To what extent did affairs in France affect the English Catholic Church?

The outbreak of Revolution in France and the arrival of refugees in England was a profound shock to the English ruling classes, for it signalled a possible change in the world order. This fear of change was heightened by the Revolutionary war in North America that had concluded with the Peace Treaty of Paris in 1783 and recognised the sovereignty of the United States between the border with Canada to Florida in the south and the Mississippi in the west. It also was France's decision to ally herself with the Americans and her consequent financial disasters that historians feel was a cause of her own Revolution. In welcoming the refugees, many of whom were Roman Catholics including prelates and priests, there was a lessening of anti-Catholic sentiment in Britain. Events in America and France had shown that there was something worse than Roman Catholicism with its lingering association of foreignness and being of the dark. That "something" was political radicalism and revolution, which posed a much greater threat to the English ruling classes. The changes brought about by the consequences of the French Revolution added new dimensions to the Catholic Church in Britain amongst them being the establishment in Britain of seminary education and the return to Britain of monasticism, both male and female. But first to be discussed is the impact, if any, that the emigres themselves had on the church.

For the most part the French refugees or émigrés as they were usually known, preferred to keep themselves to themselves, and after an initial welcome, the leaders of the English Catholic Community began to prefer this state of affairs also. Not only were there administrative problems associated with the émigré clergy in particular, but Catholics shared in the deep-rooted dislike of the French by the English in general. The reason for the French preferring isolation lay in the reason that they were in England not France, for strictly speaking they were deportees; Bellenger estimates that there were between four and five thousand priests among the émigrés, who had chosen exile rather than swear allegiance to the new constitutional church set up by the Revolutionaries and which they considered to be schismatic.[1] The constitutional Church was ordered in line with the state; dioceses were rearranged to match department boundaries and bishops elected by the same electorate who chose the secular officials, including non-Catholics, and installed by the metropolitan archbishops. A new bishop would write to the Pope only to tell him of his appointment. This modification of Church governance was carried out without the Pope's agreement and when the bishops and priests were required to take an oath of allegiance to the nation and uphold the new constitution in November 1790, only seven bishops and approximately half the priests did so. The non-jurors as the remainder were termed, were not allowed to exercise their ministry and were replaced by constitutional bishops and priests. In 1791, the Pope condemned the Church constitution and in 1792 with international relations deteriorating the non-jurors were declared enemies of the state and deported. As Bellenger points out, this was an important factor in their acceptance by the English Establishment, for they could present themselves as more sinned against than sinners.[2]

Many of the exiles initially stayed in the English ports where they had landed, although a large number including the bishops did move to London, or the big hostel that was set up for them in Winchester. Diocesan and regional uniformity largely was maintained by the exiles, which increased their isolation from the mainstream of English life, as did their emotional attachment to 'home' and the desire to return as quickly as possible. There is a debate about their influence upon English Catholicism; some writers such as Hugh Aveling view them as an important element in the English Catholic Revival[3], revisionist historians such as John Bossy barely mention them.[4] Many of the émigré priests earned their living as tutors in large households or schools,

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[1] D. T.J. Bellenger 'The French Exiled Clergy in England and National Identity' in Stuart Mews (ed), *Studies in Church History Vol 18* (1982, London).

[2] D.A. Bellenger, *French Exiled Clergy in the British Isles after 1789* (1986, Bath).

[3] Aveling, Hugh, *The Handle and the Axe* (197?)316-8.

[4] Bossy, *English Catholic Community*, 356.

some were granted faculties to serve their fellow countrymen, and yet others who were English speaking were used by the English Vicars Apostolic in helping the English Catholic Church. They were particularly useful in the coastal areas, where their language was an advantage in the multinational character of the ports, and after the battle of Trafalgar in caring for the French prisoners of war. They were responsible for the founding of many new coastal missions such as Whitby in North Yorkshire, which soon thrived.[5] With the nature of the English mission still in the early stages of growth, French priests were also used in areas where a mission would normally be only considered if there was a glut of priests. Such a mission was set up in Pocklington, in the East Riding of Yorkshire, where the French mannerisms and ritual behaviour of Abbe Fidélè were fondly recalled by Bishop William Ullathorne in his memoir.[6] A more influential aspect of the émigré's influence upon English Catholics lay in their spiritual writings and counsel such as that of Abbé Nicholas Gilbert,[7] which began to infiltrate English Catholic practice and certainly opened the door for its Europeanisation through the Oxford converts and the colourful Italian and French missioners who began arriving mid-century.

One consequence of the Revolution was the return to England of seminary training. It was a quick and largely unexpected transition. The loss of Douai especially was felt to be an incipient disaster for upon it depended, not only a considerable proportion of the financial resources of the English Catholic Church, but also:

> the welfare…of the English mission, which had received its supply of priests principally from that establishment. If…it was unfortunately lost, from what other source could the necessary supply of priests be obtained?…The secular establishments abroad did not supply collectively as many priests for the English Mission as the one effective college at Douai. It was then the hope and main prop of the Catholics of England.[8]

The loss of the French colleges meant that alternative provision had to be made in England for the education of new priests. The Vicars Apostolic moved quickly to establish colleges for their students, and by 1794, for example, the Northern District students were gathered together at Crook Hall, the forerunner of Ushaw. At its closure, Douai had on roll eighty-nine students, of whom thirty-four were seminarians. Twenty-two of these subsequently were ordained to serve in the Northern District, which underlies the importance of Douai for the local missions.

The education provided by Douai was progressive in that it became the first college to educate sons of the gentry who were not looking towards priesthood, alongside the seminarians, and this dual training became a feature of the other foundations and was continued in the early English seminaries. This also allowed the Vicars Apostolic to circumvent the confused provisions of the Second Catholic Relief Act that on one hand stated that Catholics who took the oath could teach, but on the other hand stated:

> that nothing in this Act contained shall make it lawful to found, endow, or establish any religious order or society of persons bound by monastic or religious vows, or to found, endow or establish any School, Academy or College by persons professing the Roman Catholic Religion[9]

It was a clause generally taken to refer to seminaries and no legal challenge was ever mounted against the foundations; but the Trustees of the colleges remained nervous, especially when, in

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[5] See Margaret Turnham, *Catholic Faith and Practice in England 1779-1992: The Role of Revivalism and Renewal* (Boydell Press, 2015).

[6] See Margaret Turnham, *Catholic faith and Practice*, 000-000.

[7] See W.J. Nicholson, 'Nicolas Alain Gilbert, French Émigré Priest 1762-1821' *Northern Catholic History* Vol. 12 1980; Margaret Turnham, *Catholic Faith and Practice*, 00-000.

[8] Penswick, J., 'The Reign of Terror' in Gillow, J., (ed.) *The Haydock Papers* (London 1888) 112.

[9] Second Catholic Relief Act (1791) Clause XV

1816 the compensation paid by the French Government to the English Catholic Church for the loss of Douai, was kept by the British Government due to the fact it might be used for superstitious purposes.

A further consequence of the French Revolution for Catholicism in Britain was the revival of monasticism for both male and females that began with several religious communities seeking refuge in England. Most were English Orders, who had sought refuge themselves in France at the time of the Reformation, but there were also three French communities such as the Trappists who settled in Dorset and who managed to salvage their traditions and lifestyle.[10] However, they were regarded with suspicion by the English and as Bellenger explains it took a generation for them to break with their French past and adopt England as their home. The returning English Orders were dependent for the most part on the Catholic aristocracy and gentry for material help. Many of these had been educated by the Orders in exile, and so felt they owed a debt of gratitude. Remote country houses that had been deserted by the families were loaned to the Religious, such as Holme-on-Spalding-Moor in Yorkshire where the English Canonesses of the Holy Sepulchre lived between 1794 and 1796. The account of their stay reveals that in order to maintain a low profile, it was rare for them to don the habit, but devotions that had not been seen in England before such as the feast of the Sacred Heart created a lot of local interest.[11] Although the French Orders were received as refugees from the Revolution, the English Orders potentially had a more difficult obstacle to overcome, and that was the special proviso within the 1791 Relief Act that forbade the foundation of colleges or monasteries in England. It seemed however, that the events of the Reign of Terror had engendered a sense of sympathy rather than anti-papalism and the returning Orders were able to settle permanently and establish new houses and colleges, including Ampleforth and Downside which were both Benedictine foundations and Stonyhurst, which was Jesuit although at the time of its founding the Order was still suppressed.

The English Benedictine Congregation had several houses and one convent in France. There was also a school and junior seminary in Germany. From the continent the President-General had sent out monks to help on the English Mission throughout the recusant period. Although the communities at Ampleforth and Downside are primarily known for their work in education, in fact the Congregation themselves regarded that as secondary as 'the whole purpose of the Congregation was the Mission.'[12] Until the end of the nineteenth century each monk swore an oath, when making his profession that 'I promise, vow and swear to go to Mission work (and come back) when and as often as President and Superiors may judge fit'.[13] Towards the end of the penal times, there was criticism that the Benedictine missioners had become too easy-going and conventional;[14] Viscount Fairfax of Gilling for example, dismissed six Benedictine chaplains in rapid succession for lax practice during the 1760's. However, a Jesuit Chaplain also failed to please. Without funds the groups of refugee monks had tried unsuccessfully to settle in various parts of England, before the President-General in 1802 persuaded Fr. Anselm Bolton OSB to give up his house and property at Ampleforth, to form the nucleus of the future Monastery of St Laurence and in 1814 a second group of refugee monks settled at Downside to form the community of St Gregory the Great.

Ampleforth was not intended to be anything but a monastic community working on the mission in Yorkshire, but in 1803, the German community was also forced to return to England. This was a result of the secularisation movement in Germany which, in the wake of the French Revolution and the Enlightenment suppressed all its religious foundations. It was originally

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[10] See D.A. Bellen*ger, French Exiled Clergy in the British Isles after 1789, Chapter 8.*

[11] See Turnham*, Catholic Faith and Practice* p000

[12] Anselm Cramer OSB, *The Story of St Laurence's Abbey and College Ampleforth* (Ampleforth Abbey 2001) iv.

[13] *Ibid*., 77.

[14] See Hugh Aveling, 'The Eighteenth-century English Benedictines' in Eamon Duffy (ed.), *Challoner and his Church* (London 1981)15

decided that only the 'church students' would be sent to Ampleforth in order to complete their formation and the lay students would be educated in Lancashire. By 1805 the latter was broken up and Ampleforth began to take lay students also. Although the monks still worked on the mission field in both Yorkshire and Lancashire the name of Ampleforth became synonymous with its school. Downside had a more uncertain start in its new home as the local Vicar Apostolic, Augustine Baines OSB wanted the congregation to be placed under his care and provide him with a seminary. Unwilling to take part in his scheme their relationship with the bishop became hostile. However, their work flourished on the mission field concentrated in the industrial areas of the Northwest of England and South Wales. By the turn of the century however, most of the parishes had been transferred to diocesan priests and education became the main focus of their work.

After the worst of the excesses brought about by the Revolution in France were over, some of the Religious Orders who were French in origin returned to that country as did the majority of secular priests and their bishops. However, a century later there was a new wave of persecution against the religious orders due to the secularisation of the French state. This in turn eventually led to the passing of the Combe Laws in 1904, which banned Religious orders from teaching in France and decreed that their houses be closed within a ten-year period thereby forcing them into exile. Nursing orders were similarly phased out. The story of the Bernardine Sisters is similar to what occurred across the country over this whole period. During the Revolution it was illegal to be religious or nun and all their property was forfeit. However, the Bernardines like many of the Orders wished to continue their life and were forced to go into exile in England Belgium and Germany. In 1797, they returned to France to set up a new foundation in Douai, but then moved to a more isolated village, Esquarmes. Much like the Penal Times in England, Mass and the Sacraments were celebrated in secret, often at night. Religious freedom was restored in 1805, which allowed to Sisters to openly continue their charism of the education for girls which by 1817 had grown into a community of 150 Sisters and 300 girls in two foundations- a boarding school for the well off and a free school for the poor children in the neighbourhood. However, in 1897, religious persecution again forced many religious back into exile and a group of Bernardine Cistercian sisters arrived in Slough. They had found a house in Langley they thought might be suitable for a school with the added bonus that it already possessed a chapel. In October that year, having worked hard to make the derelict house habitable, they brought over 12 French girls, all over the age of 15 and with two English girls in addition, they founded the school. In 1901, a lay teacher was professed, and she then became the first Headmistress of the school. As in France, the school was still a finishing school as well as a boarding school, teaching subjects such as Music, Needlework, English and Deportment. It still exists today as a Catholic state grammar school though like many of schools founded similarly the sisters have withdrawn from active participation in its running.[15] Like the other congregations from France who founded houses in England, the sisters who settled at Slough were Frenchwomen. All the congregations however, soon attracted English-speaking novices and in the field of education, where many of the congregations found their main apostolate, this was particularly important, as it made communicating with the children easier.[16]

To sum up, France had provided a place of refuge that had enabled the training of priests for the English Mission to continue throughout the penal era, and in return England became a place of refuge for French priests and religious during the Revolution There was already then a history of exchange of ideas in terms of Catholic practice. For their part, the French congregations would have seen the opportunities in England as a chance to begin furthering their missionary efforts

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[15] Stbernards.slough.sch.uk *History of the school*

[16] In England, novices came from one of three groups, English-born, Irish-born and second generation Irish.

into English-speaking territories that up to then had been denied them. As Bellenger quoting JH. Danton says

> If the French Revolution was a terrible blow to the church in France, Divine Providence was quick to turn to good account the misfortunes of the exiled priest who crowded every packet boat that reached the English Channel ports.

Dr Margaret Turnham

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