

An 18th Century Episcopal Instruction for Ossory

Con Costello

Before Dr. John Thomas Troy, O.P. was consecrated archbishop of Dublin in 1784 he had been bishop of Ossory for eight years. During his time in that See he was firm in his condemnation of agrarian offenders, and equally so of the improprieties associated with wakes, patron days, and special holidays, such as May Day.

From October 22nd to 24th 1782 Dr. James Butler, archbishop of Cashel, presided at a diocesan synod in the cathedral at Thurles. Having defined the regulations for the administration of the sacraments the archbishop focussed the attention of the synod on the necessity for the suppression of certain types of gatherings which were known to lead to occasions of sin, and to the importance of proper conduct at wakes. He spoke of the prevalence of brawling, the punishment of such offenders, and the obligation of those culprits to present themselves to the bishop.

Within less than two months of this synod the bishop of Ossory issued a written instruction to be read to the people of the diocese. Unlike a similar letter written by his predecessor in the See, Dr. Thomas Burke, some eighteen years before, Dr. Troy's epistle did not carry the addendum "To be explained in Irish", which fact may represent a decline in the use of the language of the diocese. The letter of 1782 concerned the behaviour of the faithful, particularly on patron days and at May time celebrations, and the immoderate use of whiskey. It was made clear that drunkenness at fairs and other places of assembly led to riots, bloodshed, and murder, while the families of those addicted to whiskey suffered deprivation. But it was on the subject of May Balls that the bishop expressed himself most strongly.

The custom of May Balls seems to have been peculiar to the south and south east of the country. On May eve groups of young bachelors went around collecting the balls which were presented to them by couples married since the previous May. The balls might be hurling balls or globes decorated with silver and gold thread, possibly representing the moon and the sun, and they would later be hung, with garlands and egg shells, on the May bush. The abuse of the custom was seen to be in the festivities which accompanied the collection of the balls when the young men also demanded either money or drink. Generally the evening deteriorated into an occasion for drunkenness, brawling and rioting.

Early in May 1768 the Kilkenny newspaper *Finn's Leinster Journal*, published a letter from an anonymous writer who signed himself "Florus, and a hearty well wisher of the City of Kilkenny". He wrote that "for many years past the peace of this city has been disturbed every May Eve by a vast multitude of audacious fellows, who assemble together to collect May Balls among the new married folk. They sally out with Herculean clubs in their hands, and as those unmeaning May Balls are seldom or never given without a piece of drinking money to boot, such bloody battles ensue in different quarters of the town such confusion and uproar . . ." Having described the further outrages of the festivities he demanded that in future the culprits should be apprehended and brought to justice.

But his advice does not seem to have been heeded. A decade later, in the issue of the 7/9th May, 1778, the *Freeman's Journal* reported that one Patrick Reade of Johnswell "had his skull fractured in a quarrel which arose between some men who assembled to collect May Balls, in the neighbourhood of Bennet's Bridge. He was taken to hospital, where he was trepanned (traditional surgery on the skull practised since pre-historic times) on Sunday, and shortly after died". The following year, in its edition of May 1st, *Finn's Leinster Journal* announced that on the previous evening the citizens of Kilkenny were "delivered from the old usual horrors of May Eve, and it is to be hoped that this example will ensure, for the future, the peace and tranquility of the public". This improvement was credited to the deputy mayor who had "exerted himself with peculiar vigilance" on May Eve, checking the youths in their quest for the May Balls. The bearer of the May Ball had been seized and gaoled and, despite the efforts of some soldiers from the garrison to re-assemble the mob, the crowd had dispersed.

In his *Enquiry into the First Inhabitants of Ireland*, published in 1781, Gen. Charles Vallancey commented on the May Balls custom: "In some parts of Ireland, as the counties of Waterford and Kilkenny, the brides married since the May Day, are compelled to furnish the young people with a ball covered with gold lace and another covered with silver lace, finely adorned with silver tassils; the price of these sometimes amounts to two guineas; these balls, the symbols of the Sun and the Moon, are suspended in a hoop ornamented with flowers, which hoop represents the circular path of Belus or the Sun; and in this manner they walk in procession from house to house".

While Vallancey's interpretation of the custom was probably not appreciated by the young bachelors of Kilkenny, neither did the youth of Callan observe the strictures of the deputy mayor of that

city. Reporting on the festival of 1782 *Finn's Leinster Journal* said "On Tuesday a number of people in different parties assembled at Callan in order to collect May Balls; they disagreeing, a quarrel immediately ensued in which Nicholas Butler, of that town, cooper, unfortunately received a blow of a stone on the forehead and instantly expired. The offender has since fled". The perpetrator of this unfortunate act was one Sean na Sal, and the May Ball was being given by a newly married minister, Dr. Lampart. No doubt this incident was much in the mind of the archbishop when he urged the suppression of brawling at the diocesan synod in October, and the death of one of his flock must have greatly influenced the bishop of Ossory when he issued his instructions on conduct at fairs and such gatherings, before Christmas of that year.

The following is the text of Dr. Troy's Instructions to the people of the diocese of Ossory, dated at Kilkenny on December 12th, 1782:

"To the Rev. Pastors, and other R. Catholic Clergymen of the Diocese of Ossory.

Rev. Sirs — Although I am persuaded that nothing has been wanting on your parts, to impress your respective Flocks with sentiments becoming good Christians, and useful members of society; it is nevertheless, notorious that too many of our Communion seem insensible of their duty towards God, and their neighbours. Their constant and scandalous Breach of every Law is principally occasioned by an immoderate Use of Whiskey; whereby they are not only disabled from working, and of course from providing for their wretched Families; but likewise being deprived of their reason from Intoxication, disturb the public peace by frequent Riots at Fairs, and other assemblies; which they often resort to with the Antichristian Intention of raising a quarrel, or revenging a real, or imaginary insult offered to their Relations, Friends and Partisans. By this conduct so contrary to the Maxims of the Gospel, which everywhere inculcates forgiveness of our real and greatest enemies, under pain being refused Pardon from our merciful God. These Nominal Catholics belie their profession of Christianity; they often occasion Bloodshed, sometimes Murder, and always give Scandal. Such glaring Outrages against divine, and human Laws demand our serious Consideration, and require our most strenuous exertions to repress, and prevent them. In order, therefore, the more effectually to accomplish these great Ends,

and enforce the Respect due to the Commandments of God, the Law of the Church, and Ordinances of the State; Thereby I not only beseech you in the most earnest Manner to continue your zealous endeavours to promote temperance and thereby procure Peace; but likewise command you, as far as in me lies, to observe the following Instructions, with Respect to Rioters, and other unhappy Disturbers of the Public Tranquility.

1. You are not to admit to Sacraments any Person who strikes another at a Fair, or any other public place of meeting (except in Case of just and necessary defence) until the Offender shall publicly acknowledge his crime, ask pardon of God, and solemnly promise Amendment before the congregation assembled on a Sunday, in each respective Parish Chapel.
2. If the offenders should relapse notwithstanding the aforesaid Declaration, and promise; you are not to administer any Sacraments to them, or permit them to enter the Chapel without express Orders from me, if I should be in the diocese, or from the Official in Kilkenny during my absence.
3. Such Offenders as neglect to observe the above mentioned Discipline, and who may be in Danger of Death; can receive Sacraments, and be reconciled to the Church, if they are found otherwise disposed, and sincerely promise to comply therewith in Case of Recovery. But you are not to Bless the Clay, or say Mass for them in public.
4. All offenders persevering in their obstinacy till Death, and refusing to promise Amendment, are to be regarded as excommunicated Persons in every Respect, and consequently unworthy of any Indulgence. You are not, therefore, to accompany their Funerals.
5. The Anniversary Festivals of the Saints to whom the respective Churches are dedicated, and which are called *Patron days* were formerly solemnised in this Kingdom with becoming Piety. On these days the faithful of each Parish assembled in order to commemorate the Triumph of their *Patron Saint* over the World, the Flesh, and the Devil. They spent the day in Prayer, they gave Alms, and endeavoured to imitate the heroic Virtue of the Saint in order to partake of his Glory in Heaven. In these times, the Case is quite

otherwise. Our deluded people assemble on these days for Wicked purposes. Instead of praying, they wish damnation to themselves and acquaintances with most horrid deliberate imprecations.

They profane the Name of God, and everything else that is Sacred, by most execrable Oaths; and finish the day by the perpetration of the grossest impurities, by shedding their neighbours Blood, by Murder, and the Transgression of every Law. They have been seriously warned from the Altars not to frequent these Assemblies, and to avoid the Occasion of such scandalous Excesses. In order the more effectually to prevent them in future, I do hereby prohibit any Priest whatsoever under Pain of suspension to be incurred by the very Act of Transgression, to celebrate Mass in public, in any Part of the respective Parish where a *Patron day* occurs except it should be an Holiday of Obligation; and then, in the Chapel only; and as the Erection of Booths, and Tents in the usual Places of Meeting is known to encourage these lawless Assemblies, Thereby also require you to take particular Notice of such R. Catholics, who preferring a little temporary emolument to their own Salvation, and public Peace, scruple not to let their Ground for the Purpose of erecting said Booths, and tents; As such Worldlings give occasion to, the outrages that ensue, they are not to be admitted to Sacraments, 'till they promise Amendment.

6. In order to prevent the tumults, and other many fatal Consequences of requiring and giving garlands, globes, and other Decorations generally known by the Appellation of *May Balls*, because given by young married People, and carried about on the first of May, I hereby most strictly command each and everyone of you, not to administer sacraments to any Person, or Person of your respective Parishes, who shall hereafter at any Time demand said *May Balls*; or call for Money, Liquor, or any thing else in place of them, till such Transgressors declare their Repentance, and Promise amendment before the Congregation assembled as above. The same is to be observed with Regard to any young married Couple, or either of them, who shall hereafter at any Time give, or procure to be given said *May Balls*, or Money, Liquor, or any other thing in their stead, to any Person, or Persons whatsoever; Moreover the first Child of any Couple so offending, is to be baptised in the Parish

Chapel, and nowhere else: As to the Woman she is not to be churched till thirty days shall elapse after her delivery. When called upon in future to administer the sacrament of Matrimony, you are to inform the Parties, and others present of the above and require their solemn promise of punctually complying therewith.

7. You are to publish this Letter from your respective altars on the three Sundays immediately following the Receipt thereof; and on the last Sunday, of the next, and every succeeding Month of April.

Finally, I require you to observe the above Instruction and Regulations under Pain of Suspension from all priestly functions. That the Almighty may enable us to contribute towards the happiness of each other, and all Mankind, in this World, and in the Next, is the constant wish, and fervent prayer of

Revd Sirs.

Kilkenny Your most devoted Servant in Christ

Dec 12 1782

John Troy

However, even the episcopal strictures did not completely halt the custom of May Balls. Over a quarter of a century later Thomas Crofton Crocker, in his *Fairy Legends of the South of Ireland*, described May Day revels in his native Cork when the village girls presented the youths with “a holly bush, in which are hung several new hurling balls”. A few years later the Callan diarist Humphrey O’Sullivan, on the 30th April 1828 noted “. . . I hear the young boys had two golden May Balls in the fields to-day. They got them from two newly married couples last Shrovetide. They have a May-bush on top of a stick or long pole, with the golden ball in the middle of it, and they dance around it with the young girls. There hasn’t been a May Ball in Callan since 1782, when Sean na Sal killed Butler”. On the 3rd May the following year O’Sullivan recorded in his diary “. . . Two May Balls were taken up (that is a

May-bush covered with silk, ribbons, flowers etc., and a ball hanging down in the middle of it, also covered with ornaments), one from the Gronta family in Curalonga, and one from the Breathnach's on the Fair Green. The young men played hurling with one of them. The golden apple that Paris took among the Goddesses did less harm than some of these May Balls do. Before this a May Ball hadn't been taken up since a man was killed taking a May Ball from the newly married minister, Dr. Lampart, at Callan Cross fifty years ago".

Sources:

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