

Eliza Vaughan: A Remarkable Convert

(These words were written by John Beaumont, a lawyer by training and formerly Head of the School of Law at Leeds Metropolitan University. He is now working as a legal consultant and freelance writer on Catholic issues).

Elizabeth Louisa Rolls was born on 8th October 1810, but was always known as Eliza. She was brought up in an atmosphere of "earnest evangelical piety" in a family that originally came from Penrose in Monmouthshire. The family were described as yeoman farmers in the eighteenth century, but by the time of Eliza's birth they had made a considerable fortune from building houses in the London area. However, they lost much money in the depression following the Napoleonic wars and eventually went to live in France at St Omer between 1820 and 1826. Whilst there the family attended an Anabaptist chapel on Sundays, but Eliza did come into close contact with Catholicism as well. On occasions they went to Catholic ceremonies and processions, and we know that she attended at a convent on once to see a young woman take the veil. After their return to England in 1827 the family's finances revived greatly and much of their fortune was restored.

Eliza was to become the first wife of a Catholic, Lieutenant-Colonel John Francis Vaughan (1808-1880) of Courtfield, Ross, Herefordshire. The Vaughans were a longstanding recusant family, many of whom suffered for their faith during the centuries following the Reformation. It is not known how John and Eliza met, but we do know that they often attended Mass together before their marriage. The marriage itself took place on 12th July 1830 at St. Mary's Anglican church in Bryanston Square, London. It must be remembered that the civil law in 1830 still required all marriages to take place in the established Church. The couple appear to have been devoted to each other, something that continued throughout their married life. Eliza soon converted to the Catholic faith, being conditionally baptized on 31st October 1830 at Courtfield by the chaplain, Fr. Francis Joseph Daniel.

After her marriage Eliza continued to be impressed by seeing the Catholic faith in action on the Continent. In 1837 she wrote to her husband as follows from Bruges during a stay there:

"Really, the more I see of the churches, of the piety, the ceremonies of this town, the more edified I am... Last night we went to Benediction at Notre Dame and we both agreed that we had never felt such devotion—the lights, the incense, the dear devout women in their mysterious black cloaks, some with arms extended in silent adoration, all conspired to elevate one's heart above this world".

She also had access to the authentic Catholic tradition in the excellent library at Courtfield, which she herself supplemented. She is reported as having bought every book she heard about on the subject of prayer, her two favourites being

The Spirit of Prayer by St Alphonsus and *Pensées Pieuses*. She loved also to read the lives of the saints. In relation to prayer she benefited by having as an adviser her sister-in-law, Sister Frances Angela, a Visitation nun, and another sister-in-law, Sister Mary Chantal of the same Order. Eliza's character, in addition to one particularly remarkable aspect of her prayer life, is brought out very well by the biographer of one of her children: '[S]he consecrated her heart and soul to the service of God. Her religion coloured her whole outlook upon the world. It was a favourite saying of hers that she had received all from God, and so must be ready to give everything back to Him. And what more precious had she to give and surrender than her own children? She wanted them all to become priests and nuns. It was not a case of thinking that it would be nice if some younger son made up his mind to study for the priesthood, or one of the daughters went to a convent, there to pray for the rest; she besought God to send vocations to them all, to Herbert, her eldest born, no less than to the others. For nearly twenty years it was her daily practice to spend an hour from five to six in the afternoon in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament asking this favour that God would call every one of her children to serve Him in the Choir or in the Sanctuary'. (John G. Snead-Cox, *The Life of Cardinal Vaughan* (1911), Vol. 1, p.11).

Eliza's prayers were certainly answered. She became the mother of thirteen children who lived to maturity (one other child died shortly after birth). In the event all her five daughters entered convents and six of her eight sons became priests. To take them in turn, starting with the sons: Herbert Cardinal Vaughan (1832-1903) was the second Bishop of Salford, then Archbishop of Westminster and founder of St. Joseph's College for Foreign Missions at Mill Hill, London, Most Rev. Roger William Bede Vaughan (1834-1883) became a Benedictine monk of Downside and later Archbishop of Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, Fr. Kenelm Vaughan (1840-1908) was a priest of the Archdiocese of Westminster, Fr. Joseph Vaughan (1841-1896) (Dom Jerome in religion) was a Benedictine who established St Benedict's Abbey, Fort Augustus, Scotland, Fr. Bernard Vaughan, SJ (1847-1922) was a priest of the Society of Jesus and a renowned preacher, Right Rev. John S. Vaughan (1853-1925) was Bishop of Sebastopolis and Auxiliary of Salford. Even the other two sons entered ecclesiastical seminaries for a time to try their vocations. Colonel Francis Baynham Vaughan was Private Chamberlain to Pope Pius X and Reginald Vaughan was JP for Monmouthshire. It is a remarkable list.

Four of Eliza's five daughters became nuns*. Gwladys (1838-1880) joined the Visitation Order in Boulogne; Helen (1839-1861) entered the Sisters of Charity in London and died shortly afterwards; Clare (1843-1862) became a Poor Clare in Amiens and died after nine months there; and Mary (1845-1884) became prioress of the Augustinian convent in Newton Abbot. The fifth daughter, Margaret, born in 1851, was handicapped. As if this were not enough, Eliza was also grandmother of Fr. Herbert Vaughan, Catholic priest and Doctor of Divinity

of Rome; of Fr. Francis Vaughan, Catholic priest; and of Rev. William Vaughan, lay-brother of the Society of Jesus.

An achievement of this kind does not come easily. A profound spirituality is its inevitable foundation. We are fortunate to be able to witness this through the entries that Cardinal Vaughan made in a diary he kept in his twenties: "After breakfast, an hour in the morning was always spent in meditation in the chapel, which was her real home. She generally knelt, slightly leaning her wrists against the prie-dieu. I do not recollect ever seeing her distracted on these occasions, or looking anywhere [other] than towards the Blessed Sacrament or on her book. She often remained with her eyes fixed on the Tabernacle, and while her body was kneeling at the bottom of the chapel, and her face beautiful and tranquil with the effects of Divine Love, her heart and soul were within the Tabernacle with her dearly beloved Saviour. Even in those days I was much struck with my sweet mother's ardent love and devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. I used to watch her myself when in the chapel, and love her and gaze upon her. I used often to watch her from the gravel walk in the flower garden, and marvel to see her so absorbed in prayer. Her love of the Blessed Sacrament was untiring". (Snead-Cox, op cit, p.14).

Later on in his life, Cardinal Vaughan wrote a letter to his biographer in which he reminisced further about his mother and the childhood of his brothers and sisters:

"She made Heaven such a reality to us that we felt that we knew more about it, and liked it in a way far better even than our home, where, until she died, her children were wildly, supremely happy. Religion under her teaching was made so attractive, and all the treasured items she gathered from the lives of the Saints made them so fascinating to us, that we loved them as our most intimate friends, which she assured us they most certainly were". (ibid, p.25). Eliza was also an example to her children in her works of charity, especially in numerous kindnesses shown to the poor. She was a friend of George Lawrence Bernard Burder, an Anglican curate, who lived nearby. He is considered to have converted under her influence. He later became the second Abbot of Mt. St Bernard's Cistercian Monastery near Leicester from 1853 to 1858. Eliza suffered much from ill-health, but her sudden death was still a shock. On 24th January 1853, a few hours after giving birth to her son John, later a priest and bishop of course, she complained of fatigue and then suffered much pain. After a few hours, conscious and "praying fervently to the last", she died.

One may begin to appreciate the depth of the love in which the memory of their mother was held by all her children by one further fact. When, some years later, their father married, as his second wife, Mary, daughter of Joseph Weld of Lulworth, the children never during all the years she devoted to them greeted her with the name of mother. The word had become too sacred from its associations ever again to be used in common speech, and so the second mother

was always spoken of and addressed by them all, even by the younger children, simply as Mary.

There are all sorts of ways in which a Catholic apostolate can prosper. Many women have evangelized to great effect in the public forum. Three women are recognized as Doctors of the Church. But we must never forget the Catholic home and hearth, the central importance of the family, and the spiritual strength that comes from the domestic life. Eliza Vaughan is a great witness to that vital role. Her contribution is wisely summed up in a more recent biography of Cardinal Vaughan:

Her prayer life was remembered, by those who knew her, as extraordinary. To a few who have read about her, and of her prayer on behalf of her children, she has seemed eccentric. The figure of a young woman praying an hour each day that her children follow a calling to the Church has been misleading. What emerges from her correspondence is the figure of an active mother of a large family, a person with a remarkable prayer life who was at the same time filled with love and affection for her husband and children, her family and friends (Robert O'Neill, MHM, Cardinal Herbert Vaughan (1995), p.17).