

A Roman Tomb or Cardinal Newman's Second Blunder

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BEFORE setting out on a round of visits to the Irish bishops to get their goodwill for founding the Catholic University of Ireland, John Henry Newman paid a visit to Mr. Geoghegan's outfitting establishment in Sackville Street to equip himself against the rigours of an Irish Winter (1854), and he asked for a clerical cloak. The draper showed him a plaid wrapper and assured him that it was the very height of fashion for a priest.

Arriving at Kilkenny railway station, Fr. Newman engaged a jarvey-man to take him to the bishop's residence. What with the coloured cape and the Oxford accent, the jarvey was in no doubt where to take his fare, and dropped him on the episcopal doorstep. Fr. Newman rang the bell . . . No response. Eventually he turned the knob and walked into the hall. He made a noise, in vain, and walked up some steps, thinking it was indeed a bishop's house and a very fine one, too. At length, he knocked on a room door and a scullery-maid came out and assured him that it was the Palace, but that His Lordship was in London. Further enquiry made it plain to Fr. Newman that he was not in the house of Dr. Walshe, but that of Dr. O'Brien, which bishop, he knew, had been writing about him for the previous fifteen years in the most virulent tones. Fr. Newman bowed out and made his way, very likely trudging on foot, to the door of the Catholic Bishop of Ossory.

The second blunder precedes the other chronologically, but I have manipulated the story in the interest of artistry.

We go back eight years. It is November 1846. Octavia Catherine Bryan, nineteen-year-old daughter of George Bryan of Jenkinstown has arrived in Rome to marry the Prince Borghese. And how, you may be prompted to ask, was the daughter of a not very notable Irish gentleman considered a suitable match for the Borgheses, who numbered princes, cardinals and even a pope in their family and looked to the Doria and Pamphili daughters for brides, not to one of the landed gentry of County Kilkenny.

The explanation is this :

Octavia's mother was Margaret Talbot of Co. Wexford, whose eldest sister had married her English kinsman, John Talbot, 16th Earl of Shrewsbury, the premier Earl of England. The first daughter of that alliance married Prince Doria

Pamphili; the second, Gwendaline, married, in 1835, Marc Antonio, Prince Borghese. Gwendaline was a rare and remarkable woman. In her were combined beauty and intelligence and devoutness. By her devotion to the poor, she taught the jaded Roman aristocracy the true meaning of Christian love. And while her life became a model to be aspired to, her death was even more memorable. After five years of marriage, she died with three of her young sons who had contracted scarlatina.

So when the old Prince Borghese was looking for a bride for one of his sons, he enquired if there was yet another Talbot girl, for there was none in Rome to match Gwendaline's virtue. Yes, he was told, there was one. She was actually a Bryan, but her mother was Talbot and she was niece to the saintly Gwendaline.

Thus Octavia Bryan came out to Rome to marry Prince Borghese; she caught fever and was dead in a few weeks. Her tomb is in St. Isidore's Church, a white marble sepulchre with the inscription in Latin: "Octavia Catherine Mary, daughter of Cavalier (Equitis) George Bryan of Jenkinstown and Margaret Talbot. She was born in Rome, 25th February 1827 and met her last day of earthly life in the same city, 1st December 1846."

The top of the rectangular monument consists of a single slab of white marble, beautifully carved in high relief into a life-sized figure of the dead girl, lying dressed in bridal array, a chaplet of rose buds holding the bridal veil on her brow, a crucifix on her breast under her crossed hands, slippers on her feet. The sculptor has cut his name in gilded letters on the top left, Vincenzo Gajassi, and embossed there are two coats of arms, on the left the arms of the Wexford Talbots and on the right, not the arms of the Bryans, as might be expected, but those of the Earls of Shrewsbury.

And when Octavia died, suddenly, on that first day of December, Prince Borghese went down to Propaganda College where there was a forty-five year old Englishman, the most famous convert of the century, John Henry Newman, and he begged Newman to preach at her funeral. "Oh! but I cannot," pleaded Newman, "I am only in minor orders. It is out of the question." "That can be arranged with Cardinal Vicario," the Prince responded loftily, and so it was.

The ubiquitous Father Prout (Sylvester O'Mahony) was in St. Isidore's on the day. He describes the scene in a letter to Charles Dickens :

"The solemn dirge and requiem held over the poor lady in the Church of the Irish Franciscans, St. Isidoro, was attended by several hundred British visitors, besides the young lady's kinsfolk, of the princely houses of Doria, Pamphili and Borghese. Towards the termination of the

sorrowful ceremony, at a pause in the liturgy, there arose in the body of the church, a person in ecclesiastical costume, of pensive and careworn aspect who, standing near the coffin, addressed himself to speak. His voice was low at first, so that few heard him till it gradually filled the Church, and it was understood to be a simple recital of the unostentatious virtues of the deceased; but soon came words of more impressive import and a whisper went round that the unexpected speaker on the occasion was the Rev. Mr. Newman, late of Oxford."

Prince Borghese had the simplistic belief that it was only worldly motives deterred Protestants from joining the Catholic Church, and it was he who suggested the theme for the sermon. Newman proceeded to berate the English Protestants who had come to enjoy the sacred music for their miserable irreverence when sight-seeing in the churches in Rome. To be taxed with bad manners made those English faces grow longer and longer. Their Catholic friends, who had invited them to the ceremony, were even more infuriated. Within days, exaggerated reports of Newman's behaviour came to the ears of Pio Nono, and the Pope, who a short time previously had expressed a wish to see Newman again and again, now found that the Vatican Court was much too occupied to entertain that unpredictable ex-cleergyman now studying for the priesthood in Propaganda College.

Once again, and assuredly not for the last time, Newman had blundered.

Sources :

- "The Life of John Henry Cardinal Newman" by Wilfrid Ward.
- "The Final Reliques of Father Prout."
- Unpublished Mss. by Ivo O'Sullivan, O.F.M.

