CHILDREN OF THE SECOND SPRING

FATHER JAMES NUGENT AND THE WORK OF CHILD CARE IN LIVERPOOL

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Review by Brother Joseph Hendron

According to the information on the title page, this book was first published in 2005, the centenary of the death of Mgr. James Nugent (27th June 1905). I had not heard of it until I read a short notice of it in The Tablet of March 1st. this year. It seems it has only recently reached the bookshops. The title caught my eye, and I thought it would be interesting to read an outsider's take on the work of the De La Salle Brothers in Liverpool in the 19th Century at the time Father Nugent was ministering in the city. There are references to 'Christian Brothers' and 'Brothers of Christian Instruction'; but no clarity as to their identity and no detail on their contribution to education at that time. More on this later.

The title and sub-title are hardly accurate; the book is a biography of the man from family background and childhood through schooling, seminary years in Ushaw and Rome, first curacies in Blackburn and Wigan before settling in Liverpool; then fifty years ministry in Liverpool before retirement. He is best remembered for his work for and with children during those fifty years, with his slogan "Save the child". The statue in St. John's Gardens includes a small boy standing beside him on the plinth.

But he was an innovator, leader and supporter of many apostolates. He campaigned on many fronts. Between 1849 and 1858 he had opened five schools and in 1856 the Catholic Reformatory Association was established with Nugent as Secrertary. In 1859 he was named owner and editor of 'The Northern Press' and the following year founded 'The Catholic Times'. On January 1st 1863 he was appointed Chaplain to Walton gaol. He resigned from this ministry at the end of 1885. During this period he made the first of what were to be many visits to Canada and USA with the first group of emigrant children to find them good family homes – 1100 children would emigrate in the next few years. An orphanage was opened in Ottawa in 1901 to receive emigrant children. Modern practice would hardly approve of this procedure in childcare; but evidently it was an accepted, even an enlightened approach then. He launched the 'League of the Cross for Total Abstinence' in 1872 convinced that many of the social ills and evils were the result of drunkenness. In turn this was an outcome of the poverty, squalor, lack of education and job opportunities in the city. In his memoirs, and Mgr. Furnival in the book paint a grim picture of conditions in the city in the second half of the 19th Century. The population was increasing by leaps and bounds due to rapid industrialisation, immigrants coming from outside the city and those escaping the famine in Ireland. In the first six months of 1847 300,000 immigrants arrived in the city; 76,000 of them remained in it. Liverpool became the second Port of the Empire and the Gateway to the Atlantic but at what a price in housing conditions, lack of education, social services. All the time he was opening schools in and around Liverpool including one on the famous Clarence ship in the Mersey, which a second fire was to destroy. In using the Clarence as a school Nugent had the praiseworthy aim of not just 'reforming' the boys but of teaching them the needed sea-going skills; many of them would find a career as seamen, given the rapid expansion of the port.

As I read through the book I had the impression of an Adrian Nyel type character. Totally dedicated and selfless in his concern for the young, founding schools and orphanages and refuges all around but not always having the needed organisational or inter-personal skills to consolidate what he had done. In the final rather drawn out chapter of the book reviewing his subject's life the author writes:

> "In Nugent's personal, utter commitment to the cause which he had espoused lay both his strength and his weakness. His achilles heal was, in the early years at least, his independence and the 'go it alone' approach he seemed to adopt which sometimes kept others at arm's length.
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> Nugent badly needed to be understood, to be accepted. He was a hard man to work with and a hard act to follow as Father Berry discovered to his cost, so that there were many who admired him from a distance but could not keep close to him in the sheer vitality of his mission. Yet, in later life there was a greater mellowness and tolerance in his manner that smoothed over much of the

> turmoil of earlier times. He had set very high standards for himself and he expected others to follow; an expectation that he gradually realised had to be tempered with realism."

Given Nugent's extraordinary dynamism and the diversity of enterprises in which he became engaged it is difficult to evaluate our Brothers' contribution in the whole scheme of things. At that stage they were still seeking a foothold in the country having settled in Clapham from France in 1855 and come to Liverpool in 1866. The beginnings in the country were difficult – difficulties in language, lack of adequate qualifications in a new country and new school system, diversity of educational needs, unprecedented social upheaval, an increasing Catholic population viewed at times with suspicion, problems of financial support for the schools and Communities,… Yet over a period of sixteen years (1866 – 1882) in Liverpool working in extremely difficult circumstances they achieved very creditable results, recognised as such by secular and Church authorities. Payment for everything was by results and by attendance – an abominable system in any era but particularly so given the poverty and squalor in the city. Fifteen Brothers had charge of six primary schools, (1,600 pupils in total) and a school for training young men to become teachers. In addition six Brothers looked after a reformatory and a Boys' refuge. Three Brothers died in Liverpool during this time: two of typhoid fever, Francis Girolamo Cuny in 1866, aged 22, shortly after arriving in the city, and Hugh Feeney in 1881, aged 56, also after just a few months in the city. Both are buried in Ford cemetery. Brother John Dunne died in 1882, burial place unknown. All the above represents quite a contribution, and sacrifice, on the part of our Brothers to education in one city. The failure of a plan to open a novitiate in Liverpool in 1882, a sad story in itself that merits some space, precipitated their departure from the city in that year. I feel they were worthy of a slot to themselves in this biography.

Brother Clair Battersby in "The De La Salle Brothers in Great Britian" (published in 1954) wrote in the concluding chapter regarding the beginnings in Britain:

> "There were some false starts and some attempts which ended in failure or petered out in a disappointingly short time. Yet all this represents effort, sometimes very painful effort, and, to a certain extent, achievement also, and ought therefore to be reckoned in the total sum."

One might overlook the absence in this interesting and informative biography of detail on the Brothers' work in Liverpool, but I found a more disappointing though not unexpected or surprising omission in the second of the two paragraphs below.

> "James Nugent belongs to two distinct but related traditions in modern history. He takes his place in the long line of philanthropists, benefactors and community leaders who, in Liverpool, rose like giants to tower above the destitution and misery that lay all around them and helped to shape the life and the heritage of the city we now know. He compares favourably with the greatest of them: William Roscoe, William Rathbone, Josephine Butler, and many more. If James Nugent has not gone down in history with quite the same acclaim as other fellow reformers this does not imply that his contribution was any less significant or that his influence was any less profound.
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> The other tradition to which he belongs is that of a special band of people whose prime concern was the protection and formation of the young. He is part of the story about the spiritual care of children epitomised in the life of St. Joseph of Nazareth, St. Vincent de Paul, Blessed Edmund Rice and St. John Bosco, to name but a few. Their work is reflected in memorial statues that show them with a young child at their side."

No mention of John Baptist de La Salle; presumably he is among those not specifically named. He merits a higher ranking in such a list – and what critique of it would female Religious want to offer!?