

NICHOLAS CARDINAL WISEMAN

1802-1865

BRENDAN LARNEN, O.P.



NE day a gracious lady entered the Cathedral of Seville with her infant son to dedicate him to the service of the Church. A half century later, long after her own death, that son was known to have fulfilled his pledged destiny. Meanwhile, turbulent, romantic and inspiring years intervened. The position of the Church changed, particularly that of the English-speaking Church. No longer was it harassed, but an institution of impressive, new-born vigor. Such might not have been had this tiny infant's life been shaped differently, for it was he who created and gave direction to a more enduring Catholicism in England.

His future seemed not to be fated for the rôle which he undertook in the drama of resurgent English Catholicism. As the son of an Irish maritime merchant, who had married an aristocratic Irish lady in Spain, no comfortable existence in his parental homeland where the Faith was proscribed, could be foreseen for Nicholas Wiseman. Although his parents were welcomed in their alien refuge, often their hearts strayed back to their beloved Ireland, regretting that their son, Spanish priest though he was pledged to be, would perhaps be wholly unaware of their dearer native land. Immediately his Spanish birth dominated his life. The first words he lisped were lively Spanish syllables. When Mr. Wiseman died, however, his wife returned to Ireland with the children—Nicholas, an older brother, and a younger sister.

His schooling began at Waterford in a gruff Irish boarding school. There he learned English, if nothing else, and like many another Irishman he could usually use it effortlessly but effectively. Soon he was transferred to Ushaw, a Catholic school in the bleak hills of England's Durham. There an impressive scholar, Doctor Lingard (who wrote such an impartial history of England that he aroused the suspicion of his fellow priests) evoked a zealous studiousness in the timid, shy Spanish-Irish boy.

Nicholas, self-effacing though he was, arrested the interest of his class fellows by his eminent success in his studies. However, no

friendships were created for him during his years at Ushaw except that for Errington. He manifested such an alert and deep interest in the history of Rome that he merited for himself an invitation to attend the English College, founded there by Pope Gregory XIII (one of the three Gregorys who loved England) during the Elizabethan era. It had just been restored after the downfall of Napoleon, when Nicholas Wiseman set sail for Rome.

For three months he voyaged against fickle winds before he set foot upon the mainland of Italy. Then he travelled by derelict coaches to Rome, with bandits menacing the highways and filth or wantonness making rural inns the more uninviting for a night's stay. However, Rome finally burst upon him as something he had never imagined, though he knew both its topography and unaged lore by heart.

More astonishing to Nicholas Wiseman was the English College which became his residence for the next two decades. It was a bright, cheering and artistically appointed edifice whose wide corridors and spacious stairways ever reminded him of the gallant and loyal Englishmen who had preceded him through the house. An aged and toothless porter had welcomed him, narrating his hoarded memories of the men who had lived adventurous, stealthy, and harrowing lives upon their return to England.

The warmth and splendor of Rome, its tempting intellectual atmosphere challenged all of Wiseman's studious impulses. In his twenty-second year he faced three famed theologians in public disputation that he might obtain his doctorate in theology. Beset by four hundred propositions, Wiseman fared handsomely and concluded his success with a banquet for the disputants and his professors. Among those who witnessed his superb intellectual performance were the future Gregory XVI and de Lamennais. At that time both were ardently interested in the Creed which the young Spanish-Irishman defended with such admirable élan. Neither realized that theology would make them fatal enemies, for Gregory XVI condemned and excommunicated de Lamennais.

When Wiseman was ordained to the priesthood in his twenty-fifth year, he was known throughout Rome as a gracious and contagiously exuberant young gentleman. His scholarly research in Roman antiquities was vigorous and original. He consumed months in work at the Vatican Library where he guided Macaulay before the latter penned his famed essay about the Popes. Wiseman's success and distinction were attained so effortlessly that his appointment to the professorship of Oriental Languages at the University of Rome

was not at all surprising. Though he was then but twenty-six years of age, he had also been appointed the Rector of the English College.

With such achievement enlarging about him, Wiseman foresaw a comfortable future in Rome. His native Spain, his beloved Ireland, and his adopted England no longer assumed significance in his mind. However, with the passing of Catholic Emancipation by the British Parliament, his thoughts were borne back to Ireland and England, for he had been deputed to announce the official religious liberation of the British Isles to Gregory XVI. Between the Pope and himself a fond friendship had been wrought ever since that day when Gregory, then a Camaldolese monk, had confronted him with intricate objections at the disputation.

Scholar though Wiseman had proven himself to be, he still possessed the Irish casualness towards erudition. Adventure rather than study was to become more alluring in his life. When Montelembert, de Lamennais, and Lacordaire, three enthusiastic and apostolic Frenchmen came to Rome, they suggested to Wiseman that he should undertake the reconversion of England. Immediately he accepted their challenge, for a visit of Newman too, convinced him of the trust which they had suggested to him.

Soon Wiseman, now a monsignor, returned to England and the English were astonished by such an urbane and affable young prelate. Newman eulogized him in the press; Gladstone attended his lectures; Daniel O'Connell invited him to become one of the founders of *The Dublin Review*. Such a triumph urged him to forsake his languid life of scholarship for the adventurous and active apostolate.

For a short time Wiseman returned to Rome while the English bishops petitioned Gregory to send him back to England and the Pope graciously agreed. Wiseman was still young and brilliant, still possessed of splendid dreams, wholly unaware that those same bishops one day would regret their request.

Soon the older Catholics, whose forefathers had preserved the Faith in England for centuries, began to distrust and dislike Wiseman because of his interest in converts. When Newman surrendered, after reading Wiseman's article on the Donatist schism which devastated his faith in Anglicanism, many other famous Oxonians came over to the Church. Then a few of the older Catholics began to desert while most of the others remained churlishly aloof towards the converts whom they should have welcomed as brothers.

Meanwhile Wiseman dreamed his dreams and Rome trusted that he would fulfill them. The situation within the Church became strange. Thousands of Irish emigrants clamored for priests to assist

their spiritual needs. Converts sacrificed everything for the Faith. Some of the older Catholics forsook the Faith to justify their prejudice against recent converts. Despite the fact that Wiseman had been appointed pro-Vicar of the London District with preëminent jurisdiction among the clergy, they hardly aided him at all. He found himself very much alone, with homeless and harassed converts, helpless and friendless Irish emigrants, and the rebellious older Catholics.

With so many petty strifes confronting him Wiseman's glowing apostolate dimmed. Somehow the splendid ability of Newman did not pervade Oxford where Wiseman expected the intellectual life of England to be reconsecrated to the Faith of its fathers. Yet he remained obstinately seeking the gleam of his dream of a Catholic England.

He sought the restoration of the Catholic Hierarchy in England. His appointment as Cardinal Primate and Archbishop of Westminster was, however, a surprise. Official England formidably opposed this usurpation of spiritual dominion by the Roman Church. "Papal Aggression" became the catchword of the Government. The *Times*, the unofficial mouthpiece of the Government, refused to understand the flamboyant English of Wiseman's pastoral letter "from out the Flaminian Gate of Rome." Throughout England both the Pope and himself were burned in effigy. All the hoarded vituperation which had once been cast upon Daniel O'Connell was again thrust against the Church. The older Catholics as a group protested against the hierarchy and expressed their loyalty to the Queen. The Duke of Norfolk scandalously emphasized their antipathy towards Wiseman by his apostasy.

Meanwhile Wiseman himself experienced his first taste of the anti-Popery antagonism while passing along the streets of gay Vienna where he saw and read the *Times*. Momentarily his vital enthusiasm and happiness was numbed, but he carried on gallantly. Immediately he dispatched a note to the Prime Minister, Lord John Russell, explaining his position as Primate as well as reminding the same gentleman that he himself had agreed upon the restoration. Russell, however, continued to allow the falsehoods and chicanery imputed to Wiseman to go unchallenged. Only Disraeli rebuked him for such conduct, but Disraeli's protest was opportunist more than opportune since he was Russell's political enemy.

Wiseman's friends were intimidated and his intimates foresaw that violence would menace him when he set foot on English soil. They were convinced that he had misjudged the temper of the English people while they feared that he might boldly attempt to recover

from his error; which was exactly what Wiseman purposed. Immediately he demanded an explanation from the Government while he began to pen his own vindication. The Government explained away the affair by futilely seeking a whipping boy. Wiseman was subject to mob hate; his carriage was stoned; and throngs hooted and jeered him wherever he went. Then, within a week after his return, his appeal to the English people was published in every London newspaper, even the truculent *Times*. Essentially his defense was a plea to the English sense of fair-play. The people could not ignore it without condemning themselves. Even the *Times* was provoked to admit that Wiseman's concise, caustic, and ruthlessly logical English was intelligible. Lord Russell stood convicted by the thousands of clamorous letters which indicted him in the public press.

Then Wiseman contrived to create a significant Church organization despite his imprudences. Shortly after the Duke of Wellington's magnificent funeral, he planned the first synod, never realizing that his own funeral would surpass the Iron Duke's in grandeur and impressiveness. At the synod Newman delivered the inaugural sermon, "The Second Spring," whose epic and classic splendor lives forever in English literature. Newman's transparent style unveiled the brilliance that had once been Catholic England's and foretold that a similar splendor would brighten the life of the reborn Church. While Wiseman listened, he forsook his eminent dignity and sobbed like a child.

But Wiseman's career became clouded with failures and disappointments which were occasioned by his heedlessness. He sent Newman to Ireland (where the gruff Cardinal Cullen appreciated neither his asceticism nor his aestheticism) to found a university according to an ideal which still survives in literature. Against the wishes of his subject bishops, Wiseman repudiated his coadjutor, Errington, the first friend he had ever made and perhaps the first enemy, too. With Manning destined for the See of Westminster, the hierarchy reacted in almost open rebellion. Only Pius IX subdued them when he scolded them like schoolboys.

Death soon began to lurk upon Wiseman's gathering years. He no longer appeared the vital, impressive young prelate. Lengthy illness had already begun to make inroads upon his once superb physique. His body became fleshy and flabby while he became careless about his personal appearance. Only once during his last years did he appear his former self. That was during his triumphal tour of all Ireland where the populace idolized him in a typically Irish way. At Waterford he reminded them that it was there he learned to speak

English. Ireland was well aware during those few months how thoroughly he had mastered English, for he delivered more than a thousand different speeches during his stay. Though he then received deserved adulation, its tiring activity weakened him. When he bade farewell to Ireland, he was returning to England to die.

Soon his waning mind strayed back to his far happier days in Rome. After he had exhorted his clergy to practise peace and charity no matter what the cost, his consciousness ebbed. One morning, as quietly and as obscurely as he had been born, he died without a tear attending his demise.

The impressive splendor of a conscientiously fulfilled liturgy, which Wiseman had emphatically insisted upon, heightened the magnificence of his funeral. Within the seven mile course to Kensal Green where his body was interred, hundreds of thousands thronged the way to see his bier borne behind a carriage containing his cardinal's hat and his robes. Everyone was well aware that the first English cardinal since Wolsey was being buried in English soil. Not as many, however, were conscious that his death sealed the happy fate of the resurgent Church. Only a few knew how well he had fulfilled that pledge which his gracious mother had made so many decades ago when she laid him upon the altar in far away Seville's Cathedral. Nobody could deny, though, that Nicholas Wiseman had proven himself a good shepherd.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Butler, O.S.B., Dom Cuthbert, *Bishop Ullathorne* (Cincinnati: Benziger Bros.)

Gwynn, Denis, *Cardinal Wiseman* (New York: P. J. Kennedy & Sons.)

Leslie, Shane, *Henry Edward Manning—His Life and Labors* (New York: P. J. Kennedy & Sons.)

Leslie, Shane, *The Oxford Movement* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company.)

May, J. Lewis, *Cardinal Newman* (New York: The Dial Press.)

Strachey, Lytton, *Eminent Victorians* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co.)

Ward, Maisie, *The Wilfrid Wards and the Transition* (New York: Sheed & Ward.)

Ward, Wilfrid, *The Life of John Henry Cardinal Newman* (London: Longmans Green & Co. Ltd.)