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# The Irish Church and the Papacy

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Patrick J. Corish

We do not know who were the first Christians in Ireland, but the comings and goings between Ireland and her neighbour, Romanized Britain, inevitably led to small Christian groups being established here and there. We do know when these scattered believers were given a church organization, and the circumstances in which this came about. In the year 429 Pope Celestine had sent Germanus, the bishop of Auxerre, to Britain as his legate to deal with problems there arising out of the Pelagian heresy. The person who first suggested this mission to the Pope is named as the deacon Palladius. In some way or other this mission to Britain suggested that something should be done for the Christians of Ireland. The contemporary chronicler Prosper of Aquitaine, who is our source for these events, noted that in 431 the deacon Palladius was ordained by Pope Celestine and sent 'to the Irish who believe in Christ to be their first bishop'. So, while the numbers of Christians in Ireland may not have been great, they were numerous enough to warrant a bishop and an organized church, especially perhaps because of the threat of heresy at the time; and this bishop and church organization they received directly from Rome. Nearly two centuries later, in writing to Pope Boniface IV in 613, St Columban is witness to the fact that this was remembered in Ireland: 'All we Irish,' he writes, 'we who live at the edge of the world, accept nothing outside the evangelical and apostolic teaching . . . the Catholic faith, as it was first delivered by you, the successors of the holy apostles.' The island at the edge of the world had never seen a Roman legion, but now it was a spiritual province of the apostolic see of Rome.

We have, then, precise contemporary information about why and when the bishop Palladius came to Ireland. Oddly enough, we have nothing more. Very shortly afterwards — according to the most commonly accepted dating the very next year, 432 — another missionary arrived in Ireland, Patrick the Briton. What he achieved

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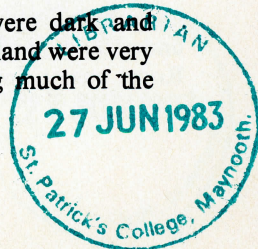
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almost completely blotted out the memory of Palladius. In some ways Patrick himself is an obscure figure. His very fame wove a legend about him, and much of its detail is to say the least highly suspect. For example, when we read in the Annals of Ulster and the Annals of Inisfallen under the year 441 that 'Leo was ordained forty-second bishop of Rome and Bishop Patrick was approved in the Catholic faith' there must be some doubt as to what lies behind these cryptic words. It is accepted that no fifth-century annalistic entry is contemporary, and it is impossible to be certain what if anything happened in Patrick's mission on the occasion of Leo the Great becoming Pope. What we can be certain of, however, beyond all reasonable doubt, is that at the time this entry was composed it was taken for granted that the Christian faith of the Irish was a concern of the see of Rome.

However, Patrick does not remain altogether in the obscurity of what people later wrote about him. We have two short documents that are unquestionably from his own hand, the *Confession* and the *Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus*. They may be very short on persons, places and dates, but they do reveal very clearly Patrick's powerful and engaging personality. We can see too what might be described as the framework of his life. He was a Romanized Briton, a citizen of the empire. For him, the world is divided into 'Christians' who are 'Romans' and 'barbarians' who are 'pagans'. By bringing Christianity to the Irish Patrick has, as he sees it, Romanized them. The third of the *dicta* attributed to him in the Book of Armagh may indeed not be authentic, and is not easy to translate, but the phrase so often quoted from it, 'ut Christiani ita ut Romani sitis' does catch the mind of Patrick as it appears in his authentic writings. Because of his work in Ireland, the Irish have, as he puts it, become 'fellow-citizens of the holy Romans'. He and the Irish have identified, though at times a phrase escapes him that shows how hard it was for him not to feel still an exile even among the people that it was 'his chosen vocation to bring into the Christian world of Rome — 'And so I live among barbarians, a stranger and exile for the love of God.' In fact, during Patrick's lifetime the close bond between Rome's temporal and spiritual empires was dissolving in the west. Political power was passing to the 'barbarian' peoples, the Goths, the Vandals, the Franks, the Lombards. Except for the Franks, the Christianity they had first accepted was that of the Arian heresy. The conversion of the Franks to the faith of Nicea was the decisive event that made possible the entry of the 'barbarians' into the spiritual empire of Rome.

In western Europe the fifth and sixth centuries were dark and confused. Communications broke down. Rome and Ireland were very far apart. When the darkness showed signs of lifting much of the





brightest hope was provided by monks from Ireland, and of these the greatest was certainly Columban of Bangor, Luxeuil and Bobbio.

Three letters written by Columban to popes have come down to us. The first two concern the problems being raised by the fact that the Irish calculated the date of Easter in a different way from the rest of Christendom. In the first, Columban speaks sharply to the pope, defending the Irish usage with all kinds of theological and mystical considerations. He has moderated his stance in the second, and asks only that the Irish be allowed to retain their distinctive practice. It is in the third letter that the language of Columban is at its sharpest. Here he is in very deep water, indeed palpably out of his depth. The point at issue is the attitude to be taken in the Three Chapter controversy, that combination of political pressures with the ultimate refinements of the Greek speculative intellect. It had perhaps been a little obscure even to the Roman theologians, and the Lombard bishops of northern Italy certainly missed some of the finer points. Columban saw the whole dispute primarily as an obstacle to his work of evangelization, and in his long letter to Pope Boniface he castigates sharply what he sees as certain Roman ambivalences on the issue. In this letter in particular we see all the fiery contradictions of his temperament — the humility blended with impatience and impetuosity, the rigid adherence to the traditions of the Irish Church, the respectful understanding of the papal position coupled with a determination to speak out when he believed the faith was at stake.

As already noted, he is witness to the fact that the Irish continued to be conscious of the fact that they had received from Rome 'the evangelical and apostolic teaching, the Catholic faith,' and the titles and attributes he gives the popes in the formal opening salutations of his letters show how clearly aware he is of the overriding nature of papal authority: 'to the holy lord and father in Christ, the fairest ornament of the Roman Church, like a most honoured flower of Europe in her decay, to the distinguished bishop, skilled in the meditation of divine eloquence, I, the lowly Columba, send greeting in Christ . . . to the holy lord and apostolic father in Christ, Columba the sinner sends greeting . . . to the most fair head of all the Churches of the whole of Europe, estimable Pope, exalted prelate, shepherd of shepherds, most reverend bishop . . .'

Yet it is not in these formal salutations that one gets the most authentic witness of Columban to the papacy: perhaps it comes through with more of the taste of the early Middle Ages at the end of the second of his letters: 'Farewell, Pope most dear in Christ, mindful of us both in your holy prayers beside the ashes of the saints.' An understanding of the relationships between the early Irish Church and Rome has at times been obscured by a tendency to discuss it in the

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formal salutations that one gets the most from Columban to the papacy: perhaps it comes from the time of the early Middle Ages at the end of the twelfth century, Pope most dear in Christ, mindful of the prayers beside the ashes of the saints.' An awareness of the early Irish Church and its relationship to another Church was to compare the witness of its saints to the witness of the saints of Rome.

light of post-reformation controversy, or indeed in the juridical terminology elaborated by the scholastics. As well, it is easy to underestimate the sheer physical problems of communications at the time. Of necessity, normal Church administration outside Italy was in the hands of the local authorities meeting in synod, Rome reserving the right of appeal, that is, it intervenes in disputed cases and decides the issue, normally at the request of the parties concerned. This is exactly what happened when the paschal controversy spread to Ireland itself. The testimony of our primary witness, Cummián, is precise and explicit. When agreement could not be reached in Ireland, he says, it was decided, in accordance with the synodal decree that such cases should be referred to the chief of cities, to send to Rome men known to be wise and humble, 'as children to their mother'. That this step could not be taken lightly is clear from his comment that God granted them a fortunate journey: some of them got to Rome, and after three years some returned. The Roman decision they brought with them was accepted.

'Pope most dear in Christ, mindful of us both in your holy prayers beside the ashes of the saints.' This is not the language of law or jurisdiction, but it has a rich content of meaning. The authority of any Church was based on its holy witness to the faith, and this is made tangible in the treasured relics of its saints. The Irish word for cemetery is *reilig*, that is, where rest the relics, the *reliquiae*, the earthly remains of the saints. In old Irish there is another word, *ruam*. It occurs in three related meanings, the city of Rome itself, any great ecclesiastical centre that might fittingly be compared to Rome, and a cemetery, usually the cemetery of such a place. A passage in the prologue to the *Martyrology of Oengus*, composed about 800, suggestively blends the three senses in its praises of the great monasteries of Ireland:

The proud burgh of Aillenn has perished with its boastful throng,

great is triumphant Brigit, fair is her crowded *ruam*.

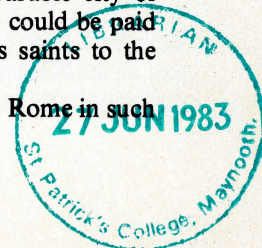
The burgh of Emhain has faded away save that its stones remain,

thronged Glendaloch is the *ruam* of the western world . . .

The little places that were occupied by twos and threes, they are *ruama* with multitudes, hundreds and thousands.

Rome was the chief witness to the faith, the incomparable city of saints and martyrs, and the highest compliment which could be paid to another Church was to compare the witness of its saints to the witness of the saints of Rome.

The Irish do not seem to have gone on pilgrimage to Rome in such





great numbers as did the Anglo-Saxons after their conversion, a pilgrimage strikingly testified to in the fact that the area around St Peter's still has among its street-names the words 'burgh' and 'Saxon', witnesses of the desire to be buried as close as possible to the greatest of Rome's saints, the prince of the apostles, so that on the last day one might be favourably placed to claim clientship with the person who had the keys of the kingdom of heaven. In the eleventh century, however, Rome began to attract Irish pilgrims in some numbers. Western Europe was returning to order, and the Annals note the names of many royal Irish pilgrims to Rome, especially between the years 1027 and 1066, when conditions for the journey were particularly favourable. The most distinguished was the last surviving son of Brian Boromhe, Donnchad mac Briain, King of Munster, who was dethroned in 1064 and went on his pilgrimage to Rome, where he died the following year, and lies buried in San Stefano Rotondo, just around the corner from the present Irish College. By the end of the century there was an Irish monastery in Rome: the Annals of Inisfallen record in 1095 the death of 'Eoghan, head of the monks of the Gael in Rome.'

By the date of Brian's death the papacy had at last been freed from the tyranny of the factions, and by the pontificate of Leo IX (1049-54) had emerged with increasing confidence as the leader of a reform of the Christian life. By the end of the century this papally-directed reform had reached out to distant Ireland. It was inaugurated at a series of synods presided over by papal legates, at Cashel in 1101, Rathbreasail in 1111, and Kells in 1152. The Norman invasion that came so soon afterwards in some respects disrupted the reform, but in others it brought Ireland more fully into the wide world of papal Christendom. The Normans had ties everywhere, from Ireland to Jerusalem. Their kingdom of Sicily was at times the protector of the papacy. As late as the end of the seventeenth century a Catholic bishop in Wexford, Luke Wadding, sprung from a Norman family that had lost its lands in the Cromwellian confiscation, could number among the treasured heirlooms he still possessed 'a small glass bottle of blood which hath been in the castle of Ballycogley since my predecessors first came, what blood it is I know no more than that it was esteemed to be a drop of our Saviour's blood, brought by one Gilbert Wadding who was at the taking of Jerusalem by Godfrey duke of Lorraine.'

For the later Middle Ages, then, Ireland was, like the rest of Europe, a province of the great domain of papal Christendom. By the end of the fifteenth century that domain was showing signs of coming apart, because of a spreading conviction that the ecclesiastical system

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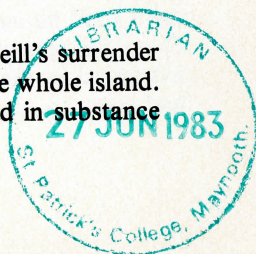
In the eighteenth century, then, Ireland was, like the rest of Europe, the great domain of papal Christendom. By the end of the century that domain was showing signs of coming under the growing conviction that the ecclesiastical system

presided over by the papacy did not fulfil genuine religious longings, and because the western European countries were less and less inclined to defer to an authority like the pope who was outside the national boundaries, especially if the services he provided gave rise to growing criticism.

By the end of the century the papacy had indeed reached a low level. So, it must be confessed, had the Church in Ireland. And yet there was little or nothing of that 'nationalist' suspicion of the papacy that had become so common elsewhere — not indeed that this can be interpreted to the moral credit of either Ireland or the papacy: it arose from the developments of political history. The authority of the English king in Ireland had always been limited by the partial failure of the Norman conquest, and for fifty or sixty years before the reformation it had been at its lowest point and very nominal indeed. There were few parts of Ireland where in men's minds the king was nearer than the pope.

From what has just been said, however, it will be clear that it by no means follows that Ireland would automatically take the Roman side in the great sixteenth-century debate on the rejection or acceptance of papal authority. In fact it did, though historians are still probing the obscurities of why it did. The signs of what the future direction is going to be are beginning to appear with some clarity in the second half of the reign of Elizabeth. It may be that not many Irish people had the clarity of James Fitzmaurice's crusading vision when he landed at Smerwick in 1579. Perhaps it was just as well they did not, because Fitzmaurice was already something of an anachronism. His vision of a Catholic crusade probably took shape when he was in Rome, where the great victory of Lepanto over the Turks in 1571 must have suggested that a new age of crusading was at hand: no one could know that it was to prove in fact the last crusade. It is quite certain that when he passed through Paris some years before, vainly seeking help from a feeble and embattled monarchy, he could have no idea that the little group who were to arrive here in 1578, always remembered as the founding generation of the Irish College in Paris, the priest John Lee and his six young companions, were in truth the representatives of the future, not the crusades, but the seminary priests. It is certain too that the Catholic faith was only one element in the complex aims of the great Hugh O'Neill. Yet when he was forced to seek exile after defeat it was in Rome he found refuge, and there he lies buried, in San Pietro in Montorio.

The last Irish resistance had been broken with O'Neill's surrender in 1603, and the English monarchy now controlled the whole island. But by this time the battle for religious allegiance had in substance





been decided: the Irish as a body were to follow Rome. This commitment of a whole people to a religion differing from that of their civil ruler has no parallel elsewhere. In other respects too this Irish Catholic religion had unique features. Elsewhere, if the Catholic religion was not the established religion of State it was organized as a mission, not as a Church. Its bishops were not diocesan but vicars apostolic. It did not have an organised parish system. This, substantially, is what happened in England and Holland. In Ireland, however, there was a Church, that is, bishops were appointed to the territorial sees and they built up, with substantial success, a parish system as newly reorganized by the Council of Trent.

In the countries with established Catholic Churches those nationalistic forces already in existence before the reformation continued to develop and to limit the power of the papacy. In this, France was the centre and model. Things went differently in Ireland, that strange hybrid with an organized Church in what was juridically a 'missionary' territory. In the nature of things, Rome tried to keep a closer control in these 'missionary' areas, and this was institutionalized with the establishment of the Congregation of Propaganda in 1622. Ireland was to remain under its direct authority until 1908. Even through the worst decades of the Penal Code close links were maintained between the Irish Church and the papal see, co-ordinated by the internuncio in Brussels. This regular communication with Rome did more than counterbalance the fact that the education of the Irish diocesan clergy came to be more and more concentrated in France. The Irish Catholic Church that emerged from the penal days had a sense of links with Rome more than any Church in northern Europe.

Because of the developments during the French revolution the old 'nationalist' Churches lost their privileged position within the State. Deprived of this protection, they tended to look directly to Rome in a way which would have been unthinkable in the eighteenth century. The spiritual prestige and authority of the papacy grew, and Ireland shared this growth of 'ultramontanism' or tendency to seek direct and immediate guidance 'beyond the mountains', south of the Alps, in Rome. In Ireland, these developments are especially associated with the name of Paul Cardinal Cullen, though it is a fair hypothesis that they would have taken place in any case, though possibly not so dramatically or decisively. Born in 1803, he had gone to Rome to study for the priesthood at the age of seventeen, and had remained there until his return to Ireland as archbishop of Armagh in 1850. From his letters home it is very clear how strongly he had been influenced by the mystique of the eternal city, and how it was there he had come to grasp the idea of religion as something permeating the

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whole of life, whether expressing itself in solemn ceremonies or in active charity towards the poor. In his twenty-eight hard-working years as archbishop, first in Armagh and then in Dublin, he left his stamp on the Irish Catholic mind. That stamp, needless to say, was ultramontanism. We have his own words for it: as he saw things, to be ultramontane was simply to be a good Catholic.

The Irish Catholic experience has been in many ways a distinctive one. Yet we are surely not pressing the evidence if we see running through its distinctive developments the central thread of Rome and the papacy. It spreads across the centuries: Columban in the seventh century, addressing the 'Pope most dear in Christ, mindful of us both in your holy prayers beside the ashes of the saints'; James Fitzmaurice in the sixteenth, proclaiming at Smerwick that Pope Gregory XIII had chosen him as 'general captain' in the war 'undertaken for the defence of the Catholic religion', though the future was not to be in the hands of warring captains but rather with the 'popish priests' whose zeal was already noticed by Edmund Spenser in 1596: 'for they spare not to come out of Spain, from Rome and from Rheims, by long toil and dangerous travelling hither, where they know peril of death awaiteth them and no reward or riches are to be found, only to draw the people unto the Church of Rome . . . God's harvest, which is even ready for the sickle and all the fields yellow long ago'; or the young Paul Cullen early in the nineteenth century, re-learning the lesson of the mystique of the papacy that in our own times is seen to be still potent in a world that in the last analysis does not know the answers and deep down would dearly like to know. Just now, there are a few answers we could do with in Ireland.

### THE CANONS REGULAR OF THE LATERAN

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