

The Life & Times of St. Oliver Plunkett

Early life in Ireland: 1625-1647

Oliver Plunkett was born in Loughcrew, Oldcastle, Co. Meath on the 1st of November 1625. His Father John, was Baron of Loughcrew and the family had excellent connections with many of the other well known families of the day. Nearby, is Sliabh na Caillaigh the site of Loughcrew megalithic burial grounds which dates back five thousand years and contains important megalithic art. Of considerable historical importance, the monument is one of the main four passage tombs in Ireland today. Oliver as a young boy, would have known the site well.

He was tutored by a cousin, Fr. Patrick Plunkett, titular Abbot of St. Mary's Cistercian Abbey in Dublin, who ministered from the chapel at Killeen castle.



Chapel at Killeen Castle

From a young age Oliver had wished to become a priest and as a young man he was chosen along with four others to attend the Irish College in Rome. However he could not leave Ireland immediately, due to the upheavals and atrocities of the Ulster rising, with some reports speculating that up to twelve thousand people may have lost their lives around this time. Early in 1647 he and his fellow students finally set out on their journey to Rome, under the care of Fr. Peter Scarampi the Papal Envoy, who had been in Ireland attending the meetings of the Confederation of Kilkenny. Prior to sailing from Waterford, they had been delayed for several weeks waiting for a favourable wind.

Travel was a perilous adventure, given that it was strictly forbidden for young men to travel to the continent to enter seminaries. While out at sea, misfortune struck, they were pursued by two English privateer warships, which were rapidly closing in on their boat. If caught they were sure to be imprisoned or possibly meet a worse fate. The group prayed for deliverance from their plight, promising that they would undergo a pilgrimage to Assisi in return for a safe arrival. Shortly afterwards a terrible storm blew up, which lasted for two days and when the storm eventually subsided, the warships were nowhere to be seen. In thanksgiving Fr. Scarampi renamed the ship St. Francis and they eventually landed at Ostend, having been blown many miles off course. Shortly after landing, they survived a second perilous adventure when robbers abducted them. Penniless, they were then allowed to continue on their journey and fulfilled their promised pilgrimage to Assisi.

Life in Rome: Seminarian, Priest and University Student: 1647-1657

After three months of exhaustive travel they finally reached Rome in May 1647. They would have been most impressed with their first sightings and experience of Rome, as its fine churches, gardens and fountains would have contrasted greatly with their homeland. Life was not going to be easy for Oliver; the Irish college could not accept him straight away so it was the good will of Fr. Scarampi who organised and paid for Oliver's studies and accommodation. After his abduction, Oliver had become a pauper student; indeed he would have to endure a shortage of money on almost a continuous basis when he would return to Ireland many years later. Having enrolled in the Irish college, Oliver took the customary oath to return to Ireland after ordination. Throughout his years of study, Oliver proved to be an exceptional student; the Rector of the Irish College is reported to have deemed Oliver amongst the foremost in talent, diligence and progress. Oliver was ordained on the 1st of January 1654, a joyous occasion for him and those close to him.



The Old Irish College located in the Street of the Irish



Collegio Romano



Sapienza University

Due to the great danger for priests in Ireland as a result of the Cromwellian conquests, Fr. Oliver and his fellow clergymen were naturally released from their promise to return home at that time. Irish Catholics were given the choice of faith or possessions, and to their eternal credit; they choose by an overwhelming majority to give up their land, property and positions, rather than to relinquish the great treasure of their Catholic faith. Fr. Oliver then undertook higher studies at Sapienza University in Rome, studying law. All the while, he served as a chaplain with the Oratorian fathers and ministered in the Santo Spirito hospital. It is known that Fr. Oliver dedicated a good deal of time to visiting the poor in hospitals and feeding and cleansing those who were ill. Some years later, Oliver wrote about the pious practice in Rome of visiting the Seven Churches including the catacomb and obviously he himself undertook this pilgrimage regularly, undoubtedly praying for the intentions of his greatly troubled homeland at this time.

Life as a Professor in Rome: 1657-1669

Fr. Oliver obviously earned an excellent reputation from his higher studies, as in 1657 he joined the staff of Propaganda College as Professor of Theology and later Professor of Apologetics or Controversies.



Propaganda College

Propaganda College was an impressive establishment located in the same building as the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith and as such the whole complex was a hive of activity. He toiled as professor for twelve years and it is said that he helped to improve standards in the college a great deal. Meanwhile, news arriving from Ireland continued to be grim; the Cromwellian conquests were proceeding at pace and Oliver's family had been deprived of their estate at Loughcrew. Irish bishops appointed him as their agent in Rome and as a result he was kept well informed of the difficulties and harshness of the conditions back home.

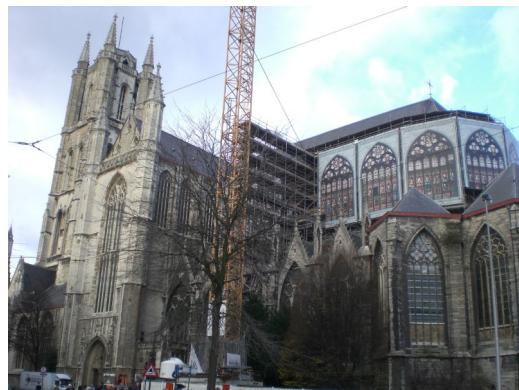
After Cromwell's death and the subsequent restoration of the monarchy; the situation for the church in Ireland eased somewhat. Rome finally felt confident towards the end of the 1660's to appoint a few new Bishops, who could actually be sent on the Irish mission. The Archbishopric of Armagh became vacant in 1669 due to the death of Archbishop Edmund Reilly, who had spent his remaining years in exile in France. At a meeting in Rome to decide upon his replacement, Pope Clement IX stated that there was no need to discuss the matter any longer as Oliver was the ideal candidate and he so declared his appointment. Oliver clearly understood that the task he was about to undertake was a daunting one fraught with danger, but he was willing to give up a relatively comfortable lifestyle in Rome, all in the service of the Church back home. Like St.

Patrick before him, he was willing to leave a secure and regular way of life, to answer the call of Ireland, so as to work amongst an impoverished Church and people, knowing of course that countless hardships and dangers awaited him as Primate of Ireland.

In his spare time, Oliver continued to distinguish himself in works of charity and he kept up his visits to the Santo Spirito hospital, adjacent to the Vatican. Some years later in a letter from Ireland, Oliver would express his joy at the election of a friend, Cardinal Odescalchi as Pope Innocent XI: "While I was a professor of theology and controversies for many years in Propaganda College I had first hand experience of the saintly life led by his Holiness, and of the high reputation for wisdom, prudence and piety which all had of him. I also rendered special service with Mr. Marcantonio Odescalchi, often assisting him when he served the wretched beggars, needy and full of vermin, whom he gathered together in a house with all expenses paid by him, even to their clothing, often he cleaned and fed them with his own hands. It is recorded that when Oliver went to say his farewells at the Santo Spirito hospital, Fr. Mieskow the superior wished Oliver well, along with the prophetic words: "My Lord you are going to shed your blood for the Catholic faith." Oliver left Rome during the first week of September 1669, travelling via, Bologna, Innsbruck, Munich and Mainz from where he travelled by boat down the Rhine into Cologne and further on into Holland; then on to Brussels on his way to receive his episcopal ordination.

Episcopal Ordination

It was decided that Oliver would be ordained Archbishop of Armagh, in Flanders, Belgium on his journey home to Ireland, as it was thought that a well-publicised ceremony in Rome might antagonise the government and result in further persecution of the Catholic community. His episcopal ordination took place on the first Sunday of Advent, 1st December 1669 in a quiet ceremony at St. Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent. A week after his episcopal ordination, Archbishop Oliver set off again on the next part of his journey home to Ireland, via Ostend, London and Holyhead. Before leaving he wrote: "I am thinking of passing myself off as an Italian tourist who is going out of curiosity to see the sights of London" and he added that he had given his papers and letters to an English gentleman to be brought to London. (*To read more in depth about St. Oliver and Ghent, visit our Map Section / Belgium.*)



St. Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent

London

As the newly ordained Archbishop of Armagh, Archbishop Oliver arrived in London on 13th December 1669. Before travelling to England he had written: "I shall not delay long there, but shall go to my diocese where until my last breath I shall live in obedience to the Holy See and the service of souls, even if it should cost me my life." He actually stayed for some time incognito in the Royal Palace under the protection of Fr. Philip Howard the confessor to Queen Catherine, who was a Catholic. Hiding out in St. James's Palace had a certain irony as there were already agents on the look out for him, so perhaps this was one location where he could best remain unnoticed. The day after his arrival he was presented to the Queen by Fr. Howard and he gave her a letter from Cardinal Barberini in Rome.

Because of harsh weather, he was obliged to stay in the London area much longer than he had intended as a result of the impossibility of travelling with snow and ice, so he stayed there for most of the winter. He recalled that it was so cold while in London that the wine in his chalice had frozen, which would indicate an indoor temperature of minus five or six degrees. The winters were very much colder than in modern times, the seventeenth century being among the coldest of what has been termed a mini ice age. Archbishop Oliver was to suffer from the effects of this harsh weather on many occasions subsequently, either on his long journeys, at mass-rocks, or in unheated hiding places or prisons.

Fr. Howard brought Oliver in his carriage to see the sights of London, and no doubt they witnessed the after-effects of the great fire of London, which had occurred only three years earlier. During the hysteria of the Popish Plot, which was yet to come, Catholics would again be accused of starting the fire. Indeed a monument was erected to commemorate the event and a plaque was placed on it in 1681 blaming the Catholics for the fire, where it would remain for almost two hundred years. During his stay, Oliver also met many priests resident in England including Fr. Humphrey Ellis the Dean of the Chapter along with several other members, and he found them all devoted to the Holy See. He also met many of the leading Catholic families in the London area.

Due to the harshness of the laws towards Catholics, there was no resident bishop in England for the previous thirty-eight years; the Catholics of England were forced to rely on the services of Irish bishops who would be passing through, or from continental bishops who might make the occasional short visit. In light of this it would be extremely surprising if Archbishop Oliver did not first exercise his role as a bishop over that time period of three months, which he spent in England. It is unlikely that he ordained any priests, but it is quite possible that he confirmed. Indeed, during the last fortnight of his life as a condemned man in Newgate Prison, he was allowed countless visitors including children and he may well have confirmed in England at this time also. So perhaps Archbishop Oliver's first and last exercises as a bishop, were performed in the London area.

One leading priest whom he met was Fr. Pulton, who had previously been an army officer and probably for reasons of disguise was still known as Captain Pulton. In a series of letters addressed to Captain Pulton, Oliver signs himself as William Browne, his first use of the nom-de-plume, and within weeks he himself would adopt the costume and accoutrements of an army captain, calling himself Captain Browne. Using such a disguise had many advantages, as army officers were a common sight on the roads, had the freedom to travel and would usually not draw any suspicion. No doubt Fr. Pulton sowed this idea with Archbishop Oliver and perhaps even supplied the uniform with all its trappings. The English leg of his journey proved to be the most traumatic part of his overall passage from Rome, and he wrote: "I suffered more between London and

Holyhead, where I boarded ship, than during the whole journey from Rome to London, severe cold and strong winds and then heavy snow and finally as the snow melted, the rivers were so high that three times I was up to my knees in water in the carriage."

Returning to Ireland: 1670

Waiting a further twelve days in Holyhead for a favourable wind, he finally landed after an overnight sailing, at Ringsend, Dublin, on Monday 7th March 1670 at 9am. As England and Ireland had not yet adopted the Gregorian calendar and were still ten days behind the continent, this date was coincidentally celebrated on the continent as St. Patrick's Day, feast of the National Apostle of Ireland and founder of the See of Armagh. Perhaps it was more than a coincidence, that his many friends in Rome would around that very hour be remembering him in a special way in their prayers on that feast-day morning. Upon returning to Ireland, Archbishop Oliver was invited to stay with several of his relatives, including the Earl of Fingal and the Baron of Louth. He was anxious to travel to his diocese where he received an overwhelming welcome, arriving in time for the Holy Week and Easter ceremonies. Aware that he was in a perilous situation as Viceroy Robartes had spies on the look out for him; Archbishop Oliver felt it prudent to keep a rather low profile, so he travelled about in a disguise. When he left Ireland, as the young Don Oliverio, while under the protection of the Papal Envoy, Fr. Scarampi, he was waved off by thousands of people in procession at the quayside at Waterford. Now as the Primate of Ireland, Archbishop Oliver disembarked in secret at the tiny little promontory of Ringsend in Dublin, almost certainly dressed as the military officer Captain Browne. Later recounting in one of his letters, that for some months he adopted the disguise of a Captain William Browne, with a wig, sword and a pair of pistols as befitted an officer and disclosing that on one occasion he broke into song in a tavern so as not to reveal his true identity.

Within two months of Archbishop Plunkett's return to Ireland, Viceroy Berkley replaced the more hard line Robartes and this appointment greatly eased the tension. The laws on the statue books were strongly anti-Catholic and it very often depended on the Viceroy or a local official or dignitary as to how strictly they were enforced. During these times in Ireland, the Duke of Ormond was a powerful figure; a previous viceroy in the past and a man of great wealth and many would say he was the power behind the Viceroy. Ormond's policy was one of divide and conquer and he would support and encourage any group who had ideas which would cause trouble between the Irish, all in the interest of protecting his considerably swathe of property.

Freedom and very high work rate: 1670-1673

The climate of toleration having changed for the better with the new viceroy, Archbishop Oliver could at last discard the disguise and proceed with his work more openly while still maintaining a certain degree of caution. This was the beginning of the period in which he would experience his greatest freedom, which was to last for approximately three and a half years. He took advantage of this short period of toleration with an extremely high work rate. This period also corresponded to the time when King Charles might have conceded, freedom of conscience to Catholics, but was thwarted in this by an increasingly troublesome Parliament. Oliver promptly set up his headquarters, alternatively in Ardpatick and Ballybarrack just outside of Dundalk, these

areas being central in the diocese and also in a rural area where locals could possibly warn him of any approaching search parties. Local tradition can still point to an ancient oak tree at Ardpatick where Archbishop Oliver is believed to have hidden to avoid capture. His brother Edward and family who were displaced from Loughcrew also lived here.



St. Oliver Oak Tree at Ardpatick



The Shrine at Ballybarrack



Ruins of Ardpatick Church

At the time of his return, Oliver had lived more than half of his lifetime in Rome, twenty-two years in total, as a student, a priest and then a teaching professor. In many respects he had become Roman and in his numerous letters from Ireland, he felt most comfortable when writing in Italian. He now faced huge challenges however as the Primate of Ireland. Most dioceses had not had a bishop in a generation, some dioceses had not even seen the sight of a bishop in forty years and Archbishop Oliver became the only active bishop in the whole of the northern province for some time. Undaunted, he saddled his horse and travelled extensively across the broad expanse of the eleven dioceses under his care, an enterprise which would have been a real act of stamina for him. Even today with good roads and every modern means of transport, this would still be quite an exhausting undertaking. Within months of his return, he held a meeting of national bishops in Dublin, two diocesan synods of priests and a provincial synod at Clones. So as not to attract undue attention to himself, he then went from village to village across the province confirming. This meant having a much greater number of such ceremonies rather than just a few in the larger centres of population. He was obviously happy to increase his workload for this reason and it would not be uncommon for two Confirmation ceremonies to be held on the same day.

He conducted two ordination ceremonies, completed a diocesan visitation of parishes in his own diocese and visited six dioceses including an area in north Antrim to plan a visit to the Hebrides. From Anglo-Irish stock there was some opposition initially among the Gaelic-Irish to his appointment, but these were soon won over, largely by his example as a good pastor, an able administrator and by his incredible work rate, irrespective of hardship. The six vicar generals wrote a letter of thanks to Rome within a half year of his arrival: “For sending such an illustrious Primate to Ireland, he is so untiring in good works and so exemplary in his life and conduct that he has won for himself and the clergy, the love and reverence even of the enemies of the faith”.

There were barely a handful of church buildings allowed across the province, so his many confirmation ceremonies were invariably held at moss-coated mass-rocks and he wrote: “There are bearded men of sixty who have not yet received the sacrament of Confirmation.” Exposed to all weathers, it is recorded that he was sometimes barely able to stand with weakness after his weary journeys and the long open-air ceremonies. Warned to protect his health, he replied: “When a sailor has a fair wind he sets full sail.” Later he would write:

“I shall not spare myself fatigue” and also: “I did not give repose to brain, pen or even horses these four years, in a vast province of eleven dioceses.” A pioneer in many respects, he said that he would forego alcohol as an example to the clergy. Oliver put his undoubted language skills to good use, leading the faithful in prayer, administrating the sacraments and preaching the good news to them, all in their native language. He appointed a new vicar to the diocese of Raphoe and it was he who accompanied him on the long journey to Donegal to show him the passes and to introduce him around the diocese. Writing about his travels in his own diocese and around Donegal, he wrote in a letter to Rome: “What Alps and Apennines I have crossed the Lord knows.” His congregations, although they were impoverished in terms of material wealth, but in terms of spirituality, he recognised them as rich indeed. This was an all-encouraging sign for Oliver in terms of continuing in his work.

Premunire

Under the law of ‘Premunire’ it was illegal to exercise any authority from an outside jurisdiction and especially from the Pope. This law was an all encompassing one and meant that Archbishop Oliver had to be always very careful lest a complaint would be made against him to the authorities. Several efforts had been made previously to remove the scandalous Vicar of Derry, all of which failed; he then reported his dismissal by the new Archbishop under this law. Oliver had probably already foreseen this and may have cleared the way with the Governor of Ulster, but at any rate the case was thrown out of court. Oliver’s cousin, Sir Nicholas Plunkett was then the leading Catholic lawyer in the country and his advice would have proved invaluable to him on this and many subsequent occasions; he was a brother to Bishop Patrick Plunkett of Meath who was Oliver’s tutor of old at Killeen.

A Diplomat

St. Oliver was a diplomat, who astutely steered clear of politics, kept on good terms with many leading citizens, including Lord Charlemont the President of Ulster, who allowed him the use of his courtyard in Armagh for confirmation ceremonies and Henry Moore the Earl of Drogheda who allowed him a public church with bells on estates, which were exempt from the jurisdiction of the royal ministers. Later when arrested, Archbishop Oliver was brought to London to face trial there, because of the common belief that no Protestant jury in Ireland would ever believe the trumped up charges of treason, which had been levelled against him.

His Work for Peace and Reconciliation, symbolised by the Broken Pike in the Canonisation Picture, now located at the Shrine in Drogheda

Upon his return, Archbishop Oliver found the Irish Church in a disorganised state, having been leaderless for some decades. There were serious divisions in the Church between the Gaelic-Irish and the Anglo-Irish, between the diocesan clergy and the religious orders, and finally between the religious orders themselves. Some religious communities even had two superiors living in the same house, one for each faction. On his many visitations, Archbishop Oliver proved successful in bringing order and peace to each diocese in

turn. In a letter dated the 10th October 1670, he reported to Rome: “I found serious divisions in them, but by the grace of God, all is now quiet in the dioceses which I have visited”.

Significantly, he also brought peace to the province when he brokered a peace agreement between the Government of the day and the Tories/Raparees. These were the descendants of some of the displaced Irish who had resorted to banditry and robbery. They were the cause of untold misery as many of the law abiding Catholics were fined or made to suffer for any incidents committed. These fines were often un-payable by families who were landless poor and had barely enough to live on. Archbishop Oliver arranged a meeting with the Tories/Raparees; going to the hill country of Armagh/Tyrone, where he spoke in Irish to their leaders and persuaded them to accept peace terms with the Government. Soon he could write: “The province has not had greater peace in thirty years.”

Throughout the years of his ministry, Archbishop Oliver worked tirelessly for peace in Ulster, hence his adoption in 1997 as a Patron for Peace and Reconciliation in Ireland.” Many people recite the enclosed prayer daily for this intention. Cardinal Tomás O’Fiaich in his biography of St. Oliver states: “It is worthy of note that the Truce which brought to an end the War of Independence came into force on his feast-day in 1921.” Oliver’s Peace Agreement has many similarities with the more recent Good Friday Agreement of 1998 as it also included the laying down of arms and the release of prisoners. Perhaps it is also more than a coincidence that the momentous first meeting of the new Northern Ireland Assembly took place on a feast-day of St. Oliver. Early in the twenty-first century, we give thanks to God that we can now repeat those words of St. Oliver, when he stated: “The province has not had greater peace in thirty years.

Drogheda schools

Catholic schools were outlawed and Dr. Plunkett, a former professor in Propaganda College, recognised a great need for schools to educate both young boys and priests in Ireland. Young Catholic boys had no opportunity for any type of formal schooling and the scholarship of those priests who had been solely educated in Ireland, left a lot to be desired. Over the previous three decades, good men were ordained in their hundreds; the lucky few went to seminaries on the continent, but the vast majority, often got little chance of a proper spiritual formation. In recognition of this fact, he diplomatically obtained permission to set up a school, which he himself paid for in Drogheda. Remarkably, the school, which he built from the ground up and supplied with Jesuit teachers, was in operation within four months of his return as Archbishop. It could cater for one hundred and fifty boys, including forty who were Protestant. A section of the school was reserved for the education of priests and this college could accommodate up to fifty-six at a time.

Within eight months of his schools start up; Archbishop Oliver had been summoned on no less than nine occasions to the Viceroy’s court in Dublin because of the school’s existence and for his exercise of foreign or papal jurisdiction. His diplomacy and his experience as professor of controversies in Rome obviously stood to him, as he won the argument on each occasion, thus enabling the schools continuance for a little while longer. The winds of toleration soon changed for the worse however and the schools in Drogheda were levelled to the ground by the authorities in November 1673, after only three years and five months in operation. This was a terrible blow to Archbishop Oliver, having expended so much effort and resources on the school and college, now witnessing their great potential stamped out. Nevertheless their influence for good, even after such a short

time in operation, would have been felt in the Irish Church and in society generally, for many years afterwards. Later he wrote: "There is nothing which gives me greater interior pain however, than to see the schools established by me thrown down after such expense. O what will the Catholic youth do now, so numerous and so talented." (*To read more in depth about St. Oliver's schools, visit our literature Section / Drogheda - National Shrine*)

Primacy of Armagh

Dublin was growing ever more powerful in size and influence and Archbishop Peter Talbot of Dublin, sought to increase its influence in Church affairs also. He contested the Primacy of Armagh and Archbishop Plunkett robustly came to its defence, writing that the Primacy of Armagh had been well established and recognised since the time of St. Patrick. The disagreement between the two archbishops was referred to Vatican authorities for a decision and the ruling from Rome, eventually confirmed the Primacy of Armagh. In 1680 when both Archbishops were imprisoned in Dublin Castle, Oliver brushed past his guards at one stage and was able to minister spiritually to the then dying Archbishop of Dublin.

Letter Writing

His letter writing was prolific, either to Rome via the Internuncio in Brussels, or to his fellow bishops throughout the country. Several times he mentions that he is in weekly communication with his fellow bishops and two hundred and thirty letters of his remain today; most of these are preserved in the archives of Rome or in Downside Abbey in England. His correspondence from the condemned cell in Newgate prison, probably give us the best insight into the man, as they clearly reveal the depth of his spirituality and faith. His letters are quite long, well over a thousand words in many cases and most of our knowledge about St. Oliver and of his work, comes from his own pen. He felt obliged to keep his superiors informed on a regular basis and in total he must have written thousands of letters throughout his lifetime. The expense of all this correspondence was considerable, as there was no postal service as such, but a series of couriers and trusted agents who collected and distributed the mail, each of whom had to be paid. In order to reduce the number of letters and his costs, he often requested that his letters to Rome would be circulated to various people there and he also requested that no envelopes be used when writing to him because upon delivery, his charges would then be halved.

He often wrote on one side of the paper and so as not to be wasteful he would complete the page with writing, sometimes writing sideways on the margin so as to fill the whole page and then folding it in such a way that the address would be on the outside. In one such letter, seeing that more space is available on the page, he continues the letter with another topic, beginning: "In order not to burden the post with blank paper". He often concluded a letter by writing "the paper is at an end" and then signing off. Some letters were in his own secret code, using numbers to represent either letters of the alphabet, specific words or even named individuals; this was quite clever as it used over a hundred ciphers in total. Aware that many of his letters would be opened in the 'The Castle', he was always careful what they contained and he scrupulously steered clear of all political topics. He signed many of his letters under the pseudonym of Thomas Cox or Edward Hamon. He was also quick witted and sharp in his correspondence and he often included little sayings, such as: "When the cat is

away the mice will play”, “The blind man is no judge of colour”, “The spirit indeed is willing but the purse is weak” or “If the whole world should come crashing down the ruins will strike an undaunted man”. An indefatigable letter writer, the cost of his voluminous correspondence added to the cost of the schools, meant that Archbishop Oliver was forever short of money because his income was so small, so he often sought help in this regard in his letters.

St. Oliver's Personality

His letters are all fascinating; containing detailed reports of his work in Ireland or enthralling descriptions of the condition of the Irish Church and people. As reports go, it would be expected that his true personality would only occasionally break through. However over the whole series of his letters which are extant, his character, warmth and personality comes across strongly. We can say with certainty that he was a warm, compassionate man, he was a humble, forgiving man and he possessed great uprightness and integrity. He had strong courage, was obedient to authority and he was a grateful man who never forgot to acknowledge any form of kindness bestowed upon. Whenever a principle in which he believed was at stake, he would defend it robustly and courageously and his pen could be quite sharp in this regard. He had a sense of humour, which also surfaces occasionally. Through the evidence of his letters, he kept meticulous records and accounts, all of which prove he was an excellent administrator, so it must be unusual then, that he could be an outstanding worker out in the field as well. A diplomat, he built bridges between the different traditions and he was soon respected in all quarters. Despite the many hardships he endured of persecution and climate, his letters portray him continuing in his work across the province, revealing to us a man of extraordinary stamina, steely determination, devotion to duty and of personal self-discipline. A good teacher to the last, he wrote shortly before his death: “Being the first among the Irish, with the grace of God, I shall give good example to the others not to fear death”.

Loyalty to Rome

Archbishop Oliver was renowned for his love, and loyalty to the Holy See, continuing the fine tradition of the Irish Church in this regard, knowing all the while that this loyalty would guarantee the faithfulness of the Irish people in the true faith. He was obedient to any instruction or even suggestion coming to him from Rome and he wrote: “The Holy See is the chief physician, I am the under-physician and to me is entrusted a great number of patients...The will to cure this illness is not enough for us under-physicians; the proto-physician must put his hands on it”.

Dispute between the Franciscans and the Dominicans

Archbishop Oliver was asked by Rome to settle the lively controversy between the Franciscans and the Dominicans over the ownership of ruined and abandoned religious houses. The Franciscans were first to reappear in any numbers after the tyranny of the conquests and they wished to exclude the Dominicans from several of the northern dioceses as a result. After a thorough investigation, Dr. Plunkett ruled in favour of the

Dominicans. The rivalry had become quite bitter between those orders and as a result of his decision in favour of the Dominicans, much of that hostility was then re-directed against himself. The religious orders to whom we owe so much, had in times of persecution the wide ranging powers of missionaries apostolic and it was inevitable that there would be tensions later when these powers were being reined in or withdrawn. Many false reports were then sent to Rome against Archbishop Oliver, who answered these calumnies point for point, adding: "Lies have short legs and time will tell who has written the truth". Indeed two renegade priests, who were expelled from the Franciscan order for banditry and other such crimes, would later travel to London and present false evidence against him at his trial.

Ordinations

A key part of Archbishop Oliver's reform was the education and high standards of priests. He recognised that the need for the education of priests should be ongoing, with the building of the college in Drogheda. A poor man himself, he maintained a high standard of decorum and through his example, he expected similar high standards from priests. As an example to his priests, he dressed in a poorer type of cloth, gave up alcohol, lived a simple type of lifestyle and his work rate despite frequent hardship was exceptional. He ordained about two hundred priests in total, only ordaining those who were worthy and who had passed a strict examination. This large group of dedicated priests, fired with the same zeal as he had, was surely one of his most important legacies. These young men knew that priesthood was a perilous vocation, but went ahead with ordination nevertheless, proving yet again that youth will not run away from an immense or a dangerous challenge.

Times of Persecution: 1673-1681

Towards the latter part of 1673, toleration for the Catholic religion was again withdrawn, upon the insistence of Parliament and the passing of the Test Act the previous year. To Oliver's very great sadness, the schools at Drogheda were then knocked to the ground by the authorities. Bishops were ordered to leave the country; with handsome rewards available for the capture of any prelate who did not comply and many went in search of such a prize. Archbishop Oliver declined the easier option of exile, preferring instead the consequential hardships of going on the run, often in the open Irish countryside, writing: "We shall not abandon our flocks unless compelled to do so, we shall first try out the prisons and other torments, already we have suffered so much on the mountains, in huts and in caves, and have acquired the habit of suffering to the extent that it will be less inconvenient in the future." Archbishop Oliver wrote: "In this country there is a fixed force of eight thousand soldiers between infantry and cavalry and these are now distributed throughout the counties and districts. It is thought that they will be ordered to help the police to hunt down the prelates and religious:" Refusing to flee he also pleaded that his fellow bishops should stay in the country and he wrote: "For if the captains fly, it is in vain to exhort the single soldiers to stand in battle". St. Oliver thus left a strong marker for the future that the day of an Irish bishop living in exile should be over and he wrote that the time was then appropriate: "To take down the sails and seek shelter in some safe harbour." By this time he had destroyed all his documents and it is known that St. Oliver was quite meticulous in keeping records, having earlier recalled

that he had confirmed forty-eight thousand, six hundred and fifty-five souls. Religious houses also destroyed their records and as such the Irish again lost a large amount of historical data.

His old friend from Rome, John Brenan, then the bishop of Waterford, hid with him in the hill country of south Armagh and they both suffered greatly at this time. One incident records them moving from one hiding place to a more secure one, having been informed that agents who were actively seeking them were getting closer. The following is just a short extract from a letter dated 27th. January 1674 and describes their predicament: "Snow mixed with big hard hailstones was falling, a cutting wind was blowing into our faces and the snow and hail blew so strongly into our eyes and affected them so much that we are hardly able to use them even yet. Finally, after frequent danger of being suffocated by the snow in the valleys, we arrived at the house of a poor gentleman who had nothing to lose, but through bad fortune he had a stranger in the house, by whom we did not wish to be recognised, and so he put us in a fine room under the roof where we have remained without chimney or fire for eight days now, may it be for the glory of God and the good of our souls and of the flock committed to us." Oliver's eyes suffered greatly thereafter and his friend's arm was immovable because of the effect of the cold. In the same letter, he praises God for the grace they received to suffer on the Feast of the Chair of St. Peter and he hoped that in the long run it would break the violence of the tempestuous waves.

He recounts another interesting situation which he had to endure: "I am all alone in an old granary which belongs to a farmer who brings me some bread and a little butter from the nearby town, and whenever this man drinks too much in town, I must fast for more than one day. Milk is the usual beverage and it is dear to buy, and when I get it fresh it seems to be as sweet and delightful as the wine of Albano or Genzano. I have however two consolations, one is interior, namely that I suffer for a good cause, and this will have its result, so I hope in the Divine Mercy, an eternal reward. The second consolation is in my books, which enable me to say that I am never less alone than when alone, never less solitary than when solitary."

Archbishop Oliver reported: "Sometimes it happens that a parish which one year has two hundred Catholic families will not have thirty the following year, as happened in various parishes of the diocese of Armagh this year, because the Catholics being as a rule, lease holders, often lose their leases." These leases would be given to families of other religions and he added: "When a new colony of them arrives, the poor Catholics are put aside." As a result of a wet autumn and a bad winter, it was impossible to sow and consequently most of the cattle, horses and sheep had died. He wrote that five hundred people had died in the Archdiocese of Armagh, in the famine of 1674 and that he had pawned silver candlesticks and a silver cup so as to be able to provide bread for the poor to the value of one pound each week. He recounts that one could travel twenty-five miles in his area and only find a half a dozen Catholic families within that territory, he also noted that in the previous year his income was very small and that the priests were greatly harassed, not daring to appear openly by day, especially around Armagh. Gradually the persecution eased somewhat and he could continue with his work over the next couple of years, but never again would he have the freedom, which he had experienced over the previous three years or so. Despite often hungry, homeless and suffering from the cold, he remained determined to wear out rather than to rust, writing: "The distillation from my eyes has greatly increased because of the disastrous visitation of the northern mountains, I can hardly read or write letters as big as headlines, but there was no check on my tongue from preaching in both the English and Irish languages". He continued nevertheless with his church reforms across the province; bringing order, peace and hope to each diocese in turn and preparing each of them for the difficult years which were yet to come.

Imprisonment: December 1679 – July 1681

Storm clouds again gathered and towards the end of 1678, the incredible allegations of Titus Oates were revealed in London. Catholics and the Jesuits in particular, were falsely accused of plotting to kill Charles II, the Protestant King, so that James, his Catholic brother, might replace him. The Pope was then accused by Oates and some others, of planning an invasion of England. Outlandish trials soon took place in London, followed by cruel executions at Tyburn. Archbishop Oliver who had secretly visited his cousin and tutor of old, Bishop Patrick Plunkett before his death in Dublin, wrote: “He died a poor man, because being a wealthy man in his lifetime he gave alms freely, his right hand did not know what his left hand did and he never denied alms to any poor person, he frequently gave secret help to the poor, ashamed gentlemen and widows, of whom we have many since the extermination carried out by Cromwell”. Shortly after writing this letter Archbishop Oliver was arrested on 6th December 1679 and jailed in Dublin Castle. The Authorities had become aware that he was staying in the house of a Mr. Meleady, in the Naul, Co. Dublin.

Archbishop Oliver was then woven into the plot and accused of plotting against the King and planning to bring a French force into Carlingford harbour. Who better to supply false evidence than some of the suspended priests, both secular and religious whom he had to deal with, over the previous decade. Archbishop Oliver was brought to Dundalk for trial on 23rd July and although not allowed any defence counsel, he raised no objection to the all-Protestant jury, knowing that he himself was well known and respected there. He was also aware that his accusers were disreputable characters, who were themselves wanted men in Dundalk and so the trial soon fell through. Lord Shaftesbury and others in London, then decided to bring Archbishop Plunkett to London to face trial, knowing that there was probably not a jury in Ireland which would convict him, irrespective of its makeup. They also knew that as a result of the hysteria and wild reports of Catholic plots in England, a rigged jury in London would not be overly concerned with the true character of any of those involved. Brought over to Newgate prison in October, Archbishop Oliver was placed in strict solitary confinement to spend a second harsh winter in jail. Afflicted with several ailments, suffering from pain and exposed to the harshness of prison life, he aged considerable at this time. He spoke to no one except his jailors and they became impressed by his fasting, constant prayer and inherent good humour. Despite the meagre rations and hard regime, he still fasted three or four days a week; this was his opportunity for self purification and he made good use of his time.

Trial

Brought before the court on 3rd May, he pleading not guilty; the trial proper was fixed for the 8th June and he asked for more time to produce his defence witnesses, but this was denied him. Oliver’s faithful servant, James McKenna and a relative John Plunkett, travelled back to Ireland to gather evidence and to assemble character witnesses. Due to adverse winds, their boat could not set sail for several weeks and when they eventually arrived in Ireland the authorities in Dublin, frustrated them in their efforts to get documents from the records office. Consequently, they were unsuccessful in meeting the deadline of the trial date. As Archbishop of Armagh, Oliver was straight in his dealings and always resolute that he would have nothing whatsoever to do with politics. The prosecution had therefore to rely totally on concocted evidence at the trial, but it should not

be forgotten that the witnesses against him were all Catholics and all Irish, bought and brought over from Ireland. Among them were at least four suspended priests and four lay people, most and probably all of them with criminal records. In return for their testimony, they received money and promises of pardon for their crimes.

On the day of the trial, Oliver who was again not allowed any defence counsel, disputed the right of the court to try him in England and he also drew attention to the criminal past of the witnesses. The Lord Chief Justice replied: "Look you Mr. Plunkett, do not waste your time by talking about these things... The bottom of your treason, which is treason of the highest order, was the setting up of your false religion and there is nothing more displeasing to God than it". The jury retired to consider the charge of high treason and returned within fifteen minutes with a guilty verdict. Archbishop Oliver, knowing the horrible punishment for treason, was to be hung, drawn and quartered and realising that he was to be martyred for his faith, simply replied to the court: "Deo Gratias" or God be thanked.

The Lord Chief Justice pronounced sentence: "You shall be drawn through the City of London to Tyburn, there you shall be hanged by the neck but cut down before you are dead, your bowels shall be taken out and burnt before your face, your head shall be cut off and your body be divided into four quarters." Oliver addressed the court and said that he could easily have gained his freedom, as he had already been offered it, if he would confess his guilt and condemn others, adding that he would rather die ten thousand deaths than wrongfully take a farthing of any man's goods, one day of his freedom or a minute of his life.

Condemned Man

As a condemned man, the regime in prison was relaxed for the last fortnight or so of his life and he was allowed visitors. Fr. Maurice Corker a Benedictine monk was also imprisoned and it is believed they got the opportunity through influence and perhaps a little bribery of the guards to meet and to hear each other's confession. During that time they wrote frequently to each other. Archbishop Oliver's servant James was also allowed visit and he brought Mass requisites and letters to him from Fr. Corker. To Oliver's great joy he could again celebrate the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

Throughout his lifetime, Oliver had led an exemplary life, it is documented that as a young man he had been a well-behaved and excellent student, as a priest he was devout and very compassionate as witnessed in the Spirito Santo Hospital. As a professor in Rome, even the Pope had admired his work and as Archbishop and Primate, his record speaks for itself. Yet it was in those last months, in the dark unheated dungeon of Newgate, that his sanctity had fully developed and shone forth for all to see. Many English Catholics came to visit him in prison during the last fortnight or so of his life, to spend time with him and comfort him, but it was they who came away comforted and edified by his demeanour and his blessings, as his holiness was quite apparent to them. He was also impressed and very grateful to them for their kindness and great charity towards him and he described them, as "rare Catholics."

Undoubtedly, Oliver's most revealing letters about himself were the ones he penned at this time from his prison cell. Amongst these were letters and notes to Fr. Corker, each of which illustrate his deep spirituality. These are all well preserved and among the cherished possessions of the Benedictine Community at Downside

Abbey. It is often said that Fr. Corker possibly enrolled St. Oliver as a Confrater of the Benedictine order. Indeed another Benedictine priest imprisoned with St. Oliver at this time, Fr. Cuthbert Wall, alias Mr Marshall, lent St. Oliver a ‘shift’ to wear on his way to Tyburn. This garb may well have been a form of habit or scapular to represent the Benedictine order. In any event, St. Oliver saw himself as coming under the obedience of Fr. Corker, who was President of the English Benedictines at the time. St. Oliver left all decisions in his hands; ie. how the barber would attend to him, whether or not to have a fortifying drink on the day of execution, the drafting of his final speech and finally he left his clothes, possessions and his body to be at Fr. Corker’s ‘will and pleasure’.

Archbishop Oliver’s earlier decision in favour of the Dominicans in their disagreement with the Franciscans was not universally accepted, indeed it had created difficulties for him over the years. Two students purposely broke the bust of Oliver, which was in St. Isidore’s College in Rome; both were expelled at the time, but regained admission to the Franciscan order in Spain where they completed their studies. Returning to Ireland, they continued to be disobedient and highly troublesome to Archbishop Oliver, eventually giving evidence against him at his trial in London. With remarkable candour and with more than a trace of humour, Archbishop Oliver could write at his time, only two weeks before his death: “Those who once beheaded my statue have now achieved the same object in the case of its prototype.”

Martyrdom

On the 1st July 1681, after celebrating an early morning Mass in his cell, Archbishop Oliver was dragged on a sledge from Newgate prison, before a noisy crowd, a distance of three kilometers to Tyburn. The keeper of Newgate when asked how the prisoner was, replied that he had slept soundly and that he was as unconcerned as if he was going to a wedding. From the three cornered gallows at Tyburn, Archbishop Oliver in a prepared speech, refuted his accusers point by point and forgave all of them, including the judges, and those who had given evidence against him at the trial: “I beg of my Saviour to grant them true repentance, I do forgive them with all my heart.” Oliver’s theme of reconciliation continued, by his asking forgiveness of all those whom he had ever offended by thought, word or deed. He prayed: “I beseech your Divine Majesty by the merits of Christ and the intercession of his Blessed Mother and all the holy angels and saints to forgive me my sins and to grant my soul eternal rest.”

Kneeling he recited an act of contrition, the Miserere psalm and he repeated before his death: “Into Thy hands, O Lord, I commend my Spirit.” Several priests were close by and they blessed and absolved him at the point of his death. St. Oliver worked tirelessly as Archbishop for ten years, paying the ultimate price of martyrdom without seeing the fruits of his labours, and his crowning glory was the manner of his death, humble, heroic and holy. He may have been already dead when he was taken down and the further mutilation began. A fire had been prepared to consume his remains, his head was thrown into it, but it was quickly recovered and scorch marks may still be discerned on the left cheek. His demeanour and his speech from the scaffold were well received and it was patently obvious to many that he was innocent, as the plot had already shown signs of crumbling.

In the previous few years many blameless individuals had been hanged at Tyburn, mostly priests and none had tried to gain their freedom by pleading guilty or condemning others and this had exposed a weakness

in the plot. Oliver's trial, conviction and his eventual martyrdom on 1st July 1681, was such an outrageous episode that it greatly discredited those who brought it about and the credibility of the plot and of its advocates collapsed completely thereafter. Lord Shaftesbury the principal promoter of the plot was arrested and imprisoned on the following day and Titus Oates was arrested soon afterwards on a charge of perjury. As a result, St. Oliver became the last of the one hundred and five Catholic martyrs of Tyburn who had given their lives over the previous one hundred and fifty years and also the very last of the Catholic martyr's, condemned by the state in these islands. Deo Gratias.



The Martyrs Altar in Tyburn Convent



Plaque on the Wall at Tyburn Convent