
The Catholic Mission at Cheltenham 1799-1809

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A census reveals that there were only 210 Roman Catholics living in the whole of Gloucestershire in 1773, served by four resident chaplains who were attached to the families at Hartpury Court, Beckford Hall, Horton Court and Hatherop Castle. During the early 1780's a Franciscan priest, Father Andrew Weetman, who was missionary at Perthyre near Monmouth, also celebrated Mass periodically in Gloucester and at Stroud. The Catholic community in the city was undoubtedly very small as it had been virtually eclipsed after the chapel there had been ransacked by the followers of William of Orange less than a century beforehand.

Correspondence between Dr Greenway, Gloucester's second resident Missioner, and Bishop Sharrock, the Vicar Apostolic of the Western District, throws light on the very beginnings of Catholic life in the town of Cheltenham. For example, in 1796 permission was sought for the Abbe Duchemin to shrive a Cheltenham couple who were shortly to be married as "he constantly attends Cheltenham every week to teach French".

On 15th July 1799 an application was made to the Justices for a room in North Street, Cheltenham, to be used as a temporary chapel so that "his Majesty's Catholic loyal subjects who frequent that watering place may have the benefit of prayers on Sundays etc". The application was signed by Rene Godelier, "officiating French Priest for the season at Cheltenham". We cannot be sure when Godelier commenced his summer visits but we do know that in March of the following year Dr Greenway urged his Bishop to invite him to anticipate his annual visit as the Brown-Mostyn Family were planning to spend the spring at the spa. Little is known of Godelier although he can probably be identified as Rene Pierre Godelier who had formerly been a cure in the Diocese of Angers before the Revolution. His visits to Cheltenham are referred to in a number of Abbe Duchemin's letters and furnishings provided by him were still in use in the Mass room at Cheltenham in 1805.

Outside of the summer season from at least 1801, Mass seems to have been celebrated at Cheltenham by the Abbe Duchemin. We also find that in April 1799 he was unable to celebrate a second Mass at Gloucester for the 200 Irish soldiers billeted there because "he was engaged at present" at Cheltenham. Again the request for Mr Godelier to anticipate his visit in 1800 was the result of the Abbe being unable to make the journey there because of his unwillingness to travel on horseback. Apparently since Christmas he had twice been flung from his horse and was in danger of being killed although he had now recovered from his cuts and bruises.

In November of 1800 Dr Greenway died and he was buried in his chapel at Gloucester – “near the wall under the pillar between the two windows nearest the altar”. Charles Brown-Mostyn, a prominent Catholic visitor to Gloucester, wrote to a friend, “I have for these last four days had a most melancholy time with poor Mr Greenway our worthy chaplain and a man I esteem greatly. I write these from his room now. I fear he is very weak, near the end and, in the dreadful state he is in, it is to be wished he may not live long. He has both an apoplectic and paralytic stroke and is both speechless and helpless”.

During the following month Bishop Douglass of the London District appointed the Reverend John Jones as the new Missioner at Gloucester but, as he was unable to come to the city straightaway, services were for a time conducted by the Abbe Duchemin and by the Reverend Lewis Brittain O.P., chaplain to the convent of Dominican nuns at Hartpury. Jones stayed only a few years in Gloucester as he left in January 1804 to accept the living of Margate; it would seem that he had not continued to run the school and could not survive on the minuscule stipend which was attached to the mission. The Vicar Apostolic of the London District decided that he could only provide Gloucester with a French priest as his nominee, the Reverend Peter Gondolphi, had declined the position. Bishop Sharrock was reluctant to accept this solution as he clearly wanted an Englishman to fill the appointment.

As a result of Bishop Douglass’s decision, Jones urged Bishop Douglass to appoint the Abbe Duchemin as his successor at Gloucester with perhaps a suitable French priest being found to serve the people of Cheltenham. Bishop Douglass was happy to pursue this suggestion but Bishop Sharrock was filled with apprehension:

“Tho I know no harm of Mr Duchemin I am ignorant of his qualifications for the pastoral charge. He has no faculties as far as I know from Bishop Walmesley. When I passed thro’ Gloucester, about fifteen months ago, Mr Jones gave me, I believe, some reasons why it was expedient to approve him for foreigners, which was done. The French in a general way, are not well calculated for our mission: whether Mr Duchemin was ever employed in the sacred functions of ministry, what knowledge he has of Theology, what zeal he has for the salvation of souls etc, I have already said, I am ignorant. His occupation for some years, in teaching French etc has not been a preparation for his sacerdotal duties. It is a constant distraction... If you named him, should precaution be taken concerning the house, chapel, furniture, plate etc...?”

Jones persisted with his scheme and on 20th December 1803 he wrote to Bishop Sharrock with further details concerning the Abbe together with descriptions of the Gloucester and Cheltenham missions. The Abbe, a priest of the Diocese of Le Mans, had worked for ten years in France as a vicaire (assistant) and shortly before the persecution he had been appointed as a cure (parish priest). During the last ten years he had worked in Gloucester, not only teaching in Dr Greenway’s school but celebrating Mass in the city whilst Jones was away in Cheltenham. He was much esteemed in the city and described as very temperate: “I do not think there is an exception of one day in the month that he does not spend his evenings at home. He has borrowed of my books of a religious tendency”.

With regard to Cheltenham, Jones mentioned that he had now served Cheltenham for two seasons. In 1802 the summer had resulted in an income of £17 out of which he had to find five guineas for the room, half a guinea for a woman to sweep it and when he was not invited to take refreshment by any of his congregation, which was often the case, he had suffered the further expense of buying a meal at the inn. The 1803 season, on the other hand, had proved to be more encouraging as Lord Stourton had stayed in the town for three months and during that time he had invited him to celebrate Mass twice a week at his residence for which he had received a decent stipend. Before he left in January 1804 the only Catholics then residing in Cheltenham were Lady Southwell, her sister, the Berington family, the Lamberts and six ladies together with their Catholic servants. Jones concluded in his letter to the bishop that the Catholic gentry were far more considerate in their dealings with foreigners than they were with native clergy and that the possible solution for Cheltenham might be the appointment of a French clergyman who would be acceptable to the gentry there.

The Abbe Duchemin was finally appointed a Missioner at Gloucester and he agreed on a temporary basis, to celebrate an early Mass in the city before setting off at 10 o'clock for Cheltenham. Meanwhile he was asked to suggest a suitable French priest for Cheltenham who both spoke English and possessed manners that might be found agreeable to the gentry.

The pastoral care of Cheltenham and Gloucester proved to be both tiring and frustrating. In the February he complained of few Catholics being present at the spa whilst in April he was experiencing difficulty in either hiring or borrowing a horse. This had resulted in his having to run on foot to Cheltenham where he arrived to celebrate Mass tired, dishevelled and late. Also by this time the premises where he celebrated Mass had changed hands and the new proprietor was looking for a rent of ten guineas for the season rather than the six guineas which had been paid to his predecessor. Not only were costs rising but the visitors to Cheltenham seemed totally indifferent to the provision to a proper place of worship and their offerings for the whole year were only in the region of fifty to sixty guineas. How could this meagre income ever cover the expenses of a resident missioner when it was insufficient to cover his own expenses? No wonder the Abbe wrote to Bishop Sharrock that the Catholics of Cheltenham must be prepared to help themselves if they expected the services of a priest. In June 1804 the Mass room seems to have been lost but whether this was only a temporary problem cannot be determined. Later nineteenth century accounts of St Gregory's Church state that Mass was "said in a room at the back of what was then the York Hotel, and subsequently in a public house in Greyhound Lane". Certainly the Abbe was expecting his congregation to have to move into a private house at this time.

The Abbe attempted to find a French priest for Cheltenham but he seems to have had little success. His childhood friend, Mr Cormier, finally decided not to leave London whilst a Mr Blanchard decided to decline the position. The situation became more desperate and Bishop Sharrock even mooted the possibility of the Abbe moving from Gloucester to live at Cheltenham. The pastor declined for he did not wish to deprive his congregation at Gloucester, then consisting of three infirm ladies, their servants, the artisans, Irish soldiers,

Italians and other poor Catholics, from hearing Mass. He observed that the few rich Catholics who came to Cheltenham during the season were perfectly able to take a carriage to Gloucester or at the very least they could send over a post chaise to collect him during the winter months.

By the December of 1804 only the Beringtons were left in Cheltenham and in reflecting on the year that had just passed he realised he had only collected £42-12-0d even though Mrs Berington had personally taken it upon herself to stand at the door with a plate so that no one could escape without making a donation. With regard to the Mass room the seats and altar had twice been confiscated by the proprietor to pay the rent which had not been paid by other hirers of the room. There was also an expense of ten or eleven shillings on each occasion the room had been used and he had suffered an additional outlay of two and a half guineas for the repair of furniture which had been damaged through being constantly placed in position and then removed afterwards. The Abbe felt that the gentlemen and ladies who visited Cheltenham should show more generosity and respect, for he had travelled nine miles in all weathers to reach them each Sunday for which he received only ten or eleven shillings.

There is evidence of this dissatisfaction being mutual as the gentry were not happy with the arrangements either. Father Birdsall, writing thirteen years later, presents the situation from their point of view: "after saying mass at an early hour at Gloucester, (the priest) generally came over on Sundays and holidays to say a second mass for the Catholics who might be in Cheltenham, at least during the summer months. But as there was nothing certain as to that point, and as he had frequently to look out for a room, wherein to say prayers, even when he did come, and as the hour could not be exactly and uniformly be observed, these Catholics who were conscientious observers of their Church's precepts, experienced no small uneasiness and inconvenience during their visit to the place".

A permanent solution was clearly necessary and in consequence Bishop Sharrock, himself a Benedictine, approached his confreres with a scheme for the setting up of a Benedictine mission at Cheltenham rather like the one in Bath. The Abbe's correspondence reveals that Father Benedict Caestryck, a Dominican priest who fled from Bornhem in 1794 and had since lived with various families in London, had spent at least one season in Cheltenham where he clearly experienced a degree of success. This had obviously heartened the bishop who hoped that one of his own brethren might succeed where the Abbe had seemed to fail. During the spring of 1805 plans pushed forward and on 29th May of that year the Rev James Calderbank OSB left Bath for Cheltenham where it was intended that he might make his permanent residence.

Before arriving in Cheltenham the new Missioner decided to visit the Abbe at Gloucester where he presented him with £25 to compensate for any financial loss which he might incur through relinquishing his Cheltenham duties. However, Calderbank left Gloucester filled with apprehension for he realised that if the £50 which the Abbe raised during the previous year was to be matched by a similar sum in 1805 he would not be able to pay for either his lodgings or the Mass room. His concerns were clearly justified for within a month the Abbe had heard

that Calderbank was already planning his departure from the spa. In fact, Calderbank left the town before 17th September 1805 and the Abbe resumed his duties there. The Benedictine experiment had failed. If Calderbank could not make a go of it during the busiest three or four months of the year how could a resident missionary ever hope to survive the winter?

The Catholics of Cheltenham were not satisfied and an attempt was made to find a suitable French priest who might be prepared to supplement his income by offering French lessons in Cheltenham. In July 1806 Mr Berington was involved in finding a candidate and a letter to the Bishop from the Abbe Duchemin of May 1807 would suggest that he had some success. The letter informed the Bishop that a French priest had just arrived in Cheltenham to teach languages and music. Although he had not actually been brought to Cheltenham by Berington he had been involved in negotiations for him during the previous summer. It would seem that a number of non-Catholic families led by Captain Grey, had invited him to teach French to their children. Initially the Abbe Duchemin seemed disturbed by the meeting perhaps because he had recently striven to place the Mass room on a proper basis and had relinquished some of his teaching in Gloucester to give more time to Cheltenham. Certainly he was not happy to hear from the new priest that negotiations for his post had included discussion of the stipend of the Cheltenham mission. The Abbe reminded the bishop that during the last couple of years he had been faithful in his duties to the people of Cheltenham and had celebrated Mass regularly for them except for five or six Sundays during the previous winter when Mrs Berington had urged him not to bother as Lord Kenmare had opened up his residence to the Catholics in the locality who wanted to hear Mass.

The Abbe Nicolas Alexander Cesar des Mignaux had been a priest for twenty-five years when he arrived in Cheltenham. He was a Bachelor of Theology of the University of Paris and for fifteen years he had been Canon and Secretary of the Metropolitan Chapter of Rouen until the persecution had forced him to embark for England where he arrived in September 1792. However, there seems to be little evidence to support the local tradition that he had been a chaplain and spiritual advisor to King Louis XVI. During his years in exile he had acted as both a priest and as a teacher. In 1803 he was in Edinburgh and whilst working in Scotland he ministered among some poor Catholic families for a time.

The new French priest quickly settled in Cheltenham and became popular among both visitors and residents. The Abbe Duchemin soon realised that it was in the interests of the people of Cheltenham if he resigned his duties and handed them over to Abbe Cesar. As a result, the new priest was given the necessary faculties by the bishop to minister in Cheltenham and he became effectively the locum-tenens to Abbe Duchemin from October 1807 whilst the latter continued to minister to the people of Cheltenham for another nine years.

At some point the Abbe Cesar moved from 133 High Street to Weavers Hotel in Cheltenham. In July 1808 he informed Bishop Collingridge, who had been appointed co-adjutor to Bishop Sharrock, that he had no candidates for confirmation that year and he saw little point in hosting an episcopal visitation as "all my lambs are away and I see nearly every Sunday new faces". Apparently during the winter months, the congregation was more stable

with several English and Irish families there. Certainly the Abbe Cesar became a favourite with the leading inhabitants of the town through teaching their children and as a result of this he was given permission to celebrate Sunday Mass in the Town Hall as he had no permanent chapel. However, he did not enjoy this privilege for more than a year, for on occasion of King George III's jubilee the hall was required for a public dinner and the Abbe had to find alternative accommodation. His use of the Town Hall was apparently not appreciated by some of the "more orthodox Protestants" in the town and the Abbe did not resume his use of it after the jubilee celebrations.

Meanwhile Bishop Sharrock and his co-adjutor were still considering the possibility of a Benedictine mission in Cheltenham and the man chosen to initiate this was the Reverend John Augustine Birdsall O.S.B., the assistant missionary at Bath. According to Birdsall the Abbe Cesar was made aware of the plan from as early as July 1809 and at first he expressed his warm support for the scheme. It was decided that Birdsall would arrive in Cheltenham at the end of the current season when terms were at their most favourable and it was hoped that a chapel might be erected in time for the beginning of the 1810 season. As the arrangements progressed the Abbe Cesar became less enthusiastic and he wrote to the bishop expressing his grave reservations. Not only did he feel that the Town Hall would not be made available to Mr Birdsall, as it had been offered to him as a personal favour, but that there was an insufficient income to support a full time missionary. Birdsall was not dissuaded for he had sufficient funds of his own to build a chapel and he was also able to share with the bishop some information he had gleaned from a lady and her two daughters who had just arrived in Bath from Cheltenham. "As to the prayers before Mass which Mr Cesar says, she knows indeed they are in English by the clerk answering in English, but otherwise it is a mere jargon. Mr Cesar says Mass with exceeding rapidity and that an entire want of edification is the consequence. Particularly she mentioned there being never Mass except on Sundays and holidays".

Birdsall arrived in Cheltenham on 15th October 1809 and he immediately paid a courtesy visit on the Abbe Cesar. Birdsall found the Abbe surprised to see him after having sent such a discouraging letter to the bishop for he immediately questioned if such a letter had been received. It was evident to Birdsall that he was in fact unwelcome but he accepted the Abbe's invitation to dine with him. Clearly this was a difficult transition for the Abbe for not only was he going to be deprived of being the missionary at Cheltenham but he was to lose an income which had totalled £92 in 1808 alone. In the event the two lived on outwardly friendly terms and without disagreement although Birdsall was aware that the Abbe spoke of his demise amongst his own circle of friends as "an intrusive and even as an injurious proceeding". However, the unpleasantness of the change was gradually softened by them regularly dining together.

The Abbe handed over the mission to the care of Birdsall in the presence of the congregation and Birdsall celebrated his first public Mass in Cheltenham on Sunday 19th November 1809 in a large room at Weavers Hotel. This room had been used for a few weeks by the Abbe Cesar

and Birdsall continued to use it until the new chapel was eventually opened. He permitted the Abbe to celebrate Mass for Lady Gould and her family at her residence until she departed from Cheltenham in the spring of the following year and he also allowed him to hear the confessions of some of his former penitents. Whilst Birdsall was anxious not to upset the Abbe and his friends, by March 1810 he was expressing concern that the mission could not support two priests and he said of Lord Castle Ross, who had been on an extended visit to the Goulds, "I see nothing of him nor his money – where the collection is small every shilling counts".

Birdsall need not have worried for the Abbe Cesar died during the following year in Cheltenham, aged sixty years. He was buried in the parish churchyard where a stone was erected by subscription by his former pupils. The stone bore the following simple inscription "to the memory of the Rev. Alexander Cesar, French Priest, who died Sept.24,1811". His death marks the end of the pre-Benedictine years in Cheltenham.

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SOURCES

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