
Two Diocesan Reports Elphin (1753) and Killaloe (1792)

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TWO DIOCESAN REPORTS ELPHIN (1753) AND KILLALOE (1792)

Edited by
HUGH FENNING, O.P.

Both of these reports or *relationes status* as they are technically called occur in the archives of Propaganda Fide and have already been listed with other documents of their kind.¹ Neither of them appears ever to have been printed or quoted before, but they are of sufficient length and interest to merit publication now.

The first, by John Brett, O.P., of Elphin (1748-1756), belongs to the middle of the century and is to that extent something of a rarity, for virtually all the diocesan reports of the period were composed either before 1716 or after 1770. It is devoted to the 'spiritual state' of the diocese—a fact which might lead one to suspect the existence of a corresponding report on the 'material' aspects of diocesan affairs—but its actual contents are more general than the title would suggest. The bishop speaks of diocesan dignitaries, parishes, clergy, nuns and schools. He devotes two paragraphs to the Catholic laity, commenting on their poor economic and social position. Over the previous five years four had defected from the faith, but ten others had been converted during the past year in the single town of Athlone. Dr Brett mentions that the diocese was about to have its first taste of the Charter Schools, for one was already being built in Sligo. Two other paragraphs, on diocesan conferences and the need for a dispensation in the matter of servile work on holydays, bring the report to a close. Two cases of conscience are then annexed, after the bishop's signature. One concerns the need for a public renunciation of heresy on the part of the penitent apostate: the other asks whether a priest may be permitted to binate merely because of his poverty. The answer of the Holy Office to the first of these problems was printed by Thomas Burke with his biographical notice on the bishop.²

¹ H. Fenning, 'A guide to eighteenth-century reports on Irish dioceses in the archives of Propaganda Fide', *Collect. Hib.*, xi (1968): 19-35. Subsequent to the publication of that list, Fr B. Millett, O.F.M., reminded me of a volume I had forgotten to check A.P.F., Fondo di Vienna 28. That volume contains reports on Achonry (1792), Galway (1793), Kilmore (1794) and Tuam (1797). Another report on Galway (1795) occurs in A.P.F., S.O.C.G., vol. 901, ff. 70-71.

² *Hibernia Dominicana*, pp. 507-508.

The second report, by the long-lived Dr MacMahon, O.P., of Killaloe (1765-1807), belongs to a later period when the writing of such statements had become more common. But it is unusual in its informality, for what we have here is the bishop's original letter in English from which his Roman agent would compose a more polished but perhaps less valuable report in Latin for presentation to the Holy See. The document is particularly interesting for its comments on the diocesan clergy and the bishop's school in Ennis, and it answers some of the questions raised by the Rev J. Clancy in his excellent study of the bishop's long career.³

1. *Report to Propaganda by John Brett, O.P., bishop of Elphin, 15 September 1753. Copy. (A.P.F., S.C., Irlanda 10, ff. 422-5).*

Copia.

Status Spiritualis Diaecesis Elphinensis provinciae Tuamensis in Hibernia
hac die 15 Septembris 1753.

Diaecesis Elphinensis praeter episcopum habet tres dignitarios, decanum scilicet, archidiaconum, et cantorem: capitulum ex praedictis et sexdecim canonicis constat. Hi, cum cathedralis cum omnibus suis redditibus sit penes Protestantes, nullum exercent munus chorale, nec exercere possunt, sed sunt parochi sparsim per diaecesim, et quoties opus est eos consulere, ad aliquem designatum locum ab episcopo vel decano per tabellarios convocantur.

Parochias numerat 77, sed a quinquaginta circiter annis, tot sunt factae uniones, ut modo supersint 45; quarum singula suum habent pastorem, et septemdecim earum, ultra parochum, habent singula coadiutorem seu vicarium, qui vices supplet parochi si senex vel malesanus sit, vel ei in obeundo munia parochialia auxiliatur, et hi pro sustentatione tertiam percipiunt emolumentorum partem.

Nec mirandum his modernis temporibus tot factas fuisse uniones, nam parochi nostri nec decimas nec alios habent redditus, sed de populo omnino vivunt: ~~de~~ crescente populo, necesse est ut decrescat pastorum numerus. Populus autem in agris nostris a quinquaginta circiter annis valde imminutus est, eo quod cum plus lucri accrescat Dominis ex pastura quam agricultura et solum nostrum sit graminis feracissimum. Boum armenta et pecudum greges numerosissimi, passim per campos expulsis colonis et praediorum conductoribus aluntur, adeo ut ubi quondam octo vel decem agricolae pro suo statu satis commode in suis benectis domunculis cum suis familiis villatim convivebant, hodie vix reperitur una misera pastoris vel armentarii casa; quo factum est ut esto olim

³ 'Michael Peter MacMahon, bishop of Killaloe, 1765-1807', *Molua* (1940): 3-19.

una parochia rectori sufficeret, hodie vix duae mediocrem victum et amictum suppeditant.

Praeter hos sacerdotes animarum curam habentes in dicta diaecesi reperiuntur quinque religiosorum mendicantium familiae. Patres praedicatorum ordinis S. Dominici habuere olim unum conventum in loco dicto Sligoe, alterum ad Ballindoon, tertium Cloonsabris [Clonshanville], et quartum Roscommon;⁴ et fratres minores habuere conventum Elphiniae. Sed cum hae domus quondam, ut ex ruinis patet, elegantissimae, sint omnes dirutae, patres in locis remotioribus sibi excitarunt receptus pro temporum iniquitate satis commodos in quorum quolibet conveniunt quinque vel sex religiosi quoties opus est; aliquando vero uno vel altero domui remanente, caeteri hinc inde discurrunt vel quia vocantur in adiutorium parochorum, vel quia apud ditiores obeunt munus sacellanorum, vel denique causa praedicationis vel quaestus.

Scholas nec publicas nec privatas licet nobis per leges habere. Sunt aliqui ludi magistri qui iuniores clanculum erudiunt in litteris humanioribus, et ditiores domi habent vel religiosos vel scholares pro suis liberis instituendis.

Monialium nullam habemus domum in tota diaecesi. Quinque ante annis soror Susanna O'Fallon, monialis Dubliniensis ordinis S. Augustini, approbante SSmo. Domino Benedicto XIV, Athlone domum religiosarum sui instituti fundare aggressa est, sed praematura morte praepedita opus non absolvit, et unica religiosa quam ad professionem recepit ad aliam ordinis domum transivit.⁵ Hospitalia nulla reperiuntur in dicta diaecesi, nec sodalitates, nec eremita, nec alia quam plurima quae in exterorum regnum ditionibus occurrunt.

Quod ad laicorum statum attinet, possum sine haesitatione affirmare quod si capita censeantur, Protestantes vix vigesimum quemque in suis numerabunt. Hi enim civitates ut plurimum incolant et in dicta diaecesi nulla est civitas. In oppidulis seu potius castris quae quinque numerantur sunt plurimi Aatholici, et tamen in his nostrorum numerus est triplo maior. In agris vero vix tricesimus est Protestans. Verumtamen hoc Catholicos inter et Sectarios inest discrimen, quod magistratus omnes, viri militares, legistae, officiales cuiuscumque generis et vix non omnium

⁴ Burke supplies the names of the friars attached to these convents in 1756. There were five in Sligo, three in Ballindoon, nine in Clonshanville, and sixteen in Roscommon: *Hibernia Dominicana*, pp. 249, 261, 311, 326. The Franciscan provincial, writing in 1766, said there were nine friars in the convent of Elphin, five of them old and sick: *Collect. Hib.*, viii (1965): 87. There were therefore about forty friars in the diocese in 1753. Added to the forty-five parish priests and seventeen curates, these brought the total number of priests in the diocese to more or less a hundred.

⁵ While yet bishop of Killala, Dr Brett had written to Rome (5 Oct. 1747) recommending this foundation. For the text of his letter see Fenning, 'Some problems of the Irish mission, 1733-1774', *Collect. Hib.*, viii (1965): 77-78.

feudorum et possessionum Domini, sicut et ditiores mercatores, sunt Protestantes. Vulgus autem mercatorum, colonum, artistarum, pastorum, famulorum, et diurno labore victum quaeritantium, orthodoxae adhaerent religioni.

Defectiones a fide aliquando contingunt. Tres viros et unam femellam his quinque annis quibus indigne praesum diaecesi Elphinensi avaritia seductos a nostris descivisse planximus. Conversiones tamen sunt summo Dei beneficio multo frequentiores: nam hoc ipso anno inter tot detenentia in solo castro de Athlone decem amplexati sunt fidem, et quamplurimi in extremis positi ad salutis semitam quotidie revertuntur.

Scholae pro instructione liberorum pauperum Catholicorum in religione Protestantica et artibus mechanicis regio diplomate erectae, esto alibi edant stragem sanguineis lacrymis deflendam, apud nos nondum reperiuntur, nec ullus nostrae diaecesis Catholicus quod post sedulam percuntationem scire poteram unquam eis tradidit suam prolem instituendam. Sed, proh dolor, proxime imminet procella, nam iam unam parant in castro de Sligoe. Modo viginti tres harum scholarum sunt erecta in hoc regno et in eis aluntur scholares 1,409, ut patet ex calendario seu Ephemeridi Wattsonii editionis huius anni currentis.⁶

Diaecesis dividitur in quinque decanatus, in quorum singulis habentur conferentia mensiles, ad quas accedunt omnes parochi et confessarii illius districtus, et in eis agitur de casibus conscientiae, de fidei controversiis, de sensu morali Evangelii currentis, et de quibuscumque aliis difficultatibus emergentibus. Uni ex eis praest episcopus per seipsum, aliis vero per suos vicarios generales et foraneos,⁷ hasque omnes sicut et totam diaecesim visitat quolibet anno.

Festa, die Dominica aliisque paucis exceptis, pessime sanctificantur, nec ad eorum observantiam cogi potest populus, cum pauperes ut plurimum Dominis Protestantibus subsint qui eos, velint nolint, ad laborem servilem obligabunt, et qui eis non subsunt, paupertate lugente, ad laborem adiguntur; unde spero praeceptum hoc relaxandum, praesertim quoad festa incidentia in mensibus Februarii et Martii quando seminatur avena, exceptis festis Purificationis et Annuntiationis, et in mensibus Iulii, Augusti, Septembris et Octobris, cum colliguntur grana et foenum.

Hic est praesens status spiritualis diaecensis Elphinensis quem ego

⁶ A copy of Samuel Watson's *Kalendar* for the year 1791 is listed by Douglas Hyde and D. J. O'Donoghue, *Catalogue of the Books and Manuscripts of the late Sir John T. Gilbert* (Dublin 1918), p. 888. Perhaps the bishop is referring to John Watson's *The Gentlemen and Citizen's Almanack*, of which there are copies for 1750 and 1752 listed in *Bradshaw cat.*, i. 85.

⁷ MS: *fuaneos*.

infrascriptus indignus episcopus humillime submitto iudicio et emendationi
Suae Sanctitatis hac die et mense qui supra.

Inferius erat signatum:

fr. Ioannes [Brett] ord. praed. Episcopus Elphinensis.

Supradictus humillime quaerit quid agendum in casibus sequentibus:

1. Titius, ne patrimonium satis amplum amittat, abiurat exterius, non tamen cordetenus, fidem, Protestantium ecclesiam aliquo tempore frequentat, eorumque caenam sumit: sed postea cupit admitti ad paenitentiam. Fidem tamen publice profiteri non audet, cum eo casu iuxta leges omnia eius bona debeant fisco cedere et ipse perpetuo incarcerari. Quaeritur an sit admittendus absque alia scandali reparatione, dummodo promittat missam privatim audire, se nunquam aditurum Aatholicorum ecclesiam, nec eorum caenam sumpturum, dicatque non raro coram pluribus se non convictione, sed ne bona perderet fictui fidei renuntiasset, et tandem, talia frequenter edat signa quibus vicini praesertim Catholici dignoscant ipsum non esse reipsa Protestantem: uno verbo, dummodo reparat scandalum omni meliori modo quo potest salvis remanentibus bonis et libertate.

2. Dum in facultatibus conceditur episcopis Hiberniae ut possint dare licentiam bis in die festo celebrandi, modo adsit necessitas, quaeritur an sufficiat necessitas celebrantis, unde sit casus et quidem non rarus. Titius, pauper sacerdos, nihil certi habens unde vivat, celebrat in domo cuiusdam divitis quolibet festo, unde annuatim percipit decem circiter scuta romana, sed cum de his nullo modo potest vivere aut vestiri, quaeritur an episcopus in vim facultatum posset illi dare licentiam celebrandi denuo in aedibus alterius divitis qui tot alia scuta illi solvet, de quibus si non victum, saltem amictum poterit procurare.

2. *Michael Peter MacMahon, O.P., bishop of Killaloe, to Charles O'Kelly, O.P., at the Minerva in Rome, Cappaville, 5 June 1792. (A.P.F., S.O.C.G., vol. 895, ff. 52-3).*

Reverend and Dear Father Master

It's almost time for us now, at the heel of life, to renew our correspondence. It's true, our last was to you, but I remember you mentioned in a letter to Dr Nihill that you wrote me a long one, which never came to hand. But no punctilio should, nor would hinder me from assuring you of my regards. Likewise I had nothing material to communicate to you that would put me under the necessity of making use of [an] amanuensis. For these two years past I had a tremour and cramp in my right hand, so as that I could hardly sign my name, but now thank God am much

better and able to give you an account of my diocese in order that you may make a report of it to those whom it may concern.⁸

The set of parish priests I found in the diocese of Killaloe when I began to govern it, are all dead except two who have coadjutors. The diocese has 54 parish priests, all of my own ordination except six, and I can boldly assert to the S. Congregation that they are qualified for any parish on the continent, except five (one ordained by myself and the others in Paris and Flanders) but of good morals. We have not worse missionaries in this country than many of those who went abroad young and were ordained in virtue of privileges formerly granted to some of our Colledges when the bishops were persecuted in this kingdom. But now thank God, that they are tolerated to exercise their spiritual functions, those privileges should cease or be recalled. I wrote to some of the superiors of those privileged Colledges not to send any of my subjects to ordination without my consent; otherwise I would not know them as belonging to my diocese. But when I was well informed by the moderators of the Colledges they studied in of their merit and conduct, I would with pleasure send them dimissories. I have four or five priests in Paris, students under the care of Dr [John Baptist] Walsh superior of Lombard whom I ordained, all behave well under the severest persecutions. I have five or six more in the diocese of Bourdeaux who have finished their studies some years ago; as they remained there without my consent I can give no account of them. There is one [James] Bourke who was ordained there, in whose favour an Irish priest resigned his parish some years ago, worth five hundred pounds a year. This man is supposed to have taken the civick oath, which I am apt to believe as he is a man of the world.⁹

I must now give an account how I have disposed of eight pounds eight shillings I received yearly of the Roman money. I added to it what schooled and cloathed once a year about 16 poor boys, and when instructed in the principals [*sic*] of religion and in little reading and writing, I bound them to trades or servitude. Those I bound to mechanism required an apprentice fee and a suit of cloaths. I also paid a school master and bought books and paper for them. This school I supported out of my own pocket these 25 years past, which cost me about 30 pounds a year over and above the Roman money. But now that we are tolerated to erect publick schools I have put my school on a larger scale. I took, last year, a piece of ground joining the chapel in Ennis on which I built

⁸ The formal Latin version, which differs even in its contents from the original, occurs *ibid.*, ff. 51, 54. The report was item 12 at the general congregation of Propaganda Fide held on 4 March 1793: A.P.F., Acta 163, ff. 18-25.

⁹ For details on this Fr Bourke and other priests of Killaloe at Bordeaux see Walsh, 'Some Records of the Irish College at Bordeaux', *Archiv. Hib.*, xv (1950): 92-141, especially pp. 119-20.

a handsome school-house which cost me above two hundred pounds. I then assimbled the principal Roman Catholics and by a publick and legal instrument conveyed it to the diocess rent free for ever. I then put a yearly subscription on foot for its support, in which I had success, for I received in hand at the last assizes of Ennis above a hundred pounds and expect to receive an equal sum next assizes. I can assure you that three thirds are Protestants. The judge subscribed five guineas. Lord Hertfort, foreman of the Grand Jury, subscribed the like sum. The most of the Grand Jury subscribed from one to two and three guineas [?] each, Mr Burton 8, and all paid their first subscription for the immediate reception of poor boys. I mention these, knowing that it will be agreeable to you to hear what liberal sentiments at present subsist betwixt Roman Catholics and Protestants.

But lett it not be imagined that it is my diocess that enabled me to erect and support this school. No. It is by an annuity allowed me by my family. For though it is the largest it is the poorest in Munster except Kilfenora. For there is not a city or town of any great consequence in it, nor Roman Catholic of any great fortune, but mostly peopled with Protestants, Presbyterians, Quakers, Swaddlers, Baptists, Seekers, and Moravians.

We are still here in suspence about an archbishop. Dr Teahan has kept us in suspence. It's only a few days ago I was informed by a letter from Dr Egan of Clonmel that he sent back his bulls. We his confrères are very jealous of his conduct, for we imagined that in gratitude for the honour we paid him he would inform us of this design. But we suppose that he intended with his party to smuggle in some friend of their own. I wish the lot may fall on Dr Nihill. Though not possessing as active health as it were to be wished, he might I think supply the want of it by his superintendence and by the choice of proper vicars to act under him.

I think my faculties will be out this month or next. I request you will get them renewed. And though I seldom grant dispensations, but empower my vicars to grant them, for which I am sure they received some mulct: but, *qui facit per alium facit per se*. I scruple it, though Dr Conway showed me a letter, I fancy from the cardinals, which allows him to impose penance in proportion to the indulgence granted, to those who requier it in consanguinity and affinity. And some of our best divines here think it more allowable than receiving a mulct for a dispensation in the publication of banns, as it is a greater infringement on the law, though allowed by the Council of Trint.

Our order¹⁰ has dwindled to almost nothing in this kingdom, very

¹⁰ The Dominicans.

much owing to their being deprived of their chance of preferment, as formerly, in the church, which has hindered young boys of decent families of intering into religious orders. Our late archbishop [James Butler II] was much suspected for having made a bad impression on the minds of the S. Congregation in respect to friers. God forgive him. I suppose you have heard ere now of the death of your friend the Knight of Malta. He willed me sixty pounds a year during my life. My nephews are in the same predicament with the rest of the nobility of France. They were both colonels and made a resignation of their regiments to the National Assembly and joined the exiled princes. God give them success. If in any thing I can be of service to you, command me freely, for be assured that I am, with the highest esteem and affection, your most obedient humble servant,

Cappaville near Limerick
June 5th 1792.

Michael Peter MacMahon.