

Bishop Richard Challoner

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London Catholic Truth Society No.b450a (1974)

Richard Challoner was born on 29 September 1691 at Lewes, Sussex, England. Both his parents were of Sussex origin. His father, a wine-cooper, was a dissenter, a Presbyterian, as was his wife, whose maiden name was Grace Willard. Her husband died during their son's boyhood; he was their only child. Grace Challoner had to find employment, and her first engagement was at Firle, a few miles from Lewes. This was the house of the Gage family, who had remained faithful Catholics in spite of the persecutions since Henry VIII's time and had lived there since the days of Henry VI when they became possessed of the manor. They were staunch loyalists and, in the Civil War, Sir Henry Gage had fallen in battle. His half-brother, Doctor Francis Gage, became President of the (Catholic) English College at Douai, Flanders, in 1677. Grace Challoner and her son did not stay long at Firle, for by 1704 they were at Warkworth Manor, near Banbury, where she became housekeeper. Lady Anastasia Holman was a widow; she was the daughter of Blessed William Howard, Viscount Stafford, the grandson of Saint Philip Howard.

It is not known when mother and son were converted. Before Richard could be consecrated bishop in 1741, it was necessary to obtain a dispensation, as he had been brought up a Protestant. The record states that he was 'about thirteen years old' at the time of his conversion. This suggests 1704, while he and his mother were at Warkworth. The exact year is not known, but the human agent is known; he was the notable apologist John Gother, who was chaplain at Warkworth. His spiritual works were collected in sixteen volumes. Richard Challoner early showed a desire for the priesthood and John Gother arranged for him to go to Douay, where his entry is dated 29 July 1705. 'The said Rich Challoner is recommended by the late Mr. Gother and the Lady Anastasia Holman, and put on one of Bishop Leyburn's funds.' John Gother had died at sea on his way to take up the presidency of the English College, Lisbon, where he himself had been trained.

As was customary, the boy's true name was not used at Douay; this was a survival of the dangers of the names being sent to the English Government by informers; so Richard Challoner, by adopting his mother's maiden name, became Richard Willard. Catholic parents were still liable to fines if they sent their children abroad for their education.

Douay.

The famous College had given a hundred and sixty martyrs for the Faith; it was a great tradition of which all the students were proud. The President, when Challoner went there, was Doctor Edward Paston, an austere priest who had governed the College for sixteen years. The course of training was divided into two stages. For five years, the boys followed the normal school studies of the period; those who had no vocation for the priesthood then left to take up work in civil life. The others had a further six years of study, the first two being devoted to philosophy and the last four to theology. His tutors soon found that Richard Challoner was a boy of exceptional intellectual abilities, and he was so far advanced when he arrived that he was excused two of the school years. As a 'Philosopher', he took the College oath in November 1708.

The town of Douai became a victim of the war then raging and for two months was under siege until its surrender in June 1710. During this period, Doctor Paston evacuated the students to Lille. The Dutch remained in control, and allowed the College to resume its work. Two years later the French successfully took the offensive and this time the students went to Arras; Douai was recaptured in the summer of 1712, and has remained part of France. The students probably enjoyed these alarms and excursions.

We need not here follow Richard Challoner's scholastic career in detail. As soon as he was qualified, he became one of the teaching staff and later prefect of studies. Doctor Paston died in 1714 and was succeeded by Doctor Robert Witham, with whom Challoner formed a close friendship. The Jacobite rising of 1715 raised great hopes at the College and many relatives of the students were involved. Richard Challoner was ordained priest in March 1716 and said his first Mass that Easter Sunday. He was absent in England in 1718 for two months on 'private affairs' and met his mother for the first time after thirteen years.

He took his B. D. at the university in 1719, and in the following year became Vice-President of the College. For ten years, he followed a placid, academic life, the only event being that he took his D. D. in 1727. During his Douay years, Challoner wrote one small book with the attractive title *Think Well On't*; this gave meditations for every day of a month. It was published in 1728 and proved so helpful that it was frequently reprinted for more than a hundred years. The book already showed the characteristics of Challoner's writing — absolute clarity of expression but without any rhetorical refinements; plain, straightforward English that the ordinary reader could follow with ease.

On the Mission.

It was not until 1731 that Richard Challoner at last won permission to return as a missionary priest to his native country. A year later his mother died and was buried in the old Catholic Cemetery at Winchester; her son was not at her death-bed, as he could not be warned in time.

England and Wales had been divided into four Districts each with a Vicar-Apostolic (a bishop in partibus – that is a bishop without a formal residence, but notionally assigned a see in foreign parts of the world), who was under the direction of the Congregation of Propaganda in Rome. These Districts were of great extent; London, for instance, covered ten counties. A Vicar-Apostolic was therefore faced with problems of distance and transport in supervising his priests; moreover, the financial resources were meagre and he could not afford to maintain an administrative staff beyond having one or two chaplains. When Challoner returned to England, there were about 70,000 Catholics in the country, of whom some 25,000 were in the London District with sixty secular priests.

The aged Bishop Bonaventure Giffard was then Vicar-Apostolic of the London District. He died in March 1734 at the age of ninety-one. His coadjutor, Bishop Benjamin Petre, succeeded him and not long afterwards, he appointed Challoner to be his Vicar-General. Few details are known of Challoner's pastoral work at this period. Priests, of necessity, had to live in obscurity; under the penal laws, they were liable to life imprisonment simply for being priests, and informers could reap a reward if they could bring a successful prosecution. The only safe places where Mass could be said in London were the Embassy Chapels; the Sardinian Chapel off Lincoln's Inn Fields was purposely built larger than was necessary for the Embassy staff so that it could be available for Catholics. The district round the Chapel became a favoured residential area for Catholics, especially the streets leading north out of Red Lion Square, and it was here that Challoner lived during his

fifty years in London. Like other priests, he changed his lodgings from time to time to evade the attentions of informers. Later on, he rented houses in the name of his housekeeper, Mrs. Mary Hanne. (Footnote: The Catholic Record Society had a plaque placed on 44 Old Gloucester Street, the house where Challoner is believed to have died.)

He said Mass and preached occasionally at the Sardinian Chapel, but usually he said Mass in many out-of-the-way places such as cellars, attics and even cock-pits.

Early writings.

Challoner soon recognized two needs that could best be met by the printed word. The first was to instruct and strengthen Catholics in their faith; the second was to combat Protestant misconceptions and attacks. He always regarded the first as of primary and urgent importance; he preferred not to enter into controversy but it could not be avoided; the Church must be defended. The *Unerring Authority of the Catholic Church* was published in 1732; five years later came *The Catholic Christian Instructed*, a book that went through many editions up to the 1880's and was translated into French. In his preface, Challoner attacked the views of Doctor Conyers Middleton, who had argued that the Catholic liturgy was based on pagan practices. Legal proceedings were threatened against the printer and author (if he could be identified by the initials 'R... C...'), and Challoner was advised to withdraw to Douay until the storm died down. When he arrived at the College, he found that his old friend Doctor Robert Witham was mortally sick; he died in May 1738.

Challoner had not been so absorbed in controversy that he had forgotten the devotional needs of Catholics, and just before crossing to France, he published a translation of Thomas a Kempis's *Imitatio Christi* (the Imitation of Christ) under the title *The Following of Christ*; this for generations was the version used by Catholics and others.

His stay at Douai was fruitful and he must have occupied many hours with his pen. He there produced his most influential book, *The Garden of the Soul*, published in 1740. This was a vademecum containing instructions, the Ordinary of the Mass, notes on Confession, the Jesus Psalter, the Litany and general prayers. The book also included the ten meditations from the *Introduction to a Devout Life* by Saint Francis de Sales, the saint for whom Challoner had a special devotion. This invaluable aid to devotion was reprinted numerous times up to this 20th century. Its place was taken by the *Small Missal*.

During his stay at Douay, Challoner must also have begun collecting the materials and transcribing the documents for his *Memoirs of Missionary Priests*, published in two volumes in 1741-2. After his return to England he was assisted by Alban Butler, then a professor at Douay, who sent him copies of original accounts of the martyrdoms of the priests and lay-folk whose lives are recorded in that book, which remains the classic record of the martyrs from 1577 to 1684. Challoner's accuracy has rarely been challenged.

Bishop of Debra.

Before his death, Doctor Witham had recommended Challoner as his successor at Douay, and this was so generally approved that his appointment seemed assured, but Bishop Petre had to be reckoned with. He took more energetic action on this occasion than he had ever taken in anything before, and at length he got his way. Richard Challoner was appointed his coadjutor with the right of succession to the London District. He was consecrated Bishop of Debra on 29 January 1741 at

the Hammersmith Convent. This had been founded by Queen Catherine of Braganza; a school for girls was established there under the nuns who, of course, could not wear the habit.

Now that he had got his coadjutor, Bishop Petre withdrew to his family estate in Essex; his health was precarious but he lived another seventeen years. For all practical purposes, Bishop Challoner was now Vicar-Apostolic. He at once set out to make a visitation of his vast District; this was a great undertaking, entailing as it did much tedious travel, but it was an essential foundation for his pastoral work. For too long great numbers of Catholics had been deprived of the sacrament of confirmation and many priests had not seen a bishop since coming on the mission. One small sample of what was involved must suffice for all; this is taken from his notes of a tour in West Sussex in 1741. At Cowdray he confirmed 116 candidates; at West Grinstead, 41; and at Slindon, 67. It took him two years to cover the ten counties.

Meanwhile the apostolate of the printed word continued. The Grounds of the Old Religion, published in 1742, was a substantial exposition of the Rule of Faith grounded on the word of God and the apostolic tradition. His next work was complementary to the Memoirs; he set out to revive knowledge of the old British and English saints; his book was called *Britannica Sancta* and was published in 1745. By this book and the Memoirs, Challoner hoped to promote among Catholics a pride in their ancestry, not as a form of boasting, but as a means of strengthening their loyalty to the Church, and to show them that their present sufferings were not as hard as those endured by the martyrs and saints of the past.

The Forty-five.

The year 1745 was one of grave decision for Catholics. The preparations for an invasion by Prince Charles Edward were known to the Government and a watch was kept on leading Catholics. When the Young Pretender reached Derby on Black Friday, 6 December 1745, all Catholics were ordered to leave London; their houses were searched for arms. It is not known if Challoner left the city but the indications are that he did not do so. He did his utmost to prevent Catholics from taking any active part in the rising and he succeeded in restraining many. At the same time, he, like most Catholics, regarded the Old Pretender as the legitimate King James III, and, indeed, Challoner's appointment had been sanctioned by the exiled prince.

After the defeat of the Jacobites, the London prisons were crowded with Scottish and English Catholics. Challoner raised funds for their support, for otherwise they would have been half-starved; he and his priests went into the prisons as unofficial chaplains. This was done so discreetly that the Government did not interfere. Fortunately, the country quickly regained its equilibrium. A proposal was made for exacting a stringent oath of loyalty from all Catholics, but this was dropped. With the defeat of the Jacobites in the '45, Catholics became more reconciled to the Hanoverian dynasty. The effective end of their support came when Pope Clement XIII refused to recognize the Young Pretender as Charles III on the death of his father in 1766.

Schools.

One effect of the anti-Catholic feeling roused by the '45 was the closing of the small Catholic school at Twyford, near Winchester, where Alexander Pope and the future Bishop James Talbot and his brother were educated. Challoner had visited the school in 1741. It was not until 1749 that he found an alternative at Standon Lordship in Hertfordshire, where he was able to rent the mansion from Lord Aston. The school remained there until 1767, when it was removed to Hare Street, a few

miles north; two years later a final move was made to Old Hall Green, and so it eventually became St Edmund's College.

Bishop Challoner was far from satisfied with only one school. Finance was a serious problem, but there were legal ones as well, as Catholics were forbidden to buy land or to run schools; so various subterfuges had to be used to get round the law. Sedgely Park, near Wolverhampton, became available in 1763; this school had a most successful career, but was ultimately merged in the present Cotton College, [which closed in 1987].

The Douay Bible.

It was about 1748 that Challoner began the work for which he is best remembered — the revision of the Douay Bible. The translation of the New Testament had been published in 1582 and of the Old Testament in 1609. Its cost put it out of reach of most Catholics; moreover, there was a natural reaction to the Protestant contention that the Bible alone was the source of the Christian Faith. Challoner did not set out to make a new translation; his aim was to remove antiquated words and expressions so that the Bible would be more readable and understandable by ordinary folk. As his collaborator, he had a Carmelite friar, Father Francis Blyth. The complete work, with Challoner's notes, was published in 1750. A few minor revisions were made in later editions, but when we speak of the Douay Bible, we mean Challoner's version.

The next important publication was *Meditations for Every Day in the Year*, published in 1753. This became a beloved book in many Catholic households and among non-Catholics as well. For instance, it was a favoured book of devotion for the Anglican John Keble, the mentor and friend of [Blessed] John Henry Newman. It was last reprinted in 1916 [and 2012]; it was translated into French and Italian.

There is not space here to deal with all the books for which Bishop Challoner was responsible; they include translations (Saint Francis de Sales), lives (Saint Teresa of Avila), as well as such compilations as the *Manual of Prayers*. The frequent reprints testify to the value put on them by Catholics who had only occasional opportunities for going to Mass. These faithful people have sometimes been called, with a touch of disdain, 'Garden-of-the-Soul Catholics'. It is difficult for us to understand the restrictive conditions under which they lived; they were isolated from the rest of the community and were regarded with suspicion. Yet theirs was a solid piety, securely based on prayer and meditation, and lacking many of the aids to devotion that we accept as normal. The books of Bishop Challoner fortified them and gave them spiritual sustenance.

In such a brief record as this, it is convenient to deal with Challoner's writings as a group, but it should be remembered that this work went on throughout his years as Coadjutor and Vicar-Apostolic. It began in 1728 and ended in the year of his death, 1781, with a volume containing a number of occasional discourses.

Vicar-Apostolic.

Bishop Petre died in December 1758 at the age of eighty-six; Bishop Challoner became Vicar-Apostolic of the London District at the age of sixty-eight. He at once applied to Rome for a coadjutor, and, indeed, it seemed an urgent matter, for the Bishop was seriously ill in the spring of 1759. He submitted to Rome three names but indicated his preference for James Talbot, aged thirty-three, a brother of George, the Earl of Shrewsbury. He and his brother Thomas, who later became Vicar-Apostolic of the Midland District, were both trained at Douay. James Talbot's name was

submitted to the Old Pretender for his concurrence; this was the last time such an action was taken. There was some delay in the consecration until Bishop Challoner was sufficiently recovered from his illness. James Talbot was consecrated as Bishop of Birta in August 1759. From then onwards, Bishop Challoner spent most of his time in London.

One of his chaplains described the Bishop's way of life; it was strictly regulated so that not an hour was wasted and he was thus able to do so much writing; he always had some book on hand and could turn to it whenever he had half-an-hour's leisure.

He was up at six o'clock, made an hour's meditation before saying Mass, followed by his Thanksgiving. Breakfast was at nine, after which he said part of the Office. The rest of the morning was spent in correspondence and in seeing those who wanted his advice or had other business. Dinner was at two o'clock, when 'he was always very cheerful and agreeable'. After dinner, he would go for a walk with one of the chaplains and pay short calls on members of his flock. He returned home before six o'clock to be available to hear confessions or give advice. Supper was at nine. The rest of the Office would be said, and then he could turn again to his writing, which included not only books but long letters of spiritual direction to those who sought his help. The need for secrecy and prudence has meant that few details of Challoner's pastoral work have been recorded, but what has come down to us shows how assiduous he was in responding to the needs of both clergy and laity.

The first Relief Act, 1778.

One of the many trials of the Bishop was the defection of some of the leading Catholic families. The final collapse of the Stuart cause had its effect in reconciling Catholics to the reigning house with a growing desire to take their natural places in the conduct of affairs. Many conformed; they included the Gages of Firle — this must have greatly distressed Challoner — the Montagues, the Shelleys, the Ropers, the Waldegraves, and others. There was also a renewed attack on Catholics in the 1760's. Informers out to earn a reward caused the closing of several 'private mass houses', and they brought suspected priests before the magistrates; thus Bishop Talbot was indicted three times but, for want of proof of his priesthood, the cases were dismissed.

Yet it was at this very period, when the Catholic Church in this country was at its nadir, that the first steps towards emancipation were taken. The cause was not a growth of the spirit of tolerance, but a military need. The American War of Independence that began in 1775 called for more and more soldiers, and it was thought that many recruits could be gained in the Highlands of Scotland if the religious difficulty could be overcome; the oath that a soldier had to take implied a repudiation of the Pope. In 1778, a government emissary went to discuss the matter with Bishop George Hay, the Vicar-Apostolic of the Lowlands. He at once advised that Bishop Challoner should be consulted. The government could not officially deal with a 'Romish Bishop' as he had no legal standing — indeed, should have been in prison! So the official negotiations were conducted through leading Catholic laymen such as Lord Petre (Robert Petre, 9th Baron Petre). The Bishop would have liked the repeal of all the penal laws, but this would not have been approved by Parliament; something more modest had some chance of acceptance.

After much parleying, a Bill was introduced in the Commons on 14 May and the Act received the royal assent three weeks later. It permitted all Catholics who took an agreed oath to serve the Crown; the laws against priests were repealed.

The Act was very limited, but it opened the way to full emancipation fifty years later.

Bishop Challoner and Bishop Talbot at once issued a pastoral letter saying the oath was acceptable, and that Catholics could now 'meet without danger to yourselves or your flocks, from the very grievous penal laws'.

The Gordon Riots.

Parliament had moved without testing public opinion and there was still strong anti-papal feeling in Scotland and England. Under Lord George Gordon (who may charitably be regarded as half-crazed), a Protestant Association was formed and a monster petition was presented to Parliament on 2 June 1780 for the instant repeal of the new Act. Mobs gathered when the petition was taken to the House of Commons, and soon got out of control. The town riff-raff joined in.

The Embassy chapels were burned and looted and many a Catholic had his house plundered and even destroyed. Other objectives soon attracted the mob; prisons were forced and prisoners freed; the Bank of England was attacked.

It was not until a week had passed that at last order was restored. Charles Dickens's *Barnaby Rudge*, based on authentic materials, does not exaggerate the violence of the riots.

As soon as the mob got loose, Bishop Challoner's chaplains and friends were alarmed for his safety and for three weeks, he was sheltered in a friend's house in Finchley.

There is no doubt that the sorrow over what had happened hastened the aged Bishop's end. He died in his house in Gloucester Street on 12 January 1781; he was in his ninetieth year. He was buried in the family vault of his friend Bryant Barrett at Milton, Berkshire.

The entry in the parish register reads: `Anno Domini 1781, Jan. 22. Buried the Reverend Richard Challoner, a Popish Priest and Titular Bishop of London and Salisbury (sic), a very pious and good man, of great learning and extensive abilities.'

Richard Challoner's remains were reinterred in 1946 in the Chapel of Saint Gregory and Saint Augustine in Westminster Cathedral, a fitting sepulchre for the greatest of the Vicars-Apostolic who in his lifetime was known as 'the Venerable Bishop Challoner'.

His achievement.

By divine providence, Richard Challoner served the Catholics in England for fifty years at a period when the penalized Church was slowly losing ground; many had become disheartened and the prospects of recovery were more than doubtful. Challoner's numerous publications are the chief achievements that now bring him before us, but, as Bishop John Milner noted in his funeral discourse in January 1781:

`If it were not known how assiduous he ever was in the discharge of his sacred functions, and how much of his time was constantly taken up with preaching, instructing, administering the sacraments, attending to the various and intricate concerns of his district, and with his prayers and devotions, we might be led to imagine that he had done nothing else but write, and that his whole life had been devoted to the composition of the many works he has left us in defence of the true faith and of sound morality.'

It was by this twofold apostolate — his pastoral care and his writings — that he sustained the faith of his flock when they sorely needed encouragement to persevere. At the end of his life, he saw the first step taken towards emancipation, and it was undoubtedly his decisive approval that made it

possible for that step to be taken; had he insisted on consultation with Rome at every stage, the opportunity would have been lost by the inevitably long-drawn-out exchanges of opinion. Yet it remains true to say that it was by his books that his influence was most effective, far beyond his own District, and, indeed, among non-Catholics as well. The Garden of the Soul and his Meditations, as well as other publications, were, as we have seen, frequently reprinted up to the early years of this 20th century. His Missionary Priests gave Catholics a pride in their ancestry and showed them patterns of endurance under persecution. His revision of the Douay Bible was for two centuries the Bible known to Catholics.

For his contemporaries there was a third influence — his holy life. To quote Bishop Milner again:

`When I represent Bishop Challoner as a saint, I say no more of him now after his death, than all who knew him have said of him during his life.'

This gives numerous glimpses of Bishop Challoner as pastor and preacher. William Mawhood, the famous diarist, went to him regularly for confession and attended his sermons at The Ship Tavern. He sheltered the bishop at Finchley during the Gordon Riots, of which Mawhood gives a first-hand account.

Bishop Challoner's mitre and faldstool are at Westminster Cathedral; the chalice he used at Finchley is at Downside Abbey.

PRAYER FOR THE BEATIFICATION OF BISHOP CHALLONER

O God, who did make Your servant Richard a true and faithful pastor of Your little flock in England, deign to place him among the Blessed in Your Church, so that we who profit by his word and example may beg his help in heaven for the return of this land to the ancient faith and to the fold of the one true Shepherd Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
