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Roundtable

Spaces of Space-making: Diaspora Fundraising by the Nineteenth-Century Irish Catholic Church

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More than 3000 Catholic churches were built in Ireland in the century after the granting of Emancipation in 1829, with, as many historians have affirmed, a notable augmentation in the scale, elaboration and 'magnificence' of those constructed in the 'devotional revolution' period after 1850.[1] Such increasingly grand edifices had somehow to be paid for, and while the Church found multiple new ways to tap into contributions from its resident congregations,[2] there was also, in light of astounding levels of outward migration to North America from the 1840s onwards, a demonstrable turn towards accessing the resources of the more cash-rich Irish Catholic diaspora.[3] The fact that, as one West of Ireland bishop noted around the turn of the century, there were by then more people born in his diocese living in the US than in the diocese itself, compounded the necessity of doing so.[4] One of the most common and lucrative means of fundraising from Irish emigrants was the clerical collecting tour, wherein male religious personnel, working either alone or in small groups, spent months and even years traversing migrant cities and towns in aid of particular individual building projects in Ireland. Reminiscent of the centuries-old Franciscan practice of 'questing', which saw friars begging for alms to support themselves,[5] the extent of the newly internationalized phenomenon is perhaps best demonstrated by the fact that of the 19 Catholic cathedrals built in Ireland in the period 1850–1900, at least 16 were in part funded by one or more overseas collecting tours. Thus, while a chapel (and even a cathedral) may have been a resource for a tight-knit local community, an international set of actors frequently helped it to come to fruition.

The proliferation of these self-described clerical 'beggars' therefore underscores the significance of what others in this roundtable have identified as a 'Catholic Atlantic' and an increasingly transnational Irish Catholic Church, since the institution's very fabric in Ireland depended in large part on sustained interpersonal and financial engagement beyond the island. Spaces of Catholic worship in Ireland were in part products of an expanded sense of Irish Catholic 'place', then. However, these overseas collecting tours have much else to tell us about the spatial dynamics of Irish Catholicism. This essay will focus on what I am calling

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1 Emmet Larkin, 'The Devotional Revolution in Ireland, 1850–1875', *American Historical Review*, 77 (1972), 625–52; Niamh NicGhabhann, '"A Development of Practical Catholic Emancipation": Laying the Foundations for the Roman Catholic Urban Landscape, 1850–1900', *Urban History*, 46 (2019), 44–61.

2 Patrick Doyle and Sarah Roddy, 'Money, Death, and Agency in Catholic Ireland, 1850–1921', *Journal of Social History*, 54 (2021), 799–818.

3 Sarah Roddy, 'The Spoils of Spiritual Empire: Emigrant Contributions to Nineteenth-century Irish Catholic church-building', *Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies*, 5 (2012), 95–116.

4 Bishop John Lyster, 'To our exiled people in the United States…' (n.d. [*c.* 1899]), Achonry Diocesan Archive, Ballaghderreen, Lyster Papers.

5 Cathal Duddy, 'An Introduction to Franciscan Questing in Twentieth-century Ireland', *Irish Geography*, 48 (2015), 39–61.

'spaces of space-making', that is, the diaspora spaces in which clerical collectors did their vital fundraising. These constitute, I argue, yet another 'backstage' that is crucial to understanding several pertinent facets of Irish Catholic space, including the emotional narratives around sacred space and how those narratives undermined the putative communality of sacred space.

1. JOLLY BEGGARS

While overseas clerical fundraising trips were common, travelling abroad *with the intention of returning* remained such a relatively rare phenomenon in nineteenth-century Ireland that many priests who conducted collecting tours kept detailed records of their sojourns. Using the diaries and letters that four such priests left behind, I will first explore how clerical fundraisers practically negotiated their task, before turning to the physical sites where this fundraising took place. The diaries are as follows. First, Fr James Donnelly, later bishop of Clogher, fundraised for Dublin's proposed Catholic University in the 1850s; although it was never built, he and several other simultaneous collectors collected tens of thousands of pounds. His diary remained private.[6] Second, Fr Michael Buckley fundraised for Cork's 'North Cathedral' (the Cathedral of St Mary and St Anne) in North America in the early 1870s. His sister published a version of his diary after his death.[7] Third, the aptly monikered Fr Pius Devine fundraised for his religious order, the Passionists of Harold's Cross, Dublin, in North and South America and Australia in the mid-1870s. His diary – from which this section's title derives – also remained unpublished.[8] Finally, Fr Willie Ronan, a Jesuit, fundraised for the building and support of his order's school and seminary, Mungret College, Limerick, across North America in the 1880s, and his almost-daily letters home form a kind of epistolary diary.[9]

Cumulatively, the collectors' accounts reveal that this kind of diaspora fundraising was an overwhelmingly urban phenomenon, each of them starting their trips by landing in New York City and radiating out from there to cities and towns elsewhere. While the extent of their journeys afterwards varied considerably, discernible patterns in their tours suggest that a definite circulation of knowledge was a factor that influenced the collectors' itineraries. The earliest of the collectors, Donnelly, was alone in staying in and around New York for the duration of his trip, making regular short fundraising trips to towns within a few hours reach. His fellow University collectors went to the likes of Boston, New Orleans, and Montreal. The tactic in this relatively early overseas foray seems to have been a simple process of locating substantial Irish immigrant communities, preferably living in economically vibrant cities, and pursuing them. Local clergy and bishops seemed to be the network on which these collectors could rely for information.

Later fundraisers trod similar geographical paths, but with different levels of sophistication when it came to information flows. The itinerary of Michael Buckley revealed him to be the best prepared. His tactic of finding the richest Cork man in a given city on arrival, often identified well in advance, and getting that man's rich friends – with or without Cork connections – to also donate was hugely lucrative, but his other modus operandi of being

6 Diary of Rev. Dr James Donnelly, written during a fundraising trip in America, 1852–1853, RC Clogher Diocesan Records, PRONI, DIO(RC)1/11B/2.

7 Rev. M. B. Buckley, *Diary of a Tour in America*, ed. Kate Buckley (Dublin: Sealey, Bryers and Walker, 1886).

8 Fr Pius Devine, 'The Adventures and Misadventures of a Jolly Beggar' (1872–1875), Devine papers, Central Archives, St Paul of the Cross Retreat, Mount Argus, Dublin.

9 Letters from Fr Willie Ronan to Fr Rene, 1884–1886, Papers of Mungret College, Jesuit Archives, Dublin, SC/Mung/49.

directed towards neighbourhoods where poorer Cork people lived and going door-to-door was also very successful.[10] Pius Devine, travelling at more or less the same time and through many of the same cities and districts, had cultivated no such networks, and evidently found things much tougher than Buckley as a result; to the extent that his titular claim to 'jolliness' in his task sometimes seems forced. His seemingly accidental meeting of a US senator shortly after arriving in New York was the occasion of a $50 donation,[11] but did not appear to lead to multiple other meetings with well-to-do Irish Americans. Devine therefore spent much more time giving lectures in especially 'Irish' cities and going door to door looking for small-sum donors. By the 1880s, Willie Ronan was following a path that reflected a mix of where the Jesuits had settlements across the continent in this period, and where large Irish immigrant communities still proliferated. But in New York, he adopted the Buckley tactic with some success. 'I am making out the names of the principal Catholics in this city with a view to sending them circulars & then calling on them', he wrote. Yet, unable to get the priests of the city to divulge those names to him, Ronan turned to a wealthy Limerick solicitor he met on arrival, who 'made out a splendid list for me & one which is much better than could be made out by all our Fathers put together'.[12]

Ronan's problems with the New York priests hint at one of the major obstacles that all Irish clergymen collecting in North America in this period faced: the hostility of the local bishops and clergy who saw them as interlopers out to take money from their own collection plates, and were frequently disinclined to give them permission to fundraise publicly from Irish-American congregations whose resources they regarded as their own. In that sense, this was a highly competitive donor market, and incoming fundraisers, no matter how high-profile their cause, were often forced to carve out space on the margins of it. Permission to collect was routinely sought from resident bishops, but very often not given, or rescinded when the time to preach in particular churches actually came.[13] It was also a highly dynamic market, where new local church- or school-building projects might suddenly displace an incoming Irish priest in the pecking order, and in which large cities like New York, New Orleans and St Louis were at various times proclaimed 'over-run' with begging clerics from outside.[14] For example, when Ronan made his trip, he knew of at least seven priests on similar missions in New York alone, and one bishop in Portland, Maine told Buckley that 'the market is drugged with them',[15] implying both that he saw religious fundraising as taking place within a competitive market, and that he thought that *too much* competition paralysed that market, and made it difficult for anyone, insider or outsider, to make money in it.

2. EMOTIONS AND SPATIAL NARRATIVES

The fundraising described therefore took place in two over-arching imagined 'places': an 'Irish spiritual empire' in which a priest building a chapel in the 'metropole' could feel breezily entitled to ask residents in the 'colonies' who would never even see the church in question for donations towards it, and a North American religious 'marketplace' wherein Catholic clergy of different nationalities fiercely competed for the finite resources of the same lay people.

[10] Buckley, *Diary of a Tour*, pp. 50, 113, 147.
[11] Devine, 'Jolly Beggar', 27 August 1872.
[12] Fr Willie Ronan to Fr Rene, 15 October 1884, Mungret College, Jesuit Archives, Dublin, SC/Mung/49.
[13] Buckley, *Diary of a Tour*, pp. 137–38, 139, 212.
[14] Devine, 'Jolly Beggar', 21 September 1873.
[15] Buckley, *Diary of a Tour*, p. 137.

Yet if these contexts for Catholic fundraising were meaningful and shaped the practices of the collectors – encouraging travel to North America, dictating their itineraries once there, demanding a degree of fundraising ingenuity as they competed amongst one another – in another sense, the *material spaces* in which the everyday collecting was done were just as significant and shaped both the emotions of the fundraising process and the subsequent narratives that surrounded the churches that were built with the proceeds.

Diaspora fundraising could indeed be an emotional experience. The content of public lectures suggests that clerical fundraisers were always ready to appeal to migrants' sense of patriotism, and their intense longing for the country they had left behind. As Buckley's tactic of targeting Cork people attests, priests were also aware that migrants' identities as not just Irish, but coming from particular Irish counties and regions, could be used to fill coffers. But there was also in these fundraising tours widespread use of some more commercially savvy fundraising mechanisms. Many collectors ensured that their arrival in particular neighbourhoods was well-known in advance by advertising in newspapers, often for specific lectures, but sometimes in a more general sense: Buckley's arrival in New York and subsequent move west was reported, for example, and those he visited often seemed well aware that he was in town before he arrived on their doorstep.[16]

Individual donors might also solicit particular, personal experiences before giving their donations. Many Irish migrants paid money to have their confessions heard in the Irish language, to hold a conversation in Irish, or even simply to be in the presence of a priest 'fresh from Ireland'; Buckley recorded much delight from women he encountered who exclaimed 'hasn't he the rale look of the ould sod'.[17] Meanwhile, a young servant girl from Cork meeting Buckley wanted some material item, however small, from her native city in return for her donation of $4.[18] A further development of affective fundraising techniques saw Father Willie Ronan, in an early form of the 'sponsor a child' strategy that later became a staple of NGOs, arranging that anyone who paid for training of a student at Mungret College would receive a photograph and the contact details of the student in question, in order that a transatlantic correspondence and an emotional connection might be opened between donor and beneficiary. 'It is in this way', he wrote, that 'the interest of these good people will be kept up in their adopted children'.[19]

Beyond such intimacies, however, it is clear that wherever possible, touring priests used fixed public locations (including churches and lecture halls) in order to target as large, and in class terms, as diverse a group of people at once as possible. Offering Mass or giving a lecture could usually guarantee a substantial crowd who would expect to be asked for a donation. Such occasions could therefore be very lucrative but were rarer than many fundraisers would have wished because of the aforementioned obstruction from resident clergy. James Donnelly, fundraising in the 1850s, got around this by targeting other fixed spaces; he had notable success among workmen at the numerous brickyards, railroads and factories dotted around New York state, for example.[20] Workplace fundraising seemed to be much less common for later collectors, who instead found themselves trawling city streets and tenements, and in a sense living up to the metaphorical label of 'beggar' which they assigned themselves. As each of

16 Buckley, *Diary of a Tour*, p. 140.
17 Devine, 'Jolly Beggar', 24 August 1872, 4 June 1873; Buckley, *Diary of a Tour*, p. 113.
18 Buckley, *Diary of a Tour*, p. 66.
19 Fr Willie Ronan to Fr Rene, 15 November 1885, Mungret College, Jesuit Archives, Dublin, SC/Mung/49.
20 Donnelly, diary, 23–25 June 1852; 5–9 July 1852, PRONI, DIO(RC)1/11B/2.

Buckley, Devine and Ronan noted, even when accompanied by local guides (paid or unpaid) this was tough work, which took a physical and emotional toll on them, far more so than did appealing to an audience from a pulpit or a lectern.

For Devine, even canvassing the brownstone houses of well-to-do New York was a dispiriting experience. Genteel Catholics were apt to make him wait, or call back many times, often before giving him little nothing at all by way of a donation. Their chambermaids, he noted caustically, were more generous.[21] But going door to door in the poorer districts had still greater trials. While lucrative, 'It was', he noted:

> a slow thankless harrowing sort of occupation and how often am I inclined to sit down and pitch it up. Courage however, it must be done. To be going up and down stairs going into rooms, full of washtubs, smells, dirty women, unkempt children, with the suds, pots, beefsteak for dinner, cat, dog, wet clothes, brushes and shoes all in glorious confusion, to get 50 cents in one place, a dollar in another and nothing in another and to be all day long breaking your shins and getting out of breath and, and, sick and tired of yourself and the whole world, and when one day like that is over to have to begin another.[22]

Willie Ronan found it similarly difficult: 'One little drawback to this house-to-house collection is the difficulty of getting up & down the stairs of these big houses, & the constant talking & being on one's feet for so many hours every day. I am doing this work cautiously & seeing how far I can fairly go & I have come to the conclusion that I cannot do much in that way & I am sorry as it is a certain means of getting money. I hope principally to succeed through preaching & collecting in churches'.[23] Michael Buckley's house-to-house collecting, which he engaged in less often than the others, was glossed differently in his published diary, as a positive, but nonetheless time-consuming and emotionally demanding experience:

> whenever we entered a house we were received with a smile of welcome, and a shake of hands which placed us at once at our ease. We were then ushered into the drawing room, and all the members of the family were summoned to meet us; in many places they kissed our hands, and fell on their knees for our blessing.[24]

All the same, he noted that many of the houses he entered could be just as impoverished as in Ireland, and they were often unbearably hot and crowded; he also suffered greatly from rheumatism and respiratory problems throughout his tour, and died shortly after his return to Ireland having 'overstrained a delicate constitution', testament to the difficulties that the exertions of travel and the change in climate presented to all of the fundraisers.[25] Indeed, sending congregations were well aware of the dangers toward which the fundraisers went. Buckley was not the only priest to fall ill during his trip, and the gala farewell dinners that many Irish

[21] Devine, 'Jolly Beggar', 8 December 1873.
[22] Devine, 'Jolly Beggar', 10 November 1872.
[23] Fr Willie Ronan to Fr Rene, 4 November 1884, Mungret College, Jesuit Archives, Dublin, SC/Mung/49.
[24] Buckley, *Diary of a Tour*, p. 100.
[25] 'Death of the Rev. M. Buckley', *Freeman's Journal*, 20 May 1872, p. 3.

parishes organised for collectors were a conscious acknowledgement that the clerics might never return to see the chapel their efforts would build.[26]

The sensations attached to house-to-house collecting among ordinary Catholics and especially the Irish-American poor – the sounds, the smells and the physical space that had to be negotiated – were perceived and experienced by collectors as largely unpleasant, therefore; they were something to be endured and avoided if at all possible. In this context, Buckley's pursuit of wealthy individuals both in their own palatial homes and even in upscale restaurants – he dined at the famous Delmonico's in New York with Charles O'Connor, a politician who ran for the US presidency in 1872 – as well as all of the collectors' clear preference for, and dogged pursuit of, *public* space in which to make their fundraising appeals, even in the face of concerted opposition from American clergy, reveals a tension that sits at the heart of most fundraising. On one hand, priests wanted the high-profile supporters and quicker and easier accumulation of cash that private appeals to the wealthy could offer them. On the other, there was a rhetorical as well as a financial value in gathering multiple small sums from a great swathe of individuals, most easily done in large group settings. When the latter was necessarily sourced through door-to-door street collecting instead, it was much harder won. While it could still be painted as evidence of demotic support for particular projects and the Irish Catholic Church more generally, the struggles of the collecting priests in these circumstances were also well documented and widely accepted: Buckley's local newspaper in Cork described his 'arduous mission' and 'long and toilsome journey' and later congratulated him and his fellow collector on the 'extraordinary success with which their labours have been crowned'.[27] Lisa Godson's astute explanation in her essay in this roundtable of the bodily suffering that religious material objects inside and outside the church building were meant to engender in the laity had, in many ways, a counterpart in the stories of priestly endurance that surrounded such fundraising feats for the church. As a consequence, the buildings were just as likely to be regarded as products of individual clerical sacrifice as of collective effort.

3. CONCLUSION

'Spaces of space-making' in the Irish Catholic Church were therefore multi-layered, being at once imagined and materially embodied, at once imperially ambitious and locally specific, at once communal and intimately personal. While the imagined, the imperial and the communal as wrapped up in the contemporary trope of the 'Irish Spiritual Empire' have previously arrested this scholar's attention,[28] the material, the local and the intimate, encompassing one 'backstage' of Irish Catholic space, should not be overlooked. Richard Butler has recently written about the well-known phenomenon of the 'church-building priest' in twentieth-century Ireland and demonstrated the extent to which the ostensibly communal process of creating a new parish church could be controlled by the agenda, aesthetic tastes and ambition of one man, the priest, something well echoed by Caroline McGee in her piece in this roundtable.[29] Peeling back the curtains on the clerical collecting tour phenomenon gives us a

[26] There was no gala dinner for Buckley but he was seen off from the port by a crowd 'in such multitudes as were absolutely astonishing'. *Cork Examiner*, 24 May 1870, p. 2.

[27] *Cork Examiner*, 12 May 1870, p. 2; 'New Catholic Cathedral Cork. Rev. Messrs Buckley and Hegarty', *Cork Examiner*, 29 December 1870, p. 2.

[28] Sarah Roddy, 'Spiritual Imperialism and the Mission of the Irish Race: The Catholic Church and Emigration from Nineteenth-century Ireland', *Irish Historical Studies* 38:152 (2013), 600–19.

[29] Richard Butler, 'Building a Catholic Church in 1950s Ireland: Architecture, Rhetoric and Landscape in Dromore, Co. Cork, 1952–6', *Rural History*, 31 (2020), 223–49.

similar view of the Victorian 'Irish Spiritual Empire' as one in which clerical labour, emotions, and physical sacrifices were seen as integral to the creation of church buildings, a fact that somewhat undermines contemporary rhetoric and ceremony, expertly analysed by Niamh NicGhabhann here and elsewhere, that painted churches as spaces created by (and for) a wider, sometimes transnational, congregation.[30] As much as the dominant script appeared to be that Ireland's church infrastructure was dependent on the pennies of the poor (and, uttered more quietly, the pounds of the rich), persistent noises off indicated that those who toiled in collecting the pennies, and the pounds, were still seen as the true stars of the show.

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[30] NicGhabhann, 'Laying the Foundations', *passim*.