

Transcript, “The Birmingham Three”, *Sunday Sequence*, BBC Radio Ulster, 08:30, Sunday 22 August 2010.

Interviewer: William Crawley (WC)

Ruth Dudley Edwards (RDE), journalist and friend of Fr Dermot Fenlon

Jack Valero (JV), spokesman for the Birmingham Oratory

WC: The pastoral centrepiece of Pope Benedict’s visit to Britain next month, will be the beatification of John Henry Newman. Afterwards the Pope will make a private visit to the Oratory in Birmingham, founded by Newman. He’ll meet members of the Oratory community, but not all of them. Because 3 Oratorians; two priests and a brother have been ordered to leave Birmingham and to spend time in prayer, many hundreds of miles apart, apparently indefinitely and with no public explanation being given for their exile. There is now a “Free the Birmingham Three” campaign who have launched their own website which includes a ticking clock, counting the period of their exile in days, hours, minutes and seconds. Yesterday marked the 100th day since the three left Birmingham. Their case has been taken up by the journalist and crime fiction writer Ruth Dudley Edwards. She joins me now along with the spokesman for the Birmingham Oratory Jack Valero. Good morning to you both.

RDE and JV: Good morning William.

WC: Ruth, why have you become involved in this case?

RDE: Because I have known Dermot Fenlon, who is one of the priests who has been exiled, for fifty years. We met when I was sixteen and he was eighteen and at university he was really a big brother to me and we were very close in Dublin UCD and in Cambridge and have always remained friends despite going in dramatically different directions. You know, he has lived with the fact that I am an atheist who has divorces and I have lived with the fact that he has become a very orthodox priest but there is a great residue of affection, so I was absolutely staggered when somebody showed me an item in the *Tablet*, 22nd May, that three members of the Birmingham Oratory had been ordered to go on retreat after disagreements with the rest of the community, and it mentioned Fr Philip Cleevely, Fr Dermot Fenlon and Brother Lewis Berry. And as you say they were told to spend time in prayer for an indefinite period. [...] Friends wanted to know that had happened, his parishioners wanted to know what had happened. Fr Philip and Dermot I know are very much loved priests, that became very clear early on [...] I am a friend as well as a journalist and what I was struck by, was the injustice of this because it became clear that I couldn’t ask Dermot what had happened to him, because he wasn’t allowed to speak. The three of them were told they were not allowed to speak about what had happened to them. So they couldn’t defend themselves in public. So my sixty-eight year old friend had been thrown out of his house and his reputation was being trashed in the blogosphere. The *Tablet* article had given the impression that something very odd was happening there. The *Times* picked it up and talked about the bone of contention being the fact that the provost had had a close but chaste relationship with a young man. And then there was talk about making Newman a gay icon. I read hundreds, I read thousands of posts on various blogs and really I was more confused than ever-

WC: Jack Valero is also listening Ruth, let’s see if we can make sense of what actually happened in this case and to these three Oratorians. Jack Valero, an injustice Ruth Dudley Edwards says?

JV: Yes I mean in fact what she said or you said that there was no public information. From the very beginning we said that this was an internal matter relating to disciplinary matters of the community and also clarify for their reputations that none of the three were guilty of any sexual misconduct whenever any allegations against them on that front or anything like that. But by disciplinary matters, you know, I meant things like pride, anger, disobedience, disunity, nastiness, dissention, the breakdown of charity, that kind of thing. That's why they asked for privacy to deal with it because these are things private to people and could impinge on how their character are seen

WC: So are you saying that these three men have been ordered into prayer and silence because of nastiness, disunity and pride?

JV: Because of, well, when the visitation started in April 2009 and the visitor Fr Selden arrived, he found the community at Birmingham disintegrating. Its very existence was actually threatened you know, this, this is a man that is not an autocrat as it has been said in the papers or in the blog, this is a man who went in there and spent a year from April 2009 to April 2010, trying to help them to sort themselves out privately because these were private dissensions within the community. And when this wasn't working, he said well I need to do something, this isn't working, this community is in danger. So he thought well the answer is to ask some to be absent from this community for a while. But this "Free the Birmingham three campaign" what, what is the meaning of this, these three men are not prisoners, they can come and go as they please, they can do pastoral work, they are priests of good standing, they can study, they can publish articles, they can visit friends, their movements are not restrained, what does it mean?

WC: Can they give interviews to the press?

JV: There's only two things they cannot do-

WC: Can they, can they give interviews to the press?

JV: Well, well they cannot speak about the visitation because it involved them and other people and the visitation is still going on and it's a private thing about private character and so on and they cannot live in the Birmingham Oratory for the time being until they are healed and the community is healed and this involves not just them, but the people there. And the idea that there is some conspiracy to silence them because they are orthodox or something like that is an insult to the people who are left there because there is no difference between the Oratorians, they are all equally orthodox, they are all equally good, but people sometimes don't get on. There are people in communities sometimes have problems. This goes right back to the time of Newman, [...] he spoke about this, he also had problems with some people, we're about to beatify him, he got over this problem, but you know, these problems with communities should be sorted out internally because they relate to people's characters and it's really bad to speak about them in the media in this way I think.

WC: Ruth Dudley Edwards?

RDE: Well it's certainly bad if you say nasty Jack! They have not asked for this to be kept quiet, from my understanding, they are not allowed, by their superiors, to defend themselves. That is the position. If they were in prison, they would be allowed to defend themselves

JV: Well.

RDE: Fr Felix' way of sorting out the Oratory, I was just looking at the website this morning-

WC: Fr Felix being the apostolic visitor sent by the Pope to sort out some of the difficulties-

RDE: the Viennese visitor, yes, whom indeed Jack Valero hadn't- has never *met* even- has been an oddity of all this; that Jack Valero, who is a spokesman for Opus Dei, has been made the spokesman for the Oratory. There are six priests according to the website; four of them have been chucked out by Fr Felix. There are two left, one of them is eighty-nine.

JV: sorry, that's not true, there were six priests when he arrived, there are four priests now-

RDE: there are, according to, well they're not bringing the website up to date Jack-

JV: there is a parish there with four priests, most parishes in the UK have one priest, this is a parish with four priests, it used to have six, three are away, but one has come so there are now four-

RDE: Jack we haven't got much time, lets not argue about minutia. What has been taken out of the Oratory is the heart and soul of Newman. Dermot Fenlon is an internationally respected scholar of Newman, Fr Philip Cleavelly, ran the Newman cause website [-jack stop, jack please stop interrupting me-] and Brother Lewis Berry was the archivist for Newman. Now we know what's happened to Brother Lewis Berry, he has been transported to South Africa for a year.

JV: Come off it!

RDE: We are told, we are told...

JV: Come off it!

RDE: ...we are told that he wants to go and as the blogosphere says, frankly Fr Felix, we don't believe you. One of the most interesting things for me in all this William has been that...

JV: You've got all this completely wrong.

RDE: ...has been the contempt for the laity displayed by particularly Fr Felix Selden.

WC: Okay, we need to hear Jack Valero's response to some of this now. Jack, some serious allegations here, that this treatment of these three men is draconian, its medieval, it's a form of silencing, it's a form of exile, it's a form of imprisonment when they cannot even give an interview to the press about their current situation. Your response to that?-

JV: Well, ... there is a visitation going on and they are sorting it out. They will talk to the press, I was talking to Father Philip last night and he thought it had got out of control, he's preparing himself, he's going to go to the press now and say what's happening and so on. But as I said before these people, their movements are not restrained, they are not prisoners

anywhere, they are different parts, they can be wherever they like, the only thing they're not allowed to be is in the community, while the community is being healed, while they themselves are being healed and this is a process that needs to go on. This is not just arbitrary; this is not happened arbitrarily for some other sort of ideological reason. This is to do with healing the community

WC: And is there, is there any truth in the claims that some are making on the internet, that Fr Paul Chavasse, the former head of the Oratory, who stepped down from his position in December, is to return to his position before the papal visit?

JV: No I, this is what I said to Ruth when she asked me I said he's going to be away and he's going to come back at some point, like the others are going to come back at some point, we don't know, it's not going to be soon.

WC: more likely after the pope has been to Birmingham and gone?

JV: I think so yes

RDE: So, so the moment in the lives of these three people-and I can't speak for Fr Paul Chavasse, I still think he'll probably be back- the highest spot of their entire lives was to be being present at the beatification of Cardinal Newman whom they had served, whose reputation they had served, they're going to be denied that. Now that level of cruelty absolutely astonishes me. It is cruel, it is brutal, it is as bad as throwing a sixty-eight year old man out of his home. Dermot Fenlon has lived in that place for twenty years and it was to be his home forever. His reputation has been trashed, all over the place. Where can he go? He's at the moment, he's a vagrant.

JV: Well it must have been serious, it must have been a very serious thing to have gone on in that house for that to happen. That's what I am saying, it's very serious things going on in that house.

RDE: I think it's very clear, I think it's very clear Jack Valero, that Fr Felix, instead of being a mediator, acted like an inquisitor, that has made brutal decisions and that now the church is gathering behind him to defend him. And to throw at these people anything you can think of, and not give them a chance to defend themselves.

WC: Jack Valero, isn't this yet another PR disaster by the Vatican, with the potential to overshadowing the Papal visit itself?

JV: Well the Vatican, the Vatican is not involved.

WC: the Papal apostolic visitor is involved

JV: Yes, yes, I mean obviously bad things happen and the community had some problems and they have been trying to resolve them some people have taken up the cause to "Free the Birmingham Three" and have made this big thing about it and as I said, this is misguided, this is not what's happening. What is happening is the healing of a community and this was the way that was seen that would work-

WC: Jack Valero and Ruth Dudley Edwards I am sorry to cut you short but that's all the time we have, you can read more about the Birmingham Three on my blog and Sunday Sequence will come live from Birmingham on Sunday September 19th when the pope officiates the beatification of John Henry Newman.