



Cherwell

Papers

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Editorial Note

This paper by Anne Murphy, SHCJ stimulated animated discussion at the Cherwell Conference. Those who read it months later undoubtedly will wish once again to engage in discussion. Certainly this demythologizing of Newman's expectation of a "second spring" will enable each reader to rethink important issues facing the church and the Society of the Holy Child Jesus today.

The depiction of the Irish immigrant, in the main "un-churched", arriving in England at the time of the famine and settling among the "old Catholics" does, as Anne suggests, bear analogy to the influx of Latin American Catholics into the established North American church in our times. By implication, it raises the issue of diversity throughout the world and within the church. Furthermore, the tension between the laity and the clergy which characterized the church in England at the time of the restoration the hierarchy enhances one's understanding of Cornelia's relationship with bishops and with those laymen from whom she received remarkable support.

Questions of diversity and orthodoxy, culture and authority, status and office, clergy and laity are very much at issue today, some three decades after the surge of optimism born of Vatican II. Anne rightfully points out that the Society of the Holy Child Jesus was founded in similar times and urges our review of the past so to address the future.

Ann M. Durst, SHCJ

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Anne Murphy was born in London, and obtained her BA.(Hons) in History before entering the Society of the Holy Child Jesus (1955). She taught in secondary schools in Killiney, Hastings and Blackpool, and obtained her Masters degree in Theology, before becoming Principal at Mayfield, Sussex (1971-80). After studying in Rome and obtaining her Doctorate in Theology from the Gregorian University, she took up her present post as lecturer in Theology and Church History at Heythrop College, University of London. She has had an opportunity to spend a sabbatical term with SHCJ sisters in Chile (1990), and has contributed articles to The Way, The Month, The Heythrop Journal and The Tablet

Old Catholics, New Converts, Irish Immigrants. A Reassessment of Catholicity in England in the Nineteenth Century.

Anne Murphy, SHCJ

On 13 October 1846, Cornelia Connelly and her three companions arrived in Derby to begin their religious life in the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. They had been invited there by Nicholas Wiseman, coadjutor to Bishop Walsh, Vicar Apostolic of the Central District. Two years later Wiseman was sent to Rome at the request of the English bishops to present the case for the restoration of the English hierarchy. One of his principal arguments was *'that a diocesan episcopate was essential to bring law and order into the Catholic community and to instill a proper spirit of obedience among clergy as well as laity'*.¹ Wiseman moved to London in 1848, and in 1850 when the hierarchy was *'restored'* he became Cardinal Archbishop of the Catholic community in England, assisted by twelve suffragan bishops. It was when they assembled at their first provincial synod at Oscott College in 1852, that Newman preached his famous *'second spring'* sermon so full of euphoria and promise.

But the restoration of the hierarchy did not *'restore'* pre-reformation Catholicism to England as Newman thought, but was a nostalgic Gothic revival, concealing an ultramontanist spirit. It marked a certain hardening of lines and narrowing of sympathies, a degree of clericalisation, centralisation and Romanization which had not been characteristics of the English Mission in penal and post penal times. The shape of English Catholicism from 1850 - 1965 (Vatican II), which we once considered *'normative'*, and on which we based our understand-

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ing of our mission as SHCJ sisters, was relatively short lived, and is now in the process of radical change. Our congregation was but one of many called to help with the expansion of Catholicism and the establishment of a highly institutional Church (schools, hospitals, parishes). Our founding story is bound up with the '*myth of the second spring*', part of the folklore of English Catholicism, which is now being questioned and re-assessed. The '*myth*' can be summarised as under four major points:²

1. The second spring was understood as a last minute miraculous resurrection of English Catholicism facing imminent extinction '*through death, persecution, indifference and apostasy*'.
2. This '*resurrection*' was made possible because of the massive immigration of devout Irish Catholics, and conversions from Protestant England.
3. The reorganised Catholic community '*restored*' good discipline, authority and right belief, which, it was assumed, had not been possible in penal times.
4. This was largely due to the leadership and efforts of a heroic clergy, without whose work the whole venture would not have succeeded.

Each of these assumptions have been questioned and modified in the light of recent scholarship. The revised version should be of considerable interest in recovering aspects of our founding story, and for our search for new forms of mission and identity in the contemporary church.

The Myth of a Declining Community: 'Old' English Catholicism 1770 -1850.

It is no longer possible to assume that by the end of the eighteenth century, Catholicism in England was about to disappear. From the middle of that century it was actually on the increase and beginning to shift from a rural to an urban setting. As early as 1767, 51% of Catholics were no longer in agricultural or domestic based occupations, but had migrated to the new industrial towns in the North and the Midlands. As with the urban population as a whole, Catholics increased in numbers. They were absorbed into urban life and were accepted by the once '*nervously Protestant*' towns, making a significant contribution to civic life and economic enterprises. So the immigrants who first helped to swell Catholic urban congregations were English, not Irish, and they enjoyed a degree of acceptance

and toleration even before the repeal of anti-Catholic legislation (1793).

Eighteenth century English Catholicism, far from being moribund or in decline, was expanding and saw itself as part of society within which it sought to play a responsible role. Catholics in Manchester and Salford, for example, represented the 'complete economic hierarchy' from artisan to factory owner. Those with the means to do so supported local campaigns to build hospitals, fire stations, and soup kitchens. Many were to play a significant part in public life, though still debarred from some offices. The more affluent families sent their children to Manchester Grammar school (there was no Catholic school system) and supported a scheme for Sunday School for the poor of all denominations. In their view Christianity was not just a matter of private devotion but had to do with concern for others, the instruction of the poor, and a duty to 'bear no malice'. There is every evidence to suggest that this 'inclusive' mentality was a common phenomenon and was shared by both the clergy and the laity.

The English Catholic community was one in which the laity took considerable responsibility. In 1778, when the Catholic Committee of leading aristocracy and gentry set about looking into the repeal of the penal laws, they did not consult the clergy, 'the English Roman Catholic gentlemen being quite able to judge and act for themselves in temporal matters'.³ The decline of the influence of the Catholic landed gentry was offset by the increasing influence of urban Catholics. In the towns where new parishes and churches were established with the help of influential laymen, a form of 'congregationalism' flourished, where it was naturally assumed that lay patrons would have some say in the appointment of the clergy and in the running of the parish. St. Patrick's North Soho (London) was founded with the help of the Irish business men in 1792/3; Warwick Street, in South Soho, continued to attract Old English Catholics. Both had a strong tradition of lay influence and concern. But this was to change in the church of 1850s.

If the leading laymen did not consult the clergy in 1778 about the repeal of the penal laws, the bishops did not consult the leading laymen in 1850 about the restoration of the hierarchy. They excluded even John Talbot, sixteenth Earl of Shrewsbury, though he had financed a number of building projects and saved the Midland District from bankruptcy. The shift from a lay controlled to a hierarchical controlled Church occurred somewhere between 1770 - 1850. It was by no means an inevitable shift, and the so called 'second spring' should now be seen as a move into an ecclesiology which had many limitations. The old English community could have responded to new pressures and challenges in ways very different from those planned by Wiseman, but those who thought so were in the minority. The time is now ripe to record what was lost with the 'restoration'

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of the hierarchy in 1850, rather than reiterate the myth of the so called death of Old Catholicism.

**The Myth of English Catholicism Revived by
Irish Immigration and Massive Conversions.**

The Irish immigrants arrived in significant numbers from 1790s onwards; they increased during the 1820s and were to reach tragic proportions during the years of the Great Famine of 1840's. (Cornelia Connelly arrived at this precise time). The Irish immigrants, like the English rural Catholics, sought employment in the industrial areas of Lancashire, the Midlands and South Wales, as well as London. Irish immigration presented the English Catholics with a new pastoral problem: the non-practising Irish Catholic. The penal laws and the absence of a parish structure had resulted in a Latin-American type Catholicism, at least in rural Ireland. Irish men and women were deeply religious, usually anxious to get their children baptised, but did not go to church regularly. In 1806, Rowland Broomhead, Catholic priest in Manchester, said that his ministry involved many who had not regularly practised for 20-40 years. These were mainly, though not exclusively, Irish. The sight of members of the Irish community having a *ceilidh* in the slums of Manchester, while rarely attending Church, was incomprehensible to the English clergy and was a source of friction between them and Irish clergy working in England.

The reasons for this non-practice are many and complex, and more study on the patterns of Irish pastoral practice during penal times is needed. The parochial reorganization of Irish Catholicism was to come later in the nineteenth century under Cardinal Cullen. That the lives of the immigrants were totally disrupted by the pain and hardship of famine, exile and uprooting from the familiar conditions cannot be overestimated. They retained their identity through festivals, rites of passage (birth, marriage, wakes), and by remaining close to folk religion and the rhythm of the seasons of the year. They were not indifferent to religion, but rather deeply and fiercely pious. But the facts are there: in the nineteenth century, Irish immigrants had a high baptism rate and a low rate of church practice. So, as has been said most succinctly, it was not '*conversions from Protestantism to Catholicism among the English, but full non-practice to practice among the Irish*' that constituted the pastoral challenge of the '*second Spring*'.⁴ In terms of sheer numbers it was a very great challenge. No wonder that the clergy appealed for more priests and religious, and undertook a vast programme of supplying schools, churches and catechetical instruction to meet the needs.

The quiet growth of English Catholicism, the irruption of poor Irish immigrants whose pastoral needs were little understood, and a more cautious assessment of the so-called '*tide of converts*' who

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sought admission to the Catholic community have considerably modified the *'myth of the second spring'*. The growth of the Oxford movement (1833-45) and the conversion of Newman (1846) had been monitored carefully by Wiseman, who hoped for, *'and daily expected, many more conversions to follow'*. Though there were significant converts, who attracted much publicity, it was never a tidal wave. The euphoria engendered by the granting of Catholic emancipation (1829) and the promise of converts is understandable, but then so too was the anti-Catholic backlash. It was Wiseman's hope that Catholics would cease to be an unimportant non-conformist sect and become a full denomination rivaling, or even outstripping, the established Church of England. But hope quickly turned into evangelism. Prayers for the *'conversion of England'* to Roman Catholicism replaced the gentler, inclusive litany of intercession for England (or on behalf of our country) which had been in earlier versions of the *Garden of the Soul*. The desire to *'win back'* souls to Catholicism naturally alarmed even moderate Protestant neighbours.

Between 1790-1850 circumstances led the new leaders of the Catholic community to become less tolerant and more triumphalistic. This was inimical to many of the older Catholics, laity and clergy. Catholic evangelical piety was to be matched by the great Methodist revival and its concern for, and appeal to, the working, industrial classes. There is evidence that some Irish immigrants in South Wales were *'won over'* to Methodism. This bred a sense of rivalry, mistrust, and competing *'evangelism'* between Christian communities, which replaced the older tolerance and mutual respect. Each community tended to define itself in opposition to the *'other'*, the *'enemy'*. The case of Connelly versus Connelly was to erupt in this newer climate.

The Myth of the Restoration of a *'Truly'* Catholic Church.

Cornelia's difficulties with Wiseman and other bishops and clerics may be seen in the context of a recent assessment. *'The appearance in nineteenth century England of an aggressive and exclusive Roman Catholic clergy with an appetite for contentious dogma, authoritarian rubric, clerical omnicompetence and often tasteless obsequiousness towards the papacy, has been attributed to a variety of causes'*.⁵ The author goes on to suggest that a single unifying factor was the rise of the clergy as a profession *'where they not only enjoyed a sense of solidarity but also reclaimed their inheritance from laymen who had treated them like servants.'* One can readily see that the role of a chaplain in a great house like Alton Towers was very different from that of a parish priest in a new industrial town.

But early in the century the urban priest worked in collaboration with the laity rather than exercising *'authority over'* them. Tolerant ecumenical-minded pastors, like Rowland Broomhead in

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Manchester, detested theological rivalry and worked for 'good neighbourliness' between Christians. He was to be succeeded by a man like the Rev. Joseph Curr, a skilled polemicist who 'initiated something of a Jihad against all things non-Catholic'.⁶ Curr and his like held that Protestants were the descendents of those who had committed heresy and so were a danger to the Catholic flock. The so-called endangered and beleaguered Catholic was to be taken out of society and placed in 'the protective custody of anything from a Catholic school to a Catholic Literary Society'.⁷ It is sad to reflect that Cornelia's educational enterprise was unwittingly caught up in this strategy. 'The service of the sisters in schools and other institutions was seen from the outset as vital to the maintenance of a separate Catholic identity within society'.⁸

This new separate Catholic body was to be more tightly controlled by a restored hierarchy with bishops very firmly at the head. They even regarded the clergy as in need of firmer discipline. The shift from the more flexible leadership of the English Mission under Bishop Challenor (d. 1781) to the restored hierarchy under Wiseman (1850) was very marked both in organization and spirit. A new form of confessionalism was born, which saw the Roman Catholic Church as the sole deposit of faith and as a clerical enterprise in which the 'simple faithful' had a largely passive role.

The Myth: Restoration Through the Efforts of a Heroic Leadership.

Nineteenth century Catholicism has usually been presented as largely the work of a small band of national clerical leaders: Wiseman, Manning, or Faber. This version of 'history from above' has been challenged in several ways, for we can no longer view the life of any Christian community as a backdrop to episcopal or clerical policies. But the myth of heroic leadership has largely overlooked the fact that between 1820 -1850, many Catholic priests/missionaries exhibited real heroism, working in the new industrial slums, meeting premature deaths from typhus and other diseases. Some, like Henry Gillow from Lancashire, or Ignatius Spencer from Althorp, came from the old landed gentry; their upbringing did not prepare them for the conditions of their mission. Most made their 'option for the poor' for pastoral rather than social reasons: the ideal of the good shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep was very strong. But they lived in the slums as authentic members of the community, answering the call of the sick, carrying medicine into disease ridden hovels, able to enter no-go areas without fear of molestation. Many of them had the character and 'clout' to sort out financial problems, or act a mediator in gang feuds. The socio-pastoral work of these priests (and in similar ways of the sisters) has been almost unnoticed and unsung. The pastoral experience and strategy of nineteenth century English Catholicism in the urban slums, was, for its time and

place, a deliberate option for the poor which deserves our greater attention. The myth of '*heroic leadership*' is not misplaced when applied to many of the local clergy, whose lives still remain largely unknown.

The Invisibility of the Contribution made by Women Religious in the Nineteenth Century

But the really unknown territory is the role women religious played in nineteenth century Catholicism.⁹ It is nothing short of a miracle that they were there at all, for it is only with the benefit of hindsight that we assume the willingness of thousands of Irish and English women to join active religious congregations. The English imagination was deeply suspicious of the secretiveness of convents, and the ideology of home and hearth was very strong. Nearly two hundred years had passed since Mary Ward's attempt to establish an unenclosed form of religious life in England. Dubbed the '*galloping girls*', her experiment had to await a later age to be fully appreciated. Meanwhile almost the only option open to women seeking religious life was abroad, in existing orders or in convents founded for English women (for example in Bruges, Cambrai). These were usually contemplative, enclosed and '*aristocratic*'. The requirement of a dowry restricted admission to the daughters of wealthy families; those without a dowry were accepted as lay-sisters, but had often been '*in service*' in the houses of the landed gentry.

Formal religious life for women received a shot in the arm because of communities fleeing from the consequences of the French Revolution. But the apostolic religious life which developed after Catholic emancipation (1829) and in response to new pastoral needs (1840s onwards) was very different. It was to be unenclosed and to appeal to all classes. It provided English Catholicism with thousands of dedicated pastoral workers and was astoundingly popular. In about 1773, there were perhaps twenty nuns in England living in two illegal convents.¹⁰ By 1873, it is estimated that some 3,000 nuns lived in 235 convents in England and Wales; by 1900, it had risen to between 8,000 -10,000 sisters in some 610 convents. Yet the contribution they made both to church and society has largely gone unrecorded and unappreciated. This was partly self-chosen, for the ideal of a hidden and humble life of service was widespread. So '*invisibility was a goal in its own right and to have achieved it was a sign of success*'.¹¹

But the surge of interest in Women's History has sought to make visible this work, sometimes in unexpected areas. For example, a new and distinctively '*Catholic Space*' and environment was created in England between 1840 and 1900, in the building of chapels, churches and institutions.¹² By concentrating on the construction of buildings rather than the '*content of the interiors*', historians have

overlooked the involvement of women (and in particular of sisters) in the interior decoration and upkeep of these 'spaces'. Almost all the making of vestments, altar linen, altar frontals etc., was the work of needlewomen. Often they were involved in the choice of statues, stations of the cross, and other church furnishings. The everyday work of sewing, mending, cleaning and laundering also fell to their lot. This was an enormous contribution to ecclesiastical life and incidentally a 'public space' where women were allowed to operate. Cornelia not only restored the Mayfield Chapel through her fundraising efforts, she was also responsible for its furnishing and decoration. 'She was a keen practitioner as well as patron of Church art, and completed oil paintings of Our Lady of Sorrows and of St. Ignatius'.¹³ We may not like the taste of Victorian needlewomen, nor to be reminded of the hours of toil which went into the needlework display for 'Reverend Mother's feast,' but there is no doubt that vestments, embroidery and even carpets were made in 'free time' and often given away to needy parishes. The continued upkeep and maintenance of many churches were aspects of Catholic public life in which women were highly active.

The Social Origins of Early Members of the Society.

Women's history has also directed attention to some unexpected areas such as class, ethnicity, gender roles and motivation among the sisters in nineteenth century England. We SHCJ, in common with most other religious congregations, have few details about the social origins of our early members. The SHCJ, together with the IBVM'S, the Faithful companions of Jesus and The Society of the Sacred Heart, adopted (or were forced to adopt) a two-status membership of choir nun and lay sister. The proportion was roughly two to one in favour of the choir sisters, largely because they could bring a dowry or salary to the impoverished congregation, usually expanding beyond its resources. Contemporary congregations who remained 'undivided' were the Cross and Passion sisters, the Poor Servants of the Mother of God, and the Franciscan Missionaries of St. Joseph. The old divisions were roughly between ladies and women; today the interest has definitely shifted to the women. It would be a good area of research to discover where our nineteenth century lay sisters came from and what attracted them to the Society; Sister Aloysia Walker, Cornelia's first companion, was in domestic service at Spetchley Park. How many, if any, of the two hundred or so factory girls they instructed in the early days at Derby, were later attracted to religious life? How often have we really acknowledged that the domestic support of the sisters enabled the choir nuns to develop a semiprofessional life as teachers, nurses and social workers.

The Society of the Holy Child Jesus was unusual among the English foundations for its mixed social and ethnic composition.

One piece of research should be of particular interest to us SHCJ. Susan O'Brien has looked at our 'Register of Novices and Professions' and come to the following conclusion: [The Society of] 'The Holy Child Jesus was *unusual among the English foundations for its mixed social and ethnic composition, drawing on the old Catholic gentry and the new professional and business middle classes, converts and traditional Lancashire plebeian Catholics, Irish landed families and Irish immigrant working class, and it undoubtedly owed its exceptionality to its foundress. As a well-educated middle class American with a democratic outlook, Cornelia Connelly had some success in modifying the effects of the English class structure, although it is debatable whether even she would have attracted the same social cross section if she had been allowed to make no distinction between choir and lay sister.*'¹⁴

Conclusion

In the context of this article, that is a very warm tribute to Cornelia Connelly and her vision for a new congregation. In its very composition, the group of women who joined her society embodied the 'social mix' that was nineteenth century Catholicism. Old Catholics (rural and urban), new converts, and Irish immigrants were attracted to her spirit and found a home within the Society. Her inclusive love was to widen to embrace French and American postulants, and she wanted to extend it to the whole world. 'History is about people, not things, and our work as historians is about the present as well as the past' (Christopher Hill). This whole area of research into the 'myth of the second spring' has highlighted the fact that social and ethnic diversity was at the very root of our foundation both in the composition of the SHCJ and in our pastoral work. Despite many difficulties, unity in diversity was to be its living characteristic. The question we have to ask ourselves is whether in the late twentieth century our membership and pastoral orientations reflect this diversity as much as they did during Cornelia's life.

But what also becomes very clear from recent research is that Cornelia was asked to found the Society at a time particularly inimical to her spirit. She would have been more at home in the English Catholicism of Challoner than that of Wiseman. The promise of a 'second spring' turned into a long hard summer of triumphalism, authoritarianism and exclusivism, which was the antithesis of her ecclesial understanding. Yet she established her society embodying the counter traditions of freedom, creativity, trust and generosity of spirit. At the cost of great personal suffering and inevitable tension, she remained true to her vision of the human person being enabled to 'grow up into Christ', and so to contribute as a mature adult to both Church and society. So in its own way the Society, through Cornelia, tried faithfully to live out a prophetic role in contemporary English Catholicism. This too is our inheritance.

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Notes

1. John Bossy *The English Catholic Community 1570-1850*. (London 1975), 36.
2. Gerard Connolly 'The Transubstantiation of a Myth: towards a New Popular History of Nineteenth Century Catholicism' *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 35:1 (1984), 78. I am much indebted to this article.
3. John Bossy, (1975), 330.
4. Gerard Connolly, (1984), 89.
5. Ibid, 94.
6. Ibid, 97.
7. Ibid.
8. Susan O'Brien 'Terra Incognita :The Nun in Nineteenth Century England' *Past and Present* 115 (1988), 110-140. Again I am much indebted to this article.
9. Ibid 121. See also M. Ewens *The Role of the Nun in Nineteenth Century America* New York 1978.
10. Two convents in York (IBVM) and Hammersmith. O'Brien (1988), 110 for statistics.
11. Susan O'Brien 'Making Catholic Spaces: Women, Decor and Devotion in the English Catholic Church. 1840-1900.' Ed. Diana Wood. *Studies in Church History* 28 (Oxford 1992), 449-464.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid 248.
14. Susan O'Brien (1988), 135. See also Susan O'Brien 'Lay Sisters and Good Mothers: Working-Class Women in English Convents, 1840-1910.' *Studies in Church History* 27 (Oxford 1990), 453-465. *She estimates that about 250 novices were received before Cornelia's death in 1879. Also that of the early sisters more than 50% lived to be over seventy (111 out of 200), and many lived into their eighties.*

Cherwell Papers

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