

Mayo Heritage

Newsletter

North Mayo Heritage Centre

Vol. VI Issue 10

9th March 2025



YouTube

Who remembers
**THE PARISH
MISSION?**



Cover image: A typical stall at a parish mission,
Image from Swords, L. 204. A Dominant Church. The Diocese of Achonry 1818-1960.

Are you interested in

TRACING YOUR MAYO ROOTS?

If you are interested in professional help to research your family History or are curious about your ancestry, why not contact us?



The
North Mayo
Heritage
Centre



Riailtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

This project is supported by the Department of Rural and Community Development and Pobal through the Community Services Programme

The Parish Mission

The parish mission was a central, annual event in the life of a 20th century Irish village.

The Jesuit order were the first to perform missions, in the 1600s, as part of the Counter Reformation against the advance of Protestantism.

Liam Swords records Fr. Corcoran, a Jesuit, holding a short mission in Banada, Co. Sligo in 1673.¹ In the second half of the 19th century, the Catholic Church in Ireland embarked on a devotional revolution.² The legacy of the Penal Laws were dying away, and the old ways, of priests trained in the Irish Colleges on the continent, of a folk based religion, were swept away by Maynooth trained clergy determined to stamp their control on how people manifested their faith.

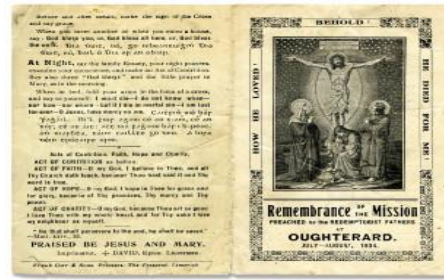
Integral to this was the infamous parish missions. These were week-long visits to a parish by a group of outside priests, usually from an Order. Every night, confessions and devotions would be held in the local church. Outside, religious goods stalls would ply their wares on the parishioners.

The evening concluded with a sermon, often designed to scare the souls of the faithful. Among the most prominent orders to give such missions were the Capuchins, who were focussed on abstinence.

The Irish Bishops had tasked the order with making 'Ireland sober is Ireland free' a reality. Their missions involved getting people to 'take the pledge for the duration', that is, to abstain from alcohol for the 12 months until the next mission came to town.

The religious order most associated with parish missions were the Redemptorists, who were, to put it mildly, noted preachers. Their sermons were the stuff of legend, noted for fire and brimstone. One Redemptorist recalled that 'the Irish loved strong sermons that filled them with the holy fear of God'.³

Attendance at the parish mission, in a society which took religion, and public acts of faith, very seriously, was compulsory, as far as the clergy were concerned anyway. As John Duggan wrote in his monologue on the subject, 'to miss the parish mission was the lowest of the low'. But rural Ireland was nothing without its renegades, as the Aran Island born writer Brendán O hEithir recounted in his wonderful memoir 'Over the Bar'. As a ten year old, Brendán was serving on the altar for a parish mission on Inis Mór in 1940. One of his tasks was 'to ring the bell for the sinners of the parish who were not attending the mission'.



Redemptorist Fathers Mission leaflet. Oughterard 1934

(Image: Oughterardheritage.org)

This group numbered two people; the local doctor and Séimín O Cualáin. The doctor held out for three nights, and when he conceded defeat, O hEithir remembered 'see[ing] him walking slowly down the back road to the church, wearing the good suit he only wore on a rare holiday to the mainland. It saddened me, for he did not really want to go, and this proved that he was not really independent, despite his wealth'.

Séimín O Cualáin had held out for one night only, but without a fight. After missing the opening night, one Redemptorist made the mistake of calling on Séimín to remind him of his duties to his faith. He was chased away by a pitchfork wielding Séimín, who according to O hEithir's memory, 'had been on a tear, and was in no mood to discuss his absence from the mission'.

When he did give in, Séimín approached the church on the second evening, and passing the men sitting on the wall smoking and waiting for the summoning of the bell, raised his hands over his head and said 'well, sure even King Leopold of the Belgians had to surrender honourably in the face of superior forces'.⁴

References:

- ¹ Swords, L. 204. *A Dominant Church. The Diocese of Achonry 1818-1960*. The Columba Press, Dublin. p.378-9
- ² Larkin, E. 1972. 'The Devotional Revolution in Ireland, 1850-75'. *American Historical Review*, vol.77, no.3
- ³ Sharpe, J. 1989. *Reapers of the Harvest: The Redemptorists in Great Britain and Ireland, 1843-1898*. Veritas. p.162
- ⁴ O hEithir, B. 1984. *Over the Bar. A personal Relationship with the GAA*. Ward River Press, Dublin.

Below: Carracastle Temperance Branch c.1900 (Image: A Dominant Church, Liam Swords)

