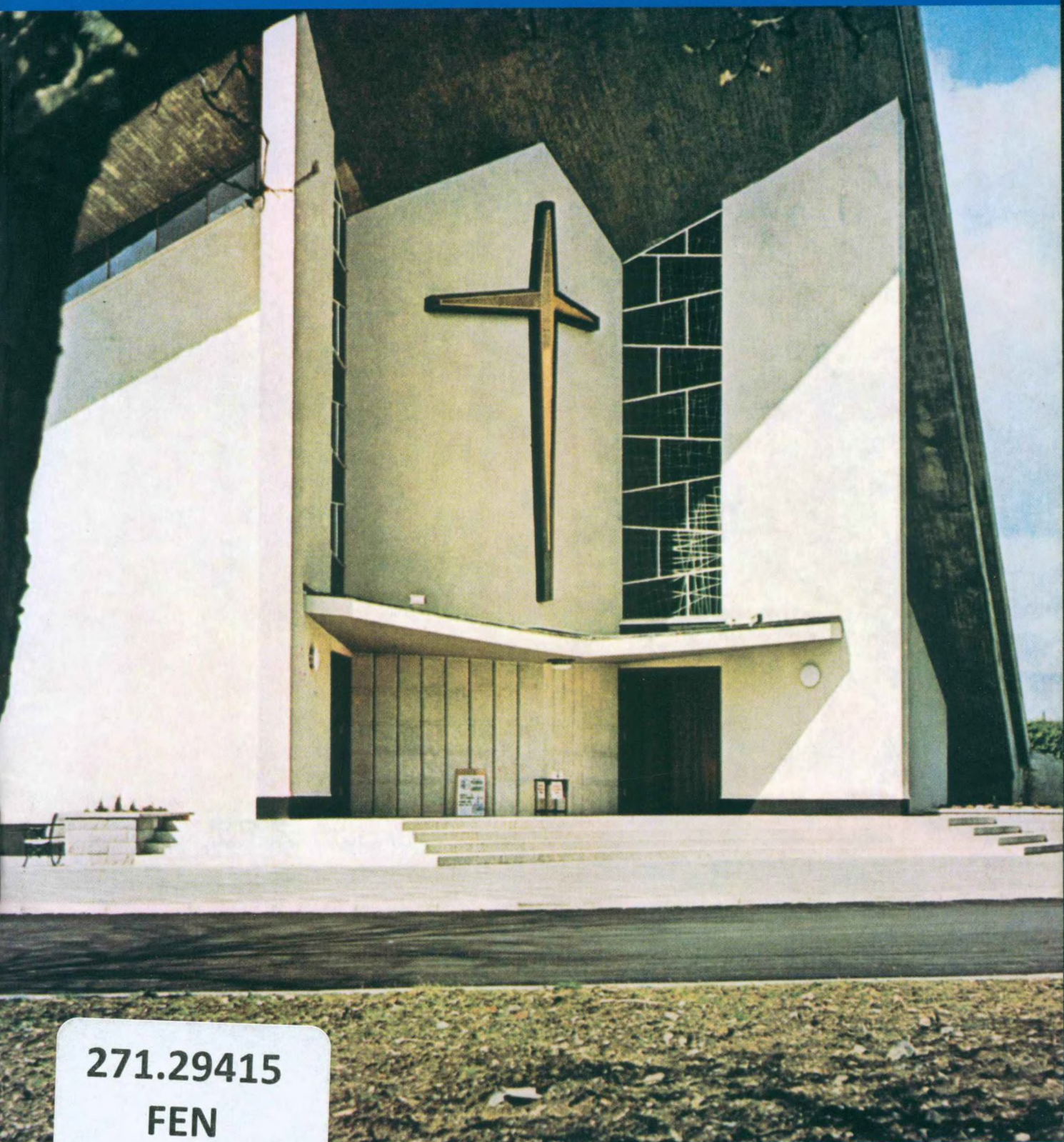


# Dominicans of Athy

1257 – 2007



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**Dominican Order - Irish Province**

Dominicans of Athy 1257-2007

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When the Dominicans first came to Ireland in 1224 they very quickly settled in the five major ports and also at Kilkenny, on the road between Dublin and Waterford. Pausing then for eight years to take breath and train recruits, they moved inland to Mullingar in 1237 before making their first foundation in Connacht at Athenry and two others, their first in Ulster, at Coleraine and Newtownards. That was in 1244. Again there was an eight-year pause before they founded another three convents in Connacht and finally set up house in Athy. The traditional date of their arrival on the banks of the Barrow was 1253, but other views prevailed and the seventh centenary of the priory was celebrated in great style at Athy in 1957 exactly fifty years ago.

Even granting that these first Dominicans were Normans and spoke Norman-French like the colonists, the pace at which they settled so quickly in so many centres calls for some explanation. Like the Sisters of St Teresa of Calcutta today, they had something to offer which the Church in Western Europe badly needed. Unlike the parish clergy of the time, they were highly trained preachers. They were also free to move quickly from place to place, whereas monks were bound by vow to stay at home, and had the further advantage of being free from the parish responsibilities that occupied the Canons Regular already well settled in Ireland.

The Norman colonists, always attracted by river valleys and rich land, had been in Athy for eighty years before the Dominicans came. Their strategic fortresses at Kilkea, Woodstock and Reban controlled the Marches of Kildare, protected the immigrant farmers, defended the ford across the Barrow and kept the road from Dublin to Kilkenny open. The local magnate was Richard de St Michael, baron of Reban, builder of both Woodstock and Reban, and founder also about the year 1210 of the priory of St Thomas for Canons Regular in Athy. These Canons were called Hospitallers because they cared for the sick, and more often 'Crutched Friars' because the emblem of the Cross was often in their hands or more conveniently sewn onto their habits. At Athy, where their churchyard still survives, they also took care of the parish of St John.

Who it was invited the Dominicans to Athy is still a puzzle. The most likely candidates are the head of the de St Michael family, baron of Reban at the time, or Maurice Fitzgerald, owner of Kilkea from 1244. Maybe the friars came without a formal invitation and were made welcome by the townsmen as happened in Dublin and elsewhere. The Hospitallers of St John's probably offered them shelter until they found a place of their own on the other, eastern, bank of the Barrow, opposite the present priory. There finally they settled down, at first in thatched huts of wood and clay, later in a stone convent and church dedicated to St Peter Martyr of Verona, one of the earliest saints of the Order.

Peter Martyr, inquisitor of Lombardy, was a forceful preacher, particularly active against those who believed that matter was evil and that the one God cannot have created both matter and spirit. For them, since the body of Christ was only a phantom, he could not have risen soul and body from the dead. These heretics, called Cathars in Italy, murdered St Peter in 1252 and he is said to have traced the word *Credo*, 'I believe', on the ground with his own blood just before he died. One short year later he was canonised. In sacred art he is usually shown with a knife between his shoulder blades or in his head. While the Dominicans were settling down at Athy in the 1250s, the fame of St Peter Martyr must have been ringing in their ears. More than ten years later, in 1269, they gave the same dedication to yet another priory at Lorrha in Co. Tipperary.

Between their coming in the 1250s and the close of the century, the Dominicans could lead a fairly normal life in Athy for it was the golden age of Norman Ireland. Athy had no protective walls, nor even a bridge across the Barrow, but the growing town had little to fear as yet from the neighbouring Gaelic tribes, particularly those of Laois. The priory of the Friars Preachers, to use their official name, must have been thought sufficiently large and secure, for meetings of delegates from priories all over Ireland were held there in 1288, 1295 and 1305. More often they were called Blackfriars from the colour of their cloaks. Being 'mendicant friars', like the Franciscans or Greyfriars of Castledermot and Stradbally, they begged for their bread



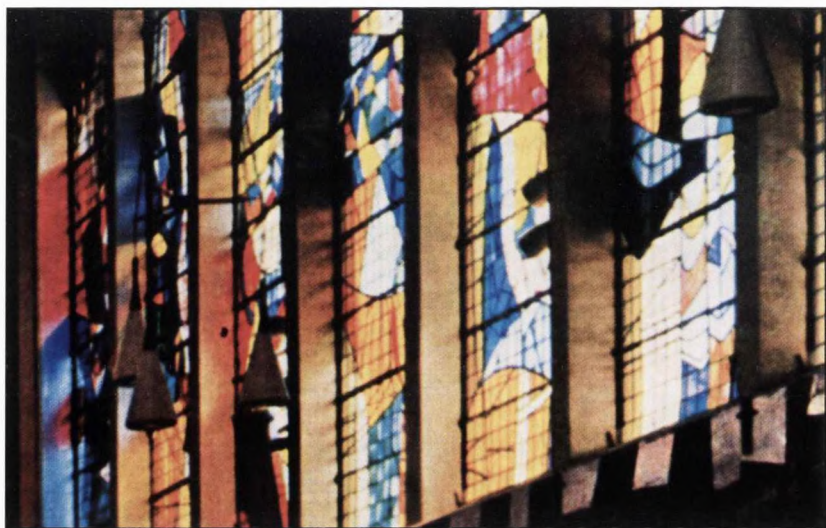


in town and country, especially during summer and autumn as the harvest came in. With their quest, which ranged as far as Stradbally, Kilcullen and Dunlavin, they combined their work as preachers in towns and hamlets over a wide area. If they could not preach in Gaelic on their arrival, they were forced to learn the language very soon. They needed it urgently both to eat and to preach, often for alms, in the scattered parish churches. Not that they ate very much, for they were vegetarians in the early years of their first fervour. They used also wake up and leave their dormitory before midnight to say part of the divine office in church, a practice considered to have been the greatest austerity in their daily life.

Meanwhile the names of two early benefactors appear. Richard le Porter gave them an acre in the 1290s, when an acre in Athy cost as much as a pig. John de Slane, perhaps the man of that name contracted in 1300 to build some fortifications at Athy, gave them another six acres 'adjacent to their dwelling place, for the enlargement thereof' in 1314. These acres, clearly intended for a larger priory and

church, may have taken in the marshy land downstream from the abbey recently developed as a marina. The friars also had a fishing weir, probably for eels, on the Barrow. Several local worthies raided it one night in 1309 and stole a net full of fish 'by force of arms'. Among the raiders, surprisingly enough, were three ecclesiastics: Thomas the Chaplain, Brother John prior of St Thomas of Athy and a friar Maurice, also of Athy. Two years later, even the new parish church of St Michael was burgled and the goods stored there by some of the more wealthy townspeople were taken away.

So ended the 'golden years' of Athy under the Normans. Thereafter, the local Irish clans began to press more strongly against this outpost on the very edges of Anglo-Norman settlement. As early as 1288 the Viceroy had spent a fortune putting troops into Reban and elsewhere in the area. More money was advanced in 1300 to build a 'fortalice' or small fortress in Athy itself, but perhaps this was never done. South Leinster became the setting for a widespread race revival led by the MacMorroughs, O'Mores and O'Connors who threatened the whole line of the Barrow. Athy was burned in 1305 by the Irish of Laois and Offaly, and was to be burned four times again before the century closed.





The area became a sort of battlefield. The lord deputy himself came along in 1314 and managed to kill about 800 of the O'Mores and their allies. Two years later, 'in a cold year of famine and plague', Edward Bruce with his Scottish invaders pillaged Castledermot, Athy and Reban. At Castledermot the Franciscans saw their friary destroyed, their vestments, books and furniture carried away by the Scots. The Anglo-Normans opposed this mighty army near Ardsclull but failed to defeat them. Although Bruce held the field there were severe losses on both sides. The slain Anglo-Norman leaders were buried in St Michael's at Athy; the Scottish victims, notably Fergus Ardrossan and Walter of Moray, were laid to rest in the Dominican friary. Bruce, the self-styled king of Ireland, then crossed the ford into Laois and Offaly before turning north for Ulster and an early death at Faughart near Dundalk. He was the brother of the great Robert Bruce, king of Scotland.

Soon after this battle a new Anglo-Norman leader appeared in the neighbourhood. This was John Wogan, formerly Chief Governor for many years, who became in 1317 the greatest tenant of the Fitzgeralds, Earls of Kildare, and occupied the castles of Kilkea and Castledermot. If he put the Dominicans on their feet again after Bruce's departure, it would explain why a much later writer claimed that Wogan — wrongly given as 'Hogan' — was one of the founders of the abbey. Before 1650, the title of 'founder' was sometimes given to a later benefactor when the original founder was long forgotten and circumstances had drastically changed.

The fourteenth century was a disastrous time for the Anglo-Normans, and particularly for their undefended outposts in the Marches. The Black Death or bubonic plague, brought to Ireland by rats in 1347, carried off a quarter of the population in cities and towns. Rural areas escaped the worst of it. Eight Dominicans died at Kilkenny in 1348 and there were to be six later outbreaks of the disease in the space of forty years. By 1382, half the Anglo-Norman population had been carried off by pestilence and their hold over the countryside had greatly weakened. Athy, small as it was, may not have escaped these successive waves of plague, particularly because of its

barge-borne river-trade with New Ross near the sea. Few details about the Dominicans survive the wreck of time: the name of a prior, Philip Pereys, in 1357; the foundation of another convent in Kildare at Naas in the same year; more forays against the O'Tooles, O'Mores and MacMorroughs 'in the parts of Laois' and the brief settlement of a military garrison at Athy in 1360.

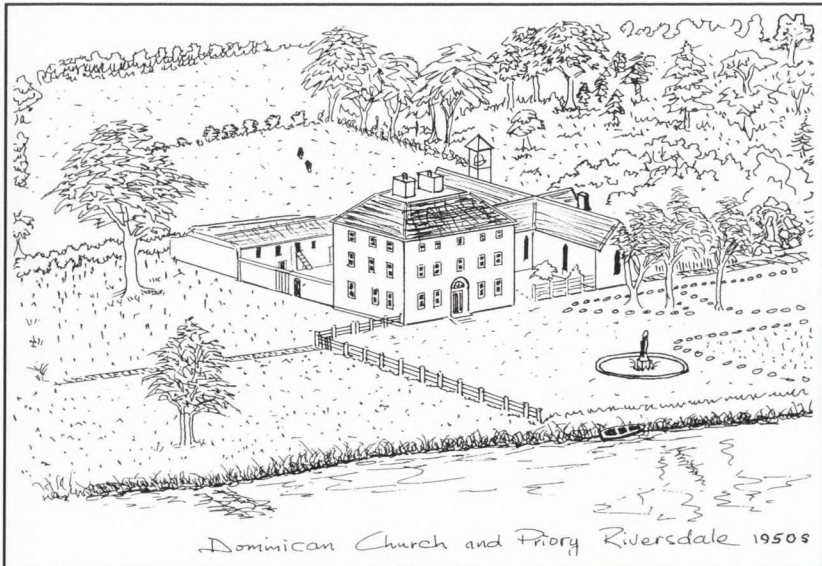
By 1372 the Barons of Reban no longer ruled or owned Athy. The new 'lord of the town' was a certain Oliver Eustace who had acquired land and houses formerly belonging to the de St Michael family. Following ancient custom, Eustace appointed inspectors of weights and measures who on market days also sampled whatever bread, beer and meat was on sale. The trouble was that since the town was 'largely destroyed', Eustace insisted that these inspectors should work inside the Dominican cloister. After complaining about this nuisance for two years, the Dominicans took Eustace to court before the lord deputy at Moone and won their case. The incident reveals the name of another prior, Henry Mody, with those of three of his subjects: William Duraunt, Thomas Scryven and William Roche. Significantly, the names are Anglo-Norman. Two of them — Duraunt and Roche — reappeared at Dublin in 1380 as supporters of an attempt then being made by the Dominicans of Ireland to have a national superior of their own rather than continue in subjection to a vicar named by the provincial of England. They never succeeded until Henry VIII destroyed the English province of the Order root and branch.

The fact that the Dominicans were looking for Home Rule at this time reflects a national feeling shared by many Anglo-Norman leaders who were famously becoming more Irish than the Irish themselves. The friars at Athy in 1374 may have borne Norman names, but the Order opened yet another house in 1382 at Aghaboe near Rathdowney, Co. Laois, under the patronage of MacGillapattrick, lord of Ossory. Clearly they had a foot in both camps, and must have moved about among the 'mere Irish' both to quest and to preach. Meanwhile the military struggle between the colonists and the dispossessed Irish went on. O'More and O'Dempsey were defeated



near Kilkea Castle in 1414, as though in answer to the prayers of the Archbishop of Dublin who led a procession through Castledermot so that God might bring victory to the colonists. Soon after, the lord lieutenant repaired the bridge at Athy and put a new tower on it, besides a 'great fortification' round about, as a protection against the enemies of Laois. The colonists might now, as they imagined, safely leave their property in the fields, something unthinkable for thirty years before. Yet the Irish encroached again until 1420 when the viceroy came to the Red Ford in Athy, or as some say the Red Moor, where he slew 'many of the kin and terrible army of O'More; and the sun stood still for three hours until the English had destroyed the Irish'.

During the 1300s there were many among the colonists, even priests, who claimed it was no sin to kill an Irishman. In 1366, one of the many Statutes of Kilkenny forbade friars to admit Irish novices. Even if some within the Pale followed this ruling, there had been a change of heart a century later when two Dominicans of Athy had definitely Irish names. John O'Lawlor, clearly belonging to one of the Seven Septs of Laois, appears in 1453. After several years at Oxford,



*Dominican Church and Priory Riversdale 1950s*

he was teaching in the abbey of Athy. The reason for his appearance in the records was that the Pope allowed him to become a Cistercian and take over the abbey of Baltinglass. Whether he ever managed to do so is another question, but it is interesting to note that Baltinglass was one of the places where the Dominicans of Athy carried out their quest. The second Irish friar of Athy was Maurice Macanrag who in 1475 was dispensed by the Pope from a legal impediment to his further promotion. Like many Irish priests at the time, his parents had never been married.

If the case of the Dominican abbot of Baltinglass shows that the Dominicans of Athy were not living up to the Constitutions of the Order, there was another sign of slackness in 1468 when the entire community at Athy applied to the Pope for possession of some parochial rectories in the neighbourhood actually held by the dean of St Patrick's in Dublin. One was Kilberry, held by the dean from 1219 and even by Dean Swift five centuries later. This petition to the Holy See was presented by 'the Dominican prior and community of St Peter Martyr in Athy, who are not of the observance'. Here one has the first and only evidence that the old abbey was dedicated to St Peter Martyr, linked to the admission that the Athy Dominicans stood outside the contemporary movement for reform of the Order, which meant a return to 'strict observance'. Had they been 'of the observance' their request for parochial rectories would have been rejected out of hand. That they wanted rectories at all may have been for more revenue or because they wanted a parochial ministry.

So far as the Dominicans were concerned, the Observant Reform in Ireland was almost entirely confined to Connacht where it began in 1426 with the foundation of a new friary at Portumna. Granted, the movement started at Longford in precisely the same year, but it never flourished in Leinster as it did beyond the Shannon. So far as Athy is concerned there are only two hints of any wish for observance. One was the intended creation of a new community at Inchaquire, about two miles north of Ballitore, in 1488. Edmund Wellesley, baron of Norragh, gave the Dominicans some land on which to build a church, 'inspired by his devotion to the Order, the



exemplary lives of the brethren and their constant preaching of the Word of God'. He may have had more practical reasons too since his new castle at Norragh: 'stood on the frontier of the Marches and had no help save God'. Either way, one hears no more of Dominicans at Inchaquire. The second hint comes in the same year, 1488, when friar Maurice Fierry of Athy was dispensed from the law of the Order so that he might ride a horse, wear linen, carry a knife and eat meat. Whether Observant or Conventual, Friar Fierry was taking care to protect his lifestyle.

When the colonists drew the line of their famous Pale, a double-ditch, in 1495 it came no further south than Kilcullen, leaving Athy to fend for itself. Fitzgerald, Earl of Kildare, then built another castle to defend the bridge, a little upstream and on the same side as the Dominican abbey. White Castle, as it is called, still stands there today. This was one of six castles in which Silken Thomas Fitzgerald maintained a garrison during his rash rebellion (1534-35). After his execution at Tyburn, another band of marauders under Donald McCare Kavanagh attacked Athy in 1539, burning 'all the buildings' of the Dominican monastery. This combination of rebellion in Kildare and attack from Laois played into the hands of Henry VIII



who wanted secure borders guaranteed by loyal men. He would reward their loyalty, as he had done already in England, with the land and property of suppressed religious houses. The few who stood up to that brutal despot paid for it with their blood. During 1539, Kavanagh had simply attacked the friary at Athy in June. King Henry, being more thorough, just took it 'into his own hands' in August .

Legal documents concerning the suppression of the abbey offer some interesting details. Robert Woulff, the last prior, withdrew with his small community of friars in 1540, not having much option to do anything else. Yet Prior Woulff served on the official panel assessing the value of some local rectories also being sequestered. In fact he had held until then a valuable lease on one of them, at Fassagh Reban. Although Matthew St Michael, baron of Reban, was likewise on the panel assessing the Blackfriars of Athy, neither he nor the others knew when precisely the abbey had been established nor who had been its founder. Among them, the most important was Martin Pelles, constable of the castle of Athy, who already occupied 'the Blackfriars of Athy' in November 1540 and would get possession of the property three years later. The church itself had a bell-tower with two bells, a chapter house, dormitory, kitchen, three rooms and two halls, one of which (the refectory?) was said to be large. There must surely have been an open square cloister area within the complex too. The site, with a cemetery, orchard and garden, covered half an acre 'by the greater measure'.

Unlike monasteries, few friaries had much land. The Dominicans of Athy had more than twenty-five acres here and there, with 'two large fish-ponds or fisheries called fishing weirs on the Barrow within the house of Athy aforesaid'. Their property included two acres of pasture and two more of meadow along the Barrow in Athy itself. They owned six cottages and ten 'great acres of arable land at le More' near the town, with eight 'great acres' of pasture on the Barrow and in the fields of Athy, said by the official panel, who had their own agenda, to be 'devastated and unoccupied'. On the Island in the Barrow itself they owned another half-acre of pasture. Outside the town, their possessions included an acre with a millrace at



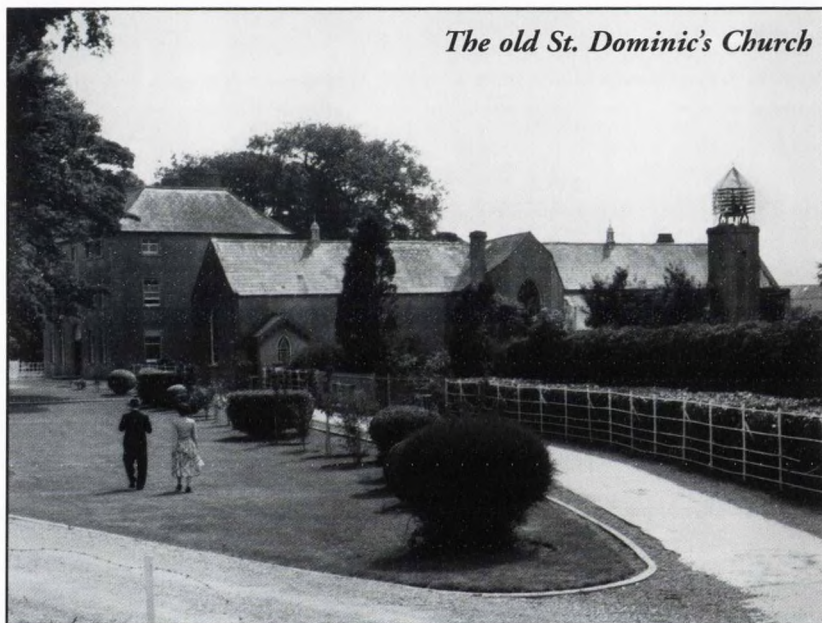
Tullochgorey in the parish of St Michael, and seven acres of arable land at Mollengrange, now Grangemellon, a few miles downstream from Athy. James Fitzgerald of this 'Myllons Grange' was on the panel.

Prior Woullfe and his friars left their house in Athy as a place 'profaned and dissolved' to find employment as curates in the neighbourhood or simply move on towards Connacht to take refuge in friaries which Henry VIII was unable to 'take into his hands', much as he would have liked to. It was the end of an era, for the same monarch now styled himself 'the only Supreme Head on Earth of the whole Church of Ireland'.

### *Recovery, Persecution and Exile* 1630-1698

**T**he suppression of the monasteries, quickly effected in Leinster and Munster, took rather longer in parts of the country where the State had as yet no control. Normal Dominican life continued as before in Connacht and Ulster for another thirty years. Some convents survived even into the 1590s when Connacht was finally subdued by the armies of Queen Elizabeth. One or other, such as the priory at Urlar in Co. Mayo, may even have escaped suppression altogether. Yet while the Irish Dominicans went into almost total eclipse, the friars never forgot their claim to a house in Athy. Thanks to a new policy of sending young men to Spain and Flanders for education, their numbers grew during the 1620s and their reforming leader, Ross MacGeoghegan of Westmeath, put his mind to the restoration of the Order in Leinster.

By 1627, when MacGeoghegan went out of office as Provincial, there were sizeable Dominican communities once more at Dublin, Kilkenny and Mullingar. Athy too was re-established in his time, though we have no list of its members. Curiously, an official list of former priories drawn up in 1627 included even Inchaquire near



*The old St. Dominic's Church*

Ballitore, but that ghost convent was never heard of again. Fr MacGeoghagan, himself of noble birth, had a Dominican nephew named Edmund O'Dempsey who was at least as noble as his uncle. He was in fact the son of Terence O'Dempsey, head of the O'Dempsey clan, baron of Philipstown and later Viscount of Clanmalier, owner of more than 20,000 acres in Offaly and Laois on both sides of the Barrow. Fr O'Dempsey had been working in Ireland from about 1624, quite likely not far from Athy. While he was provincial of the Order in Ireland, his own father testified in 1636 that he had given his Dominican son both houses and lands at Cluony with their annual revenue of £27. The place seems to correspond to Cloney on the east bank of the Barrow some miles downstream from Monasterevin. Twelve friars, presumably the Athy community, lived nearby in the castle at Belin which guarded a particularly ancient ford. The idea may seem strange, but even the Jesuits had a community in Kilkea Castle (1634-46) by courtesy of Elizabeth Nugent, widow of the Earl of Kildare. Besides, on a list of founders of priories drawn up



in 1647, O'Dempsey, Viscount of Clanmalier, appears as founder of the Dominican priory of Athy.

At the time of the Confederation of Kilkenny (1641-1649), the town of Athy, because of its strategic importance, was besieged, captured and recaptured by the various forces in the field. Some Dominicans at least, under their prior Thomas Bermingham, moved from Belin into their former abbey in Athy. General Preston, fighting against the Confederation, after first severely damaging Woodstock Castle in 1648, next trained his guns on the abbey which was garrisoned by Confederate soldiers from Ulster. Prior Bermingham set a large wooden cross on the belfry, and rallied both friars and soldiers, assuring them that since God was on their side Preston would not prevail that day. For all the shooting the cross was never hit and St Dominic himself appeared above the tower as though to guard it. The date of this vision, seen by defenders and attackers alike, was 15 September 1648, the feast of the wonder working image of St Dominic at Soriano in Italy. There is a hint here that the abbey itself, from its restoration by the O'Dempseys, was dedicated to St Dominic. So it appears at anyrate in all later records.

One year later Father Bermingham and his friars were still at Athy when Lord Castlehaven arrived with yet another army. Castlehaven belonged to the Confederation, largely a Catholic body, but that faction-ridden group no longer had any time for friars, most of whom still warmly supported the papal nuncio Rinuccini. So, when the prior with some friars went out to his camp to plead for the preservation of the abbey, they were arrested at once. After taking Athy 'in a few moments' Castlehaven proceeded to burn, plunder and pillage the whole place. Then he was called away urgently to Dublin, leaving the actual demolition of the Dominican abbey to an officer named MacThomas.

The arrival of Oliver Cromwell in September 1649 ushered in a decade of severe religious persecution. At Drogheda, the scene of his first military success against the Confederates, he slaughtered the entire garrison and about six priests. One of them, an army chaplain,

was Richard Ovington, subprior of Athy, who was captured after the famous siege and executed out of hand. Cromwell, the Lord Protector, may have spent only eight months in Ireland, but he has never been forgotten. Within three years his Model Army put an end to the Confederate forces forever. Neither Cromwell nor his Roundheads had any time for Catholics, for the Mass or for priests, and the effects of his ruthless policy were soon felt in Kildare. In April 1650, the Cromwellian governor of Dublin marched to Castledermot where he attacked the castle and turned out the occupants, including three Franciscans who are thought to have been murdered on the spot.

Prior Thomas Bermingham of Athy, having already survived so much, was captured soon after by Cromwellian forces and imprisoned at Dublin. The soldiers amused themselves by taking off his Dominican habit and dressing him up as a Franciscan. His sentence was exportation to the Barbadoes to work on the sugar plantations, but after two friends paid a hefty fine he was simply exiled to the continent where he died in 1655 at Anagni in Italy.

It was time for friars to leave the country or at least to lie low. Even the bishops fled the country. Likely enough the remaining Dominicans of Athy fled to Derryvullagh, also called The Derries, an island of thirteen acres in the middle of Monavullagh bog. While this was close enough to their former castle at Belin it was much safer, for the only approach was by a long and narrow causeway. For all this precaution, the new prior Redmond Moore was also forced to go into exile with his confrère Edmund O'Dempsey, now bishop of Leighlin. The pair reached Bilbao in Spain early in January 1653. Bishop O'Dempsey was to die at Pontevedra in Galicia in 1655, but Father Moore would see Ireland again. After Cromwell's death and the restoration of the monarchy in England, Redmund Moore came back through London and again became prior of Athy in 1661. His successor in that office by 1664 was a certain Joseph Carroll. During the 1660s, the provincial, Fr John Hart, encouraged the formation of eighteen small convents 'in very remote places', which would well describe Derryvullagh where the Athy community was hiding out.



While passing through London in 1661, Fr Moore had the misfortune to meet the Franciscan Peter Walsh, a native of Castledermot, who had taken on himself the role of peacemaker between Church and State. His *Loyal Formulary*, once accepted by bishops and clergy, would assure the government of their allegiance and all would be well. However, it would also have created a schismatical national Church on Gallican lines. Walsh had the vigorous support of the new lord deputy, the crafty Ormonde, who rightly foresaw that here was the perfect means of dividing the clergy. Would they take this oath of allegiance or would they not? Since Fr John Hart, the provincial, and Redmund Moore refused to do so, they were thrust in 1666 into Proudfoot Castle, a prison on the Liffey in Dublin, where mice used nibble their feet as they slept on the floor. The foul smell of the river, slender rations and the winter cold increased their sorrows. Under this treatment, Father Moore died on 21 March 1669, one of the more unfortunate victims of Peter Walsh. He is an interesting figure, not least because two surviving chalices bear his name. One was made in 1638, perhaps at the very outset of his priestly work in Ireland; the other, undated, was made for him while he was attached to the convent in Mullingar. A third chalice of this period is inscribed 'Thomas Ronayne' and 'Dom. Conv. Athy'. If this originally belonged to a Dominican, the owner was Thomas Ronan, prior of Youghal in 1675.

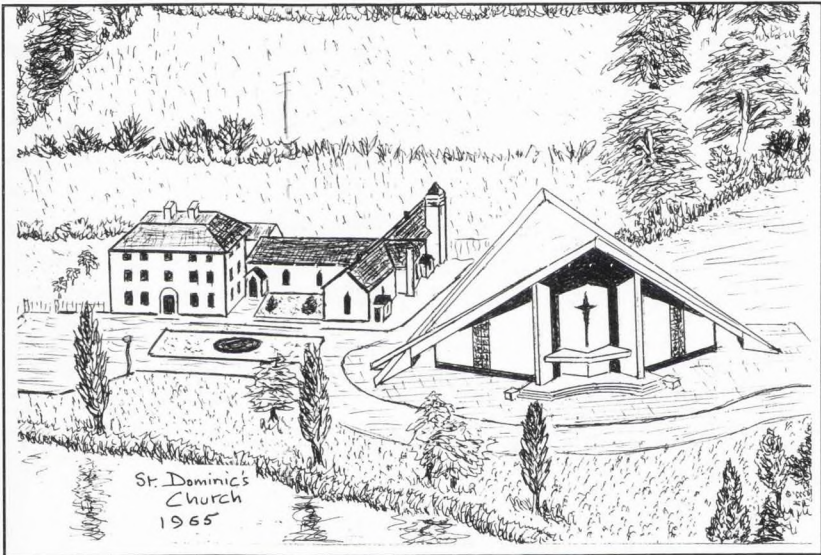
Two other Dominicans were also harassed at this time, for the Restoration did not bring persecution to an end. One was Michael Shiel, arrested in 1668, who sometimes lived with his sister at Lisdark (Lisdarig?), Co. Laois. Another was an otherwise unknown 'Keane' Carroll, perhaps identical with Joseph Carroll, prior of Athy in 1664; he too suffered imprisonment at Dublin between 1668 and 1669. Nor did matters improve with time. About 300 parishioners flocked to Mass in Athy in November 1678, thinking that 'Mass would soon become scarce, for nobody would omit it while it was to be had'. Coincidentally, a Dominican named Richard Cuddihy began his priestly work in Ireland that very year. From 1683 he was to be the anchor-man of the Athy community up to the end of the century. The unusual surname Cuddihy, also found as Cuddy, suggests that he came from Kilkenny.

After so much turmoil, there came a break in the clouds when James II, a Catholic, succeeded to the throne in 1685. Churches and friaries opened again, even in Dublin. Bishops too appeared in public once more, if only for five years, because these glory days ended in 1690, at least in Leinster, with the Battle of the Boyne. The Dominican provincial kept a record from 1683 of all the different friaries and the names of their members. While this window of opportunity lasted it is more than likely that the friars came to live once again in Athy itself. There were six of them, including a novice, in 1687. Richard Cuddihy was almost invariably superior, whether as prior or vicar. Other friars came and went, staying only for a year or so, with the exception of Malachy Murphy who remained at Athy for six years from 1683. After the debacle of the Boyne, Father Cuddihy appears alone in our record during 1691, but then there was a certain recovery with four again in community in 1694. By 1697, in a worsening situation, only two remained: Richard Cuddy, 'living for the most part in Athy' and Edmund Shiel, assistant to the parish priest of Castledermot but living in Killelan parish just to the south of it. Then came the final blow in 1698 when all bishops and friars were sent willy-nilly into exile with severe penalties for those who stayed or tried to come back. Another thirty years and more would pass before any Dominican saw Athy again.

### *Athy under the Penal Laws, 1730 - 1842*

Within fifteen years of the General Exile, the friars opened small chapels once again in cities like Dublin or Galway where there was safety in numbers, but in small towns like Athy it was impossible to pass unnoticed. Friaries might spring up again in Connacht, where the landowners were often Catholics themselves, but not in rural Leinster where squires and magistrates strictly enforced the penal laws. The law did permit a mass-house or two in each parish and there was one at Athy in Chapel Lane off Leinster Street, rebuilt about 1720. An official report of 1731 noted that two diocesan priests took care of the chapel, and that there were no friars in the town at that time. By 1735, a 'prior of Athy' had been appointed, but who or





where he was does not appear. Perhaps it was Terence O'Reilly whose postal address, also in 1735, was 'at Lord Mountgarret's near Athy'. The same Lord Mountgarret died a year later and Fr Reilly returned to Dublin.

One reaches firmer ground in 1743 when two young priests, both from the neighbourhood of Athy, returned to Ireland from the College of San Clemente in Rome. That college was to send many another Dominican to Athy throughout the century. The two priests were Thomas Cummins and Dominic Dillon. Where they lived does not appear, but it is thought they may have had a base-camp of some kind at Nicholastown between Athy and Castledermot, on the very outskirts of Athy parish. During 1744, when there was a scare about the 'growth of popery', John Jackson the local magistrate reported from Athy that he could find neither priest or friar 'in this corporation' because the parish priest, Daniel Fitzpatrick, was at Barrowhouse two miles away and in another county. Clearly the parish priest had decamped during the enquiry and the magistrate was saying no more than he had to. Any Dominicans at Nicholastown had simply to run for cover for a week or so.

In 1754, after an absence of sixty years, they returned quietly to Athy itself. Fr Thomas Cummins had a chalice made for the convent in that year, probably to mark the occasion. It is now in the parish of Coolock, Dublin, and bears the inscription: *Fr. Thos. Cummins Ords. Praed. me fieri fecit pro suo conventu Athyensi A. D. 1754*. Two years later the Dominican historian, Thomas Burke, visited Athy as he had often done before. Scarcely a trace of the old abbey was to be seen, for a new Protestant church stood on the site of the medieval convent beside the Barrow; he did not mean the present Protestant church with its beautiful spire but an earlier one on Emily Square. For many years before, Burke commented, priors of Athy had regularly been appointed, but they could not live there because the largely Protestant inhabitants of both town and neighbourhood bore 'a perverse ill-will' against them. In the preceding few years, however, Frs Dominic Dillon and Thomas Cummins had managed to build a little house in Athy itself without opposition, and there they quietly lived, preaching by word and deed to Catholics and Protestants alike. With an elderly friar named Thomas Hanly from Roscommon they formed a little community of three.

Their thatched convent stood in a laneway which came to be called Convent Lane in token of their presence. It is now called Kirwan's Lane off Leinster Street. Like their brethren who settled in Newbridge at much the same time, the Dominicans had no public chapel of their own but helped the local clergy when called upon. Unfortunately they fell foul of a new archbishop of Dublin, Richard Lincoln, who accused them in summer 1758 of trying to take over the parish of an excellent priest with the help of their Protestant friends and even the magistrates, threatening the pastor with imprisonment and demanding half the revenue of the parish. Dr Lincoln, be it said, was neither a man of peace nor a friend of friars. Innocent though they were, both Dominic Dillon and Thomas Cummins had to leave the archdiocese and the convent briefly ceased to exist. Dillon died soon after in lodgings at Harold's Cross, Dublin. Cummins quickly returned. For want of better information on the quarrel one can only suppose that one or both had been acting as curates in Athy and, with the support of some Protestant friends, asked for better financial reward.



By 1767, Thomas Cummins was prior, living at *Athy* with Michael Cummins, surely a relation, who had come from Rome at the height of the storm in 1759. One finds that there were again only two attached to the house in 1780, probably for want of funds to support a third. Deeper causes still were sending all the religious orders in Ireland into decline. After 1750 they were forbidden by Rome to accept novices in Ireland itself and were put more strictly under episcopal control. Besides, a spiritual malaise throughout western Europe sapped the vitality of religious orders everywhere. Until 1794, the Irish Dominicans still had three foreign colleges for the training of recruits, and of the three it was San Clemente in Rome which enabled the convent of *Athy* to carry on. James Vincent Dunne and James Thomas O'Brien both came home from Italy about 1779. Fr Dunne was to serve in *Athy* for eighteen years until his early death in 1797. Fr O'Brien tended to remain in Dublin but came to *Athy* from time to time. The mere survival of the house, however small, was a minor miracle. The Franciscans, for instance, though always a more numerous body, having lost their friaries at Clane, Kilcullen and Stradbally well before 1700, had to quit even Castledermot in the mid-eighteenth century. By 1780, the Dominican house in *Athy* was the only friary of any Order in the diocese of Dublin apart from those in the capital itself.

Part of this success was due to the fact that Fr Thomas Cummins, a native of *Athy* with a wide circle of friends, simply stayed where he was for more than forty years and lived to a good old age. A large tablet on a tombstone in St Michael's cemetery once bore the now illegible inscription: 'Here lies the body of the Rev. Thomas Cummins / of the Order of St. Dominic / who during a busy life / of upwards of 40 years in the town of *Athy*, by / the exemplary and unaffected piety of his life had / endeared to him all ranks of people that in / compliance with the wishes of his numerous / friends a [few?] select ones erected this tomb in testimony / of their esteem for him and in veneration of his memory. He died [10th] October 1788 aged 88 years. / Requiescat in pace. / Sat ubi Deo vixit heu citius amicis absumitur.'

The companion and successor of Fr Cummins was James Dunne, also a student of San Clemente in Rome, who came to Athy about 1779 and died rather prematurely in 1797. He lived to see the Grand Canal reach Athy from Dublin in 1791 and the building of the present bridge across the Barrow in 1796. His name was added to the inscription on Fr Cummins' tomb at St Michael's: 'Also the body of the Rev. James Dunne of the / Order of St. Dominic being Residentor of / Athy for 18 years departed this life June the 27 / 1797 aged 45 years. / Requiescat in pace.' Had he lived just one year more, Fr Dunne would have seen the yeomanry burn the parish chapel during the '98 rebellion. Even at that, Athy escaped lightly in contrast with Carlow where several hundred insurgents and others were slaughtered in the streets.

The earliest surviving account-book of St Dominic's was opened in 1802 by the newly arrived prior Fr John Gogarty. Shortly before, while a curate in Kilmacow, he had been shot by a soldier but the bullet was safely extracted and his life saved. For the next ten years he kept regular accounts at Athy, and in an excellent hand. His only companion was Fr Walter Brennan, also from San Clemente in Rome, and more briefly by a Fr Patrick Rice who either retired sick to Athy or took refuge there from the pogroms in his native Newtownards; he was certainly at Athy in 1800 but died in 1804. They worked as curates, even in chapels near Castledermot, but chiefly at Athy itself. Various expenses between 1803 and 1805 for painting the altar, making a tabernacle and buying candle-sticks, which were paid for 'out of the chapel collection', seem to refer to the parish chapel then being rebuilt rather than to a domestic Dominican one in Convent Lane. As curates they paid 'proxy money' as it was called to the archbishop whenever he came on visitation. In 1810, their little cabin-convent was honoured by a visit from two very distinguished churchmen: Archbishop Troy of Dublin, himself a Dominican, and his assistant Archbishop Murray.

The convent, probably only a single-storey building, slated and whitewashed, was held on lease from the Duke of Leinster and Anthony Reeves, perhaps an estate-agent. There was also a farm,



exchanged in 1806 for another at Gallows Hill which they improved with a stone-wall and gateposts. They grew their own barley, potatoes and oats, and had meadow enough for a cow, with a pig, hens and beehives for good measure. Most of the farm-produce was sold off, adding to the revenue they already had from their extensive country quest and their share of the parish collection. Even so, the end of each year left them with only a shilling or two to spare.

When Fr Gogarty left the scene in 1812, removed perhaps by death, Walter Brennan was briefly on his own until a particularly capable man came down from Newbridge as prior. This was John Kenneally, a priest who for twenty years had been a curate in Limerick diocese and of whom it was proudly announced on his tombstone in St Michael's that he had 'raised five relatives for the Church of God: a brother and four nephews.' Three of his Dominican nephews were to work in Athy, and one of them died there as he did himself in 1842. Some complained that he turned the convent into a 'family concern', but it was well he did because it kept the priory alive at a time when other religious houses were folding all over the country.

Like his predecessor, Fr Kenneally kept excellent accounts for almost thirty years. While the record largely repeats what we already knew of the farm, it does reveal how much they relied on two annual collections in the parish church and particularly on their wide-ranging quest. This annual tour brought them on horseback by Cloney to Monasterevin, by Crookstown, Narraghmore and Dunlavin to Kilcullen. Eastward, they followed the line of the Wicklow mountains, riding to Castledermot, Baltinglass, Rathvilly, Hacketstown, Rathdrum, Redcross and even to Glendalough. To the south, they begged food and money at Ballyadams, Ballylynan, Wolfhill, Kilabban, Levitstown and Clonegall. To the west, they quested at Timahoe and Esker, Stradbally and Portlaoise. Since such circuits were jealously guarded, each convent having its own area, these boundaries or 'limits' would have been the traditional ones, going back to the seventeenth century, if not further still into medieval times. The friars of Athy did not stray too close to

Newbridge or Kilkenny where other convents of the Order still survived.

Father Kenneally was curate of Athy from his arrival in 1812 until 1823 when his nephew Michael Vincent McMahon became curate in his turn. This nephew died tragically young in 1828 and from the very month of his death the regular receipt of 'parish money' no longer figures in the books. While there was of course a parish priest, Maurice Keegan, the Dominicans were said to have made a 'large addition' to the parish church and in 1817 paid the cost of 'hanging a bell'. That bell can hardly have been for a chapel of their own, since they did not have one yet. The *Catholic Directory* of 1821 mentions no friary, only a 'general free school for poor children' then being established at Athy, and a Confraternity of Our Lady of Carmel. Since they are said to have 'nearly had the administration of the parish', this may have happened in 1825 and 1826 during the final sickness of the parish priest or the delayed arrival of his successor. In those two years, the account-book notes payments both to the schoolmaster and 'for the schoolhouse', as well as receipts for saying the 'third Mass' at Athy and more frequent attendance at Barrowhouse.





On the premature death of Fr McMahon, yet another of Fr Kenneally's nephews, Laurence Cremmin, came to join him at Athy and stayed there for nearly forty years. Two traditions, namely the 'family concern' and the custom of having only two Dominicans in the town, were both maintained. However, not being curates any more, they began to think of having a chapel of their own. One has to wait until 1835 before the account-books first note the regular purchase of 'wine and wafers for the altar'. They had moved house in fact from Convent Lane to Leinster Street into what Lewis, author of the *Topographical Dictionary*, described in 1837 as: 'a modern building occupied by two Dominican friars, with a small domestic chapel, near the entrance to Athy from the Dublin road'. The same house is also marked as 'Convent' on an estate map of 1839. This too was a single-storey building, No. 82 Leinster St.

Fr William Connolly, Kenneally's third Dominican nephew, came to the new friary at 82 Leinster Street in 1839. Very likely he gave classes there to some local boys, as he was later to do in Kilkenny. The Provincial praised him in 1841 as being 'most constant in his attention to the confessional'. That was in the tiny Dominican chapel beside the house for which extra timber had been bought a year before. And so life went quietly on until the death of the patriarch Fr Kenneally in 1842 at the age of 78. He too was buried in St Michael's under an upright tombstone cut by Keogh of Carlow. The inscription runs: *Here lies the body of the Very Rev.d / John Kennelly O. S. D. He took the / habit of his Order at Louvain in / Flanders in 1787. He was elected Provincial / in 1820. He reared five / relations for the Church of God; / a brother and four nephews. He / died 25<sup>th</sup> Dec<sup>r</sup> 1842 aged 78 years. / Also the Very Rev.<sup>d</sup> Thomas McDonnell / S. T. P. of Limerick died Nov.<sup>r</sup> 25<sup>th</sup> 1878 / (ann. prof. 64 aged 84 years) / Dominican Priory Athy. / Requiescat in pace. Amen.*

## St Dominic's, Riversdale 1846-1962

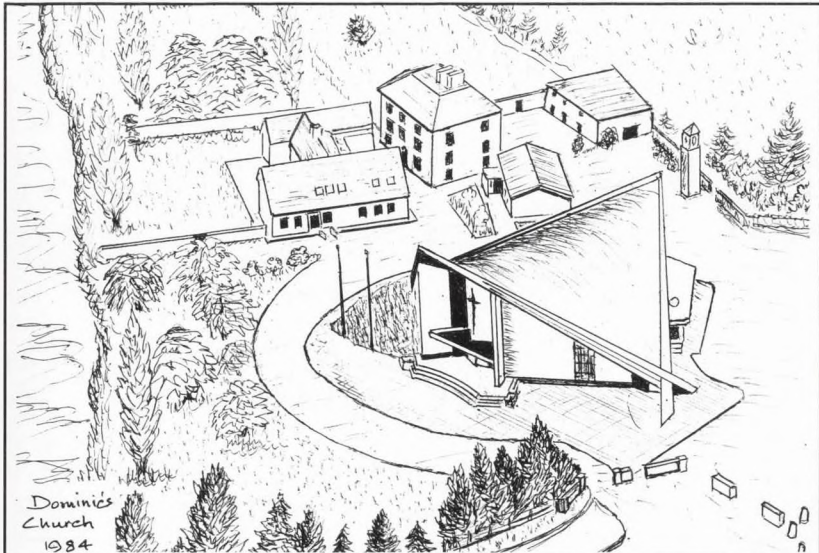
With the passing of the patriarch Kenneally, his Dominican nephews began to think of a radical departure. Frs Cremmin and Connolly decided to leave their house and tiny oratory at the Dublin end of the town, cross the Barrow and find a better setting for their apostolate. In February 1846 the two friars bought a fine house called Riversdale a little downstream from the bridge on the western side of the Barrow. Little did they know what disasters were about to strike. Between 1846 and 1847, the Great Famine led to the death of more than a thousand people in the workhouse at Athy. Another thousand and more left the town altogether for a better life in England or America. Four years passed before the Dominicans could get possession of their new house, so they stayed on at 82 Leinster Street. On their removal in 1850, the Duke of Leinster rebuilt it in two storeys as an estate office, employing a builder named Kirwan. What had long been Convent Lane was later called Kirwan's Lane in his memory. The title 'Convent Lane' followed the Dominicans across the Barrow, eventually attaching itself to the narrow passage leading from Duke Street to Riversdale.

Riversdale, a handsome three-storey house, had been built about 1780 by Lewis Mansergh and bought in 1816 by Joseph Lapham, a tanner of Dublin. His widow, Anne Lapham, her son Joseph and son-in-law Thomas Beasley of Athy, sold the property to Laurence Cremmin for £800 by a conveyance dated 23 February 1846. Apart from the house the property included a walled fruit-garden, some stables and more than four acres of partly marshy ground by the river. On their arrival late in 1850, the Dominicans began to adapt some of the outhouses and stables for use as a church. They also hoped to have a small school there for boys, inspired perhaps by the recent success in that line of their confrères at Newbridge.



For the Irish Dominicans as a whole, the 1850s was a time of reform and revival marked by the establishment of a central novitiate at Tallaght and a new emphasis on the essentials of conventual life. One of the key players in this reform, Bartholomew Russell, on becoming provincial or general superior, came down to Athy in 1853 to assess the situation. His notes reveal that this 'family concern' owned not one but two farms, each of twelve acres, though neither showed much of a profit. The convent itself was at some risk of 'degenerating into a farmhouse'. Substantial debts to four individuals amounted almost to £1,000. What most shocked the visitor was the condition of the little chapel. Yet he was pleased to find the house in perfect repair and suggested that they should buy 'the land near the bridge and the five houses in between, putting in a gateway with a wooden causeway' from Duke St. towards the convent. That laneway must have been very muddy. Fr Russell even thought it would be a good place for a novitiate, but soon changed his mind in favour of Tallaght, Co. Dublin.

Complex situations are not to be remedied overnight, but St Dominic's, Riversdale, was slowly put to rights. The first step brought



an end to the 'family concern' by the displacement of Fr Connolly to Kilkenny in 1853 and of Fr Cremmin to Dublin in 1861. A new arrival, the elderly Fr Thomas MacDonnell of Limerick, set about the enlargement and improvement of the chapel between 1864 and 1867. He painted the walls on the outside, laid a carpet around the altar, bought a new harmonium and a safe, a new tabernacle, a sanctuary lamp, branched candlesticks for Benediction and vestments of cloth of gold. The 'new' harmonium suggests the existence of a choir at St Dominic's, and a choir there certainly was by 1872.

Next to go were the two farms, both sold off before 1869. Their sale removed the danger of the convent becoming a farmhouse and helped to reduce outstanding debts. As for income, it had been customary at the parish church to have two annual collections for the Dominican Fathers, one on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday and another in August on St Dominic's day. Although these are said to have been given instead to the Christian Brothers from 1853, the Dominicans still had in 1861 an annual collection in the parochial chapels of Athy apart from their annual quest in Castledermot and Crookstown.

After 1877, when old Fr McDonnell died, all his successors at Athy belonged to the new generation trained on the strictest lines at Tallaght. Two of them, Frs Matthew Fulham and Nicholas Duffy, in charge of Riversdale between 1877 and 1884, had been in the very first group of novices trained by the famous preacher Fr Thomas Burke in 1856. Under their care, a boundary wall was built next to the Grand Canal 'for a portion of the ground hitherto unenclosed', and all debts liquidated. Their little chapel was found in 1885 to have been 'beautifully decorated, the furniture stained and varnished, the altars improved'. The visitor, Fr Towers, pronounced his verdict on the chapel: 'Notwithstanding the absence of architectural beauty and proportions, it is very devotional and worthy of its holy use.' The account-books of the time mention the Stations of the Cross, the Crib (from which some money had been stolen), the purchase of a branch candelabra and a new cope, besides the purchase in 1882 of two religious habits for the community.



Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament on Sunday evenings was already part of the church programme in 1873 when a visitor ordered that it was to be preceded by an 'instruction' and recitation of the Rosary. The Rosary Confraternity must also have been established early, for it was 'reorganised' shortly before 1885. By 1920 some 400 men and women belonged to it. A tall silver chalice presented to the Dominicans of Athy by the 'Brothers of the Most Holy Rosary' in 1888 is still in daily use. A second chalice of gold was presented to the convent by Michael and Margaret O'Hara in 1921 to mark the centenary of St Dominic.

It is hard to visualise now what came to be called 'the old church', demolished in 1973. One prior described it as 'God's Doll House by the Barrow'. It was, at all events, a small T-shaped building on an axis running from Riversdale towards Duke Street for a length of almost eighty feet. The combined transepts gave a maximum width of 108 feet, but neither the main aisle nor the transepts were more than sixteen feet wide. The three altars were set almost in line with each other. Two wooden galleries, one close to the entrance from the priory and the other at the end of the south transept, gave the congregation a little more room. Two porches were added after 1906. Set into the southern transept there was a bell-tower, for which a bell was cast in St James' Foundry, Dublin, and brought by canal to Athy. It was blessed in July 1898 and christened 'Dominic' – it is still in use.

### *Fr John O'Sullivan, 1886-1932*

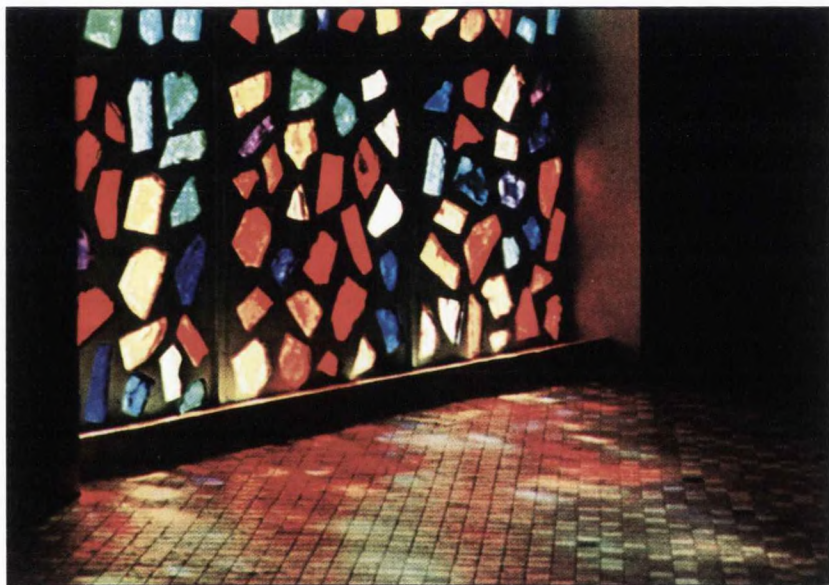
**F**r John O'Sullivan, a native of Clane, came first to Athy in 1886 and stayed there almost without a break for forty years until his death. Often enough he was the only priest in the house and hardly ever had more than one companion. As the years passed he came to be enormously appreciated for his long sympathy with the poor and unfortunate. Daphne Mould and other writers have sketched his summer progress on the quest, travelling by pony and trap along the



country lanes, stopping wherever there was anyone in need of comfort or consolation. When Provincials came on visitation he used plead with them never to close the priory in Athy. Even in death he was remarkable. Since he died suddenly during Mass after the consecration of the Host, the local curate had to be summoned to complete the Sacrifice. His funeral at St Michael's was immense, for the entire countryside, Catholic and Protestant alike, came to pay their respects. Even miracles were reported after his burial. He left the people of Athy with an abiding devotion to the Holy Souls, so much so that the prayer he always used was inscribed on a marble mural plaque by the members of the Rosary Confraternity.

Another memorial to Fr O'Sullivan, unveiled in 1933, was a Lourdes Grotto in the grounds, designed by Michael Kinnane C. C. and P. F. Dolan, superior of the Christian Brothers Schools. Local volunteers spent almost a year in its construction under the direction of Mr Guilfoyle, a gardener at Tonlegee House. For all their efforts that Grotto, like the old church itself, was to be demolished thirty years later.





During the 1940s the grounds around the priory were extended and made more accessible to motor-traffic. In 1942, Mr Mansfield of Duke Street sold the community a field of more than two acres adjoining their land along the Canal; the present Garda barracks and ESB installation now stand on part of it. Six years later, a new road for cars was made through the grounds and a car-park provided. Further improvements were inspired by the seventh centenary of St Dominic's in 1957, an event celebrated in great style at Athy. Mr George Farrell of Spring Lodge donated not only a wrought-iron memorial gate supported by two handsome stone walls, but also a free-standing statue of St Dominic on a plinth set in a floral roundabout between the church and the river. That metal statue, made in France, now stands at the entrance to the present church, underlining the fact that this is the only Dominican church in Ireland dedicated to the founder of the Order.

As early as 1937, two processions through the grounds were held in honour of Our Lady during the month of May. A procession on the feast of Corpus Christi also became an annual event, the

Dominican procession merging with the parish one from 1957 to ensure 'a large and respectable' attendance. Among those taking part were members of the Rosary Confraternity and of the Third Order, formerly called Tertiaries but now styled the lay Dominicans. Tertiaries, though not mentioned in Dominican records before 1924, have certainly prospered in Athy ever since. A second chapter of male tertiaries, formed in 1959, was put under the patronage of St Martin de Porres whose statue was soon placed in the church. Another new devotion was encouraged in 1948 when a lady from Newry donated a statue of Our Lady of Fatima. An annual novena in her honour began in the following year.

The Dominican community in Athy seems to have been the smallest in the country, for there were never more than two priests there, and never a brother, up to 1941. Thereafter there was a community of three until 1954 when the number rose to four, at which level it remained fairly steadily until 1963. The priests living there were usually retired missionaries who had given their best years to Trinidad before coming to Athy in hope of a safe haven and peace at the last. Not that the brethren simply spent their days in prayer by the Barrow; many were busy giving parish missions and retreats all over the country. At least one of them, Fr Louis O'Sullivan (†1968), who gave his last eight years to Athy, is still gratefully remembered forty years later because of his care for the weak, the suffering, the outcast and the poor.

### *A New Church, 1963 - 1965*

From the earliest years at Riversdale, the Dominicans had thought time and again of replacing the first chapel they had cobbled together from the old stables. Even when they drew up plans for a better one, successive Provincials would tell them to wait for a better time. Fr Mannes Cussen, for example, between 1938 and 1942, stressed the need to acquire more land with an eye to later development and better access. In any case, times were hard between the two World Wars and there were other factors in play which kept



Ireland poor into the 1950s and beyond. When winter was past Athy got both the fine new parish church of St Michael and a new Dominican one almost in the same year. St Dominic's, now a striking landmark on the Barrow, was the first church of the Order to be built in Ireland for more than sixty years.

By 1959, the old chapel was past repair, its floors sagging, its mortared walls on the point of perishing from damp. Two particularly decisive Dominicans took the situation in hand: Fr Louis Coffey, the provincial for whom to see was to do, and Fr Philip Pollock, prior of Athy from 1961 to 1967. In his very first year, Fr Pollock selected an architect, James Thompson of Limerick and Dublin, and with him travelled much of post-war Europe to see the latest modern churches. They were particularly struck by two churches in France, one at Ronchamp and the other at the monastery of La Tourette, and were influenced also by the work of American architects who had already begun to use complex double-curved roofs. They returned with plans that would revolutionise church building in Ireland. To depart from the standard Romanesque and Gothic models needed more than ordinary courage at that time. Fr Pollock's plans were approved in March 1962 and an expert builder, James Geraghty Ltd of Celbridge, agreed to face the job at an estimated cost of £53,000.

When it came to clearing the site, the chief casualty was the grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes. Only the statue of the Blessed Virgin survived, and this was given soon after to the residents of Pairc Bhríde who still take care of it. The elaborate work of pile-driving then began, not so much to support the walls but to anchor the roof which was to carry almost the entire weight of the building. Truly solid rock was found only at a depth of forty-two feet. After the laying of the foundation-stone on 8 December 1963. Fr Pollock set off for the United States to raise funds in addition to those already collected from generous donors in Athy and throughout Ireland. By May 1964 the roof was complete but it would take another nine months to finish the building. Finally, on 17 March 1965, the provincial Fr Louis Coffey came to bless and open the new St Dominic's. On that happy but poignant day, Fr Louis O'Sullivan said the last Mass to be offered



*1965 new church with old church and old priory still standing*

in the old church before Fr Pollock celebrated the first to be said in the new.

Within the new fan-shaped church, no pillars obstructed the view of the sanctuary, nor was any member of the congregation more than eighty feet from the altar. In this respect it embodied immediately the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council which in March 1965 had not yet come to a close. Each individual fibreglass seat was centrally heated, which was no small comfort to the old in an Irish winter. The acoustics were perfect and preachers have found that the building ‘works’ as a church. Well-known Irish artists lent their various skills to please the eye and raise the spirit. George Cambell RHA designed both the stained-glass windows and the Stations of the Cross in seven panels of sized marble, flush with the walls. Breeda Lucci, née Rynne, of Cork and Prosperous, carved the crucifix above the altar from poplar, an elongated figure almost six feet tall, as well as two panels in bronze: one of the Deposition of Christ on the altar and another of St Bridget’s Cross on the tabernacle. The



marble-work within the sanctuary, in line with the new liturgical norms, was carried out by John Collins and Sons of Dublin. Three shrines in the church at the time of its opening honoured Our Lady, St Dominic and St Martin de Porres.

From outside, the view of the new St Dominic's is spectacular and heart-lifting. The saddle-backed roof in reinforced concrete, the work of Mr Kennedy an engineer of Dublin, has been compared to a jet plane, even to a Concorde, because of its 'latent grace, beauty and power'. To another writer it seemed like 'a gigantic bird about to take flight spreading its wings in the sunshine'. The silent swans of the Barrow, when flying in to touchdown, offer the only local comparison or competition. Like dreamy cathedral spires, the two-pointed roof of St Dominic's lifts the eye and the heart towards heaven. Say what one will about the church, it was an immense improvement on the old one, destined in 1965 for demolition. That old chapel, so full of memories for the people and worthy of a better end, was rented out for a year in 1967 to the Kildare Knitware Factory; at least the proceeds were passed on to the poor. In summer 1968, with the Festival of Athy in full swing, it was even requisitioned as a Bingo hall. After such indignities, the chapel was mercifully demolished in June 1973, when it is said its hallowed walls 'crumbled at the mere touch of a bulldozer'.

The only significant addition to the new church after its opening was a massive statue of St Martin de Porres in limestone set under the organ loft in 1973. The sculptor was Fr Henry Flanagan O. P. of Newbridge who also made the six copper plaques illustrating incidents in the life of St Martin set into the wall near the statue. The statue of Our Lady, originally under the organ loft, made its own way from the back of the church to a place of greater honour near the high altar.

Until 1969, the whole complex of church, priory and car-park was essentially a cul-de-sac, leaving drivers no option but to come and go by Convent Lane. Athy Urban Council then opened up an approach to the car-park from Green Alley beside the canal. The last

three derelict cottages on Convent Lane, an eye-sore and traffic hazard, were demolished in 1972. The return of the still energetic Fr Pollock as prior (1972-1975) was marked by the building of a small two-room annexe to the priory in 1974 on the site of the old church. He also began negotiating with the Board of Works in 1975 for the sale of more than an acre of land towards Green Alley on which the new Garda Barracks and Telecom warehouse now stand.

Despite the fall-off in the number of religious vocations first noticed in 1965, the number of Dominicans in Athy increased to six, peaked at seven in 1975 and then fell slowly back to about four in the 1990s. At St Dominick's, the effect of the vocations crisis was cushioned by the fact that those living there were usually semi-retired or actually unwell. Among them one should mention Fr Raymund Dowdall who spent the last decade of a varied and fruitful ministry beside the Barrow between 1970 and 1980. Within the Order he will always be remembered for the historical *Memories* he published, giving some account of every Irish Dominican who had died since 1930. This work appeared in five parts, each covering a decade, but only the final part (1970-1980) was written in Athy. This last volume included an account of Fr Dowdall himself, for he died precisely in 1980 and it was his friend Fr Peter Coyne, also of Athy, who saw the volume through the press. One of the very few inscribed chalices now in the church was given to him in 1973 by his sister Winifred Dowdall to mark his golden jubilee. The inscription in highly classical Latin runs: *Fratri suo Raymundo sacerdoti luna explenti lustra hunc calicem dicavit Winifred Dowdall 28-10-1973*. Father Dowdall, incidentally, was the first of many Dominicans to be buried in the new section of St Michael's cemetery, across the road from the old.

### *The New Priory, 1983-1984*

**T**he provincial Fr Louis Coffey was certainly gifted with foresight, for as early as 1965 he forbade any further development in Athy likely to interfere with the building of a new priory in twenty years' time. So the community still lived in Riversdale, an elegant



eighteenth-century dwelling and part of Athy's architectural heritage but a building notably short on modern comforts and very hard to maintain. With only one central staircase it was also a fire-hazard. In 1973 it was officially condemned and destined for demolition. Although a new priory, specifically designed for a community, was clearly needed, it took some while to settle on a plan. Even when St Dominic's had cleared all its debts in 1977, there was still a delay until the arrival of Fr Jim Harris as prior in 1981.

The present priory, built between 1983 and 1984, greatly resembles the new priory at Galway which Fr Kieran Duggan had built not long before. It was designed in fact by the same firm, represented by Miss Eily O'Connor of H. G. and L. O'Connor of Galway. The builders were D. and J. Carbery of Athy who undertook the contract for £290,000. Essentially it is a H-block in two storeys with a staircase at either end. Two of the rooms, designed specially for the sick, were paid for by the Province. While building was still in progress, old Fr Columba Coyne made his way up an unfinished staircase and most unfortunately fell to the ground below. He had ministered at Athy since 1968 and done much to direct the Dominican Laity. His death was a tragic incident in what otherwise came as a most welcome development, for the brethren were glad to leave a large dwelling-house, in which some religious happened to live, and move into a house specifically designed for a community.

In August 1984 the demolition of the old priory began. The walls, it turned out, were mostly of brick and solid only in part. Both dry and wet rot had left the beams in a dangerous state. And that was the end of the elegant Riversdale House on the banks of the Barrow. Only the ground floor was preserved and re-roofed to serve as a much-needed hall with two good-sized rooms. This new Dominican Hall was officially opened in May 1985, providing accomodation badly needed at St Dominic's and even, as the house chronicler noted, in the town of Athy itself. When the first Bingo session was held there in November 1985, many had to be turned away.

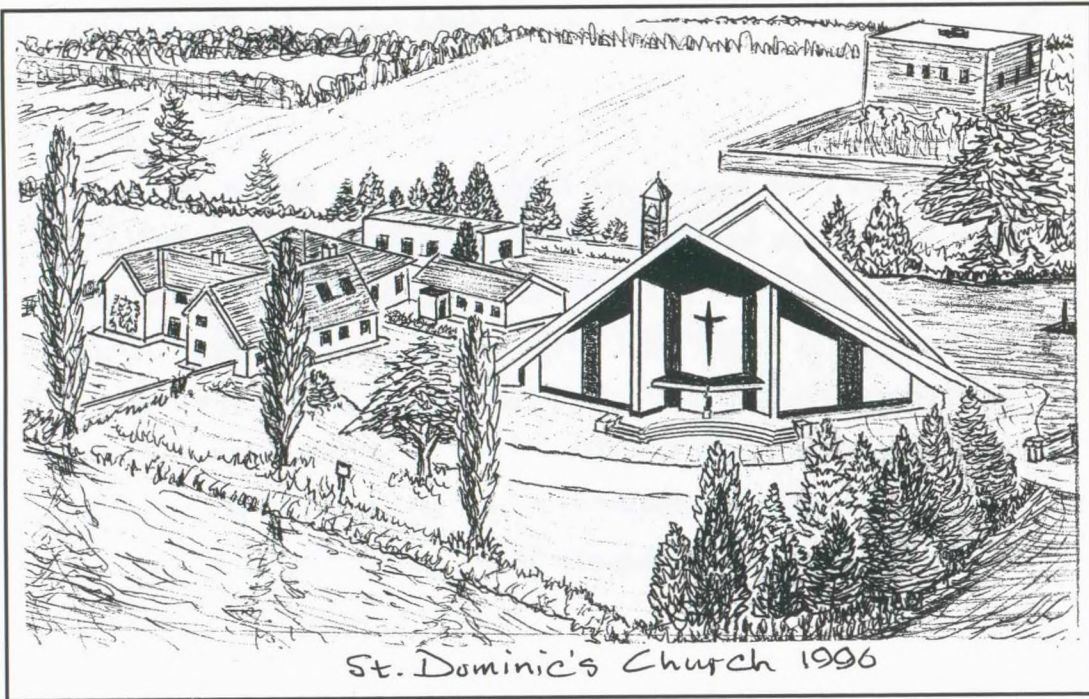
The new church, now twenty years old, also needed attention. The original lighting installed in 1965 having become unsatisfactory and expensive, was replaced in 1982 by a fluorescent system with single bulbs hanging from the ceiling to give a brighter spread of light. The stained-glass windows, especially those on the south-western side exposed to the prevailing winds, were reinforced with storm-glass. Towards the end of 1983, a new organ was also installed. Originally built in the 1950s for a Presbyterian church in Belfast by Evans and Barr of Belfast, it had now been completely rebuilt by the Irish Organ Company, also of Belfast, under the direction of Mr. W. Davidson at a cost of more than £10,000.

During the 1990s, Fr Ailbe O'Connor had to attend in his usual meticulous way to the actual structure of the church, particularly to the insulation of the roof where rain was seeping through. Even steel ribs and concrete structures had to be repaired at enormous cost in 1997. Earlier still, during the Bluegrass Festival of 1993, someone started a fire inside the church, destroying a few rows of seating and blackening the walls. Only some miracle of grace stopped the fire from reaching the organ-loft.

### *Novices at Athy, 1989-1993*

If Fr Bartholomew Russell thought in 1853 that Athy would be a good place for a novitiate house, Fr Louis Coffey too had the idea in 1965 that a novitiate might conceivably be built there in the future. That improbable prophecy was fulfilled in 1989 when two novices received the habit of the Order in Athy. Although the novitiate of the Province had been in Cork since 1936, so few now wished to join the Order that it was thought they would be rather lost in a large priory and might profit by living in a smaller community. Two others were received at Athy in 1992 but none thereafter, not for lack of candidates but because the number seeking admission rose slightly and Athy could spare rooms for only two at a time. One good result





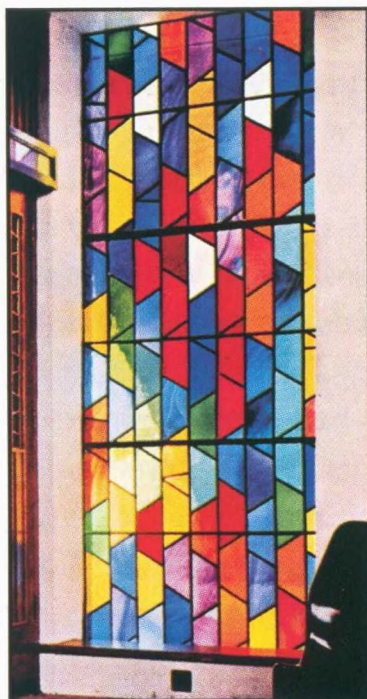
of the experiment was that the community began to say the divine office in church, accompanied by the laity after 1992, and church services were enhanced by more frequent singing.

Since the crisis in vocations affected the diocesan clergy too, the Dominicans were asked as early as 1976 to supply a curate in Athy. That was followed in 1982 by a proposal that the community might take over part of the parish between the canal and the Barrow with the care of the hospital as well. Neither invitation was taken up, but the community did agree in June 1993 to say Mass daily at the hospital and have done so ever since. When the Christian Brothers of Athy, also victims of the crisis, could no longer staff their school in 1995 they very graciously made a present to the Dominicans of their fine wooden altar which Fr Gerard O'Keeffe painstakingly reassembled in the private oratory of the community.

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Over the past seven hundred and fifty years, the Dominicans of Athy have seen every shade of fortune, and have had their share of hunger, fire and sword. Because Henry VIII took their old abbey away, they were even forced out of the town for almost ninety years. Later on, two of the brethren were called upon to give their lives in the cause of truth soon after Oliver Cromwell paid his memorable visit to Ireland. A third was imprisoned and banished. After the expulsion from Ireland of all friars and bishops in 1698, the Dominicans were not allowed into Athy again for almost fifty years. Since 1754 they have been able to maintain an unbroken presence in Athy, offering Mass, preaching the Word and giving the daily witness of their religious lives. All seems tranquil now, with a fine new church and priory by the goodly Barrow, but what of tomorrow? New dangers loom as the friars grow old and their numbers drop, not only in Athy but across the Western World. It is as well to remember that as recently as 1900 St Dominic's got by with only one or two priests to serve their little chapel. Meanwhile, one can only pray to the Lord of the harvest to send labourers into his vineyard.





### *Priors of Athy*

1357.	Philip Pereys
1374.	Henry Mody
1539.	Robert Woulff
1648-49.	Thomas Bermingham
1651-52.	Raymund Moore
1661-62.	Raymund Moore
1664.	Joseph Carroll
1683-85.	Thomas Brennan
1685-88.	Richard Cuddihy
1688-89.	Patrick Marshall
1691-97.	Richard Cuddihy
1754.	Thomas Cummins
1756-59.	Dominic Dillon
1767.	Thomas Cummins
1793.	James V. Dunne
1799.	James T. O'Brien
1802-12.	John Gogarty
1812-20.	John Kenneally
1820-23.	Walter Brennan
1824-42.	John Kenneally
1843-49.	Laurence Cremmin
1850-53.	William D. Connolly
1853-61.	Laurence Cremmin
1861-62.	William D. Connolly
1863-77.	Thomas J. McDonnell
1877-80.	Dominic Matthew Fulham
1880-84.	Thomas Nicholas Duffy
1884-87.	George Thomas Hughes
1887-90.	Francis Purcell

1890-96.	Thomas Pius Boylan
1896-1900.	John C. O'Sullivan
1900-03.	Thomas Crotty
1903-06.	John C. O'Sullivan
1906-08.	James P. Dowling
1908 (Jan. to June).	Stephen A. O'Kelly
1908-11.	Patrick McCormick
1911-17.	Raymund Kieran
1917-20.	John Kiely
1920-27.	W. Benedict Costello
1927-33.	Francis Ryan
1933-36.	Raymund Kieran
1936-42.	Paul McKenna
1942-48.	Jordan M. Noonan
1948-51.	Pius M. Cleary
1951-57.	W. Marcolinus Colgan
1957-60.	Sebastian Casey
1960-61.	Dominic O'Neill
1961-67.	Philip Pollock
1967-72.	Henry Peel
1972-75.	Philip Pollock
1975-81.	Leo Clandillon
1981-86.	James Harris
1986-89.	Anthony Roche
1989-92.	Stephen Hutchinson
1992-98.	Ailbe Henry O'Connor
1998-00.	James Donleavy
2000-07.	John Heffernan

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*Pen Sketches : Gerard O'Keeffe OP*

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