

Reading's link with Blessed Dominic Barberi

On Saturday 8 October a blue plaque on an apartment building in Reading was blessed by Fr John Sherrington CP. The plaque commemorates the death in Reading of Blessed Dominic Barberi.

Following the blessing, a reception was held at the Irish Club, at which Fr Sherrington gave an address on the life of Blessed Dominic.

'His coat fitted nowhere. His waistcoat seemed like a cast-off... his shoes innocent of polish and he wore the meanest and most wretched hat that could be seen in England out of the collieries,' Mgr Searle, Vicar General to Cardinal Wiseman.

'When his form came within sight, I was moved to the depths in the strangest way. The gaiety and affability of his manner in the midst of his sanctity was itself a holy sermon,' John Henry Newman.

These two quotations reflect the impression made by Blessed Dominic Barberi, the first provincial of the Passionists in the United Kingdom and the man who received Newman into full communion with the Catholic Church.

The fact that it was Dominic who received Newman was no accident. His kindness, goodness, and ecumenical attitude had already made an impact on the Tractarians.

Anglican clergy had rarely been addressed in such courteous terms by a Catholic priest or Catholics. At the end of (a) very long letter he says, 'Adieu then dearest brethren, be you in peace and the God of peace and love be with you, Amen.'

Born in Italy, Dominic joined the Passionists in 1813. In prayer he received a call from God to preach the Gospel in England. After many years, in 1841, he was sent to England to establish a Passionist house at Aston in Staffordshire. He worked extremely hard, despite his poor health, travelling extensively to give retreats and missions.

He met Newman briefly in 1844 and the following year was invited to call on him at Littlemore. When he arrived, on 8 October 1845, he was soaked through. While he was drying himself by the fire Newman entered the room, knelt and asked to be received into the Catholic Church.

On 27 August 1849 Fr Dominic and Fr Louis Pesciaroli, set off from Paddington to go to Stroud for the opening of a new church at Woodchester. As the train neared Pangbourne Fr Dominic became ill. A doctor from Reading happened to be on the train, and attended him. The doctor and Fr Louis helped him off the train at Pangbourne but none of the inns would admit him because they were afraid he was a victim of the cholera epidemic. They went back to Reading where he was taken to the Railway Tavern in Caversham Road. There he was put to bed and assured the doctor that he was in much less pain. The doctor continued on his own interrupted journey, but Fr Dominic died that afternoon.

The Railway Tavern was later renamed the Duke of Edinburgh and subsequently demolished. The plaque was erected on the building that now stands on the site.