

Parish Missions

North Leitrim 1865-74

Fr Ultan McGoohan

The hey-day of parish missions was in the late nineteenth century in the decades following the Great Famine. The famine had a devastating impact on the morale of the country and this was further exacerbated by constant emigration that severed the traditional familial and communal bonds of Irish society. People had lost their moorings and the Catholic Church was determined to fill the vacuum by providing people with a renewed sense of meaning, purpose and hope. A gathering of the Catholic bishops at Thurles in 1850 mandated parish missions as the best means of re-juvenating Irish Catholicism and the nation..

A mission consisted of the visitation of a parish for up to three weeks by a religious order. Over the course of the visitation the parishioners followed an intense programme of religious exercises. The mission concluded with an enormous outdoor gathering of the whole community, at which people renewed the promises of

■ Fr Haly

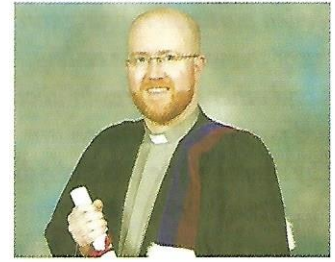


their baptism and where often a mission cross was unveiled in memory of the mission and as an encouragement to people to continue their good resolutions once the mission was concluded. These mission crosses are still be found in many places including outside the churches in Glenfarne, Glencar and Manorhamilton.

The local newspapers provide ample reports on parish missions. Another important source are the religious orders themselves. The orders involved included the Redemptorists, Jesuits, Passionists, Oblates, Dominicans and Franciscans and customarily they kept detailed reports on each mission they conducted and those reports provide a rich and largely untapped source of information on the religious and social condition of individual parishes in nineteenth century Ireland, including Leitrim.

Mission Killargue 1874

In November 1874, the Jesuit Missioner Robert Haly, was among those who conducted a mission in Killargue. Fr Haly left an account of the mission in his diary. Haly had travelled by train to Enniskillen about thirty miles from Killargue and his other colleagues had taken a train to Sligo about forty miles away. Travel by train illustrates the importance of the railways in facilitating travel to remote rural parishes by the missioners. The local clergy had made a great deal of effort in preparation for the Killargue mission



including purchasing sacred vessels, vestments and altar linen for the sacristy. Haly writes:

One of the advantages of a mission is the impulse given for the improvement and embellishment of the house of God previous to the Exercises. The Killargue mission was a striking instance of it. Grand new vestments; a fresh supply of fine altar linen; 2 fine new silver chalices; a fine ciborium, splendid ostensory, magnificent cope, together with all the other requisites for Benediction; 3 new and very fine missals, with one deficiency, however, they were not furnished with registers. The curate promised to supply this want without loss of time.

Haly noted the poverty of the people which often was one factor explaining non-attendance at Mass

We had a little procession (within doors) of the B.V. the third Sunday, but Fr D. Murphy with all his exertions could not succeed in getting more than 4 or 5 girls sufficiently attired to walk. Numbers of the people come to confession in borrowed clothes and vast numbers are unable to attend Mass on Sunday for want of shoes and clothes.

Finally, Haly's diary provides an insight into the living conditions the missioners had to cope with, particularly in poorer parts of the country.

The good Pastor was put to the pin of his collar to render his humble mansion convenient and comfortable for 'the Holy Fathers'. To furnish me with sleeping accommodation, he had to divide a good size bedroom into two, by means

of a wooden partition running three quarters of the way to the ceiling. The chinks and other apertures in about one third part of the partition are closed by sheets of the General Advertiser and Weekly News. The ceiling directly over my bedstead has been plastered but nowhere else. In all other parts of my room and the room adjoining, the slates and rafters are visible. The other half of my room is occupied by servants, and occasionally my ears are enchanted with the music of their shoe brush and I am invigorated as well by their redundant (sic) atmosphere, as they are equally by mine.

At least Haly was more fortunate than another of his colleagues on the mission in Killargue.

Our fourth Father, (Denis Murphy) is sleeping out, and must be very glad when he finds himself in bed for he has usually a river of mud to wade through before he gets to it.

Tension in Kinlough 1865

Sectarian tension was heightened in north Leitrim following the announcement that a mission was planned for the parish of Kinlough in 1865. The local Church of Ireland rector, the Rev. William Ashe objected when news filtered out that the local parish priest, Rev John Maguire had invited the Jesuits to conduct a mission in his parish. The local landlord Mr Johnston supported the stance of the Rev Ashe and a war of words was conducted between all three parties in the local newspapers. Essentially the Rector and the Landlord saw the missionaries as Catholic proselytisers, preaching false and superstitious doctrines. They challenged the missionaries to public debate. The



■ Mission Cross, Glencar

missioners, as a general rule, were forbidden to engage in public controversy. That of course did not stop the local parish priest, Rev Maguire, in correspondence published in the newspapers, from strongly defending, in the name of religious liberty, his right to invite the missionaries to his parish. The three-week mission in Kinlough went ahead in September 1865 despite the tense atmosphere. The Ballyshannon Herald, on 9 September 1865 reported that the 'dangerous and immoral' teachings of the missionaries 'has already begun to manifest itself in Kinlough.' The newspaper took

exception to the erection of a mission cross at the parish church. On the 7 October 1865, the Ballyshannon Herald dramatically reported a rumour that the church in Kinlough had been desecrated and burnt to the ground and that the mission cross had been destroyed. A reporter was sent to investigate what transpired to be 'fake news' and the newspaper concluded its report by stating, 'nor had the cross been broken down, for we found an old woman on her knees at the foot of it, pouring forth her devotional aspirations in the misguided simplicity of her heart.'