

## DOMINICANS AND THE IRISH PERSECUTIONS

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It is now nearly seven hundred years since Dominican history in Ireland began. Seven centuries of existence crowned with the diadem of success, tinged with the blood of persecution—what a story it unfolds before our retrospective eyes! A link between the age of chivalry and the era of progress, the connecting rod between medieval spiritualism and modern materialism. It has witnessed the transition in philosophy, in morals, in religious belief, and throughout all it has preserved its own immutable calm. Of these seven hundred years of existence, three periods may be classified: the period of progress, the period of persecution and the period of restoration. It is to the era of persecution we must direct ourselves, to the second age of Dominicanism in Ireland, to that epoch of blood and iron wherein men died that true religion might live.

The Irish persecutions began with the act of supremacy and ended with the act of emancipation. Comparable to a flood, it had its inception in the intoleration of Henry VIII, reached its crest in the fanaticism of the Cromwellian regime, and finally subsided when the eloquence of O'Connell made staunch English Protestants, for the time being, indifferentists. Like a flood, it broke the bounds of moral restraint, swept away the landmarks of Christianity and established ruin where peace and plenty basked in the sunshine of the true religion of Christ. Thus, the Irish persecutions are not the pangs of travail that precede the birth of liberty; they are, rather, the death-throes of a passing age of grandeur, the vain attempts to separate the body and soul of Celtic national life.

In common with other modern persecutors, the reforming Henry first directed his efforts against the religious institutions. He was inspired by no high motives; his object, it seemed, was wholly mercenary. He drove the monks from their monasteries that he might appropriate their incomes. Such a motive is compatible with the greedy nature of the King, but there is obviously a deeper cause for the suppression of religious. Henry dispersed the monks because of the wonderful influence they exercised over the minds of the people. Monasteries with the tradition and liberty of centuries behind them were not likely

to obey the mandates of a despot whose ancestors were Welsh savages when the monasteries were already diffusing beams of culture and Christian charity upon an emancipated world. In the royal fiat of suppression there was no regard for the antiquity of religious institutes. Those with the tradition of a thousand years were rated in the same category as those of more recent growth. When the English monasteries were confiscated and the communities dissolved, the monarch, wishing to broaden his sphere of spiritual influence, turned his attention to Ireland.

In the year 1531, when the persecution commenced, there were in Ireland thirty-eight Dominican foundations. The number of brethren is not definitely stated; it probably ranged from three to six hundred. The work of spoliation was carried out incompletely by Henry, who confined his activities within the pale. In fact, the suppression was only begun by that infamous king. Within the pale, however, there were many deaths. The Dominicans were unwilling to give up the homes which had sheltered them for three hundred years, and were still less willing to surrender control of the flock entrusted to them by divine command. Force was used; some were expelled violently and retired to the houses of their Order less open to the attacks of the monarch; others remained to crimson their white habit in their blood because they preferred to obey God rather than man.

To Elizabeth fell the doubtful honor of completing the work her father had begun. During the comparatively quiet reign of Edward VI, and under the Catholic reactionary sovereignty of Mary, the Order had progressed with giant strides. It is persistently stated that the Dominican roll at the accession of Elizabeth contained a thousand names. The blood of the martyrs of Henry's day was not shed in vain, for it was sown as spiritual dragon's teeth from which sprang a crop of spiritual warriors. But at the close of the reign of the "Virgin Queen," when the roll was again opened, only five or six aged men answered the call. The prophecy of the Savior was being accomplished; the warning of Saint Paul, "All that live godly shall suffer persecution," was being proved as enduring to the end of time, for we continually read of a Friar Preacher being hanged because he was a religious, because he had devoted his life to God, because he had entered this mode of living, at the dictates of his conscience, to save his immortal soul. Nor was the death penalty an exception in those days; it was rather the rule. That was

the season of unnatural harvests, when the trees bent under the weight of criminals whose only crime was their religious belief. Again, we read of the slaughter of the whole community of Derry convent in a single night, and at the same time all the Fathers of Coleraine perished in like fashion. The narrator, an eye-witness, mentions these foul deeds as ordinary occurrences, from which it is inferred that many communities met with a similar fate.

And after all the bloodshed, after all the destruction of Dominican property, what did Elizabeth gain! True, she obtained some ephemeral successes. She succeeded in depriving the peasantry of the benefit of clergy; she executed some of the Friars and drove the remainder to the continent; but there her victories ended. She did not reckon with the tremendous vitality of the Order she sought to destroy, she did not perceive the effects of its universality. She was ignorant of the spirit that animated its members, the spirit fostered by tradition and strengthened by the passage of years, the spirit that drives the sometimes revolting body into the jaws of death to fulfill the object of the foundation of the Order, the safety of souls.

Elizabeth in the height of her glory illustrates splendidly the vanity of human wishes. By the banishment of the Dominicans she elicited the sympathy of Europe for a cause she wished to obliterate. It was her great desire to Protestantize Catholic Europe, and yet she was the innocent cause of strengthening the faculties of the universities of Portugal, of France and of Spain. She made a tremendous attempt to destroy Catholicity in Ireland by the forceful separation of flock and pastor, yet hardly had death wrapped her in its cold embrace when the Dominicans she believed she had cowed by oppression were coming back from foreign lands to infuse new life into the famished souls of their countrymen, to prove the unconquerableness of their hope and trust, and to teach them optimism for the future.

Now the crest of the wave of persecution looms up. It would seem that faith had been tried enough by a century of oppression and found not wanting; but the will of God deigned otherwise. The cup of bitterness had not been drained to the dregs. It remained for Cromwell to rub salt into the wounds his predecessors had made.

The intensity, the fierceness, of the Cromwellian reign of terror is only paralleled by that period of ancient history when Rome ruled the world and Nero ruled Rome. Nowhere else is

cruelty so conspicuously exhibited; nowhere else such contempt of human feeling. Cromwell is the Nero of modern times, Ireland the arena, Puritan Ironsides the ravening wolves whose appetites were satiated only by the indiscriminate effusion of human blood. Since they were monsters who could and did impale innocent babes on their sword-points because they were idolaters, their attitude in regard to priests who officiated at the idolatrous cult can easily be imagined. No pity was shown to the Dominican who fell into their hands; no trial was afforded him, no time to commend his soul to God. Like a wild animal he died where captured, and was hung in chains on a nearby tree as a warning to his brethren and to the peasantry at large. Oh, the luridness of that epoch after the ordered migration to the West! The disobedient were killed at sight. A price was set on the Friar's head. The apprehension of a Dominican and the capture of a wolf brought the same bounty.

The history of the period is epitomized in the story of the old Dominican who followed his charge into its Western exile. Weary and hungry, he dropped by the roadside. The fields, as far as his eye could reach, were deserted. No smoke was issuing from the chimneys of the nearby cottages. He was in a desert, or, rather, in the track of a cyclone which had destroyed the living and left the inanimate untouched. As the dusk of evening stole across the sky, the scenes he witnessed passed before him as in review. He saw again his peaceful cloistered home. Pictured before him was the abrupt transition from peace to turmoil at the approach of the destroyers. He heard horses trample where the sandaled-feet of monks used to tread. Puritan soldiers rushed in where angels hovered in fear and trembling. The rough demand of the troop to his brethren to come out was borne to his ears. He saw his Prior hacked to pieces, a middle-aged Friar pushed up against the convent wall and shot, a young man scarcely out of his teens, with the ascetic countenance of a saint, pierced with a sword because he did not smile at the insulting remarks of the soldiery. He observed the boy's eyes open in pained surprise, saw him stagger a little as his hand automatically touched his breast, heard the soft thud of his body as it struck the ground, and watched his white habit quickly assuming a ruddy hue. So accutely did the old man visualize the tragedy that the soft night breeze wafted to his nostrils the nauseating odor of freshly spilled blood. He again saw the sturdiest of his brothers



reserved from death to be sent as slaves to the Barbadoes. He knew that many of his Order had escaped the eyes of the spies and were performing their ministry in peasant's garb. Then, too, he was aware that some had reached the continent, and were out of the present danger. And this fact made him rejoice exceedingly, for he knew that at the first opportunity his white-robed brethren would return and build again the edifice that the storms of heresy had twice destroyed.

Nor was the dying man's discernment at fault. Soon the Dominicans returned. Singly, in pairs, sometimes in small bands, they trickled back to the scenes of their former labors. Smuggled into the country—for they were contraband—they left the ease, quiet and comparative comfort of continental convent life for the harrassing anxieties of a hunted existence. It was ever thus; the bravest are always the first to mount the breach, the hero's place is where the battle is thickest. Such was the ideal fabricated by the Dominicans. What mattered death when the martyr's crown of glory was the reward! What mattered slavery when slaves needed spiritual aid! Yet, this semblance of living proved to be founded on a false security, which was demolished by the general banishment of regulars in 1698.

That all did not obey the command is apparent. In penal times Mass was offered continually. In caves, in deep recesses of the woods, the faithful assembled at midnight to see the drama of Calvary reenacted. The priest, who performed the offices of a cowherd by day, donned the garments for his ministerial function at night and kept alive the flame of faith when the clouds hung low and darkest. And then when the efforts of man had done its worst, when the diabolical ingenuity of persecution had failed in its attempt to wipe out the divine foundation, persecutors could only exclaim, at least inwardly, "The finger of God is here!" Oppression assumed a purely passive aspect, but it required the matchless eloquence of a preacher of truth to turn the passivity into toleration.

The most striking feature of Dominicanism during the persecutions was its tremendous vitality. Thrice almost annihilated, thrice it arose from its ruins and flourished. A general chapter of the Order, held about the middle of the eighteenth century, commemorated the death, for the faith, of six hundred Irish brothers, but such wholesale massacre could not check a spirit that welcomed death as tending to the greater glory and honor

of God. The loss of property and means was no curb to men whose faith in their founder was only surpassed by their trust in the Lord. And, then, the charity that runs through the fabric of their institution like a prominent thread of gold! "Greater love than this no man hath than that he should lay down his life for his friend." Six hundred Dominicans died that the souls of a nation might be saved!

If the Irish Dominicans are noted in profane history, they must be represented as the lambs which the wolves devour. Even such representation is not necessary. Whenever the Rosary is recited it will recall the memory of those who lived in the iron time, for the Rosary, that peculiar devotion of Dominicanism, is claimed by many as being the mainstay of Irish steadfastness when the machinations of heresy were well nigh unbearable. Too few ruins that still exist are a mute-epitaph to those who died within them and an imperishable cenotaph to those whose bones moulder in a foreign soil.

—Bro. Antoninus Healy, O. P.