

# THE IRISH WAY

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FATHER WILLIAM DOYLE, S.J.

(1873—1917)

By FR. JAMES BRODRICK, S.J.

PERHAPS the Irish Way of being Catholic might best be described as the Way of the Cross. Ireland, indeed, has had no monopoly of martyrdom, but her share of it has been very great and almost unique in comprehensiveness. It is understandable, though wonderful and admirable, that a mighty people like the Germans should suffer economic martyrdom and yet come through triumphantly, but there are worse forms of martyrdom than the economic, and Ireland, puny and weak as a nation, suffered them all. She was robbed of her lands, her industries, her distinctive culture, once among the finest in Europe, her language, so full in its simplicities of God and His Mother as to be almost liturgical and, heaviest deprivation, the vast majority of her children. That this terrible spoliation, unparalleled in history, was in the main suffered for religion's sake is the verdict of impartial research. Thus Arthur Young, the famous English Protestant traveller, says as the result of his tour of the country, at the end of the eighteenth century :

“ The history of the two religions in Ireland is too generally known to require any detail introductory to the subject. . . . Upon the whole nineteenth century of the kingdom changed hands from Catholic to Protestant. The lineal descendants of great families,

once possessed of vast property, are now to be found all over the kingdom in the lowest situation, working as cottiers for the great-grandsons of men many of whom were of no greater account in England than these poor labourers are at present on that property which was once their own. So entire an overthrow and change of landed possession is, within the period, to be found in scarce any country in the world. . . . The poor Catholics in the South of Ireland . . . are under such discouragements that they cannot engage in any trade which requires both industry and capital. If they succeed and make a fortune, what are they to do with it? They can neither buy land nor take a mortgage nor even sign down the rent of a lease . . . The system pursued in Ireland has had no other tendency but that of driving out of the kingdom all the personal wealth of the Catholics and prohibiting their industry within it. The face of the country, every object, in short, which presents itself to the eye of the traveller, tells him how effectually this has been done. Oppression has, moreover, reduced the major part of the Irish Catholics to a poor ignorant rabble.”

And yet the “ rabble,” having been despoiled of all the precious things by which nations keep their souls alive, all except one, remained vitally a nation, a fact explicable only by some extraordinary quality in their Catholicism, in the special Irish Way of being Catholic.

That Way the Irish people learned from their own great Saints, beginning with St. Patrick. The distinctive mark of those Saints was their austerity and heroic love of the Cross. Notwithstanding disadvantages of climate, the Irish hermits of old “ successfully rivalled, in their extraordinary penances and austerities and vigils, the hermits of Egypt

and even those of Syria.”\* While in the Middle Ages, says an expert French authority, “it is quite certain that the Island of Saints was the most ascetic country in Europe.” That this very full acceptance of Our Lord’s condition for discipleship did not lessen in subsequent centuries is written plain in Ireland’s history. No soft or self-indulgent people, no people without the spirit of true Christian asceticism in their bones could have lived out the sixteenth century in Ireland unwaveringly loyal to their Faith. This they did, too, for the most part, without either spiritual or political leadership, since there is sad evidence to prove that the Irish bishops and priests of the mid-sixteenth century were no better than their brethren of Bavaria and Austria at that period. Bavaria and Austria, however, had powerful Catholic sovereigns to pull them through, whereas Ireland had only some squabbling chieftains for whom the survival of Catholicism was but a minor interest of warfare. It must, then, have been some quality in the common people that worked the miracle, and what that quality was is indicated by the observations of Barnaby Rich, a Protestant soldier in the army of Essex, who afterwards wrote a description of his Irish experiences. Naturally he found the common people of Ireland a murderous, plundering lot—but when it came to fasting and penitential exercises he was compelled to admit that not even Cardinal Bellarmine outshone them in austerity.†

But asceticism, the readiness to endure pain and privation for the sake of an ideal, would not have been enough to save Ireland’s soul. There has always been a more positive element—a glad acceptance of suffering, a holy eagerness for it, not merely as a spiritual drill or tonic, but as a participation in the Divine experience of Him Who, having

\* Cambridge Mediaeval History, Vol. I., p. 1534.

† Cardinal Bellarmine, now St. Robert Bellarmine, Doctor of the Church, was alive when Rich wrote, and the best known Catholic in the world.

joy set before Him, endured the Cross. An attentive reader of St. Patrick’s *Confession* must notice how full it is of St. Paul, how utterly Pauline St. Patrick himself was at heart. Through Patrick the teaching of the great Epistles on the Mystical Body of Christ and the *Pleroma* passed into Irish Catholicism, creating a tradition of personal devotion to Our Divine Lord and His Church which made everything suffered for His Name’s sake not only tolerable, but sweet. This trait of loving intimacy with Christ appears in the rhyme of an old chronicler about St. Comgall, the Founder and first Abbot of Bangor:

Amavit Deus Comgallum  
Bene, et ipse Dominum.

It is the explanation, too, or the best part of the explanation, of Ireland’s missionary effort from the days when St. Columcille, St. Columbanus and St. Gall founded their famous monasteries abroad\* to our own day when there is hardly a mission field in the world without its contingent of Irish priests and nuns.

Nor in the most modern times, in this present generation when we seem to be heading for the ghastly, painless *Brave New World* of Aldous Huxley, has Ireland forgotten the marked Christian asceticism and expiatory devotion of the past.† Other nations have their great shrines of Our Lady or the Saints to which the sick are brought from all over the world. Ireland has Lough Derg, but Lough Derg is not for the sick. They would be dead after a day of it. Lough Derg is unique in the world as being primarily and of set purpose a place of stern penance and expiation,

\* At least two hundred and fifty different localities in France, Belgium, Switzerland, Italy and Germany, are associated with the names and ministry of old Irish Saints.

† In this connection it is interesting to note that the one sane man in Mr. Huxley’s fierce satire on Fordian civilization reverts in disgust to the ascetical practices of Christian monasticism.

and it is significant that stalwart Irishmen and Irishwomen flock thither in ever increasing numbers for a period of spiritual purgation as drastic as the ancient Fathers of the Desert could have desired.\*

In other and more general practices, too, the same ascetic and penitential spirit is evident. Certainly no country in the world observes the Church's fasting legislation with the strictness of Ireland. Only a generation or two ago it was a common thing for men and women, including the aged, to touch no food during Lent until after sunset, and the writer has painful memories, dating from very tender years, of the black, sugarless tea and dry bread by which the significance of Ash Wednesday and Good Friday was burned into the small understanding of a child.

Another general feature of Irish Catholicism which the careful observer cannot fail to note is what might be called its starkness and independence of all that is not strictly essential. Thus, the Irish people as a whole have no marked devotion to the solemn liturgy of the Church. But it was of them that the Nonconformist English statesman was speaking when he said: "It is the Mass that matters"—the ordinary Low Mass which, in penal times, they risked their lives to hear as it was said by some hunted priest on a bare rock of the hillside. Those Mass-rocks of Ireland are truly symbolic of the Irish Way. Again, devotion to the Mother of God is certainly no less strong in Ireland than in any Catholic country, yet Ireland has never had a famous shrine of Our Lady such as pre-reformation Walsingham. Finally, nothing in her religion has meant more to Ireland than the Passion of Our Divine Lord. It has, of course, meant the world to other peoples, too, to the peasantry of the Black Forest, for instance, but

\* It was a great wish and, indeed, determination of our present Holy Father, Pope Pius XI, to make the Lough Derg pilgrimage, until his election to St. Peter's Chair rendered the project impossible.

with a remarkable difference. The Black Forest is positively sown with wayside Calvaries and there are practically none of them in Ireland. These are but a few instances of a phenomenon noticeable in Irish Catholicism, a restraint in the externalization of devotional impulse which may be due in part to the repression of penal times, but it is almost certainly mainly rooted in the ascetical spirit of the people. Like their beloved Mother Mary, they keep these things in their hearts. It would probably not be very far out to say that the true Irishman is austere by nature despite the gaiety with which he is credited. When that austerity is pressed into the service of an ideal, whether of this world or the next, it easily becomes heroic, as witness cultured, Protestant Mitchel, rotting on a felons' hulk, but magnificently defiant of "Gaffer Bull" to the last; one-armed Davitt lecturing to his pet blackbird in Portland Gaol; saintly Pearse struggling against poverty and derision in his Gaelic school, and then with his toy sword and box of soldiers challenging Great Jove himself to the encounter.

Of their breed was Father Willie Doyle, though the cause for which he lived and died had no visible flag to assert its nobility. Speaking of Father Doyle's earliest days in the Dalkey of the seventies, his old nurse reported: "His love to be a soldier even from his babyhood was wonderful—to fight for Ireland," and long afterwards as a man, it was his "burning love for Ireland" that, next to his sanctity, most impressed his dear English friend, Father Charles Plater.\* Indeed, Willie Doyle was Irish to the core of him, and more Irish in the profoundest, Catholic sense than any but a few intimates suspected, until after a German

\* These and all the following details of Father Doyle's life are, of course, taken from Professor O'Rahilly's Classic biography (fourth edition, 1930), one of the finest, wisest, most inspiring and learned religious books ever published. It has been translated into the principal European languages and has made Father Doyle the possession not only of Irish, but of universal Catholicism.

shell had sent him to heaven, his biography dropped like another one in the midst of our Christian complacencies.

William Doyle, educated in England by the sons of Antonio Rosmini, on whom the Jesuit *Liberatore* had waged fierce, philosophical war, entered the Irish Novitiate of the Society of Jesus in March, 1891, as the direct result of reading a small book on the religious life by the Founder of the Redemptorists. After following the normal Jesuit course of college work and study, he was ordained priest in 1907. Between 1908 and 1915 he gave 152 missions and retreats, characterized, say those who made them, by amazing energy and devotedness, though his health was very bad. In 1916 he went to the Front as chaplain to an Irish Regiment, and in August of the following year was killed during a battle while out in the open ministering to a wounded soldier.

That is the outline of Father Doyle's story, forty-four years of humdrum existence with no great learning nor achievement of beauty to crown it, and for romance, only a flash at the end. Of course, even during his lifetime it was known to those who lived with him or came under his influence that he was an exceptionally holy and zealous priest. At the time of his death, too, newspapers of every complexion rang with praise of his matchless courage and devotion to duty, and a brother chaplain, a Scotsman, published his considered judgment that he had merited the V.C. "not once alone, but twenty times," though he never received it. But these facts by themselves would not have sent Father Doyle's name round the world, for there were other priests who lived holily and died heroically without anybody knowing except their immediate circle and God. What caused the stir in Father Doyle's case and made the reviewers gasp was the revelation in Professor O'Rahilly's book, first published in 1920, of a hidden life of prayer, penance, expiatory suffering and divine love

that seemed to have come straight out of the deserts of Egypt or the cloisters of the Middle Ages. The surprise could hardly have been greater in some quarters if Simeon Stylites had been found one morning on the top of Nelson's Pillar in O'Connell Street, or Trafalgar Square. Was not this the twentieth century, and was not Father Doyle, by all accounts, a perfectly normal Roman priest, handsomer, perhaps, and better-groomed than most, a good mixer, jolly and humorous, a gentleman and man of the world? . . . It was and he was ; and so, by the testimony of St. Athanasius, was St. Anthony of Egypt a gentleman and man of the world. Such a life as Father Doyle's makes hay of our narrow categories. It was a life externally full of human charm, for like his great brother Jesuit, St. Robert Bellarmine, Father Doyle was emphatically "D'humeur fort gaie,"\* and loved innocent fun, sweet cakes and Irish butter as well as any man. "Violent temptation to eat cake and resisted several times," is one of the entries in his spiritual diaries, which, but for the accident of his death on the battlefield, might never have been published, as he had left instructions that they were to be burned. Professor O'Rahilly explains the reasons which caused relative and superiors to overrule the dead man's wishes and to any fair-minded reader they must appear perfectly convincing. Father Doyle had kept such records for a long period as a check on his progress in the love and service of God. It was a common practice with the great Saints. Among the earliest of the documents is the following scrap, written when he was a novice :

A.M.D.G. ac B.V.M.

My Martyrdom for Mary's Sake.

"Darling Mother Mary, in preparation for the glorious martyrdom which I feel assured thou art

\* The words of Bishop Camus who knew St. Robert personally.

going to obtain for me, I, thy most unworthy child, on this the first day of thy month, solemnly commence my life of slow martyrdom by earnest hard work and constant self-denial. *With my blood I promise thee to keep this resolution. Do thou, sweet Mother, assist me and obtain for me the one favour I wish and long for: To die a Jesuit Martyr.* May 1st, 1893."

The words here given in italics were written by Father Doyle in his own blood, and far from being a mere specimen of noviceship heroics, they registered one of the dominant desires of his life. Even as a boy he had begun to hunger after hardship, and to school his ardent and restive young heart. Very impetuous by nature, hot-tempered and active-minded, he soon realised that only by a steady, ruthless process of self-discipline could he find his own soul and the fulness of God. So he set to work in the way taught by St. Ignatius, taking this fault and that, one at a time, making resolutions, breaking them, and making them again, giving his natural appetites and inclinations a thousand pin-pricks a day till they were forced into the service of the great love that encompassed his being. Like the child of the ballad, not through a summer's day, but for a score of years, he

Piled up small stones to make a town,  
And evermore the stones fell down  
And he piled them up again.

The story of his daily denials, kept a guarded secret from those around him, and still more the story of his self-inflicted sufferings, all to satisfy the love of his Crucified Master, which more and more devoured him, read like chapters from Blessed Henry Suso or St. John of the Cross. "Last night I rose at twelve," he wrote in 1915, "and knelt in the cellar for an hour to suffer from the cold. It was a hard fight to do so, but Jesus helped me. I said my rosary

with arms extended. At the third mystery the pain was so great that I felt I could not possibly continue; but at each *Ave* I prayed for strength and was able to finish it. This has given me great consolation by showing the many hard things I could do with the help of prayer." The many hard things, what a list they make! They are Father Doyle's "holy follies," the very exuberance of love which as à Kempis says, "often knows no measure but grows fervent beyond all measure." He would rise at midnight, tie his arms in the form of a cross and remain before the Blessed Sacrament in that position for three hours on end. During the winter he used to slip out of the house in his night-shirt at 3 o'clock in the morning, and stand, up to his neck, in a frozen pond, praying for sinners. Several times he undressed and rolled in furze bushes—"for Jesus' love," as he adds in his record. In an intimate letter he recalls a certain day on which "the love of Jesus Crucified was burning in my heart with the old longing to suffer much for Him, and even give Him my life by martyrdom. This thought was in my mind when, crossing a lonely field late that evening, I came across a forest of old nettles. Here was a chance! Had not the saints suffered in this way for Him with joy and gladness of heart? I undressed and walked up and down until my whole body was one big blister, smarting and stinging. Words could never describe the sweet but horrible agony from that moment till far into the next day. . . . More than once I knelt by my bed and offered Him my life, as I felt I could not live, and then in my weakness begged Him to have pity on me and yet the moment after He gave me strength to murmur: 'Still more, dear Lord, a thousand times more for Your dear love.'" To apply the maxims of jog-trot prudence to such deeds is about as helpful as trying to find the temperature of the sun with a clinical thermometer. And there were hundreds of such deeds in Father Doyle's life, efforts of

finite love to come to terms with the Infinite. As the Curé of Ars used to say : " To be a saint it is necessary to be beside oneself, to lose one's head entirely." Father Doyle's one aim in all his terrible wooing of pain was to fill up what is wanting in the sufferings of Christ, to be clothed, as the Jesuit rule demands, in His garment and livery, to make reparation to His Sacred Heart for the neglect and outrages of a sinful, ungrateful world. " He seems pleased," he wrote, " when I am alone in the chapel, if I kneel close to Him, uncover my breast and ask Him again to pour His grace and love into my heart. I often press my throbbing heart to the door of the Tabernacle to let Him hear its beats of love ; and once to ease the pain of love, I tried with a penknife to cut the sweet Name of Jesus on my breast. It was not a success, for I suppose my courage failed ; I did try a heated iron, but it caused an ugly sore." On another occasion he said : " I know not why I am writing this except it be to ease my straining heart, for at times I feel half mad with the love of God."

So the grain of wheat that had died in the ground ripened to its golden maturity. The Irish Way of being Catholic, the good and gallant old way of mortification and self-denial proved once again in Willie Doyle its perennial efficacy. Matt Talbot and he both went the way of the Irish Saints, and it led them, as it will any man who follows it steadily and bravely, beyond all petty scepticisms and hesitations to the top of God's mountain. There is no word in Father Doyle about the Mystery of Suffering with which the modern world is so anxiously and unavailingly concerned. He had found his way to the Heavenward side of the mystery and discovered, like so many great and simple souls whose metaphysics were negligible, that its other face is love. That is, perhaps, the greatest lesson which his life and the history of Catholicism in his country teach us. The solution of our trouble is under our noses : *Solvitur patiendo.*