

Popular Religion in Gaelic Ireland 1445-1645

(2 volumes)

Part 1

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List of Abbreviations

Conventions used in Irish Historical Studies have been generally followed.

Additional abbreviations are listed here.

- ADD* Lambert McKenna (ed.), *Aithdioghluim Dána*. 2 vols. (Dublin, 1939-40)
- AC* A. Martin Freeman, (ed.), *Annála Connacht: the annals of Connacht (A.D. 1224- 1544)* (Dublin, 1970)
- AFM* John O' Donovan (ed. and trans.), *Annála rioghachta Éireann: Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters, from the earliest period to the year 1616*. 7 vols. (Dublin, 1851)
- AFOD* Lambert McKenna (ed.), *Dánta do chum Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh* (Dublin and London, 1919)
- ALC* William Hennessy (ed.), *The Annals of Loch Cé: a chronicle of Irish affairs from A.D. 1014 – A.D 1590* (London, 1871)
- AU* B. Mac Carthy (ed. and trans.), *Annala Uladh-Annals of Ulster, otherwise Annala Senait; A chronicle of Irish affairs, A.D. 431-1131; 1155-1541*. 4 vols., (Dublin, 1887-1901)

- BCC* A. O' Kelleher and G. Schoepperle (eds. and trans.), *Betha Colaim Cille: Life of Columcille compiled by Manus O'Donnell in 1532* (Illinois, 1918)
- BM* Lambert McKenna (ed.) *The Book of Magauran* (Dublin, 1947)
- BOH* Lambert McKenna (ed.) *The Book of O'Hara* (2nd ed., Dublin, 1980)
- CPL* J. A. Twemlow (ed.), *Calendar of entries in the Papal registers / Papal letters relating to Great Britain and Ireland xii A.D. 1458-71* (London, 1933).
- DBM* Cuthbert Mhág Craith (eag.), *Dán na mbráthar mionúr* (B.Á.C., 1980)
- DD* Lambert McKenna (eag.), *Dioghlúim dána* (B.Á.C., 1938)
- DDé* Lambert McKenna (eag.), *Dán Dé* (B.Á.C., n.d.)
- DMMD* N. J. A. Williams (eag.) *Dánta Mhuiris Mhic Dháibhí Dhuibh Mhic Gearailt* (B.Á.C., 1979)
- DMU* David Greene (eag.), *Duanaire Mhéig Uidhir* (B.Á.C., 1972)

- GBMCM* N. J. A. Williams (ed.) *The poems of Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe* (Dublin, 1980)
- IM* *The Irish Monthly: a magazine of general literature* (Dublin, 1874-1954)
- N.M.A.J* *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*
- n.l.t.* not later than
- PA* Antoin Gearnon, *Parrthas an Anna* (eag. Anselm Ó Fachtna) (B.A.C., 1953)
- PB* Lambert McKenna (eag.), *Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn* (B.Á.C., 1931)
- PCT* N. J. A. Williams (eag.), *Pairlement Chloinne Tomáis* (B.Á.C., 1981)
- PH* Atkinson, Robert (ed.), *The passions and homilies from the Leabhar Breac: text, translation and glossary* (Dublin, 1887)

- PL J. P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus a J. P. Migne editus et parisiis anno domini 1844 excursus: series latina. Supplementum.* (Paris, 1974)
- RIA Royal Irish Academy
- SBC Cainneach Ó Maonaigh (eag.), *Smaointe beatha Chríost: innsint Ghaeilge a chuir Tomás Gruamdha Ó Bruacháin (fl.c.1450) ar an Meditationes Vitae Christi* (B.Á.C., 1944)
- SSA Aodh Mac Aingil, *Scáthán Shacramuinte na hAithridhe* (eag. Cainneach Ó Maonaigh), (B.A.C., 1952)
- TBGB Geoffrey Keating, *Trí bior-ghaoithe an bháis: the three shafts of death* (eag. Osborn Bergin) (B.Á.C., 1931)
- TC Bonaventura Ó hEoghusa, *An Teagasg Críosaíde* (eag. Fearghal Mac Raghnaill) (B.A.C., 1976)
- TCD Trinity College Dublin

Introduction

Increased interest in the area of 'popular religion' among historians is a relatively recent phenomenon. John Bossy traces its origins to the school of 'religious sociology' which was inaugurated in France in 1931 by the canon law historian, Gabriel le Bras.¹ It is certainly true that historians of the Francophone world have proved themselves to be forerunners in this field of research, publishing widely, from a relatively early stage, on the experiences of the laity in late medieval and early modern France.² The term itself, however, is fraught with difficulty and any historian who might naively consider attempting to definitively unravel its meaning, faces a minefield of objections.

The study of religious ideas in late medieval and early modern Europe is necessarily overshadowed by the two great events of religious change that swept across the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, namely the Reformation and Counter-Reformation.³ The initiation of programmes of religious reform during this period was

¹ John Bossy, 'The Counter-Reformation and the people of Catholic Europe', in *Past and present* 47 (1970), pp 51-70.

² See especially Jeanne Ferté, *La vie religieuse dans les campagnes parisiennes, 1622-1695* (Paris, 1962); Jacques Toussaert, *Le sentiment religieux en Flandre à la fin du moyen âge* (Paris, 1963); André Vauchez, *La spiritualité du moyen âge occidental* (Paris, 1975); Raoul Manselli, *La religion populaire au moyen âge: problèmes de méthode et d'histoire* (Montreal, 1975); Michel Vovelle, *Piété baroque et déchristianisation en Provence au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1973); idem, *Ideologies and mentalities* (Cambridge, 1990).

³ I have chosen to use these terms as they are the most frequently used among historians. Although this study does not purport to be a forum for discussion on their relative merits, nevertheless, I do acknowledge here that the terms themselves are not without their difficulties.

to affect, to varying degrees, all orders in society, touching prelates who enjoyed the high echelons of ecclesiastical office as well as humble peasants who faithfully said their prayers. While the need to reform abuses within the hierarchical structures of the late medieval Catholic Church has been well documented, something also had to be done about the belief-systems and religious practices of the vast majority of Christians, comprising the laity, both lettered and unlettered.

Jean Delumeau's thesis that the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation shared the same objective, namely the Christianisation of the masses who, until then, presumably remained in a veritable twilight zone between orthodox Christianity and superstition-ridden paganism, is well known.⁴ The conclusions of other commentators, such as Jacques Toussaert, are less flattering still. His portrait of Flanders at the end of the late medieval period is synthesised by Natalie Zemon Davis:

[He]...paints Flanders as a Christian country in only an official sense, with a laity largely indifferent to Communion and Confession, naïve, excited, sensationalistic in matters of faith, and timing sporadic religious activity to occasions defined by family, natural catastrophe and folk tradition, rather than by parish solidarity and spiritual needs.⁵

Studies such as those of Delumeau and Toussaert broadly identify the hallmarks of 'popular religion' as syncretism, superstition, folk tradition and a general lack of participation in sacramental life. Such a conclusion can only be reached by contrasting the values of 'popular' religious devotion with certain institutional norms.

⁴ Jean Delumeau, *Catholicism from Luther to Voltaire* (London, 1977).

⁵ Natalie Zemon Davis, 'Some tasks and themes in the study of popular religion', in Charles Trinkaus with Heiko A. Oberman (eds), *The pursuit of holiness in late medieval and Renaissance religion* (Leiden, 1974), p.308.

John Bossy responds to Jacques Toussaert's dismissal of lay religion in Flanders on the basis of its lack of sacramental practice alone, by arguing that one can only conclude from the evidence that 'the Church of the late medieval centuries was not in actual fact a parochially-grounded institution.'⁶ Any further judgement on the matter, therefore, is superfluous and risks inaccuracy.

The unfavourable categorisation of pre-Reformation lay religious piety, exemplified in works such as those of Delumeau and Toussaert, must, however, be understood in its proper context before the place of 'popular religion' in current historical writing can be properly appreciated. Much of the denigration of late medieval 'popular' piety in the past has resulted from what Aron Gurevich calls 'an aristocratic, elitist view of medieval culture, based only on the thoughts of "high brows", - theologians, poets, philosophers and historians', which he regards as having dominated scholarship.⁷ When judgements are made on the basis of accepted, elitist, religious norms, any deviation from these can lead to the immediate branding of transgressors as followers of pagan or heretical practices. Natalie Zemon Davis explains that this approach, often adopted by historians in the past, 'tends to assume that authentic religious doctrine and pure religious sensibility are first and foremost in the hands of a spiritual elite among the clergy.'⁸ For a historian to identify certain late medieval practices as superstitious, for instance, it is necessary that he or she possess a clear understanding of what constitutes superstition. More often than not, superstition is understood as the antithesis of orthodoxy. And orthodoxy itself receives its definition from an accepted

⁶ Bossy, 'The Counter-Reformation and the people of Catholic Europe', p.53.

⁷ Aron Gurevich, *Medieval popular culture: problems of belief and perception* (Cambridge, 1995), p.xiv.

⁸ Davis, 'Some tasks and themes in the study of popular religion', p.309.

code of beliefs held and promulgated by an institutional Church. Keith Thomas states that it was the Church which defined what was superstition and what was not.⁹ One of the challenges for modern historians of 'popular religion' is not so much to move away from the kind of rigid classifications embodied in terms such as 'orthodoxy' and 'superstition' as to use alternative ways of making such classifications. The present study demonstrates, at least with regard to the religious ideas of the laity in late medieval Gaelic Ireland, that some concepts, which initially appear to belong to the world of superstition, have far deeper roots in orthodox Christianity than pagan magic. Distinguishing between delusion and dogma, then, is not always a straightforward process. This is something which historians of 'popular religion' have had to learn. Just as 'superstition' and 'orthodoxy' can no longer be regarded as fixed categories, neither can the dividing line between so called 'orthodox' or 'official' religion (as exemplified by certain 'elite' groupings, such as the higher clergy and the most learned of the laity) and its 'popular' manifestation (among all other groups) be understood as unwavering. Indeed, this study seeks to demonstrate that such a dividing line can no longer be held to exist, at least in the way it has heretofore been perceived.

Raoul Manselli, in treating of methodological approaches to the study of 'popular religion', argues that the historian who considers both 'official' and 'popular' religious expression as separate entities commits a serious error:

⁹ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the decline of magic: studies in popular beliefs in sixteenth and seventeenth-century England* (London, 1992), p.55.

*Percevoir la religion populaire comme quelque chose tout à fait distinct de la religion savante serait donc, à notre avis, une erreur méthodologique grave.*¹⁰

W. Th. M. Frijhoff believes that a high degree of integration existed, especially in the middle ages, between the two forms of experience. Furthermore, he indicates that the classification of what was 'popular' and what was not, itself changed and developed over time. Towards the close of the later medieval period numerous religious practices, previously acceptable to elite groups, were now consigned to the 'popular' realm of piety:

It is characteristic of the early modern times that a number of practices become gradually increasingly marginal: these practices are then qualified as 'popular' because they no longer fit into the social cultural scheme of values expounded by an elite.¹¹

What was once considered 'official' religion, then, is, with the passage of time, categorised as belonging to another order entirely. Little wonder that Frijhoff questions whether it is meaningful any more to make a distinction between 'popular' and 'official' religion at all.¹²

Modern historians of popular culture increasingly admit that the transmission of ideas was not always a one-way process, namely a filtering of thoughts from the higher orders downwards. Similarly, it can no longer be held that the higher clergy and

¹⁰ 'To perceive popular religion as something totally distinct from educated religion would constitute, in our opinion, a grave methodological error' [my translation]: Manselli, *La religion populaire au moyen âge*, p.16.

¹¹ W. Th. M. Frijhoff, 'Official and popular religion in Christianity: the late middle ages and early modern times', in Pieter Heindrick Vrijhoff and Jacques Waardenburg (eds), *Official and popular religion: analysis of a theme for religious studies* (The Hague, 1979), p.80.

¹² Ibid.

educated elites remained cut off from the world of the praying peasant and therefore un-affected by his religious thoughts. Natalie Zemon Davis warns historians against the assumption that the communication between clergy and laity on religious matters travelled in only one direction – from the clergy downward.¹³ R. W. Scribner concurs with this argument by pointing out that forms of ‘popular’ devotion are continually being created. Those found acceptable are made ‘official’ by the institutional Church and the non-acceptable are outlawed¹⁴ (and, more than likely, are thereafter classified as ‘popular’). It is clear that the boundary between what constitutes ‘official’ as opposed to ‘popular’ religion constantly shifts position, at times preventing devotions, practices and concepts from entering, and at other times, welcoming them with open arms. It is a similar story with traffic travelling in the opposite direction, as in the case of the recommendations made by the higher clergy to their flocks and the less well-educated priests in their charge, which often fell on deaf ears.¹⁵ Scribner concludes that:

¹³ Davis, ‘Some tasks and themes in the study of popular religion’, p.313.

¹⁴ R. W. Scribner, *Popular culture and popular movements in Reformation Germany* (London, 1987), p.44.

¹⁵ W. Th. M. Frijhoff sets out four categories of religious practice, which he labels Institutional, Semi-institutional, Para-institutional and Anti-institutional. The first category comprises Church liturgy and the administration of the sacraments. The second includes the use of approved sacramentals of the Church, the worship of officially canonised saints and the expression of piety within accepted devotions. The third includes superstition and malpractices performed on the basis of an erroneous understanding of the sacraments and devotions of the Church. The final category consists of practices that are openly hostile to the beliefs of the institutional Church. These include witchcraft and occult practices in general, in addition to heresy. It is evident that the various elements featured in each category were shared, to a degree, across the wide spectrum of society: Frijhoff, ‘Official and popular religion in Christianity’, p.94.

Popular religion encompasses both 'official' and 'non-official' religion. The clergy and laity share the same 'official' religion while many clergy doubtless share the 'non-official' religion of the laity.¹⁶

He expresses dissatisfaction with many of the distinctions made between 'popular' and 'official' religion, citing four of the most familiar of these:

1. Religion which deviates from the institution versus institutional religion.
2. Practical religion versus the philosophical religion of scholarship.
3. The religion of the greater part of the population versus the religion of the upper strata of society.
4. Inferior, distorted religion versus superior religion.¹⁷

While containing some elements of truth, nevertheless, these definitions have been shown to be inadequate and Scribner does not subscribe to any of them.

The difficulties surrounding the term 'popular religion', then, have led more recent historians to question its continued usefulness. Eamon Duffy, in his study of religious ideas in fifteenth and sixteenth-century England, chooses to avoid the term altogether, preferring to substitute the expression 'traditional religion' in its stead.¹⁸ He clearly nails his colours to the mast in the introduction to the above work:

It is my conviction, and a central plank of [my] argument...that no substantial gulf existed between the religion of the clergy and the educated elite on the one hand and that of the people at large on the other...It is true that the wealthy and literate had increasing access to and interest in types of

¹⁶ Scribner, *Popular culture and popular movements in Reformation Germany*, p.44.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp 17-18.

¹⁸ Eamon Duffy, *The stripping of the altars: traditional religion in England c.1400-c.1580* (London, 1992).

spirituality previously confined to the monastery. Yet within the diversity of medieval religious options there was a remarkable degree of religious and imaginative homogeneity across the social spectrum, a shared repertoire of symbols, prayers, and beliefs which crossed and bridged even the gulf between the literate and the illiterate. For that reason, in talking of the religious beliefs and practices of the late medieval parishioner, I have avoided all but the occasional use of the notion of 'popular religion'...Instead I have used the phrase 'traditional religion', which does more justice to the shared and inherited character of the religious beliefs and practices of the people...¹⁹

While the present writer largely concurs with Duffy's analysis of the state of pre-Reformation religion, the phrase 'popular religion' is, nevertheless, retained for the purposes of this study. Duffy's alternative is not without its difficulties. 'Traditional' (from the Latin verb *tradere*) implies something that is 'handed down' or 'passed along', usually from generation to generation. In modern parlance it has also come to denote something that is peculiar to a particular region or social setting, something that is 'native', as in 'traditional music' or 'traditional cuisine'. The present study, which treats of 'popular religion' in late medieval Gaelic Ireland, demonstrates at length that most religious ideas and concepts found among the late medieval Gaelic Irish belong to a common store of religious beliefs found right across the European continent at this time. To label these ideas as 'traditional', then, would be quite misleading as they belong, not exclusively to the religious mentality of the Gaelic world, but rather, to a common European religious heritage.

While acknowledging the grave difficulties associated with the term 'popular religion', the present writer suggests a new way of understanding the phrase. Modern

¹⁹ Ibid., pp 2-3.

historians such as Duffy have shown that people living in the late medieval and early modern period inherited a shared belief-system that crossed even social boundaries. Frijhoff portrays man in the *ancien regime* as follows:

[Man was]...above all, a religious man: not in the contemporary sense of a pious, practicing or social-politically active Christian, but in his existential motivation, in so far as he experienced his existence primarily in terms of a narrow, physical solidarity with the hereafter.²⁰

Duffy has highlighted the importance of liturgy, for example, in influencing the religious ideas of both the literate and illiterate alike.²¹ It is my contention that 'official' or 'orthodox' religion can only properly be understood as consisting of fundamental Christian doctrines as promulgated by the Church's Magisterium, or teaching authority. The subsequent personal appropriation of and response to these doctrines by the learned or unlearned, literate or illiterate, lay or cleric, peasant or prelate, can, in one sense, be considered as 'popular religion'. This may, at first, appear odd. However, when one considers that deviations from orthodoxy were not simply the preserve of the peasant and, concomitantly, orthodox theological insights were not the sole possession of the learned nobleman, the claim that certain sections of society held a monopoly on either 'official' or 'popular' religion, as previously understood by earlier historians, becomes increasingly untenable. The case of the 'merits of the Mass', as discussed in chapter 4, illustrates that what Frijhoff terms 'semi-institutional' or perhaps even 'para-institutional' devotions, which fed so called 'popular' excesses regarding the power of the Eucharistic host, were not only endorsed by the higher echelons of ecclesiastical office and preached by prelates, but

²⁰ Frijhoff, 'Official and popular religion in Christianity', p.72.

²¹ Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, pp 11-52.

were also given the stamp of orthodoxy by being attributed to St Augustine! The widespread use of stories emphasising the far-fetched and the fantastic aspects of religion, exemplified in the medieval *exempla*, which were devised and preached by the learned and enjoyed by literate and illiterate alike, attests to their popularity among all social strands. The content of the lives of the saints found in medieval collections such as the *Legenda Aurea* at first appear to be the stuff of 'popular' devotion. But this was 'popular devotion' with 'official' endorsement, having been compiled by the archbishop of Milan, Jacobus de Voragine. 'Popular religion', therefore, is best understood as a personal response to doctrine. The core beliefs of Christianity are based on Revelation, i.e. God's communication with His people and, more specifically, on the triple authority of Scripture, Tradition and the Magisterium. Orthodoxy can be taken to mean the deposit of faith, founded upon these three sources. However, religion can only become 'popular' when there is some human engagement with these doctrines. This engagement by individuals, then, constitutes 'popular religion.' It is the response of the human person to his or her existential religiosity and to God's Revelation as transmitted by the Church. This response is often skewed and uncertain and, more often than not, and to varying degrees, exhibits an understanding of the divine that is somewhat different from that outlined in official doctrine. Consequently, such an explanation of the term indicates how expressions of popular religion can be found among both the learned and unlearned, the literate and illiterate and the clerical and lay orders. For the purposes of this study, 'popular religion' is understood literally as the 'religion of people.' To attempt to specify 'which people?' is to impose a restriction on the term for which there is no longer any satisfactory evidence. It is shown here that this involved, perhaps to a degree not previously recognised, sharing a belief-system which transcended, to a much greater

extent than has been heretofore admitted, the various social boundaries previously thought to have separated two radically different experiences of faith. 'Popular religion', then, can be understood to constitute the manner in which both the idea of God and the doctrines of the Church were assimilated by individuals and groups, and the various responses, which resulted from that understanding.

Historians wishing to examine the subject of popular religion in late medieval and early modern Ireland should expect to be disappointed. So far, no comprehensive study of popular religious ideas during this period has yet been undertaken. Certainly, when one compares the state of research into popular religious ideas in France or England with Irish research on the same area, it becomes apparent that historians concerned with Irish history are only beginning to attempt to redress the balance. As noted above, the Francophone world has led the way in this regard. Similarly, works, such as Robert Whiting's *The blind devotion of the people* (London, 1987), treating of popular religious responses to the Reformation, Keith Thomas's *Religion and the decline of magic* (London, 1992), examining superstitious and magical elements of folk belief in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and Eamon Duffy's *The stripping of the altars* (London, 1992), exploring the world of 'traditional religion' in the period 1400-1580, with particular emphasis on the influence of the liturgy on lay belief, and David Cressy's *Birth, marriage and death: ritual religion and the life-cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford, 1997), have all ensured that the religious ideas of the laity in late medieval and early modern England have recently received adequate attention.

Similar studies of the Irish situation during the same period have not emerged to the same degree. It was to fill this *lacuna* in Irish historiography that Raymond Gillespie published *Devoted people: belief and religion in early modern Ireland* (Manchester,

1997). Gillespie argues, in the introduction to this work, that ‘in religious terms, experience and belief are more important than institutions.’²² This study examines, in the main, the manifestation of religious ideas in seventeenth-century Ireland and focuses predominantly on the world of the Old English. Samantha Meigs’s *The reformations in Ireland: tradition and confessionalism 1400-1690* (Dublin, 1997), meanwhile, examines a much broader period of time, referring equally to Old English and Gaelic source material. Her examination of this complex subject, while attempting to cover nearly three hundred years of Old English and Gaelic Irish history in a treatment that runs to just 144 pages, results in a study that appears somewhat superficial. Meigs proposes to examine religion in Ireland from a social and cultural perspective. Her principal interest is in discovering why Catholicism endured in Ireland throughout the reformation period. She sees the answer in the ‘particular nature of the medieval Irish religious tradition and the way it was entwined with the social and mental structures of the traditional Gaelic world.’²³ Meigs claims that Catholicism’s resilience in Ireland was not due merely to political and economic factors as debated by historians such as Brendan Bradshaw, Steven Ellis and Nicholas Canny, but to the complex interrelationship of the Gaelic clergy, the chieftains and the *aes dána*, or men of art. Meigs deals with many features of popular piety such as devotion to the saints, the making of pilgrimages, the use of relics, and so on. However, her primary interest lies, not in the subject of popular religion *per se*, but in the endurance of Catholicism in Ireland during a period in which the axiom *cuius*

²² Raymond Gillespie, *Devoted people: belief and religion in early modern Ireland* (Manchester, 1997), p.10.

²³ Samantha Meigs, *The reformations in Ireland: tradition and confessionalism 1400-1690* (Dublin, 1997), p.2.

regio eius religio held sway across the rest of Europe. Although this work can serve as a useful introduction to possible sources for a study of popular religion in Gaelic Ireland, it lacks comprehensiveness and does not examine the subject in its own right. Although no comprehensive study of popular religion in Gaelic Ireland has yet emerged, there have been earlier attempts to examine some aspects of popular piety. The most useful of these has been Peter O' Dwyer's survey of the cult of the Virgin Mary in Ireland, entitled *Mary: a history of devotion in Ireland* (Dublin, 1988). This work examines devotion to the Blessed Virgin from the beginnings of Christianity in Ireland to the twentieth century. Chapters dealing with the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are quite comprehensive and packed with useful information. O' Dwyer has recourse to a wide variety of sources, including the annals, bardic poetry, the Gaelic *bibliothèques* such as the *Leabhar Breac*, apocrypha and *exempla*, tomb sculpture and iconography. His subsequent survey of the history of religious ideas in Ireland, entitled *Towards a history of Irish spirituality* (Dublin, 1995), however, lacked the comprehensiveness and attention to detail that is evident in his work on the Virgin Mary.

The present study attempts to address the need for an examination of popular religious ideas among the Gaelic Irish in the late medieval and early modern period. A wide variety of source material has been used in the compilation of this work, incorporating secular and religious literature, ecclesiastical and state records, as well as artistic and architectural evidence. One of the principal primary sources used in this study is the large corpus of bardic religious poetry composed during the period. An introduction to this source is provided below. The work is divided into three distinct parts. The first part (chapters 1-4) examines the world of religious ideas in Gaelic Ireland in the pre-Tridentine period. This section has a thematic structure. The first chapter

examines the Gaelic idea of the Godhead - Father, Son and Spirit. It begins with a consideration of what might constitute a 'Gaelic theology.' The second focuses on the figure of the Virgin Mary, and particularly on her intercessory role as Mediatrix and the position afforded her within Gaelic society as 'kinswoman.' Devotion to the saints is the subject of chapter three. This examines, in particular, the devotion of the Gaelic Irish to the twelve apostles, to popular European saints of the Church and to native local, diocesan and 'national' figures. The fourth chapter explores the world of liturgy and the sacraments. Three of the most important sacraments for all Christians, namely Baptism, Penance and Eucharist are considered at length. The second part of the thesis involves a consideration of the impact of Tridentine reform on late medieval Gaelic religious ideas, especially in the wake of Irish emigration to continental Europe in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Chapters five and six focus on Irishmen studying on the continent, who encountered the ideas of the Council of Trent for the first time. Chapter five deals specifically with the efforts of Irishmen such as Flaithrí Ó Maolchonaire, Bonaventura Ó hEoghusa and Theobald Stapleton who, having been immersed in the Tridentine world, took it upon themselves to inculcate their fellow countrymen in the doctrines of the Council by compiling Tridentine catechisms in the native language. Particular attention is paid to the attempts of these figures to bridge the gap between pre-Tridentine piety and its successor. The primary focus of chapter five is catechesis. The sixth chapter continues to examine the world of the Irish on the continent, exploring some of the other publications in Gaelic, which emerged from St Anthony's College, Louvain, destined for an Irish audience at home. These exhibited many of the hallmarks of the Tridentine spirit while also retaining much that was already familiar to audiences ignorant of Trent's decrees. They also manifested a great awareness of and sensitivity

towards political events in Ireland. The third section of this study (contained in chapter seven) examines what happened to these new ideas emerging from Trent when they finally reached Irish shores. The implementation of the Council's decrees and doctrines proved to be a slow and often cumbersome process. However, there exists sufficient evidence to show that the message did, however sluggishly, have effect. Geoffrey Keating, whose work *Trí bior-ghaoithe an bháis* is examined in this chapter, is a good example of a priest, trained in Counter-Reformation Europe, who preached the doctrines of Trent, while ministering in the diocese of Lismore. However, his pedagogical method involved couching these same decrees in a style and language that very much reflected the pre-Tridentine world. Obviously he surmised that it was not fitting to serve solid food to babies who were still only capable of drinking milk. Evidence of responses to the pastoral implementation of Tridentine norms can be gleaned from the records of the Jesuit mission in Ireland, which document the reactions of individuals in both Old English and Gaelic Irish areas to the Tridentine invitation to renewed recourse to the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist and its concomitant emphasis on catechesis.

While a large range of source material has been examined in the preparation of this work, one particular body of evidence requires some comment. The corpus of religious poetry composed by the bardic order of poets, which is used extensively in this work, is understood here to reflect, to a great extent, popular religious ideas in Gaelic Ireland during the period 1450-1645. Such a claim necessitates a detailed explanation, which elucidates the nature and function of the poetry itself, the reasons for its composition and the audience for which it was composed.

The religious verses of the bardic poets in the late medieval period are useful indicators of popular religious belief for some very important reasons. These works

were created, for the most part, by laymen and represent an understanding of Christianity that existed outside the precincts of ecclesiastical institutions. The poems were not composed in a monastic setting, as were earlier religious works, for instance. The ideas contained therein, therefore, do not belong exclusively to the clerical world, but allow some insight into lay religious life. Neither are these religious ideas the preserve of the bardic caste alone. The very function of bardic poetry, as outlined below, necessitated that its message be understood by a wider audience than the men of art themselves. In highlighting their non-clerical nature, however, it must not be assumed that the religious beliefs expressed in these poems were, somehow, totally divorced from the clerical world of the institutional church. Indeed some poets were members of religious orders as in the case of Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn (*d.*1487) and were, necessarily, influenced by the vocation in which they lived. Similarly, poems commissioned by church authorities might often require the presentation of an ecclesiastical point of view on certain matters. The religious poetry of the bards, therefore, can be said to express ‘popular’ beliefs, in the sense in which I have understood the term above. They contain expressions of devotion by a wide range of individuals, both lay and clerical, sharing a common belief system and exhibiting common traits in their response to God. The usefulness of these works has often been recognised by commentators on Irish spirituality. Diarmuid Ó Laoghaire enquires: ‘*Cad tá mar fhianaise againn ar spioradáltacht na ndaoine sa ré sin? An fhilíocht.*’²⁴ Peadar Ó Duibhir notes this too: ‘*D’fhág [na baird] moll mór fianaise ar a ndeabhóidí agus ar a spioradáltacht*’ and reinforces this view in his later work by

²⁴ ‘What evidence have we for popular spirituality in that period? Poetry’: Diarmuid Ó Laoghaire, ‘Spioradáltacht na hÉireann, 1200-1500’, in Máirtín MacConmara (eag.), *An léann eaglasta in Éirinn 1200-1900* (B.Á.C., 1988), p.139.

commenting that the bardic poet made ‘the greatest contribution as a medium for spreading current religious trends.’²⁵ The religious ideas expressed in this kind of poetry were representative of and impressionable upon a significant number of people, both clerical and lay. It must be admitted, however, that the exact extent to which these ideas influenced the *illiterati* of Gaelic Ireland can never be adequately measured. Their history, as Michel Vovelle puts it, is unfortunately ‘a history of silence.’²⁶

Religious poetry composed by the bardic poets developed along the same lines as the secular praise poetry with which they plied their trade. The emergence of the praise-poet can be traced to a merging of two much older orders of poet, namely the literate order of *filid* and the oral order of *bard*, which occurred in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries.²⁷ The praise-poet, who succeeded in acquiring a generous patron, routinely composed verse in his honour, praising his attributes as chieftain and prince of his territory. These attributes were usually identifiable with the prescriptions for a fitting ruler, found throughout the medieval legal tracts. They included the qualities of wisdom, physical beauty, martial skill, and generosity and, of course, justice. The formal eulogy of rulers belongs to a common Indo-European institution in which court poets appraise their patron’s performance in terms of an image of the ideal ruler. The patron who was thus praised was then, in some sense, obliged to adopt the characteristics for which he received the praise, and if he already possessed them in

²⁵ ‘The [bards] left a huge mass of evidence of their devotions and spirituality’: Peadar Ó Duibhir, ‘Spioradáltacht na hÉireann sna meánaoiseanna agus an cúlra staire’, in Máirtín MacConmara, *An léann eaglasta in Éirinn*, p.15; O’ Dwyer, *Towards a history of Irish spirituality*, p.148.

²⁶ Vovelle, *Ideologies and mentalities*, p.98.

²⁷ Katharine Simms, ‘Literacy and the Irish bards’ in Huw Pryce (ed.), *Literacy in medieval Celtic societies* (Cambridge, 1998), p.238.

abundance, was encouraged to continue to live up to the ideal model of rule.²⁸ The manner in which this operated in Indo-European panegyric, which ultimately influenced the praise-poetry of the bardic caste, has been described by Georges Dumézil as *laudo ut des* ('I praise that you might give') and *dedisti, laudavi, da* ('You have given, I have praised, give').²⁹ In the first case, the poet praises the patron's qualities in order that he might exercise them. So, for example, the poet extols the patron's generosity in order that he might prove generous to him. The second case involves the recounting of some occasion in the past when the patron proved himself to be generous. The poet recalls the occasion and praises the patron for it in order that he might repeat his generous act.

Poems composed in praise of a Gaelic chieftain were mostly destined for public performance before the ruler, his family and retinue. This frequently occurred at large banquets during which the munificence of the ruler as expressed in verse could also be witnessed first hand by those attending. The works were most obviously designed to please the chieftain; therefore, a collection of meaningless clichés usually did not suffice in this regard. The concepts alluded to in the poems needed to be intelligible to both the patron and those attending; otherwise the exercise proved futile. This was especially the case when the composition was designed as propaganda to impress a visiting chieftain who was required to be in awe of his host upon leaving. The patron was, more often than not, familiar with the contents of the poem before its public recitation and, just in case he might disapprove of some elements of the delivered work, payment was usually made after the performance. The public nature of much of

²⁸ Catherine A. McKenna, *The medieval Welsh religious lyric: poems of the Gogynfeirdd, 1137-1282* (Massachusetts, 1991), pp 4-5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.5.

the large corpus of bardic poetry increases its usefulness in the pursuit of historical research. Bardic poetry played a significant role in the spread of ideas in the late medieval period. Brian Stock's concept of a 'textual community', where a group of people are bound together by their knowledge of a particular text, is of particular relevance here.³⁰ Texts during this period, therefore, did not merely influence the individual who possessed the capability of reading them, but also filtered down to a wider audience through 'interpreters' who, having absorbed the message by reading it, or by word of mouth, communicated it orally to the illiterate.³¹ Bardic poets, then, fulfilled this function when their works were performed in public before a large gathering.

The composition of religious poetry by professional poets differed little in style from their secular works. In this case they composed, not for an earthly patron, but a heavenly one. It was customary for praise-poets to dedicate at least one-tenth of their work to God. This was known as the payment of the *deachmhadh* or tithe. The heavenly patron was often addressed in the same manner in which an earthly patron might be, drawing upon a similar stockpile of imagery to recite his praise. Appellations such as 'bright hazel', 'full moon', 'tree rising above the wood' and 'bright salmon' were applied equally to secular and heavenly patrons. This feature was not peculiar to Irish bardic poetry but was also found in the religious poetry of Wales where, as Catherine A. McKenna notes, the *awdl i Dduw* (panegyric ode to God) is much like the *molawd* (eulogy to a secular prince) 'both in focus and in the use of literal, metaphorical and periphrastic terms for traditional attributes to the good

³⁰ Simms, 'Literacy and the Irish bards', p.247.

³¹ Ibid.

sovereign.³² The religious verses of the bards also contain the *laudo ut des* and *dedisti, laudavi, da* formulae, as discussed by Georges Dumézil. This often leads the poet to express an inordinate confidence that his request will be heard since, as in the case of secular princes, the power of praising the patron in verse was often understood to guarantee the continued exercise of his beneficent nature. This confidence often required tempering by means of the simultaneous adoption of a penitential tone in order that the poet might not stray too far from the righteous fear of God that pervaded medieval spirituality.³³ The reliance of medieval religious poetry on its secular counterpart for structure and style was not confined to the bardic compositions of Gaelic Ireland. Rosemary Woolf notes a similar reliance in medieval French poetry: 'The religious lyric...is normally an offshoot of a well-established secular form, which it adapts and exploits for its own purposes.'³⁴

It has already been stated that bardic religious poetry serves as a valuable indication of the kinds of belief that were shared by a significant number of people, lay and clerical, in late medieval Ireland. However, the manner in which these poems are used as historical evidence for the purposes of this study necessitates careful explanation. The period under examination in this study covers the years 1450-1645. These years witnessed considerable change, not only in Europe as a whole, but also in Gaelic Ireland in particular. It should be noted from the outset that poems used as evidence of the religious attitudes and beliefs of the Gaelic Irish in this study mostly date from the fifteenth, sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. There are, however, exceptions to this trend. In some cases the poetry of the thirteenth-century poets, Donnchadh Mór Ó

³² McKenna, *The medieval Welsh religious lyric*, p.26.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.32.

³⁴ Rosemary Woolf, *The English religious lyric in the middle ages* (London, 1968), pp 1-2.

Dálaigh, Muireadhach Albanach Ó Dálaigh and Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe is cited, in addition to other earlier poets such as the fourteenth century Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh. Such citations may appear unusual in a study of the popular beliefs of people living centuries apart. Nevertheless, they can be justified. Scholars examining bardic poetry are often inclined to split into two distinct schools. The first school considers the poetry of the professional poets as staid and dull, lacking innovation and merely consisting of a series of fixed archaisms and conventions, which do not take account of changing circumstances. John E. Murphy represents this point of view in his appraisal of the religious compositions of the bardic poets:

Much similarity of thought is found running throughout the poets; placed side by side the ideas seem to have changed little from the year 1250 to the year 1650. There are many fancies, conceits and strange notions which stamp these poems with the bardic mark; the poets aimed not so much at new ideas and originality as they did at expressing in perfect language, and according to the strictest metres the prevalent and religious teachings of the day.³⁵

There is some evidence to support Murphy's argument in both the secular and religious work of the poets. Joep Leersen alludes to the persistence of the depiction of a chieftain as spouse of his land, a topos that can be traced back to antiquity. He cites both the fourteenth century example in which Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh depicts the blushing bride, Éire as awaiting marriage to Tadhg, the heir to the chieftainship of Clann Cárthaigh and the seventeenth century portrayal of the death of Eoghan Rua Ó Néill in terms of Éire losing her spouse. Commenting upon these, he states:

³⁵ John E. Murphy, 'The religious mind of the Irish bards', in John Ryan (ed.) *Féilsgríbhinn Eóin Mhic Néill* (Dublin, 1940), p.82.

Here, then, is a literary link between the wholly dissimilar political situations of 1403 and 1649, the respective years of these poems to Tadhg Mac Cárthaigh and Eoghan Rua Ó Néill.³⁶

A great deal of religious imagery also tends to continue to appear in poems that are centuries apart. For example, the thirteenth century poet, Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh's praise of Mary, contained in the line 'O Mary...unebbing wave, my ship is in thy hand to steer', closely resembles similar language used by Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth centuries: 'No other sea is like that unebbing sea, her mercy.'³⁷ The most prominent recent contribution to this school has been that of Michelle O' Riordan, whose work *The Gaelic mind and the collapse of the Gaelic world* (Cork, 1990) argues unambiguously that the bardic corpus represents an ideological continuity in the late medieval and early modern periods that is emblematic of a static political culture.³⁸ She explains her inclusion of poems from the thirteenth century, which are discussed at some length in the first chapter of her work, in the following manner:

The poems...can be regarded as patterns for the use of motifs and themes, which will reappear in different historical contexts in the sixteenth century. While the historical context undoubtedly changed between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, the use of the motifs and themes are used in the same way by the later poets, for the same reasons and to articulate the identical world view.³⁹

³⁶ Joep Leersen, *Mere Irish and fíor-Ghael: studies in the idea of Irish nationality, its development and literary expression prior to the nineteenth century* (2nd ed., Cork, 1996), p.155.

³⁷ *DDé* 30, v.1; *AFOD* 15, v.11.

³⁸ Michelle O' Riordan, *The Gaelic mind and the collapse of the Gaelic world* (Cork, 1990).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.63.

The second school, to which scholars examining bardic poetry are increasingly subscribing, advocates a reappraisal of the literature of the poets. This re-examination involves an admission that significant changes in emphasis and awareness can be detected in the work of the poets over time. Breandán Ó Buachalla, in a review of O' Riordan's work, convincingly argues that while common bardic themes, such as the exhortation to unity among the Irish, survived from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries, their meaning, nevertheless, changed radically over that time. For instance, the unity being called for in the seventeenth century is clearly unity between the native Irish and the Old English (under the term *Éireannach*), who define themselves against the new settlers.⁴⁰ His general caution against taking stock motifs at face value, while recommending that they be evaluated differently in accordance with the period and circumstances in which they were used, is useful advice. Using the seventeenth-century bardic proclamation of James I as king, high-king and spouse of Ireland as an example, he cleverly distinguishes between language and its meaning, stating that while 'the literary modes, the themes, the metaphors are uniformly traditional, the *message* is not.'⁴¹

The work of Marc Caball has demonstrated that bardic poets, while using familiar imagery such as that of the spousal relationship between the chieftain and his land (as highlighted by Joep Leersen above) were able to draw on traditional notions of Ireland's territorial integrity to articulate a political response to conquest and

⁴⁰ Breandán Ó Buachalla, 'Poetry and politics in early modern Ireland', in Alan Harrison and Ian Campbell Ross (eds), *Eighteenth century Ireland: iris an dá chultúr* 7 (1992), pp 159-60.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.164.

colonisation along the lines of a national paradigm.⁴² This response, while employing traditional themes, was innovative in its perception of Ireland and the people who populated it. An increased awareness of the presence of people of a different religion in the country, which soon became entwined with political conflict, attests to new perceptions among the poets.⁴³ Their reaction to changing circumstances in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, illustrated by the expression of an evolving sense of national, political and religious identity, highlights the professional caste of poets as individuals who were far from lacking acumen in either area.⁴⁴ Ann Dooley, in an examination of the poetry of Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh, also recognises the need to avoid the dismissal of bardic poetry as rigid, impersonal and static. She requests that

in assessing the formal and essentialist patterns of bardic poetry, we nevertheless remain sensitive to the ways in which individual poets make the most apparently public and rigid of literary conventions and genres bend to the personal by inscribing into its forms disparate elements of personal contrariety.⁴⁵

⁴² Marc Caball, 'Faith, culture and sovereignty: Irish nationality and its development, 1558-1625', in Brendan Bradshaw and Peter Roberts (eds), *British consciousness and identity: the making of Britain, 1533-1707* (Cambridge, 1998), p.117.

⁴³ Ó Buachalla, 'Poetry and politics in early modern Ireland', p.159.

⁴⁴ Marc Caball, *Poets and politics: continuity and reaction in Irish poetry, 1558-1625* (Cork, 1998), pp 42-81.

⁴⁵ Ann Dooley, 'The poetic self-fashioning of Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh' in Michael Richter and Jean-Michel Picard (eds), *Ogma: essays in Celtic studies in honour of Próinséas Ní Chatháin* (Dublin, 2001), p.223.

Just as poets were aware of political developments and responded to them accordingly, so too were they aware of developments in the religious sphere. It is true that a great deal of religious imagery and language used by poets in the thirteenth century continued to be employed by poets three centuries later. Staple medieval religious themes such as the struggle of the soul and the body in Man, the prevalence of sin, the fear of Judgement, the role of the Virgin Mary as Advocate and the functions of the saints as intercessors, the beauty of Heaven and the terror of Hell proved just as relevant to the Christian in the seventeenth century as they were in the thirteenth. However, a close reading of the religious poetry of the bards demonstrates that forms of devotion that became popular in Europe, such as the Cult of the Five Wounds, which spread rapidly in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, were quickly adopted and used.⁴⁶ The gradual assimilation of popular European devotions in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries also served to hone and develop earlier religious themes, ensuring that their later appearance in bardic poetry is accompanied by an enriched and enhanced understanding. Perhaps the clearest example of poets adapting to changing religious circumstances is provided by a figures such as Giolla Brighde Ó hEoghusa who, when they realised that the future appeared bleak, turned to religious life and reinvented themselves as Counter-Reformation propagandists while still employing their art, as Ó hEoghusa did in his catechetical verses. The use of bardic poetry in catechesis would have been inconceivable a century earlier. Yet, changing

⁴⁶ For a more detailed treatment of the spread of this devotion in bardic poetry see Salvador Ryan, “‘Reign of blood’: aspects of devotion to the wounds of Christ in late medieval Gaelic Ireland”, in Joost Augusteijn and Mary Ann Lyons (eds), *Irish history: a research yearbook* (Dublin, 2002). The ‘Charter of Christ’ image is a good example of a motif that was adopted into bardic poetry during the period of study here. See Andrew Breeze, ‘The charter of Christ in medieval English, Welsh and Irish’ in *Celtica* xix (1987).

religious circumstances, namely the Reformation and Tridentine reform, called for a rather different kind of bardic poem.

It must be admitted, therefore, that bardic poetry spanning the period 1250-1650, contrary to John E. Murphy's analysis, contains both continuities and discontinuities. This study makes use of earlier poetry, lying outside its historical timeframe when appropriate. This is only done when it can be proved that the ideas in question were also in vogue in the period 1450-1645, and earlier versions of such ideas are merely included to provide additional examples and to locate the later ones in their proper context, namely as belonging to a traditional stock of motifs. The poems of such prominent early figures as Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh continued to exert influence and were used as exemplars for later students in the bardic schools. They also continued to be learnt as showpieces and thus the ideas contained within them perpetuated themselves.

This study examines popular religion in two phases. The first phase is that of the pre-Tridentine period, and represents, to some degree, pre-Reformation religion. The second phase is broadly defined by a gradual awareness of the implications of the decrees of Trent. However these phases can never be clearly delineated. Evidence can be found of Tridentine awareness in Ireland as early as the 1560s. Equally, evidence exists to demonstrate an entrenchment in pre-Reformation thought as late as 1645 and beyond. Bardic poets living during this period do not fit into fixed categories any more than other individuals do. It would be fallacious, for example, to label a poet such as Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaird (*fl.* 1577-1618) as Tridentine in character as if he embodied all that the Council intended. Rather, he is an amalgam of old and new ideas, erstwhile and fresh emphases and nuances. For this reason I have chosen to use the works of poets such as Mac an Bhaird, who lived between two worlds, namely the

Tridentine and pre-Tridentine, where appropriate, to illustrate both experiences. The first section of the thesis, which deals in the main with pre-Tridentine ideas, necessarily contains references to some poets who lived in an age when there were great efforts made to implement Tridentine reform. The persistence of some pre-Tridentine ideas in individuals such as Mac an Bhaird (who also, admittedly, demonstrated Tridentine influences) attests to the fact that religious change occurred slowly and in stages, over time. In terms of devotional change it is not uncommon to find that not only is the proverbial baby retained while the bathwater is thrown out, but often most of the bathwater is likewise hoarded. In examining the religious musings of the post-Tridentine poets then, it can never be assumed that the most virulent Catholic reformer (of which there were few) does not possess a ‘traditional’ underbelly.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Further discussion of bardic poetry as a *genre* can be found in chapter 1.

Chapter 1

Towards a definition of Gaelic theology: the God Question

To speak of a 'Gaelic theology' is a somewhat dangerous enterprise. It suggests an approach to God that is insular and localised, neatly cocooned in a world cut off from, in this case, European religious ideas of the late medieval and early modern period. However, nothing could be further from the truth. In fact the broad religious and devotional trends, which characterised and fed the world-view of most of the European population, were also to be found in Gaelic Ireland. It can be taken that late medieval Europeans possessed an innate sense of the centrality of divine action in the world, an acute awareness of human sinfulness, misery and mortality, a reliance on the efficacy of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, a firm confidence in the intercessory role of Mary and the saints and an abiding fear of the possibility of an eternity in Hell after a terrifying experience of judgement. These ideas, among others characterised mainstream European religious thought, and Gaelic Ireland was not immune from them. The reverence with which relics and shrines were treated, for instance, along with a belief in the importance of pilgrimage in expiating sin does not set Gaelic Ireland apart in any way from fifteenth and early sixteenth-century England, France, Spain or Germany, which all show similar lines of belief and practice.¹

It is important to remember, however, that while one can come to certain conclusions regarding general religious concerns and trends in late medieval and early modern

¹ See in particular John Bossy, *Christianity in the west 1400-1700* (Oxford, 1985); Duffy, *The stripping of the altars: traditional religion in England c.1400-1580*; William Christian, *Local religion in 16th century Spain* (Princeton, 1981); Robert Scribner, *Popular culture and popular movements in Reformation Germany* (London, 1987).

popular piety, this is never sufficient when attempting to understand how one particular group of people (whether recognised as such by geographical or ethnic classification) came to appropriate such broad trends and ideas. In his assessment of the state of popular religion in pre-Reformation Ireland John Bossy concludes that both experiences (Irish and European) were quite similar:

Popular religion in Ireland on the eve of the reformation seems in most respects to have been in much the same condition as it was on the continent, only more so. The Irish church, too, clearly entered the sixteenth century as a 'conglomerate of autonomous communities', among which the communities of natural kinship were prominently represented; it possessed little in the way of a real parochial structure and performed erratically in religious observance and sacramental practice.²

Such an account, however, tells nothing of the theology of the Gaelic Irish. In using the term 'theology' I do not understand it in terms of a highly organised and systematic corpus of dogmas and doctrines, but rather in the sense of its root meaning (Gr. *theos* and *logos*) as an account or rationale of God. Each human person, at some stage of his life, is confronted with the God-question. Walter Kasper states that 'the human person can never forget the question of God because it accompanies the person himself...God is an abiding problem; he is the problem par excellence which we describe as "mystery".'³ In speaking of a 'Gaelic theology', therefore, I mean an account or rationale of God adopted by the Gaelic Irish and adapted to and moulded by the socio-cultural setting in which they lived. This theology is rooted in the

² John Bossy, 'The Counter-Reformation and the people of Catholic Ireland, 1596-1641' in T. Desmond Williams (ed.), *Historical Studies* viii (Dublin, 1971), p.157.

³ Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (London, 1983), pp 12, 14.

orthodox teaching of the institutional church arising from the basic confession of *Credo in unum Deum*, and in this wise, the God of the Gaelic Irish was not far removed from say, the God of the Tuscan peasant, in attributes and personality. Yet, examined more closely, He is more Gael than Tuscan. Kasper explains theology as follows:

Theology takes as its starting point the talk about God (*theos*) that has been transmitted in the Church's confession of faith and endeavours to justify this talk at the bar of reason (*logos*) in view of the questions of human beings, and to understand it more fully.⁴

It is by reflecting on, and attempting to understand more fully, the rationale of God provided by the institutional church in its teaching, that the Gaelic Irish made theology their own and thus understand God in a subtly unique way, peculiar to their history, folklore and culture.

In examining how the Gaelic Irish speak about God in their literature, prayers, iconography and devotions, it will be seen that theology does not exist in a vacuum but in a given culture and society, and individually in a given life-history. Therefore one can, in fact, argue that Gaelic theology is at once inextricably linked to and rooted in orthodox Catholic doctrine which permeated European religious thought, and yet also divorced in some way in its expression and language by the often fragile boundaries of culture. John Macquarrie explains this idea well in his discussion of theological language:

Theological language arises out of religious language as a whole, and it does so when a religious faith becomes reflective and tries to give an account of

⁴ Ibid., p.13.

itself in verbal statements...theology itself lives and has its meaning only in relation to the wider religious matrix from which it arises.⁵

For the Gaelic Irish theology, two principal matrices existed, the first being the living faith and sacramental life of the Christian community nourished by the transmission of doctrine and practice which the representatives of the institutional church (i.e. monks, friars, secular clergy etc) facilitated to varying standards and with varying degrees of success. The second matrix, as observed above, was the socio-cultural setting in which the people lived and which formed their psyche. These twin matrices are not unique to the Gaelic Irish but are found in every society and culture that theologises. Therefore, the influence of devotional ideas and practices from outside the Gaelic community, which themselves had been moulded and shaped by different socio-cultural understandings of divine mysteries, also impacted on Gaelic theology. Evidence of this appears widely and frequently in the sources for this research. To attempt to define the term 'Gaelic theology', therefore, is not an easy task. However, to speak of it as an account of God given from the heart of the socio-cultural life of Gaelic Ireland, rooted in the central teachings of Catholicism and moulded by the interests of wider European popular piety, is to offer a rather tentative definition.

The cultural setting

Fifteenth-century Ireland has been noted for its spiritual decadence. Anthony Lynch describes it as a 'period of stagnation and decline'⁶ and Peter O' Dwyer notes how church buildings fell into disrepair, and how familial control of dioceses, monastic institutions and parishes again became common, and celibacy among great numbers

⁵ John Macquarrie, *God-talk: an examination of the language and logic of theology* (London, 1967), p.19.

⁶ Anthony Lynch, 'Religion in late medieval Ireland', in *Archivium Hibernicum* xxxvi (1981), p.3.

of the clergy was jettisoned.⁷ Yet, both writers also note how this century saw a great Gaelic resurgence, aided by the weakening English presence in Ireland, which can be attributed to a large extent to their preoccupation with the wars with France in the early part of the century, and internally with the War of the Roses later on.⁸ This political resurgence of the Gaelic Irish, which saw sporadic attacks and raids by clans eager to recapture lands and extend their power base, was matched by a spiritual resurgence, which found its epicentre in the mendicant orders, revitalising not only the Franciscans but also the Dominicans and Augustinians. This was known as the 'Observant Reform', which was part of a broader continental Observant movement advocating a genuine return to the rule of the order and an emulation of the charisms of its founder. F. X. Martin has shown, in the case of the Augustinians, how reform was carried out to an overwhelming extent by the Gaelic Irish. Out of eight Augustinian friaries founded in fifteenth-century Ireland, seven were located in Connacht.⁹ On the whole, among the mendicant orders, ninety friaries had been founded between 1400 and 1508.¹⁰ The prevalence of the Franciscan order, especially in Gaelic Ireland, ensured that prayers and devotions dear to that order were transmitted to the Gaelic laity to whom the friars ministered. The Franciscan spirituality seems to have appealed strongly to the religious consciousness of the Gaelic believer, prompting Robin Flower's remark 'I think it may be claimed that the

⁷ O' Dwyer, *Towards a history of Irish spirituality*, p.132.

⁸ Lynch, 'Religion in late medieval Ireland', p.3; O' Dwyer, *Towards a history of Irish spirituality*, p.135.

⁹ F. X. Martin, 'The Irish Augustinian reform movement in the fifteenth century' in J. A. Watt (ed.), *Medieval studies presented to Aubrey Gwynn S.J.* (Dublin, 1961), p.232.

¹⁰ O' Dwyer, *Towards a history of Irish spirituality*, p.135.

Irish were naturally Franciscan, Franciscan before St Francis.’¹¹ The mendicants specialised in preaching during this period, when such instruction was sorely lacking. In an anonymous report on the condition of Ireland in 1515 the friars are singled out as the only group who preach the word of God.¹² Colmán Ó Clabaigh notes how Irish friars in the fifteenth century had increasing contact with the ideas of their *confrères* abroad through attending the triennial chapter of the ultramontane Observants, and being subject to visitation every three years by French and German commissaries. He attributes the preponderance of late fifteenth-century continental works in the Youghal friary library collection to this, and also to the greater availability of printed texts.¹³ The fifteenth century not only saw a spiritual revival in the form of Observantism but also witnessed a similar revival in literary activity. This was the century in which the great Gaelic *bibliothèques* or devotional collections such as the *Leabhar Breac*, which dates from 1411, the *Book of Ballymote* from around 1400, the *Yellow Book of Lecan* (spanning both centuries) and the *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum*, dating from 1437 to 1440, were being compiled.¹⁴ Much of the material contained in the above collections pre-dates their compilation, often by two or more centuries.

¹¹ Robin Flower, *The Irish tradition* (Oxford, 1947), p.128.

¹² ‘State of Ireland and plan for its reformation’ in *State papers for the reign of Henry VIII*, III, (London, 1834), p.15.

¹³ Colmán N. Ó Clabaigh, *The Franciscans in Ireland, 1400-1534: from reform to reformation* (Dublin, 2002).

¹⁴ *Leabhar Breac, The Speckled Book, otherwise styled Leabhar Mór Dúna Doigre* (facsimile, Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, 1876); *Book of Ballymote...*, ed. Robert Atkinson (facsimile, Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, 1887); *The Yellow Book of Lecan...*, ed. Robert Atkinson (facsimile, Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, 1896); see also Máirtín MacConmara, ‘An Léann eaglasta ag baile 1200-1500’, pp 110-11.

However, it is significant that these *bibliothèques* were viewed as important enough an enterprise to be commissioned. They were not produced in a monastic setting as the great books of the earlier period were, but instead were, by and large, the product of secular scholars and were commissioned by prominent Gaelic families. There were, however, still links to important churchmen of the period. The *Leabhar Uí Mhaine* or 'Book of the O'Kellys', for example, was written for Muirchertach Ua Ceallaigh who was bishop of Clonfert 1378-94 and archbishop of Tuam 1394-1407.¹⁵ This was also the century in which many continental devotional works were translated into the Irish language. The Gaelic translation of *Meditationes vitae Christi*, completed around 1443, was translated by Tomás Ó Bruacháin, a choral canon of Killala, and was written by Domnal Ó Conaill. The latter is also thought to have written down the first Gaelic translation of Pope Innocent III's *De Contemptu Mundi* about the same time, which was translated by William Mac Givney of Breffny. The life of Mary, known briefly as the *Vita Rhythmica*, is also thought to have been translated into Irish in the fifteenth century.¹⁶ Religious texts from England were similarly absorbed into Gaelic culture, most notably the *Carta Humani Generis*, the earliest translation of which roughly dates from 1461-3, and which was the work of Uilliam Mac an Leagha.¹⁷

It is quite evident from the above examples that the fifteenth century afforded important access to continental religious material. This material was primarily in the

¹⁵ *The Book of Uí Maine, otherwise called 'The Book of the O' Kellys'*, with introduction by R. A. S. Macalister (collotype facsimile, Irish Manuscripts Commission, Dublin, 1942); see also Timothy O' Neill, *The Irish hand: scribes and their manuscripts from the earliest times to the seventeenth century with an exemplar of Irish scripts* (Portlaoise, 1984), p.36.

¹⁶ Mac Conmara, 'An léann eaglasta ag baile, 1200-1500', pp 113-14; see also Canice Mooney, *The church in Gaelic Ireland: thirteenth to fifteenth centuries* (Dublin, 1969), p.33.

¹⁷ Breeze, 'The charter of Christ in medieval English, Welsh and Irish', pp 118-19.

hands of the few, i.e. those who owned manuscripts and inevitably those who possessed the ability to read them. However, that is not to say that the store of hagiography, apocrypha, *exempla* and pious legends did not reach the less privileged members of society in some shape or form. Inevitably these became used as preaching aids and thus found their way into many sermons. Secondly, as noted below, another way in which a wider audience came into contact with such material was by hearing references to pious legends featured in a sizeable proportion of the religious works of professional bardic poets, who were, themselves, in the main, lay people, albeit a somewhat elite grouping, by virtue of their learning and position in society.

The *file* or *bard* (both terms had come to be used indiscriminately to describe the 'praise poet' in the period being dealt with)¹⁸ belonged to a hereditary caste and many Gaelic families became closely associated with the profession, often establishing bardic schools, which facilitated their educational requirements. Courses were traditionally long and difficult, lasting six or seven years during which aspiring poets were trained in the art of complicated metres and linguistic skill.¹⁹ The post of distinction, which most poets earnestly desired, was the position of *ollamh flatha* (or 'chief's poet'), who was employed by an individual chieftain and received, in turn, respect and honour that exceeded his status as a man of art.²⁰ His principal duty was to compose praise poetry which extolled key virtues of his chieftain, such as his learning, generosity, military prowess and so on, while also recording all manner of

¹⁸ In the late medieval period the poet described himself as a *file* while performing the functions of an earlier *bard*. He was most often referred to by the annalists as a *fear dána* and he employed the use of a lowly assistant to recite his compositions, who was known as his *bard*: see Simms, 'Literacy and the Irish bards', pp 238-9.

¹⁹ Osborn Bergin, *Irish bardic poetry* (3rd ed., Dublin, 1984) pp 10-11.

²⁰ Pádraig A. Breatnach, 'The chief's poet' in *R.I.A. Proc.*, lxxxiii (1983), p.38.

lore and legend associated with his wider family and marking key events in the lordship's life by the composition of verse. Such compositions would normally be read aloud by a reciter (sometimes referred to as a *bard*)²¹ in a semi-public setting, that is, usually before a large assembly consisting of the chieftain, his family and his retinue. A great deal of emphasis was placed on the physical performance of the piece. The impact of the recital was heightened by the poet's, often ostentatious, dress and an accompaniment consisting of harp music.²²

Poems composed solely to serve the aggrandizement of a particular clan were often, understandably, quite narrow in their subject matter. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, which witnessed the spread of literacy among the Gaelic aristocracy, gave rise to the letter-poem, written for the sole attention of the person to whom it was addressed. Conversely, the same development ensured that poems treating of more general themes could be copied and transmitted to a slightly wider-reading public.²³

Despite the fact that a poet had allied himself to a particular chieftain, this did not prevent him composing verse in praise of other patrons. Should he decide to do this, however, it was commonly agreed that he would always dedicate at least one verse of his eulogies to his principal patron.²⁴ This provision offered benefits to both patron and poet. On the one hand, the exalted status of the principal patron, in addition to his military power and intellectual ability, found an audience in far-away regions. The poet also benefited by having his literary competence and skill displayed in other

²¹ Osborn Bergin uses the word in this way, while pointing out, simultaneously, that the technical term for this individual was *reacaire*: see Bergin, *Irish bardic poetry*, p.8.

²² Simms, 'Literacy and the Irish bards', p.245.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp 251-2.

²⁴ Breatnach, 'The chief's poet', p.55.

territories, ensuring that, should he ever require alternative employment, his reputation had gone before him.²⁵

It should be noted that secular patrons were not the only ones who commissioned poetry. Church authorities, despite their frequently expressed aversion to the bardic order, also employed the services of poets to compose religious verse, commemorating certain events such as the building or restoration of churches and monasteries, or simply the occasion of an important feast day.²⁶ These poems were more than likely performed publicly in an ecclesiastical setting. Some poets, who, at the end of their days, sought to make their peace with God and retire to a monastery, were often accommodated in return for the composition of religious verse. However, the composition of religious verse did not necessarily rely on either of these cases. Preliminary work done by Katharine Simms on the extant corpus of bardic poetry reveals that out of some 1,800 to 2,000 poems, over half are addressed to earthly patrons with a further twenty percent directed at heavenly patrons and the remaining percentage of poems representing *dánta grádha*, bardic contentions etc.²⁷

Peter O' Dwyer explains how the bardic poets wrote poetry to heavenly patrons in much the same way as they did to earthly patrons, offering a 'tithe' or one-tenth of their art, to God: *'Faoi mar a scríobh an bard dán chun luach saothair a fháil ón bpátrún, scríobh sé dán spioradálta mar dheachú dá shaothar do Dhia agus súil in*

²⁵ Ibid., p.55.

²⁶ Katharine Simms, 'An eaglais agus filí na scol', in *Léachtaí Cholm Cille* xxiv (1994), p.29.

²⁷ *Idem.*, 'Bardic poetry as an historical source', in Tom Dunne (ed.), *The writer as witness* (Cork, 1997), p.71.

*áirde aige le pardún agus grásta mar aisíoc.*²⁸ There are two elements involved in what O' Dwyer states above. The first deals with the duty of paying the '*deachmhadh*' or 'tithe'. Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn (*d.*1487), Observant Franciscan and poet, refers to the tithe in his poetry: 'I owe a tithe of my art, the due tithe; Mary's son will demand its value; grievous not to pay it.'²⁹ The second element is expectation of grace or favour in return. Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh, who was one of the most renowned poets in the sphere of religious poetry, wrote in the thirteenth century of his expectation of the grace which was due to him: '*Fuaras mian, ón fuaras mian, rí saidhbhir agus é fial; file mi-se ag iarraidh grás mar dleaghair gach dámh do-riar.*'³⁰ In addressing the question of Gaelic theology, the question of how significant the wealth of religious poetry written by the bards is for our understanding of the Gaelic religious mindset, must be posed. The answer to this question underpins the importance of the material discussed both in the present and the following chapters. Bardic poetry, particularly praise poetry composed for secular patrons, has frequently been branded as lacking in sincerity, variety and freshness, in essence, as pragmatically utilitarian. If the same charge can be applied to the religious compositions of the poets, then the sincerity of the sentiments expressed therein becomes, at the very least, questionable. Osborn Bergin, however, warns against too harsh a judgement in this regard:

²⁸ 'Just as the bard wrote a poem in order to gain the value of his work from his patron, he wrote a spiritual poem to God as a tithe of his work, in expectation of [gaining] pardon and grace in return': Ó Duibhir, '*Sporadáltacht na hÉireann sna meánaoiseanna agus an cúlra staire*', p.13.

²⁹ *PB*, 7, v.11.

³⁰ 'I desired and desired a rich and generous king; I am a poet, seeking grace, which is the due of every man of art that serves': *DD*, 28, v.1

The Irish chiefs liked compliments, to be sure, but we need not suppose that they were so simple as to take them at their face value. For one thing, the practice was too common. When everyone in high place is addressed in superlatives, superlatives lose their force.³¹

It is rather more difficult to believe that poetry considered as 'due' to God could be lacking in sincerity. If secular lords were liable to be wise to empty words, aimed at puffing up their supposedly naïve personalities, as Bergin has suggested, surely, then, poets would not expect their heavenly patrons to be less wise in this respect. Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh (*fl.* late sixteenth and early seventeenth century) reacts against this kind of flattery when he states that 'songs of flattery are dangerous things...great the peril in the effect of lies.'³² Lambert McKenna is of the opinion that bardic religious poetry differs strikingly from 'any form of religious poetry composed at any other time in any other land, and even from the earlier religious poetry of Ireland'³³, going on to argue that these poems were not destined for liturgical use as hymnody, but rather for reading in secular households, not to encourage devotion but to display professional, literary skill.³⁴ McKenna suggests that some kinds of poem, such as those embodying a confession of sins for example, 'would seem to have been written for their author's own pious pleasure or by way of practice in technique.'³⁵ The suggestion that religious poems might have been used as exemplars of metre and style

³¹ Bergin, *Irish bardic poetry*, pp 15-16.

³² *AFOD* 5, v.2.

³³ *DDé*, p.x.

³⁴ *Ibid.* As seen above, however, the religious compositions of the professional poets were sometimes commissioned by ecclesiastical patrons, and, in these cases, it must be imagined that the promotion of devotion featured among the reasons for their commissioning.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

in bardic schools is supported by the fact that verses dedicated to heavenly patrons commonly feature a much wider and far more technical range of metres than those composed for secular lords.³⁶ In any case, these men were, for the most part, lay folk and primarily professional poets, born into hereditary poetic families, trained and instructed in making a living by eulogising their secular patrons. Writing religious poetry, then, was not their primary role. This is significant. Because of the lack of a 'religious agenda', evangelical, catechetical or otherwise in the bardic religious poetry of the pre-Reformation period, these poems can be a valuable means by which insight might be gained into religious ideas prominent in Gaelic Ireland. John Watt expresses a similar view when he writes:

It is impossible not to feel that in this type of writing we are as near as we are likely to get to how the educated laymen of the time actually did think about their religion...all the other sources are instructional, concerned with telling men how they should think about their religion. Because of the position and employment of its authors this verse must be a fair reflection of the religious sentiment of the ruling classes of Gaelic Ireland.³⁷

Lambert McKenna makes similar remarks elsewhere.³⁸ Having alluded to the care and attention which poets routinely gave to crafting the religious poem as a work of linguistic and metrical precision, it is important to note that the writing of such poetry was not merely a literary task devoid of any spiritual experience. The account of a Spanish visitor, writing in 1580, while on an expedition to aid the Geraldines, speaks of a spiritual preparation that some poets were prepared to undergo, in the form of

³⁶ Simms, 'An eaglais agus filí na scol', p.29.

³⁷ John Watt, *The church in medieval Ireland* (2nd ed., Dublin, 1998), pp 212-13.

³⁸ *PB*, p.xiv.

prayer and fasting, before they produced and committed to memory their work.³⁹ In exploring the world of Gaelic theology, therefore, bardic religious poetry comprises a vital source for historical research. It is by means of a close viewing of the texts, supplemented by evidence from numerous other sources that some understanding of the Gaelic religious mindset may be gained.

Providence

People living in late medieval and early modern Europe as a whole etched out existences in a world in which God was perceived to direct and influence everyday affairs. The pervasive idea of the Creator God was very much that of a hands-on ruler. Gaelic Ireland was no different in this regard. Raymond Gillespie states that ‘the belief that the Christian God existed and was at work in people’s lives was central to the working of early modern Irish society.’⁴⁰ This realisation of the centrality of God’s existence and action in the world, which was found among all sectors of society, was fundamental to all attitudes to the divine. Sallie McFague uses the term ‘sacramental universe’ to refer to an existence where ‘the things of this world, its joys and catastrophes, harvests and famines, births and deaths are understood as connected to, and permeated by divine power and love.’⁴¹ She could easily have added the word ‘justice’, for perceptions of the beneficence and mercy of God were matched and accompanied by a keen awareness of His justice, which was often the key to

³⁹ ‘They cultivate sacred poetry with great assiduity; they do not undertake to compose verses on sacred subjects except after fasting and prayer’: ‘The manners and customs of the Irish, especially in the Desmond territory’ in P. F. Moran (ed.), *History of the Catholic archbishops of Dublin since the Reformation*, vol. I (Dublin, 1864), p. 93.

⁴⁰ Gillespie, *Devoted people: belief and religion in early modern Ireland*, p.20.

⁴¹ Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical theology: models of God in religious language* (London, 1983), pp 1-2.

explaining events of everyday life as seen below. The Gaelic Irish lived in a world, therefore, where God's intervention in the mundane was commonplace and His providence all-encompassing.

The idea of a partisan God is essentially a biblical one. In the Old Testament, Yahweh is routinely portrayed as intervening in human affairs on the side of His 'chosen people', the Israelites. This intervention, however, was not always to the Israelites' liking. While, on the one hand, God could turn back the Sea of Reeds on their Egyptian enemies,⁴² He could also inspire Israel's enemies to attack and pillage her, in order to bring about her conversion, as in the case of the Assyrian conquest.⁴³ The perception of God's action in the world that existed in late medieval Europe closely resembled that of the authors of at least some of the books of the Old Testament. In the period with which this study is concerned God's alliances can be seen to change and develop over time. The *Annals of Ulster*, for instance, record God as acting against a deed of treachery directed at the rule of Domnall Ua Néill in 1504:

A treacherous attack [was made] on Ua Neill (namely, on Domnall) this year by his own people, namely by Tadhg Ua hOgain and by his sons, in the castle of Ua Neill himself, and the castle was taken by them. And God turned upon themselves in that same hour and the town was taken from them and Tadhg himself and two of his sons were hung and the third man of them was mutilated on the same day.⁴⁴

God's intervention could also be provoked by foul play. The sin of fratricide was perceived to be particularly heinous in His eyes in an account dating from 1513:

⁴² Exodus 14:27-29.

⁴³ Isaiah 10:5-7.

⁴⁴ *AU*, 1504.

Cathal Junior, son of Domnall, son of Eogan Ó Concobuir, the son of a king who was the best in hospitality and prowess and perspicacity that was in lower Connacht, was slain by his own brother, namely by Eogan, son of Domnall, in treachery, close by the town of Ó Gillgain. And it came of the direct judgement of God that Eogan himself was hung by Ó Domnaill at the end of three days through that deed.⁴⁵

An account from 1534 relates how the eminent historian, Maghnus Ua Duibhgennain the Tawny, was smothered and concealed in his own house by his wife and Brian, son of Toirdelbach Mag Uidhir. Brian fled into Oirghialla (Oriel) and, not long after, Flaithbertach, son of Philip, arrested the woman and two others. Mag Uidhir had the lady imprisoned (for she was with child) and the two accomplices burnt. When she gave birth to her child she was duly hung. Likewise, Brian, who had fled the scene, was shortly captured by his own brothers and put to death. The annalist, summarising the results of the affair, comments:

And woe is the one who does murder and deceit, to doom, after that murder and the excellence wherewith it was punished through miracles of God and Martin.⁴⁶

Events such as these were thought to come about through the converging of two sets of actions – human action and divine action. The interpretation of such occurrences, then, involved the taking into account of both dramas, which were acted out simultaneously. In the case of the last example, for instance, the actions of Mag Uidhir, which brought about the execution of the perpetrators, were necessary for the

⁴⁵ Ibid., 1513.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 1534.

resolution of the affair. However, behind this outer stage, the resolution was brought about principally by the workings of God and St Martin, as the annalist relates.

Towards the end of the sixteenth century the belief in God's intervention in human affairs persists. However, by this time, the enemy is more clearly defined than before as is evident from a manuscript entry by a scribe writing in 1599:

*Misi Emand Og O Cealluigh do scriobh an rand laidhnisi a Baile puirt an rideri .i. an sa gleand an seiseth la do mi August 1599 an cet blian do cogadh Muimnech an aigaidhsi Gall 7 go ma leosan creochas sin ma thoil Dia linn docum na guighsi sin do dhenam.*⁴⁷

Lughaidh Ó Cléirigh, in his seventeenth-century biography of Red Hugh O' Donnell, although most probably writing for an audience that were familiar with the stricter norms of Tridentine teachings, continues to employ the idea of the partisan God in his portrayal of the exploits of the hero in the closing years of the sixteenth century. *Beatha Aodha Ruaidh Uí Dhomhnaill* contains many passages that support the ideals of the Counter-Reformation as discussed below (see chapter 6). However, it also perpetuates the idea of a God who intervenes on the side of His people against the enemy. For Ó Cléirigh, 'His people' were clearly the Irish rebels and the 'enemy' the English forces intent on the destruction and conquest of Ireland. Thus the late medieval idea of the partisan God is carried over into the seventeenth century, adapting itself to new political circumstances. Red Hugh O' Donnell's escape from

⁴⁷ 'It is I, young Edmond O' Kelly who wrote this Latin verse in Baile puirt an rideri, i.e. in the valley on the sixth day of the month of August 1599 in the first year of the war of the Munstermen against the English and may this violence recoil on them if it is God's will that we make this prayer': G. Dottin, 'Notice du manuscrit irlandais de la bibliothèque de Rennes', in *Révue Celtique* xv (1894), p.89.

Dublin castle in 1592 is recounted by Ó Cléirigh in the following manner: ‘When it seemed to the Son of the Virgin full time that he should escape, he and some of his companions took advantage of the guards.’⁴⁸ Christ is thus seen as directly involved in assisting the hero. Similarly the victory of the Irish at the Battle of the Yellow Ford is attributed to ‘the glorious God and almighty Lord.’⁴⁹ It is interesting to note, however, how the biographer of Red Hugh also explains a setback suffered by the O’ Donnell camp in 1600 in terms of God’s benevolent action:

The reason why God did this was lest pride or haughtiness, desire or self-will should turn Aodh Ó Domhnaill aside from the straightness of his judgement...and lest he might set his mind and thoughts on his own strengths and powers rather than on the decrees and gifts of the lord of heaven and earth.⁵⁰

There are two possible explanations for this insertion by Ó Cléirigh. The first concerns the nature of the biography itself and its primary purpose, namely the exaltation of O’ Donnell’s status as hero. The biographer faced the task of explaining exactly why God, who was supposedly on the side of O’ Donnell and his men, allowed this setback to occur. God could not be seen to be inflicting punishment upon the hero, as this would surely cast a shadow on the hero’s stature and credibility. Therefore the action of God is categorised as benevolent and is explained as necessary to preserve and strengthen O’ Donnell’s good character. Had the reversal of fortune occurred on the English side, it would surely have been interpreted as a sign of God’s

⁴⁸ Lughaidh Ó Cléirigh, *Beatha Aodha Ruaidh Úi Dhomhnaill*, ed. Paul Walsh. (2 vols, Dublin, 1947), i, p.19.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.183.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.275.

punishment for the injustices perpetrated on the Irish. This first explanation, then, is rooted in the political context surrounding the compilation of the work itself and illustrates an interpretation of events that belongs particularly to the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, indeed one that arises out of a specific polarisation between Irish Catholic rebels and their New English Protestant enemies. However, Ó Cléirigh's explanation is no less grounded in a second understanding of God that belongs to the late medieval period as a whole. It is only out of this earlier foundation that Ó Cléirigh can apply a much older idea of God to new circumstances. This older idea of God, which still influenced Ó Cléirigh and many others in the seventeenth century, acts as a useful example of the manner in which late medieval religious ideas persisted into the Tridentine era, while being shaped and moulded all the while to interpret different situations. The phenomenon of misfortune befalling good people was frequently explained in terms of God's continuing formation of the individual in virtue. After all, a passage in the *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum*, beginning with the question 'Cadde in tadhbar fa dug Dia easbaid do Maisi Mac Amra',⁵¹ seeking the reason for the dumbness of Moses, explains that it was to preserve him from Satan's sin of pride.⁵² God was seen to intervene, then, as a benevolent force in the lives of people, often saving them from themselves or, rather, saving their souls from their bodies.

The dualistic concept of the good soul battling against the inclinations of the evil body, which was so prevalent in medieval Europe, was also to be found in Gaelic Ireland. The fifteenth century poet, Tuathal Ó hUiginn speaks of the body in the

⁵¹ 'For what reason did God give Moses a disability?' [my translation]

⁵² Edward Gwynn, 'The manuscript known as the Liber Flavus Fergusiorum' in *R.I.A.Proc.*xxvi (1906), p.34.

following terms: ‘Let me accuse my body, ‘tis easy to prove sin against it; it controls all that I have, and grievously deceives me’⁵³ and goes on to request the aid of Christ in relieving him of his plight: ‘If God’s Son aids me not, it is hard for me to release my body with its four elements held down by the roots of sin.’⁵⁴ Cormac Ruadh Ó hUiginn’s poetry, the composition date of which is uncertain but which was certainly some time before 1473,⁵⁵ describes the interaction of body and soul and its consequent effects on the poet in quite a Pauline manner: ‘my body is being pampered for my soul, so that my soul has been ruined by it; the power of my body is so great (over me) that at times I am not myself.’⁵⁶ Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh, whose work dates from the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century, speaks of Satan and his own body as allies in a war against his soul, and calls on the Holy Spirit to take control instead.⁵⁷

As many Irish Catholics, then, were eager for God to take action, whatever that action might be, in the war against their mortal bodies with their passions and evil inclinations, it is no wonder that reversals in fortune and, even at times, death were accepted as God’s permission of certain misfortune in order to prevent greater

⁵³ *DDé*, 19, v.1.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, v.15.

⁵⁵ This poem appears in a collection of bardic poems in the so-called *Yellow Book of Lecan*, which conclude with the insertion ‘Scanlan, son of Maolmhuire Ó Maolchonaire wrote this *duanaire* in 1473’: *ibid.*, p.vii.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 23,v.10. This admission by Cormac Ruadh Ó hUiginn bears many resemblances to St Paul’s discussion of the effects of the body on him in Rom 7:15-17: ‘I do not understand my own behaviour; I do not act as I mean to, but I do things I hate. While I am acting as I do not want to, I still acknowledge the law as good, so it is not myself acting, but the sin which lives in me.’

⁵⁷ *AFOD*, 37, v.9.

calamity and disaster. The thirteenth century Gaelic poet, Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh's admission that 'from clay at first came I, with clay too shall I lie; my burial and my rising too is in God's hands' attests to the early existence of an attitude of abandonment to God's designs.⁵⁸ The providential hand of God intervened, therefore, in bringing about death when it was most appropriate. This is certainly the way Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn viewed it in the fifteenth century: 'Death, when its time comes is fated for me, the hours slipping by till the fixed hour be reached', going on to observe that 'the Lord lets not his children who are ready to depart tarry on this passing plain; the day He comes is a blessing for them.'⁵⁹ This was not simply a case of the good dying young. It was more often a case of removing a repentant soul from the world before it gained an opportunity to get into further trouble. In an Irish translation of the 'Gregory Legend', found in a seventeenth-century manuscript, and which Sheila Falconer believes could date from anytime between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, the story is related of an emperor, who committed incest with his sister who, herself, bore a child for him. He is advised by his confessor to go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land to expiate the sin. While there, he dies. The empress, on hearing of his death, interprets it in the following way: 'God was not pleased to allow him [to return] to this land for fear he should do as before.'⁶⁰ A benevolent God, then, was believed to primarily look after the interests of the soul, even if that did sometimes mean the death of the body. A triad, dating from the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries, provides a succinct explanation of why God chose to shorten the lives of sinners:

⁵⁸ *DDé*, 28, v.9.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 17, vv 9-10.

⁶⁰ Sheila Falconer, 'An Irish translation of the Gregory Legend' in *Celtica* iv (1958), p.52.

On the three reasons for which God shortens the life of sinners: to inspire fear into people; that they fall not into sin again; that they pray to their native saints to shorten their lives because of their evil deeds.⁶¹

Not everyone was satisfied, however, to rely on the divine providence of the Christian God alone. An account left by Captain Francisco de Cuellar of the Spanish Armada, who was shipwrecked on the west coast of Ireland in 1588 details how, while sojourning with a Gaelic chieftain, the chieftain's wife and many of her friends approached him and repeatedly begged him to read their palms and tell their fortunes.⁶²

Not all of God's intervention in human affairs, however, was regarded as benevolent. God's justice was also acutely recognised. This could be meted out in either of two ways, by means of natural disaster or by directly intervening to bring about the death of the guilty party. The 'Sermon on Kings' in the *Leabhar Breac* explains natural disasters as the result of the transgression of the will of God by rulers:

It is [through] transgression of the will of God on the part of kings that...everything is infected by the violence of stormy weather and by adverse seasons, oftimes the green fields are burnt by fires and by lightnings while the buds and blossoms of the vine and all other fruits on the earth and on trees dry up and waste away.⁶³

⁶¹ O' Dwyer, *Towards a history of Irish spirituality*, p.150.

⁶² Francisco de Cuellar, 'Letter from one who sailed with the Spanish Armada and tells the story of the enterprise of England' (prepared by D. W. Cruickshank and P. Gallagher) in P. Gallagher and D. W. Cruickshank (eds), *God's obvious design: papers for the Spanish Armada symposium, Sligo, 1988* (London, 1990), p.238.

⁶³ *PH*, p.410.

This idea has obvious roots in biblical literature, particularly in the Book of Kings where successive kings bring hardship on their land by ignoring the covenant of Yahweh. Recurring phrases such as ‘But (X) sinned in the sight of Yahweh’ or ‘He did what is displeasing to Yahweh’ bear this out.⁶⁴ Significantly, this notion is also closely connected to an idea of kingship in early Irish society concerning the *fir flaithe* or ‘prince’s truth’. The king had to be flawless in honour and truth; otherwise disaster would befall the tribe he ruled. The early Irish sagas, which were still being transcribed in the late medieval period, and were undoubtedly familiar to many, who were not scribes, by means of oral transmission, were filled with instances of what befell the land when the ruler broke his ‘truth’. Kim McCone refers to a list of benefits of *fir flaithe* as listed in the early Irish gnomic tract, *Audacht Morainn*, including the warding off of great lightnings and plagues, the acquisition of territory and riches, the blessings of peace, tranquility, happiness, comfort and health, success in war, continuity of inheritance and abundance of meat, dairy products, fish and offspring.⁶⁵ Natural disaster, then, could be attributed to God’s disfavour and was frequently clearly interpreted as such. During the plague of 1575, Sundays, Wednesdays and Fridays were appointed as fast days in order to combat its further spread.⁶⁶ The thirteenth-century poet, Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe, expresses astonishment when he discovers that God did not manifest His anger by means of bad weather when He recalled His betrayal: ‘Wednesday was the day when the Lord was betrayed...it was not right that there should be good weather, but ice spikes and rain

⁶⁴ See, for example I Kings 22:53.

⁶⁵ Kim McCone, *Pagan past and Christian present in early Irish literature* (Maynooth, 1991), p.129.

⁶⁶ Richard Butler (ed.), *The annals of Ireland by friar John Clyn and Thady Dowling* (Dublin, 1849) pp 41-2.

on the day that the king of the world was betrayed.⁶⁷ Such an interpretation of the elements, expressed by one of the earlier poets, persisted right into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The sin of one man (an unjust ruler, for instance) was perceived to bring punishment upon all. Yet, it did not necessarily have to be someone of such importance. In the life of Colmcille, compiled by Manus Ó Domhnaill in 1532, it is recorded that the saint arose one night, requesting his fellow monks to pray ‘for there hath been done but now in the world a passing great sin and it is to be feared that the vengeance of God therefor will fall on all.’⁶⁸

It was also considered that a more individual form of punishment might be meted out by God; this was seen largely as the consequence of personal sin. Gofraidh, son of Briain Mac an Bhaird, composing in the late sixteenth century, recognised that his sinfulness (particularly the Seven Deadly Sins), led inevitably to punishment: ‘Seven evil folk have been for long my guides; alas they bring seven causes of punishment.’⁶⁹

However, punishment was understood to be distributed by God even before a person faced his eternal judgement. In 1484, an annalist records how ‘six of the people of Gilla-Patraig, son of Philip, son of Cú Chonnacht Mag Uidhir [Maguire]...were slain in the night, through vengeance of God and Tighernach in Daire-Maela[i]n itself by two sons of Edmond Mag Uidhir’ in return for the desecration of a church.⁷⁰

Similarly, God’s wrath prevailed in an incident recorded by the annalist as having occurred in 1492. The sons of Donnchadh Mag Uidhir embarked on a raid upon Senadh Mac Maghnus, killing two innocent farmers as they went. Because of God’s

⁶⁷ *GBMCM*, 21, v.1.

⁶⁸ *BCC*, p.237.

⁶⁹ *ADD 52*, v.5.

⁷⁰ *AU*, 1484.

intervention in the matter, they were put to flight, during which fourteen of their number drowned.⁷¹ Interestingly, the annalist appeals to Scripture to interpret the meaning of the incident:

And because the Lord was not with them when men rose against them, without doubt the water swallowed them up as saith the psalmist.⁷²

In Manus Ó Domhnaill's sixteenth-century life of Colmcille, the saint is not reticent about cursing a murderer that slew a woman who was taking refuge at his side. The curse that he uses in this instance involves the saint beseeching God to kill the perpetrator quickly.⁷³ The fact that annalists quoted Scripture to support their idea of God's action in the world and that contemporary portrayals of important saints such as Colmcille highlighted a sharing of the same view of God, demonstrates how pervasive such a view was, right into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. What changed over time (for example from the fifteenth to the late sixteenth century) was not necessarily *how* God did His business, but to *whom*. Similar accounts in the later sixteenth century, therefore, focus on the religious divide that was beginning to be experienced. The annals of Loch Cé record how in 1579 both the bishop of Ó hÉlidhe and the son of Ó Ruairc were apprehended by the Justiciary, who had them hanged, 'to the profanation of God and men.' God was not slow in establishing justice, however:

⁷¹ Ibid., 1492.

⁷² The lines are taken from Psalm 123 (124).

⁷³ BCC, p.57.

But God performed a plain, manifest miracle on the Justiciary, i.e. a burning attacked his head the day these two were hanged and this burning did not leave him until he died of it in the course of a short time.⁷⁴

A year earlier, one native Irish scribe, writing in Leinster, could not fathom how the New English could be prosperous and Protestant simultaneously: 'It is a matter of surprise to me that God tolerates them in authority except that he beareth patiently and that His vengeance cometh slow and direct.'⁷⁵ Lughaidh Ó Cléirigh's reference to the punishment of George Óg Bingham, for his desecration of churches dedicated to the Virgin Mary and Colmcille, shows that the idea of a punitive God was very much alive as late as the early seventeenth century.⁷⁶

Views of God's retributive and chastising roles, as discussed above, were not exclusive to Gaelic Ireland. In fact God is seen as acting in similar fashion throughout the many collections of religious *exempla*, which achieved huge popularity in Europe, particularly among the mendicant friars who used them frequently as illustrative devices in sermons. Compilers of such collections on the continent such as the French Dominican, Étienne de Bourbon (c.1250) portrayed an image of God very like that seen in the examples above. In one tale, a blaspheming sailor mysteriously drowns, despite knowing how to swim. His body is later recovered with its tongue shrivelled up.⁷⁷ Similarly, an archdeacon who murdered a bishop in order that he, himself, might

⁷⁴ *ALC*, 1579.

⁷⁵ Paul Walsh (ed.), *Gleanings from Irish manuscripts* (2nd ed., Dublin, 1933), pp 160-1.

⁷⁶ Ó Cléirigh, *Beatha Aodha Ruaidh Uí Dhomhnaill*, i, p.97

⁷⁷ *Anecdotes historiques, légendes et apalogues tirés du recueil inédit d'Etienne de Bourbon, Dominicain du xiiie siècle* (Paris, 1877), # 390.

succeed him, dies during the celebration of his own nomination to the bishopric.⁷⁸ The story of the sin of one woman leading to the death of many people appears in the *Liber Exemplorum*, which was compiled by an English member of the Irish Franciscan province about 1275.⁷⁹ The compiler of this collection of *exempla* possibly studied in Paris in 1264 and would seem to have been heavily influenced by the breadth of preaching resources available there.⁸⁰ Certainly the influence of Étienne de Bourbon's material is particularly strong in the *Liber Exemplorum*, illustrating how such ideas came to be popular in other parts of Europe among those who heard them preached.⁸¹ Tubach cites the thirteenth-century *Speculum Laicorum* as the source for the tale of St Olaf who, while idly whittling a stick on a Sunday burns the shavings on his hand.⁸⁰ An unrelated tale, which appears in the *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum*, tells of a little boy carrying firewood on a Sunday, who dies when the wood mysteriously catches fire and consumes him.⁸¹ The same fundamental idea, namely that the Sabbath is to be respected, is to be found in both tales. Moreover, God does not deal lightly with those who disregard this principle. In these cases His vengeance and justice evenly balance His benevolence and mercy.

Those who managed to sin and get away with it, as it were (without direct divine punishment), were conscious of having to make reparation for their crimes. This often took the form of a long, arduous pilgrimage, a substantial deed of almsgiving or some

⁷⁸ Ibid. For further example see Frederic C. Tubach, *Index Exemplorum: a handbook of medieval religious tales* (Helsinki, 1969).

⁷⁹ A. G. Little (ed.), *Liber exemplorum ad usum praedicatorum* (Aberdeen, 1908), 206b.

⁸⁰ Ó Clabaigh, *The Franciscans in Ireland, 1400-1534*, p.126.

⁸¹ Tubach, *Index exemplorum*, p.521.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p.274.

⁸¹ Gwynn, 'The manuscript known as the *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum*', p.37.

kind of penitential abstinence or fasting. Samantha Meigs relates an interesting case of such practice, found in the registers of Bishop George Dowdall. In 1539 Heneas MacNichail, a layman from Armagh, was obliged by the Dean of Armagh to visit eighteen sites of pilgrimage in Ireland as penance for having strangled his own son. Two years later he reappears in Dowdall's register, claiming to have completed his penance.⁸² The annalists frequently record instances of pilgrimages undertaken as penance. The *Annals of Ulster*, for instance, relate that in 1491 'Henry, son of Hubert, son of James Dillon slew his own father, namely Hubert, with thrust of knife and he himself set out for Rome after that.'⁸³ The sinner might also found a monastery, as expiation for sin, or at least offer to sponsor an existing foundation's restoration. Some accounts of the Mag Uidhir clan illustrate how individuals belonging to an important Gaelic family, in this case rulers of Fermanagh, made reparation to their God. In 1428, 'Aedh, son of Philip Mag Uidhir went on his pilgrimage to the city of St James...and died...after cleansing of his sins in the city of St James.'⁸⁴ Thomas junior, son of The Mag Uidhir was with him on the journey.⁸⁵ This Thomas junior became king on the death of his father, Thomas Mór, in 1430.⁸⁶ In 1447, the following account appears in the annals:

A french roof was put by Thomas Mag Uidhir junior...on the church of Achadh-urchaire in honour of God and [S.S] Tighernach and Ronan. And it

⁸² Meigs, *The reformations in Ireland*, p.39.

⁸³ *AU*, 1491.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 1428. The city of St.James (Santiago de Compostela) was one of the most popular sites of pilgrimage in medieval Europe.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 1430.

was he that built the eastern gable of the church for [the good of] his own soul.⁸⁷

On his death, in 1480, he is credited as being a man who ‘made churches and monasteries and Mass chalices and was [once] in Rome and twice at the city of St James on his pilgrimage.’⁸⁸ Perhaps not all his good works were undertaken as penances, but it is reasonable to assume that he did wish to cleanse himself of sin as his uncle had ultimately done at Santiago de Compostela. Another such ‘good work’ was undertaken in 1443 by William Mac Givney of Breffny, namely the translation of Pope Innocent III’s *De contemptu mundi*. Robin Flower recounts how the translator lay sick with a sword wound at the time.⁸⁹ It will probably never be known whether Mac Givney undertook this work as an act of penance for sin. However, such a motive is, nevertheless, a possibility.

Imagining God

While an innate awareness of God’s presence may have pervaded the lives of late medieval European Christians in general, it is necessary to enquire further into the matter of how God was perceived by the Gaelic Irish in particular. Do Gaelic Irish descriptions of God’s personality and activity match those found in other countries during the same period, for instance? An investigation of the sort of imagery used to portray God and the various elements that formed and shaped that imagery is important here. The fact that the presence and action of God was felt so strongly at this time suggests that this God must have been accorded a personality to which people could easily relate. The God of the late medieval Christian was anything but a

⁸⁷ Ibid., 1447.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 1480.

⁸⁹ Flower, *The Irish tradition*, p.128.

transcendent and disinterested figure that remained aloof and removed from earthly affairs. Human attempts to conceptualise God throughout history have involved the employment of anthropomorphisms, through which God is portrayed as possessing human characteristics. Just as God made Man in His own image and likeness, Man, in turn, in his effort to depict his maker, routinely repaid the compliment. Although the Christian tradition has sometimes shied away from making pronouncements about God, chiefly evident in patristic tendencies towards a *theologia negativa*, in which scholars were only prepared to declare upon what God is not, as opposed to what He is, popular religion, with its emphasis on relationship, was always likely to decide that individuals could not adequately communicate with a being who is more what He is not than what He is!⁹⁰ It is for this reason that portrayals of God frequently make use of familiar imagery that reflects those who depict more than the subject of the depiction, Himself. Sallie McFague observes that religious language is not only about God but also about us:

The tradition says that we were created in the image of God, but the obverse is also the case, for we imagine God in our own image. And the human images we choose for the divine influence the way we feel about ourselves, for these images are 'divinised' and hence raised in status. For instance, earthly kingship gains in importance when the image of king is applied to God.⁹¹

While universal human attributes have been applied to God throughout history, it is also the case that these same attributes are frequently further honed in order that God

⁹⁰ For a discussion of negative theology see Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, p.96 ff. The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) enshrined the main thrust of this theology in its decrees, declaring that all similarity between God and creatures is superseded by a greater dissimilarity.

⁹¹ McFague, *Metaphorical theology*, p.10. For a discussion of how religion can legitimise social institutions see Peter Berger, *The social reality of religion* (London, 1969), pp 33-8.

might appear in the guise of a native from a given culture or society. McFague terms this the 'interpretive context' of religious language, explaining that this is 'the context which recognises that we, who attempt to speak about God, are social, cultural and historical beings with particular perspectives influenced by a wide range of factors.'⁹²

It should come as no surprise, then, that the imagery used by the Gaelic Irish to describe God is heavily influenced by their native culture and society. However, it is important to remember that when one peels away these layers, in which the Gaelic depiction of God is couched, one discovers the core characteristics of the Christian God as understood by believers right across the European continent at the time and as was ultimately found in the Apostles' Creed. While native imagery may have been employed to better imagine the Creator, there is nothing unique in the Irish portrayal of God that cannot be found, albeit in alternative guise, elsewhere on the continent. Catherine A. McKenna, while discussing Welsh bardic religious poetry of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, notes how the poets interpret their religious themes in terms of contemporary legal and social institutions, especially the institution of bardic poetry itself.⁹³ Irish bardic poets acted similarly in this regard. They related the Christian story in familiar terms that could easily be understood. Even if some of the social institutions became obsolete over time, which some inevitably did by the sixteenth century, their persistent appearance in poetry suggests that they contained something of relevance to both poet and listener, which transcended their original significance. The manner, then, in which God was socially acculturated into Gaelic Irish society and given a face is examined below.

⁹² Ibid., p.3.

⁹³ McKenna, *The medieval Welsh religious lyric*, p.81.

Professional poets, who were accustomed to composing encomiums for secular lords, did not significantly alter the style of their poetry when they shifted the focus to heavenly patrons. The religious poems, then, follow a very similar pattern to that exhibited in their secular works. Christ is addressed in the manner in which a secular lord might be and, concomitantly, He is praised for His wisdom, justice, physical beauty and martial exploits. Just as a secular prince might be praised for his tremendous deeds of valour, so the deeds of God, as found in salvation history, are similarly lauded.⁹⁴ The listing of these deeds is heavily reliant on the articles of the Apostles' Creed, which relate how God created the world and was subsequently born into it, going on to redeem it from sin through His Passion, Death and Resurrection. Similar language is used to praise both secular and heavenly patrons. The epithets applied to Christ and Mary, for instance, are also used to praise secular patrons and their wives or daughters. In most instances, the epithets applied to religious figures are directly influenced by those coined for secular patrons. However, sometimes the reverse is the case. At times, the language of religious poetry is used to highlight a patron's status.⁹⁵ It is important to remember, however, that when secular imagery and appellations that were customarily part of the poet's craft were used in a religious context, they assumed a meaning and significance of their own. It would be unwise to judge these titles and images as mere echoes of poems composed for secular lords. For one thing, the composition of religious poetry was considered a serious matter, as is evident from the admissions of poets themselves. Poets, approaching the end of

⁹⁴ For parallel examples of this in Welsh religious poetry see McKenna, *The medieval Welsh religious lyric*, pp 24-30, 37-9.

⁹⁵ I have discussed a good example of this, namely the term *fion-fhuil*, or 'wine-blood' elsewhere: see Salvador Ryan, "'Reign of blood": aspects of devotion to the wounds of Christ in late medieval Ireland', pp 146-8.

their days, sometimes retiring to a monastery, routinely lamented the fact that they had not expended more energy in the service of their heavenly Lord, admitting that their secular work had not always been genuine in sentiment. The late sixteenth-century poet, Domhnall, son of Dáire Mac Bruaideadha, states, on retiring from secular work, that

deceitfulness has been put behind me for good; henceforth I will sing true – and well rewarded – praises of the Lord of the Six Hosts; the eternal kingdom will be my reward.⁹⁶

Just as poems were often offered to secular patrons as a means of rebuilding broken relationships and amending wrong-doing, as in the case of Eochaidh Ó hEoghusa's poem to Conchobhar Mac Diarmuda, who was established as Lord of Magh Luirg by Aodh Ruadh Ó Domhnaill in 1595,⁹⁷ eulogies dedicated to heavenly patrons were similarly offered as reparation for sin, as a result of which the poet hoped to be exonerated of Christ's murder. An unidentified poet, composing sometime before 1631, states:

I want no other master for my art but God; I must do my art work for Him; the breast and the nail will not then be charged against me – that is all the reward I ask.⁹⁸

While a poet might, on occasion, be prepared to risk a secular patron's displeasure, on account of substandard work, it is difficult to imagine him dicing with eternal salvation in the same way. It follows that the titles used to address heavenly patrons were most likely not arbitrarily selected or thoughtlessly inserted. A detailed survey

⁹⁶ *ADD* 58, v.3.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 34, v.21.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 96, v.1.

of the corpus of religious poetry composed by the bards provides substantial evidence that the language used in these works, although heavily borrowed from the secular world, nevertheless contains remarkably impressive theological insights, including additional layers of meaning that one would not expect to discover in the secular compositions. While the language and style of religious eulogies closely resembles that of poems composed for earthly patrons, these were not simple borrowings. The depth of theological insight to be found in a significant amount of bardic religious poetry composed during this period is not merely accidental. Poets who committed themselves to the composition of sacred verse, while using familiar bardic conventions, nevertheless transformed the meaning of the language they used by allying it with a deep appreciation for Christian doctrine. As illustrated below, the result of such a marriage between conventional encomium and clever Christianised conceit is a rich expression of theological perception, rooted in native Gaelic culture.

God or Christ as king

The political and socio-cultural centrality of kingship in Ireland heavily influenced Gaelic portrayals of God from its first encounters with Christianity. The application of the title of 'King' to God is, of course, not unusual. A title such as 'King of Kings', which Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh uses in a thirteenth-century poem, is to be found also in biblical literature, where it is even applied to secular rulers.⁹⁹ The concept of

⁹⁹ *DDé* 29, v.13. The title is used in Daniel 2:37 to refer to King Nebuchadnezzar. The Book of Daniel was very popular in medieval Gaelic Ireland as evidenced by the number of references to it in the sources. Blathmac, the eighth-century monk-poet also uses the title in reference to God. See James Carney (ed.), *The poems of Blathmac son of Cú Brettan together with the Irish Gospel of Thomas and a poem on the Virgin Mary* (Dublin, 1964), p.63, v.186. It can also be found in *PB* 5, v.34 and *AFOD* 34, v.2, illustrating that it survived into the fifteenth and late sixteenth centuries.

God as king, with its roots in Judaeo-Christian culture, was easily adopted by the Gaelic Irish, for whom kingship was regarded as especially important. In examining the title of 'king' as applied to God or Christ (epithets proper to both God the Father and Jesus, His Son, were routinely treated as interchangeable by the bardic poets), it must be enquired as to what extent God was portrayed in terms of a particular Gaelic sovereignty. The title of 'High-King', which is applied to God right up to the seventeenth century, is usually accompanied by an elaboration on traditional attributes required by an Irish king.¹⁰⁰ Kim McCone explains what exactly these requirements were:

It would appear, then, that the ideal king in ancient Ireland was supposed to excel in the three basic areas of military prowess, mental discernment and physical beauty, thus combining the functions of warrior (*láech*) and judge (*brithem*) with his own specifically regal need for a perfect appearance.¹⁰¹

The traditional qualities identified as prerequisites for an Irish king were routinely applied to God, indicating that He was considered as legitimate Lord and God. When a lord's rule was legitimate and he was seen to be doing a good job, the elements were described as exhibiting their approval of his rule by providing fine weather and returning generous crop yields. The fifteenth-century poet, Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn (*d.*1448) describes such harmony in nature in his praise of the rule of Tadhg Ó Conchobhair (*d.*1403):

While thou rulest, snow comes not in snow's season, heat fails not when heat is due; for thee, gentle rain falls, mingling with the sun's bright shafts.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ For examples of the use of the term 'High King' see *ADD* 69, 76 and 77 and *AFOD* 16 and 24.

¹⁰¹ McCone, *Pagan past and Christian present in early Irish literature*, p.122.

¹⁰² *ADD* 5, v.20.

Domhnall, son of Dáire Ó Bruaideadha, also describes nature's endorsement of the rule of Conchobar Ó Briain, upon whom the earldom of Thomond was bestowed in 1558:

Covered with honey-dew is every bush, all the rivers are full of salmon, every tree in the wood is covered with clusters that bend it to the ground.¹⁰³

The late sixteenth-century poet, Mathghamhain Ó hUiginn, portrays God's rule as similarly eliciting favourable responses from the elements:

The noise of the thunder-clouds, the sounds of all the animals, the angel-like strains of the birds, the rustling of the foliage of every upland, the lowing of the deer herd, the whispering of the wood – these are the praises given by the elements to their good Lord.¹⁰⁴

As the ideal Irish king, God is portrayed as displaying perfection of appearance, military prowess and generosity. Alluding to Christ, Muirchertach Ó Cionga, who lived at the close of the sixteenth century, addressed him as 'God's son, a stalk of good, noble seed, without blemish', referring to the automatic disqualification from kingship of one who was, in any way, physically marked.¹⁰⁵ The requirement that a king should not be impaired is frequently alluded to in the heroic sagas. It is also found in at least one law tract under which Congal Cáech was disqualified from the kingship of Tara, having been blinded in one eye by a bee.¹⁰⁶ The praise of a ruler's martial successes in bardic political poetry is well known. In the same way Christ as heavenly ruler is depicted as a great warrior who achieved His most significant

¹⁰³ Ibid., 27, v.28.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 76, v.17.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 60, v.5.

¹⁰⁶ Fergus Kelly, *A guide to early Irish law*, p.19.

victory in His battle with sin and death on Calvary, which is discussed in detail below. The sixteenth-century poet, Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh, who is particularly noted for the use of this imagery, connects Christ's braving of battle-wounds (the five wounds, which He suffered upon the cross) with His claim to kingship:

He murmurs not at the wounding of His side and breast, He must needs save
His folk; for our sake He was lifted up on three nails; a king must be over His
people.¹⁰⁷

Christ's engagement in battle differs significantly from that of secular princes, however. While earthly rulers might achieve power despite their battle wounds, Christ won His kingship *because of them* [my emphasis]. The fifteenth-century poet, Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn, describes this anomaly in the following verses:

God's son was not firmly established in His realm till His blood was shed.../
King beyond all king's rivalry – we should trust His power; there is no true
king but the king who lives, and after dying, dies not /
Though He died sentenced by the Jews, He cannot be dethroned; He is, will be
and ever was; He is our curer and our High King.¹⁰⁸

The generosity or niggardliness of rulers in Gaelic Ireland was constantly under the scrutiny of bardic poets, ensuring that a chieftain's success or failure in this area was invariably worthy of note in their compositions. Just as a secular ruler might be extolled for his munificence and the lavish nature of his banquets, so too was Christ, as heavenly ruler, appraised. While a poet might seek greater worldly payment from a patron for his poems, his main preoccupation, when addressing his heavenly patron, was that he might gain entry to the banquet of Heaven, i.e. that he might be saved.

¹⁰⁷ ADD 64, v.5.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 78, vv 2, 5, 6.

Domhnall, son of Dáire Mac Bruaideadha alluded to this aspiration in the sixteenth century:

Singing God's praise is pledge of wealth to come; if a prince be praised for gain's sake the sooner shall I get his gifts, the wealth of one who is never ungenerous.¹⁰⁹

Later, in the same poem, Mac Bruaideadha refers to God's overlordship, stressing His pre-eminence above all other earthly kings:

To no man shall I apply for the gifts possessed by God, whose knowledge penetrates all space; however generous a king may be with his treasures, a hundred times more generous is He who is their real owner.¹¹⁰

This is a good example of bardic convention acquiring additional significance when translated from secular to religious composition. It was quite usual for a poet to state that the ruler, to whom he dedicated his verses, towered above his peers and outmatched them in all areas, in effect elevating his status far beyond that of any other earthly ruler. This was frequently achieved by using the image of the ruler as a single tree rising above the forest as a whole, outstripping all opposition. A poet who composed an encomium for Cormac Ó hEadhra sometime between 1581 and 1612, addressed him as a 'fragrant branch overtopping wood.'¹¹¹ However, poets who made such claims for one patron could quite easily make similar claims for another should circumstances necessitate alternative employment. The poet himself cannot have taken the claim itself too seriously at any one given time. While he may have admired

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 58, v.1

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, v.11.

¹¹¹ *BOH*, 8, v.20. An earlier example is provided by the thirteenth-century poet, Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe; see *GBMCM* 1, v.28. This image was also used to praise Christ in religious poetry. See, for example, *ADD* 77, v.2. It is used in praise of the Virgin Mary in *ADD* 82, v.23.

his patron's qualities, he must surely have realised that he might, one day, have to regard another ruler with similar respect. Such political expedience, however, was not possible with God. Moreover, it was quite clear to most poets that God's power could not be usurped (except, perhaps by His mother's intervention) and that He was the definitive ruler. In short, such claims, when made of God, acquired an authenticity and sincerity that could not be upheld in secular poetry.

Banquets were usually good opportunities for rulers to express their generosity and hospitality, being frequently judged on their performances on such occasions by bardic poets. The fifteenth-century poet, Tuathal Ó hUiginn, in a poem dedicated to Brian Ballach Ó Conchobair (*d.*1418), expressed admiration of his hospitality:

Aodh's son, ever facing lances, is the man we glorify; ever honoured shall be
all in his banquet hall (crowded) even to the doors.¹¹²

In religious poetry, the host is Christ and the banquet hall, Heaven. Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh, a century later, uses very similar language to praise Christ's generosity after His successful military campaign (His Passion and Death):

After His war with Adam's race, Thy Son [the poet is addressing Mary],
Heaven's ever-holy king, gave a banquet of grace crowded to the door.¹¹³

The special nature of Christ's banquet is highlighted by the fact that it is open to all, friends (the virtuous) and strangers (sinners) alike. Uaithne, son of Uilliam Ó Cobhthaigh (*d.*1556) notes that Christ 'prepared for us a feast hall and a feast great enough for the whole world; we enter a tavern without waiting to be invited.'¹¹⁴

Maolmhuire, son of Cairbre Ó hUiginn, a late sixteenth-century poet, and possibly the

¹¹² *ADD* 7, v.28.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 66, v.18.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 68, v.8.

same individual as Miler O' Higgins, who served as archbishop of Tuam between 1586 and 1590, states that 'Heaven's lord fortified a castle large enough for us all.'¹¹⁵ Tadhg Óg Ó Dálaigh (*fl.* 1520), in the light of the open invitation to Christ's banquet, considers it 'foolish for a crowd not to storm a guest hall left open during a feast'¹¹⁶, referring to those who, because of apathy, refused to accept Christ's gift of salvation. Predictably, the quality of Christ's generosity is juxtaposed with the poorer version found among mortals. Cormac Ruadh Ó hUiginn, (*n.l.t.* 1473), notes that 'His household ever welcomes newcomers; 'tis more hospitable than folk here; greater the fellowship in Heaven.'¹¹⁷ An unidentified poet (*n.l.t.* 1473) begins a poem on Christ with the following affirmation of His regal generosity: 'Rarely has a king shared his kingdom...'¹¹⁸

The requirement that a king be wise, described in the gnomic tract *Audacht Morainn* as *fir-brethach*¹¹⁹ (literally, 'true-judging') was especially important when the king in question was Christ, who would judge the world at the end of time. Just as in previous examples, the imagery used to praise the discernment of secular patrons was similarly applied to Christ. One of the most powerful images used to identify this gift in an individual was the use of the appellation 'salmon'. Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaird, who composed in the early seventeenth century, praised Cormac Ó hEadhra by addressing him as 'this fierce bear of martial ways, this golden-gilled salmon from the fresh, smooth, narrow stream of the Máigh.'¹²⁰ Tadhg, son of Giolla Brighde Mac

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 77, v.15

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 71, v.24.

¹¹⁷ *DDé* 21, v.29.

¹¹⁸ *ADD* 83, v.1.

¹¹⁹ McCone, *Pagan past and Christian present*, p.121.

¹²⁰ *BOH* 9, v.39.

Bruaideadha, in a poem dedicated to the same individual, highlights the importance of wisdom in a ruler for a chieftain's retinue:

Their full moon, their high tide, their sun shining forth after rain, is a prince whose decision is always solid and whose advice is ever ready, their prosperity.¹²¹

As early as the thirteenth century, bardic poets were highlighting the wisdom of Christ by use of the salmon epithet. Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe calls Christ the 'salmon of knowledge.'¹²² Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh also used the title when speaking of the Son of Man.¹²³ Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn (*d.*1487) cautions that 'for men to reject the love of the salmon of the ocean, their warmest friend, is to join the race of (his) foes.'¹²⁴ It is difficult not to see, in both the secular and religious use of the salmon image, traces of the legend of Fionn, who acquired wisdom by burning his thumb and subsequently sucking it, while cooking salmon, in the Fenian cycle. Joseph Falaky Nagy explains how the salmon is one of the traditional symbols of *imbas*, the esoteric knowledge of the poets:

According to medieval Irish poetic lore, *imbas* comes from a tree (or a grove of trees) located at the source of the great rivers of Ireland. Nuts fall from the branches into the water and are consumed by salmon. These fish, in turn swim downstream and are caught and eaten by waiting poets, who thus acquire the sought-after *imbas*.¹²⁵

¹²¹ *BOH* 6, v.43.

¹²² *GBMCM* 9, v.11.

¹²³ *DDé* 29, v.31.

¹²⁴ *ADD* 89, v.5.

¹²⁵ Joseph Falaky Nagy, *The wisdom of the outlaw: the boyhood deeds of Finn in Gaelic narrative tradition* (London, 1985), p.137. In a poem dedicated to St Francis, an unidentified poet of the fifteenth

The fifteenth-century Rennes manuscript, written in the Franciscan Observant friary of Kilcrea in 1475, contains, in its *dindsenchas* of the Shannon River, reference to the inspiration and wisdom contained in the nuts of the hazel tree which the salmon chew when they fall on the well.¹²⁶ It would be highly unlikely for professional poets, skilled in *seanchas* and lore, to be unaware of the traditional importance of the terminology they were using. The acquisition of wisdom by consuming the salmon whole, or in part, (as Fionn legendarily did) received an added significance when translated into religious poetry. The late sixteenth-century poet, Aodh, son of Cú Chonnacht Ó Ruanadha, speaks of Mary as the ‘pool of the great salmon’,¹²⁷ alluding to her carrying Christ in her womb. One wonders whether a member of the illustrious *aes dána* ever cast his mind on the consumption of the salmon of knowledge by poets eager to acquire *imbas*, while he himself consumed the Eucharistic species, the ‘Author of Wisdom’ at Mass.¹²⁸ It would be strange for a poet to leave his wealth of *seanchas* at home while approaching the altar. A sixteenth-century religious poem by

or sixteenth-century extols the virtue of humility in the saint in a manner that is reminiscent of this tradition: ‘The full nut falls into the stream; it tends to earth – so wise men say – the blind one remains above’ (‘To St Francis of Assisi’, *IM* 1930, v.22, p.152). St Francis is obviously compared to the ‘full nut’ that is lowly by nature, refusing to remain in an exalted position.

¹²⁶ The *dindsenchas* appears in a fifteenth-century manuscript preserved in the library at Rennes, in ff. 90-125. The section on the Shannon appears at 109 b I. See Whitley Stokes, ‘The prose tales in the Rennes *dindsenchas*’ in *Révue Celtique* xv (1894), p.457. The section on the Shannon also appears in the *Book of Ballymote* f.381^a30, also in the fifteenth-century TCD Ms. 1322, f.39^a, the *Book of Lecan* RIA f.479^a; also in Bodleian Ms.Rawl.B406, no.33 and finally the *Book of Leinster* from the middle of the twelfth century at f.156^a6.

¹²⁷ *ADD* 82, v.10.

¹²⁸ The fifteenth-century friar-poet, Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn (*d.*1487) uses this more theological term to describe Christ in one poem. See *PB* 23, v.44.

Domhnall, son of Dáire Mac Bruaideadha, appears to move away from the salmon tradition in folklore, stressing that poetic wisdom comes from no other source other than God:

No man has any excellence of mind or possessions but he gets it from God; it is thus the poet's poetic gift (not the poet himself) that earns the reward, whoever may be the giver of it. /

His are the treasures given me (by princes), His the wisdom I impart to others; 'tis God's Son who both forms the poet's words and rewards him for them.¹²⁹

In Mac Bruaideadha's poem, therefore, Christ clearly replaces the salmon as the source of wisdom. Incidentally, the original source of the poet's knowledge, namely the nut from the hazel tree is also used in bardic poetry as a metaphor for Christ (but, as always, not exclusively),¹³⁰ as is the hazel tree itself.¹³¹ The use of the title 'salmon of knowledge' to describe Christ is rooted both in the Judaeo-Christian tradition and native Irish lore. Firstly, the designation of God as the source of all wisdom is an important theme in Old Testament literature.¹³² Native folklore relating to the *imbas* of poets, with its origins in a pagan past, is Christianised when it is used in the religious poetry of the bardic poets. While the appellation of 'salmon' addressed to a patron might be reminiscent of a pre-Christian Irish history, there is no doubt that poets such as Domhnall, son of Dáire Mac Bruaideadha sought to interpret the title in

¹²⁹ *ADD* 58, vv 9-10.

¹³⁰ *GBMCM* 9, v.13.

¹³¹ *ADD* 76, v.19.

¹³² See, for example, Solomon's prayer for wisdom (W^s 7:15-16): 'May God grant me to speak as He would wish and conceive thoughts worthy of the gifts I have received, since He is both guide to Wisdom and director of sages; for we are in His hand, yes ourselves and our sayings, and all intellectual and all practical knowledge.'

a purely Christian context, leaving his audience in no doubt as to who he believed to be the principal source of wisdom. Examples such as these illustrate how universal truths of Christianity were quite easily expressed under the guise of poetic imagery that owed its origin to a distant and different past.

The importance of the genealogy and kinship of rulers in Gaelic Ireland was not forgotten when discussing heavenly personages. As early as the thirteenth century, Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh speaks of God as ‘our kinsman’ and Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe reminds his listeners of God coming to judge His own kinsmen.¹³³ An unidentified poet (*n.l.t.*1614) addresses Christ as his brother while the sixteenth-century poet, Mathghamhain Ó hUiginn, praises his creator and lord as ‘foster-brother.’¹³⁴ Depicting people in terms of their establishment or retention of kinship with Christ was hugely important in the Gaelic mind. To be a member of a kin-group was the key to legal status in society. The bardic poets reflect in their religious poetry the ever-urgent need to belong to a unit that was healthy and strong. They like to indulge in sorting out Christ’s own kin-group and genealogy. Jesus, for Aonghus, son of Aodh Ruadh Ó hUiginn is ‘grandson of Joachim’¹³⁵; for the late sixteenth-century poet, Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh, He is ‘comely grandson of Anne’¹³⁶ while, three centuries earlier, Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe spoke of Joachim as ‘*seanathair Dé*’ (‘grandfather of God’).¹³⁷ Joachim is said to have been of noble origin

¹³³ *DDé* 26, v.2; *GBMCM* 21, v.9

¹³⁴ *ADD* 86, v.17; *ibid.*, 76, v.13.

¹³⁵ ‘The Song of Aonghus Mac Aodha Ruaidh Ó hUiginn’, v.4 in Shane Leslie (ed.), *Saint Patrick’s Purgatory: a record from history and literature* (London, 1932), p.175.

¹³⁶ *AFOD* 21, v.4.

¹³⁷ *ADD* 49, v.9.

(*'deaghachain é'*)¹³⁸ because he was eventually to be the grandfather of God and it would be inappropriate, to say the least, for the God-Man to have anything but the best genealogy. A poem attributed to Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh refers to *'trí glúine geinealach Dé'* ('three generations of the genealogy of God').¹³⁹ The generations in question are those of the Trinity – Father, Son and Spirit. Kinship with Christ was crucial for those who wished to ensure their inclusion at the heavenly banquet. Muirchertach Ó Cionga (*fl.* 1580) alludes to the importance of the entire kin-group gathering for the banquet at the castle of Heaven:

Thy grace is our ladder to Thee in Thy heavenly castle; choose no narrow-minded way in our regard; 'tis best that all a family should be in its home.¹⁴⁰

The idea that humanity belonged to Christ's kin-group arose from the Virgin Mary's acceptance of her role as Mother of God. Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn (*d.* 1448) refers to the initial establishment of the kin-relationship: 'My kinship with God was not secure till the angel confided God's wish to her.'¹⁴¹ In effect, humanity was understood to be related to God on His mother's side. Ó hUiginn proceeds to note how he has won Christ's attention only because of his relationship to the Virgin Mary:

Though that branch from Heaven had little reason to have regard for me, she led me to Him owing to my kinship, for she was a kinswoman of mine.¹⁴²

Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn, in a plea for forgiveness, asks Christ to remember that he is a result of His Father's creation and thus has a significant bond with Him; even more important, however, is the kinship bond that the poet has with His mother:

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ *DD* 60, v.1.

¹⁴⁰ *ADD* 60, v.28.

¹⁴¹ *DDé* 2, v.6. See also *ibid.*, 10, v.14; 20, v.35; 28, v.19.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, v.10.

My creation by Thy Father is reason for His forgiveness of my sin; and – seeing Mary’s existence – what nearer relationship to Thee, O Son, could I have?¹⁴³

The regard that a Gaelic chieftain might have for his kin-group is reflected in Christ’s regard for humanity. It was this bond of relationship, according to Maolmhuire, son of Cairbre Ó hUiginn, which led Christ to sacrifice His life: ‘He died on the cross to satisfy His kin-love.’¹⁴⁴ Bardic poets considered the claim to kinship with Christ, through Mary, a particularly powerful plea as is evidenced by the frequency of its appearance in the religious poetry of the period. Surely a mighty chieftain was responsible for the safety of his kin-group, it was thought. It was never forgotten, however, that the source of humanity’s kinship with the Redeemer was Mary. Maolmhuire, son of Cairbre Ó hUiginn surmises, therefore, that if he is to be ultimately rejected by Christ, then this will also involve the rejection of his kinswoman, the Virgin Mary:

Of one blood are we, I and the nurse-mother of the Creator’s Son; Mary, my sister, will rule the castle or else she and I shall be outside it.¹⁴⁵

The same poet also goes on to claim that the shedding of Christ’s blood, for which humanity stands eternally accused, involved the shedding of kin-blood, including humanity’s own blood (since the human race is of one blood with Christ, through His mother):

¹⁴³ *ADD* 89, v.21.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 77, v.14

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, v.16.

Owing to our kinship with Mary, we (Christ and I) are of one clay, the clay of the four elements; not more of Thy blood than of mine didst Thou shed (i.e. it was as much mine as Thine); 'twere senseless of Thee to disown me.'¹⁴⁶

An unidentified poet (*n.l.t.*1614) succinctly states that 'our brother should remember that His mother and I are of one blood; no gain for her is anything granted to her if she meet with a refusal in the matter of (my) sin', indicating that the Virgin Mary's priorities were primarily those of kinship and that any other favours bestowed on her by Christ would remain empty if He ignored the obligations that kinship involved.¹⁴⁷

Thus, Cormac Ruadh Ó hUiginn (*n.l.t.*1473) expects Christ to remember His responsibility in this regard:

May Christ fulfil His kinship duties though men be neglectful; He should have regard for His mother's blood, for she and I are of one stock.¹⁴⁸

Genealogy and kinship was also important for the issue of succession, which was so vital in the political life of Gaelic society. The question of succession, predictably, also spills over into the religious world of God's kingship. Maolmhuire, son of Cairbre Ó hUiginn complains of the folly, in Gaelic political terms, of having put Christ to death: 'Thou art the high king's son – we cannot do without thee; to slay thee was a senseless crime'¹⁴⁹. The *Propaganda Fide* archives in Rome bear witness to the fact that speaking about the Son of God in terms of political succession

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, v.31.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 100, v.30.

¹⁴⁸ *DDé* 22, v.5.

¹⁴⁹ *ADD* 77, v.18.

continued into the seventeenth century; it is reported that some people believed that Christ the Son could not be God until His Father had died!¹⁵⁰

While God the Father and Christ the Son were frequently portrayed in the image of the ideal Gaelic ruler, wise, powerful, physically striking, generous and hospitable, they were also depicted in a less regal manner, which balanced the ideal of perfection with accessibility. The sixteenth-century poet, Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh, makes reference to the ‘king in her [Mary’s] womb’¹⁵¹. Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn (*d.*1448) addresses the ‘king who sat on Mary’s gentle lap.’¹⁵² Domhnall, son of Dáire mac Bruaideadha mentions the ‘child-king’¹⁵³ and Diarmuid Mac an Bhaird (late sixteenth century) speaks of ‘our gentle king.’¹⁵⁴ The gentler side of Christ’s kingship often appears when His relationship with Mary is in question.¹⁵⁵ The title of ‘king’ or ‘lord’ is often applied to the deity in many other forms not linked to Gaelic culture. He is called ‘king of grace’, ‘the world’s lord’, ‘true anointed prince’, ‘king who floods and ebbs’, ‘heaven’s king’, ‘angel’s king’, ‘king of lords’, ‘Lord of Heaven’, ‘Heaven’s three-fold king’, etc.¹⁵⁶ Christ is also addressed as ‘prince of the six households.’¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁰ Raymond Gillespie, *The sacred in the secular: religious change in Catholic Ireland 1500-1700* (St Michael’s College, Vermont, 1993), p.3.

¹⁵¹ *ADD* 66, v.16.

¹⁵² *DDé* 7, v.26.

¹⁵³ *ADD* 58, v.13.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 56, v.12.

¹⁵⁵ The calming effect of Mary on her Son, Jesus, is treated of in chapter 2.

¹⁵⁶ *DDé* 29, v.31; *ADD* 63, v.7, *ibid.*, 76, v.9; *GBMCM* 9, v.10; *ADD* 75, v.16; *AFOD* 16, v.1; *ibid.*, 22, v.8; *ADD* 51, v.3; *ibid.*, 69, v.9.

¹⁵⁷ *ADD* 76, v.5. The ‘six households’ refer to the *sex aetates mundi*, or six ages of the world, a periodisation of world history that ultimately derives from Augustine’s division of history into seven ages, corresponding to the days of creation, in his work *De Civitate Dei*. The ages in question span

Besides the title of 'king', an alternative epithet, which is frequently applied to God or Christ, is 'liaigh' or 'leech' (physician). This image also comes from the heart of Gaelic Irish society and is used from an early period. Wendy Davies identifies the *liaigh*, whose traditional role had some influence on the later bestowal of the term on patrons in bardic poetry, as having three main functions. They were 'mechanics of the body' (classified as *dóer-nemid* with independent status among craftsmen such as wrights, blacksmiths, braziers etc. by the eighth or ninth-century legal tract *Uraicecht Becc*), nutritionists and legal officers (ensuring that the sick or injured person got his legal entitlement).¹⁵⁸ In short, they were men of status. Irial, son of Aonghus Ó hUiginn (*fl.* 1585), in a poem dedicated to Cormac Ó hEadhra, states that now that the tribe of Luighne (a people who inhabited districts in both Meath and Sligo) is under Cormac's rule, they have a leech to cure their wounds.¹⁵⁹ The role of the leech or physician, therefore, was to tend to those placed in his charge and to ensure that their well-being was upheld at all times. When the title of *liaigh* was bestowed upon a ruler, then, the message conveyed contained an affirmation of the suitability of the individual for his role, with an assurance that his people would prosper and be taken

from Adam to Noah, Noah to Abraham, Abraham to David, David to the Exile, the Exile to the coming of Christ, the sixth age covering the period from Christ's Incarnation to the end of time. The seventh age (sometimes cited) signifies eternal life, which corresponds to the original Sabbath. This division of world history was well known in late medieval European literature as a whole and appears in Irish collections such as *Lebor na hUidre*, the *Book of Ballymote*, the (*Great*) *Book of Lecan*, *Leabhar Uí Mhaine* and frequently in bardic poetry. See Martin McNamara, *The apocrypha in the Irish Church* (Dublin, 1975), pp 30-1.

¹⁵⁸ Wendy Davies, 'The place of healing in early-Irish society' in Donnchadh Ó Corráin, Liam Breatnach and Kim McCone (eds), *Sages, saints and storytellers: Celtic studies in honour of Professor James Carney* (Maynooth, 1989), p.48; see also McCone, *Pagan past and Christian present*, p.86.

¹⁵⁹ *BOH* 12, v.16.

care of properly under that rule. In religious poetry, the message is similar. However, as always, the epithet becomes much richer and far more profound when applied to Christ. One particular poet, who, in a poem attributed to Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh, prayed that ‘we be truly cured by the leech who loves to cure us’¹⁶⁰, may well have been aware that, in this line, he was echoing the response of Jesus to a leper who sought healing in Luke 5:12-14: ‘Of course I want to’. The poet proceeds to note that this particular physician asks for no fee for His visit and does not prescribe any medication (in this case the bitter draft of gall that He drank on the cross) that He does not first, Himself, imbibe.¹⁶¹ The poet addresses Christ as ‘healing herb’ and ‘healer of all wounds’ and asks for the cure of his soul.¹⁶² The application of the title ‘healer of all wounds’ to Christ illustrates very well the fascination bardic poets had with paradox. In the case of Christ, who, it must be admitted, is in a different category of *liaigh* to any secular ruler to whom the title might be applied, the healing that is performed relies solely upon the wounding of the physician Himself (in His Passion and Death), the wounds subsequently acting as healing herbs. Thus, the sixteenth-century poet, Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh, links Christ’s role as physician with His wounded hands on Calvary in a clever conceit:

The leech who cured His race deserves that His cure of it go not unpaid; the
Son hanging on the Cross cured our wounds; a leech’s hand is naturally blood-
stained.¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ ‘To Christ our physician’, *IM* 1922, v.1, p.517. The provenance of this poem is uncertain since, despite its attribution to Ó Dálaigh, it occurs only in late and corrupted manuscripts.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, vv 3-4.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, vv 7, 11.

¹⁶³ *ADD* 63, v.31.

In another poem, treating of Christ's Passion, Ó Cobhthaigh comments: 'each of Thy wounds – even that in Thy breast – was a soothing herb for Eve's race.'¹⁶⁴ What was obviously quite an old title, frequently used in secular poetry, and with its origin in a role, which was given great importance in early Irish law, was translated into a religious epithet by the bardic poets, attaining a new and deeper significance in the process. The title was used as a vehicle with which the poets could expound upon both traditional and emerging religious themes. The idea that the body and soul are perpetually at war with each other, a religious theme that is found throughout the medieval period, is referred to in the light of Christ's role as physician in a poem by Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn in the fifteenth century:

Thou art the physician tending the soul and curing the (body's) wound; but the one does not thank Thee for the other's cure.¹⁶⁵

The treatment that Christ gave to His patients, through His Passion, sometimes elicited a similar response from individuals wishing to assuage the physician's own pain. The following example, although outside the timeframe of this work, merits attention, nevertheless. Gofraidh Ó Cléirigh (*n.l.t.*1372), in an interesting reversal of roles, offers himself as physician to Christ: 'May I find herbs in my heart and place them in Christ's wounds; may I be a leech for the wounds...'¹⁶⁶ While Christ could offer humanity His wounds and sufferings on Calvary as 'herbs' to cure its inherent sinfulness (Mathghamhain Ó hUiginn once addressed Christ as 'gracious physician curing all men of wickedness'¹⁶⁷) humanity, in turn, could offer its virtue and good

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 64, v.23. An unidentified poet (*n.l.t.*1614) addresses the cross itself as 'our saving herb': *ibid.*, 88, v.9.

¹⁶⁵ *DDé* 7, v.20.

¹⁶⁶ *ADD* 61, v.10.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 76, v.15.

deeds to cure Christ. Ó Cléirigh highlights this in the following verse: ‘Let my charity sink into Christ’s wound; may not pain equal to His body’s pain be decreed against me in His book.’¹⁶⁸

The theme of light, which is prominent in Scripture and, in particular, in the Gospel of John where Christ claims to be ‘Light of the World’,¹⁶⁹ appears frequently in bardic encomiums, both secular and religious. Sometimes it occurs in quite a familiar form as in Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh’s description of Christ, contained in the lines ‘royal candle of the living world is the Father’s son, the lord...king of eternal light’¹⁷⁰ or Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn’s ‘O torch of six flames’ (referring to Christ as light / torch of the six ages).¹⁷¹ However, more often, Christ appears as a ‘full moon’, an image that is more native than universal, and which the poets prefer to use. Its secular use in poetry usually portrays the ruler as a reliable guide for his people. The late sixteenth-century poet, Tadhg, son of Giolla Brighde Mac Bruaideadha, describes a prince (in this case, Cormac Ó hEadhra) whose decision is as solid as ‘their [his people’s] full moon.’¹⁷² Iolland Ó Domhnalláin, praising Cú Chonnacht Mág Uidhir around the same time, calls him ‘a full moon on whose account the Maguires are praised.’¹⁷³ The

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 61, v.11. Wendy Davies, commenting on the approach of the Irish legal tracts to illness and sick care, which often seem preoccupied with the status of the injured notes that ‘only in the case of a king were herbs admitted as a possible cure; ...presumably it was only kings who had access to herbal remedies because they were expensive and rare.’ If this was actually the case, then to offer to Christ, or receive from Him, a healing by herbal remedy was a great privilege indeed. See Davies, ‘The place of healing in early-Irish society’, p.48.

¹⁶⁹ Jn 8:12.

¹⁷⁰ *DDé* 28, v.1.

¹⁷¹ *PB* 23, v.48.

¹⁷² *BOH* 6, v.43.

¹⁷³ *DMU* 24, v.40.

use of the term 'full moon' to describe Christ in sixteenth-century religious poetry conveys a similar message. Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh, addressing Mary, and reminding her of the Incarnation, reflects that 'the first rays of that full moon must have caused great joy.'¹⁷⁴ Eochaidh Ó hEoghusa, composing at the end of the century, calls Christ 'a moon never darkened.'¹⁷⁵ Domhnall, son of Dáire Mac Bruaideadha, speaks of 'a moon for me as bright as the sun and ever unclouded'¹⁷⁶ while both Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaird and Mathghamhain Ó hUiginn refer to Christ as 'the full moon' with the latter poet adding 'of which Daniel spoke.'¹⁷⁷ In treating of Christ's Passion, the late sixteenth-century poet, Diarmuid Mac an Bhaird, refers to 'Mary's lamb [who] lay on the torture cross and the moon above them faded away',¹⁷⁸ indicating the death of Christ as he 'faded away' on the cross, but also echoing the Synoptic accounts of the sky darkening and darkness falling over the land.¹⁷⁹ Alternatively, the reference may be closer in meaning to earlier depictions of the sun and moon as at the crucifixion scene depicted at the top shaft of the High Cross of SS Patrick and Columba at Kells, discussed by Peter Harbison. Two figures, one of which turns its back on Christ, are identified by Harbison as the sun and the moon. He mentions a similar illustration on the ivory of c.870 in the National Library, Munich, where the sun and moon ride respectively on chariots towards and away from Christ.¹⁸⁰ Pádraig Ó Fiannachta

¹⁷⁴ *ADD* 63, v.20.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 76, v.15.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 58, v.27.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 54, v.4, 75, vv 1,44. The Book of Daniel was immensely popular in medieval Ireland.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 56, v.12.

¹⁷⁹ Mark 15:33, Matt 27:45, Luke 23:45.

¹⁸⁰ See Peter Harbison, *The high crosses of Ireland: an iconographical and photographic survey* (3 vols, Bonn, 1992), i, pp 275-6.

interprets Christ's portrayal as 'full moon' as highlighting his role as '*treoir sa dorchadas*' ('a guide in the darkness'), which corresponds with its secular meaning.¹⁸¹ This interpretation is strengthened by the evidence of an unidentified poet (*n.l.t.* 1614) who calls Christ 'the splendid star of guidance, our bright moon of peace.'¹⁸² However, the use of this term, so often employed in bardic praise poetry, becomes as much a reminder of the universal Johannine theme of Christ as 'Light of the World' as a reflection of native Gaelic imagery when it occurs in religious verse.

Bardic poets often employed features of nature to praise their earthly patrons and, concomitantly, Christ. One of the most popular of these was the branch or bud image. The thirteenth-century poet, Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh calls Christ 'a fragrant bud...though not yet a full-grown fruit; naught like it exists except the branch of the tree whence it grew.'¹⁸³ In this case, Ó Dálaigh does not merely employ a particular pair of appellations that he might use in the same way in a poem dedicated to a secular patron. His description includes an important statement about the nature of Jesus and about His equality with the Father. The branch image is to be found in bardic poetry from the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries. Christ, for Gofraidh Ó Cléirigh (*n.l.t.* 1372) is a 'branch sprung from Mary' and for Diarmuid Mac an Bhaire (mid sixteenth century) 'the tree blossoming in Mary's womb'¹⁸⁴ which becomes, in Eochaidh Ó hEoghusa's words, 'our lofty tree of shelter.'¹⁸⁵ The late sixteenth-century poet, Maolmhuire, son of Cairbre Ó hUiginn, describes Christ as a 'tree

¹⁸¹ I wish to express thanks to Mgr Pádraig Ó Fiannachta for discussing this image with me, in addition to a number of other questions.

¹⁸² *ADD* 86, v.25.

¹⁸³ *DDé* 29, v.13.

¹⁸⁴ *ADD* 61, v.19; *ibid.*, 56, v.4.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 76, v.9.

overtopping a wood'¹⁸⁶, indicating His supremacy above all. The bud / branch / shoot / stock image, which was, incidentally, often used in connection with Trinitarian question, is reminiscent of similar imagery used in the prophetic literature of the Bible.¹⁸⁷ While it was certainly used in secular poetry, its employment in religious verse afforded the poet much greater possibilities for conceit. Thus, the late sixteenth-century poet, Diarmuid Mac an Bhaird's description of Christ as a tree highlights His role as antidote to the effects of the Tree of Knowledge in Eden:

The world's lord, the tree blossoming in Mary's womb, by going beneath the tomb saved the whole world, His race, from the (consequences of the) spoiling of the tree.¹⁸⁸

Many other titles were regularly employed to address Christ in bardic religious poetry. The scope of this present work does not allow for a detailed survey of them all. Some appellations explore paradoxes of the divinity, an exercise for which the Gaelic Irish had a particular *penchant*; for Donnchadh Mór, therefore, Christ is 'strongest of the strong' while also being 'weakest of the weak'¹⁸⁹ and an unidentified poet (*n.l.t.* 1614) wonders how Christ is 'death and yet new life.'¹⁹⁰ Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaird explores the paradox of Mary bearing her Creator: 'As a kernel in a nut, lay her father in her womb.'¹⁹¹ Other images were clearly influenced by biblical stories that were either read or, more often than not, heard. Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh asks

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 77, v.2.

¹⁸⁷ See Isaiah 11:1, 'A shoot springs from the stock of Jesse; a scion thrusts from its roots'...

¹⁸⁸ *ADD* 56, v.4.

¹⁸⁹ *DDé* 29, v.16.

¹⁹⁰ *ADD* 86, v.26.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 90, v.9.

‘could there be better herdsman for his flock?’,¹⁹² addressing Christ in terms of His role as shepherd, which features prominently in the gospels.¹⁹³ The late sixteenth-century poet, Gofraidh, son of Brian Mac an Bhaird, makes reference to another familiar gospel story when he addresses Christ as ‘sea whose ebbing abounds in fish.’¹⁹⁴ When Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn calls Christ ‘door unlocked’¹⁹⁵ it is difficult not to imagine the gospel passage that encourages one to knock, with the promise that a door will open, as the inspiration for his thoughts.¹⁹⁶ Some references to Christ are more theological in character. Tuathal Ó hUiginn (*d.*1450) speaks of Christ’s body ‘with its two natures, those of the Father and of Mary, God’s mother.’¹⁹⁷ Philip Bocht calls Christ ‘author of wisdom.’¹⁹⁸ Gofraidh, son of Brian Mac an Bhaird refers to him as ‘glory which was and is and shall be’¹⁹⁹ and a poem attributed to Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh contains a phrase which bears a strong resemblance to the theological musings of the Fathers of the Church, namely ‘lord of purest substance.’²⁰⁰ However, the most difficult problem of all, which presented itself to poets and theologians alike, was the task of addressing the Trinitarian nature of God.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 65, v.34.

¹⁹³ Jn 1 :15; Mt 11: 27; Lk 10 : 22.

¹⁹⁴ *ADD* 51, v.1. The relevant Gospel passages are Jn 21:6 and Lk 5:6.

¹⁹⁵ *PB* 23, v.48.

¹⁹⁶ Matt 7:7 ff.

¹⁹⁷ *DDé* 18, v.20.

¹⁹⁸ *PB* 23, v.44

¹⁹⁹ *ADD* 51, v.10.

²⁰⁰ ‘Poem to Christ’, *IM* 1923, v.17, p.473.

The Problem of the Trinity

In a homily dealing with some articles of the Creed, appearing in the *Leabhar Breac* the following instruction is given regarding the Trinity:

For He who is Father is not Son or (Holy) Ghost; and He who is Son is not Father or (Holy) Ghost; and He who is Holy Ghost is not Father or Son. However these three persons are one God, and not three Gods; one Creator and not three Creators; one Lord and not three Lords. For they have one and the same Divine nature; they have the same will and power; and they have the same abode. For they are together in every place and their acts are the same, since it is together they made and govern every creature. Not older, indeed is one than another of them, since the three persons existed before creatures, and before times, without beginning, without commencement in the world, as they will have no limit nor end.²⁰¹

This kind of instruction, appearing in homiletic form, presents itself in a non-academic manner. The language is simple and direct, with no evidence of the convolution sometimes found in more theological tracts. The passage relays a very simple message, namely that the persons of the Trinity are distinct from each other and yet are, nevertheless, one God. They are not divided in will, are coeval with each other and are without beginning or end. These are, in fact the basic tenets of Trinitarian dogma. One cannot help imagining the above instruction on the Trinity as indicative of the kind of material preached from pulpits around Ireland in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Any preacher who managed to get across these basic points to his congregation would have been very pleased indeed. Understanding the finer

²⁰¹ See Edmund Hogan (ed.), *The Irish Nennius from L. na hUidre and homilies and legends from L. Brecc* (Dublin, 1895), p.30.

theological points was probably beyond the great majority of both lay people and clergy, who were largely unskilled in the discipline of theology.

A scheme for the instruction of the laity, beginning with the words '*Ignorantia sacerdotum*', promulgated by the Franciscan Archbishop of Canterbury, John Pecham (1279-92) at Lambeth in 1281 provided priests with material for catechetical purposes on the Apostles creed, the Ten Commandments, the Seven Works of Mercy, the Seven Deadly Sins, the Seven Virtues and the sacraments. Within the section on the Creed, the question of the Trinity was addressed. In Armagh, if not elsewhere, every priest was expected to possess a copy of it and to preach on its contents four times a year.²⁰² The practice of quarterly instruction on church documents did not only apply to this constitution. The Synod of Cashel constitution of 1453 was also expected to be in the hands of every priest and explained to the people in their native language four times a year (on the Sundays before Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, and Michaelmas).²⁰³ In a fifteenth-century English manual based on the *Ignorantia Sacerdotum* we find a statement on the Trinity which was undoubtedly applied in Gaelic Ireland as in England: 'Ther shal no creature discusse or studie hou Pat God may be thre and oon but fully bileeue as al Hooli Chirche bileeueh.'²⁰⁴ Belief, then, and not understanding was of primary importance, a clear advocacy of Anselm's *fides quaerens intellectum*. This attitude is clearly reflected in various sources for the period, particularly those relating to the later sixteenth-century. A poem on the Creed

²⁰² Watt, *The church in medieval Ireland*, p.211.

²⁰³ 'Provincial Synod of Cashel held in Limerick, 1453', section 21, in John Begley, *The diocese of Limerick, ancient and medieval* (Dublin, 1906), pp 431-41.

²⁰⁴ The manuscript in question is Bodleian Library Ms. Eng. Th. c 57. See Phyllis Hodgson, 'Ignorantia Sacerdotum: a fifteenth-century discourse on the Lambeth constitutions' in *The Review of English Studies* xxiv, No.93 (January, 1948), p.6.

by an unidentified poet (*n.l.t.*1614) begins by the words ‘*Creidim mar chreideas an eaglais*’ (I believe what the Church believes).²⁰⁵ Matthew Lamport, a Wexford boatman who involved himself in the Baltinglass rising of 1580, defended himself in the presence of his inquisitors at his trial by saying ‘I do not know how to debate these things with you. I only want you to know that I am Catholic and I believe in the faith of my holy mother, the Catholic Church.’²⁰⁶ Philip O’Sullivan Bear, complaining in the seventeenth century about the poor state of the faith in Ireland in the previous century, states that ‘some indeed were so ignorant of the evidence of the faith that they knew not how to prove or explain anything beyond that they themselves firmly believed whatever the Roman Catholic Church believed.’²⁰⁷ Clearly, among those who ‘believed as the Church believed’, there existed three kinds of believer. Firstly, there were those who knew what the Church believed, adhered to it themselves and were able to provide some reason why they believed such things; secondly there were people who knew what the Church believed and believed in it themselves but without the ability to rationally explain their belief. Lastly there were those who testified belief in those things the Church believed in, but were not quite certain what they were!

Bardic poets, from an early stage, undertook explorations of the nature of their Triune God. The early poets, such as those composing in the thirteenth century, frequently concern themselves with problems of enumeration. Muireadhach Albanach Ó Dálaigh examines Christ’s condition as God-Man while petitioning Him for mercy: ‘O Thou who art one and two give us a light judgement; O Thou who art three in one, let a

²⁰⁵ *DD* 15, v.1’.

²⁰⁶ Gillespie, *Devoted people*, p.26.

²⁰⁷ Philip O’ Sullivan Bear, *Ireland under Elizabeth*, trans. Matthew.J. Byrne (Dublin, 1903), p.43.

prompting of Thy humanity move thee',²⁰⁸ referring at once to Christ being one (the Second Person of the Trinity) and two (possessing both a human and divine nature) and being three-in-one (as Christ is God, He is a Triune God). Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh also addresses Christ as both three and two.²⁰⁹ The difficulty in believing such a mystery is enunciated by Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh (*d.*1387) in the following verse:

May the belief in Heaven's three-fold king, the High-King, three-in-one – is the mystery made any easier by counting them several times? – sink into my heart.²¹⁰

For some, like Cormac Ruadh Ó hUiginn (*n.l.t.*1473), poetic musings could result in questionable theological conclusions. In one particular poem, Ó hUiginn states that 'the Father remained ruling in Heaven; the king of glory was divided, one part being in the Virgin's womb',²¹¹ thus displaying impeccable Arian qualities! Later poems tend to emphasise belief rather than confusion. The late sixteenth-century poet, Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh, affirms the Trinitarian dogma when he states:

Father and pure innocent Son, and Holy Spirit, bright and strong. God's Son who has guided us is Three in truth and yet One!²¹²

Aodh, son of Conchonnacht Ó Ruanadha, composing around the same time, uses the branch image to illustrate the nature of the Trinity: 'Fragrant tree of three-fold fruit are the three gold branches on one stock, whose branches are alike.'²¹³ Poets

²⁰⁸ *ADD* 70, v.30.

²⁰⁹ *DDé* 27, v.11.

²¹⁰ *ADD* 69, v.9.

²¹¹ *DDé* 21, v.14.

²¹² *AFOD* 5, v.6.

²¹³ *ADD* 82, v.22.

sometimes treated the persons of the Trinity as interchangeable. One such poet (*n.l.t.*1631), nevertheless stresses the necessity of belief in the mystery: ‘O Holy Spirit – holy Thy state! – Thou art the Son and Thou art the Father; that Thou art in three parts must be believed and yet the nut is not divided.’²¹⁴ The description of important personages as ‘nuts’ was not uncommon in secular poetry, being sometimes used to identify individuals as the fruit of noble families. Thus, in a poem by Muirchertach Ó Cionga (*fl.*1580) the Virgin Mary is described as ‘the queen, a branch bearing royal hazelnuts’, highlighting her role as Mother of the Triune God.²¹⁵ According Mary the distinction of having borne not only Jesus but also the Trinity, as a whole, in her womb, was not new. The thirteenth-century poet, Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe, states that ‘for nine long months the saviour-child of the world, the only-begotten, shone, a three-fold flame lying in her womb.’²¹⁶ Contemporaneously, Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh identifies Mary as ‘*buime trír máthair mhic Dé*’²¹⁷ and the persons of the Trinity as her nurslings.²¹⁸ Fondness for paradox, evident throughout bardic poetry, also appears in treatments of the Trinitarian question. Muireadhach Albanach Ó Dálaigh, in the thirteenth century, describes the scene in Heaven after Christ’s Ascension as ‘a meeting... of the two royal persons, the Son ever ancient and the Father ever new.’²¹⁹ Such paradoxical statements not only reflect bardic conventions.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 98, v.19

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 60, v.4.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 49, v.13. For further discussion of this image see Andrew Breeze, ‘The Trinity as taper: a Welsh allusion to Langland’, in *Notes and Queries* 235 (1990).

²¹⁷ ‘The mother of the Son of God is the nurse of three’: *DD* 9, v.1.

²¹⁸ ‘*Triur i n-a trír daltaibh dhi*’ (‘The three are her nurslings’): *ibid.*, v.9. Mary is also portrayed as not only the nurse of the three divine persons, but their lover also: *ibid.*, v.8.

²¹⁹ *ADD* 70, v.21.

They also illustrate an appreciation of subtle theological points. Later poets, such as Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh, continued to employ paradox to create works of art that also contained valuable theological conclusions. Ó Cobhthaigh thus places the Trinity at the centre of the Passion event by referring to the ‘wounding of the three in the person of the one.’²²⁰ The works of the bardic poets show individuals trying to grapple with a profound mystery that can never be fully understood. Later poems tend to profess belief rather than identify its inherent problems. The shift in focus reflects the changing nature of belief in sixteenth-century Ireland, most particularly the rise of confessionalism and a greater sense of Catholic identity in the later 1500s. To identify oneself as ‘believing what the Church believes’ became especially important during a period in which Catholic recusants began to react against a common threat. Catechesis on the Trinity, such as that found in the *Leabhar Breac* homily, was eventually to find its way into the verses of the bardic poets. This development is examined in chapter 7. Illustrations of the Holy Trinity also played a formative role in shaping belief. Helen M. Roe has identified two kinds of illustration prominent in the period examined here.²²¹ The first is known as the ‘Throne of Grace’ or ‘Mercy Seat’ and came into fashion in the mid-thirteenth century. The Father is depicted as crowned and imperially robed, holding the cross on which His Son hangs crucified between His knees. Between the heads of the Father and Son, the dove, representing the Spirit, hovers.²²² Roe has identified fifteen illustrations of this kind, all dating from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and also cites other later examples which are not

²²⁰ Ibid., 64, v.2.

²²¹ Helen. M. Roe, ‘Illustrations of the Holy Trinity in Ireland 13th to 17th centuries’ in *R.S.A.I.Jn.* cix (1979), pp 101-50.

²²² Ibid., p.102.

included here. These illustrations take many forms including tomb sculptures, altarpieces, a chalice, a wooden statue, a silver crosier, etc. They are also of wide geographical distribution, covering counties Meath (2), Kilkenny (5), Dublin (4), Tipperary (1), Limerick (1), Waterford (1) and Galway (1).²²³ The second version of the Trinity, which grew popular towards the end of the fifteenth century, is strongly connected with the theme of the coronation of Mary as Queen of Heaven. The emphasis in this illustration is, in fact, more on Mary's glorification than on the three persons. God the Father is unusually seated among the clouds to the dexter of the scene. He is crowned and robed. On the sinister side is God the Son, seated and holding a long, slender, cross. He is usually depicted as crowned with thorns and partially clothed by a robe. Between the two figures, Mary is seen to rise above the clouds, waiting to be crowned. The dove hovers over the whole scene. Roe identifies four examples of this scene, two from Galway and two from Kilkenny, all dating from the seventeenth century.²²⁴ This particular representation of the Trinity places Mary in the foreground, and in examining an example such as the four carved limestone panels above the altar of St Nicholas in the Catholic Cathedral of Galway, one could be forgiven for assuming that Mary was, indeed, taking her place as a member of the Trinity. Perhaps it was representations such as these that led some people to the conclusion that there were four Gods, as reported in 1668 by the Achonry priest, Fr John Sullivan.²²⁵

²²³ Ibid., pp 110-12.

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Gillespie, *Devoted people*, p.24.

God in Creation

For the Gaelic Irish, God was, above all, an active being. His work was clearly evident in creation and the splendour of nature. This was not lost on a people who had a great regard for the natural elements. Creation was God's work and was seen as essentially good. The thirteenth-century poet, Muireadhach Albanach Ó Dálaigh, affirms the goodness of God's work in the line: 'O Trinity, thou hast made me of earth and living fire; thus a man of earth and fire is the fashioning of a good man.'²²⁶ Earth and fire were traditionally regarded as two of the four elements of which Man was composed. As late as the sixteenth century, Maolmhuire, son of Cairbre Ó hUiginn, referred to these constituent elements in his poetry, alleging that he and Christ were both made up of the 'clay of the four elements.'²²⁷ All, or some of the elements are mentioned frequently in bardic poetry. Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh is theologically insightful in his thirteenth-century poetic description of the creation of the world. He begins by describing the creation of Heaven as '*uasal*' ('noble').²²⁸ The creation of the earth is described as '*obair mhór*' ('a great work').²²⁹ The creation of animals, meanwhile, is called 'a wondrous work.'²³⁰ Yet, the creation of Adam and Eve is set apart from that of previous creatures by calling it a '*holy* [my emphasis]

²²⁶ ADD 70, v.7.

²²⁷ Ibid., 77, v.31. The notion that man is made up of four elements, namely clay, water, fire and wind, is an ancient one, found as early as 750 in the Irish *Liber de Numeris* and as recently as 1817 in a late recension of the tenth-century Irish apocryphon known as *Tenga Bithnua* ('The Evernew Tongue'). See McNamara, *The apocrypha in the Irish Church*, p.22; also G. Dottin, 'Une redaction moderne du Teanga Bithnua' in *Révue Celtique* xxviii (1907), p.277.

²²⁸ DDé 31, v.1.

²²⁹ Ibid., v.4.

²³⁰ '*d'orduigh dhóibh ní dealbh ghann*': ibid, v.7.

work' ('*diadha an obair*').²³¹ Ó Dálaigh thus admits that the human being has a sanctity, which is not possessed by the rest of creation, clearly emphasising his uniqueness as God's supreme creation. It is important to note that, at a time when the abject misery of the human condition was strongly emphasised in religious literature (exemplified by Innocent III's *De Contemptu Mundi*), the goodness of human creation was also recognised as glorifying the Creator.²³²

Recognition of God's greatness in the wonders of the natural world appears as one of the staple features of Gaelic spirituality that persists in bardic religious poetry from the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries. Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe comments that 'to cover up the ground under us so that the sun could suck up the snow is a miracle'²³³, continuing, in another poem, to remark that 'though you find the sun's rays weak [weather in thirteenth-century Ireland apparently differed little from our present fare!] there is no craftsman who could make them; what wright could fashion a bramble thorn, even though it be the worst thorn in existence?'²³⁴ Gofraidh Ó Cléirigh (*n.l.t.* 1372) highlights God's care for the beauty of the earth in the line 'Thou orderest the day, showing forth clearly the woods and fair lakes till night closes over

²³¹ *Ibid.*, v.8.

²³² Medieval religious thought included the idea that after a number of angels rebelled against God and were cast down to Hell, He replaced each of the lost ones by creating a human being. Both Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe and Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn refer to this notion in their poetry: see *GBMCM* 20, v.7 and *PB* 8, vv 8-9. Giolla Brighde explains that this is why the world was created for humans. Before their arrival, it was merely 'an empty board without pieces' (*GBMCM* 20, v.8). The fondness, which the Gaelic Irish traditionally had for the game of *fitchell*, or chess, is evident in Mac Con Midhe's comparison of the human role on earth to that of a chess piece on the board of life.

²³³ *GBMCM* 19, v.24.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 21, v.30.

the western sky',²³⁵ while Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn (*d.*1448) wonders 'who could have made the ebb and tide, the forming of the egg in the bird, the hazel and the apple tree? Let me find a maker of them if I can.'²³⁶

Nature itself, by its very existence, was understood to glorify God. Gofraidh Ó Cléirigh states that 'there is no wind in tree, no shower of driving snow, no sea wave beating on sharp rock but sings His praise.'²³⁷ Similarly, Eochaidh Ó hEoghusa, at the end of the sixteenth century, identifies the praise of God as the primary function of the created elements: 'As regards the elements created in the great world, they mean, by their melody to show forth the praises of the excellences of God.'²³⁸ Verses such as these closely resemble the canticle of Daniel (Dan 3:57-88), none more so, perhaps, than the following verse by the late sixteenth-century poet, Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh: 'May the wind praise the king of the stars! May all weathers praise Him! This is my joy! The flocks and the noisy waves praise the great bright ruler.'²³⁹ Given the Book of Daniel's popularity in medieval Ireland, it comes as no surprise that its influence can be detected in the religious poetry of the bardic poets.

The Passion and Death of Christ

By far the most momentous act of God, and the one which is most frequently referred to in bardic poetry, is Christ's death on the cross, which won salvation for the human race. His suffering or Passion on the cross became hugely significant, attracting unprecedented interest, particularly in the late medieval period, across Europe as a whole. Émile Mâle states that '*dès le commencement du xive siècle, la passion devint*

²³⁵ ADD 61, v.21.

²³⁶ DDé 9, v.24.

²³⁷ ADD 61, v.25.

²³⁸ Ibid., 76, v.18.

²³⁹ AFOD 20, v.9.

*la grande préoccupation des âmes*²⁴⁰. The emphasis, which was increasingly placed on affective devotion (i.e. mental and emotional involvement with the person of Christ in the various life situations in which He found himself, sympathy with His pain, hardship, sorrow, suffering, etc.), developed fundamentally from European Church reform of the late eleventh and twelfth centuries. The mystical theology of St Anselm and St Bernard in the twelfth century exemplified this new trend. The thirteenth century saw the new religious orders, particularly the Franciscans adopt this method and bring it to those to whom they ministered. The need for material on which to meditate saw the flowering of suitable literature, which focussed on the lives of Christ, of Mary and the saints. The ubiquitous *Legenda Aurea* (Golden Legend) emerged in this century, compiled by Jacobus de Voragine, archbishop of Milan. It was also at this time that the life of Mary, entitled *Vita Beatae Virginis Mariae Rhythmica*, was compiled. The following century saw the completion of one of the most successful works of the period, *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, by the Franciscan, Johannes de Caulibus. These works, among others, were all subsequently translated, whole, or in part, into Gaelic. The new emphasis on affective piety influenced the development of Passion devotions particularly. The Passion of Christ was the event, *par excellence*, the recounting of which drew tears, sorrow and contrition for sins. Not surprisingly, it became an effective tool for winning souls in the hands of the mendicant orders, particularly during the Observant reform of the later fifteenth century. A poem by Friar Michael of Kildare, entitled 'Christ on the Cross', which was written in Middle English, and included in the fourteenth-century British Library Ms. Harley 913, typifies this form of literature. In this work, the poet addresses an

²⁴⁰ 'Since the beginning of the fourteenth century the Passion became the great preoccupation of souls':
Émile Mâle, *L'art religieux de la fin du moyen âge en France* (7th ed., Paris, 1995), p.87.

audience from the scene of the cross, challenging the hearer to focus anew, in graphic detail, on the physical sufferings of Christ. In the words of Angela Lucas ‘we are made to feel the pain and see the blood.’²⁴¹

The bardic poets portray the Passion of Christ on the cross and His subsequent death in many different ways. This event and its detail is heavily painted with the colours of Gaelic culture and society, perhaps much more so than in any other aspect of Christ’s life. Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn (*d.*1448) alludes to the ‘woman in the orchard robb[ing] my soul for an apple; she had no way to pay the debt and should not have incurred it’²⁴² but of Christ’s coming to save the world ‘in human form that outweighs Eve’s sin.’²⁴³ Christ’s coming to earth to right the injustice done is portrayed in terms of a Gaelic chieftain’s war on alien territory which was once his own; Ó hUiginn says that ‘against our sins God pressed on the war; he was ready to wage it; ’twas we began it.’²⁴⁴ Before the war began ‘Adam’s race lay helpless in dark mist.’²⁴⁵ The cross is referred to elsewhere as a torch to scatter the mist from the six generations.²⁴⁶ The ‘mist’ represents the darkness of sin, which causes confusion, disorientation and lack of direction. The ‘mist’ also represents primeval chaos. Domhnall, son of Dáire Mac Bruaideadha, while referring to creation, alludes to Christ’s fashioning of the stars of night, emphasising that ‘their primal form was a mysterious mist.’²⁴⁷ The pre-Passion state of the world therefore, is portrayed as one of disorder and chaos, the imagery

²⁴¹ Angela M. Lucas, *Anglo-Irish poems of the middle ages* (Dublin, 1995), p.195.

²⁴² *DDé* 7, v.32.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 8, v.19.

²⁴⁴ *DDé* 3, v.3.

²⁴⁵ *ADD* 63, v.18.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 88, v.7.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 58, v.14.

clearly linked to the pre-creation state described as *tohu wa bohu* in the Hebrew of Genesis.²⁴⁸ Sin is identified with this disorder, chaos and darkness. The imagery used here is simple, yet also quite theologically developed. That the above poets were aware of the theological precision of their poetic musings is doubtful. On the other hand, they were undoubtedly aware that before Christ's saving Passion, mankind lay in a state of darkness and confusion, and this is, itself, orthodox theology. Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn speaks of the cross as 'the tree which saves men – fruitful work; thou wert offered to atone for the apple tree.'²⁴⁹ The Passion of Christ signified a new beginning, the tree of the cross becoming the replacement for the Tree of Knowledge in Eden, which led to mankind's downfall.

The drama of the Passion of Christ is described especially well by the bardic poets of the sixteenth century and, in particular by Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh, whose work on the Passion surpasses that of all others in its vividness of imagery. Christ is a 'young prince set on asserting his right to his inheritance'²⁵⁰ by seizing possession of land in his ancestor's country.²⁵¹ The prince rides a steed (the cross), 'paying no heed to death.'²⁵² Christ's battle for mankind is a bloody one. He carries a 'shield of love' in His hands for protection, yet is still wounded.²⁵³ These wounds only make Him more

²⁴⁸ Gen 1:1-2.

²⁴⁹ *DDé* 3, v.7.

²⁵⁰ *ADD* 65, v.26.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 71, v.32. This poem is by Tadhg Óg Ó Dálaigh (*fl.*1520).

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 64, v.15; see also Maolmhuire, son of Cairbre Ó hUiginn, *ibid.*, 77, v.35. Description of the cross as a steed was not unique to Gaelic Ireland, being found contemporaneously in other European sources. See Rosemary Woolf 'The theme of Christ the lover-knight in medieval English literature', in Heather O' Donoghue (ed.), *Art and doctrine: essays on medieval literature* (London, 1986).

²⁵³ *ADD*, 64, v.17.

furious and determined. Ó Cobhthaigh depicts Him as charging his foes, advancing upon the enemy fort while His wounds become increasingly inflamed.²⁵⁴ Maolmhuire, son of Cairbre Ó hUiginn takes up the story: ‘the cross was his steed when he was wounded; there would be nothing strange in a wounded man riding a steed were it not that He was wounded in the heart,’²⁵⁵ and further emphasises the special nature of this wound by stating that ‘no man wounded in the heart could have recovered as Christ did; scarce anyone survives a heart-wound; it was always dreaded.’²⁵⁶ The ‘heart wound’ is synonymous with the breast or side wound which claimed the greatest affection of all the five wounds, not only among the Gaelic Irish, but also in European devotion in general. Eamon Duffy believes that ‘the side wound of Christ had a particular fascination and devotional power [because] it gave access to His heart, and thereby became a symbol of refuge in His love.’²⁵⁷ It was the breast wound that

²⁵⁴ Ibid., v.21.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 77, v.35.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., v.37.

²⁵⁷ Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, p.244. Tadhg Óg Ó Dálaigh (*fl.*1520) confirms Duffy’s interpretation of the appeal of the breast or heart wound when he explains its significance: ‘God wished not us to be kept out of His heart; the spear in His breast points the way in for us; no man was excluded from it, though men have ever wished to keep a foe at a distance.’ (*ADD* 71, v.35). Brian Caoch Ó Dálaigh, in an undated poem which appears only in seventeenth-century manuscripts, attests that ‘the wound in His breast is the way to His heart’ (‘Our salvation’, in *Studies* xxxviii [1949], v.3, p.468). The very symbol of Christ’s love (His heart-wound), however, could also be the cause of His most awful terror. Fearghal Ó Cionga (*fl.*1560) fears, above all, Christ’s vengeance on account of that particular wound: ‘Not to speak of Thy crucifixion and other wounds – for nothing can repay Thee for Thy nailing – I dread (above all) Thy anger at Thy breast-blood’ (*ADD* 59, v.22). To praise the breast-wound of Christ was the primary duty of any poet devoting a poem to the Passion theme. An unidentified poet (*n.l.t.*1631) states: ‘For the poets who write fine eulogies, and yet write not the praises

brought an end to the Lord's war, according to Muirchertach Ó Cionga.²⁵⁸ It was there (geographically!) 'in the bloody gap of the breast' that Christ found Adam's race for which He had been searching.²⁵⁹ The heart wound, seen as the most horrendous of Christ's wounds, concomitantly became His most powerful means of saving souls. Having won the war, then, with a single hosting (a mighty achievement),²⁶⁰ 'Heaven's ever holy king gave a banquet of grace crowded to the door.'²⁶¹ While religious verse treating of the Passion relied heavily on secular imagery, there is evidence to suggest that praise poetry, composed to eulogise secular patrons, also borrowed from poems dedicated to their heavenly counterparts. If Christ was depicted in the mould of a valiant Gaelic warrior, then it is also the case that secular chieftains were portrayed as sharing some of Christ's martial skills, exhibited at the Passion. Two interesting examples of this are contained in the following verses. Ragnall Ó hUiginn (*d.*1325), in a poem dedicated to Magnus Mág Shamhradháin (*d.*1303), comments that 'not often does Magnus, lord of Aighne, mind a foe's spear striking his chest.'²⁶² Similarly, Lúcas Mac Naimhin describes the death-wound of Fearghal, son of Brian Mág Shamhradháin (*d.*1322) as akin to that of Christ:

of the breast-wound, the praising of all and sundry will be of little avail; they shall have small reward from God for it' (*ADD* 96, v.10).

²⁵⁸ *ADD* 60, v.1.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 63, v.18.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 60, v.12.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 66, v.18.

²⁶² *BM*, 11, v.18.

When the soul of Fál's prince had left him, every man gave him this testimony: 'If thy back was marked by wound 'twas a wound that came through the cavity of thy breast O Fearghal.'²⁶³

Christ was not always depicted as entering the battle on horseback. Occasionally He is depicted as marching into conflict. The late sixteenth-century poet, Muirchertach Ó Cobhthaigh, describes Christ as progressing forward on foot, despite being sorely wounded:

He marched forward, a great march for a wounded man goaded to anger; when His wounds grew inflamed Thy Son dashed into the house whence the darts were coming.²⁶⁴

An unidentified poet (*n.l.t.* 1614) identifies love as the propelling force that spurred Christ on:

He marched to meet death, His reason for bearing (the cross); the heat of His love so inflamed that it killed Him, the third of the three branches.²⁶⁵

With highly imaginative and superb skill, the bardic poets described the momentous event of the Passion in terms of the great successes which chieftains had cause to celebrate, namely victories in battle and, as illustrated above, this trend sometimes came full circle when the abilities of secular lords in battle were, themselves, compared to the 'martial' skills of Christ at the Passion. The great deed, which Christ achieved, was described in a manner that any chieftain, proud of his retinue, could appreciate. Yet battle imagery was not the only imagery that chieftains could relate to.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 5, v.28.

²⁶⁴ 'Christ our Saviour', in *Studies* xxxviii (1949), p.188, v.32.

²⁶⁵ 'To the Blessed Virgin', *IM* 1930, p.468, v.12.

The image of the hunt was also popular in bardic encomium. Christ on the cross was hunter and the human race, His people, the quarry. Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh uses this image particularly well: ‘a hunt is planned, a promising one, the six hosts being the quarry; the hound of love stopped not its course till it had gone round the hillside of Christ’s feet.’²⁶⁶ The geographical locations of the hunt scenes at once correspond to scenes of rural Ireland and Passion scenes. Ó Cobhthaigh continues by describing how ‘the young king set his net to catch the six generations: the hunt (for us) continued till that youth of our race was driven by us to the wood’²⁶⁷ (the wood corresponds to the forest of refuge in which the pursued quarry lies hidden and also the wood of the cross of crucifixion). This kind of literary conceit is repeated in a different form later on in the poem: ‘The youth spent a time – ‘twas for this he came on earth – hunting his race, a hunt devised by thee, beginning in the womb and afterwards through a forest of thorns’²⁶⁸ (symbolising the crown of thorns). The hunt is also portrayed in terms of fishing. Christ fishes for us with a blood-net: ‘A net consisting of His blood was spread so that it hid Him from His race which was being fished for but would not come ashore until that red net was set for it.’²⁶⁹

Christ’s Passion and Death on the cross was also portrayed as a rescue operation in which He saves His race from nautical difficulty and ultimately from drowning in dangerous waters. At the time of Christ’s Passion ‘the full waters of the dangerous

²⁶⁶ *ADD 67*, v.12.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, v.8. Ó Cobhthaigh continues, later in the poem, to develop the conceit further: ‘Well for all men that the wood which gives them refuge is so dense; may that wood of Thy grace get ever denser and hide our growing sins.’ (*Ibid.*, v.18).

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, v.28.

²⁶⁹ ‘Our Salvation’, p.468, v.9.

bay threaten[ed] to engulf us',²⁷⁰ in the words of Muirchertach Ó Cionga (*fl.*1580), who continues by stressing that they soon 'met the shore of God's mercy.'²⁷¹ The vessel containing mankind had been foundering, yet, in Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh's words, 'the wave (of blood) that was the atonement for long standing sinfulness flowed in 'neath our foundering ship.'²⁷² Tadhg Óg Ó Dálaigh (*fl.*1520) specifies that this wave consisted of breast blood, going on to note how it 'burst forth through great love, bearing my bark along.'²⁷³ Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh places Christ in the boat itself, and depicts him as taking over the rowing: 'The Lord rescued us by the guiding oar empurpled in his breast-blood; He kept plying His two wounded hands till we, His foes, were brought to shore.'²⁷⁴ The oar in question indisputably represents the spear, which Longinus was traditionally believed to have thrust into the side of Christ, causing the breast-wound initially.²⁷⁵ For Ó Cobhthaigh, the breast-wound also serves as 'the only ship-haven for Eve's race...wherein he sheltered us.'²⁷⁶ As noted above, this particular wound was frequently given special status among the five wounds of Christ.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁰ *ADD* 60, v.3.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 65, v.14.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 71, v.5.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 63, v.35.

²⁷⁵ The figure of Longinus is discussed below.

²⁷⁶ *ADD* 66, v.10.

²⁷⁷ See for example *ADD* 56, v.16 by the late sixteenth-century poet, Diarmuid Mac an Bhaire: 'Owing to the breast-wound each of us, even the worst of us...has a right to the best of Thy banquet'; also *ADD* 63, v.37 by Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh: 'Marvellous how the blood from His side melted the ice of God's anger off us.'

Christ's sacrifice on the cross was considered to be truly life-giving. Nowhere is this more vividly highlighted than in the use the bardic poets make of agricultural imagery. The poets again use familiar language to express a profound mystery. Muirchertach Ó Cionga speaks of the 'autumn ploughing' (of Christ's flesh) as being humanity's salvation.²⁷⁸ Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh imagines the world's weight of sin as a plough pressing on Christ's body on the cross.²⁷⁹ Elsewhere he emphasises the necessity of ploughing up Christ's flesh to yield a good harvest: 'The Lord, when fastened to the cross, ploughed up the lea of His slender-fingered hands; every good lea must be ploughed.'²⁸⁰ An unidentified poet (*n.l.t.*1631) comments that 'there is ploughed soil (i.e. flesh) in both Thy hands.'²⁸¹ The seed, which Christ buys for the soil in His field, is expensive.²⁸² In the words of an unidentified poet (*n.l.t.*1631) it is sown in His hands and most deeply in His wounded heart.²⁸³ Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh notes that the rain necessary for the seed's growth comes in the form of blood: 'the blood-rain...is the shower that made our seed grow;...the heavier the rain the brighter the sunshine after it.'²⁸⁴ Elsewhere he develops this image further, making use of the kind of paradox that poets enjoyed:

²⁷⁸ *ADD* 60, v.26.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 63, v.2.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 65, v.29.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 95, v.25.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 66, v.29.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 95, v.25.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 63, v.29.

The red nail-wound being filled with a rush of blood, owing to Thy anger, poured forth a heavy rain, a rain not causing darkness, but presaging fine weather.²⁸⁵

Brian Caoch Ó Dálaigh uses this image in a similar fashion in a poem treating of Christ's salvation, which appears in two seventeenth-century manuscripts.²⁸⁶ Ó Cobhthaigh, continuing the same theme, comments in the succeeding verse of his poem:

Heavy the fruit of the tree which saved the Six Generations; our wood contained not a single fruitful tree till Thou didst droop Thy head on the cross.²⁸⁷

Here, Ó Cobhthaigh combines a well-known bardic image, used in secular poetry, with a theological understanding of the Passion that was commonly employed by the Fathers of the Church. The image of a fruitful tree usually signified one of two things in secular verse. A poem by the late sixteenth-century poet, Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn (*d.*1591), written in praise of Cormac Ó hEadhra serves as a fitting example of its use. Firstly, the subject of a eulogy was sometimes addressed as a fruitful tree or branch. This is the case in Ó hUiginn's poem, in which two of the sons of Cian Ó hEadhra, namely Brian and Cormac, are hailed as 'two fruitful branches of a fragrant forest.'²⁸⁸

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 67, v.18.

²⁸⁶ 'On the cross Thou wert wounded by Thy own folk – a heavy rain is presage of good harvest': 'Our Salvation', p.469, v.26. This poem appears in RIA Ms. 23 D 14 and TCD Ms.1382, both dating from the seventeenth century.

²⁸⁷ *ADD* 67, v.19.

²⁸⁸ *BOH* 5, v.1.

The second manner in which the image could be used is illustrated later in the poem. The legitimacy of the Lord of Luighne is highlighted by Ó hUiginn when he portrays nature as responding favourably to Cormac Ó hEadhra's rule:

The warmth of the early spring joins the branches of the great trees to the roots of the sward; the fruits bend the trees so low that there would not be more safety on top for the bird's nest.²⁸⁹

Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh's reference to the lack of fruitful trees on the earth before Christ's death on the cross is, thus, heavily influenced by a secular motif signifying the endorsement of an individual's rule. In effect, Ó Cobhthaigh is stating that earth could not boast of a legitimate ruler before Christ's inauguration as king on the cross.²⁹⁰ However, it is also reminiscent of the parallel drawn by many Fathers of the Church between the tree in the Garden of Eden that brought condemnation and the life-giving tree of Calvary that brought salvation. In this way, it can again be seen how stock motifs and images borrowed from secular poetry attained new life and additional significance when entering the religious sphere. Such borrowings, therefore, were neither arbitrarily nor thoughtlessly carried out. Maolmhuire, son of Cairbre Ó hUiginn, also describes the fruitful results of the fall of Christ's blood-rain: 'the dripping of His heart-blood – heavy the harvest on Adam's race; corn rises 'neath that rain, torrents of grace pouring down from Him.'²⁹¹

²⁸⁹ Ibid., v.30.

²⁹⁰ Ó Cobhthaigh intimates elsewhere that Christ took up His kingship on Calvary: 'He let His side be wounded; His death fraught with the world's salvation was the move by which He saved the six hosts and thus entered upon His power' (*ADD* 63, v.12). Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn (*d.*1448) also expresses the same thought (*ADD* 78, v.2). The idea itself is essentially Johannine, and is found implicitly suggested in Jn 19:19-22.

²⁹¹ *ADD* 77, v.4.

Scenes of Christ as warring chieftain making a *creach* or plunder on enemy territory, retrieving land rightfully His, hunting for the Six Generations with determination, rescuing His people from overwhelming waves in stormy seas and cultivating them with His heart-blood are beautifully vivid depictions, designed to appeal to the religious mentality of Gaelic chieftains. The metaphors used have a distinctive native application. It is no wonder then, that the poets speak of Christ's victory on Calvary in terms of winning what may have been a chieftain's favourite game – *fitchell* (chess).²⁹² Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh uses this image when discussing the Passion:

To save His folk was a move in the game, a move attended by all blessings; a move that would save us, the Lord perceived, on the chess-board, when He had seen His chess-men ruined.²⁹³

The use of the chessboard as a metaphor in bardic poetry was not unusual. As early as the thirteenth century, Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe spoke of the world before the creation of mankind as 'an empty board without pieces.'²⁹⁴ If humans were portrayed as chess-pieces in bardic poetry, then mention of a chess-player suggested one who ruled and directed them. The appearance of the metaphor in secular poetry indicated just that. A poem written by Uilliam Ó hUiginn (*d.*1378) for Niall Mág Shamhradháin describes him as 'a noble chess king who rules every square of his land.'²⁹⁵ In the same way, Ó Cobhthaigh's description of Christ's victory in the game confirms Him

²⁹² P. W. Joyce confirms that among the higher classes in ancient Ireland chess was a favourite pastime, with every chief's house having, at least, one chess-set for the use of the family and guests. Chessboards were sometimes given as part of the tribute to kings. See P. W. Joyce, *A social history of ancient Ireland*, (2 vols, Dublin, n.d), ii, p.477.

²⁹³ *ADD* 63, v.9.

²⁹⁴ *GBMCM* 20, v.8.

²⁹⁵ *BM* 14, v.10.

as a worthy ruler of His people, a champion who controls every square of the board of life. The late sixteenth-century poet, Muirchertach Ó Cobhthaigh, makes reference to another similar board-game, *cluiche timchill* (the ‘round game’) in the light of the Passion: ‘Before He had finished the round game it had left a mark on His right side; He arranged his folk over the board of His heart; a full board had never yet been won.’²⁹⁶ This reference refers to Christ’s winning back of all humanity by His death on the cross. The fact that the chess contest that was His Passion and Death was won by Christ was not understood to guarantee automatic salvation, however. An unidentified poet (*n.l.t.* 1631) admits that, although the chance of salvation has been offered to him, he must, nevertheless, take advantage of the victory by placing himself in the right place at the right time (i.e. follow the dictates of God):

Thou wilt not reject me O God, though Thou mightst well do so; the square on the (chess) board that would save me – ’twere a shame for it to be left empty by me.²⁹⁷

References to Christ’s blood-letting in Gaelic literature of this period (and earlier) are often accompanied by the curious term ‘wine-blood’, which describes its composition. This is quite an old term, being found at least as early as the eighth-century poetry of Blathmac, where the line ‘*Ro-cés testin fínfolo*’ speaks of Christ’s shedding of wine-like blood.²⁹⁸ In the thirteenth century, Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh stresses the importance of drinking God’s wine-blood worthily, suggestive of a Eucharistic context.²⁹⁹ The ‘Passion of Longinus’ in the *Leabhar Breac* relates how, when

²⁹⁶ ‘Christ our Saviour’, p.187, v.12.

²⁹⁷ *ADD* 84, v.18.

²⁹⁸ ‘He suffered the shedding of wine-like blood’: Carney (ed.), *The poems of Blathmac*. 2, v.178.

²⁹⁹ *DDé* 26, v.22.

Longinus pierced Christ's side, '*tainic ass fuil ocus fín*.'³⁰⁰ This reference does not appear in the 'Passion of Longinus' of the famous *Legenda Aurea*.³⁰¹ Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn pleads with his God in the fifteenth century: 'O ancient Creator, avenge not on us Thy son's burial, but pour His wine-blood into the scale.'³⁰² Muirchertach Ó Cionga speaks in the sixteenth century of God's vengeance drawing the wine-blood of the Lord³⁰³ while, contemporaneously, Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh asserts that Christ 'shed the wine-blood of His white hands for our love',³⁰⁴ wine which, in the words of an unidentified poet (*n.l.t.*1614) is 'the entrance price to the palace above.'³⁰⁵ As in other instances, however, we find the term 'wine-blood' escaping the confines of religious language and being just as comfortably applied in secular poetry. In a poem written for Art son of An Calbach (*d.*1458), asking him for protection, the poet tells the story of the *ollamh* Domhnall who was slain by Clann Cholmáin but was avenged by an Calbach Ó Conchobair Fhailghe, Art's grandfather, at the battle of Cnoc Aisde. He asks Art to imitate his grandfather for 'Oilill's wine-blood which he has received in his veins binds him to avenge that act of treachery.'³⁰⁶ He wonders too why 'Cathaoir's wine-blood whence Art is descended is not set on defending [him]'.³⁰⁷ Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaird, in the late sixteenth century, also uses the term in secular

³⁰⁰ 'There came out blood and water': *PH*, p.60.

³⁰¹ Jacobus de Voragine, *The golden legend: readings on the saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan. (New Jersey, 1993).

³⁰² *DDé* 9, v.28.

³⁰³ *ADD* 60, v.33.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 63, v.21.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 86, v.27.

³⁰⁶ 'Some Irish bardic poems lxxxv', in *Studies* xxxvii (1948), v.25, pp 88-90.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, v.30.

verse.³⁰⁸ The term can therefore be interpreted in many ways. In secular poetry perhaps the best reading of it is ‘rich / noble blood’. In religious poetry, it is a little more difficult to decipher its meaning. Both Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh and Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh (while centuries apart), hint at a Eucharistic interpretation, Ó Dálaigh mentioning ‘worthiness’ and Ó Cobhthaigh speaking of ‘His heart-blood, pure wine to be drunk from golden cup.’³⁰⁹ The wine-blood of the cross brings salvation (Ó Cobhthaigh comments that Adam would have done well to drink it).³¹⁰ Yet it also signifies a continuing salvific role played by the Eucharist, leading to the enjoyment of what Gofraidh Ó Cléirigh (*n.l.t.* 1372) calls the ‘wine feasts’ of Heaven.³¹¹ There is, then, a clear link drawn by the poets between what happened on Calvary, what happens at the Eucharist and ultimately what (was hoped) would happen in the afterlife.³¹²

The Five Wounds of Christ

Devotion to the Five Wounds of Christ was one of the most popular cults of late medieval Europe. Books of hours (*horae*) from this period contain a great selection of prayers to the wounds, which were often indulgenced. These prayers were linked to an image entitled the *Imago Pietatis* (‘Image of Pity’), known otherwise as the ‘Man of Sorrows’ or the ‘Mass of St Gregory’. According to legend, St Gregory the Great (540-604) once received a vision of Christ while celebrating Mass. Christ was seated on or standing in His tomb, displaying His wounds, while surrounded by the

³⁰⁸ ‘*fionghuil an chraobh Néill Náraigh*’: *DMU*, 1, v.43.

³⁰⁹ *ADD* 63, v.21.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, v.39.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, 61, v.31. Heaven is frequently portrayed in terms of a wine feast.

³¹² For a fuller discussion of this term see Ryan, “‘Reign of blood’: aspects of devotion to the wounds of Christ in late medieval Gaelic Ireland”, pp 147-8.

instruments of His Passion.³¹³ Woodcuts of this scene were in common circulation in late medieval Europe, having, from the fourteenth century onwards, spread from Italy to France and then to England.³¹⁴ As an aid for affective meditation, this image inspired both literate and non-literate alike. Its great popularity can be attributed, according to Émile Mâle, to the enormous indulgences attached to it.³¹⁵ The *Imago Pietatis* normally had a rubric offering up to 32,755 years of pardon for those who devoutly recited five *Paters*, five *Aves* and a Creed before it.³¹⁶ A fine example of this image can be found in the Franciscan friary, Ennis, dating to the fifteenth or sixteenth century.³¹⁷ Margaret M. Phelan suggests, based on the lack of evidence from early Christian art in Ireland, that devotion to the Five Wounds in general must have been introduced by the Norman overlords and was not translated into Irish art until perhaps the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries.³¹⁸

Probably the most notable manuscript containing medieval Hiberno-English poetry (British Library Ms. Harley 913) dating from c.1330 or a little later, and which was most probably originally a *vademecum* or portable preaching manual, contains, in one of its poems, an important reference to the Five Wounds. The ‘Song of Michael of

³¹³ Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, p.38.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.238; see also Fergus O’ Farrell, ‘Our Lord’s pity in Ennis friary’ in *N.M.A.J.* xxii (1980), p.33.

³¹⁵ Mâle, *L’art religieux de la fin du moyen âge en France* (4th ed., Paris, 1931), p.100.

³¹⁶ Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, p.239.

³¹⁷ O’Farrell, ‘Our Lord’s pity’, p.33. Also the Image of Pity is displayed on the McCragh tomb, Lismore Cathedral, as well as at Jerpoint Abbey, County Kilkenny.

³¹⁸ Margaret M. Phelan, ‘Irish sculpture portraying the five wounds of Our Saviour’ in Etienne Rynne (ed.), *Figures from the past: studies on figurative art in Christian Ireland in honour of Helen M. Roe* (Dublin, 1987) pp 242-3.

Kildare', written in English, contains the exhortation: 'To Criste ye ren and falleth o knen that wondis tholiid fiue' ('Run and fall on your knees to Christ who suffered five wounds').³¹⁹ The fact that this manuscript, judging by its contents, was most likely a Franciscan compilation, and that some of the poems were compiled as preaching aids, is of some significance. Clodagh Tait suggests that the Franciscan order may have played a pivotal role in the spreading of the cult of the Five Wounds due to their special affinity with the devotion, arising from the stigmata borne by their founder.³²⁰ The spread of the devotion in Ireland kept pace with its development on the continent as a whole. By the fourteenth century a votive Mass in honour of the wounds had appeared in a French missal, by which time it had also become an officially recognised feast. Reference to the feast is found in the Sarum missal as early as the first half of the fifteenth century.³²¹

Although appeals to the Five Wounds occur very frequently in late fifteenth century and especially sixteenth-century bardic poetry, evidence also exists of much earlier manifestations of this devotion. The thirteenth-century poet, Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh, is confident that the merits of the wounds of Christ will save him from damnation:

The wounded foot keeping me from Hell; the wounded hand, which I adore,
drives the demons away from me. /

³¹⁹ Lucas, *Anglo-Irish poems of the middle ages*, pp 66-7.

³²⁰ Clodagh Tait, 'Harnessing corpses: death, burial, disinterment and commemoration in Ireland 1550-1655' (Ph.D. thesis, NUI Cork, 1999), p.235.; see also Tait, 'Irish images of Jesus', in *Church Monuments* xvi (2001).

³²¹ Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: the Eucharist in late medieval culture* (Cambridge, 1991), p.304; R. W. Pfaff, *New liturgical feasts in later medieval England* (Oxford, 1970), p.86.

The side, which they wounded, shall save me from Devil's folk; God's flowing hair, cut by their shears, shall save me from them.³²²

Gofraidh Ó Cléirigh (*n.l.t.* 1372), likewise, expresses similar trust: 'Thou barest Five Wounds, O Jesus, O fair-formed hero; precious is the blood of those wounds; Thou art our hope of the wine feasts.'³²³

Margaret M. Phelan has identified six sculptures portraying the Five Wounds on the body of Christ (but not the crucified Christ). There are three in County Kilkenny, (two in St Canice's Cathedral and one in Gowran), and one each in Meath (Plunket Church, Rathmore, Athboy), Galway (St Nicholas's Collegiate church), and Mayo (Dominican Abbey, Strade).³²⁴ In all six depictions Christ is shown with a royal crown on His head, benevolent face and bare torso displaying His side wound. His hands are raised, palms facing outwards, displaying His palm wounds. His feet, too, are bare for purposes of exhibition. The carvings are to be found on monuments associated with important Norman families, the Butlers (two separate tomb chests in St Canice's and a tomb at Gowran), the Plunkets (on the shaft of a baptismal font in Plunket church), the Joyces (tomb, St Nicholas's) and the Jordans (tomb in Dominican church, Strade). Both John Hunt and Helen M. Roe attest that these figures represent Christ the Judge and King of Glory.³²⁵

³²² *DDé* 24, vv 13-14.

³²³ *ADD* 61, v.31.

³²⁴ Phelan, 'Irish sculpture portraying the five wounds of Our Saviour', pp 242-6.

³²⁵ John Hunt, *Irish medieval figure sculpture 1200-1600* (2 vols, Dublin, 1974), i, p.111. Also Helen M. Roe, *Medieval fonts of County Meath* (Trim, 1968), p.96. Hunt cautions against associating Christ the Judge with the devotion to the Five Wounds. However, whether or not these two devotions were supposed to be associated in the first place, they certainly came to be at a later stage, as is particularly evident in bardic religious poetry.

The wounds of Christ had, in fact, two roles to fulfil in popular consciousness, namely a salvific role and a condemnatory one. The salvific role was perhaps best illustrated in the 'Mass of St Gregory' image where the inextricable connection between the saving work of Christ on Calvary (His being wounded, His shedding of blood and His death) and the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass (the bloodless Calvary) was stressed, refuting the heretical denial of the Real presence of Christ on the altar. This role is widely referred to in bardic poetry, as observed above, where Christ's wounds are depicted as harbours in storms, and where they slake the craving of the thirsty and promote new life and growth. Yet the same wounds are simultaneously portrayed as incriminating evidence for mankind's punishment. This contrast is elucidated by McKenna when he states, from the evidence of the poetry of Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn alone, that 'His wounds accuse us, crying out for our punishment, and yet save us; they are inflicted by our sins and cure those sins; they are the effect of God's wrath and check that wrath...'³²⁶ There was a general recognition that the Five Wounds would play a key role as principal witnesses on the Day of Judgement, as discussed below.³²⁷

As noted above, bardic religious poetry, particularly of the sixteenth century, mentions the Five Wounds of Christ frequently. Laoiseach Mac an Bhaire (a late sixteenth-century poet) invokes them as his defence: 'I flee to the Lord's five wounds, the easiest roads to be found to his goodly dwelling...in that hour of contention may the ruddy streams of the five hearts point my path to thy fair fort.'³²⁸ Aonghus Fionn

³²⁶ *PB*, p.xviii. See especially poems 5, v.28 and 19, vv 5-6.

³²⁷ For a fuller discussion of this subject see Ryan, "'Reign of blood": aspects of devotion to the wounds of Christ in late medieval Gaelic Ireland', pp 144-6.

³²⁸ *ADD* 55, vv1-2.

Ó Dálaigh is confident that the ‘ruddy marks of the five hearts are...full price to win [his] prayer.’³²⁹ Maolmhuire, son of Cairbre Ó hUiginn, is even more explicit in his confidence that the Five Wounds will save him:

Christ’s foot and heart will put me in possession of my couch (in Heaven); His hand, too, will be in mine as I enter (Heaven).³³⁰

Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh, however, reflects on the precarious position of humanity in the light of Christ’s wounding: ‘’Twere dangerous for Adam’s race to ask it to atone for the side wound; a wounded man feels for long his desire of vengeance, and Christ had spent a long time lying in His wine-blood.’³³¹ In the previous century Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn speaks of Christ’s bloodied hands as ‘a wand entitling us to His favour; if we atone for the harm done by the sins He forgives us,’³³² encouraging, in true Observantine spirit, a return to sincere penance as reparation for sin. He goes on to shift the focus from Christ’s wounding in the past to his wounding anew by sin: ‘Which of us has not renewed His wounds, increasing the *éiric* due to God? Not God’s side-wound is to be feared by men, but His fresh wounding.’³³³

³²⁹ *AFOD* 24, v.9. The five wounds are sometimes termed as the ‘five hearts’. There is a play, here on *croidhe*, which can mean both the centre of the palm (where the nail is inserted in many depictions) and the heart (the site of the breast wound and also the centre of the emotions, especially love).

³³⁰ *ADD* 77, v.10.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 64, v.38.

³³² *PB* 21, v.4.

³³³ *Ibid.*, v.34. The *éiric*, in brehon law was the ‘blood-price’ or ‘body-fine’, a compensation paid to the kin-group of an individual illegally killed. In the case of a murder, if the culprit refused to pay the kinsmen of the victim, they were expected to pursue a blood-feud against him. The image of the *éiric* is used in bardic religious poetry to illustrate the compensation due to God (Christ’s kinsman) from humanity on account of their illegal killing of His Son. The killing of Christ was considered to be particularly horrendous, being classified as early as Blathmac’s poetry in the eighth century as *fiugal*

Late medieval bardic religious poetry reflects the broader religious and devotional trends evident elsewhere. Contemporary iconography of Christ's Five Wounds, whether it was a 'Mass of St Gregory', an 'Image of Pity' without the Gregory Mass scene attached, or an heraldic *Arma Christi* (where the wounds and / or Instruments of the Passion such as the crown of thorns, ladder, sponge, hammer, nails, etc. are displayed against the background of a cross), facilitated affective meditation on the Passion and Death of Christ. It also encompassed both functions of Christ's wounds. The *ostentatio vulnerum* (the pose in which Christ displays His wounds) was either consoling or condemning, and the distinction was literally in the eye of the beholder, for at the Last Judgement it was believed that when Christ arrived as judge 'He would display His wounds to the elect as pledges of His love for them, to sinners as bitter reproach.'³³⁴ The Five Wounds were, at once, defence and indictment. The hymn *Anima Christi*, composed by St Ignatius of Loyola (1492-1556), contains the plea 'Hide me within Thy wounds' and the *En Ego* prayer, said before a crucifix, speaks of 'Thy five most precious wounds'. Pope Clement VIII granted great indulgences to those who recited this prayer at the end of the sixteenth century, in response to a devotion that had become both widespread and popular.³³⁵

The votive Mass of the Five Wounds of Jesus was one of the most popular masses of the late middle ages. The preface to it in the missal contained a legend recounting how the archangel Raphael appeared to Pope Boniface I, promising deliverance from earthly evil for the living and deliverance from Purgatory for the dead on whose

(kin-slaying) on account of the fact that the Jews were regarded as Christ's maternal kin. See Kelly, *A guide to early Irish law*, p.127, n.17.

³³⁴ Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, p.246.

³³⁵ Phelan, 'Irish sculpture portraying the five wounds of Our Saviour', p.247.

behalf the mass was celebrated.³³⁶ At the provincial synod of Armagh in 1558, Primate Dowdall requested every priest to celebrate the Mass of the Five Wounds for the health of the king and queen and for the primate's prosperity.³³⁷ At the execution of three Catholics in 1581 a Protestant minister reported that one of the men said to the others: 'Lett us say pater nosters 5, 5 aves & 5 credes in remembrance of the 5 woundes of Christ.'³³⁸ This devotion was hugely influential, then, not only on the continent, but also in Ireland. The tradition of reciting prayers such as the *Pater Noster*, *Ave* and *Creed* before an image of the Five Wounds indicates that this was a devotion which was pitched not at an elite group, but at a much more general level. At a very minimum, the average lay Catholic was expected to know these prayers; thus the requirements for gaining the attached indulgence were designed so that it might be quite easily acquired.

The Instruments of the Passion

In addition to the Five Wounds of Christ, the instruments of His Passion also functioned as important aids for meditation on Christ's suffering. Portrayal of the instruments is frequently to be found on Irish tombs and wayside crosses, but also in church decoration, on vestments and on chalices. Gertrud Schiller traces the development of the iconography of the 'instruments' to the twelfth-century crusades and the sack of Constantinople, which resulted in the West becoming flooded with relics of the Passion hitherto unknown. Traditionally, the East possessed a far greater deposit of Passion relics than the West. But now the West learned of new relics such as the tools that were used in the erection of the cross, and also the ladder, pincers,

³³⁶ Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, p.243.

³³⁷ Gillespie, *The sacred in the secular*, p.6.

³³⁸ Letter quoted in M. V. Ronan, *The Irish martyrs of the penal laws* (London, 1935), p.51.

hammer and dice. There also emerged a change in the form of display given to relics. As a result of the emerging emphasis on affective meditation and a more personal relationship with the object of veneration, relics were now deposited in crystal or glass reliquaries, to be seen by all.³³⁹ The Franciscan work, *Meditationes Vitae Christi* (translated into Gaelic around 1443), encouraged the devotee to enter each scene of the Passion. The Instruments of the Passion (of which there came to be an increasingly wide range) could be used as visual aids to assist the worshipper in moving from station to station. In the section of the *Meditationes*, dealing with ‘*Quomodo crucifixus est Dominus*’ (‘On how Christ was crucified’), the reader is encouraged to contemplate the following:

*Togaibh suil t'indtinde anois, ocus do-chifir drong dibh ag sathadh na croichi
annsa talamh, ocus drong ele ag ullmhughadh cloo, ocus drong ele ag
ullmhughadh ord, ocus drong eli ag ullmhughadh dreimiredh ocus
innstrimintid ele...*³⁴⁰

The interest in the discovery of Passion relics and, particularly in new acquisitions is clearly evident in Gaelic Irish sources. The story of the finding of the true cross by St Helena appears again and again in manuscripts and is included in the *Leabhar Breac*, *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum* and *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne* (c.1513-14). It is also recounted in bardic poetry.³⁴¹ In 1492 the annalist of Loch Cé considers details of a

³³⁹ Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian art*, trans. Janet Seligman (2 vols, London, 1972), ii, p.190.

³⁴⁰ ‘Raise the eyes of your mind now and you will see a band of them thrusting the cross into the ground, and another group preparing a sign and another gang readying a hammer and another crew preparing a ladder and other instruments...’: *SBC*, p.146.

³⁴¹ For a comprehensive list of manuscripts in which it is included see McNamara, *The apocrypha in the Irish Church*, p.78.

new acquisition of Passion relics in Rome, which takes its place with the other most notable events of that time which were deemed important enough to record:

A portion of the wood of the Holy Cross was found in Rome, buried in the ground i.e. the board that was over the head of the Cross on which was written Jesus Nazareus Rex Judaeorum and it was found written in the same place that it was St Helena that buried it. The head of the lance with which Longinus wounded the body of Christ was sent to Rome in this year by the sovereign of the Turks.³⁴²

The head of Longinus's lance was subsequently shown, in 1608, to the Irish earls who were in Rome at the time, having fled Ireland.³⁴³ The popularity of the most famous relic of the true cross in Ireland, namely that of Uachdar Lámhann (Holycross Abbey, County Tipperary) is well attested. An unidentified poet (*n.l.t.* 1614) states: 'Had I to tell the miracles of this cross hard were the reckoning.'³⁴⁴ Both Hugh O' Neill and Red Hugh O' Donnell are reported to have visited Holycross at the end of the sixteenth century, O' Neill travelling in the middle of winter.³⁴⁵

Representations of the Instruments of the Passion in Ireland from the fifteenth century onwards were largely influenced by a range of motifs that were deemed suitable by the particular sculptor who fashioned them. Certain motifs, however, recur frequently, becoming almost standard. These included the cross, the spear or lance, scourges, pincers, nails, hammer, ladder, crown of thorns, dice, robe and sponge / cup on pole. Less common than these are the flagellation column with ropes, the *titulus* board

³⁴² *ALC*, 1492.

³⁴³ Tadhg Ó Cianain, *The flight of the earls (1607)*, ed. Paul Walsh (Dublin, 1916), p.179.

³⁴⁴ *ADD* 88, v.10.

³⁴⁵ O' Sullivan Bear, *Ireland under Elizabeth*, p.130; Ó Cléirigh, *Beatha Aodha Ruaidh Uí Dhomhnaill*, i, p.321.

(INRI), the faces of those who spat at Christ, the thirty pieces of silver (or purse), the basin in which Pilate washed his hands, the sword and ear of Malchus, the birch rods, the handkerchief of Veronica³⁴⁶ and the cock and pot from the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus.³⁴⁷ The influence of the instruments on religious consciousness is also evident in bardic poetry. An unidentified poet mentions ‘the scourges...the hammers that struck Thee;...the pincers that seized Thy flesh;...the points of the pricking thorn spikes;..the spike in His feet, the spear in His breast, the nail in His hands;..Thy draught of gall.’³⁴⁸ Maolmhuire, son of Cairbre Ó hUiginn, mentions the three nails as being sufficient to fortify the heavenly castle (to win salvation for humanity).³⁴⁹ Just as the Five Wounds of Christ could both win salvation for some and condemn others to damnation, the same pattern applied to the Instruments of His Passion. Cormac Ruadh Ó hUiginn (*n.l.t.* 1473) is fearful of the retribution that will come from his part in crucifying Christ: ‘My share in the spear through His heart I have not requited; may Mary pray to her nursling for me, saving me from that spear.’³⁵⁰ The sixteenth-century poet, Domhnall, son of Dáire Mac Bruaideadha, in a similar fashion, claims that:

³⁴⁶ Note that the handkerchief of Veronica which becomes popular in sculpture after the 1590s is also reported to have been viewed by the Irish earls in 1608; see Ó Cianain, *The flight of the earls*, p.177.

³⁴⁷ The story is told how, after the death of Jesus, Judas returned home to his wife who claimed that the cock she was boiling in the pot was more likely to crow than was Jesus to rise from the dead whereupon the cock duly rose from the pot, prompting Judas to leave and commit suicide.

³⁴⁸ *ADD* 92, vv 12-17. As the only manuscripts in which this poem is found are late and corrupt, it is impossible to ascertain when it was written.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 77, v.15.

³⁵⁰ *DDé* 22, v.38.

We have cause to fear even the blood that saved us, the nail and the bloodstained foot, and the cross whereon His head drooped (in death), and the delicate hand and side, which He had pierced. /

We should fear too the flashing reddened spear tempered in the Lord's blood, and the rope that dragged out both His bright arms so that neither of them was left unwounded.³⁵¹

The Charter of Christ

In their respective treatments of the Passion of Christ there exists a curious pair of similarities between the poetry of Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn, who died in 1448 at Kilconly, north east of Galway, and that of Observant friar, Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn (*d.* 1487), which has been, thus far, ignored in historical research.³⁵² Andrew Breeze has drawn attention to the fact that three separate references exist in Irish bardic poetry to the English 'Charter of Christ' (*Carta Humani Generis*) theme.³⁵³ The 'Charter of Christ' is a medieval English literary allegory (appearing as early as the first half of the fourteenth century), which represents Christ as granting mankind a charter on Calvary. Christ's body becomes the parchment on which the charter is drawn up, the lance or nails become the pens, with which it is written, His wounds become the letters, etc. Uilliam Mac an Leagha, poet, scribe and translator, who travelled in the Kilkenny-Tipperary region with his Gaelicised patron, Edmund mac Richard Butler (nephew of James Butler, the 'White earl' and 4th earl of Ormond) translated one version of an English lyric of this theme (the so-called 'Long Charter B' text,

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 58, vv 20-1.

³⁵² Further comment on the significance of these similarities is made below.

³⁵³ Breeze, 'The Charter of Christ in medieval English, Welsh and Irish.'

originally written before 1400) about 1463.³⁵⁴ However, the bardic references, which Breeze alludes to, precede this date and, hence, do not rely on it. The earliest is in a poem entitled ‘*Cairt a síodhchána ag Síol Ádhaimh*’ by Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn, originally found in the so-called Yellow Book of Lecan (written in 1473 by Seanchán, son of Maolmhuire Ó Maolchonaire).³⁵⁵ Ó hUiginn curiously addresses the cross and not Christ’s body as the charter. He also describes Christ’s breast-wound as its seal. The second instance in which the ‘Charter of Christ’ theme is alluded to is in another poem, this time anonymous, from the same *duanaire*. Here the poet refers to the King (Christ) writing peace-terms for men ‘on His breast as on a document.’³⁵⁶ Breeze suggests that this poem is also of the Ó hUiginn school.³⁵⁷ The third poem, which refers to this theme, was written by Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn.³⁵⁸ Philip mentions Eve’s breaching of the peace (note how Tadhg Óg refers to the Charter as the ‘Charter of peace’).³⁵⁹ Christ’s heart-blood is the seal of his pardon. There are some later poems, however, which Breeze omits to mention. They develop the allegory in more detail

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp 117-18. This translation exists in three manuscripts: Dublin, King’s Inns 10 (c.1463); London, British Library Add. 11809 written by Mac an Leagha between c.1465 and c.1500; Dublin, RIA Ms.3 B 22, written by Tadhg Ó Ríoghghardáin, c.1473-5.

³⁵⁵ TCD. Ms.1318; see also *DDé* 3, vv 9-12.

³⁵⁶ *ADD* 84, v.5.

³⁵⁷ Breeze, ‘The charter of Christ in medieval English, Welsh and Irish’, p.117.

³⁵⁸ *PB* 21, v.17. Philip makes another allusion to this theme in another poem: *ibid.*, 8, v.19.

³⁵⁹ The idea that peace was achieved on Calvary was common in the late medieval period. The peace was considered to have been initially broken in the Garden of Eden by Eve. An unidentified poet (*n.l.t.*1631) states that ‘in pride, alas, Eve offended the Creator; by her sin she broke the peace and all her race fell too’ (‘To a crucifix’, *IM* 1922, p.118, v.9). Christ is depicted as peacemaker on Calvary. Tadhg Óg Ó Dálaigh (*fl.*1520) speaks of ‘many the peacemaker that was wounded when saving another man; Thou didst save the world but at the cost which the peacemaker pays.’ (*ADD* 71, v.20).

than is evident in the poems of the Ó hUiginn school. It is unfortunate, however, that apart from the poem by Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh, the remaining examples cannot be accurately dated. Ó Cobhthaigh states that ‘’twere useless for us to contest the tribute, but the wounded breast is a charter for our pardon; over His royal signature He settled all our differences with Him.’³⁶⁰ A poem falsely attributed to Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh, but occurring in the Book of O’ Conor Don (1631), speaks of the results arising from the fastening of Christ’s body to the cross: ‘Ever since ’tis a peace-charter, a cross of salvation, a noble beacon bright-gleaming, with its strong fair gleams.’³⁶¹ Brian Caoch Ó Dálaigh, whose poem is found in at least two seventeenth-century manuscripts, expresses similar thoughts:

Strong is a contract drawn up on a royal document; for our contract (about our salvation) we have (such) a document to rely on; if I have refused the arrangement so made ’twas a shame seeing that a king’s hand drew it up. /

This pardon for us has been strong ever since for He ascended the cross to settle it; He wrote out in a legal document on His breast the peace-terms with the Trinity so that we may never be abandoned.³⁶²

An unidentified poet (*n.l.t.* 1631) also mentions that ‘on His breast, as on a document, He has written peace-terms for men with which they may well be content.’³⁶³ Another poet (*n.l.t.* 1631) claims that ‘the nail-wounds in Thy hands are a title-deed to my salvation.’ Finally, there is also a full mention of Christ’s Charter in a poem entitled

³⁶⁰ *ADD* 67, v.38.

³⁶¹ ‘To a crucifix’, *IM* 1922, p.250, v.8.

³⁶² ‘Our Salvation’, p.467, vv 1-2.

³⁶³ *ADD* 84, v.5.

‘The Song of Tuileagna Mac Torna’, which occurs in three manuscripts.³⁶⁴ In the latter two of these, additional verses are added, along with sections of other poems. An ascription to Aonghus Ó Dálaigh is given.³⁶⁵ Tadhg Ó Dúshláine suggests that the poet is most probably Tuileagna, son of Torna Ó Maolchonaire of Kilkenny, who was pardoned on 17 March 1584.³⁶⁶ The poet, who anticipates a visit to Lough Derg, is in penitential mood:

Many a writer tells of the testament of love Thou didst leave to Thy race; that generous testament of Thy pierced side and feet is as a parchment dictated by Thee;...the pens that wrote it – sublime the tale! – were the hook-bearing thongs; not long didst Thou delay in paying, according to the charter, Thy heart’s blood poured forth.³⁶⁷

It seems that later poets, such as Ó Maolchonaire, were most probably familiar with the written text of the charter, while the earlier works of the Ó hUiginn school at best suggest that the analogy was most likely aurally acquired.

The Fifteen Pains of the Passion

The second thematic similarity which can be identified in the poetry of Tadhg Óg and Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn concerns reference to the fifteen pains or sorrows of the Passion. Tadhg Óg introduces the theme by the cry ‘The fifteen sorrows – dread suffering! - which came on Christ from Judas’s plotting – why should I not recall those fifteen sorrows which I shall tell of His passion?’³⁶⁸ He continues by beginning

³⁶⁴ Advocates Library Ms. lxiv, ff 28-9; also TCD Ms.1346, f.86-7 and RIA Ms.24 L 28, p.332-4. See Leslie, *St Patrick’s Purgatory*, pp 167-72.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.167.

³⁶⁶ Tadhg Ó Dúshláine, ‘Lough Derg in native Irish poetry’, in *Clogher Record* xiii, no.1 (1988), p.80.

³⁶⁷ Leslie, *Saint Patrick’s Purgatory*, pp 167-72, vv 18-19.

³⁶⁸ *ADD* 78, v.10.

to enumerate them (a task which he never completes). The first sorrow is the bloody sweat on Thursday, the second the trial and denial by the apostles, the third sorrow the four wounds of the three nails. After this, the poet mentions the stretching of his limbs, His abandonment by the apostles, His having been pierced by a lance, His burning thirst, the drinking of gall and His lament for Adam's race from the cross.³⁶⁹ Philip Bocht, meanwhile, mentions the 'fifteen pains of the passion' but does not go on to enumerate them: 'A troop as a thick flame pursuing us are the passion-pains...the fifteen long pains of the passion are a troop from horror-land.'³⁷⁰ I have not found an allusion to fifteen sorrows or pains of the Passion in any other poem. However, the number fifteen does occur elsewhere with reference to the Passion. Fergus O' Farrell, in his examination of the sixteenth-century *Imago Pietatis* in Ennis friary, draws attention to three dice, which appear at the tip of the spearhead; these, he claims, are marked. In his outline of the image one can discern three sets of numbers: four, six and five, which collectively add up to fifteen.³⁷¹ The detail with which such images were usually endowed precludes the suggestion that these numbers for the dice were arbitrarily chosen.

If the numbers on the dice were purposely made to add up to fifteen, then, was it because of some awareness of the tradition of the fifteen pains or sorrows? It must not be forgotten that one of the most popular set of prayers in late medieval England also had a close association with the number fifteen. The 'Fifteen Oes' of St Bridget were structured, in form, around the seven words (or utterances) of Christ from the cross.³⁷²

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, vv 11-18.

³⁷⁰ *PB* 3, v.20.

³⁷¹ O' Farrell, 'Our Lord's Pity', p.35.

³⁷² Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, p.249.

The 'Fifteen Oes' were learned prayers, rooted in Patristic and early medieval theology, but were immensely popular, progressing through the details of the passion and providing rich nourishment for affective meditation.³⁷³ They appeared frequently in printed editions of the *Horae* and in private devotional collections. Great promises were attached to their recitation, including the release from Purgatory of fifteen of the devotee's family upon recitation of fifteen *Pater Nosters* and *Aves* each day for a year in honour of each wound that Christ received (this was apparently revealed to St Bridget of Sweden or, in other versions, an unnamed recluse who desired to know the number of Christ's wounds).³⁷⁴ One cannot be certain when the 'Fifteen Oes' devotion first reached Ireland. However, one particular manuscript, namely British Library Sloane Ms.3567, written by Cúchonnacht, son of Aodh Mág Uidhir for his brothers, Éamonn and Brian, in 1664-5, reveals an important link between the Irish 'fifteen pains' and the English 'Fifteen Oes'. Early in the manuscript (fol.12 b) appears an instruction on how to pray the 'Fifteen Oes' in honour of Christ's Passion. The following translation is that of Robin Flower:

The fifteen prayers, proper to say, in commemoration of the fifteen bitterest agonies of Christ in the Passion.

The first prayer in commemoration of the fear that was on Thy limbs when Thou didst fear the Passion, for Thou didst pour a sweat of blood from Thee, praying on Maundy Thursday.

The second prayer in commemoration of the leaving of Thee alone by the apostles.

³⁷³ Ibid., pp 250-1.

³⁷⁴ Ibid., p.255.

The third prayer in commemoration of the piercing of Thy feet and hands when the nails were put into them.

The fourth prayer in commemoration of the sundering and the dragging apart of Thy limbs.

The fifth prayer in commemoration of the leaving of Thee alone upon the cross, like a lamb among wolves.

The sixth prayer in commemoration of Thy thirst.

The seventh prayer in commemoration of how Thou didst gaze in the mirror of divinity and didst see Thy Passion, how it needs must be to help the human race and Thou didst see a multitude of souls for whose salvation it was necessary and Thou didst weep exceedingly then upon the cross.

The eighth prayer in commemoration of how the Jews gave Thee gall and vinegar to drink and Thou didst say *Consummatum est*.

The ninth prayer in commemoration of how Thou didst say 'Father, why hast Thou deserted me?'

The tenth prayer in commemoration of how Thou didst say, when Thy spirit was leaving Thee, *In manu tuas Domine comendo spiritum meum*.

The eleventh prayer in commemoration of how Thou didst spend all Thy strength in the service of the Heavenly Father.

The twelfth prayer in commemoration of how Thou wert on the cross with no drop of blood in Thy body for a long while.

The thirteenth prayer in commemoration of the height of the wounds and the hurts that were inflicted on Thee, for they were so high that they reached to the presence of the Heavenly Father, and they were so broad that they filled the whole world.

The fourteenth prayer in commemoration of the depth of Thy wounds, for the wounds of the head reached the brain, and the wounds of the nails, after rending the sinews and flesh and blood of Thy body, reached the wood of the cross, and the wound of the side reached to the heart, and from the heart to the soul, and from the soul to Hell, and Thou didst draw all the holy souls from Hell up.

The fifteenth prayer in commemoration of the whole number of Thy wounds for their number was six thousand, six hundred, sixty and six, which Thou didst endure for Adam's seed.³⁷⁵

While the instruction for the recitation of the 'Oes' does indeed detail fifteen sets of pains or sorrows, another similar account appears later in the same manuscript (fol.35), which describes a revelation to three holy women, namely Elizabeth (of Schönau), Malachias (most likely a corruption of Mechtild of Hackeborn), and Bridget (of Sweden), who wished to know something of the Lord's Passion and Death. The text is in the original orthography of the manuscript:

Ar tus do buaileadh da ced buille orm.

An dara huair do buaileadh deich nduirn fichet orm.

An treas uair an tan rom gabhadh sa n gairdin ag teacht go toigh damh do leagadh seacht n-uaire me.

An cethramhadh uair do buailedh secht bhfichit dorn ann m'ucht orm.

An cuigeadh uair do buaileadh ceitri fichit dorn ann mo guailibh orm.

An seisedh uair do tairngedh me suas an diaigh mo gruaige da uair dég ar xx.

An sechtmhadh uair do buaileadh deich n-uaire ar m'fhiacclaibh me.

An t-ochtmhadh uair do rinnes naoi n-osna ar chéd.

³⁷⁵ Robin Flower, 'The revelation of Christ's wounds', in *Béaloideas* i (1927), pp 43-4.

An naomhadh uair do tairngedh m'fesog da uair dég ar xx.

An dechmhadh uair do rinne crann na croiche aon cnedh basamhail orm.

An t-aonmhadh uair dég an tan do badhas cengailte do colamhain cloiche do rinnedh se mhile cnedh ar tri fichit oram.

An dara huair dég do cnedhadh mo cenn mile uair.

An treas [uair] .x an tan do crochadh no do roighedh sa croich me do rinnedh cuig hálaidhe bais orm.

An cethramhadh uair .x do gabadh do seilighidh ann m'edan oram da uair décc ar fichit.

An cuigeadh uair décc do buailetur na saighdiuiridh ocht mbuille ar ceitri fichit ar cuig mile buille do sgiúrsa oram.³⁷⁶

[‘In the beginning, I received two hundred blows. The second time, I was given thirty blows of the fist. The third time, on the occasion when I was captured in the garden while I was on my way to the house, I was knocked seven times. The fourth time, I suffered 140 blows to my chest. The fifth time, my shoulders were struck eighty times. The sixth time, I was pulled up by the hair thirty-two times. The seventh time, I received ten blows to the teeth. The eighth time, I breathed 109 sighs. The ninth time, my beard was pulled forty-two times. The tenth time, the tree of the cross inflicted a deadly wound on me. The eleventh time, when I was tied to the stone pillar, I received 6060 wounds. The twelfth time, my head was wounded 1000 times. The thirteenth time, on the occasion when I was hanged or stretched on the cross, I received five fatal wounds. The fourteenth time, they spat on my face thirty-two times. The fifteenth time, the soldiers lashed me 5088 times.’]

³⁷⁶ Flower, ‘The revelation of Christ’s wounds’, p.39. The translation following is mine.

It appears, then, that the number fifteen had a special significance in relation to Christ's Passion and Death. For that reason, the poems of both Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn and Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn, which refer to the fifteen pains or sorrows of the Passion, may provide evidence suggesting knowledge of the 'Fifteen Oes' devotion in Ireland two centuries earlier than its appearance in manuscript form.³⁷⁷

Equally important is the strong possibility (suggested both by this link between the poets, in addition to the 'Charter of Christ' references discussed above) that Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn belonged to the same branch of bardic Uí Uiginn as his predecessor, Tadhg Óg. The poems of Tadhg Óg and Philip Bocht, which mention the fifteen sorrows or pains, are remarkably similar in their graphic illustration of Christ's suffering. Tadhg Óg paints the following picture: 'A burning affliction was the depth of His wounds, the bursting of His breast, the splitting of His feet's white skin and His hand's reddened palms.'³⁷⁸ Meanwhile, Philip Bocht speaks of 'the bursting of His sinews [which] could be heard [and] the dislocation of His limbs.'³⁷⁹ The theme of mankind's sin, its need for atonement and God's love is strongly present in both poems: 'Mankind enjoys God's love – no love for gain sake! - how can we atone to God for our sins, those of the past and the present? With justice we are called foes of the king, and yet His death came about by trying to save us!'³⁸⁰ Philip Bocht's

³⁷⁷ It should be noted that Tadhg Óg was much in demand as a poet and composed poems for many chieftains, including Ó Néill, Ó Domhnaill, Ó Conchobair Cairbre, Ó Ceallaigh, Ó Conchobair Ciarraidhe, Ó Cearbhaill, and Mág Uidhir. It is possible that the 'Fifteen Oes' devotion, manifesting itself as the fifteen sorrows in Tadhg Óg's poetry, may have been a favourite of the Mág Uidhir clan and was first encountered by Tadhg Óg in his dealings with that particular lordship.

³⁷⁸ *ADD* 78, v.24.

³⁷⁹ *PB* 3, v.15.

³⁸⁰ *ADD* 78, vv29-30.

thoughts are similar: 'May he regard His folk, though undeserving; may He stay by them even as they are and not lessen His mother-like love; if we be lost too great will have been His toil.'³⁸¹ It is, of course, possible that Philip Bocht was aware of Tadhg Óg's poems. After all, the *duanaire* in which Tadhg Óg's poem appears was written in 1473 by Seanchán, son of Maolmhuire Ó Maolchonaire, a time when Philip Bocht was presumably at the height of his career.³⁸² If this is so, perhaps some light can be shed on this renowned poet of whom nothing is known except the date of his death.

One final feature of Tadhg Óg's poem deserves attention. It concerns his statement on the number of Christ's wounds. The enumeration of the wounds of Christ as a devotion was to be found in most European languages in the medieval period.³⁸³ Great promises were to be received if one prayed fifteen prayers each day for a year in order to include each of the 5475 wounds of Christ. The story of the revelation of Christ's wounds to either an unnamed recluse, to St Mechtild of Hackeborn (1241-99) or St Gertrude the Great (1256-1301/2), was amended to state that this revelation was given to St Bridget of Sweden (1302/3-73) probably early in fifteenth-century England by the Brigittine Syon Abbey in Twickenham.³⁸⁴ This story, with its promises attached, was then prefaced to the 'Fifteen Oes' text. In his edition of Mac an Leagha's 'Charter of Christ', Gearóid Mac Niocaill notes that the number of wounds ascribed to Christ is 6,666, which is also found in an interpolation of the Irish translation of

³⁸¹ *PB* 3, v.24.

³⁸² *ADD*, vol.i, p.xi.

³⁸³ Andrew Breeze, 'The number of Christ's wounds', in *The Bulletin of the Board of Celtic studies* xxxii (1985), p.84.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p.87.

Meditationes vitae Christi.³⁸⁵ Breeze suggests that Mac an Leagha's translation was written sometime between 1461 and 1463, and that both texts were influenced by the figure of 6666 wounds which came not from England, but the continent, where it occurs in the early fifteenth-century *Revelationes* of St Frances of Rome (1384-1440) and the writings of Gabriel Biel of Tübingen.³⁸⁶ References to the number of Christ's wounds are to be found later on, in seventeenth-century Ireland, in the manuscript written by Cú Chonnacht, son of Aodh Mág Uidhir in 1664-5.³⁸⁷ Thomas Crewe, one of King James's Irish soldiers in 1688, carried a copy of a text enumerating the blows Christ received, which again amounted to 6666.³⁸⁸ Another copy was found on a soldier called Creagh near Clonmel in 1690, which also details 6666 wounds.³⁸⁹ This leads Breeze to the conclusion that the Irish tradition of the number of wounds was related to the revelations of St Frances of Rome rather than those of St Mechtild and St Gertrude, and that the devotion probably entered Ireland, from the continent, via the Franciscans at Louvain.³⁹⁰ However, the appearance of what seems to be early references to this devotion or, at least a variant form of it, in fifteenth-century bardic poetry necessitates a re-appraisal of this view.

³⁸⁵ See Gearóid Mac Niocaill, 'Carta Humani Generis' in *Éigse* viii (1956-7), pp 204-21; see also Breeze, 'The Charter of Christ in medieval English, Welsh and Irish', p.119.

³⁸⁶ Breeze, 'The Charter of Christ in medieval English, Welsh and Irish', p.119.

³⁸⁷ British Library, Sloane Ms.3567. This manuscript also contains material printed by the Irish Franciscans at Louvain.

³⁸⁸ British Library, Add. Ms.5832; see Flower, 'The revelation of Christ's wounds', p.40.

³⁸⁹ British Library, Sloane Ms.631. Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn, meanwhile, perhaps driven by a raw bardic urge for exaggeration, numbers Christ's wounds as 56,616! ('On God, Mary's son were sixteen wounds and six hundreds and fifty-six thousand', *ADD* 78, v.26). Meanwhile, an unidentified poet (*n.l.t.*1473), more measured in tone, is content to claim that 'half of his wounds ye have not heard of', *ibid.*, 83, v.4.

³⁹⁰ Breeze, 'The number of Christ's wounds', p.91.

Longinus

The figure of Longinus, the centurion who pierced Christ's side with a lance, features prominently in the religious literature of medieval Ireland and also throughout bardic treatments of the Passion. The story goes that Longinus, who was almost blind because of age, had his sight restored by accidentally applying a trickle of Christ's blood to his eyes, the blood having run down the shaft of the spear he had just thrust into Christ's heart. This tradition was referred to in the famous *Legenda Aurea* of de Voragine in the thirteenth century. It also appears in the *Leabhar Breac*, the so-called *Yellow Book of Lecan*, the *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum* and the *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne*, among other manuscripts.³⁹¹ Longinus was affectionately referred to by the Gaelic Irish as 'An Dall' or 'the Blind Man'. Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn speaks of Longinus as giving Christ His death-wound, which differs from the biblical tradition where the soldier pierces Christ's side, seeing that he was already dead.³⁹² The poet, Ó Leannáin (*fl.*1320) notes how Christ was merciful to the *Dall*: 'When wounded by the lance Mary's son rejected not the Dall; sudden and plenteous was that merciful act of His, His love for the Dall.'³⁹³ Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh also refers to the salvation of the *Dall*, quipping that 'never was (the infliction of) a wound so well rewarded!'³⁹⁴, as does both Tuathal Ó hUiginn and Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh.³⁹⁵ The story of the *Dall* was undoubtedly very popular. It is easy to imagine how preachers would have used it

³⁹¹ *PH*, p.300f; Ian Hughes (ed.), *Stair Nicoméid: the Irish Gospel of Nicodemus* (London, 1991), p.17; Máire Herbert and Martin McNamara, *Irish Biblical apocrypha* (Edinburgh, 1989), p.69; See McNamara, *The apocrypha in the Irish Church*, p.81 for a fuller list of references.

³⁹² *ADD* 78, v.4; see Jn 19:4 for Biblical account.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, 79, v.18.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 63, v.13.

³⁹⁵ *DDé* 20, v.29; *AFOD* 51, v.12.

frequently as an exhortation to repent and trust in the boundless mercy of God. The example of Longinus was helpful in illustrating how contrition and good deeds win God's pardon: 'God's Son...accepted the penance and good deeds of the blind man though he had pierced the Lord's heart.'³⁹⁶ The story of Longinus inspired trust in God. An unidentified poet (*n.l.t.*1614) expresses this confidence in the following verse:

My accounts are not clear, though 'tis not hard to settle accounts with Thee!
The man who wounded Thee now sits in Heaven at Thy side; is it not clear
that Thy natural impulse is to save me?³⁹⁷

Not everyone was happy about the mercy shown to the *Dall*, however. The sixteenth-century poet, Gofraidh, son of Brian Mac an Bhaird, speaks of him as 'the wicked man who tortures Thee' and wishes that he himself had had the opportunity to defend Christ on Calvary with his blood-stained lance.³⁹⁸

The Harrowing of Hell

The momentous event, which succeeded Christ's death on Calvary, namely His 'Harrowing of Hell', traditionally believed to have occurred on Saturday,³⁹⁹ but sometimes on Sunday morning, was a hugely popular theme in medieval European religious literature. The apocryphal work known as *Descensus ad infernos*, having been combined with another apocryphon, the *Acta Pilati*, formed the *Gospel of*

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 51, v.12.

³⁹⁷ *ADD* 84, v.22.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 51, vv 4-5. Note that the poet speaks of his own 'lance' as being 'blood-stained' which may illustrate that he understood that he, too, had a role in putting Christ to death through sin.

³⁹⁹ Under the heading for chapter 62, '*Quid fecit Dominus in Sabbato*' the Irish version of the *Meditationes* text reads '*Quomodo Dominus Iesus iuit ad infernum*'; *SBC*, p.170.

Nicodemus, probably in the Carolingian era.⁴⁰⁰ It appears in fragment in the eighth / ninth-century *Book of Cerne*, and in the *Leabhar Breac*, being also found in the so-called *Yellow Book of Lecan*, the *Book of Fermoy* and *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum* in varying forms. A version of the 'Harrowing of Hell', written by Uilliam Mac an Leagha in the fifteenth century, bears little relation to the aforementioned texts, perhaps having been influenced by an English poem of c.1430, entitled 'A Song called Þe Deuelis Perlament or Parlementum of Feendis.'⁴⁰¹ The bardic poets portray Christ's descent into Hell as a *creach* or plunder of its contents. The sixteenth-century poet, Maolmhuire, son of Cairbre Ó hUiginn, depicts Christ, in defiant mood, as a warring chieftain bent on victory: 'Furious at Thy wounds, Thou dost on the Sunday morning raid drive recklessly Thy steed up to Hell's gates and empty its dungeon.'⁴⁰² Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh relates how 'Hell's house lost many men owing to the horse with which [He] didst rout [His] foes.'⁴⁰³ An unidentified poet (*n.l.t.*1614) details how Christ 'with this cross...broke down our foe's door and took us from him and marched off with us as His booty.'⁴⁰⁴ Another poet, whose identity is unknown (*n.l.t.*1614), relates how Christ, before emptying Hell of its occupants, built a bridge over which His people could cross. The beams, which He used in the building of this construction, were the four trees of which the cross of crucifixion was composed.⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰⁰ McNamara, *The apocrypha in the Irish Church*, p.68.

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.*, pp 71-5; see also J. E. Caerwyn Williams, 'An Irish harrowing of Hell' in *Études Celtiques* ix (1960), pp 47-78.

⁴⁰² *ADD* 77, v.27.

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.*, 66, v.14.

⁴⁰⁴ *ADD* 88, v.6.

⁴⁰⁵ 'The bridge of salvation', *IM* 1930, p.51, vv 8, 12.

Judgement

The death of Christ, for the Gaelic Irish was interpreted as a clear manifestation of the tremendous love of God. Its salvific nature is reiterated again and again in their literature, prayers and devotions, and becomes intimately connected with the liturgy of the Eucharist as observed below. Yet, a tremendous responsibility was also attached to this deicide. Mankind was ultimately answerable for its crime and would be expected to account for itself on the last day. The Passion of Christ and the Day of Judgement, then, were inextricably linked. Philippe Ariès contends that there exists a dichotomy between the attitudes of early medieval Europe to the end of time and those of late medieval Europe. The conception of the last day in early medieval Europe was influenced by the account of the visionary of the Book of Revelation, which inspired Romanesque art.⁴⁰⁶ Ariès relates how, in the twelfth century, an iconography began to be established which superimposed the scene of Matthew 25 onto the scene from the Book of Revelation, linking the Second Coming with the Last Judgement. By the thirteenth century, the judgement scene had achieved predominance and the damned were portrayed along with the elect, distinguished from each other by the balancing of Michael the Archangel's scales.⁴⁰⁷ A new anxiety and uncertainty about the eternal destiny of the soul gripped late medieval consciousness. Eamon Duffy states that 'horror and fear are the emotions most commonly associated with late medieval perceptions of death.'⁴⁰⁸ After all, this was the age of the chilling *danse macabre* portrayals of the universal power of death. Furthermore, the great plague, which struck Europe in the fourteenth century, did

⁴⁰⁶ Rev 4:2; Philippe Ariès, *The hour of our death*, trans. Helen Weaver (Oxford, 1991), p.97.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p.101.

⁴⁰⁸ Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, p.313.

nothing to inspire confidence in the eternal Judge. The vision of Christ's return in judgement was regularly depicted above rood lofts in churches as a haunting reminder of the necessity of living a good life. Christ would come at the end of time, His wounds all fresh and bleeding, to exact justice.⁴⁰⁹

The importance of the Day of Judgement was not lost on the Gaelic Irish. The bardic poets used at least fifteen different terms to refer to it.⁴¹⁰ The terms themselves are instructive in revealing the perceptions of judgement, which led to their composition. The terms include the notion of gathering (on a Monday, the day on which the judgement would take place) on an elevated area (Mount Sion).⁴¹¹ It would be mankind's appointment. Humanity would be summoned to the King's sessions as witnesses. The Day of Judgement would be a day of evaluation (literally a day of measurement by the use of scales - an allusion to Michael's role).⁴¹² Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn speaks of Jesus summoning the dead three times before passing judgement.⁴¹³ The sixteenth-century poet, Laoiseach Mac an Bhaired, states that when

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., pp 157, 309.

⁴¹⁰ *Lá an Bhreithiúnais, Lá an Luain, Lá an Tionóil, Lá an Mheasa, Lá an Tobhaigh, Lá na Coinne, Lá Coinne Sléibhe Síoin, Síosa na Ríogh, Lá na Fírinne, Lá na Coinnmhe, Lá an Fhinné, Lá an tSléibhe, Lá an Bhrátha, Lá Togharma na trí rann, Lá na hImirce*; see Ó Laoghaire, 'Spioradáltacht na hÉireann, 1200-1500', p.142.

⁴¹¹ Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn refers to the hill of judgement in his poetry: 'We shall see Him coming above us on the hill to judge; we are the flock of birds, He the hawk; dread the doom.' (*DDé* 6, v.19)

⁴¹² See *ADD* 56, v.10 by the late sixteenth-century poet, Diarmuid Mac an Bhaired: 'God has not got His tribute from the world; on Monday the time for making our choice will have gone; all the children whom God has given Eve will tremble at their sins being put in God's scales.'

⁴¹³ *DDé* 14, v.9. This idea of being summoned three times before judgement may have lived on in folklore. If so, it may be related to the belief (still held in some rural areas today) that three mysterious knocks occurring on a door in the middle of the night signals that someone close to the family is being

the host shall come to defend themselves, Christ the Judge will not be pleading their case.⁴¹⁴ The poets speak of Christ coming on that day, His cross on His shoulder, or lying upon the cross.⁴¹⁵ The cross is almost always described as being red in colour and invariably instils terror among the onlookers: ‘When thou seest the red cross and Mary’s son coming in anger – lo! Is it not late thou seest that that is no hour for penance.’⁴¹⁶ Laoiseach Mac an Bhaire depicts the cross on Monday as making ‘His crowded folk anxious.’⁴¹⁷ An unidentified poet (*n.l.t.* 1614) warns of ‘God’s red cross and His wrath and His wounds’ soon appearing.⁴¹⁸ Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn sees the cross as being directed personally against him: ‘His wrath, though slow, must break forth as the red cross points me out to Him.’⁴¹⁹ An unidentified poet, whose work appears in the Book of O’ Conor Don (1631), both invokes and fears the cross on Judgement Day:

’Tis right for me to fly to thee, O Cross of Jesus, protect me; may the flash of
Thy anger not face me, O precious red cross of God.⁴²⁰

The mixture of emotions provoked by the red cross is captured by another unidentified poet (*n.l.t.* 1631) when he states: ‘To see the marks on its reddened wood stirs pity, promises salvation, helps to ward off sin’s wounding and saves our soul.’⁴²¹

summoned to depart their earthly life. See John J. Ó Riordáin, *The music of what happens* (Dublin, 1996), p.99.

⁴¹⁴ *ADD* 55, v.7.

⁴¹⁵ See, for example, *DDé* 5, v.14; also *ADD* 56, v.8.

⁴¹⁶ *AFOD* 41, v.10.

⁴¹⁷ *ADD* 55, v.9.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 88, v.31.

⁴¹⁹ *DDé* 3, v.18.

⁴²⁰ ‘Confession of sins’, *IM*, 1922, p.31, v.32.

However, Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn's sentiments, a century earlier, seem very different in this regard: 'Hide from us Thy red cross so that Thy wrath be not seen.'⁴²²

The Irish tradition of the red cross appearing in the sky at Judgement signifies a cross awash with blood, demanding atonement. The wider tradition of Christ's wounds bleeding for all to see at the end of time is made more effective here, by the highlighting of their profusion. This interpretation is supported by the descriptions of the Passion by both Philip Bocht and Tuathal Ó hUiginn, which allude to this. Philip Bocht states that 'On His ruddy-hued cross there was no beam unstained by the blood of His outstretched hands, so that the colour of all its noble beams was changed.'⁴²³ Diarmuid Ó Laoghaire has found a reference to the red cross as early as the poetry of Blathmac in the eighth century.⁴²⁴ The image of Christ's cross appearing in the sky on the last day is to be found in an ancient versicle in the office of the Roman Breviary for 14 September (feast of the Triumph of the Cross): '*Hoc signum crucis erit in coelo cum Dominus ad judicandum venerit.*'⁴²⁵ It also appears in the *Altus Prosator* of Colmcille: '*Christo de celis domino descendente celsissimo prefulgebit clarissimum signum crucis et vexillum.*'⁴²⁶ Allusion to the ruddy appearance of the cross on Judgement Day was also to be found in John Mirk's *Festial*, a favourite preaching

⁴²¹ 'To a crucifix', *ibid.*, p.251, v.10.

⁴²² *DDé* 16, v.17.

⁴²³ *PB* 5, v.10; see also Tuathal's attestation regarding its colour, *DDé* 20, v.35.

⁴²⁴ Ó Laoghaire, 'Spioradáltacht na hÉireann, 1200-1500', p.142.

⁴²⁵ 'This sign of the cross will be in the sky when the Lord will come to judge': *DDé*, p.xvii.

⁴²⁶ 'With Christ, the Lord coming down from the highest heaven shall shine most clearly the sign and the standard of the cross': J. H. Bernard and Robert Atkinson (eds), *The Irish Liber Hymnorum* (2 vols, London, 1898), i, p.80.

manual in fifteenth and sixteenth-century England, but which was also used in Ireland. The following is an extract from a sermon for the first Sunday of Advent:

Then schal Ihesu Crist veray God and man, come to þe dome and al seyntys with hym, and schow all his wondys all fresch and newe, and bledyng, as þat day þat he deyed on þe crosse. And þer þe crosse schall be schewet all bloody, and all oþer ynstrumentys of his passion.⁴²⁷

The Day of Judgement was regarded as a day of tribute.⁴²⁸ The payment of the tribute (*síodh na cána*) literally establishes peace between God and Man. This debt had been outstanding since the sin of Adam and Eve, who broke the peace: 'Breach of peace was the only fruit Eve got from the Tribute tree.'⁴²⁹ The poets frequently refer to the Passion and Death of Christ on Calvary as the moment when the tribute was repaid and peace restored as in Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn's exclamation: 'O cross of God, o payment of the tribute.'⁴³⁰ In this understanding of the Passion, the Five Wounds become the 'five peace-gifts.'⁴³¹ However, an anomaly exists in the fact that some poets refer to the debt as still outstanding at Doomsday, by which time it is too late to settle: 'If Eve's race puts off till Monday the payment of their debt they are not likely to pay it then; 'tis dangerous for them not to travel while it is fine, for evening brings dark clouds.'⁴³² This outstanding debt clearly refers not to the sin of Adam and Eve but to the debt of individual sins, which are committed during life and are not brought

⁴²⁷ Theodore Erbe (ed.), *Mirk's festial: a collection of homilies by Johannes Mirkus (John Mirk)* (London, 1905). I wish to thank Alan Fletcher for drawing my attention to this reference.

⁴²⁸ Bergin, *Irish bardic poetry*, 50, v.9; also *ADD* 56, v.10.

⁴²⁹ *PB* 21, v.17.

⁴³⁰ *DDé* 3, v.10.

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*, v.8.

⁴³² *ADD* 84, v.2.

to the sacrament of Confession. These sins will be manifest for all to see.⁴³³ The red cross and the wounds of Jesus will confront mankind. Each wound will cry out for vengeance.⁴³⁴ The poet Aonghus, son of Aodh Ruadh Ó hUiginn, awaits it with fear: ‘On the day of gathering of the Father’s heir I shall have cause to tremble at the red nail.’⁴³⁵ The question of whether Christ’s wounds on Calvary have, in fact, paid the tribute is addressed by Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn. He encourages one to turn away from sin in order to gain access to salvation: ‘If I shun sin, Thy breast will have no cause of wrath.’⁴³⁶

In the prose tractate on matins in the *Leabhar Breac*, the Last Judgement takes place at midnight, echoing Christ’s own judgement and condemnation on earth: ‘At matins Christ will rise up to meet them with his red cross behind him to judge everyone, for the Son of God was judged by men through their evil hearts.’⁴³⁷ The judgement scene of Matthew 25 is also the account that inspired religious conceptions of the event in Gaelic Ireland.⁴³⁸ A poem on the Last Judgement, ascribed to Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh, speaks of Christ informing his people on Judgement Day of His having been spurned. When the people ask when this happened, He replies:

⁴³³ Ibid., 89, v.10.

⁴³⁴ *DDé* 7, v.30; *PB* 21, v.20.

⁴³⁵ ‘The Song of Aonghus’, v.5, in Leslie, *Saint Patrick’s Purgatory: a record from history and literature*, p.175.

⁴³⁶ *PB* 21, v.19.

⁴³⁷ R. I. Best, ‘The prose tractate on the canonical hours’ in Osborn Bergin and Carl Marstrander (eds), *Miscellany presented to Kuno Meyer by some of his friends and pupils on the occasion of his appointment to the chair of Celtic philology in the University of Berlin* (Halle, A.S. 1912), p.147.

⁴³⁸ *DDé* 5, v.16; see Mt 25:34.

I was the beggar in Thy doorway in thirst and hunger, not getting price of bit
or sup, while you were in comfort. /

I was every poor man, the woman in rags, every beggar naked and destitute.⁴³⁹

This reply is closely modelled on the Matthew text, showing familiarity with its contents. The term ‘the Day of Choosing’, which Philip Bocht uses to refer to Judgement Day, also has its origins in this gospel passage.⁴⁴⁰

The tradition of various signs of doom preceding Judgement Day is quite old and is found in many European lands and languages. An unknown source, the *Annales Hebraeorum* of St Jerome (Cirine) is cited by Pseudo-Bede, Peter Comestor and Peter Damien in their Latin works.⁴⁴¹ This tradition was very popular in Ireland. The eighth-century poet, Blathmac, mentions the signs in a poem to the Blessed Virgin.⁴⁴² There is also reference to the signs in the tenth-century ‘Evernew Tongue’ from the *Book of Lismore* and also in *Saltair na Rann*, which both St John D. Seymour and William W. Heist believe initially established this popular tradition, which is found thereafter in England and the continent.⁴⁴³ As noted above, Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh devotes a whole poem to the treatment of the fifteen signs.⁴⁴⁴ They are also to be found in a poem appearing in the fourteenth-century British Library Ms. Harley

⁴³⁹ ‘The signs of the Judgement’, *IM*, 1927, pp 262-3, vv 26-7. It is very possible that Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh wrote this poem. Its earliest appearance is in RIA Ms. D iv 2, a fifteenth-century manuscript from Kilcormac, Offaly.

⁴⁴⁰ *PB* 11, v.42; see Mt 25:32.

⁴⁴¹ *Quindecim signa*, *Historia Scholastica* and *De Novissimis et Antichristo* respectively; see Lucas, *Anglo-Irish poems of the middle ages*, p.188.

⁴⁴² Carney (ed.), *The poems of Blathmac*, pp 81-3, vv 236-41.

⁴⁴³ McNamara, *The apocrypha in the Irish Church*, pp 130-1.

⁴⁴⁴ *DD* 29.

913.⁴⁴⁵ The *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum* includes a prose treating of this topic.⁴⁴⁶ Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn provides a description of the events, as does a prose text ‘*Airdena inna Cóic Lá nDéc ria mBráth*’, found in the sixteenth-century *Leabhar Uí Mhaolchonaire*.⁴⁴⁷ These texts concentrate on the widespread disturbances of nature which well up into universal environmental anarchy before the end of the world. Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe addresses Christ, saying ‘It is you that will burn the level expanse of earth so that every smooth stone will be burnt to ashes.’⁴⁴⁸ Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh mentions ‘bolts of flame and showers of stones’ as the world’s end.⁴⁴⁹ The theme of signs before judgement was an enduring one and can be found in the poetry of Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh in the late sixteenth century: ‘The sea will be wild chaos with great storm!...the earth will be a red mass with what He has done for us.’⁴⁵⁰ It is not known to what extent this terrifying imagery was used for preaching purposes in order to encourage repentance, but the likelihood is that it was frequently employed. The signs preceding judgement were in the popular mindset for some time, enduring right up to the seventeenth century.

Who, or what was ‘God’ then, for the Gaelic Irish? The concept of ‘God’ was composed of many images. He was the Creator and ruler of nature, who brought His power to bear upon the elements, breathing life into them at creation, moulding,

⁴⁴⁵ Lucas, *Anglo-Irish poems of the middle ages*, pp 91-101.

⁴⁴⁶ McNamara, *The apocrypha in the Irish Church*, p.136.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.133; also *PB* 25, v.5f; Whitley Stokes, ‘The fifteen tokens of Doomsday’ in *Révue Celtique* xxviii (1907), pp 308-26.

⁴⁴⁸ *GBMCM* 19, v.20.

⁴⁴⁹ *ADD* 69, v.3. The rain of stones was expected to occur on the seventh day of signs; see *DD* 29, v.11.

⁴⁵⁰ *AFOD* 5, v.11. This is a reference to the earth being covered with blood, expected to occur on the sixth day of signs; see *DD* 29, v.10.

shaping and using them in history and ultimately venting His anger by manipulating the power He had given them, at the end of time. He was undoubtedly a God of justice, righting wrongs and punishing wrongdoers. Yet, there is ample evidence to suggest that He was also perceived of as a God of mercy, love and forgiveness in an age which historians in the past have often characterised as devoid of such imagery. The Passion of Christ was essentially a saving event for the Gaelic Irish, and while a strong element of fear surrounding the prospect of retribution can be detected, there is, too, a significant confidence in Christ's salvific act: 'O cross whereon God shed His blood; undertake and achieve my defense; owing to my many sins I flee to thee.'⁴⁵¹ The bardic poets often address the divine person in a familiar fashion; they approach the supernatural realm with relative ease, indicative of a certain comfort in God's presence. They enjoy portraying the elements of their faith in a manner, which tangibly connects with their immediate culture and society. Their faith, thereby acculturated and made their own, becomes real to them. This chapter attempts to elucidate and explore the range of ideas of God expressed by the Gaelic Irish in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, including some comment on the preceding age. The following chapter shifts focus from the Godhead to the next most important figure of devotion (or for some, the pre-eminent object of veneration!) – the Virgin Mary.

⁴⁵¹ *DDé* 3, v.19.

Chapter 2

Mary: Mediatrix and Kinswoman

Despite the fact that the believer in late medieval and early modern Europe lived in what Sallie McFague terms a 'sacramental universe'¹, where the idea of the divine was all encompassing, nevertheless, God was not to be approached alone. The necessity of surrounding oneself with a respectable entourage before engaging with the Godhead was keenly appreciated. This entourage consisted primarily of the Virgin Mary and one's favourite saints. The present chapter examines the role played by the first and most important of these emissaries, namely Mary, the Mother of God. Apart from Christ, the greatest and most prolific devotion of the late middle ages and early modern era was dedicated to the Virgin Mother. R. N. Swanson affirms that 'among the saints the Virgin Mary was unmatched. In the distinctions made between permitted degrees of veneration she alone (according to Thomas Aquinas) could be accorded the intensity of *hyperdulia*, which placed her above all other saints.'² While playing a somewhat subdued role in the first millennium of the Church's history, the cult of the Virgin in the west received new impetus, particularly from the twelfth century onwards.³ The woman whose role in the gospels is a largely silent one had, by the end of the period examined here, assumed the roles of Mediatrix, Advocate and Co-Redemptrix in the minds of many European Catholics, lay and clergy alike, who expressed heart-felt devotion to her. Indeed, these titles, which have never been accorded the status of Marian dogmas, are, nevertheless, indicative of the roles

¹ McFague, *Metaphorical theology: models of God in religious language*, pp 1-2.

² R. N. Swanson, *Religion and devotion in Europe c.1215-c.1515* (Cambridge, 1995), p.144.

³ O' Dwyer, *Mary: a history of devotion in Ireland*, p.23.

assigned to the Virgin by a sizeable number of Catholics up to this present day.⁴ It is interesting to note that each of the Marian dogmas was believed and cherished by the faithful before being officially recognised by the institutional Church. The historical development of the Virgin Mary's role in the later medieval period is an enormous subject and the present study can only afford to make cursory reference to it, and, only in so far as it impacts upon Gaelic popular devotion to the Mother of God.⁵

Peter O' Dwyer has done fundamental work on devotion to Mary in Ireland from its earliest appearances to the twentieth century. His study explores, in some depth, the subject of devotion to Mary in the Gaelic world.⁶ To reiterate much of the material presented by O' Dwyer would be quite a fruitless exercise. Therefore, in this chapter, I have chosen to concentrate on particular themes that frequently arise in bardic poetry and in other sources, and explore each of them with a view to obtaining a window on Gaelic Marian devotion as a whole. These themes include the two most important and most frequently depicted roles of Mary in Scripture – her *fiat* at the Annunciation and her standing by the cross of crucifixion. This chapter also considers her perpetual virginity and espousal to God, her roles as Mediatrix, Advocate and Co-Redemptrix and her designation as the 'New Eve', which appears widely in the writing of the Fathers of the Church. More specific literary treatments of the Virgin

⁴ Today, a significant number of Catholics are in favour of the proclamation of a fifth Marian Dogma, which would recognise Mary's role as Co-Redemptrix, Mediatrix and Advocate. The Marian dogmas which have already been proclaimed are the Divine Motherhood, the Perpetual Virginity of Mary, her Immaculate Conception and, most recently, her bodily Assumption into Heaven.

⁵ For a comprehensive but straightforward account of the development of Marian doctrine from the early Church to the eve of the Reformation see Hilda Graef, *Mary: a history of doctrine and devotion* (2 vols, London, 1963) i.

⁶ O' Dwyer, *Mary: a history of devotion in Ireland*.

such as her shedding tears of blood are also examined, in addition to popular Gaelic concerns regarding her relationship to the devotee's kin-group, and so on. The late medieval period, in general, witnessed a great deal of development in popular piety. Marian devotion was no exception in this regard. New ideas, prayers and forms of iconography, with the Virgin Mary as their subject, spread across Europe in the late fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It can be generally accepted that the Virgin achieved a degree of dominance such as she had never previously been accorded during this time. This did not only occur at a popular level, but was continually fed by the excessive claims of a growing number of theologians. Thus, the phenomenon of Mary's growing importance was one which pervaded so-called elite and popular religion alike, indicating, once again, the inadequacy of claims regarding chasmic divisions between these two worlds. However, wholesale acceptance of the view that pre-Reformation (or indeed, pre-Tridentine Marian devotion) was entirely characterised by extraordinary assertions of the Virgin's power that eventually began to be tempered by developments in the sixteenth century, is as unacceptable as it is simplistic. While this chapter provides many examples of the increasingly exalted role enjoyed by the Virgin, there are also indications that not everyone approved of this trend.

The Annunciation and Incarnation

The popularity of the Annunciation as a theme for religious art, particularly in the late medieval and early modern period, marked it as a defining moment in salvation history and underlined its doctrinal importance. Until 1582, when the advent of the Gregorian calendar relocated the New Year to 1 January, the feast of the Annunciation (25 March) or 'Lady Day' as it was known in England, marked the beginning of the New Year. The Annunciation scene was frequently depicted in

Ireland, examples being the seal matrix of the hospital of St John of Jerusalem at Nenagh and a medieval font from Crickstown, County Meath.⁷ Cornelius O' Dea, bishop of Limerick, had the Annunciation scene depicted on his crozier.⁸ Its importance as an event is obvious enough - while the angel waited for Mary's response to God's invitation, the world held its breath as salvation hung in the balance, dependent on a young girl. Yet the event, in itself, has important links with Mary's status as perpetual virgin and as spouse of God as seen below. Tomás Gruamdha Ó Bruacháin's Gaelic translation of *Meditationes vitae Christi* (c.1443), describes the event as follows:

Ocus adubairt Gaibrial ris an oigh ar ndul isteach an tan sin: Aue gracia plena, Dominus tecum.i. De do Beatha a ghrasa lana, ata an Tigherna maille rit. Ocus trid an mbuaidreadh do bhi uirre nir fhreagair co luath he. Ocus bith a deimhin agut nach buaidreadh coiri na peacaidh do bi uire, ocus narb e ingantus in aingil d'fhaicsin leis do bhi uiri, uair is minic do-connuic si aingil roimhe. Gidh edh, do bhi buaidredh uiri do rer an tsoiscel ag smuainedh an comhraidh adubradh re, nar gnathach gach lai.⁹

The question of Mary having been 'troubled' by the angel's message is explained as not having been caused by any sin on Mary's part. This statement illustrates the

⁷ John Bradley, 'The Ballyhale Madonna and its iconography' in Etienne Rynne (ed.), *Figures from the past: studies on figurative art in Christian Ireland in honour of Helen M. Roe* (Dublin, 1987) p.260.

⁸ O' Dwyer, *Mary: a history of devotion in Ireland*, p.126.

⁹ 'And, on entering, Gabriel said to the virgin: *Aue gracia plena, Dominus tecum* i.e. Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you. And because she was troubled she did not answer him immediately. And be certain that it was not the worry of guilt or sin that afflicted her, and it was not the surprise of seeing the angel [either], for she had often seen angels before. However, she was troubled, according to the gospel, by what had been said to her, which was not usual every day': *SBC*, p.13.

acceptance of the notion that Mary was conceived free from sin (the Immaculate Conception). Formerly it had been thought that Mary was purified from original sin by the direct intervention of God at the Annunciation.¹⁰ It was Duns Scotus (*d.*1308) at Oxford, who finally argued that Mary was preserved, and not freed from sin from the moment of her conception.¹¹ The Gaelic translation of *Meditationes vitae Christi* implies that Mary was not guilty of sin even before the angel's visit, discounting the possibility of her having been freed from sin at the Incarnation. Belief in the Immaculate Conception was nothing new in fifteenth-century Ireland. As early as 1352, the Provincial Council held by John of St Paul's, who was archbishop of Dublin, decreed the commemoration of Our Lady's Conception to be held as a solemn double feast.¹²

In bardic poetry, there are many images used to describe the event of the Incarnation. Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn (*d.*1448) uses the familiar imagery of preparation for warfare to describe Christ's coming: 'To help us the Lord came from his father's house: on military service He came to thy womb, love of us His motive.'¹³ Fearghal Ó Cionga, in the sixteenth century, speaks of Mary meriting Christ's coming: 'The captain of the

¹⁰ The Syrian poet, Jacob of Sarburg (451-521) taught that 'the Spirit that came upon her made her such as Eve had been before she had listened to the Serpent.' Centuries later, the famous Franciscan, St Bonaventure (*d.*1274) allows Mary's purification to take place in two stages, but, again, it is only in the second stage, at the Incarnation, that it was rendered impossible for her to fall into sin. See Graef, *Mary: a history of doctrine and devotion* i, pp 121, 283.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.301.

¹² Aubrey Gwynn, 'Anglo-Irish Church life, 14th and 15th centuries', in Patrick J. Corish (ed.), *History of Irish Catholicism* II, No. 4, p.44. I am grateful to Katharine Simms for having drawn my attention to this reference.

¹³ *DDé* 15, v.19.

six hosts comes stainless into Mary's bosom; in it she received from the Father a son owing to her humility.'¹⁴ The Incarnation is also seen as the moment when God took Mary as his spouse. It is coloured in the language of the consummation of marriage, yet with the reminder that Mary's virginity was left unaltered. The late sixteenth-century poet, Aodh, son of Conchonnacht Ó Ruanadha, states that 'God took Mary as spouse, yet without lying with her' (i.e. without the sexual element of consummation).¹⁵ Similar thoughts are expressed by Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe three centuries earlier, signifying the persistence of this idea.¹⁶ The subject of the spousal relationship between Mary and Jesus at the Incarnation is examined in greater detail below. It is intricately linked with Mary's virginity, and in the poetry of Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn, the impression is given that Mary's virginity initially attracted the attention of God (as her humility did in Ó Cionga's poem above) who was somehow enticed into relationship with her. He states that 'God's son remained not in Heaven; in His love He could not resist sojourning in Mary's bosom; she enticed Heaven's heir to earth.'¹⁷ He also implies that the interest was not one-sided; Mary herself wished that this union would occur:

She asked not that the "kernel from the nut" be not given her; she ceased not asking [*ag síorshireadh*] for Him till by her entreaties she conceived Him in her bosom.¹⁸

¹⁴ *ADD* 59, v.2.

¹⁵ I have used a more literal translation than McKenna's 'without marriage.' ('*Do ghabh sé re Muire mar mhnaoi 's gan luighe lé*'); *Ibid.*, 82, v.16.

¹⁶ 'She consorted with the High King but He left her virginity intact' ('*suirghe ris do-róine sí 's níor bhris a hóighe an t-airdrí*'); *ADD* 49, v.10.

¹⁷ *DDé* 10, v.29.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2, v.7.

Here again, it is evident that Mary merits certain favours because of her positive attributes. Her merits are portrayed as wooing the Godhead into engagement with the world.

Exhortation to emulate Mary's characteristics was one of the rallying cries of late medieval preaching, particularly by orders such as the Franciscans and Dominicans. The catalogue of the Franciscan friars' library at Youghal gives a valuable insight into which writers formed the minds of the preaching community. Colmán Ó Clabaigh, in his examination of late medieval preaching material at Youghal, singles out the works of Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) as featuring predominantly.¹⁹ Hugely influential, Bernard stressed Mary's mediatory role, describing her as an aqueduct leading the divine waters to earth.²⁰ He encouraged the faithful to look to Mary always for their hope, inspiration and example.²¹ Mary was regarded as the prime role model for imitation. The value of seeking to emulate her humility and virginity is especially stressed in this kind of literature. Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn (*d.*1487) asks for help in

¹⁹ Ó Clabaigh, *The Franciscans in Ireland, 1400-1534*, p.134.

²⁰ Graef, *Mary: a history of doctrine and devotion* i, p.238.

²¹ In a sermon on the Gospel of the Annunciation he fervently stresses this: 'If you will not be submerged by tempests, do not turn your eyes away from the splendour of this star! If the storms of temptations arise, if you crash against the rocks of tribulation, look to the star, call upon Mary. If you are tossed about on the waves of pride, of ambition, of slander, of hostility, look to the star, call upon Mary. If wrath or avarice or the enticements of the flesh upset the boat of your mind look to Mary. If you are disturbed by the immensity of your crimes...if you begin to be swallowed up by the abyss of depression and despair think of Mary! In dangers, in anxiety and doubt, think of Mary, call upon Mary. Let her name not leave your lips nor your heart, and that you may receive the help of her prayer, do not cease to follow the example of her conduct...if she holds you, you will not fall, if she protects you, you need not fear...' (Quoted in Graef, *Mary: a history of doctrine and devotion* i, p.237).

achieving mastery over one of these attributes: ‘Make me strive for humility of heart; Mary, mother of the world’s teacher has set about weaving my nature.’²² Mary’s poverty is also sometimes mentioned as worthy of imitation. An unidentified Franciscan bardic poet, whose work dates from the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries, states that ‘the reason why Mary, the friend and earnest lover of poverty, won her victory was her birth from poverty.’²³ These claims depict a God who could not resist the virtue that was in Mary. The Gaelic translation of *Meditationes Vitae Christi* describes how the impetuous Trinity arrive at the Annunciation scene even before Gabriel himself:

*Ocus do eirig Gabrial co subhach failidh an tan sin, ocus tainic se a foirm daena o tegdais an Thríondóid re haen-moimint ocus d’aen-eitill chum na teghdaisi a roibhi Muire. Agas cédh luath tainic on Tighearn fuair se an Trinoid roimhe is an teagh, uair badh túsca e na an teachtaire.*²⁴

Beauty was thought to attract beauty, and goodness to attract Goodness Himself. Therefore, the imitation of Mary was understood to result in an indwelling of God in one’s life. This, in essence, was the message that preachers would have earnestly desired to convey to their listeners. The Annunciation scene, as a paradigm for

²² *PB* 12, v.28.

²³ ‘To St Francis of Assisi’, *IM*, 1930, p.150, v.7.

²⁴ ‘And Gabriel joyfully and cheerfully arose at that time, and he came in human form, from the dwelling of the Trinity, instantly and in one flight, to the house where Mary was. And as early as he came from the Lord, he (nevertheless) found the Trinity before him in the house, for [the Trinity] was there sooner than the messenger’: *SBC*, p.12. Bernard of Clairvaux describes the scene similarly, stating that although ‘the King’s going out is from the highest heaven, yet His great desire giving him wings, He arrived before His messenger at the virgin He had loved, whom He had elected, whose beauty He desired’: see Graef, *Mary: a history of doctrine and devotion* i, p.237.

instruction, had it all. It had something to say about the virtuous life, about virginity and its desirability, about humility and how God favours those who possess this virtue, and about Mary's role as Mediatrix, through whom salvation came to the human race. The sixteenth-century poet, Muirchertach Ó Cionga, captures this mode of thought when he states that 'to please our noble sister He agreed to save us truly.'²⁵ If Mary merited both what happened at the Annunciation and everything that succeeded it, as Ó Cionga suggests, then she was surely the one to whom those in need had recourse, particularly seeing that God was so captivated with her beauty. What is most likely a fifteenth-century poem, attributed to Richard Butler, confirms this idea with the words 'You were chosen, O great Mary, for your humility, beauty and love, to bear the King of Mercy before every other woman'.²⁶

Any consideration of the Annunciation scene should not overlook the part played by the angel Gabriel. Both Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn (*d.*1448) and Flann Mac Conmidhe (*d.*1536) give witness to a tradition that the angel, himself, bestowed the child on Mary. Flann Mac Conmidhe reminds the Virgin that 'in thy bright round breast thou didst receive the king from one of his angels.'²⁷ Tadhg Óg, meanwhile, confirms that

²⁵ *ADD* 60, v.20.

²⁶ Gearóid Mac Niocaill, 'Dhá dhán le Risteard Buitléir' in *Éigse* ix, pp 83-88. Poem 2, v.7. Robin Flower claims that Richard Butler may have been the man who lived in 1537 in the 'fasaghe of Banauntrey...where inhabiteth Kavenagh, McMorghowe's judges and Irish rhymers' (Flower, *The Irish tradition*, p.134). Mac Niocaill, however, queries this identification, arguing that they more likely date from sometime before 1462, especially since, in manuscript (British Library Add Ms. 30512) they appear among a lot of material by the fifteenth-century scribe, Uilleam Mac an Leagha. See Mac Niocaill, 'Dhá dhán', p.84.

²⁷ *ADD* 85, v.12. The *Annals of Ulster* record the *obit* of one Flann Mac Conmidhe under the year 1536.

‘to Anne’s daughter the Lord...was given by Gabriel.’²⁸ Another idea, which is frequently mentioned in bardic religious poetry, is that Mary conceived Christ at Gabriel’s words, the conception being through the ear. The late sixteenth-century poet, Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh, states that ‘the founding of peace was Gabriel’s message to Mary, our healing mother. At her bright message the maid conceived the king of hosts from the Father.’²⁹ An unidentified poet (*n.l.t.*1631) also shows familiarity with this notion: ‘Mary conceived at the words of the angel Gabriel a great exultation; the Lord entering her womb left her a virgin.’³⁰ The emphasis on conceiving at Gabriel’s words was connected with the preservation of Mary’s virginity. This link can be seen expressed as early as the thirteenth-century poetry of Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe: ‘Gabriel comes from the Father to the Virgin with his request to her; he gives the message to great Mary and she forthwith conceives in her heart [the words of the angel].’ The poet does not omit, however, to mention that ‘Gabriel touched not her womb and Mary, in all purity, became fruitful by that great power...’³¹ This was, by no means, a new concept, even in the late medieval period.³²

²⁸ *DDé* 8, v.20. Lambert McKenna traces this idea to the *Liber Hymnorum*; See McKenna’s introduction to *Dán Dé*, p.xv, where he cites Cú Cuimne’s hymn from the *Liber Hymnorum* – ‘Gabriel advexit verbum sinu prius paterno; quod conceptum et susceptum in utero materno’ (‘Gabriel brought the Word, which was first in the Father’s bosom, which was conceived and received in the womb of the mother’) (*Liber Hymnorum* i, p.32). Cú Cuimne composed this hymn c.700.

²⁹ *AFOD* 1, v.1.

³⁰ *ADD* 98, v.10. See also Maolmuire, son of Cairbre Ó hUiginn in *ADD* 77, v.19; also Aodh, son of Conchonnacht Ó Ruanadha in *ADD* 82, v.9.

³¹ *ADD* 49, vv 11-12.

³² Origen of Alexandria (*d.*253) had, in his probing of the term *logos*, suggested that Mary had conceived at the angel’s words. This was followed by similar pronouncements by Ephraem of Syria (*c.*306-73) and later still, by Venantius Fortunatus (*d.*609) and John of Damascus (*d.c.*749). Lines from

Traditionally belief in Mary's perpetual virginity has included the claim that Mary was virgin *ante partum* (before giving birth), *in partu* (while giving birth) and *post partum* (after having given birth). It was generally held that Jesus passed through a closed womb without breaking the hymen, in much the same way as He passed through the closed doors of a house after his resurrection.³³ One of the images used to describe how Christ entered Mary's womb at the Incarnation was that of light passing through a glass.³⁴ It appears as early as the fourth century in the writings of Ambrose (c.339-97).³⁵ The crux of the matter, according to Hilda Graef, is that 'in antiquity and the middle ages, the mother was considered almost entirely passive in the production of the child which was believed to be formed out of her blood, the existence of the female ovum being unknown.'³⁶ Marina Warner further explains that Aristotelian

a sixth-century hymn of Venantius Fortunatus illustrate the concept well: '*Mirentur ergo saecula, quod angelus fert semina, quod aure virgo concepit, et corde credens parturit*' ('The centuries marvel, therefore, that the angel bore the seed, the virgin conceived through her ear, and believing in her heart, became fruitful'). John of Damascus wished, in suggesting this, to defend the belief in Mary's virginity *in partu* and *post partum* (i.e. during and after the birth of Jesus). For a general discussion of the appearance of this idea in patristic sources see Marina Warner, *Alone of all her sex: the myth and cult of the Virgin Mary* (London, 1976), p.37. Peter O' Dwyer argues that Giolla Brighde's line '*gabhais 'n-a croidhe i gcéadóir*' could more accurately be translated as 'she conceives first in her heart', echoing Augustine's *prius mente quam ventre*; see O' Dwyer, p.92. This is borne out in a line from the poetry of Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh, which reads 'The king from heaven above came to her womb and her heart': *DDé* 31, v.44.

³³ Lk 20:19.

³⁴ For a general discussion of this image see Andrew Breeze, 'The Blessed Virgin and the sunbeam through glass', in *Celtica* xxiii (1999), pp 19-29.

³⁵ *DDé*, p.xv.

³⁶ Graef, *Mary: a history of doctrine and devotion* i, p.14.

philosophy, through Aquinas, taught that the woman provided the matter for the embryo while the man gave form and motion to the matter, and quotes some lines from Rutebeuf's thirteenth-century hymn, which use this image, to support her case: '*Si com en la verriere, entra et reva arriere, li solaus que n'estame, ainsi fus verge entiere, quant Dieu, qui es cix iere, fist de toi mere et dame*' ['Just as the sun enters and passes back through a windowpane without piercing it, so were you *virgo intacta* when God, who came down from the heavens, made you His mother and lady'].³⁷ The *Legenda Aurea* also alludes to this concept:

A shadow is ordinarily formed by light falling on a solid body, and neither the Virgin nor any pure human being could contain the fullness of the deity: "but the power of the Most High will overshadow thee" and in her the incorporeal light of the Godhead took on the body of mankind in order that she might bear God.³⁸

In bardic poetry, this image is used as early as the thirteenth century and is still to be found in religious verse composed four centuries later. Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh, distinguishing between the persons of the Trinity, addresses the Third Person in the following manner: 'O Spirit of God, steadfast of will, not Thine was the body, which Mary received within her, as the sun passes through glass.'³⁹ Aodh, son of Conchonnacht Ó Ruanadha in the sixteenth century states that 'how she [Mary] received him [Jesus] coming as a sunbeam through glass (into her womb) she told no man.'⁴⁰ Contemporaneously, Muirchertach Ó Cionga claims that 'the Lord with one

³⁷ Warner, *Alone of all her sex*, pp 40-1, 44.

³⁸ Jacobus de Voragine, *The golden legend* i, p.199.

³⁹ *DDé* 26, v.23.

⁴⁰ *ADD* 82, v.24.

swoop entered as a sunbeam into the Virgin's womb' and Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh claims that 'God in His divinity came to her womb as a bright sunbeam, and became man the while He was in her womb as a nut in its cover.'⁴¹ This image, then, which made a vital statement about Mary's virginity, was not only to be found in continental Europe but also in Gaelic Ireland. Its usefulness can hardly be disputed, for, as demonstrated above, it was still being referred to in the early modern period. The continued popularity of the image indicates, therefore, sustained interest in the question of Mary's perpetual virginity.

Mary's Virginity

Of all Mary's attributes, her perpetual virginity was perhaps the most powerfully influential in the late medieval period. Mary was raised up as the personification of purity and thus became a model for edification. Secondly, her virginity was seen to make her powerful before God, meriting His keenest attention. St Bernard and others stressed that the Annunciation occurred in the springtime, which gave rise to the motif of a flower in a vase (to be found on many continental depictions of the event) that was later to become a lily, the symbol of purity.⁴² This symbol gradually took its place in the iconography of the period. On the tomb of Walter Brenach and Katherine Poher in Jerpoint Abbey, Kilkenny, there is depicted an enthroned Madonna with the child Jesus on her left knee and in her right hand she holds a lily.⁴³ In bardic poetry, however, it is the intercessory power of Mary's virginity that is predominantly emphasised. The special nature of Mary's virginity, marvelled at in lines such as 'it is

⁴¹ Ibid., 60, v.8; *AFOD* 48, v.26.

⁴² James Hall, *Dictionary of subjects and symbols in art* (5th ed., London, 1984), p.19.

⁴³ Bradley, 'The Ballyhale Madonna and its iconography', p.270.

a thing unheard of in her race that her infant harmed not her virginity' was believed to merit great influence with God.⁴⁴

The favour with God that Mary enjoyed was active in the past, present and future. The sixteenth-century poet, Muirchertach Ó Cionga, challenges the Virgin: 'Prove (O Mary) thy holy power in saving us; one of the powers of thy virginity is to make the six flocks into one.'⁴⁵ In the past Mary merited Man's salvation in her role as the New Eve (which is treated of below), just as the first Eve merited his downfall. Mary's virginity was also closely connected with Eve's sin in the garden which, according to many patristic sources, led to the acquisition of the knowledge of concupiscence without which the sexual act could not, thereafter, be conducted. In Eden, the passion inherent to the procreative act was rendered sinful, and thus, virginity, by extension, was considered virtuous and good. The entrance of the sinless Christ upon the world's stage, then, necessitated a virgin birth. Mary's virginity overcame the effect of the Fall, which had originally made it necessary for humans to join in sinful coupling in order to procreate. She alone, of all humanity, conceived without loss of her virginity (the depiction of Mary as the New Eve is treated of below). Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn (*d.*1487) implies that Mary's virginity won her the favour of bearing Christ when he says that 'He was a gift to thy virginity.'⁴⁶ Tadhg Óg Ó Dálaigh (*fl.*1520) claims that 'at the great Annunciation to Mary the King's son entered her steadfast bosom; her virginity left intact by her Father merited the child she bore Thee.'⁴⁷ An unidentified poet (*n.l.t.*1631) speaks of the debt of Adam's sin being cancelled because of Mary's

⁴⁴ *ADD* 87, v.17. This poem was written sometime before 1631.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 60, v.16.

⁴⁶ *PB* 17, v.27.

⁴⁷ *ADD* 71, v.34.

virginity: 'our debt was remitted at Mary's request - her virginity merited this as a mark of regard for her.'⁴⁸ Mary's virginity was also understood to work in the present: 'Ever young stock of virginity...Mary's grace, our moon, prays ever henceforward to God' - the poet who composed these lines (*n.l.t.* 1631) relied on Mary's offering of her virginity to God on his behalf.⁴⁹ After all, no less an authority than Ambrose (*c.* 339-97) recognised the efficacy of Mary's 'special' attribute: 'O the riches of Mary's virginity!..like a cloud she rained the grace of Christ on earth.'⁵⁰ Recourse to the merits of Mary's virginity was also undertaken to ensure future salvation in spite of the punitive designs of an angry God. Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh reminds Mary that when she goes about appeasing Christ, she should 'remind him of the glory of [her] virginity' while Fearghal Ó Cionga states that 'in virtue of her virginity, Mary can get us an entry to thy feast [Heaven]; in her work of saving us she caused thee to forget more things than the pain of the three nails!'⁵¹

Virginity, then, was a source of power. This is evident in Mary's ability to use this state to win mercy from Christ for her people. The conferral of power on the person who adopted virginity was not limited to official saints of the Church, or indeed to Mary herself. This particular virtue was therefore highly recommended as a noble state, and Mary fulfilled the role of model of all virgins. An unidentified poet (*n.l.t.* 1614) states that 'owing to Thy birth, O Lord of Heaven, Thou shalt find obedient to Thee on the Great Monday ever more virgins, many of them - though not many enough to satisfy Thee',⁵² emphasising that the circumstances of Christ's birth,

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 95, v.15.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 93, v.12.

⁵⁰ *De Institutione Virginis* 2, 15, quoted in Graef, *Mary: a history of doctrine and devotion* i, p.87.

⁵¹ *AFOD* 19, vv 11-13; *ADD* 59, v.18.

⁵² *ADD* 97, v.18.

including His choice of a sinless virgin for a mother, would encourage many people to adopt this way of life for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. Virginité was desirable to God, virgins being part of His 'spiritual élite'. It is no surprise, then that another unidentified poet (*n.l.t.*1614), imagining what Heaven is like, expects to 'stand with honour in His beautiful gleaming palace full of virgins.'⁵³ The spiritual strength of Mary, on account of her virginité is elaborated upon in the lines of another poem (*n.l.t.*1631):

Though hitherto men have ever put women aside from their path (as being of little account), (remember that) a virgin has been able to conquer (the Devil), the foe of the man (Christ) whom (that foe's) hatred had beaten.⁵⁴

The association of sexual purity with both spiritual and physical strength was not, by any means, new. Marina Warner states that Christianity inherited from the classical world a belief that virginité was powerful magic, conferring strength and ritual purity, explaining that 'celebrants of sacred mysteries in the ancient world often prepared themselves by abstaining from food and drink in order to acquire the condition of strength and purity appropriate to serving the gods.'⁵⁵ One of the *exempla* of Jacques de Vitry, which tells the story of a young boy who was brought up in a monastery and thus had never laid eyes upon a woman, provides an important insight into the physical strength that virginité was thought to confer upon its practitioners. According to the tale, when the abbot of the monastery took the boy on a journey they had occasion to stop at a forge to re-shoe the horses. While waiting there, the boy picked

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 94, v.24.

⁵⁴ 'Gér gnáth le cách romhuibh riamh na mná don chonair do chlódh, dá lucht iomuidh do bhean buadh an fear do bhual iomuidh óg': *ibid.*, 95, v.29.

⁵⁵ Warner, *Alone of all her sex*, p.48.

up a red-hot iron from the anvil, without burning his hand. Later that night, while staying at an inn, the wife of the innkeeper seduced him. The following day, the boy attempted the same feat of strength at another forge and was badly burnt.⁵⁶

There is no doubt that, in medieval Christianity, virginity was perceived as being valuable in itself and desirable to God. What, then, of secular attitudes to virginity? How closely did Mary's virginity correspond to the ideals of Gaelic society for unmarried women? Fergus Kelly states that, in terms of early Irish Gaelic law, there are no references to the legal implications of non-virginity in a bride. However, he does cite some texts that attest to the ideal of virginity in a woman who is to marry. Triad 126, found in the seventh-century wisdom text, *Senbriathra Fithail*, mentions 'the three drops of a *cétmuintir* [first or chief wife]: a drop of blood (presumably at the rupture of the hymen on the wedding night), a drop of sweat, a teardrop'. The same text also contains the question and answer '*Cid as dech do mnáib? Ní hannsa: ben maith nad fitir fer romat riam*' ('What is the best sort of wife? Not hard: a woman whom a man has never known before you').⁵⁷

The question of Mary having taken a vow of virginity as a young girl is a contentious one. The notion first arises in the *Protoevangelium* or *Book of James*, a hugely popular apocryphal work, especially influential in the West, which was probably written by a non-Jew in Egypt in the middle of the second-century.⁵⁸ The

⁵⁶ Ibid., p.72.

⁵⁷ Kelly, *A guide to early Irish Law* pp 72-3.

⁵⁸ According to this work, Mary was set down to walk at the age of six months, and she walked seven steps unaided. She was not set down again until she was brought to the temple and presented there at the age of three. She was nourished by the angels until she was twelve years old, for her mother, Anna had promised that nothing common or unclean would pass through her. This explains why, in the account of the Annunciation given in the Gaelic translation of *Meditationes vitae Christi* (discussed

Protoevangelium was probably known of in Ireland by the twelfth century, if not as early as the ninth century.⁵⁹ An Irish infancy narrative in the *Leabhar Breac* is akin to the text of the *Protoevangelium*, even though it only covers the period from the journey of Mary and Joseph to Nazareth up to the visitation of the magi. Two Latin texts, which cover the full breadth of material, date from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries respectively.⁶⁰ McNamara asserts that 'there can be no doubt that all three texts represent the same apocryphal infancy narrative, the Latin text of which must have circulated in Ireland before the Irish rendering found in the *Leabhar Breac* was made.'⁶¹ A tentative link has also been made between these texts and a work entitled *The Gospel according to the Hebrews*, which was cited in the ninth century by Sedulius Scottus, in his commentary on Matthew. A summary of the text is also cited in the *Gospels of Maelbrigte*, written in 1138, which names its source as *The Gospel according to the Hebrews*.⁶²

Whatever about the complexities of manuscript transmission, it is clear that the idea of Mary having taken a vow of virginity was familiar in late medieval Gaelic Ireland. The hugely popular life of Mary known as the *Vita Rhythmica* appeared in Latin verse

above) Mary was not alarmed at seeing an angel, for she had often seen them before; Graef, *Mary: a history of doctrine and devotion*, pp 35-6; see also Mary Clayton, *The cult of the Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge, 1990), p.3.

⁵⁹ McNamara, *The apocrypha in the Irish Church*, p.47.

⁶⁰ The three texts above are as follows: Ms. *Leabhar Breac*, pp 133b-139b (text and translation in Edmund Hogan (ed.), *The Irish Nennius*, pp 38-73); British Library, Arundel Ms. 404, fol. 1-14 (14th Century); Hereford, Library of the Dean and Chapter Ms. o.3.9, fol.114 - 133 (13th Century) (text in M. R. James, *Latin Infancy Gospels: a new text with a parallel version from the Irish*, (Cambridge, 1927)).

⁶¹ McNamara, *The apocrypha in the Irish Church*, p.44.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p.41.

in the thirteenth century and was translated into Gaelic two centuries later. It appears in over twenty manuscripts.⁶³ Citing Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis as a source for much of its material, the *Vita Rhythmica* tells of Mary being brought to Jerusalem at the age of three, where she was received graciously by the priests there. When she was fourteen, the priests of the temple ordered her to marry as was the custom, whereupon 'Mary, on hearing this, turned red and her countenance changed. She prayed to God to help her find an answer. She answered firmly that she could have no man but the one God to whom she had married her body and soul.'⁶⁴ In the 'Passion of Bartholomew' in the *Leabhar Breac* there is a reference to Mary's vow. Having cured a woman possessed by a demon, Bartholomew is asked by the local king how he can be rewarded. His reply is a plea to get to know the Lord, who was born from Mary. In commenting on the Virgin, he refers to the aptness of her bearing Christ. This suitability arose from her having been a virgin:

Most suitable was such a birth, for Mary was the first virgin who dedicated her virginity to God; she alone, of all women, from the beginning of the world, was found to have devoted herself so, in resolving in her heart that she should not know union with any man. While she was praying in her chamber, the angel Gabriel came to her, so that spiritual fear seized her at the sight, but the angel said to her 'Fear not, Mary, for thou shalt bear a son of whom heaven and earth shall be full.'⁶⁵

Mary's fear at the Annunciation has often been interpreted as the fear of having to lose her virginity in bearing a child. It was from the question 'How can this come

⁶³ O' Dwyer, *Mary: a history of devotion in Ireland*, p.130.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.132.

⁶⁵ O' Dwyer, *Mary: a history of devotion in Ireland*, p. 128.

about since I know not man?’ that the concept of Mary having taken a vow of virginity was first deduced in the West by Augustine.⁶⁶ Mary’s question is put as follows in the Gaelic translation of *Meditationes vitae Christi*: ‘*Cindus do beth sin, uair tucusa moid genmnaidhechta dom Dia fein, oculus ni raibe oculus ni bia fear co brath agum?*’⁶⁷ A thirteenth-century poem, found in the *Leabhar Uí Mhaine*, which was possibly written during a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, includes some telling lines, which illustrate how fervently Mary guarded her vow:

By the side of this temple in the west Gabriel came to make a request of her;
until bright Gabriel’s host came she was the bondmaid of the king of Heaven. /
In the shade of yonder pillar the languid-eyed queen took refuge; great Mary
was ashamed that anybody should think of soliciting a true virgin.⁶⁸

Meanwhile, Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn (*d.* 1487) was eager to clarify Joseph’s role in the birth of Christ, stating ‘her husband, I have heard, knew not the humble virgin; a son was born of that noble maid, leaving her vow unbroken.’⁶⁹ Mary’s vow of virginity, in much of the religious literature of the period, is inextricably linked to the idea that Mary wished to be the spouse of God alone, and, in fact, longed for His coming. Mention is given above to Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn’s assertion that Mary continually

⁶⁶ Clayton, *The cult of the Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon England*, p.12.

⁶⁷ ‘How can this be, for I made a vow of virginity to God Himself and I have not [had], and will never have a man?’ Presumably ‘having a man’ is to be interpreted as ‘having sexual relations with a man’: *SBC*, p.14.

⁶⁸ Brian Ó Cuív, ‘A poem on the infancy of Christ’, in *Éigse* xv (1973-4). This poem is ascribed to Giolla Brighde Albanach in a Bodleian manuscript; the ascription in Rawl B.486 reads ‘*Gilla Brigdi Albanach dixit ante transfertavit ad Curiam Romanum*’ (I am grateful to Katharine Simms for drawing my attention to this reference).

⁶⁹ *PB* 12, v.27.

sought the Lord until, by virtue of her entreaties, she conceived him in her womb. The same poet also implies that Mary's virginity wooed Christ to earth.⁷⁰ Mary's virginity, then, was considered to be inextricably linked to her espousal of God.

Mary as Spouse

Ephraem of Syria, in the fourth century, was the first to make mention of Mary as bride of her son. Some three centuries later Modestus of Jerusalem speaks in the following terms: 'Into the heavenly bride chamber entered the most glorious of brides...of Christ the true heavenly bridegroom.'⁷¹ If Christ was portrayed as bridegroom, then Mary became His bride.⁷² It is really from the twelfth century onwards, however, that this image achieved popular recognition. Bernard of Clairvaux describes the Annunciation scene in the light of Psalm 44's line 'The king shall greatly desire thy beauty', portraying God as an impatient bridegroom hurrying to his bride.⁷³ At this time the imagery portraying Mary's relationship with her bridegroom also becomes more sensual in tone.⁷⁴ Amadeus of Lausanne (*d.*1159) sees Christ's conception as a union between lovers, and Geoffrey of Admont (*d.*1165)

⁷⁰ *DDé* 2, v.7; *ibid.*, 10, vv 29, 24.

⁷¹ Graef, *Mary: a history of doctrine and devotion* i, pp 58, 137.

⁷² Jesus likens himself to a bridegroom in the New Testament (Mt 9:15, 22:1; Jn 3:29) using imagery familiar to those acquainted with the Old Testament, in which similar imagery serves to describe God's relationship to Israel (Hos 1:2; Ezk 16).

⁷³ Graef, *Mary: a history of doctrine and devotion* i, p.237.

⁷⁴ Philip of Harvengt (*d.* 1183) expounds on the physical nature of the relationship, stating that 'not only does the mother most tenderly embrace the son...but also the spouse the bridegroom; and he enjoys their mutual embraces as much as she, when he, kissing her, reposes most sweetly between her breasts; hence the Virgin rightly says that her spouse reposes between her breasts, which means that their tender love is confirmed by the glue of their embrace': *ibid.*, pp 254-5.

speaks of all three persons of the Trinity as Mary's lovers.⁷⁵ The literature of *amour courtois*, or courtly love, penetrates the religious literature of this period, remodelling Mary as a lady to be desired, aiding her to become, in the twelfth century, *Notre Dame*.⁷⁶ Marina Warner asserts that, at this time the Virgin Mary 'blended in easily with the aristocratic lady of the lyricist's passion.'⁷⁷ Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh frequently represents Mary as spouse, both of Christ and also of her devotee. Her marriage to Christ began restoration of the peace accord which had been breached by Adam and Eve: 'Nurse and mother, the world's king at her breast, the wedding with Heaven's king hastened our peace.'⁷⁸ As a king's wife, she is seen as a good patron.⁷⁹ Toying with paradox, as the bards were wont to do, Aonghus points out that 'a spouse to her son is Jesus's mother.'⁸⁰ Another poet (*n.l.t.* 1631) puts it more elaborately still: 'One who was both her spouse and her son was with Mary as spouse, and had a son, yet without intercourse with her; she deserves to rule His whole household.'⁸¹ The extraordinary nature of the events surrounding the Annunciation and the birth of Christ, in particular the girl's preservation of virginity, were regarded with such awe and wonder that the individual at the centre of it all, Mary herself, was deemed to be

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp 244-5, 248. Note that in bardic poetry Mary has been depicted as mothering not only Christ but the three persons of the Trinity also; see Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh in *Dioghluim Dána* 9, v.9.

⁷⁶ Warner, *Alone of all her sex*, p.153.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.147. It is interesting to note that, for the bardic poet, Mary often assumes the characteristics of the wife of a respected chieftain, whom the poets were accustomed to praise in secular verse. This portrayal of the Virgin is discussed in greater detail below.

⁷⁸ *AFOD*, 25, v.3.

⁷⁹ 'A good patron is a king's wife, for she helps her kin': *ibid.*, 3, v.1.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 25, v.1.

⁸¹ *ADD* 84, v.36.

worthy of ruling Heaven and earth. Mary, as spouse of Christ, had, therefore, the right to gain satisfaction for the sins of her clients: ‘Satisfaction for our sins is remitted through her, God’s spouse, wife and maid.’ Indeed, she is regarded as blind to them: ‘She regards no sin, however great (in her lover).’⁸² When her spouse (Christ) is angry at humanity, it is Mary’s intimate embraces that are seen to calm His fury: ‘When her lover has been with her, the fury of God’s angry blood is short-lived.’⁸³ Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn (*d.*1487), recognising Mary’s exalted status, recalls that her marriage was foretold: ‘Of old the prophet foretold that she would have choice spouse; she is a queen in nobility - though her spouse was more than worthy of her.’⁸⁴ The marriage ushered in a new era, dispelling the confusion of sin, in the words of an unidentified poet (*n.l.t.*1631): ‘A marriage with a virgin of our folk lifted the cloud from her race; a worthy suitor for our sister was He who proposed to her, a virgin.’⁸⁵

Mary’s role as spouse was not confined to her marriage with Christ. More importantly perhaps for her followers, they, themselves, could espouse her. Lambert McKenna affirms that the idea of mystical marriage between Mary and Man is well attested in the *Marienlegenden* (Mary legends) of the middle ages.⁸⁶ Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh rejoices that ‘it befell our sister to be at the call of any man who wished. No other maid-wife but Mary can be a mate for any man.’⁸⁷ A century earlier, Philip Bocht Ó

⁸² *AFOD*, 12, v.1; also 2, v.3. Tadhg Ó Dálaigh speaks of Mary in the following manner: ‘If I could only appeal to her, I know that she, no matter who has inflicted the heart-wound (on Christ) would not reject his appeal; every woman can be won over’ (*ADD* 71, v.11).

⁸³ *AFOD*, 25, v.5.

⁸⁴ *PB* 9, v.6.

⁸⁵ *ADD* 84, v.13. As noted already, cloud or mist usually represents sin, confusion and chaos.

⁸⁶ *AFOD*, p.xii.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 2, v.5.

hUiginn stated that ‘she alone is no (ordinary) virgin woman. Though I am her kinsman I (may) woo her.’⁸⁸ As observed in the first chapter, it was generally acknowledged in Gaelic popular devotion that Mary was appropriated as part of the devotee’s kin-group and thus, had a special obligation towards him. Usually she is identified as ‘sister’ (see below for a more detailed treatment of this topic). Because of the ties of kinship, the prospect of marrying Mary was seen as somewhat problematic on the basis of Church laws regulating degrees of consanguinity in marriage. Thus the treatment of espousing Mary in bardic religious poetry reflects what was a real and very familiar social problem in Gaelic Ireland. Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh recounts that ‘often one weds a kinswoman, tho’ any woman is a likely mate. To my kinswoman I make my wooing. After my wooing I must remember her.’⁸⁹ Aonghus was not far wrong when he stated that this often happened. Art Cosgrove explains:

For the Gaelic Irish aristocracy, real difficulties were caused by canonical regulations on consanguinity and affinity. In a letter to the Pope in July 1469, seeking a dispensation from impediments of consanguinity to permit Énrí Ó Néill to marry Johanna Mac Mahon, Archbishop Bole of Armagh made the general point that several of the leading men in Ireland ‘are living in incestuous relationships because they can rarely find their equals in nobility, with whom they can fittingly contract marriage, outside the degrees of consanguinity and affinity.’⁹⁰

⁸⁸ *PB* 11a, v.1.

⁸⁹ *AFOD* 2, v.1.

⁹⁰ Art Cosgrove, ‘Marriage in medieval Ireland’ in Art Cosgrove (ed.), *Marriage in Ireland* (Dublin, 1985), p.30.

Aonghus, in attempting to overcome the canonical difficulty, argues that, since Mary is not subject to sin, she is not subject to any marriage impediment either.⁹¹ Lambert McKenna regards his explanation as having more likely arisen from literary conceit than from theological insight. He explains that the Gaelic word *col* that is used to mean ‘marriage-impediment’ can also mean its violation (as in the case of incest) or sin in general. If Mary is without sin (*col*), then, she is, at the same time, without marriage impediment!⁹² When the marriage goes ahead it is only fitting that the customary procedures be followed. Aonghus offers his poetry as a bride-price: ‘These six verses to the queen! They are the bride-price [*caibhche*] to our sister’s spouse who blotted out the debt.’⁹³ The heavenly marriage reflects the social realities of Gaelic matrimony, the realm of Heaven being organised according to the customs of the earth. Fergus Kelly explains what the ‘bride price’ meant in Gaelic Ireland:

As in other societies, the husband is felt to purchase his bride from her father – hence the use of the expression ‘purchasing a wife’ (*creic céitmuintire*). The husband gives a *coibche* (later generally angl. caif or cayf) ‘bride-price’ to his bride’s father.⁹⁴

Once wed to the Virgin, the devotee was expected to be true to his bride and to emulate her virtues. She, in turn, would protect and guide him. Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh tells the story of a hermit youth who loved only the Virgin Mary. Hearing a knock on the door of his dwelling in the middle of the desert, he finds a woman asking for admittance in Mary’s name. He complies, and is so struck by her beauty

⁹¹ ‘*Mo [chal] ní fhaghann an ógh*’: *AFOD* 14, v.4.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p.xii.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 13, v.1.

⁹⁴ Kelly, *A guide to early Irish law*, pp 71-2.

that he falls in love with her and resolves to marry her, forgetting his vow of love for the Virgin. Soon after, another woman's voice calls to him from outside, seeking shelter. Reluctant to allow her in, he advises her to put God's cross between her and harm. Asking how she might do this, the youth gives her the words. On speaking the words, his newly betrothed (in reality, a demon) vanishes, the Virgin having preserved the youth from sin.⁹⁵ The sixteenth-century poet, Tuileagna Mac Tórna Ó Maolchonaire, while in the cave of Lough Derg, and, probably somewhat frightened, turns to Mary as his spouse for protection: 'In the island cave I think of every woman watching over her husband; I am content with thy care, O Virgin; come and watch over me.'⁹⁶ Espousing Mary, therefore, meant excluding all others, especially the tempter which led one to sin. Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn echoes this idea when he advises that 'when I am wooing my sister 'tis no time to love my foe; my good wooing ends shamefully in my deserting her for want of love.'⁹⁷

Genealogy and Kin-group

The importance, for Gaelic chieftains, of securing family identity by acquiring a detailed knowledge of genealogy cannot be overestimated. Kinship held the key to one's self-definition in the Gaelic world. The bardic poets (who were especially interested in the preservation of family lore and history) also regarded it as holding the key to one's status in the spiritual realm. Relationships with Christ, Mary and the saints were defined, then, along the lines of genealogy and kinship. Because the poets were well accustomed to praising a chieftain's kin and ancestry, it was not difficult to

⁹⁵ *AFOD* 48.

⁹⁶ 'The Song of Tuileagna Mac Torna' in Leslie, *St Patrick's Purgatory: a record from history and literature*, p.172, v.20.

⁹⁷ *PB* 11a, v.7.

translate this practice to their heavenly patrons. In speaking of Mary, the poets like to approach her when she is defined within the ambit of her family. The poet, then, usually makes a plea for help on the strength of these relationships. As early as the thirteenth century, Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe states that ‘God loved Joachim’s daughter’ while Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn (*d.*1448) praises Mary as ‘famed daughter of Anne.’ The sixteenth-century poet, Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh, calls Mary ‘Anne’s stately-browed daughter’ and Aodh, son of Conchonnacht Ó Ruanadha (who composed at the end of the sixteenth century) praises ‘Anne’s daughter, queen of the (royal) line.’⁹⁸ By addressing Mary in reference to members of her family, such as Anne, the poets sought greater favours for themselves as, presumably, the more heavenly figures who ‘got a mention’ the greater the prospect of reward. Saint Anne’s cult, in particular, reached its zenith in Europe between the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth century.⁹⁹ The quality of Mary’s ancestry was portrayed as impeccable. Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe makes reference to Joachim’s noble origin, which was necessary if he was to become God’s grandfather.¹⁰⁰ Mary was depicted, then, as coming from noble stock. Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn (*d.*1487) speaks of ‘the inheriting of the noble blood of David and the kings – all kings before him. Mary was nobler than that by her traits.’¹⁰¹ Peter O’ Dwyer notes that Mary’s genealogy is traced in three fifteenth-century manuscripts. The *Book of Lecan*, for

⁹⁸ ADD 49, v.10, *Ibid.*, 22, v.9, *AFOD* 10, v.8, ADD 82, v.17.

⁹⁹ Robert W. Scribner, ‘Elements of popular belief’ in Thomas A. Brady, Heiko A. Oberman and James D. Tracy (eds), *Handbook of European history 1400-1600: late Middle Ages, Renaissance and Reformation* (2 vols, New York, 1994) i, p.248.

¹⁰⁰ ADD 49, v.9.

¹⁰¹ PB 4, v.24.

instance, has her genealogy traced back to Uriah through forty-three ancestors.¹⁰² Uaithne Ó Cobhthaigh (*d.*1556) states that ‘only Heaven’s king is above her in the royal genealogy.’¹⁰³ Muireadhach Albanach Ó Dálaigh, in the thirteenth century, explores Mary’s ancestry by examining physical likenesses: ‘You are descended from David, your wavy hair derives from Abraham’, illustrating that concern for the construction of a suitable genealogy of religious figures was present in bardic poetry from an early stage, persisting as late as the seventeenth century.¹⁰⁴

Kinswoman

Praising Mary’s royal line was one thing. But far more important was the need to assert and strengthen the kinship that existed between Mary and her devotee. Once it was established that Mary was, indeed kinswoman, her help was requested on that basis. Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn (*d.*1448) turns in desperation to Mary when Christ appears unmoved by claims of relationship. His prayer is for the release of Niall Garbh Ó Domhnaill who was captured in 1434 and imprisoned in London: ‘Remember the kinship I boast of – for Mary’s Son does not remember – will you remember the closeness of our relationship?’¹⁰⁵ As usual, such ideas can be traced to the thirteenth-century poetry of the bardic order. Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe, therefore, recalls that all women are related to Mary, and, thus should be respected: ‘The women of the world are related to Mary-it is all the more grievous to violate them.’¹⁰⁶ Still evident in the early seventeenth-century, Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaird exemplifies his preoccupation with relationship to Mary when he pleads with her: ‘O

¹⁰² O’ Dwyer, *Mary: a history of devotion in Ireland*, p.129.

¹⁰³ *ADD* 68, v.29.

¹⁰⁴ Bergin, *Irish bardic poetry* 21, v.18.

¹⁰⁵ *ADD* 22, v.3.

¹⁰⁶ *GBMCM* 21, v.42.

strong hand, have regard for us thy kin.’¹⁰⁷ Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh, in approaching Christ’s mercy, sees his claim of kinship with Christ (being related to Him on His mother, Mary’s side) as a last resort in seeking His mercy: ‘If I have no other way to merit His mercy, the nearness of my kinship, through thee to thy spouse, O Maiden Mary, is enough.’¹⁰⁸ An unidentified poet (*n.l.t.*1614), addressing Christ, claims that Mary’s kinship with men merits their salvation.¹⁰⁹ Cormac Ruadh Ó hUiginn (*n.l.t.*1473) also uses the argument from kinship on Mary’s side: ‘May Christ fulfil His kinship duties, though men be neglectful. He should have regard for His mother’s blood for she and I are of one stock.’¹¹⁰ The thirteenth-century poet, Muireadhach Albanach Ó Dálaigh, meanwhile, takes this approach, but reverses the order, claiming his kinship with Christ in order to attract the Virgin’s attention: ‘Your great Son is a kinsman of mine, O gentle scion, O noble mother; it is right that you should protect a good kinsman; both of you had a pleasant grandmother.’¹¹¹ If one thinks of Mary’s role as that of Mediatrix between humanity and Christ, who, Himself is the Mediator between God and Man, then Muireadhach Albanach’s strategy appears quite comical. While attempting to arrest the attention of Christ, he approaches Mary as Mediatrix. Yet in order to gain Mary’s attention with a view to finally gaining access to Christ he shifts the focus back to Christ Himself with whom he claims kinship. Surely this is a perfect example of devotion going around in circles! The reference to Mary’s grandmother is unusual, though, of course, allusion to the grandmother of Jesus, St Anne, is commonplace. Fearghal, son of Domhnall Ruadh Mac an Bhaird (*n.l.t.*1614),

¹⁰⁷ *ADD* 54, v.11.

¹⁰⁸ *AFOD* 9, v.10.

¹⁰⁹ *ADD* 86, v.22.

¹¹⁰ *DDé* 22, v.5.

¹¹¹ Bergin, *Irish bardic poetry* 21, v.12.

in addressing Christ, reminds Him of his close kinship with Mary, asking him to show a little more of His mother's traits in His behaviour: 'If you are thinking of retribution from your people you will not get half of it. Remember, you are Mary's Son, your blood is not wholly your own.'¹¹² This implies that the traits from the mother's side of the family (kindness, gentleness, mercy presumably) should account for at least half of Christ's personality. Not only that, but retribution for the spilling of Christ's blood is at stake. If half of Christ's blood belongs, in fact, to Mary, then, the poet surmises that she, at least, will not seek retribution. Therefore, humanity has only to fret about half of the blood it has caused to be spilt. This is an unusual and interesting idea. Recourse to Mary's kinship with humanity was a common ploy used by the bardic poets in their compositions from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries. Since Mary was both a member of the human family and the mother of Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity, humanity, through her, enjoyed the privilege of kinship relations with the Son of God. The centrality of kinship allegiance to Gaelic Irish society was something that persisted throughout the late medieval period as a whole. The favours that the Gaelic Irish expected from Christ depended solely on Mary, since she was the key to their relationship with the king. Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn (*d.*1448) succinctly captures this idea in the following lines:

If I remind not Christ of His sojourn in Mary's womb, I cannot claim to be of
His folk; in Mary, above all, is my hope.¹¹³

Reference to Mary as 'sister', an appellation emphasising her familial nearness, appears frequently in bardic poetry. The thirteenth-century poet, Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh, explains his kinship to Christ in terms of Mary being his sister: 'The Lord

¹¹² *DD* 48, v.26.

¹¹³ *DDé* 17, v.36.

who made me must show mercy to me as He is my brother too, God's good mother being sister (to me).'¹¹⁴ Brian Caoch Ó Dálaigh (composing sometime before the mid-seventeenth century) asks 'Are we not the children of our sister's stock? She consented to this by her decision (at the Annunciation).'¹¹⁵ The late sixteenth-century poet, Maolmuire, son of Cairbre Ó hUiginn, relies on his sister's influence in the heavenly court: 'Of one blood are we, I and the nurse-mother of the Creator's son; Mary, my sister will rule His castle or else she and I shall be outside it.'¹¹⁶ As sister, Mary could never renege on her duty. Ties of kinship bound her in obligation to her family, regardless of how little she was regarded in return. Perhaps this is what Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn (*d.*1487) had in mind when he stated, with reference to Mary, that 'a sister unloved is ever a friend.'¹¹⁷ The title of 'sister' with reference to Mary is not exclusive to Gaelic Ireland, however. Athanasius, in the fourth century, for very different reasons (namely, a desire to emphasise Christ's humanity to Gnostics and Manicheans) stressed that 'the body of the Lord was real; it was real because it was the same as ours; for Mary is our sister.'¹¹⁸

The New Eve

Parallelism between Mary and Eve was a favourite theme in medieval spirituality, which was first developed in the earliest Patristic writings.¹¹⁹ Interestingly, this idea is

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 25, v.45.

¹¹⁵ 'Our Salvation', pp 463-9, v.33.

¹¹⁶ *ADD* 77, v.16.

¹¹⁷ *PB* 13, v.1.

¹¹⁸ *Letter to Epictetus* 7, quoted in Graef, *Mary: a history of doctrine and devotion* i, p.52.

¹¹⁹ Introduced by Justin Martyr (*d.c.*165) in the second century, it was developed by Irenaeus (*d.c.*202), who linked it to the Pauline notion of *anakaphalaiosis*, or recapitulation of all things in Christ (Eph

also to be found among the thoughts of the bardic poets on Mary's role. Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn addresses Mary as 'ripe berry of noblest wine; she mended the first woman's mischief: most unlike Eve she sealed the peace.'¹²⁰ The description of Mary as a ripe berry full of wine is typical of the kind of epithet routinely used by the bardic poets to refer favourably to their subjects in secular poetry. However, as observed in the previous chapter, bardic titles, commonly employed in secular eulogy, transcend their original meaning when translated into religious verse. It is very difficult not to observe in Philip's description, then, a reference to Mary as bearer of the Eucharistic Lord, who transubstantiates wine into His noble blood during the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Mary is seen as the tree which brings forth the new fruit of knowledge or wisdom in the reflections of Gofraidh Ó Cléirigh (*n.l.t.*1372): 'Thou art above me, O branch sprung from pure Mary; Thou stayest beneath me too, O golden apple of our tree'.¹²¹ Muirchertach Ó Cionga (*f.l.*1580) states that Mary, out of her kin-love, saved humanity from the bonds of the first sin.¹²² The fact that Mary is part of Adam's race makes her undoing of Adam and Eve's disobedience a vicarious act. Uaithne, son of Uilliam Ó Cobhthaigh (*d.*1556) expresses this well: 'Though Adam's race disobeyed God, the fact of Mary's belonging to it enabled her to bring it to the King's side.'¹²³ For Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh, Mary is 'the woodcutter who fells the tree of the debt.'¹²⁴ Mary's greatest asset in reversing Eve's sin was her virginity. The

1:10). He spoke of the transference of life (*circumlatio*) from Mary to Eve, Mary's obedience undoing Eve's disobedience; *ibid.*, pp 37-9.

¹²⁰ 'caor abaidh as uaisle fion': *PB* 9, v.8.

¹²¹ *ADD* 61, v.28.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 60, v.9.

¹²³ *ADD* 68, v.38.

¹²⁴ *AFOD* 25, v.13.

considerable emphasis placed on this attribute is closely linked to Mary's role as the 'New Eve'.¹²⁵ The esteem in which the virginity of Mary as the 'New Eve' was held in late medieval spirituality, in fact, owes much to the thought of Augustine, who believed that the hereditary taint of original sin was transmitted through the sexual act, concluding that since sex was inherently sinful (concupiscence or *epithymia* being necessary for its performance) then virginity was a good, and the virgin birth was necessary in order to preserve Christ from sin.¹²⁶

The themes of Mary's Annunciation and the Incarnation of Christ within her womb, her vow and preservation of perpetual virginity (*ante partum, in partu* and *post partum*) her espousal of Christ, her kinship with all of humanity and her role as the 'New Eve' are very much interrelated, and a clear understanding of the connection between them is necessary if the role of Mary in popular devotion is to be properly understood. Bardic religious poetry contains explicit references to all of the above aspects of Mary, and, it can be taken that the above vista is fairly representative of the

¹²⁵ Marina Warner explains, citing both John Chrysostom and Augustine, how, as a result of Eve's sin, humanity could not reproduce without experiencing the sinfulness of sexual passion, and that original sin was transmitted from parents to their children through the sexual act. Only a virgin birth could halt this pattern, and, thus, Mary's virginal conception and bringing forth of Jesus was necessary to undo the damage caused by the first woman. John Chrysostom's fourth-century treatment of the connection between sin and sexuality, virginity and righteousness, provides a useful insight into the importance of the virginity of Mary if she is to become the 'New Eve'. He writes: 'Scarcely had they [Adam and Eve] turned from obedience to God than they became earth and ashes, and all at once they lost the happy life, beauty and honour of virginity...they were made serfs, stripped of the royal robe...made subject to death and every other form of curse and imperfection; then did marriage make its appearance...Do you see where marriage took its origin?...for where there is death, there too is sexual coupling; and where there is no death there is no sexual coupling either.': quoted in Warner, *Alone of all her sex*, pp 51-2.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.54.

staple diet with which the general populace was fed. Frequent allusion to these particular Marian traits in the religious poetry of the bards suggests that those who commissioned the poems (secular and religious rulers alike), in addition to the audiences for whose attention they were composed, genuinely expected and desired that they would be mentioned. Mary's attributes were understood to attract the attention of the Almighty and she alone was considered worthy to bear the Son of God. At an early age she vowed perpetual virginity, because she wished to be the spouse of God alone. She longed for the consummation of her spiritual marriage, as did the Almighty, who was captivated by her beauty (principally her qualities of virginity and humility). That consummation occurred at the Incarnation, without sullyng the virginity of Mary that attracted the Almighty in the first place. This virginal consummation of marriage was the first in history that escaped the consequences of the Fall, namely by achieving conception without the inherited baggage of lustful and sinful concupiscence and without the transmission of Original Sin through the sexual act. Where Eve brought death, Mary brought life as the New Eve. Secondly, because of Mary's kinship, she represented humanity in her act of obedience and subsequent virginal conception, the merits acquired by her undoing the damage wrought by Eve, who represented the same humanity in her disobedience and subsequent concupiscence. Mary's qualities were to be emulated by the faithful in their daily lives. More importantly though, Mary was the best representative of the human race that one could call on for help when in spiritual need. She was, in a real sense, 'Mediatrix' between God and Man. How she exercised this role in practice is treated of below.

Mary and the Passion of Christ

The image of Mary standing at the foot of the cross of her Son is perhaps one of the most powerful and heart-wrenching scenes imaginable, and late medieval Europe saw it achieve prominence in literature, and, subsequently in art. From the thirteenth century onwards, Mary's identity as *Mater Dolorosa* occupied the minds of her devotees, who increasingly sympathised with the popular *Marienklagen* (laments of Mary). The *Stabat Mater*, which has its origin at this time, depicts the Virgin standing beneath the cross and, in a deeply moving manner, arrests the emotions of the listener, evoking their compassion: '*Quis est homo qui non fletet Matrem Christi si videret in tanto supplicio?*' ('Who is he who would not weep to see the mother of Christ in such torment?').¹²⁷ In this age of affective meditation, when believers were encouraged to enter into the scenes of the Passion and to empathise with the participants, it is no surprise that the *Mater Dolorosa* was particularly invoked when the Passion became too close for comfort as in the mid fourteenth century, when the Black Death was at its height in Europe. It became particularly important at this time that Mary was depicted as sharing, by her compassion (suffering-with), the suffering of Christ, and by extension, the suffering of humanity as a whole. Marina Warner explains how calamitous events in late medieval Europe shaped Marian devotion:

The intimate devotions of the last hundred years [c.1250-1350] had made the Virgin an approachable, kindly figure who could be depended on for pity and comfort. The cult of the *Mater Dolorosa* stressed her participation in mankind's ordinary, painful lot, and, although the repercussions of the Black

¹²⁷ Warner, *Alone of all her sex*, pp 213-14.

Death restored a degree of majesty and terror to the personality of Christ the Judge, the Virgin, herself, retained the common touch.¹²⁸

The suffering of Mary, then, served as a timely reminder of her solidarity with humanity. By the end of the fifteenth century, the principal late medieval works detailing Mary's sufferings at the cross were translated into Gaelic and became greatly influential.¹²⁹ Very many of the ideas regarding Mary's behaviour on Calvary, which arise in bardic poetry, can be traced to the translations of these popular continental works. More importantly, perhaps, it should be noted that Gaelic devotion to Mary in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was profoundly shaped by the development of the Marian cult on the continent from the thirteenth century onwards, and therefore, Irish manifestations of Marian piety should never be examined in isolation. The increasing importance accorded to Mary's role in salvation history and,

¹²⁸ Ibid., p.216.

¹²⁹ Peter O' Dwyer treats extensively of translated works, which include accounts of Mary's suffering that were prominent in Gaelic Ireland; see O' Dwyer, *Mary: a history of devotion in Ireland*, pp 130-64. These include the *Vita Rhythmica*, originating in the thirteenth century, but translated to Gaelic in the fifteenth century. This exists, whole or in part, in more than twenty manuscripts (p.138). The mid fifteenth-century Gaelic translation of *Meditationes Vitae Christi* is known to have existed in at least thirty-eight manuscripts (p.141). The *Dialogus Beatae Mariae et S.Anselmi de Passione* was translated at the end of the fourteenth century and exists in at least six manuscripts (p.154). Attributed to St Bernard, the *Liber de Passione Christi* appears in at least four manuscripts (p.157; also R. A. Q. Skerrett, 'Two Irish translations of the *Liber de Passione Christi*', in *Celtica* vi (1963), pp 82-117). The growing importance of the image of Mary before the cross of her Son was also reflected in Irish tomb iconography of the sixteenth century. John Hunt details sixteen sculptured examples of this motif while Clodagh Tait adds two more examples, both from County Cork, to Hunt's list. See Hunt, *Irish medieval figure sculpture* i, p.248; also Tait, 'Harnessing corpses: death, burial, disinterment and commemoration in Ireland, 1550-1655', pp 241-2.

concomitantly, her power as Mediatrix and Advocate in late medieval popular piety, was, furthermore, underpinned by contemporary theological development. It is crucial that historians, examining popular religious ideas during this period, have some understanding of the evolution of Mariology before embarking on their studies. As theological considerations of the Virgin Mary's role entered a new phase of development, fresh ideas began to emerge which, over time, impacted firstly upon learned groups in ecclesiastical circles and, then upon a wider audience, who were increasingly fed a far more exalted Marian profile in sermons than heretofore. The case of Mary's participation in Christ's Passion is a good example of a belief that developed significantly in the late medieval period and, with it, an increase in the importance of the Virgin Mary herself. The intimate link between theological developments on the one hand, and popular conceptions on the other, demonstrates convincingly, as argued in the introduction to this work, that the dividing line between so-called 'elite' and 'popular' religion was quite tenuous indeed. A brief survey of the theological origins of the belief in Mary's 'Compassion' is warranted, then, if its manifestation in the popular piety of the late medieval period is to be appreciated.

The idea that Mary experienced 'Compassion' for her Son on Calvary did not simply mean that she had some form of motherly pity for Him. Instead, it involved admitting that Mary actually participated in the Passion and, therefore, was not, merely a bystander on Calvary. Ambrose (c.339-97), while praising Mary's fortitude under the cross, nevertheless rejected the notion of Mary assisting Christ in His redemptive work.¹³⁰ Centuries later, however, Arnold of Bonneval (d. after 1156) clearly asserted

¹³⁰ 'But Jesus did not need a helper for the redemption of all;...He welcomed His mother's affection but He did not seek human help', *Expositio in Lucam* 10, 132, quoted in Michael O' Carroll, *Theotokos: a theological encyclopaedia of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (2nd ed., Delaware, 1983), p.104.

Mary's participation in the redemptive act, while mindful of the misgivings of Ambrose. He wrote that Christ 'was moved by the affection of His mother; then there was one single will of Christ and Mary, both together offered one holocaust to God, she in the blood of her heart, He in the blood of His flesh.'¹³¹ Richard of St Laurent (*d.* after 1245), who was dean of the Metropolitan Chapter of Rouen, asserted that Mary received in her heart all the wounds that Christ received on His body, sharing intimately in His saving work on the cross.¹³² The *Mariale Super Missus Est*, for centuries spuriously attributed to Albert the Great, and, thereby carrying great authority, spoke of Mary as *adjutrix redemptionis per compassionem* (helper of the redemption by her compassion).¹³³ The Franciscan, Bonaventure (*d.*1274), saw Mary's help in the redemption as her offering her son to be sacrificed.¹³⁴ Meanwhile, outside the sphere of scholastic theology, and within the mystical tradition, St Bridget of Sweden (1302/3-73) confirmed, from divine revelation, Mary's participation.¹³⁵

Gaelic Ireland was not immune from the cut and thrust of these theological debates. In fact, traces of most of the broad ideas mentioned above are to be clearly found among the works of the bardic poets. The offering of one single sacrifice by both Mary and Jesus, she in the blood of her heart and He in the blood of His body, which allowed for her full participation in the Passion, as taught by Arnold of Bonneval, is one of the central ideas that gains frequent mention. Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn (*d.*1448), in describing Mary's reaction to the piercing of her Son's hands and feet, speaks of 'her

¹³¹ *On the praises of Holy Mary* (PL 189, 1727A), quoted in Graef, *Mary: a history of doctrine and devotion*, p.243.

¹³² Graef, *Mary: a history of doctrine and devotion* i, p.267.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p.273.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.284.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.309.

heart's torture', emphasising that, although Mary was not physically crucified, she, nevertheless, felt the pain in her heart.¹³⁶ This idea is also clearly expressed by the sixteenth-century poet, Muirchertach Ó Cionga, who states that 'Mary gazed at the breast-wound and is wounded thereby, though untouched (by the lance).'¹³⁷ An unidentified poet (*n.l.t.*1631) states that 'the Virgin Mary suffered as much as the Passion' and elsewhere it is claimed that 'we are saved by our king's nurse.'¹³⁸ Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn (*d.*1487) recalls that 'though her grief crushed not her life, it lay – dread weariness! – on the Virgin as a death-load – Passion for them both.'¹³⁹ It was, firmly established, therefore, at least by the fifteenth century in Gaelic Ireland, that Mary co-operated in the Redemption, sharing the sufferings of Christ in her heart. An allusion to Bonaventure's idea, namely that Mary co-operated by offering her Son to be sacrificed, is to be found in one of Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh's poems to the Virgin in the late sixteenth century: 'She it is who got her spouse's authority and sacrificed her Son for me; I, though as yet a wanderer, am friend of the mightiest woman in Heaven.'¹⁴⁰ It is certain that the works of Bonaventure circulated in Ireland, as the Youghal Franciscan friary library catalogue of 1491 makes reference to a number of them. This also suggests that their content influenced late medieval

¹³⁶ *DDé* 2, v.24.

¹³⁷ *ADD* 60, v.31.

¹³⁸ Bergin, *Irish bardic poetry* 50, v.12; *DD* 10, v.26.

¹³⁹ *PB* 13, v.13.

¹⁴⁰ *AFOD* 3, v.2.

Franciscan preaching in Ireland, and therefore, those who listened to the sermons of the friars.¹⁴¹

The portrayal of Mary at the foot of the cross, from the thirteenth century onwards, included elements that sought to magnify the torture that Mary experienced, with a view to harnessing the emotional engagement of the believer, so that he could be helped to lament with and for the sorrowful Virgin. The human and emotional aspect of Mary's character was strongly emphasised, and this often resulted in depictions of the Virgin behaving in a somewhat undignified manner. This aspect of Mary's sorrow was largely innovative, being part of the affective devotion that characterised much of the later middle ages. Such portrayals of Mary's grief had not been thus highlighted in earlier treatments of the Virgin's experience at Calvary. Ambrose (c.339-97) depicted the Virgin as strong and faithful in the face of suffering: 'Mary behaved as befitted the mother of Christ, for while the apostles had fled she stood before the cross and looked up, full of pity to the wounds of her Son, because she expected not the death of her Son but the salvation of the world'.¹⁴² Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople (d.c.897), even went as far as to depict Mary stoically and nobly standing before the cross, without a word of indignation.¹⁴³ Although there is evidence that the late medieval *Marienklagen* were anticipated in the *Lament of the Blessed Virgin* of Simon Metaphrastes in the tenth century, Mary, while deeply grieved and wounded by the fulfilment of Simeon's sword, nevertheless, expressed her sorrow therein with dignity. However, the woman who emerges from the thirteenth century onwards,

¹⁴¹ See 'Catalogue of books possessed in 1491 by the Franciscan friary at Youghal' in Meigs, *The reformations in Ireland*, pp 145-8. For a more comprehensive edition of the Youghal Library Catalogue of 1491 see Ó Clabaigh, *The Franciscans in Ireland, 1400-1534*, pp 158-80.

¹⁴² *Expositio in Lucam* 10, 132, quoted in Graef, *Mary: a history of doctrine and devotion* i, p.82.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.193.

heavily influenced by her portrayal in the *Vita Rhythmica*, is much more eager to express her grief in elaborate fashion. Hilda Graef describes Mary's reaction to the Passion as found in the Latin version of the above work:

We are here shown a woman who has completely lost control of herself and raves hysterically. As soon as she is told that Jesus has been arrested, she faints. When she comes to, she breaks out into the most extravagant lamentations. When Mary Magdalen tells her that Jesus has been scourged she falls into a death-like swoon. She then watches Jesus carry his cross to Golgotha and screams, tears her hair and scratches her cheeks. Jesus consoles her, foretelling his resurrection, but this has no effect; under the cross Mary continues her lamentations, alternately swooning and screaming and tearing her clothes. After Jesus has died, there are further outbreaks; Mary weeps tears of blood and finally lies in a dead faint across her son's body.¹⁴⁴

It was this typically late medieval portrait of Mary's suffering that influenced the religious works of the bardic poets, especially from the fifteenth century onwards, when the *Vita Rhythmica* was translated into Gaelic. An unidentified poet (*n.l.t.* 1513-14), addressing Christ, reminds Him that 'when all had abandoned Thee, Mary and John stood by Thee; Thy death so affected her mind that she was beside herself at Thy tomb.'¹⁴⁵ Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn illustrates the Virgin's grief by using the traditional motif of the surging of the three waves, which presage the death of a hero: 'She was crushed by the waves of the three waters overwhelming the ship.'¹⁴⁶ He mentions, elsewhere, how 'when they would lead her away from the grave, she turned and cast

¹⁴⁴ Graef, *Mary: a history of doctrine and devotion* i, p.261.

¹⁴⁵ *ADD* 100, v.21.

¹⁴⁶ *PB* 4, v.49.

herself on His body.’¹⁴⁷ Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn also comments that, after all the torture she had endured ‘’twas a relief to cast herself on (the dead body of) her Son.’¹⁴⁸ In the words of another poet (*n.l.t.* 1631) ‘Mary’s blood-flecked tears shed at Thy [Christ’s] death were payment for the sealing of our pardon; our trampling on the debt due to the breast made the Virgin wring her hands over the grave.’¹⁴⁹ Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh also makes reference to a similar sight when asking the Virgin to present her suffering before God in intercession for humanity:

Tell him how thou sawest the spear stroke! Tell thy agony the day of His torture! Tell of thy shedding thy blood-red tears and of thy fingers red (being wrung with grief) for thy baby boy.¹⁵⁰

Tuathal Ó hUiginn (*d.*1450) states that he has heard that ‘His body...was buried against Mary’s will.’¹⁵¹ Mary’s suffering was seen to affect Christ much more than His own. Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn reflects on this aspect of the Passion: ‘He felt Mary’s pain more than the weight of His own wounds; it oppressed him to watch it; (to escape it) He ran to His own pain.’¹⁵² The additional pain, which Christ underwent

¹⁴⁷ *PB* 13, v.17.

¹⁴⁸ *DDé* 2, v.24.

¹⁴⁹ *ADD* 95, v.32.

¹⁵⁰ *AFOD* 19, v.12.

¹⁵¹ *DDé* 20, v.39. In the Gaelic translation of *Meditationes Vitae Christi* it is stated that, when Joseph of Arimathea came to bury the Lord, Mary said to him ‘Don’t take my son from me so soon. Bury me with him’ (quoted in O’ Dwyer, *Mary: a history of devotion in Ireland*, p.150). The *Dialogus Beatae Mariae et S. Anselmi de Passione*, which was translated into Gaelic at the end of the fourteenth century, also describes Mary’s reluctance to part with her Son. Mary, herself, recounts what happened: ‘John said “He must be buried. That is how the human race is redeemed and saved.” He was taken forcibly from me for burial. I wanted to go into the grave with him...’ (*ibid.*, p.157).

¹⁵² *PB* 21, v.33.

on account of the sorrow of His mother, is noted also by the sixteenth-century poet, Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh:

Mary was in the same plight as Thou from the cruel wounding – could plight be worse? She watched Thee on Friday bearing Thy burden; the piercing of Thy own heart hurt Thee not more (than to see this).¹⁵³

This idea is found in the Passion sequence of the Gaelic translation of *Meditationes vitae Christi* where it is stated that His mother's pain hurt Him more than the nails of crucifixion. Bernard of Clairvaux, one of the most notable theologians and devotees of the Virgin Mary of the late medieval period, is quoted there as having written '*Foderis aspere clavis extra, asperius intra, ex compassione matris*' ('[Christ suffered] bitterly from the external piercing of the nail but more bitterly from the co-suffering of [His mother]').¹⁵⁴ The late sixteenth-century poet, Muirchertach Ó Cobhthaigh's assertion that 'the sight of the wound in His right side was more than the Virgin Mary could endure; seeing the wound...she sank to the earth in a faint' follows the sequence of events, as detailed in *Meditationes vitae Christi*, exactly.¹⁵⁵

The claim that Christ suffered an intensification of pain on account of the distress of His mother serves as a useful example of some of the ways in which religious ideas were transmitted in late medieval Gaelic Ireland. Firstly, it is noted above that the Cistercian preacher, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), expressed the idea in his writings. Bernard's written works were very popular throughout the later middle ages. The 1491 library catalogue belonging to the Franciscan friary at Youghal, records that

¹⁵³ ADD 66, v.22.

¹⁵⁴ SBC, p.149; O' Dwyer, *Mary: a history of devotion in Ireland*, p.149.

¹⁵⁵ 'Christ our Saviour', pp 183-8, v.18; SBC, § 384; see also Liam Ó Caithnia, *Apalóga na bhfilí* (B.Á.C., 1984), p.156.

a collection of Bernard's best-known sermons, in one volume, was held there.¹⁵⁶ This idea was referred to in the famous continental devotional work, *Meditationes vitae Christi*, which appeared in an Irish translation in the fifteenth century, thus becoming accessible to those who consulted this work themselves, and to all who became familiar with at least some of its content through the medium of preaching.¹⁵⁷ As highlighted above, Bernard of Clairvaux's writings themselves had a significant influence on late medieval preaching in general, and therefore the appearance of his ideas in sermons must not have been unusual. A homily on the Passion found in an Irish Franciscan manuscript written at the Observant friary of Kilcrea in 1475 and now held in the public library at Rennes, bases its material chiefly on the authority of figures such as Ambrose, Augustine, Bede, Cassiodorus, Gregory the Great, Peter Lombard, and of course, Bernard.¹⁵⁸ The appearance of these ideas in the religious verses of the bardic poets in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries suggests that the theology of figures such as Bernard of Clairvaux was considered relevant to what was largely a non-clerical group. The poets do not usually cite the various authorities from which their ideas are taken and, for the most part, it is unlikely that they were aware of their provenance. However, the important point is that such ideas circulated among a band of professional poets who had no formal training in theology, and consequently, among a wider community of people who had occasion to listen to their works.

¹⁵⁶ Ó Clabaigh, *The Franciscans in Ireland, 1400-1534*, p.169.

¹⁵⁷ The friars at Youghal possessed the Latin version of this text; *ibid.*, p.176.

¹⁵⁸ Colmán Ó Clabaigh, 'Preaching in late medieval Ireland: the Franciscan contribution', in Alan J. Fletcher and Raymond Gillespie (eds), *Irish preaching, 700-1700*, (Dublin, 2001), p.89.

Devotion to the sorrows of the Virgin (varying between five and fifteen) grew alongside the increased emphasis on Christ's Passion, which characterised the late medieval period. This devotion was closely linked to the *Planctus Mariae* or 'Plaint / lament of Mary', a literary genre that developed between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries.¹⁵⁹ If the attribution of a poem treating of *Cúig cáis as mhó le Muire* to Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh is correct, it is perhaps the first recorded reference to the sorrows in Ireland (dating from the thirteenth century). Yet the attribution is by no means certain, and Robin Flower has questioned this claim.¹⁶⁰ The five sorrows are listed in this poem as Simeon's prophecy, the loss in the temple, Christ's capture by the Jews, the sight of His body in the grave, and the fifth, while not mentioned specifically, is most probably His death or His being pierced by the lance.¹⁶¹ A similar poem, found in British Library, Additional Ms. 29614, treats of the same set of sorrows.¹⁶² The fifteenth-century *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum* contains a text headed *Na cuig paidreacha so sis ar son na cuig ndubalta fuair Muire* which treats of the five sorrows of Mary and the powers given to her in compensation for what she suffered.¹⁶³ The five sorrows are listed as the words of Simeon, the dishonour shown to Mary at the cross, hearing from Jesus that He had to die to save the world, His crucifixion and, finally, when the body of Jesus was laid in Mary's arms. Recitation of five prayers in honour of the five sorrows of Mary is recorded as bringing great benefits such as freedom from sin, true repentance before death and thirty years

¹⁵⁹ Graef, *Mary: a history of doctrine and devotion* i, p.263.

¹⁶⁰ O' Dwyer, *Mary: a history of devotion in Ireland*, pp 86-7. The poem exists in at least ten manuscripts and was therefore quite popular.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p.310.

¹⁶³ *R.I.A.cat.Ir.MSS.*, fasciculi vi – x, p.1259.

indulgence, protection from evil and sickness, and an enkindling of the fire of love in the heart of the devotee.¹⁶⁴ The monastic order of Servites, founded in the thirteenth century, claimed that the Virgin had revealed to their seven founder saints the seven sorrows that she suffered, in their oratory near Florence. Their claims inspired the iconography of the *Mater Dolorosa*'s breast being pierced by seven swords. It was not until the early seventeenth century that the cult of the Dolours of Mary was officially endorsed by Pope Paul V (1605-21), by which time the number had been fixed at seven.¹⁶⁵ An unidentified poet (whose work occurs only in late and corrupt manuscripts) makes reference to the iconography associated with this devotion when he prays: 'May the seven treacherous shafts of sorrow pierce my heart, O God; that I may be as Mary was, in misery after Thy death.'¹⁶⁶ Clodagh Tait has demonstrated that the iconography of the seven swords piercing Mary's breast was used at least as early as the mid sixteenth century in Ireland as an effigy of the Virgin appearing on the McCragh tomb in Lismore (dating from the 1550s) includes them.¹⁶⁷ St Bridget of Sweden, in her enumeration of the sorrows of the Virgin, settled the figure at six, all of which appealed to the senses – knowledge, hearing, sight, touch, desire and compassion.¹⁶⁸ The first sorrow, knowledge (alluded to elsewhere in a reference to Simeon's prophecy) is very important in this regard, for it was Mary's foreknowledge of the Passion that, according to some bardic poets, caused her the most anguish.

¹⁶⁴ O' Dwyer, *Mary: a history of devotion in Ireland*, p.110.

¹⁶⁵ Warner, *Alone of all her sex*, p.218.

¹⁶⁶ *ADD* 92, v.7.

¹⁶⁷ Tait, 'Harnessing corpses: death, burial, disinterment and commemoration in Ireland, 1550-1655', p.243.

¹⁶⁸ Graef, *Mary: a history of doctrine and devotion* i, p.309.

As discussed above, the religious ideas expressed by the bardic poets in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, owed much to theological development in the late medieval period as a whole, and reflected ongoing changes in the Church's approach to the Mother of God. The idea of Mary's foreknowledge of the Passion was not new by any means. While Origen (*d.*253), and some of the Greek Fathers following him, interpreted the sword of sorrow of which Simeon spoke, as a reference to Mary experiencing doubts while her faith wavered beneath the cross, Ambrose (*c.*339-97) rejected this idea. For him, the sword indicated Mary's foreknowledge of the Passion.¹⁶⁹ Augustine (354-430) did not allow Mary to doubt either, but he did emphasise that she dared not to presume upon the Resurrection, not because she did not know about it, and clearly not because of any doubts, but because, at that time, her heart was overcome with grief.¹⁷⁰ Much later still, Rupert of Deutz (*d.c.*1135) claimed that Mary knew of the forthcoming Passion even when suckling Christ.¹⁷¹ The Virgin Mary's foreknowledge, therefore, was understood to have increased the intensity of her suffering, for she carried the pain of her Son's crucifixion each day in her heart. One poet (*n.l.t.*1631) details how Simeon's prophecy affected the Virgin: 'When the prophet foretold Thy wounding, the Virgin's pity for Thee was plain to see; Thy sore wound pierced her, and she felt Thy breast-wound before Thou didst.'¹⁷² Tuathal Ó hUiginn (*d.*1450) revisits the thoughts of Augustine when he claims that 'little was her smart relieved by her belief in her Son's rising; though she knew that, she, His nurse, was afflicted.'¹⁷³ Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn (*d.*1487), meanwhile, portrays Mary

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.81.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp 96-7.

¹⁷¹ O' Dwyer, *Mary: a history of devotion in Ireland*, p.80.

¹⁷² *ADD* 84, v.28.

¹⁷³ *DDé* 20, v.38.

as somewhat stronger in the face of suffering: ‘Though her bereavement was as much as she could bear, His mother, to console her women, told them – they had no hope of it! – [that] they would see her Son again.’¹⁷⁴ Cormac Ruadh Ó hUiginn (*n.l.t.*1473) highlights Mary’s fear of the future when he states that ‘Mary so feared the death of the Lord of Mercy that she would rather have had him ever a child than grow to be a man.’¹⁷⁵ The Gaelic *Meditationes vitae Christi* recounts how Jesus and Mary were at Martha and Mary’s in Bethany, just before He was due to go to Jerusalem. His mother pleads with Him: ‘Son, where are you going? You know that the rulers here have evil intentions regarding you. Please don’t go to the city!’ and later, when her beseeching failed, laments ‘Sad is your poor unfortunate mother, Son. Why did I bear you to get such sorrow? You are going from one sorrow to another till finally you die!’¹⁷⁶ Mary’s scolding of her Son takes place even at the foot of the cross. An Irish version of the *Vita Rhythmica* (TCD Ms. 1434), dating from the fifteenth century, documents how Mary said to her Son ‘Son, what will you do with your poor, bereft mother?’¹⁷⁷ Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn, addressing St John in one of his poems, gives a hint that he is aware of this particular tradition: ‘Thou couldst not endure the Virgin’s reproach to her son; “Dost thou pity me” she said, “childless after thee?”’¹⁷⁸

Mary’s tears

The tradition of Mary shedding tears at Calvary is very strong, especially within the devotion to the *Mater Dolorosa*. The literary motif that describes Mary shedding three tears occurs at least three times in the poetry of Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn in the fifteenth

¹⁷⁴ *PB* 13, v.15.

¹⁷⁵ *DDé* 21, v.20.

¹⁷⁶ O’ Dwyer, *Mary: a history of devotion in Ireland*, pp 147-8.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.138.

¹⁷⁸ *DDé* 1, v.16.

century. In each instance, the tears of the Virgin are meritorious, helping to win Christ's pardon for humanity's act of deicide:

The child, the Virgin's spouse did not put His anger aside until He granted our pardon at her three tears. /

Most precious did He consider the three tears you shed when fainting over your son, with the other two Marys at your side.¹⁷⁹

In the first poem, alluded to above, Tadhg Óg seems to contradict himself by stating elsewhere that the Virgin did not cry at all: 'though she dared not to cry, she stood beneath Him; grief enough for her to watch Him and not be free to weep.'¹⁸⁰ It must be understood that, in this instance we are dealing with two distinct traditions, one highlighting the sorrowful mother at the foot of the cross who grieves deeply, and the other emphasising Mary's strength and faith, which enables her to remain composed, despite her pain. These traditions are not necessarily mutually exclusive and it would be foolish to set them up in opposition to each other. They merely serve to focus alternatively on two aspects of the Virgin's character, namely her humanity and susceptibility to pain, and her spiritual strength, which helped her to endure her Passion experience. As noted above, both have their origin in patristic writings. Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn, meanwhile, does not allow the Virgin to shed tears for she has cried

¹⁷⁹ *DDé* 2, v.8; *ibid.*, 6, v.16 (note that the latter reference may indicate influence of the *pietà* image which was common at this time in English and continental art and poetry; see Andrew Breeze, 'The Virgin's tears of blood', in *Celtica* xx (1988), p.119. The *pietà* made its first appearance in Ireland in the fifteenth century – see Tait, 'Harnessing corpses: death, burial, disinterment and commemoration in Ireland, 1550-1655' p.242; see also a reference by Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn in *DDé* 10, v.20: 'Dost Thou remember, O Son of God, Thy mother's tears at Thy crucifixion? O Lord who didst grant all men to Mary's three tears, grant me too!')

¹⁸⁰ *DDé* 2, v.23.

her fill already, and there are none left. Indeed, as in Tadhg Óg's poem, her inability to release her sorrow by weeping only increases her pain: 'all strength gone, she was alas, stunned, unable to weep, her eyes wasted by tears.'¹⁸¹ The tradition of Mary shedding three tears, which emerges in the fifteenth-century poetry of Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn, was possibly influenced by references such as those that appear in the Middle English British Library Harley Ms. 913, compiled in Ireland about 1330, where, in a poem, treating of the Passion of Christ, it is written 'Al hir joi was ago, tho yo Him sei dei in rode, For to wep yhe nad no mo bot foure bitre teris of blode' ('All her joy was gone. When she saw Him die on the cross, she had no more than four bitter tears of blood to shed').¹⁸²

Allusion to the Virgin Mary weeping tears of blood becomes very common from the fifteenth century onwards in Ireland. What is perhaps the earliest reference to this motif in European literature is found in the thirteenth-century *Vita Rhythmica*. After Jesus dies, Mary is depicted as weeping tears of blood before she lies in a dead faint across her Son's body.¹⁸³ On the basis of the alleged German authorship of the *Vita Rhythmica*, Breeze suggests that the tradition of the Virgin weeping bloody tears may have begun here, for the motif has ample precedents in German secular literature.¹⁸⁴ Yet, Germany, in this regard, is not in any way unique. The motif of bloody tears, as discussed below, is recorded in many lands and cultures, from Peru to China and Ireland to Scandinavia.¹⁸⁵ The earliest English references to the Virgin's tears of

¹⁸¹ *PB* 9, v.34.

¹⁸² 'Fall and Passion' in Lucas, *Anglo-Irish poems of the middle ages*, p.111.

¹⁸³ Breeze, 'The Virgin's tears of blood', p.110; Graef, *Mary: a history of doctrine and devotion* i, p.261.

¹⁸⁴ Breeze, 'The Virgin's tears of blood', pp 110-11.

¹⁸⁵ Vernam Hull, 'Celtic tears of blood', in *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* xxv (1952), p.226.

blood date from the thirteenth century and the motif continued to be popular there for the following two centuries.¹⁸⁶ It is not unlikely that this was a favourite motif of the Franciscans, whose affection for devotion to the Passion of Christ and the Sorrows of His mother is well documented. If this is so, then it is no surprise that the first reference to the Virgin's tears of blood in Ireland occurs in a Middle English lyric found in a manuscript of Franciscan origin. Breeze argues that the motif (as applied to the Virgin) entered Ireland from England in the same way as other themes of English origin, such as the 'Charter of Christ'. Whereas both Tadhg Óg and Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn make reference to the idea of the 'Charter' in their poetry, their knowledge appears to be based on oral transmission. Uilliam Mac an Leagha, however, who gains access to the *Long Charter of Christ* B-text, translates and transmits it accurately.¹⁸⁷ In the same way Tadhg Óg and Philip Bocht probably encountered this motif through oral transmission. The fourteenth-century *Long Charter of Christ* B-text mentions the tears of blood, which are shed by Mary who is a witness to the granting of the Charter: 'And namely my moder swete; that for me blody terys gan lete.'¹⁸⁸ This is translated by Mac an Leagha around 1463 as '*in ógh mhilis bhúidh charthanach do shíl déra fola*.'¹⁸⁹ While Breeze suggests that the bardic poets received this theme from outside Gaelic Ireland, he nevertheless admits that the Irish instances of the theme are far more varied than their English counterparts, hinting that its emergence in Ireland came about through the influence of a number of different sources. The role of the bloody tears offered to assuage God's anger, he argues, arises

¹⁸⁶ Breeze, 'The Virgin's tears of blood', pp 111-113.

¹⁸⁷ For a discussion of the 'Charter of Christ motif' see Breeze, 'The Charter of Christ in medieval English, Welsh and Irish', in *Celtica* xix (1987).

¹⁸⁸ Breeze, 'The Virgin's tears of blood', p.112.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.121; *idem*, 'The Charter of Christ in medieval English, Welsh and Irish', p.116.

from a process of oral transmission, and the image of Mary throwing herself over the body of her Son is influenced by the *Vita Rhythmica*.¹⁹⁰ What Breeze does not allow for, however, is the influence of the literary motif of shedding bloody tears as used in secular literature. While mentioning Vernam Hull's study, Breeze does not attempt to connect in any way the motif's secular and religious manifestations.¹⁹¹ Even if the Gaelic use of the motif in the context of Mary only emerges in the fifteenth century, under the influence of similar usage in England and the continent, it would be naïve to assume that the secular use of the motif, with which fifteenth century Gaelic Ireland was already very familiar, had little or no contribution to make to the understanding of its younger sibling.

Vernam Hull groups together the early manifestation of the bloody tears motif under three categories, namely ecclesiastical / religious sources, annalistic sources and heroic tales. Under the first category, he makes reference to its appearance in the *Cáin Domnaig* tract, which was in existence before the tenth century. The grief of those who are forced to work on Sunday is described in the following manner: '*Nach dam 7 nach mug 7 nach cumal forsa-tabarthar sáeb-mám isin domnach, cíit a súile uli déra fola fri Día, úair ro-sáer Día dóib a llá sin.*'¹⁹² It is deemed fitting, in the *Fís Adomnán* text, which appears in *Lebor na hUidre* (which dates from at least as early as the twelfth century) that men consider the Day of Judgment even with tears of blood.¹⁹³ When, in *Betha Colmáin*, also dating from the twelfth century, the saint

¹⁹⁰ Breeze, 'The Virgin's tears of blood', pp 120-21; see *PB* 13, v.17.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp 115-16.

¹⁹² 'The ox and the bondman and bondwoman on whom wrongful bondage is inflicted on Sunday, the eyes of all of them shed towards God tears of blood, for God has freed that day for them all': Hull, 'Celtic tears of blood', p.228.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

discloses to his mother that the soil of Rome, which she had stolen out of faith, would be without effect ‘*ro·chí...caoi serb co nderaib folæ*’.¹⁹⁴ Contemporaneously, in the *Passion of Marcellinus*, which is included in the *Leabhar Breac*, a gloss on Mt 26:75 has Peter weep tears of blood, having denied Christ. In the sixteenth-century *Leabhar Uí Maolchonaire*, a text entitled *The fifteen tokens of Doomsday* (which has its origin much earlier) appears, in which it is claimed that in Hell sinners will shed ‘*déra troma fol*’.¹⁹⁵ In *Betha Colaim Chille*, compiled by Manus Ó Domhnaill in 1532, a white nag weeps tears of blood over Colmcille who is soon to die.¹⁹⁶ The bloody tears of a nag, which presage the death of an important figure, are used also in the tale of Cú Chulainn’s death, which, in part, dates from as early as the eighth century.¹⁹⁷ What could, perhaps be the earliest reference to tears of blood in Ireland, if it is not, itself, a later interpolation, occurs in a poem included in the *Annals of Ulster* for the year 687, lamenting those who fell in the battle of Imlech. The poet mentions in the final verse that had he not been comforted by Crundmael’s son ‘*roptis fola ocus cro mo der do marb Imblecho*’ (‘of blood and gore my tears would be for the dead of Imlech.’)¹⁹⁸ Tears of blood, therefore, were used to highlight the measure of grief experienced for a loved one. In the tale *Bruiden da chocae* (‘Da Choca’s hostel’) Fergus Mac Roich, the Ulster hero, laments the death of Cormac, his fosterling, his anguish intensified by the knowledge that he had been hindered from helping him by Medb: ‘Then Fergus

¹⁹⁴ ‘He saw [her]...cry bitter tears of blood’: *ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ ‘heavy tears of blood’: Stokes, ‘The fifteen tokens of Doomsday’, p.318.

¹⁹⁶ ‘There drew toward him a white nag...and laid his head on the bosom of Columcille and shed a shower of bloody tears upon his cheeks. And for a long time he wept and lamented in this wise, as a man that biddeth farewell to a beloved comrade and hath no hope to see him ever again’: *BCC*, p.409.

¹⁹⁷ Hull, ‘Celtic tears of blood’, p.232.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.231.

sorrowed and made a mighty lamentation above his (dead) fosterling and beat his palms together and they were tears of blood that he shed.’¹⁹⁹ In the tales of the *Fianna*, there is also mention of the shedding of bloody tears. In the twelfth-century *Macgnimartha Find* (‘The boyhood deeds of Fionn’), Fionn meets a woman who is lamenting the death of her son. The intensity of her sense of loss is captured in the description ‘Now it was tears of blood and now a gush of blood so that her mouth was red’.²⁰⁰ The early references to the weeping of tears of blood, therefore, focus on emphasising the intensity of grief being experienced by the person who sheds them. By stressing the degree of loss experienced, the person who laments is also being approved as *bona fide* in their affection. Surely a half-hearted mourner would not shed tears of blood. This is confirmed in later bardic secular poetry. In composing a lament for Tadhg Ó Ceallaigh (*d.*1410), Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn, living a world where laments were quite easily and quickly composed by poets and mechanically rolled off the tongues of reciters, displays his credentials of genuine sorrow by stating ‘It is my heart’s blood that first comes to my eyes as I weep over the heir of Áth Féan.’²⁰¹ Similarly, in a poem on the death of Domhnall Ó Domhnaill (*d.*1420), an unidentified poet claims that his ‘eye sheds blood-flecked tears at the sight of Inis Saimhéar.’²⁰² The Virgin’s tears of blood in Gaelic Ireland show clearly the intense love she had for her Son, and, concomitantly, the searing pain she experienced at His loss. Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn (*d.*1487), for instance, speaks in the following terms about Mary’s sorrow: ‘Thy burning heart cried and burst into red tears; ’twas greater torture for thee

¹⁹⁹ Whitley Stokes, ‘Bruiden Da Chocae (Da Choca’s hostel)’, in *Revue Celtique* xxi (1900), p.393.

²⁰⁰ Hull, ‘Celtic tears of blood’, p.234.

²⁰¹ *ADD* 10, v.33.

²⁰² ‘Some Irish bardic poems’, in *Studies* xxxix (1950), p.191, v.2.

to live than to go with thy Son into the grave.’²⁰³ Yet, that is not all. The bloody tears of Mary become meritorious in their own right, and can be subsequently used by the Virgin in pleading for mercy for her sinful children. An unidentified poet expresses this well in the lines ‘*Do cheannaigh – fa cunnradh sochair – síoth a dalta ar a deoir ndeirg.*’²⁰⁴ In fact, Mary’s tears are portrayed as part of the *éiric* that Mary pays in compensation for the sins of man.²⁰⁵ In another poem Philip sees Mary’s tears as supplementing the plea she makes with her breast. Both are powerful instruments in calming the rage of her Son: ‘If Mary’s breast be not enough to pay Him for the heart-wound, let Him accept her red tears and He will find no more sorrow in His breast.’²⁰⁶ An unidentified poet (*n.l.t.* 1614) goes so far as to wonder whether, regardless of the sacrifice of Christ, Mary’s tears, salvific in themselves, would not have been enough to redeem mankind: ‘Even had He not borne the wounds in foot and hand and heart for us do we not think the Virgin’s tears over Her Son in the grave enough to save the world?’²⁰⁷ This statement perhaps has more to do with the Virgin’s Compassion and her role as Co-Redemptrix than with the tears themselves. Nevertheless it goes further, suggesting that Mary could have redeemed the world not only as helper, sharing in Christ’s work of Redemption (Co-Redemptrix), but as sole Redemptrix.

²⁰³ *PB* 9, v.30.

²⁰⁴ *DD* 91: ‘With her red tear – blessed bargain – Mary bought her son’s appeasement.’

²⁰⁵ *PB* 24, v.36: ‘As the *éiric* of Mary’s tears – thrice she wept for me – is to be feared by me, what shall I do facing the true prophet?’ The role that Mary’s breast plays in her plea for mercy on behalf of mankind is treated of below.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 17, v.35. Mary’s use of her breast to plea for souls is discussed below.

²⁰⁷ *ADD* 86, v.8. Another poet expresses a similar belief: ‘If every other ground of hope failed me, my sister’s grief were pain enough for me; my salvation lay in the (red) colour of her tears...’: *ibid.*, 95, v.4.

And the means by which it was claimed she could achieve this was by virtue of her tears. Not even among the most exaggerated claims of Richard of St Laurent (*d.* after 1245), who was dean of the Metropolitan Chapter of Rouen and ardent promoter of the virtues and powers of the Virgin Mary, is such a statement found. Unfortunately, when Andrew Breeze admits that ‘there is nothing at all like this in English’, he does not go on to explore where such a motif might have originated.²⁰⁸

Perhaps the antecedents of the Virgin’s bloody tears found in earlier Gaelic literature provide an answer. Hull mentions an early twelfth-century text, which may indicate how a motif in secular usage could be transferred into the religious and devotional sphere. In the Ulster Cycle tale *Cath Ruis na Ríg For Bóinn*, tears of blood are employed to arouse pity and thereby cause a much sought-after secret to be divulged. When King Conchobar refuses to tell the Ulstermen the cause of the ailment that is afflicting him, they resort to sending the druid Cathbad to him to find out. He proceeds, in the presence of the king, to weep ‘*déra folcmara forruada fola corbo fhliuch blæ 7 brunni dó*’ (‘flood-like, deep-red tears of blood, so that his breast and bosom were wet’). Because he was impressed by this show of grief, the king divulged his secret.²⁰⁹ It is not difficult to imagine how the shedding of tears of blood to evoke pity, as alluded to above, might be translated into the religious sphere. Mary’s shedding of tears of blood evokes the pity of the King of Heaven because He remembers how much she has suffered. Especially in times of anger, when the Son wishes to wreak revenge on humanity on account of His having been put to death at their hands, and their continued sinfulness, Mary reminds Him that she, herself, suffered the Passion in her heart and duly presents her tears of blood as surety. The

²⁰⁸ Breeze, ‘The Virgin’s tears of blood’, p.120.

²⁰⁹ Hull, ‘Celtic tears of blood’, p.233.

words of an unidentified poet (*n.l.t.*1631) sum this idea up well: ‘The Virgin made Thee forget Thy just claims and can cure my sins; the blood-drops in her tears over Thy grave have obliterated all trace of Thy anger.’²¹⁰ Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh, fearing punishment for sin, encourages the Virgin to play on the king’s pity: ‘Tell thy anguish the day of His torture! Tell of thy shedding thy blood-red tears...’²¹¹

Drinking the blood of the deceased

Early modern Gaelic literature, particularly in the case of the *caoineadh*, or lament, often contains an unusual motif, in which the keener lamenting the death of her loved one, who lies before her, begins to drink his blood. Apart from being a motif that is found in both secular and religious literature from the early modern period, there are actually some recorded instances of the historical occurrence of this practice. In the tale *Fada an la gan clan Uisneach*, handed down in a fifteenth-century version, Deirdre laments the death of her husband, Naoise. She says “‘*Leigidh damhsa mo chéile do phógadh*”. *Agus doghaibh ag pógadh Naoise agus ag ól a fola go ndubhairt an laoi ann.*²¹² In the early modern Irish *Aided Con Culainn*, this practice is also attributed to Emer who mourns the death of the hero: ‘*Do gab ac toirrsi 7 ag truaghneméla ósa chionn 7 do ghabh ac súgad a beól 7 ag ól a fola 7 do chuir tlacht*

²¹⁰ *ADD* 95, v.8

²¹¹ *AFOD* 19, v.12.

²¹² “‘Let me kiss my husband”. And she took to kissing Naoise and drinking his blood, and she uttered this lay...’ see Rachel Bromwich, ‘The keen for Art O’ Leary’ in *Éigse* v (1945-7), p.249.

*sróil uime.*²¹³ The use of this motif was to continue unabated in successive centuries.²¹⁴

Most interesting of all are the historical references to the practice of this strange custom. Edmund Spenser, writing in the late sixteenth century, claims to have witnessed an actual performance of this ritual during his lifetime:

At the execution of a notable traitor at Limerick called Murrough O' Brien I saw an old woman which was his foster mother took up his head whilst he was quartered, and sucked up all the blood running there out, saying that the earth was not worthy to drink it, and therewith also steeped her face and breast and tore her hair, crying and shrieking out most terribly.²¹⁵

²¹³ 'She began to moan and grieve above his head and she took to kissing his lips and drinking his blood; and she put a satin robe about him': *ibid.*

²¹⁴ Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, mourning her slain husband, Art Ó Laoghaire (*d.* 1783), while addressing him in her lament, refers to her own indulging in the same practice: '*Do chuid fola leat 'na srathaibh, is níor fhanas le hí ghlanadh ach í ól suas lem basaibh*' ('Your own blood in streams, and I did not wait to clean it [up] but drank it from my hands'): see Seán Ó Tuama (ed.), *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* (B.A.C., 1961), p.35. A version of the *Romance of Mis and Dubh Ruis* written by Piaras Mac Gearailt, and dating from 1769, portrays Mis drinking blood from the corpse of her father after the Battle of Fionntrá. See Brian Ó Cuív, 'The Romance of Mis and Dubh Ruis', in *Celtica* ii (1954), p.328: '*Óir do thug ise leis mar dobadh í a aoininghean í 7 ar ccur an chatha tháinigh sí maille re drongbhuidhean a lorg cuirp a hathar ar feadh an áir; 7 iar bhfagháil an chuirp go n-iomad créachta di, gabhus ag súgha 7 ag ól na fola as na créachtuibh...*' ('And he took her with him, for she was his daughter and, at the end of the battle, she came with a large company looking for the body of her father all over the [scene of] the slaughter; and, on finding the corpse with many wounds on it, she took to sucking and drinking the blood from [his] wounds': [my translation])

²¹⁵ Edmund Spenser, *A view of the present state of Ireland* (1596), ed. Eric Partridge, (London, 1934), p.62.

According to a tradition of the knights of Glin, when Sir Thomas Fitzgerald was beheaded in Limerick in 1559, his mother seized his head and drank his blood.²¹⁶

Evidence that the practice persisted for some time is found in a nineteenth-century newspaper account, which records its occurrence.²¹⁷

It is no surprise, then, that such a motif, occurring in secular literature, and having a basis in historical practice, re-invented itself as a religious motif. It is not difficult to imagine the Virgin Mary being portrayed as a Gaelic keening woman, coming to terms with the bloody state of her Son's body in the late medieval and early modern periods. What is most surprising, however, is that allusions to the Virgin indulging in this practice are relatively scarce, and most are not explicit. Those that are, can be found much later in popular *caointe* (laments), such as Angela Partridge has collected and discussed.²¹⁸ The Gaelic translations of popular works, which relate the experiences of the Virgin at Calvary, contain various references to Mary coming in contact with the blood of Christ, which pours from His crucified body. The only complete copy of the Gaelic version of *Vita Rhythmica*, TCD Ms. 1434 (written in the fifteenth century), describes how, as He hung on the cross His blood fell into her mouth and on her clothes.²¹⁹ In the *Dialogus Beatae Mariae et S. Anselmi de Passione*, translated into Gaelic at the end of the fourteenth century at the latest, and existing in

²¹⁶ Breandán Ó Madagáin, *An Ghaeilge i Luimneach, 1700-1900* (B.Á.C., 1974), p.56. I am grateful to Andrew Breeze for having drawn my attention to this reference.

²¹⁷ It is recounted that, during a tithe affray in Cork in 1835, '[a] mother, Mrs Ryan, was weeping over the mangled and dead body of her son and sucking the blood from his wounds': see Ó Cuív, 'The Romance of Mis and Dubh Ruis', p.327.

²¹⁸ Angela Partridge, *Caoineadh na dtrí Muire: téama na Páise i bhfilíocht bhéil na Gaeilge* (B.A.C., 1983).

²¹⁹ O' Dwyer, *Mary: a history of devotion in Ireland*, p.138.

six copies, three of which date from the fifteenth century, Mary relates how ‘when they put the cross in position, His blood was pouring into the *brat* which I had on me.’²²⁰ This account, possibly earlier than the Gaelic translation of the *Vita Rhythmica*, omits the detail of the blood falling into Mary’s mouth. The *Liber de Passione Christi*, attributed to St Bernard and also translated into Gaelic in the fifteenth century, contains what is probably the most explicit early references to Mary drinking Christ’s blood. Just as in the *Vita Rhythmica* translation, the *Liber de Passione Christi* text refers to the blood of Christ falling into the Virgin’s mouth and onto her clothes:

*Do bí a bél dearg, a haigid múr rós 7 fá dearg a hédach ó fuil a haenmic 7 do bí a bél cu dearg corcra ó na sreabaibh donn fola do toiteadh asa créachtaib aga uibhi et ac pógadh na talman ara toideadhdís na tonna fola sin.*²²¹

The image of Mary kissing the ground whereupon the drops of precious blood fell occurs also in a much later Gaelic poem on the Passion, collected in Gweedore, Donegal in 1938: ‘*Casadh fuil Íosa sa ród di; chrom sí síos agus thug sí póg di*’.²²²

A little later in the *Liber* text is found the following account, related by Mary herself:

*Do chuiris a chend 7 a láma ré m’ucht 7 rém’ cruídi 7 do liges dá pócadh 7 d’ól fola an tShláinídh 7 do thócaib Iosep 7 Nicomet an corp uaim 7 ní licetar mo sháith ná díl mu shainti damh de.*²²³

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.156.

²²¹ ‘Her mouth was red, her face rose-red and her clothes were red from drinking the blood of her only-son and her mouth was crimson-red from the dark streams of blood that fell from [His] wounds, drinking and kissing the ground on which those waves of blood fell’ [my translation]: R. A. Q. Skerrett, ‘Two Irish translations of the *Liber de Passione Christi*’, in *Celtica* vi (1963), p.108.

²²² *Dán na hAoine*, DA5, vv 15-16 in Partridge, *Caoineadh na dtrí Muire*, p.241.

Mary is portrayed in this text as relishing the drink, which slakes her thirst, and she is obviously upset when Joseph and Nicodemus deny her the opportunity of fully satisfying her craving. Skerrett affirms that there is no mention of this occurrence in the original Latin version.²²⁴ What, then, is the significance of this act of the Virgin, apart from being a fleeting recognition of a most unusual traditional custom?

There is a possibility that the image of Mary craving the blood of her dead Son is a Eucharistic one. However, the practice itself, from which the religious motif derives, may very well pre-date Christianity, perhaps having its true origins in pagan ritual. Certainly in the ancient world, blood was thought to contain the life force of the individual:

Primitive Men generally look upon blood as being life itself. They see blood flow and the body die and, therefore, assume that life flows out of the body in a literal sense. Closely allied to this is the belief that the soul or spirit of the being is in his blood and that when blood escapes the blood-soul escapes too.²²⁵

When a *bean chaointe*, or keening woman, hastily drank the blood that ebbed away from her deceased husband or son, it is possible that she was making a desperate effort to retain the life-force of her loved one, as it seeped away with his blood. When applied to the Virgin Mary, however, the power of this motif is intensified. The

²²³ 'I clasped His head and His hands to my bosom and my heart and I set about kissing and drinking the blood of the Saviour and Joseph and Nicodemus took the body from me and they did not allow me my fill or the satisfaction of my desire' [my translation]: Skerrett, 'Two Irish translations of the Liber de Passione Christi', p.109.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.117.

²²⁵ Maria Leach (ed.), *Funk and Wagnall's standard dictionary of folklore, mythology and legend* (2 vols, New York, 1949) i, pp 148-9.

increase in understanding of and devotion to the Eucharist in Europe from the twelfth century onwards facilitated an increased awareness of what became known as the ‘Real’ presence of Christ in His Body and Blood offered on the altar. When Mary is depicted as craving Christ’s blood and complaining when His bloody body is taken away, denying the Virgin her fill, a clear statement is being made. As Mary was exalted as a model to be imitated, she gives here a striking example of how the Eucharist should be desired and respected. Closely allied to the Eucharistic interpretation, is the much earlier notion (which influences Catholic understanding of the reception of the Body of Christ) that to drink the blood of someone or something (man or beast) was to acquire the attributes of the individual whose blood was consumed:

Since the blood contains the soul and the *animus* of the owner and since, by the drinking of his blood his spirit and *animus* becomes a part of the drinker, many people have practiced blood-eating and drinking to enrich themselves. The blood of a courageous father will be fed to his sons to make them courageous too. Men in battle will drink the blood of fallen heroes, friends or foes, to add the store of courage and might of the hero to their own.²²⁶

An important and, thus far, overlooked reference to this practice occurs in an anonymous poem (*n.l.t.*1614) addressed to the relic of the true cross at Úachdar Lámhann (Holycross Abbey, County Tipperary). In it the poet personifies the cross, praising its great deeds. The cross is addressed as a woman, in similar terms as a poet

²²⁶ Ibid; note that Edmund Spenser, before relating the story of the foster mother of Murrough O’ Brien, alleges that the Gaelic Irish are wont to drink the blood of their enemies on the battlefield. Whether one gives credence to Spenser’s claim or not, it is the same idea that is being referred to; see Spenser, *A view of the present state of Ireland*, p.62.

might address the Virgin Mary: ‘I beseech thee, O bright summer sun, O lady-leech surely learned; wisely have I prayed to thee, O lady so famous that reachest out thy hand to cure me.’²²⁷ This ‘woman’ (the cross) is portrayed as being anointed with the blood flowing from Christ’s feet and hands, the poet concluding the verse with the line ‘thou wert washed in the Lord’s blood.’²²⁸ The image of the woman being washed in the blood of Christ on Calvary is extremely close to the portrayal of Mary beneath the cross in the Gaelic versions of *Vita Rhythmica*, the *Dialogus Beatae Mariae et S Anselmi* and *Liber de Passione Christi*, where Mary’s clothes are said to be red from her son’s blood. The succeeding verse has the woman / cross actually drink the blood of Christ: ‘Till thou didst drink of the King’s blood thou couldst not cure his race with any herb; now find in the blood, which thou didst drink, a sweet draught to cure me.’²²⁹ Predictably, it is precisely because the cross consumes Christ’s blood that it possesses the power to heal, in the view of the poet.²³⁰ In a poem by

²²⁷ ADD 88, v.17. Another instance of the depiction of the cross as a woman occurs in a poem by the late sixteenth-century poet, Tadhg, son of Dáire Mac Bruaideadha, in *DD 2*. In this poem, the cross is described as breast-feeding Christ: ‘*Dom throsghadh thánag-sa chugad, a chroch Íosa fhóireas mé; dod rodhalta ní dú a dhímheas, tú banaltra dhíleas Dé*’ [‘Fasting, I came before you, O cross of God that assists me; it is not right to disregard your nursling; you are the loyal nurse of God’: my translation], v.3, and ‘*a chroch dhearg i ndeachaidh Íosa d’fhagháil báis nachar bás dó, don mhac shaor do bhí ar do bhruinne, do fhaoimh rí na cruinne a chró*’ [‘O red cross on which Christ went to death that was no death for Him. The King of the World consented to the death of the noble Son who was on your breast’: my translation], v.15.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, v.19.

²²⁹ ADD 88, v.20.

²³⁰ Earlier in the poem the poet confirms this by stating ‘This guardian-tree of Eve’s race *became* [my emphasis] when the Son’s blood was shed on it, the salvation of his race’, v.3. This is what makes the cross ‘our saving herb’ (v.9).

Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn (*d.*1487), again dedicated to the cross, the same kind of imagery is used. In this poem, there is, perhaps, an even closer link drawn between the role of the cross and the role of the Virgin. Philip, addressing God, states that ‘its help of Thy folk is glory for it and for us; it won from Thee, O Creator, the checking of Thy anger – if only we be willing – by the appeasing power of its drinking Thy blood.’²³¹ Since, in late medieval spirituality, the suffering of Mary at Calvary (her red tears etc.) is consistently presented before God in an effort to calm His anger, it is hardly surprising that her drinking the blood of her Son should be presented too. The image of Mary relishing drinking the blood of her Son, which is highlighted in the Gaelic version of *Liber de Passione Christi*, arises here again, except discreetly, under the cover of the cross. Philip, addressing the cross, states that ‘owing to love ruling Him, at His death no drop of his body’s blood tarried on thee but thou didst slake thy thirst with it.’²³² It is this cross, washed with blood, of which, in the words of Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn, ‘there was no beam unstained by the blood of His outstretched hands, so that the colour of all its noble beams was changed’, that for centuries was expected to appear in the sky at Judgement Day, accusing humanity of its sins.²³³ It is ironic that Mary, on Judgement Day, traditionally appeals the harsh indictment of the red cross, even though both she and the cross have shared a common experience, namely being washed in the blood of Christ. Their reactions to the common experience differ, however. While the cross calls out for vengeance on the last day, Mary cries for mercy.

²³¹ *PB* 5, v.12.

²³² *Ibid.*, v.22.

²³³ *Ibid.*, v.10.

Mediatrix

The title of 'Mediatrix' as applied to Mary is not easy to define. Its origin is perhaps to be found in the parallel drawn between Mary and Eve. By the fourth century, Jerome expressed the parallel thus: 'Death *through* Eve, life *through* Mary.'²³⁴ Suggestive of a mediatory role, the Council of Ephesus (431) provided the context for Cyril to relate this role to Mary being Mother of God.²³⁵ In the fifth century, Basil of Seleucia was the first one to use the word 'Mediatress' when he described how Mary, at the Annunciation was set up as Mediatress (*mesiteuouosa*) of God and men.²³⁶ The term reached the West and appears in the work of Pseudo-Origen in the century following. Geoffrey of Soissons (c.950) wrote: 'You who are first before God, be a Mediatress for your own, bearing hope of forgiveness, lest they sink in the guilt of vices'.²³⁷ O' Carroll summarises the history of the term:

From the fifth through the fifteenth century, Fathers, Doctors, preachers and hymn-writers explained or assumed Mary's mediation without contradiction. It was the Easterns, using Paul's own language, who borrowed his word, *mesitis*, without stirring the slightest fear that the dignity of the one *Mesites* [Christ] would be compromised. The word was not used in a strictly homogeneous sense. The contexts varied from age to age and culture to culture, though certain essential aspects are distinguishable: Mary's essential role in the work of salvation; and her ceaseless, heavenly activity on our behalf.²³⁸

²³⁴ O' Carroll, *Theotokos: a theological encyclopaedia of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, p.239.

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Ibid., p.240.

²³⁷ Ibid., p.241.

²³⁸ Ibid.

There is no doubt, however, that the role of Mary as Mediatress came into its own from the twelfth century onwards. From that century alone, René Laurentin has counted fifty texts that refer to this title.²³⁹ The idea that God gives life to all things through Mary alone, which highlights His choice to manifest Himself in the world through the Virgin, is found in the writings of Gottschalk of Limburg (*d.* 1098) and is broadly characteristic of writings on Mary at this time. Bardic poetry also contains allusions to this concept.²⁴⁰ This is hardly surprising, given the prevalence of the belief in Mary's mediatory role in the late medieval period. The more specific references occur at a fairly late stage, as in the poetry of Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaire, who composed in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, in which Mary is referred to as 'Janitor of holy Christ', emphasising that she is the doorkeeper, whom one must encounter before accessing Christ.²⁴¹ Aodh, son of Conchonnacht Ó Ruanadha (also a late sixteenth-century poet), speaking of Mary being in Heaven, claims that she 'has placed a ladder for me (to climb) into that castle.'²⁴² Perhaps the most theologically precise reference to Mary as Mediatress in bardic poetry belongs to

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁰ Graef, *Mary: a history of doctrine and devotion* i, p.209.

²⁴¹ *ADD* 54, v.14.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 82, v.17. The image of the ladder is frequently used in reference to Mary. As early as the fifth century, a homily attributed to Athanasius describes Mary as 'the ladder stretched to Heaven', while John of Damascus addresses the Virgin thus: 'You also, by fulfilling the office of Mediatress [*mesiteusasa*], and being made the ladder of God descending to us, that He should assume our weak nature...' (O' Carroll, *Theotokos*, p.240); In his 'Sermon on the Aquaduct' Bernard of Clairvaux says of Mary: 'This is the ladder of sinners, this is my greatest assurance, this is the whole reason for my hope' (Graef, *Mary: a history of doctrine and devotion* i, p.238). Mary's authority in Heaven is further emphasised by Uaithne Ó Cobhthaigh (*d.* 1556) when he states that 'when Heaven's castle was getting crowded a lady was put in charge over it' (*ADD* 68, v.11).

Baothghalach Mac Aodhagáin, who was later to become bishop of Elphin, in the prayer 'O Mary, through thy prayer and operation may the Holy Spirit, the Son and his Father wax strong in my heart and mind.'²⁴³ Although many of the references to Mary's mediatory role are to be found in poems of the sixteenth century, this idea is to be found also in much earlier verse. A poem included in the *duanaire* of Gearóid Mac Mhuiris, third earl of Desmond (1338-98), therefore addresses Mary as '*a dhóirseoir nimhe*' (doorkeeper / janitor of Heaven).²⁴⁴ While specific terms pointing to Mary as Mediatrix are few and far between in bardic poetry, the descriptions of Mary's mediatory action on behalf of humanity, which are myriad, do not leave any doubt as to how Mary's role was perceived. The Virgin's intercessory power over her Son captured the imagination of the late medieval mind, but most especially the Gaelic late medieval mind.

The Authority of a Mother

With the increasing importance given to Mary's mediatory role, particularly after the twelfth century, came an unprecedented bestowal of power and influence on the Virgin. Her identity as Mother of God was now understood to imply that her power superseded that of her Son. As noted above, this developing idea owed its birth and survival as much to the musings of theologians as it did to the practices of the laity. While Anselm (*d.*1109) stressed Mary's spiritual motherhood of her children as the driving force behind her intercessory activity, his disciple, Guibert of Nogent (*d.*1124) went a lot further, claiming that God is almost compelled to heed her, on account of

²⁴³ *ADD 57*, v.13.

²⁴⁴ Poem 19, v.3, in Gearóid Mac Niocaill, 'Duanairé Ghearóid Iarla' in *Studia Hibernica* 3 (1963).

his own law (the fourth commandment).²⁴⁵ Guibert's idea appears in sixteenth-century bardic poetry. Fearghal Ó Cionga (*fl.*1560) states that 'Mary must have her way; a child must obey its mother; when she has spent a little time talking to her son my debt will be suspended.'²⁴⁶ The obligation of a child to obey its mother, as laid down by the fourth commandment, is comfortably extended to Christ, even in the highest ecclesiastical circles, from whence the idea first came. In a disputation between Primate George Dowdall and reformed bishop, Edward Staples of Meath, held at St Mary's Abbey in May 1550, Dowdall, defending the role of the Virgin, is documented as enquiring:

Why, pray, is it not probable that St Ambrose desired the Blessed Virgin's mediation for him? As she is the mother of Christ, are not children commanded by God's commandments to reverence and obey their parents?

Therefore, as He is man, why may he not be subject?²⁴⁷

Uaithne Ó Cobhthaigh (*d.*1556) expresses similar sentiments when he addresses Mary: 'If (O Mary!) I be rejected by thy Son, thou shalt afterwards get Heaven for me by thy prayer; I take no account of rejection by a mere child.'²⁴⁸ An anonymous poet (*n.l.t.*1513-14), having experienced pardon, won through Mary, rejoices that 'justice has come to consist not in my ruin but in Mary's having a mother's power over Thee

²⁴⁵ 'And as a good son in this world so respects his mother's authority that she commands rather than asks, so He [Christ], who, undoubtedly was once subject to her, cannot, I am sure, refuse her anything; and what (I speak humanly) she demands, not by asking but by commanding, will surely come to pass': Graef, *Mary: a history of doctrine and devotion* i, p.225.

²⁴⁶ *ADD* 59, v.8.

²⁴⁷ Thomas Gogarty, 'Documents concerning Primate Dowdall', in *Archivium Hibernicum* ii (1913), p.250.

²⁴⁸ *ADD* 68, v.18.

[Christ].²⁴⁹ Although this idea peaked in the sixteenth century, it is also evident in earlier verse. Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn (*d.*1487) claims that ‘the fair womb that once enclosed Him now rules Him.’²⁵⁰ Fearflatha Ó Gnímh (late sixteenth century), meanwhile regards Mary as the ‘gentle virgin who rules her prince-son.’²⁵¹ The idea of Mary as nurse of the Trinity, which presents itself as early as the thirteenth century in the poetry of Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh and as late as the sixteenth century in the work of Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh, lends itself to giving Mary power over the three persons of the Godhead.²⁵² Therefore an unidentified poet (*n.l.t.*1614) states that ‘the Trinity can – only if she permits it – let me ascend to heaven.’²⁵³

It was on account of God’s submission to Mary, His allowing Himself to become a helpless baby nursed in her arms, that Mary was considered to possess authority over Christ. In the popular mind, Mary’s maternal authority over Christ, the God-Man, extended into their heavenly existence. Alternatively, Mary was thought to have merited Christ’s obedience by agreeing to become His mother and to rear Him as a human child. This latter explanation is based on the *quid pro quo* nature of the relationship between the saints and Christ. A favour must be repaid. The latter idea appeals to Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh, who states that ‘to pardon is the privilege assigned the Virgin on account of her nursing (Christ). He will not dare to refuse anyone to her, but will give her whom she asks of Him.’²⁵⁴ It was almost as if Christ had written Mary a blank cheque in repayment for her *fiat* and subsequent life of

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 100, v.18.

²⁵⁰ *PB* 2, v.12.

²⁵¹ *ADD* 72, v.11.

²⁵² *DD* 9, v.1; *AFOD* 2, v.6.

²⁵³ *ADD* 97, v.8.

²⁵⁴ *AFOD* 7, v.7.

service and love. Whatever she wanted, she was invariably thought to get. The sixteenth-century poet, Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh, certainly held this view. He reminds Christ in one poem that ‘Thou didst pledge the Virgin Mary – well she deserved it – her children’s salvation; (therefore) if men have still to atone for the wounds (I can say) “Make good to the Virgin her nursing of Thee.”’²⁵⁵ Mary, therefore, as Mother of God, was invoked as a mighty intercessor. Just as Mary, as mother, fulfilled her duty to Christ (rearing him) and as Christ (as son), in turn, fulfilled His duty to her (by granting what she asked), so, too, had Mary a duty to tend to her contemporary nurslings (the whole of humanity). The poets frequently remind Mary of her current motherly role: ‘This nursing mother of Heaven’s king always felt bound to defend her race.’²⁵⁶ Aonghus Fionn asks that ‘the maid’s arm be with me; a nurse should guard her children.’²⁵⁷ Mary was known widely as a merciful intercessor with a knack for calming God’s rage. The theological expression of this duty of the Virgin was probably best expressed by Richard of St Laurent (*d.* after 1245), who wrote:

Mary has so softened the Lord and still continues to do so by her merits and prayers that He now patiently tolerates even great sins, whereas before He mercilessly avenged even quite small ones;...[Mary] can not only effectively implore Him but also command Him by her maternal authority.²⁵⁸

The Franciscan preacher, Bernardine of Sienna (*d.* 1444) was not without a penchant for extravagant statements concerning Mary. He spoke of Mary’s authority without linking it to her motherhood, making her supreme in her own right: ‘Even if she had

²⁵⁵ *ADD* 67, v.26.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 87, v.15.

²⁵⁷ *AFOD* 7, v.5.

²⁵⁸ Graef, *Mary: a history of doctrine and devotion* i, pp 268-9.

not been Mother of God she would nevertheless have been the mistress of the world.²⁵⁹ Such pronouncements by respected ecclesiastical figures fed the imaginations of the learned and unlearned alike, resulting in the eventual inclusion of such thoughts in the religious compositions of the professional poets of Gaelic Ireland. The enormous influence of continental religious figures on native spirituality, largely attributable to the preaching and ministry of the mendicant friars, illustrates that Gaelic Ireland was not removed from current European devotional trends. Certainly, it took some time for ideas to circulate. The ever-increasing allusions to Mary's power throughout the sixteenth century attest to this fact. However, the beginnings of this trend can be noticed much earlier, indicating that the seeds sown by ardently devoted Marian scholars of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, did not delay in beginning their germination.

Advocate

Having established that Mary wielded extraordinary power on account of her mothering of Christ, the question of the use and purpose of that power arises. The authority that Mary was accorded in late medieval devotion had one vital function: the shielding of humanity from the wrath of God on the Judgement Day. Since Christ was expected to appear as Judge of the world on that occasion, it was presumed that Mary would function as advocate for the accused. The title 'Advocate', when used of Mary, appears first in Latin in the writings of Irenaeus of Lyons in the second century, but its exact early meaning has not been satisfactorily established. By the sixth century, however, it was being used to describe Mary's intercessory role on behalf of her people, before her Son.²⁶⁰ The twelfth century, which saw the importance of the

²⁵⁹ Ibid., p.316.

²⁶⁰ O' Carroll, *Theotokos*, p.6.

Virgin's role increase, saw the title being used more frequently, most popularly in the *Salve Regina*, the hymn which was adopted by the Benedictines at Cluny around 1135 and subsequently by the Cistercians, Dominicans and Franciscans, soon achieving the status of the most beloved late medieval chant.²⁶¹ This hymn must have been known in Ireland by at least the middle of the thirteenth century.²⁶² Bernard of Clairvaux, while stressing that God gave humanity Christ as Advocate, nevertheless states that sinners might fear Him 'because, even though He was made Man, He yet remained God' and presumably could not be trusted to take the side of humanity on every occasion. In order to resolve this problem, Bernard suggests 'Do you want to have an advocate even with Him? Have recourse to Mary!'²⁶³ The ideas of Bernard were well known in Ireland, influencing the composition of preaching material. A homily on Mary included in a Gaelic Franciscan manuscript written at the Observant friary of Kilcrea in 1475 contains the line '*adeir bernard naem cid bé ní maith do b'áil let do ullmugud tabur fa lamhaib Muire hé*'.²⁶⁴ The portrayal of Mary as Advocate, then, was linked in a special way with Christ's task of judging all people on the Last Day.

²⁶¹ '*Eia ergo advocata nostra illos tuos misericordes oculos ad nos converte*': Graef, *Mary: a history of doctrine and devotion*, p.229.

²⁶² O' Dwyer, *Mary: a history of devotion in Ireland*, p.98.

²⁶³ Graef, *Mary: a history of doctrine and devotion* i, p.238. Eadmer (d.1124) stated that 'sometimes salvation is quicker if we remember Mary's name than if we invoke the name of the Lord Jesus...her Son is the Lord and Judge of all men, discerning the merits of the individuals; hence He does not at once answer anyone who invokes Him, but does it only after just judgement. But if the name of His mother be invoked, her merits intercede so that he is answered even if the merits of him who invokes her does not deserve it' (ibid., pp 215-16).

²⁶⁴ 'St Bernard says that whatever good thing you wish to accomplish, give it into the hand of Mary' [my translation]: G. Dottin, 'Notice du manuscrit irlandais de la bibliothèque de Rennes', in *Révue Celtique* xv (1894).

Mary, on this occasion is depicted as pleading the case of humanity and is seen to do so effectively. Émile Mâle explains how this image begins to appear iconographically from the thirteenth century onwards:

*Au xiii^e siècle...Marie apparaît comme la grace plus forte que la loi. Au tympan des cathédrales on la voit agenouillée près de son fils qui s'apprête à juger le monde; elle rassure le pécheur qui n'oserait en entrant regarder son juge. Elle fut l'avocate des causes désespérées.*²⁶⁵

The language of Mary's advocacy in Gaelic poetry is the language of the courtroom. The sixteenth-century poet, Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh, states: 'I pity the man who argues his own case with a judge; to attempt a case like that is ruinous; a dispute conducted without advocate would mean the secret of our sins being brought against us.'²⁶⁶ Contemporaneously, Maolmhuire, son of Cairbre Ó Uiginn explains that 'few but mighty in power were the words of God's mother pleading with her Son; His mother was so good a pleader that justice ceased to demand redress for the nails in His feet.'²⁶⁷ Uaithne Ó Cobhthaigh (*d.*1556) prays that 'the Virgin [may] contest the Lord's judgement when it looks like a rejection of us.'²⁶⁸ An unidentified poet (*n.l.t.*1631) reassures himself that 'my mother can secure my acquittal and get Thy justice stayed; to get a malefactor forgiven is a queen's privilege; for our sakes she

²⁶⁵ 'In the thirteenth century...Mary appeared as the grace stronger than the law. On the tympan of cathedrals one sees her on bended knee near her Son who is about to judge the world; she reassures the sinner who would not dare, on entering, to look at his judge. She was the advocate of desperate cases': Mâle, *L'art religieux du xiii^e siècle en France* (Paris, 1931), p.259.

²⁶⁶ *ADD* 61, v.1.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 77, v.5.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 68, v.12.

restrains Thy desire of vengeance.'²⁶⁹ Another unidentified poet (*n.l.t.* 1631) states that 'she works for our weal, she is a friend in court for every man.'²⁷⁰ Mary's role in the courtroom appears increasingly, at least during the sixteenth century, as that of an agent who attempts, on each occasion, to pervert the course of justice. Perhaps the most blatant recognition of the Virgin's adeptness for her task is provided by Aodh, son of Conchonnacht Ó Ruanadha, who claims that 'this maid saved us; she chained up Justice.'²⁷¹ Mary's efficacy caused her to be constantly invoked, and particularly at the hour of death. The later addition, which now forms the second part of the *Ave Maria*, petitions her assistance at that very time. It was the assurance of her intercession at that hour, culminating in the salvation of the wearer, that helped spread the practice of wearing her garment (the Brown Scapular), allegedly given to St Simon Stock in 1251. The Gaelic annals, recognising the importance of the hour of death, are careful to record when an individual died under Mary's protection:

Mac Suibhne of Fanad, i.e. Domhnall Óg *mortuus est* after assuming the habit of the Order of Mary [Carmelites] on the day of the festival of Mary in Winter [the feast of her Immaculate Conception – 8 December].²⁷²

It can be taken that the fact that Domhnall died on Mary's feast day was not interpreted as coincidental. Instead, it was most likely seen as a sign of her favour. The death of Thady O Conner 'halfe king of Connacht' is recorded as occurring on the Saturday after the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 1464.²⁷³ The account continues:

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 84, v.29.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 87, v.10.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 82, v.23.

²⁷² *ALC*, 1528, p.267.

²⁷³ *AFM*, p.1028.

It was difficult to account how many offerings, both cows, horses and monyes were bestowed to God's honour for his soul. God's blessing be on him. And it was reported he saw himself weighed and that St Mary and St Michael defended his soule through God's grace and mercy, and so he was saved, as it is thought.²⁷⁴

This understanding of Mary's role at Judgement corresponds to what is generally to be found in late medieval European sources. Continental evidence of Mary's advocacy begins slightly earlier than its Irish counterpart, which suggests that ideas concerning this most important of Marian roles spread from Europe to Ireland over a period of time.

It is clear that the late medieval image of Mary as Advocate was that of a lady who never lost a case, and who desired her children to be with her in Heaven at all costs. Mary's power continued to grow throughout the period, reaching its zenith in the sixteenth century when, in the wake of both the effects of the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation, it began to be tempered. However, some caution is warranted when examining this trend. There is always a temptation to characterise the late medieval period as reeking with Marian excesses and, in turn, the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries as marking the beginning of the mellowing of Mary's power. However, this appraisal does not always ring true. The poetry of both Tadhg Óg (*d.* 1448) and Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn (*d.* 1487) serves as a useful example of a variant interpretation. Both poets were devoted to the Virgin and implored her intercession at Judgement. However, despite their veneration of the Mother of God, they hint at their uneasiness with what sometimes manifested itself as

²⁷⁴ Ibid. In a fourteenth-century French manuscript, the Virgin is depicted as holding up Michael's scales at judgement in order to spare a sinner. See Warner, *Alone of all her sex*, fig.22.

exclusive recourse to Mary's intercession at the expense of the mercy of Christ.

Tadhg Óg reveals this in the following verses:

I know I should not belittle God's mercy, however great my love for Mary,
seeing all He bore of our sorrows. /

Though a man might think Mary loved him more than Jesus, yet Mary, in
whom he trusts, shed not her blood for him.²⁷⁵

Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn, meanwhile, appears to reject the notion that the course of
Christ's justice could be thwarted on the Last Day:

All the saints, united to save me, cannot protect me from the Just Judge at
judgement on the Meeting Day. /

Unless His doom be favourable, Mary mother on her knees cannot save me
from Hell.²⁷⁶

If these verses appeared in the work of an early seventeenth-century poet, they would
undoubtedly be used as evidence of the gradual acceptance of stricter Tridentine
norms regarding devotional excess. However, the fact that they date, instead, from the
fifteenth century, convincingly illustrates the dangers of making sweeping
generalisations about the late medieval devotional world.²⁷⁷

The Persuasive Power of Mary's breast

In exercising her role as intercessor, the Virgin is depicted as often being obliged to
employ a powerfully persuasive tactic before the vengeful, retributive rage of her Son

²⁷⁵ *DDé* 17, vv 32-3.

²⁷⁶ *PB* 25, vv 20-1.

²⁷⁷ Interestingly, a good example of the Marian excesses that characterise the later middle ages can be
found in the work of the early seventeenth-century poet, Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaird, in whose poetry
one would expect to find a far more cautious and tempered approach, given the gradual implementation
of the decrees of Trent in Ireland. See *ADD* 90, v.8.

abates. But before she does this, she appeals Christ to remember how He was suckled at her breasts as an infant. The image of the *Virgo Lactans* or *Maria Lactans* is found as early as the third century in the catacomb of Priscilla in Rome. Mary gazes forward as she offers her exposed breast to her child.²⁷⁸ This image became very popular particularly in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, being found twice in Ireland, on the *Domnach Airgid* shrine and in the Stowe missal, both dating from the fourteenth century.²⁷⁹ A variation of this theme is found in the Register Book of the Corporation of Waterford, 1566, where the Virgin is depicted as standing, holding the child in her left hand, away from her breast, which is exposed.²⁸⁰ More commonly, the Enthroned Madonna is found, where Mary is depicted as crowned, holding the child on her knee. The child points to the Virgin or lays his tiny hand on her breast, indicating that she is his mother. This image was known in Ireland as early as the seventh century.²⁸¹ John Bradley lists twelve depictions of the Madonna and Child on tombs. These all date from the sixteenth or late fifteenth centuries. Clodagh Tait identifies a thirteenth – the 1543 Tullaroan Grace slab, which Bradley omitted.²⁸² The prominence of this image on tombs is interesting. Surely it represents an acknowledgement of the key role of

²⁷⁸ Warner, *Alone of all her sex*, p.193. The *Virgo Lactans* image was heavily influenced by the image of the Egyptian Goddess, Isis, nursing her son, Horus, in her lap.

²⁷⁹ Bradley, 'The Ballyhale Madonna and its iconography', p.264.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p.273.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p.264. This image became an important statement after the Council of Ephesus (431) rejected the Nestorian heresy, which denied that Mary could be the Mother of God (*theotokos*) but was instead only Mother of Christ, the man (*christotokos*). The Christ-child points to Mary, emphasising her motherhood of his two natures.

²⁸² Bradley, 'The Ballyhale Madonna and its iconography', pp263, 267-73; Tait, 'Harnessing corpses: death, burial, disinterment and commemoration in Ireland, 1550-1655', p.241.

the Virgin at the hour of death, namely keeping her Son at bay while the rigours of judgement pass by. While Mary holds Christ in her arms, He is subdued and less likely to exercise His judicial office. Mary nurses Christ, then, while her devotees pour into heaven. This idea is widely reflected by the bardic poets. Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe, as early as the thirteenth century, prays ‘May the breast that was laid to His lips be between me and fierce-hosted hell.’²⁸³ Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn, in the fifteenth century, relates how ‘turned aside from exacting justice, the Son in her arms drank at her bosom, white milky bosom by which was dissolved His wrath.’²⁸⁴ Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn adds that ‘the breast whereon the Virgin nourished God’s son – wondrous peace-making! – the result of its milk drunk by the child was that His wrath turned to gentleness.’²⁸⁵ The soothing effect of Mary’s milk came to be increasingly acknowledged on the continent in the later middle ages, eventually prompting the thoughts to which the bardic poets gave expression. Blessed Paula of Florence, an anchorite was, in a vision (c.1368), given the gift of the Virgin’s milk, signifying her intercession on behalf of mankind.²⁸⁶ From the thirteenth century onwards, phials reportedly containing the Virgin’s milk were venerated across Europe, in shrines such as Walsingham, Chartres, Genoa, Padua, Rome, Venice, Avignon, Paris and

²⁸³ *ADD* 49, v.36.

²⁸⁴ *PB* 2, v.4.

²⁸⁵ *DDé* 17, v.29. The consoling effect of being suckled at the breast appears in Isaiah 66:10 ff where Jerusalem is portrayed as a mother, now free, who consoles her mournful children: ‘Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her; that you may suck and be satisfied with her consoling breasts, that you may drink deeply with delight from the abundance of her glory’.

²⁸⁶ Warner, *Alone of all her sex*, p.199.

Naples.²⁸⁷ The Virgin's milk, therefore, became a powerful symbol of her mercy. The Dominicans, for very different reasons, were instrumental in propagating the cult of the *Virgo Lactans*. As the order was, at first, vehemently opposed to the notion of the Immaculate Conception (which was, incidentally, broadly supported by the Franciscans under the influence of Duns Scotus [d.1308]), they claimed that 'if Mary had a physiology wholly uncorrupted by the consequences of sin then her body would have been incapable of nourishing the Christ child in the womb, and of providing milk for the new-born infant.'²⁸⁸ As the idea of Mary's Immaculate Conception gained prominence, particularly in the fifteenth century, the image of the *Virgo Lactans* declined. If Mary was free from sin, then perhaps she did not lactate, it was thought.²⁸⁹

The familiar idea of Mary meriting Christ's attention, in which the Godhead is somehow under an obligation to her, appears also in relation to her nursing of Christ. The Virgin was thought to have a right to have her children saved owing to the merits of her life. As early as the thirteenth century this idea is found in the poetry of Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh: 'May my sister's Son bring me safely to death...owing to the breasts whence He drank of thy substance.'²⁹⁰ Two centuries later, Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn reminds Mary that 'owing to the breast thou gavest Jesus, thou hast the right to save me from Him.'²⁹¹ He adds, elsewhere, that 'if Heaven's lord be not satisfied with thy request, woe to him who has caused thy breast to have been drunk in

²⁸⁷ Ibid., p.200.

²⁸⁸ J. A. Tasioulas, 'The portrayal of Mary in the N-town plays' in Diane Watt (ed.), *Medieval women in their communities* (Cardiff, 1997), p.227.

²⁸⁹ Warner, *Alone of all her sex*, p.204.

²⁹⁰ *DDé* 25, v.44.

²⁹¹ Ibid., 6, v.17.

vain!’²⁹² An unidentified poet (*n.l.t.* 1513-14) relates how Mary urges her Son not to reject her child on account of His drinking at her breast and the nine months in which she cared for Him in her womb.²⁹³ It is possible that the mother who breast-fed her child was perceived as transferring something of her own nature to the child. Perhaps this also accounts for the calming effect of the milk on Christ. This idea is not without foundation.²⁹⁴ Tuathal Ó hUiginn (*d.* 1450) asserts that Mary is different in temperament from her Son: ‘I ask Christ’s mother to calm His anger; though the Lord is become one of us, Mary is gentler than her Son.’²⁹⁵ Suckling Mary’s breast was thought to somehow activate a merciful side to Christ, the side that He inherited from His earthly mother. His justice is thus cheated of the usual domination it exerts on His character: ‘Thy rest on Mary’s breast revealed Thy mercy; Thy anger disliked Thy drinking at her merciful bosom.’²⁹⁶ Bernard of Clairvaux, whose writings inspired many a preacher in late medieval Ireland, hints at the existence of this idea when, encouraging women to breast-feed their own children, he gives the example of his mother breast-feeding all seven of his family: ‘The noble lady disdained to commit them to another’s breasts, but infused into them something of her own goodness with

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 15, v.7.

²⁹³ *ADD* 100, v.34.

²⁹⁴ Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn supplies evidence which suggests the existence of such an idea in his allusion to the tradition that Mary nursed John the Baptist for a time and that he was preserved from sin: ‘The nursing she gave him made him advance (in virtue); no fault was in him after she warmed him on her breast’ (*PB* 27, v.7).

²⁹⁵ *DDé* 19, v.19.

²⁹⁶ *PB* 17, v.24.

this mother's milk.'²⁹⁷ The above evidence, then, is illustrative of how contemporary understandings of physiology influenced late medieval spirituality.

When a gentle reminder of her having suckled Christ was not enough to calm the Just Judge, the Virgin was sometimes obliged to resort to more extreme measures. Thus, she is often depicted as baring her breast to her Son, vividly exhibiting a sign of His former dependence on her. The bardic poets frequently allude to such a striking gesture. The following examples all date from the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Uaithne Ó Cobhthaigh (*d.*1556) states that 'no words of His mother could clear off the charge against me; she must coaxingly show her breast to her Son that thus His wrath may abate.'²⁹⁸ Muirchertach Ó Cionga (*fl.*1560) also believes that 'her breast with its unquenchable flame (of love) satisfies the wrath of her Son.'²⁹⁹ Flann Mac Conmidhe (*fl.*1612), addressing Christ, testifies to the power of Mary's breast: 'When Thy anger rises, let it be stayed (by the sight of) that breast (of Mary), white and gleaming and able to save all men from Thy rising wrath.'³⁰⁰ Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh, meanwhile, petitions the Virgin to 'show thy bosom to the lamb of thy breast...'³⁰¹ This motif, which occurs late in bardic poetry, has a fascinating background in both the religious and secular literature of Ireland and Europe. The following extended discussion of its occurrences elsewhere provides convincing proof of how the secular and religious worlds of the middle ages were inextricably interwoven, both in Ireland and on the continent. Historians ignore any one of them at their peril. The motif of the Mother of God baring her breast is used in the following

²⁹⁷ Warner, *Alone of all her sex*, p.197.

²⁹⁸ *ADD* 68, v.4.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 60, v.10.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 85, v.11.

³⁰¹ *AFOD* 19, v.11.

pages as a case study of the development of a religious idea, tracing its early secular manifestations and its subsequent adoption into the religious sphere, before its eventual appearance in the bardic poetry of sixteenth century Ireland. This treatment seeks to explore how religious ideas were transmitted across late medieval Europe by way of sermon material, literature and iconography, examining how they ultimately reached Irish shores.

The image of a mother exposing herself to her son in order to persuade him to accede to a request is essentially of Classical origin. The most striking similarity between Mary's action and that found in Classical literature is the action of Hecuba in the *Iliad*, when she pleads with her son, Hector, not to fight Achilles. Her gesture has been described as an attempt to evoke in him the sentiment of *eleos* (pity).³⁰² The suggestion that the exposed breast gives a glimpse of how Hecuba would react, should Hector be slain, can be compared with how the lamenting handmaidens at the death of Dido are depicted in an early fifth-century manuscript of Virgil's work. A tenth-century manuscript illumination of the Massacre of the Innocents shows grieving mothers reacting similarly.³⁰³ However, there are also significant dissimilarities between the two scenes. The most fundamental difference is that Mary does not

³⁰² 'The memory that Hecuba seeks to provoke in her son bears the same features as the mourner's memory. She asks Hector to "remember", essentially, how he will be mourned should he die: her exposed breast suggests the vehemence of the bereaved mother's grief. Hector will be stirred to feel *eleos* if he bears in mind not only the way Hecuba nursed him as a baby but how she will be unable to bury him properly if he dies at Achilles' hands. This memory is less a recollection of the past than a lively sense of the intimate and inextricable ties between them': Kevin Crotty, *The poetics of supplication: Homer's Iliad and Odyssey* (New York, 1994), p.74.

³⁰³ 'Death of Dido' from Virgil, which dates from the beginning of the fifth century A.D. (Rome, Vatican Library). My thanks to Jim Bugslag for these references.

expose her breast to God out of any fear of Him being killed in battle. If this were the case, one would expect her to perform the gesture before her Son goes to Calvary to be crucified. Aeschylus's *Choephoroi* also mentions a mother exposing her breast to her son; in this case, however, Clytemnestra's action in the presence of her son, Orestes, was aimed at convincing him to have mercy on her.³⁰⁴ Mary, on the other hand, implores Christ's mercy on humanity and not on herself. Descriptions of the actions of other breast-baring women are to be found in both Tacitus's *Germania* and Plutarch's *Moralia*. In the former, Tacitus recounts how faltering armies were spurred into more vigorous action by women who exposed their breasts in order to impress upon them the harsh reality of the enslavement that would certainly follow defeat.³⁰⁵ In the latter, the character Bellerophon's rage is calmed by the actions of the Lycian women.³⁰⁶

Classical instances of women baring their breasts to achieve specific goals must have had some influence on the eventual emergence of this motif in the heroic tales of Gaelic Ireland. In the Ossianic tale 'The Chase of Sid na mBann Finn', when Fer-Lí, the son of Fer-tái wished to kill Finn, the following incident is related:

'Tis then Iuchna Ardmhór, daughter of Goll, son of Morna...came to the hostel, tore her checkered coif from her head, loosed her fair, yellow hair, bared her breasts and said: 'My son', said she, 'it is ruin of honour and disgrace to a soldier and a reproach to tell and dispelling of luck to betray the

³⁰⁴ I am grateful to Scott McLetchie for drawing my attention to this instance of the motif.

³⁰⁵ I wish to thank Phyllis Jestice for providing me with this reference.

³⁰⁶ See Raymond J. Cormier, 'Pagan shame or Christian modesty', in *Celtica* xiv (1981).

princely Finn of the Fiana; and now quickly leave the hostel, my son', said she. And Fer-Lí left the hostel to his mother.³⁰⁷

A similar incident appears in the Ulster Cycle, where Cú Chulainn is reported to have reached Emain Macha, having killed the sons of Nechta Scéne. The watchman fears that Cú Chulainn will execute mass slaughter and recommends the sending out of naked women to meet him. In desperation, King Conchobar heeds the recommendation and sends out the women, who bare their breasts to him, causing him to become distracted and to hide his face, whereupon he is overcome.³⁰⁸ Raymond J. Cormier enquires whether Cú Chulainn's reaction hints at Christian influence, portraying him as ashamed on account of saintly modesty or, alternatively, some other non-Christian, Classical influence. He cites W. B. Stanford's assertion that the Cú Chulainn episode finds an analogue in Plutarch's *Moralia* 248B (IX. The Lycian Woman) where Bellerophon accedes to the Lycian women in four successive versions, calming his anger.³⁰⁹ The pattern of each version is the same: (1) Bellerophon performs an act of liberation; (2) He receives no thanks; (3) He becomes enraged; (4) He encounters the women, who request him to cease his anger; (5) His anger abates. Interestingly, the portrayal of Mary prevailing upon her Son to cease His anger, follows a similar pattern: (1) The act of liberation that Christ performs is His death on the cross, which redeems humanity; (2) Humanity is, for the most part,

³⁰⁷ Kuno Meyer (ed.), *Royal Irish Academy Todd lecture series xvi: Fianaigecht* (Dublin, 1910), p.73. The story is taken from British Library, Egerton Ms. 1782, fo.20b 1. This manuscript (c.1517) was written by scribes of the family of Ó Maoilchonaire in Cluain Plocáin, Co. Roscommon, for Art Buidhe Mac Murchada Caomhánach (*B.M.cat.Ir.MSS.*, ii, p.262).

³⁰⁸ This incident appears in recension 1 of *Táin Bó Cuailgne*, II, 802 ff, near the end of Episode III (*Macgnimrada*, 'Boyhood Deeds'): See Cormier, 'Pagan shame or Christian modesty.'

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

indifferent and ungrateful; (3) Christ's rage arises both from the wounds He suffered on Calvary and mankind's subsequent apathy; (4) He encounters the Woman (Mary) who requests Him to cease His anger; (5) His anger abates. It is not difficult to imagine how secular scenes such as those found in classical literature and, later, in the heroic sagas of Gaelic Ireland, were eventually transmuted into religious ones. The first clear allusion to such a transmutation is provided by a disciple of Bernard of Clairvaux in the twelfth century. This disciple, the Cistercian abbot, Arnold of Bonneval (*d.* after 1156), while discussing in a sermon the mediatory roles of both Mary and Christ, she before the Son and He before the Father, illustrated this mediation by using the image of Christ bare-chested, showing His wounds to the Father, and Mary uncovering to Christ her breast.³¹⁰ Thereafter the image passed into popular usage, being applied to the Virgin when she implored her Son for mercy.

The occurrence of this newly translated motif in the religious literature and iconography of Europe became quite regular from the twelfth century onwards. The role of Mary was clearly that of Advocate who pleaded for mercy for humanity. Alfonso 'El Sabio' X (1221-84), royal patron of Castile, in his *Cantigas de Santa Maria* refers to this action of Mary:

³¹⁰ *'Securum accessum iam habet homo ad Deum, ubi mediatorem causae suae Filium habet ante Patrem, et ante Filium matrem. Christus, nudato latere, Patri ostendit latus et vulnera: Maria Christo pectus et ubera...'* ('Man now has a sure access to God, where he has the Son as Mediator of his cause before the Father, and before the Son the mother. Christ, His side being laid bare, showed to the Father His side and His wounds: Mary [showed] to Christ her breast and her paps'); *De Laudibus Beatae Mariae Virginis* in *PL* 189, p.1726.

E en aquel dia, quan'ele for mais irado/ móstra-ll'as tetas Santas que ouv' el mamado (and that day, when He was more angry / she shows Him the holy teats He once suckled).³¹¹

Iconography matching the above verse occurs usually in Judgement scenes where Mary, with her bare breast, petitions the formidable figure of Christ who is usually sitting on a rainbow, His open wounds condemning the world and its sin.³¹² Ana Domínguez Rodríguez considers the illustration of the Final Judgement scene in two of the *Cantigas* as marking an important change in the portrayal of the intercession of the Virgin. She regards the abandonment by Mary of her exercise of simple intercessory prayer for this far more proactive and dramatic approach as illustrated in two of the *Cantigas* (50 and 80) as exceptional for the thirteenth century, highlighting the importance of the role of the *Cantigas* in the diffusion of this image, which was to become ever more popular, especially throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.³¹³ Mary's role in this instance is primarily to calm Christ's anger by reminding Him of the nursing she once provided Him with. Often John the Baptist accompanies Mary in her intercession. This is the case in a Welsh depiction of the Doom that appears over the chancel arch at Wrexham.³¹⁴ John the Baptist also appears

³¹¹ *Cantiga* LXXX. See Alfonso X El Sabio, *Cantigas de Santa María* (Madrid, 1979). I am grateful to Carlos Sastre for drawing my attention to this reference.

³¹² Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, p.157.

³¹³ Ana Domínguez Rodríguez, "Compassio" y "Coredemptio" en las *Cantigas de Santa María: Crucifixión y Juicio Final*, in *Archivo Español de Arte* 281 (1998), pp 27, 29.

³¹⁴ I am grateful to Madeleine Gray for this reference. For a discussion of Welsh depictions of the interceding Virgin see Madeleine Gray and Salvador Ryan, "Mother of Mercy": the Virgin Mary and the Last Judgement in Welsh and Irish tradition' in Karen Jankulak, Thomas O' Loughlin and Jonathan Wooding (eds) *Ireland and Wales in the middle ages* (forthcoming).

with Mary in the same way in wall paintings, dated 1425-1550, that are to be found in fourteen village churches in Denmark.³¹⁵ The growth of popularity enjoyed by this image in succeeding centuries was due in no small part to its acquiring an important place in various manuscript copies of the hugely popular fourteenth-century *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, being later represented right up to the seventeenth century in miniatures and panel paintings.³¹⁶ It is in the *Speculum* that the related image of the *double intercession* of Christ and Mary before the Father first emerges, which casts another light on the significance of the Virgin's breast-baring.

Chapter 39 of the *Speculum* introduces a scene where Christ, in an attempt to offset the anger of His Father, shows Him the wounds He bore for the sake of humanity. The author includes an interesting reference to Roman history, alluding to an individual who prefigured Christ in his use of this gesture. The figure is Antipater, a defeated general, who goes before Caesar showing him the wounds that he received while fighting in battle in an effort to convince the emperor to have pity on him and pardon him of his obvious bungling of military affairs.³¹⁷ Similarly Mary's intercessory role is shown in the *Speculum* to be prefigured, this time in Scripture, by the pleading of Esther, who goes before Ahasuerus on behalf of her people.³¹⁸ In the most complete manuscripts of the *Speculum* there appear four miniatures in chapter 39 – two show Christ and Mary before the Father in their intercessory role, He showing the wound in His side, she her breast. The third and fourth miniatures present the events in history

³¹⁵ I wish to express my gratitude to James Mills for providing me with the above information.

³¹⁶ Rodríguez, "‘Compassio’ y ‘Coredemptio’ en las Cantigas de Santa Maria", p.29.

³¹⁷ Ibid.

³¹⁸ Woolf, *The English religious lyric in the middle ages*, p.35.

that prefigured this action, showing the Antipater and Esther scenes respectively.³¹⁹

The text accompanying the images synthesises the subject matter of the preceding chapter and highlights what the new chapter hopes to teach:

*In praecedentibus capitulis audivimus quomodo Maria est nostra Mediatrix et quomodo in omnibus angustiis est nostra defensatrix; consequenter audiamus quomodo Christus ostendit Patri suo pro nobis sua vulnera et Maria ostendit Filio suo pectus et ubera.*³²⁰

In French miracle plays and Italian *laude* Jesus is depicted as displaying His wounds to the Father (which are understood to merit the Father's attention) as He pleads on behalf of humanity, while Mary bares her breast (which, in the same way, merits His ear). She states '*Doulz chier filz, vez ey la mamelle don't je te norry bonnement*' ('Dear sweet son, regard the breast with which I nursed you well.')³²¹ In an anonymous text, probably dating to sixteenth-century Spain, Mary pleads with her Son on behalf of sinners using the following words: '*Por la leche que mamaste, hijo de mi casto pecho, por el vientre en que encarnaste, por la Pasión que pasaste por*

³¹⁹ Rodríguez, "'Compassio" y "Coredemptio" en las Cantigas de Santa María', p.29. The Esther scene is also depicted on what remains of a fifteenth-century altarpiece of Konrad Witz: see Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian art: ii: the Passion of Jesus Christ*, p.225.

³²⁰ 'In the previous chapters we have heard how Mary is our Mediatrix and how she, in all trouble, is our defender; consequently let us hear how Christ showed His wounds to His Father for us and [how] Mary showed her breast and teats' [my translation]. See Paul Perdrizet, *La Vierge de Miséricorde: étude d'un theme iconographique* (Paris, 1908), p.246. The link between both chapters (i.e. the link between Mary's role as Mediatrix and her proactive advocacy at Judgement) is discussed below.

³²¹ Warner, *Alone of all her sex*, p.199.

*nuestro bien y provecho.*³²² This image is also to be found widely across Europe as in Konrad Witz's panel, 'Man of Sorrows and Mary intercede with God the Father' (c.1450).³²³ In a similar painting by Hans Holbein the Elder (c.1508) the inscription above Christ reads 'Father, see my red wounds; help men in their need, through my bitter death' and above Mary 'Lord sheath Thy sword that Thou hast drawn, and see my breast where the Son has suckled.'³²⁴

This scene was often used in *Horae* (Books of Hours), particularly those of the fifteenth century. Ana Rodríguez lists a number of these, including an unusual illustration in a Spanish Book of Hours which depicts Mary kneeling before the cross, showing her bare breast to her Son, while Christ looks down at her and, with His right hand freed from the nail, points to the wound in His side. God the Father watches the scene from above.³²⁵ In the famous 'Hours of Catherine of Cleves' (1435), a similar scene is portrayed, Christ on the cross and Mary kneeling before it, baring her breast to her Son. However, in this case, Christ does not look down at His mother but instead looks up in an expression of deep pain at God the Father who views the scene at a distance. On the phylactery above Mary is written '*Propter ubera quae te lactaverunt*

³²² 'By the milk with which you were fed, son of my chaste breast, by the womb in which you took flesh, by the Passion which you suffered for our good and benefit' [my translation]; Rodríguez, "'Compassio" y "Coredemptio" en las Cantigas de Santa Maria', p.30.

³²³ Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel; see Caroline Walker Bynum (ed.), *Fragmentation and redemption: essays on gender and the human body in medieval religion* (New York, 1991), p.113.

³²⁴ Ibid. The 'Triptych of Antonius Tsgrooten' (1507) of Van der Weyden also depicts this image (A.C.L. Brussels).

³²⁵ Ms. Res. 191 (fol. 145 v) Biblioteca Nacional de Madrid: Rodríguez, "'Compassio" y "Coredemptio" en las Cantigas de Santa Maria', p.30.

*sis sibi propitius.*³²⁶ It is also to be found in the ‘Hours of Turin’ of Jan Van Eyck.³²⁷ Caroline Walker Bynum suggests that the association made between Christ’s wounds and Mary’s breast is not simply an illustration of her compassion (sharing in Christ’s Passion) the extolling of which was dear to Arnold of Bonneval, but instead, is a comparison between two feedings. Alluding to a medieval physiological notion that breast milk was actually a form of blood, all human exudations considered at the time as ‘bleedings’, Mary is seen to have shed her ‘blood’ just as Christ did. Conversely, the image of Christ breast-feeding humanity with the blood from His side-wound was not unfamiliar in medieval spirituality.³²⁸ Moreover, as early as the writings of Augustine we find that, placed between Christ’s side wound and Mary’s breast, he cannot decide from where he should receive nourishment.³²⁹

The question begs itself, however; from what source was this motif, so popular in Europe, eventually transmitted to Gaelic Ireland, which resulted in four different bardic poets alluding to it in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries? Did the secular version of this motif, to be found in both the tales of *Fiannaíocht* and *Rúraíocht* reach Ireland before its religious counterpart, and what exactly was the relationship between the two? How did an obscure reference in a sermon by a

³²⁶ ‘On account of the teats that suckled you, be gracious to her’ [my translation]; *La Miniature Hollondaise: Le Grand Siècle de l’enumination dans les Pays-Bas Septentrionaux* (Brussels, n.d.), p.41.

³²⁷ Rodríguez, “‘Compassio’ y ‘Coredemptio’ en las Cantigas de Santa Maria”, p.31.

³²⁸ See Bynum, *Fragmentation and redemption*, for a more comprehensive discussion of this image.

³²⁹ ‘*Hinc pascor a vulnere; hinc lactor ab ubere. Positus in medio quo me vertens nescio*’ (‘From the one, I am fed from the wound; from the other I draw milk from the breast. Placed in the middle, turning myself whither I know not’) (*PL* 185, 878). I am grateful to Rev Rohann G. Roten for drawing my attention to this passage.

relatively little known Cistercian eventually impact itself so heavily on literary and iconographic expressions of devotion in late medieval Europe? These are not easy questions to answer. Yet there are certain clues that may afford us some greater insight. Rosemary Woolf, making reference to the appearance of this motif in a poem found in John of Grimestone's preaching book (which invites man to consider the 'double intercession') suggests its direct source of influence as *Le Triple Exercice* of Stephen, an early thirteenth-century abbot of the Cistercian monastery of Sawley in Yorkshire.³³⁰ It is not difficult to imagine that this motif, originating in twelfth-century Cistercian France, most probably travelled to England courtesy of Cistercian links (as evidenced by Stephen of Sawley's reference to it) and, therefore, may also have travelled to Ireland in the same way. The artistic and literary standing it eventually attained could well be attributed not to Arnold of Bonneval but instead, by default, to Bernard of Clairvaux. For the passage mentioning the maternal gesture of Mary was repeatedly referred to as the work of the more famous saint. Stephen of Sawley made this mistake in his *Triple Exercice*.³³¹ The *Speculum Beatae Mariae Virginis*, a collection of texts borrowed from Bernard, contained Arnold's passage, attributing it likewise. The Louvain theologian, Molanus, defending the image against reformist criticism in the mid-sixteenth century, quotes the lines in his work *De historia sacrarum imaginum*, again without the proper attribution. It is clear that the misattribution worked to the advantage of the survival and influence of the passage itself. Being Bernardian in tone, rooted in Bernard's famous *De Aqueductu* sermon in

³³⁰ Man is invited to consider that 'De moder De sone sewt hire breste, De sone his fader his blodi side and alle his wondis depe an wyde': Woolf, *The English religious lyric in the middle ages*, p.34.

³³¹ See A Wilmart, 'Le triple exercice d'Etienne de Sallai', in *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique* xi (1930), p.360.

which he spoke of Mary as the canal through which the graces of God flow to us, the passage of Arnold of Bonneval strengthened Mary's role as Mediatrix and introduced the *Scala Salutis*, theme which had Mary intercede with her Son, and her Son with the Father, giving rise to its expression in the 'double intercession.' The respect with which the writings of Bernard were held in late medieval Europe was very high indeed and, therefore, if an idea supposedly came from Bernard it was sure to get publicity. Although references in bardic poetry to Mary baring her breast do not appear earlier than the sixteenth century, the poetry of Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn (d.1487) provides a vital clue that suggests that the 'double intercession' had reached Ireland at least by the fifteenth century. In a poem on St Francis, Philip Bocht depicts the friar as imitating the gesture of Christ in His display of wounds to the Father:

Francis's wounds requite the nails piercing Thee; the saint's breast-wound
requisites the deep-wounded breast. /

Francis will bare his breast, pleading for the forgiveness of all my conduct,
which wounds Thy breast.³³²

This particular depiction of Mary's advocacy at the Last Judgement has a fascinating background, rooted in both the secular and religious literature of the European continent. Its adoption by the bardic poets illustrates once more that Gaelic Irish devotion was heavily reliant on European models and that continental models themselves were dependent on antecedent secular imagery, which was often highly evocative and which succeeded in appealing to the imagination of many. Secular and religious imagery then, were seldom to be found far apart from each other.

³³² *PB* 1, v.25.

Mary: sacred and secular

The portrayal of Mary by the bardic poets serves as a good example of the manner in which contemplation of the divine was often conducted through the lens of the familiar. The portrayal of Christ as a Gaelic chieftain, which is discussed in chapter 1, was part of the bardic custom of describing God in a manner that could easily be related to. It is also noted, in the same chapter, that while the portrayals of individuals in secular poetry influenced the depiction of heavenly personages, the opposite was also the case. Bardic borrowings did not only work in one direction. The same can be said of the treatment of Mary. If the poets regarded Christ as a powerful Gaelic chieftain and generous patron, they saw Mary as, alternatively, his beautiful wife or daughter. Mary, then, assumes the virtues of the female member of an important household. The sixteenth-century poet, Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh, when speaking of Mary, asserts that ‘a good patron is a king’s wife, for she helps her kin.’³³³ An unidentified poet (*n.l.t.* 1614) regards Mary as the mother of a powerful king for whom he wishes to compose a eulogy: ‘O Mary, mother of the High-King, commission me to write thy eulogy so that my name be beneath thy eyes on thy list (of people to be rewarded).’³³⁴ The physical description of a female member of the household was always an important aspect of bardic composition. Predictably, the Virgin Mary is described in similarly flattering terms. Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn asserts how ‘she must be loved, noblest lady, most blessed companion; curling is her hair, slender her brow, soft her lap, small her foot.’³³⁵ Most important of all, however, was the attribute of generosity. In a poem written in praise of Órlaidh, daughter of Ó Ceallaigh (perhaps

³³³ *AFOD* 3, v.1.

³³⁴ *ADD* 97, v.2.

³³⁵ *PB* 9, v.14.

sometime between 1424 and 1448), Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn states that ‘thou shalt exalt Ceallach’s race by the way thou shalt give lavishly thy banquet-wine, giving it away in big goblets when the banquet is over.’³³⁶ The generosity of Mary is praised in similar terms. In short, she is assessed on her ability to lavishly distribute wine in the household of Heaven. According to Uaithne Ó Cobhthaigh (*d.*1556), the Virgin sees to it that everybody gets a place and a drink at the heavenly castle banquet: ‘When Heaven’s castle was getting crowded, a lady was put in charge over it.’³³⁷ Ó Cobhthaigh claims that there is no shortage of wine ‘where cup-bearer never fails.’³³⁸ Mary is portrayed as being particularly well disposed towards alcohol. While this fits in with the depiction of the generous hostess, it may also be related to her request to her Son to change the water into wine at Cana. Whatever its true origin, an unidentified poet (*n.l.t.*1631), while addressing Christ, alludes to Mary’s favourable disposition towards wine-drinking: ‘The gall, which Thou wert not bound to drink – our sister would have wished more wine in it.’³³⁹

Just as secular portrayals of women in Gaelic households influenced bardic religious depictions of Mary, so too did the characteristics of the Virgin Mary impact upon the descriptions of the wives and daughters of chieftains. Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn’s praise of Órlaidh, daughter of Ó Ceallaigh compares this young lady to the Virgin by referring to her shedding three tears: ‘Heaven is the destined home of this lady from fair Síodh Aodha; the three tears (like Mary’s) which the princess of Gaola sheds are the more precious, as she hides them.’³⁴⁰ A later example of the sacred influencing the secular

³³⁶ *ADD* 11, v.13.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, 68, v.11.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, v.33.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, 95, v.19.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 11, v.24.

is found in a poem composed by the late sixteenth-century poet, Eochaidh Ó hEoghusa, for Conchobar Mac Diarmuda (who was established as Lord of Maigh Luirg by Aodh Ruadh Ó Domhnaill in 1595). In an effort to reconcile himself with Conchobar, Ó hEoghusa appeals to the mediation of his wife, Mairgréag: ‘I will ask Domhnall’s daughter to smooth away the anger from thy dark face; she will save me from thy wrath and will earnestly plead for me.’³⁴¹ It is not difficult to see the image of the Virgin Mary pleading with Christ in this depiction (albeit that in the above case Mairgréag is Conchobar’s wife and Mary usually pleads with Christ as His mother). For the Gaelic Irish in the late middle ages, then, the role of Mary was of huge importance. Being considered part of their stock, she reflected the humanity of the divine. After all, Christ had taken His biological humanity from her. It was customary to approach the Virgin before Christ in seeking favours. It was believed that, as her children, humanity could hardly be refused. When Mary approached God with the requests of her kin she always got what she asked for, her merits superseding any reluctance on the part of the Almighty. As intercessor she was without par. The increase in the importance extended to the Virgin, particularly after the twelfth century strongly influenced the spirituality of Gaelic Ireland as it did the whole of Europe. This heightened awareness of the Virgin’s power was confessed by theologians and peasants alike. The ensuing period, which lasted well into the sixteenth century, and in Gaelic Ireland, much longer, can rightly be called the ‘Age of Mary’. When this age first dawned upon Gaelic Ireland, the Irish, who had always had a special devotion to the Mother of God, were not short of language in which to express it.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 34, v.22.

Chapter 3

The saints: a hierarchy of intercessors

There are many reasons why the cult of the saints became so important in late medieval Europe. The thirteenth-century Dominican archbishop of Milan, Jacobus de Voragine (1230-98), reflecting upon the principal motives for their veneration, in the *Legenda Aurea*, cites six in total. In his opinion, the saints existed primarily to honour God, to provide aid and assistance to humanity, to increase its hope and surety, to provide examples to be copied, 'for the debt of interchanging neighbourhood' and for the honour of those, themselves, who venerated them.¹ The contribution that the above work made to the knowledge of saints and sainthood in late medieval Ireland can scarcely be underestimated. This compilation, along with the later *Sanctuarium* of Italian hagiographer, Bonino Mombrizio (1424-82), were the fundamental sources for a large number of the lives of foreign saints translated into Gaelic in this period.² It is interesting to note that it was the foreign saints, and not the native holy men and women, who are recorded as having largely captured the imagination of devotees at this time. Fergus O' Farrell makes reference to this fact in an iconographic context:

When the Normans came to Ireland from Wales in the late twelfth century they brought with them devotion to their own saints: almost all the surviving religious sculpture in Ireland from the thirteenth century onwards is of SS

¹ Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, p.170.

² Canice Mooney, 'The Church in Gaelic Ireland', in Patrick J. Corish (ed.), *History of Irish Catholicism*, ii, 3-5 (Dublin, 1968), p.39.

Catherine, Margaret, Thomas etc, and the only Irish saint represented is an occasional representation of St Patrick.³

Even the attention given to popular Irish saints such as Patrick, Brigid and Colmcille cannot be examined apart from the Anglo-Norman world, under which influence they were raised to the rank of the 'three patrons of Ireland.'⁴ Eamon Duffy makes reference to the traits that characterised the most popular saints in fifteenth and early sixteenth-century England, highlighting in particular the spectacular legends that accompanied them.⁵ Common to the accounts of many of the most popular foreign martyred saints was the horrific nature of the sufferings that preceded their martyrdom. A similar scenario applied in Anglo-Norman Ireland, which also influenced the Gaelic world. The more gruesome the torture, the more popular the saint became. The popularity of the lives of the early Roman virgin martyrs illustrates this trend. In his examination of late medieval Irish figure sculpture on tomb fronts, John Hunt provides a list of the range of saints that are represented. It would not be strange to expect that depictions of native saints such as Patrick, Brigid and Colmcille should surpass all others in number. However, Hunt lists only five representations for St Patrick and this number is matched by the frequency with which St Thomas of

³ Fergus O' Farrell, 'The Inishmurray statue of St Molaise: a reassessment' in Etienne Rynne (ed.), *Figures from the past*, p.208.

⁴ John Hennig, 'The sources of the martyrological tradition of non-Irish saints in mediaeval Ireland' in Michael Richter (ed.), *Medieval Ireland: saints and martyrologies* (Northampton, 1989), pp 417-18. In comparing the late thirteenth-century 'Martyrology of St Thomas's, Dublin' with the later 'Martyrology of Christ Church, Dublin' (dating from sometime nearing the end of the fourteenth century) Hennig notes about 350 additions, which are included in the latter compilation, while also admitting that some omissions were also made.

⁵ Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, p.170.

Canterbury is depicted. St Francis appears six times and St Michael ten. A very telling comparison can be made between the Irish saint, Brigid, whose depictions number five, and St Catherine of Alexandria who, in pre-1560 depictions, appears seventeen times.⁶ The popularity of foreign saints as iconographical subjects was matched by their renown in literature. St Margaret of Antioch, who, according to Hunt, is depicted five times in early sixteenth-century tomb sculpture, achieved a huge following, versions of her life appearing in at least ninety Gaelic manuscripts alone.⁷

By far the most popular saints, as evidenced by iconographical depictions, were the apostles. Even the apostle Matthias, a less-known figure, and a late arrival to the group (Acts 1:26), is listed by Hunt as appearing eleven times, while the ever-popular Peter appears twenty-five times in all.⁸ The order in which the apostles appear on tomb-chests was based not on Scriptural listings but, instead, on the diptychs of the Canon of the Mass in the Sarum rite. Hunt explains that the sixteenth-century masons alternatively included or excluded St Paul as one of the apostles, depending on whether Matthias was present or not.⁹ The apostles line up on tombs assuming the role of intercessors that continue to plead for the salvation of the individual after death. Sometimes the work of intercession is seen to begin sometime beforehand as it was not unknown for tombs to be commissioned and erected many years before the eventual death of the individual, as in the case of the tomb of James Schorthals, Ballylorcan, Kilkenny, which was constructed by the O' Tunney workshop in 1507

⁶ John Hunt, *Irish medieval figure sculpture 1200-1600: a study of Irish tombs with notes on costume and armour* (2 vols, Dublin, 1974) i, pp 254-7.

⁷ Diarmuid Ó Laoghaire, 'Beathaí naomh iasachta sa Ghaeilge' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University College Dublin, 1967), p.xxx.

⁸ Hunt, *Irish medieval figure sculpture* i, pp 253-4, 248-9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.108.

even though the individual who commissioned it did not eventually die until after 1534!¹⁰

When exploring the role of the saints in the lives of the Gaelic Irish, it is important to acknowledge the abiding influence of the Anglo-Norman world and its hagiographic imports from Britain and the continent. New orders such as the Augustinians, having supplanted the older Irish monks in many areas, brought with them devotions to new saints. A cursory survey of Augustinian church dedications in Ireland cited in the *Calendar of Papal letters* for the years 1458-71 provides some idea of the number of churches dedicated to saints extraneous to Ireland.¹¹ St Thomas of Canterbury, for instance, had an Augustinian priory dedicated to him at Ballybeg near Buttevant in Cork, which was originally founded by Philip de Barry in 1229. The church of St Thomas Martyr, Dublin, whose establishment ironically owes itself to Henry II's instigation in 1177, also honoured him, as did an Augustinian priory at Toberglory, Downpatrick, founded by John de Courcy about 1183.¹² His status as a saint was confirmed by the fact that he was recognised as the official patron saint of all clergy in Ireland.¹³ St Edmund Martyr was honoured in an Augustinian priory of Athassel in

¹⁰ Hunt, *Irish medieval figure sculpture* i, pp 185-6.

¹¹ The evidence of Augustinian dedications illustrates how religious orders spread devotion to continental saints in Ireland. However, it must be remembered that many parish churches remained dedicated to native holy men and women. Bishop George Montgomery's survey of church dedications in the diocese of Derry (c.1609, but broadly reflecting a much earlier period) reveals that parish churches were mostly dedicated to the native variety. See Henry A. Jeffries, 'Bishop George Montgomery's survey of the parishes of Derry diocese: a complete text from c.1609' in *Seanchas Ardmhacha* xvii, no.1 (1996-7).

¹² CPL xii, 1458-71, pp 53, 465; see also Aubrey Gwynn and R. Neville Hadcock, *Medieval religious houses: Ireland* (London, 1970) pp 159, 172, 170.

¹³ Hunt, *Irish medieval figure sculpture* i, p.110.

the diocese of Cashel and also in another priory of the same order 'by the bridge of Limerick'.¹⁴ The same order honoured St Martin of Siena (not to be confused with Martin of Tours) in a priory in the diocese of Kilmore, and St Melanfyd in the diocese of Lismore in the same period.¹⁵ Of the above saints, the best known was St Thomas of Canterbury and Hunt cites five examples of his representation on figure sculpture in three counties, Meath, Kilkenny and Tipperary.¹⁶ The speed with which St Thomas's cult grew in Europe as a whole was extraordinary. Canonised in 1173, the first monastic dedication to him was made at the Augustinian priory of Baswich, England, founded by Gerard de Stafford in the same year. It is no surprise then, that Irish dedications to him in this period arose from houses of the Augustinian canons, who had a particular devotion to him.¹⁷

Although there is little evidence to suggest that St Thomas of Canterbury ultimately acquired many devotees in Gaelic areas, other imported saints fared much better. One such saint whose cult captured the devotional hearts of the Gaelic Irish was Catherine of Alexandria. The beginning of devotion to St Catherine in Ireland is also linked to the Augustinian canons and more precisely to the Abbey of SS Peter and Paul (*Cnoc na nApstal*), Knock, near Louth where the abbot, Marianus Gorman, compiled his *Martyrology* sometime between 1166 and 1174. It is here that the first reference to

¹⁴ *CPL* xii, pp 87, 333.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp 200, 666.

¹⁶ Hunt, *Irish medieval figure sculpture* i, p.257. There are also eleven other representations of an archbishop figure with a cross-staff in one hand while blessing with the other, which may be identified as St Thomas. These are found in Ennis, Dublin, Kilkenny, Strade (Mayo), Sligo and Mothel (Waterford); *ibid.*, pp 257-8.

¹⁷ Alison Binns, *Dedications of Monastic houses in England and Wales 1066-1216* (Woodbridge, 1989), p.32.

Catherine's cult is found, her feast day being cited as 25 November.¹⁸ Peter Harbison traces another episode in the development of devotion to this saint when he notes that one of the seven penitential beds of the famous shrine of St Patrick's Purgatory, Lough Derg, is dedicated to her (the other six being dedicated to early Irish saints Patrick, Brigid, Colmcille, Molaise, Brendan and Dabheoc). He attributes the dedication to the Augustinians who took over one of the islands in the lake about 1140 and revitalised the pilgrimage. The seventh bed must have been re-dedicated some time after that, as a later writer, Fergal, refers to its former patron, St Adomnán.¹⁹ The fact that St Catherine was given pride of place in one of the most famous medieval pilgrimage sites in Ireland if not in Europe, coupled with the fact that she ousted as gargantuan figure as Adomnán is testimony to her importance and to the esteem in which she was held, not only by the Augustinians but, eventually by the devoted pilgrims who apparently accepted the change of dedication without undue fuss. There are two examples of priories of Augustinian canons dedicated to St Catherine, one at Aughrim and the other at Waterford.²⁰ The manifestation of devotion to Catherine by the Gaelic Irish is discussed below.

Saints in Gaelic Ireland generally fulfilled much the same function as they did on the continent, executing their roles as protectors, intercessors, healers and exemplars. As in other areas however, the Gaelic Irish manifestation of devotion to saints exhibited its own unique characteristics, which reflected social and cultural attitudes. As elsewhere, there were different categories of saints to be invoked. Firstly, there was

¹⁸ Whitley Stokes (ed.), *Féilire Húi Gormáin: the Martyrology of Gorman* (London, 1895), pp xviii-xix.

¹⁹ Peter Harbison, *Pilgrimage in Ireland: the monuments and the people* (London, 1991), p.65.

²⁰ Gwynn and Hadcock, *Medieval religious houses: Ireland*, pp 158 and 197.

the diocesan saint after whom most cathedrals were named.²¹ Figures such as Colman of Cloyne, Brendan of Clonfert, Canice, and later, Ciaran of Kilkenny (from the twelfth century onwards known commonly as Ossory diocese) eked out a prominent position as diocesan patrons, even though Brendan's reputation certainly superseded that office. Not only cathedrals, but also many parish churches within diocesan jurisdiction bore the name of the patron, thus making him a familiar figure to which the faithful of that diocese could have recourse. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, there was the local saint, the figure attached to a particular area or locality. Scattered across the country were wells and often 'beds' associated with various saints, who were reputed to have dwelt and ministered in a particular area. Therefore, Ballyvourney in Cork invoked its patron, Gobnait, while Inis Oirthir, Aran, sought the protection of its beloved Caomhán and Lorrha, County Tipperary, clung tenaciously to its patron, Ruadhan with whom it was immediately associated. The added attraction of Lorrha was that a relic of Ruadhan's hand was believed to be preserved in a silver case there until the reign of Henry VIII.²² The third category of saint was the national patron. As noted above, Patrick, Brigid and Colmcille were proclaimed as patrons of Ireland under Anglo-Norman influence. The Anglo-Norman warrior from Somerset, John de Courcy, who quickly assumed the prominence of an Irish king in Ulster, was instrumental in promoting their respective cults.²³ It was de Courcy who commissioned the influential *Vita Sancti Patricii* written by the Cistercian, Jocelin of Furness. Jocelin was subsequently invited to Downpatrick

²¹ For cathedral dedications see Gwynn and Hadcock, *Medieval religious houses*, pp 59-101.

²² *Ibid.*, p.185.

²³ Art Cosgrove *et al.* (eds), *A new history of Ireland ii: medieval Ireland 1169-1534* (Oxford, 1993), p.135.

around the time of the 'discovery' of the relics of the three saints; the relics themselves were translated to a shrine in the cathedral there.²⁴ What the title 'national patron' actually signified in Gaelic Ireland in the period stretching from the Anglo-Norman invasion to the Tudor conquest is uncertain, however. Joep Leerssen states that, in what was essentially a 'clan society', 'the suzerainty of the independent chieftain...was the fundamental concept of the Gaelic *politeia*.'²⁵ The tradition affirming that it would be Patrick who would judge the Irish on the last day is mentioned in a ninth-century sermon known as the *Vita Tripartita* (or Tripartite Life), which stated that an angel communicated this privilege to him while he fasted and prayed on Croagh Patrick, and also, somewhat earlier, in the seventh-century *Liber Angeli*. It would be an anachronistic fallacy, however, to suggest that the producer of such a tradition had any sense of an integrated nation to which a homogeneous people

²⁴ Bernadette Cunningham and Raymond Gillespie, ' "The most adaptable of saints": the cult of St Patrick in the seventeenth century', in *Archivium Hibernicum* xii (1996) p.83.

²⁵ Joep Leerssen, *Mere Irish and Fíor-Ghael: studies in the idea of Irish nationality, its development and literary expression prior to the nineteenth century* (Cork, 1996), p.153. Leerssen traces the idea of *Éire* in the post-Viking years as the outermost frame of reference for Gaelic Ireland, meaning something like the 'whole world', through the Norman conquest where the invaders were not defined according to nationality but merely as *Goill* (foreigners), and on to the term *Éireannach* used in the poetry of Gearóid Iarla (Gerald, third earl of Desmond) in the fourteenth century (which amounts to a grouping together of *Gael* and what would later be termed *Sean-Ghall*, defined geographically against the English who lived in England). When Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn in a fifteenth-century poem addressed to O' Carroll of Ely, exhorts *Éire* to unite, he does not mean to incite a 'national' movement towards unity, but merely wishes to bolster the rule of O' Carroll to whom he hopes other surrounding chieftains (who, in this case, constitute *Éire*) will capitulate. In the sixteenth century the 'Gaelic order' is described by Leerssen not as a *politikon* opposing English expansionism but instead as a set of cultural values without any central political point of reference (See pp 156, 159, 169, 179, 189-90).

belonged.²⁶ What exactly was meant, then, by Patrick judging the Irish, is unclear. It is evident, however, that Patrick, in some sense, transcended the local saint in that he was considered protector of the whole land as opposed to a specific locality.²⁷ The recounting of the story of the protection he affords the Irish at Judgement is found in Manus Ó Domhnaill's sixteenth-century *Betha Colaim Chille* while Edmund Campion, in 1571, relates how one 'lewd prelate' was able to convince his parish that St Peter had struck Patrick over the head with his keys as the 'protector of the Irish' attempted strenuously to persuade the heavenly doorkeeper to allow an Irish gallowglass inside.²⁸ Curiously enough, this tradition of intercession on behalf of the Irish on Judgement Day is not very often referred to in bardic religious poetry dealing with *Lá an Luain*. It seems strange that, despite the endurance of such a tradition (which if taken at face value was a very profitable one for the 'Irish'), with merely a couple of exceptions, the poets refrain from invoking Patrick in this way.²⁹ Instead, they commonly turn to the apostles, to Mary and figures such as Michael the Archangel and Catherine of Alexandria. None of the aforementioned intercessors

²⁶ Whitley Stokes (ed.), *The Tripartite Life of Patrick with other documents relating to that saint* (2 vols, London, 1887) i, pp 117-21.

²⁷ Cunningham and Gillespie, "The most adaptable of saints", p.86.

²⁸ See *BCC*, pp 114-18. There is a note on the origins of the 'keys' story (which, incidentally, has a parallel in an illustration found in the eleventh-century *Liber Vitae* where Peter lashes out at the devil with his keys in one particular conflict for souls) in David N. Dumville, 'An episode in Edmund Campion's "Historie of Ireland"', in *Éigse* xvi (1975-6), p.132.

²⁹ Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn (d.1487) mentions the promise when he states 'the books tell – and this must be repeated at Doomsday – that thou shalt be judge of the men of the West [the Irish]; God gave thee charge of them' (*PB* 10, v.45). Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn also asks Patrick to approach God on behalf of his people: 'Go and implore Mary's Son; bring with thee all his household till he lets all my kindred come to Him, thou highest of God's saints' (*DDé* 12, v.9) yet does not mention the promise specifically.

were allegedly granted special dispensatory powers on behalf of the Irish in the same way as Patrick was. Why, then, was Patrick's office, as 'Judge of Internal Affairs' not capitalised upon?

Perhaps the answer to this question reveals something significant about late medieval Gaelic spirituality, placing it more broadly within the bounds of orthodoxy than has previously been admitted in earlier assessments. On the evidence of bardic religious poetry, a clear hierarchy of saints, worthy of invocation, can be discerned. As observed in chapters 1 and 2, the poets have greatest recourse to the merits of the Passion and Death of Christ coupled with the intercessory power of the Blessed Virgin. Beyond the assistance of Jesus and Mary, lie the apostles, the people who spent the most time with Christ when He walked on earth. Other biblical figures such as John the Baptist were also hugely important. The cult of St Michael, too, revolves around a biblical figure, the archangel who challenged Lucifer and his angels' secession from the heavenly kingdom.³⁰ The figure of St Anne, mother of Mary, although not appearing in the canon of Scripture, achieved prominence through the endurance of tradition. The status procured by the above figures among the Gaelic Irish testifies to their possession of a coveted place on the hierarchical ladder of intercessors. If it can be demonstrated that the above figures were considered part of a hierarchy of intercessors beginning with Mary and continuing with the apostles (including the precursor, John the Baptist as a sort of proto-apostle), St Michael and some other biblical figures such as Mary Magdalene, then it can be argued that devotion to the saints in the late medieval period remained largely within the bounds of official doctrine, given the orthodoxy of such a procession. Following on from this hierarchy, devotion to other saints, including early martyrs of the Church, pious

³⁰ Dan 12:1; Rev 12:7.

individuals who led exemplary lives along with local and national figures associated with dioceses, parishes and regions can be deemed quite acceptable in its own right. Knowledge of the precise nature of devotion to many of these less-known and more regional saints is scant, owing to the fact that most of the traditions associated with them were transmitted orally and would eventually be lost centuries before frantic attempts were made to record them. The possibility that pious Gaelic Catholics first turned to their local representative for assistance before troubling the more prestigious members of the heavenly court does not necessarily indicate that they considered their regional figures more powerful intercessors. Instead, it could be expected that the local saint would have a natural proclivity for local affairs. Eamon Duffy cautions against the view that devotion to the saints in the late medieval period became disconnected from the central mystery of the Christian faith, namely the person of Jesus Christ and His Passion, Death and Resurrection. Referring to the surviving medieval rood screens of England, he states that a false impression of the perception of saints in lay piety is created because most are denuded of their principal image, the great crucifix, flanked by Mary and John while, nevertheless, retaining, images of the saints. The original construction of rood screens, however, placed saints firmly in their proper place:

The saints stood, in the most literal sense, under the cross, and their presence on the screen spoke of their dependence on, and mediation of the benefits of Christ's Passion, and their role as intercessors for their clients not merely here and now, but at the last day.³¹

Taking, as evidence, the preponderance of references to the benefits of the Passion of Christ as opposed to those mentioning the intercession of the saints in the extant

³¹ Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, pp 157-8.

corpus of bardic religious poetry, it is clear that, at least within the ambit of the poets and their patrons, which was quite extensive, a fundamentally orthodox hierarchy of values was adhered to. Discussion of the role of saints in late medieval Ireland in this chapter closely follows the hierarchy outlined above.

Devotion to the Apostles

The apostles, according to Eamon Duffy, 'were the collective symbol of the saints *par excellence* – they represented the whole heavenly hierarchy and the foundation of the Church, as well as being the primary witnesses to the cross and resurrection of Christ.'³² Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh (whose thirteenth-century religious poetry was considered paradigmatic by later poets), while making a plea for the salvation of his soul, provides a useful example of a devotee approaching the saints on a hierarchical basis, and of the important niche the apostles occupied within that hierarchy. As one might expect, he first approaches Christ seeking mercy: 'I ask mercy of Mary's Son – has He not pitied all men?'³³ Next, Mary is implored; he assures himself that he 'cannot fail to win Heaven through her prayer.'³⁴ After the Blessed Virgin, Ó Dálaigh clearly selects the apostles as the next most powerful agents of intercession; calling them the 'twelve prophets' he entreats their help while, at the same time, naming them: 'Andrew, virginal John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew famous, Thaddaeus, Paul and Peter, Thomas, great Matthias, James the Elder, Simon, those twelve I cleave to, in life and death I implore them.'³⁵ And so he continues his attempts to elicit the favours of the heavenly powers, going on to beseech the seven archangels, the four

³² Ibid., pp 158-9.

³³ *DDé* 25, v.46.

³⁴ Ibid., v.49.

³⁵ Ibid., vv 51-2. In this list, Paul is included as an apostle while Barnabas is omitted.

evangelists, the three widows (Martha, Mary mother of James, and Mary Magdalene) and then five female virgin saints (all Irish excepting Catherine).³⁶ The apostles had a very special function to fulfil, especially at the hour of death. At that time they were understood to undertake the defence of the soul, which many lurking demons wished to snatch away to Hell. An unidentified poet (*n.l.t.* 1614) assures himself that ‘though many be the harsh charge against me, my foe and his band who are set on my ruin fear those twelve on trial day.’³⁷ Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn expressed similar sentiments in the fifteenth century when he stated that ‘tho’ numerous the band set to ruin me at death, my soul-friends outnumber them; wrath against me shall be less than its cause.’³⁸ It is important to remember too that in the renowned account of the Virgin Mary’s dormition, *Transitus Mariae* (recounted in Gaelic under the title *Timna Muire*), the original form of which was possibly known of in Ireland before the eighth century, it is recounted that the apostles were summoned to Mary’s deathbed, where they remained with her to usher her into the Saviour’s arms.³⁹ Paul is among the apostles who are summoned. On meeting Christ before Mary’s death, he is first given a test of spiritual strength, being obliged to battle with the devil. With Peter’s help, he manages to overcome his adversary and is thereby allowed to return to the house where Mary is to die.⁴⁰ It could be argued that there is found in the *Transitus* a clear

³⁶ *Ibid.*, vv 53-9.

³⁷ *DD* 34, v.5 (translation provided in *IM* 1930, p.356f)

³⁸ *PB* 24, v.5.

³⁹ McNamara, *The apocrypha in the Irish Church*, pp 122-3; for an informative account of the various versions of the *Transitus* see R. Willard, ‘The testament of Mary’, in *Recherches de Théologie ancienne et médiévale* ix (1937). Note that Peter and Paul’s battle with the devil is only found in Irish recensions of the tale (Willard, ‘The testament of Mary’, p.361).

⁴⁰ Willard, ‘The testament of Mary’, pp 356-7.

precedent for the gathering of apostles around the deathbed of an individual who is about to meet Christ. If they were present at Mary's departing, eager to defend her, how much more zealously would they gather around a dying sinner who would more earnestly require their assistance.⁴¹ Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn (*d.* 1448) refers to the above scene in a poem that is dedicated to Mary and which begs her to defend his sinful soul at death. The fact that Tadhg Óg just happens to mention the scene from *Transitus Mariae* in a poem dealing with the theme of assistance at the hour of death is hardly accidental. In fact it seems that the poet is reminding Mary how God had ordained her soul to be shepherded from the snares of evil at the hour of her death by the presence of the apostles: 'The day thou didst consent to leave the world the apostles, O great Mary, were all gathered around thee.'⁴² Surely the Virgin, having, herself, benefited from their escort at death, would not refuse to implore her Son to tend to the dying in like manner. It was the apostles too who secured a proper Christian burial for Mary when the Jews attempted to attack the funeral procession and carry off the body.⁴³ It is little wonder, then, that the twelve apostles, who exercised such an active role at the

⁴¹ Note, too, that in the account of John of the Bosom's death found in the *Leabhar Breac*, he is reported as addressing Christ in the following manner: 'Take me to you, as you promised me, in the company of my brethren, Paul, Peter, Matthew and Thomas, and the other apostles, so that I may partake of the great feast which you created from the beginning and which has no end' (Herbert and McNamara, *Irish biblical Apocrypha*, p.97). John, like all good Christians, wishes to make the passage from death to life in the company of the apostles, despite his familiarity with them during life. If a text such as this was designed to instruct, edify and encourage others to emulate the lives of the saints, what better way to teach people to entrust themselves to the apostles at death than to have one of the apostles themselves show how it is done.

⁴² *DDé* 15, v.23.

⁴³ Willard, 'The testament of Mary', p.358.

deathbed, should feature so prominently on tomb chests of the fifteenth and sixteenth-centuries.

It was not merely at the deathbeds of others that the apostles were effective, however. The importance attributed to their own deaths should not be underestimated, as numerous references to the various 'passions' the apostles endured illustrate. The Gaelic Irish showed a great interest in the manner in which the apostles died. As early as the poetry of Blathmac in the eighth century, there are references to the deaths of the apostles: Matthew and Philip by the sword, the deaths of the two apostles named James, one by clubbing (James Minor – son of Alphaeus), the other by an axe (James Major – son of Zebedee, whom Herod Agrippa had beheaded, his body being later taken to Spain), Thomas by a spear and both Barnabas and Matthias by the iron.⁴⁴ The various accounts are not always in agreement regarding the exact nature of the deaths. For example, Blathmac relates that Philip died by the sword, while a poem found in the *Leabhar Uí Mhaine* (n.l.t.1372) states that he was crucified.⁴⁵ The treatise 'Genealogy, deaths and personal appearances of the apostles' found in the fifteenth-century *Leabhar Breac*, tells how the crucifixion occurred after Philip's tongue had been cut from his head seven times in an effort to curb his incessant preaching. This tradition is peculiarly Irish, giving rise to the popular apocryphon, *The evernew tongue*.⁴⁶ The passions of various apostles such as Peter and Paul, Bartholomew, James, Andrew and Philip, along with that of John the Baptist were very popular and appear in the *Leabhar Breac*, while the fifteenth-century *Liber*

⁴⁴ Carney, *The poems of Blathmac son of Cú Brettan*, vv 248-51, p.85.

⁴⁵ Tomás Ó Máille, 'Christ was crucified', in *Eriú* iii (1907), pp 194-99, v.7.

⁴⁶ *R.I.A.cat.Ir.MSS*, fasc. xxvii (Dublin, 1943), p.3400; see also McNamara, *The apocrypha in the Irish Church*, pp 85, 114.

Flavus Fergusiorum also contains an abbreviated selection. These relate in detail the circumstances surrounding the deaths of the apostles.⁴⁷ What part however, did such accounts play in shaping how devotees understood the role of the saints (in this case the apostles) in their daily spiritual lives? Examining how the bardic poets interpreted these ‘passions’ in composing for their patrons goes some way towards unravelling this problem. Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh, the thirteenth-century poet, treats of the horrific deaths of Christ’s chosen ones in the following manner: ‘The fate of the twelve; why was it right to slay them? That they should fall by sword and slaughter was decreed for them.’⁴⁸ God evidently allowed this to happen for a specific purpose. A few verses later, he hints at what this purpose might be in recalling that ‘not one of all those twelve died natural death but John.’⁴⁹ Proceeding to praise John the Evangelist, he states that ‘John of the Bosom lived on until he passed away; noble the treasure of virginity he had; it won him death by God’s act.’⁵⁰

These very telling lines seem to reveal a viewpoint which held that martyrdom was necessary for the salvation of the apostles who had sinned whereas the apostle who traditionally had not sinned (John of the Bosom, the ‘beloved disciple’) was permitted to die a natural death. At least this is the opinion expressed by Lambert McKenna, when he mentions this curious belief in the light of a similar reference found in a poem by Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn.⁵¹ However this assessment is not as straightforward

⁴⁷ A selection of these have been edited in Herbert and McNamara, *Irish biblical apocrypha*.

⁴⁸ *DDé* 26, v.46.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, v.51.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, v. 52.

⁵¹ *PB*, p.xxii. The poem in question is 16, vv 27-32. This belief is expressed more clearly in another poem by Philip Bocht when he says ‘I have heard that the apostle’s body never gave way to the least fault in the way of sin’ (*PB* 11, v.10).

as it first appears. If John of the Bosom was spared the necessity of dying a martyr's death because he had been preserved from sin in life, what of John the Baptist? For there also existed a tradition recounting how the Precursor had been preserved from sin from the time the Virgin Mary nursed him, while assisting her cousin Elizabeth. Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn makes reference to this very same tradition in the lines 'the nursing she gave him made him advance (in virtue); no fault was in him after she warmed him on her breast.' He explicitly drives home this point in the succeeding verse when he states that 'of the race condemned (by Original Sin) to penance, no saint or virgin, however pure, was kept safe till death – except John and Mary.'⁵² Yet, despite the tradition of sinlessness that was attached to the Baptist, he was, nevertheless, destined to suffer martyrdom. Had Lambert McKenna been specifically referring to John of the Bosom's lack of sexual sin (i.e. his virginity) his summation would, moreover, make even less sense, for one of the most enduring characteristics of the Christian martyrs has been their virginity! It must be admitted, therefore, that there is evidence to support the existence of two traditions, one pertaining to John of the Bosom and the other to John the Baptist, and that perhaps, some confusion arose from time to time between both personages. There is also evidence to suggest that it was thought, at least by both Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh and Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn (who possibly borrowed this idea from his more famous predecessor), that martyrdom purged outstanding sin, enabling the sinner-saint to enter Heaven. Donnchadh Mór, while mentioning the death of Stephen the first martyr states that he was 'made great through short suffering while Paul stoned him.'⁵³ Philip Bocht, meanwhile, makes the same point more clearly: 'The punishment of stones cast at him saved Stephen and his

⁵² *PB 27*, vv 7-8.

⁵³ *DDé 26*, v.54.

folk; the stones, which were a bridge for them, averted Heaven's justice.'⁵⁴ The same Paul who had had Stephen executed 'was not allowed into His [God's] presence till he parted with his head.'⁵⁵ The martyrdom of the apostles, therefore, was believed to have led to their sanctification, and ultimately their salvation.⁵⁶

The suffering and martyrdom that the apostles endured operated in a similar manner to the trials of the other saints (and those of Jesus and Mary too), becoming an efficacious standard, which was borne before the Almighty in intercession for humanity, ultimately meriting His utmost attention. These standards are frequently borne by the apostles in iconographical depictions. John Hunt's study of religious iconography on tomb surrounds of the sixteenth century reveals that in depictions of St Paul, the apostle invariably carries a sword, symbolising his own martyrdom by beheading.⁵⁷ Thomas, too, carries a spear, referring to the tradition that he was also beheaded.⁵⁸ Andrew, having been crucified, carries a saltire cross.⁵⁹ James Minor

⁵⁴ *PB* 16, v.30.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, v.27.

⁵⁶ Philip Bocht seems to believe that John of the Bosom was not too pleased at being exempt from a martyr's death because of his sinlessness and would rather have given his life in this way. Speaking of Mary in the same vein, he says: 'Besides John of the Bosom, she alone, his nurse and friend and support got not the death she and he craved for' (*PB* 9, v.39). Philip draws a close comparison between Mary and John's sinlessness. For instance, he mentions how, after his death and burial, angel's flour was found in his grave instead of his body, alluding to the tradition that he was assumed, like Mary, body and soul to Heaven (*PB* 11, v.22). This account differs from the Gaelic translation of Pseudo-Abdias found in the fifteenth-century *Leabhar Breac*, which mentions John's body having remained incorrupt, his hair being cut and nails clipped thenceforth every year by a holy youth (see Herbert and McNamara, *Irish biblical apocrypha*, p.98).

⁵⁷ Hunt, *Irish medieval figure sculpture* i, p.249.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.251.

(son of Alphaeus) sometimes carries a club, in memory of his own particular end, and so on.⁶⁰ The manner of the saint's death is not recalled only in cases where another conventional mark of identification supersedes that of the saint's martyrdom in importance. Thus, in the case of Peter, the Petrine supremacy is highlighted by representations of him carrying the keys of the kingdom; likewise, the strong association of James Major (son of Zebedee) with the popular pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella in Spain necessitated his sporting a pilgrim's hat, cockleshells and staff.⁶¹ Devotees, who liked to remind God how much their favourite saint had suffered, frequently invoked the merits of his martyrdom. The example of devotion to John the Baptist's head serves to illustrate the point. Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn, while relating the story of John's condemnation of Herod and Herodias and his subsequent death by beheading, notes that 'men put their trust in that head; as its brother (my head) needing its kin-love, has now but a shadow of youth, help of me is urgent.'⁶² Using John the Baptist's head as a means to intercede with the Lord for himself, Philip goes on to say 'If his head be not enough, let him offer to God his pure life for my sins and thus make sure to save my soul.'⁶³ The head of John the Baptist was imbued with miraculous properties. Philip notes that it remained henceforth just as when it fell, i.e. with flesh still on it.⁶⁴ Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn (*d.*1448) relates another marvellous story not found in the Passion of John the Baptist in the *Leabhar Breac*. Tadhg recounts how, after John the Baptist's death, Herodias hid his head in a lake,

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.249.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.251.

⁶¹ Ibid., p.108.

⁶² *PB* 27, v.31.

⁶³ Ibid., v.32.

⁶⁴ Ibid., v.30.

the surface of which, thereafter, appeared to be covered with flames.⁶⁵ There exists at least one iconographical depiction of *caput St Johannes in disco* (St John's head on a dish) on an Irish tomb chest, according to Hunt.⁶⁶ As late as the seventeenth-century, this devotion endured as observed in Tadhg Ó Cianain's account of the flight of the earls, in which he considers a visit to the shrine of John the Baptist's head in Amiens, France, very worthy of mention:

After dinner they went to a beautiful gorgeous church called the Church of Mary. The head of John the Baptist was shown to them. It was in a glass of crystal, evident and visible to whomsoever would be present, with many wonders and miracles...⁶⁷

It is clear, therefore, that the head of John the Baptist, symbolic of the martyr's death he suffered, was greatly venerated and considered an effective instrument in the evocation of God's mercy.

An alternative method, used to employ God's mercy, involved reminding Him of the stories of some of His chosen apostles and disciples who sinned, repented and found mercy. The apostles most frequently used as examples were Peter and Paul, along with many references to the story of Mary Magdalene. Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn, acutely aware of his own sinfulness, and anxious to gain mercy, recounts the story of Paul's

⁶⁵ *DDé* 11, v.29. It seems that some confusion may have arisen on the poet's part between the story of John's decapitation and that of Paul, for in the *Passion of Peter and Paul* found in the *Leabhar Breac* a similar incident is related which details how, after Paul's execution, his head voluntarily rolled to a certain lake where it remained for forty years. After the fortieth year, light was seen flashing on the lake and the head of Paul was subsequently found in the middle of the lake, after which it was retrieved and brought back to Rome with great honour (*PH*, p.337).

⁶⁶ Hunt, *Irish medieval figure sculpture* i, p.255.

⁶⁷ Ó Cianain, *The flight of the earls*, pp 31-3.

conversion, laying emphasis upon the extreme measures God used to change his heart. This gives the poet hope for the successful resolution of his own case: 'To God's Son shall I say: whether I wish it or not, deal with me as Thou didst then; Thou didst change that man's heart.'⁶⁸ The confidence gained from the example of Paul leads him to surmise: 'Bad though I be, 'twas harder to turn Paul to knowledge of the faith; O God, prove thy power on me.'⁶⁹ Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn, meanwhile, asserts that both Peter and Paul were ordained by God to fall in their lives in order to instil confidence in those who would eventually invoke them as saints:

On repenting we get consolation from Peter, the apostle who fell; 'twas for that he fell /

Purposely was Paul chosen by the Lord of the Three Hosts; sinners should flee to him; well for them he was a sinner.⁷⁰

Enlisting the assistance of both apostles, requesting them to be proactive at the hour of his death, Philip Bocht chooses not to rely exclusively on one or the other lest one apostle be negligent in his duty: 'If Paul rejected me Peter alone would win my pardon from God; let whichever loves me the more try it.'⁷¹ In this way, the poet challenges both saints to a sort of contest of fidelity to their charge's cause. In praising both apostles in the succeeding verse, Philip extols some of their attributes in a manner that discloses a subtle Franciscan agenda: 'Poverty was one of their vows;

⁶⁸ *DDé* 6, v.33.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, v.35. The same idea is expressed in another poem (*n.l.t.*1614) found in *DD* 30, v.22: 'Mary Magdalen yielded to Thee – O God how could my conversion be harder? Surely 'twere easier to bend me; Thou didst turn even Paul from sin' (translation in *IM* 1930, v.22 p.467).

⁷⁰ *PB* 26, vv 16-17.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, v.32.

they were perfect in chastity as well as obedience.’⁷² The saints, therefore, are immediately depicted in Franciscan mode, ensuring that those who wished to emulate their virtues were inevitably led along the path that the order was called to promote. In this case, the saints are manipulated into assuming characteristics that the devotee wished to inculcate in others.⁷³ The relationship between the devotee and his apostle-protectors, as in the case of the other saints also, was firmly based, however, on a *quid pro quo* basis. Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn, while lamenting that in his days of sickness his ‘friends’ abandoned him, is nevertheless ready to admit that, especially in the case of Peter and Paul, it was no more than he had already done to them: ‘Peter and Paul, in neglecting me, only retaliated; I neglected them both; I say the same of Andrew.’⁷⁴ An unidentified poet (*n.l.t.* 1513-14) urges those who will listen to his poem to take heart and not be afraid to repent and ask for mercy: ‘Mary Magdalen won her pardon by crushing her heart; thou, O sinner, hast the right to look for pardon; remember that Paul, too, sinned.’⁷⁵ Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh, in the late sixteenth century, also takes care to stress the contrition of Paul, Peter and Mary Magdalene in his poetry.⁷⁶ These three saints, therefore, stood as important witnesses to God’s mercy in the life of the sinner. Far from instilling the divine terror that the middle ages is so often

⁷² *PB* 26, v.33.

⁷³ Philip Bocht elsewhere exhorts others to obedience, particularly friars, noting that ‘did a man bear all martyrdom for Thee, O Christ, and not obey Thee, he were as a house dismantled’ (*PB* 8, v.2). By imbuing the great St Paul with Franciscan virtues, those who followed the saint might inadvertently follow the virtues also.

⁷⁴ *DDé* 13, v.9.

⁷⁵ *ADD* 100, v.27.

⁷⁶ *AFOD* 36, vv 5-8.

renowned for, these saints exhibited the compassionate side of God through the example of their lives.

The importance of St Peter, however, extended far beyond the fact that he repented of the sin of denying Christ. He commanded authority, the foundation of the Church having been laid upon his shoulders. In each of the tomb chest depictions of him listed by Hunt, he appears, characteristically, with a key or keys, representing the keys of the kingdom entrusted to him by Christ.⁷⁷ Expressing his role as Vicar of Christ using a particularly Gaelic term, an unidentified poet (*n.l.t.*1631) refers to him as ‘the Lord’s *comharba* [my emphasis] bright and glorious.’⁷⁸ The late sixteenth-century poet, Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaird, recalls how Peter converted the Romans, taking courage from this in calling upon him: ‘May God’s janitor not turn me away. He brought salvation to his foes in Rome, a lasting irresistible miracle; no wonder folk should truly trust him.’⁷⁹ If an individual had not established a personal friendship with (or devotion to) Peter, he had little business troubling the saint directly (as observed above in the case of Tadhg Óg). Tadhg had neglected Peter for some time. Perhaps this is why, when searching for a saint to commend him to the Lord at death, while choosing Peter, he nevertheless makes his request through another apostle (John of the Bosom), with whom he has presumably already established good diplomatic relations: ‘If, owing to His wrath, Heaven’s Lord stand against me, speak for me to the doorkeeper.’⁸⁰ This approach is very interesting. Clearly Tadhg Óg considered

⁷⁷ Hunt, *Irish medieval figure sculpture* i, pp 248-9. See Matt 16:19 for scriptural reference.

⁷⁸ ‘To a crucifix’, *IM* 1922, p.253, v.29. Although in later manuscripts this poem is ascribed to Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh, it is almost certainly not by him. The Book of O’ Conor Don (1631) in which it makes its earliest known appearance leaves the poem without ascription (*ibid*, p.253).

⁷⁹ *BOH* 10, v.18.

⁸⁰ *DDé* 1, v.7.

Peter more powerful and ultimately more influential than his own friend, John; for if he did not, he could easily have asked John to intercede directly with God Himself, saving the poet the embarrassment of having to make a convoluted request. As the appeal continues, the manner in which this was expected to work out in practice is elucidated: 'The apostle I have mentioned, one of Christ's folk, and those I have not mentioned, get them to commend me in Thy name.' Peter then, is expected to place Tadhg's case before the Lord as recommended by John and not merely by Tadhg himself. This mode of appeal was regarded as having considerably more weight than one undertaken directly by Tadhg himself, especially owing to the fact that if Tadhg had a '*cara sa chúirt*' at all, it was definitely not St Peter!

Others, however, were not as neglectful of the chief apostle and could, therefore, approach him with ease. The evidence of bardic poetry alone testifies to the fact that people invariably chose certain saints as favourites and were thus inclined to invoke them more frequently than others. Mathghamhain Ó hUiginn (*d.* 1585) seems to have had a particular devotion to Peter, who appears suddenly in at least two of his poems. He is invoked on both occasions in the closing stanzas.⁸¹ The practice of closing a religious poem with a prayer to a favourite saint or saints can be found as a stylistic feature of at least some bardic religious poetry. Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn, for instance, chooses St Francis (predictably) and also St Michael as the saints whom he commonly calls upon in many of the last verses of his poems.⁸² The plea usually focuses on a request for aid at the hour of his death or else on Judgement Day. The sixteenth-century poet, Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh, meanwhile, is noted for his closing verses dedicated to St Michael alone, highlighting his particular devotion to the archangel

⁸¹ *ADD* 75, v.45; *ibid.*, 76, v.21.

⁸² See *PB*, especially poems 2, 4, 6, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 16, 20, 23 and 25.

who traditionally weighed souls on that fateful day.⁸³ Mathghamhain's prayer to Peter is one of entrustment whereby he surrenders the care of his soul to the saint: 'My soul's defence I confide to Peter: that star of all sages will be able to protect my last moments in the matter of requiting the wound made by the lance.'⁸⁴ He states elsewhere that 'a help to save me against all foes is the shelter of the famous tree, Peter, my noble captain of our heavenly host.'⁸⁵ Another poet sees Peter as the firm mast of his ship in the face of storms, steering him towards Heaven.⁸⁶

Other favourite apostles included both John of the Bosom and James Major. These two apostles were important figures as they were brothers, traditionally held to be sons of Mary Salome, who, herself, was one of the three daughters (all named Mary) of St Anne.⁸⁷ The apostles James and John, therefore, were, in effect, the extended family of Jesus. This point was not lost on bardic poets such as Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn who seemed to appreciate the notion of keeping things in the family:

When Mary's Son called His two friends, James and John, He chose the two
nearest Him in blood /

⁸³ See poems in *AFOD*.

⁸⁴ *ADD* 75, v.45.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 76, v.21.

⁸⁶ *DD* 34, v.30: '*Seol mo luinge re hucht n-anfhaid, iomdha slighe don tigh thuas, ná leagadh sé muna seolfam, Peadar is é ar seolchrann suas.*'

⁸⁷ Tradition held that St Anne had borne three daughters named Mary -- Mary Salome who gave birth to James and John, Mary the wife of Cleopas who gave birth to four sons, James, Joses, Simon and Jude, and, finally, the Virgin Mary who gave birth to Jesus. See Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, p.181. Incidentally, the thirteenth-century poet, Muireadhach Albanach Ó Dálaigh also mentions this set of relations, explaining how Anne, the 'grandmother of God' had married three husbands, each of whom had fathered a 'Mary' with her. These three Marias in turn took three husbands, the first giving birth to James, the second to John, and the third to Jesus (Bergin, *Irish bardic poetry*, 21, vv 3-8).

For God's sake may He, owing to that kinship, not reject my soul; 'tis to urge them on that I mention their kinship with Him.⁸⁸

The importance of the notion of kinship, as noted above, in the case of the Virgin Mary, can equally be applied to the realm of the saints. In this case the kinship is, in fact, real. The poet exhorts both saints to have courage when approaching God to intercede for their client, for they should be especially entitled, because of their kinship, to His favour. In another poem dedicated to the story of John, Philip loosely follows some of the quasi-historical tales found in the *Legenda Aurea*. The story of his raising a dead woman (his friend) to life for instance is taken from Jacobus de Voragine, who names the woman as Drusiana.⁸⁹ Philip recounts the story of John's drinking a chalice of poison and yet surviving. The most likely source for this story is also the *Legenda Aurea*, which possibly borrowed it from Isidore of Seville's *De ortu et obitu patrum*.⁹⁰ However, this story also appears in an Irish life of John found in the *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum* that is otherwise radically different in content from that of the *Legenda Aurea*. It was compiled by Uighisdin Mac Raighin (*d.*1405), member of the Canons Regular of St Augustine at Lough Ree, translated from Latin lives such as those of Pseudo-Abdias and / or Pseudo-Mellitus.⁹¹ This story is explicitly recalled in at least two tomb chest sculptures identified by Hunt, one at the Rock of Cashel, which depicts John holding a chalice with a dragon emerging from it, the other at

⁸⁸ *PB* 24, vv 14-15.

⁸⁹ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, ed. William Granger Ryan (2 vols, New Jersey, 1993) i, p.51.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp 53, 55. See also Isidore's work in *PL*, LXXXII.

⁹¹ McNamara, *The apocrypha in the Irish Church*, pp 96-7. Pseudo-Abdias was reputed to be the first bishop of Babylon. He wrote his apostolic history in the seventh or eighth century (*ibid.*, p.90). See also Gearóid Mac Niocaill, 'Beatha Eoin Broinne II', in *Éigse* viii (1956).

Thurles, where he is depicted holding a chalice from which the devil emerges. Both date from the first half of the sixteenth-century.⁹² At Dunsany, County Meath, Heather King has identified a shaft fragment of a late medieval cross, dating from c.1480, which contains another representation of John holding the poisoned goblet and a book.⁹³ Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn also mentions how John survived immersion in a vat of boiling oil, a story found in the account of ‘St John before the Latin Gate’ in the *Legenda Aurea*.⁹⁴ Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn, in his praise of John, avoids these stories completely, remaining instead with the detail that he was his master’s favourite and that he stayed by the cross with Mary while the other apostles fled.⁹⁵ Both Philip Bocht and Tadhg Óg, however, agree that Christ gave secrets to John that He gave to no other.⁹⁶

Devotion to St James Major was also extremely popular in Ireland, particularly on account of the long-standing tradition of Irishmen going on pilgrimage to his shrine at Santiago de Compostela. The annals are dotted with references to chieftains, lawyers and poets heading off on pilgrimage to the shrine. One such reference notes how two pilgrims, father and son, died shortly after returning, emphasising not that bad luck

⁹² Hunt, *Irish medieval figure sculpture* i, pp 251, 104.

⁹³ Heather A. King, ‘Late medieval crosses in County Meath c.1470-1635’, in *R.I.A.Proc.*, lxxxiv (1984), p.99.

⁹⁴ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend* i, p.284. Another poet (*n.l.t.* 1614), lamenting his lack of knowledge and his need of comfort and solace, surmises that he will not reach the state he aspires to, even if he were to acquire a ton of John’s oil (*DD* 34, v.31). This is an interesting verse and may perhaps refer to the oil in which John was boiled, or instead to some relic or sacramental in use at the time.

⁹⁵ *DDé* 1, vv 9, 15.

⁹⁶ *PB* 11, v.27; *DDé* 1, v. 10.

befell them as a consequence, but, on the contrary, that their deaths were, in some sense, blessed by the saint whom they had so recently honoured:

O' Driscoll More...died in his own house after having performed the pilgrimage of St James, and his son Teige died penitently one month after the death of his father after having returned from the same pilgrimage.⁹⁷

The effects in both cases, then, were positive. There has always been great significance attached to death at home among the Irish and it has long been regarded as a blessing.⁹⁸ The fact that O' Driscoll's son, Teige is described as having died *penitently* [my emphasis] is also indicative of the perceived fall-out of graces consequent on the pilgrimage.⁹⁹ In the nineteen representations of St James Major identified by Hunt, he appears wearing his pilgrim's hat with scallop shell and carrying a staff and purse, and sometimes also a book.¹⁰⁰ The Passion of St James, found in the *Leabhar Breac*, is almost identical with the narrative on James in Book 4 of the *Apostolic History* of Pseudo-Abdias and is most likely a translation from this Latin work, for the *Legenda Aurea* only uses some of this material and makes certain additions not found in the Gaelic version.¹⁰¹ As in the cases of the other apostles, St James became, for many, a favourite saint, who was frequently called upon to intercede with God for particular favours. Conchobar Crón Ó Dálaigh (fl.1583) was one devotee who called on both St James and the Blessed Virgin to intercede for him:

⁹⁷ *AFM*, 1472.

⁹⁸ The traditional aspiration for '*bás in Éirinn*' exemplifies this attitude.

⁹⁹ For reading on this pilgrimage see Roger Stalley, 'Sailing to Santiago: medieval pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela and its artistic influence in Ireland' in John Bradley (ed.), *Settlement and society: studies presented to Francis Xavier Martin, O.S.A.* (Kilkenny, 1988).

¹⁰⁰ Hunt, *Irish medieval figure sculpture* i, p.250.

¹⁰¹ See McNamara, *The apocrypha in the Irish Church*, p.94.

‘May St James and the angelic virgin obtain from the Prince of Heaven that I should not be sued for the guilt of the spear wound which saved the world from its plight.’¹⁰² An interesting feature of the thirteenth-century poetry of Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh, which, incidentally, is not found in later compositions, is the naming of some prominent Old Testament figures among the saints. In imploring all of the saints to win Heaven for him Donnchadh first turns to Mary, then the twelve apostles, whom he names, proceeding to invoke seven angels (including Michael, Gabriel and Raphael, but also less-known figures such as Phanathiel, Ruimiel, Uiriel and Sairiel). The four evangelists are then called upon, then the three widows (Martha, Mary the mother of James and Mary Magdalen), Catherine of Alexandria and some Irish virgins. However, most interesting is his invocation of four prophets from the Old Testament: ‘Amos, Ezechiel, Isaias...four noble men to be loved, and noble Daniel the true prophet.’¹⁰³ These Old Testament figures were honoured as saints, complete with feast days and evidence for their veneration is found in the *Martyrology of Gorman*, which was compiled c.1167. The feast of Amos was celebrated on 31 March, Ezechiel on 10 April, Isaiah on 16 July and Daniel on 31 July.¹⁰⁴

St Michael the Archangel

The figure of St Michael, archangel and supreme defender against Satan, commanded devotion in Ireland since at least the eighth century if not earlier.¹⁰⁵ Both the *Martyrology of Tallaght* and *Feilire Oengusso* (eighth century) mention him, the former celebrating the dedication of the church at Monte Gargano on 29 September

¹⁰² *DMU*, 19, v.27.

¹⁰³ *DDé* 25, vv 48-61.

¹⁰⁴ Whitley Stokes (ed.), *Féilire Húi Gormáin*, p.xliii.

¹⁰⁵ Helen M. Roe, ‘The cult of St Michael in Ireland’ in Caoimhín Ó Danachair (ed.), *Folk and farm: essays in honour of A. T. Lucas* (Dublin, 1976), p.252.

and the latter mentioning the anniversary of the associated apparition on 9 May while anticipating the final victory over the Antichrist on the later date.¹⁰⁶ A homily on St Michael found in the fifteenth-century *Leabhar Breac* relates the history of the shrine at Monte Gargano before its formal consecration.¹⁰⁷ The history begins with a terrifying dragon that routinely intimidated the inhabitants of the surrounding region, spreading plague to both crops and cattle. The people, thinking he was a god, offered him sacrifice. However, in answer to the prayers of some Christians, St Michael came to their assistance, entered the cave on the top of the mountain where the dragon dwelt, and promptly slayed him.¹⁰⁸ A second incident, involving a wealthy man

¹⁰⁶ Part of the tradition associated with St Michael includes the story of an apparition on Monte Gargano, Italy in 492, where the archangel requested that a church be built on the site and dedicated in his honour (ibid., pp 251-3).

¹⁰⁷ *PH*, pp 453-55.

¹⁰⁸ The story of the dragon that spread disease and pestilence surely has its origin in a very real agricultural crisis, most probably involving widespread infection of crops. This becomes more evident when one examines how the feast of the apparition was henceforth commemorated in other areas. A good example is that of New Castile, examined by William A. Christian. He notes that it was customary between April 25 and May 9 to make regular visits to shrines in springtime processions to implore protection for the crops. The feast commemorating the appearance of St Michael at Monte Gargano (there celebrated on 8 May to make way for Gregory of Nazianzus on the 9th) saw many processions to Marian shrines take place (Christian, *Local religion in sixteenth-century Spain*, pp 115-6). This association of St Michael with the prevention of plague is further evidenced in the story of how Pope St Gregory the Great saw a vision of the archangel in 590 as he crossed the *Pons Aelius* (now Ponte Sant' Angelo), making his way towards Hadrian's mausoleum (now Castel San' Angelo). Michael stood sheathing a flaming sword on top of the building. Rome, at the time was suffering an outbreak of plague, and Pope St Gregory duly interpreted the manifestation as a sign that the epidemic would soon cease: Serena de Leonardis (ed.), *Art and history: Rome and the Vatican* (Firenze, 2000), pp128-9.

named Garganus who loses a bull from his herd, eventually finding it at the cave, is also related. The man, obviously angry, shoots an arrow at the bull in rage, but the arrow merely rebounds on him instead. The inhabitants of the region, under instruction from the bishop, pray for guidance in interpreting this sign and in three days Michael the Archangel appears to the bishop informing him that it was he who had protected the animal. The people of the region henceforth began to offer prayers to the angel on the mountain. A third manifestation of the angel's power involved a great victory for the Christians who battled against the pagans in that region, after which a church was erected on the spot in his honour. St Michael appeared to the bishop of the city to relate to him that he had consecrated the church himself, and thereafter it has had a special association with him. This association is also alluded to in the Life of John the Evangelist found in the fifteenth-century *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum*.¹⁰⁹ While the beginning of the text is lost, the subsequent section deals with the coming of the Antichrist and his ensuing destruction by St Michael. The scene is again Monte Gargano where Michael had once slain the dragon. John the apostle relates how Michael strikes the Antichrist on the crown of the head, splitting him in two.¹¹⁰ The physical description of the archangel given in the text translated from the Latin (as seen above) by Uighisdin Mac Raighin, probably in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, is worthy of note:

¹⁰⁹ See Herbert and McNamara, *Irish biblical apocrypha*, p.95. The life occurs at f.32 [87] r^oa in the manuscript.

¹¹⁰ It is no accident that John relates this story as he is traditionally regarded as the author of the Book of Revelation or Apocalypse, dealing with the end times. It is in this book (Rev 12:7) that Michael is shown to have battled with the dragon. It is not surprising then, that a Life of this saint should contain material of an eschatological nature.

This is the manner of Michael's appearance as he comes to fight Antichrist. He is radiant, fair of countenance, red-cheeked, with gentle steady long-lashed eyes, with eloquent red lips, and a white throat. He is shining with zeal, light-footed, angry, furious, aggressive, with his beautiful four wings spread around him, with a protecting sharp-edged splendid sharp ornamented slender sword firmly in his strong hand, to smite Antichrist in a manner befitting a noble, angelic heavenly personage.¹¹¹

The *Leabhar Breac* homily on St Michael gives an appraisal of the attributes and duties of this mighty archangel, amounting to five in all. They provide an important basis from which to begin an investigation of the many facets of popular devotion to the saint. The first involves Michael casting down the rebellious angels from Heaven in the aftermath of the heavenly battle recorded in Rev 12:7. The second duty Michael undertakes is to battle with the devil in order to win the soul of the deceased person after death. The third involves his decision-making on behalf of the righteous on the Day of Doom. An integral part of this duty (although not mentioned specifically in the text) is his weighing of souls in a balance (the so-called *psychostasis*). The fourth function he performs is that of battling with and defeating the Antichrist (in this text, as is most traditionally found) on Mount Sion at the end of time. His fifth duty is simply to rule in glory with the saints forever.¹¹² Devotion to St Michael therefore revolved around his performance in the above areas. Iconographic representations of the saint are neatly divided between two themes, namely Michael's combat with the dragon (Satan) and his weighing of souls at Judgement, as shown by Helen M. Roe in

¹¹¹ Herbert and McNamara, *Irish biblical apocrypha*, p.95.

¹¹² *PH*, p.453.

her list of depictions.¹¹³ The eschatological character of both themes is illustrated by the fact that Michael is frequently placed beside other key players in the final drama. For example, on the fifteenth-century bell shrine of St Conall of Inis Caol, County Donegal, he is placed next to Christ the Judge with the crucifixion; St John the Baptist, Peter and Paul and the other apostles are also shown.¹¹⁴ John the Baptist in particular is a frequent companion of St Michael's in depictions. He appears next to him in other fifteenth-century depictions at Cashel, Clontuskert and Curraha.¹¹⁵ The link that was drawn between the two saints in iconography may have influenced poets such as Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh in the sixteenth century, who accepted and endorsed such a connection in their verse. Addressing John the Baptist, Aonghus prays: 'The day when the Lord sets Michael's scale to weigh my sins, may I be helped by thy wisdom and thy humility lest I be rejected.'¹¹⁶

Generally speaking though, Michael's reputation was primarily linked to his defence of souls on the Day of Judgement. A short list of examples dating from the fourteenth to the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries serves to illustrate this point. Uilliam Ó hUiginn (*d.* 1378) places his confidence in Michael's shield to defend his soul from the dangers of eternal damnation: 'I entrust my soul to the protection of

¹¹³ Roe, 'The cult of St Michael in Ireland', pp 260-3.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.262.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp 260-1. His role as intercessor at the Last Judgement in conjunction with the Virgin Mary has already been commented upon in Chapter 2. At Curraha St Michael is shown in combat mode, complete with shield and spear, on the octagonal shaft of a baptismal font. The reasoning behind the presence of John the Baptist in this case is straightforward enough – the subject of baptism itself. Michael's combat mode here clearly refers to the overcoming of evil (Original Sin) in the specific instance of a child being baptised.

¹¹⁶ *AFOD* 35, v.9.

Michael's shield – it fills Heaven (with souls); he has – better than any saint, kept away from sin; why does he not save even the whole world?'¹¹⁷ Helen M. Roe refers to a unique illustration that lies outside characteristic depictions of the saint in Ireland; in this case he appears as *Psychopompus*, i.e. conductor of a soul to Heaven, carrying a tiny soul-figure up to Paradise in the folds of a napkin.¹¹⁸ However, the idea of St Michael conducting a soul to Heaven was not without precedent in fifteenth-century Ireland. In fact, a verse by Gearóid Iarla (1338-98) is a good example of the literary expression of the same notion.¹¹⁹ Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn (*d.* 1448), in a poem devoted to Michael's defensive action at Judgement, chooses the archangel as his defender (v.7) and looks forward to a fair trial: 'May I be in his court; may I purchase his peace charter; he is ready to give it when I wish to buy it', going on to entrust the care of his soul to him: 'I confide to thee possession of my soul; in return get my pardon from the Lord.'¹²⁰ Tadhg, however, was not always as confident of Michael's protection. In another poem he enlists the aid of John of the Bosom against what he sees as Michael's fearful doom:

¹¹⁷ *BM* 14, v.38. The shield that Michael carries is usually charged with the sign of the Cross, making it much more than just a battle emblem. The armour with which Michael is equipped has deep significance. It is God's armour (see Eph 6:10-17) and Satan is routed not by Michael's power alone but by the power of God, signified by the sign of the Cross of human salvation. When he does not carry the shield, he is at least protected by a small cross, which he wears on his head as at Cashel and Kildare (Roe, 'The cult of St Michael in Ireland', pp 260, 262).

¹¹⁸ This is found on a tomb panel at Jerpoint, County Kilkenny and dates from the fifteenth century. *Ibid.*, pp 255, 262.

¹¹⁹ 'A Mhichéil, gabh mo dheaslámh dom breith ar cheartilár nimhe, dom beith ag Críost 'na áras is guidhe a mháthar linne': Gearóid Mac Niocaill, 'Duanaire Ghearóid Iarla', in *Studia Hibernica* 3 (1963), 19, v.8.

¹²⁰ *DDé* 14, vv 17-18.

Stand warrant for me with thy Master, O John; great the danger from Michael's doom; 'tis no light task to be my warrant against the doom of the judgement scale.¹²¹

However, Michael mostly appears as defender rather than accuser. Therefore there was consolation to be had when an individual died around the time of his feast (29 September). The annals are especially conscientious about mentioning how close the date of an individual's death was to the feast days of important saints. The *Annals of Connacht* record one interesting instance for 1464:

Ir, son of Cathal Ruadh Mac Raghnaill, a full worthy prospective chieftain of his own land for every achievement whereby a noble may win approval, died this year in the week before the feast of Michael; and we pray the said Michael to comfort his soul.¹²²

Similarly, the *Annals of the Four Masters* for 1475 relate how one Edmond, son of Melaghlin O' Hanly, died on the fourteenth day before Michael's feast day.¹²³ The feast of Michaelmas, when the judicial year officially began, was hailed therefore as quite a promising time during which to die. Michael might perhaps feel an urge to tip the scales of justice in favour of the sinner around this time. Eamon Duffy calls Michaelmas 'the great autumnal celebration of the triumph of celestial powers over those of the underworld.'¹²⁴

Great confidence, then, was placed in the archangel who held the scales in his hands. An unidentified poet (*n.l.t.* 1614), beseeching Christ to hear the intercessory prayer of

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 1, v.1.

¹²² *AC*, 1464.

¹²³ *AFM*, 1475.

¹²⁴ Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, p.47.

St Michael, was not averse to exercising a little blackmail to ensure that his case would be heard. The argument he employs is so illustrative of the ingenuity of the Gaelic approach to spiritual politics that it merits quoting at length. Addressing Michael at first and then finally, Christ, the poet begins:

Urge thy Lord till He wash my soul of its filth; win, owing to thy obedience,
its cleansing /

The Lord's tribute-steward will stand by me on Testament Day; if, then, Jesus
rejects me, will it not be to reject two? /

I talk not of my own rejection, but of God's rejection of Michael; to be
slighted by Jesus is equal shame for him and me /

The pleader stands to represent me at my sin's trial; if I merit not Heaven, urge
Thy rights on the archangel (not on me).¹²⁵

Christ, then, who would, if at all possible, shy away from any semblance of rejecting Michael, would surely not be unduly harsh to the companion who was under his care either (or so the poet hoped). The late sixteenth-century poet, Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh, possibly the most prolific commentator on the role of St Michael in the bardic world, invoked the saint frequently. He expounds upon Michael's advocacy: 'Come O steward and speak for me.'¹²⁶ He is, however, aware of his unworthiness in even asking for aid: 'My disposition in thy regard has ever been foolish – lo my foe is proving this against me! Greater shall be proved the power of thy miracles if thou hidest my sins on doomsday.'¹²⁷ In this last verse, Aonghus has struck upon a recognised theological truth. At Judgement his 'foe' (the devil or Satan) attempts to

¹²⁵ 'St Michael', *IM* 1930, p.514f, vv 22, 7, 11, 35.

¹²⁶ *AFOD* 32, v.7.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, v.8.

accuse him of neglecting the saint. Meanwhile, the saint overlooks the faults of the sinner and, instead of accusing, acquits him instead. The poet, therefore, recognises the identity of the devil as accuser, which his name signifies.¹²⁸ One particular verse addressed to St Michael by an unidentified poet (*n.l.t.*1614) suggests that the composer was focussing upon an image of the saint (possibly in a church) while making his plea: ‘O image of Michael, I flee to thee; embrace me lovingly; though I must make my defence it is useless when thou bringest charges against all men’s souls.’¹²⁹ Here we have a different attitude to that held by Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh. The above verse suggests that justice must be done whereas Aonghus had hoped that Michael himself might thwart the path of justice by concealing his client’s misdemeanours. Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn, in the previous century, paints Michael in the same light as Aonghus does later on. Michael is the defender and the advocate. It is he who makes the defence for his client. In one poem, Philip, apparently aware of the seriousness of his crimes, enlists not one but two advocates, who work in tandem for his acquittal. St Catherine of Alexandria assists Michael in his task. Philip reflects: ‘a sinner like me is hard to defend unless Michael strive his best; though thou art on my side, O maid, my defence is hard work, even for two.’¹³⁰ St Michael, then, was a very important player in the eschatological drama of death and subsequent Judgement. He was ignored at one’s peril and therefore, the late medieval period, renowned for its

¹²⁸ The name ‘devil’ (Gr. *Diabolos*) means ‘accuser’ or ‘slanderer’, more literally ‘one who throws an obstacle in another’s path’ (Gr. *Diaballein* = to throw across) which is precisely what Aonghus describes the ‘foe’ as doing, while Michael, on the other hand, is willing to be merciful. When Aonghus describes the devil as ‘foe’ he is adhering closely, perhaps without realising it, to the root of his other title ‘Satan’, which means ‘adversary’ (Heb. *Sātān* = enemy).

¹²⁹ *ADD* 97, v.37.

¹³⁰ *PB* 18, v.12.

obsession with the Last Things, saw his cult flourish. It was not until the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries that devotion to the mighty archangel began to wane.

The most successful virgin martyrs: Saints Catherine and Margaret

Devotion to two virgin martyrs in particular, namely Catherine of Alexandria and Margaret of Antioch, was hugely popular in late medieval Ireland and indeed Europe as a whole. Both saints have their feast days recorded in the twelfth-century *Martyrology of Gorman*, suggestive of the influence of the Augustinian canons in the propagation of their respective cults.¹³¹ However, if this is the case, it is nevertheless evident that St Catherine was much more enthusiastically promoted than her counterpart by the order. By the thirteenth century there were at least four Augustinian foundations dedicated to her: one near Lucan in County Dublin, another in Waterford city, at Aughrim and a convent of Augustinian nuns (Monasterneallowduffe) in County Limerick.¹³² It was Catherine and not Margaret who was chosen to replace St Adomnán as patron of the seventh penitential bed in Lough Derg.¹³³ In terms of the number of iconographic representations extant on tomb surrounds, St Catherine appears by far the more popular subject. Hunt has listed seventeen depictions of Catherine while listing only five of Margaret.¹³⁴ A library list of the earl of Kildare for the year 1510 also sheds light on the greater popularity of Catherine. While he possesses 'Saint Kateryn's Life' in Irish, there is no mention of

¹³¹ Catherine's feast day is recorded as 25 November while Margaret's appears on 20 July. See Whitley Stokes (ed.), *Féilire Húi Gormáin*, pp 339, 381.

¹³² See Gwynn and Hadcock, *Medieval religious houses Ireland*, pp 192, 197, 158, 323.

¹³³ See above.

¹³⁴ Hunt, *Irish medieval figure sculpture* i, pp 254-6. Catherine is also represented at Duleek (1601) and on the Navan wayside cross (early sixteenth century) as described by King, 'Late medieval crosses', pp 107, 113.

Margaret's.¹³⁵ Nevertheless, both saints achieved great status in the late medieval world. We know some of the names of the Anglo-Norman prioresses of the Augustinian priory of the Holy Trinity, Lismullin, Meath, and they reveal something very important about the saints they were expected to model themselves on. In 1346 the prioress was named Margaret, in 1368 Katherine, in 1402 Agnes (another notable virgin martyr) and in 1470 Margaret again.¹³⁶ All of the above mentioned prioresses were given the names of virgin martyrs - strong-willed women who were prepared to shed their blood rather than renounce their God. It was presumably hoped that the virgin martyr they adopted as patron would infuse in them some of her characteristics and virtues.

Interestingly, neither the *Leabhar Breac* nor *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum* contain accounts of the lives of either Catherine or Margaret, dating, as they do, from the earlier part of the fifteenth century. It is only from the later part of the century onwards that Gaelic translations of the lives of these saints begin to emerge.¹³⁷ The life of Catherine found in British Library, Egerton Ms. 1781 (c.1484-7) seems to be based on a standard Latin life but with considerable variations, suggesting that the scribe may have been attempting to relate the story from memory rather than

¹³⁵ Meigs, *The reformations in Ireland: tradition and confessionalism, 1400-1690*, p.150.

¹³⁶ Gwynn and Hadcock, *Medieval religious houses Ireland*, p.322.

¹³⁷ Diarmuid Ó Laoghaire has identified a Life of St Margaret, dating from the years 1450-4, found in Laud. Misc. 610, 7 r a – 8 v b. This represents another recension in a simpler style. See Ó Laoghaire, 'Beathaí naomh iasachta sa Ghaeilge', p.xxx. Incidentally, the earliest version of the life of Catherine in the Christian world dates from the tenth century and is in Greek. While historically, nothing is known of the saint, her cult begins to spread across Europe from 1027 onwards, the date of the transferral of her relics to Rouen: Lène Dresen Coenders (ed.), *Saints and she-devils: images of women in the 15th and 16th centuries* (London, 1987), pp 93-5.

translating it directly from a Latin source.¹³⁸ The Life of Margaret that appears in the same manuscript, being a free rendering of the Latin life in the *Sanctuarium* of Bonino Mombrizio (1424-82), Latin scholar, teacher and philologist, was compiled by Philip Ó Dálaigh, Premonstratensian canon of Holy Trinity island, Lough Key.¹³⁹ The life of Margaret, under the direction of Ó Dálaigh takes on the form of a bardic romance. Taking into account that Mombrizio's *Sanctuarium*, containing the Life of St Margaret, was not published until 1480 and that Egerton 1781 can be dated to the years 1484-7, the latter manuscript provides a remarkable example of how quickly texts could diffuse themselves across Europe, finding their way into the hands of scribes such as members of the Mac Parrthaláin clan (writing in the barony of Tullyhaw, County Cavan) who were certainly responsible for the production of the bulk of it.¹⁴⁰ Later versions of the lives of both saints appear in *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne*, compiled c.1513-14 at the behest of Máire Ní Mháille (wife of Mac Suibhne Fanad). The first part of the book, known as the 'Book of Piety', was written by Ciothruadh Mág Fhionnghaill from Tory island, who, along with Enóg Ó Giolláin, translated both lives from Latin. The versions in *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne* differ from those in Egerton 1781. Ciothruadh concludes his Life of St Catherine with the lines:

So that so far is the life and death of Catherine the Virgin and it was Enóg Ó
Giolláin and I myself who drew it from the Latin and a curse on all my

¹³⁸ *B.M.cat.Irish.MSS.*, p.530.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.531.

¹⁴⁰ Ó Laoghaire, 'Beathaí naomh iasachta sa Ghaeilge', p.xxx.

implements, and everyone who shall read or listen to, or memorise it will gain Heaven for himself and three others he most likes *et reliqua*.¹⁴¹

Such a formula provided an incentive for the reader or listener to learn the tale by heart and thereby acquire the assistance of the saint in his hour of need, that hour being unquestionably the hour of death.¹⁴² It also brought the character of the story alive, leading the individual into a direct encounter with the saint and her blessings. The scribe himself was not merely performing a duty, but actually wrote out of an experience of devotion to his subject. This comes across quite strongly in a personal petition included in lines at the end of p.105, col.1 of the manuscript: 'I beseech the mercy of God through the intercession of Catherine the Virgin, and it is not easy to steal me away today from Síle.'¹⁴³

St Catherine is invoked frequently in bardic religious poetry, certainly from as early as the thirteenth century. Her appearance in the poetry of Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh is interesting. While calling upon the whole company of Heaven to have mercy on him, Donnchadh arranges his intercessors into various categories. Predictably, he begins with Christ, with Mary following, then the apostles, the archangels, the

¹⁴¹ Paul Walsh (ed.), *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne: an account of the Mac Sweeney families in Ireland with pedigrees* (Dublin, 1920), p.xlvi.

¹⁴² It should be noted also that the *Legenda Aurea* reported that Catherine, before she was beheaded, prayed to God that 'any who should remember my passion, be it at death, or in any other necessity, and call me...shall have by thy mercy the effect of his request and prayer' after which a voice from Heaven allegedly replied: 'to them that shall hallow thy passion I promise the comfort of Heaven' (Tait, 'Harnessing corpses: death, burial, disinterment and commemoration in Ireland, 1550-1655', p.263). Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh used a similar formula in a thirteenth-century poem: 'I pray, too, to the prophet who will give Heaven to all who learn off what I compose; may he bring to Heaven every man who recites it' (*DDé 25*, v.76).

¹⁴³ Walsh (ed.), *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne*.

evangelists and the three widows, until he arrives at the five virgins under the direction of their queen, Mary. What is intriguing is that Catherine appears listed alongside four early Irish virgin saints - Deirbhile, Brigid, Samtha and Caoluinn.¹⁴⁴ Donnchadh invokes all five in the following way: 'Catherine strong to help, Deirbhile, Brigid, holy Samtha and Caoluinn, five fair trees 'neath which I need not fear much.'¹⁴⁵ This inclusion becomes most interesting when one recalls, as noted above, that sometime after the Augustinians revitalised the Lough Derg pilgrimage in 1140, one of the seven penitential beds (formerly dedicated to Adomnán) was rededicated to Catherine who now appeared among another list of early Irish saints – Patrick, Brigid, Colmcille, Molaise, Brendan and Dabheoc.¹⁴⁶ One could say then, that, by the thirteenth century Catherine of Alexandria had been adopted by the Gaelic Irish as one of their own. Donnchadh expresses great confidence in Catherine's power, as his patron, to extinguish his evil deeds before the face of God: '*Fa chabhair Caitir-íona do mhúchadh mo mhíghníomha; ní beag an daingean damh-sa, m'aingeal is m'éarlamh-sa.*'¹⁴⁷ Another poem dedicated to St Catherine, this time by an unidentified poet (*n.l.t.*1513-14) may perhaps have been composed by Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh. It is found in *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne*, coming directly after the

¹⁴⁴ Deirbhile's feast day occurs on 3 August (or 26 October for Deirbhile of Achad Cuilinn), Brigid's on 1 February, Samtha's on 19 December and Caoluinn's (possibly any of the saints named Cúelán listed in the *Martyrology of Gorman*) on 19 June, 23 June, 30 June, 25 July, 29 July, 25 September, 29 October (depending on which Cúelán you choose). Catherine's feast day is 25 November.

¹⁴⁵ *DDé* 25, v.59.

¹⁴⁶ Harbison, *Pilgrimage in Ireland*, p.65.

¹⁴⁷ 'By the help of Catherine my misdeeds were extinguished: [she] is no small fortress for me, my angel and my patron' [my translation], *DD* 53, v.28.

Life of St Catherine compiled by Ciothruadh Ó Fionnghaill and Enóg Ó Giolláin.¹⁴⁸ Another copy of the poem (consisting of seventeen verses as opposed to the eleven found in *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne*) exists in *The Book of the Dean of Lismore*, compiled 1512-26 by Sir James Mac Gregor, dean of Lismore (Argyllshire) and his brother, Duncan.¹⁴⁹ It begins ‘Star of the world, Catherine, helper of the Greeks; she succours the choicest of the races of every province there against death.’¹⁵⁰ Then follows a detailed appraisal of the physical attributes of the saint in typical bardic style. However the poem nears its end with three verses listing a set of exclusively Irish saints (excepting Martin of Tours, who is also included in the list) and praising their virtues. Among them are Brigid, Athracha, Ciarán, Colmcille, Pádraig, Martain, Mongan, Manann, Comann and Coireall.¹⁵¹ The fact that Catherine is again listed among Irish saints, and that many of the saints mentioned above feature in other lists of Ó Dálaigh’s, strongly suggests that this is another of his compositions.¹⁵² That the second copy of the poem (found in *The Book of the Dean of Lismore*) occurs in a manuscript containing four other poems by Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh (along with many other poems attributed to thirteenth-century Irish bardic poets such as

¹⁴⁸ It appears at p.105, between the Life and Ciothruadh’s note following (24 P 25, p.105).

¹⁴⁹ E. C. Quiggin, *Poems from the Book of the Dean of Lismore with a catalogue of the book and indexes* (ed. J. Fraser), (Cambridge, 1937). Poem 31, p.48 (in the original manuscript, the poem occurs at p.36).

¹⁵⁰ *ADD 99*, v.1.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, vv 8-10.

¹⁵² Brigid, Ciarán, Martain, Colmcille, Pádraig (Patrick) and Comann all appear listed in *DDé 25*, vv 59, 66, 67 and 69.

Muireadhach Albanach Ó Dálaigh and Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe), strengthens the argument further.¹⁵³

It is no surprise that the cult of St Catherine grew, developed and flourished in fifteenth and sixteenth century Ireland. Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn treats of the life story of Catherine in a poem dedicated to her honour. Influenced by the Life in Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda Aurea*, it contains, nevertheless, a free rendering of the details, suggestive of having been recalled from memory. For Ó hUiginn, Catherine 'drank of the wine of humility' (playing on the rendition of her name as *Caitir Fhiona*) 'intoxicating her heart with fervent love of God.'¹⁵⁴ This provides the Observant friar with an opportunity to give a lesson on this particular virtue, the importance of which he stresses in the opening verses: 'Why I should love humility is this: the swelling of my spirit lessens my wealth after death.'¹⁵⁵ Philip asserts that, by recalling her story, he is offering a prayer to this lowly virgin. He is not sparing in his praise of the saint, affirming that no maiden ever surpassed Catherine in purity except the Virgin Mary.¹⁵⁶ As ever, the poet's attention soon turns to what the saint can do for him on the Last Day. Addressing Christ, Philip urges him to take into account the amount of blood spilt by Catherine (which could be used to wash away the poet's sin), adding that, if this is not enough, surely He could settle the balance by contributing some

¹⁵³ Poems attributed to Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh are to be found at pp 11, 101, 122, 296 of the manuscript, Muireadhach Albanach at pp 19, 113, 150, 255, 284, 307, Giolla Brighde at p.40 and also other early poets such as Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh at pp 12, 53, 124, 165 (see Index of Authors in Quiggin).

¹⁵⁴ *PB* 14, v.5.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, v.3.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, v.22.

drops of His own.¹⁵⁷ Ó hUiginn next reminds Christ how Catherine's virginity, humility and poverty should merit His mercy and then, turning to the saint herself, he climaxes with the plea 'At the weighing of the judgement scale, if thou canst not overlook my sins remind my accuser that thy head was cut from thy breast.'¹⁵⁸ Here again, the *raison d'être* of a saint's sufferings and martyrdom as perceived by the devout Catholic of the late medieval period can be observed. The saint, through horrific suffering, merited a passage to heaven for souls who wished to enlist themselves as clients. The particular forms of torture, gruesome as they may have been, became valuable tools with which the saint was henceforth equipped to pick Heaven's locks.¹⁵⁹ Thus, in another poem, Philip, contemplating the weighing of his soul by Michael at the Last Day, implores Catherine: 'In fear of the light measure I merit, be sure, Catherine, to put thy martyrdom at my end of the scales.'¹⁶⁰ On that day, humanity in general was expected to make full compensation for the wounds inflicted upon Christ on Calvary, and especially for the heart-wound. The fifteenth-century devotion to the Five Wounds impressed upon believers that it was only through Christ's wounds that souls entered Heaven but, paradoxically, not before reparation was made for the fact that they had been inflicted in the first place. Philip, however, is so confident of Catherine's merits that he disregards his need to atone for

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., v.24.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., vv 25, 31.

¹⁵⁹ This idea can be traced back at least as early as the ninth century in Ireland, when, in the epilogue to the *Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee* we read: 'The great host, which, I reckon, which died in every nation, to Thee, O Christ, who art noblest, I appeal by its sufferings' and later 'I appeal by their truly innocent bloods on roads: I appeal by their limbs, their lances through their sides'; see Stokes, *The Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee* (London, 1905), p.278.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 18, v.14.

the wounds of Christ at all, offering the virgin martyr's sufferings as surety: 'If thou, O Catherine, strive hard for me, it matters little what God claims for his heart-wound; there are more ways to heaven than that.'¹⁶¹

The subject of Catherine's mystical marriage with Christ, featured in hundreds of Christian paintings from the fourteenth century onwards, is treated of in the account of the saint's life in the *Legenda Aurea*. Usually in depictions of this subject, the Virgin Mary assists Christ in placing the ring on Catherine's finger.¹⁶² This theme, however, does not get much attention from the Gaelic bardic poets. An exception to this is found in a poem by an unidentified poet in which the theme is alluded to in the second last verse, dedicated to the virgin martyr: '*Óg do-bhir gairm an ghrádha; mó ná sin a snaidhm síodha, gídh mór bráithtir a buadha, Caitir chuanna óg Fhiona.*'¹⁶³ Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh in the sixteenth century also invokes Catherine frequently in his poetry. Like Philip Bocht, he highlights Catherine's efficacy at the hour of death. His confidence in her is sure for he believes that she will foot the bill of his sinfulness: 'The fullness of the tribute is remitted to her, gifts from the Virgin Catherine.'¹⁶⁴ Undoubtedly that is why he chooses Catherine as one of eight patrons who will escort him to eternity, hiding his sins.¹⁶⁵ However, Catherine was not only

¹⁶¹ Ibid., v.39.

¹⁶² Warner, *Alone of all her sex*, p.128.

¹⁶³ 'The Virgin that received the call of love: as great as her gifts are judged, greater than these is her mystical marriage, noble young Catherine of the Wine' [my translation] : *DD 24*, v.29.

¹⁶⁴ *AFOD 7*, v.8.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 30, v.7f. The other seven mentioned are the Virgin Mary, Michael Archangel, John the Baptist, Francis, Patrick, Colmcille and Brigid. Catherine takes her place in the middle of the Irish saints, Colmcille and Brigid as one might expect, having been long adopted among as one of their own.

effective at death. As a patron during one's life she readily defended her own. The *Annals of the Four Masters* record how, in 1513, Owen O' Malley made a raid on the town of Killybegs (which was under her patronage) from the sea, plundering it and then attempting to make an escape. However, a storm overtook their ships while they were on the sea and Brian Mac Sweeney who pursued the raiders had them killed 'through the miracles of God and St Catherine whose town they had profaned.'¹⁶⁶

The early seventeenth-century poet, Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaird provides a useful insight into devotion to St Margaret in his poem '*Iomdha fear suirghe ag San Mairghréag*.'¹⁶⁷ In this poem, Fearghal woos the virgin martyr who famously gave up her life when a rejected suitor's obsession with her turned to violence. He begins by acknowledging the fact that Margaret is a lady much in demand: 'Many a suitor has St Margaret, she has magnified her folk; she suits herself to every man she weds; she is a huntress of souls.'¹⁶⁸ On account the legend, which related how the saint was swallowed by a dragon and eventually managed to extricate herself from the monster's body by making the sign of the cross and exploding the offending beast, Margaret gained the reputation of patron of women in labour. Devotion to the saint by expectant mothers was undoubtedly strong, aided by the promise of an easy birth: '(Successful) childbirth is the prize of thy martyrdom; thou canst hardly be neglected as thy devotee suffers no pang if she only ask thee for an hour of safety.'¹⁶⁹ Fearghal describes in detail Margaret's gruesome torture and final martyrdom, adhering fairly closely to the version found in the *Legenda Aurea*. Interestingly, however, Fearghal

¹⁶⁶ *AFM*, 1513.

¹⁶⁷ *DD* 32 (translation found in *IM* 1929, p.593).

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, v.1.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, v.17.

interprets Margaret's rejection of the crazed governor Olibrius as an indication of the favour with which she regards the poet himself: 'That she will not reject my suit I gather from this; that her one-time rejection of her noble suitor was a favour for me.'¹⁷⁰ In all five depictions of St Margaret listed by Hunt the saint appears with a cross staff, indicating her belief in the power of the Sign of the Cross. In one representation (at Jerpoint in County Kilkenny) she is depicted as thrusting the cross staff down the mouth of the dragon.¹⁷¹

Two popular friars: Saints Dominic and Francis

The popularity of both St Dominic and St Francis in late medieval Ireland is hardly surprising when one takes into account that the Dominican order (Conventual and Observant) was to be found at forty-one different locations throughout the country until the middle of the sixteenth century and that the Franciscans (Conventual and Observant) were, themselves, to be found at sixty-two.¹⁷² However, devotion to these saints was not confined to areas where their respective religious orders had influence. St Dominic is depicted on four tomb surrounds according to Hunt. Two of these occur where the order was located (i.e. Sligo and Athenry) but two other depictions are to be found at Thurles and Mothel, neither of which had a Dominican friary. In the case of St Francis, Hunt lists six representations, three of which are to be found at Franciscan sites.¹⁷³ Interestingly, lives of Dominic or Francis fail to appear in either the *Leabhar Breac* or *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum* and do not gain entry to important fifteenth-century manuscripts such as British Library, Egerton 1781 or Egerton 91, the latter

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., v.38.

¹⁷¹ Hunt, *Irish medieval figure sculpture* i, p.256.

¹⁷² Gwynn and Hadcock, *Medieval religious houses*, pp 220, 240-1.

¹⁷³ Hunt, *Irish medieval figure sculpture* i, p.255.

having been written by the prolific scribe Uilliam Mac an Leagha. Neither do they appear in *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne* (1513-14). However, details from these lives, traceable to the *Legenda Aurea*, were, nevertheless, transmitted by poets such as Tadhg Óg and Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn. The *Legenda Aurea* was, of course, accessible in fifteenth-century Ireland as evidenced by the Franciscan friary library catalogue at Youghal.¹⁷⁴

In a poem dedicated to Dominic, Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn relates various incidents from the saint's life. Towards the end of his poem, he includes events already recorded in the *Legenda Aurea*: 'Another day 'tis said, a shower overtook him journeying; it touched not his cloak; you would have thought it came not near him.'¹⁷⁵ Philip Bocht, later on in the fifteenth century, relates the same story in a poem devoted to the saint.¹⁷⁶ The *Legenda Aurea*, however, highlights that it was on account of Dominic's making of the Sign of the Cross that he was spared the rain's assault, a detail omitted by Philip.¹⁷⁷ Another incident related by Tadhg Óg concerns a day when Dominic's books fell from his hands into the sea. After Dominic prayed, they were all recovered, with not one letter harmed.¹⁷⁸ This story is also recorded by Philip Bocht, although his version speaks of only one book having been dropped into the sea. He then goes on to note how this miracle proved Dominic's power and command over even the elements.¹⁷⁹ Stories concerning the preservation of important books or manuscripts

¹⁷⁴ Meigs, *The reformations in Ireland: tradition and confessionalism, 1400-1690*, p.145.

¹⁷⁵ *DDé* 4, v.22.

¹⁷⁶ *PB* 20, v.27.

¹⁷⁷ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend* i, p.51.

¹⁷⁸ *DDé* 4, v.23.

¹⁷⁹ *PB* 20, v.31.

from harm were not uncommon in the lives of saints.¹⁸⁰ In the same poem, Philip tells how 'once he dictated piously a document and gave it to a messenger; his sanctity was shown by the paper being unscathed by a fire.'¹⁸¹ Evidence of the same tradition is found in similar stories regarding Colmcille, as told by Manus Ó Domhnaill in his *Betha Colaim Chille* (1532). A certain man in Alba was travelling across a stream with a satchel of books upon his back, many years after Colmcille's death. He happened, while crossing, to fall into the water and was drowned. His body was found twenty days later, still carrying the satchel of books, all of which were now decayed save a leaf from a book that Colmcille had written with his own hand, which was miraculously preserved. Ó Domhnaill concludes with the phrase 'God's name and Columcille's were magnified thereby.'¹⁸² Similarly, in another story, it is related how a book of the gospels that Colmcille had left behind in a kiln, which subsequently took fire, was wholly preserved from the flames when it raised itself above them by its own accord.¹⁸³ Both of the other events in Dominic's life recorded by *Legenda Aurea* and retold by Tadhg Óg (namely his raising three people from the dead and the cure of a blind man) are also related by Philip Bocht.¹⁸⁴

Perhaps the most interesting assertion by both Tadhg Óg and Philip Bocht in relation to this saint is that the merits of his life were, in fact, retroactive, i.e. that others

¹⁸⁰ It is also related how St Cronan of Roscrea once accidentally dropped an open Gospel book into a lake, and when it was recovered after forty days and forty nights in the water not even one letter had suffered damage: see Charles Plummer (ed.), *Vita Sanctorum Hiberniae* (2 vols, London, 1910) ii, p.68.

¹⁸¹ *PB* 20, v.25.

¹⁸² *BCC*, pp 453-5.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, p.187.

¹⁸⁴ *DD* 4, vv 25-6; *PB* vv 30, 35.

benefited from the graces won by the saint long before the saint was born. Tadhg Óg introduces this subject when he speaks of Longinus (the *Dall*): ‘I must get from God peace through this prayer; owing to St Dominic the Blind man was forgiven the lance that pierced him.’¹⁸⁵ Alluding to the fact that this claim is not made in the account on Dominic in the *Legenda Aurea*, Liam Ó Caithnia suggests that Tadhg mixed this story up with the tale of the blind man having his sight restored because of a visit to Dominic’s relics, told a few verses later.¹⁸⁶ However, this is most certainly not the case, as explained below. Philip Bocht works out of the same tradition when he states that ‘wise folk say that, as Francis, to our relief, won Christ’s coming for our sin’s sake, God granted this to Dominic too.’¹⁸⁷ Tadhg Óg purposely refers to a distinct tradition of the retroactive powers of a holy man, which can be found elsewhere. Two clear examples of the power of a saint in action before his earthly life began can be found in Ó Domhnaill’s *Betha Colaim Chille*. Lugaid, whose son, Fiachra killed one of the monks of Bishop Eoghan of Ard Sratha, came to the bishop in fear, as Bishop Eoghan had cursed Fiachra (leading to his death) and all his seed. Pleading for mercy, Lugaid was told: ‘I will accept terms from thee...and I would not accept them save in honour of a blessed holy boy [Colmcille] that shall be born of the same seed as thine at the end of two score years and ten.’¹⁸⁸ Bishop Eoghan also remarked that

it was by reason of Columcille’s being of one race with Lugaid that God suffered him not to curse Lugaid nor to curse his children after him. And

¹⁸⁵ *DDé* 4, v.9.

¹⁸⁶ Ó Caithnia, *Apalóga na bhfilí*, p.172.

¹⁸⁷ *PB* 20, v.15.

¹⁸⁸ *BCC*, p.25.

moreover..that thus much of honour should God show him by reason of Columcille's being of his tribe.¹⁸⁹

The second instance occurs when a skull is brought to Colmcille while he is walking along the side of the Boyne. It turns out to be that of Cormac Mac Airt, one of his own ancestors. The story continues to relate how the skull begins to speak, and shares its tale with its saintly descendant:

And the skull related that albeit his faith had not been perfect yet such had been the measure thereof and his keeping to the truth that, inasmuch as God knew that Columcille would be of his seed and would pray for his soul, he had not damned him in very truth.¹⁹⁰

Neither of these stories is to be found in Adomnán's Life, which forms the core of *Betha Colaim Chille*. However, it is quite possible that traditions such as these, more than likely found in other versions of the saint's life now lost, and most probably familiar to fifteenth-century poets such as Tadhg Óg and Philip Bocht (Manus Ó Domhnaill drew on a plethora of sources for his Life), had some influence on the redaction of the lives of foreign saints also.

Francis, who is also invoked frequently in bardic poetry, was even more popular than Dominic. The greatest bardic exponent of the virtues of this saint was, predictably, the Franciscan, Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn. In praising the virtues of the patron of his order, Philip emphasises his chastity, obedience, poverty and humility (the characteristic Franciscan traits) but with particularly barbed intent. It is clear from much of his poetry that he is making a serious statement about the lack of evidence of such virtues in many of the Franciscan communities of the time. The *Annals of Ulster*, recording

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., p.27.

¹⁹⁰ BCC, p.129.

Philip's death in 1487, attest to the fact that the poet was a member of a Franciscan community committed to the Observantine reform that flourished in the second half of the fifteenth century.¹⁹¹ Driven by his perception of the lack of observance of poverty in the order, Philip complains 'Chastity and obedience were the inheritance his folk got; but the harm it incurred from being helped (by alms) resulted in its poverty not flourishing.'¹⁹² A poem, attributed to Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh by Lambert McKenna, is more likely to have been composed by Philip Bocht. He exhorts the friars therein (in true Observantine spirit) to embrace again the virtue of humility: 'Though the highest branches in the wood are broken by the storm, the storm does no hurt to the lowly one.'¹⁹³ This particular image would have resonated loudly in Gaelic circles. As observed above, it was customary for poets to praise their chieftain-patrons (and often their spiritual ones) with the title 'highest branch' or 'tree overtopping wood'. Philip follows with more striking imagery from nature: 'The field of heaviest corn grass has its crop laid low; and the most fragrant branch is the lowliest on its tree.'¹⁹⁴ Finally, he makes his point directly: 'Till they lost the game long ago they had only one rule; the brethren have been divided in two; I cannot omit to speak of them.'¹⁹⁵ Encouraging his fellow Franciscans to adopt the virtue of obedience, Philip states: 'The friar should be obedient; obedience begets God's love...did a man bear all martyrdom for thee O Christ and not obey thee, he were as a house dismantled.'¹⁹⁶

¹⁹¹ 'Pilib bocht mac Cuinn Crosaigh hUi Uiginn d'heg in bliadhain si: idon, Brathair Mimur de Obseruancia, nech is mó 7 is ferr duanaire diadhachta 'san aimsir deigheanaigh': AU 1487.

¹⁹² PB 1, v.6.

¹⁹³ DD 52, v.21 (translation in IM 1930, p.150f).

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., v.23.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., v.26.

¹⁹⁶ PB 8, vv 1-2.

Just as other saints such as John the Baptist and Catherine were believed to perform mighty works of intercession for sinners, so too was Francis. The latter saint, however, had a distinct advantage over the rest. While both John the Baptist and Catherine may have suffered grievous suffering on the road to martyrdom, it was, nevertheless, merely their own wounds that they bore, and, concomitantly, pleaded with. In the case of Francis, however, the saint had the distinct privilege of imploring mercy for humanity not on account of his own wounds, but of Christ's, which he, himself bore (i.e. the stigmata). In this era of devotion to the Five Wounds, this was a huge boon. The point was not lost on Philip Bocht: 'In excess of love, Jesus stamped – loving proof of God's anger – His five wounds on Francis's " five hearts."'¹⁹⁷ On Judgement Day, therefore, when one was expected to render the debt incurred by humanity to Christ for the infliction of the five wounds, only Francis could reimburse Christ with the exact payment (having borne the very same wounds himself). Therefore Philip can say with confidence 'Francis's wounds requite the nails piercing Thee; the saint's breast wound requites the deep wounded breast.'¹⁹⁸ In the verse following, however, Philip does something even more interesting. He states that 'Francis will bare his breast, pleading for the forgiveness of all my conduct which wounds thy breast.'¹⁹⁹ The imagery here is that of the Virgin Mary as Advocate and Mother, baring her breast to her Son in an effort to appease his anger on Judgement Day, which has its roots in classical literature. It became a popular literary and iconographic motif, influenced by the writings of Arnold of Bonneval (*d.* after 1156),

¹⁹⁷ *PB* 1, v.9.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, v.24.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, v.25.

remaining popular until at least the seventeenth century.²⁰⁰ The intercessory power of Francis before the Father, therefore, is almost put on a par with that of the Virgin Mary, or more specifically (in the case of the *double intercession*), Christ. Revering Francis as his particular patron, Philip liked to request his continued help and protection as he neared the end of most of his religious poetry, regardless of theme or subject. The popularity of dying in the habit of the order of St Francis, thus winning the saint's protection, is well attested. Obits featured in the annals usually refer to the deceased having died so many days before a certain saint's feast day (or often on the day itself) or having been buried under his protection (in a church dedicated to him or before an altar dedicated to him) or, indeed, in the habit of his order as is the case in the following reference from the *Annals of Loch Cé* for 1527: 'Ó Cléirigh, i.e. the Gilla Riabhach, son of Tadhg Cam, an adept in science and a man of great wealth died in the habit of St Francis in the middle month of Spring.'²⁰¹

Given that Francis bore the wounds of Christ and that he was hailed as a powerful intercessor on Judgement Day, what is most surprising is not that he was so acclaimed, but, conversely, that he remained uncalled upon in many poems where such an invocation would have not only been fitting spiritually, but also thematically. His noticeable absence is particularly accentuated in poems which have the Passion of Christ or the Five Wounds as their subject. Sixteenth-century poets such as Laoiseach Mac an Bhaire, Diarmuid Mac an Bhaire, Maolmhuire, son of Cairbre Ó hUiginn and particularly Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh treat of these themes at length, yet without

²⁰⁰ A variation of this theme is the *double intercession* where both the Virgin and Christ plead with the Father, she showing her breast, He, His wounds.

²⁰¹ *ALC*, 1527.

mention of the wounds of Francis or his share in the Passion.²⁰² The late sixteenth-century poet, Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh also considers the subject of the five wounds without mentioning the stigmata of Francis.²⁰³ The reason for this is not ignorance of the saint or lack of devotion, however. Indeed in one poem in particular, which deals with the subject of death, he names Francis among a company of eight saints in whose intercession he has particular confidence.²⁰⁴ Instead, it arises purely from lack of relevance. These poems are broadly Christological in tenor (excepting the occasional reference to the Virgin's intercession). This does not constitute evidence of some early influence of Counter-Reformation dumbing down of the role of saints. Instead, it is merely indicative of poets reflecting on the mystery of Redemption through the medium of their craft, without necessarily having to pack their contemplations with surplus heavenly personages. The clear hierarchy of intercessors alluded to above is at work here, the first in line being the merits emanating from the Passion and Death of Christ. Francis is not mentioned because, for the poets in question, he is only incidental, and in the above cases, superfluous.

The others

Clodagh Tait, in her treatment of death-bed patrons, and of St George in particular, suggests that 'it is unlikely that devotion to this saint extended much further than Dublin and parts of the Pale, even in the sixteenth century, despite his popularity in England.'²⁰⁵ However there exists some evidence to suggest the contrary. The

²⁰² See *ADD* 55, 56, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67 and 77.

²⁰³ *AFOD* 24.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 30, vv 8-11.

²⁰⁵ Tait, 'Harnessing corpses: death, burial, disinterment and commemoration in Ireland, 1550-1655', p.266.

Leabhar Breac, for instance, contains a text entitled *Páis Georgi*.²⁰⁶ The *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum* also contains the Life of St George.²⁰⁷ A homily on the life of St George, essentially a reworking of the *Leabhar Breac* text, with the addition of the story of the saint's encounter with the dragon (first found in *Legenda Aurea* but missing from the *Leabhar Breac* and *Liber Flavus* versions), is found in Egerton 91 (fifteenth century), written by Uilliam Mac an Leagha.²⁰⁸ Even Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn, while, confusing the story of St George with that of Blessed Walter of Birbech (who appears in Caesarius de Heisterbach's *Dialogus Miraculorum*), nevertheless demonstrates that he has heard of the saint, albeit his knowledge of the saint's life appears a little awry.²⁰⁹ A poem dedicated to St Augustine (presumably written by a member of the Augustinian order and *n.l.t.*1614) begins '*Toghaim Aibhisdin mar aighne*' ('I choose Augustine as pleader').²¹⁰ It is based largely on material found in the *Legenda Aurea*, which is cited as the source of a story about the saint's finger, the details of which, the poet, in the end, does not relate, perhaps because the audience knew the story well or because he had forgotten the exact details. The *Legenda Aurea* contains the full version. A certain man once asked the guardian of Augustine's body for a finger from it, paying the guardian an appropriate fee. However the guardian, who was a monk, gave him a fake instead of an authentic finger. Yet because of the man's faith, God intervened in such a way as to grant him a real finger of the saint, which was later proven when his coffin was opened.²¹¹ The

²⁰⁶ This can be found at 190b (Vol I).

²⁰⁷ This can be found at f.44 [] r^oa.

²⁰⁸ *B.M.cat.Ir.MSS.*, ii, p.439.

²⁰⁹ *PB* 13, vv 23-36.

²¹⁰ *DD* 59, v.1 (translation in *IM* 1930, p.186f.)

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, v.30. Also see Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend* i, p.129.

poet goes on to enumerate some of the miracles and healings performed by Augustine including the story of a woman who was accustomed to burning hot with passion. One night, however, she dreamed of St Augustine who quickly cooled it for her!²¹²

Native saints

It is a curious anomaly that the bardic order, bastion of Gaelic heritage and tradition, does not give much attention to native Irish saints in its religious poetry. In fact, references to the likes of Patrick, Brigid and Colmcille, not to mention lesser saints of Ireland, are few and far between. Whether this indicates that from the Anglo-Norman invasion onwards the cults of native saints were on the wane is doubtful. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that the various cults attached to native saints persisted in the centuries following. The scribal tradition of copying and translating the lives of saints testifies to a continued interest in the homegrown variety. Also the widespread use of relics of native saints for swearing oaths, for curing and as battle talismans right up to the end of the sixteenth century and beyond, demonstrates that devotion to the individuals whose power they contained and transmitted was indeed alive and well.²¹³ As alluded to above however, it is quite a difficult task to investigate how the native Irish saints fitted into devotional patterns that were, by now, broadly based upon popular saints of the universal church whose cults were commonly celebrated across Europe. When the average Gaelic Christian of the fifteenth or sixteenth century encountered some sudden difficulty did the name of a native rather than a foreign saint automatically fall from his lips? Such a question is next to impossible to answer. Did the people of Lorrha, for instance, always invoke St Ruadhán when in need? And

²¹² *DD* 59, v.34.

²¹³ For an interesting discussion of the various functions of relics see A. T. Lucas, 'The social role of relics and reliquaries in ancient Ireland', in *R.S.A.I.Jn.* cxvi–cxvii (1986-7).

did the inhabitants of Downpatrick spontaneously call upon Patrick who was so closely associated with their locality or instead, on St Francis, whose virtues were presumably regularly extolled by the Franciscan order whose foundation in the area dated from c.1240?²¹⁴ Again, no comprehensive answer to this query is attainable. Possibly the first exclamation was not devoted to a member of either category. If the spontaneous scribblings known as *marginalia* found on manuscripts such as the fifteenth-century *Leabhar Breac* are indicative of initial invocations of heavenly personages, then one might simply expect a brief ‘*A Dia*’ or ‘*A Muire foir.*’²¹⁵

A comprehensive study of the role of native saints in the lives of the ordinary Gaelic Catholic is not attempted here. Neither is an in-depth examination of the various recensions of the Lives of native saints embarked upon. The volume of material is too great, and such a topic merits a much more thorough treatment than can be afforded here. This section, however, consists of a mere snapshot of how devotion to the native saint worked in practice by reference to a number of different sources.

The Local saint

Perhaps the most influential saint of all in the lives of people in any given locality was the local one, or, at least the saint who traditionally had some association with the area. Regardless of the frequency of an individual’s contact with the institutional church the local saint was sure to impinge upon his life. The local saint could not be ignored, for to ignore him would involve ignoring the landscape and environment, and effectively the wealth of *dindsenchas* (place-lore) on the lips of most of one’s family and friends. One could not be blind to the holy well or deaf to the names of valleys, mounds or rivers so frequently associated with the lives of saints. Therefore, stories

²¹⁴ Gwynn and Hadcock, *Medieval religious houses*, p.247.

²¹⁵ *R.I.A cat.Ir.MSS.*, fasc. xxvii, pp 3385-95.

regarding local saints were undoubtedly more often learnt from one's environment than from one's attendance at the Church's liturgy. The importance of genealogies of the saints in this regard must be stressed. Samantha Meigs notes that

through the genealogies, saints could be claimed as clearly 'belonging' to certain families or regions. This connection was especially important in Gaelic society where patronage was often determined by hereditary family associations.²¹⁶

If an individual could establish that his clan had sprung from the same stock as that of the local saint, then he could, in a very real way, claim that saint's protection and favour. An interesting example of a poet claiming an association between his family and the pupil of a local saint from the fourteenth century serves as a useful example of this mode of thought. Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh (*d.*1387) reminds the family patron, Colmán of Cloyne (who also ranked as patron of the diocese in ecclesiastical circles), that the saint himself had been a poet before entering religious life, and that, on becoming a cleric, had bequeathed his skill and learning to his fosterling and pupil, Dálach, from whom the Uí Dhálaigh, renowned for bardic verse descended.²¹⁷ Gofraidh makes a defence of the art of poetry, stressing that it is not opposed to God (referring to the ancient prejudice of the Church against the bardic order) by using not only the family patron but also the ecclesiastical patron (of the diocese) to make the point. In this case, then, Colmán's dual office is helpful. He is the perfect intermediary, having allegiance to both sides (the bardic order and the Church) and revered by both. Gofraidh makes no secret of the saint's connection with the Uí Dhálaigh: 'Great Colmán, son of Léinín, melodious sage of smooth, bright hand, the

²¹⁶ Meigs, *The reformations in Ireland: tradition and confessionalism, 1400-1690*, p.28.

²¹⁷ Bergin (ed.), *Irish bardic poetry*, p.70.

O'Dalys are bound to love thee; thou art our share of the Colmáns.'²¹⁸ On account of this bond the poet requests special favour:

As thou hast given us our art, O mighty Colmán, find for us a city like the fort of God, when we have spent our first life /

Have regard for us, O fosterer of our ancestor, concerning that high and pleasant city; take me in charge above all others for my kinship to him whom thou hast chosen.²¹⁹

When an injustice was committed against any member of a family under a saint's protection, immediate consequences ensued. One instance of this concerns a member of the O' Dempsey clan who were under the patronage of St Eibhin of Monasterevin.

The annals relate how his heavenly patron reacted to his murder:

Toirdhealbhach Dubh Ó Dimusaigh was killed in treachery by his own relative, i.e. by Muirchertach Óg Ó Dimusaigh, whilst under the guarantees of God and St Eibhin. Muirchertach Óg himself was killed soon after that by Ó Mordha through the power of God and St Eibhin.²²⁰

A sixteenth-century manuscript (British Library, Additional Ms. 18205), originating in Fermanagh, is devoted to St Molaisse (also known as Laserian) of Devenish.²²¹ It contains, among other things, a Life of the saint based on a Latin homily but

²¹⁸ Bergin (ed.), *Irish bardic poetry*, 16, v.1: 'Tú ár gcuid do na Colmánaibh' – this expression immediately establishes, not only an association, but, in addition, almost a possession of the saint, implying mutual duties and responsibilities. Gofraidh distinguishes this particular relationship from acquaintances with any of the other St Colmáns, (of which there were many). *The Martyrology of Gorman* lists ninety-two Colmáns in all; see Stokes (ed.), *Féilire Huí Gormáin*, pp 344-5.

²¹⁹ Bergin (ed.), *Irish Bardic poetry* 16, vv 14-15.

²²⁰ *ALC*, 1534. Also found in the *AFM* for the same year.

²²¹ Feast day, 6 January: Stokes (ed.), *Féilire Huí Gormáin*, p.374.

containing a wider range of material, providing a great insight into how a local saint was revered.²²² One poem of thirty verses (*Sloinfead do chach ceart Mlaisi*) treats of the fact that tributes are due to the saint from clans occupying a territory in north west Fermanagh entitled Tuath Rátha. It also relates how the lords of that area, the O' Flanagans, are to carry the gospels of Molaisse as their *meirge*, or standard, into battle.²²³ In addition, the manuscript contains two verses of a hymn by the Mic Draighin of Cell Ro in Tirawley who claim kinship with him on his mother's side.²²⁴ The local saint could also be used to confirm a family's status. A poem of seventeen verses, entitled *Cinndus fuair Mlaisse in Bealach*, found in the same manuscript, relates how Molaisse made the Uí Taithlig coarbs of Devenish (an island on Lough Erne where Molaisse founded his monastery in the sixth century) and the Uí

²²² *B.M.Cat.Ir.MSS.*, ii, p.462.

²²³ The subject of the use of proeliators in battle is treated of below. Carrying the gospels of Molaisse around on circuit might also indicate the duty of exacting tribute, as this was a common practice by ecclesiastics who possessed relics of a particular saint. The relics also served as an insignia of the collector's office and authority and an instrument for intimidating those who were somehow reluctant to pay (See Lucas, 'The social role of relics and reliquaries in ancient Ireland', pp 14-15). It is unlikely that the O' Flanagans were keepers of the gospels, as the book (in battle known as proeliator or *cathach*) was probably in the possession of the coarbs who were the O' Meehins. This ties in with the fact that this family still possessed the shrine for the gospels in 1851 (see below). For a photographic study of Irish relics in the medieval period see Ragnall Ó Floinn, *Irish shrines and reliquaries of the middle ages* (Dublin, 1994).

²²⁴ '*Meic Draighin de Corcaraidhe 7 braitri do Mhlaisi iat do thaobh a mhathar*' (*B.M.Cat.Ir.MSS.*, ii, p.464).

Mighigein coarbs of Ballaghmeehin.²²⁵ The coarb of Molaisse was a lay incumbent of the ancient *termon* dedicated to the saint, who cared for the church land and had certain administrative responsibilities as the modern representative of its founder.²²⁶ The collection of tributes due to local saints was a common practice by coarbs. In return, the saint was expected to protect his followers and intercede for them. The O' Flanagans, lords of Tuath Rátha are mentioned frequently in the annals. This ruling family emerged as hereditary parsons or priors of the Culdee community on Devenish (a continuation from the early monastery) in the fifteenth century, continuing to exercise this role in the sixteenth century also.²²⁷

In the case of St Caillín of Fenagh, County Leitrim, it was the coarb who had possession of the *cathach*. An introduction to the Life, found in British Library,

²²⁵ Ibid., p.463. O' Donovan states that in 1851 the Meehins still farmed the *termon* lands of Ballaghmeehin, then in the parish of Rossinver, Co Leitrim. He also alluded to the fact that the head of the family possessed the shrine of the gospels of St Molaisse (ibid).

²²⁶ For a more comprehensive discussion of the roles of coarbs see Canice Mooney, 'The Church in Gaelic Ireland', in Corish (ed.), *A history of Irish Catholicism*, pp 10-15. The *Annals of the Four Masters* record how, in 1439, O' Meehin of Ballagh, Coarb of Molaisse died. As might be expected, devotion to the local saint, whom the coarb represented, influenced the naming of children. In 1391 the annals record how Lasarina (after the saint), the wife of O' Meehin of Ballaghmeehin, died. It is not improbable that this lady was in fact a member of O' Meehin's family (judging by the name) and that the marriage could in fact have been contracted outside the degrees of consanguinity allowed for by the Church, although this does not necessarily have to be the case. The name would have been popular in any case due to the prominence of the local saint's cult.

²²⁷ Incidentally, an Augustinian priory was founded beside that of the Culdees in the twelfth century and both retained a separate existence thenceforward (See Gwynn and Hadcock, *Medieval religious houses*, pp 33, 169). For entries relating to the O' Flanagans as priors in the annals see *AFM* 1449, 1450, 1451, 1462, 1479, 1505, 1520, 1521.

Cotton Vespasian E. II, ff. 108-120 (dating from 1535), written in an English hand, explains the consequences of non-payment of tributes due to the saint. Referring to Caillín and his expectations, the writer states

He sheweth...whate they shoulde paye vnto him and his Successors, called Abbott or Corb w^{ch} should haue the Custodie and keepinge of y^e Caagh or Cachboagh [i.e. Cathach]. There is written yf they pay not y^e duties, as in this booke is layde downe to the Abbott or Corb they shall not enjoy from y^e bridg forde to Sligo. And also should losse the Caagh or Cachboagh: w^{ch} yf they lost should be to there ouerthrowes in all battles or feights wheresoeuer for y^e interpretinge of the name Cathboagh is Victory in Battles.²²⁸

A saint's *cathach*, therefore, was a powerful tool for the collection of tributes. The battle talismans of Caillín were many. Not only was Colmcille himself said to have given Caillín the four gospels with the promise that they would be signs of victory for the monks and people of Caillín till doom, but also, according to the *Book of Fenagh* (1516), the saint received a bell called *Clog na Rígh* from Patrick.²²⁹ There is enough

²²⁸ *B.M.Cat.Ir.Mss.*, ii, p.466.

²²⁹ Lucas, 'The social role of relics and reliquaries in ancient Ireland', p.19. According to the Life of Caillín, this bell had to be obeyed by the people of Caillín's territory, especially when taken on rent-collecting visitations by the clergy of Fenagh: 'Whenever the sons of Eoghan Mac Neill shall not obey *Clog na rígh* and Caillín's Comarb, when it is taken to them, famine and disease, scarcity of food, and much warfare and plundering shall be in their land; misfortune and poverty shall be theirs here and hell yonder' (ibid., p.15). If, however, payment was made, as promised, to the Cinél Eoghain of Tyrone who fell under Caillín's jurisdiction, 'every difficulty and oppression in which the Clann Eoghain may be – if the bell is thrice carried round them, "twill save them from every danger"' (ibid., p.19). The *Book of Fenagh* (R.I.A. Ms 23 P 26; D. H. Kelly and W. M. Hennessy (eds), *The Book of Fenagh* (Dublin, 1875)) was compiled in 1516, written for Tadhg Ó Roduighae, coarb of St Caillín, by Muirghes Mac Páidín Uí Maolchonaire, a renowned scribe of the early sixteenth century.

evidence to conclude that the use of a proeliator (*cathach* or ‘battler’) as a standard (*meirge*) in conflict was quite common.²³⁰ The most famous *cathach* of all was that of Colmcille, mentioned in the annals for the year 1497 when Con O’ Donnell was defeated by Teige Mac Dermot of Moyling and the *cathach* taken from its keeper. However, two years later, when peace had been restored between both parties, the *cathach* was returned to the O’ Donnells. Manus Ó Domhnaill, in his *Betha Colaim Chille* relates how Colmcille used the *cathach* during his conflict with Diarmuid, King of Erin. Describing the ritual of bearing the proeliator three times sunwise around the Conall Gulban whom Colmcille wished to be safeguarded in battle, Manus alludes to what was most likely a standard practice in his age, as seen in the case of Caillín’s *Clog na rígh* above.²³¹

In the case of St Grellán of Craeb Grelláin whose feast occurs on 10 November according to the *Martyrology of Gorman*, the people of the territory of Hy Many (Uí Mhaine) who were under his care were, at one time, expected to pay a *sgreaball* in his honour.²³² A poem occurring in the Life of St Grellán elaborates on the duties of the race of Maine towards their patron and, in turn, his responsibilities towards them. The poem ends with an exhortation from the saint:

²³⁰ See many other examples in Lucas, ‘The social role of relics and reliquaries in ancient Ireland’ pp 17-20.

²³¹ *AFM* 1497 and 1499. This is also reported in the *Annals of Ulster* for the same years; *BCC*, pp 183-5.

²³² A *sgreaball* literally meant three pence but in this case most probably involved an ovine or sheep tribute: John O’ Donovan (ed.), *The tribes and customs of Hy Many, commonly called O’ Kelly’s country* (Dublin, 1843), p.81. The material for Hy Many comes from the Book of Lecan, compiled from other manuscripts for Gilla Iosa More Mac Fírbis, chief historian of the O’ Dowds of Tireragh, Sligo, c.1418.

Let the battle standard of the race be my crosier of true value /

And battles will not overwhelm them; their successes shall be very great.²³³

The subjects of the saint seem to have abided by Grellán's recommendations for, around 1418, the compiler of the Book of Lecan reports that 'St Grellán presides over their battles i.e. the crosier of St Grellán, or some such, is borne in the standard of the King of Hy Many.'²³⁴ In the same way as the O' Flanagan's, lords of Tuath Rátha, enjoyed the use of Molaisse's *cathach* in battle, so too did the rulers of Hy Many relish the protection of Grellán. However, not all of the territory of Hy Many was under the protection of Grellán. The Book of Lecan relates how the descendants of one particular ruler were buried under St Ciarán's protection instead: 'The burial of the race of Cairpri Crom [the O' Kellys] belongs to Clonmacnoise and St Ciarán, for which a tribute is made to St Ciarán; he has seventeen townlands of free land in Hy-Many.'²³⁵

The local saint, therefore, worked for his charges as long as he received the recompense he desired. This failing, he would display his anger by cursing the area and its inhabitants. The harsh actions taken by saints against those who did not pay their dues, which were largely the stuff of early lives of the saints, lived on in the transcription and versification of these lives in succeeding centuries, continuing to convince people of their veracity. A poem treating of St Brecán's encounters with the people of Clare dating from 1443 was probably based on an earlier life of the saint,

²³³ Ibid., p.14.

²³⁴ Ibid., p.81.

²³⁵ Ibid. This refers to the bequest of land made by Cairbre Crom, who was prince of Hy Many for nine years, of seventeen townlands to the monastery of Clonmacnoise, after which his progeny were customarily buried there, under the protection of the saint (ibid., p.15).

since lost.²³⁶ Brecán speaks through the verses of the poem. He explains how he did not get on very well in Doora and thus was obliged to take action: ‘Boldly I cursed the cows of Dooras when they would feel the torment of thirst at the onset of bulling and lactation.’²³⁷ In Kilbreckan he fared somewhat better, baptising Clann Maoil Domhnaigh: ‘I bequeath well-being and prosperity to the family of handsome Maol Domhnaigh, I bequeath well-being to their cows and I bequeath excellence of feasting.’²³⁸ Yet Brecán continues by outlining the *quid pro quo* nature of his relationship with them: ‘May the great related family not lack leading men (?). I am entitled to a full-grown pig from every herd from the Clann Mael Domhnaigh. If they give them every single year I will ward off every robber from them.’²³⁹ However, there is also a dire warning attached: ‘If the stately people of Mael Domhnaigh will fail me, may their herd of pigs be depleted and their leading men the fewer for it.’²⁴⁰ Brecán’s next words are inspired by contemporary devotion and give a clear indication that this poem dates from the fifteenth-century. He states that ‘this is something of my history that the king of Heaven revealed to me, in the name of Jesus I confirm it.’²⁴¹

The cult of a local saint was not always universally promoted. With the arrival of religious orders such as the Augustinians, Franciscans and Dominicans and their

²³⁶ Anne O’ Sullivan, ‘St Brecán of Clare’, in *Celtica* xv (1983).

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, v.15.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, v.34.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, v.36.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, v.39.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, v.46. Devotion to the Holy Name of Jesus developed in fifteenth-century England, finally being recognised as a feast and gaining a votive Mass in the 1480s (see Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, p.115).

subsequent taking over of early monastic sites (which was not uncommon), new dedications were frequently made. The sixth-century monastery of St Tiernan at Aghmacart, Ossory, for instance, was taken over by the Augustinian canons in the twelfth century and rededicated to St Mary.²⁴² It appears in the *Calendar of Papal letters* in 1465, described as ‘St Mary’s, *alias* St Tiernan’s.’²⁴³ The monastery of *de Antro S. Finbarri* (Finbarr’s Cave) had, by 1470 come to be described in the *Papal letters* as ‘St Mary’s *alias* St John the Evangelist’s.’²⁴⁴ The Dominican priory at Lorrha was founded in 1269 by Walter de Burgo under the patronage of St Peter and not St Ruadhán, the local patron.²⁴⁵ In a sense, this is not very surprising given that the founder was not of native Irish origin. Some friaries were dedicated to native Irish saints though. Florence Mac Gillpatrick, Lord of Ossory (and of native Irish stock) founded the Dominican friary of St Canice in Aghaboe in the late fourteenth century, dedicating it to the local saint whose ancient monastery was situated nearby.²⁴⁶ Dedications of parish churches were a different matter and there exists ample evidence that local saints were celebrated in church dedications around their area. A parish church dedicated to St Fergus of Inis Cáin, Lough Erne (whose feast day occurred on 29 March according to the *Martyrology of Gorman*) is mentioned in an entry in the *Papal letters* for 1459, while there were parish churches dedicated to St Fintan of Ossory and St Ciarán of Ross in their respective homelands.²⁴⁷

²⁴² Gwynn and Hadcock, *Medieval religious houses*, p.156.

²⁴³ *CPL xii, 1458-71*, p.414.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.792.

²⁴⁵ Gwynn and Hadcock, *Medieval religious houses*, p.227.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.221.

²⁴⁷ *CPL xii, 1459, 1468, 1471.*

Diocesan Saints

The diocesan saint was really a local saint at heart, distinguishing himself only by his care of a locality that was somewhat larger. The other important distinction between his status and that of a local saint was the fact that he was usually revered as the founder of the Church in that region. When the diocesan system was established in the twelfth century it was, by and large, centred around the sites of the early Irish founders of important monasteries and named after them. The church of Achonry, for example, was founded by St Finnian of Clonard, later becoming a diocese at the Synod of Kells in 1152.²⁴⁸ Similarly, Lismore, where St Carthach founded his monastery in 636, became the seat of the Lismore diocese at the Synod of Rathbreasil in 1111.²⁴⁹ Kilmore became the seat of what was then known as the diocese of Breifne or Tír Briuin in 1250, establishing itself in the place where traditionally St Felim was regarded as having founded his monastery.²⁵⁰ The institutional church encouraged devotion to the diocesan saint under whose patronage the ecclesiastical territory rested. The church of St Felim seems to have been built anew, having gained the status of cathedral 'by the consent of Pope Nicholas V' in 1453 or 1454.²⁵¹ However, the work must not have been finished by 1461, for in that year the faithful were encouraged to give alms for its completion:

Relaxation in perpetuity of seven years and seven quarantines of enjoined penance to penitents, who, on the feasts of St Felimy the Confessor and Whitsuntide, visit and give alms for the completion and conservation of the

²⁴⁸ Gwynn and Hadcock, *Medieval religious houses*, p.60.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.91.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.87.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.88.

church of the said saint at Kilmore, which, as the pope has learned, Bishop Thady has, at his own expense, begun to build anew, and has, for the most part, finished, but for the completion of which the resources of the said bishop and church are insufficient.²⁵²

Such offers of indulgences were not uncommon at this time. However, they were not given lightly or without reason. It was expected that a large number of people would respond generously to this offer and contribute accordingly. Those who chose to avail of the indulgence were encouraged, therefore, to take note of the feast day of their diocesan patron (9 August) and make the pilgrimage to his church.

Some diocesan patrons were associated with more than one diocese, and thus achieved greater status and acclaim. One such figure was St Brendan. As founder of many churches, he effectively became the patron of the dioceses of Clonfert, Ardfert and Annaghdown (united to Tuam in 1327). He ranks, therefore with Patrick and Colmcille, who, themselves, claimed the allegiance of more than one diocese.²⁵³ A poem contained in the *Book of Magauran* and dating from the fourteenth century, refers to an ancient practice, which was still in use in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The poem, by Ragnall Ó hUiginn (*d.*1315) recounts the story of Fearghna and his wife, whose eight children were slain by Brendan's nobles. They immediately travelled to the saint, along with a hundred warriors and fifty ladies and began to fast

²⁵² *CPL xii 1458-71*, p.131.

²⁵³ St Patrick is associated with the following dioceses: Armagh (which he founded), Ardagh (where traditionally it is held that Patrick's kinsman, Mel, was first bishop), Down (also held as traditional founder), Elphin, Kells (a diocese in its own right from c.1202-1211, claiming to have been founded as a church by Patrick) and Kilalla (where he left St Muireadach as first bishop). Colmcille, meanwhile, is traditionally regarded as founder and patron of Derry and Raphoe dioceses (Gwynn and Hadcock, *Medieval religious houses*, pp 58-101).

against him. The following morning, Fearghna's wife had borne a son whom Brendan baptised, giving him his own name. It is then related how 'the hundred warriors and the fifty ladies all made an offering to the saint.'²⁵⁴ The poem is dedicated to Tomás Mág Shamhradháin, heir to Eochaidh, son of Maonach, son of Baoithín, son of Bréanáinn (Brendan – the miraculous child). Two things should be observed here. Firstly, the cult of Brendan was familiar to the Mág Shamhradháin clan. Secondly, the poet sought to establish an historical link between the clan and St Brendan. In this case, as in the example of Colmán and the Uí Dhálaigh, the link was not directly along the bloodline but was, instead, related to an event in the past where the paths of both parties crossed. The practice of fasting against someone as a form of moral coercion gained its acceptability from the fact that it was practiced by the saints themselves, as is attested to in accounts of their lives. St Ruadhán of Lorrha fasted against the King of Tara, Diarmait Mac Cerbaill and was joined in the act by Brendan of Birr.²⁵⁵ The story, *Mír do Mhícheál*, found in a manuscript dating from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, relates how Patrick fasted against King Laoire.²⁵⁶ There is ample evidence to show that this practice was actually carried out historically. In 1530, a group of clerics are reported to have fasted against Niall Ó Néill.²⁵⁷ In a poem written in 1599 by Tadhg, son of Dáire Mac Bruaideadha, who lived at Dunogan castle, Ibricken, County Clare, the poet addresses Aodh Ruadh Ó Domhnaill, whose

²⁵⁴ BM 18, v.19.

²⁵⁵ Meigs, *The reformations in Ireland: tradition and confessionalism*, p.33.

²⁵⁶ Mooney, 'The Church in Gaelic Ireland', p.47.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.48.

soldiers had allegedly stolen some of his cattle: 'I will fast on you as is ordained by the sages, but first I will give you time as I am duty bound.'²⁵⁸

National patrons – Patrick, Brigid and Colmcille

The exact nature of devotion to the three patron saints of Ireland in the late medieval period is difficult to assess. For one thing, the evidence for such a study is conflicting. As discussed above, sources such as bardic religious poetry and religious figure sculpture, such as John Hunt has surveyed, suggest that it was mainly an international body of saints that captured Irish attention at this time. In relative terms, Patrick, Brigid and Colmcille are largely ignored in these sources. Undoubtedly the hugely influential role played by the mendicant orders in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries ensured that founders such as Francis and Dominic, in addition to other universal saints such as Michael the Archangel were actively promoted as intercessors over and above native candidates. Mendicants maintained contact with their *confrères* on the continent and were thus more susceptible to encountering and adopting devotions from Europe. Preaching, for which they were renowned, in turn provided opportunities for the propagation of new cults among the laity. Invocation of continental saints in bardic religious poetry of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries exemplifies the move away from native to more universal intercessors. One could be forgiven, therefore, for imagining that Ireland's premier saints exerted little influence during this period. However, alternative sources suggest that devotion to these saints continued unabated at another level. Perhaps the starkest reminder of this is the phenomenon of holy wells of which few parishes were bereft in the later middle ages. These wells, many of which date from the pre-Christian period, were dedicated to

²⁵⁸ *IM*, p.67. See also a tale entitled 'Tidings of the three young clerics' in the fifteenth-century Book of Lismore in which a cleric fasts against God: Stokes, *Lives of the saints from the Book of Lismore*, p.ix.

both local and national saints and were visited frequently, especially around the saint's feast day (on which the rituals of the 'Pattern' or 'Patron' day were performed), by local people who wished to honor the saint and perhaps seek a cure from illness. It is estimated that some 3000 holy wells exist in Ireland.²⁵⁹ What is most interesting, however, is that the majority of these are dedicated to one of the three patrons – Patrick, Brigid and Colmcille.²⁶⁰ One of the characteristics of the three patrons is that they transcend local boundaries. In Logan's list, well dedications to Brigid are found as far apart as Cork, Clare, Leitrim, Mayo, Longford, Carlow, Kildare, Cavan and Louth. In the case of Colmcille, they are found in places as removed from each other as Donegal and Wexford, Mayo and Carlow. Patrick, meanwhile, is recorded as patron of wells in Down, Donegal, Mayo, Longford, Carlow, Meath, Cavan, Dublin, Meath, Clare and Limerick.²⁶¹ However, even in Patrick's case, there were limits to his fame. Wells dedicated to him are seldom found, therefore, in Waterford, Cork or Kerry, where his cult was weaker than elsewhere.²⁶² The popularity of holy wells in Ireland attests to the fact that native saints continued to be invoked in time of need. The most noted site of pilgrimage associated with St Patrick in late medieval Ireland was of course St Patrick's Purgatory Lough Derg, which was perhaps as well known on the continent as it was

²⁵⁹ Patrick Logan, *The holy wells of Ireland* (Gerrard's Cross, 1980), p.14.

²⁶⁰ Unfortunately no comprehensive list of holy well dedications exists. However, a brief survey of Patrick Logan's index of random wells discussed by him illustrates the preponderance of sites dedicated to one of the three patrons. For an alternative discussion of holy wells see Elizabeth Healy, *In search of Ireland's holy wells* (Dublin, 2001).

²⁶¹ Logan, *The holy wells of Ireland*, pp 167-9.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, p.39.

among the Irish.²⁶³ This was the place where, in imitation of the rigours of Patrician penance, one could repent of one's sins and be cleansed and healed. This was certainly the intention of the late sixteenth-century poet Tuileagna Mac Torna Ó Maolchonaire, as expressed in his poem *Loch Derg aon Róimh na hÉireann*.²⁶⁴ In his poem, he invokes Patrick as 'Judge of Banbha' and 'guardian of my soul.'²⁶⁵ A poem by Aonghus, son of Aodh Ruadh Ó hUiginn (fl.1590s) entitled *Mo chean théid i dteaghais Phádraig* also invokes the saint, asserting that he who arises from the saint's bed on Lough Derg is released from the fear of Judgement, receiving instead a pledge of protection from Patrick.²⁶⁶

It is not surprising that poems, which were most probably commissioned by the ecclesiastical patrons of Lough Derg, should invoke the intercession of the site's principal patron. Indeed, in Ó hUiginn's poem, saints associated with the other 'beds' on Lough Derg, namely Colmcille, Brendan, Molaisse, M'Aodhóg and Catherine are similarly called upon. However, such straightforward invocations of Patrick's intercession at the Last Judgement in bardic poetry were generally uncommon. Poets were far more likely to implore the intercession of the Virgin Mary and the apostles

²⁶³ See Leslie, *Saint Patrick's Purgatory: a record from history and literature* (London, 1932); also Robert Easting, 'The historical background to the pilgrimage to Lough Derg' and Próinséas Ní Chatháin, 'The later pilgrimage: Irish poetry on Loch Derg' in Michael Haren and Yolande de Pontfarcy (eds) *The medieval pilgrimage to St Patrick's Purgatory: Lough Derg and the European tradition* (Enniskillen, 1988); for a discussion of Gaelic poetry written about the pilgrimage see Tadhg Ó Dúshláine, 'Lough Derg in native Irish poetry' in *Clogher Record* xiii no.1 (1988).

²⁶⁴ Ó Dúshláine, 'Lough Derg in native Irish poetry', pp 80-1.

²⁶⁵ Leslie, *St Patrick's Purgatory: a record from history and literature*, pp 168-72.

²⁶⁶ Ní Chatháin, 'Irish pilgrimage: the later poetry on Loch Derg', p.206.

for that purpose than Patrick. There are some exceptions to this, however. Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn (*d.* 1448) requests Patrick to approach Christ on his behalf:

Go and implore Mary's Son; bring with thee all His household till He lets all my kindred come to Him, thou highest of God's saints.²⁶⁷

The goal of Ó hUiginn is, however, union with Jesus and Mary: 'keep me not waiting for thy favour – establish me in Jesus's love' and again 'bring me to Mary, control my will.'²⁶⁸ Reminding Patrick of his past wonders, Ó hUiginn mentions (from memory²⁶⁹) legends associated with the saint including his making honey from water, a wolf returning sheep to him that he had stolen earlier, the restoration of sight to the blind man who baptised Patrick, the raising of his sister from the dead and the digging up of a necessary ransom for the saint by one of the swine.²⁷⁰ Each of the stories mentioned by Ó hUiginn originates in the *Vita Tripartita* (or Tripartite Life), a homiletic tract dating from the ninth or early tenth century.²⁷¹ Evidence for the popularity of this life can be found in British Library, Egerton Ms. 93, written by Domnall Albanach Ó Troighthigh in 1477 in County Clare, which includes a version.²⁷² Some of the stories also appear in the fifteenth-century *Leabhar Breac*.²⁷³ Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn (*d.* 1487) also details stories of Patrick in one of his poems,

²⁶⁷ *DDÉ* 12, v.9.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, vv 10-11.

²⁶⁹ 'thy miracles are a story of which I omit much; many will escape me though I strive to tell them': *ibid.*, v.26.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, vv 17-25.

²⁷¹ James F. Kenney, *The sources for the early history of Ireland: ecclesiastical* (Dublin, 1997), p.342.

²⁷² *B.M.Cat.Ir.MSS.*, pp 434-5.

²⁷³ See Whitley Stokes, *Three Middle Irish homilies on the lives of saints Patrick, Brigit and Columba* (Calcutta, 1877).

most of which are also derived from the *Vita Tripartita*. In the opening verses of the poem, Ó hUiginn describes pre-Patrician Ireland as a land in bondage, barren and inhospitable and in the grip of the forces of Hell.²⁷⁴ Cows no longer yielded milk and the countryside was infested with reptiles and toads.²⁷⁵ The state of the land was understood as punishment for sin, the presentation of the situation echoing the biblical story of the plagues of Egypt.²⁷⁶ In some ways, the portrayal of Patrick mirrors that of Christ coming to free his people from the burdens of the pre-Passion state of the earth, as portrayed by the bardic poets of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: ‘By the Pope’s leave, a hard ordinance was drawn up by our soul-father for freeing Banbha’s land from slavery; it meant saving us from Hell.’²⁷⁷ The remainder of Philip’s poem concerns itself with relating the many marvels wrought by Patrick after his arrival in Ireland, most of which are derived from the *Vita Tripartita*. The saint is described as aiding a child to emerge unscathed from the womb, carrying a deadly poison in his hand in addition to restoring a cow (which his clerics had killed) to life again, blessing her with an abundance of milk. In order to transport a leper across the sea he cast an altar-stone on the water and used it as a raft. Icicles were known to burn when Patrick had no other means of heating. The claim that Patrick shall be the judge of the Irish on Doomsday is also related.²⁷⁸ Towards the end of the poem, Philip requests the

²⁷⁴ *PB* 10, vv 1-4.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, vv 5-6. The Franciscan friar, Aodh Mac Aingil, also alludes to Patrick’s banishment of toads from Ireland in his seventeenth-century work on penance: see *SSA*, p.29.

²⁷⁶ For instance, in verse 9, Philip explains that ‘exposure to fierce reptiles – another of her plagues – destroyed her folk and ruined her stock.’

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, v.11. The company of ‘thirteen holy men’ mentioned in verse 13 is suggestive of Patrick and twelve companions, linking the saint even more closely with the person of Christ and his disciples.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, vv 32, 42, 46, 47, 45.

intercession of the saint at Judgement: 'On the Day of Stress, as my soul's care rests on thee, undertake to stand over me as a protecting tree, though I am no worthy child.'²⁷⁹ The final verse implores the dual action of Patrick and 'the angel' (presumably Michael) in keeping justice at bay.²⁸⁰

The form adopted by the *Vita Tripartita*, containing, as it did, a variety of material that included historical data, proverbs, legend and folklore, paved the way for the marriage of hagiography with secular heroic cycles such as those found in the twelfth-century *Acallamh na Senorach*, which describes the interaction between Patrick and members of the Fianna.²⁸¹ Later lives of saints, such as Manus Ó Domhnaill's *Betha Colaim Chille* (1532) would continue to draw material from both official 'lives' such as Adomnán's Life of Columba, but also from contemporary folklore.²⁸² Manus Ó Domhnaill's life of Colmcille contains a lengthy treatment of Patrick's role as judge of the Irish (which is also found in the *Vita Tripartita*). The life describes in detail what was expected to occur on Doomsday. Patrick meets the men of Ireland at Clonmacnoise. He sounds the bell with which he once banished demons from Croagh Patrick, at which Irish all duly assemble. Colmcille, by whose mouth the story is related, states that it will be well for those who have done Patrick service on that day. The kind of service recommended includes the prayerful keeping of the saint's feast day by almsgiving and fasting. From there the party proceeds to Crossa-Keale in Meath where they await the rest of the company arriving, under Colmcille's

²⁷⁹ Ibid., v.49.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., v.52.

²⁸¹ See Gerard Murphy, 'Acallam na Senórach' in Myles Dillon (ed.), *Irish sagas* (4th ed., Cork, 1985)

²⁸² In describing this development, it should be emphasised, as reminded by Pádraig Ó Fiannachta, that Adomnán himself incorporated a significant amount of folklore into his text when he compiled it: see Pádraig Ó Fiannachta, 'Betha Cholmuib Chille', in *Léachtaí Cholm Cille* xv (1985), p.24.

protection, from Alba. Next the Irish meet with Martin of Tours who, with Patrick, goes forward in procession to Peter and Paul who leads them to the Mount of Olives. Patrick does not go before Christ personally, instead sending Peter, Paul and Martin, in addition to Ailbe of Emly, as envoys. What happens next includes a series of discussions between Patrick's envoys and Christ, information being relayed back to the Irish patron after each response. Christ complains that Patrick has with him many sinners and evil men. Ailbe argues, in response, that Patrick once requested Christ to cover Ireland with the waters of the sea seven years before Doomsday in order that his people might come before the Lord as martyrs and penitents. Christ, however, remains adamant that the evil ones remain behind. Patrick is not impressed when Ailbe relates the decision of the Lord and remains defiant in purpose: 'That is not a beginning of welcome...and thus it shall not be.'²⁸³ In turn, other Irish saints such as Ciaran and Canice make the journey to Christ, requesting that He honour His promise to Patrick, which He made on the day He sent him to Ireland, namely the privilege of judging his own on the Last Day. Finally a process of consultation between Patrick and his hosts and the nine hierarchies of Heaven is suggested by Christ, at which point the story is cut short.²⁸⁴ The inclusion of the story of the judicial prerogative of Patrick in Ó Domhnaill's *Betha Colaim Chille* illustrates its continuing relevance in the sixteenth century.

The subject of Manus Ó Domhnaill's monumental work in 1532, namely Colmcille, was celebrated throughout the medieval period as the patron of poets. Both the fifteenth century *Book of Lismore* and *Leabhar Breac* contain a homiletic version of his life, compiled to celebrate the saint's feast and which revolved around

²⁸³ BCC, p.117.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., pp 115-19.

Genesis 12:1: ‘*Exi de terra tua et de domo patris tua et uade in terram quam tibi monstrauro.*’²⁸⁵ This homily had its source in what was known as the ‘Old Irish Life of Colum-cille’, dating from the eleventh century or earlier.²⁸⁶ This life, in addition to Adomnán’s more famous version and a range of other sources, was used by Ó Domhnaill in the compilation of his work on the saint in 1532. As part of this project, a number of poems attributed to or written about the saint were also collated. Some of these, which were gathered by Eoghan Carrach Ó Siaghail (*fl.* 1530-45), an assistant to Ó Domhnaill, are to be found in Ms.Laud Misc.615, in the Bodleian library.²⁸⁷ Interestingly, while a huge body of poetry, which is either attributed to the saint or has the saint as its subject, exists for the earlier medieval period, there is very little to suggest that the saint was frequently invoked in the religious poetry of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.²⁸⁸ Liam Ó Caithnia discusses a small number of poems that make mention of the saint in the later period. Three of the poems are written by members of the Mac an Bhaird family – Fearghal Óg and Domhnall respectively.²⁸⁹ A fourth is composed by Tadhg, son of Dáire Mac Bruaideadha towards the end of the same century.²⁹⁰ A fifth poem, by Diarmuid Ó Cléirigh, entitled *Maruid fós ferta*

²⁸⁵ See Stokes (ed.), *Lives of the saints from the Book of Lismore*, p.168; also Stokes (ed.), *Three Middle Irish homilies on the lives of Patrick, Brigit and Columba*, p.90.

²⁸⁶ Kenney, *The sources for the early history of Ireland: ecclesiastical*, p.434.

²⁸⁷ Brian Ó Cuív, *Catalogue of Irish manuscripts in the Bodleian library* (Dublin, 2001).

²⁸⁸ For a list of poems relating to Colmcille and their printed editions, see Kenney, *The sources for the early history of Ireland: ecclesiastical*, pp 436-40.

²⁸⁹ See *DD* 81, *DD* 93 by Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaird and a poem by Domhnall Mac an Bhaird found in the *duanaire* of Theobald Butler of Cahir Castle in the late sixteenth century. See James Carney, *Poems on the Butlers* (Dublin, 1945), poem 1.

²⁹⁰ *DD* 95.

Coluim, relates the story of Colmcille's return from Scotland to free the son of the king of Ossory who was held in captivity on a bed of iron by Aedh Mac Ainmireach, which is also found more fully in *Betha Colaim Chille*.²⁹¹ With the exception of Ó Bruaideadha, the poets in question all hailed from Donegal and thus participated in what was understandably a local pride in their saint. It should be noted, therefore, that while saints such as Patrick, Brigid and Colmcille came to be regarded as 'national' saints, especially in the hagiographical reform of the seventeenth century, their cults were not uniformly celebrated in all parts of the country. The composition of manuscripts from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries either illustrates the personal preferences of those who were responsible for their compilation or the lack of availability of source material. References to the three patrons, then, are not always found together as a single unit at this time. Uilliam Mac an Leagha's collection of saints' lives in British Library, Egerton Ms. 91, while including the lives of George, Longinus, Brendan, Senan, Colmcille and Brigid, mysteriously omits that of Patrick. Meanwhile, the manuscript known as Egerton 93, compiled by Domhnall Albanach Ó Troighthigh in Clare in 1477, includes a version of the *Vita Tripartita* of Patrick, omitting any material regarding Brigid or Colmcille. The devotional collection assembled for Máire Ní Mháille, wife of Mac Suibhne Fanad in 1513-14, known as *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne*, includes a life of Colmcille in verse and prose and a short recension of the *Vita Tripartita* of Patrick, while omitting any reference whatsoever to Brigid. Thus, the concept of Saints Patrick, Brigid and Colmcille as 'national patrons' should be approached with caution. These saints, while achieving a status far greater than the saints of localities or dioceses, were not universally acclaimed with the same fervour. The vibrancy of their cults varied from region to region and, for a variety of

²⁹¹ For references to these poems see Ó Caithnia, *Apalóga na bhfilí*, pp 167-71.

reasons, it is not until the hagiographical projects of the seventeenth century (themselves influenced by contemporary political and religious developments) that they begin to truly assume the responsibilities of national patronage.²⁹²

The study of late medieval devotion to the saints in Gaelic Ireland raises what are, perhaps, more questions than answers. Firstly, there seems to be some discrepancy between sources such as bardic poetry and figure sculpture and the widespread recourse to the use of holy wells, the former sources favouring newer, more universally-recognised saints, while the latter adhered to older and more native intercessors. There is no doubt that this period witnessed an influx of devotion to new continental saints, spurred on by the blossoming of religious orders throughout the country. The Observant reform of the fifteenth century ensured that mendicant orders such as the Franciscans and Dominicans offered the most vibrant and appealing form of ministry, helping to bring about the huge influence they wielded in the area of religious devotion during this time. It is no surprise, then, that candidates promoted by the religious orders began to capture the imagination of those who attended their local friary. The newer saints, whose lives were dealt with in the well-known *Legenda Aurea* of the thirteenth-century, received ample attention from the bardic poets who, in turn, used them to animate their religious compositions. These saints, too, became mighty intercessors in the minds of many. This, too, is quite understandable, since the eschatological dimension to life was treated of at length in the sermon literature of the period. The recommendations of local friars regarding useful intercessors obviously did not fall on deaf ears. While devotion to native saints certainly did not die out during this period, it faced a significant challenge from the continental newcomers. It

²⁹² Discussion of the late medieval cult of St Brigid is omitted here as a discussion of the sources for the development of her Life is provided in chapter 6.

is worth remembering, however, that in the greater scheme of things, the all-pervasive devotion to the Passion and Death of Christ and the mighty intercession of His Mother Mary wielded supreme authority in the area of devotion. They topped the hierarchy of intercessors, Christ interceding with His Father and Mary interceding with Christ. The saints, too, had their hierarchy and the intercessory power of figures such as the apostles, who routinely lined the bases of tombs, was not lost on those who feared death. The late medieval period witnessed an unprecedented development in the role of saints as intercessors. The native Irish saints, who had been venerated long before figures such as Catherine of Alexandria and Francis, tended to present themselves not so much as wily advocates on Doomsday but as models of virtue to be imitated. Their lives, which detailed long and arduous hours of prayer and penance, rewarded by fantastic miracles, encouraged those who heard them to emulate the practices of their local holy men and women. This portrayal of native saints as exemplars was to reach its zenith in the representation of Saints Patrick, Brigid and Colmcille in the very different circumstances of the seventeenth century.

Chapter 4

The Sacraments: gateways to God

In a largely pre-literate society, what an individual saw and heard hugely influenced what he believed. Therefore, late medieval Church liturgy, with its spectacular and dramatic character, played an indispensable role in shaping and moulding lay belief. On the one hand, it facilitated a communal experience of worship, and on the other it served as the matrix for the expression of personal piety as noted by Eamon Duffy:

For the late medieval laity, the liturgy functioned at a variety of levels, offering spectacle, instruction, and a communal context for the affective piety which sought, even in the formalised action of the Mass and its attendant ceremonies, a stimulus to individual devotion.¹

It was liturgy that effectively organised the whole year into a set timetable of feasts to be celebrated, saints to be venerated and mysteries to be contemplated. Liturgy sanctified time. It represented the primary in-breaking of the holy into people's lives. As R. N. Swanson observed, 'liturgy, in a real sense defined devotion.'²

The importance of the Church's liturgical actions can hardly be overestimated. At the most important stages of a person's life the Church was present and had something to say. In the liturgy, the Church interpreted the major events of life and provided a religious language through which the deepest sentiments of the human heart could be expressed. In formal liturgy, the laity were quite used to the clergy approaching Heaven on their behalf and commending them in life and in death to God. The importance attached to ritually marking key stages in a person's life has been

¹ Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, p.11.

² Swanson, *Religion and devotion in Europe c.1215-c.1515*, p.92.

commonly held at all times and in all cultures.³ By means of the liturgy, the Church sacramentalised the lives of people, providing a divine interpretation for the significant events of earthly experience. This chapter focuses particularly on popular understanding of liturgy and the sacraments in late medieval Ireland. Discovering how the sacraments were understood is pivotal in an examination of popular perceptions of the heavenly world. It is principally at defining moments in life that an individual considers fundamental religious questions. While a man might not be particularly pious, or indeed might not be given to contemplating divine mysteries on a day to day basis, the situation changes somewhat when he holds new life in his hands for the first time or, conversely, watches helplessly as the life of a loved one ebbs away. Suddenly the search for meaning becomes very real to him. This pattern was no different in late medieval Gaelic society, and therefore, to catch a late medieval man at prayer when an important sacrament is being administered is to witness religious experience at its most raw. This chapter examines three of the sacraments a late medieval Gaelic Irishman would have received as he went through life, namely Baptism, Penance and the Eucharist.

One particular problem that arises while surveying the medieval liturgy is the issue of rites and form. Western Europe in the middle ages did not exhibit liturgical uniformity. The Stowe Missal (792-812), which was used in Ireland until the twelfth century was Gallican rather than Roman in character.⁴ The twelfth-century Church reform saw the Synod of Cashel (1172) order the Anglican (Roman) Use.⁵ Although

³ For an introduction to this area see Arnold Von Gennepe, *Rites of passage* (London, 1960).

⁴ J. D. C. Fisher, *Christian initiation: baptism in the medieval West* (London, 1970), pp 82-5. The Gallican rite was the liturgical rite that prevailed in Gaul from the earliest times up to the eighth century.

⁵ *Ibid.*

the various religious orders possessed their own liturgical forms, perhaps the Sarum liturgy was to be the most significant. The Sarum Use, based on the Anglo-Saxon Use before it (which itself was influenced by foreign elements), was drawn up by St Osmund, bishop and founder of the cathedral church of Salisbury (1078-99). While co-existing beside other Uses such as those of Hereford, York, Lincoln and St Paul's (London), it eventually became the most important Use in England, Wales and Ireland.⁶ For the purposes of this study the text of the Use of Sarum will be employed when examining liturgical form.

Baptism

Baptism according to Sarum was quite an elaborate affair. It must be noted that the following description of the ceremony, based on a 1543 version of the *Manuale ad usum percelebris ecclesiae Sarisburiensis*, essentially lays out how the sacrament should be administered ideally. It serves, then, merely as a guideline when imagining how a baptism might practically be performed in a rural enclave of Gaelic Ireland. Liturgical manuals were not always followed to the letter and any study of the administration of the sacraments in practice must appreciate this. However, in order to understand popular conceptions of the sacrament, an outline of its structure is required. Firstly the infant was brought to the doors of the church. The priest enquired of the midwife whether the child was male or female and whether he had been baptised at home already. If that was the case, he would not be immersed in water and the formula of baptism would not be said over him. However, the lengthy preceding parts of the ceremony would, nonetheless, be performed. The priest also asked the name of the child. He placed the male child on his right and the female on his left.

⁶ Charles Walker, *The liturgy of the Church of Sarum together with the kalendar of the same Church* (2nd ed., London, n.d.), p.3; see also Swanson, *Religion and devotion in Europe c.1215-c.1515*, p.95.

Then he made the sign of the cross on the forehead and breast of the infant with his thumb, saying, 'The sign of our Saviour and Lord Jesus Christ I place upon thy forehead / breast.'⁷ Three prayers were said over the infant, during which the priest twice enquired the name of the child. Then the priest took some salt, exorcised it and then blessed it. Some of the salt was placed in the mouth of the infant while the following prayer was recited: 'Receive the salt of wisdom for a propitiation of God unto eternal life.'⁸ Following this, a series of prayers of triumph over Satan were said and then a formal prayer of exorcism. There was a different set of prayers for both male and female. The priest made the sign of the cross again on the forehead of the infant. The passage from the Gospel of Matthew concerning the children coming to Jesus was then read. The priest then spat into his left hand and touched the ears and nose of the child with his right thumb while saying '*Effeta*', meaning 'Be opened.' The godparents and all present recited the Our Father, Hail Mary and Apostles Creed.⁹ Then the priest made the sign of the cross on the right hand of the infant with these words: 'I give thee the sign of our Lord Jesus Christ on thy right hand that thou mayest sign thyself and keep thyself from adversity and remain in the catholic faith

⁷ E. C. Whitaker, *Documents of the baptismal liturgy* (London, 1970), p.231.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.233.

⁹ The instructions in the manual for this point of the proceedings are as follows 'Afterwards let the priest say to the godfathers and godmothers together with all that stand about that *they themselves must say* [my emphasis] in order *Our Father* and *Hail Mary* and *I believe in God*' (*ibid.*, p.237). This is important, for it placed the onus on godparents to prove that they at least knew the rudimentary prayers of their faith and could therefore pass them on to their charges.

and have eternal life forever and ever.’¹⁰ The infant was blessed in the name of the Father, Son and Spirit and was then led into the church for the baptism proper.

Before the litany of the saints began, the godparents were invited to pray that the administration of the sacrament might be pleasing to God. The way they could most effectively do this was by reciting the prayers they knew best, namely those that formed the staple and prescribed diet of the laity:

Goodfaders and goodmoders and all that be here about, say in the worshyppe of god and our ladye and of the xii apostellys an *Our Father* and *Hail Mary* and *I believe in God* that we may so mynster thys blessed sacrament that yt may be to the pleasure of almyghty god and confusyon of our most gostly enmy and salvacyon of te sowle of thys chylde.¹¹

As noted above, these prayers were considered a minimal requirement for the laity. The duty of godparents to pass on the faith to the children with whom they were entrusted could not be properly carried out if they themselves did not know the basics; hence the need to ensure this by requesting them to begin to recite these prayers themselves on a couple of occasions during the course of the ceremony. The exhortation to pass these prayers on to the child followed:

God faders and godmodyrs of thys chylde whe charge you that ye charge the foder and te moder to kepe it from fyer and water and other perels to the age of vii yere, and that he lerne or se yt be lerned the *Our Father*, *Hail Mary*, and

¹⁰ Ibid., p.238. This gesture was a borrowing from the Irish Stowe Missal. However the stage of its occurrence differs. In the Stowe Missal it occurs after the child has been formally baptised and is clothed in the baptismal robe (See Fisher, *Christian initiation: baptism in the medieval West*, pp 82-5).

¹¹ Whitaker, *Documents of the baptismal liturgy*, p.239.

*I believe, after the lawe of all holy churche and in all goodly haste to be confermed of my lorde of the dyocise or of hys depute...*¹²

The litany of the saints followed. Then the priest proceeded to the consecration of the font. A long sung preface included a banishment of all evil spirits from the water. The priest divided the water in the form of a cross with his right hand and blessed it, after which he cast water in four directions in the form of a cross. Later he breathed three times into the font, again in the form of a cross, and proceeded to drop wax from a candle into the font in the same fashion. The water was then divided cross-like by the candle. Both oil and chrism were poured separately into the water and then together. The infant was carried to the font and the godparents were requested to pronounce their faith as a response to the enquiry of the priest 'Do you renounce Satan?'... etc. The priest then took the child and baptised him by a three-fold dipping, invoking the Holy Trinity while facing the child towards the north, the south and finally towards the water itself. When the child was brought up from the font he was anointed with chrism in the form of a cross on the forehead. The name of the child was enquired and he was dressed in his baptismal robe (*pannus chrisimalis*) with the words 'Receive a white robe, holy and unstained, which thou must bring before the tribunal of Our Lord

¹² Ibid. What was required of godparents is very clearly stated in the Sarum manual: 'Wherefore persons are not to be received or admitted as godparents except those who know the aforesaid things [Our Father, Hail Mary, Creed and the Sign of the Cross] because godparents must instruct their spiritual children in the faith, which they cannot do unless they themselves have first been instructed in the faith' (p.251). The Synod of Cashel (1172) made it indispensable for a bishop to be present at the initiatory rite if Confirmation was to take place. The Stowe Missal had no provision for a bishop taking part (Fisher, *Christian initiation: baptism in the medieval West*, pp 82-5).

Jesus Christ that thou mayest have eternal life and live for ever and ever. Amen.’¹³ A burning candle was placed in the hand of the infant and he or she was exhorted to ‘guard thy baptism, keep the commandments, so that when the Lord comes to the wedding thou mayest meet him together with the saints in the heavenly hall, that thou mayest have eternal life and live for ever and ever.’¹⁴ If a bishop was present, the child was to be immediately confirmed and communicated. If he was not present, the godparents were enjoined to ensure that the infant be confirmed as soon as the bishop came within a distance of seven miles.¹⁵ They were also given the duty of returning

¹³ Whitaker, *Documents of the baptismal liturgy*, p.247. The rubrics then state clearly that it is permitted to use the chrismal garment a second time on another baptised person but that ‘the cloth must not be put to common uses, but brought back to the church and kept for the uses of the church.’

¹⁴ Ibid. The imagery is clearly that of Matt 25:1-13, where ten bridesmaids await the coming of the Bridegroom (Christ), five with enough oil to keep their lamps lighting, the other five with an insufficient supply.

¹⁵ By 1543 however, the minimum age for Confirmation in practice was actually seven years (ibid., p.252, n.1). An early instance of this judgement was when the Council of Cologne in 1280 declared that persons under seven years were too young to be confirmed. This view came to be more widely held later on. The reasons for this were many. Firstly there was an uncertainty as to the origin of Confirmation, and whether in fact there was a Scriptural basis for it at all. This led to neglect and indifference among parents, clergy and even bishops. Laxity in conferring the sacrament at baptism coupled with the practical difficulty of bishops reaching remote areas of their dioceses lengthened the interval between baptism and confirmation further until it came to be believed that waiting until the child reached the age of reason was the preferable option and conferring of the sacrament at an earlier age was outlawed. Councils such as those of Cologne (1536), Milan (1565), Genoa (1574), Sorrento (1584) continued to pronounce upon the issue, illustrating that the practice of confirming at an earlier age had not died out. In fact confirmation at the baptism ceremony was not completely inadmissible in sixteenth century England as shown by the fact that Elizabeth, daughter of Henry VIII was baptised and

the baptismal robe (*pannus chrisimalis*) to the church. Next, a passage from Mark's Gospel concerning the cure of an epileptic demoniac by Jesus (Mk 9:17-29) was read over the child. The rubric explained the reason for this: 'because according to doctors it is a good protection against falling sickness.'¹⁶ Then the Prologue to the Gospel of John was recited. And so concluded the baptismal rite of Sarum. This was, broadly speaking, the layout of the baptism ceremony to be found in Ireland up to the piecemeal introduction of the Roman ritual in Irish dioceses in the seventeenth century. Allowance must be made for some variations, however, as Sarum adopted appropriate local customs.¹⁷

There is always a liturgical gulf between how a ceremony is supposed to be performed or understood and what actually happens in practice, and late medieval Gaelic Ireland was no different in this respect. In searching for references to Irish baptismal practices at this time, the compositions of the bardic poets shed little light on the matter. Despite their interest in the cleansing of sin through the merits of the wounds of Christ, they pay little attention to the process whereby Original Sin was cleansed at baptism. However, other figures, such as the sixteenth-century commentator, Edmund Campion (*d.*1581), were more than willing to refer to questionable practices at such ceremonies:

confirmed on the same day in 1533 (Fisher, *Christian initiation: baptism in the medieval West*, pp131-6).

¹⁶ Whitaker, *Documents of the baptismal liturgy*, p.248.

¹⁷ James Gerard Mac Garry, 'The statutes of Tuam from the Council of Trent to the nineteenth century', (DD thesis, St Patrick's College, Maynooth, 1932) p.38.

In some corners of the land they used a damnable superstition, leaving the right armes of their infants males unchristened (as they tearmed it) to the intent it might give a more ungracious and deadly blow.¹⁸

What can be said of such a claim? Firstly, it is clear that the baptism referred to is by full immersion. This is not unusual for, despite the fact that since the twelfth century full immersion was becoming less and less employed in the Latin Church, it is well attested that in Ireland the practice survived right up to the seventeenth century when it drew the attention of synods such as those of Dublin (1624) and Tuam (1631), leading to its gradual demise.¹⁹ The second element is a little more difficult to understand. If the claim has some historical basis and is not just a puffed-up rumour, it poses interesting questions about how those who performed baptism in this way understood the sacrament.²⁰ The right arm was the arm most often employed in the use of a sword and this factor is obviously important. If baptism washed away Original Sin, was it somehow conceived as making the person somewhat less aggressive, less valiant, holier in spirit yet weaker in body? If so, it would make sense to have the rest of the child's body washed in baptismal water while preserving the

¹⁸ Edmund Campion, *A historie of Ireland* (written in 1571 and published in Dublin, 1633. New York, 1977), p.15.

¹⁹ Mac Garry, 'The statutes of Tuam from the Council of Trent to the nineteenth century', p.38. Interestingly, the catechism of the Council of Trent allowed for full and / or triple immersion; indeed it advocated the retention of whatever local practice was used: 'But whether the ablution be performed once or thrice must be held to make no difference, for that baptism was formerly, and may now be, validly administered in the Church in either way, sufficiently appears from the epistle of St Gregory the Great to Leander. That rite, however, which each individual finds observed in his own church, is to be retained by the faithful': J. Donovan (ed.), *The catechism of the Council of Trent* (Dublin, 1867), pp 150-1.

²⁰ I have not come across reference to any similar practice elsewhere.

sword arm from debilitation. The right hand was also known as the ‘Gospel hand.’²¹ While this in itself should not discourage one from baptising it, Whitley Stokes nevertheless observes that in former times it was believed that ‘prayers as well as curses were most effective when the right hand was employed.’²² Whether baptism with its constituent exorcisms was thought to impede the efficacy of the curse, while uncertain, is nonetheless a possibility.

Richard Stanihurst (1547-1618), a friend of Campion, borrowed his reference to this baptismal practice but also added a further piece of information: ‘Others write that gentlemen’s children were baptised in mylke and the infants of poore folk in water who had the better or rather the onely choice.’²³ Stanihurst’s knowledge of the practice is secondary. He has read about it and therefore it is not certain whether the alleged practice was presumed to still occur in his own time. It is probable that Stanihurst relied on the account of the Synod of Cashel found in *Gesta Regis Henrici*

II. Louis Gougaud explains:

Au xii^e siècle on voit une autre coutume établie en Irlande, celle de baptiser les nouveau-nés à la maison sans recourir au ministère sacerdotal. Le concile de Cashel (1172) prohiba cet abus, et de plus, assure-t-on, celui autrement grave, qui consistait à baptiser les enfants des riches en les plongeant par trois fois dans du lait;..nous ferons d’ailleurs observer que c’est seulement Benoît de Peterborough (+1193) qui attribue au concile de Cashel la prohibition de la triple immersion lactée et que cet auteur pourrait bien

²¹ Whitley Stokes, *The martyrology of Oengus the Culdee* (London, 1905), p.xxv.

²² *Ibid.*, p.xlviii.

²³ Liam Miller and Eileen Power (eds), *Holinshed’s Irish chronicle: the historie of Irlande from the first inhabitation thereof unto the year 1509 collected by Raphael Holinshed and continued till the yeare 1547 by Richarde Stanyhurst* (Dublin, 1979), p.115.

*d'ailleurs, n'avoir entendu parler dans ce passage que d'un rite profane de la naissance, lequel n'excluait peut-être pas un baptême administré selon les règles.*²⁴

There are two contemporary accounts of the Synod of Cashel (1172), that of Giraldus Cambrensis, which records as its second constitution that 'children should be instructed in front of the doors of each church and should be baptised in the consecrated font in baptismal churches'²⁵ and a second, once attributed to Benedict of Peterborough but now widely acknowledged to be the work of Roger of Howden. It is the second account, which examines in more detail the sort of practices that prompted legislation, that makes mention of baptism with milk:

In the council they ordered and commanded by authority of the pope [present, so to say, in his legate?] that infants be baptised in church, by priests and with the use of the words 'in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. For the custom in various places in Ireland formerly was that

²⁴ 'In the twelfth century, one sees another custom established in Ireland, that of baptising the newly born at home, without recourse to a priestly minister. The Synod of Cashel (1172) prohibited this abuse, and, in addition an equally serious one, which consisted of baptising the children of the rich by immersing them three times in milk;...we will observe, moreover, that it is only Benedict of Peterborough (+1193) who attributes the prohibition of the triple immersion in milk to the Synod of Cashel and that this author may well have intended only to speak of a profane birth rite in this passage, one which, perhaps, did not exclude a baptism administered according to the [proper] norms' [my translation]: Louis Gougaud, *Les chrétientés Celtiques* (2nd ed., Paris 1911) p.202. In fact the passage Gougaud refers to was probably not the work of Benedict of Peterborough at all as the *Gesta Henrici II*, in which it is contained, is now generally accepted as a first draft of Roger of Howden's *Chronicle* which treats of the government of Henry II; see John Watt, *The Church in medieval Ireland*, p.238.

²⁵ Giraldus Cambrensis, *Expugnatio Hibernica: the conquest of Ireland* (ed. A.B. Scott and F.X. Martin) (Dublin, 1978), p.99.

immediately the child was born its father or some other person plunged it three times into water and if it was the son of a rich man it was plunged three times into milk and afterwards the water or milk was thrown out into the drains or some other unclean place...²⁶

Gougau's suggestion, prompted by the work of John Salmon²⁷, that the above reference may not have been to baptism proper but, instead, to a profane birth rite that did not necessarily exclude the separate performance of the sacrament at another stage, hardly seems likely. The allusion to triple immersion certainly suggests a Trinitarian formula and such a practice was generally interpreted in that way.²⁸ Furthermore, a story related in Manus Ó Domhnaill's *Betha Colaim Chille* (1532) strongly suggests that the washing of an infant with milk was equated with baptism:

There was a king hight, Aongus mac Nadfraich, that had the sovereignty of Munster. And one night his wife had an avision. Her seemed that she was heavy and great with child and that she brought forth a whelp and bathed him in new milk. And in what place soever in Erin that whelp went from that time the place was straightway filled with new milk. The queen told her avision to the king and the king himself did read the avision and he said: 'Thou shalt bear a son', said he, 'and he shall be baptised in the graces of God and he shall become a saint, sowing the word of God and preaching it in every place whereas he goeth throughout Erin'.²⁹

²⁶ Quoted in John Watt, *The Church in medieval Ireland*, p.240.

²⁷ John Salmon, *The ancient Irish Church as a witness to Catholic doctrine* (Dublin, 1897), pp 64-5.

²⁸ For instance Martin of Braga (510-80) preferred triple afflusion because of its Trinitarian implications; see T. C. Akeley, *Christian initiation in Spain c.300-1100* (London, 1967), p.69.

²⁹ *BCC*, p.143.

The king's interpretation of the dream clearly indicates that he understood the washing of the child with milk as referring to the child's baptism, and the effluence of milk that followed the saint's path as the many baptisms that he himself would administer, thus winning many souls for Christ.

Gaelic literature refers elsewhere to incidents where babies are washed in milk soon after birth albeit they do not necessarily accord the practice any sacramental significance. In fact, they more often than not reflect what was undoubtedly a practice dating from the pre-Christian period which, in later years, as evidenced by the concerns of the Synod of Cashel (1172) and the recounting of the story of Aonghus Mac Nadfraich in *Betha Colaim Chille*, came to be associated with baptism ceremonies performed at home. For instance a homily on Saint Brigid in the fifteenth-century *Leabhar Breac* relates the following story:

Now on the morrow, at sunrise, when the bondmaid was going with a vessel full of milk in her hand, and when she put one foot over the threshold of the house inside and the other foot outside, then did she bring forth the girl, to wit, Brigit. The maidservants washed the girl with the milk that was in her mother's hand. Now that was in accord with the merits of St Brigit, to wit, with the brightness and sheen of her chastity.³⁰

The reasoning behind the act of bathing in milk is interesting. Milk was generally conceived of as having cleansing, purificatory or healing properties.³¹ It is indicated in

³⁰ Stokes (ed.), *Three Middle-Irish homilies on the lives of Saints Patrick, Brigit and Columba*, p.57. John Salmon, arguing that the assertion of Benedict (Benôit) is most probably fantastic, alludes to Brigid having been washed with milk, '*sans préjudice du baptême*'; see Salmon, *The ancient Irish Church as a witness to Catholic doctrine*, pp 64-5.

³¹ The healing properties of milk are illustrated in a story found in the fifteenth-century Rennes manuscript. Trostan, a Pictish druid is quoted as saying 'Let thrice fifty milch kine be milked into one

the above reference that Brigid merited the bathing and that to have the bath was a sign of the honour accorded to her chastity. Whether the milk was considered to be effective in her, leading her to further virtue is uncertain. The *dabach* was a vat or tub used in ancient Gaelic Ireland for holding milk and ale. A variation of the *dabach*, called the *dabach fothraicthe* was used for personal bathing.³² The use of the *dabach* or storage vat in the bathing of babies is alluded to in a short narrative inserted into a genealogy of the Munster Éoganacht. The narrative describes a dream of Oíbfínd, wife of King Conall Corc of Cashel, concerning her four sons from whom a central group of these dynasties claimed descent, and a fifth half-brother, Cormac Cruithnechán, ancestor of their more distant and bitter rivals, the Éoganacht Locha Léin. The dream is described in the following manner:

This is the Oíbfínd who saw the vision the first night she had slept with the king of Cashel. That is she saw that she had begotten four whelps. She bathed the first whelp in wine...she bathed the second in ale...she bathed the third in new milk...she bathed the fourth in water;..the fifth whelp reached her from outside as she lay and she bathed that one in blood.³³

It is uncertain what particular pre-Christian ritual incidents, such as found in the above account describe. Again, in this instance, bathing in milk is, if not explicitly a sign of honour, at least a sign of acceptance into the kin group as opposed to the rejection suffered by the fifth child. The fact that the domestic *dabach* was used and also that baptism by full immersion was also often performed in the home, possibly

trench and let him whom the men of Figda shall slay be bathed in that milk, and from the poisons of their weapons he shall arise healed' (Whitley Stokes, 'The prose tales in the Rennes dindsenchas', in *Révue Celtique* xv (1894), p.428).

³² A. T. Lucas, 'Washing and bathing in ancient Ireland', *R.S.A.I.Jn.*, lxxxv (1965), p.72.

³³ Kim McCone, *Pagan past and Christian present* (Maynooth, 1990), p.131.

led some commentators, such as Stanihurst, to conclude that events such as those described, were, in fact, Gaelic baptismal rites.³⁴ His assessment might not have been wholly inaccurate, however, as by the late medieval period the Christian and pre-Christian ritual may have been combined into the one ceremony. Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that as late as 1627 baptisms in beer were not uncommon, prompting a firm clarification of the invalidity of this practice.³⁵

Until the twelfth century, canon law allowed for only two baptismal seasons, Easter and Pentecost. However, over the following centuries this practice fell into disuse and various councils and synods decreed that all infants should be baptised no later than eight days after birth. A growing belief in the necessity of baptism for salvation led to a greater concern to baptise children as soon after birth as possible lest they should die prematurely without the grace of the sacrament.³⁶ A common belief in the urgency of

³⁴ Baptism in the home was consistently discouraged by Church authorities. The rubrics for the Sarum liturgy state clearly that 'it is not lawful to baptise someone in a hall or apartment or some other private place, but only in churches in which there are fonts specially appointed for this purpose, unless it be the child of a king or prince or such necessity have arise that it is not possible to come to church without risk' (Whitaker, *Documents of the baptismal liturgy*, p.249). See also Synod of Cashel (n.25 above)

³⁵ Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Report on Franciscan manuscripts preserved at the convent, Merchant's Quay, Dublin* (Dublin, 1906), p.101: '*Cum sicut ex tua relatione percepimus, nonnumquam propter aquae penuriam infantes terrae tuae contingat in cervisia baptizari, tibi tenore praesentium respondemus, quod, cum secundum doctrinam canonicam oporteat eos ex aqua et Spiritu Sancto renasci, non debent reputari rite baptizari qui in cervisia baptizantur.*' (Since, as we have learned from what you have told us, it sometimes happens that, because of the shortage of water, the infants of your country are baptised in beer, we reply to you, in the sense of the enclosed, that, since according to canonical teaching, those [infants] should be reborn from water and the Holy Spirit, those who are baptised in beer should not be regarded as validly baptised).

³⁶ Fisher, *Christian initiation: baptism in the medieval West*, pp 109-12.

the matter survived into the Reformation period, being just as zealously expressed in the 1549 English Prayer Book.³⁷ Manus Ó Domhnaill, in his life of Colmcille, details how the saint was baptised straight after birth, highlighting the importance of the practice: ‘the noble priest Cruithnechan Mac Cellachain did baptise him straightway he was brought forth.’³⁸ Church pronouncements were not always taken on board, however. Despite the fact that the Sarum manual insisted that the *pannus chrismalis*, or baptismal cloth, should not be put to common uses but instead brought back to the church³⁹ this was obviously ignored by some who attributed a ‘sacred quality’ to it, eventually attracting condemnation of its abuse by the synod of Dublin (1614).⁴⁰ As observed above, the ideal set out by the Church for the baptism of infants was an administration of the sacrament, taking place in a church and by a priest. However, practical realities did not always allow for this. The Sarum rubrics enjoined upon priests therefore to

Frequently on Sundays explain to his parishioners the form of baptising in pure, natural and fresh water, and in no other liquid, so that if necessity arise they may know how to baptize infants according to the form of the Church, using the form of words of baptism in their mother tongue distinctly and openly and in an even voice in no wise repeating those words that are properly said once or similar words in addition to the same, but without any addition, subtraction, interpolation, alteration, corruption or transposition saying thus: I

³⁷ Ibid., p.112.

³⁸ *BCC*, p.41.

³⁹ See n.13 above.

⁴⁰ Alison Forrestal, ‘The Catholic synods: their influences and their influence, 1600-90’ (MA thesis, Maynooth College, 1996) p.14.

crisene the *N* in the name of the fadir and of the son and of the holy gost.

Amen.⁴¹

Should a layperson be obliged to administer the sacrament, the infant was still to be brought to the church for the accompanying exorcisms and unctions.⁴² However, if both a layman and laywoman were present, the man and not the woman should confer the baptism, unless of course she knew the formula and he did not.⁴³ The ideal, in any case, was baptism in a church by a priest. The fact that the ideal was not always met in early modern Ireland was a cause of distress to some such as John Shearman, a Waterford schoolteacher who, in a letter to the archbishop of Armagh dated 12 July 1585, complains that ‘they never christen their children but in their houses, either with a man priest or for want of him (which commonly the wealthiest of them want not) the women themselves christen.’⁴⁴ Baptism had more than just a religious function. It was also used as a tool in social regulation. Alison Forrestal explains that ‘baptism was popularly understood as symbolic of the new-born’s incorporation and membership of the kin network and as such was an occasion of celebration amongst the extended kin group.’⁴⁵ The choice of godparents for newly born infants was not just a haphazard exercise. Instead, it had important ramifications for the strengthening of kinship bonds. Treating of ritual in early modern Europe as a whole, Edward Muir remarks that ‘the creation of *god sibs* linked natural and spiritual kindred, creating

⁴¹ Whitaker, *Documents of the baptismal liturgy*, p.248.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.249.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.250.

⁴⁴ W. Maziere Brady (ed.), *State papers concerning the Irish Church in the time of Queen Elizabeth* (London, 1868), p.99.

⁴⁵ Forrestal, ‘The Catholic synods: their influences and their influence, 1600-90’, p.14.

friends and allies in a society that was always full of real and potential enemies.’⁴⁶ Fiona Fitzsimons argues, focussing on the phenomenon in Ireland, that ‘gossiprid was in fact the natural concomitant of marriage and fosterage in creating alliances.’⁴⁷ Since there was no restriction on the number of godparents one could have in pre-Tridentine baptismal practice, this resulted in the rite of initiation into the Church becoming a rite whereby one also entered into a highly politicised kin network. The creation of alliances through gossipred did not always end amicably, and deeds of treachery, aggravated by the fact that they were often meted out between parties that had entered into alliance with each other, are frequently documented in the annals. One such entry, for 1538, illustrates very clearly the inexorable link between the social and the sacramental:

Foul fratricide was done in Tellach-Eathach: to wit Toirdelbach the freckled, son of Thomas the Bald son of Feidhlimidh Mag Samradhain chose a day to make gossipred with the descendants of Tadhg Mag Samradhain and they went to meet each other peacefully...Toirdelbach slew eight of them, namely four of their noble persons and four others with them and four inoffensive children (who were brought to be baptised at Inch church).⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Edward Muir, *Ritual in early modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1997), p.22.

⁴⁷ Fiona Fitzsimons, ‘Fosterage and gossiprid in late medieval Ireland: some new evidence’ in Patrick J. Duffy, David Edwards and Elizabeth Fitzpatrick (eds), *Gaelic Ireland c.1250-c.1650: land, lordship and settlement* (Dublin, 2001), p.139. On the social significance of baptism in Europe see John Bossy, *Christianity in the West* (Oxford, 1985), p.15f; on opposition to such social revelling see John G. A. Prim, ‘Ancient civic enactments for restraining gossiping and feasting’, in *Transactions of the Kilkenny archaeological society* i (1849-51).

⁴⁸ *AFM*, 1538.

What was often seen as two opposing functions of the sacrament was frequently criticised by outside observers such as H.C. who, in 1599, severely condemned the forging of gossipred by

abusing the holy sacrament of the communion: which all perties in that league combyned (must receave the same to confirme any thinge, that is or shalbe from thence forth agreed uppon betwene them, yea though it smell of rebellion, murder, threassonne burnyng or any other capitall degree of what nature soever, so that by the illusion of the devil whereas that holy sacrament was instituted of chryste to the salvacon of the worthy receavor is by such people as theise converted to the distrucon bothe of body and soule to as many as useth this kynde of gossipride from the which kynde of combinacon the Lord deliver us.⁴⁹

The abuse of the sacrament of baptism, through the forging of kinship alliances and a lack of appreciation for the religious nature of the act, was later to be criticised by the Tridentine Church.⁵⁰

The Sacrament of Penance

The decree *Omnis utriusque sexus*, promulgated by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) marked an important turning point in the sacramental practice of the late medieval Church. This act enjoined upon each member of the faithful who was above the age of reason to annually confess his sins to his own priest and receive communion under pain of excommunication.⁵¹ The stipulations of the decree arose out of a long history

⁴⁹ Fitzsimons, 'Fosterage and gossiprid in late medieval Ireland: some new evidence', p.148.

⁵⁰ See Forrestal, 'The Catholic synods: their influences and their influence, 1600-90.'

⁵¹ Thomas N. Tentler, *Sin and confession on the eve of the Reformation* (New Jersey, 1977), pp 21-2.

of discussion on the most effective way to administer the sacrament.⁵² While the early system of canonical penances, which were public and rigorous, eventually gave way to the Irish system of Penitentials, which were private and with a fixed tariff for every sin, nevertheless some elements of former practice remained. Chief among these was a tendency to postpone reception of the sacrament until the deathbed, or at least late in life, as penances continued to be quite severe in nature.⁵³ The sixth-century Council of Toledo had denounced frequent visits to a priest for confession as an abuse, seeing it as a sign of inexcusable laxity.⁵⁴ The enduring tendency in Gaelic Ireland, even after the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, to postpone confession for as long as possible is well attested in the religious poetry of the bards. Gofraidh Ó Cléirigh (*n.l.t.*1372)⁵⁵ concludes a poem on repentance with the following words: 'Let me confess with earnest heart 'ere my death my sins to God.'⁵⁶ In another poem, he admits that his journey towards reconciliation with God has been, through his own choosing, a slow one:

I am slow to roof my house; soon shall I hear the coming shower; the world is
no lasting house for him who would fain be dry. /

⁵² Ibid., pp 3-21. See also A. Murray, 'Confession before 1215' in *Transactions of the Royal historical society*, 6th series, iii (1993) pp 51-81.

⁵³ Ibid., p.10. See also Hugh Connolly, *The Irish penitentials and their significance for the sacrament of penance today* (Dublin, 1995).

⁵⁴ Tentler, *Sin and confession on the eve of the reformation*, p.14.

⁵⁵ Ó Cléirigh's *floruit* is uncertain; however four poems are ascribed to him in *Leabhar Uí Mhaine* (Book of Hy Many) written by Seaán Mór Ó Dubhagáin (*d.*1372) indicating that Ó Cléirigh must have lived, at the latest, in the fourteenth century.

⁵⁶ *ADD* 61, v.32.

I love the women of this world and its banquet, (yet) short is its spell; are not the days slipping by? This beloved earth which is evil for me; this passing world is not my home.⁵⁷

Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn (*d.*1448) also gives evidence of the practice of late confession when he laments ‘My end is almost come; I should have prepared for it.../ now is the hour for penance; how know if I should live another hour? Let me seize the time at hand.’⁵⁸ Despite the exhortations of Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh (*d.*1387) to confess one’s sins without allowing them to linger on, the poet himself does not relish the kind of penance that he might be given to accomplish (in this case a long and arduous pilgrimage) and thus his sins remain uncompensated for:

Anyone who indulges in such desires as mine (?) a day will come when he will repent of it; no wonder that he is found (a pilgrim) at the fair, bright stream of the Jordan. /

Far from atoning my sins I take no step towards Rome; shrinking from that journey I content myself with dreaming of Rome.⁵⁹

Tardiness in coming to God in repentance was a feature of Gaelic life that is evidenced even at the end of the sixteenth century in the poetry of Eochaidh Ó hEoghusa: ‘Long since I should have come to Thee; slow in coming was this day when I see the truth...I am a vessel full of evil deeds.’⁶⁰ Some, however, took a more relaxed view of the need for repentance, as evident in the case of one unidentified poet (*n.l.t.*1631):

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 62, vv 1-2.

⁵⁸ *DDé* 5, vv 1, 5.

⁵⁹ *ADD* 69, vv 21-2.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 73, v.3.

The world's debt to Thee is long overdue, the debt that was not called in when it fell due – I do not object to this delay about it! There is never the same heat in the sun at eventide. /

My accounts are not clear though 'tis not hard to settle accounts with Thee.⁶¹

The shift in emphasis regarding the theology and administration of the sacrament, which was ratified by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, had, at one level, been developing since the ninth century. Among the developments were the following – a general lightening of penances which were to be arbitrary and not fixed, a greater importance given to contrition rather than fulfilment of penitential exercise a renewed stress on the necessity of private confession for the forgiveness of sins and a more clearly defined importance given to the power of the priest's absolution.⁶² John Bossy explains the latter development well:

Adapted to different social forms, the social concept of penance persisted through the centuries of the barbarian west until scholastic theology interiorised the notions of sin and repentance. Reconciliation to God and not to the community became the object of the sacrament; the change was institutionalised with the universal imposition of private confession by the Lateran Council of 1215.⁶³

It is against the background of *Omnis utriusque sexus* that the sacrament of penance in late medieval Gaelic Ireland is examined here.

⁶¹ Ibid., 84, vv 21-2.

⁶² Tentler, *Sin and confession on the eve of the reformation*, p.16.

⁶³ John Bossy, 'The social history of confession in the age of the Reformation' in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, xxv (1975), p.22.

Penance and reception of the Eucharist

The requirement that all should confess and receive the Eucharist annually, as promulgated in 1215, was inextricably linked to developments in Eucharistic theology in the twelfth century.⁶⁴ With a greater emphasis on the *real* presence of Christ in the Eucharistic species came the need for a greater scrutiny of the state of one's soul before one could receive. Non-reception was not an option as all were required to approach the sacrament at least once a year at Easter and to have confessed one's sins beforehand.⁶⁵ Both sacraments, thus, strengthened each other, and the new legislation inculcated in the faithful renewed respect when approaching them. This is evident as early as the thirteenth century in the poetry of Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh. Having described in some detail the Passion and wounds that Christ suffered on Calvary to redeem humanity, linking the wine-blood He shed on the cross with the Eucharistic species, Donnchadh promises: 'I swear to God who sees me and hears me – and judgement is his – I will, as I am bound, drink thy wine-blood worthily.'⁶⁶ He goes further when he suggests that sin is an impediment to valid attendance at Mass itself (without mention of the reception of the Eucharist): 'See, my friend, if thou goest to church in time for Mass; if thou sinnest in church thou dost not (validly) attend Mass there.'⁶⁷ Concern that one should receive the sacrament in a state of grace continues to appear as a theme in bardic religious poetry in the centuries following. Tuathal Ó hUiginn (*d.*1450), in a poem treating of the Eucharist, makes the point several times: 'The Lord's body avails not if I receive it in spite of my sin; before its reception sin's

⁶⁴ See Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: the Eucharist in late medieval culture* (Cambridge, 1991).

⁶⁵ Swanson, *Religion and devotion in Europe c.1215-c.1515*, p.33.

⁶⁶ *DDé* 26, v.22.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 28, v.36.

root must be plucked out' and again 'to receive it with sin in my heart is death; it is fruitless for him who receives it lightly, though its reception is (meant to be) a presage of salvation.'⁶⁸ Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn (*d.*1487) offers an explanation why this should be so: 'To approach the Lord's body after sin is the more grievous as the communicant receives him in his divine nature.'⁶⁹

Penance and the wine feast of Heaven

Despite being concerned with being in a state of grace before receiving Holy Communion, a greater consideration was clearly entry into permanent communion with God in Heaven. It is in this context that the following verse from the sixteenth-century poet, Fearghal Ó Cionga, should be understood:

Because of my grave sins I cannot enter to drink of the wine feast; it was astonishing of me to turn my back on the hall yonder when there was a feast being drunk in it.⁷⁰

The image of the wine feast was commonly used to describe the heavenly banquet.⁷¹

The sixteenth century poet, Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh, refers, in the same way, to sin blocking his entrance to the heavenly banquet:

My sin, a seed that had brought forth its fruit, prevents me from being invited to the feast; I cannot go into it.../

My perverseness should have been confessed; God's race are none the better for the long respite they have got if it encourages them to more guile.⁷²

⁶⁸ *DDé* 18, vv 2, 6.

⁶⁹ *PB* 17, v.11.

⁷⁰ *ADD* 59, v.4.

⁷¹ See below.

⁷² *ADD* 64, vv 39-40.

An interesting poem by Tadhg Ó Dálaigh (*fl.c.1520*) also makes reference to the heavenly feast. However, in this poem, there is no allusion to the necessity of confession and the poet relies solely on the merit of Christ's Passion to gain him entry, preferring to take his chances when he reaches the hall above. The opening lines 'No appropriated field is God's grace' hint at the tone of the remainder of the poem.⁷³ Ó Dálaigh, noting that Christ did not delay in pardoning the world, forgetting mankind's sins, is highly expectant of God's mercy: 'Though none of us deserve pardon, why should not I get it like anyone else?'⁷⁴ The Passion of Christ has opened up the heavenly feast hall and Ó Dálaigh has every confidence that he will not be turned away:

O God, Thou wilt not reject me if I can make my way to Thy hall; 'twere foolish for a crowd not to storm a guest hall left open during a feast. /

Though 'twere fit that a sinner like me be excluded from the palace, 'twould be an unheard of thing for Christ's breast wound that any guest should be kept out from the feast.⁷⁵

Preparation for confession

In order to prepare for confession, it was necessary that one knew what sin was and was thus able to examine one's conscience before receiving the sacrament. Instruction on the administration of the sacrament of confession was also required for priests and in the wake of the Fourth Lateran Council there arose a large corpus of *summae* and manuals to aid the clergy in this task. Among these, some of the most important *summae* (large exhaustive books dealing with moral and sacramental theology) were

⁷³ Ibid., 71, v.1.

⁷⁴ Ibid., v.9.

⁷⁵ Ibid., vv 24, 26.

the Catalan Dominican, Raymond of Peñaforte's *Summa de casibus consciencie*, compiled between 1220 and 1245, fellow Dominican, John of Freiburg's *Summa confessorum*, written at the end of the thirteenth century, and later Angelus Carletti of Chiavasso's (1411-95) *Summa angelica*.⁷⁶ Of more practical use for priests in general were the manuals of confession and pastoral care. Works such as the *Confessionale-Defecerunt* of Antoninus of Florence (1389-1459) and the *Opus tripartitum* of Jean Gerson (1363-1429) were hugely popular, the latter running to sixteen printings in the fifteenth century alone.⁷⁷ Colmán Ó Clabaigh notes that there is evidence of many of these works being used in late medieval Ireland. A catalogue of books possessed by the Franciscan friary at Youghal lists two copies of Raymond of Peñaforte's work (although Ó Clabaigh wonders whether it is not in fact John of Freiburg's more popular work (similar in format and content) the *Summa confessorum* that was held there).⁷⁸ The friars also owned a copy of Antoninus's *Confessionale-Defecerunt* and two copies of Angelus of Clavassio's *Summa angelica*. The catalogue also lists two unidentified volumes by Jean Gerson. It is very probable that one of these was the *Opus tripartitum*.⁷⁹ The Youghal library catalogue is not the only place that one finds reference to continental confessional works being absorbed into Ireland. An abbreviated version of John of Freiburg's *Summa confessorum* is found in a fifteenth century Observant manuscript (TCD, Ms 250) and a library catalogue of the earl of Kildare dating from 1526 lists two of the works of Antoninus of Florence.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Tentler, *Sin and confession on the eve of the reformation*, pp 31-5.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp 39, 45.

⁷⁸ Ó Clabaigh, *The Franciscans in Ireland, 1400-1534*, p.148.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp 149-50.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

Having established that confessional *summae* and manuals were, at least, to be had in late medieval Ireland, it can be taken that they exerted an important influence on the administration of the sacrament and played an important role in its evolution. Before one could approach the sacrament of confession it was imperative that one knew that sin had been committed. In order to know that one had sinned, one needed to be aware of what constituted a sin in the first place. Such awareness, however, was not always to be found, as is illustrated in the following case, related by Edmund Campion:

I found a fragment of an epistle wherein a vertuos monke declareth that to him (travailing in Ulster) came a grave gentleman about Easter desirous to be confessed and howseled who in all his life time had never yet received the blessed sacrament. When he had said his minde the priest demaunded him whether he were faultlesse in the sinne of homicide? Hee answered that he never wist the matter to bee haynous before but being instructed thereof hee confessed the murther of five, the rest he left wounded, so as he knew not whether they lived or no.⁸¹

In this case it appears that the penitent was incapable of enunciating what sins he had committed and quite evidently lacked the tools for a personal examination of conscience. The confessional manuals most often aided the priest in examining the penitent by providing a list of sins and also enquiries that could be put to different categories of people. John of Freiburg's short work, the *Confessionale*, designed for use by less competent confessors, and found in the fifteenth-century manuscript, TCD Ms 250, outlined how confessions should be heard, how penitents should be put at their ease and also provided an examination of conscience based on the seven deadly

⁸¹ Campion, *A historie of Ireland*, pp 15-16.

sins.⁸² These sins, namely pride, envy, wrath, avarice, gluttony, sloth and lechery, formulated by Gregory the Great and later systemised in the twelfth century, were to constitute, for most of the late medieval faithful, a moral checklist by which one's conscience could be examined.⁸³

The Seven Deadly Sins and the Ten Commandments

Until the sixteenth century, at the popular level, it was the Seven Deadly Sins and not the Ten Commandments that held sway as the vehicle *par excellence* through which one reached a knowledge of one's personal sins. These sins could easily be depicted in church iconography in the form of persons or animals, far more straightforwardly than could the Ten Commandments. However, that is not to say that the Ten Commandments did not feature at all in tracts designed to prepare one for confession. In fact, surprisingly, they appear alongside the seven sins from the start. Archbishop John Pecham's programme of instruction, dating from 1281, popularly known as *Ignorantia Sacerdotum*, which was obligatory preaching material in the diocese of Armagh, required clergy to know and teach the Ten Commandments after the Creed and before the Seven Sins.⁸⁴ The *Confessionale-Defecerunt* of Antoninus of Florence (1389-1459) included an examination of conscience based on both the Decalogue and

⁸² Ó Clabaigh, *The Franciscans in Ireland, 1400-1534*, p 150.

⁸³ John Bossy, 'Moral arithmetic: seven sins into ten commandments' in Edmund Leites (ed.), *Conscience and casuistry in early modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1977), p.215.

⁸⁴ Watt, *The church in medieval Ireland*, p.211; also Bossy, 'Moral arithmetic', p.218. A fifteenth century manuscript (Ms. S 35) at St John's College Cambridge, based upon Pecham's Lambeth constitutions and compiled by at least two different priests, contains a body of material designed to aid the priest in the administration of the sacrament. A section dealing with inquisitions priests might use with penitents is structured around the Ten Commandments, seven deadly sins and five bodily wits; see Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, pp 58-9.

the Seven Deadly Sins.⁸⁵ If both of these methods of preparation for confession appeared so often, side by side, in the manuals, why did one come to gain more prominence at a popular level than the other? John Bossy has argued that had these manuals been followed closely by the clergy then the Ten Commandments would have been equally familiar to the laity as the seven sins.⁸⁶ Yet it seems that, for the purposes of the clergy, the seven sins were more manageable as a memory aid and were deemed sufficient for the purposes required. There are even suggestions in the official manuals that reflection on the seven sins was enough to make a good confession. Tentler, examining Jean Gerson's *Opus tripartitum*, makes the following observation:

Although his *Opus tripartitum* takes up sins against the Ten Commandments in the first part and the seven deadly sins in the second, he concludes his discussion of the latter with the advice that they are enough for a good examination of conscience. The seven deadly sins, he notes, will provide all the insight necessary into the sins according to the five senses, works on mercy, articles of faith, and the Ten Commandments. One need not add anything to them unless there is some particular circumstance he wants to explain.⁸⁷

Reference to the seven sins in bardic religious poetry was not at all uncommon. Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn (*d.*1448) refers to 'the seven deadly sins beguiling me cause my soul's trouble; 'tis misery not to turn from them seeing the warnings given against them.'⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Ó Clabaigh, *The Franciscans in Ireland, 1400-1534*, p.150.

⁸⁶ Bossy, 'Moral arithmetic', p.218.

⁸⁷ Tentler, *Sin and confession on the eve of the reformation*, pp 137-8.

⁸⁸ *DDé* 7, v.35.

The 'warnings' Tadhg speaks of could be an allusion to sermons he has heard that encouraged people to avoid them. Gofraidh, son of Brian Mac an Bhaird (*fl.* late sixteenth century) comments that 'seven evil folk have been for long my guides; alas they bring seven causes of punishment.'⁸⁹ Meanwhile, Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh, three centuries earlier, refers to the 'eight sins of the perverse body' (the deadly sins were sometimes enumerated as the 'eight carnal sins' in bardic poetry).⁹⁰ Here eight canonical hours are employed by Donnchadh as safeguards against the sins in question: Prime against gluttony, Terce against anger, Sext against 'sin with dark-browed woman', None against greed, Vespers against despair, Compline against envy, *Iarmhéirghe* (Lauds) against 'boastfulness and proud speech' and Matins against 'pride and evil jesting.'⁹¹ Later in the poem he provides a list of 'weapons' that can be used to combat the deadly sins in question:

Fasting against gluttony, patience in anger...avoidance of soft-haired woman
against adultery / almsgiving instead of greed,...charity against envy /
modesty instead of foolish boasting / humility instead of pride.⁹²

Here Donnchadh is alluding to a method of avoiding sin that already had a long history in the Irish Church, namely the principle of 'cure by contraries', which came to Ireland originally through the writings of John Cassian (*c.* 360-435) and came to be used especially in the Irish penitentials that superseded the older canonical system of penance by the end of the sixth century.⁹³ This principle utilised the metaphor of

⁸⁹ *ADD* 52, v.5. Note that here the Seven Sins are personified.

⁹⁰ *DDé* 24, v.6.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, vv 3-5.

⁹² *Ibid.*, vv 8-10.

⁹³ Hugh Connolly, *The Irish penitentials*, p.7; also Tentler, *Sin and confession on the eve of the reformation*, p.9.

medicine and healing, arguing that vices could be healed by the adoption of a corresponding virtue.⁹⁴ There is also an implicit reference to antidotes for the Seven Sins in the poetry of Gofraidh Ó Cléirigh (*n.l.t.* 1372) in which he alludes to the seven or eight antidotes (reflecting again the frequent variation in their enumeration) as ‘steps...to bring me to Heaven.’⁹⁵ It is not difficult to imagine how steps such as obedience, patience, truthfulness, confession, abstinence, penance, mercy and almsgiving could be conceived as useful virtues in counterbalancing the weight of the seven (or eight) deadly sins.⁹⁶ The usefulness of being able to assign corresponding virtues to the seven sins could be seen as one reason for their success story in the high and late middle ages. John Bossy alludes to this fact in comparing their worth with that of the Decalogue:

Familiar, flexible, covering remedy as well as disease, the Sins were a more serviceable slate on which, guided by the priest, one might perform an annual calculation of the moral account or annual moral check-up.⁹⁷

The evidence of bardic religious poetry is quite interesting in its treatment of the seven sins and the Ten Commandments. If one takes Bossy’s statement on board, i.e. that ‘for the average person, the Decalogue was in 1600 a relative novelty’⁹⁸ then the evidence of Gaelic religious poetry does not exactly fit into this pattern. The Ten Commandments do appear, as expected, in the later poetry of individuals such as Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh and Gofraidh, son of Brian Mac an Bhaird (both late sixteenth century poets). However, the Seven Deadly Sins appear alongside them in

⁹⁴ Connolly, *The Irish penitentials*, p.7.

⁹⁵ *ADD* 62, v.20.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, vv 21-8.

⁹⁷ John Bossy, ‘Moral arithmetic’, p.219.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.215.

these instances, indicative of their continuing relevance. What is most revealing, though, is that the Ten Commandments are featured in the earlier poetry also and not only in conjunction with the Seven Sins, but frequently in their own right. An examination of these instances makes for interesting reading. Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh (*d.*1387) composes the following verse: ‘I leave my tithe unpaid and break the Lord’s Ten Commandments; much I do which I should not; I give no alms.’⁹⁹ Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn (*d.*1448) has special mention for the Ten Commandments in a poem which recounts Paul’s conversion: ‘It [the road of penance] lies before thee, keep to it, my friend who strivest to Heaven, the red road of the Ten Commandments leading to our Creator.’¹⁰⁰ In another poem, dealing with the Virgin’s intercession, Tadhg mentions how difficult it is to keep the Ten Commandments: ‘To avoid (violation of) the Ten Commandments is hard unless it (this grace) be granted me; I cannot afford not to keep watch at the head of every road leading to me.’¹⁰¹ Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn (*d.*1487), in a poem extolling the virtues of the twelve apostles, states that ‘Holy Simon, Devil’s foe and Christ’s friend, kept the Commandments – fruitful work – and forced his foe to yield to him.’¹⁰² None of the above poems have any reference to the Seven Sins; the Ten Commandments alone are mentioned. The later poetry often features both moral evaluation systems.¹⁰³ In a poem addressing the

⁹⁹ *ADD* 69, v.8.

¹⁰⁰ *DDé* 6, v.11.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 15, v.9.

¹⁰² *PB* 24, v.21.

¹⁰³ A poem attributed to Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh, but clearly mistakenly so, and which is found in the Book of O Conor Don (1631) mentions both the Seven Sins and Ten Commandments at vv 4 and 6 respectively; see ‘Confession of sins’, in *IM* 1922, p.28.

traditional medieval theme of the soul vs. body conflict Gofraidh, son of Brian Mac an Bhaird (late sixteenth century) includes the following verses:

Swift to attack her [the soul] too are her own dear offspring, the eight carnal sins, biting her as fierce packs of hounds; pitiful is that attack. /

And even the man whose sin baptism has removed – the roots of that sin come when the Ten Commandments are forgotten, charging and clawing at him with teeth and nails.¹⁰⁴

Interestingly, in this poem, out of thirty-five verses only one mentions the Ten Commandments whereas there are two explicit references to the Capital (or deadly) sins and several others that are implicit.¹⁰⁵ The seven sins are depicted as animals, wolves or ‘sleuth hounds’ that attack the soul, which is a lamb of Christ’s flock.¹⁰⁶ The way in which the Ten Commandments are presented is worthy of note. Gofraidh states that despite the fact that Original Sin has been removed by Baptism, nevertheless the roots of that sin (concupiscence) appear and flourish when the Ten Commandments are forgotten. The roots of Original Sin are depicted as ‘clawing’ their victim ‘with teeth and nails’, suggestive of the wolf or hound metaphor.¹⁰⁷ Clearly, then, concupiscence is encountered in the guise of the Seven Deadly Sins. To forget the Ten Commandments is to allow these sins to grow and flourish. Despite the

¹⁰⁴ *ADD* 50, vv 21, 23.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* The two explicit references are found at vv 21, 25. The implicit references appear in vv 2, 20, 23 and 35.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.* See vv 1, 2, 25, 35.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, v.22.

many references to the seven capital sins, however, primacy¹⁰⁸ is given to the observance of the Ten Commandments rather than the avoidance of the Seven Sins in one's moral life. If these are kept, the verse suggests, the Seven Sins will not be a problem. Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh, in a poem dealing with the subject of confession specifically, accuses himself of many of the deadly sins in successive verses – pride (v.3), greed (v.4), anger (v.5), envy (v.6), sloth (v.7), impurity (v.8), perjury (v.10) and vain speech (v.15).¹⁰⁹ The accompanying reference to the Ten Commandments occurs at verse 9: 'All Ten Commandments of the Lord I break in my sinfulness. The tearing of the page of the Ten Commandments is all recorded against me.'¹¹⁰ In this poem, while Ó Dálaigh admits that he has broken God's Law as expressed in the Decalogue, the examination of his conscience is clearly based on the seven (or eight) sins. Elsewhere, when looking towards his death and judgement, he plans to set forth on his journey to eternity with 'eight companions' who must 'hide' his sins. The companions are his favourite saints. The sins they will hide are clearly the capital sins.¹¹¹ The background to the concern of Aonghus was the belief that after death the seven deadly sins would be called up to testify against the soul by accusing it of having fallen for one or more of their seductions.¹¹² This belief is strikingly portrayed in the earliest text of the Irish version of the 'Harrowing of Hell' (derived from the

¹⁰⁸ In this instance I do not understand 'primacy' in the sense of 'greater importance'; instead, here I take it to mean 'basic' or 'foundational', i.e. chronologically, the keeping of the Ten Commandments precedes the avoidance of the Seven Sins.

¹⁰⁹ *AFOD* 39, vv 3-15.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, v.9.

¹¹¹ *AFOD* 30, v.7.

¹¹² See *DDé* 30, v.3. Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh remarks: 'I fear for the state of my soul on the Day of Truth, the Eight Sins being against me...'

apocryphal *Evangelium Nicodemi*), which was recorded by Uilliam Mac an Leagha in the second half of the fifteenth century. In the opening scene ‘Satan, fearing that Christ will come to harrow Hell, summons the Seven Deadly Sins in order to discover whether Christ has ever succumbed to their temptations.’¹¹³ Both the seven deadly sins and the Ten Commandments had roles to play in popular consciousness in the late medieval period. While it does seem that the Ten Commandments came to be more frequently represented in the later period, the influence of the seven deadly sins persisted, perhaps more vigorously than has been previously acknowledged.

How to confess properly: sixteen conditions

Clerics who were concerned that penitents make a good and complete confession usually fell back on clear instructions regarding the proper use of the sacrament such as the ‘sixteen conditions of a good confession’ attributed by writers such as Antoninus of Florence and Angelus de Clavassio to St Thomas Aquinas.¹¹⁴ The conditions were usually listed as follows: ‘let the confession be simple, humble, pure, faithful, and frequent, unadorned, discreet, willing, ashamed, whole, secret, tearful, prompt, strong and reproachful and showing willingness to obey.’¹¹⁵ The popularity of this formula in Ireland is evidenced by its inclusion in tracts on confession found in the fifteenth-century Franciscan manuscript written at Kilcrea and now in the public library at Rennes, in TCD Ms 667 (also dating from the fifteenth century) and in at least four other late fifteenth and early sixteenth century codices.¹¹⁶ The Irish version was based on Antoninus’s *Confessionale-Defecerunt* but contained a fuller

¹¹³ Caerwyn Williams, ‘An Irish harrowing of Hell’, p.46.

¹¹⁴ Tentler, *Sin and confession on the eve of the reformation*, p.106.

¹¹⁵ ‘*sit simplex, humilis, confessio, pura, fidelis, atque frequens nuda, discreta, libens, verecunda, integra, secreta, lachrimabilis, accelerata, fortis et accusans, et sit parere parata*’: *ibid.*, pp 106-7.

¹¹⁶ Ó Clabaigh, *The Franciscans in Ireland, 1400-1534*, pp 151-2.

commentary.¹¹⁷ The fact that it is included in the *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne* commissioned in 1513-14 for Máire, daughter of Eoghan Ó Máille and wife of Eoghan Ruadh Mac Suibhne Fanad illustrates that pious lay people such as this devout woman used the list in practice.¹¹⁸ The concerns expressed in the list were as relevant in Ireland as they were on the continent as shown by the extended Irish commentary. The penitent was urged to be simple and humble in the presentation of his sins, without holding any sin back from the priest. He was also advised not to include a list of his good deeds in the confession in an attempt to take the focus from his misdemeanours. He was to have trust that his sins would be forgiven, expressing confidence in the mercy of God. Most importantly, deep contrition was a prerequisite for good confession. Frequent confession (in this case three times a year) was strongly advocated.¹¹⁹ These recommendations were widely acknowledged, if not always observed, as is clear from the evidence of a large number of bardic poems that deal with the subject of repentance. Unsatisfactory confessions, however, obviously continued to be the norm among the laity, as the reiteration of similar instructions was deemed necessary by Irish clergy intent on transmitting Tridentine reform to their homeland from European centres such as Louvain. Some of the requirements for good confessional practice, as recognised by bardic poets are examined below.

One of the most important recommendations for good confessional practice was to avoid delay in coming. As noted above, largely because of the fear of inordinate penances and also because of sheer neglect, the confession of one's sins was frequently left until late in life or even until the deathbed. However, to leave penance

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Walsh (eag.), *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne*, p.151.

¹¹⁹ Ó Clabaigh, *The Franciscans in Ireland, 1400-1534*, p.153

to the last minute was to risk dying without the comfort of the last sacraments if the priest did not arrive in time. In order to prevent this happening, one of late medieval man's most urgent petitions during life was for 'schrift, housel and anneling' (confession, communion and anointing) as outlined by Eamon Duffy.¹²⁰ The Irish annals, when reporting the deaths of notable individuals, frequently confirm that departure from this life was after 'unction and penance', clarifying the state of their souls before death. However, many Gaelic poets advised against leaving repentance to the final hour. An unidentified poet (*n.l.t.* 1631) rued his own doing so:

O Saviour of the six generations I did not ask Thee to hear my confession after
each sin but only when I felt my body wither.¹²¹

This kind of laxity is attributed by the poet to a naive and foolish trust in God's mercy, the kind of trust that encourages a person to carry on sinning without taking account: 'Trusting, O Trinity, that Thy mercy may visit me – foolish trust – I ceased not from sin nor made any account of it.'¹²² Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh (*d.*1387) makes a similar assessment of the foolishness of delaying repentance: 'Grant that I abide not in whatever sin I commit, O God; not to rise from it, O Lord, is worse than to commit it.'¹²³ To refuse to avail of the grace of the sacrament was seen as a serious rejection of what Christ achieved in His Passion, and so a misplaced trust in the merits of the Passion without recourse to the formal sacrament was frowned upon by one of the most notable exponents of Passion themes, the sixteenth-century poet Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh, who accuses himself of such an error:

¹²⁰ Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, pp.120, 311.

¹²¹ 'Confession of sins', in *IM*, 1922, v.14, p.29,

¹²² *Ibid.*, v.13.

¹²³ *ADD* 69, v.16.

My perverseness should have been confessed; God's race are none the better for the long respite they have got if it encourages them to more guile; for the debt due to the nail is made greater by it.¹²⁴

The importance of settling one's accounts while the weather is fine occurs occasionally in bardic poetry. The sixteenth century poet, Tadhg Óg Ó Dálaigh (*fl.* 1520) recalls how Christ's peace (achieved by His death on the cross) was given to previous generations, while adding the aspiration 'May the weather not change for us.'¹²⁵ However, other bardic poets were more aware of the mutability of 'weather patterns' and thus urge the faithful to make peace while they have the opportunity. One unidentified poet (*n.l.t.* 1631) considers it prudent to offer the following reminder:

If Eve's race put off till Monday the payment of their debt they are not likely to pay it then; 'tis dangerous for them not to travel while it is fine, for evening brings dark clouds.¹²⁶

The fifteenth century poet, Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn, in an effort to establish a balance between the Divine attributes of Mercy and Justice, and so avoid the kind of naïve abandonment to mercy that leads to laxity, makes the following statement: 'His mercy is sunshine before deluge; it is not to be praised beyond other virtues; He will avenge His grievances too.'¹²⁷ However, ever the Franciscan, Philip elsewhere, while expounding upon the same theme, reassures tardy penitents with the following message: 'Thy neglect of Heavenly glory till the evening of thy life prevents thee not, my friend, from entering His house if thou now hold by Mary's lamb.'¹²⁸

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 64, v.40.

¹²⁵ *ADD* 71, v.9.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 84, v.2.

¹²⁷ *PB* 25, v.3.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 12, v.24.

While availing of the sacrament, it was strongly advocated that the penitent be open and honest in his listing of sins, without holding any back out of shame. To do this was a sin in itself and the confession was deemed incomplete and, therefore, useless. From an early stage there was the awareness, as evidenced at least by some bardic poets, that this was a grave issue. An unidentified poet (*n.l.t.*1631) issues a strong statement against concealing sins from the priest when he notes the following:

‘More grievous than sin is to refuse to confess it; if one has been unrighteous to conceal it is an equal sin.’¹²⁹ Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn (*d.*1487) meanwhile explains that on the Day of Judgment all shall be revealed: ‘No man shall hide his deeds on the Gathering Day; he should flee to the soul’s leech to confess them.’¹³⁰ Gofraidh, son of Brian Mac an Bhaire, in the late sixteenth century, warns of this in a more explicit manner: ‘The sins of which a man is conscious and which he has left unconfessed – no joyous thing is the approach (to him) of their battle cries – it means misery in store for him.’¹³¹ A poem treating of the feast of Corpus Christi, written by an anonymous poet and included in TCD Ms. 1340 (dated 1614), includes the following verses:

Foes of the soul are sins one does not confess, fleshly sins growing apace; to
tell sins is to banish them. /

Woe then is he who hides his sin and confesses it not humbly; if a man’s
sorrow is genuine his atonement for sin will cause it to be forgotten by God.¹³²

¹²⁹ ‘Confession of sins’ in *IM*, 1922, v.22, p.73.

¹³⁰ *PB* 6, v.10.

¹³¹ *ADD* 50, v.23

¹³² *Ibid.*, 94, v.32.

The sixteenth-century poet, Maolmhuire, son of Cairbre Ó hUiginn, makes a theologically insightful remark regarding the refusal to confess sin out of shame, using the case of Eve's sin in the garden as an example:

Confess and ask for pardon; God pardoned not Eve in the matter of the apple;
the sin itself He would have forgiven but He could not forgive her denial of
it.¹³³

These brief extracts from poetry composed between the thirteenth and late sixteenth centuries illustrate that at least in some circles the recommendation that confession be 'whole' or complete was recognised and aspired to.

The most important requirement for confession was not frequency or completeness, however, but sincere and heartfelt contrition. If one was not truly sorry for sin the exercise was meaningless. An unidentified poet (*n.l.t.*1631) clearly states that 'God asks only repentance of their sins from men.'¹³⁴ The primacy of contrition is strongly argued for by Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn (*d.*1448) in a verse in which he condemns those who are unmoved by the Passion: 'The guiltier are Eve's children – 'tis sad for Christ – because for one tear of sorrow His flesh and blood would be forgiven them.'¹³⁵ To illustrate this, he uses the example of Mary Magdalen who washed the feet of Jesus with her tears and dried them with her hair. The result was that 'there was no sin she had committed while squandering her youth but was forgiven her in return for her tears.'¹³⁶ Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn (*d.*1487) concurs with the sentiments of Tadhg Óg in illustrating how Heaven is won by tears: 'Thou shalt get from God Heaven for

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 77, v.39.

¹³⁴ 'Confession of sins' in *IM*, 1922, v.26, p.418,

¹³⁵ *DDé* 5, v.21.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, v.28. This example is also used by Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh; see *AFOD* 51, v.10.

sorrow-tears; that home should be eagerly sought.¹³⁷ Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh (d.1387) encouraged free flowing tears in his own life as atonement for sin: ‘May I succeed in atoning for my sins as is my duty; my eye was given me for shedding tears; let me not check them.’¹³⁸ The late sixteenth century poet, Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh, recounts a story to illustrate the effect of sorrow on sin. Once a woman had an unlawful child. Panicking, she cut the child’s throat after which the stains of three drops of blood remained on her hand. All attempts to wash them off were in vain until one day when the woman realised that she had done wrong and sorrow entered her heart. She hastened to confession and confesses, albeit with great difficulty, her encounter with an unlawful lover and her subsequent murder of her child. As she confesses, her tears flow freely, indicating her sincere contrition. As she wipes her eyes, her tears remove the three stains. Aonghus summarises by stating that ‘contrition removed the stains in her heart as well as the three blood stains.’¹³⁹

One of the recommendations for a good confession as outlined in *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne* (1513-14) was a great confidence in the mercy of God and a deep trust that one is forgiven once the sin has been sincerely and contritely confessed and absolved. References to the mercy of God and His willingness to forgive are frequent in bardic poetry. The sixteenth-century poet, Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh, is characteristically pictorial in his description of the abatement of God’s anger through the sacrificial offering of His Son on the cross and the subsequent outpouring of mercy on humanity:

¹³⁷ *PB* 6, v.40.

¹³⁸ *ADD* 69, v.28.

¹³⁹ *AFOD* 51, v.25.

The ceasing of a storm is the more welcome for the wealth which the sea casts up; the wave of love flowing over the shore of the heart has spread abundant wealth of mercy.¹⁴⁰

Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn, a century earlier, highlighted the mercy of God and the reconciling effect of the sacrament of Confession in the following verse:

Greater than is thought is God's mercy; His wrath has lost its first strength; it is easy to avoid owing to the means He has established for getting pardon.¹⁴¹

The point made by both poets was simply that God's mercy is readily available; however, one must avail of the means He provided in order to attain it. The gravity of the sin is inconsequential when compared with the mercy of God. In the same poem, Philip Bocht provides encouragement to those who remain disheartened by what seems to them to be unforgivable: 'Distrusting my watchfulness – I trust the more His mercy – He proportions His power to my sin; my crime is less than His power.'¹⁴² It is clear that one of the problems encountered by penitents was a form of scrupulosity that wondered whether forgiveness had really been received. An unidentified poet (*n.l.t.*1631), who was not slow to proclaim that 'however great a man's sins, is not God's mercy greater'¹⁴³ attempted to put matters at rest regarding this issue by the use of a simple image:

When the soul of each of us is placed in our bodies a demon comes to it, book in hand, noting our sins. When good confession undoes the sin [the] Devil cannot see it for a hole appears in the book.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ *ADD* 67, v.5.

¹⁴¹ *PB* 17, v.1.

¹⁴² *PB* 17, v.6.

¹⁴³ 'Confession of sins' in *IM* 1922, v.29, p.74

¹⁴⁴ *DDé* 30, vv 4-5.

There is strong evidence, however, to suggest that undue confidence in God's willingness to forgive without proper attention to His justice resulted in a somewhat cavalier approach to morality and one's salvation. Maolmhuire, son of Cairbre Ó hUiginn is confidently assertive of his destiny in the following verse:

'Tis wrong for a sinner like me to be let into Thy banquet room; yet seeing that all men are making for that one banquet 'tis too late now to reject any of them.¹⁴⁵

An unidentified poet (*n.l.t.*1631) expresses a similar confidence in when he claims:

My accounts are not clear, though 'tis not hard to settle accounts with Thee!
The man who wounded Thee now sits in Heaven at Thy side; is it not thus clear that Thy natural impulse is to save me?¹⁴⁶

An immense trust that all things would be right with God in the end, despite the individual's personal sin during life, perhaps led commentators such as Fynes Moryson to explain the thieving nature of the Irish in the following manner:

Theft is not infamous but rather commendable among them so as the greatest men affect to haue the best theeues to attend vpon them, and if any man reprove them, they Answer that they doe as their fathers did, and it is infamy for gentlemen and swordmen to liue by labour and manuall trades. Yea they will not be perswaded that theft displeaseth God, because he giues the pray into their handes and if he be displeased, they say yet he is mercyfull and will pardon them for vsing meanes to lieue.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ ADD 77, v.7.

¹⁴⁶ ADD 84, v.22.

¹⁴⁷ Graham Kew, 'The Irish sections of Fynes Moryson's unpublished itinerary', in *Analecta Hibernica* xxxvii (1988), p.102.

Despite this confidence in God's mercy, for some, excessive anxiety regarding the attainment of forgiveness continued to be a cause for concern. A story concerning a monk who doubted whether the penance he received was sufficient for him to attain forgiveness is related in Manus Ó Domhnaill's *Betha Colaim Chille* (1532). A monk who had sinned with a woman repented and confessed his sin to Findia who did not make much of it. Yet, Findia's calm approach to the matter sowed the seeds of scrupulosity in the monk:

And when the monk left Findia the Adversary came to him in the shape of a man and enkindled in him the fire of the sin of despair and told him that the shrift that Findia had given him would not avail him.¹⁴⁸

The monk then went to Comgall to confess again and Comgall treated him in the same way. Lastly he went to Colmcille, expecting perhaps to have a weighty penance prescribed for him. Colmcille's advice to the penitent is a striking example of how contemporary attitudes to penance had changed from a tariff mentality to recognition that 'punishment fitting the crime' did not necessarily apply in the spiritual realm:

If thou wast to commit the sins of all the men in the world there is no penance, however small, that the priest thou dost confess to should put on thee, if thou perform it, that would not set thee right with God, if so it be that thou repent.¹⁴⁹

Here repentance and not penance is highlighted as being most important. Despair and scrupulosity are identified as tricks of the Adversary and are shown not to come from God. In fact, to despair, according to Cormac Ruadh Ó hUiginn, could be mortally

¹⁴⁸ *BCC*, p.223.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

dangerous: 'Dwelling always on my sins is no way to reach Thy dwelling; my sin is not my greatest woe, but my sinking beneath it.'¹⁵⁰

In the Irish commentary on the sixteen conditions for a good confession, it is advised not to include a list of one's good deeds in an effort to distract attention from one's sins. Evidence that such a practice existed in late medieval Ireland is to be found in poems that both illustrate and frown upon it. The thirteenth century poet, Muireadhach Ó Dálaigh, provides a clear example of someone confessing his sinfulness yet spending more time justifying himself by listing the crimes he has not committed: 'Sinful I am, yet have I ruined no man, nor rebelled O Son of God; my hand has ruined no one; hear me for Mary's love.'¹⁵¹ Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn, in contrast, stresses humility as the prerequisite for right relationship with God. Having explained that 'young sin' (sin recently committed and confessed shortly afterwards) is 'easy to wash away'¹⁵² he goes on to object to any form of self-exaltation: 'The sum of my words is that I must not boast of my merit; the best of my gifts to Thee is only part of Thy gifts (to me).'¹⁵³ In another poem, addressing himself, he gives this advice: 'Let me not trust in my virtue; it is slight in weight; 'tis blindness not to see I have ever been rebellious.'¹⁵⁴ Meanwhile, Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn outlines the process of a good confession, and the foundation from which he begins is humility. This humility leads to an acknowledgement that one is weak in penance. This in turn leads to sorrow or contrition for sin and 'this sorrow shall be a smooth road to Him.'¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁰ *DDé* 23, v.30.

¹⁵¹ *ADD* 70, v.3.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 89, v.16.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, v.17.

¹⁵⁴ *PB* 19, v.30.

¹⁵⁵ *DDé* 6, vv 7, 13.

The sixteen conditions for a good confession and the commentary upon them constituted practical advice for the faithful. The above evidence from the bardic poets indicates that they were at least aware of some of the recommendations contained therein, not necessarily from direct contact with the 'conditions' as some of the earlier poetry predates their arrival in Ireland, but possibly from other similar sources.

Confession in practice

How exactly did the Gaelic Irish of the late middle ages confess their sins? According to John Bossy 'the practice of the sacrament of penance seems to have evolved in Ireland in much the same way as on the continent.'¹⁵⁶ Generally speaking, the priest was directed to hear confessions in an open or public place where all could see him.¹⁵⁷ The advent of confession boxes was not until the second half of the sixteenth century and, even at that, because of the tumultuous nature of ecclesiastical life in sixteenth century Ireland, general use of them took somewhat longer to establish, especially in rural areas. As observed above, confession was a required yearly practice that took place usually during Lent as a preparation for the celebration of Easter. Bossy argues that the social nature of confession, i.e. penance understood as reconciliation not only with God, but with the Church (and especially one's immediate community), that was prominent in the high middle ages, actually persisted right up to the Reformation period. Thought to have been somewhat jettisoned in favour of a more interiorised version of penance in which reconciliation with God was considered the most important effect of the sacrament, Bossy argues that in the popular mindset the actual

¹⁵⁶ Bossy, 'The Counter-Reformation and the people of Catholic Ireland', in T. Desmond Williams (ed.), *Historical studies* viii (Dublin, 1971), p.166.

¹⁵⁷ Tentler, *Sin and confession on the eve of the reformation*, p.82.

practice of confession continued to incorporate this social dimension.¹⁵⁸ Eamon Duffy concurs with this view when he observes that for the majority of parishioners confession was a time for ‘practical reassessment, reconciliation with neighbours, and settling of spiritual accounts.’¹⁵⁹ The fact that this ‘settling of accounts’ often involved the penitent complaining to the priest about the sins of his neighbour rather than confessing his own is well documented.¹⁶⁰ Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh recognises his own tendency to report the faults of others when he admits:

Not clear to any his own fault, but clear our neighbours. He who perceives not
his own faults should understand that this is no credit to him. /

I perceive not – a sad testimony – my own guilt though it cause me trouble!

Oftener I talk of everybody else’s crimes!¹⁶¹

Such a practice was repeatedly cautioned against in the confessional manuals advising confessors. The proposed solution was often akin to what a certain priest offered a woman penitent who spent time divulging her husband’s sins in the confessional – he prescribed two penances for her to fulfil, one on her own behalf and the other on her husband’s!¹⁶²

The decree *Omnis utriusque sexus* instructed that annual confession should normally be made to one’s own priest (*proprius sacerdos*), namely the priest of one’s parish. The intention was that the priest should know the individual in question and therefore be in a better position to advise and to guide. However, the prominence of mendicant

¹⁵⁸ Bossy, ‘The social history of confession in the age of the Reformation’, in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5th series, xxv (London, 1975), pp 22-4.

¹⁵⁹ Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, p.60.

¹⁶⁰ Bossy, ‘The social history of confession’, p.24.

¹⁶¹ *AFOD* 28, vv 1, 4.

¹⁶² Bossy, ‘The social history of confession’, p.24.

friars, especially the Franciscans in fifteenth-century Gaelic Ireland, provided an alternative to confessing to one's own priest.¹⁶³ The Franciscans might be described as a special task force in Gaelic Ireland whose speciality was the sacrament of penance. This was the source of some tension between secular and regular clergy. Simply put, the Franciscans were better trained in both theology and spiritual counsel than their secular counterparts and therefore it was not surprising that they proved popular as confessors. The Irish Franciscan tract on confession, found in the Rennes manuscript and TCD Ms 667, stipulated, however, that confession should be repeated if the confessor had no jurisdiction over the penitent because he was excommunicated or living in concubinage. Such pronouncements would have irked many of the secular clergy for whom concubinage was not uncommon.¹⁶⁴ The same confessional tract includes the text of how a model confession should be made for the instruction of

¹⁶³ The question of confessing to a friar as opposed to one's own parish priest was a thorny one. In Armagh in 1411 Archbishop Fleming had allowed mendicants to preach and hear confession but only through a strict system of episcopal licences. However, what was perceived to be increasing intrusion on the pastoral areas of the secular clergy led to much tougher measures against the mendicants being put in force at the Synod of Cashel in 1453. Not only was one to confess having gone to an unlicensed friar for the Sacrament of Penance but it was declared to be a mortal sin to merely listen to an unlicensed friar preach; see Michael A. J. Burrows, 'Fifteenth-century Irish provincial legislation and pastoral care', in W. J. Sheils and Diana Wood (eds), *The churches, Ireland and the Irish* (Oxford, 1989), p.64.

¹⁶⁴ Ó Clabaigh, *The Franciscans in Ireland, 1400-1534*, p.153. At the Synod of Armagh, 1530, it was deemed necessary to remind clergy of the legislation against priests committing fornication; see Henry A. Jeffries, 'Diocesan synods and convocations in Armagh on the eve of the Tudor reformations', in *Seanchas Ard Mhacha* xvi (1995), p.124.

penitents, beginning ‘*a oidi 7 a athair inmain, indisim mo chair do Día 7 dibsi.*’¹⁶⁵ The confession is arranged following the order of the seven deadly sins, offences with the bodily senses, against the articles of faith, the Ten Commandments, and neglect of the works of mercy. In the margin of the first column of folio 37 v^o of the Rennes manuscript, however, one scribe remarks rather cynically ‘*is teirc duine an Erinn doni a faeisdin mur adeir an leabur-so*’, indicating that the ideal expressed in the tract was far removed from the nature of confessional practice on the ground.¹⁶⁶

One of the problems that dogged late medieval confessions in Europe as a whole and also in Ireland specifically was the imposition of money penances. One of the most influential manuals of confession, the anonymous *Manual for parish priests* originating in fifteenth-century Germany, expressly forbade clergy from demanding money for the hearing of confessions and also from the common practice of prescribing as a penance the purchase of masses which the confessor himself would celebrate.¹⁶⁷ Articles against Sir John Bale, commissary to Archbishop Loftus of Dublin, dated 6 January 1580 accuse him of acting as a Catholic priest in secret, absolving penitents in the Roman fashion. Interestingly, the description of Catholic absolution involves a money transaction:

And being commissary, and having any rich man of the country in the censures of the church for fornication, adultery or any like offence – wherewith a great number be odiously infested and therefore would [should] be more severely punished – he absolves them for money in the fields, and in

¹⁶⁵ ‘Dear Father confessor, I confess my sins to God and to you’ (my translation); see G. Dottin, ‘Notice du manuscrit irlandais de la bibliothèque de Rennes’, in *Révue Celtique* xv (1894), p.84.

¹⁶⁶ ‘Few people in Ireland make their confession as this book says’; see Dottin, ‘Notice du manuscrit’, p.84.

¹⁶⁷ Tentler, *Sin and confession on the eve of the reformation*, p.87.

other secret places, to color their crimes with the Pope's absolution – *Absolve te, &c.*, and hath been seen and heard of credible persons giving that absolution on horseback in the fields – the penitent kneeling before him – which is his common practice, to get money as he visits in the country.¹⁶⁸

The link between money and penance was an old one. The payment of money towards a certain designated cause could gain an individual a plenary indulgence, that is, a temporal remission of punishment due to sin. Sin absolved in confession, while removed, nevertheless left the effects of the sin behind and these had to be atoned for by the performance of penance, almsgiving and good works. The provision of money towards a worthy cause designated and approved by the Pope who ratified the granting of all indulgences could be used as part fulfilment of penance necessary after sin. Usually indulgences were granted to those who financially aided the restoration of churches such as the 'relaxation during twenty years of five years and five quarantines of enjoined penance' granted by Pope Paul II on 31 May 1465 to

all Christ's faithful who on the Annunciation of St Mary the Virgin and Whitsun Tuesday visit and give alms for the repair and conservation and the increase of divine worship in the parish church of St Mary Callan in the diocese of Ossory, the buildings of which, on account of wars and age are very much in ruin.¹⁶⁹

A more unusual example is found in the register of Primate John Swayne of Armagh (1418-39), dated 2 June, 1430, in which relaxation of forty days indulgence from

¹⁶⁸ W. Maziere Brady (ed.), *State papers concerning the Irish Church in the time of Queen Elizabeth* (London, 1868), p.38.

¹⁶⁹ J. A Twemlow (ed.), *Calendar of entries in the Papal registers / Papal letters relating to Great Britain and Ireland xii A.D. 1458-71* (London, 1933).

penances enjoined was granted to those who aided a certain Stephen Thorleston, who was detained with Rory Mac Maguna and his men, and who was obliged to pay 14 marks ransom.¹⁷⁰ Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe, the thirteenth century poet, understood the concept of money payment well as he illustrates in the following verse: 'I brought with me from a noble patron saint's church, as payment for forgiveness, the rent of Patrick of the city of Rome; I leave it upon the bosom of the altar.'¹⁷¹

The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass

For late medieval Christians there was no doubt as to what was the most important liturgy they would ever attend. Celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass in which the bread and wine offered by the priest were changed utterly (transubstantiated), becoming the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ, captured the imagination and the devotion of the entire later middle ages in a way that no other event could have done. Miri Rubin confirms this view succinctly when she writes that 'at the centre of the whole religious system of the later Middle Ages lay a ritual which turned bread into flesh – a fragile, small, wheaten disk into God.'¹⁷² The theological developments in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that underpinned the flowering of devotion at a popular level, particularly the implications of the defining neologism of *transubstantiation* which arose from intense examination of the Eucharistic problem, are treated of at some length by Rubin and are not the primary concern of this particular study.¹⁷³ Instead, the focus here is specifically on the fruits of theological

¹⁷⁰ D. A. Chart (ed.), *The register of John Swayne archbishop of Armagh and primate of Ireland, 1418-39* (Belfast, 1935), p.101.

¹⁷¹ *GBMCM* 17, v.38.

¹⁷² Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: the Eucharist in late medieval culture* (Cambridge, 1991), p.1.

¹⁷³ See Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, pp 14-35.

development that manifested themselves, in a variety of skewed forms, in the lives of people all over Europe, including the Western outpost that was Gaelic Ireland.

The decrees of the Synod of Cashel in 1453 are a useful place to begin an examination of the increased solemnity with which the Eucharistic species began to be treated. Article 67, dealing with the manner with which Holy Communion should be brought to the sick by priests, illustrates, in its prescriptions, a great concern for reverence and propriety in the carrying out of this ministry:

*Statuit concilium ob reverentiam sacramentorum, viz., eucharistitiae et extremae unctionis quod ecclesiarum curati talia ministrantes alba induti et campana praecedente infirmam accedant...ad Christi fidelium devotionum excitant.*¹⁷⁴

It is also laid down that bells be always rung to announce the presence of the Eucharist in processions.¹⁷⁵ The Synod of Cashel contained comprehensive guidelines regarding the furnishing of churches and placed added responsibility on parish laity to provide for the liturgy in their own churches. The synodal legislation decreed that among the items that laity should provide for their church were a missal, a silver chalice, an alb, a stole, a chasuble, a surplice and a font *inter alia*. Moves were also being made to replace tin chalices with silver ones.¹⁷⁶ These prescriptions clearly

¹⁷⁴ The council resolves that out of reverence to the sacraments, namely, the Eucharist and Extreme Unction, the curates of churches when called to administer these sacraments should approach the sick person clothed in alb, and preceded by a bell...in order to stimulate the piety of the faithful': 'Provincial Synod of Cashel held in Limerick, 1453' in J. Begley (ed.), *The diocese of Limerick: ancient and medieval* (Dublin, 1906), p.437.

¹⁷⁵ *campana tamen semper praecedat eucharistitiam* ('in any case, bells should always precede the Eucharist'): *ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ Burrows, 'Fifteenth century Irish provincial legislation and pastoral care', p.65.

show an increasing concern in ecclesiastical circles with adding greater weight to the liturgy in ordinary parish churches by making its furnishings more sumptuous, contributing, thereby, to the sense of wonder, awe and mystery experienced within the liturgy itself. The significance of the bell, for instance, in exciting devotion and alerting the laity to the fact that the presence of Christ was imminent, is best illustrated by its use before the sacring of the Mass. Diocesan legislation across Europe, especially from the thirteenth century onwards, decreed that bells should be rung to herald the moment of Christ's arrival upon the altar. Regional variations in *minutiae*, such as the number of rings, persisted, but the basic point of the exercise was the same. Bells before the sacring acted as a *reveille* that proclaimed Christ's coming, in the words of the statutes of Coventry (sometime between 1224-37) 'like a gentle trumpet announcing the arrival of a judge, indeed of the saviour.'¹⁷⁷ The tolling of a larger bell outside the church simultaneously made known to the greater parish that the elevation of Christ in the Eucharist was taking place so that all could kneel and share in this most sanctified of moments.¹⁷⁸

Harnessing the power of God: devotion to the Host

Late medieval liturgy left the participant in no doubt as to the importance of the moment of elevation, when the priest, having completed the words '*Hoc est enim corpus meum*' bowed down to the host and then raised it above his forehead so that it could be seen by the people. Miri Rubin states that 'at the elevation all senses were called into play. Bells pealed, incense was burnt, candles were lit, hands were clasped, supplications were mouthed.'¹⁷⁹ This, was, in effect, the defining moment of the Mass

¹⁷⁷ Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, p.58.

¹⁷⁸ Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, p.126.

¹⁷⁹ Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, p.58.

and was the time when favours were most likely to be granted. As reception of Holy Communion was not at all frequent among the laity in the later middle ages, this was the opportunity *par excellence* to engage with one's God. However, a fleeting moment was often not sufficient for some, and therefore the practice of stealing the Eucharistic species in order to harness its power and use it for one's own interest is well documented. Particles of the host, sprinkled on vegetables, functioned as an insect repellent, some believed.¹⁸⁰ Crops blessed with the host would produce good yields.¹⁸¹ A charm said over three hosts was an English remedy for fevers.¹⁸² In short, the uses of a host outside of the solemn celebration of the Mass were innumerable. An early example of a sacrilegious use of the host in Ireland is recounted in the *Liber Exemplorum*, a Franciscan collection of exempla (c.1275). The woman in question had stolen the host to use as a charm to increase the price of her wine.¹⁸³ Generally exempla, while detailing how the host was construed to work, go on to discourage abuse of the Eucharistic species by describing how erstwhile perpetrators of such abuse each came to a sticky end. One of the ways in which the consecrated host could be effective was in the art of seduction. It was thought that if a man or woman kissed the object of his desire while a consecrated host was in his mouth then his charm would be rendered irresistible and the object of his affection would become his own for life. However, in a story found in the *Dialogus Miraculorum* of Caesarius of Heisterbach (d.1240), things did not go according to plan for one lustful priest who,

¹⁸⁰ Swanson, *Religion and devotion in Europe, c.1215-c.1515*, p.182.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, p.338.

¹⁸³ Ó Clabaigh, *The Franciscans in Ireland, 1400-1534*, p.145.

while keeping a host in his mouth in order to cast a spell on the woman he kissed, found himself growing bigger and bigger until he stuck to the church roof!¹⁸⁴

It could be argued that extra-liturgical use of the consecrated host for worldly objectives does not necessarily imply a lack of respect or reverence for the sacrament. Those who engaged in such activity obviously believed strongly in its efficacy, a belief grounded in the doctrine that this was not ordinary bread but the body, blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ. Viewed from this perspective it is little wonder that some people were prepared to employ the *real presence* of Christ in the blessing of their crops, the healing of their ailments and the sanctification of their romantic relationships. The fact that such actions constituted a thoroughly inappropriate use of the sacrament might indeed have been lost on a great many people, although one might find it difficult to excuse the actions of the licentious priest (mentioned above) who should have known better. Many undoubtedly surmised that if the consecrated host was powerful during Mass then why not outside of it? To expect miraculous results from an extra-liturgical use of the host for a particular good undeniably marked a deep faith in its power which was Christ working in His world. To abuse the host out of contempt or scorn was a different matter indeed. A chronicler from the mid fifteenth-century, recording a spate of robberies in London churches, in which pyxes reserving the host were stolen, attributed the theft to heretics, the organiser of which was a Lollard who boasted at a supper that he had eaten 'ix goddys at my sopyr that were in the boxys.'¹⁸⁵ Such an abuse of the host could indeed be categorised as arising from an inherent lack of respect or reverence for the Eucharist and differs fundamentally from other uses of the host, however erroneous. Nevertheless, the

¹⁸⁴ Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, p.318.

¹⁸⁵ Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, p.101.

exemplars were not sparing in their indictment of those who did not treat the host with proper care, even if they had proved themselves to be fervent believers heretofore. One of the most notable, that of the priest and the bees, found in the fifteenth-century *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum*, describes how a good and devoted priest encountered a swarm of bees as he was bringing Holy Communion to a sick man. He laid the host on the ground and then walked on, forgetting to pick it up. The bees returned to find it and they took it to where they lived and paid it reverence by building a chapel of wax for it, complete with an altar, a Mass chalice and a pair of priests. Meanwhile the priest whose duty was to be its custodian in the first place remembered that he had laid it on the ground and promptly went to search for it in vain. Sorry for his sin, he went to confession and did a year's penance. At the end of that period an angel came to him and told him where the host was and it subsequently inspired faith in all who went to see it.¹⁸⁶

The elevation and its significance

Theft of the host for whatever purpose, although well documented, was not, however, the most common means by which veneration was shown to Christ in the Eucharist. For most people the moment during which the priest raised the host above his forehead to be adored by the faithful marked the high point of their encounter with God. This was the moment of public recognition that it was no longer bread that the priest held in his hands but the living body of Jesus Christ. In the Sarum rite, at the beginning of the Institution narrative when the priest recited the words 'Who the night

¹⁸⁶ E. J. Gwynn, 'The priest and the bees', in *Ériu* ii (1905), pp 82-3. The version of this story appearing in John Mirk's *Festial*, originating from the collection of Caesarius of Heisterbach, recounts how the host had been placed in the hive by a beekeeper who believed it would promote honey production. See Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, p.104.

before he suffered took bread into his holy and venerable hands' the rubrics of the manual directed that he should raise the host '*parumper ita quod non videatur a populo*.'¹⁸⁷ Clearly the compilers of the manual wanted to avoid at all costs a situation where the faithful would be prematurely worshipping what was still bread. The elevation above the forehead after the words '*Hoc est enim corpus meum*' along with the ringing of the sacring bell helped to avoid such confusion. Because reception of the host in Holy Communion was something that, for most, was done once a year, at Easter, 'for most people, most of the time, the host was something to be seen, not to be consumed.'¹⁸⁸ The rood screen served as a partition between the nave and the chancel and could be an obstruction to viewing the elevation of the host. The screen marked the boundary between the nave, where the people worshipped, and the chancel, which contained the altar area where the miracle of transubstantiation took place. The screen and its veil gave what went on behind it greater significance and added to the sense of mystery and awe one might experience at the rather elaborate Sunday ritual which was the Sarum Mass. Squint holes provided on the dado (the lower and solid part of the screen) in many English churches attest to the fact that the laity were encouraged to gaze at the elevated host, but in a manner that heightened the expectation of doing so and preserved the reverential awe it inspired.¹⁸⁹ Unlike those in England, late medieval parish churches in Ireland did not adopt any distinctive character or design and were most usually merely simple extensions to pre-existing churches. Frequently there was no differentiation made between the chancel and the

¹⁸⁷ 'for a short while so that it is not seen by the people': Charles Walker, *The liturgy of the church of Sarum together with the kalendar of the same church* (London, n.d.), pp 66-7, n.41.

¹⁸⁸ Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, p.95.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.112.

nave in width, resulting in long, rectangular buildings. Elizabeth Fitzpatrick and Caimin O' Brien, in their study of late medieval churches of County Offaly surmise that in these parish churches 'wooden rood screens were probably used to separate "church" and parishioners from "chancel" and celebrant'.¹⁹⁰

For the late medieval believer, to see the host was to commune with one's God. To gaze at the host was understood as a significant privilege and concomitantly the benefits to be accrued were considerable. No wonder, then, that the question was raised by William of Auxerre (*d.*1232) and others in the thirteenth century whether a person in mortal sin, and thus unworthy to receive the Eucharist, committed further sin by merely looking at the sacred host when it was elevated at Mass.¹⁹¹ Although this was subsequently ruled out on the principle that '[S]eeing Christ's body provokes towards the love of God'¹⁹² Joseph Jungmann recounts how those who had been excommunicated were forbidden the sight of the host and sometimes resorted to making holes in church walls to snatch a glimpse of their God.¹⁹³ Many accounts testify to the fact that for some, the only part of the Mass worth attending was the elevation. People were known to have abandoned preachers in mid-sermon to rush off to another church when they heard the sacring bell announce the elevation, often running from church to church just to be present for that moment and even starting

¹⁹⁰ Elizabeth Fitzpatrick and Caimin O' Brien, *The medieval churches of County Offaly* (Dublin, 1998), pp 126-8.

¹⁹¹ Aidan Nichols, *The holy eucharist: from the New Testament to Pope John Paul II* (Dublin, 1991), p.80.

¹⁹² '*aspicere corpus Christi provocativum est ad dilectionem dei*' (William of Auxerre, *Summa aurea*, lib.4, tract 7, c.7, q. 3) quoted in Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, p.64.

¹⁹³ Joseph A. Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman rite: its origins and development* (London, 1959), p.90.

lawsuits to ensure that they got a good view while in church.¹⁹⁴ Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn (*d.*1448), in a poem recounting the experience of Mary the mother of Jesus at his crucifixion, highlights the Virgin as the perfect Mass-goer when he states that ‘Mary fled not from his murderers but gazed on his body...’¹⁹⁵ This reference to Mary stoically gazing at Christ’s body on the cross explains concisely just what the average Catholic was expected to do at Mass: gaze on Christ’s crucified body with the eyes of faith. This is how the elevation was consistently presented in late medieval art and literature. Although one could not see the blood and the wounds of Christ as He hung, suspended in the hands of the priest as the sacrificial victim, the reality was the same. The legend of the ‘Mass of St Gregory’ which appeared in iconography all over Europe from the fourteenth century onwards popularised the belief that when one gazed at the host one gazed at the crucified Christ. The legend recounts how Pope Gregory was celebrating Mass in front of an altar in the church of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme in Rome when he experienced a vision of Christ standing in his tomb surrounded by various instruments of the Passion and displaying His wounds.¹⁹⁶ Images depicting this event found their way into Books of Hours and were reproduced in great numbers in the form of cheap block-prints. A carved panel found in the fifteenth / sixteenth century transept of the Franciscan friary, Ennis, depicting Christ standing, displaying His wounds and surrounded by the instruments of his Passion is based largely on the ‘Mass of St Gregory’ image.¹⁹⁷ Images such as these helped to

¹⁹⁴ Swanson, *Religion and devotion in Europe, c.1215-c.1515*, p.100; Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman rite*, p.91: ‘It could happen – as it did in England – that if the celebrant did not elevate the host high enough the people would cry out: “Hold up, Sir John, hold up. Heave it a little higher”’: *ibid.*, n.6.

¹⁹⁵ *DDé* 10, v.18.

¹⁹⁶ Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, pp 238-40.

¹⁹⁷ See O’ Farrell, ‘Our Lord’s Pity in Ennis friary’, in *N.M.A.J.* xxii (1980), pp 33-8.

explain to the faithful that the sacrifice of Calvary and that of the Mass were one and the same and illustrated that it was the crucified Christ who was raised by the priest at the elevation, hidden in the guise of a simple host. Prayers recited before the image promised great indulgences and were dedicated to the Wounds of Christ, a devotion that spread rapidly in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Another legend, this time concerning a bishop in Germany named Albert, is found in three Irish manuscripts dating from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries respectively. These are the *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum* (occurring in Vol. II fol.25^r line 15ff), Bodleian Library Ms. Rawl. B.513 (fol. 3^r a-b) and the sixteenth-century TCD Ms.1337 (pp 556-7).¹⁹⁸ The story relates that a bishop named Albert had prayed long and hard for a revelation that would indicate to him the best way to serve God. One day while he celebrated Mass, having consecrated the host, Albert told the Lord that he would not raise Him any higher or lower until He granted his request. Christ then revealed to him seven (or eight) things most useful to the soul and secondly a devotion in which fifteen *Pater Nosters* are recited daily with meditations accompanying them. Paul Grosjean wonders whether the fifteen *Pater Nosters* requested do not constitute a method of dividing the 150 *Ave Marias* of the Rosary into decades.¹⁹⁹ However, an alternative explanation is that the number fifteen might be reconciled to its use elsewhere as a significant number in devotion to the Passion and the wounds of Christ. After all, one of the most prominent sets of prayers in late medieval England were the 'Fifteen Oes', whose origin were spuriously attributed to St Bridget of Sweden (*d.*1373), and which promised, among other things, the release

¹⁹⁸ Paul Grosjean, 'A continental saint and a mediaeval Irish devotional practice', in *Zeitschrift für Celtische philology* xix (1933), pp 66-7.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.71.

from Purgatory of fifteen of the reciter's family. These prayers were supposed to be said daily for a year, after which the devotee would have honoured each of Christ's wounds.²⁰⁰ Two fifteenth-century bardic poets also mention fifteen pains or sorrows of Christ at the Passion.²⁰¹ Coincidentally, a fifteenth-century Swedish version of the above tale exists in a manuscript that was compiled at the Brigittine monastery of Nådendal between 1487-91.²⁰² Interestingly, though, the revelation of the fifteen prayers to Albert, is omitted in the Swedish version and Grosjean concludes that it must not have been known to the Swedish translator.²⁰³

The connection between what happened at Mass and what happened on Calvary is central to an understanding of popular devotion in the late middle ages. The cult of the Five Wounds of Christ, from the outset, came to be linked with the sacrifice of the Mass. An illumination in a Parisian Book of Hours (c.1400-20) show two angels adoring a round, white host that is raised on a cross and crowned with thorns.²⁰⁴ This devotion quickly adopted a votive Mass for itself, appearing as early as the fourteenth

²⁰⁰ Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, p.255.

²⁰¹ ADD 78, v.10; PB 3, v.20. A seventeenth century manuscript, British Library Sloane 3567 contains a Gaelic text that was clearly translated from one of the introductions to the Fifteen Oes beginning 'Na cuig paidreacha dég as coir do rádh i ccuimhne na ccuig ccás .x. as cruaidhe i raibh Críost ag faghail na paise'; see Robin Flower, 'The revelation of Christ's wounds', in *Béaloideas* i (1927), p.43.

²⁰² Grosjean, 'A continental saint', p.67. Eamon Duffy suggests that the Fifteen Oes have their origin in the circle of the English Brigittines; see Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, p.249. Dom André Wilmart argued in the nineteen thirties that the Fifteen Oes were first attributed to St Bridget early in the fifteenth century at the Brigittine Syon abbey near Twickenham in Middlesex; see Breeze, 'The number of Christ's wounds', *The Bulletin of the Board of Celtic studies* xxii (1985), pp 86-7.

²⁰³ Grosjean, 'A continental saint', p.65.

²⁰⁴ Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, p.302.

century, becoming an officially recognised feast around the same time.²⁰⁵ It appeared in the Sarum missal in the first half of the fifteenth century.²⁰⁶ The Mass of Sarum, which contained certain rituals that helped to physically convey the drama of the Passion such as the priest bowing his head at the end of the *Memento* of the dead, signifying the death of Christ, also gave recognition to this devotion by directing the celebrant to make the Sign of the Cross with the host five times at the doxology concluding the Canon to signify the five wounds.²⁰⁷ Eucharistic tales abounded of hosts that bled as a sign to doubters or to those who treated the sacrament with scorn. The scornful Jew was a popular character in these stories. Invariably he would enter a church and ridicule the fact that Christians believed the host was really the Body of Christ, leading ultimately to an act of violence in which the host is attacked usually with a knife to see what will happen. An unidentified bardic poet (*n.l.t.*1614) recounts one of these stories in a poem treating of the feast of Corpus Christi. He tells of a Jew and a Christian who were in a business partnership. The Christian, who was in debt, asks the Jew for a loan. The Jew agrees but on one condition: 'No loan from me shalt thou get, O Christian, until I get a bond on thee for possession of the body of the Lord.'²⁰⁸ The Christian accedes to the request and hands over the host to the Jew. Along the way both the elements and the trees pay homage to Christ present in the sacrament:

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p.304.

²⁰⁶ R. W. Pfaff, *New liturgical feasts in later medieval England* (Oxford, 1970), p.86.

²⁰⁷ Walker, *The liturgy of the Church of Sarum*, p.69; Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman rite*, p.88.

²⁰⁸ *ADD* 94, v.4.

Owing to that gentle fair body all the elements refrained from (troubling) them; 'twas forbidden to the elements, owing to the man's having the Lord's holy Body to be fierce against him. /

A tree lying on a gap, as the Lord's Body, God's Body, approached, rose up from the ground as though possessed of reason.²⁰⁹

This impresses the Jew and he tells his other Jewish friends in the city what has happened. They do not believe and, crying out 'never was body without blood in it', they test the claim by wounding the host.²¹⁰ Immediately torrents of bright blood flow from the host like the waters of the Deluge, filling the city and drowning the Jews. The Christian who regretted ever handing over the host is saved: 'God rises up to save the good Christian – wondrous deliverance! The ground whereon he stood floated as a boat on the sea.'²¹¹ Some elements of this story are worthy of note as they are crucial in understanding how the redeeming Blood of Christ, offered for humanity at every Mass, was perceived to work in late medieval Europe.

Firstly, there is irony in the story. The weather recognises the *real presence* by refraining from inclemency. The tree also recognises Christ and duly venerates him. This is in contrast to the dullness of the human who until this point has refused to believe. Examples of plants and animals recognising Christ in the Eucharist, while humans remain unmoved, are common in exempla treating of the sacrament.²¹²

²⁰⁹ Ibid., vv 7-8.

²¹⁰ Ibid., v.12.

²¹¹ Ibid., v.16.

²¹² Caesarius of Heisterbach tells of a host stolen and hidden in a field. The oxen in the field refuse to plough over it and instead kneel down and adore the Christ. A story regarding St Anthony of Padua relates how the saint convinced a man of the truth of transubstantiation by starving a mule for three

Secondly, as noted above (chapter 1), the Blood of Christ simultaneously saves and indicts. In the story of the Jews and the Christian, it is observed that while the Blood of Christ drowns the unbeliever, it supports and saves the believer.²¹³ A similar, but shorter version of the same story is recounted by Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaird in a poem written while in Scotland in the early seventeenth century, in which he states ‘I receive not the Lord’s Body.’²¹⁴ His reason for including this story of unbelief is hinted at in the following verse: ‘Alba alas believes not as she should that the High King’s blood flows into the host; but I hold by His ordinance.’²¹⁵

The dissemination of stories regarding bleeding hosts were intended to stress the fact that the host was not just bread but the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ. An unidentified poet (*n.l.t.*1614) laments at the lack of belief that he perceives in his midst: ‘Shame on him who understands not that he has got three gifts, Christ’s Body from Heaven, His soul and His Divinity.’²¹⁶ The bleeding also signified the Passion of Christ, which was represented at every Mass, and in particular the manner in which He was wounded again by the sins of sacrilege, doubt or disrespect. The story of the Bleeding Host of Santarem in Portugal exemplifies this quite well.²¹⁷

days and then holding in one hand a basketful of oats and in the other a consecrated host. The mule, instead of rushing to the oats, knelt down instead to adore the Eucharist: Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, p.124.

²¹³ The Christian is saved and supported by Christ’s Blood, as is detailed elsewhere e.g. *ADD* 71, v.5.

A good example of the dual action of Christ’s Blood can be seen by comparing the following verses in the poetry of Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn: *PB* 5, v.28 and *PB* 19, vv 5-6.

²¹⁴ *ADD* 53, v.4.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, v.8.

²¹⁶ ‘The soul’s blindness’, in *IM* 1930, p.406.

²¹⁷ Sometime between 1225-47 a woman whose husband was unfaithful went to a sorceress for help and guidance. The sorceress asked the woman to procure a consecrated host for her use and promised that she could then help he. Knowing what she was doing to be sacrilegious, the woman proceeded to

Bleeding hosts were not the only means by which God could, by miraculous intervention, inspire faith in His *real presence* in the Eucharist. There are many tales that relate how doubters who gazed on the host were sometimes shown a child in its stead. One of the oldest Eucharistic tales of this *genre* dates from the sixth-century collection entitled the *Vitae Patrum*. It describes how an old man, who suffered from doubts, regained his faith when he witnessed a child at the moment of consecration. Having professed his faith, the child disappeared.²¹⁸ Another later example describes a Jew who accompanies his Christian friend to Mass, at which he witnesses every member of the congregation devouring a beautiful child. The interpretation that his friend gives of the vision is interesting. He says that it is a sign of God's wrath against the Jews for crucifying His Son. Had he been a Christian believer he would only have seen the host. The vision is not regarded as a privilege but an indictment.²¹⁹ It is significant that in the story, despite the fact that only the priest receives Holy Communion, the Jew, nevertheless, sees, as the congregation gaze on the host, a

receive Holy Communion at Mass but not to swallow it, putting the host into a kerchief instead. As she made her way home the host began to bleed and, panicking, she placed it in a trunk. During the night, a bright light shone from the trunk and the couple, investigating the phenomenon, were moved to spend the night in adoration and reparation; this story is one of many tales of Eucharistic miracles discussed in Bob and Penny Lord, *This is my body, this is my blood: miracles of the Eucharist* (California, 1986).

²¹⁸ Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, p.135.

²¹⁹ Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, p.105. This story, known as 'the Mass of Saint Basil' involves the Jew experiencing horror as he sees a child torn asunder before his eyes. Convinced of the truth of Christianity, he converts; see Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, p.123. The realisation that he is being indicted because of his unbelief is prompted by the inherent message within the vision, which 'stresses the presence of a real, human, suffering body, a historic Christ born to a Virgin, and the other, which stresses redemption through sacrifice' (Rubin, *Corpus Christi* p.136).

replica child fly to each of them to be eaten.²²⁰ This element of the story clearly conveys the message that to view the host was to commune in a real way with one's God in the form of a Spiritual Communion, which was, undoubtedly, in the minds of most, no less effective than the annual reception of the sacrament. Just as in the rest of Europe, the idea of a child appearing on the altar was also to be found in Gaelic Ireland and the idea was most likely imported by means of similar *exempla*. One such example appears in Mss 20978-9, Bibliothèque Royale Brussels (c.1618). A monk, who had devotion to Mary, but nevertheless was doubtful about the *real presence* of Christ in the Eucharist, was celebrating Mass, but when he came to the moment of consecration his mind wandered. Having consecrated the host it was lifted out of his hands and disappeared from sight. Calling on Mary for help, the monk acknowledged his sin, after which Mary came to him with Christ at her breast as an infant. She reproached him in the following words:

Behold the one whom you blessed on the dish a while ago. Behold the Son of the pregnant virgin. Behold the one who will be eaten in His Blood and in His Body, in His Divinity and in His Humanity. Behold the King and the Saviour and the Redeemer of the race of Adam. Behold the Creator of Heaven and Earth and Hell and the visible and invisible elements.²²¹

In a poem dedicated to the Blessed Sacrament, the sixteenth-century poet, Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh, uses similar imagery when he addresses the host: 'Welcome...young child, yet ever old!'²²² The image of a child appearing at Mass

²²⁰ Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, p.105, n.46.

²²¹ Íde Ní Uallacháin, 'An cnuasach exempla Gaeilge sa ls. 20978-9 i Leabharlann Ríoga na Bruiséile' (Ph.D. thesis, NUI Maynooth, 1998), Imleabhar 1, p.158.

²²² *AFOD*, 16, v.3.

was to live on in the minds of lay Catholics for quite some time. A rather late example of this can be seen in the answer to a question put by the Baron de Corthay to a woman in Shrule, County Mayo in 1689. The baron asked the lady what she thought happened at Mass. She answered: 'That I will never forget; I receive the Virgin Mary (God bless her) with the little Jesus in her arms.'²²³

The Merits of the Mass

The moment of elevation, which constituted the highpoint of the Mass for most lay Catholics in late medieval Europe, was believed to be a time of extraordinary grace, an occasion when God dispensed His gifts in abundance. Just what kind of gifts He gave was outlined in a list known as the *virtutes missae* or *merita missae* that quickly became widespread in manuscripts across the continent from the thirteenth century and, more importantly, continued to exert a huge influence on popular religious consciousness for hundreds of years. Most frequently, the benefits described in the list were given certain credibility by attributing their origin to some well-respected Church Father such as Augustine or Ambrose. Their stamp of orthodoxy gained, they were then preached to the faithful with great effect. Miri Rubin describes one such sermon, given by Bishop Brinton of Exeter in 1375:

In a sermon for a Sunday after Epiphany 1375 Bishop Brinton of Exeter taught that after seeing God's body no need for food would be felt, oaths would be forgiven, eye-sight would not fade, sudden death would not strike one, nor would one age, and one would be protected at every step by angels.²²⁴

The timing of such a sermon was not coincidental. Given that the Epiphany celebrates the adoration given to the Christ child by the three wise men it was surely appropriate

²²³ Gillespie, *Devoted people*, p.66.

²²⁴ Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, p.63.

that, in the light of that feast, the ‘benefits’ to be accrued from such adoration (replicated in the veneration of the host at Mass) would be treated of. These merits were obviously not merely the fare of the unlearned strata of society. Their elucidation by a bishop illustrates that they appealed also to the upper echelons of ecclesiastical circles. Their appeal was expansive. The *Doctrinal of Sapyence*, a French pastoral manual translated in 1489 by Caxton for ‘symple prestes that understande not the scriptures...to lerne and teche to theyre paryshens’ contained the list.²²⁵ The Vernon manuscript (c.1375) in the Bodleian library includes an extensive treatment of the benefits of attending Mass under the title of ‘A treatise of the manner and meade of the Mass.’²²⁶ Citing his authorities as ‘Austin, Ambrose, Bernard and Bede’ (the ‘merits’ proper being ascribed to Augustine and additional benefits attributed to the others) the writer lists the merits of the Mass, of which a summary is given here:

Every step to and from hearing Mass is noted by the Guardian angel.

That day a man does not age.

Nor does he become blind.

He has God’s pardon if he goes to confession.

And if he dies it avails as the Viaticum.

It makes work to be without annoyance or trouble.

And it helps to cure sharp sorrows.

Before a long journey hear early Mass.

²²⁵ Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, pp 56, 100.

²²⁶ Thomas Frederick Simmons, *The lay folks mass book or the manner of hearing mass with rubrics and devotions for the people* (London, 1879), pp 361, 128-35.

It will not hinder your journey.²²⁷

The ‘*virtutes missarum*’ in versified form, as compiled by the fifteenth century English monk, John Lydgate, are found in British Library, Harleian Ms.3954, f.76, col.2, in which each virtue is assigned to a different saint.²²⁸ According to Saint Gregory, then, it is a good medicine for a man to hear Mass before he dines, and according to Saint Paul the Mass ensures, for women in labour, a painless delivery.²²⁹ Another manuscript containing Lydgate’s versification promises that the man who hears Mass shall not suffer sudden death that day.²³⁰ Additional guarantees that sailors would encounter no troublesome wind and that the poor would have needful food are given in British Library, Harleian Ms. 2251, fol.187 b.²³¹

The above list of benefits was also familiar to the Gaelic Irish as evidenced directly by the manuscript tradition and indirectly by various other sources. In Gaelic sources the merits are usually numbered at fourteen. The text found in the fifteenth century *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum* begins with the following statement:

‘*Adeir Augusdín naemh gebé éisdfeas Aitfrinn ó tosach co deiredh co faghann sé ceathra hachaingí déc ó Dia an lá sin.*’²³² The fourteen benefits are then listed. A brief summary of these is given below:

1. Everything you ask for (if it be good) shall be granted to you that day.
2. Every idle word that you speak shall be forgiven that day.
3. Every idle oath that you swear shall not be held against you then.

²²⁷ Ibid., pp 131-2.

²²⁸ Ibid., p.367.

²²⁹ Ibid., p.369.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Ibid., p.371.

²³² Gearóid Mac Niocaill, ‘Disiecta membra’, in *Éigse* viii (1955-7), p.74.

4. You shall not lose the sight of his eyes.
5. You will not die without the reception of the Eucharist.
6. You will not suffer sudden death that day.
7. Every step you make, to and from [Mass], is a land held by charter for you in Heaven.
8. While you are at Mass you do not age.
9. At the moment you see the Body of Christ every evil spirit that was in you flees.
10. Whatever food you take that day will not assail you (i.e. you will have good digestion).
11. The length of time you spend at Mass corresponds to the amount of time by which your Purgatory will be shortened, if you go there at all.
12. If you go to Mass out of love and pray before the cross of crucifixion, the doors of Heaven will open to you and the doors of Hell will close and all the demons will not be able to attack you.
13. You prosper more successfully after Mass than before it.
14. All the venial sins you commit between Masses will be forgiven you.²³³

A similar list, differing only mildly in wording and in the sequence of some of the benefits, appears in the *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne* (c.1513-14) and in later manuscripts.²³⁴

²³³ Ibid., pp 74-5. The above material comprises a summary of the fourteen benefits as found in the *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum* which, while adhering to the substantial matter therein, is, not a direct translation of the list.

²³⁴ *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne* (RIA 24. P. 25 p.45), British Library Ms. Egerton 136, f.46 (c.1630), British Library Ms. Egerton 198, art.16 (c.1717) and British Library Ms. Egerton 211, art.4 (c.1758).

One interesting feature, however, is the *proviso* contained within the title of each of the versions of the text. The merits are said to be available to all who attend Mass ‘*ó tosach co deiredh*’ (from beginning to end), thus depriving those who wished to accumulate a quick spiritual fortune by running from church to church to ‘catch’ as many elevations as they possibly could. Their place is not to be found in the category of ‘popular superstition’ but rather in the more orthodox setting of Church teaching. In many of the copies of the *merita missae* found in England they are placed firmly in the context of teaching the unlearned how to attend Mass properly. In the tract ‘On the manner and mede of the Mass’, found in the Vernon manuscript (c.1375), the merits of attending Mass are found within a general exposition of doctrinal points concerning the celebration of Mass such as the teaching that the value of the sacrament comes from the fact that the sacramental rite is ‘done’, independent of the dispositions of the minister of the sacrament, his personal sinfulness etc. (*opus operatum*).²³⁵ The pedagogical tone of the tract is found in verses such as the following:

Ful fayne I wolde þat 3e hit wist,
On Crist whon 3e schulde calle,
To call on Crist with mylde chere,
Lewed men I shal 3ou lere.²³⁶

Similarly, Miri Rubin describes a poem by John Audelay in the early fifteenth century in pedagogic terms.²³⁷ Statements such as ‘While you are at Mass you do not age’ are

²³⁵ Simmons, *The lay folks Mass book*, p.132.

²³⁶ ‘I shall be glad for you to know when to call on Christ. You are ignorant and I will teach you’: *ibid*, p.133.

²³⁷ John Audelay’s lengthy poem ‘*De meritis missae, quomodo debimus audire missam*’, of the 1420s is really a verse sermon summarising points of doctrine, which dwells on the utility of the mass when properly observed: Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, p.108.

not to be considered the mere fantasy of an un-catechised and unlettered laity. This claim does not have its roots in superstition but, instead, in the sacramental theology of the Church. In the age of the Church Fathers, the sacrificial character of the Mass was discussed at length and developed to a large extent by Augustine among others. When attending Mass, then, one attended a re-presentation of Calvary in which the one sacrifice of Calvary was made present again, except in a bloodless manner. The benefits of Christ's sacrifice on Calvary, not confined by space or time, were considered to be effective in an active and retroactive manner. If by attending Mass one attended the same sacrifice of Calvary and participated in the heavenly liturgy surely one could not be caught up in earthly time for the duration of the Mass. The following passage from the writings of St John Chrysostom illustrate the orthodoxy of this teaching:

We have our victim in Heaven, our priest in Heaven, our sacrifice in Heaven... When you see the Lord sacrificed and lying as an oblation, and the priest standing by the sacrifice and praying, and all things reddened by that precious blood, do you think that you are still among men and standing on earth? ²³⁸

If one believed, then, that the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass took place outside of space and time, the idea that a person did not age during the length of its duration was not terribly far-fetched at all.

It is likely that the *merita missae* found their way into sermons delivered in Gaelic Ireland, as familiarity with at least some of the promises attached is hinted at in some sources. The thirteenth-century poet, Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe, seems to have been familiar with the tradition expressed in the seventh benefit of the Mass, namely

²³⁸ Nichols, *The holy Eucharist*, p.50.

that each step an individual took on the way to Mass was of significance; he states that 'He [the High King] enumerates for our salvation a man's steps when he goes to mass.'²³⁹ The advice given in the version of *merita missae* found in the Vernon manuscript (c.1375) to hear Mass before a long journey, coupled with the promise found in British Library, Harleian Ms. 2251, fol.187 b. that sailors would suffer no ill wind after hearing Mass was clearly part of a tradition that was still vibrant in the first half of the seventeenth century when Philip O' Sullivan Beare considered it important to illustrate the point by the following story. Richard Creagh was in Spain selling goods, and before he departed from port he decided to hear Holy Mass. His companions, however, not as zealous in their devotion to the Mass as he, left port without him. They had not gone far out, relates O' Sullivan Beare, when he saw the ship sink.²⁴⁰

Another promise found in the *merita missae*, namely, the forgiveness of venial sins (found in the *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum* at number fourteen, and also implied in numbers two and three) is found widely in Gaelic sources, particularly bardic poetry. The sixteenth-century poet, Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh, makes reference to such a pledge, as illustrated in the following verse: 'I ask Thee, now that I have received Thee, O bright blessed host, O body of the king, owing to my consuming of Thee, to pardon my sins and evil deeds.'²⁴¹ Tuathal Ó hUiginn (d.1450) reformulates the words of the consecration of the Mass to make this point: 'That body was consecrated by the words of God's Son from Heaven: "Receive this body to cleanse thy sin; 'tis better so for

²³⁹ *GBMCM* 21, v.37.

²⁴⁰ O' Sullivan Beare, *Ireland under Elizabeth*, p.13.

²⁴¹ *AFOD* 37, v.6. See also *ibid.*, 17, v.1.

thee” said God.’²⁴² A letter dated 10 June 1582 from Henry Wallop, lord justice, to William Burghley, describing the rebelliousness of the Irish, makes reference to such a belief: ‘And hearing Mass on Sunday or Holyday, they think all the week after they may do what heinous offence soever, and it is dispensed withal.’²⁴³ This claim has an uncanny resemblance to the fourteenth benefit of the Mass as outlined in the *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum*: ‘All the venial sins you commit between Masses will be forgiven you.’²⁴⁴

Uses and effects of the Eucharist

There can be little doubt but that a firm belief in the power of the Eucharist pervaded late medieval European society. A cursory examination of *exempla* dealing with the subject of the consecrated host attests to its alleged ability to win battles, overcome floods, prolong life, preserve from drowning, cure illness and so on.²⁴⁵ Belief in this power instilled in most a deep sense of reverence and awe before the sacrament. An indication of how seriously this reverence was taken is found in the common practice of swearing oaths *super sacramentum* or ‘over the sacrament.’²⁴⁶ Oath taking was a serious business and the penalties for perjury were severe.²⁴⁷ It was generally accepted, therefore, that those who swore on the sacrament would have the appropriate awe and reverence to resist profaning it by perjury, which was believed to provoke divine retribution. When a consecrated host could not be procured, parties

²⁴² *DDé* 18, v.4.

²⁴³ Maziere Brady (ed.), *State papers concerning the Irish Church*, p.59.

²⁴⁴ Mac Niocaill, ‘Disiecta membra’, p.74.

²⁴⁵ Frederic Tubach, *Index exemplorum* (Helsinki, 1969), pp207-13.

²⁴⁶ See for example Gearóid Mac Niocaill (ed.), *Crown surveys of lands 1540-1 with the Kildare rental begun in 1518* (Dublin, 1992), pp 104-8.

²⁴⁷ See Gillespie, *Devoted people*, p.33.

were often content to swear on Mass books, which contained the sacred words of the Holy Sacrifice. Hugh O' Neill, Earl of Tyrone, upon meeting one Captain Warren in Dundalk in 1597 'called for a Mass book and swore in the presence of Captain Warren...that he looked for no aid from Spain.'²⁴⁸ Fynes Moryson also alludes to such a practice.²⁴⁹ The consecrated host or the Mass book were not the only objects that could be sworn upon. Indeed any relic considered important enough to ensure the oath-taker approached his business with due gravity was acceptable. The *Bachall Íosa* or Patrick's staff, held at Christ Church was a favourite tool for oath taking. It was believed that punishment for perjury committed over this particular relic would be more severe than if one swore over the gospels.²⁵⁰ On 19 March 1529, at Dublin Castle, a certain Sir Gerald Mc Shane swore on both just to be sure!²⁵¹ Pacts were often sealed by a common partaking in the Eucharist as Fiona Fitzsimons points out in her treatment of gossipred in late medieval Gaelic society.²⁵² The sacrament, then, played a vital role in the ordering of society, exercising a function that would not be frivolously toyed with.

Because the effects of Christ's sacrifice on Calvary, re-presented in the Mass, were held to transcend the limits of space and time, they were equally applicable to both living and dead. From the twelfth century onwards, the development of the doctrine of

²⁴⁸ *Cal.S.P.Ire., 1596-7*, p.278.

²⁴⁹ Graham Kew, 'The Irish sections of Fynes Moryson's unpublished itinerary', p.105.

²⁵⁰ Gillespie, *Devoted people*, p.34.

²⁵¹ 'Examination of Sir Gerald Mc Shane sworn right solemnly upon the holy Mass book and the great relick of Ireland, called Bachalum Christi in [the] presence of the king's deputy, chancellor, treasurer and justice', *Cal. S.P Ire., 1509-73*, p.7; for a fuller treatment of the practice of swearing oaths on relics see A. T. Lucas, 'The social role of relics and reliquaries in ancient Ireland', pp 21-8.

²⁵² Fitzsimons, 'Fosterage and gossipred in late medieval Ireland: some new evidence', p.144.

Purgatory led to an increasing awareness of the efficacy of the Mass for the souls of the faithful departed.²⁵³ The benefits the Mass accorded to these souls were suitably illustrated in legends that supported devotions such as the Trental of St Gregory. Saint Gregory's Trental (alternatively known as the 'Golden Trental') consisted of thirty Masses, celebrated over the period of a year, three Masses on each of the ten principal feasts of Christ and Mary – Christmas, Epiphany, Candlemas, Annunciation, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, Trinity, Assumption and the Nativity of Mary. The Masses were to be offered for the holy souls in Purgatory.²⁵⁴ The legend behind the devotion told how Pope Gregory's mother, considered by all to be a pious woman, had in her youth conceived a child illegitimately and subsequently murdered it to cover her shame. She had never confessed this sin and therefore died unshriven. After her death, she appeared to her son during Mass as a grotesque creature who was undoubtedly suffering the pains of Purgatory. She requested her son to say thirty Masses over the period of a year for her release. He did and she subsequently appeared to him radiant and enjoying the glory of Heaven.²⁵⁵ The devotion spread quickly and by 1410 it had acquired the title of 'Golden Trental' in England, presumably because of its proven efficacy.²⁵⁶ This devotion was also popular in Ireland, with both Anglo-Irish and Gaelic Irish Catholics alike. The will of one Nicholas Suttowne, clerk, who left his body to St Werburgh's church, Dublin (20 July 1478), stipulated that after death he requested a priest to celebrate for him 'for three years the Trental of St Gregory.'²⁵⁷

²⁵³ Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, p.51.

²⁵⁴ Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, pp 370-1.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p.371.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid*.

²⁵⁷ Deed 327 in Raymond Refaussé and M. J. McEnery (eds), *Christ Church deeds* (Dublin, 2001), pp 95-6.

Manus Ó Domhnaill, compiler of *Betha Colaim Chille* (1532) obviously considered the Trental important enough to have Colmcille perform the ritual on discovering the skull of Cormac Mac Airt:

And he left not that place ere he had said thirty Masses for the soul of Cormac...and at the last of these Masses the angels of God appeared to Columcille bearing with them the soul of Cormac to heaven to enjoy glory everlasting through the intercession of Columcille.²⁵⁸

A particular devotion could acquire no greater endorsement in Gaelic Ireland than to be seen to be practiced by a saint of such great stature as this 'national' patron. An insertion, such as the example above, into the standard lore of Colmcille superimposes a late devotion upon an earlier era, thus giving the current devotion greater credibility. Moreover, if it was, in fact, realised that the Trental was not in use when Colmcille lived, it was perhaps surmised that, had he known of its efficacy, he would have certainly utilised it.

Bardic poets, for their part, treat of many aspects of the Eucharist. Some of these, such as its worthy reception, its merits and the necessity of faith when approaching Christ, have been discussed above. Some remaining themes require brief attention. Because, in many cases, mere traces of broader themes are to be found, the following treatment is necessarily something of a mixed bag. Christ was hailed as a Healer in the sacrament. Healing, however, depended upon belief. A passage occurring in the fifteenth-century *Leabhar Breac* tractate on Vespers contains the following note:

²⁵⁸ BCC, p.129.

So was our lamb pure and unspotted, namely the Son of the King of Heaven and earth and His Body and Blood are since upon every holy altar, healing all people if they but believe.²⁵⁹

Tuathal Ó hUiginn (*d.* 1450) highlights the healing effect of the sacrament while giving the following advice: ‘Do reverence to this Guest and ye shall be rewarded; welcome this Guest: He is the herb who heals.’²⁶⁰ Stories of miraculous physical healings attributed to the power of the sacrament were part of the staple content of late medieval religious *exempla*.²⁶¹ In the same poem, Ó hUiginn describes how Christ left His Body with us after His Ascension to Heaven, leading him to conclude in typical bardic fashion that ‘His departure was no departure.’²⁶² A link is clearly drawn between the Eucharist and salvation in verse 30: ‘Few of His race would win Heaven if the Lord’s Body had remained above; even now that He is with us ’tis hard for Him to bring His people to paradise.’²⁶³ To attend Mass was to attend Calvary, the event that made salvation available to all. Two of the promises traditionally pledged to those who attended Mass were preservation from sudden death and reception of the last sacraments (see *merita missae* 5 and 6 in the *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum* as discussed above). Attendance at Mass was traditionally held to put demons to flight (*merita missae* 12) and thus, a person who had received the last sacraments was thought not have been assailed by demons to the same degree.²⁶⁴ The devil could not

²⁵⁹ Best, ‘The Lebar Brecc tractate on the canonical hours’, p. 147.

²⁶⁰ *DDé* 18, v.16.

²⁶¹ See Tubach, *Index exemplorum*, 2646 and 2652, for two standard examples.

²⁶² *DDé* 18, v.31.

²⁶³ *DDé* 18, v.30.

²⁶⁴ To die without the sacraments was considered, at least by Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaire ‘a sinner’s death’ (*ADD* 53, v.24).

abide where Christ dwelled. The sixteenth-century poet, Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh, testifies to this belief when he addresses the host he has just received: 'As this cold body wherein Thou liest, O Trinity, is unclean, O wavy-tressed One, drive my foe from it for it is the shrine of my soul!'²⁶⁵ Interestingly, it is the Trinity that is addressed here and not the person of Christ. This was not unknown in bardic poems referring to reception of the Eucharist. In another poem, Aonghus pleads 'Come into my heart O Trinity!'²⁶⁶ The thirteenth-century poet, Muireadhach Ó Dálaigh, makes the following petition, which is perhaps an implicitly Eucharistic reference: 'Alight on my tongue, O Trinity.'²⁶⁷

The influence of liturgical texts on popular devotion to the Eucharist is hinted at in some bardic poems. One cannot help notice, in Tuathal Ó hUiginn's poem on the Eucharist, echoes of the pre-Communion prayer beginning *Domine non sum dignus*: 'I am not worthy, owing to my many sins, to approach Thee O Body of the Lord, though Thou findest not a dwelling here mayest Thou...'²⁶⁸ Interestingly, however, this prayer is not found in the Sarum rite, but in the more developed Roman rite.²⁶⁹ It could, indeed have been adopted from an alternative rite for use by the laity as a pre-Communion prayer. However one wonders how relevant such a prayer would be to a people who, in general, only received once a year. Knowledge of the fundamentals of liturgy is difficult to gauge. The *Leabhar Breac* contains a tract on the significance of

²⁶⁵ *AFOD* 17, v.5.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 37, v.5.

²⁶⁷ *ADD* 70, v.1.

²⁶⁸ *DDé* 18, v.9.

²⁶⁹ Charles G. Herbermann *et al.* (eds.), *The Catholic encyclopaedia: an international work of reference on the constitution, doctrine, discipline and history of the Catholic Church* (17 vols, New York, 1912), xiii, p.480, col.1.

the colours of the chasuble.²⁷⁰ The same text also appears in the *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum*.²⁷¹ A scribe named Flann Mac Cairbre was sufficiently aware of liturgical norms to celebrate, in a marginal note of a manuscript written in 1554, Queen Mary's accession to the throne and her reversal of Henrician and Edwardian liturgical reforms.²⁷² It is very probable that others were barely conscious of any changes occurring in the first place!

Conclusion

Late medieval Christianity viewed the sacraments as gateways to God. Baptism brought the newly born into the community of God known as 'Church', defining them against those who were still situated *extra ecclesiam*. Penance reconciled the individual with that same Church and with Christ. The Eucharist brought the late medieval Christian into a very tangible and highly charged experience of the divine. In an age in which sacramental theology was evolving rapidly at one level and popular devotions springing up to interpret and regurgitate this theology at another, Gaelic Ireland was not immune from these changes. However, as always, continental religious innovation was accommodated by the Gaelic Irish on their own terms, ensuring that older practices continued to endure and newer ones were adopted at the least cost to the society and culture in which they would eventually find a home. Although most Gaelic Irish men and women, no less than the faithful of other European countries, would have possessed what was, at best, a rudimentary knowledge of sacramental theology, their display of 'popular devotion' was, more

²⁷⁰ RIA 23 P 16 108 a i

²⁷¹ RIA 23 O 48 vol ii, f.41[] r^ob.

²⁷² Marc Caball, 'Faith, culture and sovereignty: Irish nationality and its development, 1558-1625' in Brendan Bradshaw and Peter Roberts (eds.), *British consciousness and identity: the making of Britain 1533-1707* (Cambridge, 1998), p.133, n.92.

often than not, rooted in fundamentally orthodox Church teaching. The example of the ‘timelessness’ of the Mass, as noted above, serves as a fitting illustration of this. Furthermore, one particular element of the baptismal rite of Sarum was intimately connected to a custom that was scornfully described by the English historian, William Camden in his work entitled *Britannia*, which was first published in Latin in 1586. One of the final acts of the priest in the rite of baptism was to recite the Prologue to John’s Gospel over the child. This gospel was understood to have great powers of protection. The *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne* (1513-14) contains notice of indulgences granted by two popes, namely Clement V (1305-14) and Urban V (1362-70) for the reading or hearing of the Gospel of John.²⁷³ Little wonder, then, that Camden refers to the Gaelic Irish hanging the beginning of John’s Gospel around the necks of their children as a preservative against misfortune.²⁷⁴ Customs such as that described by Camden were where theology and daily life met. The understanding of the use of a biblical text in a sacramental rite was not at all dissimilar from the reasoning behind its use as an amulet of protection. Just as in the case of the perceived exit out of space and time at Mass, which led to claims of a suspended process of ageing, the liturgical and extra-liturgical uses of Scripture, as exemplified above, did not always manifest themselves as distant and far-removed cousins, with little in common. If this was, indeed, the case in late medieval devotion, then popular perception of the sacraments and their liturgical celebration warrants considerable re-evaluation in future studies.

²⁷³ Mary Ann Lyons, ‘Lay female piety and church patronage in late medieval Ireland’, in Brendan Bradshaw and Dáire Keogh (eds) *Christianity in Ireland: revisiting the story* (Dublin, 2002), p.65.

²⁷⁴ William Camden, *Britannia: or a chorographical description of the flourishing kingdoms of England, Scotland and Ireland and the islands adjacent: from the earliest antiquity* (translated from the edition of 1607 and enlarged by the latest discoveries of Richard Gough) (3 vols, London, 1789), iii, p.658.