provide a more general knowledge of the apostolic work of Fr. Gentili. We shall, therefore, provide a table with the inclusion of all recorded activities of Fr. Gentili during the year 1847, and we shall then concentrate on a few of greater significance. There is the added problem that records for this year have not been kept as accurately as in previous years, and there are, therefore, uncertainties about dates and length of some Missions.

2 nd January 1847	Cheadle	14 days Mission
17 th January 1847	North Shields	12 days Mission
31 st January 1847	Stockton on Tees	7 days Mission
7 th February 1847	Hartlepool	12 days Mission
21 st February 1847	London	14 days Mission
7 th March 1847	London	14 days Mission
21 st March 1847	London	14 days Mission
April 1847	Northern District	2 Missions (Furlong)

April 1847	London	Preaching (Gentili)
23 rd May 1847	Preston	30 days Mission
June 1847	Egton Bridge	Preaching
June-July 1847	London	Preaching
11 th July 1847	London	14 days Mission
August 1847	Ushaw	Retreat (Gentili)
August 1847	Liverpool	Retreat (Gentili)
August 1847	York	Retreat (Gentili)
Mid September 1847	Dublin	Preaching (Gentili)
September 1847	Dublin All Hallows	Retreat (Gentili)
26 th September 1847	Manchester	14 days Mission
15 th October 1847	Bristol	14 days Mission
Mid November 1847	Dublin	Preaching (Gentili)
Nov. December 1847	Sheffield/York	Preaching (Gentili)
December 1847	Micklegate	Preaching (Gentili)
26 th December 1847	Huddersfield	30 days Mission

It is interesting to notice the many Missions preached by Fr. Gentili and Fr. Furlong in various churches in London. They had preached Missions in London before, and Fr. Gentili had been called on many occasions to preach retreats to the clergy of London at St. Edmund's College. It was Frederick Lucas, editor of *The Tablet*, who wrote about the special difficulties encountered by Fr. Gentili in London, and he attributed them to the fact that London was "the special abode of comfortable people", less inclined to accept the message of repentance and of conversion than the crowds of ordinary and poor people all over Britain. Fr. Gentili himself confessed to Bishop Ullathorne that he felt that his Missions in London had been less successful than in other parts of the country, but he attributed this to the fact that churches in London were much smaller making it very unpleasant for the large number of faithful, crammed for hours into restricted spaces; moreover, with the Missions sometimes being held in private chapels it became much more difficult for the poor and the Protestants to gain access.

Bishop Griffiths, the Apostolic Vicar for London, displayed great interest and participated whole-heartedly, helping the two missionaries with the functions, the preaching, and with hearing Confessions. The first two Missions of this year were held at the Chapel of the King of Sardinia and at the chapel of the King of Spain: both chapels were overflowing with people wanting to hear and to go to the Sacraments. The processions with the Blessed Sacrament were most solemn occasions, on a par with similar ones in the Continent for the splendour of the arrangements and of the decorations. 28 Protestants asked to be received into the Church, 18 in the first and 10 in the second Mission. The third Mission in the chapel of Morefields, witnessed the greatest number of people, having had a most solemn opening by three Bishops: the Apostolic Vicar, the Bishop of Montreal, and the Bishop of Adelaide.

All through the Missions in London, Fr. Gentili paid special attention to the strong community of Italian immigrants, preaching to them regularly in the chapel of the King of Sardinia.

Bishop Ullathorne had been a most fervent admirer of Fr. Gentili, and had invited him, a few years earlier, to the famous mission at Coventry where he had witnessed the indefatigable zeal, the fiery words, and the whole array of apostolic skills displayed by Fr. Gentili on that occasion. He was now the Apostolic Vicar of the Western District, appointed after the untimely and sudden death of Bishop Baines in 1843. He had chosen Bristol as his place of residence, rather than Prior Park, wishing to be closer to the working classes of industrial Britain. It was to Bristol that Bishop Ullathorne called Fr. Gentili and Fr. Furlong to preach a Mission. He himself left a brief account of that Mission:

“In the month of October 1847, Dr Gentili and Mr. Furlong undertook to give a mission for fourteen days at St. Joseph’s, Bristol, where I was then residing as Vicar Apostolic. They came straight from holding a mission at Manchester where, during its last days, they had sat up to two or three o’clock in the morning in the confessional, and they took no intervening rest before commencing their new task.

This mission was remarkably successful. It commenced a new order of things in Bristol which had not since been arrested. Their exertions demonstrated that the religious wants in the city were much greater than anyone had calculated upon”.

In the long discussions that the Bishop and Fr. Gentili had during that time, they exchanged views on the big topic of the day, the possible establishment of the Hierarchy in England and Wales. There was agreement that the division into vast Districts was far too inefficient and in need of radical change.

In effect Fr. Gentili had a great interest on that matter since he had been asked by Cardinal Franzoni, through Fr. Rosmini, to send full and secret Reports to Rome about the real conditions of the Catholic Church in Britain. Fr. Gentili, who had acquired a most profound knowledge of the situation through direct practical experience in the industrial cities as well as in London, and through his discussions with priests, religious, and bishops everywhere in Britain, took the commission to explain to the Holy See the problems, the aspirations, and the practical steps required for a successful establishment of the Hierarchy with the most profound sense of responsibility and sent more than a dozen Reports all through 1847 to Cardinal Franzoni.

He had the joy of receiving an acknowledgment from Pope Pius IX, which stated that the Pope had read with great interest all his Reports, and thanked him for his meticulous presentation of facts, wishing him every success in his apostolic endeavours.

1848

The year opened with Fr. Gentili and Fr. Furlong immersed in their Mission at Huddersfield, which had begun on 26th December and lasted for 30 days, with the usual great spiritual results. They prepared 150 young people for their first Holy Communion, received into the Church 15 Protestants, and even managed to shut down two brothels!

When the Mission ended, the two missionaries remained in Yorkshire, preaching in various towns and holding a Mission at Bradford. In the middle of February, they went to Bristol to hold a mission for 30 days, as agreed in the previous mission with Bishop Ullathorne. The reason was that both had agreed that a Mission should last for about a month, to give more time for the instruction of the people and for drawing them closer to God as a result of the real blessings that they experienced during the days of the Forty Hours, of processions, of renewal of Baptismal vows, of approach to the Sacraments.

The experiment worked well, and for the whole duration of the Mission the Church remained full, and more and more people approached with great devotion the sacraments of Confession and of the Eucharist. Bishop Ullathorne wrote, *“The labour was indeed excessive... Even to the last day abundant work was provided for the confessionals... At this time, though as energetic as ever, Fr. Gentili was visibly much worn, and I felt anxious about him, and urged that after the close of these missions he ought to have a good interval of rest”*.

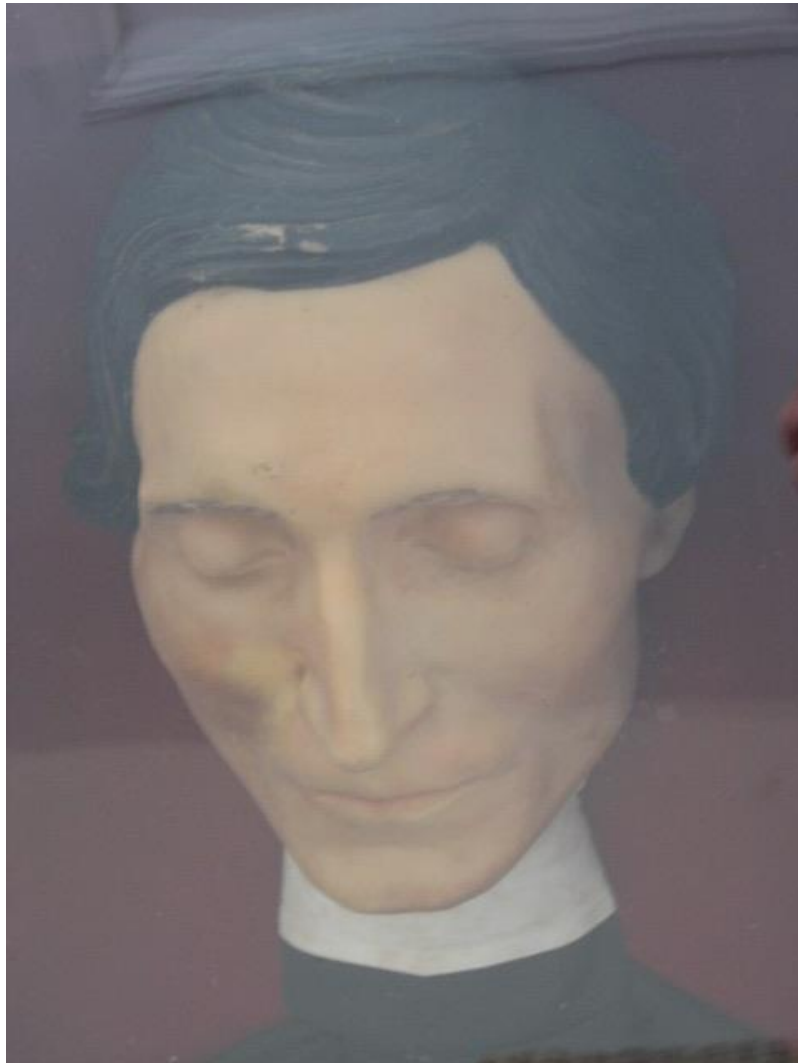
But Fr. Gentili had already agreed to preach Missions at Bath, and in Ireland. He started the Mission at Bath immediately after the one at Bristol, and it was to be the very last Mission he preached in England. We know nothing about this last Mission, except for the comment of Bishop Ullathorne that “it was one of the most happy” of all his missions, and that, between Bristol and Bath, over 100 Protestants were received into full communion with the Catholic Church.

Bishop Ullathorne was not the only one to worry about the declining health of Fr. Gentili. Fr. Pagani also became extremely concerned, begging him to take a rest and to stop for a while his fasting and his physical penance. He was just forty-seven, but he had been working for years with fierce intensity, sleeping a few hours at night, fasting at each Mission for three days with the people, and eating very little at all times. Moreover, he had the added burden of spiritual direction through correspondence, which he could only deal with at night and during the few spare moments of the day. One such letter, to a married lady in February 1848, is perhaps an echo of the kind of teaching he would offer at some stage during his retreats:

“Nothing better than prayers, but we must recollect that humility is the great ingredient of all sanctity; and a sincere act of humility is more valuable before God than many prayers. He who is humble is a saint, and few prayers are necessary to him in order to be heard by the Lord. We see it in the prayer that the woman of Canaan made to Christ. She prayed first and was not heard; she humbled herself and repeated her prayer in a very humble manner. Christ, Who had seemed to despise her, heard her at once. So, likewise, He did with the Centurion. He said, when Christ offered to go and visit his servant, that he was not worthy to receive Him under his roof, and Christ performed instantly the requested miracle; and so the prayer of the crucified thief, and that of the Publican was heard, because coming from a profound sense of their humility.

Endeavour then, while you are so anxious about your prayers, to be so likewise in laying down more every year the great foundation of all sanctity, that you may build its edifice on a firm rock. He who is humble has all graces, and he who is humble has patience, meekness, self-denial, and every Christian virtue; he soon arrives at the perfection of charity and begins to foretaste on earth the calmness and the happiness of Heaven”.

CHAPTER EIGHT



The death mask of Fr. Gentili

MISSION IN IRELAND

APRIL – SEPTEMBER 1848

“He who is humble has all graces, and soon arrives at the perfection of charity” (Fr. Gentili)

Before departing for Ireland, Fr. Gentili went to Kenilworth to stay with Mrs. Amherst, whose daughter was now a nun in the Rosminian Convent as a Sister of Providence in Loughborough. In the morning of his departure, on giving his farewell to the family he added, *“You will not see me in England any more; you will pray for me at the news of my death”*; and then, turning to Fr. P. Mitchell, he told him, *“You will say a Mass for the repose of my soul”*. It was Bishop Ullathorne who reported this conversation to Fr. Pagani soon after Fr. Gentili’s death a few months later.

The first Mission in Ireland took place at the Church of St. Audeon, in Dublin, from 29th April to 4th June 1848. The concourse of people was extraordinary, and great enthusiasm greeted the various stages of the Mission, an event which had not been seen before in Ireland. We have Fr. Gentili’s own comments as he wrote to a friend in England:

“I remained in the confessional most of the night, and others with me. Forty, fifty priests would have been insufficient to gather in the big harvest, and from this you may gather that a mission in Ireland is twice more successful than one in England. This morning, people came to Communion in their thousands; two priests and at times four were occupied in giving out the Bread from Heaven. You will be pleased to hear that the Almighty God has indeed blessed this first Mission: 55 Protestants have been converted, 85 Catholics have been confirmed, more than 20,000 communions, and by the hundreds the people who received the Sacraments for the first time or after many years”.

In between the first and the second Mission, both Fr. Gentili and Fr. Furlong spent a few days as guests of Lady Bellew, at her pressing invitation. She had been the cause of Fr. Gentili’s deep crisis in his younger days when still a barrister in Rome. He had fallen in love with her, but he had been refused her hand by her guardians and she had been whisked away to England on the very next day. The following year she married a young Irish baronet, Sir Patrick Bellew, with whom she had five children. She was delighted now to meet Fr. Gentili and rejoiced at the opportunity of offering him a little rest from his apostolic work.

In the middle of June 1848, the two missionaries began their second Mission in Ireland at Rathmines in Dublin. It lasted over a month and it received the same enthusiasm and participation as in the previous one. On 23rd of July, near the end of the Mission, Bishop Whelan confirmed 500 people, mainly adults. There was the case of a gentleman who for years had refused the Sacrament of Confirmation. Having gone to Confession to Fr. Gentili, he said to him, *“Well, don’t you wish to become a perfect Christian?”* These simple words spoken by the holy man of God were sufficient to break his resistance, and he was confirmed with the others.

Fr. Gentili’s warm eloquence when speaking about the Blessed Mother of God moved the people to a deep love for Her and, with his help, they formed at Rathmines the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception. The blue Scapulars needed by the members of the Confraternity were in short supply, and Fr. Gentili organised the ladies to produce them for themselves and for the poor who had asked for them.

The two events that most contributed to the success of the Mission were the Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament for the Forty Hours of Adoration, and the solemn procession

with the Blessed Sacrament through the streets of Dublin. The profound faith of the Irish people, tested in every way by years of persecution and oppression, came fully alive at both events. The main altar of the Blessed Sacrament, beautifully decorated, was ablaze with candles, and the people flocked to worship the Lord.

Even greater was the enthusiasm and joy for the solemn procession of the Blessed Sacrament through the streets of Dublin. It was a tremendous injection of Catholic pride, a moment of freedom at the chance of affirming publicly the most sacred belief of the Irish people. The people of Rathmines, in the Memorial given to Fr. Gentili and Fr. Furlong, made this very same point:

“In giving thanks to you, our beloved benefactors, for the blessings you have provided for us, how can we forget the joy we experienced in carrying in procession through our streets Our Lord JESUS Christ in the adorable Eucharist? During the long years of oppression, we could carry the Son of the eternal God only in hidden places, and, in more recent times, in our churches. But it was you who brought back the worship of our Lord in the open, followed by thousands of the faithful, with the greatest pomp and solemnity possible to us. You were the first to carry the Saviour of the world through this land, most loved by Him”.

A young Irish nun, who had been present at the Mission, wrote an account of her recollection from a convent at Bandon, County Cork:

“I remember distinctly attending the mission given by him in the parish of Rathmines, Dublin, in the year 1848. ... Everyone was simply fascinated by Father Gentili. He was very tall and slight, and exceedingly graceful in every movement, and especially so when, clothed in his religious habit and cloak, he preached from a platform erected at the side of the altar. Near this there was a table with a large Cross placed on it. But, beyond all, he looked the very personification of sanctity and mortification... The Church was thronged with people during the devotions, and indeed all day long trying to get to Confession. No need to say the good Father’s confessional was besieged, many remaining there all night...”

News about the movement of our two missionaries after the successful Mission at Rathmines is rather patchy. It seems that Fr. Gentili went to preach a retreat to the sisters of Mercy at Birr, in the diocese of Killaloe, and afterwards he preached another retreat to the clergy in Dublin. On the last Sunday of August, both preached on behalf of the schools at Rathmines in need of funds, in the churches of St. Mary and of St. Peter.

On the 3rd September 1848, in the parish of St. John in Dublin, Fr. Gentili and Fr. Furlong opened the Mission in a most solemn fashion, being the local feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary of the Consolation. The people of Dublin had a good knowledge of the outstanding qualities of Fr. Gentili either from direct experience or from reports that had been spreading rapidly everywhere, and they came to the Mission in huge numbers. It was true that the area in which the Church was situated was among the poorest in Dublin, densely populated by crowds who lived in abject and unhealthy conditions. It was true also that many had tried to dissuade Fr. Gentili from preaching a Mission there, for fear that his health may suffer as a result. But Fr. Gentili had been pressed by his apostolic zeal, and now the people were filling the Church eager to hear the word of God preached by the zealous missionaries.

Writing to a friend, Fr. Gentili described moments of the Mission: *“The number of people is so great that we do not know what to do. Unfortunately, the local priests are already so busy in their parishes that they can do little to help us in the confessionals; and so the heavy burden is on our shoulders, and we can achieve only a small part of the good we could achieve if we only had other priests to help us”*.

Fr. Furlong himself wrote at about the same time, *“I have never seen in my life a people better disposed and willing to bring nourishment to their soul and to draw the greatest profit from the Mission”*.

It was during the first days of the Mission that Fr. Gentili wrote a letter to Fr. Rosmini which was to be his last to his spiritual Father. Fr. Rosmini had been asked by Pope Pius IX to get ready to be made a Cardinal, and Fr. Rosmini had obtained permission from the Pope to consult first with the presbyters of the Institute. Fr. Gentili sent him the following reply:

“My dearest and most loved Father Superior and General, in Christ JESUS, whose glory we are bound to seek in all things. Amen.

I reply immediately to your demand, and I wish to advise you to accept the honour the Vicar of Christ wants to bestow on you; and since you ask that I should give you a command, then I do command you in the name of holy obedience to accept it. The Lord has answered my many prayers, and it is my hope He will grant you even greater things, not for your sake but for the sake of the crucified Bride of the Crucified Lord.

Receive, then, my dear Father, the Sacred Purple, but remember on that day the purple cloth that was placed in mockery on the bruised shoulders of the King of Heaven, and how it was bathed in the Blood of the Man-God; and do you offer again, unto the Eternal Father, your blood in union with His most Precious Blood, whence Holy Church took its rise. Thus will the wisdom given to you from Heaven redound to the true glory of God.

I am here in Ireland giving a third Mission with Fr. Furlong. The Lord has opened for us a larger and more fruitful field than the one in England. We could easily have a house and a church here in Dublin. I have asked many of the Bishops here to place the whole island under the protection of the Immaculate Virgin Mary... Should this happen, I am sure there will be a new dawn for this poor and afflicted land...”

Fr. Rosmini kept close to his heart these words of Fr. Gentili, and he often quoted them in his letters. Writing to Fr. Pagani, after Fr. Gentili's death, he said, *“Our dear brother Don Luigi was truly a prophet, when, having heard of the command given me by the Pope, warned me to remember that purple cloth that covered the shoulders of JESUS Christ”*.

In the meantime, the Mission was progressing with great numbers in attendance. The iron will of Fr. Gentili had managed to sustain for a while the increasing weakness of his body, but on the evening of 16th September, as he was in the confessional, he was seized by high fever, and after a while he was forced to abandon the confessional and

made it with great difficulty to the house, where he wrapped himself in his own cloak and laid down on the sofa, unable to move or to do anything.

Fr. Furlong rushed to see him and persuaded him to get into bed. In the morning, they called the doctor, who did not seem unduly preoccupied, and so there was some hope of a speedy recovery. But the high fever persisted over the next few days, and it affected his lungs making his breathing painful and difficult. In the morning of 24th September, it looked as though there was an improvement, but in the evening the attacks of fever became more persistent and acute, and in the morning his breathing became difficult and his whole body was shaking with fever.

In the evening of 25th September, his conditions worsened and two doctors agreed that it was now a question of life or death. Fr. Gentili made a full confession to his companion, and received from him the Viaticum and Extreme Unction. During the night, Mrs. Dolan, the wife of a solicitor and extremely fond of Fr. Gentili, whom she venerated as a saint, sitting beside his bed witnessed his last hours. He spoke most of the night in a delirious state, about his Father Rosmini, about matters of the Institute, or about the Missions.

At one moment, he spoke at length of the government of Divine Providence over the events of the world, and he gave a lecture on the theological virtues and on the grace of JESUS Christ. He concluded his imaginary sermon saying with a weak and clear voice, "Let us remember at all times the one end for which we have been created by God, and to this end let us always turn all our thoughts and affections and works". He then slowly lifted his hands high and blessed his imaginary audience with the sign of the cross, letting them fall heavily and without life on the bed.

As his condition deteriorated, in the very early hours of the morning, Mrs. Dolan called Fr. Furlong, who had been persuaded to take a few hours sleep; he rushed in and in a state of distress began repeating short prayers beside the bed. Thinking that death was not yet imminent, he went to Church and offered Mass for him; when he returned he recited the prayers for the dying, and gave him the final blessing.

Fr. Gentili died at 7.15 in the morning of 26th September 1848, while the Sacrifice of Mass was being offered for him in the Church of St. John by the Augustinian Superior and by other priests.

The typhoid fever had prevailed over his weak body; a fever he had caught while in close contact, in the restricted space of the confessional, with the poor population of the area, many of whom afflicted by disease and by the "famine fever".

The news of his death spread among the long line of people who had been crowding the streets all around the house from the first moment of his illness. Profound commotion and sorrow descended over Dublin, and for the few days the body of Fr. Gentili rested in the Church of St. John, an endless number of people came to honour and to pray to the holy priest who had given his life for their sake.

The solemn funeral took place on 29th September. Bishop O'Connor and Bishop Devereux officiated, with a great attendance of the clergy. The panegyric was preached by Dr. Moriarty, the rector of the Augustinian Community. Immense crowds followed

the funeral procession to Glasnevin cemetery, and Fr. Gentili was buried beside the tomb of the great Irish statesman Daniel O'Connell.

This is how Fr. Furlong communicated the sad news to his Provincial, Fr. Pagani:

"Our venerable and holy brother Luigi Gentili fell asleep peacefully this morning in the arms of JESUS and Mary. He sacrificed his life to serve his beloved Lord, and died in battle with the weapons in his hand. I should not have expected his toils to come to an end so soon: fiat voluntas tua! Deus meus et omnia! Our Lord, who had called him first of our brethren to England, has called him first to the land of the living. What happiness we can find in the sacred embrace of religion."

Fr. Rosmini wrote at once to Fr. Pagani, sending comforting words: *"It is true that we have lost a most dear brother in Don Luigi, and the Lord's vineyard a valid worker; but do not let our sorrow turn to despair, but let it be joined to spiritual joy at the thought that the new citizen of the heavenly Jerusalem can do more for the Church now than he could have done here on earth; and moreover, at the thought that this was the Will of God"*.

Fr. Pagani was the recipient of hundreds of tributes honouring Fr. Gentili: from the many Bishops for whom Fr. Gentili had been a constant advisor, spiritual director, friend, companion in the apostolic work – Bishops Wiseman, Ullathorne, Briggs, Walsh, Brown, Griffiths, Riddell, Murray, Redmond, Weedall, etc. – to the hundreds of local priests and nuns to whom he had been the perfect model of holiness and of apostolic zeal; and to many lay people who had been touched by his spirituality, his holiness, his austerity, his gentleness. Particularly moving were the tributes that came from his own brethren, from Furlong to Pagani, from Belisy to Lockhart, from Hutton, to Egan, Toscani, Signini, and many others. Frederick Lucas, the editor of *The Tablet*, printed many pages of tribute, and his own editorial was most impressive.

It may be appropriate to conclude this brief account of the life of Fr. Gentili with the tributes offered by three persons closely involved in the Second Spring, and in the restoration of the Hierarchy in England and Wales, Ambrose Phillips, Wiseman, and Newman:

"The news, wrote Ambrose Phillips, was what of all things I least expected. I should have thought that his career was rather beginning than ending. At least, when one thought of the spiritual wants of England, and of his wonderful power to relieve them, I flattered myself that he would have been spared, for many years, to gain souls to Christ. But alas! We were not worthy of this blessed saint... Nothing can ever replace him to me in this world; and my only comfort is to invoke his prayers".

It was Bishop Wiseman who used, on behalf of many, the word "martyr", to stress the total gift of himself to Christ, at the service of His brethren:

"It is not only the Institute of Charity that has endured a much painful loss, but the entire Catholic Church in England, who had come to know and appreciate the zeal, the eloquence, and the holy life of your dead brother. It is a certainty that he died a martyr's death for the sake of the salvation of souls, and I am convinced that the Lord has already given him a most blessed reward".

We conclude with the words written by Cardinal Newman:

“I write to convey to you the great concern both of myself and of our community, at the afflicting event which has befallen you and yours. It is very mysterious indeed that anyone should be taken away in the midst of a career of such holy and important services as Father Gentili was rendering to Catholicism in this country. But may we not be confident that, in proportion to the greatness of the visible loss, is the real gain which will accrue both to religion and to your own Institute in particular, by the removal of so holy a person, who doubtless is able to do more for you and for the Church, where he is now, by his prayers than he could do by even the greatest exertions on earth?”



Cardinal H Newman

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REV. FR. LUIGI GENTILI (1801-48)
PRIEST OF THE INSTITUTE OF CHARITY
FOUNDER OF ST. WINEFRIDE'S PARISH
AND SCHOOL IN 1842.