

SUCCISA VIRESKIT.

A STUDY OF THE BENEDICTINE HISTORY OF THE LAST HUNDRED YEARS.

V.

(Continued from page 278.)

The wonderful vitality of the monastic order has been nowhere more signally manifested than in the United States of America. In that vast territory where forty years ago not a single Benedictine was to be found, the Order now possesses six abbeys, thirteen priories, and sixty missionary churches, besides sixteen monasteries of nuns, while four of the monks who have made profession of St. Benedict's rule have been called to the episcopal office in various parts of the North American continent. Before narrating the series of events by which such a remarkable development has been arrived at, we will gather together a few details illustrative of the earlier links which connected the Benedictine Order with America.

Centuries ago, long before the birth of Columbus, there was in far north Greenland a Benedictine monastery. The information which has come down to us concerning the early settlement which the Icelanders formed in Greenland is very scanty, and so we are unable to say with precision from what monastery the monks for this first "American" foundation were drawn. It is probable however that they, as well as the Canons Regular of St. Austin who likewise had a house in Greenland, were members of some Islandic or Norwegian religious house who shared in the enterprise of their countrymen, and accompanied them in their expeditions to minister to their spiritual wants, and, may be, spread the faith among the pagans who frequented the newly-discovered lands. The canons settled at Petersvik in Tessermin Fjord; the Benedictines secured a pleasant site in Hrafris Fjord or Ounastok on the western coast. There, on an island blessed with hot springs, they built their church and monastery. Beyond these meagre facts nothing seems known of the history of the colony; it in all probability shared the fate of the other Norse settlements, and succumbed to the long continued disasters caused by the

altering climatic conditions, the ravages of small-pox, and the attacks of the savage Esquimaux.¹

The next event in Benedictine history in connexion with America occurs towards the end of the fifteenth century, when Dom Bernard Boil, a monk of Montserrat, accompanied Columbus in his second voyage, in the quality of the first Apostolic Vicar of the newly-discovered lands (1493). The labours of Boil seem to have been limited to the West Indian islands and were brought to an end by a disagreement with Columbus which led to the return of the Vicar Apostolic to Spain, where he appears to have ended his days as abbot of the monastery of St. Michael de Cuxano in the neighbourhood of Barcelona.

In the following century various monasteries were founded in the new world by the Spanish and Portuguese monks,² but as their history does not concern us we will pass on to the Benedictine history of North America. It is not impossible that one or two members of the English congregation laboured in the American missions; certainly the President General of the congregation was considered to have power to grant missionary faculties to any of his subjects for the various English colonies in America. Father Ambrose Bride, a monk of St. Gregory's, who was professed in 1657, received permission from the general chapter to devote himself to the services of the Catholics in Maryland. A native of the same catholic colony, made his profession as a Benedictine monk at St. Gregory's under the religious name of Paul on the 28th of December, 1705.

About the year 1790 a French colony was established in Ohio, at a place called Gallipolis, and an effort was made by its promoters to have a bishop appointed for the spiritual benefit of the colonists.³ The project however failed, owing probable to the erection of the new See of Baltimore, but Dom Didier, a monk of the congregation of St. Maur, and chaplain of the colony, was invested

¹ See the *Sacristy*, 1871, Vol. I, p. 85.

² The Brazilian Congregation, composed of seven abbeys and four priories, was erected in 1827 by Pope Leo XII, consequent on the political severance of Brazil from Portugal, and continued to flourish in merit and numbers till 1855, when an imperial decree forbade the reception of novices. To evade the law some Brazilian novices were professed at St. Paul's at Rome for the Brazilian congregation, but as the government in 1870 strictly prohibited the monks from returning to their native country, they devoted themselves to the establishment of a monastery in Portugal.

³ See sketch of the Origin and Progress of the Catholic Church in the United States of America, by the Rev. C. J. White, D.D., Darras, IV, 614.

with ample powers to be exercised in obedience to Dr. Carroll, who had been appointed first bishop of Baltimore.

In connexion with Dr. Carroll, we may remark that his consecration as the first bishop of the great North American hierarchy was performed at Lulworth Castle, Dorsetshire, by the Right Rev. Bishop Walmsley, O.S.B., Vicar Apostolic of the Western District of England (August 15th, 1790). It is a matter of interest to English Benedictines that through a member of their congregation they were instrumental in transmitting to the church of America the sacred order of the episcopacy.¹ Bishop Carroll during his stay in England made the acquaintance of several members of the Benedictine Order, and, as the following shows, entertained the hope of seeing a monastery of the English congregation established in his diocese. The letter is in the Downside archives and has not hitherto been printed. It is addressed to "Mr. Michael Pembridge,² Cotman Place, Dorking, Surrey," and was sent to England by the good ship "Carolina." The interesting light which this letter throws on the condition and prospects of the Catholic Church in America less than a century ago must be our excuse for printing it in full.

BALTIMORE, September 19th, 1794.

REV. SIR,—Your very precious favour of May 2nd, was not received more than about three or four weeks ago. I instantly remembered your name, and your benefaction; and I am far from intending to flatter, when I say, that no book is more eagerly sought after than the *Whole Duty*, &c.; and I am confident that if 500 copies were sent in, some to this place, some to Philadelphia and New York, they would meet with a rapid sale.

I said that your letter was a precious favour, but nothing can be more pleasing to me than the prospect of having in my diocese a settlement of English Benedictines. I will not enter now into the reasons of my attachment and veneration for them; suffice to say, that I trust in God they will honour and extend religion; and that I never can forget, that they were the Apostles of England, Germany and many other countries. If therefore your venerable Chapter has encouraged your idea, I promise, as long as God grants life, to give to the undertaking every encouragement in my power.

¹ Of Franklin's connexion and friendship with the English Benedictines in Paris we hope to speak on some other occasion.

² Dom Benedict Michael Pembridge, a native of London made his solemn profession at St. Gregory's at Douai on October 15th, 1741. He was the author of *The Whole Duty of Man*, a book still much esteemed, and of several other works, many of which have never been printed.

I will now give the best answer in my power, to the questions, you propose, 1^o, all things considered, such as, healthiness of situation; cheapness of land; favourable disposition of the laws; the extensive prospect of supplying the immense western territory of the United States with well trained virtuous Apostles and pastors, I am decidedly of opinion that the neighbourhood of the town, called Pittsburgh, in Pennsylvania, about 300 miles from this, would be the properest place for a settlement and school. This situation is far remote from and as secure as London, from the Indians. There is a continual communication of trade and regular posts from that settlement to Balt^e, Philad^a and all the trading towns on the Atlantic. I cannot now detail many other reasons for this preference. 2^o I am convinced, that with one thousand, or twelve hundred pounds st^g, three or four hundred acres of good land might be obtained there, and a neat, comfortable and sufficiently large wooden house might be built to accommodate twelve religious, including at least four good laborious lay brothers, who would be exceedingly useful, as your great distress here would be for hirelings, and the laws of Pennsylvania admit not slaves. 3^o Besides this sum, for the first year a good deal more will be wanted for subsistence; and may it not on this account, be advisable, to send first two or three judicious persons to examine and prepare for the rest? 4^o There appears to me no need of application to Rome.

I have now only to pray earnestly and sincerely to God, that he may not suffer the prospect to be delusive, but that it may be realized to the great advantage of my diocese. With the greatest esteem, I am

Rev. and hon^d Sir,

Y^r most obed^t Serv^t,

✠ JOHN, Bish^p of Balt^e."

From one cause or another the project which Fr. Pembridge and Bishop Carroll had so much at heart was abandoned, and the introduction of the Benedictine Order into the United States was reserved for the present century. The manner in which it was brought about was as follows.

Among the five companions to whom King Louis of Bavaria gave the restored Abbey of Metten was one, Dom Boniface Wimmer by name, of Thalmassing in Bavaria, who two years after his ordination as priest, made his profession at Metten, on the 29th of December, 1833, then in his twenty-fifth year. For twelve years his time was taken up with the labours incidental to the new foundations which the Benedictines were making in Bavaria, at Munich, and elsewhere, and the experience which he gained in parochial and educational work during that period was most valuable to him in the long life of labour which he was soon

to enter upon in America. During the early years of Dom Boniface's monastic life a considerable number of his countrymen had emigrated to the United States, and their spiritual destitution in their adopted country was sufficient to excite the sympathy of those whom they had left at home. Money was offered in abundance to pay the expenses of such priests as were willing to join the emigrants; but the dearth of clergy in Germany was such that very few could be spared for the new mission field. To the practical mind of Fr. Wimmer the most satisfactory solution which suggested itself was the idea of starting a German monastery in the very midst of the emigrants, to be at once a centre of religious and educational influence and the nursery and seminary of future generations of priests. This idea, which he advocated in the many public and private meetings which were held for the relief of the emigrants, was well received; and Fr. Boniface himself undertook, with the sanction of his superiors, to proceed to America for the purpose of commencing the monastic colony which his zeal had first suggested. With a few companions he set out for America, the cost of the journey being defrayed by several benefactors, among whom the king of Bavaria held the first place. Providence directed Fr. Wimmer to Pittsburg, the very place which Bishop Carroll had suggested as the fittest place for a Benedictine centre. The Right Rev. Michael O'Connor, bishop of that city, received the party with every possible kindness, and himself led them to the spot which he had selected for the future monastery. This was a little mission church dedicated to St. Vincent de Paul, which together with the adjoining presbytery had been built by a poor Franciscan missionary, Father Theodore Brouwers, nearly sixty years previously. Father Brouwers seems to have been in many ways a remarkable man. As a missionary he had spent many years in the West Indies previously to his labours among the scattered Indian and white population in the forest land of Pennsylvania. Attached to St. Vincent's church was a property of 313 acres, known as the Sportsman's Hall estate; which besides another property of 154 acres seven miles away, Fr. Brouwer had by his will, dated the 24th of October, 1790, bequeathed to his successors in the mission. Before his death Fr. Theodore had often predicted that from Sportsman's Hall there would some day go forth many priests, and when, on the same 24th of October, 1846, Bishop O'Connor handed over the property to the Bavarian Benedictines, the first step was taken towards the fulfilment of the good old Franciscan's prophecy.

(To be continued)