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MEMOIRS OF DISTINGUISHED GREGORIANS.

No. III.—THE RIGHT REVEREND WILLIAM
PLACID MORRIS, O.S.B.,

BISHOP OF TROY, (*in Partibus infidelium*).

WILLIAM PLACID MORRIS was born in London on the 29th of September, 1794. His parents, who lived in Holborn, were poor and worked for their living, but were rich in piety and virtue, and most carefully attended to the bringing up of their children. William was the eldest of the family of five, and while still very young began to show signs of unusual talent and quickness. He was sent to a day school at the early age of four, and was soon acknowledged to be the best scholar for his age in the school. When five years old he could read, write, and spell, and his memory was so good that when anything had to be got up in a hurry he always figured to advantage. From his tender years he manifested a great devotion to the Passion of our Lord, and before the ordinary age of the use of reason he was observed to shed tears whenever our Blessed Saviour's sufferings were mentioned. Habits of mortification too began to form themselves in his young heart, which were noticed by his parents; while that exquisite and touching sympathy with the poor which was so marked in him as a priest of God, began to show itself, we are informed, even before he was old enough to walk alone.

At the age of eleven he was sent to the Fathers at Acton Burnell. It is not known what enabled or induced his parents to

send their son to a college 160 miles from London. It seems probable that an excellent old Benedictine, Father Lorymer, at that time attached to the chapel of Lincoln's Inn Fields was instrumental in getting him to St. Gregory's. The Morrises attended the chapel of Lincoln's Inn, and the pious and well behaved boy would no doubt have often served Fr. Lorymer's mass there. He was naturally delicate and timid, and appears to have suffered a good deal from home sickness when he found himself among strange companions; he soon, however, grew reconciled to the life, became happy, and at his first examination obtained the first place in his class, a pre-eminence he never lost. He was fond of his books and advanced very rapidly.

"In the month of July, 1810," he writes to a friend in after life, "I was called to a higher step and a new era in my life; I was called to take upon myself the religious habit of the Benedictine body, and enrolling myself in that pious and learned confraternity dedicate myself entirely and irrevocably to the yoke of religion. I was, it is true, but young at the time and, the world would say, not able to know my own mind or judge for myself. But I did, and though now at the distance of twenty-two years since the eventful act took place, yet I do say, were I able to recommence my life, I should perform the same duty and at the same early period of my life. On the 25th day of the following July, 1811, I pronounced at the foot of the altar those vows which to my last breath I hope ever to practice and not to swerve from."

His novice master was Fr. R. Ratcliff, and of him, in 1842, he writes in his journal, "I heard of the sudden death of my dear and well-beloved friend Fr. Ratcliff, in his seventieth year. He was my novice master, and I owe much to him. I first commenced study under him, and he was a true religious, simple, guileless, and ever ready to do good to all that lay within his sphere."

He attacked his theological studies with an ardour for which he blamed himself in after life, for his health gave way and he eventually lost more by enforced abstinence from work, than he had gained by imprudent application. His general reading must have been very wide during the time he was in his monastery, for he quotes English poetry and prose with surprising ease and aptness in his journal and letters. The study of his own tongue was his especial care, and there is an amusing passage in his journal, written in 1832, which proves that he was somewhat in advance of his age on some points. "I cannot help pouring out my invective," he says, "against the barbarous practice of most of

our places of education, particularly among ecclesiastics, that when a boy rises to a Latin or Greek form, he must no longer think of or cultivate his mother tongue. Oh! that over every door of every seminary was written, in large and deep marked characters 'Attend to the cultivation of English.'"

In the Holy week of 1813 he was sent from Acton Burnell to Wolverhampton to receive minor orders. His companion on the occasion was John Bede Polding, afterwards archbishop of Sydney, and he received the orders from the hands of Bishop Milner. Three years and a half later, 1816, he was ordained sub-deacon and shortly after deacon by Dr. Poynter, vicar-apostolic of the London district. And on the feast of St. Peter and Paul 1817, he reached what he then supposed to be the "resting place of his ascent," being ordained priest, at Bath, by Dr. Collingridge, then vicar-apostolic of the western district

Fr. Placid Morris was in the community at Acton Burnell, when it removed to Downside in 1814, and it was here that the greater part of his religious life was spent. Besides the duties of choir, private study and teaching, which he shared with the rest of his brethren, he was employed a good deal in Procurator's work. It was to his suggestions that were owing the "wash-house, laundry and brew-house" which in those days were matters of great moment to St. Gregory's. In the latter part of 1817 he taught a class of logic, which he candidly confessed that he did not at all like. He seems to have preached a good deal, when only a deacon, both in the college chapel, in Bath and Bristol and even in London. In preaching, even at this time, he appears to have manifested the great readiness and fluency which characterised his sermons in after life. In one of his brief jottings, made during the Christmas of 1818, we have a picture of him sitting down to write a sermon at nine o'clock on Saturday, January 3rd, finishing it at eleven and preaching it the next morning in the college chapel. It was on "The good use of time."

In the spring of 1819 Fr. Placid Morris, then in very delicate health, was sent to travel for a time in Ireland. At this time his superiors were very anxious about him and when Bishop Slater went out to the Mauritius in the same year it was almost arranged that Dom Placid should accompany him. It was thought that a warmer climate would probably preserve a life which seemed too frail to last in England. At first he was inclined to go but on his return from Ireland with renewed strength, he wrote to the President-General asking leave to remain at Downside. Three

months later, August, 1819, he was appointed to the London mission.

The scene of his labours in London, was the chapel of the Portuguese embassy in South Street, Grosvenor Square. Here he worked for ten years, until in 1829 the chapel was closed. The congregation to whom he ministered was the most influential and educated in London. His salary was very small, being under £60 a year, and out of this he paid £20 to the Rev. Dr. Fryer the senior priest, for board and lodging; but the good doctor, in consideration of the readiness shown by Fr. Morris to help him in pastoral duty, seems always to have returned the money. His Sunday duty was generally severe. He preached regularly every Sunday at the High Mass, which in those days was at nine o'clock, assisting also as deacon, and then he said Mass himself either at noon or one o'clock, so that he seldom got his breakfast before two o'clock. He became well-known and popular as a preacher and was frequently in request at other chapels besides his own. An old prospectus, dated November, 1820, announces, on behalf of the managers of the "Aged Poor Charity," that the annual sermon for the benefit of the Institution will be preached at the Sardinian Chapel, Lincoln's Inn Fields, by the Rev. WILLIAM MORRIS, on Sunday, the 17th December. Fifty-one years afterwards, in 1871, when the active young priest had grown into a bowed and grey-headed old man, he preached again for the same charity, in the same church, on the same day.

He seems to have loved his work in South Street and never spoke of this part of his life without a shadow of regret, as though there had been in it a freshness and absence of responsibility which contributed to make him enjoy the activity of youthful missionary enterprise. There were some circumstances of the South Street mission which made him after revert to his Sundays there in many different parts of the world. Bishop Morris had a keen appreciation of music, and in those days there was not a place of worship in London where a musician would have had a greater treat than at the Portuguese embassy, when Alfred Novello played on the best organ in London, and when Hunt, Evans, Leriza and Frank assisted in singing the choicest pieces of Sarti and Pergolesi, Haydn and Mozart.

During the ten years of his life at South Street there is very little to record. In the January of 1828 Dr. Fryer and Fr. Morris were presented to Don Miguel, who had shortly before assumed the regency of Portugal under rather questionable circumstances. Fr.

Morris at that time considered this presentation quite the event of his stay in London. In consequence of the unsettled state of royalty in Portugal, the Portuguese embassy in 1829-1830 hardly had a master, and at the latter end of 1829 the chapel of the embassy was closed and the chaplain paid off. The peremptory cause of the closing of the chapel was that the lease had expired, and the Marquis of Westminster refused to renew it on any terms.¹ Fr. Morris was accordingly without a mission for some time, till about the beginning of 1830, when he was appointed to the chapel in Cadogan Terrace, Chelsea, as assistant to Abbe Voyaux. For about two years he laboured here on the modest stipend of £70 a year.

At this time Fr. Morris made a visit to France and the Low Countries. Three of his sisters had taken the Benedictine habit in the Irish convent at Ypres, and their brother on going to see them paid his first visit to Paris and the north of France. At the general chapter of the Anglo-Benedictines, held in 1832, Fr. Morris was present as deputy for the aged Fr. Lorymer, and was made "Predicator Generalis," which gave him a seat in chapter for life.

It was sometime in the year 1831, when Fr. Morris was quietly occupied in the duties of his Chelsea mission, that he received notice of his promotion to a bishopric and appointment as Visitor-Apostolic of the island of the Mauritius. This was an event for which he was little prepared, and he speaks of his surprise and agitation with a sincerity that cannot be questioned "I know my own insufficiency," he writes to an intimate friend, "I was by no means a stranger to my want of ability, talents, courage, or virtue, requisite for such a charge. And all my superiors not only urged compliance on my part, but so far as they could, ordered it." And indeed the prospect before him was not encouraging. His mission was to an island little known, fourteen weeks' sail from England, with a tropical climate, a population partly French, partly negro, among whom religion was reported to be in a very bad state. Fr. Morris addressed remonstrances to the Holy See, but they were not admitted, and he finally thought it his duty to submit.

The consecration took place on the 5th of January, 1832, in the chapel of St. Edmund's college, Old Hall. Bishop Bramston, vicar-apostolic of the London district, was the consecrating prelate: the

¹ The Portuguese government do not appear to have behaved well, as they seized all the chapel furniture, and would have taken the fine organ had not Dr. Fryer anticipated them.

assistants were Bishop Gradwell, coadjutor to Bishop Bramston, and Bishop Baines, O.S.B., vicar-apostolic of the Western District. "A beautiful Italian Mass," says the "Catholic Magazine,"¹ "was sung by the gentlemen of the college." The sermon was preached by Bishop Baines, and the faded and worn MS. of this sermon dated at the top Feb. 2, 3 a.m., Mr. Longman's room, is still preserved among the "Morris Papers" at Downside.

Bishop Morris had much to do in England before he set sail for his distant church, and the time between February and October was fully occupied in making arrangements, not merely for his individual convenience, but also in his public capacity. He had to deal with the Colonial Office, at the head of which was Lord Goderich, and various and prolonged were the negotiations and altercations he had with the secretary and office respecting church matters in the Mauritius. It was long before he could effect anything, and the little he at last obtained was only extorted by constant "dunning" and uninterrupted perseverance. His predecessor had enjoyed a salary from Government of £1,000 a year, but Bishop Morris was to receive only £720. The rest was to be the retiring pension of Bishop Slater, and on his death (which took place before he had touched a penny of his pension), the sum was not to be added to the bishop's salary. Bishop Morris knew that the Catholics of the Mauritius were poor, that churches had to be built and schools provided, and although he would have preferred in some respects to have gone out a free man, he thought it his duty to stand out for what he could get. He next applied for passage-money and salaries for as many priests as he could persuade to go out with him. This also Government refused. He was at liberty to take out as many priests as he liked, but no salaries could be guaranteed to them. As to passage-money, there was no fund at their disposal for this purpose, and all they could undertake to do was to *recommend* the Colonial Treasury to repay the cost of passage out. "This was heavy," says Bishop Morris, "for a man who was a pauper, and possessed not one disposable shilling; and such was literally my case."

He scraped money enough together to pay the passage of himself and two priests, the Hon. and Rev. Edward A. Clifford and another, on board the "Royal George," a trader to the Mauritius, of 500 tons. It was to have sailed in September, but was delayed for a month in order to take out the new governor of the Mauritius, Sir William Nicolay and his suite. Sir William, on

¹ March 2nd, 1832.

the eve of departure, was advised to proceed to the colony in a ship of war, as the island was reported to be in a state of mutiny. The *Royal George* proceeded on its way without him, having besides the bishop some thirteen Catholics on board. After a long voyage, the incidents of which are minutely recorded in a diary kept when on board by Dr. Morris, the island was sighted on January 22nd, 1833. "The island is in sight," he wrote under that date, "with all its waving palms, cocoa trees and bannanas. Scarcely had we been at anchor five minutes when a man-of-war boat with six oars with Colonel Stanley the second in command, hereafter the governor, and Captain Dickinson came on board to welcome me. After the usual salutations, &c., &c., they proposed to go on shore. I bade good-bye to the captain and passengers, went down the ship's side, took my place in the boat provided for me, and behold me, after exactly fourteen weeks sailing, setting my foot upon the Isle of France."

The Isle of France, or the Mauritius, lies half-way across the Indian Ocean, and, before the days of the Suez canal, was a most important station for Indian traders, and a convenient harbour of refuge from the storms which at times sweep over those seas. It had been some twenty years in the hands of the English at the date of which we write. Dr. Morris's stay in the Mauritius, the classic ground of Paul and Virginia, was neither long, nor we fear happy. It would occupy too much space to give as detailed an account as may be gathered from his letters of this portion of his life. The diocese he was called upon to govern was hardly less extensive than the continent of Europe itself. From the island of Mauritius it stretched away in one direction over South Africa, in another over the greater portion of British India, and in a third over Australia and the islands of the Pacific Ocean. Such a diocese, now governed by some forty-five bishops, might well paralyse the energies and destroy the health of any man however gifted. Added to the overwhelming nature of this charge were some special difficulties in the Mauritius itself. Dr. Slater, his predecessor, had left him a large legacy of misunderstandings between bishop and clergy, and bishop and people; besides the association with a bishop's name of very considerable debts incurred. On his arrival Dr. Morris found that the bishop's house had been stripped of its furniture by the creditors of Dr. Slater, and he had to buy back every table, chair, and bedstead in the place.

Then, just at first, the bishop's health was not good, and he took a great dislike to the place, climate, and people, and shut himself up

in his own house, hardly visiting anyone in the city of Port Louis. The clergy were very few, perhaps not more than seven in the whole island, and some of these were hardly such as would have been employed by any bishop who could make his own choice. At Port Louis itself, with a parish of 29,000 Catholics, there were but two priests. The people, also, though particular enough in some respects, as flocking to church on the great feasts, had lost almost all obedience to the ordinary commands of the Church. The Sundays were profaned by work of the most public kind, which prevented many who would otherwise have attended at Mass from coming to the church. Then the island had not divested itself of the Voltairean spirit of infidelity, which during the time of the French revolution had taken such firm root among the inhabitants of this colony. Though in the Mauritius there were about 100,000 inhabitants, nine-tenths of whom were nominal Catholics, on the first Easter after Dr. Morris's arrival only some 450 approached to their Easter duties, and in one large parish of Port Louis where there was a nice chapel and a resident priest, the report said that "to the pastor's sorrow not one single member of his congregation had complied with the Easter precept." As to schools there were but two poor schools in the island; one supported by the protestant society for the Propagation of the Gospel, and the other, in the pay of the government, where children of all religions mixed together without any moral control. Dr. Morris endeavoured to provide a Catholic school, but was much crippled by want of means, and by the hostility shown towards him by a large section of the population. This distrust and dislike was at first a great puzzle to the good bishop, but as he came to know more about the politics of the island he discovered the reason. At the time of his landing, and during most of his sojourn there, the inhabitants were endeavouring to ward off the inevitable emancipation of their slaves. As most of the better class were large planters, whose estates were cultivated by the slaves, they looked upon such a proceeding as little short of ruin and robbery. Even before Dr. Morris left England and when he was absolutely ignorant of the question in any form, his name was associated by the Mauritians with the party for emancipation, solely because his appointment was announced in the same paper as that of the attorney-general, whose views were very pronounced on the matter, and though after his arrival he studiously avoided mixing up with any political or social question, still he never quite succeeded in undoing the harm this chance announcement had done him, or of winning the cordial attachment

and confidence of his people. It was towards the end of his stay in the Mauritius, in 1839, that the vexed question was at last set at rest by the almost sudden emancipation of the slave population, amounting to some 65,000. This large number of men and women at once made free, and made to depend on themselves for everything, brought great misery to the island, which it was the endeavour of Bishop Morris to alleviate as far as possible. He spared no trouble to put these poor men and women so completely unaccustomed to depend on themselves, in the way of making use of their liberty, and got very little thanks for his Christian endeavours from the better class, who looked upon themselves as deeply aggrieved, and would have been almost glad to witness the sufferings of their poor slaves.

But Bishop Morris's greatest trouble was with some of the clergy. The life of one priest, a Corsican by birth, was so notoriously scandalous that the bishop thought it his duty to denounce him to the governor, who after inquiry expelled him from the colony. In the presence of the police before leaving, this wretched man swore that he would never rest till he had been avenged on the bishop. He knew, as all did in the colony, that the hands of Dr. Morris were tied by want of means, that for this reason there were not so many clergy as were needed and a few schools. Still in Rome he made the authorities believe that the bishop had got him expelled because he wanted to introduce some reforms in education; that he was himself doing nothing but leading an idle worldly life, spending his £1,000 (which he never had) on pleasure, and that he had given universal scandal by his manner of life. He represented himself as the agent of the clergy of the island, and so won the ear of the authorities by his intrigues, that they sent Dr. Morris orders to vindicate his character from these charges. The bishop at once forwarded to Rome conclusive evidence of the malice and falsehood of the Corsican, consisting of a denial of the charges signed by every priest on the island, who at the same time repudiated having requested the banished priest to act as their agent, of a letter written by the governor to the same effect, and the notes taken at the trial of his traducer. Somehow or other the bundle of papers, which had been forwarded by an opportunity that offered itself, by one of the French bishops, who had promised to take them with him to Rome, got mislaid and they never reached. Many years afterwards, on the death of the French prelate, they were found among his papers and sent on, when too late, to their destination. The Propaganda having waited in vain for any reply to their

demand for an explanation of the charges brought against Dr. Morris, sent him a peremptory command to repair to Rome. Towards the end of the year 1840 he reached that city, when owing to the unfortunate loss of the documents which would have triumphantly repelled the accusations of his enemies, he found that his case had already been settled. He had only been appointed *Visitor* Apostolic, and not *Vicar*, and hence there was little difficulty in cancelling his powers. Had he been a *Vicar* Apostolic there would have been greater difficulties in the way of his removal from his episcopal charge. As it was, he acquiesced in the decision of the Propaganda without endeavouring to justify himself in the minds of the authorities there.

After a stay of some months in Rome, Dr. Morris returned to England and accepted, at the suggestion of Bishop Griffiths, the chaplaincy of the newly established convent of the *Sacré Cœur* at Roehampton. Here he remained till his death, the most devoted of fathers to the children of the convent, the most respected and valued of directors to the nuns. They were able to find him only a very wretched cottage to dwell in, and though a salary of £100 a year was promised to him he never would accept it and for the greater part, if not all of his long service, extending over a quarter of a century he received nothing whatever. For nearly a year he lived at Acton, and walked in all weathers to Roehampton, a distance of six miles, for their morning mass. For a longer period he lived at Castlenau and had to walk a mile and a half each morning to the convent; in later times they built him a house, *Subiaco Lodge*, quite close to their gates.

There was another convent to which he was especially attached, the *Faithful Companions of Gumley House*, Ilseworth. He was the confessor of the house, and that took him to Gumley every week, and sometimes twice, during a long period of years before his death. He would never receive any remuneration for his constant care and attention to these duties, the pleasure it gave him to be with "his dear children" being an ample reward to his affectionate heart. For many years his presence was necessary at all their school treats and prize giving, and for several years he presented a medal, the possession of which was most keenly contested for. On days of special ceremony, such as the first communion or the day of the prizes, he loved to wander out into the grounds with a group of young children round him, and there late in the evening, he would sit on when all the other guests had departed, surrounded by the happy faces of his dear children. It

was the custom of these children from time to time to make him some little present which he always prized for their sakes. On one occasion a small portrait of himself, painted from a photograph, was presented to him. He looked at it and then laughingly said, "I see you have improved the old man! That's more than I can do! I've been at him for more than seventy years, and he is just the same he was to begin with." Asked if he would like to have it, he said "No! No! Thank you, I have too much trouble already with the original." An anecdote the bishop used to relate of this period of his life is perhaps not out of place here. One day he was crossing Barnes common when a gipsy woman ran up and asked him to go and see her son. "He was climbing a tree" said she, "and has fallen and broken his back." The bishop followed her and entered a sort of gipsy van, where lying on a heap of rags, he saw the poor lad. He was a fine intelligent little fellow between nine and ten years old, but there was clearly no hope for him as his spine was broken. The woman told him that the doctor had said as much, but earnestly pleaded that the bishop would do something. Dr. Morris knelt down by the bed of rags, and from the answers to his questions he soon found that the poor child was ignorant of every kind of religious truth. He taught him what he could and on the following day was just in time to baptize him before he died.

The exiled king of the French, Louis Phillippe, and his queen Marie Amelie, had the greatest respect for the bishop of Troy, and he was a constant visitor at Claremont. He was invited to all the family celebrations, the first communions and confirmations, at which he not unfrequently was asked to address the young princes and princesses, which he did with touching eloquence. A letter lies before us in the hand writing of the exiled king in which he thanks the bishop for the sermon he has preached at the first communion of his eldest son.

From the year 1843, when he returned permanently to live in London or its neighbourhood, there was no voice more frequently heard in the London pulpits than his, and no bishop more constantly to be found at every celebration than Dr. Morris. He was ever ready to sing mass, to preside at a public meeting, to preach a sermon, or to perform any ecclesiastical function in the diocese of Westminster and Southwark. During a considerable portion of Cardinal Wiseman's time he was practically the auxiliary bishop, and performed nearly all the necessary ceremonies. Cardinal Manning thus expresses himself to the bishop in a letter written

just before his consecration. "It will deprive me of a great help and joy if I may not hereafter see you pontificate as often as ever among us. You are so bound up with the diocese of Westminster that we shall not know ourselves without your kind presence and cheering words." Perhaps what struck everyone most of all during these years of constant toil in the service of others, was his deep humility manifested in his relations to all he came across. Most Londoners who remember him, can recall times when they have met the bishop trudging along to a ceremony and carrying his "Pontificals" in an old carpet bag. His maxim was never to ride when he had time to walk, and never to let anyone carry his bag for him. In those days all must have admired the spirit of kindness, of charity and generosity with which he, for long years, regardless of his own ease, comfort and dignity, devoted himself at all times and seasons to be the servant of all. Whatever person, prelate, or missionary priest, in an important or humble position, hinted to the bishop of Troy some need or difficulty, he was always ready to come to his assistance, thinking of everyone's repose and ease but his own. There are few churches in London or its neighbourhood that are not in some way indebted to Dr. Morris. At the opening of many he assisted either as the celebrant or as the preacher, whilst for many years hardly a celebration was possible at any of them without his presence.

The last public act of his life was to preach at the consecration of Dr. Scarisbrick, O.S.B., Bishop of Mauritius. This took place on February 11th, 1872, in Liverpool. Dr. Morris was unwell when he left London, but he was most anxious to fulfil his promise to Dr. Scarisbrick. He was in great pain during the discourse, which was almost inaudible, and in spite of the advice of his brethren in Liverpool he determined to return at once to London. He never rallied and died a week later, February 18th, 1872. After the funeral ceremonies at St. George's, Southwark, the body was brought to Downside, and lies buried in the cemetery till such time as a more fitting resting place be found for his remains in the new church.
