

A letter from the Venerable Ignatius of St Paul Spencer, C.P., and the prayers of the Irish for the conversion of England

Introduction

As the marriage of Lady Diana Spencer to the Prince of Wales on 29 July 1981 approached, a stained-glass window in St Saviour's Church, Dominick Street, Dublin, attracted a degree of attention. Erected in memory of Thomas H. Burke, the under-secretary for Ireland who was fatally stabbed in the Phoenix Park, Dublin, in 1882 by members of the Irish nationalist group known as the Invincibles,¹ the window was commissioned by John Poyntz Spencer (1835–1910), fifth Earl Spencer, lord lieutenant of Ireland, and a distant relation of the future royal bride.

In more recent years, the cause of canonisation of the Venerable Servant of God Ignatius of St Paul Spencer of the Congregation of the Passion of Jesus Christ has brought the Spencer name to prominence once again and so the discovery of a letter written by him and held in the archive of the Dominican friars of St Mary's Priory, Cork, prompted a significant degree of interest among the friars. Occupying three pages, the letter was written on 19 January 1839 at Dudley, England, and addressed to Fr Bartholomew T. Russell, O.P., of the Dominican Convent, Cork, at that time situated in Dominick Street. The letter concerns an association of prayer established by Spencer for 'the conversion of England to the Roman faith'² although the scope of the association was subsequently broadened. At the beginning of the letter, Spencer acknowledges an invitation from Russell but declines it, as his ordinary, Thomas Walsh, vicar apostolic of the Midland District in England,³ had advised him 'that there is work enough cut out for me at home'.⁴ As to the actual nature of the invitation, it remains a subject for speculation.

The letter attests to the initial phase of 'the great association of prayer'⁵ for the conversion of England which Spencer had launched at the end of

1 See James Quinn, 'Burke, Thomas Henry' in *Dictionary of Irish Biography Online* (<https://www.dib.ie/biography/burke-thomas-henry-a1182>) (20 June 2024).

2 Letter from Fr Ignatius Spencer, C.P., to Fr Bartholomew T. Russell, O.P., 19 January 1839 (Archive of St Mary's Priory, Cork, 30/35/4).

3 At the time of Spencer's letter, England and Wales were divided into the vicariates apostolic of the Midland, Northern, Western, and London Districts.

4 Letter from Spencer to Russell.

5 *Ibid.*

the previous year as well as to the first efforts to broaden its intention in order ‘to gain prayer not for England only but for all Protestant nations with her’.⁶ It also offers a record of the recommendation of the affair to the archbishops and bishops of Ireland, a recommendation which ultimately led to Spencer’s activity in Ireland and his predilection for the prayers of the Irish as the most effective means to secure the conversion of England. In more general terms, the letter may also be of interest to those investigating the emergence of confraternities and associations of piety in the nineteenth century and the devotional revolution in Ireland.⁷ To those charged with the arrangement and description of archival records, the discovery of the document may offer fresh impetus as the letter emerged only during preparation of a descriptive list of the records held in an archive previously subjected to much neglect.

The Venerable Servant of God Ignatius of St Paul, C.P.

The Venerable Servant of God Ignatius of St Paul (1799–1864)⁸ was born as George Spencer, the youngest of seven children born to the second Earl Spencer. After six years as a clergyman in the Church of England, he converted to the Catholic faith and, after two years at the Venerable English College, Rome, he was ordained a priest on 26 May 1832. Shortly after his return to England in that same year he was assigned to West Bromwich as curate and in 1839 appointed spiritual director to the seminarians at St Mary’s College, Oscott.

6 Ibid.

7 For an introduction to the contribution of confraternities and sodalities to the religious and social history of modern Ireland, see Colm Lennon (ed.), *Confraternities and sodalities in Ireland: charity, devotion and sociability* (Dublin, 2012); Emmet Larkin, ‘The devotional revolution in Ireland 1850–1875’ in *American Historical Review*, lxxvii (1972), pp 625–52; Thomas McGrath, ‘The Tridentine evolution of modern Irish Catholicism, 1563–1962: a re-examination of the “devotional revolution” thesis’ in *Recusant History*, xx (1991), pp 512–523; and Carla Delay, ‘The devotional revolution on the local level: parish life in post-Famine Ireland’ in *U.S. Catholic Historian*, xxii (2004), pp 41–60. In addition, see Carmen M. Mangion, ‘Catholic revivals in Britain and Ireland’; Cormac Begadon, ‘The Infrastructure of Catholicism’; and Peter Philips, ‘Catholic belief and practice’ in Liam Chambers (ed.), *The Oxford history of British and Irish Catholicism*, iii: *Relief, revolution, and revival, 1746–1829* (5 vols, Oxford, 2023), iii, pp 12–35, 104–22, and 123–141 respectively as well as Salvador Ryan, ‘Devotional and sacramental cultures’ in Carmen M. Mangion and Susan O’Brien (eds), *The Oxford history of British and Irish Catholicism*, iv: *Building identity, 1830–1913* (5 vols, Oxford, 2023), iv, pp 137–153.

8 A number of biographies of Ignatius of St Paul have been published, the earliest by a confrère in 1866: Pius a Spiritu Sancto [Devine], *Life of Father Ignatius of St Paul, Passionist (The Hon. & Rev. George Spencer) compiled chiefly from his autobiography, journal, & letters* (Dublin, 1866). See also Urban Young, *Life of Father Ignatius Spencer C.P.* (London, 1933); Josef Vanden Bussche, *Ignatius (George) Spencer, Passionist (1799–1864): crusader of prayer for England and pioneer of ecumenical prayer*, *Annua Nuntia Lovaniensia* xxxiii (Leuven, 1991); and Gerard Skinner, *Father Ignatius Spencer: English noble and Christian saint* (Herefordshire, 2018). In addition, pamphlets have also been penned in view of the introduction in 1992 of his cause for canonisation: Ben Lodge, *Ignatius Spencer* (London, 2005); and Jerome Vereb, *Ignatius Spencer: apostle of Christian unity* (London, 1992).

In 1847 he received the Passionist habit and the name of Ignatius of St Paul, and a year later he pronounced his vows. In 1849, after the sudden death of his predecessor, he became superior of the Passionists in England until 1851 and, as such, supervised the erection of the English province of the Passionists in 1850.

Applauded as the first English Catholic apostle of Christian unity and ‘an ecumenical pioneer’,⁹ Spencer was convinced that the conversion of England to the Catholic faith was imminent¹⁰ and he spent much of his life working to achieve it. For much of his priestly life ‘he was to devote his best energies to the Irish people’,¹¹ as he valued the prayers of the Irish for the conversion of the English more than the prayers of any other nation.¹²

On 1 October 1864, on his way to visit Robert Monteith, ‘the most influential and significant Scottish Catholic layman in the nineteenth century’,¹³ Spencer suffered a heart attack and died.

Association of prayer for the conversion of England to the Roman faith

In a letter of 5 November 1838 Spencer advised John Briggs, vicar apostolic of the Northern District, of the circumstances surrounding the establishment of ‘an association of prayer for the conversion of England to the Roman faith’ during a sojourn at Paris.¹⁴ It was ‘the zealous manner’¹⁵ of Hyacinthe-Louis de Quélen, archbishop of Paris, that prompted Spencer to propose ‘an actual arrangement’¹⁶ and at an assembly of clergy in the Church of Saint-Sulpice the archbishop’s proposal that ‘they should undertake to pray for the conversion of England on every Thursday’¹⁷ was received most favourably. In addition, the religious superiors to whom Spencer was introduced by means of a circular letter promptly pledged their prayers as requested while a number of the archbishops and bishops of France promised to recommend the intention in their ecclesiastical provinces and dioceses. Indeed, ‘it appeared ... that there was reason to say that all France would soon be united in this prayer.’¹⁸

9 Vereb, *Apostle of Christian unity*, p. 2.

10 See Letter from Ignatius Spencer, C.P., to Joachim Le Sage ten Broek, 15 November 1838, cited in Vanden Bussche, *Crusader of prayer for England*, p. 64.

11 Vanden Bussche, *Crusader of prayer for England*, p. 47.

12 See Devine, *Life of Father Ignatius of St Paul*, pp 252–3; and Skinner, *English noble and Christian saint*, p. 217.

13 Bernard Aspinwall, ‘The Scottish dimension: Robert Monteith and the origins of modern British Catholic social thought’ in *The Downside Review*, lxxxvii (2016), p. 46. See also Vanden Bussche, *Crusader of prayer for England*, p. 239, n. 50.

14 Letter from Fr Ignatius Spencer, C.P., to John Briggs, vicar apostolic of the Northern District of England 1836–1840, 5 November 1838, cited in Devine, *Life of Father Ignatius of St Paul*, p. 248.

15 Letter from Spencer to Briggs, cited in Devine, *Life of Father Ignatius of St Paul*, p. 249.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

Although Spencer began ‘the great work’¹⁹ in 1838, he and a few of his friends had already been encouraging one another to pray privately for the conversion of England and he had himself adopted the practice of offering Mass every Thursday for that intention.

No sooner had the movement of prayer for the conversion of England been initiated in 1838 than Spencer found himself urged to broaden its intention to include Protestants and separated Christians ‘all over the world’,²⁰ as well as lapsed Catholics. Initially opposed to the alteration,²¹ Spencer was persuaded by a letter from abroad ‘to extend the object to ... the conversion of all the nations which ... under the name of Christian, remain separated from the centre of unity’.²² Indeed, in his letter to Russell, he urged him ‘to promote to the utmost this great object’.²³ However, the objection some time later in 1839 of Pope Gregory XVI to such alteration saw the association of prayer obliged to persevere with its original intention²⁴ until the broadening of the intention secured the approval of Pope St Pius IX in 1852.

Spencer was also reluctant to afford the association a formal organisation,²⁵ fearing that attachment to ‘a particular scheme’ might in some way hinder ‘the universality’ of the association.²⁶ He wished the association to proceed as it had begun, under the auspices of bishops and priests already and routinely engaged in the care of souls.

As to the form of the prayer to be offered for the conversion of England, Spencer was flexible and tolerant. Although he declared himself content simply ‘to request prayers from all the faithful for England, all days and at all times’,²⁷ Thursday was the preferred day ‘to offer ... communion, or assistance at Mass, or visits to the Blessed Sacrament, or, in short, whatever they did for God’²⁸ for the conversion of England. Similarly, priests were urged to offer Mass on that day each week for that intention. The preference for Thursday was inspired by the Benedictine nuns of Mount Pavilion at Colwich in Staffordshire where High Mass was offered, the Blessed Sacrament exposed, and a solemn act of reparation made every Thursday

19 Devine, *Life of Father Ignatius of St Paul*, p. 248.

20 Vanden Bussche, *Crusader of prayer for England*, p. 49.

21 See Letter from Spencer to Russell.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Vanden Bussche, *Crusader of prayer for England*, p. 48.

25 See Skinner, *English noble and Christian saint*, p. 216.

26 Letter of Fr Ignatius Spencer, C.P., to Ambrose Phillipps de Lisle, Oscott, 4 September 1839, cited in Vanden Bussche, *Crusader of prayer for England*, p. 48. Vanden Bussche refers to the provincial archives of the Passionists as held at Sutton, St Helens, Merseyside. However, subsequent to the publication of *Crusader of prayer for England*, the archives were transferred to Douai Abbey, Woolhampton, Reading, Berkshire, England.

27 Letter from Spencer to Briggs, cited in Devine, *Life of Father Ignatius of St Paul*, p. 250.

28 Ibid. See also Letter from Spencer to Russell.

‘for the outrages committed against the Divine Eucharist’²⁹ which for Spencer included ‘the blasphemy of the Blessed Sacrament authorized by law for three centuries’,³⁰ that is, the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion.³¹

As he concludes his letter to his Dominican correspondent, Spencer recommends the daily recitation by the faithful of five decades of the Rosary, ‘St Dominic’s favourite devotion’,³² or at least that the conversion of England be remembered in addition to their own intentions.³³ In other words, he was content that the intention of England’s conversion be simply remembered ‘if nothing more was done in reference to it’.³⁴

The prayers of the Irish

The eager welcome of the French clergy of his proposals may well have encouraged Spencer to address himself to the archbishops of Ireland. To his delight, William Crolly, archbishop of Armagh, promised his assistance and undertook to recommend the affair to the entire hierarchy of Ireland at the annual synod of the Catholic prelates of Ireland that was due to commence on 21 January 1839.³⁵ The Irish hierarchy gave Spencer’s proposals ‘a good share of their attention’³⁶ and endorsed ‘wholeheartedly’³⁷ his appeal for the prayers of the Irish for the conversion of England in contrast to the varied response of the vicars apostolic of England: while Thomas Walsh, vicar apostolic of the Midland District, demonstrated himself ‘the strongest supporter of a public prayer campaign’,³⁸ Thomas Griffiths, vicar apostolic of the London District, was anxious ‘that such a prayer campaign should not receive too much publicity in England’,³⁹ and Peter Augustine Baines, O.S.B., vicar apostolic of the Western District, was ‘an open opponent of such a prayer campaign’.⁴⁰

As the prayers of the Irish for the conversion of England were the heroic prayers of the oppressed for the oppressor,⁴¹ Spencer thought more of their prayers than the prayers offered by the faithful of any other country and according to his earliest biographer: ‘he began to love Ireland ... with

29 Letter from Spencer to Briggs, cited in Devine, *Life of Father Ignatius of St Paul*, p. 250.

30 Ibid.

31 See Vanden Bussche, *Crusader of prayer for England*, p. 41, n. 21.

32 Letter from Spencer to Russell.

33 Ibid.

34 Letter from Spencer to Briggs, cited in Devine, *Life of Father Ignatius of St Paul*, p. 251.

35 See Letter from Spencer to Russell.

36 Devine, *Life of Father Ignatius of St Paul*, p. 252.

37 Skinner, *English noble and Christian saint*, p. 217.

38 Vanden Bussche, *Crusader of prayer for England*, p. 42.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid., p. 43. See ‘Rome subdues an opponent of Spencer’s public prayer movement: Dr Baines’ Lenten pastoral letter (1840)’ in Vanden Bussche, *Crusader of prayer for England*, pp 49–69.

41 See Devine, *Life of Father Ignatius of St Paul*, pp 252–3; and Skinner, *English noble and Christian saint*, p. 218.

an ever-increasing love, and trusted chiefly to the faith and sanctity of her children for the fulfilment of his zealous intentions.⁴²

Subsequently, Spencer was to dedicate the best of his energy to the people of Ireland.⁴³ On his first trip to Ireland, in 1842, he preached in Dublin, Carlow, Wexford, Waterford, Kilkenny, Cork, Limerick, Ennis, Birr, Loughrea, Galway, Castlebar, Tuam, Longford, Mullingar, and Navan.⁴⁴ Returning to Ireland in 1850, he addressed the Irish hierarchy assembled at the Synod of Thurles and launched himself into a campaign of sermons that took him to Carlow, Kildare, Kilkenny, Carrick-on-Suir, Tipperary, Cork, Birr, Limerick, Drogheda, Newry, Dundalk, Ardee, Castleblaney, Carrickmacross, Derry, Strabane, Omagh, Dungannon, Lurgan, Enniskillen, Ballyshannon, Clogher, Dublin, and Maynooth and required of him in the space of two months some seventy-nine sermons on the conversion of England.⁴⁵ After a brief visit to England, he returned to Ireland before the end of 1850 and at the beginning of 1851 he preached in Borrisokane, Limerick, Ennis, Gort, Galway, Ballinasloe, Mullingar, and Dublin.

A further visit to Ireland in 1856 lasted well into 1857 and afforded the occasion for further sermons. In the course of 1857, he again returned to Ireland and his sermons, missions, and retreats took him to Roscommon, Castlerea, Boyle, Sligo, Easkey, Cullinamore, Ballina, Ballycastle, Killala, Castlebar, Ballinrobe, Westport, Tuam, Athenry, Dublin, and Gorey.

The remaining years of his life were dedicated to ‘the little missions’,⁴⁶ ‘half a week of missionary work’⁴⁷ and mostly conducted in Ireland. According to his own calculations, he had conducted 160 such missions by the end of 1858.⁴⁸ ‘As always, he worked from the firm conviction that providing a greater depth for the Christian life of the Irish, who also made up the majority of the Catholic population in England, offered the best chances for the expansion of the Catholic Church in England.’⁴⁹ Indeed, the sanctification of Ireland for the benefit of England appears to have become ‘the obsession of his life.’⁵⁰

42 Ibid., p. 253.

43 See Vanden Bussche, *Crusader of prayer for England*, p. 47.

44 See *ibid.*, p. 88.

45 See Devine, *Life of Father Ignatius of St Paul*, p. 398.

46 Vanden Bussche, *Crusader of prayer for England*, p. 243.

47 Devine, *Life of Father Ignatius of St Paul*, p. 465.

48 See *ibid.*, p. 467.

49 Vanden Bussche, *Crusader of prayer for England*, p. 243.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 216.

Document

In the transcription of the letter, paragraphs have been introduced and the use of capitals and punctuation silently corrected. Spelling has been modernised and the date of the letter standardised. Insertions due to the damage of the supporting stratum of the text are set within square brackets.

Dudley,⁵¹ 19 January 1839

Dear Rev. Sir,⁵²

I have been looking forward for some years past, as to a most bright event, to putting my foot at last on Irish ground⁵³ where I have so many personal friends, and so many, as I discover from time to time, who though not personally knowing me, have such kind feelings towards me already. But I am not my own master and I have not yet seen the time when this happiness was to be granted me.

When first I began exercising my functions in England, I saw that I must make it my rule to do as well as I could what was given me to do and not follow any projects of my own without being approved by my own bishop.⁵⁴ I did not, however, at first understand the importance of this rule as I have done since. Now I am determined to be entirely at the disposal of my own superior and not to think of moving far from home for any purpose except as he judges expedient. I did not answer your kind letter directly because I was waiting for the <illegible>⁵⁵ occasion, which I shortly expected, of seeing him. I have now seen him and laid your letter before him. He answered, as he has many former applications of the same kind, that there is work enough cut out for me at home. Indeed, I have been obliged to decline many invitations in our own District⁵⁶ and I do not think I have yet once gone out of it for any purpose like that for which you so honourably invite me. We must, therefore, as yet be content to communicate with each other in spirit and I am happy indeed at the establishment of the great association of prayer of which you have heard for this reason, as well as for the vast benefit we may hope from it in the

51 Assigned to West Bromwich in 1832, Spencer's zeal soon saw him agree to minister also in Dudley. See Vanden Bussche, *Crusader of prayer for England*, p. 37; and Skinner, *English noble and Christian saint*, p. 194.

52 Fr Bartholomew T. Russell, O.P., Dominican Convent, Dominick Street, Cork, Ireland.

53 A trip to Ireland in 1835 was prevented by illness. See Devine, *Life of Ignatius of St Paul*, p. 230; and Vanden Bussche, *Crusader of prayer for England*, p. 36. Only in 1842 did Spencer travel for the first time to Ireland. See *ibid.*, p. 88.

54 Appointed coadjutor vicar apostolic of the Midland District of England and titular bishop of Cambysopolis in 1825, Thomas Walsh succeeded as vicar apostolic of the Midland District in 1826. As such, he was the bishop whose approval was required by Spencer.

55 An illegible unfinished word scored out by Spencer.

56 The Midland District.

direct way because it will unite the hearts and feelings of Catholics so closely while they are employed together in seeking grace from God for their brethren.

I am happy to say that the primate of Ireland, Dr Crolly,⁵⁷ and Dr Murray⁵⁸ have undertaken to recommend this affair to all the Catholic prelates of Ireland who are to be assembled this next week at Dublin.⁵⁹ I trust all your warm-hearted nation will rise as one man in the cause.

You will would perhaps soon be informed, if I had did not now tell you, that tho' I began soliciting prayers in France for England only, I have been led by a letter I had from abroad⁶⁰ to extend the object to all the conversion of all the nations which arise under the name of Christian remain separated from the centre of unity. I was rather against this alteration when it was first proposed to me because it seemed to deprive England of the benefit of which she had the prospect of exclusively before, but I hardly knew how to refuse to accede to a request such as was made me to endeavour to gain prayer not for England only but for all Protestant nations with her, and at last I made up my mind that I ought to give up my point and most rejoiced am I now that I did so. For I trust we shall now gain as much more general cooperation in all parts of the world as people in all quarters will be interested in it for themselves and their neighbours, and England will lose nothing. I have no fear of that for the power of united prayer is not like that of a steam engine or an army which cannot compass an undertaking beyond a certain extent. It can convert ten nations as easily as one and God will not shorten the measure of the graces which he may have prepared for our country because we with a generous confidence are willing to open our arms and embrace all to a participation of the benefit of these prayers to which as promised to us we might previously have claimed an exclusive right. But, of course, as the object is more extensive now, we ought to gather our strength and apply it with the more determined vigour, and I entreat you with your friends to promote to the utmost this great object which I trust it will be given to Ireland to be the first to nation to embrace it with one simultaneous movement, as France

57 William Crolly, archbishop of Armagh 1835–1849, and, consequently, primate of all Ireland as distinct from the archbishop of Dublin who is styled the primate of Ireland.

58 Daniel Murray, archbishop of Dublin 1823–1852.

59 The annual synod of the Catholic prelates of Ireland was held from 21 to 26 January 1839. See *The Complete Catholic Directory, Almanack, and Registry for the year of our Lord, 1840* (Dublin, 1840), p. 343.

60 From correspondence exchanged between Joachim George Le Sage ten Broeck, a layman in Holland, and the Abbé Louis-Joseph de Baudry, a priest of Saint-Sulpice who, after the Revolution of 1830, abandoned France for Geneva where he became associated with an association of prayer for the conversion of Protestants, it has been noted that already in 1838 the latter had urged Spencer 'to broaden the prayer intention for the conversion of England to include Protestants and separated Christians all over the world.' Vanden Bussche, *Crusader of prayer for England*, p. 46.

was the first to commence unanimously the more limited undertaking with England alone in view.

What we request is a Mass every week or [at] least a memento⁶¹ from the clergy on Thursdays; from the faithful [and/or] particularly religious persons, Communion on that day and hearing Mass, and that they should offer all they do for God on that day to this intention not excluding of course other days, if they please. Thursday was chosen ~~in~~ with a view of reparation to the adorable Sacrament for the blasphemies of misguided Protestants. We also wish that St Dominic's favourite devotion the Rosary of the Blessed Virgin should be universally recommended ~~to all~~ and that they faithful should offer the third part daily, with this intention, for the conversion of all < illegible >⁶² who are divided from the Church under the name of Christian, or at least superadding this to their own private intentions.

I am dear Sir

Yours most sincerely,

George Spencer

61 At Mass, a silent remembrance by the priest of those for whom he wishes to pray.

62 A phrase heavily scored out by Spencer and consequently illegible.