

Saints and Devotional Cultures

Mary Heimann and Cara Delay

Catholic devotional life in Britain and Ireland changed profoundly during the twentieth century. The Second Vatican Council (1962-5), although it did not change everything, offers a convenient demarcation line between a notional ‘before’ and ‘after’. Broadly speaking, the pre-Vatican II Catholic world was more communal, even sectarian, in its cradle-to-grave institutional Catholicism. Before the liberalization of the 1960s and 1970s, when ‘no salvation outside the Catholic Church’ was interpreted strictly, ‘Catholics generally only met and socialised with other Catholics’. This gave Catholics in England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland a strongly communal identity fostered through parishes, schools, sodalities, clubs and societies. ‘Being Catholic’, as Catholic sociologist Michael Hornsby-Smith reminisced, ‘was as much a part’ of who one was as one’s gender or ethnicity: “‘Once a Catholic, always a Catholic’”.¹

Catholics had their own ‘subculture’ of Christian beliefs (including transubstantiation, the sacredness of the priesthood, papal infallibility, saintly intercession, the sinlessness of the Blessed Virgin Mary), values (including sexual chastity and opposition to contraception) and practices (such as fasting before receiving Holy Communion, abstaining from meat on Fridays, weekly confession, genuflecting in front of the Blessed Sacrament, receiving ashes on the forehead on Ash Wednesday, going to Mass on holy days of obligation as well as on Sundays), some of which seemed blasphemous or superstitious to Protestants. Aspects of faith were expressed through specific images, concepts and spiritual aids: by praying with rosary beads, making the sign of the cross, wearing scapulars, praying to saints (especially the Blessed Virgin Mary) or contemplating uniquely Catholic images like the Sacred Heart or Our Lady of Lourdes.

Post-conciliar Catholicism, which sought to modernize, ecumenize, and open up to the world, made Catholicism more accessible, but less distinctive, attracting some and repelling others. This cultural change, sometimes described as an exit from the Catholic ‘ghetto’, occurred at the same time that anti-Catholic prejudice was declining, along with religious observance more generally, across most of the British Isles. Because membership in the Established churches continued to drop faster than in the Catholic Church, by 1989 Catholicism had overtaken Anglicanism as the largest denomination in the British Isles. Whether it was still ‘the same church’ after the changes of the 1960s and 1970s – changes which included the shift from the Latin to the

¹ Michael Hornsby-Smith, *Reflections on a Catholic Life* (Peterborough, 2010), p. 49.

vernacular liturgy, the weakening of sodalities and confraternities, and the erosion of formerly central devotions such as Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament and Public Rosary – seemed more open to question.²

Devotional practices in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland did not exist in splendid isolation: each borrowed from, shared, or influenced the others. This chapter is nevertheless divided, for the sake of clarity, into two parts: the first looks at devotional cultures in England, Scotland and Wales since 1900; the second focusses on the island of Ireland, both before and for a hundred years after the creation of the Irish Free State. Northern Ireland, a constituent part of the United Kingdom, is treated in this chapter geographically and ecclesially rather than constitutionally and so falls under discussion of the island of Ireland. Some regions and geographical areas, especially those associated with the recusant past, such as Lancashire, Yorkshire and parts of London, held distinctive micro-histories which could set their Catholicism apart. Others created or rediscovered their own local histories, saints and holy places. Local campaigns, like one advocated by Liverpool schoolteachers in the 1930s for an alleged English stigmatic, sharply divided domestic Catholic opinion and was eventually turned down by Rome.³ During the interwar years, there was a marked struggle in the Catholic press between those who sought to keep a distinctively English character to devotional life and those who more readily incorporated Continental or Irish practices. The Forty Martyrs of England and Wales, beatified in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, were finally canonized in 1970; Scottish Jesuit John Ogilvie was canonized in 1976 and Edinburgh-born enclosed nun Margaret Sinclair declared venerable in 1978.

The Eucharistic Congress of 1908, a grand Catholic occasion and the backdrop to one of G.K. Chesterton's 'Father Brown' stories, evokes the atmosphere of the pre-conciliar world which revived in the interwar period and dominated until the 1960s. Clergy and religious from around the world descended on Edwardian London, where 'a procession of nearly 20,000 Catholic children' from all over the capital, the girls decked in 'veils and wreaths', the boys in 'sashes and rosettes', carried 'banners and streamers and gay devices' along streets lined with the papal colours.⁴ The 1908 Congress offers a snapshot of how the Catholic hierarchy in the United Kingdom of Great

² Frank J. Sheed, *Is It the Same Church?* (London, 1968), p. 1.

³ Mary Heimann, 'Medical and Mystical Opinion in British Catholicism: The Contentious Case of Teresa Higginson' in Tine Van Osselaer, et. al. eds., *Sign or Symptom?* (Leuven, 2017), pp. 75-100.

⁴ *Report of the Nineteenth Eucharistic Congress* (London and Edinburgh, 1909), p. 534.

Britain and Ireland sought to present itself to the world: as a mass community of the faithful, clearly organised into religious orders, Catholic schools, mutual-aid societies, prayer circles, confraternities, guilds and sodalities ranging from the Children of Mary and Third Order of St Francis to the St Vincent de Paul Society and the recently founded (1906) Catholic Women's League. Every demographic, every stage of life, had its particular Catholic umbrella.

Hosting the Eucharistic Congress in London proclaimed Catholicism in Britain to have 'arrived'. The triumphalism was tinged with defensiveness. Towns and cities, most notoriously Glasgow, Liverpool and Belfast, continued to be sharply divided along confessional lines for most of the century. Nor was official toleration yet taken for granted. The ecclesiastical hierarchy had been restored to England and Wales two generations before, but it was only thirty years since Scotland had ceased to be viewed by Rome as missionary territory (1878). Wales had only been treated as a separate ecclesiastical unit, with its own vicar apostolic, since 1895. Even London's Westminster Cathedral, or 'Metropolitan Cathedral of the Most Precious Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ', had been open just five years (1903). The neo-Byzantine basilica, with its soaring campanile, was uncompromisingly Italian; but the interior was a devotional space which focussed on English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish saints and martyrs, and catered for the local Catholic community's traditions and devotional tastes, themselves a melting-pot of domestic and foreign influences.

Eucharistic devotion lay at the heart of faith. Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, in the specific form which had been developed by English recusants and which, by the First World War, had come to rival the Mass as the most popular form of worship among Catholics across the British Isles, remained the single most widely offered church-based devotion throughout Britain well into the 1960s.⁵ The 1908 Eucharistic Congress was supposed to reach its final crescendo with the public procession of the Blessed Sacrament through the streets of London, for the first time since the reign of Mary Tudor. The Host, held aloft in a monstrance, was to be followed from Westminster Cathedral by Catholic dignitaries dressed in full ecclesiastical splendour; and the Congress brought to a close by the blessing, with the Blessed Sacrament, of 150,000 people gathered in the streets. At the last minute, the Prime Minister asked that the display be toned down, a request justified through the terms of the Catholic Emancipation Act (1829), which technically still forbade outdoor religious processions, though these provisions had not been enforced for

⁵ See Mary Heimann, *Catholic Devotion in Victorian England* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 176-190 and e.g. *The Catholic Directory 1937* (London, 1937), pp. 73-449.

years.⁶ Benediction was therefore given from the balcony of Westminster Cathedral rather than in the streets. ‘Shorn’, as the official English Catholic report of the Congress lamented, ‘of the splendour which would have been conferred by rich vestments, costly banners, torches, incense and silken canopies’, the ‘spectacle of that vast array of clergy, with Prelates, Bishops, and Princes of the Church’ was nevertheless ‘stupendously imposing.’ Between the Cathedral and a guard of honour formed by the Catholic Boys’ Brigade, an observer recalled, ‘stood line upon line of altar-servers, members of confraternities, British and foreign clergy and laity.’ After a series of bugle calls, which brought the crowds to a hushed silence, ‘every head in the vast multitude bowed low as the Cardinal Legate appeared on the balcony bearing the Sacred Host’ and ““with tears streaming from his eyes”, blessed the faithful.’⁷

For all the outward show of confidence, the Catholic hierarchy was anxious. Although baptisms were still buoyant,⁸ it was repeated everywhere that ‘far too many Catholics neglect Sunday Mass’.⁹ ‘Leakage’ from the faith was only partly attributed to lack of state funding for Catholic schools. Clerics worried that parental ‘indifference’ led children to neglect Sunday Mass, so preventing the formation of pious habits. ‘Saturday’s drinking, late shopping, theatres, going to bed after midnight, long sleep in the morning, Sunday excursions’ and ‘evil surroundings’, especially in ‘large towns’, where ‘the atmosphere is Protestant, worldly, sensual, materialistic’ with ‘all kinds of dangerous attractions’, were ‘killing religion’.¹⁰ Similar complaints were still being made in 1950, when the centenary of the Restoration of the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy was celebrated in London’s vast Wembley Stadium. On this occasion, the usual football fans were replaced by 100,000 Catholics who together recited the Latin *Credo* and sang ‘Faith of Our Fathers’ and ‘God Bless Our Pope’.¹¹

A Catholic’s life followed the fasting and feasting, the rhythms and seasons, of the liturgical calendar. This included abstinence on Fridays, taking part in mass Corpus Christi processions, going on Lenten retreats, celebrating Easter and preparing for a ‘good’ death. Corpus Christi at

⁶ Carol Devlin, ‘The Eucharistic Procession of 1908: The Dilemma of the Liberal Government’, *Church History* 63(3)(1994), p. 425.

⁷ *Report of the Nineteenth Eucharistic Congress*, pp. 599; 601-2.

⁸ In this volume, chapter by Kinnear, Appendix A10.1-10.2.

⁹ F.M. Geudens, ‘The Neglect of Sunday Mass’, in *Report of the Nineteenth Eucharistic Congress*, p. 103.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 112.

¹¹ John Murray, ‘Westminster and Wembley: Reflections on a Recent Centenary’, *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 39(156)(1950), pp. 407-418.

Cardiff castle was called *the* event of the year.¹² At Mass, one could follow along in one's own missal, recite alternative prayers (such as those to be found in the Catholic Truth Society's *Simple Prayer Book*) or simply pray the rosary, contemplating mysteries, while the priest officiated. Outside Mass, pious practices included attending Benediction or Vespers; taking part in the 'living' rosary; following the Stations of the Cross; honouring the first Friday of Devotion to the Sacred Heart; making novenas to the Blessed Virgin Mary or to popular saints such as St Anthony of Padua or St Francis of Assisi, or going on pilgrimage. Popular Catholicism was shot through with homely practices – saying grace before meals, keeping a picture of the Sacred Heart on the wall or a bottle of Lourdes water on the mantelpiece; reciting a quick prayer to St Anthony to find a misplaced object; wearing a St Christopher talisman bearing the legend 'Behold St Christopher. Then go your way in safety' when setting out on a journey - or even attaching specially made St Christopher badges to car or bicycle.¹³



Figure 7.1 Annual Corpus Christi procession through the streets of Cardiff, here passing through Cardiff Castle
(Permission from Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

¹² Trystan Owain Hughes, *Winds of Change: The Roman Catholic Church and Society in Wales 1916-1962* (Cardiff [1999], 2017), pp. 8; 205-6.

¹³ See, e.g. *The Catholic Directory 1937* (London, 1937), p. 29.

Central to Catholic understandings was the reality of purgatory and need to reduce the amount of time spent there for oneself and one's loved ones.¹⁴ Indulgences, including plenary, were sought. Prayer cards, given out at funerals, requested mourners to pray for the soul of the deceased. Flowers and red votive candles were left at graves; rosaries or scapulars sometimes buried with the corpse. At home, pictures of the Sacred Heart, or Our Lady of Fátima, were turned into makeshift domestic shrines adorned with candles and flowers. Catholic homes were further marked out by the placement of a crucifix, or perhaps a statue of Christ or a saint, in the entry hall, kitchen or bedroom. They might display holy water, perhaps a memento from a pilgrimage kept in a container shaped like the Blessed Virgin Mary, rosaries made of olive wood from the Holy Land, images of the Pope, Our Lady of Lourdes and other devotional objects. Children's bedrooms typically displayed an image of the Holy Family, the Blessed Virgin Mary, or a favourite saint. First Communion was an elaborate coming of age ritual for which little girls were dressed like brides. Expensive gifts, such as silver or golden necklaces with a crucifix or medallion, richly decorated missals, or costly rosary beads marked the occasion. These matched the set of silver apostles' spoons which were typically given at a Christening, in which the baby was again dressed symbolically in white, its sins washed away through the sacrament of baptism, just as they were again forgiven during first reception, confession, confirmation, and after the *Confiteor*.

A distinctively English Catholic atmosphere was first conveyed to middle-class children in the nursery, before they were old enough to be sent away to school. Joan Windham's *Six O'Clock Saints*, aimed at the 'six-year-old [who] is easily bored', ensured that even young children could relate to saints. St Antony of Padua was introduced to Catholic children as 'the same St Antony who finds things for you when you have lost them; singing the 'Alma Redemptoris Mater' as a way to avoid being 'Run Over at Crossings'. St Francis put the wolf of Gubbio and the villagers 'on their Honours' to live together in peace. St Joseph called their donkey 'Flopear because its ears were so big and floppy' whereas 'Our Lady called it Softears because they were so soft to stroke'. 'I'm just coming', sang Our Lady, as the Holy Family fled Egypt for their lives, 'and she popped two wooden animals that St Joseph had made for Jesus into the basket.'¹⁵

Catholic children were encouraged to view all countries in which there were Catholics and all historical periods since the birth of Christ as their inheritance. Saints, living or dead, were

¹⁴ David Geiringer, 'At Some Point in the 1960s, Hell Disappeared: Hell, Gender and Catholicism in Post-war England', *Twentieth Century British History*, 15(2)(2008), pp. 255-72.

¹⁵ Joan Windham, *Six O'Clock Saints* (London [1934] 1943), pp. 51; 21; 3-4.

family. Present institutions, such as Westminster Abbey, the Coronation Oath or the University of Oxford, were presented as part of their own distinctive pre-Reformation history. In *More Saints for Six O’Clock*, the first in a series of sequels, children were introduced to the Welsh St Winifrede, the Scottish St Margaret and the English St George; but not the Irish St Patrick.¹⁶ Although Irish Catholics made up numbers, their distinctive spirituality was considered in some senses separate from the recusant traditions of the English, Welsh and Scottish, whose own martyrs and saints were given a strong plug in Catholic Truth Society pamphlets. Separate Catholic Truth Societies of Ireland, India, Scotland (and even of Hexham and Newcastle) catered for partially distinctive markets: the Scottish Catholic Truth Society, for example, focussed mainly on recovering Scottish Catholic history and promoting local saints and martyrs, leaving it to the Catholic Truth Society in London to publish J.W. Reeks’ *St George, Protector of England* (1932) and the Catholic Truth Society in Dublin to bring out *Saint Patrick*, edited by Paul Walsh, in the same year.

Suffering was a core component of the Catholic message. It was dwelt upon in hagiographies, contemplated in the crucifix, the rosary and the Sacred Heart, and invoked through the stations of the cross. Mortifications and self-denial were recommended even to young children, with wider ramifications explored in the chapter in this volume by Daly and Pound. The rules were that ‘whatever anyone says, or wants you to do, you say “Yes” ...The more you hate it the bigger your sacrifice to add to your Special Pile of Sacrifices. And Our Lord or your Guardian Angel counts each time you say it, and at the end we’ll all see who has the most.’ Following too formulaic an interpretation of self-mortification was also wrong. ‘Did you know,’ Windham explained, ‘that there is a sort of Unselfishness that is Selfish? I know it sounds all wrong, but it is when people Grab *all* the Not Very Nice things to do, and that doesn’t give anyone else a chance of being Unselfish too. They might be collecting “Yes’s” just as hard as you are, and you are spoiling it for them!’¹⁷ Catholic remedies for the scrupulosity (‘Catholic guilt’) engendered through constant, anxious self-scrutiny were to be found in prayer and, above all, in confession and subsequent reception of the Blessed Sacrament, through which the slate was wiped clean and the unworthy sinner restored, albeit temporarily, to a state of baptismal innocence.¹⁸ And so the cycle of sin, repentance and forgiveness began again.

¹⁶ Joan Windham and Marigold Hunt, *More Saints for Six O’Clock*, pp. 55-9; 72-6.

¹⁷ Windham, *Six O’Clock Saints*, pp.100; 102.

¹⁸ Walter Jewell, *On Making a Good Confession* (London, 1945).

Catholics in Britain were expected to remain vigilant, aware as a religious minority that they inhabited an 'alien world' which did not share or understand Catholic values. Adolescents were warned about the power of sex. 'We eat too much and we have it in our power to stop', explained a Benedictine housemaster at Ampleforth, 'but with the sex impulse it is like jumping over a cliff, we have power to jump or not to jump, but once the leap has been taken, good-bye control'. Young Catholic men, about to encounter the society of women, were to cast themselves 'at the foot of the cross' and 'demand assistance from Christ'. They were to 'implore our Blessed Lady, Virgin most Pure, to lift us out of the jungle of desire.' 'Mortifications', they were gently reminded, 'need not be hair shirts but, for instance, quite simply, but very hard, not seeing the dangerous person again, or not getting into the dangerous situation again. All of which is so easy to say and so difficult to do.'¹⁹

The elevation of chastity, a virtue enjoined on both sexes, but with particular intensity for girls, fit the highly gendered 1950s. The sodality of the Children of Mary, open to young people after they had taken their First Communion, been aspirants for at least three months, and 'given proof of true piety and devotion', required members to say morning and evening prayers, recite the rosary, go to Mass daily if possible, confess their sins, take Communion weekly or fortnightly 'but never less than once a month', and go on retreat at least four days every year.²⁰ Catholic girls, who became Children of Mary as commonly as non-Catholics became Girl Guides, were encouraged to seek help from the Virgin Mary to keep chaste. Symbolism surrounding the Immaculate Mother of God and ever-Virgin, whose bodily Assumption into heaven was infallibly declared in 1950, emphasised purity. On the Feast of the Purification, remembered a convent girl in the 1950s, 'we wore starched white veils of tulle that stood out around us like a nimbus. With the medals of the Sodality of Our Lady on blue ribbons round our necks, we processed with our lit candles up to the communion rails to be blessed'.²¹ On the same day, each young girl laid a lily at the feet of the Virgin's statue with the words: 'Mary, I give you the lily of my heart, be thou its guardian for ever'. St Thérèse of Lisieux, 'the Little Flower', appealed to those who identified with the sentimental notion that the young saint had given glory to God by 'just being her beautiful little self among the

¹⁹ Columba Cary-Elwes, *The Beginning of Goodness* (London, 1944), pp. 74-8.

²⁰ *The Child of Mary's Little Handbook* (London, 1901), pp. 25; 29; 39-40.

²¹ Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London, 1976), p. xix.

other flowers in God's garden'. The Little Flower had promised before she died to let fall 'a shower of roses' after her death, and to answer every prayer specifically addressed to her.²²

The effect of Catholic training was to create a parallel mental and imaginative universe. As was taught in the classroom catechism, preached from the pulpit and repeated in Catholic apologetics, hagiography and fiction, transcendent meaning shot through the visible and tangible world.²³ This mode of perception was said to make all the difference as a person confronted death, whether on the battlefield or in a hospital bed, and faced the prospect of divine judgement and possibility of eternal punishment.²⁴ The fictional Scottish Catholic priest in Bruce Marshall's *All Glorious Within* found that the wisdom and coherence of the Church's supernatural teachings shone 'forth from behind bomber airplanes and advertisements for syrup of figs' which adorned Glasgow's Sauchiehall Street. As he lay dying, he saw the answer to it all: '...how the lame and the sick should be healed and how the poor should be rewarded and how God's saints might eat peas off their knives; how the banker might be last and the harlot first; how a priest's hands never failed however flat his words; how the Church was all glorious within because the freight she carried healed all her cracks... It was all so simple really...'.²⁵ The distinctive Catholic message of salvation was preached, in self-conscious competition with Protestant, socialist, nationalist, materialist, spiritualist and fascist alternatives, in a succession of accessible books, often penned by converts, most notably Monsignor Ronald Knox, and through a wide range of cheap pamphlets put out by the Catholic Truth Society which explained everything from how to pray to what the latest papal encyclicals were about.

Marian devotion, although not to everyone's taste, dominated pre-conciliar devotional life. Interwar Marian apparitions, which continued at Fátima in Portugal and began at Beauraing and Banneux in Belgium, were closely watched by Catholics in Britain who continued to make pilgrimages to Lourdes, or to replicate Lourdes grottos, the most elaborate of which was built by unemployed miners at Carfin, near Motherwell in Scotland, in 1922.²⁶ Increasingly, Catholics visited Walsingham in Norfolk, where the first official Catholic pilgrimage was celebrated in 1934.

²² See e.g. Vernon Johnson, *The Message of St Thérèse of Lisieux* (London, 1936).

²³ See Robert Orsi, *History and Presence* (Cambridge, Mass, 2016).

²⁴ Rick Schweitzer, 'The Cross and the Trenches: Religious Faith and Doubt among Some British Soldiers on the Western Front', *War & Society*, 16(2)(1998), pp. 33-57.

²⁵ Bruce Marshall, *All Glorious Within* (Chatham, 1944), pp. 210-211.

²⁶ See also Alana Harris, 'Astonishing scenes at the Scottish Lourdes: Masculinity, the Miraculous and Sectarian Strife at Carfin, 1922-1945', 66(1)(2015) *Innes Review*, pp. 102-29.

Pilgrims to the Catholic shrine at Holywell in North Wales might bathe in or take holy water away from the ancient well: miraculous cures continued to be recorded, as they had even during the eighteenth century. Shrines associated with the Virgin Mary were places of supernatural cures, physical and spiritual. This seemed in tune with Pius XII's dedication of the world to the 'Immaculate Heart of Mary' in 1942 and institution of the Feast of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in 1944. Franz Werfel's bestselling *Song of Bernadette*, made into a blockbuster film in 1943, further popularised Lourdes and was screened for English Catholic schoolchildren.²⁷ In 1946, the same year in which 700,000 pilgrims gathered at the shrine of Our Lady of Czestochowa to consecrate Poland to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Our Lady of Fátima was crowned by Pius XII.

Alongside notions of a meek, compassionate and gentle Blessed Virgin Mary (BVM) who prayed for the dying and cured the sick were ideas of a battle-hardened, sternly punishing Mary who led the 'Legion' for which she was named. This 'Cold War Mary' was a Blessed Virgin who looked at twentieth-century Communism in much the same disapproving spirit as she had the French Revolution, and who could warn, denounce or punish.²⁸ Marian devotion could mean different things. After the 'fall' of Communism in 1989, the BVM came to be especially associated with the 'protection of the unborn' and 'sanctity of life', the central anti-abortion message proclaimed, for example, in a Marian apparition in Surbiton in Greater London, in 1984, but which was eventually rejected by the Vatican in 2007.

Devotional life changed after the Second Vatican Council. The liturgy was said in English, rather than traditional Latin, which pleased some and disappointed others, as explored McElroy's chapter in this volume. The reduction in the time required to fast before taking communion to just one hour – rather than, as before, from midnight the previous day – meant that it was easier to get to Mass at any time of day. This led to a decline in attendance at Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. The women's movement of the 1970s, which advocated sexual equality and charged the Catholic Church with oppressing women through the ages, presented traditional devotion to the Mary as sexist. The supposed 'victory' over Communism in 1989 through a series of events set in train by John Paul II, the first Polish pope, led to some specifically Catholic anti-liberal triumphalism.²⁹ In the decades following the 'end' of the Cold War, congregations in England, Wales and Scotland, which consisted largely of older people, were reinforced with young Catholics

²⁷ Alana Harris, *Faith in the Family: A Lived Religious History of English Catholicism* (Manchester, 2013), p. 213-4.

²⁸ Peter Jan Margry, ed., *Cold War Mary* (Leuven, 2021).

²⁹ See e.g. George Weigel, *The Final Revolution* (Oxford, 1992).

from Poland, Lithuania and elsewhere in the former Eastern bloc. This renewed, but could also divide, parishes, which characteristically added separate Polish-language masses rather than immediately integrating, immigrants. Poles also brought with them devotional traditions, such as the newly-established Divine Mercy of Jesus images³⁰ and the traditional presentation of Easter baskets for blessing. Attitudes to social issues, especially gender and homosexuality, could seem equally old-fashioned.

As many confraternities fell out of fashion, new ‘charismatic’ groups formed which sought to evangelize and worship with an intensity, and in forms, traditionally associated with Protestantism.³¹ The introduction into a parish of charismatic movements could be controversial. In 1996, for example, the Bishop of Clifton launched a formal enquiry to consider whether parishes had ‘suffered harm and neglect’ due to the presence and activities of the Neo-Catechumenate, an organisation which Pope John Paul II warmly commended. *Opus Dei*, founded in interwar Spain and established in post-war England,³² became especially controversial around the turn of the millennium, when its right-wing politics, cult-like practices (especially mortification of the flesh), and alleged influence with the Vatican won it a controversial, even sinister, reputation. Youth 2000, warmly championed by the Vatican, was another movement which appeared outwardly evangelical in its informality and spontaneity, yet linked young people with overtly Catholic phenomena such as the apparitions of the BVM reported in Medjugorje from 1981 or the stigmatic Padre Pio, a figure who had been held in suspicion by John XXIII, rehabilitated by Pius XI and Paul VI, and canonized, with unusual speed, by John Paul II.

In the twenty-first century, Catholic devotional life is various. In some places, charismatic youth groups and prayer circles, centred on Jesus and the Gospel, or on the Holy Spirit, seemed almost indistinguishable from their Protestant equivalents. Elsewhere, enclaves remained where pre-Vatican II-style worship and devotion, such as Gregorian chant, Latin masses, Benedictions,

³⁰ Alana Harris, ‘Corporeal Commotions: St Faustina and the Transnational Evolution of her Cult across the Twentieth Century’, *Journal of Religious History* 42(4)(2018), pp. 545-67.

³¹ Michael Hayes, ed., *Religious Movements in the Catholic Church* (London and New York, 2005).

³² https://opusdei.org/en-uk/article/the-saint-who-loved-england/?fbclid=IwAR187GmdqEbP4bxHdLvGWCMKfxj9gLYbWWPRs_yLHpV462mLjc55LCIZ4NQ (accessed 29 Dec. 2021).

devotions to the rosary, Sacred Heart, or holy relics,³³ continue. Pilgrimages to Lourdes, Walsingham, Holywell, Aylesford Priory and Carfin attract pilgrims. Catholic churches, whether Georgian, neo-Gothic, modernist or brutalist, fill up on Sundays better than Anglican churches, but much less well than they once did. Catholic girls' and mixed schools continued to exist; but no longer typically staffed by nuns and no longer offering a distinctively Catholic formation. Some boarding schools run by monks survive: but most nineteenth-century convents, monasteries and seminaries were either at risk of closure or already closed. Confession, renamed 'reconciliation' and usually no longer held in a booth, dropped in popularity. Francis I, affectionately portrayed, together with his immediate predecessor Benedict XVI, in the 2019 film 'The Two Popes', was shown as a humble and simple man with the political and emotional intelligence to build bridges between progressives and conservatives partly through social media, including Twitter. The encyclical 'Fratelli Tutti' (3 October 2020), issued during the COVID-19 pandemic, called upon the world to reject war, narrow and violent nationalism, xenophobia and contempt for people different from ourselves; but also reaffirmed sanctity of life. Whether the combination of traditionally liberal and conservative views, and a distinctly Catholic conscience, would unify twenty-first century Catholics in Britain the way the old 'Catholic ghetto' and sensory 'imaginary' once could, remained to be seen.

Across the Irish Sea, the prominence of twentieth-century Catholicism has been well established. In Northern Ireland, the 'spiritual danger' that English Catholics confronted was present as well, as Ulster Catholics had been 'on the losing side for most of the past four centuries.'³⁴ After partition in 1921, as the realities of being a religious minority sank in, fears of being left behind by the rest of the island created notions of a Church and faith under siege.³⁵ In western Northern Ireland, however, popular Catholic devotions resembled those practiced across other parts of the island. Meanwhile, the Catholic Church arguably gave the post-independence

³³ Alana Harris, 'Bone Idol? British Catholics and Devotion to Thérèse of Lisieux' in Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, *The Sixties and Beyond: Dechristianization in North America and Western Europe 1945-2000* (Toronto, 2013), 429-52.

³⁴ Marianne Elliot, *The Catholics of Ulster: A History* (New York, 2001), p. xxxviii.

³⁵ Elliot, *Catholics of Ulster*, pp. 366, 369, 374-8.

Free State, and later the Republic, their ‘political legitimacy’.³⁶ For Irish Catholics, North and South, popular Catholic devotions were not only central to their faith but also helped mark the lifecycle and seasons. They established family and community ties, constituted domestic culture, and allowed Catholics to claim public space.

Throughout the twentieth century, practices such as the rosary and the consumption of devotional items proved stalwart. The significance of the Catholic home as a devotional space has recently been demonstrated by scholars working on the United Kingdom and Ireland.³⁷ Across the British and Irish isles, practices included home-based devotions such as family prayer, decorating with religious items, and building home altars or backyard grottoes. These domestic devotions expressed the importance of piety to daily life, allowed for intimate individual and familial connections with the sacred, and taught children to incorporate Catholic material culture into their devotional lives. Domestic piety was promoted by the hierarchy and clergy as well; Irish-born and US-based Patrick Peyton CSC, known as ‘The Rosary Priest’, became famous in the 1950s as he traveled the world promoting Marian devotion through the family rosary.

Popular Catholic devotions linked families, communities, and nation. Shortly after the 1932 Eucharistic Congress in Dublin, the following assessment appeared in the *Irish Press*: ‘Last week showed many things—and one was the steel strength of our home life. Every happening had behind it its father, mother, child. The decorations—father on top of the ladder, mother handing him things—mainly fashioned by herself—and advising, children looking on’.³⁸ Here, community devotions relied on what happened in the home, often constructed as the heart of the faith. Also central to commemorative events like the Congress were material culture and consumerism. During and after the celebration, the *Irish Catholic Directory* featured ads by companies selling a variety of rosary beads, including ‘in Fancy Colours or in Mother of Pearl’ for between 4 and 8 shillings, as well as brown scapulars, statues of St Anne, Sacred Heart badges, hanging crucifixes, religious frames pictures, and holy water fonts.³⁹ These items increasingly adorned the bodies and decorated the homes of Irish Catholics.

³⁶ Louise Fuller, *Irish Catholicism Since 1950* (Dublin, 2002), p. 3.

³⁷ Harris, *Faith in the Family*, Cara Delay, ‘Holy Water and a Twig: Catholic Households and Women’s Religious Authority in Modern Ireland’, *Journal of Family History* 43(3)(2018), pp. 302-19.

³⁸ *Irish Press*, 27 June 1932.

³⁹ *Irish Catholic Directory*, 1932, pp. 111-8.

Eucharistic devotions also were essential in Ireland (Figure 7.2), where Corpus Christi processions had become integral to devotional life and the Eucharistic Congress showcased popular piety in Dublin.⁴⁰ Yet other rituals and practices persevered in the Irish context as well. Masses and rites of passage including the infamous wake thrived. These events were structurally supported by one of the most visible effects of Church renewal in modern Ireland: a revitalized Catholic architecture and infrastructure.⁴¹ Membership in confraternities and sodalities exploded in the twentieth century. Ubiquitous by the 1960s, the archconfraternity of the Holy Family spread through every parish in Dublin ‘with an average membership of 450 men, 800 women and 980 youths’. The Church hierarchy actively encouraged the expansion of sodalities and confraternities, in part to combat fears of encroaching secularization and individualism.⁴²



Figure 7.2 Dubliners watching the annual Corpus Christi procession, 1985. Permission from Tony Murray.

In rural areas, outdoor occasions—parish missions, pilgrimages, and devotions at holy wells—dominated. Public Marian devotions would ebb and flow throughout the century; parish missions witnessed their heyday before 1950; and some holy wells fell into ruin by the 1950s and 60s, but each of these remained important in some places well into the second half of the twentieth

⁴⁰ Rory O'Dwyer, *The Eucharistic Congress, Dublin 1932: An Illustrated History* (Dublin, 2009).

⁴¹ E.g., Thomas Kennedy, 'Church Building', *A History of Irish Catholicism: Vol. 5, The Church Since Emancipation* (Dublin, 1970).

⁴² Cara Delay, *Irish Women and the Creation of Modern Catholicism* (Manchester, 2019), pp. 62-9.

century and certainly, at least sporadically, well past the Second Vatican Council. These religious occasions shed light on the continuities and heterodoxies of Irish Catholicism,⁴³ revealing the dynamic devotional cultures that still linger across the island despite conciliar reforms, the impact of the abuse crisis, and the enormous transformations of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ years.

One of the most intensely popular and powerful religious occasions was the parish mission or ‘the missions’. During the missions, orders such as the Redemptorists travelled to Irish parishes and stirred up devotion for weeks. They encouraged Marian piety, including the laity’s devotions to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour. The popularity of the parish missions suggests that they ‘were touching something very deep in the people’s psyche’.⁴⁴ Even in the 1940s and 50s the vibrant popular devotion that Irish Catholics expected and embraced was visible at the missions. Processions and pilgrimages during the missions were ‘colourful, with religious emblems, banners, [and] flowers’. Temperance soirees featured food, music, and dancing.⁴⁵ Missioners preached in chapels, but attendees, and devotions, spilled outside of their walls. The bodily performances of the missioners were gendered, helping to establish a sort of ‘muscular Catholicism’ that was especially significant in a postcolonial Ireland trying to overcome the historical feminization of its men as well as compete with Protestant notions of muscular Christianity.⁴⁶ At the mission, parishioners also made their voices heard; they wept, shouted, and cheered. A full-on sensory experience, the parish mission was one that enthralled the body of the worshipper.⁴⁷

Missions provide compelling evidence for the syncretic and often rural nature of popular Irish Catholicism.⁴⁸ Brendan McConvery, moreover, has argued that in the wake of Irish Revolution in the 1910s and 20s, missions helped recreate local ties, serving as ‘instruments of reconciliation in communities that had been deeply divided’ by years of conflict and civil war’.⁴⁹

⁴³ Sue Morgan and Jacqueline deVries, ‘Introduction’, in Sue Morgan and Jacqueline deVries (eds.), *Women, Gender and Religious Cultures in Britain, 1800-1940* (New York, 2010), p. 3.

⁴⁴ Ignatius Murphy, *The Diocese of Killaloe, 1850-1904* (Blackrock, 1995), p. 53.

⁴⁵ Lawrence Taylor, *Occasions of Faith: An Anthropology of Irish Catholics* (Philadelphia, 1995), p. 169; Murphy, *Diocese of Killaloe*, pp. 268, 264.

⁴⁶ Joseph Nugent, ‘The Sword and the Prayerbook: Ideals of Authentic Irish Manliness’, *Victorian Studies* 50(4)(2008), pp. 587-613.

⁴⁷ David Morgan, *The Embodied Eye: Religious Visual Culture and the Social Life of Feeling* (Berkeley, 2012), p. 6.

⁴⁸ Taylor, *Occasions of Faith*, p. 170.

⁴⁹ Brendan McConvery, ‘The Redemptorists and the Shaping of Irish Popular Devotion, 1851-1965’, in Henning Laugerud and Salvador Ryan (eds.), *Devotional Cultures of European Christianity, 1790-1960* (Dublin, 2012), p. 52.

The popularity and endurance of parish missions well in the 1980s⁵⁰ also testifies to how some occasions normally associated with the ‘devotional revolution’ of the nineteenth century⁵¹ lingered well into the twentieth century.

While outdoor devotions such as religious pilgrimages were a central element of popular religious life across the British and Irish isles, they often took a unique form in Ireland. Irish people travelled to popular Marian pilgrimage sites such as Lourdes and even Medjugorje, but most experienced pilgrimages in a more local context, and many sites ‘were connected to older, vernacular traditions of belief and their associations with particular places’.⁵² The famous pilgrimage to Lough Derg, County Donegal, has been visited by pilgrims continuously for centuries; for many Catholics, making the pilgrimage was an expected rite of passage⁵³ and reaffirms the centrality of sacred places in Irish culture. Drawing on earlier traditions that marked the landscape as pure or profane, Irish Catholicism was a faith that encouraged people to map devotional space.⁵⁴ Scholars have long observed ‘the existence and influence of a ‘special relationship’ between community and physical environment’ or ‘between people and place’ in Ireland.⁵⁵ Even as the Irish Church hierarchy attempted to harness its laity’s devotions into controlled spaces like the parish chapel,⁵⁶ outdoor devotions remained a hallmark of Irish popular Catholicism.

Like pilgrimages, holy well devotions persevered, particularly in rural areas. In 1997, there were still 3,000 holy wells in Ireland, many that had fallen into ruin, but some that were still actively used.⁵⁷ In Irish tradition, most people believed the well water to be sacred, and some wells became famous for their water’s powerful cures.⁵⁸ On certain days, parishioners attended patterns, where

⁵⁰ Taylor, *Occasions of Faith*, chapter six.

⁵¹ Emmet Larkin, ‘The Devotional Revolution in Ireland, 1850-75’, *The American Historical Review* 77(3)(1972), pp. 625–52. See also the chapter by Salvador Ryan in Volume IV of this series.

⁵² Síle De Cléir, *Popular Catholicism in 20th-Century Ireland: Locality, Identity and Culture* (London, 2017), p. 57.

⁵³ Victor W. Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (New York, 2011).

⁵⁴ Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars who Study Them* (Princeton, 2005).

⁵⁵ Gerry Smyth, *Space and the Irish Cultural Imagination* (New York, 2001), pp. 19-20.

⁵⁶ Quoted in Máire MacNeill, *The Festival of Lughnasa: A Study of the Survival of the Celtic Festival of the Beginning of the Harvest* (Oxford, 1962), p. 79.

⁵⁷ F.H.A. Aalen, Kevin Whelan, and Matthew Stout (eds.), *Atlas of the Rural Irish Landscape* (Cork, 1997), p. 174.

⁵⁸ Walter L. Brenneman, Jr. and Mary G. Brenneman, *Crossing the Circle at the Holy Wells of Ireland* (Charlottesville, 1995), pp. 5-6.

they conducted a series of rounds and prayers at holy wells.⁵⁹ In a County Sligo parish, local residents decorated the holy well ‘with little statues of the Blessed Virgin Mary, small coloured religious pictures, a crucifix and beads, and Candlesticks...’ They also tied ‘numerous rags [and] scapulars’ to trees.⁶⁰ Celeste Ray argues that their commitment to holy wells marks Irish Catholics as ‘unusual in Europe’.⁶¹ She also posits that, after Vatican II demoted the roles of unverifiable saints, holy well devotions ‘dropped off’, only to be revived again in the 1980s.⁶²

Popular Marian devotion would also ebb and flow in the twentieth century, but it has remained a constant presence in Irish popular culture. The popular Northern Irish sitcom *Derry Girls* (2018) features four Catholic teenage girls (and one boy) coming of age in the 1990s during the ‘Troubles’. In a season one episode, based on a 1986 episode of BBC sitcom *Only Fools and Horses*, the gang, having stayed up all night to cram for their exams, chase their dog into their local Catholic Church. There, they have a miraculous experience: the statue of the Virgin Mary appears to them and begins to cry real tears. As the liquid drips down the Virgin’s face, the girls immediately plot to use the miraculous occasion to get out of their exam. ‘We are the motherfucking children of Fatima!’ exclaims one. In reality, however, the dog sought by the girls has urinated above the statue onto the face of Mary, and in the end the girls are denounced for perpetrating a hoax on the parish.⁶³ For the viewer, the humor of the scene comes from making fun of the trope of the overwrought teenage girl and the apparition-as-hoax, but it also taps into a cultural reality: that in the 1980s, ‘strange supernatural happenings’, often involving an animated Blessed Virgin, overtook parts of the country, becoming fodder for the press and resulted in both increased piety and scathing skepticism.⁶⁴

Beginning in February 1985 and continuing for months, Catholics in counties Kerry, Cork, and Waterford reported that religious statues, mostly of the Virgin Mary, ‘were moving, changing color, ... or had come alive and given messages to the people of God’.⁶⁵ Although such appearances

⁵⁹ Celeste Ray, ‘Paying the Rounds at Ireland’s Holy Wells’, *Anthropos* 110(2)(2015), p. 418.

⁶⁰ Description of Tobernatha Well, Sligo. Lord Walter Fitzgerald papers (nd; early twentieth century), Ms. 18869, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

⁶¹ Ray, ‘Paying the Rounds’, pp. 416–7.

⁶² Ray, ‘The Sacred and the Body Politic’, p. 279.

⁶³ *Derry Girls* TV series, channel 4, UK, created by Lisa McGee, episode 1.3 (2018).

⁶⁴ *The Nationalist (Tipperary)*, 24 August 1985.

⁶⁵ Sandra L. Zimdars-Swartz, ‘Popular Devotion to the Virgin: The Marian Phenomena at Melleray, Republic of Ireland’, *Archives de Sciences Sociales Des Religions* 67(1)(1989), p. 126.

were particularly frequent in the 1980s, supernatural Marianism was not new to Ireland. MacCurtain argues that Marianism became relevant amidst the cultural and emotional destruction of the Famine years, citing the 1879 apparition at Knock, County Mayo as the peak of popular Marian devotion. According to James Donnelly, however, this peak came much later – between 1930 and 1960. Certainly the 1950s were an era of increased piety; in the Marian year of 1954, hundreds of grottoes were constructed across Ireland.⁶⁶ There was a public waning of interest in, and reporting on, Marianism after the 1960s, but the events of the 1980s across Ireland remind us that devotion to the Virgin could pop up again, particularly in response to crisis.⁶⁷

Nevertheless, a decline in religious practice was evident by the 1990s, when clerical abuse scandals and revelations about horrors at the Magdalen laundries shook the reputation of the Church.⁶⁸ These developments occurred alongside the unprecedented economic prosperity of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ years that supported secularization, and were followed by surveys and polls that claimed Ireland’s Catholics were abandoning Mass and confession,⁶⁹ a conclusion partly borne out by the Church’s own statistics.⁷⁰

By the first few decades of the twenty-first century, popular votes that legalized same-sex marriage and repealed Ireland’s anti-abortion legislation (2015 and 2018 respectively) fundamentally challenged the taken-for-granted link between Ireland and Catholicism. While some aspects of extra-liturgical devotional life remain—the importance of First Holy Communion comes to mind—even these occasions seem different to some; in the case of First Communion, blatant consumerism and ‘keeping up with the Joneses’ in terms of dress and gifts, has caused many to lament the tangible popular devotion that once marked lifecycle rituals and other religious occasions.⁷¹ Still, priest academic Peter McGrail finds generational continuities in recent First Communion rituals, arguing that the elements of the ritual as a rite of initiation, a celebration of

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 127.

⁶⁷ James S. Donnelly, ‘Opposing the “Modern World”: The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Ireland, 1965-85’, *Éire-Ireland* 40(1-2)(2005), pp. 183-245.

⁶⁸ James M. Smith, *Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries and the Nation’s Architecture of Containment* (South Bend, Indiana, 2007); Louise Fuller, ‘Critical Voices in Irish Catholicism: Reading the Signs of the Times’, *Studies: An Irish Quarterly* 100(400)(2011), p. 477.

⁶⁹ Fuller, *Irish Catholicism since 1950*, p. iii.

⁷⁰ In this volume, chapter by Kinnear, Appendix A1.3.

⁷¹ Cara Delay, “Fashion and Faith: The First Communion Dress in Twentieth-Century Ireland”, *Religions* (12)(7)(518)(2021). <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12070518>.

the child-worshipper, and the importance of symbol, through dress, gift-giving, and eating and drinking, ‘have hardly changed since the mid-twentieth century’.⁷² Continuities and changes in Irish Catholic devotional cultures, which marked the twentieth century, thus persist.

Perhaps being Irish and Catholic in the new millennium has less to do with what rituals one attends or devotions one performs and more to do with ‘belonging to a cultural tradition and heritage, to a shared collective memory’.⁷³ However, many in Ireland today who actually practice their faith do not have a shared collective memory. The first few decades of the 2000s have witnessed significant immigration, and Polish migrants’ commitment to Catholic belief and practice have earned them a reputation as ‘unexpected saviours of faith’ in both the UK and Ireland.⁷⁴ Polish female religious and mystic Faustina Kowalska, inspiration of the Divine Mercy, has helped solidify the devotion in Ireland in recent years, leading one Limerick priest to reflect: ‘The Polish community brings great life to the parish. If you look at the way they worship, it is like Ireland was 40 years ago’.⁷⁵ The Ireland of forty years ago, with its very public and visible outdoor spectacles of devotion, displayed the vibrant nature of Irish popular Catholicism. Markedly diminished aspects of this performative piety nevertheless persist, even through a century of unprecedented change. As to home-based devotional rituals and material piety, recent transformations in Irish Catholics’ domestic expressions of believing and belonging await their anthropological and sociological survey.

Select Bibliography

De Cléir, Síle *Popular Catholicism in 20th-Century Ireland: Locality, Identity and Culture* (London, 2017).

⁷² Peter McGrail, *First Communion: Ritual, Church and Popular Religious Identity* (New York, 2007), p. 151.

⁷³ Tom Inglis, ‘Catholic Identity in Contemporary Ireland: Belief and Belonging to Tradition’, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 22(2)(2007), p. 207.

⁷⁴ Kerry Gallagher and Marta Trzebiatowska, ‘Becoming a “Real” Catholic: Polish Migrants and Lived Religiosity in the UK and Ireland’, *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 32(3)(2017), p. 432.

⁷⁵ *Irish Times*, 16 May 2016, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/polish-catholics-bring-new-life-to-limerick-parish-1.2648913> (accessed 29 Dec. 2021).

Delay, Cara, 'Holy Water and a Twig: Catholic Households and Women's Religious Authority in Modern Ireland', *Journal of Family History* 43(3)(2018), pp. 302-19.

Delay, Cara, *Irish Women and the Creation of Modern Catholicism* (Manchester, 2019).

Elliot, Marianne, *The Catholics of Ulster: A History* (New York, 2001).

Fuller, Louise, *Irish Catholicism since 1950: The Undoing of a Culture* (Dublin, 2002).

Harris, Alana, *Faith in the Family: A Lived Religious History of English Catholicism, 1945-1982* (Manchester, 2013).

Heimann, Mary, 'The Secularization of St Francis of Assisi', *British Catholic History* 33(3)(2017), pp. 401-420.

Heimann, Mary, 'Medical and Mystical Opinion in British Catholicism: The Contentious Case of Teresa Higginson' in Tine Van Osselaer, Henk De Smaele and Kaat Wils (eds.), *Sign or Symptom? Exceptional Corporeal Phenomena in Religion and Medicine in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Leuven, 2017), pp. 75-100.

Taylor, Lawrence J. *Occasions of Faith: An Anthropology of Irish Catholics* (Philadelphia, 1995).