

The Way of the People

By Brother Leo Canny cfc

Based on original work in Irish by Brother Liam P. Caithnia (Canny) cfc, RIP

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Introduction

Have you ever wondered what it must have been like to grow up in a country where for many decades the Catholic Faith of the majority of the population, mainly Gaelic-speaking, was proscribed, even despised, by a hateful government, totally English-speaking, during a period dominated by the Penal Laws? Such was the case with Blessed Edmund Ignatius Rice (1762-1844), Founder of the Christian Brothers and the Presentation Brothers.

This study of the Catholic people of Ireland centers upon Ireland during these dark days of the persecution of the Irish people under the Penal Laws. The Irish people survived these dark days of persecution mainly through family prayer and the preservation of the Catholic faith by adhering to the Irish language. The research for this very unique study was based solely upon Irish language primary sources, now translated into English for dissemination to a wider audience.

In 1980 Brother G. G. McHugh, Superior General of the Congregation of Christian Brothers, requested the late Brother Liam Philip Canny (died in 2001) to research the foundations of the values, faith beliefs and religious practices of Blessed Edmund Ignatius Rice (1762-1844), the Founder of the Congregations of Christian Brothers and the Presentation Brothers, **using only Irish language sources**. Thus began a unique and long saga of research, including a period as a Loftus Research Fellow at the Christian Brothers’ Iona College in New Rochelle, New York. Brother Canny had a Ph.D. in Irish Social History from University College Dublin. He had a great knowledge and understanding of Irish history and was considered one of the finest of Irish Social Historians. The purpose of this research project was to find and study the primary sources in the **Irish** language of the religious beliefs and practices of the “folk church” --- the way of the folk people during the period between the Battle of Kinsale (1601) and the Great Hunger (1846-1847). These would be the spiritual values and beliefs that would be the basis of Edmund Rice’s life as he established the Christian Brothers and the Presentation Brothers in 1802. Liam Canny trawled through the enormous Irish language manuscript collections of the Royal Irish Academy, of the Irish Franciscans and among many other Irish sources, as well as the holdings of the Irish Folklore Commission in an attempt to arrive at an authoritative answer to the question posed to him. Brother Liam Canny wrote in Irish. His brother, Brother Leo Canny (also a Christian Brother and a scholar in his own right), and others

translated the work to make it available to an English speaking audience. This research project revealed the faith and spiritual practices of the predominantly rural Irish-speaking people who, as a result of the Penal Laws, were deprived, for the most part, of the religious and spiritual leadership of their bishops and priests. The rural Irish had to depend almost entirely on the strength of their families and the Irish language to keep alive their Catholic faith and practices. Brother Liam Canny was acutely aware that the English language sources did not adequately portray the faith, beliefs, practices and faith journey of a rural Irishman such as Edmund Rice. Edmund grew up in a rural, eighteenth century Irish-speaking family on a farm (leased by his father, not owned) outside the Town of Callan, County Kilkenny. To understand Edmund and his life journey, the study of sources in Irish was necessary. This very logical conclusion produced the work, **The Way of the People**, translated into English and published in 2011.

The Penal Laws

In 1169 the English arrived in Ireland but were able to control only a narrow strip of the land called the Pale, which extended along the east coast stretching from Dundalk which is north of Dublin, to Arklow, which is south of Dublin. Cromwell completed the conquest of Ireland in the 1640's. In the 1690's the Irish Parliament passed a series of measures known as the Penal Laws which were designed to destroy the Irish people and their Catholic way of life. Among the Laws that are important and pertinent for this study were that Catholic schoolmasters were forbidden to teach, either in schoolhouses or private homes. This law was designed to deprive Irish Catholics of every means of education. Catholics were also deprived of ownership of their land. Parish priests could remain, but had to be registered with the government. Bishops, Jesuits, order priests and monks were ordered to leave Ireland. If they returned they could be subjected to capital punishment. Obviously as the existing Catholic clergy died there would be no one to replace them. Many outlawed priests and some bishops, however, secretly remained but had to disguise and conceal themselves. Only the principle Penal Codes have been mentioned here. They were designed to maintain Catholics in subjection and to destroy Catholicism. Their overall purpose was to keep Irish Catholics in a degraded social, economic and political state and not to convert them. In the final analysis, however, the Penal Laws failed because through family prayer and the Irish language Catholics were able to sustain the faith and pass it down to their children. These were the conditions of Irish Catholics when Blessed Edmund Ignatius Rice (1762-1844) was born on a farm outside the small town of Callan in County Kilkenny.

Setting the Scene

What did the Irish believe? How did they practice their Catholic faith during the devastating Penal Law days? The author concentrates upon social history rather than political. This will be the faith story of the Irish people, not what remained of the Irish Catholic Church. To make conditions worse the Irish Catholics were deprived of their land which was then given to what was known as the ascendancy class. The impoverished Irish Catholics had to live in miserable condition in bogs, forests, mountains and on nearby islands. This is the land that the ascendancy class did not desire, but thought fit for the filthy Irish Catholics. The story of these so-called filthy Irish Catholics was preserved in songs, stories, poems and prayers, largely committed to memory in the Irish language. Shanachies, Irish story-tellers, preserved these stories and the Irish families passed them down to their descendants. Various authors eventually recorded these stories, mostly in the Irish language. Although succeeding to impoverish and enslave this nation of Irish Catholics, the Penal Laws did not destroy the Irish people, Irish culture nor their religion.

The Mass

In the fifty years after the broken Treaty of Limerick (1691) Church affairs in Ireland deteriorated. The clergy that remained and the impoverished people, however, treasured and clung to the Mass as best they could. Chapels did not exist and Mass houses were few and far between. Most of these structures were in poor condition, on the verge of collapse, which occurred on several occasions during Mass. When a priest was available, Mass might be said secretly in the woods, a hidden glen or in the mountains. Church regulations had to be relaxed during times of active persecution. For example, a papal indult allowed the Sacred Host to be kept in a secret place judged to be fitting, without the usual sanctuary lamp. Mass was also held at times in monasteries and churches that were desecrated during the sixteenth century and on the verge of collapse. When families found it impossible to attend Mass, which condition was not unusual, the recital of the Rosary become customary. Toward the end of the eighteenth century in some areas of Ireland the Penal Laws were more liberally interpreted which resulted in improved conditions for Mass houses and the practice of Catholic worship. The penal Laws remained, however, and could at any time be brutally enforced. The Penal Laws came to an end finally with Irish independence in 1922.

The Sacraments

Since Mass was difficult to attend, the regular reception of the **Eucharist** is rarely mentioned in Irish prayers and religious poetry. There is no doubt that the Irish people were devoted to their religion, but the reception of Holy Communion was not a common practice. Many simply could not attend the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass on a regular basis because of the absence of nearby churches that resulted from the imposition of the Penal Codes. To attend Mass could include a five/six mile walk of two hours to the site of the Mass and then a return of the same length. Fasting since midnight usually meant that no substantial meal could be taken until early in the afternoon. In addition, some clerics in their sermons did not encourage people to the reception of Holy Communion, questioning whether the people in the congregation were worthy. The lack of encouragement on the part of some clergy seems absurd to us today since, in those horrible times the reception of the Holy Eucharist would have been a strengthening factor in the lives of the people. The Church in general, however, did encourage regular attendance at Mass and reception of the Eucharist. Poets, however, attest to the fact that Mass was frequently neglected because of the aforementioned conditions. In addition, attendance at Mass did not guarantee the reception of the Eucharist for the aforementioned reason.

The vast majority of the Irish people who frequently received the Sacraments in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries held **Matrimony** as an important and sacred event in their lives. Europeans, in general, did not have the same regard for marriage.. In Ireland early marriage was quite common. The Church permitted girls to marry at twelve and boys at fourteen years of age. After the wedding ceremony, however, the children would be sent home to live with their parents until a second wedding ceremony was held when the couple reached the age of seventeen or eighteen years. Sometimes these youngsters were forced to marry against their wills. The family might insist upon the wedding because one of the families was in possession of more wealth or property. Sometimes the family forced a young girl to marry an older and more prosperous man. Instances of marrying for the sake of the family did occur, showing that the family was more important than the will and desires of the children. It must be stated, however, that the Catholic Church did not approve of such situations and decrees were issued forbidding such unions of youngsters. In spite of the problems mentioned, the Irish people respected the Sacrament of Matrimony and connubial defections were uncommon.

The Irish people had a great desire for the Sacrament of **Extreme Unction** and for the ministrations of the Church as their lives came to an end. Their prayers for the ministrations of the Church as their lives came to an end became almost a demand. They almost ordered God to attend to them at the time of death.

With oil, anointing and repentance
in a spacious hospitable house,
My death, that is how I am ordering
The High King to arrange it.

They therefore considered that they were entitled to a peaceful and holy death, absolved from sin by an attending clergyman.

May our last meal in this life
Be that of the Sacred Body of the Lord,
Accompanied by anointing and repentance
Our due from the right of the Church,
And a holy death in the state of grace.

It is obvious that the people were not only interested in a Last Anointing, but more importantly the need for repentance and the forgiveness of sins committed. The desire for repentance was similar throughout the districts of Ireland. In Fanaid, County Donegal, we find the following prayer.

The angel of God above me
The oil of Christ on my body
God before me and God with me.

In County Sligo we find a similar prayer.

The voice of the angels above me,
The oil of Christ on my body,
May God be before me and with me.

Without **Baptism** Irish Catholics knew that they could not receive any of the other sacraments. They realized that Baptism was the fundamental prerequisite for all of the other sacraments. With this realization priests had a great zeal and determination to serve the people by administering this Sacrament. Distance, lack of any means of transportation, primitive roads, the need for caution and the Penal Laws, however, made the desires and work of the priest to Baptize difficult, dangerous and in many instances impossible. In addition, a 1619 penal enactment made Catholic baptism by anyone an illegal act. The punishment was a fine or even imprisonment. As a result Baptisms were performed in the home, out of the sight of government agents who would report such events to the authorities. Thus, the importance of Baptism by the laity, secretly in the home, was recognized during the Penal Law days. The clergy were told to exhort parents and midwives that they had the right and duty to baptize infants when a priest was not available. Severe persecution occurred in the years after 1709. Priests lived and moved about very secretly and in constant danger of capture, imprisonment and even execution. The laity were urged to learn and follow the proper rubrics for Baptism. To be in union with the Church the 1813 Synod of Cashel informed the laity of the following:

- 1) That matter and form be exact, without omission or addition of word or action,
- 2) That only in emergency should a lay person administer the Sacrament,
- 3) That the person administering have the mind and intention of the Church (as noted above) and that there be no confusion of mind on the part of the person administering the Sacrament.

The Sacrament of **Confirmation** was highly desired by the Irish People in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. During times of severe persecution it is unlikely that the Bishop had the opportunity to examine the adult candidates before the reception of the sacrament. The Bishop had to assume that adult candidates had a sufficient knowledge of their faith and were thus eligible for Confirmation. By the end of the eighteenth century lay catechists prepared young people for Confirmation. The assumption was that these adults, lay catechists, had a sufficient knowledge of the Catholic faith to instruct and prepare the young for the reception of the Sacrament of Confirmation.

With the shortage of priests and the Penal Laws, frequent reception of the **Sacrament of Penance** was a difficult proposition. A priest ordinarily would try to come to the homes a few times a year to hear the confession of the residents. By the end of the eighteenth century pastors and priests were not pleased with twice a year confession. The Irish people, however, were satisfied and content because they believed that they knew their faith, said their prayers daily, practiced the various virtues, accepted the will of God and were faithful in the practice of these virtues. In general, folk belief maintained that a priest was not necessary for absolving sins. They believed that only God could forgive and that no one would be damned because hell did not exist. Jesus Christ promised that nobody would be eternally damned if he/she believed in Him. Another folk belief was that only such serious sins as the denial of Jesus Christ deserved damnation, if there was such a place as hell. If death was near, it was customary in Ireland and other localities to confess sins to a lay person. The understanding was that, if the ill person survived, he/she would confess to a priest when one became available. This practice was started in medieval times. In the end, however, folk belief maintained that Mary, the Mother of God, would save everyone.

Acts of Piety, Devotion and Popular Prayer

The common folk considered acts of **Charity** towards the poor to be of utmost importance. Assisting the poor and downtrodden became the virtue “par excellence” in the minds and hearts of the people, even though they, themselves, did not have a great deal in the way of material wealth. Helping the poor was held to be more important than prayer and personal fasting. Following the example of Jesus Christ the poor were considered vital parts of the Mystical Body of Christ. Reaching out to the poor gave everyone a chance to help those who were most in need. The common folk believed that where you find the poor, there you will discover Jesus Christ and His Holy Mother. Priests in their homilies insisted that true repentance must include reparation to anyone that you have harmed.

Devotion to the **Blessed Trinity** was vital among the common folk during the Penal Days. A common prayer in Kilbaha, County Clare, demonstrates this devotion and was prayed as follows:

There is but one God – to Him be thanks.
And in Him are three Persons, God the
Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
The Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy
Spirit is God and yet there is but one
God – to Him be thanks.
God the Son became man in the womb
of the Blessed Mother Mary. He chose
to be called Jesus Christ – to Him
be thanks. He died on the Cross to

save you and me and all of us from
the fires of hell.

A common, but shorter prayer, found throughout Ireland reads as follows:

Be ye with me,
O Father who created me,
O Son who redeemed me,
O Holy Spirit who sanctified me.

In 1649 Oliver Cromwell wrote the following note to the British Parliament. “Everything is not right yet in Ireland. You gave me the money, you gave me the guns, but I can tell you that every house in Ireland is a house of prayer, and when I direct my guns at these mad Irish they but raise their hands aloft, holding their beads and they do not surrender.” The Irish folk had a great devotion to **The Rosary and Mary, the Mother of God**. Apart from the Mass the greatest devotion of the Irish was to the Rosary – “Mother Mary’s Crown”. Clearly the Rosary was an established Irish devotion by the close of the sixteenth century. The British authorities clearly knew this and declared it illegal “to be bearers of beads”. They Irish folk would attend Mass on Sundays and Feast Days, whenever they possibly could. The Rosary, however, was said at least every other night in honor of the Mother of God. It was said before and after Mass and sometimes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries during Mass. In County Donegal it was customary to see the people with the beads in their hands on their way to Mass, praying in subdued tones. On the occasion of a wake the Rosary was invariably recited, led by a person known for his or her piety. A large number of the Irish folk were illiterate, but they knew the Rosary and a small number of prayers to recite during Mass and in their homes. At the times when the Mass was forcibly outlawed and priests had to remain in hiding, the Rosary and devotion to Mary, the Mother of God, remained strong and a unifying force to the Irish people. Soon, carrying or wearing the Rosary was declared an unlawful act, with severe penalties. With the support of poets and “shanachies”, however, devotion to the Rosary and Mary remained strong.

Among the folk throughout Ireland there was what could be called **Popular Prayer**. The origin of these popular prayers is unknown, but what is known is that the folk people imprinted on them a Gaelic character and that these prayers reveal to us the soul of the Irish folk people. In the Penal days these prayers had a richness that is not found today. Short ejaculatory prayers were very common. In County Clare, where the livelihood of many depended upon the sea, we read prayers to protect against the elements. Such prayers as: “May God bring you safe to shore again! and “May God and Mary protect us!” were common. One ejaculatory prayer summed up the philosophy of these folks: “Two paths to glory eternal: the love of God and the love of the neighbor.” A blessing upon the souls of the departed was expected when one passed a cemetery. Realizing that one day they also would lie in the grave, the folk people remembered in prayer the departed souls in a short prayer as they passed a cemetery. From the days of their youth the folk people were reminded of the importance of the “Pater and the Creed.” The importance of the “Creed” was understandable as it summed up the articles of faith. In the “Pater” the folk realized that they were interceding with God for themselves and for everyone else. No doubt that the Ave and the Rosary were important, but they did not hold the prominence of the “Pater” and the “Creed.”

The chanting of the psalms was a common part of religious worship. The singing came from the heart and soul of the people. Unlike the present day, singing by the entire congregation during Mass was common and expected. Brother Liam P. Canny believes that the persecution

imposed by the Penal Laws and the decline of the Irish language stifled the soul and silenced the voice of the common folk. Jesus and Mary were always linked together because how could anyone separate a mother from her son.

When they spoke of the Savior and His Mother it was as two relatives, in close daily contact with the people. No disrespect was implied, no undue presumption, only a warm love and affection. Mary and Jesus were almost always spoken of together, together invoked in time of need, for who would wish to separate child from mother? Lord make me a saint and make your Mother happy! From Jesus, Mary received her graces, from Mary He received his beautiful humanity, making Him “one of us”. Jesus was glad to “liberate David”, and David was ever looked upon as a close relation of our race, beyond all the prophets and leaders of the Old Testament who longed for the coming of the Savior.

Saints Patrick, Brigid and Colmille (Columba), no doubt, were greatly revered, but did not receive the love and devotion reserved for Jesus and Mary. Not even God the Father and God the Holy Spirit received such devotion. The Father was asked for mercy and pardon of sins and the Holy Spirit was the source of hope. The great desire of friendship and love, however, were reserved for Jesus and His Mother, Mary.

The folk considered sleep akin to death and before bedtime, special prayers such as the following were often recited:

I stretch myself on this bed
As I shall do in my grave
I confess to you, O God,
I beg your pardon for my sins.
 Guard ye my soul
This night and always
And at the hour of my death.
Amen.

Mary played an important role in these night prayers and was frequently mentioned. The following prayer was common:

O Queen of brightness,
O Queen of purity,
Deliver me from my sins,
Be my sure guide.
Obtain for me true repentance.

In referring to Mary, the Irish folk considered the title of Lady as cold and distant. To them Mary was considered the Mother of the Savior of the human race, their “friendly kinswoman,” their little virgin. Jesus was the young child, the Son of Mary and was considered one of their own.

Sean O’suilleabhain described the Irish attitude toward Jesus and Mary in the following terms.

When they spoke of the Savior and His mother it was as two relatives, in close daily contact with the people. No disrespect was implied, no undue presumption, only a warm love and affection. Mary and Jesus were almost always spoken of together, together invoked in time of need, for who would wish to separate child from mother? Lord make me a saint and make your mother happy! From Jesus, Mary received her graces, from Mary He received his beautiful humanity, making

Him “one of Us”. Jesus was glad to “liberate David”, and David was ever looked upon as a close relation of our race beyond all the prophets and leaders of the Old Testament who longed for the coming of the Savior. Sean O’neachtain could speak as a child of Mary and even be bold enough to reproach her for not answering his prayer (in Irish) – “because I spoke no English, you didn’t need me!”

Love and friendship, however, were reserved for Mary and Her Son, Jesus Christ. Saint Joseph was given a special place as the Guardian of the Holy Family, but was rarely mentioned in the prayers of the people. To the Irish folk, Saint Joseph was the “Old Man.”

Prayer held a special place for the Irish folk during these dark days and carried two obligations. First there was to be daily prayers, especially to Mary and Jesus, and then they were to be passed on to the young as a great spiritual gift and treasure. As darkness came and sleep approached the fears of the of the folk were expressed in such prayers as the following: “I stretch myself on this bed as I shall do in my grave. I confess to you, O god, I beg your pardon for my sins of the tongue, for my evil thoughts, for my sins of the flesh, for all my untruths, for my broken promises to you, O son of God, I commend my soul O Holy Virgin, O Angels of Heaven, Guard ye my soul this night and always and at the hour of death. Amen,” Mary, the Mother of Jesus, played a significant role in these night prayers. Fear and the need for repentance before sleep prompted this special devotion to Mary: “O Queen of brightness, O Queen of purity, Deliver me from my sins. Be my sure guide. Obtain for me true repentance that I may weep in sorrow.”

The prayers of the Irish people had a side effect, an all embracing aspect. to them. An aspect or side effect was that these prayers were meant not only for those reciting them, but for all the people of the world. Father O’Laoghaire expressed it best in the following statement: “These prayers sprang from the heart of a close-knit Christian community, which was suffused by an unusual spirit of charity. It was a people living in extreme poverty but among whom existed a strong sense of co-operation and a thriving custom of “meitheal” whereby neighbor helped neighbor when help was needed. There was pity for the weak and those poorer than ones self. The aged and the orphan were cared for, and a stranger could be sure of a bed for the night. Even the dead were included – were they not just beyond the ditch! Prayer at nightfall reached back seven generations.” On the Aran Islands there was a prayer for departed souls that demonstrates this all inclusive charity: “God’s blessing on our father and mother, our brothers and sisters, on the souls of all our departed,,,if God sees faulty Confession or saying of penance, neglect of Sunday and feastday Mass, may heaven’s forgiveness be given to our souls and the souls of all believers. Amen.”

“This spirit of open heartedness was engendered in the home where the Rosary, various prayers and after meals prayers were regularly said by young and old as long as the native language survived. All over the country the ‘trimmins’ of the Rosary were faithfully said in many homes and the young people could not help but imbibe the spirit that animated them, succinctly expressed in the homely Kerry prayer ‘Amen, O Christ, and let us all into heaven’”

Conclusion

How did Catholicism and the faith of the “common folk” survive during the persecution of the penal laws and the dire poverty of the “common folk? No single reason can be attributed to the survival of the Catholic faith during these terrible times. Some have attributed the survival to a strong and vehement anti-English resistance. The most logical reasons, however, appear to be the presence of a few ardent and brave priests who remained to visit the faithful, the presence of

the popular poets and lay catechists. If one were forced to select the most important reason, it would be lay catechists, mainly the parents, with their insistence on daily prayer, especially the thanksgiving after the evening meal, and the recitation of the Rosary in the evening. Without the strong Catholic faith of parents, Catholicism in Ireland would have been a dead issue by 1850.

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