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Archbishop Leahy and Faction Fighting

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Introduction

Patrick Leahy was born at Gortnahoe near Thurles in 1806. The family was of Limerick origin. His father, also Patrick, was a successful surveyor who came to work in the mining development at New Birmingham. Later the family moved to Clonmel.

Patrick senior travelled widely in the course of his work and died in South Africa in 1850 while on business. Two brothers of the future archbishop became engineers and, like their father, both travelled extensively abroad, becoming successful mining and railway engineers, especially in Turkey.

Educated first at a lay classical school in Thurles, Leahy entered Maynooth College in 1826 and was ordained a priest there in 1833. From 1833 to 1834 Leahy was a curate in Knocklong, county Limerick, and from 1835 to 1837 a curate in Thurles. Then for ten years he was a professor in the newly-opened Thurles College, becoming president of the College in 1847.

In 1850 Leahy acted as secretary to the National Synod, which was held in Thurles. When the Catholic University Committee was established Leahy was again its secretary. He was actively involved in planning the Catholic University, and was for some years professor of Scripture at the university as well as its first Vice Rector.

In 1855 Leahy was appointed parish priest and Dean of Cashel, and in 1857 Archbishop of Cashel on the death of Dr. Slattery. In 1869 and 1870 Leahy attended — and spoke at — the First Vatican Council. He died in 1875 and was succeeded by Archbishop Croke.

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Faction fighting was still not unknown in Cashel diocese when Leahy became archbishop, though the situation had improved considerably during the previous 20 years.¹ There were infrequent incidents, which at times resulted in killings or serious injuries. A person had been killed in Hospital in July 1856 and another badly injured.² A faction fight in Templemore in March 1857 resulted in another death.³

It is not, however, always easy to determine whether certain crimes may be attributed to factions or to other causes, especially agrarian. Factions around this time were sometimes blamed for crimes which were really inspired by disputes about land.

In the early 1860s there was a noticeable increase in faction fights in the parish of Emly, west of Tipperary town. In June 1861 nine men from Emly appeared at the Petty Sessions in Cashel as a result of a fierce fight at a funeral, between the Three Year Old and Four Year Old factions.

The magistrate warned against a revival of the dreaded factions in Emly and the Tipperary town area. In particular, he condemned faction fights which occurred as people were returning from funerals.⁴

In November 1861 Leahy extended his Temperance Law to the whole diocese; this law prevented the buying or selling of alcohol throughout the diocese on Sundays. When he

*Revised extract from an unpublished M.A. thesis, St. Patrick's College, Maynooth.



saw no significant reduction in the activity of the factionists in Emly he decided to attack the abuse directly. On 5 November 1862 he issued a pastoral very strongly condemning 'the demon of faction'.⁵

Those taking part in the wicked fights between the Three and Four Year Old factions of Emly were 'a scandal' to their religion.⁶ 'Alone or almost alone of the people of Ireland, certainly alone of all the people of these dioceses, you in that neighbourhood have revived those wicked factions which some years ago were the disgrace of our country'.⁷

The origin of the factions — reported to be a dispute about the age of a bull some 100 years previously -- was 'about the silliest that ever gave rise to a quarrel', the archbishop declared.⁸ Yet the activities of the two groups were destroying the peace and happiness of an entire countryside.

Members of the rival factions were waylaid and mercilessly beaten. The scene depicted by Leahy was scarcely calculated to enhance the reputation of the parish of Emly:

'If a public fair is held here or there, the leaders of faction think the fair day the very best of days for displaying the strength of their respective parties. Accordingly, the cry of the Three Year Olds is raised and is promptly met by the counter cry of the Four Year Olds; the combatants rush to the fight, people come upon their honest business are sent flying in every direction for fear of their lives, and the fair-green . . . becomes a field for the display of all the fury of the rival factions.

'Again, if people come together in numbers to enjoy some public amusement, the same cry of the Three Year Olds and Four Year Olds is raised, and then comes the onset with savage yells and sticks and stones to the interruption, and I will add, to the injury of the peaceably-disposed members of the community; for, whereas our people in Ireland have too little of innocent public amusement . . . even the little they have is now in your part of the country so abused by being turned into an occasion for getting up faction fights, that the best friends of the people are constrained to condemn all large gatherings for amusement as dangerous to the public peace'.⁹

Leahy condemned as especially wicked those faction fights which took place on Sunday — at times, when people were returning from Mass.¹⁰ Then, in the most controversial portion of the pastoral, he enumerated the 'murders and maimings and other grievous bodily injuries' which had occurred in the Emly district during the previous six years.

His 'well-authenticated' list revealed that four members of the rival factions had been killed, and so also had four others. However, two of the latter did not belong to the factions, and there was some doubt about the other two. Many more people had been seriously injured by blows from the deadly bludgeon and no less deadly stone.

These crimes occurred at fairs and returning from funerals. One fight broke out at the chapel gate, whereupon the combatants and spectators retired to a nearby field to fight it out during Mass. One of the fights listed by Leahy had taken place 'at a hurling in the parish of Emly' in December 1861. There was a similar incident at another hurling in Kiltelly during the same year.¹¹

In a most outspoken denunciation of these crimes the archbishop declared:

'Behold your deeds of guilt, you misguided people! Behold the working of your wicked factions in the effects they have produced and are producing every day — waylayings of one another, pitched battles at fair and market and other public gatherings, desecration of the Sunday and holiday, bloodshed almost at the threshold of God's house, maimings for life, manslaughter!





Patrick Leahy, Archbishop of Cashel and Emly 1857-75

‘How long, O you infatuated people, will you continue these factions, of which one is at a loss to know whether the criminality or the folly is the greatest? How long will you continue to make yourselves the scoff and the scorn of the world — to cover your religion with disgrace — to bring down the curse of the living God on your guilty heads?’¹²

Leahy appealed to the people to renounce their ‘wicked factions.’ It was his duty to eradicate the evil — a duty which he had not shirked during his numerous visits to the parish, when he had raised his voice against ‘factions, feuds and quarrels.’ His Temperance Law had helped to eliminate fighting on one day of the week.

But more needed to be done. He had, therefore, requested the Redemptorist Fathers in Limerick to preach a retreat in Emly, commencing in the following week. The archbishop advised the people to avail themselves of this opportunity to make their peace with God and each other.¹³

Leahy’s condemnation of the factions in Emly was very severe. Indeed, many felt that he had exaggerated the case. Fr. James O’Carroll in his *Diary* thought Leahy’s list of murders ‘very ill-considered’, though he is not correct in stating that Leahy attributed all the murders to faction fighting. ‘This pastoral is bitterly spoken of among the priests and laity of each diocese and even all over Ireland’, the diarist continued.¹⁴

‘Everyone was speaking of it in Dublin’, he reported, ‘and all were unanimous in condemning it’.¹⁵ O’Carroll and many others were objecting to the opportunity which Leahy had furnished for the English press to vilify the country, and particularly the diocese of Cashel. This opportunity was not missed.

The Times of London applauded Leahy’s action, though its conclusion was scarcely intended by the archbishop.

'It appears from the horrifying disclosures of this pastoral that the Roman Catholics of Tipperary have been for a long series of years shedding one another's blood with a degree of treachery, ferocity and savage vindictiveness scarcely ever paralleled in any civilized country even in the darkest ages'.¹⁶

Nor was the same journal surprised that landlords and their agents were in peril in a country where men murdered people of their own race and creed 'apparently for the mere love of excitement'.¹⁷

Even the *Limerick Reporter*, always favourable to Leahy, could only rebut the venomous attack of *The Times* with the remark that 'Surely nothing that the archbishop says of faction fighting could possibly deserve such sweeping condemnation'.¹⁸

The retreat in Emly lasted three weeks. On Sunday 30 November 1862 it concluded in a solemn manner with a public reconciliation of the members of both factions before the archbishop, who was seated in robes and mitre in front of the altar. Two by two, the former protagonists approached the archbishop and there solemnly promised —

'Never again to belong to, or to take any part with, the factions called Three Years' Old and Four Years' Old — never again to name these words by way of challenge, provocation or reproach, and never again to encourage in any way those who may do so from other parishes'.¹⁹

Leahy, deeply moved by the reconciliation, warned the people to take adequate precautions lest they should lapse back into their former bad habits. He advised them to keep away 'from the dance, from the hurling, from the race, even from the fair, if possible'. He also urged the former factionists not to drink 'out of their own houses for some time to come'.²⁰ Indeed, the people promised not to drink more than two glasses in any one day.²¹

'The reconciliation of the Three Year Olds and Four Year Olds in Emly', said O'Carroll, 'gave Dr. Leahy a European notoriety, as he was praised by *The Times* and the anti-Catholic press of England, so that his photograph is now to be found for sale in England and Scotland'.²² However, from Rome, Dr. Kirby, Rector of the Irish College, informed Leahy that the Pope and all in Rome were 'delighted at the consoling termination . . . of the feuds'.²³

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Whether or not one agrees with the severity of Leahy's censure on the factionists in Emly, at least it had the desired result. A year later the Redemptorists returned to the parish to give another retreat. Nobody had broken his promise. Moreover, five young men who had uttered party cries during the year now came forward and publicly confessed their offence. They then made the solemn promise to avoid any action which might revive the bitter feuds.

Leahy was ill and unable to attend the closing of the retreat. However, he sent a letter congratulating the people on their behaviour during the year and promised to visit the parish as soon as he was able.²⁴ Thus ended Leahy's successful effort to eradicate the factions in Emly.

In July 1863 Leahy was commended at Clonmel assizes for his efforts to suppress faction fighting and drunkenness.²⁵ A year later the *Cashel Gazette* could report that 'faction fights are now nearly as obsolete among the peasantry, as duels are among the higher classes'.²⁶ However, that report proved to be unduly optimistic.

Faction fighting continued to occur sporadically. Cappawhite, north-west of Tipperary town, earned a special condemnation in October 1864 when a number of men were tried in Clonmel for assaults of a factious nature. Addressing the jurors of the county the judge declared:

'If we could remove Cappawhite out of the precincts of Tipperary, your duties,



gentlemen, would be but light; but, I regret to say, it keeps up the old story of faction fights, with broken heads and a chance of homicide'.²⁷

A fight of a 'really desperate character' took place at Galbertstown near Thurles in March 1866, as members of rival factions were returning from a funeral. 'Sticks, stones, every procurable weapon was availed of, blood flowed profusely, and even the women and children joined in the fray'. Four combatants had their 'skulls dangerously fractured', and others were badly beaten.²⁸ A 'savage affray' at Upperchurch in October 1867 led to the death of one participant.²⁹

In the following month a farmer from Illeigh was struck down by a blow from a loaded blackthorn stick while attending a fair in Templemore. Factions were held responsible for this crime.³⁰ A fight between members of the Magpies and the Black Hens while returning from a fair in Thurles had its sequel in March 1869, when two men were sentenced to six months' hard labour.³¹

Nevertheless, while these isolated incidents continued to occur, faction fighting was gradually disappearing. In May 1871 Leahy congratulated the people of Murroe, in county Limerick, on the termination of the fights which had been common in the parish some years previously.³² Again the optimism was premature.

In the early years of that decade, especially from 1872 to 1874, there was a great increase in the incidence of faction fights and agrarian crimes in Pallasgrean (also in county Limerick) and neighbouring parishes. In January 1873 the *Cork Daily Telegraph* stated:

'The disturbed condition of Pallas locality should be a matter of the deepest anxiety to those who are interested in the preservation of peace and order. Week after week it is our painful duty to record some new outrage against life or property, or one of those furious and treacherous faction fights which have brought disgrace upon the eastern part of the Co. Limerick'.³³

Assaults with the loaded butt were all too frequent with the factionists of Pallasgrean, who appeared to 'have a tribunal of their own, to which the law of the land was subordinate'.³⁴

The increasing lawlessness in the Pallasgrean area caused Leahy to issue a second pastoral on the Three and Four Year Old Factions. In July 1874 he once again denounced the 'insane and hell-born factions'.³⁵ Recalling his success in Emly a dozen years previously, he declared that all good people were hoping that the factions 'were dead and gone, never again to be revived.'

This was not to be. The factions had been revived with increased violence in recent years, not in Emly, but in the parishes of Pallasgrean, Kiltely and Cappamore. Again Leahy did not spare the offenders:

'Nowhere else in Ireland does the disgrace of factions and faction fights exist; but wherever a newspaper is read, be it in any part of the three kingdoms, or in America or Australia, there the names of Pallasgrean, Kiltely and Cappamore are linked with the infamy of the Three and Four Year Old Factions and with the deeds of blood done in their name'.³⁶

Now, possibly reacting to the criticism of his unqualified condemnation in 1862, Leahy observed that the actual adherents of the factions were 'comparatively few in number', though they were sufficient to 'blast the good name of a whole neighbourhood'.³⁷ The district was in a truly wretched state. 'Hatred, revenge, way-layings, maimings, breaking of skulls, bloodshed, murder' — all emphasized the absence of peace, happiness and security for life in the area'.³⁸

'No man belonging to either faction can go a distance from home or get off the railway train after dark without being in danger of losing his life at the hands of the opposite fac-

tionists. If a man belonging to either faction goes to market, those of the opposite faction lying in wait for him as he returns home fell him to the earth with the loaded bludgeon or the deadly stone; and he may thank God if his bloodthirsty assailants let him escape with a broken skull'.

Gatherings of people in the area for fairs, horse races or other public amusement were 'almost invariably attended with bloodshed'. Indeed, 'all peace-loving people . . . heartily wish there were no such things as horse races in the neighbourhood of the Three and Four Year Old Factions'.

The quarrels had other lamentable consequences. Happy homes had been plunged into sorrow, and there were half a dozen men undergoing (and would continue for years to undergo) 'all the horrors of penal servitude' because of their part in the 'hellish factions'. 'The curse of the living God must fall upon those who have hand, act or part in them', the archbishop declared.³⁹

To put down the 'barbarous' factions in the three parishes, Leahy engaged three Oblate Fathers from Inchicore (in Dublin) to conduct a fortnight's retreat in each parish. He also appealed to all concerned to 'renounce factions for evermore, to lay aside all ill will and be reconciled one with another'.

As a means to preserve a lasting peace, the people were advised to frequent the sacraments and observe the Sunday Temperance Law, 'which will be a great safeguard to you by keeping you from excess in drinking, that most powerful incentive to anger and quarrelling and fighting'. Again, the people were urged to avoid fairs and markets unless necessary; when in town and villages, they should carefully shun public houses.⁴⁰

The pastoral was read in churches throughout the diocese of Emly, and was followed by retreats in the three affected parishes.⁴¹ The closing of each retreat witnessed the reconciliation of the rival factionists.⁴²

The cause of temperance was also served. At the close of the retreat in Pallasgreaan all the publicans of the surrounding district met in the parish church at Nicker, and resolved to apply only for a six-day licence in future, thereby giving full effect to the Sunday Temperance Law.⁴³

The publicans in Cappamore resolved not to open their shops on Sundays in obedience to the law.⁴⁴ A huge crowd was gathered in that village for the closing of the final retreat on 30 August 1874.⁴⁵

The archbishop, however, missed the closing of the retreat. He was then in France trying to recover his health, and a few months later he was dead. But he had succeeded in ridding the countryside of the scourge of factions. In its obituary on 27 January 1875 the powerful Home Rule organ, the *Freeman's Journal*, asked:

'What proof greater than this could be given of the mighty influence which the good prelate had over the habits and wills of his people?'



FOOTNOTES

Abbreviations:

- C.D.A. Cashel Diocesan Archives, Archbishop's House, Thurles, Co. Tipperary.
F.J. *Freeman's Journal*.
L.R. *Limerick Reporter and Tipperary Vindicator*.
O'Carroll Diary *Diary of Rev. James O'Carroll (1823-1872)*, deposited in C.D.A.

1. L.R. 25 June 1861
2. *Ibid.*, 22 July 1856
3. *Ibid.*, 16 March 1858.
4. *Ibid.*, 25 June 1861.
5. P. Leahy: *Pastoral Letter to those calling themselves the Three Year Old and Four Year Old Factions* (Dublin, 1861), 1 (hereafter referred to *Pastoral Letter*, 1862.)
6. *Ibid.*, 3.
7. *Ibid.*, 1.
8. *Ibid.*, 3. For origin of titles, cf. *O'Carroll Diary*, 3 Dec. 1862.
9. P. Leahy, *Pastoral Letter*, 1862, 3-4.
10. *Ibid.*, 4.
11. *Ibid.*, 4-7.
12. *Ibid.*, 4, 7.
13. *Ibid.*, 7-9.
14. *O'Carroll Diary*, 3 Dec., 1862.
15. *Ibid.*
16. 10 Nov., 1862.
17. *The Times*, 10 Nov., 1862.
18. 14 Nov., 1862.
19. L.R., 2 Dec., 1862 and 13 Nov., 1863.
20. *Ibid.*, 2 Dec., 1862.
21. *Ibid.*, 13 Nov., 1863
22. *O'Carroll Diary*, Jan. 1863.
23. CDA 1862/45, Kirby to Leahy, 22 Dec.
24. L.R., 13 Nov., 1863.
25. *Ibid.*, 14 July, 1863.
26. 4 June, 1864.
27. *Cashel Gazette*, 27 Oct., 1864.
28. *F.J.*, 8 Mar., 1866.
29. *Irish People*, (New York), 12 Oct., 1867.
30. *Ibid.*, 23 Nov., 1867.
31. *F.J.*, 22 Mar., 1869.
32. L.R., 23 May, 1871.
33. Quoted in *F.J.*, 16 Jan., 1873.
34. *Ibid.*
35. P. Leahy: *Pastoral Letter to the Three Year Old and Four Year Old Factions in Pallasgreen, Kiltelly and Cappamore*, (Thurles, 1874), 1. The Pastoral is not dated, but is printed in L.R., 31 July 1874.
36. *Ibid.*
37. *Ibid.*, 1-2.
38. *Ibid.*, 2.
39. *Ibid.*, 2-3.
40. *Ibid.*, 3-4.
41. L.R., 4 Aug., 1874.
42. *Ibid.*, 7 Aug., 1874.
43. *Ibid.*, 18 Aug., 1874.
44. *Ibid.*, 25 Aug., 1874.
45. *Ibid.*, 1 Sept. 1874.

