



*'You must take for your pattern the Holy Child Jesus, not only to love Him and His Blessed Mother, but to imitate Him as He lived with her in the house of Nazareth. You must follow Him as He worked with St. Joseph, as He went about His many and troublesome errands, and as He helped His Blessed Mother in her household labours. You must learn then, how He looked, how He acted, and how He prayed.'*

CORNELIA CONNELLY



This important article on the ORIGIN OF THE SOCIETY OF THE HOLY CHILD JESUS is by the Vice-Postulator of the Cause of Cornelia Connelly, as also of the English Martyrs; he is Editor of *The Way* and Joint-Editor of *The Month*.

## WHY an American Foundress for England in 1846?

By James Walsh, S. J.

THE most important conversion in the Church's history in England since the baptism of King Aethelberht by St. Augustine was perhaps that of John Henry Newman in October 1845. Within six months of Aethelberht's conversion, ten thousand of his subjects followed him into the Church. After Newman's conversion, the daily increase of converts was so great that Bishop Wiseman and his friends felt that "once a genuine amalgamation had been attained between converts and old Catholics, a movement would be set on foot which would undo the work of the reformation. The 'conversion of England' became now a hope seriously entertained."<sup>1</sup>

As Wiseman saw it, the chief obstacle to this amalgamation was the ultra-conservative and often suspicious attitude of the 'born' Catholic. What Wiseman looked

upon as zeal and enthusiasm in the new converts, the majority of old Catholics considered as imprudence and indiscretion. And they could point to the unhappy example of Ralph Sibthorpe.<sup>2</sup> The remedy, Wiseman thought, was the 'Romanisation' of both sides: a deep reverence for and devotion to the Holy See, and a practical desire for the restoration in England of the external splendours of the Church.

Wiseman was at this time President of Oscott College, Birmingham, and Coadjutor Bishop of the Central District.<sup>3</sup> The focal points of the convert movement were in this district, under Wiseman's influence and jurisdiction. He had arranged for Newman and his friends from Littlemore to be settled at the Old College, Oscott (re-christened by them Maryvale); whilst in July 1846, through the

<sup>1</sup> Wilfrid Ward, *The Life and Times of Cardinal Wiseman* (London, 1897, Vol. I, p. 441.)

<sup>2</sup> Sibthorpe, a fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, who had become a Catholic towards the end of 1841, returned to the Anglican Church in October 1843.

<sup>3</sup> Before the restoration of the Hierarchy in 1850, England and Wales were divided into districts, ruled by Vicars Apostolic.

(This and the ensuing article have been approved by Fr. Desmond McCarthy, Promotor Fidei)



generosity of Lord Shrewsbury, Faber and his institute of St. Wilfrid had been settled at Cotton Hall, Cheadle (re-christened St. Wilfrid's).<sup>1</sup>

But before the end of 1846, Wiseman had set up a third centre of convert activity in the Central District – a convent for women at Derby.

That it was the Coadjutor, and not the Vicar Apostolic himself, Bishop Walsh, who was the director of the convert activities in the Central District, is clear from a letter of Walsh to Lord Shrewsbury, dated 8th December 1847: "I had considered the Institute at St. Wilfrid's (Cheadle) and the Convent of Derby so entirely under the guidance of Bishop Wiseman that I deemed it advisable for me to interfere as little as possible."

Fr. Luigi Gentili the Rosminian, though at odds with the old Catholics on most points, agreed with them on this: that in the direction of the convert movement Wiseman's enthusiasm was intemperate to the point of recklessness. Gentili wrote to the Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda, on 3rd May 1847, a long letter criticizing Wiseman's handling of affairs at Maryvale and St. Wilfrid's, and added:

Besides these two houses for men, whither he (Wiseman) intends through the fame of Newman and Faber to draw converts who desire to become religious, he has established yet another, for women, where he is collecting several converts whom he intends to make nuns. At their head he has placed a convert lady,

Mrs. Connelly, who was separated from her husband and entered the Convent of the Sacred Heart . . . She had wished to return to America, her own country, but Monsig. Wiseman kept her to make her head of this foundation . . . a new order for convert ladies.

In the archives of Ushaw College there is a draft<sup>2</sup> of a report addressed to the Holy Father by Wiseman whilst he was still Coadjutor of the Central District,<sup>3</sup> which outlines the primary purpose of the new congregation in terms similar to those used by Gentili:

With regard to the ladies, the plan conceived in Rome was for a Congregation which should receive converts and which would be adapted to their needs. The idea had the approval of his Eminence the Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda who asked me to have the rules translated and examined by prudent persons . . . Already they have received several converts, and the community increases daily.

It has always been acknowledged, and rightly, that the Society of the Holy Child Jesus owes its actual birth, under God, to Nicholas Wiseman. But its conception (and much less its adult growth) was in no way dependent on him. Its gestation (if we may continue the metaphor) was almost complete when Lord Shrewsbury intervened on Wiseman's behalf, as he had intervened in the case of Faber and the Community of St. Wilfrid. So Pierce Connelly wrote to his brother John on 28th April 1846, just after Cornelia's departure from Rome for England, via Paris:

<sup>1</sup> Chapman, *Father Faber* (London 1961) pp. 150-53.

<sup>2</sup> It is not known whether this report was ever sent.

<sup>3</sup> He became pro-Vicar Apostolic of the London District in August, 1847.



Fr. Grassi, Nelie's director, had very nearly sent her to America<sup>1</sup> – but Lord Shrewsbury so strongly argued in favour of England that she is now on her way there...

And Wiseman himself always insisted on the unforeseen and providential nature of his connection with the Society of the Holy Child. "My connection with the infant Institute", he wrote "has been from the first extraordinary. Without my seeking it, it seemed to me to come almost spontaneously under my care."<sup>2</sup>

Shrewsbury's dramatic intervention is more likely to have been sheer opportunism than the result of deliberate planning by Wiseman. It must have occurred in the winter of 1845, just after Newman and his associates had settled at Maryvale, and about the time when Wiseman wrote to Walker at Scarborough:

The question is not of providing an asylum for the celibates and Littlemoreans, but of assisting, at least temporarily, those who, coming over, give up all, and are from circumstances unable to do anything for themselves. There are one or two very able men in that painful position. *The same is to be said of ladies who lose their situations by becoming Catholics.*<sup>3</sup>

It is true that no man was more aware of the educational needs of Catholic England in 1846 than Wiseman. But education was not, it would seem, the immediate reason why the Bishop 'adopted' the American Cornelia Connelly as the

foundress of a new congregation of nuns in England at this time. In Newman and Faber he had found two leaders who, he thought, would give practical shape and direction to his plans for deploying the new converts in the work of conversion. Faber was already an enthusiastic 'Roman' and "Wiseman's cherished wish, that Newman should spend some time under the shadow of the Apostolic See, was carried out in the autumn of 1846."<sup>4</sup>

But there was as yet no outstanding woman amongst the Anglican Converts, whilst amongst the old Catholics there was "an almost complete absence of prominent laywomen."<sup>5</sup> Wiseman was quick to see that Cornelia, though an American, was admirably suited to be the female counterpart of Newman and Faber. He would have seen her as, equivalently, the wife of a convert Anglican clergyman: one who shared the same outlook, hopes and aspirations as her husband. Pierce Connelly had gone out of his way to make himself a Roman in the sense that his intimate friend and patron, Lord Shrewsbury, was a Roman. There was never any question of Pierce the priest choosing his native land as the field of his apostolic labours; it was always Rome or England. Cornelia, too, was thoroughly Roman in outlook. She had been the intimate friend of Gwendalin Talbot, whom Wiseman considered the best type of old Catholic – married to

<sup>1</sup> We know that Fr. Grassi was in communication with Bishop Fenwick of Boston before the end of 1845 about the possibility of Cornelia's making her first foundation in that diocese.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Mr. Buckle, the father of Mother Maria Joseph, one of Cornelia's early companions, and her first biographer.

<sup>3</sup> Wilfrid Ward, *op. cit.*, pp. 444-5. Italics mine.

<sup>4</sup> *op. cit.*, p. 450.

<sup>5</sup> David Mathew, *Old Catholics and Converts*, in *The English Catholics, 1850-1950* (London 1950) p. 213.



a Roman prince. Cornelia was cultured and civilised in the sense in which Wiseman understood these terms; and her spiritual formation was almost entirely Jesuit.<sup>1</sup> She had been chosen out by Fr. John Grassi, one of the most influential and prudent Jesuits in Rome, and one well-acquainted with the problems of the Church in the English-speaking world, to found a new congregation of teaching nuns: a project which had the warm approval of Cardinal Franzoni, Prefect of Propaganda. Wiseman doubtless realised, as well, that she was peculiarly free from the prejudices and preconceptions of the new converts, as well as of the old Catholics. In fine, if Wiseman's influential position in the England of 1846 was providential for Cornelia and her infant society, Cornelia herself was no less providential in the furthering of his schemes for the conversion of England. When Cornelia pronounced her vows as a religious in Wiseman's presence just over a year later, on 21st December 1847, the Bishop must have felt that his plans were going forward. Her community numbered ten and six of them were converts.

When Shrewsbury wrote to the English Jesuit Provincial, in September 1846, that "there is no one so capable of carrying out an Institute of this description as good Mrs. Connelly", he had in mind what *The Tablet* called its "striking feature, receiving... ladies desirous of temporary retirement, or of preparing for the Holy Sacraments, converts, etc....

a congregation that appears peculiarly adapted to the wants of England at the present time."<sup>2</sup> But the wants of Catholic England, as envisaged by Wiseman and his followers in 1846, were destined to change their shape. The spate of conversions very soon became a trickle, and Wiseman's plan for a Congregation for converts, a mere memory. When Cornelia was invited to England in 1846, the plan and purpose of her Society had already been laid down, as Wiseman himself admitted in a letter to the Community at Derby:

19th October, 1849

The field which you have chosen for the exercise of spiritual mercies is indeed vast and almost boundless, but it presents the richest soil, and promise of the most abundant return. The middle classes, till now almost neglected in England, form the mass and staple of our society, are the 'higher class' of our great congregations out of the capital, have to provide us with our priesthood, our confraternities, and our working religious. To train the future mothers of this class<sup>3</sup> is to sanctify entire families, and sow the seeds of piety in whole congregations.

If we omit the word 'England', the letter could have been written by any Bishop on the east coast of America - Boston, New York, or her native Philadelphia. But Newman and Tract 90 were English; and Wiseman saw *this* American Foundress and her institute as part of the answer to his prayers and plans for the conversion of England.

<sup>1</sup> For Wiseman's pre-dilection for Jesuit spirituality cf. Wilfrid Ward, *op. cit.*, pp. 260 ff. And he wrote to the Jesuit Provincial at the end of September 1846 to say that the existence of the new congregation depended on the availability of a Jesuit director

<sup>2</sup> *The Tablet*, 31st October 1846.

<sup>3</sup> Mother Connelly, however, intended her Society to teach *all* types of children, and the Derby Community devoted themselves first of all to day and night school for the child-workers of the Industrial Revolution.