

STUDI

THE ORIGINS OF THE SALESIAN WORK IN LONDON A CENTENARY LECTURE

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The centenary of a foundation provides an important stimulus for a critical historical examination of the traditions which inevitably surround the beginnings of that work. This is particularly true of the Salesian foundation in London because the traditional starting point for this work dates back to the earliest days, the 'golden age', of the Oratory, to the concern of Dominic Savio for the conversion of England and to the famous day dream he had of a great triumph which God was preparing for Catholicism in that kingdom.¹

The aim of this article is to examine, first of all, what connections there were between the Oratory and England, and to try to provide some explanation for Dominic Savio's keen interest in that far off land.

Secondly, it is hoped to examine the actual circumstances which led thirty years later, to the foundation of the first Salesian mission at Battersea in London in November 1887.

Looking into the background of a day dream would appear, on the face of it to be an uncertain process but what can be established for certain is that don Bosco had direct contact with the English mission in the person of Dr. Lorenzo Gastaldi, a not inconsiderable figure among the Rosminian missionaries in England and that Gastaldi himself had direct experience of the Catholic revival and shared in the prevailing enthusiasm for it.

It can further be established that Dominic Savio was a pupil at the Oratory while Gastaldi himself was in Turin, on leave from England and that Gastaldi was a frequent preacher at the Oratory both before and after his final return from England.

What this article seeks to suggest is that Dominic's interest in England and indeed the ideas contained in his day dream can be attributed, at least

¹ G.B. LEMOYNE, *Memorie Biografiche* (San Benigno Canavese 1898), vol. 5. Dominic first met don Bosco at the Becchi on Oct. 2nd 1854 (p. 123), he entered the Oratory in November of that year and his day dream is chronicled towards the end of the volume (p. 626).

in part, to the influence and preaching of Lorenzo Gastaldi and indeed that there are significant resemblances between Dominic's account of his day dream and a notes that were made at the Oratory of the Retreat sermons given by Gastaldi, though admittedly, some time after Dominic's death.

Secondly, the article suggests that the actual foundation thirty years later had much less to do with the Catholic revival than the dream might suggest and that don Bosco the realist was much more moved to try to improve the desperate situation of poor urban Catholics in a depressed part of one of the world's greatest cities.

The Italian view of England

England seems to have exercised a peculiar fascination for certain Italians both statesmen and clerics. Count Camillo Benso Cavour, the architect of Piedmont's industrial and political expansion, visited England on three occasions (1835, 1852, 1856) recognising and admiring the immense industrial and political power of the British Liberal Parliamentary system.²

From a very different point of view, churchmen such as Fr. Antonio Rosmini, philosopher and founder of the Institute of Charity, saw the British Empire, with its stable administration as a great opportunity for missionary work among the peoples of Asia. Through Luigi Gentili, one of his earliest disciples, he became instrumental in bringing to England the zeal and enthusiasm of the Italian religious orders which promoted a new confidence among the Catholic community. Blessed Domenico Barberi, the holy Passionist priest, despite some early misgivings about Rosmini's Institute, conceived a great passion for the English Mission, eventually crowning the first stage of its growth by receiving John Henry Newman into full communion at Littlemore in October, 1845.³

On the one hand, these Italian clergy saw England as the world's most powerful Protestant power, a visible sign of the success of freemasonry and the powers of darkness in the world; on the other, in the 1840's and 50's they saw the first signs of a Catholic revival. They were greatly encouraged by the growing numbers of Catholics in England, due to immigration from

² Denis Mack SMITH, *Cavour* (London 1985) Cavour made three visits to England in 1835 (see pp. 16-18), in 1852 (see pp. 65-66) and finally in 1856 (see pp. 91-92).

³ Claude LEETHAM, *Rosmini* (New York 1982). For his interest in England and contacts with Gentili see pp. 152 *et seq.*

Ireland, and were especially encouraged by a few notable conversions from members of the Oxford Movement in the Church of England, which they saw as heralding a mass conversion.

Fr. Barberi described what he believed to be beginning in Leicestershire in a letter to his Father-General in December 1840:

"He (Wiseman) explained, among other points, that wherever a Catholic priest is stationed in England at present, the Protestants around come in numbers for instruction like bees to their hive! So that, in any case apart from hereditary Catholics, a parish very soon grows up.

I observed this myself last Sunday, when I was at Grace-Dieu, Mr. Ambrose Phillips' house. On that occasion, a poor Protestant walked seven miles to hear Fr. Gentili preach! More than that he stayed on all day in church, shivering with cold, and only a piece of bread in his pocket, for the sole purpose of trying to persuade Gentili to go and preach in his town. The poor missionary could not make him any promise as he was already fully occupied in towns and villages nearby. And be it noted that, in the town from which this Protestant came, there is not a single Catholic! Poor people to make them Catholics, all they want is someone to instruct them with combined zeal and charity. Ah! if there were only many good missionaries! But the labourers are few".⁴

To beleaguered Italian churchmen, overwhelmed by the hostility of increasingly anticlerical governments in their traditionally Catholic states, the prospect of a 'Second Spring' for the Church in the very heart of enemy territory provoked enormous enthusiasm for the English mission.

In England itself Catholicism was changing. The challenge of Emancipation and of massive Irish immigration during and after the famine of 1845-8, and the small but influential group of converts had begun to change radically the outlook of the English Catholics. Aristocratic converts like Ambrose Phillips de Lisle, were anxious to abandon the traditional 'low profile' English Catholicism, of *the Garden of the Soul* variety, in favour of revivalist preaching at the street corners and the introduction of popular Italian devotions. At the instigation of these converts, the Institute of Charity (the Rosminians) and later the Passionists sent some of their most gifted members to work in England. Dr. Luigi Gentili and Fr. Dominic Barberi brought a completely new style of Catholic devotion and a renewed sense of mission to the English scene. They were welcomed too, by some very influential English Catholics who like Wiseman had studied at the reopened English College in Rome and who influenced even such traditional centres as Ushaw College during the presidency of Charles

⁴ Denis GWYNN, *Father Luigi Gentili* (Dublin 1951), p. 137.

Newsham (1837-1863). The appointment of Nicholas Wiseman as the Cardinal Archbishop in the re-established hierarchy in 1850, and the conversion of some of the leading members of the Oxford movement, seemed to promise the speedy return of England to the Church of Rome.

Laurence Gastaldi and the English mission

Among the Rosminian missionaries of the second generation was Dr. Lorenzo Gastaldi (1815-1883). Born of a wealthy Turin legal family, he began his studies at the *Collegio dei Nobili* and at 14 entered the University of Turin where he studied for the priesthood while living at home. He took his doctorate in theology in 1836⁵ though his special interest was moral philosophy. He became a member of the faculty and was also part of a well known academic society (*Accademia Solariana*) where he discussed philosophical questions with such well known figures as Vincenzo Gioberti, as well as many other clerics who later became important in the Italian Church, such as Luigi Nazari, Archbishop of Milan.⁶ He was ordained in 1837 and worked at the University, being made a Canon of the collegiate Church of St. Laurence in 1841. He was fascinated by Rosmini's philosophical approach and increasingly looked for a deeper interior life, especially after the disappointment associated with the closing of his newspaper, *Il Conciliatore Torinese*, in 1849. He expressed his desire to enter the Institute of Charity in September 1850 and went to the noviciate at Stresa in 1851.

After his noviciate he was sent to England in 1853, to teach theology to the Rosminian students at St. Marie's, Rugby, where he stayed till 1856 when he returned to Italy for eighteen months, ostensibly for family reasons. It would seem however from correspondence with Fr. Pagani, the new Superior General that he found religious life a struggle and asked to be released from his vows in 1855.⁷ Behind this request, there seemed to lie his fear that his family affairs would be open to his local superior's inspection and that he would be unable to administer the patrimony his father had left him for the rest of the family. The Superior gave him permission to return to Italy to administer these affairs for two periods, May to September 1856, and a three month period in 1857.⁸ Yet, even with these extraordinary

⁵ G. TUNINETTI, *Lorenzo Gastaldi, 1815-1883* (Roma 1983), vol. 1, p. 26.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 105. But also during these intervals he was often invited to preach.

concessions, Gastaldi found his position as a junior member of the order very frustrating:

"...it is impossible for me to continue any longer as a scholastic in the Institute... new difficulties arise in the process of time. I go back day by day towards the tail of this religious body, while the boys, who greeted me at my entrance, are advancing towards the head".⁹

In 1858, he became Rector of the Cardiff Mission. Here he seems to have been in his element and he organised the building of what still remains the biggest Catholic Church in Cardiff, St. Peter's. However, he returned to Turin in 1862, after a dispute with his Superior over the division of the Cardiff Mission. There he severed his ties with the Rosminians and became in turn, Bishop of Saluzzo in 1867 and Archbishop of Turin in 1871.

Gastaldi, Don Bosco and England

Canon Gastaldi and don Bosco first met at a theological examination in the year of don Bosco's ordination in 1841. During the examination, Gastaldi was impressed by the candidate's nerve (not to say, impudence). When don Bosco was questioned on a particular point which he knew nothing about (or which he did not think, according to his pious biographer, don Lemoyne, was part of the material to be examined), he was not upset but proceeded to invent a canon of the Council of Trent with the first phrases that came into his head: "And is that what the Council itself says?" asked Gastaldi, marvelling at such nerve. Don Bosco began to laugh so much that the examiner himself had to laugh as well.¹⁰

When don Bosco had begun the Oratory, Canon Gastaldi used to come along with some other priests from the city to hear confessions, teach catechism and preach. Apart from these priests, ladies from some of the best families in Turin came to help don Bosco's work for poor boys. Among the foremost of these was Signora Margarita Gastaldi, Canon Laurence's mother. She worked alongside don Bosco's own mother supervising the boys' linen and the cleanliness of the house. The *Biographical Memoirs* describe her activities thus:

"On Sundays she would inspect the beds, and like a general reviewing her troops, she examined the pupils one by one, to see whether

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹⁰ G.B. LEMOYNE, *Memorie Biografiche* (San Benigno Canavese 1898), vol. I, p. 515.

they had changed their shirts and washed properly, then, after setting the soiled linen aside, she would send it to the washerwomen. She went round Convents and girl's schools encouraging them to exercise their skills in needlework on the clothes of don Bosco's poor boys".¹¹

When Canon Laurence entered the Institute of Charity, he asked his mother to consider don Bosco and his boys as her children in his place. In 1853, before he left for England he made a secret will dated the 22nd April in which he left don Bosco and his successors at the Oratory of St. Francis of Sales in Valdocco, the not inconsiderable sum of 70,000 lire.¹² During his stay in England, they corresponded and Gastaldi wrote his *Istruzione Catechistica sul Matrimonio*, which don Bosco published in his *Catholic Readings* as part of his campaign against the introduction of Civil Marriage. Don Bosco, for his part, kept Gastaldi informed of what was happening at the Oratory, and on Italian and family affairs:

"La Signora, your mother, whom I can call mother and mother of the sons of my house, is continually occupied working for these poor boys (...) she is tenderly loved by all the boys of the house (...) though her own cross is your brother Giovanni who no longer wants to follow her advice; and here I must resume some news which is rather late. Your brother, the lawyer, last autumn, went to Paris with his *fiancé*, whose name is unknown; and your mother fears that he has married her with only a civil ceremony. Your mother showed herself somewhat offended that this course should have been taken without her knowledge; for now things have been patched up (...)"¹³

The fact that don Bosco was privy to the intimate details of Gastaldi's

¹¹ G.B. LEMOYNE, *The Biographical Memoirs* (New York 1968), vol. 4, p. 99.

¹² G. TUNINETTI, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

¹³ Archivio Arcivescovile Torino: 14.9.12 Don Bosco to *Il sig. Canonico D. Lorenzo Gastaldi Dott. in Teol. dell'inst. della carità, S. Patrick's Liverpool*, p. 1. "La Signora sua madre, che posso chiamar madre mia e madre di tutti i figli della mia casa, è continuamente occupata per questi poveri giovani. (...) ella è teneramente amata e venerata da tutti i ragazzi della casa, come ella pure li ama tutti indistintamente nel Signore, e gode abbastanza buona salute. La sua croce però sta nel fratello Giovanni, che non vuole più secundarla né suoi consigli; e qui debbo ripigliare una notizia alquanto indietro. Il fratello l'avvocato lo scorso autunno andò a Parigi con una Fidanzata, il cui nome è ignoto; e sua madre teme che l'abbia sposata con solo matrimonio civile. La madre si mostra alquanto offesa di tal cosafatta a sua insaputa; per allora la cosa fu rappatumata". (My thanks are due to Don Aldo Giraud for his transcription of this letter of don Bosco from the Archdiocesan archive which is only partly quoted in Tuninetti's life but also shows don Bosco's disapproval of the Law of Suppression which had already passed the elected Chamber but which he hoped would not pass the Senate). Don Bosco also gave details of the numbers of boarders in the Oratory as 98 with himself and another priest and ten clerics (students for the priesthood) chosen from the boarders. He also gave news of his financial situation and of the progress of the *Letture Cattoliche* of which there were 12,000 Italian readers and 5,000 French.

family life and could write to him about them would be sufficient, on its own, to explain don Bosco's interest in England, but Gastaldi's role as a correspondent for the Catholic newspaper *L'Armonia*, which was read at the Oratory, meant that there was a formal link between the actual experience of the English mission and don Bosco's Oratory. For Laurence Gastaldi the 'Second Spring' was not a remote phenomenon but a part of his everyday experience, which he shared no doubt with don Bosco on his visits to the Oratory and through his mother.

Gastaldi and Dominic Savio's day dream

The influence of Laurence Gastaldi upon the Oratory in Turin can, perhaps, be best illustrated by reference to a day dream or distraction which came to one of don Bosco's most gifted pupils, St. Dominic Savio (1843-1857, canonised 1954). He had come to the Oratory in Turin in 1854 hoping to train for the priesthood. He had begun his classical studies at Professor Bonzanino's school but his life was marked by a special degree of piety, and don Bosco's mother remarked on the trance like moments of prayer in which Dominic seemed to be absorbed after Communion. Whether through the direct influence of Gastaldi's reports in *L'Armonia*, or through his correspondence with don Bosco, or his mother, Dominic Savio seems to have developed an early enthusiasm for the English mission. In 1855 he was heard to remark: "So many souls need our help in England, if only I were strong enough and good enough, I'd go there now and do my utmost by word and example to lead people to God".¹⁴ Don Bosco had undoubtedly fostered this missionary desire in the boy, because he feared that Dominic's desire for an ascetical form of piety might get the better of a balanced judgement. He counselled, therefore, an active work to win the hearts of his companions for God.

During 1857, Dominic often remarked that if he could see Pius IX, he had something very important to tell him. When, eventually, don Bosco enquired as to what this message was, Dominic replied:

"(...) would tell him that, in the midst of all the troubles awaiting him, he should continue his special care for England. God is preparing a great triumph for the Catholic Church there". When Don Bosco asked how he knew, Dominic replied: "One morning as I was praying after Communion a strong distraction overcame me, I thought I saw an

¹⁴ G.B. LEMOYNE, *op. cit.*, vol. 5, p. 207.

endless plain, crowded with people, blanketed in heavy fog. They kept blundering about as if they had lost their way and no longer knew where to turn. 'This is England', someone told me. I was just about to ask some questions when I saw Pius IX, just as I have seen him in picture, majestically dressed, bearing a bright torch in his hands, he strode towards that immense throng. As he approached, the fog yielded to the light of his torch, and the people seemed to bask in the daylight. 'This torch', the same voice said 'is the Catholic Faith which must bring light to the English people'¹⁵.

Dominic died on the 9th March, 1857 but his dream was chronicled in don Bosco's life of the boy and has become the traditional reference point for the start of the Salesian work in England.

Looking for literary origins for a dream sequence might seem a forlorn task, except that Gastaldi was a regular Retreat preacher at the Oratory, both in the years before he became a Rosminian and again, when he returned from England in 1864. In fact, there has survived the conference notes made of that retreat and these show certain very interesting resemblances to Dominic's day dream. In the first Meditation, preached during the Oratory retreat in 1863, Gastaldi said:

There was once a traveller, who was making a journey, dressed in travelling clothes; several people by the way asked him where he wanted to go and he replied: 'I do not know'. This is a image of the men of our world who are all travelling, but do not know where they are going. But, of course, all know that they are travelling toward eternity...¹⁶

In another conference, he said:

"You have all had the grace of having received the Faith, while so many millions are without it. And what would have become of us if we had been born as Jews of heretics, Protestants, schismatics or heretics? We would have been deprived of that gift which leads to Paradise, without which no one can be saved, in India, in China, in Japan, there are millions of people that are deprived of this gift..."¹⁷

¹⁵ G.B. LEMOYNE, *The Biographical Memoirs* (New York 1968), vol. 5, p. 134.

¹⁶ Archivio Centrale Salesiano (Via della Pisana, 1111) Fondo Don Bosco 654: A4 Esercizi Spirituali Anno 1863, Meditazioni ed Istruzioni del Teologo Gastaldi ai 20 Gennaio. "Eravi un viaggiatore che aveva da fare un viaggio. Vestito da viaggiatore se ne parte. Alcune persone gli domandarono dove voleva andare, ed egli rispondeva non lo so. Questa è l'immagine degli uomini della terra i quali tutti viaggiano e non sanno dove che si vadano. Ma però tutti sanno che viaggiano per giungere all'eternità".

¹⁷ Lunedì a sera. "Noi tutti abbiamo avuto la grazia d'aver ricevuto la fede, mentre tanti miglioni di persone ne sono prive... E che sarebbe di noi se fossimo nati ebraichi eretici protestanti sismatici o eretici? noi saremmo privi di quel dono che conduce al paradiso senza

"(...) To be able to keep this Holy Faith, then, we should have a great respect for the Supreme Pontiff, who is like God on earth. He is the successor of Saint Peter, ultimately, it is he who holds the keys to the gates of heaven (...)"¹⁸

The ideas in Dominic's day dream show an uncanny similarity to those found in Gastaldi's, admittedly later, conferences. Perhaps therefore, it is not too far-fetched to suggest that Gastaldi may have preached a similar set of meditations while Dominic was at the Oratory in 1856 or 1857 and while he himself was on leave in Turin from England.

We can conclude, that the most significant influence in promoting enthusiasm for the English Mission in the hearts of don Bosco and Dominic Savio was that of Laurence Gastaldi. In his personal difficulties with his Rosminian superiors we catch a revealing glimpse of a man who found it very difficult to take a second place to anyone else and we can also discern the seeds of his later, painful conflict with don Bosco.

Why Battersea?

The second question to be addressed is why should the Salesians have come to Battersea? The answer lies in the colourful figure of Georgina, Countess de Stacpoole. She had become interested in Battersea in the 1860's through her friendship with Canon Thomas A. Drinkwater. He was a well known society preacher in Rome and had been Vice Rector at the English College. Perhaps, on account of his extra-curricular ministry, he suddenly found himself facing a congregation of unskilled Irish navies at Nine Elms, East Battersea, rather than the titled ladies who frequented the church of Sta. Maria in Monte, where he held his canonry. But, nothing daunted, the good canon soon enlisted the help of his wealthy friends for his building of the church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, East Battersea. Unfortunately, two of his benefactresses were somewhat proprietorial in their attitudes and a dispute soon broke out over who was to provide the altar for the church. As a consequence Mde. de Stacpoole transferred her interest to the Clapham Junction end of the Battersea parish where she soon found a site for her corrugated iron chapel in Trott Street.

del quale nessuno si può salvare. Nelle Indie, nella China, nel Giappone, si trovano miglioni di uomini che ne son privi di questo dono".

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 654, Bl. "Per poter poi conservare la Santa fede conviene che si abbia un grande rispetto al Sommo Pontefice. Egli è come il Dio in terra, Egli è il Successore di San Pietro, infine Egli è colui che tiene le chiavi delle porte del Cielo".

By the end of October 1874, the Countess had purchased a piece of land belonging to Mr. Trott, at what her lawyers regarded as the enormous price of L. 1000 and the corrugated iron chapel, with a turret and cross surmounting it was opened by Bishop Dannel on the tenth of October 1875, at the cost of L. 700.¹⁹ Building temporary churches of corrugated iron was commonplace in Battersea during the 1860's and 1870's. St. Mark's Church began life in 1868 as an iron chapel which was sold for L. 400 in 1874 and replaced with a permanent building at a cost of L. 5,045. A similar story can be told of the Temporary Baptist Chapel in Surrey Lane.

What seems to have been most unusual about this particular iron Church, or the Sacred Heart Mission, Clapham Junction, as it was called in the the first entry in the *Catholic Directory* for 1875, was that the Countess herself, according to her own testimony, took up residence in a caravan made of the same material as the church itself, next to the sacristy. She lived there for five years (1874-79), though a family memoir suggests she kept a suite at the Cadogan Hotel as well, no doubt for the occasional hot bath.²⁰

The Countess Georgina was the eldest daughter of Richard, First Duke de Stacpoole, a notable collector of foreign titles. His father George, the first Conte de Stacpoole, upon his conversion to Catholicism had been forced to move to England, by a disapproving Protestant Irish family. After a successful business career, he set up house in Grosvenor Place, and had the exiled Louis XVIII as a neighbour and friend. At the Restoration, he removed to Paris where he received a French title. His son Richard was created Visconte de France (21st July 1818), made a Papal Marquis by Pope Leo XII in 1828 and Duke by Pope Gregory XVI, in acknowledgement of his services in rebuilding St Paul's — outside — the Walls.²¹ During the Roman Republic (1848-9), Georgina's brother, George Stanislaus, the third Duke, was caught smuggling letters to the Bavarian Ambassador for Pius IX, and imprisoned in Castel Sant'Angelo. He received the Order of Christ from a grateful Pope, an exclusive honour, later bestowed on Prinz von Bismarck at the end of the Kulturkampf.²² In 1850, Georgina herself received a Bavarian honour for her part in the smuggling incident, being created a Canoness of the Royal Chapter of St. Ann of Munich.²³

According to a family Memoir,

¹⁹ Mde. de Stacpoole to don Dalmazzo SDB, Archives GB (Salesian Provincial House, 266, Wellington Rd. North, Stockport, Cheshire SK4, 2QR) (15th Oct. 1887).

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Burke's Peerage Foreign Titles of Nobility* (London 1936) p. 2602.

²² G. de STACPOOLE, *Irish and Other Memories* (London 1922) p. 52.

²³ *Burke's Peerage*, p. 2602.

"She divided her time between Rome, Paris and the Cadogan Hotel, London. She never married, saying that she would never bend her will to any man (a warning not heeded, to their peril, by a number of clerical gentlemen). She built a church in Battersea, now rebuilt and enlarged; she also helped build a church in Kildare. Her share in the family furniture was destroyed, uninsured, in a fire in the Baker St. Depository. She died in Paris and is buried at Salins, near Fontainbleu. As she bought an annuity for herself, she had nothing to leave on her death".²⁴

The Countess certainly brought an unexpectedly aristocratic dimension to the Catholic Community that gathered round her church in Trott Street. The Countess insisted in her deed of gift to Bishop Dannel that the Church of the Sacred Heart be a separate parish with its own resident priest, and the first priest, Fr. Patrick McKenna came to reside in Trott Street in a room he rented from Mrs Mary Pash. She was an Irish woman, a widow with seven children who worked as a laundry woman to keep her family from the workhouse. He stayed at 22 Trott St. until he was transferred in 1883,²⁵ and it was to this house that the first Salesians came for a meal on their first night in London, the 16th November, 1887.²⁶ The Pash home seemed to be the heart of the Catholic Community in Battersea because even after the priest was withdrawn, sick calls were directed to Mrs Pash's address, according to the *Catholic Directory, 1884*.²⁷

By 1883, after nearly ten years of conflict between herself and the Irish priest, over matters as various as the priest wanting the replacement for the iron church to be called St. Patrick's, the countess's refusal to help with the schools, her accusations that the nun, 'the one who came from the devil' was not only running the school but was also running the parish as well. Besides all this the poor state of parish finances and the desperate state of repair of the Church meant that it was effectively impossible for the priest to stay.

Despite this, the Countess left no stone unturned, to find a way for her foundation to be recommenced as a parish. Each of Bishop Dannel's successors, first Bishop Coffin and then, Bishop John Butt, all received

²⁴ A Family Memoir, kindly lent me by Robert de Stacpoole, 88, Warwick Gdns. Kensington, London.

²⁵ *Catholic Directory and Ordo* (London 1876). The Sacred Heart Mission Trott St. has as its address for the priest as 22 Trott St.

²⁶ SDB, Archives GB, Letter from Fr. Francis Bourne to Révérend Père (15th Nov. 1887). "Je m'attends vos pères demain a VICTORIA à 5h — en ce cas nous aurions quelque chose à manger à N. 22 à 6h. Mrs. Pash aura préparé la minestra".

²⁷ *The Catholic Directory and Ordo, 1884*, mentioned no resident priest at Trott St. It says: "Served from Battersea East (Sick calls to be sent to 22 Trott St.)".

various warnings and petitions from the Countess. Finally, when it became obvious under Bishop Butt that there was no prospect of any change, the Countess decided to use her family connections and influence in Rome to have her petition against the Bishop heard in the Curia.

Her deeply personal commitment to Battersea meant that she felt obliged to protest to the Pope himself. In her petition to the Pope (as Fr. Ceria recorded it, though the London version is somewhat shorter and appears to be an earlier draft) she complained,

"(...) the Baptismal font was established, the civil authority for conducting marriages was obtained and the sacred vestments and vessels and all other objects necessary for worship were acquired by the foundress (...) but (the bishop) replied that he did not have either the means or the priests available (...) (so that the Mission) would, from now on cease to be a parish and become only a chapel dependant on the nearest parish (...) Your Holiness can see from the above that the hopes of the Donor are being frustrated... She, humbly begs that the deed of gift made in 1874 to the Bishop of Southwark in the presence of the notary Hastings, should become entirely null, and should in no case be presented by any future bishop of that diocese against don Bosco and the Salesian Congregation, they having become proprietors of all the aforesaid enclosure".²⁸

The Countess had probably met don Bosco through Mgr. Kirby at the

²⁸ E. CERIA, *Memorie Biografiche*, vol. 18, p. 800 for the text of the petition, but the SDB. GB Archives have a shorter and apparently earlier version autographed by the Countess: Copie autentique de la petition remise a S. Santità Leo XIII par G. di Stacpoole 14 Mars, 1886. This would appear to be a copy of an earlier draft of the petition quoted by Don Ceria in E. Ceria: *Memorie Biografiche* (Torino 1937), vol. 18, p. 800-801: [in detta chiesa] "Fu stabilito il fonte battesimale; si ottenne la licenza dell'Autorità civile per la celebrazione dei matrimoni: i vasi sacri, i paramenti e tutti gli altri oggetti necessari al culto furono acquistati dalla fondatrice (...) I nostri desideri erano appagati; il popolo aveva la sua parrocchia, aveva il suo parroco. (...) Ma le cose non andarono così per lungo tempo. Il curato ci lasciò, né fu più rimpiazzato (...) I paramenti stessi ed i vasi sacri furono quasi tutti portati altrove. Monsignor Butt Vescovo attuale, pregato di continuare a conservare come parrocchia la Chiesa, fece dire alla sottoscritta non aver egli i mezzi occorrenti e sacerdoti disponibili per la Chiesa del Sacro Cuore, la quale d'ora in avanti cesserebbe d'esser parrocchia, per non essere che una Cappella dipendente dalla parrocchia più vicina.

La Santità Vostra vede dal suseposto come le speranze della donatrice siano state frustrate, malgrado tutte le promesse ricevute; per cui la sottoscritta (...) contessa di Stackpoole desidererebbe finalmente che l'atto di donazione fatta nel 1874 al Vescovo di Southwark, in presenza del notaio Harting di Londra venisse intieramente annullato né potesse in nessun caso essere presentato dai futuri Vescovi di quella diocesi contro Don Bosco e la Congregazione Salesiana, divenuti proprietari di tutto il recinto suddetto. (...) Prostrata adunque ai Vostri piedi, Beatissimo Padre, la sottoscritta prega istantemente la Santità Vostra, affinché Ella si degni secondare i desideri esposti in questa supplica..."

Irish College in Rome, where she was certainly a dinner guest. She had become one of don Bosco's great benefactresses, helping in the building of the Sacred Heart Basilica, Rome, in the foundation of the house in Paris, and with the building of a Mission in Patagonia.²⁹ The above petition must have seemed very unusual to the officials at the Congregation of Propaganda, to which it was referred, not so much that a bishop was in dispute in his diocese, such appeals to Rome were encouraged, but because it was addressed by a lay person in what had become a largely clerically dominated Church. Surely only a lady with an established position in the so-called Black aristocracy would even have attempted such a move, much less succeeded in it.

Bishop John Butt, who was first auxiliary, then, Bishop of Southwark from 1886, happened to be in Rome for his *ad limina* visit in 1887 and had met don Bosco at the celebrations for the consecration of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart. He tried to dissuade don Bosco from the idea of coming to Battersea, alleging truthfully, "(...) the poverty of the place and the impossibility of it supporting even one priest". On his return to London, one of his priests reportedly congratulated him on having met a living saint, "Some saint", he replied, "(...) He may be a saint but according to his own pattern. He is certainly a stubborn old man with a mind of his own".³⁰ When Bishop Butt was told that don Bosco had said that the Salesians would come to Battersea and that this house would be one of the great houses of the congregation, with a grand Church and vast playgrounds, he replied: "But where will don Bosco find space for all this? Well, I suppose there is always Battersea Park".

Perhaps, not unnaturally Bishop Butt found it somewhat difficult to deal with two characters who were as determined and well connected as don Bosco and the Countess. The one surviving letter from don Bosco to Bishop Butt showed a rather formal Religious Superior writing to inform the somewhat reluctant bishop that the Congregation of Propaganda had decided that there was "...a church in the diocese which it is agreed the Salesians should take over in September or October 1887".³¹

²⁹ E. CERIA, *Memorie Biografiche* (Torino 1937), vol. 17, p. 358, 363, 429.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. 18, p. 450.

³¹ Don Bosco to Bishop Butt (27th Aug. 1887), SDB Archives GB.

Accepting the Battersea parish, seeing the difficulties

The first Salesians only began to realize what a difficult mission they had assumed when they crossed the Channel and saw London for the first time, though some of the problems had already been foreseen by the Superiors.

Despite the Papal rescript, the commencement of the English Mission required the consent of the governing body of the Salesian Society, the Superior Chapter. Since don Bosco was by now unable to attend its sessions because of ill-health,³² don Rua presided in his absence, yet he had a far from easy task to convince the other members of the wisdom of accepting this parish in far off England.

"Don Rua disclosed that don Bosco had accepted a church in England from our outstanding benefactress, the Countess de Stacpoole. The Holy Father has already given his delegation. We need to appoint a priest, a cleric (student for the priesthood) and a coadjutor (lay member of the Society). Don Sala (asked) if we could withdraw from obligations like this by declining them, and if the Bishop of that diocese was favourable, and added that before going to England we should write to him".

Far from accepting the decision as announced, don Sala did not hesitate to question it.

Don Rua reported that the bishop was favourable, they had met in Rome and that he had said that we could either develop the church of the Countess or open another better one. He added that Mgr. Kirby, at 85 years of age, had visited don Bosco twice to beg him to go to England and insisted that the opportunity of entering England should not be refused. But don Sala was still not convinced.

"He raised the dangers for a young priest of entering homes and prisons; he said that Protestants would cause an uproar as soon as letters arrived and some, for a joke, would go to the confessional to seduce the priest".

Don Rua was faced with a great deal of fear and prejudice about England, but he brought the discussion to a close with these balanced conclusions,

"(...) first of all we should send someone with the job of visiting the

³² ACS, *Verbali delle Riunioni Capitolari*, vol. 1, June 10, 1887, (ASD, 869, 0592, p. 99 (my translation)).

place; we should also write to the local Bishop and be guided by his reply; the Countess de Stacpoole should be content that we are going to take possession and then, even if we returned to Italy for some time, no point of honour is involved".³³

In September 1887, the Countess herself was in England "working for you".

"I have seen the dear little church. On, what desolation, hordes of urchins sweeping down in turn, have destroyed all the fruit and the trees, and the crystal windows of the church"; (stone throwing vandals are not a phenomenon restricted to the Battersea of our own age). "We are waiting for the coming of the priests, we hope for two English or Irish among the three: one for the parish, the other for the little ragamuffins".³⁴

Fr. Dalmazzo's Visit

As a result of the deliberations of the Superior Council, Father Francis Dalmazzo, former Procurator of the Society in Rome, and well known to Mde. de Stacpoole, made an exploratory visit to London in the second week of October 1887. He found little in the immense city to warm his heart, though he thought the size of the railway junction at Clapham amazing and was very impressed by the welcome he received from the priest at Wandsworth, Fr. H.D. Galeran, a French priest of the Southwark diocese. On his first day he reported on what he had discovered about the Iron Church:

"I have not yet inspected the forseen field of my labours. They tell me in fact, that the iron church, given so much build up, is a thing of very little consequence and of no value, lasting only a little while, being put there as a way of establishing a foothold, while waiting for better times, in which case we will have to build a new church".³⁵

The process of making a realistic report began next day, though Fr. Dalmazzo was obviously keen to be finished:

"My mission is complete. I have visited everything with calm and thoughtfulness and have spoken at length with Bishop John Butt... The Bishop welcomed me with great charity and a truly paternal kindness,

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

³⁴ ACS, FDB, 156, C12 Sept. 12th London, and DI.

³⁵ ACS, FDB, 203, CIO, CU, Ven. Padre 9.10.1887.

and assured me that every difficulty would be smoothed over. He himself will press our part with Fr. Connolly, the neighbouring Parish Priest, named by the Countess as 'the Enemy', ordering him to give back everything presented to us in the beginning. I even visited this parish priest myself, and he certainly showed himself cold enough (...) but he is disposed to cede everything of any worth.

Let me add only one thing, that the Bishop made one condition and that was, that given, God avert, that the Salesians were unable to keep the parish then the property would return to the diocesan bishop. He has no preference between English, Irish or Italian for PP., but rather the most capable and pious. The parish of Battersea is Irish and that he leaves it to the wisdom of don Bosco (to decide)".³⁶

In his report on the corrugated iron church building he remarked that all the Catholic Churches here had begun in this way; in fact, Fr. Galeran's at Wandsworth was even smaller "*e più brutta*"; a further difficulty, he foresaw, was that municipal approval was required for its use every two years and L. 500 will have to be spent to make it usable.

He managed to be more hopeful about the site, which was about 2000 metres square, with room for a fine church and two playgrounds, and the school which is extremely well attended by 250 boys and girls and accommodated in light and airy brick built premises.

The Catholics were certainly for the most part poor labourers who worked at the local gas works though there were better off members who were doing a lot for the parish. He mentioned Fr. Bourne, saying that, "the priest who has decided to become a Salesian is a real gem, helping me with translation". The Bishop was only willing to let him go to Turin because he will get two priests in his place. In fact, it was Fr. Dalmazzo who suggested that Fr. Bourne be left to help the newcomers, and explained that he found himself not too well and struggling to adapt to the custom of sleeping without having some *minestra*, and of not having a drink except a small glass of beer at the end of the meal, and he found himself generally suffering from the great cold.

In the following two letters later in the month he dealt with the legal problems of owning property in England, where a civil agreement needed to be signed and a form of 'trust' seemed to be necessary. Fr. Galeran introduced him to the lawyers and helped to avoid a large bill. He also told him that he could expect little more than 100 lire in the weekly collection. He further detailed his unwillingness to remain in England:

"I thank don Bosco through you, for the mark of trust given me by

³⁶ ACS, FDB, 203, DI, D2, St Thomas Wandsworth 10.10.1887.

saying — you have nothing against my staying in London. It grieves me much that my physical condition and habits will not allow me to remain".

He was very anxious that they should send out MacKiernan by the end of the month, because the Bishop wanted to introduce the Salesians on the feast of All Saints. He also foresaw what was to become a major difficulty, namely the problem of the contract with the Bishop. He consulted the other religious orders about what he regarded as the excessive harshness of the terms, whereby the diocese would make no compensation to the religious order for improvements made to the church or parish premises, should they relinquish the parish. He further recognised the difficulty of getting a male cook in England and explained that in England even the Pallottine Fathers have ladies to work for them.³⁷

The one piece of consolation he was able to offer was that the parish contained what was said to be Sir Thomas More's garden, where he would come across the river, early on summer morning, after having served Mass, to take his breakfast.³⁸

The Arrival

Fr. Dalmazzo returned to Italy before the middle of November and it was left to Fr. Francis Bourne to welcome the pioneers to Battersea. "I expect the Fathers tomorrow", he wrote on 15th Nov. 1887, "at Victoria at 5,00 — in that case, we will have something to eat at number 26 at 6,00. Mrs. Pash will have the *minestra* ready".³⁹ The only other testimony to their arrival comes from the family memory of the home that first received them. One of the daughters of the Pash family used to tell her children how frightened she'd been as she took the two Salesians to see the Iron Church on that first night and how she had had to walk the whole length of the building in the dark to turn on the gas for the lights which was up near the altar.⁴⁰ What they saw no doubt, filled them with dismay, but Henry Galeran must have soon reassured them by his great faith and sense of mission, which he expressed in a letter to don Rua:

"There are poor children, erring and abandoned in incalculable

³⁷ ASC, Microschede 3557 C1, C9, D1.

³⁸ ACS, 3557 D1.

³⁹ SDB, Archives GB, F. Bourne (15th Nov. 1887).

⁴⁰ Verbal Testimony of Sr. Eileen Bleach SND.

numbers in the dark corners of this immense Babylon. Nothing can equal the zeal of the English clergy but a great part of the harvest is lost for lack of workers. Dear Father, the souls that cost our Saviour so much are calling out to you and you are coming to them. I know no quarter of London which needs you as much as Battersea. I call on don Bosco and his Sons — Father, take possession in the name of Jesus Christ of this capital where so many sins are committed, and so many souls are in ignorance and are lost. How blessed are the feet of those men who are coming to us in the name of the love of Christ who considered souls worth the shedding of his blood".⁴¹

⁴¹ ACS, FDB 203. Galeran St. Thomas's, Wandsworth 15 Oct. 1883.