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SOME ASPECTS OF REDEMPTORIST MISSIONS IN THE NEW IRISH STATE (1920-1937)

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INTRODUCTION

Since their arrival in Ireland in 1851, the Redemptorists have become synonymous with a certain kind of vigorous mission-preaching, often described by its critics as 'fire and brimstone'. The work of the early missions has been studied extensively by writers like John Sharp[1] and Emmet Larkin[2]. It is not my intention to reopen the ground which these scholars have so adequately covered, although it remains a fertile field for further exploration[3]. The purpose of this paper is more modest: it sets out to examine some aspects of the work of the Irish Redemptorists from the beginning of the War of Independence until shortly before the Second World War. In effect, its contents will be confined to the years 1920-1937, the year in which the new Irish Constitution was promulgated. The primary sources it will draw upon are the Mission Chronicles of the houses within the Irish Republic[4].

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[1] *Reapers of the Harvest: The Redemptorists in Great Britain and Ireland 1843-1898* (Dublin 1989).

[2] *A Redemptorist Missionary in Ireland 1851-1854: Memoirs of Fr. Joseph Prost* edited by Emmet Larkin and Hermann Freudenberger, in "Irish Narratives" Series, edited by David Fitzpatrick (Cork University Press, 1998).

[3] This is not intended as a criticism of Dr Sharpe's work. His focus was on the united Redemptorist Province of Britain and Ireland up until its separation in 1898, yet the accounts of many of the Irish missions call for study on the part of someone who is more finely attuned to the particular problems and opportunities facing the Irish Church in this period.

[4] These are in effect Limerick, Dundalk, Esker and Dublin. There was a large community of Redemptorists at Clonard, Belfast, but after the Partition of Ireland, the

The chronicle entries follow a predictable and traditional formula, beginning with what might be termed a rough and ready 'demographic profile' of the parish, listing the main occupations and socio-economic status of the people, patterns of religious practice and the numbers attending the mission, especially for confession and communion. The latter figures are probably reasonably accurate: the missioners usually carried a counter in their habit pocket to keep a tally of the number of confessions. Occasionally too, the records shed light on other interesting, if incidental, details. The ancient Irish language (Gaelic) was in decline even in the areas, mostly in the South and West, where it still remained the vernacular. Despite the pledges of the new Free State Government to promote its revival, many of the clergy were not enthusiastic, particularly since they believed that young people forced into emigration would stand a better chance of integrating into the new urban cultures of Britain and Ireland and might remain more faithful to the practice of religion if they were educated in English. Many of the Redemptorists of this period were staunch supporters of the language revival. They knew too from experience that people were more at home in their vernacular. A mission at Clockbrack in the western archdiocese of Tuam in 1927, for example, provoked the following irate comment,

> "English is not understood by the people. The ministrations on that account fail to satisfy the needs of the parish. The excuse of the priests 'They must be educated for England' is fictitious. The education is a fraud and the ministry is abused. The affair of English speaking on the part of the priests is shockingly scandalous"[5].

The missioners were required to note what are called 'the principle abuses of the place' as well as any particular difficulties they encountered. Both were often ignored or treated rather blandly in practice, but where the reporter allows himself a comment, it is possible to pick up some threads of social life, as well as the missioner's estimation, not always flattering or sympathetic, of how parishes were run. Occasional unsolicited comments about house-keeping arrangements in presbyteries and boarding houses might raise a smile today. The preacher of a convent retreat, for instance, passes on the advice that 'if the bed is damp where you put up, take off your boots and go to bed in

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North remained part of the United Kingdom, and parish life there was faced with a set of realities quite different from those in the rest of the country.

[5] Esker Mission Chronicles, 12-19 June, 1927.

your clothes'[6]. The success of the mission depended on good relations with the local clergy, so the warning that 'two things must be avoided at Fr. H.'s table, the Irish language and Mr De Valera (the leader of the Anti-Free State faction of the Republican movement) 'was probably the fruit of some controversy with the two missioners concerned, who were partisans of one and the other[7].

Three aspects of Redemptorist mission work in the period 1920-1937 will be considered here. Seen from this distance, their preoccupations may appear foreign and some of their methods questionable. It will be argued here that the concerns of the missioners in this period both mirrored, and gave religious authentication to, the values of the new republican ideal emerging in Irish society at this time. It is common-place in Ireland today to point up the inadequacy of this idealised vision, often associated most directly with the name of Eamonn de Valera[8], and to stress its conservative Catholic roots. The reality is probably a great deal more subtle, and the evidence of sources such as those used here would indicate a complex symbiotic relationship between the two. The three areas to be considered are

1. the contribution of Parish Missions to the process of reconciliation between divided communities in the years during, and immediately following, the War of Independence and the Civil War:

2. the degree to which the parish mission reinforced the sober values of the new Republic in areas of social morality – particularly those of sexual morality and alcohol abuse,

3. how the missions continued the task of (re–?) constructing an image of Catholic Orthodoxy begun in the missions of the previous century, a process which Emmet Larkin has termed 'the devotional revolution'.

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[6] Limerick Mission Chronicle, 1926, Retreat to Cashel Mercy Convent. In those days, the preacher of the retreat did not stay in the convent.

[7] do, Parish Mission at Killenaule. In this case, one might have sympathy for the unfortunate parish priest, as his two missioners were Frs Patrick Kelly and John Gorey, stout partisans of one and the other!

[8] De Valera expressed it in particularly memorable images in his broadcast address for the feast of St. Patrick 1943. He wanted a Gaelic speaking Ireland, he told his listeners 'whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sound of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youths, the laughter of happy maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of old age. It would, in a world, be the home of a people living as God desired that man should live'.

1. – *The Missioners and Politics*

The Irish War of Independence began at Easter, 1916. It came to a head with the launch of a campaign of systematic terror against the British-controlled Royal Irish Constabulary (police force) launched in June 1919. The escalating disorder was met by the creation of an auxiliary armed force, 'the Black and Tans', who repaid in kind with a policy of reprisals aimed at the civilian population. The War of Independence came to an end with the signing of the Treaty on 6 December, 1921. The Treaty was a compromise document which, while stopping short of a Republic, gave the twenty-six southern counties the status of a Free State with an Oath of Allegiance to the King. A brief but bitter Civil War between the new Free State forces and the Anti-Treaty faction who held out for complete Republican status ensued. It lasted from April 1922 until 14 May, 1923 when Eamonn De Valera, as President of the provisional government of the Republic, issued the order to cease fire and to dump arms. De Valera's new republican party Fianna Fail eventually entered democratic politics and took the seats they had won in the election of 1927. Five years later, it was able to form a government with the help of the smaller Labour Party and some independents. Although de Valera was a staunchly practising and devout Catholic, whose half-brother Fr. Wheelwright C.Ss.R. was a member of the Baltimore Province of the Redemptorists[9], he was regarded with some suspicion by some members of the Catholic hierarchy in Ireland at the time. Having won a limited measure of independence, the new Irish state engaged in a process of marking its identity as different from the offically Protestant United Kingdom from which it had seceeded. Culturally, it undertook to promote the restoration of the Irish language. It attempted to make its legislation correspond more closely to the ideals of the overwhelmingly Catholic majority of its population. These measures included for example, the prohibition of divorce (1925), and the prohibition of the sale and distribution of contraceptives (1935). The process was given its definitive shape with the new Constitution enacted under de Valera in 1937 that officially recognised the position of the Catholic Church as the religion of the majority of the citizens. The International Eucharistic Congress in Dublin 1932 has been seen as the definitive symbolic expression of the Catholic identity of the emerging new State. Members of the government, most of whom had been barred

[9] De Valera had several friends among members of the Irish Province of the Redemptorists, and before his death was made an Oblate of the Congregation.

from the sacraments ten years before, took part with every mark of devotion in all the celebrations, and it became a fervent nation-wide celebration in which some of the lingering bitterness of the preceeding years was swept away as Ireland played host to the Catholic world.

Missions continued more or less uninterruptedly throughout the War of Independence and the Civil War. There is evidence that the work was sometimes made more difficult by the prevailing conditions[10]. One report from this period (Passage East, 1920) gives us some idea of how deeply political differences complicated relationships in parishes:

> "There was a sharp split between the village people and the country folk over a dance which was held by the farmers at a time when Sinn Fein prisoners were supposed to be dying in English prisons. The dancers were dispersed and the dance house wrecked. The Bishop suggested allowing ill-feeling on both sides to die down without much attempt to settle it up. Many on both sides were anxious to have it settled. The split in no way interfered with the attendance. There were a few Catholic gentry – greatly admired by the P.P. by the way – who turned up only for Mass on Sundays. They sent the servants on the week-night"[11].

By the end of the Civil War, the need for some reconciling influence was generally felt. One way was the parish mission. As Dr. Cohalan, Bishop of Cork, said at the close of a General Mission in Cork city in 1927,

> "Some foolish people outside the Church and some prophets of evil within the Church have been proclaiming a decline in loyalty of Irish Catholics and prophesying an abandonment of the Church by Catholics or at least a lukewarmness in regard to the sacraments and observances of the Church. Let the great mission give the answer"[12].

There were several possible reasons why the missions were well suited to performing such a reconciling and reconstructive function.

(1) They had become a tried and tested feature of Irish Catholic landscape in the Post-Famine period and did not need to be sold as a novelty.

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[10] Missions in Newtown-Killmacthomas, Millstreet, Borrisoleigh, Boherbue, Athea are all noted as having suffered from the effects of the Black and Tans (Limerick Mission Chronicle for the period 1920-21). The Borrisoleigh parish retreat had to be terminated on the Thursday owing to a Black and Tan scare, and there was no evening service in Boherbue for the same reason.

[11] Do. Passage East 25/7 - 5/ 8/ 1920.

[12] Bishop Cohalan of Cork at the close of the Cork General Mission of 1926, reported in *Cork Examiner* of 15 March, 1926.

(2) With its stress on the crowded church, communal hymn-singing and colourful but simple ritual, the mission created a sense of local celebration within the parish, which was very much the core-unit of Irish society, particularly in rural areas.

(3) The preaching of the 'Great Truths' of salvation transcended the divisive agenda of politics.

(4) A Mission by its nature sought to be inclusive, to include within the invitation all the people of the parish.

(5) In keeping with the dominant theology of the time, the mission stressed personal conversion and moral renewal. Many people who had found themselves in morally ambiguous situations during the previous years of unrest, probably welcomed the opportunity of confession.

(6) The mission-givers were strangers from outside the parish, often with an austere and aloof public persona that prevented them from being identified too readily with divisive local issues - they were accepted as 'God's men, doing God's work'. From the mission records, we can see some aspects of this in practice.

During a mission in Killarney in Lent 1923, tensions arising from the Civil War still in progress were evident, but both sides took advantage of the mission, and were welcomed alike in the confessional:

> "The most glaring abuse were the results of the 'Irregular Campaign' of warfare on the citizen population and the disregard of episcopal authority. Having suffered much from the rebels, the people turned for consolation to religion... Despite many difficulties, arising from the conditions of weather, roads, commercial depression, military activities and political propaganda, the work was blessed by God. Both Nationalists and Republicans attended well, and all sections approached the sacraments, notwithstanding the temporary estrangement between the extremists and the clergy who had openly denounced the wickedness of the Irregular campaign"[13].

A retreat at Tahilla, the out-church of Sneem, the same year, was regarded as a success for the same reason, that everyone profited by it, including Republican Irregulars, the men "on the run" who came to confession and communion. The Irish Bishops had taken a strong line against the Irregulars during the Civil War and in a Pastoral Letter of October 1922, had forbidden members of the Republican forces to

[13] Limerick Mission Chronicle 18 February-19 March, 1923.

receive the sacraments[14]. In Emly (Co. Tipperary), the following year, "the Irregulars just released from internment camps made the mission and peace seemed quite restored". Kilmichael (Co. Cork) was described as 'the scene of strife and blood-shed in the Civil War fighting as well as in the Black and Tan days', but during the mission whatever divisions there were, were due less to politics and more to a clash of personalities between priest and parishioners: 'apart from politics, there is still a great deal of discord and quarrelling. The Parish Priest is loosing his sight and seems to be perpetually quarrelling with someone in the parish'[15].

Bitterness had lingered on in some places, particularly where land issues were a contributory factor. The report on the mission given in Dunhill, Co Waterford, for example, noted that

> "There had been a class-war in this and surrounding parishes - a strike of labourers against farmers - fomented from without and which led to many outrages. This had died away before the mission which helped to heal the wounds"[16].

Political differences between pastor and people occasionally ran deep. We hear for instance of a parish where the people were lacking in enthusiasm for the mission 'owing perhaps to differences between people and priests in politics – the priest being a violent imperialist and unsociable' and it was observed that political feeling had somewhat weakened the lever of the clergy[17].

A mission in Gowel, Carrick on Shannon, earned a particularly lengthy account in the Dundalk Mission Chronicle. It is of interest since there is a sequel to the story more than ten years later on the event of the next Redemptorist mission held there[18]. The abuse that most troubled the missioners in 1922 was socialism. The Soviet Revolution had taken place less than five years before, and there had been some attempts to marry

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[14] The prohibition was not enforced strictly by many priests who were in sympathy with the Republican faction. The Irish Provincial had made the question of contact with 'Irregulars' a subject for the visitation recess in 1922, and the following year issued a letter to the communities forbidding any member to have direct dealings with them, even by letter (23 January, 1923). This did not prevent accusations that Redemptorists were giving the sacraments to Irregulars – see the correspondence between Cardinal Logue, Archbishop of Armagh and the Rector of Dundalk (10 Jan 1923) in the Provincial Archives, Dublin.

[15] do. 27.6- 18/7/ 1926

[16] do. 1925.

[17] do. Modeligo and Affane (Waterford Diocese), 1925.

[18] Dundalk Mission Chronicle, vol. 2. Dundalk Domestic Archives.

Republican idealism with a socialist vision. The chief figures in Carrick were a local man named James Gralton and his sister. Gralton had emigrated to America about 1909, and had returned to his native place sometime before the mission.[19] According to the missioner, he had won the respect of the people by being friendly and kind to them. When the local hall was burned down by the Black and Tans, Gralton built a new one at his own expense, or as the chronicler asserts, from the money at his disposal for socialist propaganda purposes. Gralton organised educational activities, including discussions of social questions, as well as dances. His sister gave music lessons and was credited with advocating divorce. They had both initially attended Mass, but soon criticised the church and 'then openly denied the existence of God'. The missioner records with evident shock

> "It is almost incredible, but it is an absolute fact - that whilst preaching these doctrines night after night, the hall was crowded to the doors, and even respectable women, and mothers of families (wearing shawls on their heads to hide their identities) went to hear him".

The preacher of the opening sermon of the mission leapt into the fray, taking as his text the biblical warning 'Beware of false prophets'. According to the missoner, the effect of the sermon was so manifest that Gralton had to go on the run after the second night. From then on, it was a glorious success culminating in an act of public reparation. With the departure of Gralton and his sister, the hall stood empty. Carrick on Shannon had been reclaimed for the Church and the supporters of private property. Gralton was later deported on the basis of his American citizenship.

The next Redemptorist mission at Gowel in 1933 ran into similar trouble. Gralton had returned the previous year, and was rumoured to have 24 adherents, most of whom were relations of his own, apart from another returned emigrant called O Beirne, who professed "not to believe in the divinity of Christ". The missioners again set their sights firmly on Gralton who was once more forced to go on the run, and in his absence, "all his adherents, except O Beirne, went to the mission and approached the sacraments".

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[19] I have taken some of the details from Tim Pat COOGAN, *The IRA* (1970) p. 105. Coogan however appears not to know of the earlier part of Gralton's career, since the only incident he describes is that associated with the Mission in 1933, which we will describe later, and he implies that Gralton only returned from the States immediately prior to this event.

Tim Pat Coogan notes that Gralton's case was taken up by the Revolutionary Workers Groups, as the Communist Party then styled itself, and they launched a 'Keep Gralton here' campaign. The Leitrim IRA however refused to become involved in the affair, as popular feeling in the county ran in the opposite direction. Peadar O'Donnell, for instance, was pelted with mud when he addressed a public meeting on the matter at Drumsna[20].

In a joint pastoral letter published in October 1931, the Irish Bishops condemned the new Republican off-shoot *Saor Eire* (Free Ireland) as 'frankly Communistic and working for the overthrow of Christian civilisation in Ireland'. In some places at least, it figured on the missioners' agenda, e.g. it was thought to be so strong in Tralee in 1935 that 'their activities had to be denounced and the people warned against them'[21]. In judging the success of the Kilkenny mission in the same year, the chronicler notes that,

> "Best of all, a little band of Communists who were causing a great deal of worry and trouble submitted. They nearly all came from the Cathedral parish. Having publicly abjured their errors, they were admitted to the sacraments".

Even in quiet backwaters in the West of Ireland 'Communism was beginning to creep into certain quarters, but it was stopped'.[22] One wonders precisely how 'it was stopped' and even more so, what local conditions had given rise to radical socialist thinking.

2. – *Redemptorists in "The Ballrooms of Romance"*

With the passage of time, as political differences became less of a burning issue, the missioners' attention appears to have been taken up increasingly by matters of sexual morality. A case of 'incestuous concubinage' which had come to light in the course of a mission in a small town in the Midlands was dealt with by forcing both parties to draw up a statement of their separation and penitence to be read publicly from the altar and by the enforced departure of the man involved. It should be stressed however that public confession of private sins was never a regular part of mission-preaching, except when it was a question of

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[20] COOGAN, *The IRA*, p. 105.
[21] do, 1935.
[22] Esker Mission Chronicle, Kiltulla and Fahy parishes.

effecting a reconciliation in the case of local factions[23]. The development of dance-halls in rural Ireland is a social phenomenon that has received some close attention. It should be stressed that the Redemptorists were not unique in their opposition to dance-halls, but simply reflected a growing concern with the changing patterns of entertainment among young people made possible by the arrival of the motor car and a more affluent society.

From the later years of the 1920s, the missioners conducted a running battle with the promoters of dance-halls, particularly, as it would appear from the mission-records, in the Cork-Kerry area[24]. One mission, for example, was slow to take fire and the missioners had to embark on a strenuous house-to-house visitation. The cause of the spiritual lassitude they soon discovered was the local dance-hall:

> "A dance-hall in the village was denounced as an occasion of sin, and when the owner refused to close the hall, – by express command of the bishop – he was denounced *nominatim* [by name] at the close of the mission. A stiff and obstinate people"[25].

One gets the impression, particularly from the final comment, that the people did not share the indignation of the missioners or the bishop. Dance-halls either had mushroomed overnight or else the church authorities suddenly became aware of something people had been taking for granted for a long time. In Dingle, for example, it was reported that three dance-houses were open during winter and spring especially on a Sunday night to late hour: the term 'all night dancing', often used as term of abuse, simply means that dances went on until 2.00 a.m.

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[23] A public avowal of sexual sin such as this is rare in the records of Redemptorist missions. It was found to be a desirable approach in the case of feuds, and as we shall see later, in the manufacture of poitín. This case is discussed at some length in Limerick Mission Chronicle, Clara mission, 1929.

[24] Dance-halls are mentioned as a problem in the following missions Ballyporeen (1928), Abbeydorney (1928), Kilflynn (1928), Clashmore (1928), Milltown (1928), Kenmare (1929), Templemore (1929), Ballylanders (1929), Knocknagoshel (1929), Kilgrarvan (1930), Dingle (1930), Aghinagh (1932), Liscarroll (1932), as well as those places discussed more fully in the text. In the Esker Chronicle. there is also reference to dance-halls e.g. four in the Parish of Backs (Killala) 1934. There are also references to dance-halls in the Dundalk mission chronicles e.g. Navan (1928), Ballyconnell (1933), Tarmonbarry (1933).

[25] Limerick Mission Chronicle, Kilgarvan, Co Kerry, 1930.

Some idea of what the missioners regarded as the depravity of the dance-halls can be gleaned from the following account of Ballyvourney and Coolea in the Cork Gaeltacht,

> "There was a dance-hall there (Ballyvourney) to which hundreds of people come long distances by motors. The hall was a scandal. There are sixteen shareholders in the hall, some of whom created difficulties. Although the Bishop had come and spoken against the evil of all-night dancing, after that the committee defied him by holding two all-night dances. Over fifty motors from Cork city, Kinsale, Bantry etc. invaded the little village and held dances for two days and two nights from Whit Sunday to the following Tuesday. Over 750 strangers and natives celebrate Pentecost in that way".

Fourteen of the shareholders in the hall gave written promises to abide by the episcopal guidelines at the close of the mission. The solemn blessing of the parish and its inhabitants, traditional at the end of the mission, was framed in such a way as to exclude the two obstinate shareholders and the congregation was asked to pray for their conversion - to all intents and purposes a public declaration that the people concerned were public sinners[26]. One can understand how the dance-hall owners at another place shirked meeting the missioners, who, no doubt with some degree of self-satisfaction, noted that the people closed them for the duration of the mission by refusing to attend, as they were pledged to do[27]. The opposition of the missioners to the dance-halls reflects a similar trend in society that culminated in the controlling legislation of the Public Dance Halls Acts (1935).

Alongside the battle with the dance-halls, the missioners promoted modesty in women's dress or campaigned against immoral literature. The definition of 'immodest dress' included swim-wear as well as the new fashion of women wearing slacks, and there are several references in our records to the campaign for 'Modesty of Deportment and Dress' which originated in Mary Immaculate Teacher-Training College in Limerick[28]. The motorcar made seaside resorts attractive to the young. In the eyes of the missioners, for example, Ballybunion had a reputation for 'much

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[26] Limerick Mission Chronicle, Ballyvourney, 1932.

[27] Limerick Mission Chronicle, Kilflynn, 1934.

[28] An unpublished paper by Professor James Donelly ('The Peak of Mariansm in Ireland') refers to this as coming into being in the 1940s through the work of the sisters of Mercy at Mary Immaculate Training College in Limerick. The evidence cited here would seem to suggest that it was, in fact. in existence long before this. See the recent history of Mary Immaculate College by Sr. Loreto O'Connor (1998).

public immorality and "marriages of necessity"' [29], while in a quite backwater like Roundstone, the missioners noted abuses such as,

> "Mixed bathing by strangers, all night dancing in farm houses, company keeping ... The Parish Priest formed a Vigilance Committee to stamp out mixed bathing. Visitors had introduced men's dress for women but the Legion of Mary is going to deal with this scandal"[30].

One missioner warns those who follow him to a small village on the Galway coast not to take its peaceful appearance for granted and advises that,

> "The missioner to this place should make it his first duty to find out and to visit those who are publicly known to be living an immoral life. One or two such were in the Children of Mary"[31].

Another danger to the morals of Catholic Ireland was perceived in the importation of British Sunday newspapers. A promise not to sell bad books and papers was exacted from the local news-agents during a mission in Navan in 1928 and,

> "A secret vigilance committee was formed of seven men whose business it will be to see that the promise is faithfully kept and report to the priests any information they may obtain about bad literature coming into the parish"[32].

Once again, the Redemptorists were quite in tune with the official mood. The Free State Government had introduced a number of Censorship Acts of films (1923), and publications (1929) which gave the state censor powers to ban books deemed obscene or indecent or liable to pervert public morality. Some years later (1933), de Valera's Government was to introduce a tax on imported newspapers in 1933, a measure designed to check the flow of English daily papers in the state.

Seen from this distance, there seems a prurient and unhealthy attitude manifest in much of the Redemptorist preaching on this theme and on the other great theme of mission-preaching, namely 'the occasions of sin'- in practise, 'company keeping', and one must seriously question

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[29] Limerick Mission Chronicle 1931.

[30] Esker Mission Chronicle 7-28/8/1935. As early as 1920, the public abuse mentioned during a mission in Rosses Point was 'mixed bathing' 1-15 August, 1920 (Dundalk Mission Chronicle).

[31] Esker Mission Chronicle, Kinvara 8-22 / 4/ 1934.

[32] Dundalk Mission Chronicle 29 April- 30 May, 1928. The missioners were Michael Curran, John Gorey and Alphonsus O'Connor.

how it contributed to the formation of the moral world of the average Catholic young person or parent of a growing family.

3. – The "Poitín Missions"

The abuse of drink had been long considered a serious public abuse in Ireland which the government of the independent state soon took steps to curtail. It passed *The Intoxicating Liquor Act* in 1924, reducing the hours during which public-houses were allowed to open for the sale of alcohol, and three years later in 1927 a new Act reduced the number of licensed premises. The Redemptorists had played a leading part for instance in the "Great Western Temperance Campaign", launched by the Bishops of the Province of Tuam in 1909. In rural areas, the problem was particularly exacerbated by the distillation of an illicit spirit best known in Ireland by its Gaelic name poitín (sometimes spelled 'poteen' in English), and in the USA as 'moon-shine'. A series of so-called 'poitín missions' was led by two Redemptorists, Frs. Stíophan Conneely and John Gorey, in Connemara, Counties Mayo and Clare. The earliest references to poitín in the mission chronicles occurs in the accounts of missions in Carraroe (Co.Galway) in 1926 and in Pullathomas - Ahoos (Co.Mayo) the following year.[33] The first decisive step against poitín-making was taken during the next mission in Carraroe five years later (25 January-23 February 1931):

> "Poitín was the abuse, and there was a lot of drunkenness as a result of it. We made the people bring down the poitín and on the last Sunday, we had a bonfire with about 14 gallons or so. The mission-cross was planted and there was a big procession the same day. We got about 1,000 names for the Sacred Heart Confraternity. The priest there is one in a million and they are a holy people who listened to everything. Apart from the poitín, everything is fine. In Tír an Fiaidh, the out-church, 13 stills, 6 worms, 35 gallons and 6 bags of malt were handed in, and everyone took the pledge around the bonfire on the last Sunday of the mission. In Leitir Meallain, most of the people involved in poitín making again handed over 30 gallons, 14 stills and worms and 5 bags of malt".

Stills and worms are the technical terms for the distillation chamber and the long metal tube in which the spirit is cooled: grain malt

[33] Esker Mission Chronicle 3-10 October, 1926. The Esker Chronicle is the major source for what follows. Most of the entries for the Gaeltacht missions are in Irish: translations are my own.

was the usual ingredient in the production of the drink. Flushed with their success, the intrepid two moved on to Rosmuc (Co.Galway):

> "The blessing of God was on the work of this mission. The parish was destroyed (*millte*) with poitín. The people handed up every drop they had and every worm. We had a bonfire in all the places. In Litir Mor, 50 gallons of poitín, 15 stills and worms, a ton of malt. In Camus, up to 70 gallons, 24 stills, 18 worms, 2 tons of malt. In Rosmuc, 5 stills, 5 worms, 4 bags of malt and 10 gallons of poitin. All the men took the pledge. The people showed strong faith. All the people came to the mission. Totally in Irish: not a word of English".

In August of the same year, they were back in Connemara, in Carna, where they found little enough poitín, except around Derryrush and a little in Cashel. They found a little in Rossaveel the following month, but there was no public burning. The following year (August 1932), they were in Moygowna in the diocese of Killala where,

> "The parish priest gave every assistance to make the mission a success. Young people making poteen. Ten stills were given in. The year before, two men died from the effects of poteen. Men, women and children were drinking it. All night dancing another abuse. Poteen was brought in and sold at dances".

Later in the same month, a short mission (one week) in Kilfinan Co.Clare brought in six poteen stills. In 1933, during a bi-lingual mission in Moycullen (where every second sermon was in Irish), poitín-drinking was detected in some places. Two missions in the diocese of Killala had similar results: in Corballa, 'the holders of poteen surrendered or destroyed their stills'. The mission in Ballycastle was described as,

> "Most successful. Every poteen maker gave up the trade. All took the anti-poteen pledge. One hundred and seventy became pioneers, 4 stills given up".

Pullathomas, where the presence of poitín had first been detected in 1928, had a mission in September – October 1933. The missioners paint the abuses of the parish in fairly lurid colours: apart from poitín making, there was drinking at wakes, mass missing and neglect of the sacraments. Boys and girls of 22 years were reported as not having been to Mass since their confirmation, and 'the people were destroyed with poitín'. Twenty-three stills and 77 barrels were handed up. The

'renewal'[34] of the Ballycastle mission the following year gave heartening results for only two new cases of poitín making were discovered and all who had broken the pledge came to renew it. The parish of Lacken near Ballycastle, however, remained untouched by reform:

> "People gone wild. Poteen, dancing, mass-missing rife. Sheebeens abundant. People would not come out. Missioners spent Monday and Tuesday 'raiding' and afterwards there was no trouble ... Eleven stills publicly burned. All the parish took the anti poitín pledge".

Oughterard was missionized by Fr. John Gorey and Fr. Tom Cassin in July-August of the same year (1934) and *sheebeens* (unlicensed drinking places) were reported, especially in the village of Rusheens, but everyone took the pledge. Culnamuck, however, proved to be more of a challenge:

> "A stubborn and ignorant people, debauched by poteen. They told barefaced lies and only with great difficulty did they surrender four stills. All except four took the anti-poteen pledge, but their earnestness is doubtful. The neighbouring parish of Killanin spoils them"[35].

The old team were back together in Rosmuc in Lent of 1935. They began by calling in the stills (5) and worms (3) for 'there is no point of giving a mission here unless they hand in the stills'. The renewal in Lackan took place in June and the missioners congratulated themselves on the improvement:

> "Last year people in a bad state with poitín. Renewal most consoling. People kept the pledges against poitín which abuse has been rooted out".

The anti-poitín campaign lasted about four years until Gorey was assigned to the Limerick house. It was pursued with the greatest vigour in the Gaeltacht or Irish-speaking areas of Connemara, probably because Conneely, who was himself a native speaker from the Aran Islands, believed that he had his finger on the pulse of the people of the Gaeltacht. It is difficult to assess its impact significantly at this distance. Although it never totally eradicated the poitín trade, there is some evidence, including a letter on behalf of the head of the Irish police-force

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[34] A 'Renewal' was a return visit by the missioners about a year after the initial mission, to 'renew' the effects of the mission by a week of preaching and the opportunity for confession. It was usually more low-key than the original mission.

[35] It was in the diocese of Galway where poitin-making did not carry the censure of a reserved sin which it did in the archdiocese of Tuam. The Parish Priest of Killanin obviously left well enough alone and did not question his penitents about poitin-making.

that its manufacture and sale were greatly reduced as a result of the missions[36].

"Dear Father Superior,

I am directed by the Commissioner to refer to the Missions given by the Reverend Fathers Conneely and Gorey of your Order in the parish of Lacken, Co. Mayo, during May and June of this year.

The area in which the Reverend Fathers preached is one in which poteen-making is a long-established practice and consequently, their very successful efforts towards the suppression of illicit distillation were all the more meritorious: in fact, they did more in a short time than the Gardai [police] could hope to accomplish even over a considerable period.

The Commissioner desires me to thank you and through you Fathers Conneely and Gorey for the valuable and praiseworthy work they have done in the Lacken area. The continuation of this very excellent work by these Missioners would, I beg to suggest, be very much appreciated in other western districts where the poteen traffic still thrives despite all Garda efforts.

Yours very sincerely,
E. Coogan
Deputy Commissioner."

What methods did the missioners use? Apart from the dramatic burning of the stills and poitín making equipment, they administered a solemn promise not to make, distribute or to use the illegal spirit. This was done with much solemn, if improvised, ritual and accompanied by spiritual threats of a fairly blood-curdling kind. The *Catholic Standard* for example reports how Fr. Conneely,

"placed his crucifix against the wall of the church and asked would any poteen-maker in the congregation go as far as to trample on it, and yet when they were making poteen they were guilty of that act"[37].

An editorial in the same paper praised the destruction of the poteen as a 'notable testimony of the people's devotion' and concurred in the missioners' assessment of the danger which poitín drinking posed to the health of the nation:

[36] Original, dated 18 August 1934 is in the archives of Esker.
[37] 9 March, 1931

> "How much harm poteen drinking formerly wrought may be learnt from some priests of long experience, who can tell of districts that bear the mark of the abuse in weakened manhood and in lowered character".

For the leader-writer, there was a fashionable variant of the poitín trade, viz. 'the drinking of cocktails is perhaps the most contemptible alcoholic abuse that has appeared" and asked rhetorically: "cannot all Ireland put down the cocktail habit and the worse evil of the jazz-dancing room with which it appeared among us?"

Although the missioners' zeal is to be commended, some of the tactics they employed gave offence. A Redemptorist who visited one of the areas mentioned above about a year ago, has reported that the 'poitín mission' of sixty years ago was still fresh in the folk-memory, and that it had left traces of fear and smouldering resentment behind. There were stories of the missioners turning the pictures of the Sacred Heart towards the wall. Such an action would have been seen as depriving the house of the divine blessing.

4. – *The Piety of the People*

Most of the missioners however treated the people with respect, and even with stiff affection. They did not expect to find the average parish a place of total corruption, for 'no particular abuse' is the most frequent comment. The Redemptorists were at their best when preaching to ordinary people, with ordinary sins, and these were the people who responded most readily to them. They did not court the attention of the better-off classes at the expense of the more numerous popular audience. In Cobh, for example, 'as a body, the "aristocracy" of Ashbrook did not attend'[38], while the last survivor of the O'Connell family of Derrynane, the elderly Mme. O'Connell attended morning and evening along with her household staff. The stronger Catholic identity emerging with the Free State lead to a certain triumphalism at the disappearance of the last vestiges of Empire, and of 'Souperism' in particular[39]. In Templemore, for example, they rejoiced that,

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[38] Limerick Mission Chronicle 1935.

[39] Souper' is a term of contempt used by Irish Catholics to describe some Protestant Missionary Associations who during the Great Famine of 1845-1847 offered food or other relief services to the starving on condition that they attended divine service at the mission-station. While many of the Protestant associations, especially those run by the Quakers offered generous unconditional relief, some others, especially the Irish Church Mission, considered the famine as quite literally a heaven-sent opportunity

> "The Soupers are now extinct, and one apostate family, the O'Mahoneys of Dromore (a sole survivor, a childless widow now remains), formerly had an evil influence. Their castle, a fortress of the ascendancy and souperism, has been burned down"[40].

Even as late as the early years of the century, missioners in the West were still reconciling whole families of 'jumpers' or 'soupers'.

More frequently, the missioners recorded the unobtrusive piety they found in the countryside and in the small towns. The people of one parish were 'nearly all total abstainers - there is no public house in the parish'.[41] The renewal of the mission in Corofin for example revealed that as a result of the mission 'many young men are going to daily communion and some old women have begun to talk to their enemies'.[42] A retreat-giver to the Irish-speaking battalion at Renmore painted a glowing picture of the piety of the young officers and men of the fledgling Free State army: one captain kept the traditional 'black fast' for the whole of Lent, abstaining from butter, milk and eggs as well as from meat for the whole six weeks, while the commandment, as well as daily Mass and Communion, made spiritual reading and meditation each day of Lent[43].

The mission 'general confession' was by now less of a novelty than it had been in the previous century, but it was still not unusual for people to spend much of the day in the queue for confession in clothes sodden by the rain and without anything to eat.

The legacy the missioners wished to leave behind was more frequent attendance at the sacraments, daily prayer in the home and a vigorous local sodality. The warm devotionalism of the concluding events of the mission, especially the Way of the Cross, devotions to the Blessed Sacrament and the Consecration of the parish to Our Lady with vigorous singing of popular hymns was in stark contrast both to the stern

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to embark upon a 'Second Reformation'. The adherence of the people to the Mission was in most cases short-lived, and after the Famine they returned to the Church, but the slur of 'having taken the soup' or of being 'jumpers' often hung over a family for several generations. The activities of the 'Soupers' is one reason for the phenomenal growth of parish missions in post-Famine Ireland. For an account of the activities of the Irish Church Mission in its historical context, see Desmond BOWEN, *The Protestant Crusade in Ireland 1800-1870* (Dublin, 1978).

[40] Limerick Mission Chronicle, 1929.

[41] Dundalk Mission Chronicle - Drumraney, Co. Meath June 1924.

[42] Limerick Mission Chronicle, 1928.

[43] Limerick Mission Chronicle, Renmore 1928.

preaching of the 'eternal truths' in the early part of the mission, and to the frugal fare usually available in rural parish churches. Customs that had been the norm in the 19th century before the great post-Famine surge in the building of churches, survived in some places into the 1930s. Many priests of the older generation continued to say daily Mass in their domestic oratories rather than in the parish church, and reservation of the Blessed Sacrament or the regular celebration of benediction were still not a universal observed[44]. One of the results of a mission in Ballinahassig in 1926 was the people's demand to have the Blessed Sacrament reserved in all three churches of the parish[45].

The position is the same as regards frequent communion. A retreat-master records that in a certain convent 'a number of sisters have the custom of not going to communion on several days during the retreat'[46]. Despite Pius X's Decree on Frequent Communion (1905), little had been done in many places to encourage the faithful to receive the eucharist regularly. The only Mass available in many places was at 11.30 or later, and the fasting regulations of the time put communion out of the reach of many people as a regular event. The effects were noticeable in one place:

> "Being accustomed only to receive the sacraments at the 'Stations', the people were slow to go to communion. Nor did they make much of the First Friday. By order of the PP, no confessions were heard on that morning, though the curate lives near the church. They must come the day before. The PP himself lives a mile away, and says Mass at home daily, except on Sundays, and allows no bell to be rung during the weekdays, not even for the Angelus nor for the Curate's mass on weekdays, on the plea that no village exists in the place. It is ascribed by some to economic reasons that the Blessed Sacrament is not reserved and the bell is not rung in the church. The Blessed Sacrament has been removed on the pretext of dampness from the place"[47].

Attendance at Sunday Mass was less universal than recent commentators on the once almost universal rate of Irish mass-attendance might have us believe. Distance from the church and lack of transport were considered as reasonable excuses especially in bad weather. Some became careless as a matter of course, and it has been noted that where

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[44] There was no reservation in any of the three churches of Kilmichael: benediction had never been given in one, and in another, it had not been given for twelve years.

[45] Limerick Mission Chronicle, June, 1926.

[46] Dundalk Mission Chronicle , Bessbrook 1920.

[47] Limerick Mission Chronicle, Lisgould, Cloyne 1933.

poitín drinking was widespread, there was a noticeable drop in mass-attendance. These were scarcely the reasons for low attendance in the large town of Castlebar where 'many absented themselves from Mass and the sacraments. The number of these absentees was so remarkable that it might be considered a public abuse'[48].

The Redemptorists promoted confraternities as part of the ongoing reform of parish life in the belief that, in their absence, little spiritual nourishment was available for the average layperson, particularly in the rural parts. Their experience of running confraternities with the help of large religious communities probably made them unsympathetic to the challenge facing the local priest in the parish to find time to prepare material for the confraternity in addition to his normal work. In one place, for example, the people were regarded as good but singularly unfortunate in the clergy they had been given, for 'in this ill-favoured parish, all they get is Mass and that is all'[49], while 'the mania for short sermons and quick devotions' made mission-preaching in Waterford a headache[50].

The attendance figures for the missions usually note that everyone or nearly everyone in the parish attended at least part of the mission. Where they did not, it could often, in the missioner's view, be conveniently put down to mental illness or 'oddness'. Where there was no apparent sign of madness, the most common cause was the effect of bad habits picked up abroad. In Kenmare, for example, there were,

> "some negligees (sic) and absentees including drunkards and a few apostates who had travelled abroad and returned with their faith impaired. But nearly all the inebriates attended and some of the apostates promised to pray"[51].

In many cases, the dissenter was an educated man, not infrequently the local doctor, or more occasionally, someone in an irregular matrimonial arrangement.

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[48] Esker Mission Chronicle 4-25/ 9/ 1927.
[49] Limerick Mission Chronicle, Aglish, 1934.
[50] do. Waterford 1931.
[51] Limerick Mission Chronicle, Kenmare 1929.

CONCLUSION

The national and religious press provide glowing accounts of Redemptorist missions of this period, a sign of the degree to which it corresponded to the general mood of the time. If one is to find critical voices, one must look for them among the imaginative writers. Patrick Kavanagh's *Tarry Flynn,* for example, a semi-autobiographical and satirical novel[52], casts his native parish in a faintly ridiculous light. Kavanagh writes with the soul and the conscience of a believer, to whom the matters of the Spirit are as important as the energy of the life-force that he painfully feels has been stunted in his community. The second chapter of his book is a lengthy account of a parish mission for which the Parish Priest, summoned two Redemptorists 'who were such specialists in sex sins', from their monastery in Dundalk. The portrait of the missioners is scarcely flattering. Tarry senses something more than faintly bombastic in their rhetoric in comparison with the parish priest's less flamboyant preaching. One gets nevertheless a sense of the exciting and novel, the hint of a larger world that the mission brought to the safe world of 1930s rural Ireland. Yet, for all this, the mission's promise of life is ultimately deceptive. As Tarry watches the close from the balcony he 'got a creepy feeling in the nerves of his face which something that was ludicrous and pathetic always made him feel', and as the crowd went home, 'once again the clay hand was clapped across the mouth of prophecy'[53].

Résumé

Les Rédemptoristes furent sans doute les prédicateurs de missions populaires les plus connus en Irlande durant la période couverte par cet article. On a souvent décrit leur style comme "feu et soufre"! Cet article nous donne un aperçu de la situation politique en Irlande après la proclamation de l' *Etat libre d'Irlande* et de la guerre civile qui s'en suivit. Il traite des problèmes que durent affronter les missionnaires concernant la politique, la morale sexuelle et l'abus d'alcool distillé frauduleusement, connu sous le nom de *poitín* en irlandais et *poteen* en anglais. Les missionnaires ont aussi découvert un peuple à la piété discrète et à la dévotion sincère.

[52] First published in 1948. Quotations are from the Penguin edition of 1987.
[53] Patrick KAVANAGH, *Tarry Flynn,* p. 44.