

DOMINICAN LETTERS

II—*A Chaplain to the Forces, 1632*

GODFREY ANSTRUTHER, O.P.

THE letter printed below is a reminder of how sketchy is our knowledge of the English Dominicans during the half-century prior to the foundation of Bornhem in 1658 and the start of the registers of clothing and profession. Englishmen who joined the order joined abroad, and their particulars were recorded in the registers of foreign convents, registers that for the most part are no longer extant. In 1615 these scattered members were formed into an English Congregation, but without a house of its own and without even the most rudimentary archives. Thus any chance reference to a Dominican at this dark period is a find of some importance, and this letter is a fair example of what we may still hope to unearth in some archive in almost any part of western Europe.

All that is known of the writer of this letter is what he tells us himself. He is writing to the master-general, Nicholas Ridolfi. The dispensation he asks for was beyond the powers of the master-general, and a copy of his letter was therefore sent to Propaganda. It is this copy only that has survived. It is here translated from the Latin.

Most Reverend Father,

Prostrate at your paternal feet, with all obedience possible I crave your blessing. A reverential fear has hitherto imposed a bridle of silence upon me and I have not dared to write. But mindful of the gentleness and zeal of such a Father, love has persuaded me to approach you. There was a widespread rumour of your coming into Flanders, and that was another reason for my silence, as I hoped to tell you by word of mouth what I now am compelled to write.

After I had laboured some two or three years in England together with our other reverend fathers, it happened that, by the enterprise of some Catholic noblemen, a new regiment of nearly two thousand soldiers was about to embark for the service of the Catholic King in Lower Germany. The greater part was infected with the heresy of the Protestants. Hoping to

bring them to a happier state, these gentlemen continually besought us that our holy order should undertake this ministry, and I, though most unworthy, acceded to their prayers and with the permission of the reverend Father Vicar undertook the burden. I scarcely doubted that this affair was fully known to your paternity from the start by the letters of our Father Vicar.

I have now spent almost a year and a half in this ministry, and in that time (praise be to God) I have converted more than five hundred to the Faith. Daily new children are born to the Church, and it is in this matter that I seek most humbly to know the will of your paternity.

Several young men here in Flanders have offered themselves to me, men of good birth and education, who wish to be clothed in our holy habit, and I humbly beg your paternity that, for as long as these turbulent times persist, you will be so good as to assign a house in one of the provinces near to England where they can be received. As long as things go favourably for the Dutch and other heretics the persecution of the Catholics in England grows more intense. Therefore I trust your paternity will favour our province with, if possible, even greater love.

While I was resident in England there was at London a Spanish nobleman named Charles de Coloma who had the office of ambassador for the Catholic King at the English court. He is now General Master of the Camp in Belgium and one of the foremost military leaders in the whole of Lower Germany. Such was his love for our order in England that all our religious who were then in London were maintained at his expense and protected from the pursuivants like his own servants. When Fr Dominic of St Thomas was apprehended and cast into prison he went to the King and procured his liberation. How can we poor things repay these benefactions? I therefore humbly beg your paternity to write to him and thank him for his singular devotion to our Congregation, lest our ingratitude should deprive us of the help and protection of his successors. And if it seems good to your paternity, would you please admit him to all the benefits of the order, as a singular benefactor?

Your paternity will forgive me for daring to write to you; I am at a loss to know whether or not you have heard these

things from Fr Vicar. The number of the brethren of our little Congregation in these parts is small indeed. In England there are Fr Vicar and Fr George Popham who reside in London; Fr George of St Thomas, Fr William Fowler and Fr Ralph Fowler, his brother; Fr Vincent della Cueta and Fr Dominic of St Thomas; all working in various parts of England. Working with me here in this bumper harvest is Fr Lewis of St Idelfonse, who is in some difficulty about staying here because of a special oath he took in the Roman college to return to England. Therefore I humbly ask your paternity that you will allay his scruples in this matter and grant him the further merit of obedience by ordering him to stay. May your reverend paternity long continue to help, for the comfort of our holy order and of the whole Church.

Given in the royal camp near Diest in the province of Brabant, 12 September 1632.

Would your paternity be good enough to direct the reply to the Rev. Fr Rector of our Irish brethren at Louvain.

Your paternity's most obedient son and client,

fr Philip Lee de Ameros, Dominican.¹

We learn from this letter that in 1632 there were seven English Dominicans in England and two in Belgium. In addition there was Robert Armstrong² who was finishing his studies in Rome, and his younger brother Thomas³ who was undergoing his novitiate at Naples. Eight of these eleven—the Vicar-General Thomas Middleton, Popham, George of St Thomas (Catchmay), Vincent della Cueta or Cueva (Craft), William Fowler, Lewis of St Idelfonse and the Armstrongs—will be known to readers of *A Hundred Homeless Years*. The other three, including the writer of this letter, have never before been named among the Dominicans. Ralph Fowler is not entirely unknown. He entered the English College in Rome in October 1623, aged about thirty-five, and left in the following February.⁴ Thence he went to Douai and received the four minor orders at Arras on 22 February 1625. On 13 February 1625,⁵ Richard Ireland, a priest at Paris,

¹ Propaganda Archives, vol. 74. *Lettere di Germania, Colonia, . . . Fiandra*, etc. 1632, f. 266.

² Robert Armstrong took his brother's name, Thomas, as his religious name. He studied at the college of the Minerva and left for England 22 October 1633. (Arch. of Minerva, *Acta Collegii S. Thomae*, p. 101.)

³ He left the English College in Rome to join the order, 22 January 1632. (CRS, 40, p. 2.)

⁴ CRS, 39, p. 202.

⁵ CRS, 10, p. 234.

writes to Thomas Rant, the clergy agent in Rome:

'This morning I received a letter from Mr Dr Cheney at Douay whereby I understand that Mr Fowler is entered among the Benedictines and he beginneth his novitiateship there. I forgot to send your letter the last week to him, and now I think it not fit for divers reasons, so I must keep it more.'⁶

Ralph evidently changed his mind and joined the Dominicans, but nothing further is known of him.

Dominic of St Thomas, a *confessor fidei*, defies identification, though he may be known under some other name. Charles de Coloma was ambassador in England from April 1622 till October 1624, and again from January 1630 till March 1631. During his first period he interceded with James I for the liberation of 'Fisher the Jesuit and Buck the priest, who has £1500 left to him'.⁷ Fisher is the well-known Jesuit John Percy but Buck has not been identified, so may possibly be the Dominican.

Philip Lee's letter was considered by the cardinals of Propaganda on 14 December 1632:

'As regards the conversion of 500 soldiers, the Congregation ordered the matter to be taken up with the General of the Dominicans, having first obtained a more particular relation of these conversions. As for Fr Lewis, the Congregation considered that if it so pleased his Holiness it was possible to proceed by way of declaration or dispensation, to salve Fr Lewis's conscience, especially if testimony could be obtained from the Belgian Nuncio as to his fitness.'⁸

On 24 January Fr Lewis's case was again considered:

'The Congregation ordered that the Belgian Nuncio be written to, so that having satisfied himself as to the qualities of Fr Lewis and as to the progress that he and his companion were making in the conversion of the soldiers, he should grant him the faculty to remain for three years in the service of these soldiers, notwithstanding the oath to return to England which the said friar took in the English College, provided that at the end of the three years, or earlier if he leaves the services, he shall be bound by his oath to return to England.'⁹

Where did Lewis of St Idelfonse take the mission oath? Lee says

6 West. Cath. Arch., B. 47, no. 120.

7 Cal. S. P. Dom., 1619-23, p. 511.

8 Propaganda Archives, I.c., f. 275.

9 ib. Acts Congregationis 8 (1632-3), p. 175.

'in Collegio Romano'; the Congregation says 'in Collegio Anglicano'. Obviously the oath was taken only in the English colleges and it looks as though the Venerable English College in Rome is meant. But there is no student in the register there who can possibly be identified with Lewis. There may be another explanation. When Lewis entered the college of the Minerva in July 1629 it is stated in the register:

'He is a son of the province of Spain and of the convent of Toro, but has sworn to return to the province of England.'¹⁰

This suggests that he either took the oath at one of the English colleges in Spain before joining the order, or else that his oath was not the ordinary mission oath but a special one binding him to the Congregation of the English Dominicans. He left Rome on 20 September 1631,¹¹ so had been about a year with Lee in Brabant.

Something more will be heard of Lewis in our next Dominican Letter, but we can do no more for his companion Philip Lee but wonder what happened to him. Meanwhile we note the long shadows cast by coming events. A quarter of a century later, Bornhem was to be founded in Brabant, where these two army chaplains laboured so fruitfully, and its donor was to bear the honoured name of de Coloma.

¹⁰ Minerva, *Liber Collegii S. Thomae*, p. 42.

¹¹ *ib.* *Libro dell'uscita*, f. 5.