The Society for Irish Church Missions to the Roman Catholics: Philanthropy or Bribery?

Miriam Moffitt

The emergence of an Ireland where Roman Catholics had the right to participate in the electoral process on the same basis as Protestants (1829) and where Catholics had access to a state-funded elementary education system (1831) and even to a government-funded seminary at Maynooth (1795) engendered extreme horror and revulsion in many Protestants of England and Ireland. This consolidation and acceptance of a religion that some condemned as not scripturally based appalled many ultra-Protestants of Britain, who felt they could not stand idly by. The Fund for the Spiritual Exigencies of Ireland, founded in 1846 by Alexander Dallas, and a committee of clergy, London gentlemen, and English nobility came together formally in 1849 to establish the Society for Irish Church Missions to the Roman Catholics (henceforth ICM). It was centered in the evangelical wing of the Church of England, and its object was to convert the Roman Catholics of Ireland to what it held to be a scriptural faith. It perceived the Irish famine of 1845–47 not only as an opportunity to convert the Romanists of Ireland but also as a judgment from God on Irish Roman Catholics for having stubbornly clung to their religion: “The truth of the Scriptures was verified in the groans of the dying, and their wails for the dead,” which the ICM saw as a fulfillment of biblical prophecy: “Son of man, when the beast from it” (Ezek. 14:13 KJV).

Potato Famine and British Anti-Catholicism

The ICM was in the right place at the right time. The already heightened anti-Catholic atmosphere of nineteenth-century Britain was augmented by the emigration to England of tens of thousands of illiterate Irish Roman Catholic peasants fleeing the famine; for Edward Bickersteth, it was “notorious that the poverty, idleness and vagrancies of the Irish are adding to the pecuniary burdens of our industrious classes.” It was suggested, however, that if these newcomers were converted to Protestantism, “an enlightened people will supply their place; and instead of demoralising the inhabitants of England, by the vices and deceptions of Romanism, and feeding the cravings of a vulture like priesthood, [they] will disseminate (if they are educated in Ireland in the truths and doctrines of vital Christianity) peace and goodwill amongst men.”

Other factors contributed to evangelical anti-Catholicism, from which the ICM drew its support. The emergence of a ritualist movement within Anglicanism, followed by the public conversion to Roman Catholicism of many of the Church of England’s most able theologians, coupled with the restoration of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in England in 1850, brought together a pan-Protestant impetus to protect England, through the eradication of popery in Ireland, from Romish encroachment under any guise: “When you are thinking of the best method of repelling that aggression on our shores which has awakened so deep an interest in every Protestant breast and English heart . . . the best method is to carry the war into the enemy’s country,” remarks by Alexander Dallas at an annual meeting of ICM that were greeted with applause.

Besides fearing the spread of popery in England, many Protestants of the time eagerly awaited the second coming of Christ. Prophetic interpretations of the Scriptures stressed the urgent need to eliminate the Antichrist, then widely understood as referring to the Roman Catholic Church. Writings of many early committee members testify to this overwhelming conviction: “The time is perhaps close at hand, when the blast of the ram’s horn, divinely placed at the lips of the Lord’s people shall be heard, and then . . . by the power of God, this wall of Jericho, the high wall of Romanism, shall fall flat down; and great will be the fall thereof.”

The most virulent and well-resourced attack on Irish Catholicism was spearheaded by the ICM: “It is a war of extermination; and so it ought to be, for the contest is between truth and error,” remarks at another annual meeting of ICM that were met with “renewed applause.”

Relief Provided and Schools Established

Armed with seemingly limitless funds, the ICM sent its workers to the most deprived areas of Ireland, exploiting the obvious needs of the poor, principally sustenance, clothing, and, most important, education. Although national education had been available since 1831, it had been stubbornly excluded from the western diocese of Tuam by John MacHale, Roman Catholic archbishop of the diocese. This huge, densely populated coastal diocese contained arguably some of the worst land in the country. Having suffered previous famines, it was totally unable to withstand the catastrophic famine of 1845–47. Following the failure of the potato crop, slums in towns throughout Ireland were filled with the destitute, forced from their rural holdings and desperate for relief. It was to two starve communities—the rural peasants of Connemara (West Galway) and the slum dwellers of Dublin City—that the ICM devoted particular attention.

From the outset the ICM distributed much-needed relief. So-called ragged schools were established, where poor children received food and clothes, as well as scriptural education. Famine orphans were cared for in homes associated with the mission in both Connemara and Dublin, and food was distributed at controversial classes for adults (that is, confrontational in approach) that directly outlined the errors of Rome. In 1851 the mission had 36 schools in Connemara, spending, in one week alone, £16 16s. 0d. on 4,700 pounds of meal to feed 9,872 persons and tending 433 sick. It quickly extended its operations on a massive scale: by July 1851 the Connemara mission had 2,045 scholars or about one third of the local population on its books and 1,670 in attendance; in addition, 142 Irish teachers were teaching the Scriptures to 2,954 persons, while 917 visits in a single week were made to homes by Scripture readers. It should be noted that in rural Ireland, July was always termed the hungry month, with the previous year’s potatoes eaten and the next

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year’s not ready. Even many years after the famine ended, it was noted that attendance at schools where relief was distributed was always highest in the summer months.12

In the early days of the ICM, especially in the years 1850 to 1854, both the income and potential of the movement appeared limitless. In 1854 the mission raised an income of £40,039, its highest ever. At this stage it employed 58 ordained missionaries, 362 Scripture readers, and 142 teachers, and over the next few years Connemara gained eleven new churches and sixty-four mission schools.13 Supporters were encouraged to visit the mission and report on their successes, as did John Gregg of Dublin, who wrote: “How pleasant was it to see so many people, once dark and deluded Romanists… upwards of five hundred people were within and without [the mission school].”14 Similarly, Denham Smith noted, “Hundreds of human souls are just now emerging from a long night of papal delusion, into the clear possession of the Word of Truth,”15 while Robert Peacocks enthused that “no reports…can convey an adequate idea of the eager manner in which the Irish Romanists drink in and feed upon Scripture truth.”16 Numerous accounts of visits to the mission in the early 1850s were published, including the ICM’s own Early Fruits of Irish Missions, which ran to six editions between 1850 and 1854.17

Charges and Accusations

Undeniably, the ICM did herculean relief work among the poor in the famine years, and unquestionably many more would have perished were it not for its efforts. Fairly soon, however, people began to question the mission’s methodology, as food and clothes were not given unconditionally. The provision of soup in these schools gave rise to the term “souper,” signifying a mission agent, and even to this day the comment “they took the soup” has extremely derogatory connotations in Connemara. Charges were soon made that the mission induced the needy to convert during the “hungry years” of the famine and its aftermath. These claims were not groundless, as many Connemara recipients of mission relief were widows and orphans, who had no other means of support. A refuge for widows and orphans was opened in Spiddal,18 and three orphanages were opened at Clifden, the principal town of the Connemara district. In a letter published in the Fourth Report of the Fund, it was noted that the mission had undertaken the “gigantic task of feeding 2,000 children; they were perishing body and soul for want of food.”19

Allegations of bribery were frequently made against the movement. The ICM strenuously protested, however, that not a penny of mission funds was spent on temporal relief. It affirmed that “the society in no way interferes with the temporal necessities of the people to whom they carry the gospel.”

It is hard to reconcile the existence of the mission’s feeding program, its children’s homes, and eventually its cottages for converts with the society’s outright denial that it ever offered inducements to convert. And yet, care of the orphan and widow is surely a hallmark of Christian mission, following the gospel precept to feed and clothe the needy (Matt. 25:35–36). A Christian mission without charitable outreach would be a self-contradiction. But the core question, about using material gifts as inducements to convert, cannot be sidestepped. In order to unravel the truth, it is necessary to delve deeper into the ICM’s operations.

Separation of Material and Spiritual Aid?

In the Roman Catholicism of nineteenth-century Ireland, the laity was discouraged from having firsthand personal contact with the Scriptures, being taught that an educated person was needed to interpret them: “The bible is a book not easily understood, even by well educated persons…If the learner differ about many of the most important portions of the Holy Scripture, how could a Kingscourt labourer, or an Achill or Galway fisherman interpret it, and deduce the true body of Christian doctrine from it?”

Herein lay the nub of the question: namely, is it right or is it wrong to entice Catholic parents, against their conscience, to send their starving child to a school where he or she will be made to study the Scriptures in order to receive food, when the parents earnestly believe that the child should not have direct contact with the Scriptures? The mission tried to argue from both sides by insisting that its missionaries did not personally distribute food, and that even if the children did go against their conscience, a Catholic conscience was a defiled conscience: “We do not give the food; we only give the instruction; but some kind ladies, who have observed the wretchedness and hunger of the poor children give the food and clothes, which are given only as temporal relief. The children do not commit a sin by receiving it; for being Roman Catholics, their conscience is misdirected, and it is not sinful to induce a man to go against a defiled conscience.”

The argument that the mission itself never distributed relief was made on the grounds that “some kind ladies” raised monies for temporal relief. It was stated in the mission’s magazine Banner of Truth that ICM felt it important to confine its object to the spiritual needs of Ireland. “One of the fundamental principles of the Society, upon which it has ever acted, and purposes ever continually to act is, never to administer any part of the fund committed to its care to the temporal relief of a single individual. . . . While it is the duty of the agents to steel their hearts against offering any relief for temporal distress from the funds of the Society, their position is truly painful.”

This argument does not obtain any more today than it did in the nineteenth century. The mission’s Connemara superintendent, Rev. Hyacinth D’Arcy, signed the annual report of the Fund for the Converts and Children of Connemara, and his wife, Fanny D’Arcy (née Bellingham), signed its receipts, on the back of which was stated that the fund “relieves the sick, the widows, the fatherless, and others in their distress; and God has given it His blessing in its bringing many to hear of Jesus.” The very existence of printed receipts for the fund demonstrates that this was a structured and sanctioned practice. It may have been possible in Dublin to separate religious and philanthropic activities; in Connemara, however, both mission and relief were administered by ICM personnel and distributed mainly through the schools, as was observed by a visitor to Fakeragh school: “On entering, we were much amused by the immense pot of Indian meal stirabout [porridge] which was cooling near the door.”

The truth of the issue was that missionary income was raised in England and spent purely on missionary expenses. Income for philanthropic purposes was raised, mostly in Ireland, by a variety of funds for homes and schools. In 1880, the first year for which a breakdown of “philanthropic income” is available, £16,000 was raised by the ICM and spent on its missionary activities, and
£14,000 was raised by a subgroup of ICM supporters for philanthropic purposes. It appears that such a division had always been practiced.

Mr Eade has not acknowledged (what many clergymen in Ireland knew before) that there is a fund, which is collected in Ireland under the auspices of the Irish Church Missions Society, and with its full sanction and approval, by which fund the most objectionable part of the machinery of this Society has been worked. It is to the existence of this “secret service” fund that I most object; and I am altogether at a loss to know how the agents of the Society, who know well of the existence of this fund, are able so confidently to tell our English brethren that “not one shilling of the funds of the Society are expended in temporal relief.”

*[footnote in original book:]* Many clergy in Ireland no doubt knew this, but it is evident that our English brethren were not so well informed. Eds.

**Dissent and Controversy**

It can be argued, however, that supporting homes and schools for poor children and orphans need not signify support for the mission or a wish to eliminate Roman Catholicism but is merely part of Christian compassion. This conclusion, though, does not address the issue of whether a person is “justified in giving food and clothes to our fellow-creatures for the purpose of tempting them to do what they believe to be displeasing to their Heavenly Father.” While the ICM clearly approved of this practice, others, including the bishop of Ripon, a lifelong supporter of mission, believed otherwise: “If it were possible by a bribe of a single farthing to win over ten thousand Roman Catholics in Ireland to the Protestant faith, the promoters of this Society [the ICM] would scorn the very thought of spending that single farthing.”

The mission, originating and funded from within England evangelicalism, drew only limited support from within the Church of Ireland. The alleged bribery of converts was a major issue for many Irish clergymen: “It seems to me wholly unworthy of Protestantism to make the poverty of Roman Catholics an occasion of out-bidding or over-reaching the Heads of the Roman Catholic Church, and therefore, as long as you tempt Roman Catholics, by a regular fixed system of relief, to prefer the interests of this world to the interests of the world to come, so long must I feel myself bound to make every protest in my power against The Irish Church Missionary Society.”

For the Irish poor whose children attended these feeding schools, the Bible held little attraction unless it was accompanied by some inducement. One mother admitted that she did not know “what the Jumpers teach, but that religion can’t be too bad that pities the famishing; so my children go to the Jumpers’ school and get the stirabout.” The agents in Spiddal were “well received, but the people in the absence of a regularly endowed ministry, decline to allow them to read the Bible in their cottages.” Mrs. Houston, a Connemara Protestant landowner, claimed that Scripture readers “forced themselves into the cabins and obliged the inmates, however averse to the affliction, to listen to the Word of God.”

The ICM considered that “Roman teaching is derogatory to the glory of God, and dangerous to the salvation of souls,” and it employed a confrontational approach to expose the errors of
Catholicism, claiming that “before they can hope to be accepted as guides to the fountain of all truth, they must first disabuse the people of their errors, and convince them of the fallibility and interested motives of those whose church enjoins on them the humiliating, painful, and unnatural duty of insinuating these errors into their minds.”

This aggressive approach earned many enemies for the mission, even among committed Protestants. “He is a disgrace to my religion” was the testimony of a Protestant subinspector at the Ennis assizes of 1855, respecting a Bible reader who was “a fire-brand among the people in the west of Ireland.” Mrs. Houston, who affirmed that “to make a true convert, she would compass land and sea,” described the missionaries as “graceless zealots” whose offensive practices such as referring to the Virgin Mary as “a sinful, unrighteous woman” and the cross as “a blasphemous emblem” were insulting to Roman Catholics and counterproductive. Their “violence of language, insults not only to the Priests in person, but to the Religion they professed, were amongst the favourite and usual means by which these very objectionable missionaries hoped and believed that they would accomplish the ends they had in view.”

Decline

The ICM enjoyed considerable popularity in its early years. After 1854, however, its level of annual income declined sharply. The initial decline in the mid-1850s can be attributed to the eclipsing of the Irish cause by the Crimean War and by the campaign to convert the “heathens” of India following the Mutiny of 1857. This fall in income became more marked after the publication of the results of the 1861 census, the first to include detailed breakdown by religious affiliation, in which the mission’s much-heralded advances on popery were not evident. In 1852 the earl of Roden had reported that in the Tuam Diocese “upwards of 10,000 Roman Catholics, including children, had left the Church of Rome,” and Dallas had said, as early as 1851, that the population was 50 percent Protestant. The census revealed, however, that the proportion of the population who were Church of Ireland had actually fallen. Even before the 1861 census, claims were made that the ICM had exaggerated its successes and that many Roman Catholics had returned to their former faith once the crisis of the famine had passed. With the census results declaring little progress, it appeared that the mission’s much-advertised “successes” were open to question.

The ICM could not easily withstand the dual accusation of bribery and ineffectiveness. It was claimed that “in the long run, I believe it will be discovered that The Irish Church Missions Society has done irreparable damage to the Church of Ireland,” and that public opinion had become “from year to year, increasingly uneasy on the subject . . . there is widespread conviction that the days of this monstrous scandal are numbered.” Even some of its former supporters published accounts of their disillusionment with the society: “It might be too much to expect that men who have devoted their lives to a particular object, and have always anticipated success, should now confess themselves the victim of a life-long delusion.”

Nevertheless, the mission maintained that it was flourishing, publishing laudatory accounts of mission tours, some of
which were quickly countered in the media, which criticisms were answered in turn by supporters of the mission. It insisted that the Roman Catholic population was availing itself of the mission’s services: its 1868 account of the Connemara school at Bunowenbeg stated that “Bunowenbeg [Aillebrack] is doing better than in past years,” which conveyed to its subscribers the impression of a thriving school with reasonable attendance, although the census of education carried out three months later found that there were only six children in attendance.

The income of the ICM fell from approximately £40,000 in 1854 to £26,000 in 1860, and it continued to decline throughout the nineteenth century, resulting in a sharp decrease in personnel employed and a curtailment of activities. The society withdrew from areas outside of Dublin and West Galway. The importance of itinerating missions to fairs and markets increased, since the ICM lacked sufficient personnel to operate fixed stations. Even West Galway was not spared; of its initial sixty-four stations, only nineteen were in use in 1900. In 1936 the death of John McClelland, Scripture reader at Moyrus, marked the end of ICM activities in the west. By 1940 the ICM presence was confined to forty-eight workers in Dublin (Scripture readers and school-teachers) and one Scripture reader in Belfast.

**Survival and Change**

In 2005 the ICM is still at work in Dublin and Belfast, but since 2002 it has dropped the words “to Roman Catholics” from its name. It functions today as an evangelical city mission whose aim is “to promote the glory of God in advancing his Kingdom amongst the people of Ireland . . . by the preaching of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.” It stands on the Bible, which it takes as “God’s Word written and the only infallible guide and supreme authority for all belief and behaviour.”

In times of regional crisis or natural disaster, all recognize that the need to provide shelter, food, and education to the stricken is paramount. The provision of famine relief and schooling in nineteenth-century Connemara has many parallels with current relief efforts in other parts of the world. Credit must indeed be given to the ICM for the large number of lives it saved; at the height of the famine, it daily fed thousands of persons in famine-stricken Connemara and Dublin. Nevertheless, although the ICM strenuously denied doing so, it did attach conditions to this feeding program that were highly controversial, even at that time.

The ICM’s popularity was seriously damaged by its aggressive and sometimes insulting denunciation of Catholicism, a practice that finds no place in the ICM mission of today. In its time, such a controversial approach was not only condoned but also inculcated in both Protestant and Catholic seminaries and was often an accepted modus operandi of mission work. The fact that the ICM has welcomed a scholarly appraisal of its history, that it has placed its entire archive at this researcher’s disposal, and that it has given every assistance to this work testifies clearly to the changed religious culture of Ireland today.

**Notes**

1. The arrival of potato blight caused almost total failure of the potato crop, on which a large portion of the country’s poorest were entirely dependent. Its effects were most felt in the western counties, including the Connemara region of West County Galway, where the ICM focused much of its activities.
5. The more significant theologian-converts included Ambrose Philpips, George Spencer, and K. H. Digby (all between 1825 and 1830); John Henry Newman, W. G. Ward, and F. W. Faber (all in 1845); and Henry Manning (in 1850). Another important conversion (in 1834) was that of architect A. E. Pugin.
9. The ICM adopted a controversial or confrontational approach in both classes and sermons, addressing topics such as “The Apostasy of Rome,” “The Priesthood of Christ usurped by the Priests of the Pope,” and “Religion of Rome a denial and corruption of the Christian faith.” A compilation of over 400 sermon titles is available in Trinity College, Dublin, “Irish Church Missions to Roman Catholics, advertisements of sermons” (Gall.6.m.71/72). This derogatory portrayal of Catholicism was equaled by Catholic denunciations of the “blasphemes of Protestantism”; see, for example, *Irish Catholic Directory* (London, 1858), pp. 224–25.
11. Scottish Association for the Relief of Irish Children Attending Scriptural Schools, *Report for 1851, with notes of two months residence among the Irish Church Missions in Galway and Mayo* (Edinburgh, 1851), p. 5. Scripture readers visited the poor in their cabins, reading portions of the Bible in Irish to the peasantry and inviting them to attend mission services and classes, where both the Gospel and temporal relief were distributed.
12. National Archives of Ireland, ED/37/5.3.
13. Asleagh, Ballinakill, Renvyle, Sellerna, Ballyconree, Errislannan, Errismore, Moyrus, Ballinahinch, Castlekerke, and Omeay Island. This does not include the privately funded church of Col. Thompson, an ardent supporter of the missions at Salruch, Connemara.
17. Early fruits of Irish missions: A letter from an eye-witness, after a missionary tour, during June and July (London: Society for Irish Church Missions, 1850). The mission also published *A mission tour book in Ireland*, showing how to visit the missions in Dublin, Connemara, etc. (London: Society for Irish Church Missions, 1860).
23. Durham, *Copley papers, MS no. GRE/G3/2/12.*
25. Connemara funds included Fund for the Converts and Children of
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27. The only complete copy of the correspondence between G. W. . . . and H. C. Eade and A. R. C. Dallas, relating to the charge of bribery against the Society . . . together with a paper on conscience by A. R. C. Dallas and Mr. Colquhoun’s Letter to the Daily Telegraph. Edited by four Rectors (Dublin, 1864), p. 58. Eade was the ICM missionary secretary in Dublin.


30. Until its disestablishment following the Irish Church Act in 1869, the United Church of England and Ireland was the established church of both countries. From 1870 it was known as the Church of Ireland. For the purposes of this study, it is referred to as the Church of Ireland throughout.

31. The only complete copy, p. 25.

32. David Alfred Doudney, A Run through Connemara: By the editor of the “Gospel Magazine” and “Protestant Beacon” (Dublin: G. Herbert, 1856), p. 20. “Jumper” was a derogatory term for a convert.


35. Banner of Truth, June 1, 1863, p. 89.

36. Digby Neave, Four days in Connemara (London: R. Bentley, 1853), p. 73.


41. The proportion fell when compared with a less systematic, but the only available, study of the religious composition of the population in 1834.

42. The only complete copy, p. 28.


44. A letter to His Grace, the Archbishop of Dublin on proselytism, by an Irish Peer (Dublin: Hodges, Smith & Co, 1865), p. 41.


47. George Venables, The good news is true; or, What an English clergyman saw in Connemara (London: Hatchard & Co, 1865); R. J. Rowton, Light of the West; or, A Historical Sketch of the Protestant Church in Ireland (London: William Mackintosh, 1869).

48. Banner of Truth, April 1, 1868, p. 31.

49. House of Commons Papers, Educational census showing the number of children actually present in each primary school, 1870 (Cd.6V) XXVIII, part v.1.

50. Currently the ICM maintains a city mission, an evangelical bookshop, Bible study classes, and church services in Dublin, employing one clergyman and three lay staff. Another Bible-worker is employed in Belfast; see the ICM Web site at www.icm-online.ie/index.php.