

The Anglican Historical Society of New Zealand *Te Rōpu Hītori o te Hāhi Mīhinare ki Aotearoa*

The Path to Rome:

Canterbury Association Families and Roman Catholic Conversions

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Declaration, 'Dominus Jesus'

The recent declaration issued by the Vatican authorities puzzled people of goodwill. It was explicitly clear: the Roman Catholic is the best church, other groups of people can be considered Christians, but their communities are second-class. Newcomers to the ecumenical scene were taken aback. Those who have been around longer accepted that this is still the official Vatican line, and there is really no reason to be surprised or cross.

Part of the background for this definition of Roman superiority lies in the changing relationship between the Church of England and the Church of Rome one hundred and fifty years ago.

1833-1845

Background in the Oxford Movement

From the earlier decades of the nineteenth century, the church of England was experiencing a revival of the Catholic tradition. There always had been a high church school which emphasised the continuity of the church of England from early centuries through the changes of the Protestant Reformation (generally seen as positive); this continuity was expressed in the ordered liturgy of the Book of Common Prayer, the high sacramental theology which it embodied, the three orders of bishop, priest, and deacon. These characteristics were seen as derived from apostolic times. The 'branch' theory of the Catholic church - the Orthodox churches of the East, the Roman church of the West, and the

church of England were branches of the one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic church. These three main branches were all valid and valuable. So said the high church Anglicans.

This high church revival which later is spoken of as the Oxford Movement, began with a strong emphasis on the basic Catholic doctrines of Christian identity. The first four centuries of Christianity were seen as the ideal period, which we should get as close to as possible so that we might learn to think and live as they lived. The next generation of Catholic revivalists wanted to carry this further and looked for more recent models in the contemporary Roman Catholic church. As this attraction grew more significant, splits started to occur. When the leader of this Catholic revival, John Henry Newman, the vicar of the main church of Oxford, resigned his Anglican orders and became a Roman Catholic in 1846, a number followed their hero into the Roman church.

These conversions aroused hopes in the heart of Rome of a springtime for the Roman Catholic church in England. In 1850, the Vatican set up a new hierarchy of prelates and diocesan organisation for England and Wales. The doors were open, the invitations were extended: come home to Mother Church.

1848-1852

The Canterbury Association

In 1846, just before John Robert Godley and Edward Gibbon Wakefield began to plan an Anglican church colony for New Zealand, a significant number of leading Anglicans left the

church of England and joined the church of Rome. As they arrived, the earlier converts assured the Roman authorities that more were to come, and they prayed that this springtime would bring a bumper autumn harvest. While these conversions began a significant trend, and while ever since the 1840s, Anglican clergy and active members have decided that the best place for them to follow their Christian calling has become within the Roman Catholic church, most stayed home in the church of England. My research into church life in colonial New Zealand has shown me that here the conversions to Rome among clergy and leading lay people were so few as to be almost invisible.

By the later 1840s, when the Canterbury Association was formed, things had stabilised a little and Anglicans tried to settle down without the troublemakers who had now left for Rome. I was not prepared for the contrary evidence among the Canterbury Association families.

As I researched the lives and connections of the eighty-four members of the Canterbury Association who planned the settlement of the new colony in Canterbury, I discovered that many of their families were part of this trend to Rome.

My research suggests that many of them were deeply involved in the religious controversies about the Catholic nature of the church of England. Particularly significant in this period was their claim that the church has a God-given right to order its own affairs without state interference. As the church of England did not have this freedom, this theological conviction was one of the motivations for the Canterbury Association: these high church Anglicans wished to prove that free from state control and political interference, the true Catholic nature of their church would prove itself in action.

1847-1851

The Gorham Controversy

The defection of Newman had shaken people.

The good-natured tolerance extended to youthful enthusiasts hardened into suspicion as they left the Anglican church. Waters closed over those departing, and life continued. But the uncertainty did not disappear.

The trigger for a second wave of conversions to Rome was the British privy council's ruling on the Gorham controversy. While the issues are now barely intelligible, this tale needs further explanation here, for in 1850 the very year of the first ships sailing for the colony, another ecclesial crisis was shaking the church of England. This one was directly threatening the Canterbury Association plans.

Back in 1847, the bishop of Exeter, Dr Henry Phillpotts, had refused to license as a parish priest a man called Gorham: he blocked him on the grounds that Gorham, an Evangelical, did not believe that at their baptism persons are regenerated by the power of the Holy Spirit. The church of England did require that belief of its priests - said all the new Oxford movement people and the old-style High church people like Phillpotts.

The bishop of Exeter loved litigation and went to court, and was taken to court. The first court judgement was favourable to him: but it went contrary to the interests of Gorham. As the judgement thus did not satisfy the Evangelical group supporting Gorham, this group appealed to the privy council. The judicial committee of the British government's privy council was legally the highest secular court but, in those days, it was also the highest church court. To the consternation of the High church party, the judicial committee of the privy council judged for the legality of Gorham's beliefs, and against the bishop of Exeter in his refusal to institute Gorham into his living

Now the problem had changed into a crisis of faith. The offence for the Catholic and High church party was this: a secular tribunal appointed by the state was seen as making legal

rulings on the beliefs of the church itself. To make things even worse, the archbishop of York and the archbishop of Canterbury were serving on the judicial committee: both these Evangelical prelates had sided with the secular court's judgement against the teaching of their own church. So, for the High church party, the rights of the church had become the issue, not Gorham.

Public protests against the Gorham judgement included one from sixty-three eminent lay leaders: among them, William Ewart Gladstone, brother-in-law of Lord Lyttelton, chairman of the Canterbury Association, and Lord John Manners, a member of the Canterbury Association and a bright if Quixotic figure among the Tory politicians. A more ominous protest was published, from thirteen signatories including Henry Edward Manning, the able Archdeacon of Chichester, and from the Canterbury Association members, Archdeacon Robert Isaac Wilberforce, Lord John Talbot, and Lord Richard Cavendish. Among the flurry of sixty publications protesting the Gorham judgement was a pamphlet by R. B. Paul, a member of the Canterbury Association who was later the archdeacon of Waimea (Nelson). Paul was among those rallying the Catholics to hold firm to the church of England.

So just five years after the conversion of Newman and his associates, a new wave of conversions to the church of Rome was overwhelming the Oxford Movement revivalists. These English waves continued to dash on the shores of the Tiber throughout the century.

More embarrassing evidence of unsettlement in the Canterbury Association was the conversion of three important members, Sir William Heathcote, Archdeacon Robert Isaac Wilberforce, (a son of the Evangelical reformer William Wilberforce), and Sir John Simeon. Simeon was MP for the Isle of Wight and found it necessary to resign his seat on converting. Charles Griffith Wynne, the brother-in-law of the very leader of the Canterbury colony, John

Robert Godley himself joined the church of Rome.

So, the uncertainties half-settled after Newman left were revived more powerfully now in the wake of the Gorham judgement. The Gorham judgement pushed them on along the path to Rome. Across the next couple of generations, other members of the Canterbury Association families went across to Rome. Not all were directly affected by the Gorham judgement, but the uncertainty had become endemic, and clearly many were vulnerable to leave at any time. I was curious to do a head count of families that had converts to Rome.

1845-1900

How Many Families Had Converts?

My research was into the connections between the eighty-four members of the Canterbury Association. I wanted to see what interests had brought these people together for those few years. They are so closely inter-connected by marriage, privilege, political and social interests, and the church of England.

Catching the converts in their families is of course very hit and miss. Some were thought famous enough to catch public attention. Some of those registered belong to more than one family of the Canterbury Association member. So, while the exact proportions cannot be determined, about 26 out of the 84 show up to my casual checking, an extraordinary indicator of the rate of conversion among the Canterbury Association families. Extraordinary, because in my research into clerical families of colonial New Zealand, I have come across almost none. The only one, in fact, is the Revd. George Harper, a brother of the first bishop of Christchurch, Henry John Chitty Harper; George Harper became a Jesuit priest.

These days when loyalty to one church is not often strong, and movement across from one church to another, formally and informally, happens smoothly, it is astonishing for us to realise how fierce the controversies were, and

how bitter the attitudes, particularly against Roman Catholics.

The Church Magazine (published in the 1870s in Christchurch by an Evangelical group, inspired by the Orange Lodge movement) has an interesting report of the 'Perversion of Lord Nelson's Son'. The editor, probably the incumbent of St John's Latimer Square, comments on the conversion of the second son of Lord Horatio Nelson, one of the Canterbury Association members. The editor notes that: 'His father, one of the Ritualistic leaders, had the temerity, on discovering his son's perversion, to write to The Times, and to complain of the tactics of Rome - attributing his son's conversion to those tactics.' He notes that Fr Bowden of the London Oratory (founded by Frederick Faber, like Bowden a convert) replied 'that young Mr. Nelson (Charles Horatio, born 28 Jun 1856) was not the victim of Romish tactics; that he was, when he came to the (Brompton) Oratory, a Roman Catholic in everything but in name; that he had been instructed in 'every point of Roman doctrine' while a member of the Church of England. And he concludes with the very sensible, if ungrammatical, remarks which follow: 'As long as certain members of the Church of England are in the habit of imitating the Roman devotion, of celebrating mass, invoking the saints, oral confession, reciting the Rosary, and the like, conversions will follow which, sudden as they appear, are but the necessary consequences of such a line of conduct.'

The editorial goes on to blame the Ritualist party and Lord Nelson himself for the consequences of their foolishness and congratulates the Church of England on losing a man who would have otherwise become a Ritualist priest, 'disseminating the doctrines of Rome as a clergyman of the Protestant Church.' The editor quotes from the World, that the Ritualists are: 'with very few exceptions, shallow-brained, illiterate, and under-bred young men, without moral stamina or mental backbone (offering

themselves to that church which is) drunk with the blood of the Saints.'

The comment in Church Magazine says that Lord Nelson was 'striving to assimilate the worship of the Church of England to that of the Church of Rome ... The borderland which separates the Ritualist from the Romanist is very narrow ...'

1896:

'Apostolicae Curae'

Anglicans converts in Rome, notably Cardinal Henry Manning, brother-in-law of the Wilberforce brothers (three had become Roman Catholics), and Monsignor George Talbot, relative of the Lord John Talbot of the Canterbury Association, persuaded the Pope that many more Anglicans were ready to come over to Rome.

These converts argued that the Pope need only condemn Anglican orders and by that one word of condemnation, he would wipe out the claims for recognition of the Anglican church to be acknowledged as a valid option for Catholic Christians of England. Then, the earnest members of the discredited church of England would all pack their bags for Rome.

So, against other advisors in the Vatican, Pope Leo XIII issued the encyclical 'Apostolicae Curae' on 13 September 1896. Anglican orders were condemned as invalid through defect both of form and intention. Thus, the sacraments in the Anglican church were ruled invalid, and again the invitation was reiterated: as your church is second-rate, come join the best church.

At the level of formal definitions, by which an authoritarian church must define itself, the church of Rome has not changed. From the Anglican point of view, only by the contradiction of the encyclical of 1896 is it possible for the Vatican to do other than repeat in August 2000 such words as it uses to set itself above other Christian churches in the direction, 'Dominus Jesus.'