Reflections on the Irish Jesuit Annual Letters, 1604-1674

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Anyone familiar with the work of the Jesuits in Ireland today, will, on reading just a few of these letters, be struck by the way priorities and attitudes of the Society have developed over the last 400 years. The letters referred to were written each year by the Superior of the Irish Mission, and sent to the Superior General in Rome. Twenty five of the letters from the seventeenth century survive and have recently been published for the first time, in Latin and in English translation, by the Irish Manuscripts Commission[1], under the indefatigable editorship of Dr. Vera Moynes.

About 20 to 30 Jesuits lived and worked in Ireland during this period (1604-1674), usually in most difficult conditions. From Elizabethan times onwards laws were passed marginalising the Catholic faith and effectively outlawing Catholic priests, with Jesuits a particular target. Over all this period, the law enjoined on all Catholics to attend Protestant services every Sunday. If they did not attend, and this was detected by the authorities, they faced punitive fines, loss of office if they were in the employment of the Crown, and in some cases imprisonment. The harshness with which the law was enforced rose and fell in waves over the period under review, but even under the reign of Charles the Second, was never entirely mitigated. The letter of 1616 paints a gloomy picture:

> Many jurors of inquest [juries recruited from the public to give judgment on adherence to religious laws] from different parts of the kingdom have been brought

[1] Irish Jesuit Annual Letters 1604-1674 ed. Dr. Vera Moynes. Translated by Vera Moynes and 16 others.

> to Dublin; they have been imprisoned and heavily fined for refusing to inform so-called sectarian judges about their brothers who profess the Catholic religion, and those who will not attend the churches of the heretics. [In Dublin] two magistrates suffered long prison terms and grievous financial loss, for the sole reason that they refused to swear an oath acknowledging the king's supremacy in spiritual matters... (p.537)

The zeal with which the Jesuits worked in these circumstance is remarkable, even if we allow for a certain amount of bias in the Annual Letters. Even more surprising is the extraordinary tenacity shown by the vast majority of Catholics in holding on to their faith, in spite of great inducements to change over to the Protestant faith, and of the penalties for not doing so.

The Jesuits of the time were mostly concentrated in the south of the country, in towns such as Waterford, New Ross, Clonmel and Cashel. They had a presence in Dublin, but it was dangerous for them to raise their head there due to the heavy presence of the officers of the Crown. Although the term 'residences' of Jesuits is used in relation to particular towns, the Jesuits rarely had Houses in which they habitually lived, and they usually stayed in the houses of the nobility. Often they had to move from house to house, both for their own safety and that of their hosts. If the houses they stayed in were big enough they were often able to say public Mass there and carry out other ministries. In some areas their presence was tolerated by the local magistrates more than in others. In the worst of times, especially in the Cromwellian period the Jesuits were forced to live in caves and grottoes in the mountains, and in the forests. A good account is given in the letter of 1669-1674 of the exploits of Fr. Stephen Gellous (surely a candidate for canonisation!) in his efforts to minister to the people in the general area of New Ross:

> Fr Gellous was so cautious when visiting them that the heterodox were not able to suspect that he was a priest: for sometimes he played a beggar wearing a cap smeared with fat and a tunic covered; and sometimes a miller, sprinkled with flour; sometimes a gardener or a carpenter; and elsewhere a tailor with threaded needles stuck in his sleeve... Sometimes he would bring a bucket of milk hanging from a pole between his shoulder and another's, to sell in the market... (p.973).

It was only possible to include this account in the letter because Fr. Gellous had died by the time the letter was written.

Although the Jesuits had 'residences' in only a few towns they travelled widely throughout Ireland, including Ulster and even as far as the Scottish isles.

Jesuit work and preaching

What is most striking about the work and preaching of the Jesuits at this time is the way it is coloured by a pervading backdrop of eternal damnation awaiting sinners. This preoccupation is not too surprising, since in the first sentence of the Second Week of his Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius describes the Trinity looking down on earth "filled with human beings...all are going down to hell". St. Francis Xavier was noted for the consuming

passion of his life, which was to save people from hell. In practice, this meant that in 17th century Ireland the number one priority for Jesuits was hearing Confessions, especially of people in danger of death. For instance, somewhere in north County Dublin in 1619:

> In the morning at sunrise the Fathers were engaged in hearing confessions; towards noon, without a thought of breakfast they administered the Holy Eucharist. Shortly afterwards, a sermon was delivered from an elevated spot and when it was over they applied themselves to the same task [confessions] until night, and up to the fourth day they had not satisfied the majority. The harvest was equal to the labour: for more than three thousand persons received the sacraments... (p.738).

The kinds of sins that are most often mentioned in the letters are irregular marriages and sexual relations, including incest, drunkenness, cursing and swearing, quarrels, especially between married couples or in connection with land, inheritances and Wills.

The Jesuits seemed particularly good at 'straightening out' people who had a history of missing confessions or making 'bad' confessions i.e. confessing only some of their sins. At Limerick, one of the Jesuits, in hearing confessions,

> ...stripped bare old wounds that were hidden with a continuous run of bad confessions for ten, fifteen, or twenty years...

In terms of the work done by the priests, comparison with the present day is stark. It is estimated that in North America and Europe only about 2% of Catholics go to Confession annually, and many never go. The most likely reason for this is the near-disappearance of Hell as part of Christian doctrine, or at least as it is taught to children by parents and in schools. Since the traditional understanding of salvation was deliverance from the flames of hell, the concept of salvation has also become more difficult to explain to ordinary people than it was in the 17th century.

Jesuit readiness to involve themselves in moral matters

The Jesuits of the 17th century seemed to have no hesitation in getting involved in matters that today would hardly be considered their business:

> Two people were led astray by love for one another and lived for a long time in fornication, the man a heretic and the woman a Catholic. As our priest was passing through, anxious to combat so great an evil, he called them before him and awakened their anxiety for their abandoned way of life, dangerous to their salvation and to both their reputations. So if they had any regard for one another they should not put off their marriage. They did not hesitate to follow his advice, because the man abjured heresy, was reconciled, and married. (p.622)

Another example is found in relation to funeral customs:

> By chance one of our priests went to preach at the funeral of a certain respectable woman. In the middle of the night people came to him complaining about those who were singing ribald songs. The priest hurried into the room where ... the corpse was laid out in the midst of a large crowd. He severely reprimanded the men and women

> singing there ... As a dutiful penalty for the crime, he set about questioning the offenders about everything that concerns the obligation of a Christian. And so he passed the rest of the night, instructing the wrongdoers... (P.538)

However, in Ireland this kind of 'interference' was normal up to relatively recent times. It would be rather unusual today. In former times people were more accepting of the priest's role of policing private as well as public morality. Subtle changes in public attitudes to privacy and in the standing of priests in society would make the average priest very uncomfortable if placed in this role today.

St Patrick and St Ignatius with Hibernia (UCD Archives)

Education

Up to recent times the apostolate in which the largest number of Irish Jesuits worked was education. This would probably still be the case if religious vocations had not been in steep decline since the early 1960s, so that there are not many Jesuits under the age of 65 in Ireland today

In view of the small numbers of Jesuits in Ireland in the 17th century, and the need for them to keep a low profile, they could not set up many schools. Though they were held in high reputation, and some Protestants attended, the numbers of pupils were small. For instance, in the report on New Ross for 1622:

> Here two Jesuits dwell, who in the year 1622 in addition to the normal duties of the Society established schools of Latin, beginning with the rudiments... and although the numbers are not great up to now there is promise of fruitful results. (p.808)

The schools were swept away during the Cromwellian period. Though some were re-established their situation was always fragile. We read in the report for 1670:

> This year was fatal for the schools in New Ross, which the parish priest of the heretic flock in that place aimed to suppress, using the efforts of headmaster of the grammar school and some of the citizens: for these, all of them of the same dung, having formed a conspiracy, by weight of complaints drove the pseudo-bishop's court, as it was already inclined to do, to ruin us... (p.982).

The Lord Primate Oliver Plunkett, shortly after he arrived in Ireland from Rome, set up a school in Drogheda in 1670, assisted by Fr Stephen Rice from New Ross and two other Jesuits. As well as 100 ordinary pupils, 24 newly-ordained priests studied moral theology there.

Spiritual Exercises

There is almost no mention in the Letters of the Jesuits giving the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. Of course the conditions were far from ideal, since regular contact with a Jesuit director could attract attention, and suitable premises were hard to find. Of course the parish 'Missions' mentioned frequently in the Letters may be compared to the First Week of the Exercises. The letter of 1616 states that the priests mainly administered the sacraments: "The particular practice of the spiritual exercises flourishes less often" (p.545). The letter of 1617 states that "the Spiritual Exercises in accordance with our custom were given to certain persons. (p.609).

Antagonism towards Protestants

One characteristic of the Jesuits of the time was their almost unremitting enmity towards the recently-formed Church of Ireland. There is not the slightest suggestion of ecumenism in the early Letters. This is not too surprising considering that the Protestants (as the Jesuits often referred to them), with the backing of the civil authorities, were engaged in a relentless campaign to extinguish the Catholic faith completely. The Superior of the Mission, Christopher Holywood explains:

> There is not a single county in all this realm that has not suffered the assault of a weekly fine hanging over the heads of those who are not known to attend the churches of the sectarians. This has led to the poor who cannot pay such debts being diligently sought out by officers belonging to the Crown. To escape its traps they lie in hiding... Nevertheless not everyone escapes the nets of the informers. Some are...taken to the workhouses. In these they are held as captives until they either pay off their determined debts in full or, abandoning Catholic practice, embrace that of the sectarians. (p.665)

The Jesuits regarded those who were or who became Protestants as lost souls, and worked diligently to bring them to the Catholic faith:

> By the hard work of these Jesuits [in the Dublin 'residence' in 1619] more than sixty heretics and schismatics, almost all of them born abroad, have joined the Catholics, for there are few of the native-born who do not stick doggedly to the true faith. (p.670).

The letter for 1663-64 shows some signs of a thawing of the antagonism. It reports the success of the Jesuits in recovering stolen cattle on behalf of one of the English Protestants. The same letter speaks highly of Sir Richard Rainsford, "a knight and a heretic, but otherwise the most just of men". Rainsford headed up a court set up in Dublin by order of the king "for the sake of innocent Catholics". Rainsford was very critical of the obvious perjury committed against Catholics in the court.

Vera Moynes, editor of the volumes of *Irish Jesuit Letters*, at the launch of the two volumes in the Irish Manuscripts Commission, in September 2019

'Magical Thinking'

A surprising characteristic of the Jesuits of the time is their strong belief in what is today called 'magical thinking'. What is meant by this is asserting that some unusual happening (such as someone dropping down dead) is associated with some human action, often one considered sinful. The term 'magical thinking' is disliked by some believers because it seems to suggest that God cannot, or never does, perform miracles. Nevertheless, it is hard not to see 'magical thinking' at work in passages such as the following, which occur throughout the letters:

> A certain person, chattering petulantly about St. Thomas the Apostle was cutting down trees, despite the feast day [of St. Thomas]. He fell from the tree, split his intestines, and died within two days. A certain other person, getting ready to go

> fishing on the feast of St. Martin, said, "We will risk it". On the same day he lost his net and his haul of fish, and the poor man came very close to sinking. (p.918)

In spite of this, the letters often comment on the effort of the Jesuits to combat superstition. Nevertheless, the line between superstition and 'magical thinking' is thin. A story similar to the two above is introduced as "an example of divine vengeance".

Of course stories of this kind abound in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament. Perhaps the best known of these is the story of Uzzah, who is described as being struck down dead by Yahweh for putting his hand on the Ark to steady it, because the ox pulling the cart holding the Ark stumbled, and the Ark almost fell off the cart. (2 Samuel 6, 1-7). So perhaps it is not surprising that the Jesuits of the 17th century interpreted certain events in a similar way.

Settling Disputes

The Jesuits also seemed to spend a remarkable amount of time settling quarrels. It may be that their academic education equipped them better than others for the task. Although training in dispute resolution forms no part of Jesuit formation, and it is unlikely that it ever did, for some reason they seemed uncommonly good at it, and were sought out by many people, especially those who could not afford lawyers. In the Letters the number of 'happy endings' that feature in the accounts of peace-making suggest a certain amount of embellishment in some of these accounts. The following relates to the Waterford area:

> A dispute over four thousand gold pieces that had run for nearly ten years came to a very satisfactory conclusion when it was resolved by two of our men... Two illustrious men used the opportunity to exchange disgraceful recriminations in a public forum. They became enraged to the point of seeking revenge on each other, preferring to expend all their resources on litigation before the viceroy rather than settle the matter amicably. However, their burning zeal vanished in smoke when our priest mediated. (p.545)

Domestic and marital disputes were also resolved:

> Various disputes among other citizens were taken up: between couples where wives were under suspicion, in cases where respectable men were on the point of leaving their wives, and lastly among people from the lower classes. In affairs of this kind, there is such high and widespread respect for the sound evaluation and judgement shown by our men that legal actions over land and property, even those involving the highest ranking people, are left to be decided by our brothers. (p.546)

The word 'decided' is troubling. Not only were the Jesuits not trained for this kind of work, but Par.237 of the Jesuit Constitutions appears to give it little encouragement:

> In accord with the Constitutions, Ours should refrain as far as possible from all secular business, such as the task of making Wills or being executors thereof, being agents in civil matters, or other occupations of this sort, and they should not be let by any entreaties to undertake these things or to engage in them.

Some research would be required to establish if Par.237 of the Constitutions existed in this particular form during the 17th century.

Some other observations

Anonymity

The danger of any of the Annual Letters falling into the hands of enemies of the Jesuits or of the Church meant that they give almost no personal details. Individuals are always referred to as 'our man'. Precise locations where they lived or stayed are never given Although the Jesuits lodged with various noble families, these are never identified. The earlier letters are mostly signed by 'John Bushlock' an alias for Fr. Christopher Holywood.

The Protestant bishops (described as 'pseudo-bishops') are often identified, as are other Protestant administrators and rulers. Thankfully, relying on other extant documents and the research of historians, the editor has been able to identify, in footnotes, many of the Jesuits mentioned.

Were the Jesuits Conceited?

One thing that jars in the Letters is the frequent 'self-praise' of the Jesuits in the Letters. In this case it does not appear that comparisons were considered invidious. Various unidentified nobles are quoted as saying that they found the Jesuits much superior to other priests and religious. There seems little doubt that the Jesuits were held in high esteem and that when it became known that they were visiting a particular district, people flocked from many miles around to hear them preach and to go to confession. In the letter of 1605 we read that:

> In a certain Province here, a Father gave sermons nearly twice a day all through Lent to a gathering of so many people that it was frequently necessary to keep back the crowd with cudgels as they climbed the walls, the windows, the roof using ladders and other means; and there was very often danger that the people would suffocate or the roof crash down, and people were often carried out half alive. (p.72)

Nevertheless, the constant praising of the Jesuits by the Superior of the Mission is somewhat at odds with the habit of the founder, St. Ignatius, who consistently referred to the Jesuits as 'our least

Society' and never suggested that the Jesuits were superior to other priests or religious.

Whether on account of the esteem in which people held the Jesuits, or for other reasons, some resentment of them by the other religious orders and secular priests is noted in the letters, though on the whole they worked very harmoniously together. The Dominicans, Franciscans and Augustinians were very active in Ireland at the time.

Little Self-Criticism in Letters

In no place do the letters offer any criticism of individual Jesuits or their behaviour. Perhaps this was to prevent such criticism being used as ammunition against the Society should the letters fall into the wrong hands. It is also the case that from the beginning St Ignatius

intended the Annual Letters to be read outside the order, particularly by benefactors. However, as with any group of men or women working together, it is inevitable that there were some tensions and difficulties of the kind spoken of by St. Ignatius and his contemporaries in 16th century documents. Such tensions are well documented in later publications by Jesuits, as, for instance, in Fr. Tom Morrissey's splendid account of Fr Peter Kenney, S.J., a major churchman of 19th century Ireland. The complete absence of negative criticism of the activities or lifestyle of the priests gives a certain air of unreality to the Letters, though the work of the Jesuits and the main historical events are probably reported accurately. Only in the final page of the final letter (1669-1674) is there mention of a major lapse, namely, the apostasy from the faith and from the Society of one of the Jesuit priests. (p.993).

The Irish language

There are several mentions of the Irish language. In the early 17th century it was clearly the main language of the people. A section of the 1618 letter dealing with parish missions states:

> The inhabitants of three counties in bands gathered together for their spiritual programme, the peoples of Kildare, Carlow and Laois, a quite large crowd of men and women of every state of life. And since one of the Jesuits did not know the Gaelic language very well, he was put to the hearing of confessions of a least men of higher status (almost all of whom know English in this country). The other two, knowing both languages, and other secular priests, applied themselves to the work for atonement for the bulk of the crowd. (p.681).

There is no comment in the Letters on the Irish language itself, or of its usefulness or otherwise. In more recent times a number of Jesuits distinguished themselves in research into the Irish language and in composing dictionaries.

Did Jesuits identify more with the upper classes?

It is interesting to speculate if the custom of the Jesuits of residing in the homes of the Catholic nobility shaped aspects of their ministry in later years, particularly in education. There is little doubt that it would have

Director of the Roman Archives Brian Mac Cuarta SJ with editor Vera Moynes at the book launch

been difficult for them to stay anywhere else, as the standing of the nobility, and the size of their residences, offered the Jesuits the best protection in a time of persecution. The letter of 1619 offers an interesting comment:

> By these good offices they [the Jesuits] render their work so acceptable to all that most of them [the nobility] reckon themselves blessed when our men stay in their houses: the rest almost envy these and consider that the spirit of God dwells in those places where they abide, and hence as from a spring, examples of solid piety flow on all the inhabitants. For that reason there is a sort of noble rivalry among the noble and the most respectable men... [When there is news of a Jesuit arriving in the area] they go to the superior and they will prevail by what reasons they can to get possession of the new guest. (p.735)

To the credit of the Jesuits they stayed in other places, including caves and hovels, when they had to. The account of a visit to Rathlin Island in the 1618 letter states:

> There were no residences, only low and shabby cottages. If even a little bread was available, made out of oat or barley, it was considered an abundance. If with your fish you had milk (which is practically the only common food of the inhabitants), you were being given splendid treatment. You rested most serenely if straw was laid out for your bed. (p.688)

An unreflective class distinction can be observed throughout the letters. However, this was commonly found in documents right up to the last century. Expressions such as "a certain man of the first rank" or "a certain very noble man" are frequently used in the letters. The Jesuit priests themselves mainly came from upper middle-class or even noble families (as did their founder), as only these were able to acquire the level of education required to embark on the long progamme of studies required by the Society.

Nevertheless, the letters record many instances of Jesuits helping poor people, and not only in spiritual matters. The letter of 1604 relates of a certain priest working in Limerick:

> The Father started a very large charitable project in this city which was a hospital to house the poor and sick... And before he left the city he made sure that a very good and suitable site was purchased for this purpose, and collected funds to build the edifice... [the project was then interrupted by events outside the priest's control] ...However he did not leave the poor untended, because he had them housed - and there would have been about 200 individuals in all – in the residences of those of sufficient power or wealth... (p.40).

Endnote

These letters constitute a remarkable piece of scholarship, involving teamwork between a great number of people. They cast much additional light on a rather obscure and painful period in the history of Catholicism in Ireland. They also build on earlier invaluable work by Fr. John MacEarlean S.J. (1870-1950) who transcribed and collated documents on the Irish Jesuits.

The project was originally inspired by a Franciscan, Fr. Benignus Miller, OFM, who in 1991 expressed regret that the 17th century history of the Irish Jesuits had not yet been printed. Fr. Brian Mac Cuarta, S.J., Academic Director of the Roman Archives, conceived the idea of publishing these letters in full, and the project was given wings by the involvement of Fr. Noel Barber S.J. and the members of the 1814 Committee (which was set up to celebrate the Irish Jesuit bi-centenary of the restoration of the Society in Ireland). Two further crucial steps were the engagement as editor of the distinguished historian and Latinist Dr. Vera Moynes, and the assistance of the staff of the Irish Manuscripts Commission.

Hopefully the few observations and short extracts given above will encourage people to read in full some or all of these remarkable and informative letters, extending to a total of about 500 pages in translation. They are often more entertaining than might be expected.