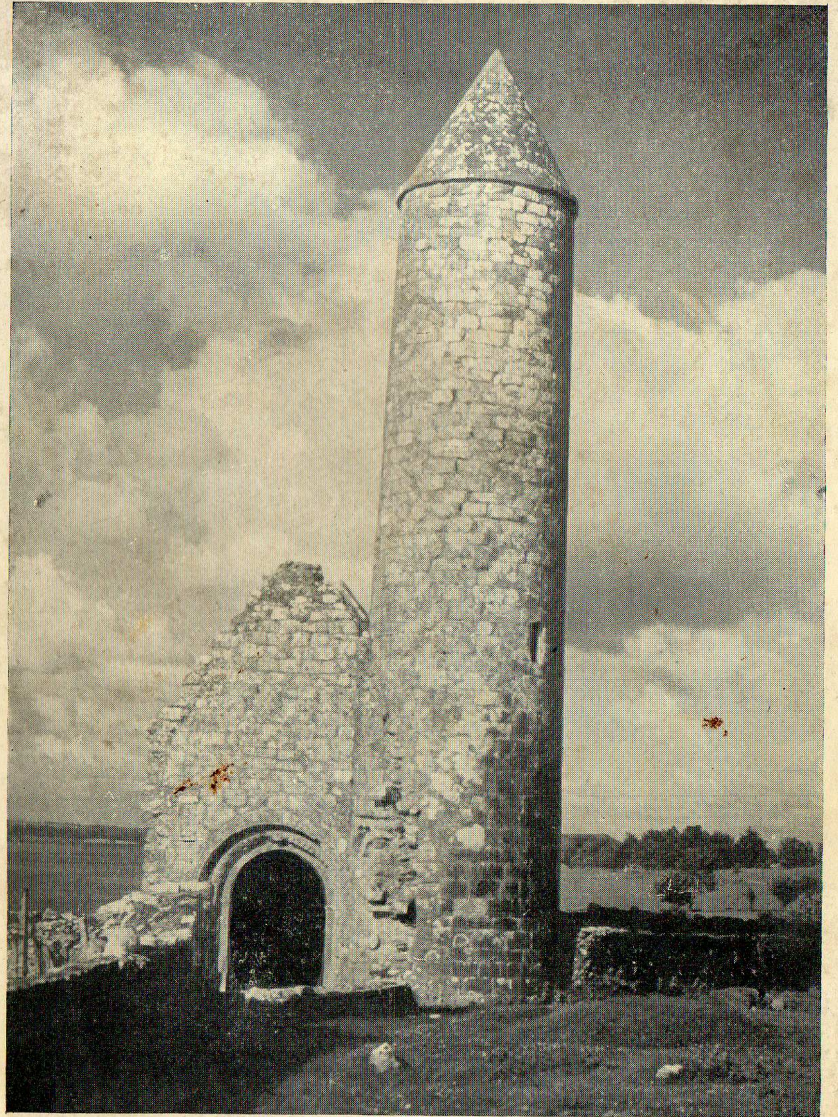


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## THE INTEGRAL IRISH TRADITION

DONNCHADH Ó FLOINN

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# THE INTEGRAL IRISH TRADITION

by

DONNCHADH Ó FLOINN, M.A.,  
*Professor of Modern Irish, St. Patrick's College, Maynooth.*

*The Cover Picture is of a ruined  
chancel arch and round tower at  
Clonmacnois.*

*Third Impression*

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# THE INTEGRAL IRISH TRADITION

DONNCHADH Ó FLOINN

**T**HERE are two prefacing facts that I beg you to remember while I am speaking. The first is that *during the last sixty years, Ireland has undergone a very remarkable revival.*

Our people do not yet appreciate what a key-figure in our history Dr. Douglas Hyde was. At a time of deep depression, it was he alone who saw that Ireland's most urgent need was not material but psychical. Hyde's psychiatry for the nation was to get Ireland to return to her own mind, to know herself as she had been, and to be herself again.

Now in this Hyde was a *ceann-ródaí*. Our leaders had always been telling us to look to the future with hope. Hyde was the first to tell us that there was no hope for us unless we looked backward.

Do not associate Hyde's name only with the language revival. The revolution that Hyde caused among Irishmen was mental. He saw that the language was a symbol of that revolution and that there could be no sincere revival without it. But the de-Anglicisation of Ireland meant for him that every compartment of the Irishman's mind and life had to be entered and remodelled and refurnished. And, in time, every compartment was in fact remodelled and refurnished—except one, as we shall see.

It must seem like an exaggeration, until one tries to think of individual facts that would overthrow it, that everything that has been done in Ireland for sixty years that had a smatch of honour in it came from Hyde's mental revolution, which was a mental restoration. The language revival; whatever was fresh in literature, whether in Irish or English; art; industry; social fashion and pastimes; most vitally of all, politics: the Hyde movement wrought a revival in all the chief departments of the natural life of the 20th-century Irishman.

The second prefacing fact is this: *Hyde's revival, so potent in every other sphere, hardly entered at all into the sphere of the Faith.* It is this obvious, and extraordinary, fact that has made me write this paper. I want you to see and to admit that the fact was extraordinary. Here, on the one hand, was the

<sup>1</sup>A lecture delivered to various student societies, 1953-4.

Hyde formula—"Glance backward"—proving so potent in twenty ways. There, on the other hand, was the 19th-century Irish Church, now sixty years unmanacled, whom it surely behoved to recall forthwith how she had acted when she was free, and yet none of her clergy had the vision of trying to revive popular interest in her past, of getting her to use the thousand details of her old behaviour and temper to inspire and direct her in her resumed way. She had grown used to obscurity. She had forgotten how she used to comport herself in her ancient choirs; how to build with her native taste; how to fashion beautiful tools for divine worship; how to compose hymns for her children to sing aloud. So, since she had to perform her worship publicly once more, she either allowed her life in the catacombs to adjust itself as best it might to conditions above ground, or she made common cause with her sister church in England, and, being content to be an English-speaking church from now on, she accepted the tutelage of the younger sister, learning from her how to build, and pray, and preach, and sing Father Faber's *Faith of our Fathers*.

I am not digressing when I suggest that we ought not to be angry when we hear, as we did recently, an unflattering description, from the Catholic side, of the peculiarly Irish quality of Catholicism in the English-speaking world. Communities abroad that show Irish missionary influence have been described as priest-dominated, liturgy-resisting, very largely unintellectual, not characterised by any very definite or distinctive ideas on church-building or sacred art. Let us not be angry: what is being described here is not Irish Catholicism *sine addito* but Irish post-emancipation Catholicism: the qualities enumerated are really only the privations of those virtues which would be found in a Church that had enjoyed long freedom. Let us realise and acknowledge that the Church in the English-speaking world was built by the penal-age Catholicism of Ireland. If we have so benefited the world by our deficiencies—

But anyway, the Irish Church blinked and stumbled along into the full light of freedom, unaware that it was walking ungainly as if it had gyves on; that it was, for instance, unimaginatively imitative in its building; that it had no art at all; nor any great interest in Catholic intellectual life. Even today, many of us speak complacently about the dark

night of persecution; we repute to ourselves as virtues the disabilities of our long repression; and, never glancing backward, we are content to behave, and to be lectured to, as if we were a new christianity.

I humbly pray the Immaculate Queen of Ireland that I may be the herald of a vocation to some of you, young Irish Catholics, to repair this century-old oversight by making the Irish Church today enter into conscious communion with the Irish Church of old, so that the world might profit still more by our witness.

\* \* \*

Once you know my purpose, you will know how I must set about it: I must give you a brief, and therefore a broad and distant, view of the early Irish Church.

Any country that has been, like Ireland, the scene of long and civilised living, is of an extent many times its own area. Forgive me for illustrating anything so obvious. Maynooth, where I come from, is now 158 years of age. I have just now looked up the Four Masters index for Clonmacnois. The first annal referred to is 558: that will be thirteen years after its foundation by Ciaran mac an tsaoir. Clonmacnois survived seven Maynooth lifetimes. When it was about three times as old as Maynooth is now, the Cross of the Scriptures, about which I hope you know, was erected to the memory of the King, Flann Sinna. Another Maynooth lifetime passed, and it was producing another work which still survives, and about which you know something, I hope—the Book of the Dun Cow. When the Normans landed, the monastery was beginning its seventh century: as if Maynooth should witness what strange invasion in the 25th century. After another Maynooth lifetime, Bruce was landing in Carrickfergus. It was in its tenth century when the Gothic doorway of the cathedral there was erected by Dean Odo. And it had passed its thousand years when Henry VIII suppressed it. Oxford will not be as old as Clonmacnois for another hundred years. From the hundreds of references to it in the annals you will see how largely it bulked in the life of Ireland:

Fifty kings—'tis no small portion—  
have come to thee, O cemetery.

Clonmacnois is just one name. Here are others, each one of which, for anyone that knows something of our past, has

mellow and holy associations : Ardmore, Emly, Seir, Armagh, Kildare, Inniscattery, Monasterboice, Aran, Clonard, Inisceltra, Terryglass, Clonenagh, Devenish, Merville, Lorrha, Achaboe, Bangor, Clonfert, Drumsnat, Ardstraw, Fenagh, Cork, Glendalough, Killaloe, Durrow, Derry, Kells and the forty churches of St. Columcille, Ferns, Taghmon, Leighlin, Lismore, Timahoe, Kilmaeduagh, Killala, Brigown, Fore, Roscrea, Balla, St. Mullins, Clonbroney, Tallaght. Kenney's *Sources*, the order of which I am following, names another score in the heroic age. And I say nothing of the other foundations that he has given, as far as the year 1200, where he stops, nor of the great new burgeoning of religion that began with St. Malachy and included the houses of the continental orders, of which upwards of 200 have been named in the school history compiled by Father John Ryan, S.J. Nor am I going to say anything about Irish missionary enterprise. I am talking only about the astonishing prosperity of religion at home ; concerning which it is not too much to say that Our Lord's work, which was the sanctification of men, can hardly ever in history have been pursued with such thoroughness or general zeal as in our country. The title "Island of Saints" is often used cynically now ; but for anyone who studies the period we speak of, it is hard to find a better name to describe it.

Here is a passage from a book which it would be shameful for an Irishman not to know about : it is from the preface of John Colgan's *Acta Sanctorum Hiberniae*, where he deals with the homonymous saints of Ireland. Now make all allowances and grant all discounts : the less rigid process of popular canonisation ; a fantastic hagiography ; the native love of working things into a system : still the least that we can conclude from the following passage is something very startling indeed :

I pass over [says John Colgan] very many homonymous saints whose names occur in smaller number-groups than the following ; but in our calendars and martyrologies we find that there were 10 saints named Gobban, 11 Lasrian, 12 Brigid and 12 Coeman, and the same number named Diucoll and Maedhog and Otteran ; 13 were named Coman and 13 Dimman, 14 Brendan and as many Mochuma, Finnan and Ronan ; Conall, Cormac, Diarmaid and Lughaidh—15 of each name ; 16 were named Mochua,

17 Lassair and as many Saran ; 18 Ernin, 18 Failbhe, 19 Cummin and the same number Foillan and Sillan ; 20 Kieran and 20 Ultan ; 22 Killen or Killian ; 23 Aedh ; 24 Columba or Columban ; 25 Senan ; 27 Fintan ; 28 Aidan ; 30 Cronan ; and—most surprising of all—of those named Colman there were about one hundred and twenty. All of these, though having the same names, since they have different feast-days or belong to different places, or are of different parentage, or for some other reason, can be shown to be distinct persons.

Now, unless we are prepared to say, against the verdict of scholarship, that the martyrologies used by Colgan were very untrustworthy indeed, the least we can conclude from that passage is that sanctity was held in very high regard in the Ireland of the 8th and 9th century. And that it was sanctity of the canonisable kind you can prove from the monuments of it that survive—the austere remains of Gallarus and Skellig and Mac Dara's island—as well as from the writings that record it, some of which I shall quote. You can prove it, too, by noting how our island sanctity was received and revered on the continent as when St. Bernard kissed St. Malachy as a fellow-pupil in the school of Christ.

Since I am trying to give you a three-dimensional but small-scale impression of the old Irish Church which we have so shamefully forgotten, I ought to say that one gets this feeling of three dimensions very strongly from reading any of those works I have alluded to : the *Annals of the Four Masters*, the *Acta Sanctorum*, the *Martyrology of Oengus*. Few of us, to be sure, could get much out of the *Annals* without the help of O'Donovan's notes ; but what a large and complex and colourful world these notes tell us about ! Or read the glosses in the *Martyrology of Oengus* : it is perhaps the best introduction you could get to that lovable, colourful, holy—but very human—Christian Ireland I am trying to describe.

But before I make a small assay of a few of those documents that have, *quasi per ignem*, survived, it may help if I give you my own conclusions beforehand on what were the primary intellectual and spiritual attitudes in our ancient church : you will be able to recognise them as they occur in the few extracts that follow ; and I shall be disappointed if you are

not disturbed to notice how completely these attitudes have disappeared from Irish Catholicity as we know it :

(1) The Irish Church had a great articulate reverence for the sources of revelation, for Sacred Scripture and Tradition. It is true that we never produced a historian or exegete whose works are part of the Catholic bibliotheca ; but the Irish Church, following St. Patrick's example, was steeped in scripture and also in the lore and learning of the Church.

(2) The Irish Church had a deep sense of communion with the Body of Christ at prayer : I mean that it had a congregational quality of worship. Yet I am not using the word *liturgical* to describe it, because that might be taken as meaning that it had developed forms of worship that were precise and concise and scrupulous in adhering to received forms.

(3) The Irish Church had a deep sense of its own continuity, a great reverence for its earlier manifestations of grace.

The following extract from the Stowe—rather, the Tallaght—Missal from the 8th–9th century gives most striking proof of the way in which our early Catholics held in their minds during Mass the consciousness of all the members of the Body of Christ.<sup>2</sup> The symbolism recalls the bidding-prayers in our Good-Friday service :

The Host upon the paten, that is the Body of Christ upon the tree of the Cross. . . . And it is in the form of a cross all the [particles] are arranged upon the paten. . . . The middle part to the celebrant of the Mass ; the upper part of the shaft to bishops ; the left part of the cross-piece to priests ; the right part to inferior grades of the clergy ; the lower part of the shaft to anchorites ; the upper left segment to clerical students ; the upper right to innocent children ; the lower left to penitents ; the lower right to married folk and people who have not gone to [communion] before.

In the Leabhar Breac, the chalice, the wine, the drops of water, are all taken as symbolising the Church and the body of the faithful :

[The chalice is] the figure of the Church. . . . [The priest]

<sup>2</sup>It ought to be explained that the Irish rubric required that the large Host of the Mass be broken into sixty-five parts. See "Quern Stone with engraved Cross" which is exhibit 1046 in the Maynooth Museum, *Supplement* (1954) to the *Souvenir Catalogue*.

puts water first into the chalice. At the first drop the people pray : *Peto te, Pater* ; at the second : *deprecor te, Fili* ; at the third : *obsecro te, Spiritus Sancte*—honouring the Trinity ; and herein is signified the people that have been poured into the Church. . . .

The elevation of the chalice of the Mass and the paten by the hands of the priest, is a figure of the congregating into one fold of the people of heaven and earth : the people of heaven *per mensam*, the people of earth *per calicem*.

Notice how the people took conscious and active part in the Sacrifice. Those old Irish Catholics would indeed have found strange the belief which, in practice at least, obtains in some circles today, that the purpose and only care of the individual Catholic is the salvation of his own soul. That kind of spiritual solipsism is a theory that seems to have been accepted in Ireland only in the middle of the nineteenth century—a kind of Victorian Catholicism. At any rate, you won't find it in the Tallaght Missal in the 9th century, or in the Leabhar Breac in the 14th, or even in poor Patrick Den of Waterford in the early 19th. This is from one of Patrick Den's very popular books of religious instruction :

Q. Have you any other advice to give on how Mass should be profitably heard ?

A. When the priest again turns to the book (after the *Gloria*) you should acquaint God of your own needs and the needs of the Church. . . . When the priest turns towards the people saying *Orate fratres*, you should ask God to accept the Sacrifice unto His own honour and unto the eternal salvation of the people.

And, to bring this congregational quality of Irish faith down to the shrunken Gaelic world of today, Father Diarmuid Ó Laoghaire, S.J. has pointed out to me how the first person plural is the common form for most of the traditional folk-prayers.

Another difference that has developed between modern Irish Catholicism and that of our Gaelic past is that we have grown shy of the scriptures. If you know something of the Irish tradition either in stone or in parchment, you will have noticed how largely Sacred Scripture bulked in it. The Irish Church continued, almost to our own day, to be markedly

Patrician in this matter. Here, from the *Leabhar Breac*, is a general apologia for scriptural knowledge :

One of the noble gifts of the Holy Spirit is the Holy Scriptures, by which all ignorance is enlightened and all worldly afflictions comforted ; by which all spiritual light is kindled and all debility is made strong. For it is through the Holy Scripture that heresy and schism are banished from the Church, and all contentions and divisions reconciled. In it will well-trying counsel and appropriate instruction be found for every degree in the Church. . . .

This is from a 17th century poet :

The Old Testament and the New the Gael has in purity, and all that the inspired Prophet spoke he remembers without a mistake.

From the time that Irish began to be written to the time when there was no-one learned enough even to write it, and longer, the Sacred Scriptures inspired poet and storyteller as well as homilist. Poems were made in it—very long poems, from *Saltair na Rann* in the 10th century to the *Beatha Iosa Criost* in the 17th. Our people versified it, carved it into stone, made the Book of Kells and the Book of Durrow merely to give it a worthy frame. If they had painted pictures, they would have gone to it for their subjects—which suggests a question that has to do with Irish art today.

Take this 9th century version of the Golden Rule :

What thou desirest from each one  
for thyself of every good,  
do thou that to everyone,  
that thou mayest come to the Prince.

Whatever for thyself thou desirest not  
of harm that is evil,  
do not wish to any man  
while thou art in the flesh.

Or this versification of some precepts from the Mount :

Assistance to thy neighbour,  
alms to all that ask thee,

restraint on the fierce heat of anger,  
forgiveness to all that harm thee.

I can only refer to the famous poem of St. Colman, lector of Cork in the 7th century, praying that his school be protected from the fearful plague, the *Buidhe Conaill*. He implores all the Old Testament saints, from Abel to the seven sons in Machabees ; and he concludes with verses which will serve me to introduce the third difference between old Irish Catholicism and ours : a love for those of our race who became heroes of Christ :

Blessing on the patron Patrick  
with the saints of Ireland around him . . .

Blessing on the patron Brigid  
with the virgins of Ireland around her . . .

Blessing on Columcille  
with the saints of Alba yonder . . .

Be we under the safeguard of the King of the  
elements . . .  
May the Holy Spirit rain down on us,  
May Christ deliver us and make us holy !

So, also, in the 13th century, does Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh sing his litany to the saints of the Bible and of the early Church : valiant Lawrence, Clement, joyous Martin, Benedict with his monks, Augustine with his canons ; and then—

I pray Patrick of the Palace of Stars, and the noble  
saints of Eire : Grinne whose love wounds me, Columcille,  
Ciarán,

Arannán, Odhrán, Finnéan, Adamnán, fair Brendan  
and Baoithín and all to whom I make my song,  
Féichín of Cong, Cuimín, Seannach . . . pure Canice,  
Comghall shall be active for me in heaven.

O Suanagh of the prompt psalms, Giolla Aodha the  
bishop, Malachy Ó Mongair . . .

Enda, patron of Aran, making my peace with Mary's  
Son.

But indeed there is no theme so common in Irish religious poetry as the backward glance to the saints of Ireland. The

classic example is the litany of Irish saints with which Seán Ó Conaill concludes his *Dirge*, and which shows how impoverished our piety has become even since the 17th century.

Here is inspiration for a stained-glass of St. Eunan :

Adamnán was twenty-six years abbot in Iona . . . Once he remained alone in contemplation for three days and three nights in his oratory, praying the Creator . . . A few holy people went to the oratory to find out how the priest was, for they thought he had been too long absent. They looked through the keyhole and saw a little child in Adamnán's bosom, shining with brilliant light. Adamnán was fondling and caressing the infant, nor could they look on him for longer because of the divine effulgence . . . Then they realised that it was Jesus who, in infant guise, had feasted Adamnán with delights.

I will conclude with two extracts which are different from all I have given, because the thought in them is certainly foreign, imported, perhaps during the remarkable renaissance of the 15th century ; and the completeness with which these European thoughts have been assimilated and subdued to native forms shows us how we, in our day, can get full benefit from what the rest of the Church can give us only if we have a vigorous life of our own. If we have not that, such importations will only be as good coal piled on a cold hearth.

The poems from which I take these are bardic, edited by Father Lambert McKenna : the first is *God in Sound* :

All active creatures with their clear voices praise the evernew Creator . . . bright eddying rivers, the voice of the little brook, the thunder of the seawaves.

The noise of thunderclouds : the angelstrains of the birds, the whispering trees on the upland, the lowing of the herd, the sound of the forest : thus do the creatures praise their good God.

The music made by every creature ever shaped is meant to praise the excellence of the pure Lord of earth : but man willingly withholds adoration from the Creator.

The second piece is a mystical commonplace :

Like thee, O forgiving Son, may I be martyred in thy martyrdom . . . may I suffer thy Passion with thee.

May I, in thy noble life, sacrifice to thee my life. May I surrender my body in thy Body. May I be poor in thy poverty.

So that I be like Mary in distress, may the seven keen shafts of sorrow for thy death pierce my heart like hers.

The thorns of his head, the spike in his footsoles, the spear in his pap, the nail in his palms—may they wound me, O God, tho' it be not enough to pay for thy blood.

May I bear the cross beside thee, may I drink thy drink of gall ; tho' to drink it were dire poison to me, may I sit with thee at one banquet.

I do not believe that better verses than these on such a theme have been made in Ireland since we took the wrong road after Emancipation.

\* \* \*

I will conclude by tying up a few loose threads.

First of all, whatever you may have thought of those scraps of old Ireland's thought which I have read for you, you must admit that there was a time when Catholic Ireland was not dumb. Why has it been struck dumb since it was unmanacled ? Is it not because our Irish Faith has been living amongst us, for more than a century, as a kind of separated form, wrenched apart from its connatural body, the Irish genius which it inhabited since the Irish nation was first baptised ? When it was embodied in that native genius, it used to utter such *suspiria* as those we have been listening to. If it is once again to exercise its proper influence on men, it is imperative that it be restored to its congenial partner. That is the integral revival I am pleading for. On the other hand, a revival of the Irish genius without the Christian soul that was its entelechy is an operation as futile as the warming of a corpse.

And what about the language revival ? I am not speaking as a revivalist, but as a priest ; and my first interest is to see



Christ's Kingdom come once again in Ireland with greater richness and power of grace than in our Golden Age; and I say that I do not believe that a revival of any sort is possible in Ireland if our people refuse the discipline of effort demanded by the language movement. If we shrink from this discipline, I believe that we shall become more and more enervated and our Christianity more and more torpid and flaccid.

For these reasons I believe that it is bad spiritual economy either to impart instruction in Irish without its age-old religious content; or to impart religious knowledge to Irish children out of the context of the Irish tradition. Imagine an Irish language course that is never graced with a prayer; or an Irish literary course that never mentions the Franciscan writers! On the other hand, imagine telling Irish children about the Mass and never mentioning the Mass-rock!

A few words now to the small class whose professional business it is to study some part of the material which we have been handling: I mean, historians, Irish scholars, archaeologists. To such scholars I appeal, first of all, that when they study the appurtenances of that old and illustrious thing, the early Irish Church, they should do so with humane reverence, because these things are as it were the detritus of a great movement that affected the eternal destiny of generations of our people. I appeal to them, secondly, to cultivate an apostolic outlook on these things. What are remotely called Celtic Studies are not in their entirety removed from the practical Irish life of today and tomorrow. Hidden in them is the seed of Ireland's only possible Second Spring. No facile talk about not using universities for propaganda purposes can exempt a university professor from his responsibilities towards his neighbour; and the enlightened leadership and direction of such experts can do untold benefit to the whole outlook of our people. I have been lamenting the fact that Newman had no successor to the vision which made him engage the services of O Curry.

I suggest, in the next place, that Irish studies should be regarded as part of the professional studies of any young Irish churchman. Is it not time that the separation between Irish churchmen and Irish scholarship should be ended? From the very beginning, it was Irish churchmen who *made* Irish learning: without them it would not have existed. Without them it would have ceased to be in any one of the early centuries. And even afterwards, until the seventeenth century, the most

illustrious names in Irish studies are churchmen's. But since Emancipation, when you have named Father Batt McCarthy and Father Edmond Hogan and Father John McErlean and Father Paul Walsh and Father Larry Murray—among those that are gone—there are very few more that you ought to name.

And now I have said all that I came here to say except the most important thing of all. Surely, it cannot have escaped you that what I have been saying implied the need of reviving a loftier and more enduring thing than any merely human endowment or tradition. It would be, indeed, a great vanity were we to endeavour to restore those things which were the trappings and the accidents of the old Irish world, while neglecting what was its soul and centre. The thing about the old Irish world which it is most needful to revive is its holiness.

“What! would you restore the Island of Saints?”

Happily, it is the only restoration about which there is no uncertainty whatsoever, if only the young men and women of Ireland can be brought to believe in their destiny.

And to tell them what their destiny is, is the most urgent work of apostleship in Ireland today.

DONNCHADH Ó FLOINN

*Coláiste Phádraig, Mánuat.*

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*The dominant ideas of this paper are those of the RÉALT, one of the works of The Legion of Mary. Enquiries to: AN RUNAÍ, AN RÉALT, 159 Rathmines Road, Dublin.*

