

HISTORY OF KILRUSH

BY

Archdeacon P. Ryan

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Fr. Tim Kelly, who died Parish Priest of Kilrush on March 15, 1869, was born at Craggaknock in the parish of Kilmurry Ibrickane of John Kelly and Anne Butler (Crusheen Parish) in the year 1803. John Kelly belonged to the third generation of the family resident at Craggaknock. The present descendants are in the eight generation. Tim Kelly entered Maynooth College where he was distinguished as a student and graduated to the Dunboyne establishment to pursue a higher course of studies. Exigencies of the mission, however, resulted in his return to the diocese. In the year 1831 he was appointed Parish Priest of Cooraclare and Kilmihiill which were then a parochial unit. He was then twenty eight years of age. After a three years pastorate he felt the need of a new church at Kilmihiill as the Masses of obligation had to be offered in wayside chapels which were no better than barns, and not infrequently, were employed for such purposes between the intervals they were used for public worship. These improvised buildings were often located in remote areas, and so, the need for a centrally placed church at Kilmihiill met the need of a very large extent of the combined parishes. The Pastor's difficulty was finance, as much of the area was bogland and mountain, holdings were small and the owners were very poor.

ERECTION OF KILMIHILL CHURCH

Fr. Kelly canvassed local opinion in what is now the Kilmihiill parish area, as to the prospects of erecting a church at Kilmihiill. The advice tendered to him was not encouraging. One can understand the hesitancy of well-intentioned people in view of the prevailing poverty and the always present fear of landlord revenge. None the less, the optimistic Pastor procured a site, had the foundations dug, and a public meeting was convened at the site. One amidst those present, a man of slender means, inquired of Fr. Kelly what he proposed to do. Availing of the query addressed to him, the anxious priest reminded his questioner of the peoples cruel yet heroic past and the future religious and civil opportunities recently made available to them through Emancipation, and appealed for goodwill and co-operation. A tear of joy glistened in the eye of the inquirer - (Fr. James Carey's grandfather). He took a purse from an inner pocket and handed the Pastor a half-sovereign, with an added blessing. The effect was electric. A cheer rose from the admiring crowd. Contributions began to filter in. The church at Kilmihiill was built and paid for - an achievement - in 1834.

Two years later he built the present church at Cooraclare. Here, owing to

landlord hostility, a swamp had to be availed of for a site. It was little larger than the area of the Church, and access to it was through a narrow lane-way. At a later date, the present grounds were added to the original site. The Cooraclare Church is a substantial commodious building and was opened in 1836. Later Cree Church was built from funds made available from Fr. Tim Kelly's predecessor - Fr. Patrick Kelly - known as "priest" Kelly, because of his herculean stand against the local ascendancy classes of the period. These three Churches built in rapid succession and in the teeth of poverty made adequate provision for the religious needs of all areas in the parish. These, together with seven schools - the first since the hedge schools, were the building activities of the youthful pastor. Fifteen years of religious and educational progress to which penal memories were gradually yielding, had thus passed, when the terrible scourge of the famine descended upon his parish 1845-1847. His reaction to the prevailing distress was what one would expect of the Pastor and the man sprung from the people. He was in every sense the father of his flock. He organised the provision of meals for the numbers who were starving and when every resource failed, he sold all he had - even his horse - to buy food for the people. His extraordinary charity became a general topic of conversation not alone locally, but even as far as Dublin. In the latter place he exercised far-reaching influence in Government and philanthropic centres to provide food for his parishioners. Fr. Kelly resided at Leitrim.

In October 1848 Fr. Kelly was transferred as Parish Priest to Kilrush. His coming was hailed with joy for his new parishioners were well aware that a man of rare worth was coming to them, whilst his departure from Kilmacduane and Kilmihiill occasioned untold regret. At Kilrush Fr. Kelly found the shell of the present magnificent Church, which had been erected by his predecessor - Fr. Kenny, whose family lived at Tirmana in the Kilmurry Ibrikane Parish. St. Senan's Kilrush was opened in 1839 and the inaugural sermon was preached by the illustrious Fr. Theobald Matthew, O.F.M.Cap. When opened to public worship the sacred edifice consisted of four walls and a slated roof. The walls were not plastered on the inside nor was the roofing ceiled. There was no church furniture except an improvised altar. On the morrow of the famine, Fr. Kelly soon set himself to the task of completing the church. The walls were plastered on the inside and the roofing was ceiled. Three altars were erected. The wooden High Alter was replaced about eighty years ago. It presently does service in the Parish out church at Monmore. The nave and transepts of the Church was floored with good regular flags. A 'sanctuary' in front of the sanctuary proper was boarded, seats for the entire floor space of the Church, including the galleries, were provided and an organ, pulpit and four confessionals were soon added to the interior equipment of the Church. The present spire was erected on the tower which formed part of the original

fabric and the present artistic porch and sacristy were built. The entire cost of the present church as completed by Fr. Kelly was £3,000, which was paid off by the energetic Pastor in a few years.

To understand the magnitude of this task one must bear in mind the conditions that prevailed in Kilrush and the surrounding parishes during the famine and the years that immediately followed it. As I write this I have before me "Paper 1089 entitled Extracts and Returns relating to evictions in the Kilrush Union" from Captain Kennedy's Blue Book report P.48 year 1849. A perusal of the report indicates that for the two years 1848 - 49 an average of 150 families a week within the Kilrush Union area were evicted from their homes and thrown out on the roadside. Most of these were tenants at will who had paid a rack rent to date but who, because of landlord malignity - the spirit of Cromwell and the conquest was rampant even in the 19th century - or middleman rapacity, were heartlessly and ruthlessly evicted from the homes that were the scenes of the weddings, christenings and funerals of generations of their kith and kin. Twenty four thousand evicted people lived either on "scalps" by the wayside or came in terror to endure a living death either in the old workhouse or the then Auxiliary Hospital. From these they were carted in trap coffins where the corpses were dumped into open dykes, the remains of which can be still seen at Shanakyle. It may be of interest to mention that the old workhouse, dismantled for some years, is now a newly built-up area (St. Patrick's Terrace). The Auxiliary Hospital later became a National School and went into disuse with the building and opening of the present National School in 1899. I went to school there for a period and although unaware of the grim history attaching to the place, it somehow even then exhaled the atmosphere of the 'bad times'. It gave the unenviable name of Paupers' Quay to the residential roadway leading to it. "Irish Marine Products" now occupy the building. These two institutions - the Workhouse and the Auxiliary Hospital or the knowledge of them have, for one born in the area, a memory such as Dachau or Belsen will have for a decent German of the closing years of the 20th century.

I recall those snippets from local contemporary history to indicate the conditions under which Fr. Kelly had to meet the payment of the debt on his new Church. Kilrush was at the period the capital of West Clare's misery which pivoted on the town, and priests and business people had to face the varying reactions of wholesale evictions with their resultant famine and pestilence. At the risk of irrelevancy I shall refer to another incident that happened at this period. It portrays the Pastor of Kilrush as the champion and defender of the stricken. I refer to the terrible drowning that occurred at the Ferry that links Kilrush with areas in the former parish of Moyarta. On the evening of December 12, 1849, a number of men, estimated from 35 to 45 from Comoge, Rathanske, Tullaroe, Querrin

and further to the West returned to the Ferry having spent the day in vain in Kilrush at the doors of shopkeepers and Parish Priest in search of food. Their effort was fruitless for no food remained. They tramped to the Ferry without having broken their fast that day. With dismal hearts they crowded into the Ferry boat. In its passage across the ferry, the overcrowded boat was borne by the heavy receding tide from Pulnasherry Bay to a point known as Grawhaw adjacent to Commoge. There the boat was sharply whirled almost at right angles and overturned notwithstanding the seamanship of the boatman, Jonathan Brew, and all but four were lost. This appalling tragedy was the occasion of the following letter written by Fr. Kelly to the Earl of Claredon, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland:

Kilrush.

December 13, 1849.

My Lord: Fully sensible of your pressing engagements I am unwilling to trespass on your Excellency; yet, from the heartrending scenes which have occurred in this district within the last few days, I feel it a duty briefly to offer our distressed situation to your Excellency's consideration.

"In this Union (Kilrush) the poorest in Ireland, during the summer months thirty thousand persons, half the present population, received our - door relief. Of these nearly twenty thousand have been, within the last year, thrown houseless and homeless on the world. I shall not harrow Your Excellency's tender feelings by a description of their miserable state; whole families huddled together in miserable huts, in appearance more like corpses from the sepulchre than animated beings. Several philanthropic Englishmen who have visited the district and seen with their own eyes our condition, have, I presume, already given to Your Excellency a faint idea of our state. Yet the cup of our misery has only within the last fortnight been filled up. Not a single ounce of meal or any our-door relief has been administered for the last ten days. Our Poor House contains over two thousand inmates; of these, nine hundred are children of a delicate frame and constitution; yet the young as well as the old are fed on turnips for the last week. Thousands from the neighbouring parishes, deprived of our-door relief, crowd about the Union workhouses; there disappointed, they surround the houses of the shopkeeper and the struggling farmer, and their lamentations - their hunger shrieks - are truly heartrending. But, my Lord, I am gratified to say that no property is touched - no threat held forth. I know whole families in this town to lie down on their beds of straw determined rather to starve than to steal. It is true that no means are left untried to alleviate their miseries by many, very many, charitable persons, of whom it may be said that, if they could coin their hearts into gold, they would give it to the poor in their present extreme necessity. Yet what avail their efforts to meet the present awful destitution!

"It was determined that a public meeting would be held to address Your

Excellency; but when a report - alas! a true report - reached us, that thirty five paupers from Moyarta parish, a distance of fifteen miles (by road), in the hope to be relieved at the Workhouse, were all - all drowned whilst crossing a narrow ferry, I considered it my duty not to lose a moment in communicating to Your Excellency our awful situation which may be imagined but cannot be described. One week more and no food. The honest, peaceable poor of this district fall like leaves in Autumn.

"I feel in thus addressing Your Excellency I take a bold step, but your sympathy for the poor has encouraged me. Never, never be it said that during Your Excellency's administration half the population in a remote and wretched district were suffered to starve. I write in a hurry - I write in confusion. My house at this moment is surrounded by a crowd of poor persons, whose blood has become water, seeking relief, which alas! I cannot bestow.

Anxiously and confidently expecting at your Excellency's hands a remedy, I have the honour to be Your Excellency's obedient and humble servant.

Timothy Kelly, P.P. Kilrush.

Needless to say nothing came of the Pastor's representations. He appealed that the public authority would enable a starving population to exist. The nonchalant indifference of the government showed that the only right it recognised on the part of the perishing multitudes in West Clare was the right to be evicted, to suffer and to die.

Another incident in which Fr. Kelly played a providential part. In mid-May 1849 Fr. Malachy Duggan, P.P. Carrigaholt and his two curates were stricken with cholera. Fr. Duggan celebrated Mass at Doonaha on the Sunday when he was struck down with the disease. Word was sent to Kilrush that afternoon that the peninsula was without a priest. Fr. Kelly and one of his Curates, Fr. Meehan, walked to the Ferry which they crossed in the ferryboat. On their way to the Parochial House at Carrigaholt, a distance of seven miles from the Ferry, they attended forty cases of cholera and famine fever. At Carrigaholt the last Sacraments were administered to Fr. Duggan who died on May 19, 1849. Fr. Kelly left his Curate after him in Carrigaholt to assist there until alternative provision would be made. The action was providential as Fr. Meehan replaced Fr. Malachy Duggan. As the illustrious Fr. Meehan of "The Little Ark" he was the hero and saviour of his flock.

The first of many great missions in Kilrush was brought to a close on May 28, 1854. On that day under the inspiration of their Pastor "the people of Kilrush anxious to perpetuate the recollection of the glorious Jesuit mission - have determined as a lasting commemoration of the event to establish immediately a branch of the Sisters of Mercy". In pursuance of the above object the

following resolutions were adopted at the close of the Mission: "Proposed by Michael McInerney, seconded by Patrick Scanlan - Resolved, That Very Rev. Timothy Kelly, P.P. do take the chair. The Chairman having explained the object of the meeting, it was proposed by Matt Kelly, M.N.B. (brother of Fr. Tim Kelly) and seconded by Michael McDonnell that Richard Foley act as Secretary. Proposed by Thomas Gibson and seconded by John Kelly - resolved - That the Religious requirements of Kilrush imperatively demand the establishment amongst us of a branch of the good Sisters of Mercy. Proposed by James Scanlan. Seconded by Michael Ryan - resolved - That immediate steps be taken for the establishing among us a Convent of Mercy for our own benefit and that of the surrounding country. Proposed by Doctor William Foley, seconded by Daniel Bugler - resolved - That our Secretary be directed to open a Subscription List whereon shall be enrolled the name of every subscriber to this glorious undertaking; which list shall be carefully preserved, printed and handed down to posterity, as a lasting record of the zeal for God's honour on the part of those who shall assist in this noble work. Proposed by Michael Glynn. Seconded by Denis Hynes - resolved - That the funds be placed to the credit of the Committee in the National Bank. Proposed by Counsellor O'Gorman, seconded by John McNamara, resolved - That a Committee be formed, with power to add to their numbers for carrying out these resolutions.

The people of Kilrush most respectfully appeal to a generous Christian public to assist them in this noble work for the honour of God and the promotion of virtue, Religion and truth. Nor do they ask for assistance without their having themselves put an earnest hand to the plough, as will be seen by the following subscription list. If the sums seem small, they beg their friends and fellow-countrymen to bear in mind that they have just raised, under the guidance of their late, dear Pastor, Dean Kenny - a temple to the living God, at an expense of over four thousand pounds. They also beg to direct attention to the fact that the population of their town is but 4,000. Every reader of the History of much afflicted Ireland - comprised within the last seven years - must be aware how heavily the famine scourge has pressed on this locality in particular. Thus it will be seen that want of means, not inclination, makes this appeal necessary.

The first subscriptions towards the establishment of the new foundation of the Sisters of Mercy at Kilrush was encouraging. Fr. Kelly in due course began the building of the present Convent of Mercy. It is the finest building in all West Clare, and is a monument to his zeal, energy and artistic taste.

In later years he fulfilled the ambition of his life. It was a visit to the Eternal City. Having visited Rome and seen the Holy Father Pope Pius IX, he felt like Simeon that he could pronounce his "nunc dimittis servum tuum Domine".

He lived at Frances St., in the building now occupied by the Christian Brothers. It was his personal property and he bequeathed it to the Christian Brothers in the event of their coming to Kilrush. He died on 15th March, 1869. The obsequies took place on March 17 and since those of St. Senan himself, there is not on record here in the West anything to compare with the tribute of veneration paid to their faithful Sagart, not alone by his parishioners, but by the public of West Clare when his remains were borne through the town and on to Cappagh and back to their resting place within the Church, near which there is that lifelike monument to him in marble erected by a grateful and appreciative people. There is a portrait of him in oils at the Mercy Convent, Kilrush.

Judged by standards of priestly attainment, Fr. Tim Kelly was a man of acknowledged sanctity, selflessness, intellectual calibre, pastoral activity and achievement comparable with the best of his time within his own country. Familiar as I am with the outstanding reputation he enjoyed in three present West Clare parishes, and having heard of him at first-hand from many who knew him, I feel that no priest ever known to have belonged to the Corcabhascin territory has been his peer as a priest, or none that is known to have ministered there - and it has had its celebrities - capable of bearing all-round comparison with him. I regard Fr. Tim Kelly as the greatest ecclesiastic that adorned this countryside since St. Sinon himself.

This article was written by Venerable Archdeacon Peter Ryan, P.P., V.G., Kilrush, who died on July 11, 1972.

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Rev. W. Moloney P.P.	10	0	0
Patt. Breen	2	0	0
Thomas Lillis	2	0	0
Timothy Kelly, bree	2	0	0
Daniel Kelly, blohanbeg.	2	0	0
Matt. Breen	1	0	0
Michael Breen	1	0	0
Daniel Sheedy	1	0	0
James Breen	1	0	0
Cornelius Mc Dermott	1	0	0
Charles Bullinan	1	0	0
Edward Ballinan, Dromelichy	1	0	0
A Friend	1	0	0
Thomas Moloney	1	0	0
Thomas Mc Mahon	1	0	0
Patt. Borry, blonreddan	1	0	0
John Kelly, Tullabrack.	1	0	0
Thomas Browne, Danganelly	1	0	0
Joseph Kenny, Tiernaglahane	1	0	0
Daniel Garry, Dromelichy	1	0	0
Michael Considine, "	1	0	0
Mr. Reidy, bloncillen	1	0	0
Michael Studdart.	1	0	0
Thomas Studdart.	1	0	0
Michael Griffin, Gower	1	0	0
James Kelly, bree	1	0	0
John Carey, "	1	0	0
John Broddy	1	0	0
Thomas Killeen, blohanmore	1	0	0
Simon Carey, Ballinagun	1	0	0
John Reidy, "	1	0	0
Patrick Reidy, "	1	0	0
John Keane, "	1	0	0
John Sullivan, blohanbeg	1	0	0
Patrick Griffin, baherfinick	1	0	0
Mr. Williams browley, Leitrim		10	0

Thomas broddy, Gower	5	0
Frank Keane, " "	5	0
Pat. Hickey, Kilmacduane.	5	0
John Bullinan, " "	5	0
Dan Breen, " "	5	0
Patt. " " "	5	0
Patt. Mc Inerney, bookadate	5	0
Patt. Galvin, " "	5	0
Thomas Keniry	5	0
John Bullinan	5	0
Michael O'Dea, Dangan	5	0
Pat. Lynch, Gower	5	0
Thomas Bullinan, Aughagarna	5	0
Widow Chambers, " "	5	0
John Tennell, Bristla	5	0
Thomas Gorman, " "	5	0
Jeremiah Mescall, " "	5	0
Michael Browley, Ballinagun	5	0
J. Madigan (Teacher), " "	5	0
Martin Browley, Bat " "	5	0
Mr. James Browley, Leitrim	5	0
Mr. Thomas Kelly, blohanbeg	5	0
Denis Hurley	5	0
John Murrighy, bloureddan	5	0
Thomas Chambers, blonfineen	5	0
Pat. Mc Mahon	5	0
Thomas Bullinan, Danganelly	5	0
Michael Markham	5	0
Denis Mc Namara	5	0
Patrick Carey, Bree	5	0
John Queally	5	0
Michael Neylon, Bakerfinick	5	0
Michael Boland, " "	5	0
Matthias Mescall	5	0
Matthew Birmingham, Bree	5	0
Pat. Mc Mahon, blohanemore.	5	0

Mr. Thomas Morrissey, Bree	10	0
Martin Consideine, Tullabrack.	10	0
Michael Ballinan, "	10	0
Edmund Ballinan, "	10	0
William Carey, "	10	0
Michael Tubridy, "	10	0
John Tubridy, "	10	0
Simon Shalloo, Lower	10	0
John Duggan,	10	0
Charles Sullivan	10	0
John Downes, blonreddan	10	0
Pat. Lennihan, blonina	10	0
Daniel Mc Grath, Dromelichy	10	0
Pat. Tubridy, Clohanemore	10	0
Pat. Reidy, Ballinagun	10	0
Michael Healy, "	10	0
Thomas Healy, "	10	0
Michael Browley, "	10	0
John Dillon	10	0
John & Michael Lynch	10	0
Honor M ^s Dermott, Caherfinck	10	0
Mr. Nash, Clohanemore	10	0
Michael Kelly, "	10	0
Simon O'Dea, blonina	10	0
Tim Kelly	10	0
Austin O'Dea	4	6
Pat. Browley, Ballinagun	4	6
James Reidy,	4	0
Miss Callinan, Tullabrack	4	0
John O'Dea	4	0
Denis Canny, barhue.	5	6
Thomas Morrissey, blomeddan	5	0
John Morrissey, "	5	0
Martin Morrissey, "	5	0
Pat. Morrissey, "	5	0
Widow Murraby, "	5	0

book-charge.

	£	s	d
Pat. Cunningham, bree		5	0
Michael Kelly, blonina		5	0
Pat. Sullivan, bree		4	0
Conor Quinn		3	0
Michael White, blonreddan		2	6
William Carey, "		2	6
Darby Cousins, Acres		2	6
Patrick Chambers, Bromelighy		2	6
Sinow Scanlan		2	6
James Mc Inerney		2	6
Michael Hartney		2	6
John Browne		2	6
Thomas Lynch		2	6
James Chambers		2	6
John Lahiff		2	6
John Downes		2	6
Thomas Lillis		2	6
John Kelly, Cashue.		2	6
Martin Morrissey		2	6
Roger Lorigan		2	6
Pat. O'Brien		2	6
Michael O'Brien		2	6
Jim Kelly		2	6
James Browne		2	6
John Carey, bluschtown		2	6
James Mullins, blohanemore		2	6
Darby O'Neill		2	6
John Mc Namara, bree		2	6
Mr. Mc Inerney		2	6
Conor Sullivan, bree		2	6
Patrick Mullins, "		2	6
Thomas Markham, "		2	0