

## 650TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE ENGLISH AND WELSH HOSPICE IN ROME

Friday 27<sup>th</sup> - Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> January 2012

This weekend, the Venerable English College (VEC) celebrates a very significant milestone in the history of English and Welsh Catholicism. For Friday 27<sup>th</sup> January 2012 marks the 650<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Foundation Deed which established an English and Welsh Hospice on the site occupied by the VEC. Its foundation in 1362 makes this the oldest English institution outside of England. From 1362-1579, there was a Hospice here. In 1579, the house became a seminary for training Catholic priests; and so it has remained up to the present time.

Some 250 people are expected to Mass and lunch on Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> January. Archbishop Nichols of Westminster will be principal celebrant. Presiding in choir will be his predecessor, the Archbishop Emeritus of Westminster, Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, along with Cardinal William Levada, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. Some eight bishops are expected to concelebrate – coming from England and Wales and also the Vatican. The English and Welsh bishops include the Archbishop of Cardiff and the Bishops of Lancaster, Leeds, Middlesbrough and Plymouth; from the Vatican are coming the Secretary of the Congregation for Divine Worship, Archbishop Augustine Di Noia, and the Apostolic Nuncio to Guatemala, Archbishop Paul Gallagher.

Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor was Rector of the VEC from 1971-77 and will be joined by the five priests to have succeeded him in that position: Monsignori George Hay, Jack Kennedy, Adrian Toffolo, Patrick Kilgarriff and the current Rector Nicholas Hudson. Present also will be the Rectors of nearly all the other seminaries training priests for England and Wales: Monsignori Roderick Strange of the Beda College, Rome; Mark Crisp of Oscott; Mark O'Toole of Allen Hall; and Fr John Pardo of Valladolid. A large group of alumni, known affectionately always as the *Old Romans*, are expected to attend, along with a similarly large number of the College's support association, *The Friends of the Venerabile*. The VEC had a particularly large intake of seminarians last autumn, taking the number of students to 45. Of these, some seven are priests, the remaining 38 seminarians – all from English dioceses save four Scandinavians.

For more than two centuries, this site on the *via di Monserrato*, fast by the *Palazzo Farnese* in the heart of medieval Rome, was a Hospice for English and Welsh Pilgrims. But the English presence in Rome predates this by some five centuries. Ine (*sic*), King of the Saxons, built the Schola Saxonum alongside the Vatican Hill in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. When Pope Innocent III in 1201 converted this into the hospital which it remains today, English priests established themselves half a mile away at the church of *San Pantaleo* at the

entrance to today's *Piazza Navona*. So many pilgrims came to Rome for the Holy Year of 1350 that it inspired a group of Englishmen living in Rome to form themselves into the *Confraternity of St Thomas of Canterbury*, buying the first house on 27<sup>th</sup> January 1362. There was already an English couple living there, John and Alice Shepherd, who sold rosary beads to pilgrims visiting the medieval St Peter's. St Bridget, living a few metres away, overlooking the *Piazza Farnese*, had already established a Swedish Hospice – as had the Germans in the *via dell'Anima*, across the *Corso Vittorio Emmanuele*.

The English Hospice attracted large numbers of pilgrims, including, in its early years, the mystic Margery Kempe, the future priest-hunter Thomas Cromwell, the future martyr St Henry Walpole, and later the poet John Milton. From 1412, the wall out onto the street was emblazoned with the English Royal Coat of Arms - the shield enduring to this day - for this was a house under the patronage of the Crown. The 15<sup>th</sup> century saw some of the most famous English humanists among the Hospice's members: Thomas Linacre, William Lily, William Warham, John Giglis, Christopher Bainbridge and John Colet. In Henry VII's reign, it was known as the "King's Hospice"; Henry VIII described it as "Our Hospice".

With the split between Rome and Elizabeth I, it was no longer possible to train priests at home; and so the Hospice's use was altered to prepare young men for the "Mission" to England and Wales, i.e. to return to their home countries to support the faith of persecuted Catholics. The VEC achieved fame fast for, in the first century of its existence, 44 of its recent alumni were martyred: of these some 10 have been recognised as Saints and the majority as Blessed. In the four centuries that it has been a seminary, the VEC has continued to welcome pilgrims to worship and to visit, offering bed and board to bishops, priests and lay people come to Rome on Church business. The *Villa Palazzola* overlooking Lake Albano, purchased by Rector Hinsley in 1920 and now a retreat-house, has enabled the seminary to continue the 650-year-long tradition of accommodating countless groups from England and Wales come as pilgrims to visit the sacred sites of Rome.

Whenever students in the first century of the seminary's existence heard that one of their number had been martyred, they would come before the church's altarpiece, depicting the Most Holy Trinity and St Thomas, to sing a song praise, the *Te Deum Laudamus*. At the end of Mass on 27<sup>th</sup> January 2012, Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor will intone the great prayer of praise once more on that same site - in thanksgiving for all the graces received these last 650 years in this place which will surely be "forever England".