

THE DOMINICANS OF SLIGO



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Hugh Fenning O.P.

The Dominicans of Sligo

by Fr. Hugh Fenning O.P.

Dominican Order - Irish Province

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Dedication

*This book is dedicated to the people of Sligo
and to the Dominican friars
who served in Holy Cross since 1252*

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INTRODUCTION

The people of Sligo and the Dominican friars have developed over many years a very close bond. It is one of faith and friendship, of service and support. The friars have lived among the people of the town and have been supported generously by them for thirty generations. The relationship of mutual love and care between us has been tried and tested since the Dominicans arrived in Sligo seven and a half centuries ago. Our solidarity has been deepened and refined by our shared suffering. It is fitting that in this year 2002 we celebrate the jubilee of this bond which has lasted for seven hundred and fifty years.

Where did it all begin? Our founder, Dominic Guzman, a priest, was born in Calaruega, Spain, around 1170. At the age of twentyfour he became a member of the canons regular in the cathedral of Osma. The canons lived a life which had many of the characteristics of monastic life. It had a strong contemplative atmosphere and their central activity was the public worship of the Church. During this time Dominic made a journey to the north of Europe with his bishop and was dismayed at what he saw. The Albigenian heresy had caused havoc and devastation among the people.

This heresy taught that there were two Gods. There was a God of Evil who was responsible for the creation of material things and all material was bad. They denied that Jesus is God. His body was only an appearance and the sacraments had no meaning or value. Many people followed them and turned away from Christ because, having no one to teach them, they did not understand the Catholic Faith. They were extremely vulnerable, like sheep without a shepherd. In his zeal for souls Dominic gathered a small band of preachers around him to teach the Faith and bring people back to Christ.

After some time Dominic realised that in order to address the situation effectively he needed to create a religious Order whose work would be solely to preach the Gospel and expound the Faith. His vision was quite unique because at that time preaching was carried out almost exclusively by bishops. He founded the Order of Friars Preachers which received papal approval from Pope Honorius III in 1216. Very soon the friars were given the popular name Dominicans.

Dominic's vision for his preachers was that they would be Christ's witnesses by the lives they led and the words they spoke and wrote. Bands of devout laypeople soon formed an association with the friars and became known as the Dominican Third Order. Dominic also founded a community of contemplative nuns and today the Dominican family includes the friars, nuns, sisters and Dominican laity. Among the great Dominicans are St Thomas Aquinas, St Martin de Porres, St Catherine of Siena and St Rose of Lima.

The hallmark of the Order was a religious community living a life of prayer, study and preaching. The friars gathered in choir several times daily to pray and

chant the Divine Office. This took the form of hymns, psalms and readings from scripture. The ideal of the Order was to contemplate the mysteries of the Faith, and to hand on the fruits of that contemplation to others. There was a strong emphasis on silence in the priory to facilitate and support the friars' life of contemplation and study. Devotion to Mary, the Mother of God, played a significant part in the life of the community.

Within three years of Dominic's death in 1221 his friars had arrived in Ireland. By 1229 they had priories in six Irish towns - Dublin, Drogheda, Kilkenny, Waterford, Limerick and Cork. They arrived in Sligo in 1252 and Maurice Fitzgerald built their first priory - Holy Cross Abbey - known popularly today as Sligo Abbey. The life of the early Dominicans can still be recognised in its architectural layout.

The covered cloister speaks to us of the private prayer that was an essential part of the friar's life. The church with its choir evokes the memory of the tens of thousands of people from Sligo and the surrounding areas who worshipped God, listened to his Word and received the sacraments in this holy place through the ages. It also reminds us of the centuries of choral recitation of the Divine Office. The reader's desk which was used for reading the scriptures and other religious writings during meals emphasises the important role that the sacred scripture and serious reading played in the life of the Community.

The town of Sligo grew up beside Holy Cross Abbey and for centuries the friars have held an important place in the hearts and minds of the people. Yet the contribution of the friars has been only one part of the story. It is the people who come to Holy Cross who have ensured the ongoing Dominican presence in Sligo. We owe a special debt of gratitude to them and to the army of laypeople who have been, and still are, involved in the friary work and ministry. These include our Dominican laity, organists, choir members, collectors, altar ladies, and altar servers. In more recent decades we have also been very well-served by our extraordinary ministers of the eucharist and our readers.

It is with genuine gratitude that I say "thank you" to my Dominican brother and classmate Fr Hugh Fenning, S.T. M. for writing "The Dominicans of Sligo." Fr Hugh who has been the Irish Dominican Archivist for more than twenty years is a renowned expert in the history of the Irish Dominicans. We are deeply in his debt for this scholarly account of the history of the friars in Sligo.

It is a long story of seven hundred and fifty years. We thank Fr Hugh for helping us to have a greater appreciation of the spiritual legacy which our ancestors, friars and people, have handed on to us. Above all we thank God for this source of countless graces and blessings, and we ask him to preserve it for future generations.


Prior

Sligo under the Normans: 1240-1345

When the Dominicans first came to Ireland in 1224, the country had been under Norman rule for fifty years. Naturally enough, the friars made their first foundations where the Normans were most strongly entrenched: at Dublin and Drogheda in 1224, and then (before 1230) at Kilkenny, Waterford, Limerick and Cork. It made sense for the friars to head first for the cities, especially in a country where even small cities were few and far between. Having come to preach and to recruit, they settled at once wherever there were large numbers to hear their sermons.

Ten years later, in 1235, the Normans decided to attempt the conquest of Connacht. The lord justice, Maurice Fitzgerald, led five hundred mounted knights with their troops across the Shannon. By the standards of the time, it was a mighty host to which the men of Connacht offered little or no resistance. Maurice Fitzgerald's share of the spoils was a lordship or manor at Sligo, taking in also the baronies of Carbery and Leyney. Although there had never been a town in Sligo before, it was a point of strategic importance on the natural road between Ulster and Connacht. Fitzgerald built a small castle there and laid out a town of one street, without so much as a proper wall to protect it.

This same 'conquest of Connacht' soon led in 1241 to the establishment of the great Dominican priory at Athenry, the first house of the order in Connacht. There was then a lull, to allow for the recruitment and training of Irish-speaking friars, before the foundation of two more houses in 1252 at Strade, Co. Mayo, and in Sligo itself. Fitzgerald gave the friars land to the east of the town on the south bank of the Garravogue river, partly for their church and convent, partly for a cemetery and garden. The chosen site was outside the town, the most easterly point in the settlement, and so it remained 'near Sligo' for centuries to come. For friars forbidden by their rule to eat meat, it was a great advantage to be able to fish from the end of their own garden. Later on, they were able to claim a share of the fish taken on the upper weir.

Some say that the abbey was dedicated to 'Holy Cross' because the Fitzgeralds bore a red cross on their coat-of-arms. Two other Dominican houses, founded even earlier by the Fitzgeralds at Tralee and Youghal, bore the same dedication. Yet two other Dominican houses, at Strade and Rathfran (near Killala), both founded by the Norman family de Exeter, were similarly dedicated to Holy Cross. The most likely explanation is that, since the Crusades were still being fought, devotion to the 'Holy Cross' was particularly strong at the time.

It would be wrong to imagine these early friars as simply the ‘spiritual wing’ of the Norman conquest. Many of them spoke Norman-French and came from England or France as the Normans did. But there were Irish-born friars too, and Irish rulers who welcomed them like Felim O’Connor, king of Connacht, who founded a friary at Roscommon in 1253, just one year after the Dominicans settled in Sligo. A member of the same royal family, Maurice O’Connor, entered the order and became bishop of Elphin in 1266, the first of eight Dominicans to hold that office. Since Bishop Maurice’s episcopate was set in a time of civil wars he could do nothing to prevent, ‘the good bishop’, it has been said, ‘must often have looked forward to death as a relief from his troubles’.

When Geoffrey O’Donnell burned the infant town of Sligo in 1257, Maurice Fitzgerald withdrew to Youghal where he died in the same year. The Dominican community he left behind at Sligo seems to have been poor enough. Apart from begging in the countryside for their own support, the friars also collected money for the Crusades; in 1266 they had only seventeen shillings and tenpence to hand in, whereas their confreres of Roscommon had collected £740. Perhaps collections in the Sligo area went mostly towards building the church. Parts of the present ruin of Holy Cross, the north and south walls of the choir or sanctuary area, with the sacristy and part of the chapter-room, go back to the thirteenth century. The south wall, pierced by eight tall lancet windows (of which two have been closed), is particularly splendid, showing that the friars of Sligo did not lack for wealthy benefactors.



The south wall, showing closed-up windows

Shortly before 1300, the Fitzgerald family left Sligo for good, retiring to their richer estates in Kildare and Munster. The political vacuum was filled by O'Connor Sligo and his overlord Richard de Burgo, the Red Earl, virtual ruler of Ulster and Connacht until his death in 1326. These Norman de Burgos very soon changed their name to Burke, adopted Irish speech and dress, and came to rule the whole of Connacht. The Red Earl, who built a fine castle at Ballymote in 1300, restored the smaller castle at Sligo in 1310.

Our first evidence that Holy Cross was used as a place of burial by the chief families of the area comes in the year 1336 when Aine McDonough, wife of O'Rourke, lord of Breiffne, was laid to rest there. She must soon have been joined in the grave by many victims of the Black Death (1347), for Sligo was a sea-port, and the bubonic plague was carried to Ireland by rats. This plague, which had come to Ireland before and was to return every ten or twenty years up to 1385, undermined the morale even of the religious orders. They went into decline, not only in Ireland but throughout western Europe, not to recover for almost fifty years.



Holy Cross Abbey from the north side

Sligo under the O'Conors: 1346 - 1440

Once the Normans of Connacht had become as Irish as their neighbours, the way lay open for what has been called a 'Gaelic revival'. The O'Conors ruled in Sligo over some smaller Irish families: MacDonough, O'Hara and O'Dowd. Yet the O'Conors, as often as not, fought among themselves, while all branches of the clan came under frequent attack from the O'Donnells on the north and the Burkes on the south. No wonder the annals report so often that Sligo was burned, the inhabitants killed, and their houses looted. At last, from 1403 to 1440, there came a time of peace and prosperity under the rule of Brian O'Connor. He at least had no real opposition within his tribe, or was strong enough to crush it.

One effect of this 'revival' was that Holy Cross came to be mentioned more often in the native annals. Its links with Leitrim, already evident in 1336, were still strong in 1402 when Farrell O'Rourke, heir to the lordship of Breiffne, was buried in the abbey. The death of the prior of Sligo, Manus son of Baethghalach MacEgan, occurred in 1411. His name too, in its modern form Keegan, may still be found in Leitrim.

Under the year 1414, the *Annals of Ulster* record that 'the monastery of Sligo was totally burned by a candle in the spring of this year'. This time the fire was serious. It probably gutted the friary and certainly damaged the church. However, the flames must have spared the north wall of the nave and both walls of the chancel, since they are standing to this day. Some friars were sent off at once to Constance in Switzerland where, in 1415, the pope issued an indulgence to all who, having confessed their sins, would help to restore Holy Cross. We learn from the pope's letter that the community usually consisted of about twenty friars; that the fire had damaged both church and priory; and that the indulgence was to be gained only on the feasts of the Assumption and St. Patrick. Clearly there was already popular devotion in Sligo to Our Lady of the Assumption and the apostle of Ireland.

The prior of the time, Brian MacDonough, son of the tanist of Tirerrill and Collooney, succeeded no doubt in raising extra funds from his wealthy relatives. The O'Rourkes of Breiffne must also have come high on the list of benefactors, for their king Tighernan was buried at Holy Cross in 1418. The result of prior MacDonough's work may still be seen. He rebuilt the south wall of the nave, replaced the east window in the chancel, and put a new roof on the whole complex. Perhaps his most ambitious contribution was the insertion of a tower or belfry, narrower than the church and not particularly high, between nave and chancel.

Against the tower, on the western side - facing the people in the nave - he then placed a stone rood-screen. This formed a gallery seven feet deep from one side of the church to the other. Two parallel arcades of three arches, supported by octagonal columns, carried a ribbed vault, on top of which stood the actual 'rood' or cross of the Crucifixion, probably in wood.

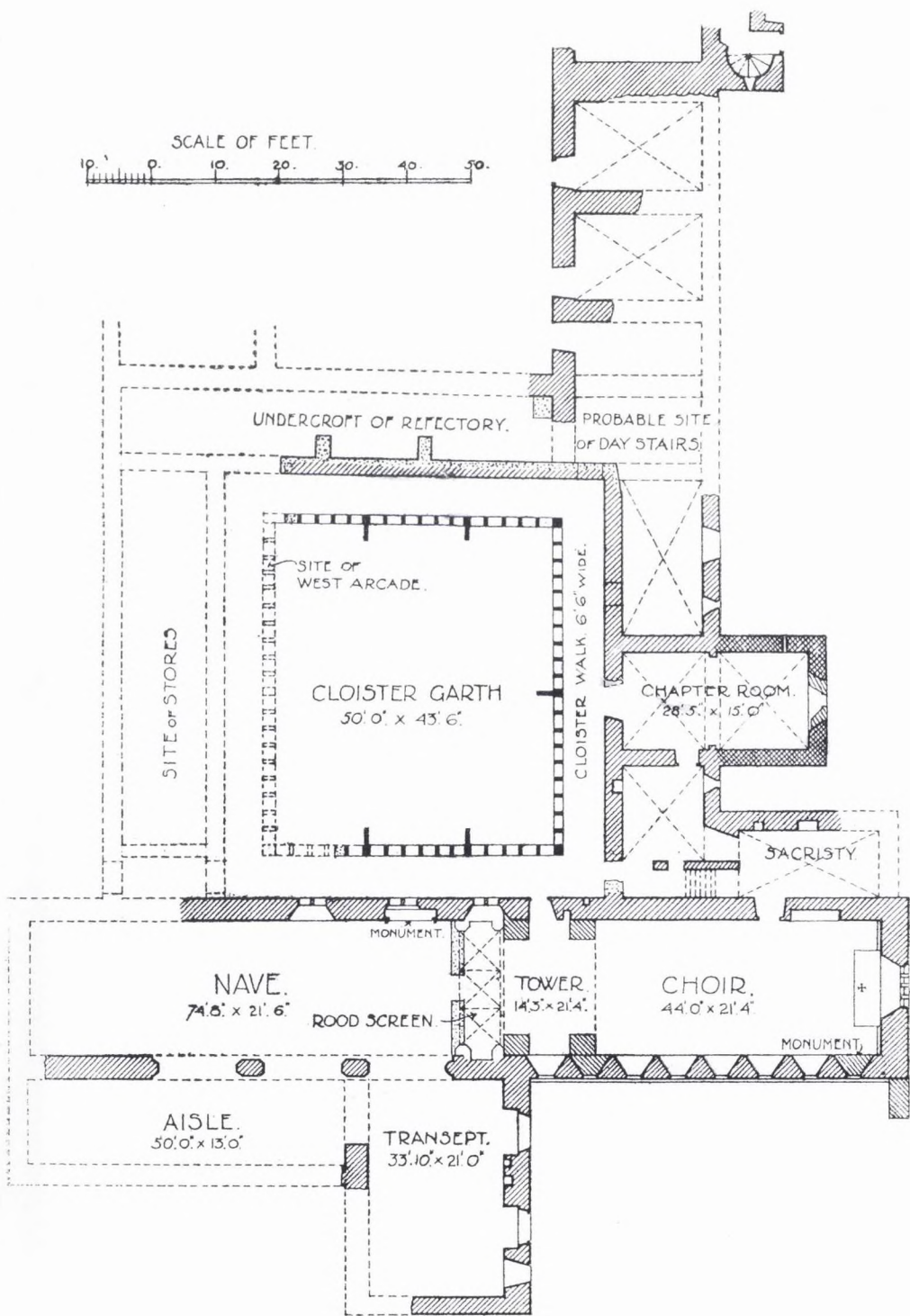
Whatever prior MacDonough did for the living quarters of the community does not appear, but he cannot be credited with the beautiful cloister so much admired today, nor with the south aisle and south transept. They bear all the traces of a later hand.

This period of peace was also remarkable for an event which took place in 1428. Brian MacDonough, parish priest of Sligo, gave up his parish to become a Dominican at Holy Cross. So uncommon a decision suggests that the regular and secular clergy of Sligo were on particularly good terms.

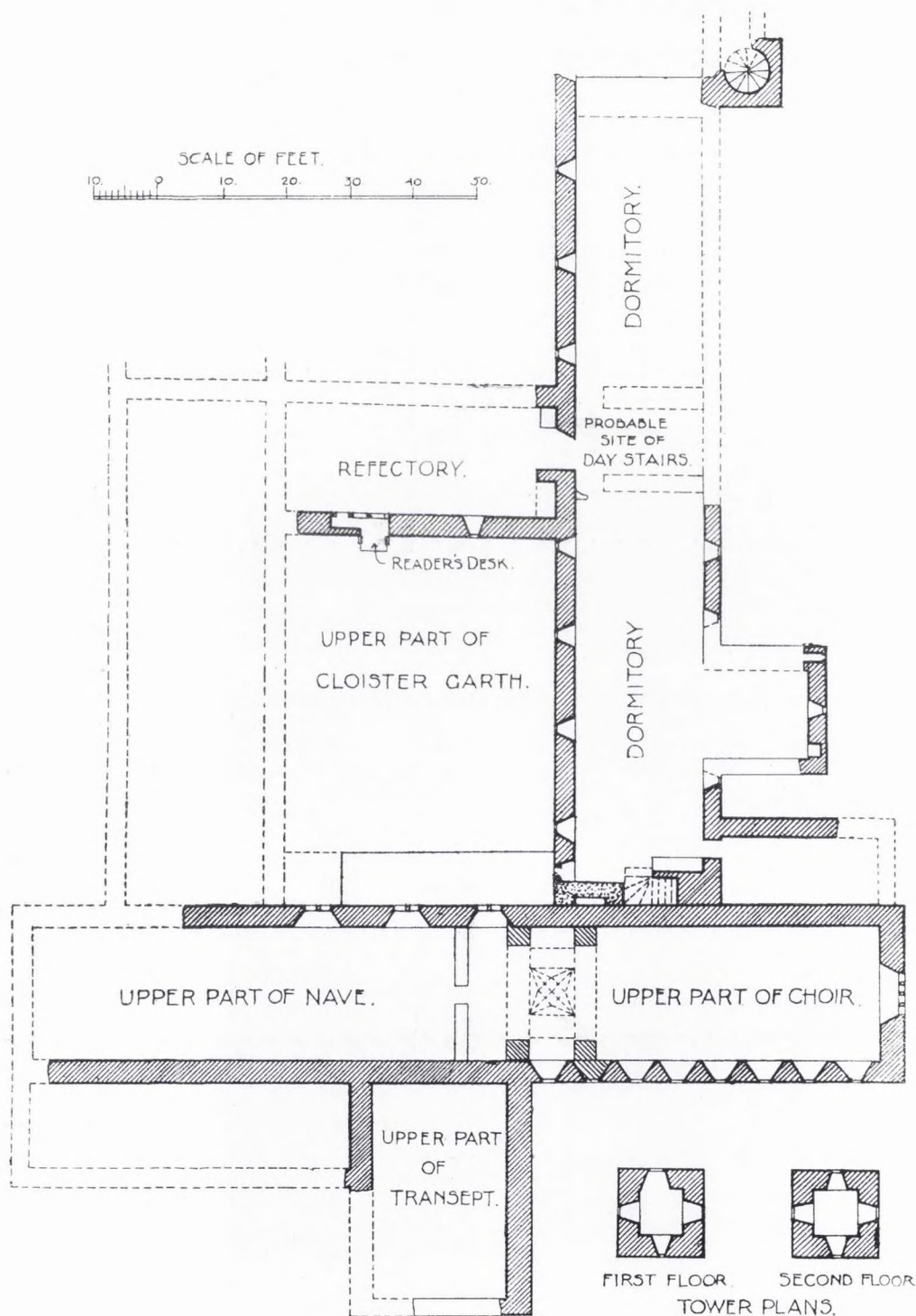
At length, Brian O'Connor, lord of Sligo from 1403, went to his reward in 1440, having throughout his time guarded his territory against all encroachments, especially by the O'Donnells. He may rightly be regarded as the second founder of Holy Cross.



Holy Cross: view of the nave and chancel from the west



Ground Plan of church and convent

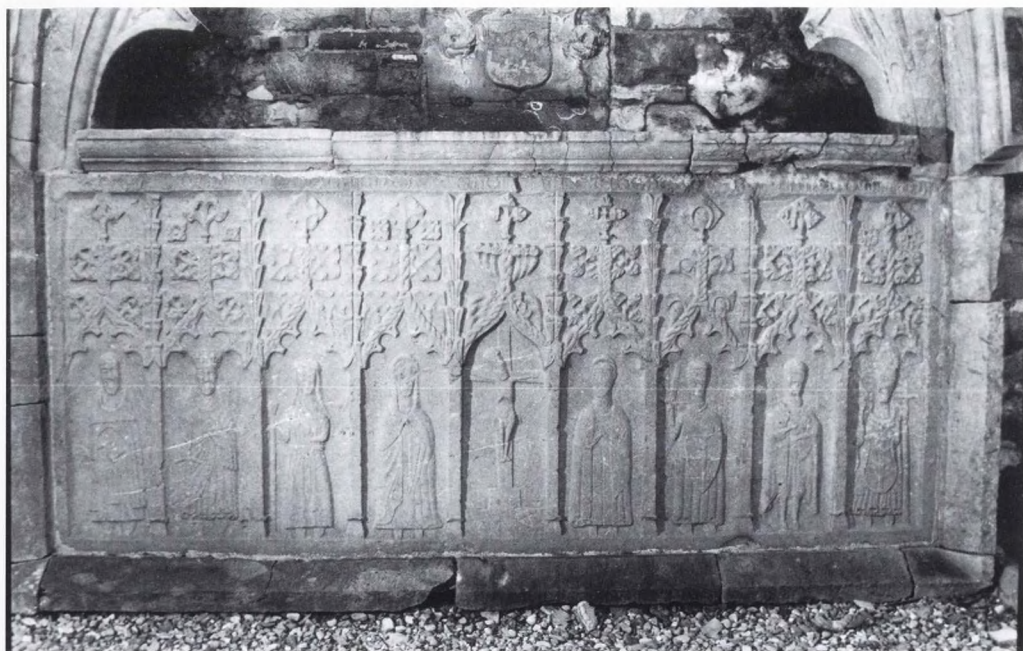


Upper Plan

O'Donnell, O'Connor and O'Crean: 1445 - 1538

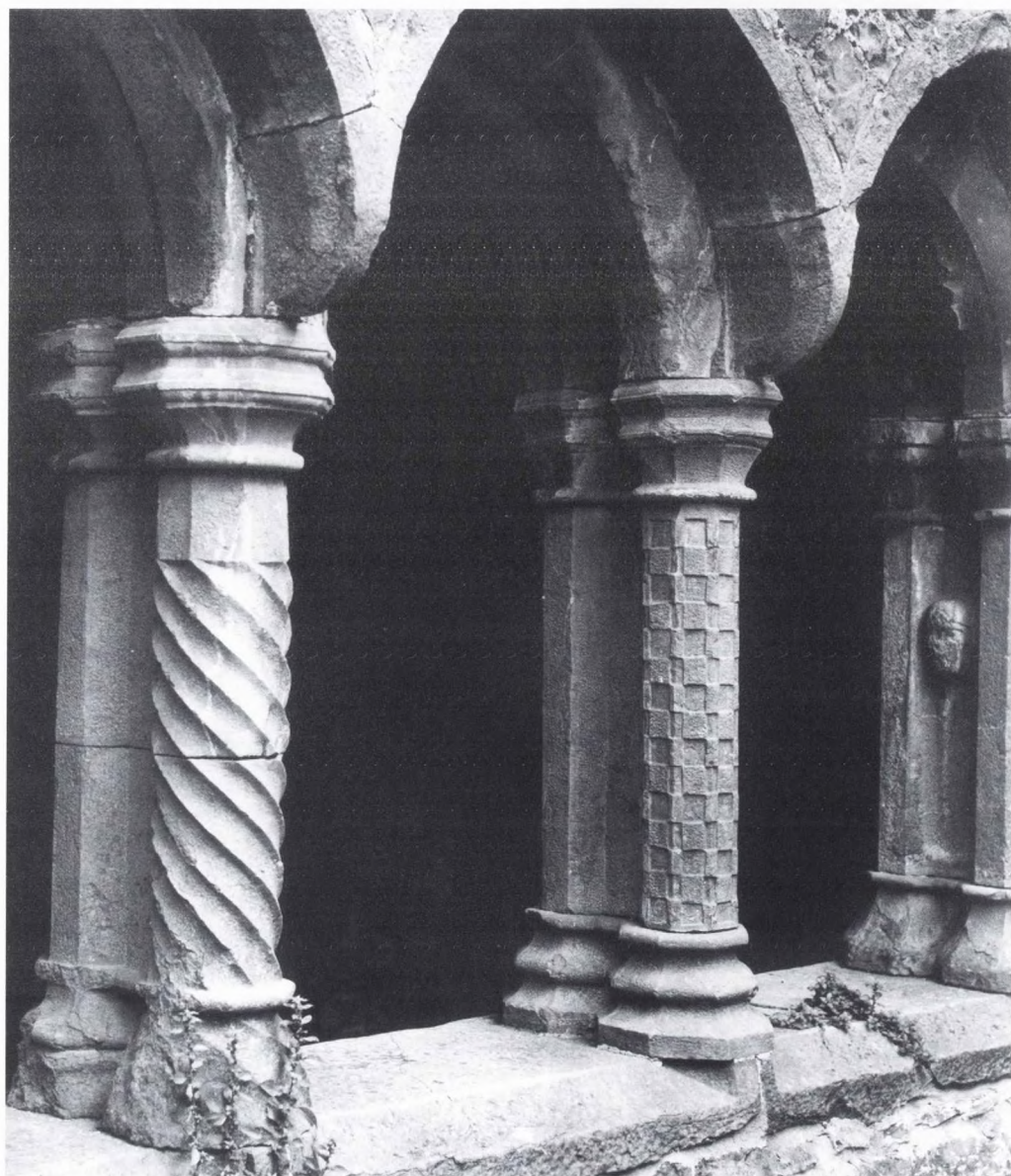
Throughout these years, while the O'Conors continued to rule Sligo, they were often attacked by the O'Donnells because they refused to pay him tribute. O'Donnell burnt the town in 1445, captured the castle in 1470, and came back in 1495 to besiege and destroy the town again. On another visit in 1516 he brought cannon-guns from France - a novelty on the Irish scene - to blow parts of the castle away, and then prolonged his visit for eleven years. Finally, in 1538, O'Connor Sligo submitted and let O'Donnell occupy the castle.

How the town survived, how the friars and Holy Cross itself came through this turmoil unscathed, passes all understanding. Yet it is certain that the O'Conors never left the area; the abbey, far from being destroyed, was greatly improved; and the first great merchant family of Sligo, the O'Creans, began to flourish. The O'Creans had come from Donegal, probably with O'Donnell. Cormac O'Crean or O'Craian, the first of the name to become prominent in Sligo, was buried at Holy Cross in 1506.



The O'Crean tomb of 1506

The vitality of the Dominicans of Holy Cross, despite all local difficulties, was shown in 1488 when one of the community, Brian MacDonough, founded a new community at Cloonymeehan, a small place half-a-mile east of Bunninadden near Ballymote. This was a sort of daughter-house or 'vicariate' of Sligo, never a priory in its own right. To judge by its ruins, much in need of repair in 1990, the church there was small and simple, suitable for tertiaries, for members of the 'observant' movement within the Order, or perhaps largely as a hostel for the friars of Sligo while out questing for corn and sheep.



Carved columns in the cloister arcade, after 1480

Shortly before or after 1500, the fabric of Holy Cross was again improved by the addition of the present south aisle and transept, which greatly increased the capacity of the church. The conventual buildings too date largely from this time, particularly the cloister arcades with their delicate carvings, now the most attractive feature of the whole complex. Since these arcades support the rooms above them, the upper rooms cannot be earlier in date. Among them, the refectory is the most interesting because of the unusual 'reader's desk'. This was set into the thickness of the wall, with a triple arcade in front of the reader and an oriel window (supported by an external corbel) at his back to throw light on the page.

The high altar within the abbey church probably belongs to this particular phase of renovation. It is much admired as the only sculptured example from the fifteenth century to survive in any Irish monastic church. Nine decorated panels on the front show carvings of a rose and bunches of grapes. The altar table bears an incised cross of Celtic design within a square frame. Apart from the cross, a sign of the dedication of the altar itself, the altar table carries also an inscription giving the name of the benefactor responsible for the work. 'JOHAN ... ME FIERI FECIT'. 'John ... caused me to be made'. The loss of one of the stones bearing the inscription has meant the loss of the donor's surname. There is however some reason to believe that the donor was John O'Crian. In that case, the altar cannot have been part of the rebuilding programme of 1420, but was erected closer to the end of the century.

This architectural flowering after 1480 shows that the friars had wealthy patrons. A recent author offers a rather surprising reason for the increased prosperity of Sligo at this time: the appearance of shoals of herring off the north-west coast. Most of the fishermen were British, but they had to come ashore to salt their catch, and pay dues of various kinds to the local lords for the privilege. About the year 1490 there was even a rhyming proverb current in England: 'Herring of Sligo and salmon of Bann, has made in Bristol many a rich man.' There is also good reason to believe that Holy Cross was flourishing also on the religious and spiritual level. Not only was the foundation of Cloonymeehan to the south a fair sign of expansion, but the friar responsible for Cloonymeehan was himself a teacher of theology at Holy Cross. Clearly the educational aspect of Dominican work was not being neglected at Sligo. Some of the younger friars probably studied theology there; only the brighter ones were sent to Oxford or Paris. Richard Hart, the most notable of them, received minor orders at Worcester in 1474.

From their first coming to Ireland, the Dominicans constituted only a 'vicariate', subject to the provincial of England. In 1484, Ireland became a 'province' of the order in its own right, and in this new Irish province Richard Hart of

Sligo, by now a 'bachelor' of theology, played no small part. In 1488 he was permitted by the master general to promote fifteen young Dominicans to holy orders. In 1491 he sailed to France to attend the general chapter of the order at Le Mans. While that chapter named him master of theology, it also declared that the Irish province would have to revert to vicarial status, some insurmountable legal difficulty having come to light. There was further promotion for Richard Hart in 1496 when he was appointed vicar of the Irish Dominicans, and again in 1505 when he became vicar of such houses in Ireland as had not yet been reformed. By implication, Holy Cross was not yet a convent of 'the observant reform'. Be that as it may, many other Dominicans of Sligo would play no small part in the survival of the order in Ireland over the next hundred years

To the south of Sligo, on the western shore of Lough Arrow, lies the abbey of Ballindoon, a small but beautiful church founded for the order by John MacDonagh, chieftain of Tirerrill, in 1507. Curiously, the first prior of the house was a certain Thomas O'Farrell who, to judge by his name, came more likely from Longford than from Sligo. Prior Thomas O'Farrell died twenty years later, the victim of political assassination, killed by a band of O'Kellys and O'Farrells. Despite this early tragedy, and many later ones, the community at Ballindoon survived until about 1760, always maintaining contact with their brethren in Sligo.

The Last Years of Freedom: 1538 - 1595

While Henry VIII set to work on the suppression of religious houses in Ireland as early as 1537, this royal policy could be implemented only in areas over which the king had strong control. Since Gaelic Ireland strongly resisted the new state church and the confiscation of abbeys, Holy Cross in the remote north-west escaped serious interference for another fifty years. Most other Dominican houses in Leinster, Munster and even coastal Ulster were auctioned off by 1541. Yet all unwittingly, the king did the Irish Dominicans a good turn. His virtual destruction of the order in England enabled the Irish friars to assert their independence and achieve the long-sought status of a 'province' of the order in 1536. Whatever problems the future might hold, they would never again be subject to a superior in England nor to any vicar of his in Ireland.

One Irish problem which had nothing to do with the Reformation was that sometimes laymen took over vacant parishes and abbeys, not for the good of religion, but to line their pockets and provide for their families. The friars of Holy Cross were brought to court in 1547 by intruders of this kind because they refused to pay dues either to the vacant parish of Sligo or to the Cistercian abbey of Boyle. They also refused to yield up any part of their funeral offerings (while the parish was vacant) and objected to other intruders on property of their own. To obtain justice, six of them travelled in that year to Rome where the pope issued two documents defending their rights. A third papal brief granted indulgences to all who would venerate an image of 'the triumph of the Cross' at the abbey in Sligo.

Quentin O'Higgins, leader of this group of Sligo friars who travelled to Rome in 1547, came home as 'permanent superior' of Holy Cross and vicar of the then provincial David Brown. Sligo was to be a house of strict observance, but some concessions were made to Irish weakness. The master general at Rome allowed them to wear linen next to their skin and even to eat meat three times a week. There can be no doubt that Quentin O'Higgins was an important figure among the Dominicans of his time. He was twice provincial of the order, though one cannot say when it was he held office. At Sligo he gave the habit to Andrew O'Crean and Eugene O'Hart, both of whom became bishops. On his way to a provincial chapter in 1565, he was tragically drowned near Limerick while he and his companions were crossing the river Maigue.

Eugene O'Hart, a native of Carbury, Co. Sligo, must have been a promising student at Holy Cross, for he was sent for higher studies to Salamanca and then, for eight years, to Paris. It was a good introduction for the young friar to the problems created on the continent by the Reformation. On his return home he

was soon named prior of Sligo and made a favourable impression. The clergy of Connacht chose him to attend the Council of Trent as their procurator, while the papal commissary in Ireland recommended him for a mitre. O'Hart set out for Italy in 1561, was ordained bishop of Achonry at Rome in 1562, and pushed north at once to attend the Council at Trent in the Italian Alps. On returning to Ireland, he promulgated the decrees of the Council in Connacht, administered the sacrament of confirmation as far afield as County Cork, showed great adroitness in dealing with the government, and eventually died in his bed, still bishop of Achonry, in 1603.

Another remarkable Dominican of Sligo, Andrew O'Crean, was prior of Holy Cross in 1562 when he became bishop of Elphin. As one can see from his name, he belonged to the leading merchant family of the town. Although he ruled the diocese until 1594, it is enough to mention here that he built a market-cross in the town, adopted Holy Cross itself as his cathedral, usually resided in the abbey, and on his refusal in 1584 to take the oath of supremacy, gave up the temporalities of the see. O'Crean's episcopate spanned the period of twenty years during which the English authorities, beginning with visits of 'courtesy', worked towards the establishment of a garrison in 1581 and the confiscation of monastic property in 1584.

Sir Henry Sidney, welcomed by O'Connor Sligo and Bishop O'Crean in 1566, remarked on the fine castle, the 'good haven', the large monastery and bishop's house, but noticed that Sligo had 'formerly' been: 'a great town, full of merchants' houses, all of which are now disinhabited and in ruins'. On this occasion, O'Connor Sligo formally submitted to Queen Elizabeth but only as a ploy to strengthen his hand against O'Donnell. As part of this arrangement, the queen allowed the Dominicans to continue as before, though under another name:

The house of the friary of Sligo, wherein the sepulture of his [O'Connor's] ancestors hath been, shall be so preserved, as the friars there, being converted to secular priests, the same house may remain and continue, as well for the sepulture of his posterity as for the maintenance of prayer and service of God.

Since Queen Elizabeth had no army in Connacht to carry out her commands, O'Connor paid not one penny of the heavy annual tribute he had promised, and the Dominicans continued as before. Their provincial, Cormac O'Fergus, recently back from a visit to Rome and Lisbon, published indulgences at Sligo in 1572. Yet government inspectors of property were on the move, noting in 1574 that Holy Cross was 'occupied by the friars' and that at Mohill, Co. Leitrim, there was a 'Black Abbey occupied by Dominicans'. Another survey of 1576 reported that the friary in Sligo was 'in the occupation of Dermot O Bolane and other friars, and is valued at six shillings and eight pence a year'.

Thady MacDuane, prior of Holy Cross, paid a visit to Rome in 1577 and presented three petitions to the pope which shed some light on his difficulties. The fact that Holy Cross was then being used as a cathedral - for the bishop could not obtain peaceful possession of any other church in the diocese sufficiently worthy - seems to have been a financial disadvantage for the friars. The community were denied their right to a fourth part of funeral offerings, and indeed to any offerings made at funerals in their own church. On the other hand they were prevented, probably by laymen, from collecting tithes or deriving income from property bequeathed or granted to them by their founders and benefactors. According to the prior, the Sligo Dominicans urgently needed money to repair the dormitory, cloisters, rooms, undercroft (i.e. crypt), external walls and outbuildings, a fact which says much for their optimism in such unpromising times. On this occasion the pope upheld the rights of the friars with respect to funeral offerings and tithes while also granting indulgences which Thady MacDuane might publish in Sligo: some for those venerating the relics of saints which the prior obtained in Rome, others to be granted on the feasts of the Finding and Exaltation of the Cross (3 May and 14 September) because of 'the image of the crucifix' kept in the friary church and so greatly venerated by the people.

At this time the friars of Sligo held a written guarantee of protection from the President of Connacht, who renewed it occasionally provided 'they did not offend Her Majesty's laws', but the establishment of an English garrison at Sligo was soon followed in 1584 by 'inquisitions' of Dominican property at Ballindoon, Cloonymeehan and Sligo itself, now judged to be the property of the crown. The documents tell us little of Holy Cross save that it had a fishing weir and was 'in the occupation of certain priests who had formerly been friars of the monastery.' This refers to their legal status as secular priests, though they seem to have remained in the abbey as friars until 1595. With Connacht ravaged by civil war in 1589, Sligo itself attacked by O'Hart, and an English garrison occasionally in firm control, normal life became impossible for the friars. The community probably broke up in 1595 when O'Donnell occupied Sligo. To drive O'Donnell out of the castle, Sir Richard Bingham quartered his troops in Holy Cross itself and pulled down the rood-screen to construct what was known as a 'sow', a wheeled shelter under which sappers could breach the strongest wall.

From these disastrous times only one letter of Dominican interest survives. It was written in 1593 by Thady MacDuane, vicar-provincial and prior of Sligo, not at Sligo itself but at Coleraine where the order also had a priory. Father MacDuane, then in charge of all the Dominicans in Ireland, remarked in this letter to Rome that constant persecution had led to a great falling-off in numbers; only as many Dominicans survived throughout the country as would suffice to

staff four houses. MacDuane took two practical steps to solve the problem: after 1595 he arranged for the training of Dominican novices in the Franciscan friary at Donegal, and was, it is said, the first to think of establishing a house of studies for Irish Dominicans at Louvain in the Spanish Netherlands. By the time that college opened about 1626, MacDuane was long since dead, but it was significantly dedicated to Holy Cross.



Head of cherub

From Kinsale to Cromwell: 1601 - 1657

The end of Gaelic Ireland, signalled by the battle of Kinsale and the Flight of the Earls, left the friars of Sligo to fend for themselves in a largely hostile world. Before 1613 their property, including two weirs, came into the possession of Sir William Taaffe. Holy Cross was used as a court-house, though the court may have used the abbey rather than the church. On the positive side, the Taaffes were staunchly Catholic and the friars had another powerful friend in Sir Donogh O'Connor More until his death in 1609. The community was, however, dispersed since Father MacDuane was quite alone in Sligo as his life drew to a close in 1608. To those about him he confidently foretold that another Dominican would come to Sligo in time to give him the last sacraments. Daniel O'Crean, a young man fresh from his studies at Lisbon, arrived unexpectedly to comfort the old priest in his final moments.

The young Daniel O'Crean played no small part in the recovery of the Irish province. As vicar-provincial in 1617, he placed some novices at Galway, not in any convent, but in the house of Martin Font, a wealthy merchant. Later he was listed in 1622 rather unaccountably as prior of Galway - perhaps a scribal error - but was prior of his native Sligo in 1624. That was the year in which Lady Eleanor Butler, countess of Desmond, erected the elaborate monument at Holy Cross to the memory of her long-dead husband Sir Donogh O'Connor. Clearly the abbey church was again or still being used for Catholic worship. The countess bequeathed twenty pounds to Daniel O'Crean who was again prior of Sligo in 1627 with a community of about fifteen, including not only some students and novices but even a 'centenarian' and another friar over sixty years of age. In the same year, Dominicans came to Sligo from every part of Ireland for a provincial chapter, which must mean that they had full possession of church and convent, quite apart from generous local support.

Although Daniel O'Crean had gathered into community even some survivors from the sixteenth-century, other friars still remained in the countryside either as parish priests or curates. The oldest and one of the most beautiful relics still preserved at Holy Cross is a pyx for carrying the Blessed Sacrament, made in 1629 by Friar Magomus (i.e. Patrick) MacHugh O. P. of Coolrecuil in the parish of Kilmacteige, Co. Sligo, for his own convent of Sligo. Father O'Crean was elected provincial in 1631 but little is known of his activities. Some of his Sligo students were now on the continent - Stephen Crean at Naples and Theodore O'Connell at Lerida in Spain - but at home, at least throughout the diocese of Elphin, the 1630s were a time of bitter persecution. The Franciscan bishop of Elphin reported that he could not spend three nights in the one house

for fear of imprisonment, Holy Cross lay in ruins, the church was used as a court-house, and the Dominicans of the diocese hid in caves and woods while Protestants occupied their property. On the other hand, there is reason to believe that the friars occupied Holy Cross again by 1637, and were certainly in residence on the outbreak of revolution in October 1641.

The 'horrid massacres' of 1641, never to be forgotten by the Protestant community, were recorded by the survivors in depositions which may still be read today. At Sligo, about thirty Protestants were slaughtered in the town jail, victims of ancient hatred and mob rule. According to survivors, the rebel leaders came in from Sligo, Leitrim and Donegal to discuss strategy at a great gathering in the abbey itself where their spirits and religious feelings were roused by Edmund MacBrian MacSwiny, 'guardian' of Holy Cross. One of the friars, Hugh McMartin, brought a Protestant into the abbey for his own safety, but the man went out and was killed. The same happened to a woman, protected in the abbey, who ran out on hearing shrieks from the jail, only to be murdered in the river. 'Distracted by the barbarity of these outrages which he was powerless to control, the prior of the abbey of Sligo fell frantic, and ran so about the streets, and continued in that frenzy for three or four weeks.' One witness claimed that she saw 'the friars in their white habits, in great companies in procession, going to sanctify the waters [of the Garavogue], casting therein holy water'. This story, told to emphasise how badly the river was polluted by human blood, probably refers to an annual ceremony, normal enough for friars who depended so greatly on fish.

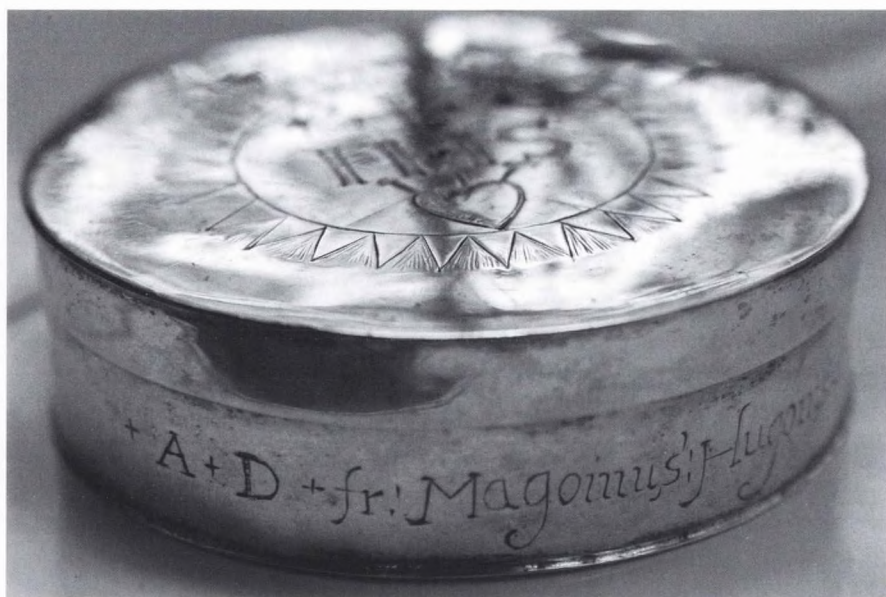
If the Catholics of Sligo spilt innocent blood, they paid for it tenfold in July 1642 when Sir Frederick Hamilton, based at Manorhamilton in Co. Leitrim, made a dawn-attack on Sligo with horse and foot. His own chilling account, published soon after, shows that the Dominicans themselves did not escape.

We fell on a great many good houses full of people near the bridge, and burned and destroyed them all. At the end of the town we crossed the river, which brought us close to the friary, burned the superstitious trumperies of the Mass and many things given for safety to the friars ... It was thought some of the friars themselves were burnt; two of them running out were killed in their habits. Wearisome our march and hot our service in burning that night the town of Sligo, where it is confessed by themselves we destroyed more than 300 souls by fire, sword and drowning, to God's everlasting honour and glory and our comfort.

The names of the Dominicans said to have been killed on this occasion are unknown. One of them may have been the 'Edmund Scanell, subprior of Sligo', included in a list of martyrs by Felix O'Connor of Sligo in 1658. After

Hamilton's raid, the war dragged on with Sligo still in Confederate hands until 1645 when it was taken by Parliamentary forces under Sir Charles Coote with terrible loss of life. The Confederates recaptured Sligo in 1649 and held out until July 1652, even after Limerick and Galway had finally surrendered to the Cromwellians. After this ten-year struggle, there was nothing left of Sligo 'but some few bare walls and a company of poor Irish cabins to distinguish the place where it stood'. Even the population of the county was soon greatly changed, for Cromwell's soldiers were paid with Irish land. And yet, amid all the horrors of war, a least one good deed by Sir Charles Coote showed that common humanity was not altogether dead. On the surrender of Ballymote, the Cromwellian general found among his prisoners the former Dominican provincial, Daniel O'Crian, aged, blind and helpless. Coote sent the old friar back to Sligo and charged the townspeople with his support.

Simply to be a priest, for most of the 1650s, was a capital crime. The Dominican Thaddeus Moriarty of Tralee, for this alone, was hanged in 1653. And yet, rather surprisingly, there is a list of sixty priests and fourteen brothers of the order still on the mission in 1657, resisting as best they could the full blast of Cromwellian persecution. The list does not say to which convents they belonged, but it does include some names with a Sligo flavour: John O'Hart, 'formerly prior of Sligo', Peter O'Connor, Charles MacDermottroe, Hugh Donaghy, Thomas Beolan and Magomus MacHugh. This last-named priest was donor in 1629 of the silver pyx mentioned above.



The silver Magomus MacHugh silver pyx

From Restoration to Exile: 1660 - 1698

The restoration of Charles II to the throne of England in 1660 brought to a close Cromwell's campaign against the Mass itself and all who celebrated it. While the clergy, and particularly the friars, had still much to suffer from time to time until about 1720, the worst was over. So far as the Dominicans were concerned, the task of reorganisation fell to John O'Hart of Sligo, appointed provincial in 1659 and for the next ten years leader of the province. His fine chalice, made for the convent of Sligo in 1666, is now in private hands. One of his first tasks was to recover the lost convents of Ulster, and this he entrusted to Dominic O'Connor, a senior member of his own community. To train and teach his youngest friars he opened a house of studies at Athenry and supervised the college of Holy Cross, Louvain, then overstocked with exiles anxious to return to Ireland. Father O'Hart also held a provincial chapter at Roscommon in 1661, but the record of its decisions has been lost. From July 1664, the provincial was imprisoned for eighteen months at Dublin, partly for moving about the country on visitation and partly for rejecting an anti-papal oath of allegiance then being forced on the clergy. As though the provincial had not trouble enough, two of his own subjects - John Berne of Roscommon and John Reynolds of Dublin - became so involved in national politics that they tried to dictate to their own superior.

The historian of the province, John O'Heyne, wrote mostly about the contemporaries he had known or heard about between 1660 and 1706. After describing the career of John O'Hart he goes on to speak of another outstanding Dominican of Sligo, Felix O'Connor. Father O'Connor, one of the hundreds forced into exile by Cromwell, worked hard for the province in Spain, Rome and Louvain, sometimes as an army chaplain, and eventually returned to Sligo of which he was prior in 1667. He was, says O'Heyne, very careful to receive to the habit 'only those young men who were talented, obedient and of honest birth.' O'Heyne also remarks that Father O'Connor 'was tranquil even in the midst of persecutions and other trials', but seems not to have known that O'Connor died in jail at Sligo in 1679, a victim of the Popish Plot. Persecution at the time was so severe that his fellow-Dominicans could not visit him to ask about conventual property, nor even to bring him the last sacraments. O'Heyne also mentions Theodore O'Connell, a Dominican chaplain at London, who bequeathed £300 to his native convent in 1668 - the money was used to buy a farm in Co. Galway - and Hugh MacMartin who seems never to have left Sligo or its neighbourhood between 1627 and his death at the age of eighty.

Another Dominican, Dominic Burke of Athenry, was bishop of Elphin from 1671 to 1704. His adventures from boyhood to old age are vividly described by O'Heyne who spent a whole year as his companion when the bishop was in hiding. Undoubtedly, he suffered much during the Popish Plot which claimed the life of his friend St Oliver Plunkett, archbishop of Armagh. Some of Bishop Burke's letters begin, not with his address, but simply 'from my cave'. And if the bishop could find no better place to live, the Dominicans of Sligo were prevented from settling in the town for some years after the Popish Plot died down. They must have relied on some friendly landlord to provide a simpler dwelling tucked away somewhere in the hills. Traditional accounts mention only the bishop's sufferings at the hands of magistrates, but it is quite clear from his letters that he suffered almost as much from clerical leaders in Connacht who, having gained control over a period of twenty years while the bishops were in exile, could hardly be brought to admit that they needed bishops at all.

The brief return of peace is shown by a valuable record, begun in 1683, which supplies the name of every Dominican in Ireland, convent by convent, for almost every year up to 1704. The details for Sligo are interesting. At first, in 1683, there were six priests and two brothers there. In the following year two novices appeared, while Dominic Hart of Sligo was given permission to conduct a school at Ballymote. By 1686 there were seven young men in the house: three 'clerics' or students and four novices. Under the Catholic King James II, who ruled from 1685 until his defeat at the Boyne in 1690, it became easier for the friars to put their affairs in order. By 1687, and no doubt for five or six years before, Holy Cross abbey was 'in possession of the friars, paying thereout to his Majesty twelve shillings a year'. This short Indian summer ended in 1688 when opposition to King James began to trouble Sligo. Sarsfield took the town for the rightful king and it was one of the last centres to surrender to King William in 1691. By then the surrounding countryside was in a pitiful state, the fields lying waste, horses and cattle hardly to be found, the houses of gentry and peasants alike standing roofless and in ruins. Within the town, most of the houses had been demolished and all public buildings destroyed, while food was extremely dear. The Dominicans survived the war - the community numbered nine in 1696 - but the novices and students had gone, as though in preparation for the exile of all the bishops and friars of Ireland in 1698.

The prior at that time, Patrick MacDonagh, drew up an account of his stewardship which throws valuable light on the affairs of Sligo for twenty years before. An investment in land, which brought in welcome rents, also enabled them in 1686 'to repair and build the convent', but these rents ceased when Nicholas French lost his estate at Abbert, Co. Galway, and the Catholic trustee took advantage of the political situation to defraud them.

Since the heat of the wars in Ireland we did not receive a penny of this rent until we were banished in the year 1698... It is certain that the friars of Sligo lost all their goods and effects and were very poor, and though they came to a head in the country they lived in a mean condition having but from the hand to the mouth by reason we could benefit nothing by our mortgage and the country and our benefactors were reduced and charity was very cold in the heart of Christians and when we were forced to break house and home by the act of parliament and leave the kingdom, our small effects could not pay our rents and debts ... The fathers of the convent of Sligo, having no other effects nor worldly means but their chalices, they agreed unanimously to dispose of some of their chalices to redeem their present necessity, and found it more proper and lawful before God and the world to make use of them than to perish in a foreign country not knowing to what part of the universe would they be turned nor what reception would they get amongst strangers.

Sligo under the Penal Laws: 1698 - 1760

So far as parliament was concerned, every friar in Ireland was to be deported to the continent in 1698. At least four Dominicans of Sligo obeyed the law; five others simply lay low or else returned from exile very soon, for they were members of the 'community' at Sligo in 1703. One of them, Patrick O'Connor, was actually in prison in that year, under sentence 'to remain in jail until transportation'. A chalice given to Holy Cross in 1703 also survives, but that was made in Spain after the death of the donor, Fr Thomas Haran, and came only later to Sligo. It must have been encouraging for these survivors of the storm that the provincial of the time, Ambrose O'Connor, was himself a son of the Sligo convent and had necessarily to stay close to them in northern Connacht where he was safer from arrest.

Although many friars acquired legal recognition by registering as parish priests in 1704, none of the Sligo Dominicans seems to have done so, though some may have acted as unofficial curates. Parish priests were forbidden by law to employ any curate whatsoever. Three younger Dominicans of Sligo, students at Rome from 1699, got leave to return in 1705. One, Peter Cluan, went for seven years as a missionary to Scotland. The other two, James Fiaghny and John Gusman *alias* Gildea, returned to Sligo where Fiaghny soon became prior and Gildea had a chalice made for the convent in 1716.

In 1712, northern Connacht was the scene of agrarian troubles caused by 'houghers' who maimed cattle in protest against a decline in tillage. The government, convinced that the clergy were behind the whole movement, ordered the arrest of all priests in several western counties and forced adult Catholics to testify not only where and when they had attended Mass, but by whom those Masses had been said. Among those interrogated was Thomas Corcoran, a Catholic merchant of Sligo, whose son or grandson we shall meet again. The replies given were vague, general and even amusing. Certainly they left the magistrates no wiser than they had been before. By 1714, the high sheriff of Sligo was forced to admit that 'the papists are so numerous in this country that without the assistance of the army there is no good to be done'.

These depositions of 1712 mention James Fiaghny 'who is or used to be prior of the convent of Sligo', and a Dominican named Thomas Rutledge, 'a reputed friar' who had said Mass in the parish of Ballysummahan. More interestingly they show that Mass was being said in the open fields, in private houses, and 'in the chapel or Mass-house near Sligo', which is understood to have been the old abbey itself. How soon the Dominicans felt free to return to

Holy Cross is still an open question. From 1698, when they recovered their farm in Co. Galway, they enjoyed at least an annual income of twenty or thirty pounds. At the very first opportunity they would have assisted at funerals in the abbey rather than lose their right to a fourth part of the collection. Our only source of information on this point is Fr Bernard Goodman of Sligo, whose narrative was written in 1859.

The Fathers emerged from their hiding places; it was no longer necessary to say Mass under the ancient oak at Tubbernalt, while peasants watched upon the surrounding hills to give signals of the enemy's approach, and the ready boat was at hand to enable the priest to fly across the lake. They sought a shelter, a place to lay their heads again under the old walls. They enclosed the chancel, strove to staunch the roof and repair its decayed timbers, but all their efforts could not contend against the ruin which had become inevitable. Reluctantly they closed its doors.

While describing Holy Cross, Father Goodman mentioned the former rood-screen - with its relic of the True Cross in a silver box - under the arch between nave and chancel: 'across this arch, the Fathers built a wall enclosing the chancel and tower when they made their last effort to save the place from utter ruin. In this wall is the door which gave admission to the limited church. Westward of this wall extend the nave and aisle.' Such was the friary chapel from about 1715, but there was not as yet a convent in which the friars might live. In 1731, a committee of the House of Lords noted both a parish mass-house and a friary in Sligo: 'the friars dispersed about the country; not above three or four known'. The provincial superior who came to Sligo in 1735 was rather better informed. The brethren had, he noted, a fund of £220 and other goods in the hands of John Phillips of Ballintoghir. They were also rather numerous, with fifteen of their legal 'sons' in Ireland and one at Rome. While many of these men worked outside the area, as Michael Wynn did at Trim, the large number was typical of the years before 1750 when a Roman decree forbade the reception of novices in Ireland.

Fears of a Stuart invasion led in 1744 to another government listing of popish clergy and friars. Oddly enough, the sheriffs at Sligo had only to ask the Dominican Ambrose Gilligan to get all the information they wanted. Gilligan named nine of his confrères 'belonging to the friary in the town', with two others, respectively parish priest and curate of Kilvarnet. Taking into account that one of the brethren in 1735 was a laybrother - unable to live by saying Mass - and that there was a 'friary in the town' by 1744, it seems reasonable to suppose that some of the community had already found living quarters outside the abbey and attended Holy Cross only for funerals. The building of a parish chapel very close to the old abbey had obliged them to move to the outskirts of the town,

presumably to the stable in Pound Street which they fitted up as a chapel. The Dominican bishop of Elphin, John Brett, when reporting to Rome in 1753, mentioned that Catholics outnumbered Protestants in Sligo town by three to one, and in the countryside by thirty to one. It was not, therefore, in the interests of magistrates and sheriffs to harass friars once they caused no trouble. They worked on Napoleon's principle that one good priest is more effective than ten policemen and costs a great deal less. There is another indication of 'fixed residence' in the town in the list of five friars 'resident in the convent' in 1757 provided by Thomas Burke in his *Hibernia Dominicana*. When communities were dispersed or living in 'houses of refuge', Burke usually said so.



*A silver chalice made for the use of the friars of
Holy Cross in 1732*

The House and Chapel in Pound Street: 1763 - 1845

Among the novices received for the convent of Sligo there was a certain Laurence Connellan who began his studies at Lisbon in 1740, continued them at Rome in 1745, and taught for long years at Louvain before returning to Sligo in 1760. Having seen so much of the glories of Catholic Europe, it naturally occurred to him that the Dominican house and chapel in Sligo left a lot to be desired. Until his death in 1790 he devoted his energies to improving the situation. For much of that time he was also prior of the house. Under his guidance the community rented a few rooms in Pound Street, now Connolly Street, to serve as a friary, and 'hired a small stable at the back which they fitted up as a chapel'. The date traditionally given for the erection of this chapel behind Pound Street is 1763. One does not like to tamper with tradition, but it is very likely that there was already a friary chapel in the town, probably in Pound Street itself, and that Father Connellan's achievement was to replace it by a better one. Unfortunately the account-books are lost, while the chapel itself was greatly altered after Father Connellan's death.

Visitors to Sligo will admire Thomas Street and Corcoran's Mall without perhaps realising that they were named after the speculative builder Thomas Corcoran, and without knowing that the same Corcoran used Holy Cross as a quarry until Laurence Connellan put a stop to his vandalism. When Gabriel Beranger visited the abbey in 1779, only three sides of the cloister were left, but Corcoran may have taken his building materials only from those parts of the the convent lying closest to the river. Father Connellan, taking advantage in 1783 of an act of parliament granting more freedom to Catholics, obtained a lease from Mr James Hart:

of all that and those the upper floor of a house on the east side of High Street ... commonly called the Friars' House ... with the chapel as it is now built ... and as now in the actual possession of said Laurence Connellan paying therefore every year four pounds ten shillings and to keep the rear side of said front house well and sufficiently thatched.

The earliest surviving account-book was begun by Bernard Mullany who took over as prior in 1790. The community, like others throughout the country, was both small and poor. The incoming prior found only five shillings and eight-pence in the safe; of his three subjects, old Father Connellan died a few months later and a younger man, Dominic May, went to America in 1794 only to die of fever on his arrival. To make up for these losses, the prior asked the bishop in December 1794 to give all sacred orders to a young son of the convent, Constantine John O'Donnell, who had yet apparently to begin his studies at

Lisbon. In the meanwhile, Father Mullany and his bursar Thomas Brennan were left to staff the friary on their own. They had two rents to pay: one for the chapel to Mr Edward Morris, the other to the Widow Connellan for their ‘parlour and kitchen’. Twice a year they took up a ‘chapel rent’ collection to meet the first of these expenses. Both house and chapel were thatched. In 1792 they laid out the relatively large sum of six shillings and sixpence for ‘a new chapel bell’, presumably a small one to hang from a pole outside the chapel since it was still illegal to have a belfry. Frequent reference to the purchase of ‘candles for illumination’ suggests that the chapel was lit by a chandelier. Occasionally the friars hired horses to quest for butter in the baronies of Tirerrill and Leyny.

Thomas Brennan, prior of Sligo from 1795, began to make serious repairs and improvements to the chapel in 1797. The gallery on the northern side was ‘shored up’. Windows were replaced, as were the beams supporting the roof, while a benefactor in Dublin donated two valuable religious paintings. All this building activity continued for some years before payment was made for leases, maps and surveys of the plot in 1802. The actual indenture whereby the Pound Street site was leased for ever to the Dominicans at a peppercorn rent by William Burton of Burton Hall in County Carlow is dated 4 January 1803. Although the document lacks the ‘map annexed’, it does provide other details of the site:

All that the house and plot of ground on the north side of High Street ... now in the possession of the said Thomas Brennan containing in front to said street twenty-one feet ten inches, in the rear twenty-six feet, and in length by Coles’ plot west side to the upper end of said premises 158 feet, and on the east side by the Conlans and by Mr Mullins 120 feet, and on the north by McCarrick’s plot 58 feet as particularly set forth and described in a map hereunto annexed.

In a private appeal of 24 May 1803, Father Brennan solicited the ‘benevolent support and subscription’ of a wealthy but unnamed benefactor. It is clear from the text that attempts to prevent the friary chapel from ‘tottering into decay’ had been going on for some time, thanks to the donations ‘of our fellow subjects of every denomination’. Even today, three walls of this chapel survive, from which it has been calculated by Dara Gallagher that it was eighty feet in length and thirty feet broad, with walls about twenty-five feet high and gables which rose at each end to thirty-five feet. There were four windows, each six feet high, in the southern wall; two windows each twenty feet high in the eastern gable, behind the altar; with traces of five smaller and irregular windows in the western gable. An undated plan of the building shows galleries on three sides, with altar-railings and a raised altar approached by four steps. By 1809 both friary and chapel were slated, because thatching, an annual expense, no longer figures in the accounts.



Apse and right wall of old chapel in Pound Street

Father Brennan also attended to the old abbey where with the help of Catholic and Protestant friends he repaired the surrounding wall and erected a substantial iron gate. He died in 1814 after a ministry of some thirty years in Sligo. During his last few years there was a revival of the ancient dispute between the friars and secular clergy over the right to offerings at funerals in the abbey. Edward Rochfort, prior in 1815, signed a 'convention' on the matter, yet still the dispute continued up to 1819 and beyond, for that was the year in which Patrick Burke first came to Sligo as administrator of St John's. Father Burke, later bishop of Elphin from 1827 to 1843, would himself stand on one side collecting offerings while a friar did the same on the other. Since the parish church of St John's was built precisely in 1819, the secular clergy needed all the money they could find. On becoming bishop in 1827, Dr Patrick Browne reached a compromise on the question of funeral offerings. For the future only the secular clergy would collect, but the friars would get a quarter of the proceeds no matter where in the parish the burial took place. This arrangement was sanctioned by Bishop George Browne who took up office in 1844.

For thirty years after Father Brennan's death, the people of Sligo suffered great poverty and hardship, partly because of the steep rise in the population. Continuous rain in 1817 led to the failure of the potatoe and oats crops, causing famine, while typhus and even cholera spread across much of the country.



*Entry to the old chapel and priory
in Pound Street*

In 1822 there was another and even more severe famine, while in 1832 a cholera epidemic forced 15,000 people to abandon Sligo for some months and claimed six hundred lives. The Dominicans had other problems of their own, for it was a period of declining numbers during which many country convents, having held out for centuries, finally disappeared. At Sligo, there were never more than two or three at Pound Street where no priest seemed to stay longer than a few years.

Perhaps Sligo too would have gone under but for the fact that the friary was in a sizeable town and the provincial Peter Smith made a timely intervention in 1832. The affairs of the Roscommon community were then being wound up and the provincial sent to Sligo not only the conventual funds of Roscommon but also three of its 'sons' whom he had found working as curates here and there in northern Connacht. One of them, Michael Keane, did much to improve the chapel in Pound Street but died young in 1834. The Sligo chapter of the third order was established in the same year: there still survives a small notebook recording the names of men

and women admitted as tertiaries between 1834 and 1843. Another of these Roscommon men was Patrick Kelly, prior of the community in Sligo, where he was 'busily administering the total abstinence pledge to large congregations' in May 1840, five months before Father Mathew first visited the town.

The New Abbey in High Street: 1845 - 1900

A young priest named Thomas Hibbetts came to Sligo in 1834 and devoted the rest of a long life to Holy Cross until his death in 1891. This native of Portumna, a product of the novitiate at Esker and the college at Lisbon, was to show what a combination of ability, perseverance and good health could do for the benefit of a struggling religious community. Better still, he had the advantage for much of this time of a companion, Bernard Goodman, even more talented than himself. Goodman, a native of Loughrea, had also studied at Lisbon and first came to Sligo in 1835. Although called away on other duties in 1838, he served again at Sligo from 1845 until his death in 1873. The third and only other member of the community over a period of almost forty years was Michael McEvoy, a native of Abbeyleix and also a student at Lisbon, who worked in Sligo from 1837 until his death in 1876. These three men were to build a completely new church and friary and abandon Pound Street for ever. They also lived to see the revival of the order in Ireland and to benefit from its results.

Father Hibbetts, who was incidentally the first to introduce daily public Mass to Sligo, began in 1842 to make remote preparations by laying aside £30 as 'rent for new chapel'. In 1845, despite the misgivings of the local clergy, he leased a restricted but central site in High Street from Lord Palmerston 'on an angle of his lordship's property'. The new church would not be hidden away behind other buildings as before, but would face boldly onto High Street for all to see. When work on the building began in June 1845, the small weekly collections in Pound Street could not nearly meet the expense. Nor could anyone have foreseen how terrible a famine was about to devastate the countryside. When a second potatoe-blight followed the first, money to finish the building was sought abroad. Father Goodman went on a fund-raising tour not only to Dublin and Galway, but to England and Scotland as well. Father Hibbetts, in December 1845, solicited funds from other Dominican houses in Ireland:

I beg to enclose a print of the front elevation of our new church ... This structure, which is nearly 150 feet long, was commenced in July. Part of it is now slated, and we expect to have it entirely roofed before February. We have hitherto succeeded beyond our most sanguine expectations in raising the funds necessary for our arduous undertaking ... We now however think the time has arrived when we should make an appeal to our brethren.

From 1846, Father Goodman directed operations, for he was now prior of the house. Famine and epidemic fever struck Sligo in the same year, putting even

the community on short rations while increasing their ministry and making it highly dangerous to themselves. Work on the new abbey slowed down, but the purchase of an organ in November 1847 shows that it did not stop. At last, on 6 January 1848 came the great day for the opening and dedication of the church, followed by High Mass, an event minutely described in both the local newspapers. The bishop of Elphin being unwell at the time, the officiating prelate was the retired Augustinian bishop of Madras, Dr Daniel O'Connor, and the preacher Fr Bonaventure McLoughlin O. F. M. The following architectural details are taken from *The Champion*:

When the great door was thrown open, the spacious edifice was crowded within a few minutes. The exquisite beauty of the new edifice excited universal admiration. It is indeed a credit to the town of Sligo, to have raised so splendid a pile. The designs of the church were given by our talented countryman, J. Benson, Esq., at present County Surveyor at Cork, and were carried out in every detail, by the artizans of the town. The plan is purely Gothic of the best period of the style. In the front rises a massive tower, of beautiful proportions, in which is the great door of richly carved limestone ... At each side, receding from the tower, is a door of smaller size ... over which are windows of elegant design, the stone mullions and heads being fancifully carved. Passing through the great door and extensive porch, you enter by lateral folding doors ... the nave of the church. We do not recollect having seen a church which struck us more impressively than this, when we looked around on the elevated walls and lines of gothic windows, diminishing perspectively in the distance, or when we bent our gaze towards the high altar, with its white pavement and carved oak screens, or when we raised our eyes to the lofty ceiling, with its maze of tracery work like the spreading branches of a forest over our heads. This splendid roof is supported by principals springing from corbels. These are cherubim, with extended wings, some bearing shields with the cross emblazoned thereon, others with hands joined in the attitude of prayer. Behind the high altar the large chancel window of stained glass, pouring down its many hues over priests and people, reminded us of the rainbow which God made a sign of mercy and peace to a pardoned world. The chancel is very fine. Its ceiling differs from that of the nave. It is charged with mouldings dividing it into panels, and at the intersections bearing medallions inscribed with sacred anagrams and set in foliated ornaments of the most chaste and charming designs.

Our enthusiastic reporter went on to mention the stations of the cross 'framed in massive oak' and a statue of Our Lady standing 'beneath a canopy on a side altar', before repeating that the church was exclusively the work of Sligo

artists, while its size and splendour showed 'the great piety and generosity of rich and poor, by whose offerings it was erected'. Over the next few decades, the New Abbey was improved in various ways. A more fitting altar to Our Lady, designed by Father Goodman, was erected in 1857. The great tower of Ballysadare limestone rose to a height of more than eighty-seven feet and was topped by eight unequal pinnacles which made it look from a distance like a great 'chess-board'. The tower was completed by summer 1858 and ready to receive a truly impressive bell almost a ton and a quarter in weight. The arrival of the bell by road from Dublin - for no railway had as yet reached Sligo - was the occasion of special joy and celebration in November 1859. That same bell, made by Murphy of Dublin, now hangs in the present belfry.

As for the interior of the church before its extension in 1900, the historian Wood-Martin gives a technical description of the elaborate hammer-beam roof trusses, remarking that the building 'nearly resembled' Westminster Hall. He also mentions that the stained-glass window behind the high altar was one of five lights surmounted by gothic tracery. This window, which overlooks the present church was enriched with stained-glass after 1874 in memory of Fr Bernard Goodman. An old photograph taken by W. Lawrence of Dublin shows that the other windows were all of plain glass. Apart from the fact that the high altar was deeply recessed, the church formed a long rectangle. The two side altars, facing down the church, stood inside the communion rail. Side altars, communion rail and pulpit were all of wood. At least three candelabra, hanging in line, provided artificial light along the central and only aisle. The old town clock, bought for the New Abbey in 1860, probably hung at the back of the church, more for the benefit of the preacher than of his listeners. The dimensions of the church are not so clear, but the nave was thirty-nine feet wide and the ceiling forty-four feet high. Although Father Hibbetts had announced that the church would be 'almost 150 feet long', its actual length, including the altar area, was about 128 feet. Curiously, the orientation of the church was towards the west, quite contrary to custom. Even in the earlier abandoned chapel in Pound Street, the priest had always faced east when saying Mass.

Father Bartholomew Russell, one of the leading reformers of the order, has left some notes of his formal visit to Sligo in 1853. By then the total cost of the church, £3,000, had been paid off, but it was still subject to an annual rent of £25. Another annual rent of thirteen guineas was being paid for the convent in Pound street. These costs were met by a 'chapel rent' collection, and also by a fair income from a farm of 330 acres very recently acquired at Greenaune in the parish of Drumlease, Co. Leitrim. Father Russell also noted that 'instructions', presumably in the catechism, were given in the church after the last Mass on Sundays from Advent to May. The friars had also been long accustomed to have

'Rosary and instruction' in the evenings during Lent. There were confessions each Saturday evening and Sunday morning, a detail bracketed with the sad comment: 'emigrants attended to.' Out of deference to the bishop, the priests no longer said Mass outside the New Abbey, no longer heard the confessions of the sick, and had stopped attending Stations 'for which they used to keep horses'. In keeping with the new conventual reform, the friars wore the habit and assembled five times a day for the divine office or mental prayer.

During his second visit in 1855, Father Russell found that an average of two or three hundred people attended the catechetical instructions given by 'tertians of both sexes assisted by some few others'. Since there were then fifty or sixty tertiaries, men and women, they must have accounted for most of the fifty or sixty weekly communicants in the church. Another detail, that there was not as yet an 'iron safe for the Blessed Sacrament', leads one to suppose that the Blessed Sacrament was not reserved in the church. This was not from lack of devotion, but a precaution against robbery and profanation.

For almost twenty years after the opening of the New Abbey the community continued to live in Pound Street, which must have been inconvenient in bad weather. Father Hibbetts eventually bought another site on Walker's Row - now Dominic Street - adjoining the western end of the church and built a friary to which the community removed in 1865. The old chapel was sold off and the old house rented out, but the Pound Street garden continued to supply vegetables, fowl and eggs for the friary table. The establishment of a Dominican college at Tallaght, Co. Dublin, in 1855 - a novitiate and house of studies of daunting austerity - ensured a future supply of dedicated priests and an improvement in religious observance. It was from Tallaght that Brother Patrick O'Sullivan came to Sligo in 1863, the first laybrother in the community for over a century. From the 1880s, if not earlier, the priests took part in what had become and still remains a major apostolate: the giving of retreats and missions all over the country. This was quite a contribution from a very small community which still numbered only three priests and one brother in 1900.

Church services at the New Abbey were less elaborate than one would expect. The Rosary confraternity established in 1874 had many enrolled members, but not apparently any regular meetings. There was no confraternity, for instance, in 1887, partly because the confraternities at the cathedral were thriving. As for tertiaries, 'the men were dying out' whilst the number of women increased. There cannot even have been a loyal corps of altar-servers, certainly not in 1882 when John Howly was paid ten shillings 'for his dutiful attendance in serving Mass'. The weekday Masses were at eight and nine. On Sundays there was Mass at nine, eleven and twelve, with Rosary, sermon and Benediction at seven in the evening. Oddly enough, there were often no sermons at all, even at

Sunday Masses. The provincial of the time had to insist in 1885 that there would be a 'sermon after Mass especially on Sundays in Lent and Advent, and a short sermon delivered at the Gospel of the last Mass every Sunday, unless one of the Fathers be absent.'

The same provincial, Father Towers, noted in 1881 that 'suitable confessionals have been lately erected and devotional statues have been given by benefactors'. He also gave instructions in 1885 that the farm in Co. Leitrim was to be sold, 'the pig-sty next to the church to be removed if possible', and gas lighting to be installed in the church. These commands were soon obeyed, except that the 'piggery' nuisance continued until 1912, but it was left to a later prior, Francis Purcell, to provide a new 'American' organ and choir gallery in 1893. In the old gallery there was not enough space for a choir and the organ bought in 1847 had had its day. Whenever that old organ was used, a man had to be paid a shilling for blowing the bellows. Father Purcell also bought the site of the church and friary outright, which put an end to the payment of a heavy annual rent. Altar-boys are first mentioned in the records in 1895, but it was not until 1899 that the bishop gave permission 'to inaugurate meetings of the female branch of the Rosary confraternity, and to have Benediction on Friday evenings'.

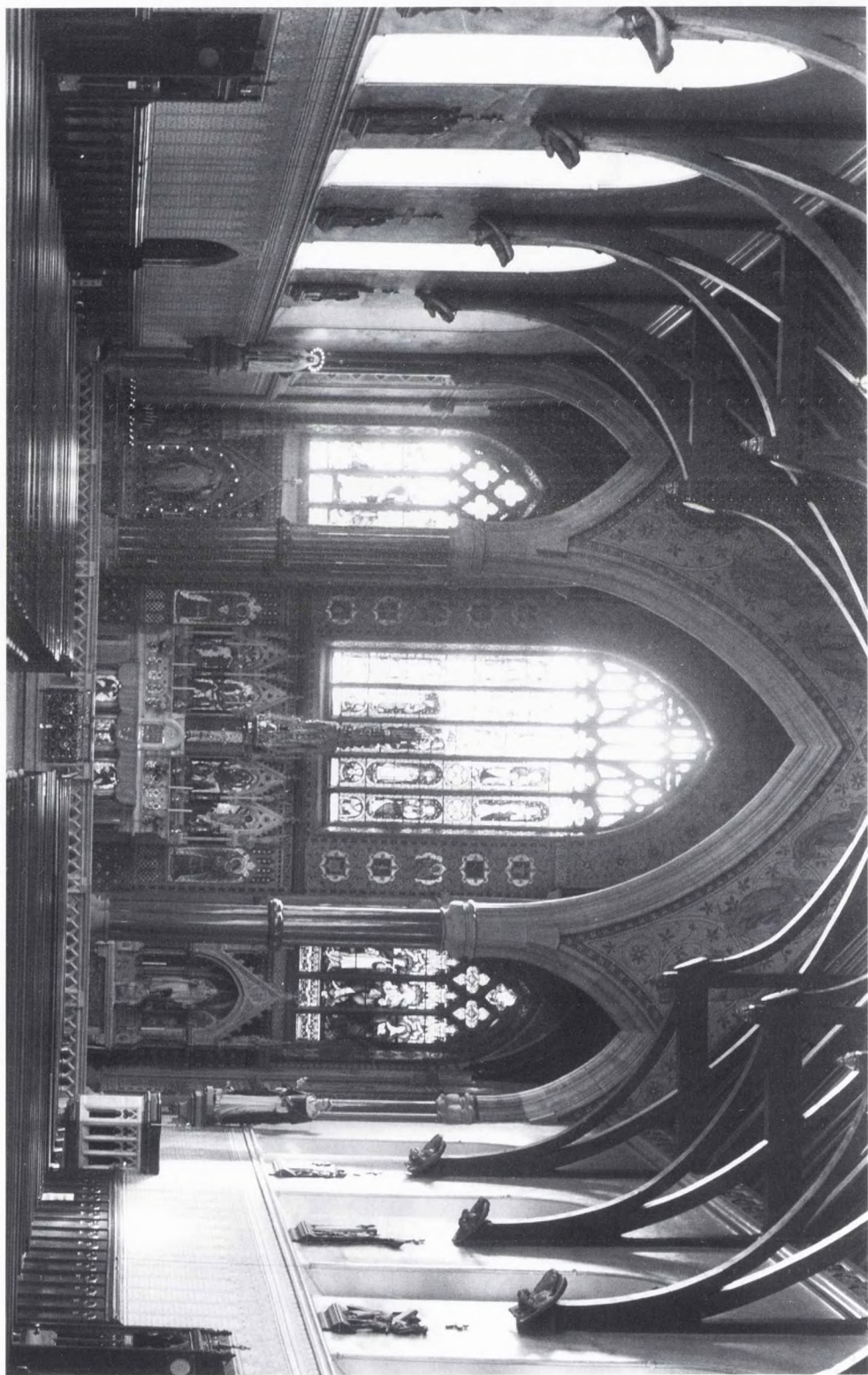
The Church Extended: 1900 - 1945

The people of Sligo who have fond memories of the Friary Church demolished in 1971, do not really remember the old church of 1848. Their memories are of that same church after it had been greatly extended in 1900 and richly decorated from time to time thereafter. Certainly the great tower of 1858 survived until recent times, with that part of the nave closest to the main door, but the old sanctuary was swept away to make the church much longer than it had been before. The narrowness of the site, hemmed in by private property on either side, prevented extension of the church in the usual way by the addition of side-aisles or a transept.



High Street: A view of church and priory from the priory garden, c.1920.

This ambitious project was begun during the priorship of Fr Joseph Flynn (1896-1899) who set out to lengthen the church towards the west by forty-six feet, as also to provide a new sacristy and oratory. The first meeting he held to invite subscriptions brought in £500, an enormous sum which enabled him to engage the architect George Ashlin and the contractors Gallagher and Doherty. Peter Battle was employed as clerk of works. After Father Flynn's departure in 1899, the work was completed in 1900 by his successor Fr Stephen O'Kelly. Both priests, coincidentally, were natives of Kerry. Thanks to Father O'Kelly, we have



The interior of the church after its 1900 extension

an extremely long and detailed list of all the alterations made, including the names of innumerable donors, which he modestly entitled: '*Memoranda of the year 1900.*'

After the demolition of the old sanctuary, the nave - from the door to the communion rails - was extended by thirty feet to accomodate an increasing congregation. The new sanctuary, from the communion rail to the gable, was sixteen feet deep and divided from the nave by three arches in Dungiven stone springing from two polished Aberdeen granite columns. The central arch, framing the high altar, being much higher than the other two, rose almost to the ceiling. Within the sanctuary, all three altars were set in line against the western gable, the side altars being dedicated to the Sacred Heart and Our Lady of the Rosary. The ceilings were panelled and grained in pitch pine with carved bosses at the intersections, while the ceiling over the new part of the nave matched the hammer-beam structure of the old.



High Altar of Friary Church

A new sacristy on the south side gave direct access to the friary which was itself improved. Also on the southern wall of the church the old side entrance was blocked up and replaced by another entrance closer to the new altar. Two porches were built, one for the sacristy and the other for the friary. New water-fonts replaced the two 'ancient ones which it is said were used in the old Abbey'. The old ones, should anyone care to trace them, were removed to the Sligo Workhouse. Even the confessionals and seats were replaced and the choir gallery enlarged. The most striking change was in the richness of the materials lavished on the church. The nave was tiled, a ceramic mosaic pavement was laid down within the sanctuary. What had formerly been of wood - the pulpit, the altar-rails, the side-altars - was now resplendent in white Carrara marble. New stained-glass windows by Earley of Dublin were installed inside the sanctuary in honour of the Sacred Heart and Our Lady of the Assumption. The high-altar with an elaborate marble canopy over the tabernacle - the gift of Mrs W. Harkan - naturally took pride of place and is better judged from a photograph than from any description. While the side altars may still be seen in a private chapel near the present sacristy, the high altar was demolished in 1973.

Bishop John Clancy consecrated the high altar and Rosary altar on 16 September 1900 and presided next day at High Mass for the re-opening of the church. To judge by newspaper accounts, the event was celebrated in style.

At about half-past eight o'clock, just as the evening devotions were closed at Holy Cross, the Temperance Band discoursed a splendid programme of music, secular and sacred. A great display of fireworks was exhibited from the tower of the church, and lighted tar-barrels and torches illuminated High Street and Market Street. The scene was one never to be forgotten by those who witnessed it. Not in the recollection of the oldest inhabitant has anything approaching it in grandeur been seen in this town.

Despite the generosity of many benefactors, Catholic and Protestant alike, including the Rosary Confraternity which had begun to thrive again, there still remained a heavy debt on the church. The sale of the old friary in Pound Street brought in only £30, so it was necessary to hold a 'Grand Concert' and an elaborate bazaar at the Town Hall in May 1902 to liquidate the debt. The Assembly Room of the Town Hall was transformed for the occasion into 'a grand scenic representation of Old Sligo' with stalls representing the principal streets, while singers and performers entertained the crowd. The Bazaar Committee even published a *Souvenir Book* of an historical nature, but unfortunately no copy of it seems to have survived.

In the years leading up to the First World War (1914-1918), Fr Peter Albert Murphy did much to improve the area around the church. He had to negotiate

with three separate landlords to acquire some ugly delapidated buildings, ‘unsanitary sheds and piggeries’, which adjoined the church on both sides. Once these were removed, the tower on High Street stood free from the houses which had hemmed it in, and for the first time there was free access to High Street on the north side of the church. It was now possible to see the lines of the church from many angles and more easily appreciate its beauty. The friary garden too was enlarged, and improvements made to the friary in which, one reads, ‘the floors were oscillating’.



*The stained glass window of
St. Raymund, St. Antoninus
and St. Columba by
Michael Healy*

Father Murphy’s artistic appreciation was shown in 1911 when the Rosary Confraternity decided to erect a stained-glass window in the nave to commemorate three members of the community recently deceased: Fathers Columba Keenan, Michael Antoninus Hughes and Raymund Skelly. Instead of taking the usual path, which would have been to employ some long-established company like Earley or Mayer, the prior commissioned ‘Mr Michael Healy, a young artist in the studio of Miss Purser of Dublin’. Holy Cross may take pride in having been among the first to recognise the talent of one of Ireland’s great modern artists. The large two-light window, which may still be admired in the present church, shows the patron saints of the three priests. Saints Raymund and Antoninus get pride of place while a dove represents St Columba of Fr Keenan’s native Derry.

Stephen Glendon, one of the most remarkable Irish Dominicans of this century, was stationed at Sligo from 1907 until 1911 and characteristically marked his arrival by organising an annual pilgrimage to Lough Derg for the Rosary Confraternity. For as long as Fr Glendon was there to lead it, the pilgrimage took place each year, but the number of enthusiastic pilgrims tapered off. The final advertisement for Lough Derg had to stress that the pilgrimage was not really too severe, considering that ‘even altarboys go there’. Apart from the hardy altarboys of 1911, Holy Cross also had at the time both a male and a female choir.

The mosaics within the sanctuary which gave such a prayerful atmosphere to the old church were initially the work of Fr Benedict Costelloe - known within

the order as Big Ben - who first came to Sligo in 1927. The essential work was done between 1929 and 1930, following plans prepared by Mr Coleman, an architect. The actual mosaics were executed by Oppenheimer of Manchester with the help of a local builder named Scanlon at a total cost of almost £4,000. When Father Costelloe left for Cork in November 1933, the following account of his achievements was entered into the council-book of the friary:

During his six years as prior important work for the improving of the church was carried out. Under his guidance the whole sanctuary, walls and apse were ornamented with rich mosaic work of most pleasing design. The side walls of the church were treated in a similar manner. The church and house were lighted with electricity. A serious fire occurred in the sacristy. This necessitated the reconstruction of the sacristy, the purchase of new vestments and furniture for the sacristy, and the decoration of the private oratory.

Even this account is not complete, because the entire front porch was also covered with mosaics, while the walls and ceiling were artistically painted. Besides, generous donors presented two fine stone statues in 1930: that of Our Lady, now in the conventual oratory, the gift of Miss Hickey, and another of the Sacred Heart, now in the cloister of the present church. The sacristy fire, mentioned above, appears to have destroyed a set of red vestments which once belonged to the Dominican bishop of Killala, Francis O'Finan (1834-1838). Father Costelloe was not, incidentally, responsible for *all* the mosaics in the old church. Those on the 'gospel' or southern side of the sanctuary, as well as the large panel of the 'Flight into Egypt', were not added until 1937.



The Flight into Egypt c. 1930



*Statue of Our Lady surrounded by the
mysteries of the Rosary in mosaic*

While the Rosary confraternity flourished under the direction of priests like Fathers Glendon and MacSorley (who died in 1942), the third order actually died out. There were plans to re-establish it in 1922, when it was thought that the permission of the bishop would be required, but it was only in 1937 that a chapter of men tertiaries was officially opened in Sligo and sixteen novices were admitted. One suspects that the women tertiaries had been quietly holding their own and took part in the great pilgrimage of the third order to Rome in 1934. A major building project in 1938 gave the tertiaries a hall of their own capable of holding 200 people. This was in effect an extension of the friary to the north, providing three further bedrooms over the new tertiary hall. The hall was dedicated to St Joseph whose statue and altar were removed from the sanctuary - they had stood against the southern wall - at this time. Almost thirty members of the third order travelled from Sligo to Galway for the tertiary congress in 1939.

Fr Raymund O'Sullivan, previously prior from 1914 to 1920, returned to Sligo again as prior from 1934 to 1940. It was he who completed the mosaics, installed a fourth confessional, relaunched the tertiaries and provided them with St Joseph's Hall. During his time the Rosary and Holy Name confraternities celebrated their diamond jubilee - they were established in 1874 - by going to Galway to honour Tom Burke, the great Dominican preacher, on the golden jubilee of his death. Fr Henry Gaffney, writer and dramatist, published a booklet, *Tribute from the North West*, to mark the occasion. Another member of the community, the genial Harry Hunt, arranged two broadcasts through Radio Athlone in November 1936: a Benediction service, 'the first ever broadcast from a church in Sligo' and a programme of sacred music.

During the early years of the Second World War, the prior of Holy Cross was William Stephens, formerly provincial, a gentle quiet man from Ballyshannon. Between 1942 and 1943 he received sixty-four people at Ballyshannon into the third order, but his main preoccupation at the time was to keep Holy Cross in good repair. The wall of the church facing High Street had to be pointed from top to bottom. The roof too needed attention, but it was the tower which gave most cause for concern. The organ went to Belfast for repair; the bell too, then in danger of crashing to the ground, was taken down for six months and then remounted; a new stained-glass window, the gift of Mrs Casey, was placed in the tower. The window represented Our Lady of Lourdes. The next prior, Fr Isidore McArdle, constructed two shrines which faced each other on either side of the nave at the end of the church. One was for the *Pietà*, originally donated in 1900; the other in honour of St Anne and the Little Flower. These shrines, recessed into and indeed through the walls of the nave, were erected in 1946.



St. Dominic

In 1941, the annals mention for the first time an 'annual procession of the Blessed Sacrament' through the streets to and from Holy Cross. This was customary until 1965 at least. Shops along the route used arrange attractive altars in their windows for the great occasion. Regular church services at the time included evening devotions every Sunday at which the preacher followed the diocesan programme of instruction in the faith. The Rosary confraternity for

women and the Holy Name confraternity for men came to the church each alternate Tuesday. The brothers and sisters of the third order, now 'well organised and put on a constitutional basis by Fr Stephens', held their separate meetings once a month. An annual novena in honour of Our Lady of Fatima was introduced in October 1946. The painted statue then presented by an anonymous donor is still preserved, but the novena itself, although still an annual event in 1965, has long been discontinued.



Mosaic panels behind the high altar showing the risen Christ in glory and Christ crowning Mary his Mother as Queen of Heaven

Centenaries and Pilgrimages: 1945 - 1972

The first centenary of the church in High Street was celebrated in May 1945 with a sung high Mass offered by Bishop Doorly. Radio Eireann broadcast the entire ceremony, but no history of the church marked the occasion, nor did the invited preacher, Mgr Arthur Ryan, venture far beyond general themes. He did, however, rather prophetically remark that no one could say whether the church, now a hundred years old, would still be there in a hundred years time or be replaced by a more stately one. The seventh centenary of the old abbey was more elaborately celebrated in 1952, for the mayor declared it an official event, several members of the Dáil attended, and the local people laboured with pick and shovel to tidy up the old graveyard for the great occasion. The bishop, Dr Hanly, presided at the Mass which was celebrated by the provincial, Fr Thomas Garde. Fr Norbert Murray, already a member of the community, published a brief historical account of Holy Cross which contains a fine photograph of the interior of the church in High Street.

There was yet another cause for celebration in 1962 when Cardinal Michael Browne, the first Irish Dominican ever to be made a cardinal, was given a civic reception in Sligo. After his official welcome both at the old abbey and the cathedral, he received the freedom of the city at the Town Hall.



*The unveiling of a plaque at Holy Cross 1952
by Fr. Hilary O'Neill*



*Civic reception for Cardinal Michael Browne O.P. 1962.
His secretary, Fr. Eustace Hayden O.P., stands on the left.*

The national Dominican pilgrimage to Knock takes place in October every year. It was first held in 1954 because that had been declared a Marian Year during which the Dominicans naturally wished to express their devotion to Our Lady of the Rosary. Sligo was well represented at Knock in 1954, just as it has been every year since right up to the present day. A much more modern devotion, that to Blessed Martin the laybrother of Lima, first appeared at Sligo in 1955 when there was a November triduum in his honour. When St Martin de Porres was to be canonized in 1962, the provincial of the time organised a pilgrimage by sea to Rome for the great event. Several people from Sligo duly embarked for Rome, while the community sent Fr Norbert Murray and Br Philip Kerrigan to represent them in St Peter's Square.

Although nothing came of it, the community decided in 1955 to build an extension to the church. Their idea was to build 'an aisle parallel to the church wall on the epistle [northern] side, taking in the present passage in the garden, between the church and the wall dividing us from Armstrong's house'. Such thoughts of expansion, obviously based on the need for a more spacious church, had to be shelved fairly soon. By 1965 the sodalities were clearly on the wane, a fact which in the opinion of the bishop and the prior was largely due to the advent of television. Besides, the very roof of the church, damaged by a great storm in 1961, infested with woodworm and leaking in many places, was judged to be highly dangerous. Fr Walter O'Brien, prior in 1965, bought a vast number of slates to repair the roof, but his plans 'to make all things new' were overruled by higher authority. In the long run it would cost less and be more satisfactory to build a completely new church perfectly suited to the new way of celebrating Mass now required by the Second Vatican Council.



1960: Mr. Eamon Tolan, Mayor of Sligo, on the left of Fr. Michael Browne, O.P., Master General, then on visitation.



Visit of Fr. Aniceto Fernandez O.P., Master General in 1967

A New Church for New Times: 1973

Fr Thomas Jordan, who became prior of Holy Cross in 1969 at the age of thirty-one, had to take stock of the whole situation. Eventually, in January 1970, the community decided to build a new church capable of holding 800 people. The prior held a public meeting in the Town Hall to explain that the actual church would cost too much to repair and still not be suitable for the new form of Mass, soon to be introduced. Six months later, in July 1970, members of the Corporation and others attended a function in the Friary Hall to inspect a model of the new church prepared by the architect Pearse McKenna. In one respect that plan was later changed, for the intended Blessed Sacrament chapel was never built.

A great and nostalgic gathering of 'Friary Catholics' took place on 12 May 1971 for the last Mass to be celebrated in the old church. The special preacher for the occasion, Sligo-born Fr Joe Gannon, recalled some of his own earliest memories of the church. He had seen the coffin of Fr Raymond Walsh (in 1924) in the sanctuary and remembered Br Dominic McCarthy (who died in 1925) going round before evening devotions lighting the gas lamps on the side walls. Each of his hearers had personal memories, both sad and consoling, of a beloved church they would see no more.

A temporary prefabricated church in the Market Yard, noisy but comfortable, was then put to constant use for almost two years during the demolition of the old church and the building of the new. The old walls simply tumbled down when hit with ball and chain, but the tower put up a stiff resistance. For all its architectural merit, the tower had no protection as a 'listed building' and the space it occupied was needed for the new church. The contractors, Messrs Kilcawley Ltd. of Sligo, moved briskly ahead with the work. The bodies of three priests - Fathers Hibbetts, Goodman and McEvoy - were found beneath the floor and left undisturbed, but since the metal coffin-plates were removed and the places of burial left unmarked, no one will ever be able to identify their remains again. The former apse with its rich mosaics and stained-glass windows was left standing, partly for nostalgic reasons, partly to hide the friary which would have looked unsightly without it. In December 1971, the arrival of extremely long steel beams practically blocked High Street for a day or two. Bishop Dominic Conway formally laid the foundation stone on 19 November 1972. This stone, particularly fine and beautifully cut, may be admired at eye-level on the back wall inside the present church.

The architect's main concern was to design a church in which each member of the congregation would be as close as possible to the altar. Considering the

narrowness of the site, he was forced to change the axis of the church so that the altar would stand not as before at the western end but to the north. He also envisaged two 'spaces' or areas for private devotion, particularly before the tabernacle. The sloping floor, corresponding to the natural contours of the site, would increase the sense of intimacy. A cloister or courtyard with pointed arches to the south evoked memories of the old abbey while forming a visual link with the high gable of the former church. In essence, and particularly with respect to the roof, Pearse McKenna was using a 'lean-to' plan which he had found to be successful in western Africa about fifteen years before.

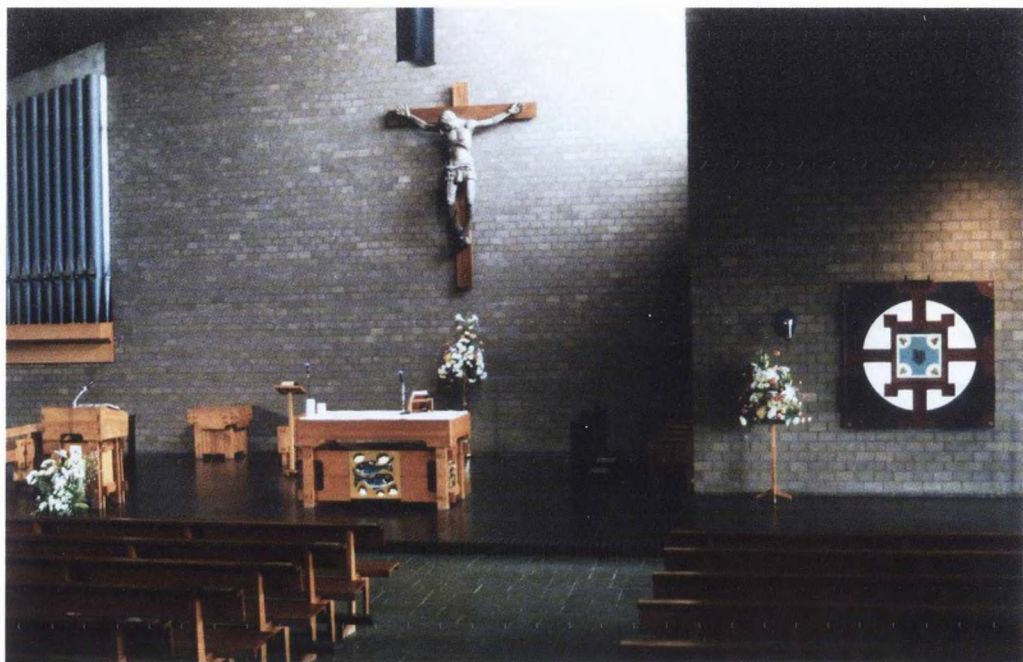


Steel framework, January 1972. Rev. T. Jordan, O.P. (Prior) presenting a car to Miss Eva Crawford by who won it in a raffle organised to raise funds for new church. Committee members include John Kane, Sean McElroy, Andy Horan.

Various artists co-operated to furnish the church. Oisín Kelly carved a Rosary group in wood and a crucifix for the sanctuary. Ray Carroll designed the altar, tabernacle, ambo and chair. Christopher Ryan provided the Stations of the Cross. The Dominican artist Aengus Buckley of Limerick made a large fibre-glass statue of St Martin de Porres. Small stones from former Dominican priories in the diocese - Sligo, Roscommon, Ballindoon, Clonshanville and Tulsk - were discreetly inserted into the walls under neat brass plaques. When all was ready, Bishop Dominic Conway came again on 13 May 1973 to open and dedicate the new Holy Cross. The bishop very kindly said that the Dominicans had done more for Elphin than any other religious order. That was because they once had five priories in the diocese and gave Elphin no fewer than seven bishops.

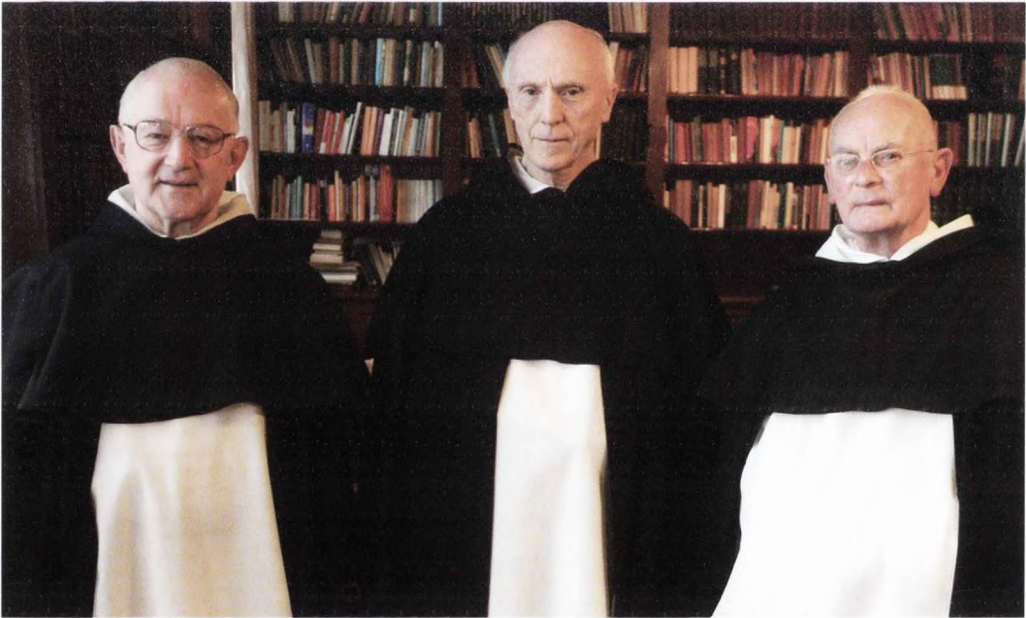
The cost of the new church, more than £130,000, was largely paid by the people themselves, coaxed along by the Building Fund Committee which kept up its good work until 1978 when they finally cleared the debt. In theory, that should have meant an end to expense so far as the church was concerned. Unfortunately the roof of the church soon began to leak, so much so that the architect himself proposed a new roof in 1979. Even that, at further heavy cost, did not entirely solve the problem. The bell-tower, through which water was seeping into the bricks below, had to be waterproofed in 1991. For many years, the weakness of the tower prevented the bell from being rung. In 1992 it was electrically automated and rang out again to the delight of Friary Catholics. More recently still, the gable walls of the old church have been repointed and the valuable stained-glass window by Michael Healy protected by storm-glazing.

Inside the church, the sloping floor of green Portland stone has had to be sealed more than once. On the High Street side, the large window of multi-coloured glass and abstract design was set in concrete mouldings which simply crumbled away. When this was replaced by plain glass in 1991, what used to be a dark area of the church got much more daylight and people were pleased with the change. The three confessionals below that window were replaced in 1991 by a 'reconciliation room' entered through a door cut into the wall of the church between the sacristy and the organ.



The sanctuary of the present church

Even the works of art installed in the new church have in some cases either been moved about or simply removed altogether. Oisín Kelly's crucifix in the sanctuary was deliberately replaced in 1977 by another from the hand of Fr Henry Flanagan of Newbridge, mounted on a cross of teak made by Br Philip Kerrigan. Kelly's Rosary group - two wooden figures of Our Lady and St Dominic - has lately been moved to the back wall of the church. The statue of St Martin by Fr Aengus Buckley, like Kelly's crucifix, found little popular favour and was replaced in 1991 by a brighter and more conventional statue.



*The community in 2002:
L-R: Fr. Ronan Cusack, Fr. Seán Cunningham and Brother Philip Kerrigan*

Friary Catholics in a Changing World

The confraternities of the Rosary and the Holy Name, a mainstay in the weekly round of prayer at the friary church for more than a century, were combined and revived in 1976. So they continued, with weekly meetings each Monday night, thanks largely to the enthusiasm of Fr Kevin Mulligan. In 1991, at which time there were a hundred enrolled, they even held a May procession through the nearby streets, but on Fr Mulligan's death two years later the confraternities died with him. The third order, or 'lay Dominicans' to use the modern term, established at Sligo long before the confraternities, appear less often in the records but proved more durable in the event. In 1986 they hosted a prayerful meeting of other tertiaries from Galway and Portstewart. Each of the three chapters which met on that occasion are still thriving today.

Every year two novenas are held in the church, one in February in honour of Our Lady of Lourdes, the other in November for St Martin de Porres. Until 1968, the November novena had always been in honour of Our Lady of Fatima. Since 1993 confessions have been heard in the church not only on Saturdays but also for three hours every weekday, bringing about a welcome increase in the number of those approaching the sacrament. The laity now have a more active part in the liturgy as readers and eucharistic ministers. Choirs too, both junior and senior, add to the solemnity of the Mass, representatives of a long tradition already well established in the friary church at the beginning of the last century. The junior choir has had some moments of glory, particularly in 1986 when it carried off no less than four prizes at the Feis Ceoil.

Since 1984, there have been occasional recitals or musical performances in the church. The Sligo Samaritans used it for their production of *Godspell*, the first performance of that musical in any Irish church. The Sligo Choral Society sang Handel's *Messiah*. The friary choirs provided a carol service at least once, while even the prestigious RTE symphony orchestra performed in Holy Cross. Such performances, provided they have a religious character, are now generally accepted, but they depend in this case on the unusual width of the new church and its excellent acoustics. The church is also well heated, which is no small comfort during the winter months.

This short account of the fortunes and misfortunes of Holy Cross for well more than seven centuries past is a small tribute to those who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith. A reminder too of the precious gift we hold in trust for generations yet to come. The 'Friary Catholics' of Sligo now face problems unheard of even forty years ago. They can console themselves with the thought that their ancestors, who suffered so much more, still kept the faith.

Priors of Holy Cross

1411	Manus MacEgan	1866-69	Bernard J. Goodman
1416	Brian McDonagh	1869-84	Thomas D. Hibbetts
1547	Quentin O'Higgins	1884-90	Thomas Pius Boylan
1562	Andrew O'Crean	1890-96	Francis Purcell
1576	Dermot O'Bolane	1896-99	Joseph Flynn
1577	Thady MacDuane	1899-02	Stephen Antonius O'Kelly
1593	Thady MacDuane	1902-05	Michael A. Hughes
1624-27	Daniel O'Crean	1905-08	Raymund Skelly
1641	Edmund MacSweeney	1908-14	Peter A. Murphy
1667-68	Felix O'Connor	1914-20	G. Raymund O'Sullivan
1679	Felix O'Connor	1921-24	Alphonsus O'Reilly
1679	Patrick MacDonagh	1924-27	Antonius Dalton
1683-85	Patrick MacDonagh	1927-33	Benedict Costello
1686-87	Michael O'Connor	1933-34	Pius Cleary
1687-90	Gregory Nellus	1934-40	G. Raymund O'Sullivan
1690-93	Raymund Burke	1940-43	William John Stephens
1695-98	Patrick MacDonagh	1943-49	Isidore MacArdle
1707	Antonine Tiernane	1949-55	Hilary O'Neill
1712	James Fiaghny	1955-56	Alexis Keily
1735	Dominic Mulfín	1956-62	Isidore MacArdle
1744	Michael Hart	1962-63	Ambrose Crofts
1757-60	Edmund Fitzgerald	1963-69	Walter O'Brien
1767	Laurence Connellan	1969-74	Thomas Jordan
1783	Laurence Connellan	1974-79	Antonius Delany(resigned)
1790	Laurence Connellan	1979-82	Patrick Carroll
1790-93	Bernard Mullany	1982-85	Louis Hughes
1795-98	Thomas Brennan	1985-91	Albert Leonard
1803-09	Thomas Brennan	1991-97	Edward Conway
1815-17	Edward Rochfort	1997-	Ronan Cusack
1820	Bernard MacDermott		
1826	James Gilligan		
1834-37	Thomas Hibbetts		
1837-40	Patrick Kelly		
1840-46	Thomas D. Hibbetts		
1846-53	Bernard J. Goodman		
1853-56	Thomas D. Hibbetts		
1856-60	Bernard J. Goodman		
1860-66	Thomas D. Hibbetts		

Dominicans of Sligo

Gillespie, John Patrick Joseph, 1880-1940. Native of Sligo; a brother in the English province.

O'Hara, Patrick John, 1880-1945. Native of Sligo.

Molloy, Leo, 1881-1941. Born at Ballinlough, Co. Roscommon, and died in Sligo.

Gallagher, Constantius Francis, 1882-1961. Native of Sligo.

Thayne, Bertrand John, 1881-1952. Reared in Sligo where his father was long governor of the county jail.

Delahunty, Michael James, 1893-1940. Reared in Sligo where he was an altar boy at Holy Cross.

Feeley, Clement Martin, 1893-1972. Native of Sligo; a member of the English province.

Wylde, Patrick Joseph, 1897-1968. Born at Keagh, Co. Sligo; a member of the English province.

Murray, Norbert John, 1907-1975. Born at Skreen, Co. Sligo.

Haran, Bonaventure James, 1911-1971. Native of Cashelgarron, Co. Sligo.

Marquess, Hugh John, 1921-1981. Reared in Sligo; a student at Summerhill College.

Fitzmaurice, Dominic Valentine, 1913-1975. Native of Kilmore, Co. Roscommon; educated at St. Mary's College, Sligo.

Farrell, Bertrand Patrick, 1914- 1997. Native of Sligo where he was an altar-boy at Holy Cross.

Burke, Maurice Thomas, 1918-1969. Born at Collooney, Co. Sligo.

Gannon, Jordan Joseph, 1918-1985. Native of Sligo.

O'Loughlin, Casimir Michael, 1920-2002 . Native of Sligo.

Morris, Anthony James, 1929- . Native of Sligo.

Burrowes, Patrick, 1943- 2001. Native of Sligo.

Dominicans Bishops of Elphin

Muiris Mac Neill O Conchobhair	1266 - 1285
Marianus O Donnachair	1296 - 1297
Nicholas O'Flanagan	1458 - 1494
Richard Mac Briain O gCuanach	1492 - 1501
Andrew O'Crean	1562 - 1594
Dominic Burke	1671 - 1704
Ambrose MacDermott	1707 - 1717
John Brett	1748 - 1756



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