

A Swiss becomes the first Papal Ambassador to Britain

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ON March 5, 1911, a son, Bruno Bernhard, was born to Bernhard and Elisabeth Heim-Studer in Olten. Seventy-one years on he has become the first Pro-Nuncio representing the Vatican at the Court of St. James's. This appointment has healed the diplomatic breach between Britain and the Pope, when, in the 16th century, the Anglican Church left the Roman Catholic fold.

In 1914 Great Britain sent the first Minister to the Vatican, and six years later established a permanent Legation. One hundred and twelve countries are represented at the Holy See, and until recently Britain was one of the very few whose missions did not have ambassadorial rank. Since it is always the other country and never the Vatican which makes overtures regarding diplomatic relations, it was up to Britain to take the first step in establishing a Nunciature in London and at the same time transforming the Legation in Rome to an Embassy.

This has now happened, and the Most Rev. Archbishop Bruno Bernhard Heim has been appointed the first Pro-Nuncio to the Court of St. James's. (*Note: Pro-Nuncio is when the papal envoy is not the doyen of the Diplomatic Corps. As doyen he would be called Nuncio*).

Archbishop Heim came to London in October 1973 as Apostolic Delegate to Great Britain and Gibraltar. He was the fifth such representative, after an Englishman, an American, an Italo-American and another Italian. The Apostolic Delegate's residence in Parkside, Wimbledon, London SW19 was bought in 1939 and is an impressive two-gabled building of Victorian proportions.

The youthful Archbishop received me (a devout Protestant) most kindly, and the few hours in his company were most interesting and stimulating. He was called to the phone by Rome as we were sitting in the ample drawing room on two levels giving onto the conservatory and overlooking the spacious garden.

Thus I was witness to his fluent Italian which equals his German, French and English. He also knows Spanish, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Dutch and Hungarian, not to forget Greek and Latin. Our conversation was carried on in modest Swiss – his Solothurn dialect is not much removed from my Basellandschaeftler idiom.

His Grace told me of his childhood and youth and of his wish to become an ordinary

country parson, dreaming of plenty of leisure to follow his love of writing and painting. But higher powers decreed otherwise. He was educated at the Benedictine College of the Monastery of Engelberg in Central Switzerland, the Collegium in Schwyz and the St. Thomas Aquinas University of Rome. His first doctorate (Ph.D.) was awarded at the latter in 1934, his B.D. three years later at the University of Fribourg. He was ordained priest in Solothurn in 1938 and was parish vicar in Arbon and Basle from 1938 to 1942.

Next he was appointed Chief Chaplain for Italian and Polish internees in the Emmental,

MARIANN MEIER interviews Archbishop Bruno Heim

whom he visited mainly on his bicycle (1943-1945). The young priest was fortunate in clearing up a misunderstanding and delicate business for a former Prince-Archbishop of Prague, upon which the Secretary of State at the Vatican encouraged him to study canonical law. He took his degree as Dr.iur.can. at the Gregorian University in Rome. This was followed by a period at the Papal Ecclesiastical Academy where he graduated in 1947.

A very important period in his career was his work as secretary to the Nuncio in Paris, Archbishop Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, later Pope John XXIII (1947-1951). The next two years were spent as Auditor at the Nunciature in Vienna, followed by a period of seven years as Counsellor and Chargé d'Affaires at the Nunciature in Bonn.

In 1961, he was created Archbishop of Xanthos, and for eight years he was Apostolic Delegate to Scandinavia, based in

Copenhagen. Of this period, the last three years he was also Pro-Nuncio to Finland. After 1969, he spent four years in Egypt as Pro-Nuncio and President of Caritas Egypt.

Now that Archbishop Heim has been appointed Pro-Nuncio, his work has not really changed much, he maintains. It is still like that of an Ambassador, but not concerned with commerce and military matters. Naturally, religious and ecumenical work take pride of place, together with charity, matters of peace, culture and education, the contact with government and churches. In his task, the experiences the Archbishop had as spiritual counsellor now stand him in good stead.

The Church of England has 1,750,000 members on the Church electoral rolls, though many more not on the registers. The Methodists have half a million members, the United Reform Church some 150,000 and the Moravians 2,500. The Roman Catholic community numbers between four and five million; it is about 10 per cent of believers in England and 14 per cent in Scotland. Thus the establishing of full diplomatic relations seems long overdue.

On one hand there was the fear that the arguments which led to the break under Henry VIII might flare up. On the other there was a feeling that "top-rank diplomatic representation should only be to and from substantial territorial sovereignty which the Vatican is not" (*The Times*). But the 44 hectares covered by it is hardly representative, for the diplomatic importance of the Holy See cannot be measured in area. The RC Church's influence is far greater.

Actually, the Holy See is not the Vatican City State, in fact the title of head of the Vatican State is the most minor of all the Pope's titles. His sovereignty of that tiny space in Rome dates from the First World War. It is an unique institution theoretically



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detachable from the Vatican, but not from Rome.

It is said that the establishing of full diplomatic relations between Britain and the Vatican was delayed partly in consideration of the tense position in Ireland. While Ulster and Ireland have been politically separated since 1920, the Church is one. Cardinal Thomas O Fiaich (Thomas Fee), Primate of All Ireland, is resident in Ulster (Armagh). The Nuncio in Dublin is competent for the whole of Ireland.

According to the *Irish Times*, Dr. Heim's upgrading is seen as smoothing the way for Pope John Paul's visit to Britain in May. But the Archbishop assured me that the organisation of the event lay in the hands of the Bishops' Conference, with Monsignor Ralph Brown as chief negotiator. It is that body, too, which has appointed Mark McCormack, the international lawyer and agent, to organise the business and important financial side of the visit; security arrangements alone cause great problems. Archbishop Heim, while not directly concerned in this side of the preparatory work, will have a role assigned to him as Papal Ambassador in accompanying the Holy Father on his visit.

The Archbishop has quite a reputation in more fields than one, as gourmet and expert cook and as gardener. When, about a dozen times a year, he entertains important guests of the highest order, he makes all the flower arrangements himself – a rather limited budget not allowing him professional floral decorators.

But undoubtedly his greatest leisure interest is heraldry. When a pupil at the Engelberg Monastic College Father Placidus Hartmann greatly encouraged the artistic side in him, specially in heraldic design. Thus in the course of time his expertise became so well known that he designed the coats of arms of

the last four Popes, as well as countless church dignitaries.

Among his publications are several books on heraldic subjects; the best-known was first published in German and French in the forties, and in English in 1978 (Van Duren, Gerrards Cross and Humanitas USA) "Heraldry in the Catholic Church, its origins, customs and laws." The book is beautifully illustrated by Dr. Heim himself. It had a Flemish edition in 1980, and the second English edition last year included oriental and Anglican heraldry and a section on Swiss and Polish housemarks, where he found remarkable similarities.

Another unique publication (again Gerrards Cross) is his "Liber Amicorum, Illustrium Hospitum," a visitors' book of extraordinary character, containing crests and coats of arms designed by the Archbishop, under signatures of the high and mighty among his visitors, both spiritual and temporal, between 1961 and 1981.

The *Osservatore Romano* called Bruno Heim "a master of unrivalled competence" and his work "the only reliable guide to ecclesiastic heraldry." It is not surprising that the Archbishop is a member of many distinguished heraldic institutions. He was a founder member of the International Heraldic Academy and member or honorary member of many national, heraldic and genealogical societies.

Among the honours awarded to him is that of Laureate of the French Academy, the Grand Cross of the Order of Malta, Knight of the Roman Eagle and Officer of the French Legion of Honour. He also received the Silver Jubilee Medal of Queen Elizabeth II.

But these distinctions have not changed the Archbishop's endearing modesty, one of the attractive traits of this great personality. I asked him whether he had ever thought of writing an autobiography. His answer was



Archbishop Heim

typical: "I told them to shoot me if I ever started on one. For you cannot write about yourself without showing off and blowing your own trumpet."

So it is left to others to write about him and his many talents and interests, his devotion, but also his friendly manner and his lovely sense of humour.

We shared a few jokes, and his bright eyes twinkled when he said he hoped the Pope would forget him in London – he is very happy in Britain and has many friends among the humble and the illustrious, from Anglican Archbishops and top politicians to Royalty and famous people in many walks of life.

Dr. Bruno Heim, Archbishop and Pro-Nuncio, may not have as much time for his writing and painting as he once hoped for as a simple country parson. But he has served faithfully in his job as Apostolic Delegate, and in his new exalted position as Papal Ambassador he will no doubt help further to heal the old breach between the two great Churches.

I left the Nunciature, wishing our compatriot many more years of fruitful activities and God's rich blessings in his new task.

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