



Most Reverend Raymond J. Boland

Bishop Emeritus

Diocese Kansas City ~ St. Joseph

The Irish Missionary Tradition

Places and Faces

Irish Pilgrimage to Kenmare Bay Hotel, County Kerry

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This seminar is a logical extension to my talk on St. Patrick of this past Tuesday. Patrick was an extraordinary missionary in his own right. During his lifetime he converted almost the whole island to Christianity and he did so without bloodshed. Without destroying the culture of the people he transformed it into a Christian matrix which was, by and large, avidly grasped by the inhabitants. Organizationally, he adopted the tribal concept of society which was well established on the island and he designed a monastic, rather than a diocesan, system to embrace it. From the beginning he sought and trained disciples whom he assigned to local churches as he brought the message of Christ from place to place. They consolidated his teaching and gave it permanence. This missionary methodology probably accounted for his notable results in little more than a generation. It would be incorrect to believe that there was no opposition to his proselytizing activity but it was apparently not sustained.

Here we must briefly examine an unusual phenomenon. Maybe there is some modern science which can explain what happened but, more so than most other missionaries of note, Patrick seems to have infected his followers with his own spiritual qualities. We might call it a holy contagion which became part and parcel of Irish Catholicism down the centuries. I will confess that there are some who admit this reality but also decry its possible limitations. I could enumerate many of these characteristics but time requires me to zero in on just one, namely, the missionary character of Irish Catholicism.

It was there from the beginning. I have already alluded to the fact that Patrick recruited others to be his coworkers and eventual successors in spiritual leadership throughout the length and breadth of Ireland. We can call this internal evangelization but in itself it was truly missionary because its beneficiaries were totally ignorant of Christianity. I want to deal with what happened next and I am going to divide my subject into two distinct periods, in many ways separated by that dismal era when the dark night of persecution dominated but did not break the faith of the Irish Church.

Although the two missionary eras I am addressing are separated by centuries it is remarkable that they have a number of features in common. I want to mention three.

- Each era begins with a network of institutions where the missionary vocation is sown and nurtured.
- Each era identifies a specific area for missionary activity within the context of the known world of its time. For the post Patrician period it was what we generally call Western Europe. For the more recent period it was the colonized world and most of the world was colonized by the European powers.

- Each era had a beginning and an end.

Allow me to outline each era in turn according to these three criteria.

THE POST PATRICIAN ERA of Irish Missionary Activity in its widest sense covered the sixth to the twelfth centuries.

Christianity was scarcely established in Ireland when the first monasteries came into being. Over the generations they both multiplied and grew larger. It would be more appropriate to call the larger ones, some with over three thousand members, universities as they were really centers of learning which attracted students from all over the continent. Ireland was the “in” place to go especially during those days when the universal distress which preoccupied the European scene earned it the appellation of the Dark Ages. It seems that everybody wanted to be a monk and those who felt drawn to greater sacrifice and renunciation of the world would seek lonely outposts among the remote islands along Ireland’s western seashore. Here they communed with their God far from human comforts with only the shrill cries of the swirling seagulls and the roar of the Atlantic surf to fill their waking hours.

Let me quote the observations of the French scholar Daniel-Rops, who describes this unusual phenomenon,

Monasteries sprang up ten at a time from the ground, and monks flocked to them in their thousands. There was certainly no family in the country which had no monks amongst its sons, and the women rivaled the men in their pious ardour.

There was nothing easy about life in these communities. Their ways of ascetic piety would be regarded by most men of the twentieth century as quite insane: reciting the psalter immersed in icy water; praying for so long, with the arms held out in the form of a cross, that the birds were able to make their nests on the head of the man as he prayed! No doubt all the Irish monks did not press the ideal of renunciation to such an extent, but they all submitted to a penitential regime which seems astounding to our easy-going ways. The ideal of penance was what these men set out to find, in cells lost in the midst of woods or in the most deserted countrysides: the finest examples of a well tried faith were forged there.

This penitential regime was so extreme that it could not last. In due time the severe asceticism of the Irish monastic tradition was replaced by the more moderate rule of St. Benedict. There were monasteries all over Ireland but I would suggest that the most influential ones were at Bangor (St. Comgall), Glendalough (St. Kevin), Clonmacnois (St. Ciaran), Lismore (St. Declan), Derry (St. Columcille), Cork (St. Finbarr), Aran Islands (St. Enda), and Clonfert (St. Brendan). (See the map) Two notable foundations by women were Kildare (St. Brigid) and Killeady (St. Ita).

These monasteries were literally nurseries for missionaries, or as Georges Goyan called them, “mission stations.” These monks inherited what has been dubbed “a sacred wanderlust for Christ.” In contrast to the blood-letting of martyrdom the desire to forsake forever one’s kith and kin and to spend one’s life in distant lands for the sake of the gospel was termed “a white martyrdom.” Where did they go? Let me quote Dr. Daniel-Rops once again; his colorful language is sparkling with admiration. He writes:

“Where did they go to, these great wanderers for Christ? We should rather ask, where did they not go? The coasts of Great Britain have many remains of their monasteries; islands lost in the mist saw them land, on which they met with extraordinary adventures, like those of Saint Brendan, who was reputed to have said Mass on the back of a whale and to have visited the gates of a frozen Hell....Brittany received numbers of them and at their behest was converted. So, also, did the Champagne of Saint Tresain, the Poitou of Saint Fridolin, the Ile de France of Saint Fursy, the Brie of Saint Fiacre, the Picardy of Saint Algis and Saint Gobain. But they went further yet, Saint Fridolin set out for Baden , Saint Killian for Thuringia , Saint Foillan for Belgium , Saint Donat for Tuscany , while Saint Cathaldus went as far as Taranto . There are so many of these Irish saints and they are to be found everywhere.”

Among the greatest were Columba, sometimes called Columcille, and Brendan. Msgr. Donnelly told us about the former, the patron of Derry and the founder of Iona . On Wednesday Bishop Kirby related the story of his diocesan patron, St. Brendan the Navigator.

I would like to tell you more about St. Killian who gives his name to the Cathedral in Wurzburg or St. Gall who is remembered by one of Switzerland 's cantons but time does not allow. I have a special affinity for St. Dymphna who ended up in Gheel in Belgium and is the patroness of the insane. Believe it or not, she has a National Shrine in Ohio !

The greatest of the Irish monks who reinvigorated the faith on the European continent was probably Columbanus. The late Cardinal O'Fiaich of Armagh wrote of him, he “was Ireland's first European poet, scholar, abbot, preacher, saint; co-founder of western monasticism, associate of kings, correspondent of popes, he was the center of controversy in his own day and has gone on generating argument ever since.” This man and his followers established monasteries all across Europe . He put Luxeuil , France , on the map and his last foundation, where he died, was at Bobbio in Italy . I can only urge you to read his life story in one hand and the Holy Father's latest Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Europa*, in the other. Although fourteen centuries apart you will discover that both men shared the same dream for a Europe infused with the love of Christ.

THE MODERN ERA of Irish Missionary Activity covered the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Three historical facts, among others, sparked this revival of interest in the missionary vocation. They were the coming of Catholic Emancipation to Ireland in 1829, the massive waves of emigration from Ireland as a direct result of the Irish Famine and the foundation of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith in Lyons , France in 1822.

The world scene changed dramatically at the end of the eighteenth century with the French Revolution and the American Revolution on either side of the Atlantic . The Industrial Revolution and the growth of cities introduced us to a completely new range of challenges and problems. Organized religion had to adapt itself to new ideas and emerging scientific disciplines, many of which confidently predicted the decline of religion because, in their eyes, it was rapidly becoming superfluous. The latter did not happen but even a cursory look at the lives of the nineteenth century popes will amply highlight the tensions which existed within the Catholic world.

In Ireland it was a case of good news, bad news. For political reasons, mostly fear of the French, the Penal Laws which spangled Irish Catholics, and to a lesser extent Catholics in Britain 's overseas colonies, were gradually relaxed. The patriot Daniel O'Connell is credited

with bringing them to an official end when Catholic Emancipation was granted by a reluctant Parliament in 1829. That was the good news and it resulted in a spate of church building throughout Ireland as the country began to take on all the appearances of a predominantly Catholic country which, of course, it was.

Then the bad news. An unpredictable natural disaster of epic proportions devastated rural Ireland. Within a decade a population of eight million was reduced to half that. The Irish Famine – *An Gorta Mór*, the “Great Hunger,” as it was called – claimed well over a million lives who were, for the most part, buried in mass graves. Another two million fled the catastrophe and the countries of the New World, in large part, became the beneficiaries of their strong backs and their ancient faith.

As wave after wave of Irish emigrants left their impoverished homeland it was quickly realized that without priests many of them would eventually lose their faith. Some did. Many of the dioceses in the Bible Belt of the United States boast thousands of families with Irish surnames who have been Baptists for generations. In addition to Maynooth, Ireland's National Seminary, a number of dioceses in the south of Ireland opened seminaries in the mid 1800s and they educated far more priests than were needed for the local dioceses. The surplus followed the Irish emigrants literally to the ends of the earth. You visited All Hallows College on the first day of your pilgrimage and you heard its unique story. A foresighted young priest of the Dublin archdiocese, Father John Hand, saw the need far more clearly than others and he founded All Hallows. I am naturally totally biased in my affection for the seminary. When I was named a bishop in 1988 I took the motto of the College, emblazoned over the main entrance, as my episcopal motto, *Euntes Docete Omnes Gentes*, Go Teach All Nations, the words of Christ recorded by Matthew. The number of dioceses in the United States was increased from one, Baltimore, to five by the addition of Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Bardstown, KY in 1808. Even before the Famine the Irish, Presbyterians and Catholics, were beginning to settle in the infant Republic. The trickle turned into a flood when the full impact of the Famine reached its terrible numbers. In his letters, one of the few times - and it may be the only one - that Bishop John Carroll lost his episcopal cool was enshrined in a bitter complaint that his diocese was being overwhelmed by hordes of uneducated Irish immigrants for whom he had no priests to provide them with pastoral care. Here was a third generation Irish-American becoming exasperated by the arrival of his impoverished countrymen! Gradually the new Irish seminaries came to the rescue. All Hallows, the seminary I know best, had ordained over 4000 priests when it celebrated its 150th Anniversary in 1992 and over 1400 of these came to the United States. There are still just over 300 of these priests active in American dioceses but this chapter in the modern-day Irish missionary movement is coming to an end. Most of the aforementioned Irish seminaries have closed and even Maynooth does not have sufficient seminarians to provide adequate future staffing for Ireland's twenty-six dioceses.

Ironically, there is more than sufficient evidence to demonstrate that there would be very few English-speaking Catholics worldwide were it not for the mass exodus of the Irish as a result of the Famine. In most countries to which they emigrated Irish priests and religious followed in their wake thus ensuring a firm foundation for the Church in their adopted lands. This is a thesis waiting to be written. Even the darkest of clouds have a silver lining.

God works in strange ways. After almost 200 years of Irish emigration to the United States (and what I am saying about the U.S. can be similarly said of Canada, New Zealand, Australia and the United Kingdom) the tide has turned. For three years in a row more Irish-born immigrants in the U.S. have returned to Ireland than those who have entered the country. In

some ways Irish-born priests no longer have an immigrant community to serve but it is still regrettable that the vocations rate has dropped so precipitously.

Two other components of the modern Irish missionary tradition must not be overlooked. They are the Columban Fathers who still labor, albeit once again with fewer numbers, in the Far East . Many were expelled from China but they found ample outlets for their missionary zeal in Korea , the Philippines and Taiwan . The St. Patrick Fathers have flourished for a century and they can take a great deal of credit for the growth of the Church in Africa . Indeed, missionary activity was so well supported in the Ireland of the 1800s and the 1900s that many religious communities and orders opened houses in Ireland specifically to tap the abundant source of vocations to enrich their apostolates. The Legionnaires of Christ were particularly active in this regard and Bishop Kevin Farrell, who had to forego this pilgrimage at the eleventh hour, and his brother bishop in the Vatican were recruited through this process.

Because their numbers were far greater than those of the priests and brothers it would be inexcusable to neglect the enormous contribution of Irish women religious in the cause of missionary evangelization. Nano Nagle (1718 – 1784) founded the Presentation Sisters. Catherine McAuley (1781 – 1841) began the Sisters of Mercy which by 1955 had 1509 foundations worldwide with 861 of them in the United States . Mother Mary Aikenhead (1787 – 1858) established the Irish Sisters of Charity which, after consolidating its presence in Ireland , fostered houses in Africa , Australia and the Americas . In more recent times a number of smaller communities with more specialized apostolates, like the Medical Missionaries of Mary, have sponsored overseas foundations. The Legion of Mary founded by Frank Duff in Dublin promoted the sending of lay missionaries worldwide long before such movements became popular after the Second Vatican Council.

We have briefly pondered some of the highlights of the Irish missionary tradition in two eras, that immediately following Patrick's evangelization and the modern era covering our two most recent centuries. Both have come to an end. The former was extinguished by the politics of the Reformation in England and Scotland when every effort was made to stamp out Catholicism in Ireland but the faith was doggedly preserved to flower again in the 1800s. This second era is now ending and as John Henry Cardinal Newman once maintained, ("We need a new spring." – a second spring.") Who knows? Maybe in God's providence it may be just around the corner.