



From the Land of Cakes to Ljubljana: The Life of William Leslie (1657-1727) Prince Bishop of Laibach



There have been a number of distinguished seminarians who have passed through the College since its foundation as a Seminary in 1615. Fr Paul Gargaro introduces one such man.

Students of the College know about former students who have become monsignors, bishops, and cardinals even, as well as those who have achieved professional success in the secular world. It's unlikely though that many former students have risen to the rank of Prince of the Holy Roman Empire (although, to be fair, it has been 210 years since anyone could aspire to that!¹).

One student who did reach that dignity was William Leslie, who entered the College in 1675. He had been born into a lesser branch of the Clan Leslie in 1657 in Warthill, Aberdeenshire; on his mother's side he was a distant relative of Bishop Elphinstone, Bishop of Aberdeen and founder of the University of Aberdeen about 150 years earlier²; on his father's a distant relative of Bishop Leslie of Ross, the champion of Mary Queen of Scots and one of the champions of Scottish Catholicism against Knox.

As a boy he attended the local school at Rayne, Aberdeenshire, and then – aged only eleven! – studied at the University of Aberdeen, before becoming a schoolmaster at Chapel of Garioch, Aberdeenshire. For reasons now unknown, Leslie left Aberdeenshire to travel to Padua in Italy where he became a Catholic.

In 1675 – and still a young man, aged just 18 – Leslie went to Rome and, on 14th December 1675, became a student at the Scots College. He took the Mission Oath on 4th June 1676. After studying philosophy for three years and theology for two, on 31st January 1681 the Cardinal Protector gave him permission to return to Padua to teach philosophy, and there he was ordained a priest later that year, on 5th April 1681.

The Bishop of Padua at that time was Cardinal Barbarigo – Saint Gregory Barbarigo³ – who had re-founded the seminary so that it was generally recognised as one of the best in Europe. That Saint Gregory wanted Leslie on his seminary staff must testify both to Leslie's academic ability and holiness of life, and reflect well on the formation provided by the Scots College.

Leslie's decision to take up a post in Padua did not mean that he was seeking to escape from the Scottish mission. In fact it appears the mission could not afford any more priests at that time and so Leslie had to find some way to support himself. He did try to return to Scotland in 1683 but could not obtain the required money for the journey. He had an elderly, and rich, cousin, also called William, who was a canon at Saint Quentin, in Picardy, and he tried to persuade him to resign the canonry so that the benefice could support him on the mission⁴.

¹ The Holy Roman Empire was dissolved on 6th August 1806 on the abdication of the last Emperor, Francis II.

² Fetternear House, one of the main Scottish residences of the Leslie family, was originally a summer residence of the Bishops of Aberdeen, including Bishop Elphinstone.

³ St Gregory may well have ordained Leslie a priest. He certainly ordained a number of Scottish priests including the first three post-Reformation Vicars Apostolic, and also consecrated one of them, James Gordon, as a bishop.

⁴ The canon was 78 at the time and given life-expectancy at that time Leslie probably thought he was near death. In fact the canon lived on until 1698 when he died aged 93!

The canon however refused to surrender his canonry and Leslie had to return to his professorial chair in Padua.

In 1684 however his ecclesiastical career took him definitively away from the Scottish mission, being called to Styria (in modern-day Austria) by one of his relatives, Count James Leslie⁵. Count James, the nephew and successor of the founder of the Austrian branch of the Leslie family, Field Marshal Count Walter Leslie⁶, was a gentleman of the Imperial bedchamber, Chamberlain to the Emperor, Privy Councillor, and Governor of Lower Austria, and was himself also a Field Marshal, serving with gallantry under King John Sobieski of Poland⁷ during the Siege of Vienna⁸ and in the war against the Turk in general⁹. Count James had heard of Leslie's talents and fine reputation in Padua and Leslie's abilities ingratiated him with Count James and with others at Court, including, eventually, the Emperor. Leslie stayed with Count James until the latter's death in 1692, assisting him in his last illness and arranging his affairs.

Once in Austria, as well as assisting Count James's successor, Count James Ernest, in the management of family affairs, Leslie undertook further studies before taking up various pastoral appointments in the Empire: Provost of Eisgarn (now a small town in modern-day Lower Austria but, at that time, the Provost had a seat in the Lower Austrian parliament) and Abbot of Schawnig (modern-day Spišský Štiavnik in Slovakia); then Rector of Saldenhofen (modern-day Vuzenica in Slovenia); then Abbot of Ardagger, finishing as Archdeacon of Cilli (modern-day Celje, in Slovenia)¹⁰.

During this time Leslie was also promoted to the Imperial Privy Council, serving Leopold I, Joseph I, and Charles VI. One aspect of this was that he travelled Europe on various diplomatic missions on behalf of Emperor Joseph I¹¹, successes on which raised his profile in the imperial service. He was selected as Coadjutor Bishop of Trieste (and Titular Bishop of

⁵ Count James's brother, Father William Aloysius Leslie SJ, was later twice Rector of the Pontifical Scots College in Rome (1674-1683; 1692-1695).

⁶ Count Walter appears to have come by his Field Marshal's baton and his countly title rather dishonourably, by assassinating Field Marshal Wallenstein, the leading Imperial general in the Thirty Years' War, after Wallenstein had fallen foul of the Emperor. Count Walter also "inherited" Wallenstein's castle of Neustadt an der Mettau (in the modern-day Czech republic). Count Walter married a princess and, when he passed away in 1667, was buried with great pomp in the Scottish Benedictine Abbey in Vienna, which he had restored. Interestingly Wallenstein converted to Catholicism in 1606 at the University of Olmutz under the influence of the Jesuits there. He may therefore have met a young Jesuit student from Scotland who was soon to arrive there to study theology – the future St John Ogilvie. Coincidentally Keith, St John's birthplace, was less than thirty miles from the Leslies' lands in Aberdeenshire.

⁷ Keeping up the Scots College links, King John was grandfather of Princess Maria Clementina, mother of Bonnie Prince Charlie. Maria died in the Palazzo Muti, next to the current site of the Gregorian University.

⁸ In the aftermath of the battle Count James captured cloth of gold and silver brocade from the Turk and had sets of vestments made from these, which the Leslies later donated to the Diocese of Aberdeen and which can now be found in the Blairs Museum, sometimes called the "Mary, Queen of Scots Vestments".

⁹ In the war he played a role in the liberation of Hungary from Turkish rule. In a sense this was a homecoming as the Leslies claimed descent from a Hungarian nobleman, Bartolf, who came to Scotland in the 11th century in the retinue of St Margaret of Scotland.

¹⁰ History does not record how many, if any, of these appointments involved pastoral work for Leslie and how many were simply financial support for his life in the Imperial service.

¹¹ Again a Scottish link: Joseph I was married to Wilhelmine Amalia of Brunswick-Lüneburg, great-great-granddaughter of James I & VI.

Abdera¹²) in 1710 although he was not consecrated until March 1712¹³. In 1716, without succeeding to Trieste, he was translated to be a diocesan bishop, of the Diocese of Waitzen (Vác, in modern-day Hungary).

Two years later the diocese of Laibach (modern-day Ljubljana, in Slovenia) unexpectedly fell vacant upon the death of Bishop Franz Karl von Kaunitz-Rietberg at the age of just 40. A few months later Leslie was translated from Waitzen to Laibach as his replacement. Waitzen does not appear to have been a particular bad diocese to have had – Leslie's predecessor was translated to Vienna and his successor was made a cardinal, showing Waitzen to be a place where high-flyers on the Imperial ecclesiastical career ladder were sent¹⁴ – but Leslie much preferred Laibach. In his own words Hungary was “a country not much civilised or cultivated as yet for conversation” and Laibach was “a much more honourable preferment”, and brought with it the title of Prince of the Holy Roman Empire¹⁵. Leslie was much enamoured by this princely title, which he called a “great honour to our name and family, seeing none before was elevated to this title”. In his humility though he admitted that he was “nowise desirous of those titles in a foreign kingdom” and said that he wanted them not as baubles for himself but rather “as a badge of the esteem of the greatest of monarchs, and as an evidence of my comportment and behaviour, whereby I have not degenerated from my birth and pedigree”.

Although not an archbishopric, Laibach was metropolitan see, and civic capital, of the Imperial province of Carniola. The see also enjoyed “many estates with fine castles” and was near one of the Leslie family's main seats, Pettau Castle¹⁶ (in modern-day Ptuj). Laibach was also on the main road from Vienna to Venice, and so was in a good location for communications and visitors.

Although obviously at home in political circles and interested in the life and status of a prince, he did not neglect his pastoral duties in Laibach. As Bishop of Laibach Leslie appears to have been a conscientious and dedicated pastor – undertaking regular visitations of his diocese and convening regular meetings of the Diocesan Synod. Bishop Leslie encouraged Marian devotions in his diocese by instituting a procession from the Cathedral to the statue of Our Lady outside the Jesuit Church of St James and by supporting the re-building of the Church of the Assumption in Dobrava, one of the main pilgrimage sites in Carniola.

He was also closely involved in the founding of the Ursuline Church and Convent of the Holy Trinity, for which he blessed the cornerstone (upon which is carved his name) in 1718, and in which he offered his last public Mass on the feast of St Ursula 1726.

William Leslie, Prince-Bishop of Laibach, died in his see city on 4th April 1727, aged 70, “universally regretted and looked up to as an honour to his country”, and was buried in his cathedral. Leslie was never able to return to the Scottish Mission but he never forgot his

¹² In those days coadjutor bishops were simultaneously appointed titular bishops. This was changed under Blessed Paul VI in 1976 to the current situation whereby coadjutors simply take the title of the diocese to which they will succeed.

¹³ It is unclear if he ever actually undertook the office of Coadjutor Bishop of Trieste or rather simply exercised episcopal office in his Archdeaconry of Cilli.

¹⁴ Another, later, successor, Karl Ambrose Ferdinand von Habsburg, was appointed Bishop of Waitzen at the age of 21 in 1806. The following year he was ordained a priest! He did not though get ordained a bishop until the next year again, after he had been translated to Esztergom as Archbishop and Primate of Hungary. He sadly died the following year, although during his one year as a bishop he managed to consecrate four other bishops.

¹⁵ Bishop Leslie was also a count, in German records he is called Wilhelm Graf von Leslie, but it is unclear if the title of count was an honorific annexed to one of his positions (e.g. as a privy councillor) or whether it was a substantive title, and if so when it was bestowed on him.

¹⁶ Bought by Count Walter in 1656 from the Jesuits of Zagreb, it remained a Leslie family seat until the Austrian branch died out in 1802.

Scottish roots¹⁷. As a young priest he could not afford to go to Scotland, but as an elderly and rich bishop he used his legacies to support others on the mission, including leaving 1000 Florins to the Pontifical Scots College, Rome¹⁸ and 1000 Crowns to the Scottish mission¹⁹. Even two centuries later the *Tablet* still remembered him as “notable benefactor of the Scots College in Rome”.

Leslie’s life was unknown to me prior to coming across him a reference to him by chance in Bellesheim. I had never heard of him in my eight years at the Scots College. It was interesting to find out more about his life – even if limited by having no access to primary sources – and it will hopefully make us all realise the many exciting lives hidden in the College’s history, and inspire the current students in writing in their own lives the interesting tales of the future.

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¹⁷ In a letter he referred to Scotland as the Land of Cakes, perhaps a sign of happy memories! (Although this moniker for Scotland seems to refer to plain foods like oatcakes rather than something more exciting with chocolate and cream).

¹⁸ Before death he had also arranged a pension of 50 Crowns a year for a former fellow student at the Scots College, Robert Strachan. Strachan was also a student at Padua before returning to Scotland on the mission. He died at Aberdeen in 1725, aged 65.

¹⁹ Unfortunately the sources do not reveal the exchange rates between Crowns and Florins to allow us see how these sums compare.