

'Nothing if not Versatile'

GARRAGHAN

by

L. S. Muir

10 July 1845. I had a visit from the Rev. O'Connelly (*sic*) who said his First Mass yesterday at Trinità de' Monti.

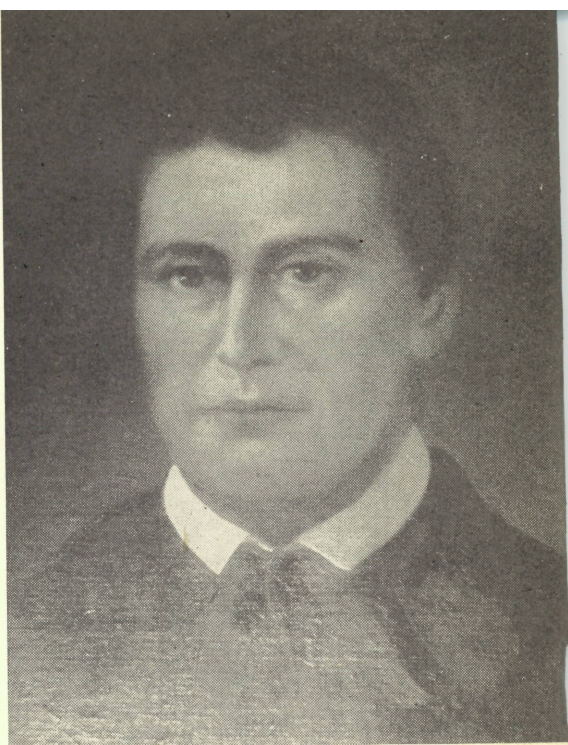
11, Friday, I heard Confessions at Trinità de' Monti and Mrs. Connelly had a talk with me.

So reads a page in Fr. John Anthony Grassi's voluminous and faithfully-kept *Diary*, whilst other entries note that in the previous August he had visited Mr. Connelly who was ill at the *Convitto* of the College of Nobles, that a month later he placed Don Samuele Asperti there, that in December Mr. Connelly was recommended to him by the Bishop of New York (the Most Rev. John Hughes) and that in January he "went to see the studio of Overbeck with Rev. P. Connelly and P. Villeforte."

With Cornelia Connelly herself Fr. Grassi may not have been acquainted until, during an illness of Fr. Rozaven in May of 1845, he began to hear confessions regularly at the Sacred Heart Convent.

Since he was to be her counsellor and friend at a most important juncture - the founding of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus - it is fortunate that history has so well preserved the story of his life.

John Anthony Grassi was twenty-four when he left his native city of Bergamo in 1799 for the Jesuit Novitiate recently established near Parma by St. Joseph Pignatelli. It had been thanks to the Empress Catherine II of Russia, "*Roma sciente et non contradicente*," that



Peter Carter

Fr. John Anthony Grassi, S.J., 1775-1849, from an oil portrait at Georgetown University where he was president from 1812-1817.

the suppression of the Society of Jesus (in 1773) had never been promulgated in her Empire and that the Jesuits had gradually filtered back into Western Europe, to be officially re-established in the "Two Sicilies" in 1804, and universally on August 7th, 1814.

But it was John Grassi's lot not only to live through major crises in the internal history of his Order but he seemed destined to live dangerously on the brink of international crises for a great part of his life. He certainly saw the world.

Russia

While still a novice he was transferred for further spiritual and intellectual training to Polotsk in White Russia, Catherine's share in the partition of Poland. Here,

Fr. Gruber, an eminent physicist, had a nursery for young scientists, as well as art and music departments, a printing press, and a College of Nobles - all of which were in accordance with the Empress Catherine's reasons for retaining the Jesuits in Russia.

It is not clear when John Grassi was ordained* but, if he was to be happy as a professor, he was above all a priest. In his thirtieth year, Grassi had his first taste of College administration as Rector of the College of Nobles while continuing the study of physics which were to be his profession or his hobby till the end of his days. There was question of his going to the new Mission in Astrakhan and he began to make a serious study of Armenian. An appeal from China, however, from the sole surviving ex-Jesuit, Fr. Louis Poirot, Court musician in Peking, led to the choice of Fr. Grassi as one of three Jesuits to be included in an embassy from the Emperor Paul I to the Emperor of China. The lay members took the overland route; the Jesuits were meant to go by sea, via Scandinavia and London, to Canton or Macao. One can read the whole odyssey in the *Woodstock Letters, Vol. IV.*

The Odyssey

Three sleds set out from St. Petersburg - Grassi, rather tall with auburn hair, quite looking the part in his Russian furs, with the Superior Fr. Korsach, a white Russian, and Brother Stürmer, a German brother-sculptor, as third in the party. There followed large crates of scientific works from the Jesuit General as also precious scientific instruments, these latter

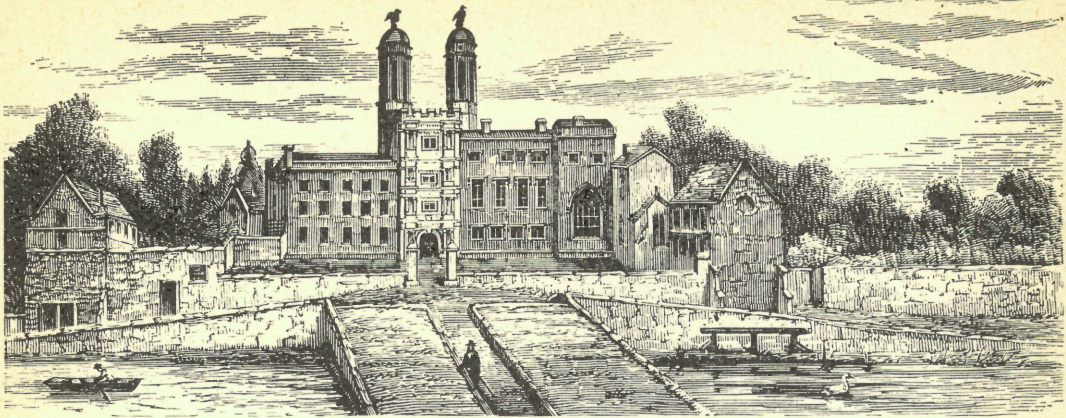
Note. He is styled "Pater" in a catalogue of 1802.

the gift of the Emperor Paul. The cold was intense and before they reached Åbo in Finland all three were laid up for ten days in a small inn. Persevering, they drove on across the frozen sea to Aland Island, then made Stockholm and Copenhagen by packet steamer and nearly lost their lives in the Skagerak. However, Gravesend was reached on May 22 after a 15-week journey, for them only to learn that the East India Company categorically refused to take them - missionaries and Jesuits! Even Fr. Grassi's well-known optimism must have been at a low ebb. But there was a small compensation for him - a visit to the Greenwich Observatory - and by the autumn the three were off to Lisbon to see if things would work out better there. Had they but known it, Portuguese waters were hardly salubrious three weeks before the Battle of Trafalgar.

If certain canonical obstacles were difficult to overcome, diplomatic ones proved insurmountable. Portugal chose to export only Portuguese missionaries to the Far East. So that was that. It was now 1807 and all they had gained was some further science teaching at Coimbra University. From Russia orders came to return to England and proceed to Stonyhurst just when the French were about to attack Lisbon itself. The fifteen-day voyage took forty-five in a British ship, part of a convoy. Here Grassi's *Diary* becomes unusually picturesque - the storms were terrifying, the Brig *La Fama* sank beside them, and his Italian soul was sickened by the recurrent fare of "pouding".

England

Stonyhurst College, *alma mater* of so many martyrs and famous



Stonyhurst College, 1807. West Front showing Fr. Wright's Wing.

men (including Archbishops John Carroll and Leonard Neale of Baltimore and their charming friend, Fr. Charles Plowden) was his first real introduction to English life. The Italian-Father-from-Russia was popular if we may go by the many invitations he received. His *diary* shows that he lunched frequently at Oder (Hodder) Place* and Dunkenhall (Dunkenhalgh). One must forgive his latitudinarian spelling. It is pleasant to note in his *Diary* that in this land of "water and porter" the big feasts like All Saints were styled by him "vine-days". It was twenty-one years since he had tasted the fruits of the Lombard vineyards. These were the small relaxations amidst his unflagging work, carrying out experiments, listening to Sir Humphry Davy lecture in London or trying to master the difficult English of *The Edinburgh Review*. All this was grist to the mill for his next assignment, to the Maryland Mission.

Maryland

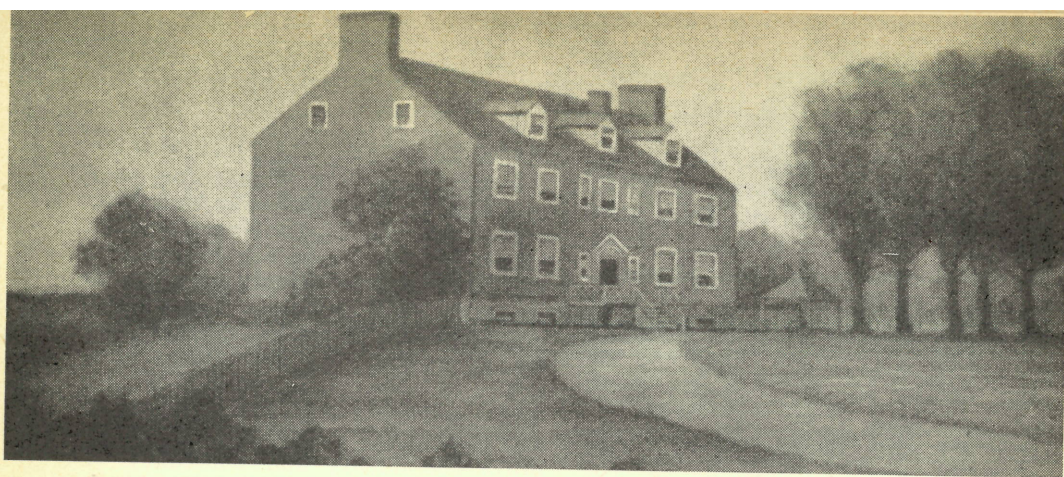
He landed at Baltimore in October, 1810. Two years later he was nominated President of Georgetown

Note *Fr. Plowden was Superior and Novice Master at Hodder; a younger son of Lord Petre lived at Dunkenhall.

College and received news within the next week, from the Jesuit General Brzozowski, that he was appointed "Superior of the Maryland Mission" which was tantamount to being Provincial. He was 37. Soon Archbishop Carroll was writing delightedly to Fr. Plowden: "Mr. Grassi has revived the College of G^e town, which has received great improvement in the number of students and course of studies." Mathematics and Natural Sciences were promoted in every way and, as apparatus could not be bought, he had it made by a lay-brother. It was during his term of office that, by act of Congress March 1st 1815, the power to grant degrees was conferred.

One would think that this major superior and president had enough to do. But Fr. Grassi never forgot his call to be a missionary in the ordinary meaning of the term. His idea of a holiday was to slip down to Alexandria, Virginia, or to ride on horseback from one Maryland country-mission to another. On one of such occasions the *Diary* records:

Nov. 11, 1816. Heard confessions in the morning up to 11, celebrated (Mass), preached, baptized 2 boys and blessed the marriage of two



Peter Carter

The beginnings of Georgetown University. How the "Old South" looked in 1789. Was it very different when Fr. Grassi first saw it twenty-one years later?

negroes. Brought Holy Communion early in the morning to a sick woman.

Then in 1817, all this activity in America came to a sudden end. Archbishop Leonard Neale of Baltimore needed the most trustworthy ambassador he could find to give the Holy See a true picture of a grave disorder that had arisen in Charleston, South Carolina. He chose Fr. Grassi. Then the Archbishop died and the other Jesuits considered it a duty to the Church for their Superior to carry through the dying man's wishes. His own health was no longer robust so the return transatlantic journey was vetoed by doctors, and Grassi remained for the rest of his life in Italy.

Italy

Rome, Turin and Naples were by turn the scenes of his activity. Besides the educational work of founding in Turin a *Collegio dei Nobili* which acquired international repute, he became the trusted spiritual director and friend of the House of Savoy. King Charles Felix died in his arms; the heir apparent Charles Albert, who had been in disgrace for his part in the 1821 conspiracy, knew that he owed his throne to Fr. Grassi's advice to Charles Felix that the young prince should be pardoned.

Despite the new King's vacillating character he remained Fr. Grassi's personal friend throughout life till the fatal battle of Novara in 1849 which was the last year of life for them both.

It was out of regard for Fr. Grassi that Charles Felix' widow, Queen Maria Christina, willed to the Order her summer residence, Villa Rufinella, in the Alban Hills.

If Fr. Grassi came back in 1817 into the maelstrom of Italian politics, he was at close quarters for the new crisis which threatened his own Society in 1820. It was his Breton friend, Fr. Rozaven, who was chiefly instrumental in persuading Cardinal Consalvi to save the Jesuit *Constitutions* and the right to proceed to the election of a Father General now that Brzozowski, who had been virtually a prisoner in Russia, was dead. Fr. Fortis was elected, to be succeeded in 1829 by Fr. Roothaan. Fr. Grassi became the latter's assistant for Italy but this did not minimise all the work he had to do for England and America. His stream of visitors clerical and lay from both these countries was, constant: Dr. Cullen, Dr. Grant, Lord Shrewsbury, Lord Petre, Charles Weld, Lord Clifford, Dr. Kendrick of Philadelphia etc., etc. On 19 May, 1847, he received a

visit from Newman, St. John, Dalgairns and Coffin a couple of weeks before Newman and St. John were ordained priests. Between times, he went on with the Ministry. He always disliked rain but even as a confessor to kings he managed to refuse a carriage. One can see him toiling up the Spanish Steps as he came from the *Gesù* all through the Roman summer of 1845 to hear confessions at the *Trinità*. Here Cornelia Connelly worked with him so often "*tante volte*" on the first draft of *Rules* for the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. He who called himself her "most lowly servant in Christ" could put at her disposal his vast experience in the ways of God and of men: his educational theory and practice gained in Russia, England, America and Italy; his knowledge of the Ignatian ideal inherited from the founder through St Joseph Pignatelli; and his unbounded missionary zeal. His only regret must have been that he could not instruct her forthwith in physics for they were both "nothing if not versatile."

Cornelia had evidently found time to write to him upon her arrival at Derby on October 13th, 1846. By 26th of that month he replied in Italian:

Madama,

I must send my thanks for your goodness in favouring me with two letters and may Divine Providence be thanked for the happy beginning of the Work of Charity about which you spoke to me so often in Rome. You confide in God, whose Glory is the sole reason for its undertaking. Beginnings have a way of being hard, and anyone who wants to do good must expect obstacles and difficulties which God allows to prove the fidelity and constancy of those who really undertake to serve Him. The Devil will unleash fury on those who make war on him but God will not allow him to prevail.

By December 1849 when Fr. Grassi died, the war was already being waged on all fronts—the Community had had to be transferred to St. Leonards-on-Sea, the Connelly children had been taken from England beyond their mother's ken, Pierce had won the first round in "*Connelly versus Connelly*." Fr. Grassi's death at this time must have been an added sorrow. In his last known letter to Mother Connelly he had written of "consuming the holocaust of oneself to God." Her own holocaust was to burn as a living flame of love for another thirty years.

Grateful acknowledgement must be made to Fr. Gilbert G. Garraghan's paper, *John Anthony Grassi, S. J. 1775-1849*, published in THE HISTORICAL REVIEW, XXIII, 1937.

Early Summer 1963

CORNELIA CONNELLY — A STUDY IN FIDELITY

by Mother Marie Thérèse, S. H. C. J.

This new life of the Foundress of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus fills in "the lacunae of the previous biographies with regard to the first part of Cornelia's life; and it tells the story of the second part of her life - from 1852 - accurately, lucidly, and fully for the first time." *From the Introduction by James Walsh, S. J., Vice-Postulator for the Cause of Cornelia Connelly.*

30s. (= \$ 4.50)

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