

# THE GERMAN CATHOLIC CHAPEL IN LONDON

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On 17th December, the third Sunday in Advent, 1809, Bishop William Poynter, coadjutor to Bishop John Douglass, Vicar Apostolic of the London District, blessed and opened the German Catholic Chapel at 2 Great St Thomas the Apostle, off Bow Lane, Cheapside. Thus began the story of the German Church of St Boniface which exists still though on a different site.<sup>1</sup> The newly-opened building of which the lease had been acquired had previously been a Dissenters' chapel. It required some adaptation and for this and the purchase money funds were being collected in 1809 and 1810.<sup>2</sup>

Catholic chapels were few and far between in the central districts of London at that date. Four of the chapels of the embassies of Catholic states were still open — the Portuguese in South Street, the Bavarian in Warwick Street, the Sardinian near Lincoln's Inn Fields and the Spanish in Spanish Place, Manchester Square; some chapels had been established for the emigrés from France and there were a few others — in Virginia Street off the Ratcliffe Highway, Moorfields, Soho, St George's Fields in Southwark and Salisbury Lane in Bermondsey.

Before the construction of Cannon Street Bow Lane extended further to the south than it does today. The streets then known as Great and Little St Thomas the Apostle led off the east side of Bow Lane. Today Garlick Hill runs further north — up to Cannon Street — and Great St Thomas the Apostle comes into it from the east. No. 2 which at the end of the last century was on the south side of the street had become business premises by 1866 and has remained so ever since (unless the street numbering has been changed) although the building on the site now appears to be fairly modern or at least reconstructed.<sup>3</sup>

It is possible that some German Catholics resident in London may have been accustomed to attending the Imperial Austrian embassy chapel in Twickenham despite its distance from the centre (the ambassador also had a house in Portland Place), and its closure which was announced in February 1808 to Bishop Douglass by the chaplain, Michael Gruber, may have been a reason for the opening of the German chapel in Bow Lane.<sup>4</sup> There must have been at this time a fair number of German Catholics in London and the first step to be taken was the appointment in 1808 to the Virginia Street chapel of a priest to look after them. This was the abbé John Becker, a Swiss by birth. He was of the diocese of Metz and had been appointed chaplain to the infantry regiment of the Baron de Rolls, a regiment in British service, by Frederick, Duke of York, Commander in Chief, in June 1795.<sup>5</sup> By this time he had been discharged on half pay. On the opening of the German chapel he became the first chaplain and remained there until December 1823 when he retired because of ill-health and went to live abroad.<sup>6</sup>

Early in 1810 John Becker was joined by Francis Muth. Born on 6th December 1782 at Hainburg in Austria, Francis Seraphim Muth was the son of Francis and Anna Maria Muth. In a short and rough autobiographical note which has somewhat surprisingly survived he gives, apart from other details about his family, the information that he was christened the day he was born and confirmed in St Stephen's at Vienna at Whitsuntide in 1799.<sup>7</sup> As a boy he was educated at Pressburg and Tyrnau and then went to Vienna for a year to study

philosophy. In 1799 he joined a religious congregation known as the Company of Fathers of the Faith, a body which had been founded in 1797 by an Italian, Nicholas Paccanari, in imitation of the Jesuits who had been suppressed by the Holy See some years before. Young Francis Muth entered the Paccanarists, as they came to be called, at Hagenbrunn near Vienna, *made his religious vows in 1800 and then proceeded to Dillingen and afterwards to Rome for studies in divinity.* The mastery of Italian that he acquired at this time enabled him later when at the German chapel to work among the Italians in London and also to translate documents which his superiors, less proficient in Italian, needed to send to Rome.<sup>8</sup>

The Paccanarists, meanwhile, were opening houses and schools in several countries and a group of priests and students came over to England in 1800 and began a boarding school in Kensington. The school actually commenced in 1801 at Kennington House, Vauxhall but was moved in 1802 to Kensington House which stood at the junction of Kensington Road and Victoria Road where there is now Prince of Wales Terrace. The house was pulled down in 1872.<sup>9</sup> In 1806 Francis Muth joined his colleagues at Kensington House and was ordained to the priesthood at Old Hall Green, Hertfordshire on 23rd May 1807 by Bishop Poynter. By this time, however, the Kensington school which numbered among its pupils the sons of French emigrés who were often unable to pay the fees was in financial difficulties and *Paccanari himself in trouble in Rome, and as a result many of his followers in England* became affiliated to the Jesuits who had survived in Russia and had been informally restored in England in 1803 by Pope Pius VII. In 1806 or 1807 the Kensington House Academy had to be sold and came under the direction of French emigré priests; it appears to have closed some five or six years later.

The sale meant that Francis Muth's circumstances had changed. On 19th January 1809 Bishop Douglass entered in his diary — 'Mr Muth, late of Kensington Academy, the sole member of the Society of the Faith of Jesus (the Company of the Faith had amalgamated in 1799 with another similar congregation and changed its name) remaining in England has received a letter from Rome . . . informing him . . . that the Pope had suppressed their order . . . that all members in Rome were reduced to the state of secular priests . . .'.<sup>10</sup> As a result Francis Muth was free to be appointed to the German chapel to assist John Becker. After some four or five years at work in Bow Lane he took a decision about a matter which had probably been in his mind for some time. *In 1810 a priest in New York, who had known him in Italy and in London, in a letter to England wrote of him as 'an excellent young man, well informed and had always an intention to become a Jesuit. I exhort him to join us (the Jesuits) and apply to your Reverence in case he should make up his mind.'*<sup>11</sup> In August 1814 Pius VII publicly restored the Jesuit Order throughout the world; the way was now open for Francis Muth and he wasted little time. A letter from the Jesuit superior in England, Marmaduke Stone, in answer to one from Muth, addressed to him at 12 Garlick Hill, Bow Lane and dated 26th October 1814, declared his readiness to admit him into the Order while pointing out that Dr Poynter who had succeeded as Vicar Apostolic of the London District would have to be asked for his consent. A passage in the letter reads 'if you have (asked him) I should be glad to know what he has said to you on the subject . . . Please to present my best wishes and respects to good Mr Becker'. What Bishop Poynter thought or said is not on record but he would seem to have raised no insuperable objections since Marmaduke Stone wrote again to Francis Muth on 9th February 1815 admitting him among the Jesuits and giving him detailed instructions about how he should perform the spiritual duties of the

novitiate while remaining on the mission in Bow Lane. On 21st June 1817 he made his religious vows as a Jesuit at 11 Poland Street, the residence of the one or two other Jesuits then living in London.<sup>12</sup>

For nearly twenty years he continued to work at the German chapel, in what must have been a somewhat dreary neighbourhood, amid financial difficulties and by himself, it would seem, after John Becker's departure abroad.<sup>13</sup> Only a very little information about him and his work during these years has survived. Thus a letter reveals that Dr Poynter returned a cautious answer to his suggestion that the Emperor of Austria might be asked to help the German chapel financially for the benefit of English as well as German priests and people.<sup>14</sup> A few years later there would seem to have been a rumour that the German chapel might have to be closed. If that happened (another letter shows) it was thought that Francis Muth might do well at Worcester if Bishop Poynter would release him.<sup>15</sup> In 1825 his Jesuit superiors once again thought that he might be the better in health for being moved — this time to Ugbrooke in Devonshire as chaplain to Lord Clifford — but Bishop Poynter thought otherwise and could not agree fearing that 3000 German Catholics would be left uncared for.<sup>16</sup> One can see the Bishop's point of view but it appears that he did hamper Francis Muth somewhat by endeavouring to restrict his activities to work among the Germans and Italians.<sup>17</sup> During his last years in Bow Lane, however, life was made easier by the presence from 1824 near Regent's Park and from 1831 until 1836 in what is now Marylebone Road, on the site occupied by the Royal Academy of Music, of a short-lived school conducted by his Jesuit brethren. In the school diary there are several references to his coming to stay, or dining with his colleagues who in turn visited him in Bow Lane. Thus there is a mention of 'Fr Muth's dinner for the German chapel' — a fund-raising operation presumably, in 1834 — '£130 was collected'<sup>18</sup>

Eventually, in April 1836, he was moved from London (celebrating his last Mass, as he tells us, at the German chapel on 11th April) and travelled to Stonyhurst in Lancashire, to the house of ecclesiastical studies for Jesuit students where he was to lecture in theology.<sup>19</sup> Only five years later, on 5th May 1841, he died in Preston at the church of St. Ignatius; his grave is in the churchyard there. In 1842 a tablet was set up in his memory in the German chapel.<sup>20</sup> 'He was a most pious and religious man' and of great talent wrote one who knew him.<sup>21</sup> The committee of the German chapel, who had in 1838 been raising funds to purchase the freehold (there seems to have been doubt about the future of the chapel unless the necessary money was collected) wrote in their appeal of his 'self-devotedness and heroic perseverance . . . for twenty-seven years amidst numberless difficulties'<sup>22</sup>

This worthy priest from Austria played a significant part in providing for German Catholics in London; the story of the subsequent fortunes of their chapel may now be taken further. Francis Muth's place at the chapel was filled in 1836 by a Polish priest, Gregory Stanciewicz who resigned in 1839 and was succeeded by James Jauch from Strassburg.<sup>23</sup> It was at about this time that the German Catholics with the help of English and Irish friends bought the freehold of the chapel for £1200. Some of the funds raised had to be spent on necessary repairs, and a mortgage for £600 bearing interest at 5% had been given to the party from whom the freehold had been bought. Bishop Thomas Griffiths, then Vicar Apostolic of the London District, Andrew Lynch, Esq., Philip Howard, Esq. and William Lescher, Esq. were appointed trustees. The last-named, who had long been treasurer when the temporal affairs of the chapel had been under the management of a committee, wrote to

Bishop Wiseman (who became Pro Vicar Apostolic on the death of Dr Griffiths in August 1847) in October 1847, by which date another of the trustees had died, of his anxiety about the finances of the chapel. The chaplain had been, and probably still was, in difficulties as a result of what some considered his indiscreet expenditure on extraordinary schemes for the benefit of poor Germans; he had not been able to pay the interest on the mortgage in two successive years and another payment was due at Christmas. Bishop Griffiths had paid the interest for the two years but thought stringent measures would have to be taken. 'It became a question with Dr Griffiths whether its usefulness was of that nature as to require its being continued'. 'Since its establishment', William Lescher wrote, '(it) has been of the greatest service to poor Germans ignorant of the English language . . . and I cannot contemplate its discontinuance without some fear for the state of many who yearly arrive from Germany in ignorance and poverty. But the number of Germans in London is not so great as it was during the war when my father first set on foot the idea of a German chapel . . .'

The writer of this letter was justified in his fears for in December 1847 James Jauch wrote to Bishop Wiseman asking for a loan. The German chapel, he wrote, was quite incapable of supporting itself; he had spent all his own money and had raised more which had been used in purchasing the chapel. He had also founded schools. Bishop Wiseman's reply is not recorded but by 1849 James Jauch had left the chapel and was living in Switzerland.<sup>24</sup>

After some improvements had been made in the chapel in 1856<sup>25</sup> there were once again financial problems and that despite the fact that an allowance paid by the Emperor of Austria had recently been nearly doubled.<sup>26</sup> Things were so bad that the Bow Street chapel had to be sold and premises in Friar Street, Great Carter Lane near Ludgate Circus were taken on a lease of four years and opened in 1859 as the new German Catholic chapel.<sup>27</sup> Friar Street, at the west end of Carter Lane, is short and narrow and runs south to Ireland Yard. It would seem very likely that the building leased was that described in 1855 as St Paul's Temperance Hall, in 1859 as a Literary and Scientific Institution and in 1863 as The Day and Sunday School Mission. It could be that it is the sober-looking building that has survived to this day at the south end of Friar Street on the left-hand side.<sup>28</sup>

Clearly a new chapel would have to be acquired. Accordingly Arthur Dillon Purcell, the chaplain, who was in charge from 1854 until 1871, went abroad to collect funds. He intended to go to Germany where he had been educated and wrote in August 1859 from Finsbury Circus where he was living to Cardinal Wiseman asking for letters of introduction to prominent ecclesiastics and expressing his hopes of organising a lottery under the patronage of the Empress of Austria to raise money.<sup>29</sup> His appeal must have shown very satisfactory results because the Zion chapel in Union Street between Whitechapel and the Commercial Road, originally perhaps a theatre before becoming a Methodist chapel, was bought in 1861 for £3270 and the alterations cost almost as much. It was opened by Cardinal Wiseman in 1862.<sup>30</sup> But in May 1873 came another disaster. The chapel was circular and surmounted by a leaden cupola and this fell in just after the congregation had departed at the end of evening service. The chapel was in ruins.<sup>31</sup> The school had to be used for services.

In 1875 Cardinal Manning laid the foundation stone of a new building on the same site in Union Street (the name was changed apparently about 1914 to Adler Street) and this church, still known as the German church, was in use until it was bombed in 1940 and destroyed.<sup>32</sup> This church is described as having been in the Romanesque style, on the lines of a basilica

without aisles with a semi-circular apse with curved ceiling. The organ and stained-glass windows and some other church furnishings came from Germany. On the exterior wall of the tower, facing the street, was a mosaic frieze showing St Boniface preaching to the heathen.<sup>33</sup>

The foundation stone of the present fine German church in Adler Street was laid by Cardinal Godfrey in 1959.

The priests in charge have been sometimes secular priests, sometimes members of religious congregations including the Redemptorists (c.1852-1854), the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (c.1871-c.1876), the Pious Society of Missions (1904-48) and the Pallottine Fathers (1948 to the present time).

# NOTES

1. See Bishop Douglass' Diary, 2, 168 in the archives of the archdiocese of Westminster (AAW). I am grateful to the archivist for permission to quote from papers in the archives.
2. See Accounts, 1786-1817, in the archives of the English province of the Society of Jesus (EPSJ).
3. Kelly's *Post Office Directory*. According to Alexander Rottman, *London Catholic Churches* (London 1926), 182, the building was, at the time of publication, a warehouse behind Mansion House station.
4. AAW. Missions IIIc.
5. See AAW. Poynter papers, IIIc2 and A46/54.
6. There are several letters from John Becker to Bishop Poynter, written after he retired, in AAW. Poynter papers, IIIc2. The date of his retirement is given in an autobiographical note by Francis Muth in the Province Register in EPSJ.14/2/6. The Land Tax Assessment books in the Guildhall Library for 1808-10 (Mss.11, 316, 328, 331, 334) give the name 'Rev. Mr. Beuthin' in Great St Thomas the Apostle. This could be a mistake for 'Rev. Mr Becker' or possibly the name of the minister of the Dissenters' chapel.
7. This autobiographical note and other information about Francis Muth is in the Province Register in EPSJ.14/2/6.
8. See The 'Re-establishment of the Society of Jesus' an Ms. in EPSJ. by Thomas Glover, 139.
9. Geoffrey Evans, *Kensington* (London 1975) 113.
10. See Bishop Douglass' Diary, 2, 163 in AAW.
11. Anthony Kohlman to William Strickland in Maryland Letters (f.116) in EPSJ.
12. Marmaduke Stone's letters are in the volume of his letters, ff.141, 144 in EPSJ.
13. Volume of transcripts, 14/2/16 in EPSJ. n. 276.
14. Letters of Bishops and Cardinals, 1753-1853, f.258 in EPSJ (1818).
15. Sewall's Letters, f.219 in EPSJ; Nicholas Sewall to Edward Scott, 3 November 1822.
16. Sewall's Letters, f.251 in EPSJ; Nicholas Sewall to John Hughes, 25 January 1825. According to Francis Muth this figure was an exaggeration.
17. Coll. S. Ign. 1750-1854, ff.57-8 in EPSJ; Nicholas Sewall to Edward Scott, 14 February 1822.
18. There is an account of this school in *London Recusant*, 3 (1973) 64-7. It began in what is now Bolsover Street. The diary is in Coll. S. Ign. 1750-1854, ff.95-124, in EPSJ.
19. Autobiographical note mentioned above.
20. H. Foley, *Records of the English Province of the Society of Jesus*, (London 1877-83) vol. 7 p.536. The tablet has been preserved and is at the German church in Adler Street.
21. Coll. S. Ign. Farm Street, f.38 in EPSJ; J. Bird to T. Glover, 3 June 1841.
22. H. Foley, Mss.3 ff.235 v-6 in EPSJ.
23. *Ordo Recitandi* ... (1837 London). Some details about the appointment of the clergy at the German chapel are in the Register of the Clergy of the London District, 1800-51 in AAW.
24. William Lescher's letter from 16 Nottingham Place, Regent's Park is in AAW (W2/2/7/4). William Lescher (1800-65), the son of William also treasurer of the German chapel who died in 1817, was generous in his assistance to Catholic chapels and schools in the poorer parts of London. His business address was in Thomas Street, St. Mary, Whitechapel and his home in Upton and Stratford before he came to live in Nottingham Place in 1845. Either his father or his uncle, Joseph, (who was living in Hampstead when he made his will in 1826) was one of the persons to whom subscriptions for the building of the Catholic chapel of St Mary, Holly Place, Hampstead might be sent. See *Laity's Directory* for 1815; Catholic Record Society series, vol. 12, 134; *London Recusant*, 5 (1975) 113-4. Letters from James Jauch to Bishop — later Cardinal — Wiseman are in AAW. (R29/18; W1/6/9/4; W2/1/3/9/2 and 3; W2/2/5/1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6).
25. Anon, *The Catholic Handbook. A History of the Metropolitan Missions* (London 1857) 25.
26. *The Catholic Handbook* 26. In December 1855 Cardinal Wiseman was sent a copy of a petition by the chaplain, Arthur Purcell, to the Emperor of Austria asking him to raise his annual charitable gift. See AAW. W2/2/5/10.
27. Rottman, *op.cit.* 182-3.
28. See Kelly, *Post Office Directory*.
29. The letter is in AAW. (W3/36).
30. Rottman, *op.cit.* 183. In December Arthur Purcell wrote to Wiseman inviting him when on his way to Etloe (his house in Leyton) to inspect some pictures that had recently arrived from Germany (AAW. W2/5/7).
31. Rottman, *op.cit.* 183-4.
32. No papers which might have thrown further light on the history of the church survived.
33. Rottman, *op.cit.* 184-5.