

# IRISH PEOPLE AND THEIR PRIESTS

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by

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## IRISH PEOPLE AND THEIR PRIESTS

In lecturing on this subject in the period from the Reformation to the present day certain interesting factors have impressed me. In view of the changing times and changing relationships through which we are passing I feel that a glance at the history of this particular relationship in these centuries may help both priest and people to understand, enjoy and develop something which is still fairly unique in the world.

### 16th and 17th Centuries

As the late Canice Mooney OFM has pointed out, Ireland at the time of the Reformation was not as depraved as some non-catholics thought nor as exemplary as some catholics seemed to believe.

“There is evidence of robust faith, of high regard for the Pope as Vicar of Christ, of a mental outlook almost inextricably interwoven with the christian way of life, of great personal devotion to Christ, Our Lady and the saints, of friendly relations between the clergy and laity. Still on the credit side but not beyond criticism in all its aspects, is the tradition of asceticism; for instance in regard to fast and abstinence, as well as deep reverence for the relics and images of the saints, and the undertaking of toilsome pilgrimages”.

There was little interest in the new Reformation doctrines among those in the Pale and even less among the Old Irish outside the Pale who formed the majority of the population. None of the latter believed that they would reach heaven on faith alone without good works. While many were ardent in faith though perhaps somewhat weak on the good works still if one may judge from the Annals they made up for it “after anointing and penance”. In these and in earlier times there had always been a healthy anti-clericalism in the country. People saw the defects in their clergy and criticized and even satirized

*Nihil obstat:* J. Carmel O'Shea, O.Carm., Censor.

*Imprimatur:* David Weakliam, O.Carm., Provincial.



them. There was a very healthy give and take in the relationship.

From Henry VIII till Elizabeth I there was a considerable confusion among the laity, and at least part of the clergy, as to what was involved in the Act of Supremacy. Quite a number of bishops and practically all the local rulers took the oath. As there was little external change in the ritual little change was noticed. The friars, most of whom had undergone a recent reform and were in close contact with the Continental church, saw the position more clearly. Their friaries were suppressed with the result that they either had to conform or go into hiding. Some had managed to conceal part of their valuables. Often the local ruler (though he had taken the oath) was able and willing to help them in their ministry. The real situation became much clearer for the laity with the spate of iconoclasm under Edward VI. Since Mary, who had succeeded him, tried to restore the catholic religion, the reign of Elizabeth (1558-1603) was to be the crucial one as the position was quite clear even though she did not persecute catholics very severely in the first decade of her reign.

From 1570, the year of her excommunication, attempts to give Protestantism a surer footing were being initiated. In 1584 Archbishop Dermot O'Hurley was put to death. The catholics of the Pale wished to remain loyal both to their religion and to the Crown while the rest of the country supported the insurrections of Fitzmaurice and of the Viscount of Baltinglass and hoped and prayed that O'Neill and O'Donnell would be victorious. This was the time when the link of faith and fatherland was forged as is evidenced in the poem *Róisín Dubh*.

*A Róisín ná bíodh brón ort fá'r éirigh duit  
Tá na bráithre a' teacht thar saíle 's ag triall ar muir;  
Tiocfaidh do phárdún ón bPápa 's ón Róimh anoir  
Is ní sparálfar fíon Spáineach ar mo Róisín Dubh.*

"Oh Ireland be not sad because of what has befallen you. The brothers (friars) are coming across the ocean (to you). Reconciliation will come from the Pope east in Rome and

Spanish wine will be lavished on you." Great hopes were entertained of help from both Rome and Philip II of Spain.

These were also the years in which the Counter-Reformation was beginning to influence Europe. Irish students had perforce to go to Continental seminaries or houses of their Orders. While this improved their intellectual and spiritual formation and opened the way for Tridentine influence in Ireland, it also tended, in stressing for the student that a priest was a man apart from the people, to encourage segregation. In the Pale one finds an alliance between the Jesuits and members of other Orders with lawyers and merchants where gradually a *modus vivendi* was evolved — loyalty to Rome in matters spiritual and to the Crown in matters temporal. The new Orders found quite a number of recruits among these classes. Fr. Nugent of the Capuchins is just one typical example of the industry both at home and on the Continent of these Orders.

On the other hand the Old Irish population, which was almost totally Gaelic-speaking, was devoted to their clergy, especially to the friars. A very close bond existed between them though the people did not pull their punches in discussing their priests. Those clergy who changed their religion were very severely criticized. His fellow-Franciscan left the Archbishop Myler McGrath in no doubt as to what lay in store for him.

"You will be in hell alive and dead, Mary's clergy will be high in heaven. Maol without *Muire*, you are insipid, heaven is not your road".

The laity also told the priest and friar what they found wanting in him. He was criticized for avarice, and inhospitality but often with a nice sense of humour to temper the barb:

*Más bráthair bocht an bráthair méith,  
is maith a ghné 's a shursaing teann;  
Más le reimhe gheibh sé neamh,  
is duine leamh an bráthair seang.*

"If the fat brother is a poor brother he has a fine face and a



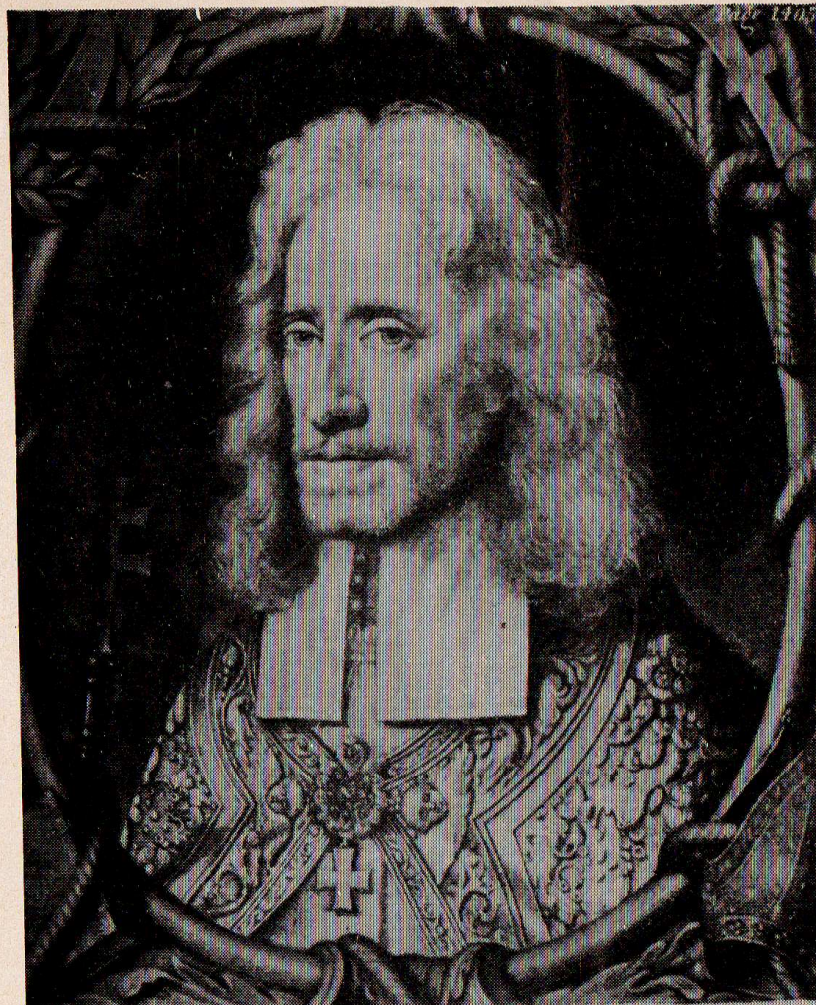
tight cincture; if his portliness gets him to heaven the thin brother is a poor specimen”.

A synod of Cashel 1661 forbade the clergy to ask for drink in lieu of the customary offerings. The drinking habits of the clergy were noted though the people were often very indulgent on this point and even invoked their example as an excuse for their own habit of drinking. One notes the healthy criticism and the ability of the clergy to respond in similar vein.

Round 1640 there was a considerable freedom for catholics. The hierarchy was almost fully re-established and attempts were being made to extend the Tridentine decrees to the church in Ireland. The papal envoy, Rinucinni, came to try to help the catholic cause but, though treated with great veneration by the ordinary people, he was welcomed with a certain reserve by the forces of the Confederates at Kilkenny, by the upper class and by some of the bishops. He was eventually opposed by them as they felt that he did not have a proper understanding of the situation. One could hardly describe the Irish of this time as a Rome-ridden people.

Cromwell appeared on the scene just before 1650 and with his sweeping conquest came a great persecution of the clergy. Many were killed, imprisoned or exiled and the era of the priest-hunter began. From this time onwards the Mass rock and nocturnal celebration of the holy Sacrifice is noted. The ways of God, at times, seem strange to us. This decade 1650-60, more than any other in our history, forged that special relationship between priest and people, between faith and fatherland. Cromwell, even more than Henry VIII, unwittingly became the founder of the Irish nation as he united all catholics and other prescribed religions into an Irish people. An Irish historian has said that the union of catholics in Ireland was from first to last a Protestant achievement. Cromwell seems to have been the principal instrument in achieving this distinction.

In the period between 1660 and the Treaty of Limerick 1691 there was a certain revival though the synods of the time show that ignorance of the faith was widespread due to persecution. Vocations began to increase. Priests were reminded to eradicate superstitious practices and to preach against excessive drinking.



Persecution was intermittent. St. Oliver Plunkett was martyred and the archbishop of Dublin, Peter Talbot, died in jail. The short period of James II (1685-88) brought a false glimmer of hope when complete freedom of religious practice was allowed. This was quickly suppressed by the arrival of William of Orange with the defeats of the Boyne and Derry and the ultimate defeat at Limerick. It is interesting to reflect that if



James had been successful and if a Catholic Stuart monarchy had been established our situation today might be totally different. Instead of enduring the long intermittent persecution the church in Ireland might easily have lost contact with the people and become a "gallican" and fettered church as happened in many countries in Europe in the eighteenth century and suffered a similar fate with the falling of those regimes.

### 18th Century

The tendency of our earlier history books has been to consider the penal days as one of continuous and severe persecution. Persecution there certainly was, and it was very bitter at times but the aim of the persecution in the eighteenth century was not to convert Catholics to Protestantism but rather to buttress the minority's ascendancy by excluding others from political power and social rights or as Lecky puts it so concisely 'to make them poor and keep them poor'. One must always bear in mind that the clergy, on the whole, were supporters of the Stuart monarchy. Persecution began in 1697 with the decree banishing the hierarchy and clergy. In 1703 a Registration Act allowed one priest to function in each parish once he was registered with the Government. Several ancient parishes were resuscitated so that thirty-three priests managed to register in Dublin even though there were only nine official parishes. Due to this, somewhat more than a thousand priests were permitted to remain to serve the million Catholics in the country. Despite the harsh laws the church managed to reorganize in periods of peace so that by the middle of the century the hierarchy and Religious Orders were fully restored for the first time since the Reformation. The clergy fell under suspicion during periods of war between England and France or when the Stuart movement loomed as in 1715 and 1745. At such times they were often forced to go into hiding until the storm blew over.

The penal days were times when the bond between priest and people grew very close. The people had tremendous respect for him. This was due first and foremost to the intense faith of the

people but also to the common endurance of hardship. The priest wore no distinctive dress as he would be readily recognized. He lived in the midst of his people in order to survive. The priest-hunters were active in Dublin and elsewhere but they themselves were often detected and molested by the populace. Rescue incidents were common and the people made great sacrifices to protect their priest. Probably from 1795 onwards clerical dress was gradually introduced. By 1826 Bishop Plunkett of Elphin was complaining that it was not being universally worn by his clergy. Dr. Butler of Cashel paid a glowing and well-deserved tribute to the devotion of his priests to their people under very difficult conditions. The priest also used his education not alone to instruct his flock in the faith but also to keep them in touch with local and world events. The fact that many of the Catholic gentry submitted to Protestantism had little effect on the people was mainly due to the closeness of their relations with the priest. But the priest who changed during the penal days became a subject for sadness and disdain. We have these lines from 1739:

"A plight on you Dominic O'Donnell — sad that I ever saw you. You were a priest on Sunday and a minister on Monday.

Come back, come back, dear child, come back and do not leave me. Come back — my share in the world — else you will not see God's glory.

You betrayed Peter and Paul — You betrayed John and his kin. You betrayed the queen of the world — she who is always praying for us".

The lament is said to have been composed by his mother.

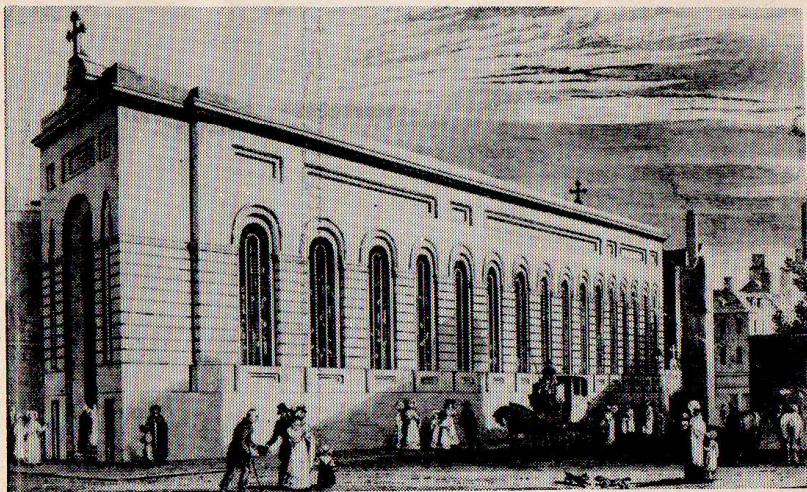
Even in these hard times the same give and take existed between the priest and people. He is criticized for his faults — gluttony, cultivation of the wealthy and love of money.

"When the great whale will come up the Maing ( a little stream); when France will be located on Sliabh Mis; when



the priests will have lost their avarice the black raven will have the power of speech”.

This is from the pen of Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin who is a good example of the witty catholic often taken in to do some work for his local priest. The priest feels that Eoghan is doing little work and Eoghan replies that it is easy for him to criticize with his ‘tummy’ full of punch.



Carmelite Church, Whitefriar Street, 1827

Appeals for money were fairly frequent if the little barb “Deire an tsoiscéil an t-airgead” is to be taken literally i.e. after the gospel comes the collection. People were poor and consequently under considerable strain. All had to pay tithes to the Protestant minister. Other taxes and rent had to be paid. Marriages and funerals were a further draw on their resources. In 1786 the bishops issued instructions to priests to be moderate in their demands especially at the Stations. The Rightboys, who were an agrarian movement in the second half of the 19th century resisting excessive tithes and rents, laid down schedules for priests. Thus in Cork and Limerick in 1786 we find these payments insisted on as maximum: Marriage (5/-), Baptism (1/6), Extreme unction (1/-), Funeral Mass (1/-),

Station Confessions (6d or 1/-), Christmas dues (1/1), Easter Dues (1/1). It should be remembered that the average wage of the labourer at the time was 6d per week in the Summer and 4d in the winter. Many people were not in a position to pay at all. From 1790 onwards chapels were being built. Schooling, such as it was, had to be paid for. The daily needs of the priest had to be met and catholics were very anxious that their priest would be, at least, of equal social standing with the minister. In the first half of the nineteenth the State was not only willing but anxious to pay the catholic clergy. The offer was not without attractions both for bishops and priests but after cautious consideration, and due in no small degree to Daniel O’Connell’s opposition, the voluntary system of contribution was retained. This was another vital factor in the relationship though it was, and often still is, a subject for complaint.

The anti-clerical bite is found more frequently in eighteenth century than in nineteenth century poetry. Movements of violence normally tend to drive a wedge between priests and people. Some priests used bitter invective in their sermons against them. Anti-clericalism grew strong in the days of the Whiteboys. Houses and even the person of priests were attacked in 1785-6. Their standing with the people was diminished. In fact Dr. Butler, the archbishop of Cashel feared that they would lose the people if the agitation continued. Wolfe Tone told the French General Hoche that the priests would have little influence if the French sent a force to Ireland. The clergy, on the whole, feared agitation as the people always ended by being in a worse plight after it. They also tended to be subservient and even allowed Protestant magistrates to address catholics in their churches on the evils that followed such courses of action and thanked them for their advice. Thus Bishop Moylan of Cork admonished his flock to have nothing to do with the French frigates lying off the coast of Cork. Still, quite a number of priests were sympathetic to the United Irishmen besides Frs. Murphy and Roche whose deeds are still proclaimed in our ballads.

The Act of Union (1800) was pushed through Parliament not only by bribery but also with the aid of the hierarchy who had



hopes that this would speed up Catholic Emancipation. But as the century developed the hope seemed to fade. After 1815 the economic situation worsened. The priests were deeply affected by the misery of the people. A new type of priest was being formed in the native seminaries by professors like John MacHale, later archbishop of Tuam. They saw one of their roles, and a pressing one at that, was to try to better the economic condition of the people.

### 19th Century

The bitter memories of '98, the resistance to the tithe, the growth of sectarianism and Orangism in the early years of this century and the struggle for emancipation all tended to unite clergy and laity. The first twenty years of the century saw some agitation for emancipation carried on by landlords, merchants and professional men. But it was quite ineffective. They were in no position to speak for the mass of Irish Catholics. The issue really came to life in 1823 when O'Connell founded the Catholic Association. He wished to involve all Catholics and others, if they were interested. First he sought the aid of the clergy. Heretofore they had not played any great part in the movement. But he realized that since they were distributed all over the country and were trusted by the people, they were in a fine position to be the local leaders of the movement. He also realized that money was vital to any hope of success. He instituted the Catholic rent a penny a month — which lay within everybody's means. Thousands of Catholics from all walks of life joined him. Their back-bones were stiffening. Dr. Jebb, the Protestant bishop of Limerick noted: "There is, what we of this generation have never witnessed before, a complete union of the Roman Catholic body . . . an Irish revolution has, in great measure, been effected".

The story of the 1828 election in which O'Connell contested and won the Clare seat is well known. The electors were canvassed by their priests and on polling day marched to Ennis, led by their clergy: A contemporary newspaper reported:

"Tuesday morning. eight o'clock. Between 300 and 400

of John Ormsby Vandaleur's freeholders are now passing up the street to the Court House, preceded by colours, every man with a green leaf in his hand, and amidst the loudest cheering from the townspeople. They are western men from Kilrush, and brought in by their clergy to vote for O'Connell. Along the road the general cry of the men was — 'Here's Kilrush, high for O'Connell, high for our priest'. Mr. O'Leary the priest of Kilrush, came with them and the town is full of Catholic clergy".

On April 13, 1829 the Catholic Emancipation Bill was passed. The priest had been introduced by O'Connell as the effective leader of his people in politics. He was to remain in that role for quite a while. On attaining Emancipation the hierarchy considered that the role of the clergy in politics was now at an end and made a statement to that effect in 1830. It met with little response. A prohibition in 1834 against the use of churches for secular meetings did not have the desired effect and many priests and some of the bishops were again to the fore on the political scene. The structure of Irish society at the time made it not alone desirable but necessary. Poverty was widespread. The Catholic middle class, outside Dublin, was almost non-existent. In rural areas the clergy were the obvious people to undertake the defence of their people. Gustave de Beaumont, a Frenchman in Ireland in 1839, could state that:

"The Catholic clergy is the most national body in Ireland. It belongs to the very heart of the country. We have seen elsewhere that Ireland, having been attacked at the same time in its religion and its liberties, his creed and his country were mingled in the heart of every Irishman, and became to him one and the same thing . . . When the altar is thus national, why should not the priest be so likewise? Hence arises the great power of the Catholic clergy in Ireland. When it attempted to extirpate Catholicism, the English Government could not destroy the creed without overthrowing the clergy. Still in spite of the penal laws, which besides sometimes slumbered, there have always



been priests in Ireland. The catholic worship had for a long time only a mysterious and clandestine existence; it was supposed to have no legal existence, and the same fiction was extended to its clergy . . . Those in Ireland who do not oppress the people are accustomed to despise them. I found the catholic clergy were the only persons in Ireland who loved the lower classes, and spoke to them in terms of esteem and affection”.

The Tithe question in the early eighteen thirties also caused priest and people to unite more closely. There was strong opposition to it. The clergy were indignant at the severe measures taken by the British soldiers against the people who made a stand while some of the clergy actually joined in the resistance as they were also burdened with the same tithe. Bishop Nolan of Kildare and Leighlin, writing about 1835, felt that the critical state of public affairs justified the clergy “in the most active and energetic exertions on behalf of the people”. It is interesting to find a stronger idea being expressed twelve years later by Fr. Joachim Ventura as he preached the panegyric in Rome on O’Connell’s death. “If the church will not march with the people, not for that reason will the people halt. They will march without the church, outside the church, against the church”.

A sizeable section of the clergy and close on half the hierarchy lent strong support to O’Connell in his movement for the repeal of the Act of Union. Archbishops Crolly of Armagh and Murray of Dublin remained aloof from it. The Government tried to detach the clergy from the movement by granting concessions in the area of education, charitable bequests and an increased grant for Maynooth. When this did not succeed, diplomatic representations were made to the Holy See. Even the services of the Austrian Premier, Metternich, were employed. The Pope, Gregory XVI, who had appointed MacHale to Tuam despite British opposition, was cautious and sent a mild letter to Primate Crolly which was interpreted by each side to suit itself.

From 1846 onwards the first effects of the Famine were



The famine

being felt. Here the clergy, though working on slender resources, showed up as the real friends of the people. A General Relief Committee was set up in Dublin with Fr. John Spratt O.Carm., as Secretary. It was one the Committees launched and supported by voluntary contribution which was able to bring a little relief to the poor in the West. It is worth remembering that Fr. Noon a parish priest sold his two watches and a service plate of silver which his parishioners had given him to get some food for them. Several priests sold their clothes and bought food for their parishioners. Writing to Archbishop MacHale on December 5, 1847 Lord Lieutenant Clarendon said:

“I do not hesitate in saying that no clergy in Europe can be compared with the Irish for zealous, self-sacrificing, faithful performance of most arduous duties”.

On the whole the clerical influence was not liked by the Young Irelanders in the Repeal movement. In the break which eventually came the clergy remained loyal to O’Connell and to constitutional methods, though a few did support the Young



Ireland ideal. In the troubled period round the 1848 rising the clergy were a restraining influence on the people. Angered at the lack of real assistance to the people stricken by the Famine they became more involved in the Tenant Right movement as a means to try to remedy social ills and emigration. It should be added that secret agrarian societies, which were then mushrooming, were condemned by the hierarchy. Round the middle of the century the clergy were more active as the country had no leader of O'Connell's calibre.

Archbishop Cullen's arrival on the scene in Dublin marks the beginning of a thorough romanization of the Irish Church and made the bishop supreme. The Irish members of Parliament set themselves up as an Independent Party. The Catholic Defence League, established in Dublin in 1851, had the strong backing of the clergy. They exercised a strong influence on the elections in 1852 and the party obtained forty-eight seats at Westminster. Strong complaints were voiced against the clerical influence in politics and even though Provincial and National synods passed decrees on the matter they had little effect on the country clergy. When the Irish Party split on the question of taking office in Parliament so did the clergy. Cullen lost face but in the country areas the priest held his old role as political adviser and at times even of organizer.

### The Fenians

The Fenians were founded in 1858. By the October of that year Fr. O'Sullivan, parish priest of Kenmare, had learned that some of his parishioners had taken the oath necessary to become a member of that secret society. In his Sunday sermon he denounced secret societies. He later passed on information to the Chief Secretary which led to the arrest of men in Kenmare and elsewhere. One of those arrested was O'Donovan Rossa. On hearing of the priest's action James Stephens, one of the Fenian founders, remarked with bitterness that it was the priests, not the British soldiers, who were holding Ireland for the English. In actual fact at that very time Fr. O'Sullivan was pleading for the release of the prisoners. He claimed that he had

taken adequate steps to suppress the conspiracy in his parish. All his parishioners had promised to sever any bonds they had with the Society and had gone to Confession and Communion. The prisoners were merely misguided and foolish men and he requested their release. But the imprisonment in Cork jail lasted seven months. The local people were excited and the priest, not unnaturally, became the object of their anger. Incidents such as this show the dilemma of the priest with the Fenians. He was torn by conflicting loyalties. He had an obligation to denounce secret societies as plotters against the Government. He had the interests and the welfare of his parishioners at heart. His own experience told him that these types of movements always ended in greater misery for the people and yet he had sympathy for their aims as he pondered the sad economic situation of the vast majority of his parishioners.

The leaders of the Fenians were only interested in the priest who would either bless their movement or by his silence give it his tacit consent. It expanded and the bishops were faced with no amateurish opponents. The death of Terence Bellew McManus in San Francisco in 1861 provided the Fenians with a golden opportunity to make a demonstration. His funeral must rank as one of the longest in history. His remains were brought across the Continent of America to New York in August. Thence it came to Cobh, Cork and Dublin where the was buried on November 10 in Glasnevin. A requiem was celebrated in New York during which Archbishop Hughes preached. He outlined what was necessary to constitute a just rebellion adding that the conditions were rarely verified in actual fact. But people, especially people in the position of the Fenians, hear what they wish in sermons and when Hughes mentioned that cases of a just rebellion sometimes did exist where one had tyrannical governments these words sounded sweet especially when voiced by an archbishop.

Large crowds turned out both in Cork and in Dublin. Bishop Delany of Cork would not allow the remains to rest overnight in a church so it was taken by the nuns in the South Infirmary. Archbishop Cullen, believing the proceedings to be a stunt to gain notoriety, also refused to allow the remains overnight in a



Dublin church. It was taken to the Mechanics' Institute. No Dublin priest was present at the funeral in Glasnevin but the parish priest of Partry, Co. Mayo, Fr. Lavelle, attended and spoke the panegyric at the graveside. Thousands of people were present which showed how the demonstration had moved the people and proved once again that the dead rebel draws greater crowds than the living one.



Cardinal Cullen

It was clear confrontation now. For the next six years there were many episcopal condemnations of secret societies and of the Fenians. Cullen, by comparing them with the secret

societies in the Papal States, was able to press Rome to condemn them. Their members were excommunicated. Bishop Moriarty of Kerry, though moderate in other areas, was no help to the situation when he proclaimed that hell was not hot enough nor eternity long enough to punish the instigators. Such strong opposition did the parish priest of Skibereen arouse that the people burned him in effigy. Official opposition was marked by the refusal of the sacraments. The clergy were mainly motivated by the fact that total strangers could come into their parish and administer the oath. They also feared that the Fenians were in league with Continental conspirators. Stephens himself lived for quite a while in Paris. Cullen once again pointed out that violence had always failed to achieve objectives in Ireland. O'Connell had always been the political hero of the clergy.

Needless to say all this led to deep friction between the clergy and the Fenians. Catholicism had preserved his sense of respect for the Irishman. The priest had played a vital role here. Now he seemed to be turning against the people. He was blamed as an interferer in politics. Bishop Keane of Cloyne was afraid that the people might desert the priest. Many of the Fenians were also unahppy. The priest did not lack sympathy for individaul Fenians nor for their ultimate ideal. Keane even felt that there was some justification for the feeling that the priests had let the people down and they had turned to the Fenians. The latter, in their turn, could very tellingly make the point that if it was right for the clergy to encourage enlistment in the Papal brigade to fight for Pius IX it could hardly be less virtuous to fight for one's own country.

The link between the priest and Fenian, though severely tested during these years, never quite snapped. Even at the height of the episcopal condemnations there were always priests to whom the Fenians could go for the sacraments. Members of some Religious Orders in Dublin and priests of the diocese of Cloyne were understanding and did not question penitents as to membership of the Society. Sometimes where condemnations were loudest individual priests were most sympathetic. At the Fenian trials the appeal for an amnesty was supported by



Cullen and many others who had been most steadfast in their condemnations.

It was another death or rather execution — that of the Manchester martyrs — which brought priest and people together again. It produced a wave of horror, sympathy and admiration which was evidenced in the celebration of Requiem Masses throughout the whole country. The political attitudes of the clergy was so influenced that in the century that followed they never again denounced physical force nationalism with the violence of the Cullen era. In the years between 1868 and 1916 Canon Sheehan and Fr. Peter O'Leary, both priests of the diocese of Cloyne, who had lived through the period, removed much of the ill-feeling by the glamour which they shed on the 'bold Fenian men'. Pearse's writings make the ideal of the priest and the fenian almost indistinguishable. John O'Leary once remarked that the politician should have on his side either the priest or the fenian. Pearse might have coined a beatitude: 'Blessed indeed would be he who could manage to have both'.

In 1870 when Isaac Butt founded the Home Rule movement few priests were interested in it. A fair section of the clergy supported the Tenant right Association while others of them thought that these matters were peripheral to their vocation. At this juncture bishops and priests were much more interested in denominational education. It was one of the great means to develop and protect their young people. Gradually the clergy became more interested in Home Rule when they became disillusioned with English efforts to remedy the Irish situation and when the movement itself became more catholic and constitutional. With the failure of the harvest in 1877 and also in the following year, the Irish clergy, seeing the labourer faced with starvation or emigration, became more active. When Michael Davitt founded the Land League in 1879 and persuaded Parnell to become its leader as well as being the leader of the Home Rule Party the national consciousness of the modern Irish State was gradually emerging. The support of the clergy was a very significant factor in the creation of this State. Gradually they realized their responsibility to maintain basic order in a society which was in fundamental economic

and social transition. By 1886 the bishops had whatever initiatives they desired in educational matters and could voice their opinion on the suitability of candidates going for election in their areas. Thereafter the clergy largely withdrew from politics.

The Gaelic League, founded in 1893, and the Gaelic Athletic Association, founded a few years earlier, were two powerful factors in developing national consciousness. It would be difficult to estimate how much both of these organizations depended on the clergy for their inspiration, development and success.

### 20th Century

During the Easter rising the hierarchy and the majority of the clergy acted as the greater section of the people did. They felt sympathy with the ideal and courage shown but considered the men and women as either misguided or unrealistic dreamers. There were no condemnations but it was well-known that confession was generally sought from some sympathetic and encouraging priests who were mostly to be found among the Orders in Dublin. But as in the case of the Manchester martyrs the executions which followed the Rising evoked the sympathy and anger of the entire catholic population and of quite a number of adherents of other denominations. The late President de Valera has written:

"The night before I appeared in the Waldorf Hotel in June 1919, when I was sought for by journalists all over America, I spent at 29th Street (the Carmelite friary in New York). It was at 29th Street that Liam Mellows stayed and it was there he found his most steadfast friends when he arrived in America after 1916. Fr. Magennis and he regarded each other as comrades in the campaign for Irish independence. Fr. Magennis was President of *The Friends of Irish Freedom* and used his position to see that the views of the Irish in Ireland were steadily kept in mind in the activities of that Organization. Soon after my arrival, however, Fr. Magennis was called to the General



Chapter in Rome. He was elected Prior General and so was no longer able to act as President of *The Friends of Irish Freedom*. That was a severe set-back to the cause of Irish freedom. Had he been able to continue as President I am sure that many of the later disastrous differences which arose in that Organization would never have occurred”.

J. H. Whyte in his book *Church and State in Modern Ireland* states that the number of statutes enacted by the Irish Parliament from 1923 till 1965 is roughly 1,800. In the case of sixteen of these the members of the hierarchy were consulted or made representations. His concluding words are interesting:

“The extent of the hierarchy’s influence in Irish politics is by no means easy to define. The theocratic-State model on the one hand, and the Church-as-just-another-interest-group model on the other, can both be ruled out as oversimplified, but it is by no means easy to present a satisfactory intermediate between these two. The difficulty is that the hierarchy exerts influence not on a *tabula rasa* but on a society in which all sorts of other influences are also at work. Party traditions can affect the bishops’ power; so can the nature of the issues on which they are seeking to exert pressure. The best answer the question ‘how much influence does the hierarchy possess in Irish politics?’ is that no simple answer is possible; it depends on the circumstances. This may seem an answer disappointingly lacking in precision, but it corresponds to the reality of things; any more definite answer would do violence to the evidence”.

Enough has been said on the priest and politics so let us briefly look at the relationship between clergy and laity since the Famine. From the days of Emancipation the social status of the priest had visibly improved. He was no longer subject to a hand-to-mouth existence but was living in tolerable comfort by 1835. One of the effects of the Famine was to reduce the population by roughly two million through death or emigration

in a short time. From 1825 to 1850 extensive church building was undertaken and, once the National System of primary education was rejected, school-buildings also had to be provided by the people. This was a considerable burden on a poor people. The population of the country c. 1850 was just over five million but by 1900 it was reduced to three and one-third million. In the same period the number of the secular clergy had increased from roughly 2,400 to some 3,000 while the regular clergy had grown from about 200 to 600. One consequence of this was that the priest could have much more contact with the people as the proportion of one priest per 2,000 now became one to somewhat less than 1,000. He was in a position to have greater personal influence on the life and morals of the community.

The rural economy of the country was also changing. The efforts to get possession of one’s farm and to keep it intact and undivided led to late marriages. This had the effect of promoting both celibacy and emigration. In 1851 a statistic showed that 12% of women aged from 45-54 were unmarried. A similar statistic for 1900 showed 26%. The arranged marriage also suited this economy admirably. The priest’s standing rose very considerably. Most of the young men entering were of peasant stock. To have a son a priest gave a certain distinction to a family both from a spiritual and temporal point of view. In these Victorian times a new climate of propriety and respectability was developing. The extraordinary emphasis on chastity of the later decades of the nineteenth and the first half of the present century owed little to what was known as the “jansenistic priest of Maynooth”, nor to the parish priest’s blackthorn stick (though it may have occasionally been applied), but rather to the prevailing rural economy and Victorian morality. Undoubtedly the mission-Fathers saw in this a heaven-sent opportunity to impress the obligations of the sixth and ninth Commandments on their packed and eager audiences. The priest’s standing continued to rise not only because of his spiritual calling and influence but also because he was a man of superior learning in days when very few could get even second-level education. He was



frequently consulted by this flock on a great variety of subjects and generally his advice on matters spiritual and temporal was gratefully followed. Probably this 'veneration' and condescension was aided by eulogies like that of Canon Sheehan:

"You priests of Ireland! When will your prophet arise to tell you what an ocean of faith, and love and adoration flows softly and silently, without break or murmur, around the little islets of your existence? If we except the love of a mother for her child, earth has no love so pure, so tender, so spiritual as the love of the Irish people for their priests. — And yet, what a gulf, yawning and impassible, is between them! No matter how close the ties of affection may be, the priest moves through his people, amongst them, but not of them! Consecrated by solemn oaths, dedicated to high and sacred purposes, the living impersonation of principles and ideas that could never have dawned upon the human mind, had they not been revealed, he walks his solitary way through life, bending, like some sublime and pitying spirit, to the weakness and wants of humanity".

The new popular devotions and confraternities which gave life and structure to a renascent Catholicism from the second half of the last to the middle of the present century also enhanced the priest's role in society. The Jesuits through the *Irish Messenger*, which had a circulation of close on 75,000 in its early days, and the Pioneer Total Abstinence Association which enrolled a quarter of a million in its first year had a very wide influence on a large section of the people. The visit of the 'holy fathers' on the parish mission provided spiritual uplift and an amount of good entertainment. Clerical influence reached its peak round the turn of the century. One wonders if their lessened role in politics (just like the loss of the Papal States in the case of the Pope) did not leave them freer to devote their energy to the spiritual and temporal needs of the people. They were the chief force controlling education and they had made

tremendous investment both in manpower and money in it.

Though Modernism seems to have made little impact on the country St. Pius X's words and actions in condemning it and his Encyclical on the Priesthood were taken very seriously in schools of theology and houses of formation. While these made a great and lasting contribution to the spiritual life of the priest they tended to isolate him, especially in his student-days, so that the student for the secular priesthood found himself cut off too much from his future flock and even from the daily newspaper, while the student in a Religious Order found himself almost totally withdrawn from contact with the laity. This caused many pains to the young priest in his early postordination relationships with the laity. To-day the balance seems to have swung to the other extreme with the result that people are uncertain as to how to relate to the priest. The easy and time-honoured adage: *Tabhair a thaobh féin don sagart agus fan uaidh* (Give the priest his quarter and keep your distance) would seem to be a guiding principle for many of the older and middle generation while some of the young are either avoiding or losing touch with him.

The social position of the priest has changed considerably in recent years. He has taken considerable knocking from some of the media and discussions on celibacy have made some insecure. Statistics do show that celibacy is far from being the main cause for priests seeking to return to the lay state. Since people do not go to confession as frequently as heretofore his influence on them personally has also been diminished. His role as soul-friend in its wider sense has often been replaced by the psychiatrist, the social worker, counsellor, paper columnist and even by the fortune-teller at times.

Vatican II wishes that the laity be invited and be willing to play a more active role in the development of the Church. The layman is no longer a child in the eyes of the Church. Priests need to show greater respect and trust in the laity's abilities and opinions. Paternalism must be considered as a thing of the past. The laity put the priest on a pedestal a century and a half ago. Now they wish to take him down and he is a wise man who comes down before he is knocked. In this way a truer and



more meaningful relationship can be restored. The priest today must be less isolated than of yore but not overclose. There will always be a certain distance between priest and people. The average Irish person has always wanted it that way. But the priest is expected to have an appreciation of and respect for all that is worthwhile in the values of his parishioners. Natural virtues, such as, kindness, sincerity, fair-play and courtesy are highly valued in secular society to-day. Modern scientific and cultural advances, the emphasis on political and civil liberty, the dignity of the human person and the layman's expertise in his own fields of activity must be properly respected by the priest.

The difference between priests and people is one of function not of rank. The Council adds: "A certain number are appointed by Christ's will as teachers, stewards of the mysteries and pastors for the sake of the others, yet all are on a truly equal footing when it comes to the dignity and action common to all the faithful with regard to the building of Christ's Body". It also explicitly acknowledges the right of the layman to make his views known to his pastors "in a spirit of sincerity, courage and prudence with a respectful charity towards the men who sustain the role of Christ by reason of their sacred office".

The final word on this subject very fittingly comes from our Holy Father. Addressing the priests of Ireland he says:

"As priests, you are privileged to be pastors of a faithful people, who continue to respond generously to your ministry, and who are a strong support to your own priestly vocation through their faith and their prayer. If you keep striving to be the kind of priest your people expect and wish you to be, then you will be holy priests. The degree of religious practice in Ireland is high. For this we must be constantly thanking God. But will this high level of religious practice continue? Will the next generation of young Irishmen and Irish women still be as faithful as their fathers were? After my two days in Ireland, after my meeting with Ireland's youth in Galway, I am confident that they will. But this will require both unremitting work and untiring prayer on your part".



