

Sparks through the Stubble

– Re-imagining Ireland’s ‘Golden Age’ of Christianity

Salvador Ryan

The clergyman was in a bit of a bind – he himself knew that he hadn’t got a squeaky-clean past. In fact, he had committed a certain sin in his younger days that now seemed to be coming back to haunt him. He had shared this indiscretion with a very close friend years ago but that friend had now betrayed him and the result was that some powerful figures in the Church were using it in a smear campaign against him. Where could he turn? And how could he defend himself?

You may at first come to the conclusion that I am speaking of some recent case, perhaps of back-stabbing within the Roman curia in the Vatican. But this case goes much further back; back indeed to the very earliest days of Christianity in Ireland. For the cleric I am speaking of is Patrick. And what seems to have been a smear campaign of sorts is what gives rise to the composition of his most famous work, the *Confession*. And you’ll no doubt be familiar with how he begins the work: ‘*Ego Patricius peccator*’ (I, Patrick, a sinner ...). This may, of course, be a stylistic feature – something you were expected to say in such a profession of faith in God. But I think there was much more to it than that. Patrick is never under any illusions about his own sinfulness and unworthiness even as he defends the integrity of his ministry against those accusing him. He admits ‘I know to some extent how I have not led a perfect life like other believers, but I acknowledge this to my Lord and I do not blush in his sight’. Here was someone who, having confessed his sin in the past (and having been betrayed by the friend he had confessed it to) did not wallow in that past and focus on the sin, but rather on the Lord who, as he says in another place lifted him from being a ‘stone lying in deep mud’ and raised him up.

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What can be said of St Patrick's approach to his own past, might also contain a very valuable lesson for the Irish Church as a whole as it reflects on its past. The theme of our Novena is 'Faith and Heritage' and our first reading from the Book of Ecclesiasticus encourages us to 'sing the praises of famous men and women, our ancestors in their generations' (44:1). And, generally speaking, for hundreds of years we have tended to do that – to recall, for instance, the huge contribution made by figures such as Patrick, Columcille of Iona, Columbanus on the Continent in Gaul and, latterly at Bobbio in Italy, Kilian in Würzburg, Virgilius (or Fergal) in Salzburg who once got into trouble in the mid-eighth century for suggesting that people might live at the opposite end of the earth (literally 'down under' where we know Australia and New Zealand to be today). We recall the contribution of Irish monasticism and the *peregrini*, the Irish missionaries who imposed exile upon themselves from their native land (rupturing their legal status and sundering access to their kin-network) to bring Christ to the pagan lands of Europe or to reinvigorate the faith in lands that were already Christian. Rightly do we recall the high standard of Latin which Irish scholars enjoyed – for instance, Columbanus's Latin was far superior to that of Pope Gregory the Great, with whom he corresponded. We think, too, of the Irish contribution to the revolution in the practice of Penance – the move from public penance in the Order of Penitents (which could only be availed of once in a lifetime after baptism – what was known as a 'last plank after shipwreck'). But the Irish monks introduced regular private penance which could be repeated again and again. In the Irish system the emphasis was not so much on punishment of wrongdoing, but on the treatment of sin as an illness; sinners were encouraged to build up their immune systems, as it were, against sin by the adoption of opposite virtues – fasting against gluttony, generosity against meanness, humility against pride, and so on. Penance was now seen as medicine, not retribution. The early centuries of Irish Christianity at home and abroad would take on the reputation of being a 'Golden Age' of sorts, richly peopled by saints and scholars alike.

Ireland's reputation for sanctity and its rich Christian heritage would be emphasized especially in times of crisis when it was under attack. This was particularly the case in the period of the Reformation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. One Galway priest, John Lynch, wrote a work entitled *Cambrensis Eversus* ('Cambrensis Overthrown') in 1662, which defended Ireland's Christian heritage against the slurs cast on it by the twelfth-century cleric Gerald of Wales, whose writings had experienced a revival at the Reformation. Gerald of Wales had pre-

THE FURROW

sented Ireland as gravely in need of reform in the twelfth century and as being barely orthodox. (Incidentally, St Bernard of Clairvaux painted a similar picture in his *Life of St Malachy*, but that was to better emphasise how St Malachy succeeded in reforming us!) The Irish, for instance, had kept a different date of Easter from that observed in Rome and clung stubbornly to their own custom until late in the seventh century. But the Galway priest, Lynch, defending Ireland makes little of this in 1662 and writes, instead, of Ireland's long history of loyalty to the Pope and to Roman observance. For him, the dispute over the date of Easter was a mere blip, quickly resolved. Thereafter, he argued:

the Irish Church was now without a blemish and attained the summit of perfection. Under the care of the popes she was presented as a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle, but holy and immaculate.

So confident were the popes of Ireland's loyalty, according to Lynch, that they began to relax their supervision of the country, 'sending neither representatives nor letters lest they might be said to be holding up a lamp to the sun'. If the Irish Church needed to be reformed at all in the twelfth century, according to Lynch, it was on account of the disruption caused by those nasty Vikings who, for a time, threw the church into disarray and presumably taught us all sorts of wicked habits like marriage irregularity and clerical concubinage, two of the problems that needed to be ironed out at the time. Had it been left to its own devices, according to Lynch, the Irish Church would have remained pretty much immaculate!

One has to admire Lynch's efforts to 'bat for the side', but I wonder if in constructing 'Golden Ages of Christianity' we do the Irish Church and the Church as a whole a great disservice. And we are not being true to the apostle Peter's admission, 'I am a sinful man' or, indeed, Patrick's '*Ego Patricius, peccator*'. For one thing, there are no such things as simply 'Golden Ages'. In the very same period of the achievements of great saints such as Columcille, Columbanus, Kilian, Fergal and others, manuals of penance known as penitentials were being composed in Irish monasteries, detailing the various penances to be assigned to specific sins. And they are very revealing. These penitentials are detailed to a fault. And every type of sin imaginable is found there. Yes, even sins that you wouldn't think possible. The following is typical:

If a cleric strikes his brother or a neighbour and sheds blood he

SPARKS THROUGH THE STUBBLE

shall do penance with bread and water and salt and be deprived of his clerical office for a year ...

If one of the clerical order should beget a son and then kill him he needs to do penance on bread and water for three years and implore the Lord for mercy, for three more years he shall abstain from wine and meat and be deprived throughout of his clerical office; in the final three years he shall fast on bread and water for forty-day periods throughout the year ...

If a cleric shall commit murder and strike his neighbour dead he must become an exile from his country for ten years and do penance for seven years in another city, three years on bread and water and four years abstaining from meat and wine ...

And the sins listed did not apply only to clerics but to the wider lay population as well. Perjury, drunkenness, theft, fornication, murder, the abuse of one's female slaves, the destruction of others through the magical arts, including the use of magical potions as abortifacients and aphrodisiacs ... These were all sins which were expected to be confessed at one time or another; they were not just the fantasies of bored clerics who wished to spice up their manuals of penance ... and this is all during Ireland's 'Golden Age' of Christianity.

Some sins, of course, were less serious – and even quite humorous. One penitential, that of Cummean, prescribes a special fast for monks who are not able to sing properly the psalms on account of being 'benumbed and speechless from drink'. And we wonder where Irish stereotypes come from!

But we are fond of constructing Golden Ages and we often tend to compare our Christianity today with some other remote time in the past when things were so different. The Eucharistic Congress held last year, for instance was compared with Ireland's 1932 Eucharistic Congress which marked with pomp and ceremony not only the new fledgling Irish state but also Ireland's spiritual empire abroad – for instance, by 1920 two thirds of the hierarchy of the United States was Irish-born or of Irish extraction; in New York the figures were much higher still; in fact, every bishop bar one from 1808 to the present day has been of Irish extraction.

Until recently, perhaps, we might have looked at the 1950s as a decade of hardship, emigration, yes, but also firm Catholic faith, a golden age of almost universal attendance at Mass and a range of devotions and huge membership of sodalities. For instance, a man attending a job interview was likely to be asked not whether he was actually a member of a sodality, but which sodality he was

THE FURROW

a member of. And yet, many clergy living in the 1950s did not, themselves, think of it as a golden age of faith. I was listening recently to a recording of a Redemptorist mission given in Tipperary Town in the 1950s and this is how the preacher assessed the state of the faith in his own day. Asking the question 'What is the greatest need of the Catholic Church today?' he remarked:

And God knows the Catholic Church is in need today. Today the Catholic Church is involved in a struggle for existence greater than any she has known in her long and glorious history.

Referring to the abject ignorance of the faith among ordinary Irish men (for it was a men's mission) he went on:

I have been giving missions up and down the country for a quarter of a century and it's my humble opinion that while Ireland must be regarded as the greatest Catholic nation in the world today, Irish Catholics, for the most part, are lamentably ignorant about their religion. They have the faith; they would gladly die for the faith; but do they know it, my friends? I am afraid not ...

And, in complaining about the conduct of Irish working men abroad who came home every so often, he went on:

I shrewdly suspect that the men who are letting us down across the water are the crowd you see outside the doors on a Sunday. When they are at home here they come to Mass, not because they love the Mass; they don't love it because they don't know what it is; and you can't love a thing unless you know it; but they come to Mass here merely out of human respect; they come to do the least possible in order to avoid a mortal sin but when they cross to this godless country they fall in with the crowd and they just go nowhere; but they're letting down the flag.

What better example of the inextricable association made in the past between being Irish and being Catholic – 'they are letting down the flag'. But more crucially, for this preacher, the 1950s was no Golden Age.

So what can we say of Irish Christianity today? Well let's face it – Christianity has always been difficult to live and Christians have always failed in living it. And Christians still fail to live it today. In comparing ourselves unfavourably with Christians in the past, I'd respectfully suggest that we all 'get over' the notion of 'Golden Ages' and that we stop trying to paint the past as any-

SPARKS THROUGH THE STUBBLE

thing other than it was: a time when Christians struggled against sin in their lives, succeeding in some instances, failing miserably in others.

But this is good news for Christians in Ireland today; it is very good news. It means that just as we struggle to respond to Christ today, so did people in the past. And just as cycles of winter in the Church long ago gave way to spring times of renewal, so we can hope for that to happen in our time too. And indeed it is already happening, even as we speak. If we are honest and humble enough to acknowledge the failures of the past, we can confidently claim the triumphs of the past too without blushing.

Each of these eras today was faced with its own challenges. In each of these periods God raised up men and women of faith, men and women who could speak to their own culture, men and women who should rightly be celebrated – in the words of the first reading:

those who led the people by their counsels
and by their knowledge of the people's lore;
those who were wise in their words of instruction;
those who composed musical tunes, or put verses in writing.

However, these figures were sinners, too. But, like Patrick, they dwelt not upon their past sin, but looked to Christ who called them into new life. For me, then, 'Golden Ages' are mere constructions that can frustrate us in their remoteness – and they do not speak to the reality of human experience. Rather than speaking of the Irish Church as 'a glorious church without spot or wrinkle, holy and immaculate' as John Lynch did in 1662, is it not more helpful to take our cue from Patrick instead?: '*Ego Patricius, peccator*'. Yes, Patrick, we are the Irish Church that you helped give birth to ... and we are sinners. Teach us to be saints.