

A Church History of St Augustine's Weymouth

Fr Robert Lyons (1956)

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ST. AUGUSTINE, a Benedictine monk, is the recognised Apostle of England, sent from Rome by Pope Gregory the Great in 597, circumstances then being considered favourable for the establishing of the Church in this country. Landing with some companions in Kent, Augustine was kindly received by King Ethelbert and his Queen Bertha, who being a Frankish princess was already a Christian. Finding the Royal Family so well disposed, Augustine returned to France, where after a time he was consecrated Bishop, and later returned to England and established his Episcopal See at Canterbury. His pioneer missionary band of Benedictine monks laid solid foundations of the Faith throughout the country. The exact date when it penetrated to the West of England is not known, but it seems probable that the Christian Faith found its way there before being planted in other parts of the country. Indeed, there is some evidence, that the West Country had the Faith as far back as Apostolic times. Glastonbury is supposed to have been visited by Joseph of Arimathea, and there is a legend that St. Ursula and her companions were Cornish. But these conjectures are open to query.

Next comes the question: When did the twin towns Weymouth and Melcombe Regis and their environs become part of the Fold of the Church? The Radipole Church, St. Anne's, would seem to date back to 1208, and it would appear there was a chapel in Melcombe Regis whose mother church was St Anne's as far back as 1300. There was a Church of All Saints at Wyke Regis in the year 1302. But Wyke and Radipole were some distance from the centre and there was a desire among the people of Melcombe Regis to have a place of worship of their own. So in 1437 the Black Friars or Dominicans set up a Friary and Chapel in the area now known as Maiden Street. Could the present Maiden St be so named for Our Lady? The villages of Upwey and Preston can each boast of a Catholic Church in this Pre-Reformation period. An interesting survival of this Friary is the Prior's chair, which is used at the Mayor making ceremony in Weymouth and is the official seat for the Mayor in the council chamber

This brings us to the Middle Ages known as the "Ages of the Faith." Beautiful Churches and Chapels, magnificent Minsters and Abbeys enriched the country with their architecture and literature. But dark days lay ahead; Henry VIII's matrimonial difficulties, skilfully used by the King's advisors to further their own ends, led to a formal Act of Schism, the Act of Supremacy in 1534. These would-be reformers had driven the wedge between Rome and England. Hence followed the dissolution of the Monasteries and the destruction or pillaging of much of the Country's Christian Heritage. Weymouth's Friary was dissolved in 1538, and fell into a ruinous condition until cleared for building sites in 1861. From this time on the Faith in England was lived and practised underground as it were, in stealth and secrecy and that only at peril of dungeon, fire and sword.

With the advent of Elizabeth I to the throne in 1558 the plight of the ordinary man-in-the-

street, Catholic, worsened. The new religion was imposed on the land by a series of Acts of Parliament and the Old Faith made well nigh impossible by a system of heavy fines. In 1570 the very existence of a Catholic Priest on English soil was by Law declared to be high treason and punishable by death. Positive antagonism to Catholics began to die down only after the defeat of the Jacobite – "Bonny Prince Charlie" in 1745. Then some 20 years later the few Catholics that remained began to seek further relief through the friendly attitude of King George III. Towards the end of the century came the frightful French Revolution, to which England was strongly opposed. In consequence several hundred of the French emigré Priests were given not merely asylum in England, but in some cases pensions and allowed to build humble Churches. Such is Divine Providence which works in ways so strange to human thinking. So at the beginning of the 19th Century we again take up the thread of local Catholic History. One of these emigré Fathers, Abbé Dubuisson, appears as the first resident missionary in Weymouth after the Reformation. From 1820 to 1822 he ministered to the scattered Catholics and to the visitors of this seaside resort; he took up the teaching of French at his lodgings, returning later to his native country.

Catholicity being thus established in a small way, Bishop Collingridge, Vicar Apostolic of the Western District, showed interest in it by sending a Father James McDonnell to further the work. In 1823, however, Bishop Baines succeeded as Vicar Apostolic, and after his consecration in May of that year, he came to reside in Weymouth, or more correctly in Melcombe Regis, at 4 Belvidere Place, and took on the Parish work until called away for more pressing duties. It was he who started the keeping of parish registers of Baptisms and Marriages. His Lordship appointed as his successor Rev. Father Edgeworth, but this priest was soon recalled to labour in Bristol City. Father Moutardier from Lulworth Castle was the next to fill the vacancy. He remained until only 1829, the year of the Catholic Emancipation and a memorable one for the Church in Great Britain and Ireland. Many penalties and disabilities against Catholics were removed from the Statute Book by this Act of Parliament, providing a large measure of freedom for Catholics and a new life sprang up in the Church, assisted considerably by the Irish Party led by Daniel O'Connell.

It was in this memorable year that the priest who built St. Augustine's Church in the Dorchester Road was sent to Weymouth. He was Father Peter Hartley and came from Tavistock, near Plymouth. The property was situated in Radipole on what the Records call the Turnpike Road between Weymouth and Dorchester. The site had a frontage of 126ft, and a depth towards the East of 155ft. On the South it was bordered by lands belonging to Sir Frederick Johnstone. The site was sold by Mr. Thomas Charles on August 23rd, 1831, to Bishop Baines and Father Peter Hartley. The dimensions of the Church are given as 56ft. long by 27ft. wide. It was opened for Divine Worship on October 22nd, 1835. Soon after his great work of building and opening the new Church and Presbytery, with all its accompanying anxieties, Father Hartley was sent to Chepstow while his place at Weymouth was taken by Father O'Dwyer who remained only until 1837, when Bishop Baines appointed Father Thomas Butler, D.D., a Dominican, as Priest-in-Charge. During his stay he preached and published some learned discourses on Catholic Doctrine. However, Father Hartley, the Church builder, returned again in 1839, but failing health brought to his assistance two other priests in succession, namely, Fathers Murphy and Waterkyn. Father Hartley died in 1840, and in the deeds of the Mission is an indenture dated May 27th 1840 which states that Father Peter Hartley, last holder of the property, died intestate. However, his three sisters and brother-in-law made over the property to the Right Rev. Bishop Ullathorne and Rev. William

Vaughan, both of Clifton, Bristol.

The next decade was fruitful and eventful for the Church. Force of circumstances caused large scale immigration from Ireland. The famine of 1848-1849 obliged numerous Irish people to seek a livelihood in England, and again it would appear to be the way designed by Providence to stimulate the Church in England.

Bishop, later Cardinal Wiseman, seized the opportunity of the growing demand for making provision for his people and appealed to the Pope to appoint more Bishops. The result was that in 1850 the Hierarchy of England was restored, giving new life and administration to the Church. Some 30 new Sees were set up and the West Country passed out of the jurisdiction of the Vicar Apostolic to come under the newly created See of Plymouth, with Bishop Errington as its first Head.

After the death of Father Hartley in 1840, Father Thomas Tilbury was transferred from Chideock to Weymouth and remained Pastor of St. Augustine's until his death on June 9th, 1856. He was appointed Canon of the newly formed Chapter of the Plymouth Diocese in 1853, but owing to ill health was never installed. Towards the end of his life he was helped by Fathers Carey and Smythe successively.

In 1856 Father Laurence Smythe extended his activities to Portland and received permission to duplicate Mass on Sundays. Sometime, however, after Canon Tilbury's death, Father Smythe went to America. Bishop Errington then appointed Father Martin Hoskins, and in 1856 this Priest presented 19 people for Confirmation, soon after which he moved temporarily to Stapehill, Father Buckle supplying for him at St. Augustine's.

Back again in 1857 Father Hoskins started a school in the Parish and opened a Mass Centre at Portland. There he got a room in the house of Mr. William Lyle Smith accommodating 50 people and Mass was said on Palm Sunday of that year. Bishop Errington transferred Father Hoskins to Plymouth Cathedral in October, 1857, and appointed Father James Dawson to Weymouth. Finding the combined missions of Weymouth and Portland more than he could cope with, Father Dawson went to Lyme Regis and was later appointed a member of the Cathedral Chapter.

His successor was Father William Walsh, who continued to say Mass in Portland until it became necessary to devote all his attention to St. Augustine's, owing to the increasing numbers of H.M. Service personnel stationed about in ship and on shore establishments. He was given an assistant in the person of Father John Charles.

Later, Father Walsh was appointed to Plymouth Cathedral and Father Charles took over the Parish. He was relieved of Portland by the appointment of Rev. George Poole, who set it up as a separate mission. Father Charles is commemorated in the Park District by a street of that name. This gesture of remembrance was made by Mr. McMahon, who had been well

acquainted with the Priest.

Father Charles while Priest-in-Charge of St. Augustine's achieved a great deal. He had the Church decorated in 1865 and a new stained glass window put in. The window was the gift of Arthur Coombe, Esq., a recent convert. It represents Our Lady with the Divine Child, St. Augustine, Patron of the Church and St. Alban our first Martyr. It should be pointed out here perhaps that the Presbytery then was where the present Sanctuary is, and the stained glass was originally at the Epistle side of the High Altar. As Maiden Street covers the site of the Mediaeval Black Friars Monastery, may this also have reference to Our Lady? One of the parishioners was responsible for installing the organ, and in recent years, three generations of the same family have been providing the Church music. It was Mr. Coombe, a native of Dorchester, who, in 1865, purchased the site of the present Church of Our Lady Queen of Martyrs, and which was opened for public worship in 1867 in the County Town. Father Charles served Dorchester from Weymouth on Sundays until the Bishop of Plymouth sent Father Michael O'Dwyer to establish it as a separate mission in 1871.

The Weymouth school, opened by Father Hoskins in 1857, lapsed for a while, but was revived in 1876 in a school house built in the Priest's garden. About this time, Father Charles was promoted to Torquay and Father Darcy succeeded him at Weymouth – but only for a few months when Father Richard Meagher came to take charge. Through growing infirmity he relinquished it in 1893. He had been Pastor of St. Augustine's for nearly 20 years, that fact alone bearing ample testimony to his apostolic spirit. His entries in the Parish Registers are like copper plate.

Bishop Vaughan, uncle of Cardinal Vaughan of Westminster, was the second Bishop of Plymouth, succeeding Bishop Errington in 1866. During his episcopate, Father Meagher died at Bristol. Canon Patrick O'Brian came to St. Augustine's in 1893. It was during his pastorate that the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary came to the town, In this year, 1897, this community, under, under Reverend Mother Mary Agnes Morrissey, succeeded in acquiring a Villa in Carlton Road, which they used as a Convent and small High School. In time it became necessary for them to extend their accommodation, so they built a new Convent and school adjoining the original villa. The school has grown out of all proportion and further extension is called for. Furthermore, it is now a recognised Grammar School for Girls. This is all most gratifying. The first claim on the lives of the members of this Religious Congregation is that of Perpetual Adoration, but their Weymouth Convent is also the National Centre for the Social Reign and Enthronement of the Sacred Heart in the Homes, which exacts considerable demand on the energies of the Community. The Nun's Mass in their Convent Chapel necessitated a second Priest, thus Canon O'Brian had an assistant during his last years. He died in 1899. After him came Father David Barry, who later became Vicar General in the Diocese of Plymouth. He was responsible for wonderful development in the Parish of St. Augustine's. He enlarged the Church by taking in the original Presbytery as a Sanctuary, and providing a new Presbytery by buying the house adjoining. The front wall of the Church was newly faced and a niche built over the entrance to house the fine statue of St. Augustine which stands there today. Mr. McMahon's work rooms and building yard were procured as a site for a school and after much negotiation with Local Authorities St. Augustine's School was built in Walpole Street, and State Aid obtained for it from the beginning. It was opened in January 1906 and occupied by the 67 children who had attended a temporary building rented in Park Street; and where the Sacred Heart Nuns were the unpaid staff. A new Primary School is now scheduled to be built as the present building is totally

inadequate for the number of children.

After Bishop Vaughan's death came Bishop Graham in 1902, though he had been Coadjutor for several years previously. He was remarkable for his scholarly attainments and retiring disposition. It was Bishop Keily, however, the 4th in line of the Diocese, who recalled Father Barry from Weymouth in 1911 to make him his Vicar General to carry on the administration of the Diocese in his absence.

Father Sheehan was appointed to Weymouth in the same year, and is gratefully remembered for his priestly work. He travelled the neighbourhood on his bicycle in all directions in search of Catholics cut off from the life of the Church by distance. Many were encouraged by his kindly visits to walk those miles at least occasionally to hear Holy Mass and receive the Sacraments; children walked to St. Augustine's School from Wyke, Chickerell and Preston, and the train brought others from Portland. The good Priest received strong whole-hearted support and co-operation from a virile Local Branch of the Catholic Men's Society, and this combination of effort built the Parish Hall on the site of the original school, using more of the Presbytery garden. One wall of the old school still stands. The value of this additional property to the future of the Church locally cannot be estimated. Appreciating his ability and character Bishop Keily raised him to the Cathedral Chapter, and in 1923 appointed him to a parish in Plymouth.

He was succeeded by Father Ketele and developments from then onwards are familiar to most local Catholics. The new Priest, appreciating to the full the spade work of his predecessors, visualised a big development plan. He realised the need of another Church in Weymouth and set to work immediately to bring this about, but first opened a centre for Sunday Mass at Sandesfort House, made possible through the zeal and kindness of Mrs. Druce, the then occupier. It was also an instruction centre for Catholic children of the neighbourhood. A site was acquired for a Church, Presbytery and Hall beyond Westham Bridge on the Abbotsbury Road, from the estate of the Earl of Ilchester. Plans were drawn up and the work commenced and in time a fine Church dedicated to St. Joseph dominated the position across the bridge. Difficulties of one kind and another accompanied the progress of the building, and the Faith of Father (now Canon) Ketele must often have been tried, but he was equal to the test and success crowned his efforts. The Church was opened with full Pontifical Ceremonial by Bishop Barrett on April 18th, 1934, and in the following year, October 1935, the Centenary of St. Augustine's was commemorated with equal ceremony.

To the great regret of the combined parishes of St. Augustine's and St. Joseph's, Canon Ketele returned to his native Bruges in 1950 owing to failing health. To his credit we must attribute the arrival of the Sisters of Mercy at "Nettlecombe", Wyke Road. Owing to the development of the town and the demand for schools and Catholic education, Canon Ketele felt that there was room for another Religious teaching Community. Consequently, he invited the Sisters of Mercy to take over St. Augustine's School in 1942 on the retirement of its first Headmistress, Miss J Sparrow who perhaps more than any other member of the present congregation has seen the growth of the Faith in Weymouth. At present there are three Catholic Schools in the twin towns of Weymouth and Melcombe Regis and recently the Sacred Heart Nuns have taken over Lodmoor High School as a Junior School to their Grammar School.

The Holy Family Church, Chapel Lane, Upwey, was opened on May 2nd, 1954, as a Chapel-of-Ease to St. Augustine's. Previous to that Mass was celebrated at the Women's Institute. The Upwey Church is convenient to the main Weymouth – Dorchester Road. Another Mass centre was opened from St. Augustine's at Sutton Poyntz on Easter Sunday, April 10th, 1955. This is an army hut rented temporarily, which serves the district of Preston and Osmington.

Note: At the time this history was written, Fr Lyons was serving as Parish Priest with Fr Kinane as assistant. Fr Robert Lyons was Parish Priest at St Augustine's from 1949-1960. For the year 1956, the records show that his assistant at the church was Fr John Kinane. This therefore dates the history as having been written in 1956.

CHURCH OF

St. Augustine

38 DORCHESTER ROAD, WEYMOUTH

Clergy

Rev. Robert Lyons **Rev. John Kinane**
Telephone: Weymouth 1886



ORDER OF SERVICES

Sundays: Holy Mass at 8.30 and 11 a.m.
Evening Devotions, 6.30 p.m.

Holy Days: Holy Mass at 7.45 a.m. and 8 p.m.

Weekdays: Holy Mass at 7.45 a.m.

Confessions: Saturdays and Eves, 3 to 4 and 7 to 8 p.m.

Convent of Sacred Hearts: Mass at 7.30 a.m.



SERVED FROM ST. AUGUSTINE'S

The Holy Family, Dorchester Road, Upwey

Mass on Sundays and Holy Days, 9 a.m.
Benediction, 5.30 p.m.

The Chapel of Our Lady, Preston

Mass on Sundays and Holy Days, 11 a.m.

