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# Denis Harty — Vicar Apostolic of Killaloe 1657-1667

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by Ignatius Murphy

Denis Harty was born in the late sixteenth century in Lower Ormond, very probably in Killodiernan (near Puckane), where he is buried. While documents of the mid-1660s differ about his age, describing him as being in his 60s, 70s, or 80s, it is clear that he was quite elderly at the time and at least in his mid 70s. This puts his date of birth at 1590 or slightly earlier.<sup>1</sup>

The available biographical information about Denis Harty is very meagre. Following the usual practice of the time, he had to go abroad to study theology. It is clear that he had a distinguished academic career in Spain, because in a brief biographical note compiled by the inter-nuncio in Brussels in 1664 Harty is described as a doctor of theology and a doctor of canon and civil law of the university of Salamanca.<sup>2</sup> Other sources refer only to his doctorate in theology.

By 1635 Denis Harty was dean of Killaloe diocese when, with five other priests, he complained to Rome about taxes being levied on the priests by Bishop John O'Molony I. In 1637 the Vicar Apostolic of Clonmacnoise forwarded to Rome copies of depositions he had taken from Denis Harty, dean of the diocese; Donagh Harty, chancellor of the diocese and vicar of Birr; Thomas Meara, vicar of Bournea; Charles Hogan, vicar of Roscrea; Dermot Meara, vicar of Ballymackey, and two other priests (Richard Markey and Morgan McIngan) whose parishes were not named.

The dispute was a very serious one as the Bishop of Ossory and the Archbishops of Cashel and Tuam were involved at various times. The Archbishop of Tuam, Malachy O'Queally, was a native of county Clare and Vicar Apostolic of Killaloe diocese when appointed to Tuam in 1630. However, he made little progress with his former co-diocesan, Bishop John O'Molony I, who was very annoyed by the charges made against him. O'Molony refused to meet O'Queally, or to acknowledge his commission from Rome. The bishop of Killaloe was similarly brusque with Archbishop Walsh of Cashel.

As the dispute developed, it became clear that the complainants were in a minority. In 1637 a group of 48 Killaloe priests signed a statement acknowledging that Bishop O'Molony had never burdened his clergy with excessive taxes. The dispute seems to have come to an end in 1639, when Bishop Rothe of Ossory reported that the Archbishop of Cashel and the Bishop of Killaloe had settled their differences.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, as Dean Harty had been leader of the complaints, the dispute must have created severe difficulties in his relationship with his bishop.

The Calendar of State Papers for 1641 contains an unusual report about a priest whom it names as Donogh O'Tartie, which is clearly a misprint for Donogh O'Hartie:

Not long since Donogh O'Tartie, son of Hugh O'Tartie, some time an English Protestant Minister, said or sang his first Mass in the open between the Lough of Rahone and the highway that leadeth to Moderinith, where were assembled near 3,000 persons, which offered some a colt, some a cow, some sheep, some a hog, some money.

Dermot F. Gleeson, commenting on this report, states that 'the lake of Rahone is the modern Lahorna or Ashley Park, and the highway to Modereeney the road from Nenagh to Birr via Graigue or Beechwood.' He assumes that Donogh O'Hartie is the same as Denis Harty, dean



of the diocese. However, this is extremely unlikely, particularly as we know that there was a Donagh Harty, vicar of Birr and chancellor of the diocese, who signed the complaint in 1635. It is very probable that Denis and Donogh were related, as they came from the same area.<sup>4</sup>

## Cromwellian Rule

The rising of 1641 led to the establishment in the following year of the Catholic Confederation of Kilkenny, which controlled most of Ireland during the remainder of the 1640s. In the areas under Confederate rule the churches were taken over again by the Catholics, and Catholic worship restored. The political situation was extremely complex, and when Oliver Cromwell landed in Dublin on 15 August 1649 he found the divided opposition an easy prey.

By the time of his return to England in May 1650 the war was moving slowly to a close. After a siege of six months Limerick fell to Henry Ireton in October 1651. Shortly before the surrender, Bishop John O'Molony I caught the plague and died in the city. His fellow bishop, Terence Albert O'Brien of Emly, a former Dominican prior of Lorrha, was captured and executed.

Under Cromwellian rule the Catholic Church in Ireland suffered persecution of greater intensity than at any time before or after. There was no place for it under the new regime, and the decision to ban 'popery' involved the total elimination of the Catholic clergy. Patrick J. Corish has described the situation of priests in the 1650s:<sup>5</sup>

They could not turn to the laity for shelter and support, for this would have exposed their hosts to too much risk. They lived in huts in the bogs, in the woods, or on the mountains. They were probably safest in the towns, where some are known to have carried on a rather daring ministry under one disguise or another. However, as a general rule the priests moved about by night, saying Mass in some guarded retreat at or before daybreak. It was certainly in this decade that the tradition of the 'Mass-rock' stamped itself on the Irish experience.

Two priests of Killaloe diocese, Roger Normoyle, parish priest of Inagh, and Hugh Carrigy, a man in his mid 70s, were hanged in Inagh cemetery by Cromwellian soldiers on 12 October 1652.<sup>6</sup> However, the usual policy towards priests after the war had ended was deportation rather than execution. The more fortunate were allowed to leave the country and go to Spain with the soldiers of the defeated Irish armies. Others were transported to the Barbadoes or, in the late 1650s, sent to Inisboffin Island off the west coast.

Denis Harty, who was appointed vicar general and given charge of Killaloe diocese after the bishop's death, was among those expelled to Spain. While in Spain he was nominated as Vicar Apostolic of Killaloe in April 1657. The Vicar Apostolic, although in charge of a diocese, was not a bishop and his appointment generally occurred when there were serious difficulties with the civil power. The problems of the Cromwellian era were reflected in the appointment of vicars apostolic to eleven Irish dioceses in 1657.

## Report to Rome

It is not known when Denis Harty received news that he had been nominated vicar apostolic. He left Spain in the summer of 1659 and travelled home through Paris, where he was given his document of appointment. He arrived in Dublin on 7 November. Cromwell had died on 3 September of the previous year (1658) but the restoration of the monarchy did not take place until 1660, when Charles was proclaimed king in Dublin on 14 May.



In the meantime Denis Harty had been busy in his diocese. On 30 October 1660 he wrote to the Congregation of Propaganda in Rome reporting on his own experiences under the Cromwellians and the condition in which he found the diocese on his return. The letter, from the archives of Propaganda, has not been published previously. The original is in Latin.<sup>1</sup>

Your Eminences,

*Having been appointed a short time ago by his Holiness as Vicar Apostolic on your recommendation, despite my unworthiness, I would now be seriously failing in my duty if I did not inform you about the present state of my flock in this diocese of Killaloe (which is a suffragan see to Cashel in Ireland) and present you with a progress report. I am sure, therefore, that you will put up with my report with your usual graciousness. Although not written with literary style, it will, however, present a truthful and candid picture.*

*When the tyranny of the heretics was at its peak, I was deprived of all I possessed and forced to leave Ireland for Spain. Having spent about seven years there I decided to return to my own country. After travelling through France I arrived in Paris about the third of September 1659. There I received the Apostolic Brief, appointing me Vicar Apostolic. This gave me new strength and, without taking any more time to rest myself, I set out for England. I regarded this as the safest way of getting home. On the way I encountered various hardships and dangers but overcame them all, arriving in England in October 1659. From England I travelled to Dublin, which is the capital of the kingdom of Ireland, and after many hazards arrived there on the 7th of November of last year.*

*After very little delay I left Dublin and within ten days arrived in this diocese. I have been here since then doing my best to fulfil your expectations in the way I have carried out my duties. I have travelled about to meet the faithful of the diocese and I have exhorted them to be constant in the practice of their faith and fervent in their piety. I have also visited the parish priests individually and urged them to be courageous and untiring in looking after the flocks entrusted to them.*

*After that I brought together the parish priests of this diocese, twenty-six in all, towards the end of last June. At this meeting various statutes, which were acceptable to all, were approved and sanctioned after the manner of a synod. I also gave authorisation to four young men, whom I considered very suitable, to receive sacred orders. Some were ordained by the Primate in Armagh and the others by the Bishop of Meath, as no bishop has been present in Cashel province for the last seven years. In Armagh province, with the Archbishop of Armagh presiding, a provincial council was held on the eighth of this month. However, in this province of Munster the large number of heretics who are in effective control of every region and who are threatening clerics with prison and exile, made it impossible to hold a provincial meeting.*

*I have been informed by very many reputable people that the clergy throughout Ireland, men of chaste and holy lives, are earnestly working in the vineyard of Christ encouraging and supporting their people with sound precepts and doctrine. I myself am aware that my co-workers, John de Burgo (Vicar Apostolic of Cashel) and William Burgat (Vicar Apostolic of Emly) have always carried out their duties in an exemplary manner. Meanwhile, the heretics here, continuing what was begun by their leader Cromwell, have not been content with confiscating all the property of Catholics, both nobility and churchmen, but have also enacted penalties calculated to make Catholic worship a secret affair and even to eliminate its very name. According to a public edict, anybody who is present at any sacred function conducted according to the Roman rite, is liable to a fine of ten English pounds, and even imprisonment and exile.*



*The tyrannous behaviour of the heretics, of which the above are the main manifestations, has drained the resources of the faithful to such an extent that they are unable to ensure a sound education in faith and morals for their sons either at home or abroad. In the month of September 1659 nine priests from the province of Munster were expelled from the kingdom into perpetual exile and we are still unaware of what has happened to them. In similar fashion, many other imprisoned ecclesiastics have been dispatched from various places on the coast, and we have no knowledge of their fate also. At Galway nine prisoners are detained. Elsewhere the groups of ecclesiastics who are being held are smaller, sometimes three, sometimes four. However, all are being subjected to rough prison conditions.*

*Despite all this the clergy are strenuously battling on behalf of the faith and are absorbing whatever the fury or inhumanity of the heretical tyranny can conjure up or inflict on them. On their behalf I now suggest to Your Eminences that, in the light of all they have endured and are still enduring for the faith, account be taken of this in the distribution of benefices and ecclesiastical dignities in this kingdom. I will write to you again about our situation as occasion demands. In the meantime the undersigned will pray continuously to God for your happiness.*

*Your most humble servant and dependent,  
Denis Harty  
Vicar Apostolic of Killaloe*

30 October 1660.

The letter has the date '22 August 1661' (in Italian) at the top of each page. This was added by an official in Propaganda, and represents either the date of arrival (nearly ten months after it was written) or the date when it was considered by Propaganda — probably soon after its arrival.

In his letter Denis Harty refers only very briefly to his treatment by the Cromwellians before his expulsion to Spain in 1652. A petition to Rome, dated 1 June 1660, from a group of clergy and laity in Killaloe diocese requesting that Denis Harty be appointed bishop, gives us some vivid details.<sup>8</sup> 'Having been tied, like a dog, by a rope to the neck of a horse, he was dragged along violently, and then thrown into a dark prison by cruel edict of the perverse commander. Not long afterwards he was exiled to Spain.' The petitioners emphasised Harty's leadership qualities and the role he had played in giving strength and support to his people in the early 1650s and after his return from Spain.

## Final Years

From 1658 to 1667 various petitions went to Rome about the appointment of a bishop to Killaloe diocese. There were two main candidates, Denis Harty and John O'Molony, a nephew of the previous bishop. The main argument against Harty was that he was elderly and totally neglected the large part of his diocese west of the Shannon.<sup>9</sup>

O'Molony, who was a doctor of theology of Paris, had the backing of Edmund O'Reilly, Archbishop of Armagh, and King Louis XIV of France.<sup>10</sup> However, because of the uncertain political situation in Ireland, Rome did not make any episcopal appointments until 1669. In 1671 John O'Molony II was nominated bishop of Killaloe. Denis Harty had died four years previously in 1667.

A mortuary chapel in the old graveyard of Killodiernan carries a Latin inscription now almost illegible because of weathering. This was recorded by Dermot F. Gleeson when it was in a





The old cemetery at Killodiernan, inside the ruined church of which Denis Harty is buried.  
(Photo by John Sherlock).

slightly better state of preservation. Gleeson's copy of the inscription, with his translation, is as follows:<sup>11</sup>

Decanus Dns. Dionysius Harty, Theologiae Doctor, Protonotarius necnon Vicarius Apostolicus Laonensis Diaecesis huc tumulum et sacellum hoc fieri fecit anno Domini 1667. Orate pro anima ejus.

(Right Rev. Dean Denis Harty, Doctor of Theology, Protonotary and Vicar Apostolic of Killaloe, caused this tomb and chapel to be made A.D. 1667. Pray for his soul.)

Although the inscription does not state specifically that Denis Harty died in 1667, the final phrase implies this. This date is also confirmed by the omission of his name after 1667-1668 from lists of candidates for the bishopric of Killaloe.

## Footnotes

1. Archives of Propaganda, Rome: *Fondo di Vienna*, vol. 13, 194r, 202r; vol. 16, 243v.
2. Benignus Millett, O.F.M.: 'Calendar of Irish Material in volumes 12 and 13 (ff. 1-200) of the *Fondo di Vienna* in Propaganda Archives', in *Collectanea Hibernica*, no. 24 (1982), 78.
3. Benignus Millett, O.F.M.: 'Catalogue of Irish Material in *Scritture originali riferite nelle congregazioni generali* in Propaganda Archives', in *Collectanea Hibernica*, no. 12 (1969), 29, 33, 39, 40, 44; *Collectanea Hibernica*, no. 13 (1970), 34-35.
4. D. F. Gleeson: 'A Day by the Shannon', in *Molua* 1955, 42-43. Gleeson gives the quotation from the State Papers in his article.
5. Patrick J. Corish: *The Catholic Community in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Dublin 1981), 49.
6. Patrick Gaynor, 'Father Roger Normoyle's Monument, Inagh, A.D. 1642', in *Molua* 1944, 32-38.
7. Archives of Propaganda, Rome: *Fondo di Vienna*, vol. 15, 45rv.
8. *Ibid.*, vol. 15, 49r. This document is in Latin.
9. *Ibid.*, vol. 13, 202r.
10. *Ibid.*, vol. 13, 241r-242v; vol. 15, 33r-35v.
11. D. F. Gleeson: 'A Day by the Shannon', in *Molua* 1955, 42.