

Blessed Charles Chapman Grafton ~ 1830-1912

by Fr. John-Julian, OJN

A Paper Presented during the Feast of Blessed Charles Chapman Grafton (*tr.*), August 29, 2009 at the Cathedral of St. Paul the Apostle, Fond du Lac, Wisconsin

Joseph Grafton was a 40-year-old mariner when he gathered his 39-year-old wife Mary and his 14-year-old daughter Elizabeth and set out from their home in Southwell, Suffolk on the two-month voyage. It was 1636, and the Graftons' goal was the colony of Massachusetts, only 16 years after the original English settlers had landed there. Within a year, the daughter Elizabeth had married John Saunders, and Joseph had become the captain of his own 40-ton ketch and soon became a flourishing merchant and respected "freeman" of Salem, Massachusetts. Little would they have guessed that they were the progenitors of a distinguished New England family, one of whom 250 years later would become the second bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Fond du Lac in the unheard of frontier territory later called "Wisconsin".

Charles Chapman Grafton was born on 12 April 1830 to Boston wealth and status. His father was Major Joseph Grafton, carrying the same name that had been handed down for 200 years in each generation of the family, and with the military title gained during his distinguished service in the War of 1812. In 1830, he was Surveyor of the Port of Boston. His wife was Anne Maria Gurley, a graceful beauty from Louisiana.

Charles was one of five children. His eldest brother Henry would be killed in service in the Mexican War, and his youngest brother James would leave Harvard for the Army and die a Captain in the 2nd Massachusetts Volunteers near the end of the Civil War. His older brother Joseph, a Captain in the Army, later proved very supportive of his younger brother's life and work as a bishop.

From the beginning, Charles was intended for the Law, and undertook his education at the prestigious Boston Latin School, and then at the equally-esteemed Phillips-Andover Academy. However, he developed serious eye problems and completed his secondary education at home with a tutor.

Because of the eye problem Charles could not do ordinary work, and this left him with considerable time on his hands. At the age of 17 he began out of curiosity to attend the newly-formed Church of the Advent, which had begun in a second-story room, and had recently taken a building on Green Street. Charles had known the rector, the Rev. Dr. William Crosswell, from the family's days at Christ Church (Old North Church), and later Charles remembered a childhood incident when Dr.

Croswell had taken him in his arms and blessed him, and he also recalled that when as a teenager he saw his friend and rector pass up the aisle and into the chancel at the Advent, “I heard, as it were, a Voice saying unto me...’ And why shouldn’t you be a priest?’”.

But, following his family’s intentions, Charles enrolled in Harvard Law School in 1851. He had just been confirmed at the Advent, and his mind was filled more with concern with religion than with the law. The Church of the Advent at the time was an “advanced” parish and took the lead in New England in implementing the principles of the Oxford Movement which meant the restoration of Catholic teachings and practice. While at college, Charles used to walk from Cambridge to Boston to make his fasting Communion at the Advent.

The Rev. Oliver S. Prescott – little older than Charles himself – had arrived as a curate at the Advent and it was to him that Charles turned with his disquieting sense of religious vocation. He recalled later that Father Prescott told him, “If God intended you to be a third-rate clergyman, rather than a first class lawyer, your duty was to enter the ministry rather than to seek to other profession.” So, much to his father’s discontent, as soon as he had received his LL.B. degree in 1853, and with the germ of monasticism growing in his mind, Charles made the great decision for the ministry.

By this time Fr. Prescott had moved to the Diocese of Maryland, and since that diocese was much more open to Grafton’s growing Catholic thought and practice Prescott recommended that he apply for ordination there, rather than in Massachusetts. So Grafton left Boston for the kindly encouragement of Bishop William R. Whittingham of Maryland (the same man who as a seminary professor at General Seminary had encouraged James Lloyd Breck in his founding of the monastic community at Nashotah and had compiled an Office Book for Breck’s group).

Grafton studied under Bp. Whittingham (and never forgot his maxim: “One ought to go to the death for the doctrine of the Real Presence”). On Dec. 23, 1855 he was ordained Deacon, and was priested on May 30, 1858 at St. Paul’s Church, Reistertown, MD. His diaconate was served at St. Paul’s where he lived in a deserted rectory with a total stipend for his first six months of \$26. “We did not have overmuch in the way of food...”, he wrote. He served several short assignments before being called to be curate to Fr. William E. Wyatt at St. Paul’s, Chaptico, MD where he stayed for four years, with the sense of a monastic vocation growing constantly.

When a new rector was called, Grafton spoke with Fr. Prescott and others about their joining him in the religious life, and when they encouraged him, he spoke with Bp. Whittingham who suggested that he act on his calling — and added that he would join him if it were in his power to do so! Consequently, in 1864 Grafton decided to go to England and consult with others there “of an apparently higher and more devout type” about a religious order.

To prepare for his journey, he and Fr. Prescott decided to make a retreat together further to test their callings. They obtained permission to use a shack on Fire Island, NY, and moved there with bedding and foodstuffs. But the Civil War was then underway, and their sanctuary was disturbed when a Union Navy Cutter arrived with a contingent of Marines who came to arrest them as suspected Confederate spies! A call to Dr. Dix at Trinity Church, Wall Street, verified their respectability, and their retreat continued.

Grafton left for England in May of 1865, did some sight-seeing, and on June 14 called on the man whom he considered the greatest religious scholar in the world and a master of the spiritual life: Edward Bouverie Pusey. He spent the better part of nine days in Oxford, and on June 16 went to Mass at what came to be called the “Old Iron Church of Cowley” in an Oxford suburb where the Celebrant was Richard Meux (pronounced “Mews”) Benson. “I was more impressed with the sacrifice than ever in my life,” he wrote later. The next morning he breakfasted with Fr. Benson and Alexander Forbes, Bishop of Brechin in Scotland, and spent the day with them touring the Colleges of Oxford. After dinner, Grafton, Benson, and Pusey went for “a long walk” where it is presumed much planning for the future began.

Then, a series of five meetings were held at All Saints Church, Margaret Street in London (where, by the way, Grafton had learned much about “advanced” ritualism — including a recipe for Altar Bread!) to discuss particularities of forming an Anglican religious order for men. At the fourth meeting, the group was joined by the Bishop of Oxford and the Archbishop of Canterbury. Word also arrived that the Bishop of London would sanction the formation of such an order. By the fifth meeting, matters finally became clear. In one of his regular letters to Prescott, Grafton wrote: “The Society will be based on the three vows, of course. The general line will be rather like that, say, of the modern orders, the Redemptorist or Jesuit, than the ancient Monastic ones.” And, showing Grafton’s commitment to parish ministry, the name would be “The Society of Mission Priests of St. John the Evangelist.” And again he wrote: “Some of England’s saintliest men will direct by their counsel [our] work, and some of them will be in it.”

In 1866, Richard M. Benson, Charles C. Grafton, and Samuel W. O'Neill took their vows as religious, and SSJE had its formal beginning. They lived a common life together at Cowley, and gave most of their time to pastoral work, to preaching parish missions and retreats, and to working in the cholera hospital. In 1868 Fr. Prescott joined the original three, and in 1870 four more novices were received. Also in that year, SSJE was asked to take charge of the Church of the Advent, Boston. Fr. Benson traveled to Boston to see the church, and the next year sent Fr. Prescott to be priest-in-charge. Fr. Grafton was sent to Bridgeport, CT to take charge of a school, but found that the donor insisted on liturgical practices which Grafton felt could not be justified. However he was therefore at hand when, in 1872, the Church of Advent elected him as rector. Fr. Benson gave his permission, and Grafton settled for the next sixteen years in Boston, with an SSJE Mission House connected to the Bowdoin Street church.

In 1876 Fr. Prescott was called to be rector of St. Clement's Church, Philadelphia. At this point there were three Cowley Fathers in America – Grafton, Prescott, and Osborne – and serious problems began to arise between the Americans and Fr. Benson. Grafton was pressing for a constitution and for independence of the American House. In 1882, the matter came to a head, and Grafton, much to his grief, declared that he would have to sever his connection with SSJE. An agreement was finally reached in which Grafton received an “honorable” release from the vow of obedience, and the other Cowley Fathers who had been assisting him at Advent were to be transferred. Instead, however, the old Bowdoin Street church was taken over by the English SSJE Fathers and renamed “The Church of St John the Evangelist.” Fr. Grafton moved (with his now-depleted congregation and without the Sisters of St. Margaret) to the new Church of the Advent on Brimmer Street in 1883. He then constituted a new Order, the Sisters of the Holy Nativity, with the few Sisters who had stayed with him at Advent.

The parish thrived beyond all expectations, with more baptisms and confirmations than any other parish in the diocese. In spite of on-going friction with the low-church bishop, Advent's congregation grew astoundingly, and the new church was completed and splendidly furnished. Four of the many parish curates eventually became bishops. And suddenly, in mid-1888, in the midst of unparalleled success, Fr. Grafton resigned as rector, and in October he moved with the Sisters of the Holy Nativity to Providence, RI, intending to exercise a ministry of preaching missions and retreats, building up his Sisterhood, and working for the development of the religious life in America.

But his intended new life was short-lived, for only a month later, Grafton was elected second bishop of the still-new Diocese of Fond du Lac, and another period of harassment started immediately, because confirmation to the election was

needed from the bishops and Standing Committees of a majority of dioceses before he could be consecrated — and for a time, there was some doubt that sufficient consents would be received. As a matter of course, the anti-ritualists opposed his election, but quite astoundingly, some English Cowley Fathers (perhaps smarting over Grafton's independence) joined the opposition. Rumors circulated that Grafton did not have the “mental vigor” for such a position. But such opposition tended to have the opposite effect wished for, and several voted for confirmation out of sympathy for Grafton in the face of the mean-spirited accusations and groundless allegations. Twelve bishops withheld consent, but four months later, the majority of confirmations were received, and the consecration set for Saint Mark's day: April 25, 1889.

Bishop McLaren of Chicago was appointed by the Presiding Bishop as Celebrant and chief Consecrator. The co-consecrators were Bishop Seymour of Springfield and Bishop Knickerbacker of Indiana. Bishop Burgess of Quincy was preacher, and Bishop Gilbert, assistant bishop of Minnesota, and Bishop Knight of Milwaukee were presenting bishops. And Grafton became the bishop of one of the newest, smallest, and poorest dioceses in the American Church.

During his lifetime, and especially during his episcopate, Grafton supported what he called the “six points” of ritual: (1) use of Eucharistic vestments, (2) mixed Chalice of wine and water, (3) use of wafer bread, (4) the east-ward position of the Celebrant, (5) candles on the altar or in procession, and (6) use of incense. In today's Church, we wonder that any of these could be a matter of contro-versy, but they were very contentious in Grafton's day.

It became the bishop's practice to give “memorials of my visitation” to every parish he visited, using funds from his wealthy family and friends in the East to provide candlesticks, sanctus bells, crucifixes, censers, vestments, altars, and even reredoses and statues. [He brought an entire family of woodcarvers from Oberammergau to Fond du Lac to provide woodwork and statues for his churches.] In a letter to the London “Church Times”, he wrote: “I am gradually getting my diocese in order, and it is filling up with good Catholic priests. It is large in extent of territory...yet small in numbers and clergy. There are about thirty clergy only, and it is the poorest of all our dioceses ... I hope by God's help, to make this a Catholic diocese ... You see ... the Church is free from the state, and when the bishop is Catholic, the way is open to these new dioceses of the West for the introduction of all Catholic teaching and practice.” As one of his biographers said clearly Bishop Grafton was always most careful to avoid lawlessness, and stressed obedience to lawful authority, whether it be Canon Law, Prayer Book, authority of the Bishop, or custom.

Personally, the bishop tended to be “reserved” (some said “aloof”) but his Bostonian background and his experience of the great bishops of England did not always jibe with the informality of the frontier. More serious was his tendency to be naive and a somewhat poor judge of character. His inclination was to accept without prudent care anyone claiming to be a “Catholic” and especially any Roman Catholic wishing to convert, or anyone interested in the religious life. This weakness of his was eventually to mar more than one project in the diocese.

However, his spirituality was truly deep and serious, and he was above all things a true priest of God. He wrote: “The priest’s calling is to perfection ... To win souls to Christ he must preach the Cross, from the Cross.” And he found in his own life that what spiritually helped him most was the practice of Confession.

Unlike many of his ritualistic confreres, Grafton was vociferously anti-Roman. At the time of McGarvey Secession over the Open Pulpit Canon, he wrote: “... Some pus has been squeezed out of the Church,” and he wrote to his Oneida children that “... it is a very great sin for any Churchman to leave their own Church, where they have the true Faith and Sacraments, and join the Roman Church” and later spoke of some Episcopal clergy “who fell away into the schismatical and erroneous Church of Rome.”

Perhaps the most famous (or infamous) event in the diocese during Grafton’s long episcopacy was the consecration of Reginald Heber Weller as bishop co-adjutor in 1900. Grafton planned the service very carefully and expressed the wish that it be the most “noteworthy” of any consecration in the American Church. He invited the Russian Orthodox prelate Bishop Tikhon (Bishop of Aleut and North America) and Bishop Anthony Kozlowski (Prime Bishop of Old Catholics in America) to participate (although Bishop McClaren’s vociferous objection to Kozlowski’s involvement in the actual consecration, meant that the two visiting prelates came only as observers).

The service was, of course, ritually splendid, but what stirred up furor across the country was the publication of THE photograph (which came to be called derisively “The Fond du Lac Circus”). It showed all eight Episcopal bishops and the two visiting bishops in cope and miter, and caused a church-wide fracas over ritual and vestments that lasted for over six months, with accusations and threats of ecclesiastical trial flying from all corners, and with scurrilous ad hominem attacks and virulent justifications. When the dust finally settled, the upshot was that traditional Catholic ritual and vestments had thereafter gained a permanent legitimacy in the Episcopal Church.

During Grafton's episcopate in Fond du Lac, there was a 68% increase in the number of clergy and a 57% increase in the number of communicants. Grafton built 28 new churches, 15 parish halls, and 21 rectories. It is believed that he spent near \$700,000 (over \$15 million in current values) of his own inherited fortunes and gifts from his friends on diocesan projects. In 1890, a diocesan priest wrote to a friend, "[Bishop Grafton's] clergy are one with him and his laity are taking more and more pride in him. We all feel what a dreadful mistake it would have been if we had not chosen him for our Bishop."

During his lifetime, Bishop Grafton served as the "legitimator" for Anglo-Catholic projects world-wide. He remained a close friend of Bishop (later "Saint") Tikhon, but his efforts at union with the Orthodox were never realized. He supported Bishop Kozlowski's application for formal intercommunion to the Episcopal House of Bishops (which also sadly came to nothing in his lifetime). He laid the cornerstone of the church of St. Mary the Virgin in New York. He celebrated the consecration Mass at St. Ignatius Church, New York. It appears that although he was out of his diocese for two or three months each year, giving retreats and addresses and sermons world-wide, he never took a "vacation" as such.

Grafton supported four attempts to found a Benedictine monastery in Fond du Lac — all sadly undone by his overly-optimistic misreading of the character of the people involved. He moved the motherhouse of the Sisters of the Holy Nativity to Fond du Lac from Rhode Island. He was a major supporter of Nashotah House Seminary. He became Superior-General of the Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament and held that position for over twenty years, advocating daily Mass in his parishes, and personally providing tabernacles for all parish altars (although he recommended against Processions and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament on political grounds).

In 1911, the bishop's health began to fail and he had difficulty walking. He had suffered from diabetes for many years, and the following spring he fell in his library and sustained injury which resulted in a gangrenous foot. In June of 1912 he was too weak to attend the Diocesan Convention, but sent his address which was read by his Co-Adjutor Bishop Weller. On August 25 it was clear that the end was near. He asked for someone to send a message to Fr. Benson in England: "Give him my deep personal love." On the 26th he woke suddenly and cried out, "Glory! Glory! I have seen the Lord and he turned and embraced me!" He received Extreme Unction and Viaticum. On August 30 he died. Canon Rogers said, "The end was peaceful. The Sisters and nurses knelt as a priest recited the

Litany for the Dying and read the Commendatory Prayers. The breathing stopped and the tired body was at rest.”

When the bishop’s will was filed for probate, it was found that his entire personal property amounted to only \$1,000. On Monday, September 1, the body was laid in state at the Cathedral in a glass-covered casket, and on Tuesday, the Solemn Mass of Requiem was celebrated by Bishop Weller. Fr. James O.S. Huntington, OHC, preached the eulogy, and the body was interred in Rienzi cemetery. A year later the remains were translated to a splendid marble tomb in the Cathedral. When the glass-covered casket was opened, “ ... it was found to the surprise of the observers that the Bishop’s features and hands were as natural as on the day he died. The miter was somewhat discolored and the chalice which he grasped in his hand was tarnished, but the body itself showed no indication of decay.”

It can be said without qualification or question that this one man holds the principal responsibility for permanent and earth-shaking changes in the Episcopal Church. A major portion of the practice and teachings that are now universally normative in the Church can find their origins in the life and work of Charles Chapman Grafton and his disciples.

SOURCES

- Belknap, Henry Wyckoff; *The Grafton Family of Salem*;
- Essex Institute, Vol. LXIV.
- Grafton, Charles C.; *A Journey Godward or Doulos Iesou Christo (A Servant of Jesus Christ)*; Young Churchman Co; Milwaukee; 1910.
- Grafton, Charles C.; “An Open Letter to the S.S.J.E.” privately printed as a pamphlet, n.d.
- History of St. Clement’s Parish: http://www.s-clements.org/History_Ritualistic.html
- Kinney, John Mark; +C. C. FOND DU LAC: *The Life of Charles Chapman Grafton, Second Bishop of Fond du Lac*; Unpublished dissertation at Nashotah House; 1967. (Note: Fr. Kinney’s dissertation is unquestionably the finest biography of Grafton in existence.) Rogers, B. Talbot (ed.); *The Works of the Rt. Rev. Charles C. Grafton*; (13 vols.) Longmans, Green; NY; 1914.
- Young, Ronald B.; *The Viscount Halifax (Charles Lindley Wood) and the Transformation of Lay Authority in the Church of England (1865-1910)*; Unpublished dissertation at General Theological Seminary; 2003.
- Mr. Ted Aaberg, Assistant Director of Research for Harvard Law School, provided invaluable assistance in researching the Law School archives for Grafton’s school records.