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0521530520 - The Vatican, the Bishops and Irish Politics, 1919-39

Dermot Keogh

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

It probably came as no surprise to many that the head of the Roman Catholic Church, Pope John Paul II, should have received such a warm welcome on his visit to Ireland in 1979: the three days, 29 September to 1 October, witnessed scenes of mass enthusiasm unparalleled in the history of the state. Over 1.2 million people attended the papal Mass in the Phoenix Park, Dublin, while over 400,000 were present at the Liturgy of the Word near Drogheda later the same day. At a special youth Mass in Galway, the congregation was over 300,000 and the ceremonies at the Marian shrine of Knock were attended by only a slightly smaller number. There were 40,000 at the old monastic ruins of Clonmacnoise, 60,000 at the national seminary of Maynooth and over 300,000 at Limerick. That, of course, did not include the thousands who assembled at the airports for the Pope's arrival and departure, and the people who thronged the streets of Dublin for the motorcade through the city.

Such figures may be considered small by international standards, but the population of the entire island was only 4.8 million, some 3.3 million of whom lived in the Irish Republic. The papal visit was both an occasion for 'national' celebrations and an opportunity to itemise what constituted Irish identity. The crossed tricolour and papal flags on many houses, the intermingling of the green, white and orange with the yellow and white in streets festooned with bunting and ribbons, was a vivid illustration of the traditional relationship between Irish Catholicism and nationalism. The last occasion the state witnessed such scenes of public fervour was at the Eucharistic Congress in 1932.

This phenomenon can be expressed in another way. The virulence of continental anti-clericalism is quite foreign to recent Irish history. In contrast to the political activities of 'Catholic' southern Europe, their 'anti-clerical' counterparts in the country once referred to as 'the island of saints and scholars' were rather more genteel in their demeanour.

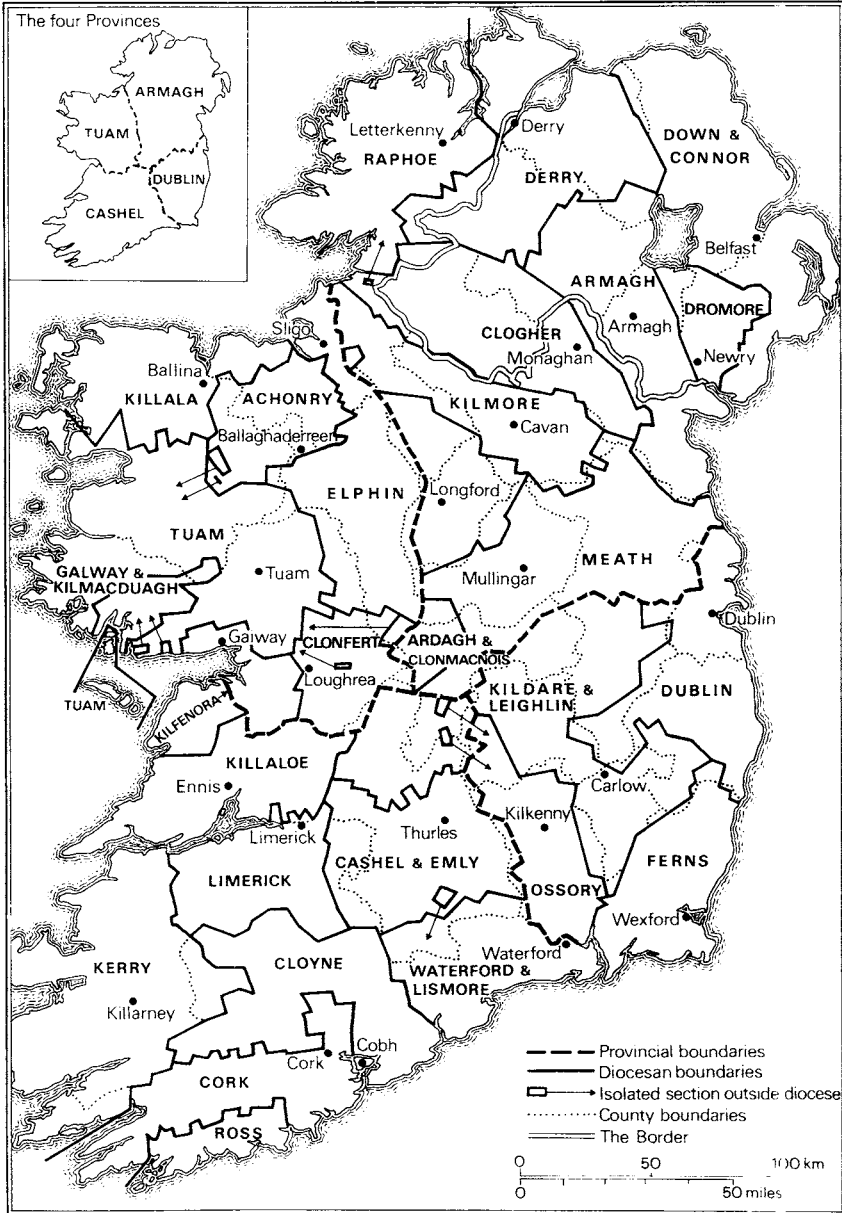


Fig. 1 (Map) Provinces and Dioceses of Ireland (*Irish Catholic Directory*)

Cambridge University Press

0521530520 - The Vatican, the Bishops and Irish Politics, 1919-39

Dermot Keogh

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

towards the Catholic Church.<sup>1</sup> Despite what many of the hierarchy may have thought politically at the time, late nineteenth-century revolutionary Irish nationalism lacked a dominant Jacobinist content: 'the people know no patriotism except hatred for their rulers' was the rather graphic description of the popular content of radical nationalism by the Bishop of Kerry, David Moriarty, in 1868.<sup>2</sup> The same bishop attacked the Fenian leaders following an abortive rising, in 1867, describing them from the pulpit as criminals and swindlers deserving of God's most withering and blighting curse, for whom 'eternity is not long enough, nor hell hot enough'.<sup>3</sup> Pope Pius IX had great sympathy with the Irish bishops in their fight against radical nationalism. He told the special British envoy to the Vatican, Odo Russell, in January 1870, how he pitied the members of local hierarchy who were 'constantly exposed to "bastonato" from the Fenians', who were 'the Garibaldians of England'.<sup>4</sup> While Cardinal Paul Cullen of Dublin never used the same colourful language as Moriarty to describe his feelings, he saw in the growth of Fenianism the cloaked advance of the anti-clerical and anti-religious philosophy which was at the base of continental oath-bound movements. It was only a question of time before the Fenians showed 'their true colours'.<sup>5</sup> Successive generations of Irish bishops believed that – like their continental counterparts – they faced a growing challenge of preventing a cleavage developing between Church and people.

This book deals almost exclusively with the post-1916 period, when the rise of radical nationalism placed growing strain on the fragile relationship between the bishops and revolutionary leaders. It examines the reasons why politicians were often critical of the hierarchy – or opposed to an individual bishop – but rarely anti-clerical. Part of the reason may be that there was a closeness between Catholicism and nationalism which quickly resulted in the defusing of public conflict through immediate effective private representations. The closeness between political and religious institutions – clandestine or otherwise – did not allow misunderstandings to develop and fester. Moreover, there was never political unanimity on the bench of bishops and that was quite widely known in high political circles.

It is important to state what this book is not: it is *not* a study of priest and people in twentieth-century Ireland. The temptation to stray into that area – no matter how attractive – has been avoided. The broader theme, although part of the original doctoral thesis on which this book is based, will be dealt with in another volume. This book is a study in diplomatic and political history. It is a study of Irish ecclesiastical and lay leaders and elites in the period from 1919 to 1939.<sup>6</sup> These dates have not been arbitrarily chosen. The year 1919 marks the setting up of Dail Eireann and the outbreak of violence between 'physical force'

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Dermot Keogh

Excerpt

[More information](#)

nationalists and British government forces. The year 1937 sees the adoption of a new Constitution based on the political philosophy of Eamon de Valera – the only surviving commander of the 1916 Rising. At one level, this book examines the response of leading churchmen to the rise of separatist nationalism and treats of the political divergences, for example, between William Walsh of Dublin and Michael Logue of Armagh. An analysis of the complicating role of the Papacy in Irish politics is viewed through the extensive correspondence of the Rector of the Irish College in Rome, John Hagan, and the reports of British envoys to the Vatican. The Roman dimension in Irish Church–State relations reveals the interaction between secular and ecclesiastical politics. Hagan will be seen as a central figure in both spheres, not adverse to taking a highly unpopular and controversial stance. He is one of many figures who will illustrate the central thesis of this book, that the leadership of the hierarchy was never a political monolith.

The role of the British mission to the Vatican and of the part played by Cardinal Gasquet and other members of the English community in Rome will also be examined. The exaggeration of British influence at the Vatican was a persistent Irish clerico-nationalist tenet of the period. Conversely, there was the tendency to underplay the lobbying power of the Irish in Rome by men like Hagan.

Large sections of this book deal with political manoeuvres in Rome; this serves as a backdrop to evaluate the development in Church–State relations in Ireland throughout the 1920s and 1930s. In the pre-Free State years, there is the constant fear of Vatican intervention in Ireland and the development of episcopal attitudes towards nationalist and state violence. In this period also, there is the forging of friendships between men like de Valera and leading members of the hierarchy, friendships that are strained beyond breaking point with the outbreak of civil war. On the Free State side, friendship between Archbishop Byrne of Dublin and President William Cosgrave is also strained during the Civil War over the policy of executions and government policy towards hunger strikers.

The extensive range of personal papers and ecclesiastical and government archives used in this study will shed new light on the complexities of the shifting relationship between political and ecclesiastical leaders in the years 1922 and 1923. It is to be hoped that the new evidence will help undermine simplistic doctrinaire attitudes concerning one of the most bitter episodes in modern Irish history. The secret role played by some bishops will come as a surprise to many who hold to the popular view that the hierarchy virtually acted as a ‘State Church’.

Fundamental to an understanding of post-independence Church–State relations is a knowledge of the web of friendships built up

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0521530520 - The Vatican, the Bishops and Irish Politics, 1919-39

Dermot Keogh

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

between leading clergymen and prominent politicians during 'the Troubles'. They proved to be of a most enduring nature. John Hagan, the Rector of the Irish College, the Superior General of the Carmelites, Peter Magennis, and Archbishop Daniel Mannix of Melbourne are but three of the most prominent names associated with de Valera and Sean T. O'Kelly. They reflect the radical and comparatively unknown side of Irish Catholicism. But that system of relationships between de Valera and the clergy extended from the higher echelons to the humble curate, like Fr Tom Power of Clogheen, or the Cistercian monks of Mount Melleray. Such friendships even survived the strains of Civil War. In other words, the Catholic Church reflected the political divisions in Irish society and there was far less indiscriminate hostility to republicans than has hitherto been believed.

It is in this context that three chapters have been devoted to the growth in Church-State relations under Cosgrave and Cumann na nGaedheal. It would be virtually impossible to cover every aspect of Church-State relations in the late 1920s. This book does not attempt that task. There is a pressing need for monographs to be written on a subject such as the Catholic Church and the development of the educational system.<sup>7</sup> Controversies over legislation on divorce, censorship, etc., are sketched in an attempt to paint a broad picture of the emerging political competition between de Valera and Cosgrave.

Hagan's patronage of de Valera is an important new factor in understanding the development of Church-State relations in the late 1920s and 1930s. The Rector's theory that de Valera represented a moderate wing of republicanism may not have had much episcopal support in late 1923. But when de Valera founded Fianna Fail, with the intellectual support of Hagan, his stock rose in episcopal circles. When he entered the Dail in 1927 – again heavily under the influence of Hagan – de Valera was seen to be well on the road to respectability. By the end of the 1920s, Fianna Fail had demonstrated to some leading clergymen that Church interests might be better served by replacing Cosgrave with de Valera. Although Hagan did not live to witness the accuracy of his analysis, the 1937 Constitution demonstrates clearly the orthodoxy of de Valera.

A note of caution. This book deals with the various Vatican institutions involved in the conduct of diplomacy. Western European administrative models do not transfer so readily to the workings of the Papacy. The Cardinal Secretary of State is appointed by the Pope and he automatically resigns on the death of the Pontiff. In this study Pietro Gasparri held that office from 1914 until 1930, when he was succeeded by Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, the future Pius XII. Gasparri, therefore, served two Popes, indicating a major degree of continuity in foreign

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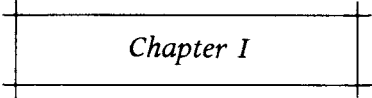
0521530520 - The Vatican, the Bishops and Irish Politics, 1919-39

Dermot Keogh

Excerpt

[More information](#)

policy between Benedict XV and Pius XI. The Secretary of State is not a Foreign Minister in the secular democratic political sense. He is identified with the Pope and works closely with the Secretary for Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs. Moreover, the Secretary of State and his Office are not exclusively responsible for relations with other countries. The Congregation of Propaganda Fide (now named the Sacred Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples) was important in this area, as was the Congregation of the Holy Office, with a former Secretary of State, Cardinal Rafael Merry del Val, acting as secretary for the early part of this study. As will be seen, the relationship between Merry del Val and Gasparri was a complicating factor in a decision-making process which was restricted to a relatively small number of people.



Chapter I

## WILLIAM WALSH AND THE ANGLO-VATICAN TRADITION

O, he'll remember all this when he grows up, said Dante hotly – the language he heard against God and religion and priests in his own home. Let him remember too, cried Mr Casey to her from across the table, the language with which the priests and the priests' pawns broke Parnell's heart and hounded him into his grave. Let him remember that too when he grows up.<sup>1</sup>

James Joyce was nine years of age when 'the priests and the priests' pawns broke Parnell's heart', according to Mr Casey in the famous Christmas dinner scene from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The occasion may have been reminiscent of many dinner parties in 1890–1 where the table was divided between those who supported and those who opposed Parnell and where the Irish were often referred to by one side as a 'priestridden Godforsaken race'. The Irish bishops were 'Lord Leitrim's horsemen', the betrayers of Ireland:

Didn't the bishops of Ireland betray us in the time of the union when bishop Lanigan presented an address of loyalty to the Marquess Cornwallis? Didn't the bishops and priests sell the aspirations of their country in 1829 in return for catholic emancipation? Didn't they denounce the fenian movement from the pulpit and in the confession box? And didn't they dishonour the ashes of Terence Bellew MacManus?

In the conversation at the Joyce household, Mr Casey – who had repeatedly attacked the bishops for betraying Irish nationalism – also protested vigorously to Mrs Riordan – the defender of the Church – that he was no renegade Catholic: 'I am a catholic as my father was and his father before him and his father before him again when we gave up our lives rather than sell our faith.'

But moments later, as the situation deteriorated and tempers became even more frayed, Mr Casey, in response to Mrs Riordan's remark, 'God and religion before everything . . . God and religion before the world', was prepared to shout 'Very well then . . . if it comes to that, no God for

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Ireland . . . No God for Ireland . . . We have too much God in Ireland . . . Away with God . . . Away with God I say.' That outburst encapsulated the dilemma in which many of the most important members of the hierarchy believed the Catholic Church had been placed in 1890–1: how was it possible to keep Mr Casey – who claimed that he was a good Catholic and that his ancestors had been persecuted for the faith – in the Catholic Church? The political situation was so volatile that Mr Casey could *at once* claim loyalty to the Catholic Church *and* shout 'no God for Ireland . . . we have too much God in Ireland.'<sup>2</sup> That was the challenge facing the hierarchy from the early 1890s – a challenge that was felt all the more acutely in a later period of revolutionary nationalism.

One of the Irish Catholic bishops who was most aware of the volatility of the political situation in the early 1890s was William Walsh, the Archbishop of Dublin – referred to as 'Billy with the lip' in the *Portrait* dinner scene. He had the Mr Caseys very much in mind as he shaped his domestic pastoral policy in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Walsh, who was to remain the single most important Roman Catholic ecclesiastical leader in Ireland until shortly before his death in 1921, had written thus to his close friend Tobias Kirby, the Rector of the Irish College in Rome, about his fears for the future of religion in the country:

As I often remarked to Your Grace, the people of Ireland, Catholics as they are, might easily enough be brought into the same state of mind that now so manifestly prevails throughout the people of Italy, France and other so-called 'Catholic' countries. The same influence is at work which has wrought such mischief there. We must be careful now lest we incur any share of the responsibility.<sup>3</sup>

Walsh was a highly intelligent ecclesiastical politician. He was an academic of considerable standing with specialist knowledge in the fields of theology, law, economics and the natural sciences. As President of Maynooth and as Archbishop of Dublin from 1885, he had adopted a series of controversial stances on agrarian and national questions. He never enjoyed the full confidence of the government, while he also had some difficulties with the Vatican. At the height of the Parnell crisis, Walsh had occasion to write to Kirby:

We are still in the midst of our difficulties here – the prospects of an amicable solution being now apparently further off than ever. It would be well if Your Grace would tell any persons who presume to offer you advice about the details of Irish affairs, that they had better keep to matters of which they are capable of forming an opinion. *Above all, let them look at home.* We here mean to strain every nerve to keep our people safe from such a fate as that which has befallen the Catholics of Rome and Italy.<sup>4</sup>



Cambridge University Press

0521530520 - The Vatican, the Bishops and Irish Politics, 1919-39

Dermot Keogh

Excerpt

[More information](#)

*William Walsh and the Anglo-Vatican tradition*

9



1 William Walsh, Archbishop of Dublin 1885–1921

Cambridge University Press

0521530520 - The Vatican, the Bishops and Irish Politics, 1919-39

Dermot Keogh

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Walsh was determined to keep Mr Casey from reaching the point where he would openly and soberly shout in public 'No God for Ireland'. In the late 1880s, Pope Leo XIII had complicated the relationship between the hierarchy and nationalists by issuing a rescript against the Plan of Campaign.<sup>5</sup> Walsh remained both personally very upset by the document and pessimistic about the position in which the bishops had been left by the move:

During the present pontificate, at all events, the old feeling of confidence can never be restored. The people of course submit with respect to the explanation given by the bishops as to the authority of the Holy See in moral questions, but they are now shrewd enough to know that the exercise of that is a matter of discretion; they cannot see why it should have been exercised against them, and in no way against the landlords whose treatment of them is at least equally characterised by injustice and want of charity.<sup>6</sup>

The difficulty of keeping Mr Casey from moving to the point where he would shout 'No God for Ireland' had been made all the more difficult by the intervention of the Vatican. Walsh was convinced that the rescript, which had been issued following the visit of Mgr Persico of the Vatican to Ireland, was inspired by the British government.

Over the following thirty years Walsh, as *de facto* leader of the Irish hierarchy, strove to prevent the emergence in Ireland of a secularised anti-clerical society. Keeping Mr Casey in the Catholic Church meant having to remain close to the political leadership of Irish nationalism. It also meant keeping the Vatican out of Irish politics. There was nothing surer to send Mr Casey into the arms of anti-Catholic revolutionaries and radicals than to *perceive* the Vatican as acting at the behest of the British. That remained a constant in the Archbishop's thinking. He also opposed any idea of sending a permanent papal nuncio to London on the same grounds. The way in which both Walsh and the Catholic hierarchy were treated over the Plan of Campaign by Rome had a considerable bearing on the development of episcopal policy towards the Vatican and Irish politics in the post-1916 period.

There were other factors which contributed to Walsh's generally critical attitude toward the Vatican in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Unlike most international organisations, the Vatican, in his view, was neither efficient nor capable of conducting business in modern European languages other than Italian.<sup>7</sup> Official Church documents sometimes did not reach Ireland until after they had appeared in the British press. That placed the local hierarchy at a considerable disadvantage.<sup>8</sup> While that situation may have improved in the early twentieth century, some prominent members of the hierarchy remained convinced that Rome did not treat the Irish Church with the respect that it deserved.