

DOWNSIDE REVIEW.

JULY, 1881.

MEMOIRS OF DISTINGUISHED GREGORIANS.

NO. II.—THE MOST REVEREND JOHN BEDE
POLDING, D.D., O.S.B.,

FIRST ARCHBISHOP OF SYDNEY.

(Continued from page 175.)

THE zeal and earnestness of Dr. Polding very soon secured for him considerable influence with the Colonial authorities. It was impossible not to admire such single-minded devotion to duty and the work of saving souls, and the Government and its officials were not slow to offer their co-operation in all that tended to the amelioration of the people. He built churches wherever they were needed, founded schools and obtained Government support for an orphanage for destitute Catholic children, which he placed under the care of some devoted nuns. It is astonishing how rapidly he was able to raise the Catholic population from their depression. One of his first efforts was to establish a newspaper, in which he taught them to assert their civil rights, and to maintain their position worthily and with confidence among their fellow men. Several measures hostile to Catholics, which had been inspired by the old traditions of the then strong party, and even some which were oppressive to the people in general, were defeated when brought into the old Legislative Council through the influence Dr. Polding exercised over public opinion. He was popularly known as the protector of the poor and oppressed, no matter of

what religion, and to him many a man in trouble or ground down by the tyranny of some harsh master fled for protection. His kind heart never could refuse to listen to any tale of distress, and he was ready at all times to do his utmost to alleviate suffering or mitigate the severity of unavoidable punishment. And in these kind offices he was called upon often to exercise the virtue of prudence as well as charity—a virtue which he possessed in the highest degree.

One or two anecdotes may better illustrate the character of the Bishop's life and labours than a long narration. One day he is walking in his garden, saying his office, when a poor convict in a chain-gang dress creeps from beneath some bushes and kneels on the path in front of him. An explanation follows. He has absconded from a chain-gang making roads 150 miles up the country. The overseer had "a down upon him"—a phrase of very terrible import in the mouth of poor prisoners. It meant that the petty officer had taken an antipathy to him, and that he was being habitually flogged with the cat for the least thing, without any chance of appeal to a higher authority. He could stand it no longer, and made his escape unperceived. He has walked by night, and concealed himself by day, having eaten nothing for five days but some cobs of Indian corn plucked in the fields. The Bishop listens to his story, and when he has placed food before the exhausted man hastens to the Chief Superintendent of Convicts. That important official is accustomed to the Bishop, and after he has heard the appeal enforced with tears, he says, "Well the man must, of course, be punished for absconding, but I will be as moderate as possible. I will inquire into the matter and keep the man in barracks meanwhile, and if his statement is anything like true he shall not go back."

On one occasion he was travelling late at night in the Illiwarra district with a country youth as his guide. The rain was pouring down, as it only does in a tropical climate, making their progress over the ill-formed road almost impossible. In the midst of the storm a few words from the boy discovers that he had been baptised a Catholic, but had for years altogether neglected the practice of his religion. The Bishop dismounts, and after he has instructed his youthful guide fastens the bridle of his horse to a tree, sits down on a log of wood and bids the lad kneel on the ground beside him. There, in the thick forest and dark night, and exposed to the driving rain, the Bishop hears the confession of long years misspent, weeps over his penitent and encourages

him to begin a new life. On Dr. Polding's next visit to the district he found that the boy had been killed very shortly after this incident by the fall of a tree he was felling.

Some weeks after the Bishop had first said Mass in the press room of Sydney gaol, the mild, quiet, but strong-willed head turnkey said to Bishop Ullathorne, "I will tell you something, sir, and I will tell it to nobody else. You know how crowded we are, and how we are infested with vermin, so that even our coarse fellows cannot stand it. Well, since the Bishop said Mass here there have been no vermin at that end of the room; and when the men come in to sleep at night there is a regular rush of both Catholics and Protestants to get to that end of the room." No wonder that we find in a letter written from Sydney in 1839¹ the words, "Many years are added to his appearance since his arrival in the colony. His labours are incessant, his zeal unbounded. Protestants as well as Catholics revere him as a Saint."

With reference to the first years of his great missionary career, Archbishop Polding wrote, "Little could be done except to keep from entire decay so much of the form and spirit of religion as had been preserved by our zealous predecessors." He was in the vigour of health and strength, and he was ever ready to sacrifice both for his people. At the call of duty he would not hesitate to ride from Sydney to Albany, and even to the most distant parts of the present colony of Victoria. When gold was first discovered, and when thousands flocked to the gold fields, and when lawlessness and violence reigned almost unchecked, he was there as a messenger of peace, led thither not by the thirst for gold which he despised, but by a desire to bring back to Christ souls that had erred. "He feared not to enter into the dense and trackless bush in which so many have perished—an invisible hand seemed ever ready to guide him. He feared not to spur his horse into the rushing torrent, when a suffering or dying child required his presence. What plain, or mountain, or valley is there in the parts of Australia then inhabited where the tones of his voice were not familiar to every Catholic ear, his features to every Catholic eye? What forest has he not travelled? What stream has he not crossed? How often was he not obliged to rest at night under the wide spreading branches of the Eucalyptus, with the saddle for a pillow and the earth for a couch? How often, in traversing the thicket, did he not tread on the venomous reptile which crossed his path—God and His and angels protecting him from injury?

¹ "Weekly Orthodox Journal," June 22, 1839.

How often was he forced to partake of the rude and homely fare of the lonely shepherd? How often did he not suffer the pangs of hunger and thirst? Whithersoever he passed a blessing seemed to remain. How the little children loved him and ran to meet him when he appeared! He too loved their society and used the influence he had over them to say to them a good word, to suggest a holy thought. It is a remarkable thing that every family whose hospitality he shared in his various missionary journeys has treasured up some good or kind word spoken by him."¹

In his many journeys through the bush it would be surprising if he were never attacked by the lawless bush-rangers. Of one such encounter he gives an account in a letter to a friend:—"I am," he says, "as yet the only clergyman who has been attacked, since we came out, by bush-rangers. The man pretended to be the constable of the road, and stood at the horse's head till a severe blow on the head made him retreat. After their wont another man came out of the bush a few yards further on and was treated in the like manner. I was not known, otherwise I should never have been attacked."

We cannot refrain from inserting the following extract from one of the Archbishop's letters to Dr. Heptonstall:—"How Scot will laugh when he learns that two of my 'mitres' were stolen! The rogue was a man selected by Gregory, and at his entreaty retained in the house. Paddy White he called himself. He had been sent out on a message, and some one gave him a shilling, with which he regaled himself and returned rather groggy. Instead of coming to night prayers he went up stairs and opened a box, in which Gregory had stowed away these mitres, and fitting them under his waistcoat walked off to the town to a hatter named Lee. Lee at once saw that they must belong to me, and kept the man in talk whilst he sent for a constable, by whom the man was lodged in the watch-house. He asked six guineas for them, and said he had been commissioned by the mate of a vessel to sell them. One belonged to Cardinal Weld and the other to poor Dr. Slater. I wish you and Scot would come and occupy each one. Master Paddy is in prison, and I suppose he will be sent to Norfolk Island unless I can obtain mitigation of sentence."

In 1841 Dr. Polding came to England with the view of providing for the constantly growing wants of his pastoral charge. Thence he proceeded to Rome to give a report of his Vicariate, and to petition for the establishment of a hierarchy. This was acceded

¹ "Father Cahill's Funeral Sermon," p. 12.

to, and in the fall of the year 1842 the Vicar Apostolic was made first Archbishop of Sydney. He lived to see Melbourne raised into a second Archbishoprick and not less than thirteen Bishopricks established in Australia, in which, up to the year 1842, he had been the only Vicar Apostolic. In the course of his long residence in the colony he left it only five times, namely, in 1840, 1846, 1854, 1866, and 1869. On the last occasion he endeavoured to carry out his wish to be present at the Vatican Council, but being overtaken by serious illness at Bombay he had to forego his intention. The chief aim of his earlier visits was to enlist the sympathy of the English Catholics for the work in which he was engaged. During his stay in Rome, in the year 1841, some serious difficulties occurred in the Church of Malta, which required the interposition of the Holy See. Archbishop Polding, of whose zeal and prudence Pope Gregory XVI. had been led to form a very high estimate, was despatched to the island with powers to set all things in order. His mission was a most complete success, and His Holiness, to mark the sense of the obligation of the Holy See to him, created him a Count of the Holy Roman Empire and Bishop-Assistant at the Pontifical Throne.

During his absence in Europe the Archbishop turned his attention to procure a larger supply of priests. However much his heart yearned to visit the friends and scenes of his youth, to see them was never the primary object of any of his visits. Six years' residence in New South Wales had taught him that if the great work was to be effectually carried out in that far distant land, a considerable accession to the Priesthood was of paramount necessity. Work and spend himself as he might as a simple missionary it was impossible that he and his little band could supply the spiritual wants of so large a population. His efforts to get others to join him were untiring, and on the whole successful. In March, 1843, he returned with a band of Christian brothers, four Passionists and a number of Benedictines, amongst whom were Bishop Davis of Maitland and Dr. Gregory, who had been his novices at St. Gregory's. He had sent forward some Sisters of Charity to the colony, and he took out with him an offshoot of the Convent of Benedictine Nuns at Stanbrook, who settled at Paramatta. Shortly after his return he instituted the Congregation of Benedictine Nuns of the Good Samaritan, to aid in the work of instructing the poor and ignorant.

Having procured more labourers for the harvest of souls, the Archbishop devoted much of his time and attention to the

establishment of a seminary, which might perpetuate the necessary supply. In a pastoral of great eloquence he urged the claims of this work upon the faithful, whilst he sketched out his ideal training of a student for the Priesthood. "They should be brought up," he says, "in simplicity and obedience, in habits of retiredness and of self-restraint, which experience has taught us is the best preparation for the future Apostolic Missionary." The Synods he held in Sydney in 1844, and in Melbourne in 1859, tended to augment the good his previous labours had effected. The University College of St. John, and the College of St. Mary's, Lyndhurst, are proofs of his care for the higher education of his people. Nor, in his great charity, did he forget those poor uncivilized Aborigines, whose simple manners had been vitiated by their contact with the refuse of convict society. In their midst he was as welcome as among the people of Sydney, and in after years he used to tell how once he had found a great difficulty in escaping the honour of being tattooed on his election to be chief of one of the native tribes.¹

It is perhaps hardly the place to speak of Dr. Polding's inner life. We may note, however, that throughout his long and laborious career, he was ever true to the lessons of his early monastic training; most devoted to the duty of mental prayer, for which he would rise in the early morning long before his household was astir, and, like a true son of St. Benedict, most devoted to the Immaculate Mother of God. When Prefect of the students at Downside, he had procured, as we have said, the restoration of the Sodality of the Blessed Virgin. He invoked Our Lady, Help of Christians, in every necessity, and twice in shipwreck he obtained the lives of himself and fellow-passengers by invoking her all-powerful intercession; and we are not astonished to learn that during the last few years of his life, the Rosary was ever in his hand, and Our Lady's name ever on his lips. His deep and earnest piety, his contempt of the world, and his love of God, were never more clearly shown than during the last few years of his life, when the arrival of his coadjutor, Archbishop Vaughan, had relieved him of many of the cares of his high office.

Once only did anything happen to disturb the well-earned repose of his old age. This was when (some madman attempting the life of the Duke of Edinburgh) foul slanders were heaped upon the Catholics of Australia. The hands of many were against them, and the colonial press teemed with studied insults on the Catholic

¹ "Catholic Standard," April 11, 1856,

faith. Then it was that the esteem Dr. Polding had so well merited by his life of self-sacrifice contributed more than anything else could have done to dispel the uncharitable suspicions of the Protestant public. Years before he had said, "Before everything else we are Catholics; and next, by the name swallowing up all distinction of origin, we are Australians." This it was his pride to claim for himself, and those who knew him best knew how loyal he ever was to the true interests of his adopted country.

The following sketch of the Archbishop in 1859 appeared in a work called "Southern Lights and Shadows," and possesses great interest for us now:—"Let me sketch the Archbishop in a stained glass light. No Monk ever looked more like a Monk than he. There is scarcely a secular sign in his face. It is a benign, lovable countenance shaded, but not sombred, with the dim religious life of the monastic atmosphere of other days. It is a face dating long before shilling pieces, and *Fid. Def.* Look at that long trailing grey hair, tumbling down his neck, like the snow about the head of a brother of St. Bernard. Look at the large, deep eyes, blue, yet burning as the 'twir orbs of Leda.' The mouth, too, is a study, power, and patience—an almost terrible rectitude, with an almost feminine sympathy—a mighty tenderness and a tender might—meet us at a glance in the fine Fra Angelico visage before us. The double chin is a great point: it throws a touch of home and everyday passion into the face, like—to borrow a figure—the wine cellars under an old Rhenish Cathedral. What a world of good feeling and geniality there is about that chin. Drop the cowl over all the rest of the face and one might swear upon that feature he was Falstaff or Brother John at once. A glorious thing, this index of 'like passions with ourselves,' in the countenance of an ecclesiastic whose religion has smothered all weakness. . . . The bearing of his Grace is particularly courtly. Here is a man you say at once who has moved in palaces, sipped from the vessels of the magnificent Lorenzo, and hob-a-nobbed with Cardinals and Popes. . . . They say his learning is fine—the light of the scholarly lamp without its smoke. His preaching is of a high order. The merits and specialities of his style are described in a phrase when we call it elegantly fervid. . . . In light and shade it is like an old crucifix, where the figures of ivory are laid upon a back-ground of ebon. His elaborations are particularly chaste. They are never heaped on, but grow out and form part of the subject itself, like the glowing arabesques in an old missal. The same lofty qualities meet us in his literary addresses. A

splendid sobriety and a sober splendour mingle and charm us. I first heard him at the Catholic Institute in Sydney. . . . I thought his address on that occasion the best thing I had heard since Talfourd. There was that precision of touch about it that never arises from mere scholarship, but only from the severest literary discipline. At the same time the power of the scholar was apparent, it stole through the chinks and crannies of the discourse as the light streams into the great hall of the Vatican from its seven thousand surrounding chambers. With him a gracious and delicate hand play almoner to a large and liberal heart. I heard the most lavish praises bestowed upon him, and never during my residence in Sydney a single disapproving word. In his own church he is adored; in *ours* he is admired."

To few men within the memory of those living have been granted such favours, both intellectual and physical. For some years after the appointed span of man's life Archbishop Polding bore upon his shoulders the care of the Church of Australia. It was not until he was nearly eighty years of age that he felt the need of a coadjutor; and even then it was very slowly that he could make up his mind that his life was drawing to a close. Not very long before his death his clear sonorous voice was heard in his Cathedral. At St. Mary's he was often to be seen, devoutly bowing down at the solemn parts of the Mass, or rapt in prayer before the altar. Were any of his Priests sick, or any old friend in distress—was there any work of charity or mercy he could perform—and again would his beloved form be seen in the streets of Sydney.

Death came at last in a fitting manner to so grand and unselfish a life. He felt that his end could not long be delayed, and so summoned to his bedside his whole household, including the servants, and humbly asked of each one pardon for any offence he might have given. The last Sacraments were received with saintly fervour and humility, and then his thoughts turned to Rome, and he asked pardon of the Father of Christendom for his errors and imperfections in the performance of the duties of his charge, and he ended by imploring the Pope to send him a last blessing. The long-for blessing was pronounced by the Holy Father two hours before the Archbishop expired. Though the telegram was not received at Sydney till after his death, the blessing travelling more quickly than the lightning which bore it soothed his last moments. His soul passed away at seven o'clock of the morning of Friday, March 16th, 1877.

We have not space to describe the magnificent funeral ceremonies

which were celebrated over his grave; nor the last sad triumph in which all classes of the community, from the governor of the colony and the ministers to the poorest artisan participated, when the remains of the first Archbishop of Sydney were borne to Petersham Cemetery. We will conclude this short notice of a great life with the feeling words spoken by Archbishop Vaughan over the remains of the Venerable Archbishop:—

“My Lords and dearly beloved,—I assure you that I feel far too depressed to-day, after what I have gone through during the past week, to say any words at all, if I did not think you would feel it as a loss if I did not in a very short way express the feelings which animate your hearts, now that we are putting away all that is mortal of John Bede Polding amongst his Priests and amongst his people. Such a life as his, and such a work as he has done, you know as well as I do, require long thought and long study, not only to amass but to place before the minds and imagination of others in order that they may appreciate his spotless life and learn the lessons which it teaches. As to myself and my loss, this is not the place I suppose to speak of a personal loss: though what is your loss, what is the loss of each one of you but a personal loss? But I feel it because it leaves upon me a weight which was born by him, and also because I know more of his former life before he came to this colony than any here present. I know something of his career during the years he was in the same house of religious discipline in which I myself was taught to serve God at early morning and late at night; and I can assure you here surrounding me that there was never anything in this world that had such a powerful action on my spirit, not from what I knew of him by my personal contact, but from the traditions that he left behind him, and from that indescribable influence which, like a fragrant flower in a garden, spreads its perfume hither and thither. What he was as a Bishop you know better than I do, because you have been in contact with him year after year, and have listened to the sage counsels and gentle reproofs which came from his lips. I will not detain you now in speaking of the works he has effected, or of his great piety, or of the wide-spread influence which he possessed throughout the community. On another occasion myself or some other person will endeavour to set forth a brief history of his life in the great and exalted position to which he attained, and to exhibit that gentleness, that forbearance, and all those other qualities which take so many years to learn, and which his life displayed so brilliantly.”