



**'Bid me come to Thee upon the waters'**  
**The Life of Father Thomas R. D. Byles (1870 – 1912)**  
**Priest and Martyr of the *Titanic* Disaster**

**By Fr Stephen J. Hoyle**

### ***Titanic* and her enduring legend**

At twenty minutes to midnight on Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> April 1912, the luxury White Star liner *R.M.S. Titanic*, on her maiden voyage from Southampton to New York, struck an iceberg in mid-North Atlantic four hundred miles off the coast of Newfoundland. The impact of the collision was relatively slight, going unnoticed by many on board, but the damage caused to the vessel would prove fatal. Although there was on the ocean a flat calm, the immense forces exerted by the water entering the ship's hull caused her violently to rend apart. In just two hours and forty minutes the forty-six-thousand-ton ship, claimed to have been unsinkable, broke in two and plunged to the ocean floor causing over 1,500 of her passengers and crew to perish in the freezing water.

News of the sinking provoked an understandable sensation. It was the worst maritime disaster then on record. Prominent among the victims were those of the like of millionaire businessmen John Jacob Astor and Benjamin Guggenheim; numerous of the most wealthy, influential and celebrated personalities of the day. Public scandal attached itself, among other things, to the vastly inadequate number of lifeboats provided, as also to the disparity in survival rates of passengers from different social classes.

However, the disaster proved more than merely newsworthy; as a recent commentator has concluded, "The sinking of *Titanic* is an event whose mythical significance has eclipsed its historical importance".<sup>1</sup> The sad loss of the great ship quickly became *legend* - an emblematic tale - having very different meanings for different people, but seized upon by persons of every shade of conviction and opinion as a source of moral and cultural instruction or admonition. Reformers, radicals and extremists on both sides of the Atlantic sought to appropriate the story to their own ends. As one modern social historian has commented,

(The *Titanic* disaster) was... an event of deep and wide resonance in Edwardian England and Progressive Era America... Beyond shock and grief, the disaster produced a contest over meaning that connected the sinking of an ocean liner in a remote part of the North Atlantic with some of the most important and troubling problems, tensions, and conflicts of the time.<sup>2</sup>

Suffragettes and their opponents; capitalists and critics of consumerism; xenophobes and campaigners for racial and ethnic equality; traditionalists and modernists; preachers, poets, editorial writers and folk singers all found in the disaster endorsement of their variant points of view.

And the relevance of *Titanic*, in this form as *cultural icon*, has persisted into the present; in our own times there remain frequent echoes of the disaster in newspaper headlines

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<sup>1</sup> Howells 1999, p.1

<sup>2</sup> Biel 1996, pp.7/8

and the work of satirical political cartoonists, as too in the common speech of everyday.<sup>3</sup> It would appear that the story of *Titanic* holds an endless fascination, having over the years been the subject of innumerable books and articles, numerous film documentaries, at least six major motion pictures, two stage musicals, and, more recently, a wide variety of Internet-sites and computer software<sup>4</sup> – compellingly demonstrative evidence of the extraordinary resilience and long-lasting power of the *Titanic* story in popular culture.

It was into this sphere of persistently widely popular symbolism that an obscure priest of the Westminster Archdiocese became propelled by his actions onboard *Titanic* on the night of the disaster, now almost ninety years ago – actions which caused Pope St Pius X to declare Fr Thomas R. D. Byles a “martyr for the Church”.<sup>5</sup>

### **The early life of Thomas Roussel Byles**

Contrary to customary film and television depiction<sup>6</sup>, Fr Byles was an Englishman and a convert to the Catholic Faith, having been brought up within the tradition of English Protestant Nonconformity. He was born Roussel Davids Byles<sup>7</sup> on 26<sup>th</sup> February 1870, the eldest of seven children, to the Reverend Dr. Alfred Holden Byles, a Congregationalist minister, and his wife, Louisa Davids. The place of Fr Byles’ birth appears disputed, but is most likely to have been Leeds, West Yorkshire, where his father was pastor of the Headingley Hill Congregationalist Church.<sup>8</sup> Sharing the distinction coincidentally with both John Henry Newman and Frederick Faber, Fr Byles was of Huguenot descent, the name *Roussel* being given after his ancestor, Francois Roussel, who fled to England in 1684.

The family to which Roussel Byles belonged epitomises the emergent Nonconformist middle class of the age, and more particularly, in the description of the historian Clyde Binfield, one often understated aspect of that phenomenon: the “...clerical underworld or intermediate intelligentsia which composed the Dissenting ministry”<sup>9</sup>. Roussel Byles’ paternal grandfather was William Byles, a leader of Nonconformity in Bradford and founder of the *Bradford Observer*, whose brother, Sir William Pollard Byles, was

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<sup>3</sup> “In (*recent*) British cartoons both the ship and the iceberg have represented Margaret Thatcher.” Lord 1986, p15. Qv also Biel *op cit*, pp226-234 on the common expression, “rearranging the deck chairs on the *Titanic*”.

<sup>4</sup> Qv. Howells *op cit*. The 1997 film *Titanic*, written and directed by James Cameron, was estimated at the time of its release to have been the most financially costly film ever made. It also equalled the record set by the 1959 epic *Ben Hur* for the most awards won from the American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (the *Oscars*); and this in spite of the unanimously unfavourable judgement of critics. Qv Walker (Ed) 1998, p.816.

<sup>5</sup> Archer Website (i).

<sup>6</sup> Fr Byles appears to have been on film invariably been portrayed as either Irish or American.

<sup>7</sup> It seems that he did not assume the name *Thomas* until his reception into the Catholic Church.

<sup>8</sup> The identification of Leeds as Fr Byles’ place of birth was made in an article sent to the *Tablet* after his death by his brother and printed 18<sup>th</sup> May 1912; probably the most reliable source for this information. Yorkshire was also mentioned as Fr Byles’ birthplace in early newspaper coverage of the disaster, *eg. The Times* of 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1912. (Qv. Bryceson (Ed.) 1997, p.99). However, Shanahan 1975 (p.49), followed by Archer (i), gives the location as Shelton, Hanley, in Staffordshire. No origin is given for this information. That there exists some confusion over this matter is perhaps unsurprising as the Byles family appears to have frequently moved home, presumably as a result of the demands of the Rev’d Dr A.H. Byles’ ministry.

<sup>9</sup> Binfield in Gilley & Shiels (Eds) 1994, p.324.

proprietor of that newspaper, a political radical and social reformer, and Member of Parliament for Shipley (1892-5) and Salford North (1906-12).<sup>10</sup> Louisa Davids was the eldest child of the Rev'd Thomas William Davids, also a Congregational minister, regarded as "a man of great erudition and scholarship", and recognised as a leading authority on early Puritan history.<sup>11</sup> It was his mother's father who baptised Roussel Davids Byles into the Congregationalist Church.

The young Roussel, who we are informed from his earliest childhood, "...was remarkable for his love of books"<sup>12</sup>, began his education as an infant attending what has been claimed to have been one of the first kindergartens in England; started in Headingley by his mother's sister. At eight years of age he was sent to Leeds Grammar School, where about 1880 he gained his first scholarship. The following year he was elected to a further scholarship of four years, but being prevented from continuing at Leeds by his father's move in 1882 to a new pastorate in Leamington, resumed his studies at Leamington College. At Leamington we are told he, "distinguished himself in mathematics, and held a scholarship for one year, besides gaining numerous prizes".<sup>13</sup>

From Leamington, in 1885, Roussel Byles won what was considered "one of the best public school scholarships"<sup>14</sup>, to Rossall School, Fleetwood, Lancashire; a Church of England foundation regarded to be the counterpart in Northern England of Marlborough. Given his Nonconformist background it is without doubt of significance, when considering the outcome of his later spiritual journeying, that Roussel Byles was educated at Rossall.

The school was founded in mid-century (1844) at a time of expansion in public school education - particularly that catering for the needs of the new middle class - as a result of the Oxford Movement.<sup>15</sup> It is, then, unsurprising that life at Rossall would seem to have been influenced by Tractarian principles. The description of another comparable institution of the period may well also be applied to Rossall: that it was designed "...to be a public school definitely on the lines of the teaching of the Prayer Book; the fast and festival days were observed there, and great care was taken with chapel services".<sup>16</sup> The school day at Rossall revolved around divine service, including the regular celebration of Holy Communion. Worship took place in the school chapel, neo-Gothic in architectural style, with seating provided for the students in a quasi-monastic choir after the fashion of an Oxbridge college. A measure of the importance of Rossall for his brother's spiritual formation is indicated by William Byles who relates how it was there that the young Rousell "...first began to break away from Nonconformity, influenced both by the

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *The Tablet loc. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Qv. Ollard 1983 pp.167-169.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid* p.167. Describing William Sewell's Saint Peter's College, Radley, founded in 1847.

weakness of the historical position of Nonconformity and also by the Nonconformists' neglect and practical denial of the sacraments", his brother developing, in the atmosphere of High Church Anglican piety, "... even in these early years a remarkable devotion to the Eucharist".<sup>17</sup>

### **An Undergraduate at Jowett's Balliol**

At Rossall School, Roussel Byles was considered a gifted student, having particular promise in mathematics, as also in history and natural philosophy. In 1888 he was elected to "a small exhibition" (a scholarship with a modest grant awarded after competitive examination), to King's College, Cambridge – which, for reasons undisclosed, he chose to resign. However, the following year he won and accepted a scholarship as a mathematician to Balliol College, and in 1889 went up to Oxford.

Then, as now, Balliol was renowned for mathematics, and the highly talented (though also profoundly problemated) mathematician J.W. Russell, described as, "an erratic mathematical genius"<sup>18</sup>, was to become Roussel Byles' tutor. However, Roussel entered Balliol at a time when, after a succession of the cleverest young men in the country had gone up as scholars - attracting in their wake generous benefactions and, therefore, also further growth - the College had come effectively to dominate the whole University.

A not inconsequential factor in Balliol's success during this period was its Master, Benjamin Jowett, regarded as "the most influential of Liberal Anglican divines"<sup>19</sup>, whose, "...Liberal influence permeated the college to a degree almost unexampled".<sup>20</sup> Although probably better known as an interpreter of Classical literature, it was he who in 1860 had been involved with H.B. Wilson and others in the immensely controversial publication of *Essays and Reviews*, a collection of writings concerned to introduce to an English audience the historical and critical study of the Bible by then well advanced on the Protestant Continent.

Under Jowett an intellectual climate was created at Balliol in which academic excellence was encouraged, as was also originality. A heavy emphasis was placed on the development of character and the qualities of leadership, as on the obligations of duty and public service. Contrary to former strictness, informal and intimate relations were encouraged between teachers and students; Jowett allocated time to see each of his undergraduates personally each week. Given this informality, there is in all likelihood veracity to the claim made for him after his death that Roussel Byles had been, "an intimate" of Jowett.<sup>21</sup> That he indeed breathed deeply the Liberal air of Balliol is

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<sup>16</sup>The *Tablet* *loc.cit.*

<sup>18</sup> Dr John Jones, dean and archivist of Balliol, quoted in Hind (1.i).

<sup>19</sup> Vidler 1971, p.123.

<sup>20</sup> *Chambers Biographical Dictionary* in its entry for Jowett

<sup>21</sup> Shanahan *loc. cit.* The *Tablet* (*loc.cit.*) describes Roussel Byles as "a great favourite of Jowett's, who more than once invited him to stay with him during vacations". The existence of the custom of vacation reading parties, introduced by Jowett, would seem to lend credibility to this observation.

evidenced in Roussel's vice-presidency of the Arnold Society, a "select undergraduate debating society",<sup>22</sup> still in existence, perpetuating the spirit of Matthew Arnold, prominent former scholar of the College, and popularly hailed as the founder of English Modernism.<sup>23</sup>

However, just as was the case with the illustrious Jowett: that the concomitant of Liberal intellectual accomplishment was a certain temperamentality and intolerance of contradiction,<sup>24</sup> so seems to some extent to have been the case with Roussel Byles. In the robust assessment of Fr Byles' life presented by his friend and fellow priest Mgr Edward Watson, the opinion is expressed that,

Fr Byles's independence of character was sometimes strained into too great self-confidence, his clear and strong convictions left little patience for those who differed. He was argumentative to a "t". I see him now pursuing an already vanquished opponent from seat to seat at St Edmund's (Ware) to insist on dotting the last "t".<sup>25</sup>

He would, too, be found idiosyncratic in his opinions: as regarding other matters, so politics,

In politics... he was perverse; wedded to free trade, and yet a champion of trade-unionism and of strikers... he betrayed a certain hauteur by the silence into which he was wont to sink in the presence of unanswerable or at least incorrigible adversaries. I can quite believe that the great Jowett affected his society..."<sup>26</sup>

This tone of censure here may not, however, solely reflect a tendency to caprice on the part of Roussel Byles, for among Catholics there persisted at this time a deep distrust of Liberal education, especially with regard to the formation and training of the clergy. As ecclesiastical historian Mgr Michael Williams has observed; in an environment still largely determined by centuries-long experience of intolerance and persecution, Catholic theological education in England tended to be presented in a "controversial" manner intended to supply straightforward answers to the enquiring or doubting mind in defence of the Church against attack or error, there being, "little attention... paid to the possibility of a student having anything to offer the Church from his own reflections or spiritual experience".<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless, in spite of any initial distrust or disapproval it may have incited, Fr Byles' scholarly training did come to be admired and to be considered to have borne fruit for the Catholic Faith,

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<sup>22</sup> Hind Website *loc. cit.*

<sup>23</sup> Qv. Willey 1980, pp.251-283.

<sup>24</sup> Jowett was notoriously given to temperamentality. Famously, when the President of Corpus Christi College greeted him on one occasion, "Master, I must congratulate you on the appearance of your new volume of Plato. May I send you a few suggestions?" Jowett tersely replied, "Please don't".

<sup>25</sup> Watson in *The Edmundian* 1912, p. 102.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Williams in McClelland & Hodgetts (Eds) 1999, p.76.

...all his work was good, in the judgement of all, whether conference papers, or the ensuing debates, or public controversy. A thorough grasp of facts, exact reasoning, clear enunciation of conclusions characterised his writing. In a word he was just what one would expect a scholar of Balliol to be.”<sup>28</sup>

That Balliol well equipped the future Fr Byles as an intelligent and energetic apologist for the Catholic Faith in the work as a home-missioner on which he was to later embark, would seem beyond any doubt.

### **Some trouble lately – Roussel Byles’ path to conversion**

The quality of Roussel Byles’ intellect, as his accomplishments as a student, would seem undeniable. After his death, he would win the accolade of having been, “...an adept in Chemistry, a mathematician, a clever linguist, much interested in politics and labour questions... a witty speaker, and a brilliant conversationalist.”<sup>29</sup> However, the results of his study whilst at Oxford appear to have done him less than entire justice. Although elected a scholar as a mathematician, he performed poorly in his Moderations (the initial public examination) gaining only Third Class Honours. Opting to change to Modern History, he received a Third Class Honours degree. In the following year he opted again to change, this time to Theology, in which he took finals and again received a Third. He graduated in 1894.

We need not, however, on the basis of this evidence conclude that he was, “hardly an outstanding student”<sup>30</sup>, as this seemingly lacklustre performance becomes explicable against the background of the spiritual journey Roussel Byles was involved in making at this time.

Soon after his having gone up to Oxford (1889), Roussel took the step of presenting himself for confirmation in the Church of England, which he received at the hands of the then Bishop of Oxford, William Stubbs, the “famous English historian”<sup>31</sup> and advocate of the Oxford Movement.

We are told that Roussel had become “a high churchman”, “very fond of ritual”, but that he nevertheless “ever realised the necessity of obedience to authority”.<sup>32</sup> The latter statement would indicate that Roussel’s was a form of Ritualism more resembling the early Tractarians, “content with the Book of Common Prayer and... punctilious in observing its directions”<sup>33</sup>, rather than the Rome-ward orientated kind typical of more “advanced” Anglo-Catholics.

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<sup>28</sup> Watson in *The Edmundian loc. cit.*

<sup>29</sup> Bishop Casartelli of Salford, quoted in Shanahan 1975, p.50.

<sup>30</sup> Hind Website *loc. cit.*

<sup>31</sup> Ollard 1983, p. 184.

<sup>32</sup> *The Tablet loc.cit.*

<sup>33</sup> Vidler 1971, p. 157.

His spiritual life at this period was characterised by, “a strong tendency to asceticism”, which involved the making of “daily meditations”, and regular recourse “to confession to an Anglican clergyman”.<sup>34</sup> His interest in the writings of the Church Fathers and in Apologetics came to rival his interest in his subject of academic study, until, sensing a vocation to ordained ministry in the Church of England, he made a request to the College that his scholarship be renewed and extended by an additional fifth year in order to enable him to read theology.

Whilst at Oxford, Roussel, by his “teaching and example” came to have a considerable influence on his younger brother, William, whom at this time he “led... away from Nonconformity”, prompting him to, “...look for a more spiritual life, and especially to realise the importance of the Sacraments and the One-ness of the Church”.<sup>35</sup> William, however, rejected the High Church Anglicanism of his older brother and mentor, favouring instead reception into the Catholic Church. He was received in December 1892. We are told that although it was he who had “...led his brother to the threshold of the Church”, of all the family it was Roussel who “...was most displeased at his crossing it”.<sup>36</sup> In this attitude Roussel merely reflected a common anti-Roman thread in the thinking of the High Church party, of the sort that caused Pope Pius IX to comment, in regard to Edward Bouverie Pusey, that he was like, “...a bell, which always sounds to invite the faithful to Church, and itself always remains outside”.<sup>37</sup>

In a letter to his brother, we see William, sometime prior to his reception into the Catholic Church, levelling criticism at Roussel’s Anglicanism, pointing to what he regards is the want of definite authority and the inconsistency of teaching in the Church of England,

Take for instance the question of the Real Presence in the Most Blessed Sacrament of the Altar. Here, O'Bardsy, Vicar of St. Peter's, Bdfd., tells his congregation that in the Holy Eucharist they do not really & truly receive the Body and Blood of our Lord, whilst in the neighbouring parish of St. Mary Magdalene's, Wm. Redhead, the Vicar, tells his congregation that in the Holy Eucharist they do really and truly receive the Body and the Blood of our Lord. Now both of these men profess to have found their respective doctrines from the same source, and under the same guidance. But it is perfectly obvious that one of them must be in the wrong. Which of them is it?<sup>38</sup>

Developing his argument, William addresses himself more directly to matters of ecclesiology and to what for him is the inadequacy of the *branch theory* of Anglicanism as compared with Catholic belief in the visible unity of the Church founded on the office of St Peter,

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<sup>34</sup> *The Tablet loc.cit.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Vidler *op.cit.*

<sup>38</sup> As *per* transcription on Archer website (iii).

The Anglicans maintain that the Church consists of different “branches”... Now they admit that all these “branches” differ amongst each other on certain points of doctrine... Are they then one? Yet no Anglican dares say that his branch alone is Catholic, and others are heretical. Again, why does not the whole Church speak, and say which is right?... Now the “Roman” view on the other hand, says the Church must be one. But in order to secure it being one, Our Lord provided it with a visible Head, without which, the Roman Catholics claim there can be no true unity... Thus I find two views – if one be true, the Church is a disunited body. If the other is true, the Church is a united body. Which am I to accept? <sup>39</sup>

For over a year Roussel’s response to his brother’s Catholicism remained one of disapproval. It was only with a letter addressed to William, received on February 24<sup>th</sup> 1894, that the first intimation came of Roussel’s own serious struggling with the claims of the Catholic Faith. The letter, which otherwise was concerned with “birthday and other more or less trivial matters”, concluded with the short paragraph,

Do you know I have had some trouble lately? The fact is I find myself unable to recognise the Anglican position. I do not, however, feel any more satisfied with the Roman position. I have given up going to Anglican communion, and have postponed my ordination as a deacon”.<sup>40</sup>

A long correspondence ensued between the two brothers, which we learn “...turned mostly on comparatively unimportant matters”, the chief among which were questions “...regarding the relative morality and happiness among Catholic and Protestant peoples”.<sup>41</sup> The superficial nature of these conversations would seem, however, to betray what was, in fact, the deferral of an outcome already recognised - but with far reaching and life changing implications if acted upon. It is clear that Roussel at this time suffered more than merely intellectual turmoil; in the description of his brother,

...the tide ebbed and flowed. Now he seemed about to utter his ‘credo’, and then he seemed to have turned back. Probably no one on earth knows what he went through – all the prayers he offered, all the works of mortification which he practised, or even all the books on the controversy he read.<sup>42</sup>

A final episode of indecision gave rise to a letter arriving “about Trinity Sunday... which seemed to breathe a note of despair that he was ever going to get the grace he was looking for”. However, on the feast of Corpus Christi a last letter arrived from Roussel which announced his dilemma’s sudden and complete resolution,

Two days before, whilst making his meditation, the fog had cleared away. There had been a short visit to the Jesuits at St Aloysius and he was to be received into Holy Mother Church and to make his first Communion on the feast of Corpus Christi...

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *The Tablet loc.cit.*

<sup>41</sup> In the attempt to resolve this issue William made recourse to statistical evidence then in the process of compilation by a German Jesuit, one Fr von Hammerstein, the claim for which was, it can only be assumed, the conclusive scientific demonstration of the greater felicity and moral rectitude of the sons and daughters of the Church. In spite of what seems now the comic implausibility of such “evidence”, we are informed, with a naive certitude characteristic of the age, that the information, “...helped not a little to clear away that little mist”. (*Ibid.*)

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

We are informed in the words of his brother that in accord “with the old story so oft repeated”, the realisation had pressed upon Roussel that, “There must be one Church founded by Our Lord, and that one could be nowhere but on the Rock of Peter”. It was at his reception into the Catholic Church, which seems likely may have involved the administration of conditional baptism, that Roussel Byles took the name *Thomas*.<sup>43</sup> Reflecting on Thomas Roussel’s reception as the fulfilment of his earliest spiritual stirrings, his brother William considers that the feast of Corpus Christi was,

Surely an appropriate festival for one who had been led perhaps more by his devotion to the Eucharist than by anything else to the altar where alone the Eucharist has its dwelling.<sup>44</sup>

However, his conversion now placed Thomas Rousell in what must be thought a uniquely problematic situation, with regard both to his relationship to the College and to the Catholic community into which he was newly received. Although he had postponed his ordination, Roussel remained a candidate for Holy Orders in the Church of England and continued at the University on the basis of the College having permitted him to read theology specifically for that purpose. From the standpoint of the Catholic Church, the continuation of Rousell’s very attendance at the University was a matter requiring special episcopal permission, quite apart from any question of the nature of the study in which he was to be involved.

It is not clear just how these issues came to be resolved excepting the bare facts that Roussel remained at Balliol for the short period of time before the termination of his extended scholarship, and that he persevered in sitting his final examinations. William Byles rightly assesses the extraordinariness of his brother’s predicament,

He took his Theology Finals a few weeks after being received into the Church, probably the first and last Catholic ever to sit for an examination in theology held by Anglican examiners. The reason for this step, of course, was the insistence of Balliol College that they renewed his scholarship for this purpose...<sup>45</sup>

And there is not a little facetiousness in the explanation of his brother’s rationale in choosing to proceed with this course of action,

...he considered that the Anglican requirements with regard to dogma were so indefinite that he could quite well answer the examination questions without giving anything more than the arguments pro and con.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Although the Catholic Church absolutely forbade the “re-baptism” of converts, it seems that it was in England at this period not uncommonly thought prudent in practice to administer the sacrament *conditionally* in order to eliminate any degree of uncertainty regarding the validity of the Protestant rite previously celebrated. Fr Scott Archer has suggested that it was in fact at his *ordination* that Roussel Byles adopted the name Thomas, but the apparently customary use of the name prior to his ordination, eg. in the letter to his brother Winter (dated September 14, 1897) would seem to suggest otherwise. Qv. Archer Website (iii)

<sup>44</sup> *The Tablet loc. cit.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

Despite the undoubted awkwardness of his situation, it is unlikely that Roussel would have been subject to the same loneliness and estrangement experienced by Gerard Manley Hopkins when also a Balliol undergraduate, as a result of his having become a Catholic in the 1860's, when conversion was commonly referred to mockingly as *perversion*.<sup>47</sup> The antagonism that had existed in previous generations towards Catholics, and in particular towards converts to the Catholic Faith, was not nearly as great. And, notwithstanding the official disapproval on the part of the Catholic hierarchy towards the University, it is thought that as many as a hundred Catholics matriculated between 1887–1894 - this figure not including the number of those, who like Roussel Byles, converted as undergraduates - the Catholic Club and the Newman Society, both for undergraduates, having been in existence since the 1880's.<sup>48</sup>

Whether or not Roussel sought out the companionship of fellow Catholic students during the few weeks he remained at Oxford is not known. Undoubtedly of importance, however, was his association with the Oxford Jesuits. That Roussel should have chosen to go for instruction to the Jesuits of St Aloysius' is unsurprising, as the clergy of the Oxford Mission, as it was then known, were recognised for their support of Catholic students at the University. When in 1894, the year of Roussel's reception, the *Petition* was in preparation for the withdrawal of the prohibition against the Universities, Jesuits from Oxford were prominent among the clerical witnesses who testified "to the excellent record and behaviour of Catholic undergraduates".<sup>49</sup> The continued importance of this friendship with the Jesuits is reflected in Roussel's immediate actions on coming down from Oxford.

We are informed that Roussel after his final examination came down from Oxford and "at once went to Manresa" on retreat.<sup>50</sup> Fr Edward I. Purbrick S.J., former Rector of Stonyhurst College and English Provincial of the Society of Jesus led this retreat. Also a convert, it has been said of Edward Purbrick that, "Few English Jesuits of modern times have earned so warm a reputation".<sup>51</sup> Fr Purbrick remained for Thomas Roussel Byles, "a close friend for the rest of his life".<sup>52</sup>

### **Beuron, Oscott and St Edmund's, Ware**

It is unclear whether the location of the retreat on which Thomas Roussel went was in fact the town of Manresa in Northern Spain,<sup>53</sup> or, as may seem more likely, the Jesuit

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<sup>47</sup> *Qv.* White 1992, esp. Chap. 12

<sup>48</sup> *Qv.* Evennett in Beck (Ed.) 1950, p. 304.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 308.

<sup>50</sup> *The Tablet loc. cit.*

<sup>51</sup> Basset 1967, p.407. Numerous stories attach to the career of Fr Purbrick, including that relating to the occasion on which he dined with an old acquaintance from Oxford - Edward Benson, Archbishop of Canterbury - at Lambeth Palace; when, with the appearance of a response to the presence of the Jesuit, a number of pictures fell from the palace wall.

<sup>52</sup> *The Tablet loc. cit.*

<sup>53</sup> In the caves of which St. Ignatius spent ten months after his conversion; in prayer and fasting there experiencing what was to become known as his *Spiritual Exercises* or Thirty Day Retreat.

novice-house of the same name at Roehampton in South West London.<sup>54</sup> However, it is known that at its conclusion, Roussel travelled to Germany “to join his Catholic brother” William, who was then studying at Tübingen.

In September 1894, when William returned to England, Thomas Roussel went “for a month or six weeks” to the Benedictine Abbey of Beuron, the mother house of the Beuron Congregation, in Hohenzollern on the upper Danube, famous for its part in the development of the liturgical movement. We are told that, “Whilst there he was offered and accepted the position of tutor to the second son of Prince von Waldburg-Wolfegg-Waldstein”, an arrangement the regal associations of which much would come to be made in eulogy after Thomas Byles’ death. At the time, however, to Thomas Byles the appointment seems to have proved rather less than satisfying as, we are informed, “the new convert... was burning to do higher things”. After six months he resigned the tutorship in order to return to England.

The next few months were spent, “visiting religious houses, and a large part of it in prayer and retirement in Yorkshire”, it may be presumed at his family home. However, the result of this period of reflection would seem to have been a growing awareness of a sense of vocation to the Catholic priesthood, as during that summer (of 1895) Thomas Roussel offered himself and was accepted as a candidate for ordination by Cardinal Vaughan, Archbishop of Westminster.

The seminarians from the Diocese of Westminster were at this time sent in order to pursue their studies to St Mary’s College, Oscott, which though it was situated in the Diocese of Birmingham and was ostensibly the diocesan seminary, functioned also in a *de facto* manner as a central seminary serving a number of dioceses.<sup>55</sup> Thomas Byles, would then, when commencing his training at St Mary’s in the autumn of 1895, find himself in the company of young men from the dioceses of Birmingham, Clifton, Newport, Portsmouth, Northampton and the Vicariate of Wales.

However, we are informed that ill health soon intervened to prevent Thomas Roussel from continuing his training at Oscott, and that after a matter of only a few weeks he was obliged to leave. This sudden onset of illness has been described as having been due in some way to the climate of the college; “as the autumn wore on the bleak cold weather of Oscott seemed to trouble him, and before the end of the year his health broke down completely, and he had to leave”,<sup>56</sup> or, as described by Mgr Ward, the President of the College, he found “the climate (*at Oscott*) too bracing for his weak

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<sup>54</sup> William Byles, who supplied the information on which *The Tablet* article is based, was himself a Jesuit novice at Manresa House, Roehampton (from 1897-?) and may in the material supplied for publication have referred to it, in familiar terms, as simply *Manresa*. Qv. Letter to Winter from Thomas Byles dated October 21 1897, on Archer website (iii). “His (William’s) address for the next 2 yrs. will be Monroe House, Roehampton, London, S.W.”. *Monroe* here must represent a misreading of *Manresa*.

<sup>55</sup> Qv. Wheeler in Beck (Ed.) 1950, p. 166. Cf. Reynolds 1973, p. 353 & Williams in McClelland & Hodgetts (Eds) 1999, p. 73.

<sup>56</sup> *The Tablet loc. cit.*

frame”.<sup>57</sup> The abstruseness of the terms employed assists little in our comprehension of what was Thomas Byles’ condition,<sup>58</sup> or what might possibly have been the wider context of the situation. However, it is clear that a solution was found in his appointment several weeks later as a master at St. Edmund's College, Ware.

The position at St Edmund’s, which undoubtedly must have been entered into by agreement with Cardinal Vaughan, seems to have been intended to enable Thomas Byles to support himself during recovery from his illness, whilst at the same time allowing him in some measure to continue his training towards ordination.<sup>59</sup> That he did pursue his own studies at St Edmund’s is clearly asserted by Mgr Ward; “after a few months he came further south and entered St Edmund’s to continue his own studies and likewise to act as a Master”.<sup>60</sup> This is confirmed by *The Tablet* in the statement that, “He received the tonsure soon after his arrival”,<sup>61</sup> marking the juridical effects of his becoming a cleric and being incardinated<sup>62</sup> into the diocese – definitely indicating his continued progress towards ordination. However, that Thomas Byles was able to continue his seminary training at St Edmund’s must represent the existence of some kind of special arrangement, as it is known that during this period there were no other students for the priesthood at St Edmund’s, the College having been reduced temporarily to a simple school for lay boys.<sup>63</sup> Thomas remained at the College for almost three years, from the beginning of the Spring Term of 1896 to the end of the Summer Term 1899.

As might be expected in the circumstances, Thomas Roussel’s duties at St Edmund’s seem to have been relatively light, his work as a teacher consisting “principally in giving private tuition to the more promising of the advanced students, and to the coaching of some boys whose preliminary education was found insufficient”.<sup>64</sup> In the judgement of Mgr Ward, however, he was in this capacity “not very successful”, though no specific

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<sup>57</sup> Ward in *The Edmundian*, 1912, p. 109.

<sup>58</sup> I am informed by Joan Byles-Barry, Fr Byles’ great-niece, that it is understood by the family to have been some form of epilepsy.

<sup>59</sup> This interpretation agrees with the “educated guess” of the Westminster Diocesan Archivist, Fr Ian Dickie, that Thomas Byles’ “time at St Edmund’s was probably to give him a living prior to his departure to Rome”. Fr Dickie further suggests that the original purpose of Thomas Byles’ being sent to Oscott was probably that he should, “read in preparation to go on to the Beda where most convert persons went”. From a letter to the present writer (dated 14 March 2000).

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* The Editorial comments in the same edition (p. 72) also make mention of Thomas Byles as “a former student and Professor of St Edmund’s”. The lecturers in seminaries were customarily called “professors”.

<sup>61</sup> *The Tablet*, *loc. cit.* The “tonsure” referred to was a ceremony, performed by the bishop, of clipping the hair of a candidate at the time of admission into the clerical state. It was abolished by Pope Paul VI in 1972.

<sup>62</sup> “Incardination is the word for the act by which a legal bond involving mutual rights and obligations is established between a cleric and some diocese... Clerics cannot be “free agents” in the Catholic Church. They will only be ordained if some juridic person (*such as a diocesan bishop*) sponsors them and permits their ordination...” (Huels, John M., *The Pastoral Companion. A Canon Law Handbook for Catholic Ministry*, Franciscan Press, Quincy, 1995, p. 174).

<sup>63</sup> Cardinal Manning had in 1869 transferred the students in theology at Ware to a newly established seminary in Hammersmith. Cardinal Vaughan, with the failure of the Hammersmith scheme and favouring the notion of a central seminary, transferred them to Oscott. They returned to Ware only in 1904 at the decision of Archbishop (later Cardinal) Bourne, to a newly created Divines’ wing eventually to be called Allen Hall – the precursor of the present-day seminary at Beaufort St., SW3. (Qv. Wheeler *loc. cit.*, p.160 & 173-174, & Reynolds *op cit.*, pp. 347 & 355, & McCormack 1966, pp. 266-269, & O’Neil 1995, pp. 412-413.)

<sup>64</sup> *The Tablet loc. cit.*

reason is attached to grant justification to this assessment.<sup>65</sup> Nonetheless, he was judged “in several ways” to have done some “most useful work”.<sup>66</sup> One unquestioned achievement was the writing, in 1897, of his only published work, *A School Commentary On the Second Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians*, intended as a single volume of a series projected at that time of “scripture manuals for the use of Catholic schools”.<sup>67</sup> He further performed a useful role as the College Librarian, the responsibility falling to him “to catalogue and reorganise the whole of Dr Ward’s celebrated library”<sup>68</sup>, a task which he began but was not able to complete.

That this period was for Thomas Roussel Byles also a time set aside for the purpose of recovery – there being a need for him to be able to demonstrate to his religious superiors the improvement of his physical health - and was therefore to some degree also a time of uncertainty, is evidenced in a letter written by Thomas Roussel to his younger brother Winter, dated September 14<sup>th</sup> September 1897. In this letter, written from Germany where he appears to have been taking an extended touring holiday, Thomas writes,

I am staying on in Germany after taking departure of the others in the hopes of getting a tutorship here for a few months. I think it is w. doubtful if I shall succeed; if not I shall go home probably in a week or two. I have been staying here at a Benedictine Convent for the last week & have had a very pleasant time. I think this is the finest country I have seen... I hope to enter some Religious Order early in next year, but I want to wait a little, partly because I have not yet found out which Order I am best fitted for, & partly because my doctor tells me that by next February, if I have not recurrence, I may consider myself quite cured of my fits, & till that is safe it would probably be difficult to find any Order willing to accept me.<sup>69</sup>

Quite whether Thomas did seriously consider leaving St Edmund’s at this time in order to explore a monastic vocation on the Continent, as seems here to be implied, is impossible to assess. That a good deal of frustration is tacitly indicated here regarding both his position at the College and with the apparently slow progress of the recovery of his health seems not an unreasonable reading. It is clear, however, that in spite of the experience of frustrations he remains capable of confident expressions of faith, and a fraternal concern for his brother Winter’s conversion,

I wish I could impart to you something of the bliss of knowing with certainty what God has revealed for our support & help. It is a happiness which grows more & more every day & which affords a truly marvellous & altogether supernatural support in all temptation, & against all evil. It is however beyond my power to impart this -- the most I can do is to pray God to give to all I love this wonderfully great Gift which I have received: and I trust you also pray continually that God will show you more of His Truth. It is the duty of everyone who does not possess a complete Revelation.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Ward in *The Edmundian loc. cit.* p. 109.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *The Tablet loc. cit.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Archer *loc. cit.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

## **To Rome and the Priesthood**

It was not until 1899 that Thomas Roussel recovered his health sufficiently to be capable of demonstrating his fitness to continue his seminary training.<sup>71</sup> He was then presented to a *bourse* (the equivalent of a scholarship) at the Collegio Beda, and departed St. Edmund's for Rome.

The Beda College was established at mid-century to provide for the needs of Anglican clergy converts who wished to proceed to the Catholic priesthood; some of the more strict requirements of seminary life coming to receive appropriate modification. In this the Beda has been judged to have been, "In many ways... the most innovative of all the English seminary developments in the nineteenth century", the adapted course of study having been "tailored to the needs and capacities of older and more experienced men".<sup>72</sup> In duration the revised course was four, rather than the usual six years, and lectures were delivered in English as opposed to the customary Latin. Thomas Roussel entered the College at a time when it was experiencing a new influx of students, after some years of decline, in response to the Bull *Apostolicae Curae* of 1896, in which Anglican Orders had been declared null and void. He received his degree from the Gregorian University in 1901<sup>73</sup> and in the following year was ordained, for service in the Diocese of Westminster, the Ordination Mass taking place at the Church of S. Appollinare on June 21<sup>st</sup> 1902.

## **"Founding Father" of the Catholic Missionary Society**

On his return to Westminster Diocese it was suggested to the newly ordained *Reverend Father* Byles that he might again take up a teaching post at St Edmund's, Ware. However, in the explanation of Mgr Bernard Ward, Fr Byles "was afraid of the strain of College life" and instead "took up parochial work".<sup>74</sup> That Fr Byles continued to be beset by sporadic illness is certain. But, matters of health apart, it is clear that the work of a teacher had been less than entirely satisfying to him. It would, too, seem not unfeasible that as President of St Edmund's, Mgr Ward might prefer to regard Fr Byles' rejection of a teaching post at the College as attributable to illness rather than to deliberate choice. He is unquestionably mistaken in referring to Fr Byles' entry into "parochial work". It seems rather that Thomas Byles yearned for a more active appointment, "labouring for the conversion of Protestants, the work to which he had ever aspired since his own conversion".<sup>75</sup> In this his aspirations happened to accord with those of his bishop, Cardinal Vaughan.

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<sup>71</sup> Mgr Bernard Ward writes: "Having recovered his health, in 1899, he proceeded to the Collegio Beda, Rome." Ward in *The Edmundian*

<sup>72</sup> Williams in McClelland & Hodgetts 1999, p. 68.

<sup>73</sup> Gorman 1910 refers to this academic qualification as a "D.D. of Rome" (p. 44). However, no other source seems to make mention of this.

<sup>74</sup> Ward in *The Edmundian*, July 1912.

<sup>75</sup> *The Tablet*, May 18, 1912.

Herbert Cardinal Vaughan, third Archbishop of Westminster, had had throughout his life a special concern for the missionary activity of the Church. This concern had most notably found expression in his foundation, when a young priest in 1866, of the St Joseph's Society for Foreign Missions (Mill Hill Missionaries). Now as Archbishop of Westminster the same missionary concern came to be directed to the unchurched masses of his own Archdiocese. It was in response to this that in 1902 he conceived the notion of an association of diocesan priests directed to the task of home-mission work. This task the Cardinal chose to entrust to the leadership of one Fr Charles Rose Chase, a Westminster priest who had previously for thirty years ministered as a clergyman of the Church of England, during which time he had served as a prominent member of the Council of the English Church Union.<sup>76</sup> Fr Chase was temporarily prevented by illness from assuming the post, but when recovered was appointed first Superior. In a letter written by Vaughan to Chase on 13<sup>th</sup> February 1903, the Cardinal asserts that,

The main object is clear and has been pointed out by circumstances and it is by these that the voice of God is usually heard. We have some three hundred priests ministering to the needs of the flock, but outside this flock there are millions within our reach. No one can contemplate, without overpowering grief of soul, the increasing multitudes who profess no religion, and are altogether without a shepherd. Their spiritual condition is like that of the inhabitants of China, Japan, or Central Africa. It is probably worse, for they are descendants of forefathers who were devout Catholics, whereas the latter are not children of Apostates from the truth, but of those who have never known the mysteries of faith and the truths of redemption. It is especially to these millions that I send you to preach the Gospel.<sup>77</sup>

Vaughan gave to the endeavour with which Fr Chase was to be charged the title of the Westminster Diocesan Missionary Society of Our Lady of Compassion; later to be known more simply as the Catholic Missionary Society and its work extended throughout the Church in England and Wales. The chief function of the Society was, in the description of a later Superior (and subsequently, Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster), Fr John Carmel Heenan, "to be the provision of lectures on Catholic theology for non-Catholic audiences". The intention behind this was both evangelistic and more broadly educational; "to attract converts but more so to correct the grotesque notions common early in (*the twentieth*) century regarding Catholic belief and practice".<sup>78</sup>

Unfortunately Cardinal Vaughan did not live to see the success of what would prove his last significant project, as he died only a few months after its inception. However, whilst its activities at first appeared somewhat *outré* to the generality of Catholics, for whom overt evangelisation was something absent from their experience of the Church, the achievements of the Society assured its eventual acceptance. In the words of a biographer of Cardinal Vaughan, "Although these missions to non-Catholics appear at first to have been looked at askance by everyone except the Cardinal the results proved

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<sup>76</sup> Qv. Gorman 1910, p. 53.

<sup>77</sup> McCormack *op. cit.*, pp. 285-287. Qv. also O'Neill 1995, pp. 430-431.

<sup>78</sup> Heenan 1971, p. 289.

so encouraging that they brought about a great change of feeling in regard to them.”<sup>79</sup> When threatened with disappearance after its work had been severely disrupted by the Second World War, the Apostolic Delegate warned the bishops that the Holy See would never condone their action in allowing the Catholic Missionary Society to die, advising that, “It would be assumed that evangelical zeal was cooling and that the Catholics of England had abandoned hope of winning this country back to the Old Faith”.<sup>80</sup> Over time the Society and its work came to be an established and much valued aspect of English Catholic life, as continues to be the case today.

Fr Chase was instructed by Cardinal Vaughan to gather “adherents, friends and supporters” wherever they could be found.<sup>81</sup> Around him Chase succeeded in assembling some of the most able priest-orators of the day, among them Dr John Arendzen, “notable theologian and scripture scholar”<sup>82</sup>, Dr Herbert Vaughan, nephew of the Cardinal, and Fr John Henry Filmer, also a convert from the Church of England and a graduate of King’s College, London.<sup>83</sup> These are commonly regarded to be the “founding fathers” of what was later to become the Catholic Missionary Society. However, in the Society’s own memory of its earliest years it seems there is from this list a significant omission – that of

the name of Fr Thomas R. D. Byles. For whilst there is surprisingly little mention in the available sources regarding this period in Fr Byles’ life,<sup>84</sup> his role in the founding of the Catholic Missionary Society is of definite attestation; as is reflected in a recent account given by Fr John Breen C.M.S.,

(Fr Byles) was a member of the Catholic Missionary Society from its inception in 1903. To our knowledge there were five 'founding fathers', Charles Rose Chase (Superior), Father John Filmer, Dr. Herbert Vaughan, Dr. John Arendzen and Fr. Byles who... was a convert to Catholicism and had trained at the Beda College in Rome. He was present with the C.M.S. team at Longcott, Gunnersbury, from 1903.<sup>85</sup>

That the omission in the sources should consistently have been made of what must be judged a notably historic role on the part of Thomas Byles perhaps becomes explicable in the light of the information forwarded by his brother William to *The Tablet* in which it is stated that, “it was not God’s will that (Fr Byles) should long continue as an active

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<sup>79</sup> McCormack *op.cit.*, p.287.

<sup>80</sup> Heenan *op.cit.*, p. 290.

<sup>81</sup> McCormack *op. cit.*

<sup>82</sup> Heenan *op. cit.*, p. 289.

<sup>83</sup> Qv. Gorman *op. cit.*, p. 103.

<sup>84</sup> *The Tablet* (April 20, 1912) mentions that in 1903 Fr Byles “joined the Diocesan Missionaries”. Again in *The Tablet*, the article based on information supplied by William Byles (appearing May 18<sup>th</sup>) remarks that “The first few months of his missionary life he (Fr Byles) spent in London”. Nyman (1998?), whose information is taken from the Brentwood Diocesan Archive, notes that Fr Byles was “a Diocesan Missionary priest”. Further, Shanahan (*loc. cit.*, p. 49) notes that the *Catholic Directory* of 1904 gives Fr Byles’ place of residence as Loncott (*sic.*), Gunnersbury – Longcott, or Long Court, in Gunnersbury, West London, having been adopted as the Society’s first headquarters (*q.v.* McCormack *op. cit.* p. 287 & O’Neil *op. cit.* p. 431). The additional information supplied by Shanahan regarding the ownership of the house by the two Monsignori Beales and Howarth is perplexing– neither name appearing in the *Catholic Directory* for 1904, nor apparently identifiable from the records of C.M.S.

<sup>85</sup> In an E-mail message to the present writer (dated 7<sup>th</sup> March 2000).

diocesan missionary”<sup>86</sup>; illness again at some early stage seeming to have intervened as a frustrating influence in his life and vocation. This might also explain the lack of reference made to him in the frequent accounts of the activities of the early diocesan missionaries in the Catholic press of the day.<sup>87</sup> Even given what seems may have been his early exclusion from active involvement, we may still conclude that Fr Byles exercised an important influence on the development of the nascent C.M.S., even if this was at the purely advisory or inspirational level.

Illness seems, however, a rather less credible explanation for another episode of which the sources appear to know nothing whatsoever - Fr Byles’ appointment in 1904 as curate-in-charge of St Joseph’s Mission, Barnoldswick, Colne, in the Diocese of Leeds.<sup>88</sup>

For whilst the material provided by his brother for *The Tablet* article referred to above relates that he was obliged to leave his work as a Diocesan Missionary because “his health broke down” and that he had consequently “to remove to the country”, Fr Byles’ appears rather to have been seconded to the Leeds Diocese during this time for a period that seems to have lasted at least several months. Whilst he clearly figures in the brief parish history of St Joseph’s, as a priest of the Diocese of Westminster, no explanation is given as to the circumstances of his appointment, and neither is any mention made of the state of his health.<sup>89</sup> Barnoldswick, on the Lancashire/Yorkshire border, which in 1904 was a bustling mill town with a thriving cotton industry and a rapidly increasing population; and a Mission with a correspondingly increasing number of Catholics and inadequate buildings and resources with which to meet their needs, may seem an unlikely place of refuge for a priest in convalescence.<sup>90</sup> Whether it was indeed due to pastoral reasons connected with his illness that the move was made, allowing him perhaps to be nearer members of his family, or, whether it is simply an example of

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<sup>86</sup> May 18, 1912 *loc.cit.*

<sup>87</sup> A typical example in this regard being the account of a *Mission To Non-Catholics At The Servite Church* in *The Tablet* October 24, 1903, p. 661, in which mention is made of “the little company of priests which Father Chase has got together at Gunnersbury, and which lays itself out for the special work of giving missions to non-Catholics”, named among which company are Dr Arendzen, Fr Filmer and Mgr Vaughan: “Each evening a lecture or sermon is delivered by one of the Fathers, while another devotes himself to answering such questions as have been deposited in writing in a question-box placed at the bottom of the church for their reception. Father Chase opened the course of sermons, and this was followed on Friday by Dr Arendzen, Father Filmer dealing with the questions.”

<sup>88</sup> The only apparent indication appears on the card containing information on Fr Byles from the card-index of the office of the then Vicar General for the Westminster Diocese, which, under a section entitled “MISSION, etc., SINCE ORDINATION:” has hand-written on it the words *Leeds Diocese* in brackets before further, more readily explicable, entries for Kelvedon and Ongar. This card is now in the Westminster Diocesan Archive.

<sup>89</sup> The brief parish history of St Joseph’s, Barnoldswick - anonymous and undated – contains the following: “In 1904 Father Thomas Roussel David (*sic.*) Byles, of the Diocese of Westminster, was appointed Curate in charge at Barnoldswick. Later this Priest moved on to become Rector of Ongar, Essex. In 1912 while travelling to America to be present at his brother’s wedding, he was one of the 1,400 (*sic.*) drowned when the *Titanic* sank. Survivors of the disaster have told that people crowded round Father Byles to receive absolution. Amongst those lost with him were his parents and several brothers and sisters.” The last, totally erroneous statement seems to be based on a mistaken reading of information printed at the time of the disaster in *The True Voice*, 26 April 1912. Regarding the connection between Fr Byles and the Diocese of Leeds I am indebted to Helen Nyman of St Helen’s, Ongar, an amateur local historian who by coincidence knew of Fr Byles’ ministry at Barnoldswick due to relatives she has who happen to live in St Joseph’s parish.

<sup>90</sup> From 1902, the converted upper storey of what had been the Old National School in Barnoldswick served as a Chapel. In the absence of a presbytery, the lower rooms of the building were used as a bedroom and reading room.

ecclesiastical flexibility in the face of a serious scarcity of clergy in some areas of the country at that time, is hard to determine.

Whatever the explanation may be concerning this interlude spent in the Leeds Diocese, the *Catholic Directory* of 1905 indicates that prior to its publication Fr Byles had returned to the Diocese of Westminster and was resident at the mission church of St. Mary Immaculate and The Holy Archangels, Kelvedon, Colchester, in Essex.<sup>91</sup> According to Fr Scott Archer, “St. Mary Immaculate and The Holy Archangels was an unusual parish”, its foundation dating to the 1860's, “when a wealthy local convert paid for a church and gave it to Cardinal Manning of Westminster.” Its large presbytery, subsequently to become a convent, was used to “place priests who were either ill or awaiting another assignment.”<sup>92</sup> It would seem, then, that Thomas Byles on his return from Barnoldswick stayed temporarily at Kelvedon with the purpose of awaiting appointment. This came later that year as he was called to take up responsibility for St. Helen's Mission, Ongar, in Essex.<sup>93</sup>

### **Well loved pastor of St Helen's, Ongar**

As is related in the parish history of St Helen's,<sup>94</sup> during the middle years of the nineteenth century,

The population of Essex quickly increased with the development of ports and resorts along the Essex coast, and the coming of the Eastern Counties Railway... The railways were built with Irish labour which produced an influx of Irish immigrants. The countryside benefitted from the coming of the railway and provision had to be made for people to practice their religion. Missions were established in many towns and for some years before 1869 there had been an attempt to supply priests for Ongar.

From 1865–1869 Servite friars who travelled each week from their recently established house in Chelsea supplied the mission,<sup>95</sup> which, during this time was known as the Mission of St Mary and St Joseph, Ongar. However, the year 1869 saw the consecration by Archbishop Manning of a new church; the Countess Helen Tasker of Middleton Hall, Brentwood, a convert to the Catholic Faith,<sup>96</sup> and William Bernard the 12<sup>th</sup> Baron Petre having acted as the principal benefactors. The dedication of the Ongar Mission thus came to be changed to St Helen's – in honour of the Countess Tasker's name-saint.

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<sup>91</sup> The County of Essex was part of the Diocese of Westminster until March 22<sup>nd</sup> 1907 when it was formed into the Diocese of Brentwood. Mgr Bernard Ward, President of S. Edmund's, Ware, was to become the first bishop of the new diocese. Qv. Wheeler in Beck (Ed.) 1950, pp. 175ff.

<sup>92</sup> Archer website i).

<sup>93</sup> The dates given in the sources for Fr Byles' appointment to Ongar differ between 1905 and 1906. The parish history (Nyman 1998?), which includes what appears to be a complete listing of the clergy who have served the parish from before the time of its foundation, gives 1906. However, the appointment already appears in the *Catholic Directory* of that year, suggesting the greater probability of, perhaps late, 1905.

<sup>94</sup> Nyman *op. cit.*

<sup>95</sup> “...the Servite Friars, newly arrived from Italy left their house in Chelsea on Saturdays and travelled by train to Epping. They would hear confessions until 10pm on Saturday then rise early to celebrate Sunday Mass. On then to Ongar where they would hear confessions and celebrate Mass in a barn behind the King's Head (public house). After lunch they would return to London.” (Nyman *op. cit.*)

<sup>96</sup> Qv. Gorman 1910, p. 266. The Countess is described as, “ a great benefactress to several Catholic Missions and charities.”

By the time of Fr Byles' arrival, St Helen's served a wide area and several communities, including Saffron Walden, Epping and Dunmow - in each of which places Mass was celebrated once a month - as also the populations of the Epping and Ongar workhouses. Fr Byles was appointed as a Missionary Apostolic, the common title at this period for secular (or diocesan) priests-in-charge, later becoming Missionary Rector.<sup>97</sup> Of Fr Byles' ministry at St. Helen's it was later said,

This scholar, one-time tutor of the German Prince, an intimate friend of Jowett, member of a highly articulate political family was, for seven years, until his death, in charge of a sprawling country mission, with a tiny church and very few people. Most of them very poor. In his loving service to his congregation he was shown to be a man humbly devoted to his duty.<sup>98</sup>

In the parish history he is remembered for the quality both of his intellect and of his pastoral care – the latter seeming to flow from a genuine interest in the lives of his people, regardless of the vast difference between their life experience and his own; a quality which, at times, could lead him into uncharacteristic pursuits,

He was known to be a learned man, a good preacher and a caring pastor to his people. A number of Ongar boys wishing to learn boxing were taught by Fr Byles, the instruction taking place in a large shed behind the church.<sup>99</sup>

Involvement in the vigorous and manly activities of the Boy Scout movement, too, proved not to be beyond Fr Byles' capabilities, as his friend and neighbour, Mgr Watson reveals,

Less capable of scouting than anyone I know he was a most enthusiastic advocate of the noble game as a most excellent training for youth. And it was after the great catastrophe that I found in his room the certificate of having qualified himself to give first aid to sufferers.<sup>100</sup>

The demands of traversing the considerable distances between the various communities of his far-flung parish made of him also an improbable devotee of the bicycle,

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<sup>97</sup> Qv. Nyman *op. cit.* The terms *Missionary Apostolic* and *Missionary Rector* reflect the particular circumstances of the English Catholic Church at this period. Even after the Restoration of the Hierarchy in 1850, England remained missionary territory, ecclesiastical structures reflecting the provisionality which was the requirement of an evolving Church; in the description of Morgan Sweeney, "Territorial bishops were appointed, but parish priests were not; in fact parishes were only to come into being with the Code (*of Canon Law*) in 1918... The country continued to operate under Propaganda (*now known as The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*), securing its release by "Sapientia Consilio" of Pius X in 1908. Only the progress of the Church in England, the Holy See judged, could justify the breaking of this last link with missionary status... The arrangements were admirable for a missionary country. The boundaries of districts and missions could be changed easily; and there was a considerable amount of freedom from established rights and vested interests that can hamper a rapidly expanding Church. Parishes... were units too stable for the country in its present state. In order to meet the objections of the clergy certain missions in each diocese were to be given a certain stability. Their pastors were to be Missionary Rectors and could only be moved after reference to a special committee of investigation. In other words certain rectors in the diocese were guaranteed a stability denied to others, a stability closely approximating to that of parish priests." (Sweeney in Beck (Ed.) 1950, pp.117 & 119). Qv. also Norman 1984, pp.108-109.

<sup>98</sup> Shanahan *loc. cit.*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>99</sup> Nyman *op. cit.*

<sup>100</sup> Watson in *The Edmundian* July 1912, p. 112.

When I first made his acquaintance and he proposed to go with me on the bicycle, I opened my eyes; he would have to go a considerable pace, I understood he was an invalid. Yes: but not in that way; not in the matter of bicycling. So I found to my cost, especially going up-hill, and I shall not forget the effort it wrung from me to keep the lead on a certain evening late in last September, or how, I was urged to greater flight and fright by the sight I saw over my shoulder in the gathering gloom, as of some preternatural jockey, bending to his work, heated, hatless, weird, dogging every revolution of my wheels.<sup>101</sup>

In spite of the making of this vigorous response to the demands of his ministry, Fr Byles continued to suffer ill health, and in view of this was regarded to have demonstrated very considerable courage. Unafraid as he shows himself to be of forthright criticism of his friend, Mgr Watson nevertheless comes to conclude regarding Fr Byles,

The devotion of a highly educated man to very humble duty, of a man of little strength to hard and rough duty – with full recognition of its true dignity – that alone, to which I testify without a shadow of doubt, is a halo about his head perceptible to every priest. Nor did he measure duty by obligation, or by the bounds of his own parish. Poor as he was he was more munificent to the Crusade of Rescue, than many a wealthy man might be. I never heard him boast about anything; the tutelage of the German Prince, the intimacy with Jowett, to say nothing of things really worthy of honourable mention I learnt only recently. Whatever Thomas Byles was in physique, in him there was nothing low or mean or little, nothing vulgar. Keenly am I reminded of a certain essay of Bacon's in which he points out that while personal disadvantages are to the mean an occasion of malice, to the nobly inclined they are a stimulus to virtue, as though in that at least the unfortunate would rise above the world.<sup>102</sup>

### **An invitation to a wedding**

Thomas' brother, William, subsequent to his conversion entered the Jesuit Novitiate at Manresa House, Roehampton, with thoughts of joining the Society of Jesus. However, finding that his vocation lay elsewhere than in the religious life, he left the Jesuit Novitiate and went to the United States of America to pursue a career in business<sup>103</sup>. Settling in New York, he there fell in love with one Isabella Katherine Russell of Brooklyn. Marriage came to be proposed, and a wedding arranged. William invited Thomas to sing the Nuptial Mass, which was organised to take place on Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> April 1912, at St. Augustine's Catholic Church, New York.<sup>104</sup>

Fr Byles proceeded to make the necessary arrangements for his part in the celebrations, writing to William to clarify some points of detail regarding the Mass<sup>105</sup>, and obtaining a ticket for an Atlantic steamship in order to make the passage to America. Initially

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<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>103</sup> Apparently in the rubber industry.

<sup>104</sup> Hind Website (i) differs from other sources in positing Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> April as the date of the wedding. This suggestion must be thought highly unlikely given the restrictions in liturgical law regarding the celebration of matrimony, and, indeed seems clearly disproved by contemporary newspaper coverage.

<sup>105</sup> *Qv.* Archer website (iii). Fr Byles in this letter expresses some anxiety regarding the possible discrepancies between the American form for the Solemnisation of Matrimony and that in use in England. He also mentions the announcement in the Diocese of Westminster of two diocesan pilgrimages, the first to Lourdes and the second to Rome, in celebration of the election of Archbishop Bourne to the College of Cardinals.

securing a ticket for another ship of the White Star Line, close to the time of sailing he transferred to *Titanic* when it became known that places were still available on board for her maiden voyage.<sup>106</sup> In words which were to appear in one obituary we are told that, “The prospect of sailing in the maiden voyage of the largest ship afloat was not without its interest, and that of a kind which would have appealed to Father Byles’ mind”.<sup>107</sup> He held second class ticket No. 244310, which had cost £13 – a significant sum to which the people at St Helen’s Mission made generous contribution.

*Titanic* was due to sail at midday on the Wednesday of Easter Week, 10<sup>th</sup> April, and was expected to arrive in New York a week later on Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup>. On the morning of his departure, Fr Byles took the railway to London and at Waterloo Station joined the boat train for Southampton. The train making its arrival directly adjacent to the White Star Company’s dock recently constructed especially to accommodate *Titanic* and her sister-ship *Olympic*, Fr Byles alighted and entered the ship by the second class gangway on C-deck. The formalities of boarding completed, arrangement was made with the ship’s Commander, Captain Edward J. Smith, for the use of a space on board ship in which to daily offer Mass – Fr Byles having brought with him a “portable altar, with all accessories” loaned by his friend, Mgr Watson.<sup>108</sup>

Delayed due to a near collision when departing Southampton<sup>109</sup>, *Titanic* crossed the English Channel to arrive at 6.30 pm at Cherbourg in order to take on additional passengers and mail. Whilst the ship lay at anchor, Fr Byles wrote to his housekeeper Miss Field at Ongar, evidently unperturbed by the eventfulness of the commencement of the voyage,

Everything so far has gone very well... We arrived at Southampton in the boat train at 11.30 and started at 12 o'clock very punctually. At one we had lunch. We were then still in Southampton Water, but when we came out of lunch we were between Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight. Before coming out of supper we had stopped at Cherbourg, and the tender was just coming alongside with passengers. The tender is a good sized boat of 1260 tons, but by the side of the *Titanic* she looks as though with a good crane we could lift her out of the water and lay her on deck without feeling any inconvenience... At the time of writing 7.45 we are still stopping at Cherbourg. The English Channel was decidedly rough to look at, but we felt it no more in the roughest part than when we were in Southampton Water. I do not much like the throbbing of the screws but that is the only motion we feel... I shall not be able to say Mass tomorrow morning, as we shall be just arriving at Queenstown and there will consequently be some confusion, but after that there will be no difficulty about it.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> In spite of the publicity surrounding her sailing, *Titanic* was well below full passenger-capacity when she embarked - “...due to the slack season and uncertainties of travel during the coal strike, (*Titanic*) was only two-thirds full (*when she sailed*). Lord 1986, p.83.

<sup>107</sup> Ward in *The Edmudian* loc. cit. p. 110.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> As *Titanic* moved into Southampton’s River Test, the displacement of water caused by her passing broke the hawsers of the American vessel *New York* moored nearby. The stern of *New York* swung out dangerously close to *Titanic*, but the tug boat *Vulcan* succeeded in averting a collision. *Titanic*’s departure was, nevertheless, delayed by over an hour.

<sup>110</sup> Qv. Hind website (1.i).

Also included in the letter are details of arrangements on board ship - *Titanic* herself being an item of considerable general interest - as well as mention of two other Catholic priests among the passengers; one a Benedictine from Bavaria, Fr. Joseph M. Peruschitz O.S.B., and the other a secular priest from Lithuania, Fr. Juozas Montvila.<sup>111</sup>

The stop at Queenstown, now called Cobh, in Ireland mentioned by Fr Byles in his letter, was made the following morning where a handful of passengers disembarked<sup>112</sup>, and over a hundred emigrants joined the ship, ferried out by tenders together with over one thousand sacks of mail. At 1.30 pm, the *Titanic* weighed anchor and slipped out of sight of land bound for New York.

The remainder of Thursday, together with Friday and Saturday were uneventful days at sea. We learn from the witness of one survivor that Fr Byles was observed in the company of fellow priest, Fr Peruschitz<sup>113</sup>, and that both were to be seen in the library; one of the few distractions available to passengers in second class,<sup>114</sup>

In the middle of the room are two Catholic priests, one quietly reading - either English or Irish, and probably the latter (*sic*) - the other, dark, bearded, with a broad-brimmed hat, talking earnestly to a friend in German and evidently explaining some verse in the open Bible before him...<sup>115</sup>

Fr Byles and his two priest-colleagues were also throughout these days in regular contact with passengers in steerage, through the celebration of daily Mass, but also in extending to them an informal pastoral ministry<sup>116</sup>. It is important to remember that, in the words of a recent writer, "...*Titanic*, for all its reputation for opulence, was both economically and officially an emigrant ship"<sup>117</sup>. Among the passengers of third class – who outnumbered those in both first and second combined - were many who in the terms of today would be classed as refugees, members of, "...‘the huddled masses’... making their way ... from the reality of one continent to the hope of another"<sup>118</sup>. Large numbers of these were from Ireland or other predominantly Catholic countries. It was, no doubt, to many of them of considerable comfort to have the celebration of Mass and

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<sup>111</sup> Fr Peruschitz, a monk of Scheyern Abbey, was journeying to Minnesota to become principal of a Benedictine-run high school. He had broken his journey by spending Holy Week at Ramsgate Abbey. Fr Montvila had courageously ministered to the Lithuanian Uniates then under proscription by the Czarist regime. Arrested and forbidden the exercise of his priesthood, he decided to leave the country in order to serve the Lithuanian Catholic emigrant community in the United States. Considered a hero in Lithuania his case is under consideration for beatification. Both priests died in the sinking of *Titanic*; their bodies, if recovered, were never identified. Qv. biographical entries on Hind Website.

<sup>112</sup> Including Francis M. Browne, a college teacher later to become a Jesuit priest, whose collection of photographs taken on board *Titanic* between Southampton and Queenstown has become an invaluable historical record of the short-lived glory of the great ship.

<sup>113</sup> The bearded, broad-hatted priest has been identified as *either* Fr Peruschitz *or* Fr Montvila. However, it appears that Fr Montvila was a third class passenger and as such would not have had access to areas reserved to the second class. It might be argued also that the description seems to better represent a religious rather than a secular priest.

<sup>114</sup> As opposed to the amenities available to the first cabin, among which were a swimming pool, squash court and Turkish bath.

<sup>115</sup> Beesley in Winocour (Ed.) 1960, p.23.

<sup>116</sup> "We knew (Fr Byles) because he had visited us several times on board...". From the testimony of two survivors from steerage, in Shanahan 1975, p.47.

<sup>117</sup> Howells 1999, p.13.

<sup>118</sup> *ibid.*

the presence of priests in the midst of the uncertainties of the journey they were involved in making.

On the morning of Sunday April 14<sup>th</sup>, Father Byles offered Mass for what would be the last time. It was Low Sunday, the Sunday after Easter.<sup>119</sup> Mass was celebrated for second class passengers in their lounge, and later for third class passengers at a seemingly unrecorded location in steerage. At the two Masses Fr Byles preached a sermon both in English and in French. He could have had no idea of the degree of pertinence of his choice of subject, being on, “the need of the lifeboat of religious consolation in the event of spiritual shipwreck.”<sup>120</sup> After Fr Byles had finished preaching, Fr Peruschitz rendered the sermon into German and Hungarian.<sup>121</sup>

For the passengers on board *Titanic* the afternoon and evening of that Sunday were as untroubled and uneventful as had been the previous few days’ sailing. The weather was bright and clear, although during the course of the afternoon a noticeable chill descended driving passengers from the decks to seek the greater comfort of indoors. Unknown to the majority of them this fall in temperature coincided not insignificantly with the receipt by the ship’s wireless room of a series of ice-warnings from other vessels indicating the presence of a large ice-field within her projected course. As a precaution her Captain ordered a special watch to be kept for ice. The ship, however, continued to speed onwards, the Captain confident in the knowledge, awarded by many years’ experience, that any disaster could be safely averted by swift evasive action.

### **A Martyr for Charity**

We do not know the whereabouts of Fr Byles when the collision occurred, although not unreasonably Mgr Ward concludes, “When the ship struck the iceberg, Father Byles was - as were most of the passengers - in bed”.<sup>122</sup> Neither is it known whether or not he was among those who felt the impact of the collision, or how it was he received the Captain’s instruction, passed falteringly by word of mouth throughout the ship: “All passengers on deck with lifebelts on”. In the witness of survivors,<sup>123</sup> he was first noticed on the boat-deck where “hastily dressed or partially dressed people” had begun to assemble, “tying lifebelts over their clothing”.<sup>124</sup> Unaware as was most everyone else that there was any real danger, Fr Byles had evidently decided to usefully employ the unexpected interruption in his sleep by reciting the Divine Office from his Breviary,

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<sup>119</sup> Also sometimes known as *Quasimodo* due to the opening words of the Introit of the Mass; *Quasi modo geniti infantes*, taken from 1 Peter 2:2. The Gospel of the Mass would have come from Saint John, Chapter 20, the story of the incredulity of St Thomas. It may perhaps be considered that the words, *...et noli esse incredulus, sed fidelis. Respondit Thomas, et dixit ei: Dominus meus, et Deus meus*, could not have been more appropriate given the trial which the coming night was to bring.

<sup>120</sup> Shanahan 1975 p.49.

<sup>121</sup> Again there is some ambiguity surrounding which one of the other two priests on board assisted at the Masses offered by Fr Byles. Probability seems to favour Fr Peruschitz. Other accounts suggest that two, or all three, of the priests celebrated Mass with a congregation that morning, however, none of the accounts gives any detail.

<sup>122</sup> Ward in *The Edmundian* loc. cit.

<sup>123</sup> For detailed biographical notes on the identity of those survivors who gave testimony regarding the actions of Fr Byles during the sinking, *qv.* Hind Website entries 2.i, 2.ii, 2.iii, 2.iv, 2.vi, and 2.viii.

<sup>124</sup> Beesley in Winocour (Ed.) loc. cit. p. 61

When the Titanic struck the priest was on the upper deck walking backwards and forwards reading his office, the daily prayers which form part of the duties of every Roman Catholic priest.<sup>125</sup>

He was reading out of a leather bound book (his priest's book of hours) and did not pay any attention. He thought as the rest of us did that there wasn't really any danger.<sup>126</sup>

Regardless of mounting indications to the contrary, the misapprehension on the part of the majority of *Titanic's* passengers that there was still no real threat to their safety, persisted well after the first lifeboats came to be lowered,

By 12.30 (*a.m.*) Captain Smith had instructed his officers to start loading the lifeboats – women and children first... but despite... the thunderous “roar and hiss of escaping steam from the boilers” and even though the ship was slightly down at the bow and was beginning to show a discernible list to starboard, many people remained reluctant to exchange the seeming safety of the ship for the apparent risk of the lifeboats. The ship's band added to a kind of party atmosphere with a medley of lively tunes.<sup>127</sup>

As is recalled by second class passenger Lawrence Beesley,

At this stage great difficulty was experienced in getting women to leave the ship, especially where the order was so rigorously enforced, ‘Women and children only.’ Women in many cases refused to leave their husbands, and were actually forcibly lifted up and dropped in to the boats. They argued with the officers, demanding reasons, and in some cases even when induced to get in were disposed to think the whole thing a joke, or a precaution which it seemed to them rather foolish to take. In this they were encouraged by the men left behind, who, in the same condition of ignorance, said good-bye to their friends as they went down (*in the lifeboats*), adding that they would see them again at breakfast-time.<sup>128</sup>

*Titanic* was, however, by her chance encounter with the iceberg, already doomed to founder, and would not again see the light of day. The iceberg damage, though in actual area surprisingly slight, had so compromised the ship's famous arrangement of “watertight” compartments that a sequence of events was initiated that would inexorably lead to her destruction.<sup>129</sup>

At what point it occurred to Fr Byles that there was indeed something seriously amiss with the ship and that those on board were genuinely imperilled is again impossible with any certainty to ascertain; although it may have been with the firing of the first distress rockets at 12.55 a.m.,

The band played on as the bow sank farther. With the firing of the distress rockets, the milling passengers began to realize that the *Titanic* was in genuine trouble.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> *The True Voice* Friday 26 April 1912, p. 1.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> Ballard 1995, p. 33

<sup>128</sup> Beesley in Winocour (Ed.) *loc. cit.* p.63

<sup>129</sup> It is thought, from subsequent examination of the wreck, that the area of the ship's hull opened to the sea by the iceberg damage amounted to rather less than twelve square feet, consisting mostly of gaps of only a finger's-width.

<sup>130</sup> Ballard *op. cit.* p. 35.

As, again, is recalled by survivor, Lawrence Beesley,

But if there were any one who had not by now realized that the ship was in danger, all doubt on this point was to be set at rest in a dramatic manner. Suddenly a rush of light from the forward deck, a hissing roar that made us all turn from watching the boats, and a rocket leapt upwards... with a sea of faces upturned to watch it... And presently another, and then a third. It is no use denying the dramatic intensity of the scene:... the calmness of the night, the sudden light on the decks crowded with people in different stages of dress and undress, the background of huge funnels and tapering masts revealed by the soaring rocket, whose flash illumined at the same time the faces and minds of the obedient crowd, the one with mere physical light, the other with a sudden revelation of what its message was. Every one knew without being told that we were calling for help from any one who was near enough to see.<sup>131</sup>

Whenever it was the realisation dawned, as soon as the urgency of the situation impressed itself upon him, Fr Byles proceeded with haste to assist in persuading the women and children about him to enter the lifeboats. In the witness of a survivor,

Then I saw him put the book in his pocket and hurry around to help women into the boats.<sup>132</sup>

As well as joining in lending mere physical assistance, it is recorded that Fr Byles also gave spiritual consolation to the many first and second class passengers on the boat-deck at this time,

After the real danger was apparent... Father Byles went among the passengers, hearing (the) confessions of some and giving absolution<sup>133</sup>

This immediate task having presumably been accomplished to the best of his ability, Fr Byles' thoughts evidently turned next to the many passengers from third class who still remained below decks. For although a great crowd now milled anxiously about on the boat-deck there were among them very few passengers from steerage.<sup>134</sup>

This situation would to Fr Byles have undoubtedly been readily, and distressingly, explicable; the journey from third class to the upper decks was not easy, which from the experience of the previous few days he would have known very well. The third class berths were located deep within the bow and stern - the least desirable areas of the ship - access even to the facilities provided on board specifically for third class being difficult from these areas. Barriers, often in the form of iron gates, marked the many divisions between steerage and first and second class - as American immigration law then required. Ordinarily among the areas to which no access was allowed was included the boat-deck where the lifeboats were stowed. In order now to find their way to the boat-deck, passengers from third class - cast out of their bunks with little comprehensible explanation, half dressed, many trying to gather up their frightened

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<sup>131</sup> Beesley in Winocour (Ed.) *loc. cit.* p. 35

<sup>132</sup> Agnes McCoy in *The True Voice loc. cit.*

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> "Most third-class passengers had so far failed to get above decks" Ballard *op. cit.* p.34

children - would have to negotiate their way to safety through a bewildering labyrinth of gangways and stairs; some routes, regardless of the extremity of the circumstances, remaining barred to them.<sup>135</sup>

John Hart was a steward in third class who, in the absence of specific orders, took it upon himself, like Fr Byles, to assist third class passengers up to the boat-deck. We are informed that Hart's actions were determined by the realisation that steerage passengers would be incapable of undertaking the journey unassisted,

At half past midnight the word came down to third class to send the women and children up to the boat deck. Steward [John Edward] Hart, who had realized early on that the third-class passengers had almost no chance of negotiating the passageways and corridors that were usually inaccessible to steerage if left to themselves, began to organize his charges into little groups.<sup>136</sup>

Added to the difficulty of the situation which faced escaping passengers from steerage was the factor of language, for as Richard Howells has written, finding one's way to the boat-deck depended as much on communication as topology,

The crew of the *Titanic* were almost exclusively British, while the third-class passengers were... a 'Babel of nationalities', comprising Armenians, Italians, Syrians, Chinese, Russians, Scandinavian and Dutch in addition to those from the British Isles... for every three third-class passengers who could speak English, there were four who could not. The crew would, therefore, have been unable to communicate with the majority of third-class passengers at the best of times, let alone in time of crisis. The problem was further exaggerated by the fact that the *Titanic* had no public address system and had also had... no lifeboat drill. It was a recipe, therefore, for chaos in which language (or the lack of it) was a significant ingredient<sup>137</sup>

Being in a privileged position to appreciate the perilous nature of the circumstances facing the many hundreds of third class passengers below decks, Fr Byles descended to steerage in order to assist with the task of leading people there up to the lifeboats,

After the *Titanic* struck Fr Byles made his way to the steerage. He was active in getting steerage passengers up to the boat deck and assisting women and children into the lifeboats.<sup>138</sup>

When the crash came we were thrown from our berths...slightly dressed, we prepared to find out what had happened. We saw before us, coming down the passageway, with his hand uplifted, Father Byles. We knew him because he had visited us several times on board and celebrated Mass for us that very morning.<sup>139</sup>

At some juncture impossible to determine, Fr Byles seems to have met with Fr Peruschitz, who for the same purpose had chosen to make the journey to third class. An eyewitness account, however, relates that,

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<sup>135</sup> Lord 1986 p. 99.

<sup>136</sup> Butler in Foster (Ed.) 1999, p. 170.

<sup>137</sup> Howells *op. cit.* p. 95.

<sup>138</sup> *The Tablet loc. cit.* p. 712

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

Of the two clergymen (*Fr Byles*) was the leader not only in rendering material aid to the frightened emigrants, but in keeping the religious aspect of the terrible occasion to the fore.<sup>140</sup>

Very likely as much to keep order and to calm the crowds of passengers who they were mustering to be lead above decks, as to focus the minds of these people on things spiritual, the priests began the recitation of the Rosary,

A few of us became very excited... and then it was that the priest again raised his hand and instantly they were calm once more. The passengers were immediately impressed by the absolute self-control of the priest. He began the recitation of the rosary. The prayers of all regardless of creed, were mingled and the responses 'Holy Mary' were loud and strong.<sup>141</sup>

An indication of the extent of the confusion on the part of the crew as a result of the lack of communication of specific orders or of rehearsed emergency procedures is the witness of survivors to the fact that, while the two priests were going from cabin to cabin rousing the occupants, there were present third class stewards who were attempting to order them back to bed,

Meanwhile the stewards ordered us back to bed... but we would not go.<sup>142</sup>

Having gathered together the women and children, the two priests proceeded to lead them in making the convoluted journey through the ship,

Continuing the prayers... he led us to where the boats were being lowered.<sup>143</sup>

...he then lead the way to the boat-deck, with which fortunately he was acquainted<sup>144</sup>

An illuminating picture of the unavoidable complexity of this journey is provided in the story related by Daniel Allen Butler regarding aforementioned third class steward John Hart in his efforts to lead passengers from steerage to the boat-deck,

Around 12.50 he set off for the boat deck, leading a score of women, some with children in tow... It wasn't an easy trip: the design of the ship, because of those outdated American immigration laws that required third class physically separated from the other classes of passengers, allowed no direct route from the third-class berthing areas to the boat deck, and access to what routes there were was very limited. That was why Hart had to lead his group up the stairs to the third-class Lounge on C deck, across the after well deck, past the second-class Library, into first class, along a stretch of corridor that led past the surgeon's office and the private dining saloon for the first-class' servants, and finally out to the grand staircase, which carried them up to the boat deck.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.* Of the whereabouts during the sinking of *Fr Montvila* nothing is definitely known. However, it does seem that there may be evidence for the presence of a priest remaining below decks in steerage with passengers from third class as the ship sank. Qv. Butler in Foster (Ed.) loc. cit. p. 173.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> Ward in *The Edmundian* loc. cit., p. 110

<sup>145</sup> Butler in Foster (Ed.) loc. cit.

The location of the third class accommodation from which Frs Byles and Peruschitz, together with their company of steerage passengers, began their journey is not known - though it would certainly seem to have been in a part of the ship other than that in which John Hart was steward; neither is known the precise route they would have elected to take. It is, however, clear that they eventually made their arrival on the boat-deck on the port-side of the second class promenade towards the stern of the ship, where Lifeboats 10, 12, 14 and 16 were being loaded and swung out. This much may be ascertained from the fact that the primary testimony to Fr Byles' actions on board *Titanic* during the disaster came from passengers who the records suggest were rescued in lifeboats 14 and 16.<sup>146</sup>

In her memoirs, stewardess Violet Jessop, who also made her escape from the ship in Lifeboat 16, recalls that, "all the women in our boat were immigrants who had left their menfolk on board",<sup>147</sup> to which John Maxtone-Graham, her editor, adds

It is not surprising that she found herself in a boat full of immigrant passengers, simply because of lifeboat 16's geographical placement on *Titanic's* boat deck. Suspended from the aftermost davits on the port side, it was nearest the most viable approach route for passengers of the third class, clambering up to the deck from their well deck aft.<sup>148</sup>

Indicated here may, then, be some clue as to how the two priests and the women and children accompanying them achieved the boat-deck. Regardless of how they arrived at the lifeboats, it was remembered that when the boats were being loaded and lowered Fr Byles remained to see the women and children safely on board,

Helping the women and children in he whispered to them words of comfort and encouragement.<sup>149</sup>

This reassurance was undoubtedly welcome, for by now signs of panic were beginning to appear among passengers on the decks nearby, which would soon give rise to violence.

By 1.30 A.M., the bow was well down in the water and the list had shifted heavily to port. People found it hard to keep their balance, and signs of panic began to appear.<sup>150</sup>

Lifeboat 10 is thought to have been lowered at approximately 1.20 a.m., Lifeboats 12, 14 and 16 between 1.25 – 1.30 a.m. Whilst it was being loaded Lifeboat 14 was twice rushed by groups of men attempting to force their way on board, Fifth Officer Lowe resorting to the use of his firearm to keep them at bay.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Qv biographies of survivors on Hind Website

<sup>147</sup> Jessop & Maxtone-Graham 1999, p. 139.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.* C.f. Lord 1976 p. 95.

<sup>149</sup> *The Tablet loc. cit.*

<sup>150</sup> Ballard *op. cit.*, p. 36

<sup>151</sup> Several... men... jumped into a boat (*boat 14*). Most of the men were hauled out... Another young man – no more than a boy – wasn't so lucky. Fifth Officer Lowe caught him under a seat in No. 14, begging that he wouldn't take up much room. Lowe drew his gun, but the boy pleaded harder. Then Lowe changed his tactics, told him to be a man, and somehow got him out. By

In the midst of this excitement and disorder, both priests were reputedly encouraged to accept the offer of a place on the boats, which both declined,

One sailor warned the priest of his danger and begged him to board a boat. Father Byles refused. The same seaman spoke to him again and he seemed anxious to help him, but he refused again. Father Byles could have been saved, but he would not leave while one was left and the sailor's entreaties were not heeded.<sup>152</sup>

(Fr Peruschitz) could have had a place in one of the lifeboats, but he declined to take it.<sup>153</sup>

*Titanic* was provided with space in her lifeboats for 980 people, although in the event of the disaster only 705 would occupy this space.<sup>154</sup> Of the approximately 2228 passengers and crew who had sailed with *Titanic*, over 1500 were left onboard when she sank. By 2.05 a.m. the last lifeboats had rowed away from the stricken ship. *Titanic's* flooded bow plunged below the water, sending a huge wave aft which washed many people into the sea. With her bow submerged the stern of the ship began to rise, those many hundreds of people still onboard left clinging to her slanting decks.

The process of *Titanic's* final foundering was immensely violent and, for those on board her, terrifying in the extreme - as is made apparent in the witness of survivor Jack Thayer, who, washed off the deck when the bow submerged, observed the final moments of the ship from the water,

The water was over the base of the first funnel. The mass of people on board were surging back, always back toward the floating stern. The rumble and roar continued, with even louder distinct wrenchings and tearings of boilers and engines from their beds. Suddenly the whole super-structure of the ship appeared to split, well forward to midship, and bow or buckle upwards. The second funnel, large enough for two automobiles to pass through abreast, seemed to be lifted off, emitting a cloud of sparks... Her deck was turned slightly toward us. We could see groups of the almost fifteen hundred people aboard, clinging in clusters or bunches, like swarming bees; only to fall in masses, pairs or singly, as the great part of the ship, two hundred and fifty feet of it, rose into the sky, till it reached a sixty-five or seventy degree angle. Here it seemed to pause, and just hung, for what felt like minutes. Gradually she turned her deck away from us, as though to hide from our sight the awful spectacle... Then, with the deadened noise of the bursting of her last few gallant bulkheads, she slid quietly away from us into the sea<sup>155</sup>

The same scene is described by another survivor, Filson Young, who recalls that,

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now Mrs Charlotte Collyer and other women in the boat were sobbing, her eight-year-old daughter Marjory joined the uproar, tugging at Lowe's arm and crying, 'Oh, Mr Man, don't shoot, please don't shoot the poor man!' Lowe paused long enough to smile and nod at her reassuringly. The boy was out now, anyhow, lying face down near a coil of rope. But No. 14's troubles weren't over. Another wave of men rushed the boat. Seaman Scarrott beat them back with the tiller. This time Lowe pulled his gun and shouted, 'If anyone else tries that, this is what he'll get!' He fired three times along the side of the ship as the boat dropped down to the sea. (Lord 1976, pp. 101-102.)

<sup>152</sup> *The Tablet loc. cit.*, p. 712.

<sup>153</sup> Saint John's Abbey Quarterly Website.

<sup>154</sup> Eaton & Haas 1996 *op. cit.*, p. 24

<sup>155</sup> Ballard 1995 *op. cit.*, p.40 - 42

The slope of the deck increased, and the sea came washing up against it as waves wash against a steep shore. And then that helpless mass of humanity was stricken at last with the fear of death, and began to scramble madly aft, away from the chasm of water that kept creeping up and up the decks. Then a strange thing happened. They who had been waiting to sink into the sea found themselves rising into the air as the slope of the decks grew steeper. Up and up, dizzily high out of reach of the dark waters into which they had dreaded to be plunged, higher and higher into the air, towards the stars, the stern of the ship rose slowly right out of the water, and hung there for a time that is estimated variously between two and five minutes; a terrible eternity to those who were still clinging. Many, thinking the end had come, jumped; the water resounded with splash after splash as the bodies, like mice shaken out of a bucket, dropped into the water... We dare not linger here, even in imagination... at this poor human agony, this last pitiful scramble for dear life that the serene stars shone upon. We must either turn our faces away, or withdraw to that surrounding circle where the boats were hovering with their terror-stricken burdens, and see what they saw. They saw the after part of the ship, blazing with light, stand up, a suspended prodigy, between stars and the still waters; they saw the black atoms, each one of which they knew to be a living man or woman on fire with agony, sliding down like rubbish into the sea; they saw the giant decks bend and crack; they heard a hollow and tremendous rumbling as the great engines tore themselves from their steel beds and crashed through the ships; they saw sparks streaming in a golden rain from one of the funnels; heard the dull boom of an explosion while the spouting funnel fell over into the sea with a slap that killed everyone beneath it and set the nearest boat rocking; heard two more dull bursting reports as the steel bulkheads gave way or decks blew up; saw the lights flicker out, flicker back again and then go out for ever, and the ship... launched herself with one slow plunge and dive beneath the waves.<sup>156</sup>

According to the testimony of survivor Marshall Drew,

As row by row of the porthole lights of the *Titanic* sank into the sea this was about all one could see. When the *Titanic* upended to sink, all was blacked out until the tons of machinery crashed to the bow. This sounded like an explosion, which of course it was not. As this happened the hundreds and hundreds of people were thrown into the sea. It isn't likely I shall ever forget the screams of these people as they perished in water said to be 28 degrees.<sup>157</sup>

And, experienced from the relative safety of a lifeboat, Lawrence Beesley also recalls the sinking's horrific aftermath,

...unprepared as we were for such a thing, the cries of the drowning floating across the quiet sea filled us with stupefaction: we longed to return and rescue at least some of the drowning, but we knew it was impossible... The cries, which were loud and numerous at first, died away gradually one by one, but the night was clear, frosty and still, the water smooth, and the sounds must have carried on its level surface free from any obstruction for miles, certainly much farther from the ship than we were situated. I think the last of them must have been heard nearly forty minutes after the *Titanic* sank. Lifebelts would keep the survivors afloat for hours; but the cold water stopped their cries.<sup>158</sup>

It was into this fearful narrative that the two priests willingly inserted themselves by choosing to remain for the sake of those left onboard *Titanic* as she sank. The accounts of their actions credited to eyewitnesses, if inconsistent in detail and chronology,

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<sup>156</sup> Young in Foster (Ed.) 1999, pp. 77 - 78.

<sup>157</sup> Eaton & Haas *op. cit.*, p. 33.

<sup>158</sup> Beesley in Winocour (Ed.) *loc. cit.*, pp. 48 – 49.

nevertheless succeed in relating their own graphic story – which becomes in the reading, for Frs Byles and Peruschitz, their stark martyrology:

Father Byles was last seen leading a group in prayer on the second cabin deck of the Titanic when the ship sank.<sup>159</sup>

After I got in the boat, which was the last one to leave, and we were slowly going further away from the ship, I could hear distinctly the voice of the priest and the responses to his prayers. Then they became fainter and fainter, until I could only hear the strains of 'Nearer My God, to Thee' and the screams of the people left behind.<sup>160</sup>

In the Titanic were two Catholic priests: Professor Byles, an Irish man (*sic*), who wanted to act in the marriage of his brother and his bride and a German monk... They helped women and children, climbing into the boats. The people on the last boat, which left the Titanic, and saved by the *Carpathia* told me, that an immense crowd of different people knelt around the two priests. They prayed the Rosary, the priests gave absolution and said, everybody may be ready now to appear in front of God's chair of trial. This happened as the waves came on deck.<sup>161</sup>

Father Byles and another priest stayed with the people after the last boat had gone and... a big crowd, a hundred maybe, knelt about him. They were Catholics, Protestants and Jewish people who were kneeling there... Father Byles told them to prepare to meet God and he said the rosary. The others answered him. Father Byles and the other priest... were still standing there praying when the water came over the deck.<sup>162</sup>

When all the excitement became fearful all the Catholics on board desired the assistance of priests with the greatest fervour. Both priests aroused those condemned to die to say acts of contrition and prepare themselves to meet the face of God. They led the rosary and others answered. The sound of the recitation irritated a few passengers, and some ridiculed those who prayed and started a ring dance around them. The two priests were engaged continuously giving general absolution to those who were about to die.<sup>163</sup>

On the boat deck that I had just left perhaps fifty men had come together. In the midst of them was a tall figure. This man had climbed upon a chain or a coil of rope so that he was raised far above the rest, his hands were stretched out as if he were pronouncing a blessing. During the day a priest, a certain Father Byles, had held services in the second cabin saloon and I think it must have been he who stood there leading those doomed men in prayer. The band was playing 'Nearer my God to Thee'. I could hear it distinctly. The end was very close. It came with a deafening roar that stunned me. Something in the bowels of Titanic exploded... two other explosions followed... as if below the surface the Titanic broke into two before our eyes. The fore part was already partly under the water. It wallowed over and vanished instantly. The stern reared straight on end and seemed poised on the ocean for many seconds... I saw hundreds of human bodies clinging to the wreck or jumping into the water. Cries more terrible than I have ever heard rang in my ears. I turned my face away but I looked round the next

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<sup>159</sup> *The True Voice loc. cit.*

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>161</sup> Hind Website (1.i).

<sup>162</sup> *The True Voice loc. cit.*

<sup>163</sup> An anonymous and undated 'eyewitness account' appearing in the Catholic magazine *America* in 1912 (?) and reproduced on Hind Website (ii).

moment and saw the other half of the great ship slip below the surface as a pebble in a pond. I shall always remember that last moment as the most hideous of the whole disaster.<sup>164</sup>

Of the actions of Fr Byles on that night, Mgr Ward concludes,

As to what happened during the last hour, when all hope of being saved had been abandoned, we can only conjecture, but we have good grounds to picture to ourselves the heroism which Father Byles had already displayed, continued to the end – until he himself was in the icy cold water in mid-Atlantic with but a few minutes to prepare his own soul as he had recently prepared others, for its entry into eternity.<sup>165</sup>

And Mgr Watson, one not given to sentimentality, writes of his friend,

When the news came of the appalling disaster the vision came to mind of that little priest nervously active, getting hold of a few Catholics he had learnt to trust and instructing them to bring together all others they could find; then a brief address and general heartfelt act of contrition, followed by many private confessions till a critical moment came and his friends urged the priest, perhaps forced him to take a place in a boat. I was substantially right. I was not in the least surprised when I heard from his brother on the testimony of survivors that he twice refused a place in the boat, determined to remain for the spiritual comfort of his perishing friends. There was no little pathos in the inequalities and disappointments of his life, but what an enviable glory in his death!<sup>166</sup>

### **An Enduring Witness**

Thomas Roussel Byles was a man of undoubted learning and vision who, we may conjecture, would today be recognised for having made a significant contribution to the life of the Catholic Church in this country, if it were not for the repeated frustrating presence of illness which so circumscribed his activities throughout his life. As it is he remains an obscure figure defined solely by the circumstances of his death.

However, it is arguably not merely pious sentiment by which may be perceived in the legacy of Fr Byles' role in the *Titanic* tragedy a fulfilment of his life's aspirations. He had, as his brother William informs us,<sup>167</sup> from the time of his own conversion, aspired above all to labour for the conversion of those remaining outside the embrace of the Catholic Church. Although by illness obliged to surrender his work as a diocesan missionary, William Byles suggests of his brother that, "we may well believe his prayers and his resignation earned for those outside the Church the graces which he had hoped to secure for them by the more direct method of preaching and instruction".<sup>168</sup> How much more effective might be thought the witness which he left behind him in his death.

No one in 1912 could have imagined the perennial fascination which the *Titanic* disaster would excite. But now, lodged in the consciousness of the many millions throughout the

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<sup>164</sup> Charlotte Collyer in Hyslop *et al* (Eds) 1994, pp136-7.

<sup>165</sup> Ward in *The Edmundian loc. cit.*, p. 110.

<sup>166</sup> Watson in *The Edmundian loc. cit.*, p.112.

<sup>167</sup> In *The Tablet loc. cit.*

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

world who are aware of the story of *Titanic* is the figure of the anonymous priest who heard confessions and gave absolution as the ship went down – a possibly unparalleled advertisement in modern times to the Christian Gospel of forgiveness and reconciliation.

At St Edmund's, Ware, a brass plaque was erected in the College Cloister to the memory of Fr Byles which may still be seen and which bears the inscription:

Pray for the soul of  
Rev. Thomas Roussel David Byles,  
Formerly Student and Professor of this College  
Who having embarked for New York on the ship "Titanic"  
When that vessel struck an iceberg and became a sudden wreck  
In the midst of that midnight horror of April 14<sup>th</sup>, 1912  
He twice refused the offered safety of a lifeboat  
Choosing rather to comfort the Catholics and other Christians  
With the supreme consolation of the Faith  
And so to die with them  
Too numerous to be saved from the deep  
But not to escape eternal loss  
Thus did he follow in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd  
Thus did he lay down his life for the sheep.

R.I.P.

"BID ME COME TO THEE UPON THE WATERS." St. Matthew, xiv. 28.

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