

THE ARCHDIOCESE OF WESTMINSTER 175 YEARS

The Archdiocese of Westminster was officially established by Blessed Pius IX on 29 September 1850. Although revolutions had rocked Europe, Catholicism was experiencing an international revival and English Catholics, released from the legal restrictions of former times, were newly confident in taking their place within society. The erection of dioceses with ordinary bishops in England and Wales had long been discussed and the new Archbishop of Westminster, Nicholas Wiseman, could be forgiven for his exuberance in hastily issuing a Pastoral Letter. 'We govern and shall continue to govern', he wrote, 'the counties of Middlesex, Hertford, Essex, as ordinary thereof...'. Queen Victoria was purported to have asked, 'Am I Queen of England, or am I not?' There was an initial outcry over this seeming 'papal aggression' and the fact that the new diocese was called 'Westminster', the heart of the Protestant establishment and site of royal coronations, added fuel to the fire. Wiseman quickly issued a widely-circulated *Appeal to the Reason and Good Feeling of the English People*, arguing that Catholics had the right to proper church government, which would actually enable them to make a full contribution to public life.

The incumbent in Westminster remained the only Archbishop in England and Wales until 1911. Cardinal Wiseman had had years of experience in Rome and was a recognised scholar and writer; Pius IX once joked that his best-selling novel *Fabiola, or the Church of the Catacombs*, had done greater good than any papal encyclical. His successor, Henry Edward Manning, a convert and widower, was an important figure at the First Vatican Council and, back home, closely identified with the working classes, decisively mediating in the 1889 London Dock Strike. They were remarkable figures.

Of course, the diocese was not created out of nothing. A missionary bishop, or 'Vicar Apostolic', had served Catholics in the London District since 1688. There was already a series of churches - 'missions' rather than 'parishes' - for the growing Catholic population (largely Irish), some of which dated back to the days when the chapels of foreign embassies were the only places in London where Mass could be celebrated. By 1850 the Jesuits were already working out of Farm Street and the Oratorians were present in the metropolis, although their church was not the magnificent neo-baroque edifice on Brompton Road but a former gin and whisky store. There were schools, charities and lay organisations, and a seminary at St Edmund's, Old Hall Green, Hertfordshire.

The new diocese led to a rapid increase of Catholic churches, schools and institutions; between 1850 and 1865, the year of Wiseman's death, 45 churches had been opened. Over subsequent decades the growth of suburbia and London's satellite towns, served by expanding railway lines, necessitated new churches and schools. Typically, a temporary church would be erected – perhaps in an existing property or a specially-constructed iron hut - as energy was normally put into the opening of a school before a permanent church was built, often many years later. Education and youth were always a priority, and Catholics of every social class made great sacrifices to raise funds for this end. Indeed, the priority of education meant that Westminster Cathedral was not opened until 1903, the great achievement of Cardinal Herbert Vaughan, our third Archbishop; in the meantime, St Mary Moorfields and then Our Lady of Victories, Kensington served as the Pro-Cathedral.

Looking back over the last 175 years, the vital role played by many religious orders and associations, and by countless men, women and children in building up the Church should be recognised: teachers, nurses and care workers, parish secretaries, housekeepers, catechists, pastoral assistants, caretakers, administrative staff and hardworking volunteers. Among others, we might mention Sir George Bowyer, who did so much to represent Catholic interests at Parliament and helped establish the Hospital of St John and St Elizabeth; Charles Pagliano, a hotel owner who set up the first Conferences of the Society of St Vincent de Paul in London, and Frances Margaret Taylor, whose work for the destitute led to the foundation of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God, based at Brentford. Many names, however, are known only to God. Much of a diocese's history is indeed hidden and we give thanks for all those who have laboured hard, often at considerable personal cost, in the Lord's vineyard over the last 175 years.

The priests who have served the diocese come in all shapes and sizes. Some were authors whose books are still enjoyed: Mgr Robert Hugh Benson, the son of an Archbishop of Canterbury, whose novels were several times referred to by Pope Francis; Fr Adrian Fortescue, a noted liturgical scholar and founder of the parish at Letchworth (he deemed his church the most magnificent one west of Constantinople), and Mgr Ronald Knox, an eloquent preacher and pioneer of detective fiction. Fr Henry Hardy, whose ancestor was famously an associate of Admiral Nelson, founded churches at Harrow, Rickmansworth, Boxmoor, Berkhamsted and Tring, often travelling on horseback and single-handedly doing so much to build up the Church in these areas. Uniquely, the diocese lost priests both in the sinking of the *Titanic* (1912) and the *Lusitania* (1915): Fr Thomas Byles, Rector of Ongar (which was then situated in the diocese) and Fr Basil Maturin, then working as chaplain to the University of Oxford. A cause for beatification has been opened for the former.

Cardinals Bourne, Hinsley and Griffin led the diocese through both world wars, Hinsley in particular winning fame as a popular broadcaster. Many churches were damaged or destroyed by enemy bombs; when Holy Redeemer, Chelsea was hit in September 1940, 19 people who were sheltering in the heating chamber were killed. The diocese continued to grow and develop in the post-war years, led by Cardinals Griffin, Godfrey, and Heenan (who died 50 years ago this November). There were many changes and challenges to face both within and without the Church, yet 36 parishes were still able to be established between 1945 and 1970.

By 2025 Westminster Cathedral has become an integral part of the London skyline, having witnessed an International Eucharistic Congress, two papal visits and a royal funeral. Leaders such as Cardinal Basil Hume were nationally respected as spiritual leaders. Two infants baptised within the diocese have gone on to become saints: John Henry Newman, Doctor of the Church, and Carlo Acutis, the first millennial saint. The twenty-first century diocese has had to adapt to the demands of increasing regulatory activity and the commitment to build up a culture of safeguarding. Its 207 parishes enjoy a rich diversity of membership, coming from every corner of the globe, and agencies such as Caritas address the many needs in society, including human trafficking. Much has changed since Cardinal Wiseman wrote his triumphant Pastoral Letter in 1850 but the diocese endeavours to remain rooted in the same Lord and Saviour and walks with hope into the future.

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