

OBITUARY RICHARD NELSON WILLIAMSON By John McAuley

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Bishop Richard Williamson, who died on 29th January 2025, Feast of St Francis de Sales, was one of the four priests whom Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre consecrated as bishops in 1988. His earthly life started and ended in England, but his work and vocation took him a number of other countries. The journey from his birth in North London to his death in Kent, 85 years later, is extraordinary and fascinating.

Richard Nelson Williamson was born in Hampstead, North London, on 8th March 1940, the second son of John Williamson and his wife, Helen (née Nelson). John Williamson, from Nottinghamshire in the English Midlands, was a senior employee of Marks & Spencer, a famous retail chain. Helen Nelson, who devoted herself to home and family after her marriage, was the only child of Harry Nelson, a successful American businessman, and his wife, Olive.

The early years of Richard Williamson's life, even if disrupted a bit by the Second World War (most notably by a temporary move to Leicestershire), were spent in a tranquil middle-class home. John and Helen Williamson got on well with each other, so life in their house was orderly and peaceful. The family had a strong sense of custom, civility and decency, but religion was more or less absent. The wedding of John and Helen Williamson, in 1936, had been a purely civil ceremony. John Williamson did not attend any place of worship on Sunday mornings, but was instead to be found on the golf course.

As a young child, Richard was sent to a private preparatory school, Downsend, in Leatherhead, Surrey, just south of London. Reflecting many years later, the bishop spoke well of Downsend and of the good grounding it gave to its pupils in

subjects such as Mathematics, French and Latin. Eventually, with adolescence dawning, it was time to move to a senior school. In those days, for pupils at schools like Downsend, the normal choice – and indeed the one taken by John Williamson for his son – would be a leading ‘public school’ (non-British readers may be surprised to learn that in England this term in fact means a very exclusive private school!). The bright young Richard won a scholarship to Winchester College, arguably the most intellectually brilliant school in the entire country.

Richard’s life so far reads like that of a typical Englishman of his class and generation. Had things continued thus, he would probably have had a successful career in business or the professions, and enjoyed a comfortable, and irreligious, life somewhere in the south of England. It is at Winchester that we see the first signs of that questioning and that bloody-mindedness that were to lead him off the bourgeois conveyor belt and, ultimately, to the Catholic priesthood. Richard quickly noticed a difference between his own social milieu, prosperous but only middle class, and that of most other Wykehamists, who came from the highest reaches of English society. This class distinction made him feel a bit uncomfortable for most of his time at the school. Another, and more important, source of discontent to Richard was the religion at Winchester. At first, he accepted the Anglicanism of the school, and received Anglican ‘confirmation,’ but he soon became an atheist and, indeed, was once reprimanded for his behaviour in the school chapel.

Even if his years at Winchester were not too happy, Richard Williamson did well enough there to be admitted to Cambridge University (Clare College). Here too, he was not at ease. He started out as a student of modern languages, before switching to law for a year and then, finally, to English literature. He duly graduated from Cambridge in 1961.

Where now for this well-educated young man? He was cultured

and good at writing. It is not too surprising that he then spent two years as an art and music critic for a Welsh newspaper. Very discouraged by the experience of being forced to re-write an article in which he had expressed his honest opinion, he soon left journalism.

After his short-lived career as a journalist, Richard now started doing what he was to do for most of his adult life: teaching. Downsend, his former prep school, needed a teacher for the final term of the 1962–63 academic year. He duly filled the temporary gap at that school in Leatherhead. At the suggestion of a friend, he then spent two years teaching in Ghana, a recently-independent former British colony. On returning from Africa, he took up an appointment at St. Paul's in London, a prestigious schools for boys. Williamson soon noticed that the St. Pauls of the 1960's was quite different from the Winchester of the 1950's; the classical education that had long been the unquestioned norm in English public schools was now being abandoned. Even the parents at St. Paul's, despite being from the 'upper end' of London and suburbia, were generally not supportive of Williamson's efforts to give their sons a real education.

It was while he was at St Paul's that Richard Williamson started to explore Catholicism. He started reading about his future religion, and visited several priests. For the moment, however, he remained an atheist. During his fifth and final year at St. Paul's he made a serious study of the *Summa Theologica*. To the disappointment of both masters and pupils, he left St. Paul's in 1970. He then spent several months on his own in a cottage in the Scottish Highlands, reading and praying (including fifteen decades of the Rosary daily).

A trick played on him by an Irish priest finally brought Williamson into the Catholic Church. The former teacher agreed to attend the reception into the Church of an erstwhile pupil. The officiating priest, Fr. John Flanagan, asked the then Mr. Williamson if he thought that his one-time student was doing

the right thing in becoming a Catholic. After some hesitation, Williamson replied that he thought that the young convert was indeed doing the right thing. The priest then invited Williamson to return in three weeks in order to be received into the Catholic Church himself. Williamson looked in vain for a reason to refuse this invitation, but within a very few minutes he realised that the game was up. He agreed to become a Catholic. Richard Williamson's reception took place on 23rd January 1971, with his parents both in attendance (but neither of them ever became a Catholic).

The new convert then set off on a Catholic tour of Europe, but not before Fr. Flanagan had suggested to him that he might become a priest (not an idea that the *dirigé* greeted with any enthusiasm). He visited a number of Marian shrines (including Rue du Bac, Lourdes, Garabandal, San Damiano, Heroldsbach and Fatima, not all these apparitions enjoying the Church's approval). He would later talk of his disappointment that, back in England, priests to whom he spoke showed little interest in the shrines he had visited. He also visited the cave in Manresa to which St. Ignatius of Loyola had retreated during his own conversion. In Rome, Williamson noticed a depressing faithlessness in the clergy. Throughout these travels, the study of the *Summa Theologica* continued. During this year-long visit to the continent, the traveller met some interesting people, including the renowned British journalist, Malcolm Muggeridge, whom Williamson knew already, and the Catholic novelist, Graham Greene and Archbishop Lefebvre, during a short visit to Ecône. This first introduction to the founder of the Society of St. Pius X seems to have been rather brief. Perhaps the most important encounter he had while on the continent was with Mama Rosa of San Damiano, who advised him, when he told her he was unsure of what to do with his life, to visit his spiritual director, Fr. Flanagan.

Upon returning to England in the spring of 1972, Richard

Williamson did indeed go to see Fr. Flanagan. On the advice of his director, he went to teach – briefly – in a nearby school. He also began to pursue the question of a vocation to the priesthood. An attempt to sign up for the secular clergy of the new diocese of Arundel & Brighton (in which Fr. Flanagan served) failed, the candidate being too Catholic for the Conciliar selectors. A short time as a postulant at the Brompton Oratory ended in the rejection of this would-be Oratorian, perhaps because of an ‘impertinent’ question (‘Why don’t we study St. Augustine?’) asked in a scripture class.

Fr. Flanagan was a conservative priest, undoubtedly orthodox in his doctrine. But he agreed to say the *Novus Ordo Missae*, and he had no part in the emerging Traditionalist movement. Indeed, on one occasion Fr. Flanagan refused to meet Archbishop Lefebvre. But he was aware that Richard Williamson, theologically too ‘right wing’ for even the Brompton Oratory (which has long had a reputation as one of the most conservative churches in London), would probably only survive at a certain newly-founded seminary in Switzerland. Fr. Flanagan recognised the reality of his client’s situation, and told him that the place for him was Ecône.

In late 1972, Richard Williamson arrived at the International Seminary of St. Pius X. He first did a thirty-day Ignatian retreat, given by Fr. Ludovic-Marie Barrielle. The retreat over, he decided to remain at Ecône to study for the priesthood. Williamson was happy at Ecône. The restless searching for something, which had perhaps begun in his far-from-happy days at Winchester, was satisfied.

Archbishop Lefebvre showed great confidence in the young Englishman. On two occasions, he was selected to be the face of the seminary when French television crews visited. And he was also the first seminarian whom His Grace sent to be grilled, in 1974, by two investigators sent from Rome.

The education that Williamson had already received meant that

he was a priest within four years of entering Ecône. On 29th June 1976, he was one of about a dozen men to be ordained to the Sacred Priesthood by Archbishop Lefebvre. For these ordinations, the Conciliar authorities purported to suspend the Archbishop *a divinis*.

Following his ordination, Fr. Williamson was sent to work in the formation of priests for the Society of St. Pius X in Germany. A year later, he was called back to teach at Ecône. He was to remain there until 1983.

A dispute within the Society of St Pius X, of which there have been a number over the years, was the occasion for Fr. Williamson's appointment as the new rector of the Society's seminary in the United States. Following a disagreement with the Society about several matters (among them the use of the John XXIII liturgy and the recognition of Conciliar marriage annulments), four SSPX priests of the Northeast (U.S.A.) district were expelled, and were soon joined by a further five. Fr. Williamson was sent across the Atlantic to fill the void left by these departures. He was appointed rector of the St. Thomas Aquinas Seminary, to replace Fr. Donald Sanborn, and – briefly – the district superior, to replace Fr. Clarence Kelly.

On arriving in Ridgefield, Fr. Williamson started what was to become a significant part of his life's work: his letters from the rector, much later to evolve into *Eleison Comments*. The earliest of these letters were little more than newsletters, keeping benefactors informed of the events following the exodus of 'the nine,' and appeals for funds. After a few months, these missives (printed on paper, and sent by post) included some commentary on goings on in the Church and the wider world. These letters from Fr. Williamson continued for the 20 years that he served as rector.

With Archbishop Lefebvre, born in 1905, now quite an old man, and with there being no realistic prospect of any other living

bishop coming to the aid of Catholics wishing to keep the Faith, the question of episcopal consecrations by His Grace started to arise. In normal times, it would be a very grave offence indeed for a bishop to consecrate another bishop without having the necessary authority from the pope. Some priests of the Society were implacably opposed to such an act by their founder, and indeed a number would eventually leave him over this matter. Others were open to the idea, and still others positively wanted to see an episcopal consecration. In autumn 1987, Fr. Williamson wrote that he hoped that any episcopal consecration would be with John Paul II's approval, but he was clearly not alarmed by the prospect of an 'unapproved' consecration.

A subject of conversation among Traditionalists at this time was that of who would be consecrated bishops. Fr. Williamson was considered the most likely of any English-speaking candidates; indeed, he later confirmed that he would have been the Archbishop's choice had only one bishop been consecrated ('He wanted a bloody-minded Brit!').

Negotiations between the Society of St. Pius X and the Rome of John-Paul II went on for most of the 1987–1988 academic year. In May 1988, the Archbishop even signed the heads of an agreement, something about which he felt very uncomfortable almost immediately afterwards. In June, His Grace announced that he would, on the last day of that month, consecrate four bishops even without John-Paul II's approval. As expected, Fr. Williamson was among the four. The other new bishops were Fr. Bernard Tissier de Mallerais, Fr. Alfonso de Galarreta, and Fr. Bernard Fellay. A crowd of thousands, including Helen Williamson, was present at Ecône for the historic ceremony. John Williamson had died the year before, but Bishop Williamson said that his father would have attended had he been able. The Vatican announced that the consecrating bishops (that is to say, Archbishop Lefebvre and Bishop de Castro Mayer) and the four ordinands had been automatically

excommunicated. Neither Bishop Williamson, or any of the other five bishops, took any notice of this decree. A chapter of the Society of St. Pius X took place very soon after the episcopal consecrations, from which Bishop Williamson emerged as the Second Assistant to the Superior General.

For Bishop Williamson, the other major event of 1988 was the move of the seminary from Ridgefield (Connecticut) to Winona (Minnesota). The Winona seminary building, a former Dominican noviciate, built in the 1950's, was bigger than the Ridgefield premises and had much more land with it; the extensive grounds enabled the bishop to give the seminarians a more 'outdoor' formation. Noticing the lack of culture, something he believed essential if supernatural grace is truly to take hold of a soul, in his seminarians, this very cultured Englishman instituted a preliminary year of humanities for the seminarians in order to fill – if only partially – the gaps in their knowledge of things such as music, literature and history.

As well as running the North American seminary of the Society of St. Pius X, the bishop was now travelling vast distances to administer confirmation to souls around the world. He once joked that if you are a bishop of the SSPX, your cathedral is a Boeing 747!

Back at the seminary, the monthly letters continued to be written. Not all of these enjoyed the universal approval of their readers. A letter in which the bishop criticised the film *The Sound of Music*, and a series of missives in which he made the case against women wearing trousers, lost His Lordship some friends.

The 1990's were fast running their course. In 1994, Bishop Fellay was elected Superior General of the Society of St Pius X. All appeared to be well in the Society of St. Pius X. The careful historian of the Society will note, however, that this was the era of the GREC (Group for Reconciliation between

Catholics) talks, which gave much encouragement to those priests in the Society hoping to reach a canonical agreement with the Conciliar Church. Speaking after his own expulsion from the Society a long time afterwards, the bishop said that those looking for a deal with Newchurch started to get to work once Archbishop Lefebvre had died (in 1991).

In August 2000, the Society had organised an impressive pilgrimage to Rome. Dozens and dozens of priests and religious, and countless hundreds of laity, prayed and processed around the Eternal City for several days. At the conclusion of the pilgrimage, the four SSPX bishops were invited to lunch by Cardinal Castrillon Hoyos, the Prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy. Bishop Williamson attended the magnificent repast, doubtless aware that food and drink can be effective weapons in politics. Talks between the Society and NewRome soon got under way. Some of the dangers of an agreement between SSPX and the Conciliar Church were set out in a letter from the rector of Winona. The 2001 talks ended in stalemate, but further talks would follow later.

An early sign of Bishop Williamson's difficult relationship with the leadership of SSPX had come in 1999 when the then Superior General, Bishop Fellay, asked him to leave Winona to become District Superior of the Philippines. Bishop Williamson refused. Four years later he did agree to step down from the rectorship at Winona, and to become rector of the Society's seminary in La Reja, Argentina. In due course, he came to see this move to Latin America as a means to diminish his influence in the Society. In 2006, the bishop's lack of enthusiasm for the re-election (at that year's General Chapter) of Bishop Fellay as Superior General was easy to discern.

In July 2007, four years after his last letter from the rector's study at Winona, Bishop Williamson delighted many Traditionalists, and doubtless exasperated a few others, when he launched his weekly *Eleison Comments*. These letters,

shorter than the letters from Winona and Ridgefield, and weekly rather than monthly, were sent by e-mail to souls scattered around the world. They did not double up as newsletters for the seminary, or any institution, and they covered a vast range of subjects – reflecting the bishop's many areas of interest and expertise. One week the letter might be about music, and the next week it might be about Zionism! Religion, and the crisis in the Catholic Church, also received ample coverage.

Bishop Williamson was happy in Argentina and might have stayed there for a good many more years. Things started to unravel for him late in 2008. His Lordship was at the SSPX seminary at Zaitzkofen in Germany for an ordination. He was interviewed by Swedish television during his stay there. Towards the end of the interview, the journalist asked him if he thought that the conventional historical narrative of the persecution of Jews during the Second World War was 'lies, lies, lies.' The bishop looked taken aback by the question, but he decided to state his opinion that the number of Jews who died in Nazi concentration camps was no more than about 300, 000 – way short of six million – and that none of them died in gas chambers. He said that the historical evidence was hugely against the widely held version of these events. The recording of the interview was, as it were, put away in a cupboard . . . but not for long.

On 21st January 2009, a Vatican decree was signed whereby the putative excommunications of 1988 were lifted. The desirability and validity of this decree (a decree that SSPX had requested) can not detain us here. Almost on the same day, the interview with Swedish television was published. A worldwide explosion (an explosion of what, the writer wouldn't like to say) erupted. 'Had Benedict XVI not known,' screamed the media, that one of the SSPX bishops was a '*holocaust denier*.' The coverage in the press, on television and on the Internet was on a scale that had probably never been seen for

any SSPX-related matter. The leadership of the Society distanced itself from Bishop Williamson. The following month, SSPX confirmed that he had been deprived of the rectorship of La Reja. Soon afterwards, His Lordship was expelled from Argentina by that country's government. He flew to London, where several policemen were waiting for him. Were the boys in blue about to arrest the homecoming bishop? No! In fact, nocturnal telephone calls between the then British District Superior of SSPX, Fr. Paul Morgan, and the police had resulted in their presence at Heathrow Airport to protect Bishop Williamson!

The next four years were spent at the SSPX house in Wimbledon, Southwest London. The bishop enjoyed the company and hospitality of the Society's clergy at St. George's House, but was undoubtedly frustrated by the lack of any defined role for him. Relations with Bishop Fellay and the leadership of the Society did not improve. The Society appeared to rushing headlong to an agreement with NewRome, and the bishop became an increasingly vocal opponent of any such sellout. He gave talks and conferences, many of them on SSPX premises, in which he raged against the betrayal of Archbishop Lefebvre's legacy. Meanwhile, court cases in Germany – arising from the bishop's interview with Swedish television in 2008 – would run, on and off, for several years.

In 2012 things came to a head between the bishop and the leadership of SSPX. He was not permitted to attend the SSPX chapter at Ecône, and he was asked to shut down *Eleison Comments*. In response to a request to submit to the leadership of the Society, he called for the resignation of its Superior General. In October, the Society declared that Bishop Williamson was no longer a member. He replied to this declaration with a well-crafted letter to Bishop Fellay.

For several weeks after his expulsion from SSPX, Bishop Williamson stayed on at St. George's House. In December 2012, forty years after he had arrived at Ecône, he left Wimbledon.

The Society did not provide him with anywhere to live, so he took up temporary residence at the home of a layman just outside London. In the spring of 2014, following some substantial gifts from supporters, he bought a decent-sized house in Broadstairs, Kent. Here he had space for a dignified chapel, an office, and space to receive visitors from around the world. Another priest (a talented cook, leading the bishop to remark that he was now eating too well!) also took up residence in the house.

The bishop was in his mid-seventies when he arrived in Kent. But the final years of his life were not spent in idle seaside retirement. *Eleison Comments* continued until just days before his death. There were souls, both locally and elsewhere in England, who sought his ministry. And, of course, around the world there were people needing Confirmation, and seminaries and religious communities (made up of people either expelled from, or having quit of their own volition, the SSPX milieu) requiring ordination. Although His Lordship refused to found any formal structure, he ministered across the globe to 'pockets of resistance.' He consecrated six bishops between 2015 and 2022, these being – in order of date of consecration – Fr. Jean-Michel Faure, Dom Thomas Aquinas, O.S.B., Fr. Gerardo Zendejas, Fr. Giacomo Ballini, Fr. Michal Stobnicki and Fr. Paul Morgan.

On Friday 24th January, Bishop Williamson suffered a sudden brain haemorrhage. He was admitted to hospital and died five days later, fortified by the rites of Holy Church.

Requiescat in pace.