

RELICS OF POPERY

By Rt. Rev. Abbot Horne, F.S.A.

PREFACE

In spite of the Reformation, the old religion still asserts itself in a number of curious ways. After the Catholic Church in this country had been in unbroken communion with the Roman Church for fifteen hundred years and more, the Protestant Reformation took place and the inter-communion ceased. During these centuries it was but natural that customs, words, and phrases descriptive of the current religion, should find a place in the everyday speech of the people. Many of these religious expressions are alive today, but the greater number of those who use them do not realize that they are paying homage to the ancient religion of the land, and are proclaiming the fact that England was once a Catholic country.

The following examples of these "Relics of Popery" still remaining, will illustrate what is meant. There are probably many more, and the list could be made much longer.

Downside Abbey Near Bath

OLD TITLES AND NAMES

Rent Days, etc.

The old custom of dating events by Saints' days went on right up to the Reformation, when the Protestants changed the method to recording the event by the date of the day of the month. Yet many of the old Catholic titles for feasts remain until now. Thus we still have Christmas, Candlemas (February 2nd on which day rents are still paid in the West of England), Michaelmas, Martinmas, and several more. Lady Day (the feast of Our Blessed Lady, March 25th being her Annunciation) is one of the well-known quarter days. There is evidence that the Reformers tried to get rid of these old Popish names, and they spoke of Christtide, Michaeltide, etc., but these new names never became popular, and we still have those used by our Catholic forefathers.

Judges' Robes

The ancient connection of the Law and the Church is still maintained in many ways. There is, for instance, the custom for Judges of the King's Bench to wear certain robes on Saints' days. These robes are really survivals of clerical vestments. The outer robe seems to be a continuation of the cope, that was once worn : the cincture, of the priest's girdle, and the stole, of the ecclesiastical stole. A Judge's scarlet robe trimmed with ermine gives way to a purple robe lined with watered silk, during the Easter sitting, such changes of raiment, according to the Church's seasons, being yet another example of the survival of ancient Catholic customs.

The Titles of the Law Terms

These bespeak a Catholic origin. There is Hilary Term (so named from St Hilary's feast day. He was Bishop of Poitiers, and died A.D. 368), Easter, Trinity, and Michaelmas terms, and the same titles hold good at the Universities to a certain extent. .

Wedding Breakfast

According to Catholic custom, marriage took place at a Nuptial Mass, and both bride and bridegroom received Holy Communion at the usual time in the celebration. As they would both have been fasting, according to the Church's law for those who communicate, they needed their breakfast after the ceremony. Their friends would join them at the meal, and hence the origin of the Wedding Breakfast. When both the Nuptial Mass and the law of fasting communion ceased after the Reformation, the breakfast following the ceremony lost its meaning but the custom has lasted on in name until the present time, and of course it is still of practical importance to Catholics.

The Holy Number Thirteen

An interesting survival of Catholic days is the number thirteen, in spite of the efforts the Reformers made to stamp it out by calling it unlucky. The model in men's minds from quite early times seems to have been Our Divine Lord and the twelve Apostles, and this number of thirteen was copied in all kinds of ways. A benefactor wanted to found some alms-houses, or hospitals as they were more often called, and it will be found that, as a rule, they were built to the number of thirteen. Thus Hugh II, Abbot of Reading, founded a hospital for thirteen poor men and thirteen poor women, about the year 1190. Richard III founded the Heralds' College in London, and appointed that the members composing it should number thirteen, as they do to this day. Catherine of Braganza, wife of Charles II, brought a body of Portuguese Franciscans to London in 1662, the community consisting of a Father Guardian and twelve friars. A "baker's dozen" as it was called consisted of thirteen loaves or cakes and there is legislation connected with this custom. But an interesting, and in some ways an amusing, survival of thirteen being regarded as a lucky number is to be found in the common custom of putting a hen to sit on thirteen eggs. When a sitting of eggs is advertised for sale, the number is always understood to be thirteen. If this number is really unlucky, as has been made out in modern times, is this number of thirteen eggs put under the hen with the hope that they won't hatch? The interest of this thirteen egg custom, with its religious tinge, is, that it should have come down to us intact all the long way from our Catholic past. And it shows also how deeply matters connected with religion, in however small a way, entered into the daily life of our forefathers.

Church Bells

Another place, where perhaps we might not look for traces of the old religion, is in the inscriptions that were often cast on the outsides of church bells. We find saints' names in great numbers, such as St Thomas, St Clement, St Augustine, St Ann, St Margaret, St Catherine, followed by the usual prayer "pray for us." Inscriptions in honour of Our Lady run through endless forms, such as "O pious Jesu, Mary's Flower," or "Thou, O Christ, will protect us through the prayers of Thy Mother," "Pray with pious mind for us, O Virgin Mary." There are endless inscriptions of this kind, up in our old church towers, and the bells are telling of the old faith, every time they are rung.

Diseases

The complaint known as St Anthony's Fire, or sometimes Sacred Fire, was erysipelas. St Anthony (A.D. 356) the Hermit, and often called the founder of Monasticism, relates how he was set upon by devils, who beat him so severely that it was thought he would die of his wounds. At his prayer, Our Lord appeared to him and healed him. In the year 1089 when there was a plague of erysipelas in many parts of Europe, it was found that persons who implored St Anthony's prayers often obtained a cure, and from that time onward the disease came to be called St Anthony's Fire.

St Vitus' Dance

An extraordinary dancing madness in the 15th century began in Germany at Treves and Cologne and then spread into several other countries. A chapel at Ulm, dedicated to St Vitus, became a place of pilgrimage for those afflicted with this dancing mania; and this accounts for the Saint's name being used to describe this curious nervous complaint, which is now known as chorea. The victims flocked by thousands to this chapel of St Vitus and, in memory of this, a procession is still made yearly on Whit Tuesday to this place. St Vitus suffered martyrdom under Diocletian and his feast is kept on the 15th of June.

OLD SAYINGS

The weakest must go to the wall

Built into the wall of many of our old pre-Reformation churches may frequently be seen a stone bench or seat running down the length of the nave on either side of the church. These stone seats date from a time before there were any wooden seats filling the nave, and hence the congregation stood throughout Mass, kneeling on the floor at the more solemn moments. Old persons and those not in good health naturally found this standing up rather trying and so they made for the stone benches projecting from the walls. It is easy to see from this how the saying arose that "the

weakest must go to the wall." Dr. Charles Cox in his *English Church Furniture* (p. 261) describes these stone seats, and their use.

To kick the bucket

This may not be a very sympathetic or feeling way to describe somebody's death, but it is an eloquent one when brought into relation with an old Catholic custom. After death, when the body had been laid out, a cross and two lighted candles were placed near it, and in addition to these the holy-water bucket was brought from the church and put at the feet of the corpse. When friends came to pray for the deceased, before leaving the room they would sprinkle the body with holy-water. So intimately therefore was the bucket associated with the feet of deceased persons, that it is easy to see how such a saying as "kicking the bucket " came about. Many other explanations of this saying have been given by persons who are unacquainted with Catholic custom.

He has not a halfpenny to bless himself with

To bless oneself is to make the sign of the cross, and the saying refers to the old pious custom of a person doing this with the first piece of money he had received that day. The recipient crossed himself with the coin, before putting it into his pocket. To give some idea as to how very poor a certain man might be, it was enough to say that he did not possess a halfpenny with which he could cross himself. After the change in religion, this custom was given up, and the recipient spat upon the coin before putting it into his pocket, and generally said that he did this for luck.

To laugh in one's sleeve

This expression has probably a monastic origin. The large choir dress, worn over the religious habit, has voluminous sleeves. When some episode occurred in the monastic choir, such as a ridiculous mistake made by a novice when reading something, or an absurd blunder when some simple act had to be done, the large sleeves covering the hands made a convenient place in which to bury a laughing face. As the covering of the face in this way was often adopted in private prayer with the object of shutting out distractions, it was not always easy for an onlooker to say for what purpose the sleeve was being used. Hence "to laugh in one's sleeve " became a handy metaphor to describe a laugh that was to be of a quiet, unobtrusive nature.

Candlemas, candle less

This saying seems confined to the West Country, and it obviously means that as the daylight begins to increase about the beginning of February (Candlemas, 2nd February) so less candles are needed for light in the house.

Short Shrift

This saying is often still used, when but little time is allowed to carry something out. It has its origin in the old Saxon word to shrive, meaning to go to confession and receive absolution. When a criminal was going to be executed he was formerly allowed just time enough to make his confession and receive absolution, before he died, and hence the origin of the expression.

CHURCH DAYS

Shrove Tuesday

The name Shrove Tuesday is another link with our Catholic past. To shrive or to be shriven are the terms our forefathers used about the Sacrament of Confession. It was the old custom in this country to prepare for Lent by going to confession on either the Monday or Tuesday before Ash Wednesday, and hence this time was often called Shrove Tide. A bell is still rung, by ancient custom, in several of the old parish churches, which is called by the people "The Pancake Bell," but it is really the bell that used to call them to the church for their Lent confession.

Ash Wednesday

The name given to the first day of Lent is Ash Wednesday. It gets its name from the ceremony of blessing ashes,

which are generally made by burning the old palms of the previous year, and placing the ashes on the heads of the faithful when they come up to the altar for the purpose. This day is still so named in many secular calendars, showing how the memory of the ceremony has lasted on.

Palm Sunday

On this day, the Sunday before Easter, palms are blessed and distributed to the congregation, in memory of that ride by Our Divine Lord, into Jerusalem, when the people broke off boughs from the trees and strewed them in the road-way. In this country, the old name of palm has clung to the willow with its golden or silver catkins, which are showing in the early spring, and there can be no doubt that these catkin-covered willows were carried by our forefathers on Palm Sunday, when Easter fell at a time that the willow could be used. But as an early or very late Easter would make the use of this kind of palm impossible, yew, from the churchyard yew-tree, was carried instead. In parts of Kent the yew is still called palm, and the quiet little graveyard, embraced by the square of cloister on the south side of Wells Cathedral, is always known as the Palm churchyard. In the middle of it stands a very ancient yew-tree. Throughout the country parts of Ireland, the churchyard yew is always spoken of as the Palm tree, and pieces from it are used on Palm Sunday. The name, Palm Sunday, is certainly a "relic of Popery."

Maundy Thursday

The Thursday following Palm Sunday, or the day before Good Friday, still goes by this name. The Maundy, in Catholic England, meant the washing of the feet of a certain number of poor men, on this day, by the reigning Sovereign, and for many ages the ceremony took place in Westminster Abbey. The word Maundy comes from the first latin word in this ceremony, which is Mandatum, and it is a reference to Our Lord's words that He was giving a new command to the disciples when He carried out the ceremony of washing their feet (St John VIII). Although the royal ceremony of the washing has been given up since the Protestant Reformation, the conclusion of that ceremony, which was the giving to each of the old men who had taken part in it, a gift of money, is still kept up. Each recipient has a purse of new coins given him which are especially minted for the occasion. Hence what is known as the Royal Maundy is a very real survival of a remnant of the old religion, only the washing of the feet and the meal afterwards, when the Sovereign waited on his guests at table, are now omitted.

Easter Sunday

What are known as Easter Cakes, a sort of large biscuit flavoured with cinnamon, appear in many parts of the West Country at Easter time. They were frequently sold at the church door by the sacristan or sexton, as he was more often called, and were doubtless bought by those who had come a long way to make their Easter Communion, and hence would be fasting. The Easter Cake would help them on their walk home again.

The Rogation Days

The three days before the feast of Our Lord's Ascension are known as the Rogation Days, and the Litanies of the Saints are sung in procession on these days. What is known as "beating the bounds " consisted in walking round the boundaries of the parish so that they might be clearly defined and the obligation of supporting the poor in the parish might have its just limits. Advantage was taken of the Rogation processions in times past for defining parish boundaries, and although these processions ceased at the Reformation, we still have a remnant of them in the custom of beating the bounds which goes on in places here and there about the feast of the Ascension.

Corpus Christi

The old village benefit clubs have now nearly ceased to exist, as the Insurance Act killed most of them. Many of these clubs must have dated back to Catholic times, for not a few kept their annual feast, or meeting-day, on what they now call "Trinity Thursday," which is of course the feast of Corpus Christi. The benefit club would have joined in the procession of the Blessed Sacrament on that day, which was a holiday, and so the members would have been free to carry out their business meeting afterwards, at which they settled the financial affairs of their club.

SOME OLD CUSTOMS

The Grotto

The Oxford English Dictionary described this as "a structure of oyster-shells in the form of a grotto, erected and exhibited by London street boys on the 5th of August," and quotes Chambers' Book of Days, II. 122. There we are told that a cockle-shell is the badge of St James the Apostle, as one of these shells was often worn by those who had been on pilgrimage to his shrine at Compostela, in Spain. St James's day was August 5th, but, since the change of style, it is now kept on July 25th. These grottos were built by children in London, with oyster shells, as cockle shells were not to be had, and were placed in some corner of a street. The grotto finished off at the top with a lighted candle and passers-by were asked to "please remember the grotto" by giving a penny to keep the candle alight. A writer to The Times (24.4.44) describes seeing a grotto under the arches of Finsbury Park Station, just before the first great war. But the grotto custom seems now to be dying out in London, and it never appears to have existed elsewhere. It is certainly a relic of Catholic days and we may regret that the changes brought about by the two great wars appear to have put an end to the custom.

One can find the remains of another old religious custom at sea. Our sailors still continue the practice of "saluting the quarter-deck " and the salute is of strict obligation irrespective of rank. It is given to the place where a crucifix always hung in Catholic days.

At Winchester, Wykehamists' scholars doff their hats in respect to the statue of Our Lady and Child, the Archangel Gabriel, and William of Wykeham, before entering Middle Gate. Commoners do not.

PLACE NAMES

There are still many places, streets, even towns, that have names that have come down to us from Catholic times. In London, one well-known street is Paternoster Row, and it is said to get its name from the large beads on a rosary, which are called Paternosters. Originally, wood turners made these beads here which were often of special design and sometimes highly ornamental. There was also another Paternoster-row and a Little Paternoster-row in Spitalfields, near the former Priory of St Mary.

Not far away we have Ave Maria Lane, Amen Corner, Creed Lane, all of which date from Catholic times. An early writer (Hatton) says that these places had their names from religious houses of Black and Grey Friars, as they were situated between them.

Bethlehem Hospital, or Bedlam, as it is often called for short, was founded in 1247, as a hospital for lunatics, under the care of a religious Order whose head house was near Bethlehem. It still exists to-day as a hospital for those mentally afflicted and so has come down from our Catholic past.

Charing Cross is another well-known name that has a history beginning in 1291, when Eleanor, queen of Edward I, was brought to Westminster Abbey for burial, it being the last of the nine crosses that marked the royal journey to the grave.

Blackfriars

This is now the district between Ludgate Hill and the river Thames. It gets its name from the important monastery of Black or Dominican Friars which was removed to this site from Holborn in 1276. The monastery was destroyed by Henry VIII.

Whitefriars

A part of London extending from Fleet St. to the Thames. There was a convent of Carmelite Friars here in Catholic days, and the white religious habit that they wore, gave its name to the district.

Greyfriars

What is known as Christ's Hospital was placed on the site of the Greyfriars Monastery by Edward VI. The property stolen from the Greyfriars was used by the King to make this foundation, and the Franciscan monastery was mostly

destroyed.

Covent Garden

In 1222 most of the present parish of St Paul's, Covent Garden, was occupied by the garden of Westminster Abbey, and its old title of convent garden has been corrupted to Covent Garden, since the reign of Elizabeth.

Old Catholic titles have continued sometimes, where we should least expect them. The names of the sees in the Established Church are mostly those that were in use before the Reformation. Thus we have, Cantuar : Ebor : London : Oxon : etc., but sees that have been created in Protestant times appear to find it difficult to live up to the old Catholic tradition, and so we get Bradford, Derby, etc.

OLD INN SIGNS

So many Inn signs, scattered up and down the country refer to the old religion, that it is possible to give only a few samples of them. **The Lamb and Flag** is fairly common, and is of course the **Agnus Dei**. The Mystery of the Annunciation under the title of the **Angel** or the **Salutation** occurs all over the country.

Few signs have undergone so many changes as the **Salutation**. Originally it represented the angel saluting Our Blessed Lady and this was still occasionally seen in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the times of the Commonwealth the Puritans changed it into the **Soldier and Citizen** and in this form it continued for long after, two citizens being represented as bowing politely to each other. The **Salutation Tavern** in Billingsgate shows it thus on an old trade token and so does the **Salutation Tavern** in Newgate Street. At present it is mostly rendered by two hands conjoined as at the **Salutation Hotel**, Perth, where a label is added with the words "You're welcome to the city."

Another sign that was quite as common as the above was the Angel. It originally represented the archangel Gabriel, and was a part of the Annunciation sign. Nearly all the trade tokens that carry this sign, show the angel with a scroll in his hands and we know that the scroll contained the words he used when he spoke to Our Blessed Lady at the Annunciation. The Reformers had less objection to an angel than they had to Our Lady, so they blotted her out on their inn signs and left the angel standing. Among the famous houses with this sign was the one at Islington, and another, still extant in London, is the **Angel** behind St Clement's Church, in the Strand. The Angel Inn at Grantham, once belonging to the Knights Templars, was standing in 1213 when King John held his court there. Not quite so common is a sign called the **Flower-pot** connected with same. Probably the early Reformers objected to Our Lady and the Archangel on a sign, and painted them out, but they left the vase with the lily in it, which is always shown standing between them. Then the flower went, after a time, the vase being called a flower-pot, and the change so made left nothing to wound the most delicate Protestant conscience.

The Catherine Wheel is another favourite sign. St Catherine was always a very popular saint, and her feast was kept on November 25th. It was in the year 375 that she glorified God by a glorious martyrdom at Alexandria, being torn to pieces by wheels armed with sharp spikes. This sign was frequently changed, after the Reformation, to **The Cat and Wheel** or even to **The Clock Wheel** as one may find by an example at Bristol.

St Blase. In parts of the country where wool-combers are employed, an inn sign with the title St Blase may sometimes be seen. The saint was Bishop of Sebaste in Armenia and suffered martyrdom in 316, his body being torn by iron combs and hooks. He is always regarded as the special patron of those engaged in woollen trades, who use tools of this kind in their work.

The Cardinal's Hat

An inn at Windsor and another at Canterbury, among several other places, have the hat of a Roman Cardinal for their sign and it is a distinctly Popish one.

St Peter's Finger

This sign shows a right hand lifted in blessing, the two smaller fingers being folded down. The inn named St Peter's Finger is at Lytchett Minster, about five miles from Wareham, Dorset. Although such a sign must have been objectionable to the Reformers, as it clearly meant that it was the Pope who was giving the blessing, yet it has lasted

on until the present time, and is frequently a place where the hounds meet. St Peter's name was often given to inns, and it has nearly always been changed by the Reformers to the **Cross Keys**, as being less harmful.

Pilgrims

Inns with this sign are generally near some celebrated shrine, and there are examples of it at Coventry and Glas-tonbury. The pilgrims often came from afar off, and needed a place of rest and refreshment.

Seven Stars

A list of over twenty-five inns with this title can easily be made out, and there are probably many more. One of the oldest is at Withy Grove, Manchester, and it was in existence before the year 1356. While it probably often referred to the constellation known as the Great Bear, it seems that it also meant the seven starred celestial crown shown in old paintings and carvings, as being worn in heaven by Our Blessed Lady.

An inn sign that certainly takes us back to Catholic times is **The Three Kings**. There was at least one inn in London, at Bucklersbury, with this sign, and it was a favourite with the silk mercers, who traded in all kinds of rich materials that they brought from Cologne.

Bleeding Heart, Hatton Garden, London. The author of *Quaint Signs of Old Inns* (G. J. Monson-Fitzjohn) says that although this was the crest of the Douglas family and has often been used as a sign, yet in the case of this inn it "is more likely that it was called after the **Church of the Bleeding Heart**, which of course refers to the Blessed Virgin Mary."

Surely inn signs, up and down our country, join in bearing witness that it was once a Catholic land and in communion with the Roman Church!

FLOWERS WITH RELIGIOUS NAMES

As our wild flowers grow in country places, it is only natural that their old names would last on among simple country folk, being handed down from generation to generation. Let us take first those relating to Our Blessed Lady :—We have

- Our Lady's Slipper (*Cypripedium calceolus*),
- Our Lady's Mantle (*Alchemilla vulgaris*),
- Our Lady's Fingers (*Anthyllis vulneraria*),
- Our Lady's Smock (*Cardamine pratensis*),
- Our Lady's Tresses (*Spiranthes*),
- Our Lady's Bedstraw (*Galium verum*),
- Our Lady's Thistle (*Carduus Marianus*), and
- Our Lady's Seal, the black bryony (*Tamus communis*).

To this list of flowers bearing Our Lady's name may be added a few among those whose titles have come down to us from old Catholic days. There is the Passion-flower, the Marigold, St John's Wort, Sweet St William, as it was called in the old herbals, but the saint has dropped out of the name now, and Canterbury Bells which are in flower about the beginning of July. The flowers were associated with the pilgrimages being made for the great feast of the Translation of St Thomas the martyred archbishop of Canterbury, on July 7th, when the bells of the churches there were probably very much in evidence.

We seem to have only one insect that bears a religious name, and this is the **Ladybird**. On the Continent its name is often closely linked with that of Our Blessed Lady.

Once again we have testimony, this time from the "lilies of the field," as to what was the old religion of England.

CHILDREN'S GAMES AND TOYS

In certain children's games, memories of the Catholic past have lasted on. Hopping and, while so doing, pushing with the foot a flat stone or piece of pottery, into squares marked out on the ground, in some parts of the country is

called **Criss-Cross**, which is obviously a corruption of Christ's cross.

A toy that has a rather unfortunate history, and is still quite common, is the **Jack-in-the-Box**. The first violent Reformers gave this title to the Blessed Sacrament, and even the Protestant government of the day objected to it, and passed a law (12 Nov., 1547) forbidding "such vile and unseemly words." The writer, as a child, had a well-made Jack-in-the-Box to play with, and on its mahogany lid were the words, **Hocus Pocus**, painted in white capital letters. He could get no explanation as to what these words meant, but he was told to say them as he pressed the spring and then the figure would jump out. As **Hocus Pocus** is a parody of *Hoc est Corpus*, the holy words of Consecration used in the Mass, the blasphemous application of this toy to one of the greatest mysteries of the Christian faith is obvious and it is also an example of the religion of the Reformers.

A rhyme the children used to sing, beginning with the words,

"Queen Ann, Queen Ann, she sits in the sun, As fair as a lily, as white as a swan,"

was of course, originally, "St Ann, St Ann," etc. No one could apply these pretty words to the rather stout and dull old lady who once reigned over us, and for whom we never seem to have had much admiration. There was a great devotion to St Ann in Catholic England and as her feast falls in the midst of the summer (26th July) she was said to "sit in the sun." The Christian name "Mary Ann" or "Marian" derived from it was a favourite, at one time, as it combined Our Blessed Lady and her mother St Ann.

Cat's Cradle

The cradle made by children with a long loop of string twisted round their hands and called a cat's cradle does not seem to have much sense, as cats don't lie in cradles. The words are really Cratch-cradle. A match is the old word for a manger so that the words mean, "manger-cradle," and they refer to the manger at Bethlehem, which was Our Divine Lord's cradle.

FOODS WITH POPISH ORIGIN

Mince-pies at Christmas at the present time are round in shape, but the older form was oblong. Selden (d. 1654), in his Table Talk, when speaking of Christmas, says: "The Coffin of our Christmas-Pies, in shape long, is in imitation of the Cratch" (manger). In 1644 the Puritans forbade the observance of Christmas. Soldiers were ordered to break into houses to see that no food such as was formerly eaten at Christmas was used. Plum-pudding and mince-pies were amongst the things forbidden, and we may therefore rank them as coming down to us from Catholic times.

Pancakes

The reason for eating pancakes on Shrove Tuesday is probably because eggs being among the kinds of food that were not allowed during Lent, or perhaps during those days in Lent when what was called a "black fast" had to be kept, in as much as pancakes required many eggs for their making, they were a way of using eggs up. The day before Lent was a sort of good-bye to them, until they appeared again as "Easter-eggs."

Hot Cross Buns

It is somewhat doubtful whether Hot Cross buns were provided in pre-Reformation days as no direct evidence to that effect can be found. On the other hand it is unlikely that they were introduced by the Reformers who disliked the sign of the cross and condemned special foods that were customary at particular seasons, as related above when speaking of mince-pies. As early fasting laws forbade the use of milk and butter on certain days, it seems quite probable that a plain kind of bread may have been sold on Good Friday, made without the forbidden ingredients, and Hot Cross buns may be its descendant. Our English Good Friday buns were originally quite plain, with perhaps a little spice added to them. It was not until about 1840 that currants first appeared in them.

THE MONTH OF MAY AND OUR BLESSED LADY

It is natural to think that May devotions must have come down to us from Catholic times, but they certainly have not.

May devotions in their present form originated in Rome at the end of the eighteenth century, where Father Latonia of the Roman Jesuit College, in order to counteract the infidelity and immorality that he found among the students, made a vow, to devote the month of May to Mary. The devotions in this College spread to other Jesuit schools, and from them were taken on in various countries. May devotions were brought into England by Father Gentili, the Italian Father of Charity, who was doing such a wonderful work in this country between 1840 and 1850.

May-day, as a public holiday, and dancing round the May-pole were certainly very old English customs, and many of our pre-Reformation poets—Chaucer in particular—have written in praise of the month of May, but none of them has mentioned Our Blessed Lady as being in any way connected with it. All these May-day celebrations seem to have been in honour of the goddess Flora.
