

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: a mostly anecdotal account of the Friars Minor in post-Reformation England as recorded in the OFM archives.

The archival records [1] afford us a record of how the friars lived – or didn't live – the Franciscan 'vernacular' tradition, as a complement to the how they wrote about it [the Franciscan Intellectual' tradition]. A factual account of people and places exists in the work by *Thaddeus Hermans OFM* and in an unpublished work by *Justin McLoughlin* [2]. Regrouped by John Gennings the Franciscans were faced with two modes of observance: that of the 'strict' observance of their formation house at Douai, and that of the 'mission' in England wither the friars were commissioned after the completion of their formation. Some were appointed as titular Guardians to the pre-Dissolution friaries or as Praeses of mission stations [3] established subsequently. The Mission was divided into 'Districts', with the resident titular Guardian acting as superior, and responsible for the well-being of his Brethren. The number of friars varied, increasing towards the mid-18Cent and declining greatly by the first quarter of 19Cent. [4], as did the number of Mission Residences [5]. Mostly the Missionaries were housed and supported by Catholic Embassies [London] or by landed Catholic Gentry in the counties [6]. Some of the precepts of the Franciscan Rule were impossible of observance, and so dispensations were obtained: to handle money, to discard the religious habit in favour of secular dress, not to fast from All Saints until Christmas. This last was necessary as its observance would make them unwelcome in many of the houses and would also draw attention to both themselves as priests and to their hosts as harbouring priests.

Nonetheless, many were arrested, martyred [7] or imprisoned [8]. The recording of the martyrdom of St John Wall is strangely laconic.[9]

The only residential friary that was set up in England was in London at Lincoln Inns Field with a projected community of about 15. But it hardly got going before it was besieged by the crowds on the landing of William of Orange in 1688, and after several days the friars had to be rescued by the troops of James II – one of the last things the kind did before fleeing the country.

Besides the constant threat of betrayal, the friars seemed very concerned about titles and precedence when they came together, and much legislation is devoted to this. The deviations of the friars on the Mission also raised concern: about frequenting 'popinas' (eating-houses), and 'symposiums' (drinking places). There were, as might be expected, a number of apostates who caused the Provincials much concern; and others who did not apostatise but nevertheless were thorns in the Provincial's side. These accounts are told with a disarming honesty and candour by the various Provincials themselves.

At Douai, too, where the students were trained – all in Latin, and Scotus and Bonaventure had to be taught – there were good things and bad things. One concern was the regulation of visits to homes and eating places, which were eventually restricted to other ecclesiastical colleges and homes designated by the Guardian. There is also a considerable amount of ordinances regulating the consumption of the local wine!

As is universally the case, the bulkiest personal records concern those who caused most trouble and even scandal, while those who 'knuckled under and got on with it' offer scant material. So, too, with our Franciscan brethren. From the accounts left by various Provincials we get hints of their struggle to survive, their missionary endeavour, their successes as well the hardship they endured when let down, as sometimes happened, by the laity who had promised to support them.

The period ends on a note of sadness. Towards the end – from 1830s onwards, there was a degree of acrimony among the few survivors themselves and the survivors with the appointed 'Apostolic Visitor', Bishop Brown OSB. It was the coming of the Belgian Friars in 1849 that brought the Province to life again.