Apparition of the Virgin Mary at WALSINGHAM

ENGLAND, XI Century

A manuscript of the XV Century traces the origins of the Shrine to 1691. After becoming a widow, Lady Richeldas de Poteshebris of Walsingham decided to dedicate her life to the Virgin Mary. She appeared to Lady Richeldas in a dream and transported her in spirit to Nazareth, to show her the Holy House where the Angel Gabriel had announced the Incarnation of the Word. The Virgin Mary ordered Lady Richeldas to take its measurements in order to be able to rebuild it on her property. Our Lady said: “Here people must celebrate the Annunciation, the root of the gratuitous redemption of humanity. Here they will recall the great joy that I had when I was greeted by the Archangel Gabriel, who said to me that for my humility I would be Mother of God. Here the pilgrims will find solace for their needs. All those who will invoke me with faith will not leave empty handed”. This dream recurred over three times. The pious woman immediately summoned carpenters and masons and built a first chapel in wood, replaced a little later by another one in brick that was donated to the Abbey of Downside. Upon the death of Lady Richeldas, her son Lord Geoffrey took hold of the property. Many people who could not go to the Holy Land began to go to the Holy House of Walsingham to commemorate the Virgin Mary like in Nazareth. The Shrine soon became a center of pilgrimage, rivaling the Holy Land, Rome and Santiago de Compostela.

The miracles began multiply: King Edward I himself was saved from mortal danger after invoking Our Lady of Walsingham. Starting from Richard I the Lionheart (1187-1199), all the Kings and Queens of England have prayed at Walsingham. Edward I even went there 11 times. In 1340 another chapel called Slipper Chapel was built one mile away, where the pilgrims left their shoes to walk barefoot the last stretch.

With the assertion of the Protestant Reformation, Marian devotion in England suffered a setback. In 1534 theCanon Regular of Walsingham were among the first to bend to the tyranny of Henry VIII, signing the Act of Supremacy that recognized him as Head of the Church. In 1538 the troops of the King destroyed the convent and razed the Shrine to the ground, not before stripping it of all its riches. The vicar prior Nicholas Milham, opposed to the agreement with the Protestants, was killed and his body was hung to the Sands. The image of Our Lady was brought to London and burned in the square "to wipe out the idolatry", as John Rowe wrote in 1538. Great was the dismay of the Catholics in seeing the destruction of the very beloved Shrine, yet the English Catholics never forgot Our Lady of Walsingham, and more than a few went secretly to pray near the Slipper Chapel, at first transformed into a residential house, then a forge, a barn and lastly a stable. In 1663 Charlotte Boyd, a wealthy lady converted to Catholicism, purchased the property of the Slipper Chapel, with the intention of restoring its devotion. She entrusted the restoration to the Guild of Our Lady of Nazareth. A wooden statue was carved, faithful copy of the original, following the model of an old seal of the Shrine, today preserved in the British Museum. In 1667, recognizing its attribute of Marian Shrine, Pope Leo XIII authorized again the pilgrimage. The first public pilgrimage took place on August 26, 1897, but for almost an entire generation this devotion elicited little enthusiasm. The reason was clear: Suffered for more than 200 years in the brutal persecution of the Protestants, the English Catholics were by then accustomed to a discreet and almost domestic style of devotion.

When, on the wave of the Oxford Movement, Cardinal Manning and others tried to restore the processions, the pilgrimages and other forms of public devotion, their efforts were not appreciated by everyone. Consequently, the restoration of the Shrine of Walsingham initially had little impact on English Catholicism. We must wait until 1954 in order that the Chapel be built as National Shrine by the Bishop of Northampton, together with the other Bishops of England and Wales. On August 26, the first Holy Mass was celebrated there, after 400 years. Two days later, Cardinal Bourne, accompanied 10,000 pilgrims there. In 1864, the Penitential Delegate Mons. O’Hara canonically crowned Our Lady: The devotion to Our Lady of Walsingham thus regained its traditional place in the pieties of the English. The canopy of the Shrine is currently entrusted to the Marist Fathers.