The Head of Oliver Plunkett

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Siobhán Kilfeather in her article "Oliver Plunkett's Head", (Textual Practice, 2002) writes:-
"St. Peter's, Drogheda is home to an exhibition of relics of St. Oliver Plunkett (1625-81), the centre piece of which is the saint's head. In a glass box on top of a marble plinth, under a gold and jewel encrusted turret, it is displayed at a height at which the average adult can regard it face to face….
The most striking feature is the mouth. The lips are drawn back slightly to expose the teeth, in what may be construed as a grimace, a snarl, or even a twisted smile…"

This man, the then Catholic Archbishop of Armagh, had been hanged, drawn, his body cut in two, and then decapitated, his head hurriedly being rescued from a fire by his supporters. That this could happen seems scarcely credible from a modern standpoint. We intend in this short work to explore the circumstances leading to this dreadful act; the rise to sainthood of this martyr and the role which this celebrated relic has played in recent times. Understanding this story, however, requires an awareness of wider events. The Reformation in Western Europe had produced divisions between followers of the Old Faith and Protestants leading, at times, to mutual slaughter. Parts of Ireland had experienced English and Scottish settlement with the indigenous population displaced and their religion, language and culture suppressed. The Irish Catholic population regarded the spread of Protestantism as a "pestilence". In England a Civil War had broken out, Charles I had been executed in 1649 and a military leader, Cromwell, emerged as Protector of the nation. When monarchy was restored to England in 1660, fears remained in the hearts of many that hard-won Protestant rights would be lost to a Catholic successor. Within the Catholic Church in Ireland, however, factions struggled with their archbishop to maintain their position and wealth. All these factors interacted in shaping Oliver's life and death.

Oliver Plunkett was born in Loughcrew, Oldcastle Co. Meath, on 1st November 1625, into an aristocratic Anglo-Irish family, being the son of John, Baron of Loughcrew, and his wife born Thomasina Dillon. He was one of five children. As a younger son he would not inherit the family lands and from a young age he expressed a wish to become a priest. He received his early education from a near relative, Doctor Patrick Plunkett, who was Abbot of St. Mary's, Dublin, later Bishop of Ardagh then Bishop of Meath. His studies included Latin, Greek, Philosophy and also Irish to enable him to preach in Gaelic, the native Irish tongue. In his mid-teens he was chosen with four other young men to go to Irish College in Rome but he could not leave immediately owing to disturbed conditions in Ireland.

In October 1641 rebellion broke out in Ireland when the Catholic gentry attempted to seize power. Their grievances were long-standing. The Plantations, or settlements of Protestants, established in Ireland during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries had deprived them of some of their land and authority. As recusants, refusing to attend service in the established church, they were obliged to pay heavy fines. Senior positions in the army and government were closed to them. Although the Irish had a parliament, this was dominated by Protestants and its legislation had to be approved by that of England. In addition a further wave of settlement seemed likely. What was intended to be a swift coup d'état, strangely in the name of the King, developed into an ethnic conflict between the Irish Catholics and the English and Scots settlers. The Catholic Confederation, formed in 1642, established control over most of the island. The beating, robbing and dispossessing of Protestant families escalated into murder with Protestant pamphleteers claiming up to two hundred thousand deaths. Modern research suggests a figure closer to twelve thousand, some of these being due to the effects of dispossession during the following harsh winter. Armies from Scotland and England in turn carried out their own massacres of Catholic troops and townsfolk. Charles' attempts to regain control were limited by parliamentary distrust of the king and fears that an army, once created, would be used to bolster the King's power at the expense of the English Parliament and the troublesome Scots Presbyterians. The outbreak of the English Civil War in 1642 left the Catholic Confederation in a position of power as opposition forces were withdrawn. The events of the 1640s were to poison English attitudes towards Ireland for decades or even centuries. To them the Irish were fundamentally disloyal and untrustworthy.

Despite Elizabethan legislation making it illegal for young men to travel to the continent to attend seminaries Oliver left for Rome in 1647 under the care of Fr. Peter Scarampi, the Papal Envoy. The experiences of a perilous journey, encountering pirates and robbers, led the travellers to swear to undertake a pilgrimage to Assisi if they were delivered safely. This being done, Oliver arrived in Rome where he enrolled in the Irish College in the Via Baccina, the next door neighbours being the Dominican Sisters. Like his fellow students, he swore the customary oath to return to Ireland after his ordination. In Rome he studied initially Mathematics, Philosophy and Theology and later both Canon and Civil Law. He was a gifted student. A certificate signed by the Rector of the Irish College, Edward Locke, S.J., states "he has been justly ranked amongst the foremost, in talent, diligence and progress in his studies…. at all times, he was a model of gentleness, integrity and piety."

The College had been founded by Cardinal Ludovico Ludovis. Usually it had six to nine students in residence with no more than two new admissions annually. Applicants had to be Irish Catholics with Catholic parents, be in good health, be of a flexible and studious disposition, be pious, have a genuine will to serve the Church and bring letters certifying previous academic work. The College also accommodated paying guests in a separate part of the building. Despite its slender resources it was called the "Seminarium Episcoporum" – the nursery of bishops. The Archives of the College allow us to have some understanding of Oliver's life as a student which was supervised by the Rector, the Prefect of Studies and a Confessor. The daily routine was quite monastic with lectures in the Collegio Romano, private study guided by the Prefect of Studies, daily mass, Holy Communion, recitation of divine office, community prayer, spiritual direction, meals and recreation together. The students were provided with all their requirements. They could not leave the College without permission and were not allowed into the city unaccompanied. They remained in Rome all year except for a short annual break at Castel Gandolfo, starting on the 29th September, St. Michael's Day, during which they were expected to work in the vineyard, the Vigna Sicciana or Giardini dell Fontana. College rooms were spartan with a bed, a prie-dieu, a small table and bookshelves. Their diet included macaroni, figs, fried liver, sausage, lamb, plus skylarks and thrushes. There were occasional student complaints to the Holy See, for example after two students were allowed to die of untreated fever and, in another case, when the Rector reduced the annual holiday to fifteen days. The tone of the College was Jesuit. Minor breaches of the rules, such as late arrival at prayer, talking to non-College members or entering the room of another student, even with the door ajar, were punished by the withdrawal of the wine served with meals or the reciting of prayers. Major breaches, such as returning to the College in a drunken state, led to compulsory

fasting with meals replaced by bread and water. Recidivist delinquents were threatened with return to Ireland. Although Oliver appears to have been a model student, the same cannot be said for all his contemporaries. Of the forty eight students entering College between 1640 and 1670, eleven did not reach ordination or return to Ireland, which was in turmoil for much of the time. The Archives contain a report on James Quirke who in 1642 "came vagabonding to Rome where he studdyed for some time and then entred into a Religious Order, from whence he departed and betook himself to selling chestnuts about the City. Afterwards he became a Priest and to the present remains in the Rome as a man hidden, not thinking of his obligation to goe on the Mission in recompence the maintenance he had in College." It was with some such unworthy men as these that Oliver had to deal later in his career.

Portrait of St. Oliver, Irish College, Rome

On 4th March 1651 Oliver received the Tonsure and Minor Orders followed by ordination as sub-deacon on 20th December 1653, deacon on 26th December 1653 and finally, ordination as a priest on 1st January, 1654. Developments in Ireland, however, made it impossible for him to comply with his oath to go on the Irish Mission. On 14th June 1654 he wrote to the Superior General, Goswin Nickel S.J., asking for permission to remain in Rome until conditions in Ireland made a return possible.

Oliver Cromwell had landed in Ireland, leading his New Model Army on behalf of the English Parliament, in August 1649. There then followed events which live in Irish consciousness to this day. After the execution of

Charles I the Irish Catholic Confederation had allied with the English Royalists who were attempting to bring his son to the throne. Invasion of England was a possibility. By 1652, Ireland had been subdued with brutality. The war led to famine which, combined with an outbreak of plague, reduced the Irish population perhaps by a half. The massacres of Protestants in 1641 had not been forgotten. The first town to fall to Cromwell's troops was Drogheda in September 1649. Its defenders and Catholic priests were executed, including some who had surrendered and taken refuge in a church. Further atrocities took place at Wexford. In 1650, the exiled Charles II switched policy to ally with the Scottish Covenanters. The Irish alliance collapsed and many Irish surrendered. Cromwell left Ireland in 1650 leaving command in the hands of Henry Ireton. Sieges of Irish towns continued until 1651 but organised resistance faded. There then commenced a period of guerrilla warfare waged by armed groups known as "Tories", operating from remote areas of marshland and mountain. Even by 1655 the situation was such that a Parliamentary document stated that "the whole Irish nation, consisting of gentry, clergy and commonality are engaged as one nation in this quarrel, to root out and extirpate all English Protestants from amongst them".

The main reason for the huge mortality was not death in battle but the counter-insurgency tactics used against the Catholic population from 1650, when large areas of the country still resisted the Parliamentary Army. These tactics included the wholesale burning of crops, forced population movement, and killing of civilians. Anyone implicated in the 1641 rebellion was executed. Fifty thousand Irish people, including prisoners of war, were sold as indentured labourers to landowners in English colonies in America and the West Indies. Most of the guerrillas had surrendered by 1653 but the remaining Tories engaged in banditry impacting on all sections of the population. Many veterans of the Parliamentary armies were given property in Ireland. In 1640, Catholics had owned about 60% of the land in Ireland but by the time of the Restoration of the English monarchy this was down to about 20%. Oliver's brother Edward and family were dispossessed from Loughcrew at the time of the Cromwellian conquest and had to relocate to Ardpatrick. More importantly for Oliver, during this period, the public practice of Catholicism in Ireland was banned.

Unable to return to Ireland, Oliver studied and ministered in Rome, especially amongst the poor. In November 1657 he joined the staff of the Propaganda College as Professor of Theology where he worked for twelve years. He was moving slowly up the ecclesiastical ladder and no doubt expected to spend the remainder of his life as an academic and administrator in Rome. With the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, conditions in Ireland improved for Catholics. Rome felt confident enough to appoint new bishops and send them to Ireland. These bishops appointed Oliver as their representative in Rome. In the 1660s, Catholic priests who were prepared to swear an oath of loyalty to the Crown were allowed to reopen chapels in some of the leading centres. Catholic worship tolerated as long as it was low profile.

In other areas, where no chapels were available, the Catholic population would congregate at "mass-rocks", large stones with flat surfaces which could function as an altar. In 1669, the post of Archbishop of Armagh

became vacant and a meeting was held in Rome on 9th July to find a successor. Pope Clement IX is reported to have said "But why delay in discussing the merits of others whilst we have here in Rome, a native of that island, whose merits are known to us all and whose labours in this city have already added so many wreaths to the peerless glory of the "Island of Saints". Let Dr. Oliver Plunkett become the Archbishop of Armagh".

Oliver was almost totally without pastoral experience even as a parish priest, much less as a bishop and head of a national hierarchy but Rome had spoken and so Oliver left the city in early September 1669, travelling across Europe for his consecration as bishop in Ghent on November 30th. His journey to Ireland necessitated travelling through England. He thought of passing himself off as an Italian tourist interested in the sights of London. He stayed for a time in the royal palace of St. James in the care of Fr. Philip Howard, the confessor to Queen Catherine, a Catholic. During this time he is believed to have met leading English Catholics and may have carried out confirmations. Apparently for his onward journey to Ireland he adopted the disguise of an army officer and took the name Captain Browne. He took ship at Holyhead and reached Ringsend, Dublin on 7th March 1670 where he stayed with relatives before moving on to Armagh where he was welcomed with enthusiasm by the Catholic population. Others saw his arrival in a different light. On November 20th 1669, Lord Conway had sent a letter to Sir George Rawdon, living near Lisburn, saying that the King had informed the Lord Lieutenant "of two persons sent from Rome that lie lurking in this country to do mischief. One is Signore Agnetti, an Italian employed by the College de Propaganda Fide, the other is Plunkett, a member of the same College, and designated as titular Archbishop of Armagh. If you can dexterously find them out and apprehend them 'twill be an acceptable service …..he thinks it his duty to search everywhere…."

In fact Oliver was able to work fairly openly without disguise for over three years as the King wanted more toleration of the practice of the Catholic faith, something opposed by Parliament. Much depended on the attitude of the King's chief representative in Ireland, the Lord Lieutenant, sometimes called the Viceroy. A number held office during his time. Lord Robartes had spies looking out for him; Lord Robartes, a man attacked by Samuel Pepys on the grounds of his "incompetence, dilatoriness, arrogance and bad temper". He was replaced in 1670 by the less hard-line Lord Berkeley of Stratton who was, according to Pepys "the most hot, fiery man in discourse". He was, however, on friendly terms with Oliver, perhaps because his wife was a Catholic. The administration of the Earl of Essex, appointed in 1672, was described as "a pattern to all who came after him".

Lord Berkeley and the Earl of Essex

The mildness and moderation of the rule of the Duke of Ormonde (a Protestant son of Catholic parents) after 1677 made him the subject of complaint in England by those who advocated a stronger anti-Catholic line.

Oliver had to be very careful since under the law of Premunire it was illegal to exercise any authority derived from any source outside England, such as the Papacy. There were problems in disciplining clergy since his authority came from an external source, the Pope. In fact, for several years he was on good terms with senior Protestant officials. His position as Archbishop did require him to travel extensively on horseback over the eleven dioceses under his care, holding meetings of bishops and priests and carrying out confirmation. A projected visit to the Hebrides does not seem to have taken place. The Earl of Drogheda allowed him to have a public church with bells in that part of Oliver's diocese within his territory. However, only a handful of church buildings were available to him and he was required to use mass-rocks in remote areas. Oliver's faithful servant, James McKenna, was a regular traveller, delivering and collecting messages and letters in various parts of Ireland. The letters addressed to fellow bishops and to Rome are the main source of information about his activities. Despite using names such as Thomas Cox and Edmund Hamond he was careful to avoid overtly political comment since he was aware that they were likely to be intercepted and read by the authorities, something confirmed to him in person by Lord Berkeley.

A major concern of Oliver was that, owing to the disturbed political environment and religious oppression, a generation had grown up in ignorance, in both academic and religious terms. A major success was the creation of a school in Drogheda, open to Catholic and Protestant boys, with Jesuit teachers. He was able to defend his school and his work in the Viceroy's Court, at least until the return of repression when the school was destroyed. He also created a college in Drogheda for the training of priests, evidently about two hundred were ordained. There had been lapses amongst clergy and he had to rebuke some of them for drunkenness and immorality. In relation to drink he wrote "show me an Irish priest without this vice and he is surely a saint." It is believed that he wrote the following poetic comment on the priests of the time:-

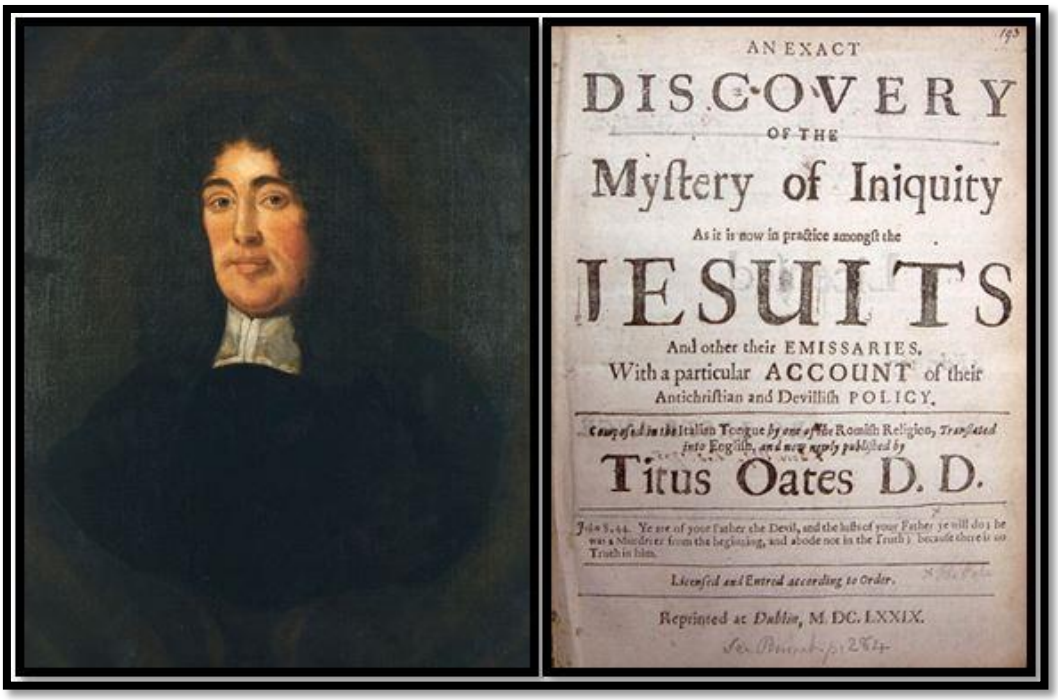
"Priests of gold and chalices of wood.
Were Ireland's lot in Patrick's time of old;
But now the latter days of our sad world
Have priests of wood and chalices of gold."

Within his archbishopric there was much disharmony, for example between the Gaelic speaking and the Anglo-Irish; the diocesan clergy and religious orders and between the religious orders themselves. He had great trouble with the Dominicans and especially the Franciscans, being critical about the kind of men that the Franciscans accepted into their novitiate. He wrote "They sow thistles and it is difficult for them to harvest melons later on." He believed that Franciscan communities on the continent had dumped their malcontents in Ireland. The fact that friars had shown great courage during the Cromwellian oppression meant that they were held in high regard by the people. Oliver complained about their poor education and lack of training and the Franciscan tradition of "questing", that is begging for alms, had also been abused. The extent of these problems led him to write that his diocese had become "the stinking cesspool of the whole province". He believed that a Franciscan, Anthony Daley, had plotted to kill him. Two Franciscan friars and a priest were stripped of their religious status and they were to have their revenge later. Disputes existed at the most senior level, the Archbishop of Dublin questioning Oliver's position as head of the episcopal hierarchy in Ireland.

The Very Rev. Philip Gallery, in "Life of Blessed Oliver Plunkett." 1922, quotes a comment of Oliver in relation to the Tories -
"The ne'er-do-wells, the wastrels, the jail birds, all who did not want to earn an honest livelihood by their brains or the work of their hands were welcome to this gang of desperadoes, known under the specious title of Tories."
After considerable effort he was able to broker a peace deal between the government and the Tories which involved the laying down of arms and the release of prisoners.

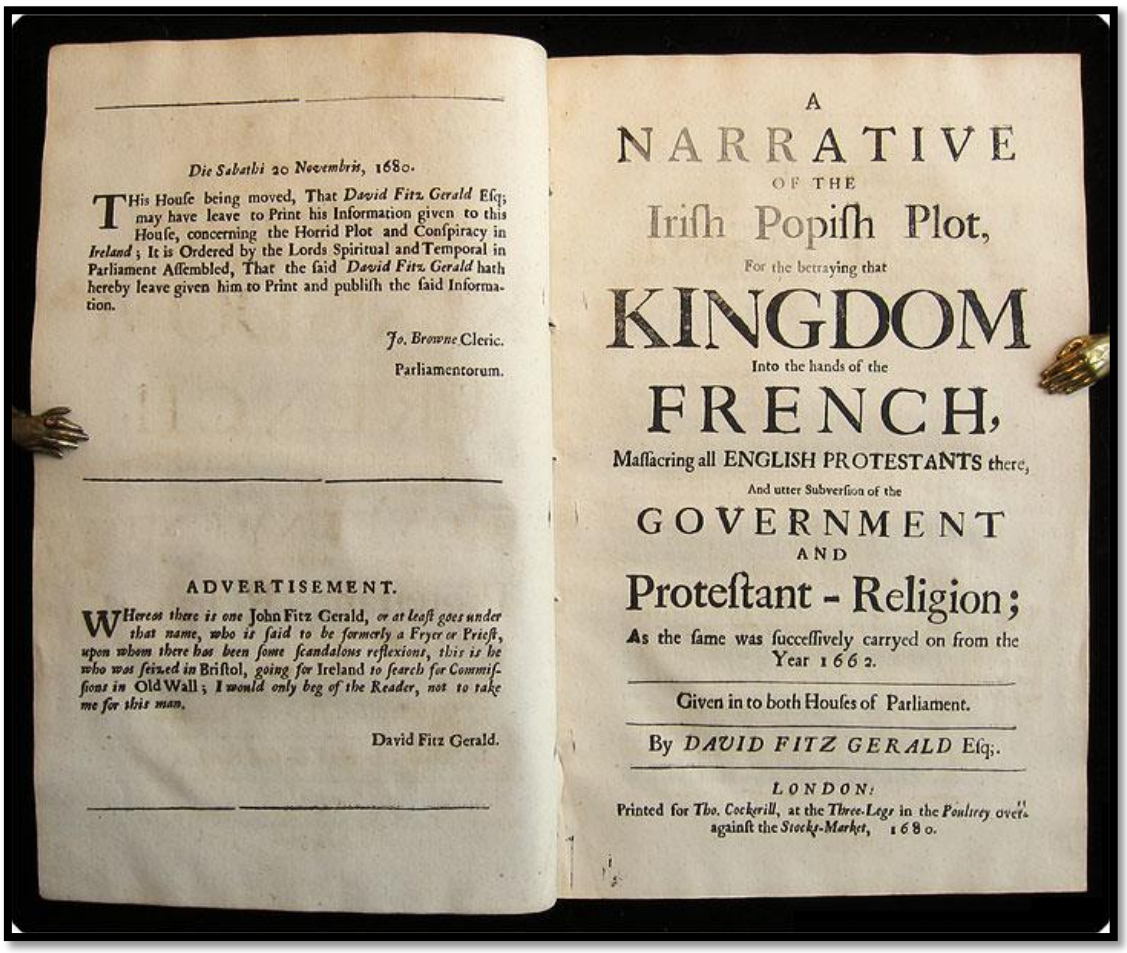
Life for Oliver in Ireland changed substantially after the passing of the Test Act in 1673. The principle was that only members of the Established Church were eligible for employment in a public office. The long-title of the Act was "An act for preventing dangers which may happen from popish recusants." This had been passed by Parliament as a means of stemming the apparent growing influence of Catholics in the court. All persons filling any office, civil or military, faced the obligation of taking the oaths of supremacy and allegiance and subscribing to a declaration against transubstantiation and also of receiving the sacrament within three months after admittance to office. The oath for the Test Act of 1673 was:-
"I (name) do declare that I do believe there is not any transubstantiation in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, or in the elements of the bread and wine, at or after the consecration thereof by any person whatsoever."

Obviously, as a Catholic priest Oliver could not accept this Act. Irish Catholic bishops were ordered to leave the country by registering at a seaport until a ship was available to take them into exile. A reward was offered to anyone who captured a non-complying bishop. Several bishops registered but Oliver chose not to do so and hid out in the hill country of south Armagh, moving from one safe house to another. He wrote "I count myself fortunate now and again to obtain a little barley bread and the house where Bishop Brenan and I are is made of straw and at the head of the bed, every small shower of rain refreshes us." Problems in finding food and shelter arose since those providing such could have their property confiscated. In early 1674 the Earl of Essex applied the legislation with more vigour and sent out spies to track down the remaining bishops and clergy. Many were imprisoned. 1674 was also a year of famine during which Oliver pawned his silver to feed families. The English Parliament seemed satisfied with the burst of activity in Ireland and, after a suitable time lapse, the bishops were allowed to leave the seaports and clergy drifted back to their dioceses. By 1675, Oliver was again moving around the country fairly freely.


AN EXACT
DISCOVERY
OF THE
Myſtery of Iniquity
As it is now in practice amongſt the
JESUITS
And other their EMISSARIES,
With a particular ACCOUNT of their
Antichriſtian and Devilliſh POLICY.
Compoſed in the Italian Tongue by one of the Romiſh Religion, Tranſlated into Engliſh, and now newly publiſhed by
Titus Oates D. D.
Joh. 8. 44. Ye are of your Father the Devil, and the luſts of your Father ye will do; he was a Murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the Truth; becauſe there is no Truth in him.
Licenſed and Entred according to Order.
Reprinted at Dublin, M. DC. LXXIX.

Oliver's fate was sealed by events in London in 1678 when Titus Oates revealed the "Popish Plot" which triggered national anti-Catholic and anti-Irish tumult. The essential features of the Plot were that Jesuits had taken measures to take over the whole country, replace the King with his Catholic brother, the Duke of York and massacre Protestants. Oates had arrived in London two years earlier as a nonentity having had some education at Cambridge and serving as an Anglican clergymen. He had gained a position in 1677 as chaplain on the naval vessel "Adventurer" but was accused of sodomy and spared execution only on the grounds that he was a clergyman. He had also a previous conviction for perjury. He became a Catholic in 1677 and spent some months in a school run by Jesuits in St. Omer before being expelled. He had gained enough information on major Catholic figures and Jesuit organisation to be able to fashion a story which had some

credible elements. He did, however, have a powerful backer in the person of Lord Shaftesbury who was keen to use this fiction to build up support of the London mob in his attempts to eliminate "popery and arbitrary government". Oates rapidly rose in esteem to such as extent that he was housed in elaborate apartments in Whitehall and was referred to as “The Saviour of the Nation”. In all eighty-one persons were accused, including Samuel Pepys. Being targeted by Oates could send someone to his doom, even Queen Catherine of Braganza was threatened, being accused of attempting to poison the King. In evidence which Oates gave to the Privy Council he detailed plans for a revolution in Scotland, a French invasion, and particularly significant for Oliver, an army in excess of 20,000 being raised in Ireland to massacre the Anglo-Irish before invading England. Catholic priests and laymen were tried, some were executed with the King powerless to save them. Even his own brother was forced to seek exile in Brussels.



Die Sabathi 20 *Novembris*, 1680.

THis House being moved, That *David Fitz Gerald* Esq; may have leave to Print his Information given to this House, concerning the Horrid Plot and Conspiracy in *Ireland*; It is Ordered by the Lords Spiritual and Temporal in Parliament Assembled, That the said *David Fitz Gerald* hath hereby leave given him to Print and publish the said Information.

Jo. Browne Cleric.
Parliamentorum.

ADVERTISEMENT.

Whereas there is one John Fitz Gerald, *or at least goes under that name, who is said to be formerly a Fryer or Priest, upon whom there has been some scandalous reflexions, this is he who was seized in* Bristol, *going for* Ireland *to search for Commissions in* Old Wall; *I would only beg of the Reader, not to take me for this man.*

David Fitz Gerald.

A
NARRATIVE
OF THE
Irish Popish Plot,
For the betraying that
KINGDOM
Into the hands of the
FRENCH,
Massacring all ENGLISH PROTESTANTS there,
And utter Subversion of the
GOVERNMENT
AND
Protestant - Religion;
As the same was successively carryed on from the Year 1662.

Given in to both Houses of Parliament.

By *DAVID FITZ GERALD* Esq;.

LONDON:
Printed for *Tho. Cockerill*, at the *Three-Legs* in the *Poultrey* over against the *Stocks-Market*, 1680.

In Ireland Duke of Ormonde had to be seen to take action. Oliver, seeing the danger, spent the winter of 1678-79 as a fugitive. Rewards were offered for capture of bishops and priests. Oliver’s letters often reveal exasperation and frustration and some wish never to have left Rome. Nevertheless he was not prepared to abandon his people. In October 1679 Ormonde issued orders for his arrest at the express command of the Privy Council. Oliver, then operating under name Mr Meleady was arrested on the 6th December 1679 and held in Dublin Castle. Information against him had been presented by Anthony Daly. Daly, a Franciscan friar, had been bombarding Rome with complaints about Oliver for some years. Oliver expected to be banished from Ireland and he only became aware gradually that he was being portrayed as the Irish co-ordinator of the Popish Plot. Oates used John McMoyer, a Franciscan from Armagh, and Edmund Murphy, a suspended parish priest, to find witnesses against him.

Oliver was brought to trial in Dundalk on 23rd July 1680. He was accused of plotting against the King and encouraging an invasion of Ireland, charges which carried the death penalty. He offered no objection to an all-Protestant jury since he was well known in the area and respected by all religious factions. He had gathered many witnesses in his defence. His accusers were wanted men in Dundalk and the trial collapsed

when they did not appear. Lord Shaftesbury and his associates arranged the highly unusual transfer of this trial to London where there would be a far greater chance of securing a conviction. The Viceroy protested against this move but he was over-ruled. On 24th October 1680 he was put on a ship to London. McMoyer, Murphy and Hugh Duffy, who had been Murphy's curate, were coached before presenting evidence before a Grand Jury which was unconvinced of the allegations. A second Grand Jury was persuaded to order a trial. On 3rd May 1681 Oliver was brought to court and he pleaded "Not Guilty".

278. The Trial* of Dr. OLIVER PLUNKET,† Titular Primate of Ireland, at the King's-Bench, for High Treason: 33 CHARLES II. A. D. 1681.

THE 3rd of May, 1681, in Easter, 33 Car. Dr. Oliver Plunket was arraigned at the King's Bench bar for high-treason, for endeavouring and compassing the king's death, and to levy war in Ireland, and to alter the true religion there, and to introduce a foreign power: and at his arraignment, before his plea he urged for himself, that he was indicted of the same high-treason in Ireland and arraigned, and at the day for his trial, the witnesses against him did not appear; and therefore he desired to know if he could be tried here for the same fact. The Court told him, that by a statute made in this kingdom, he might be tried in the court of King's-Bench, or by Commission of Oyer and Terminer in any part of England, for facts arising in Ireland; and that this arraignment there (he being never tried upon it) was not sufficient to exempt him from being tried here; because till a trial be passed, and there be a conviction or acquittal thereupon, an arraignment, barely, is no plea: for in such cases the party is put twice in danger of his life, which only is the thing the law in such cases looks after to prevent.* He then desired time for his witnesses, which they told him he could not do till after plea pleaded; whereupon he pleaded Not Guilty, and put himself upon the country for his trial. And after some consideration had about time to be allowed him to bring his witnesses from Ireland, the court appointed the day for his trial, to be the first Wednesday in next term, which was full five weeks time.

And accordingly on Wednesday the 8th of June, in Trinity-Term, he was brought to his trial; and proclamation, as in such cases s usual, being made, it proceeded thus:

Cl. of Cr. Oliver Plunket, hold up thy hand, those good men which thou shalt hear, called, and personally appear, are to pass between, &c.

Plunket. May it please your lordship, I have been kept close prisoner for a long time, a year and an half in prison: when I came from Ireland hither, I was told by persons of good repute, and a counsel'or at law, that I could not be tried here; and the reasons they gave me were, that first the statute of Henry 8, and all other statutes made here were not received in Ireland, unless they were an express mention made of Ireland in them: so that none

* 'I do appoint Francis Tyton and Thomas 'Basset to print the Trials of Edward Fitz-'Harris and Oliver Plunket, and that no others 'presume to print the same. F. PEMBERTON.'

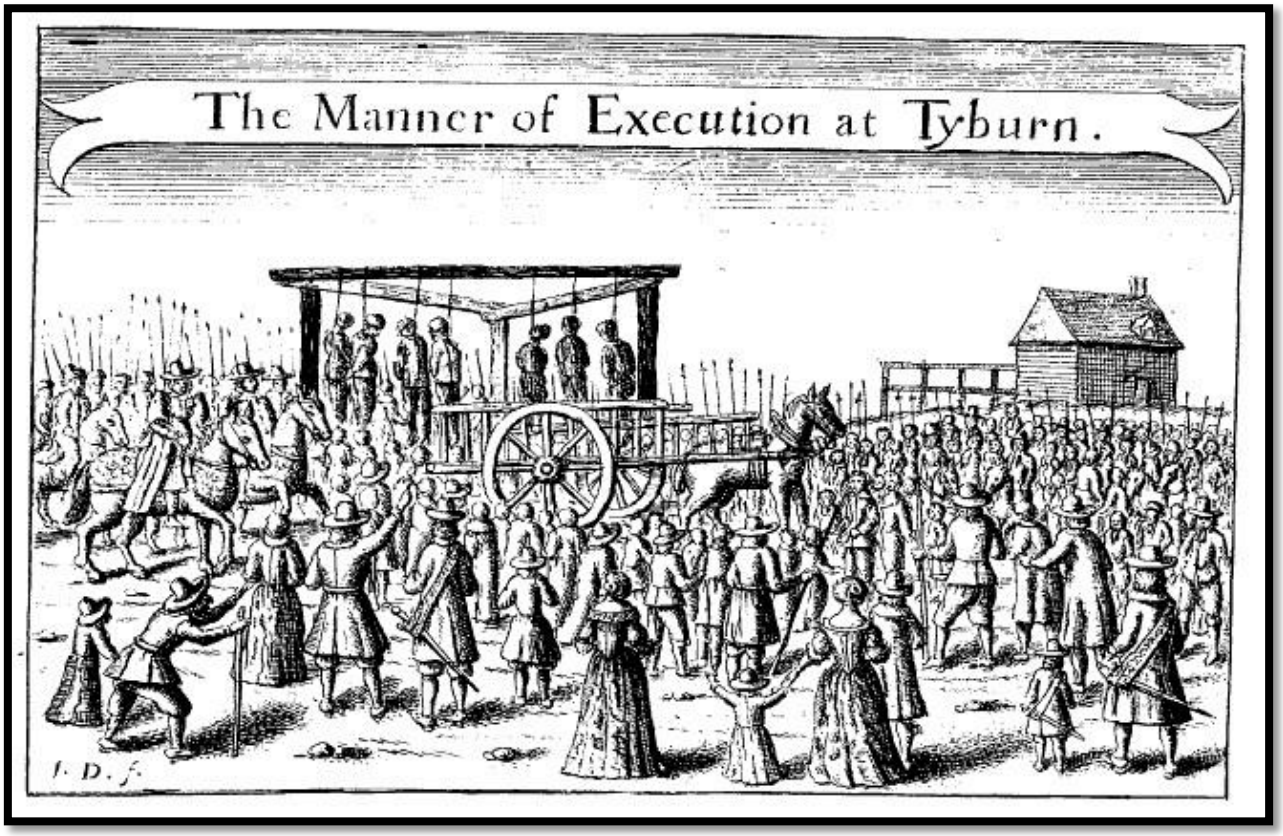
† "Plunket, the Popish Primate of Armagh, was at this time brought to his trial. Some lewd Irish priests, and others of that nation, hearing that England was at that time disposed to hearken to good swearers, thought themselves well qualified for the employment: so they came over to swear, that there was a great plot in Ireland, to bring over a French army, and to massacre all the English. The witnesses were brutal and profligate men: yet the earl of Shaftsbury cherished them much: they were examined by the parliament at Westminster: and what they said was believed. Upon that encouragement it was reckoned that we should have witnesses come over in whole companies. Lord Essex told me, that this Plunket was a wise and sober man, who was always in a different interest from the two Talbots; the one of these being the titular archbishop of Dublin, and the other raised afterwards to be duke of Tirconnell. These were

From "A Complete Collection of State Trials"

He was granted a five week adjournment to gather evidence from Ireland but his friends who sought to make this journey were delayed by bad weather and the Irish courts objected to releasing their records. On 8th June, his trial took place in Westminster Hall before three judges, headed by the Lord Chief Justice, Sir Francis Pemberton. Amongst the five counsel for the prosecution was Sir George Jeffreys, later to gain notoriety in the Bloody Assizes. Oliver, the prisoner, had no-one to represent him. Although he could not say as much publicly, in private Ormonde argued that the charges were obviously false. He wrote of the

informers who claimed Plunkett had hired them to kill the King "no schoolboy would have trusted them to rob an orchard".
Pemberton's performance at the trial was described by Lord Brougham in "Lives of the Chief Justices of England" as a disgrace on the English Bar. Evidence was given by Duffy, Murphy and McMoyer which described supposed meetings with the French and raising funds to finance an army. The underlying factors were, however, anti-Catholic paranoia and recollections of the massacres of the Protestants in 1641. The Lord Chief Justice said "Look you Mr. Plunkett…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 took only fifteen minutes to find him guilty. The judge's sentence was:-
"You shall be drawn through the City of London to Tyburn, there you will 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 divided into four quarters."
Lord Essex, the former Viceroy, told the King that Plunkett was innocent. Angrily the King said that he could have saved him had he said this at the trial but that he himself could not pardon him.

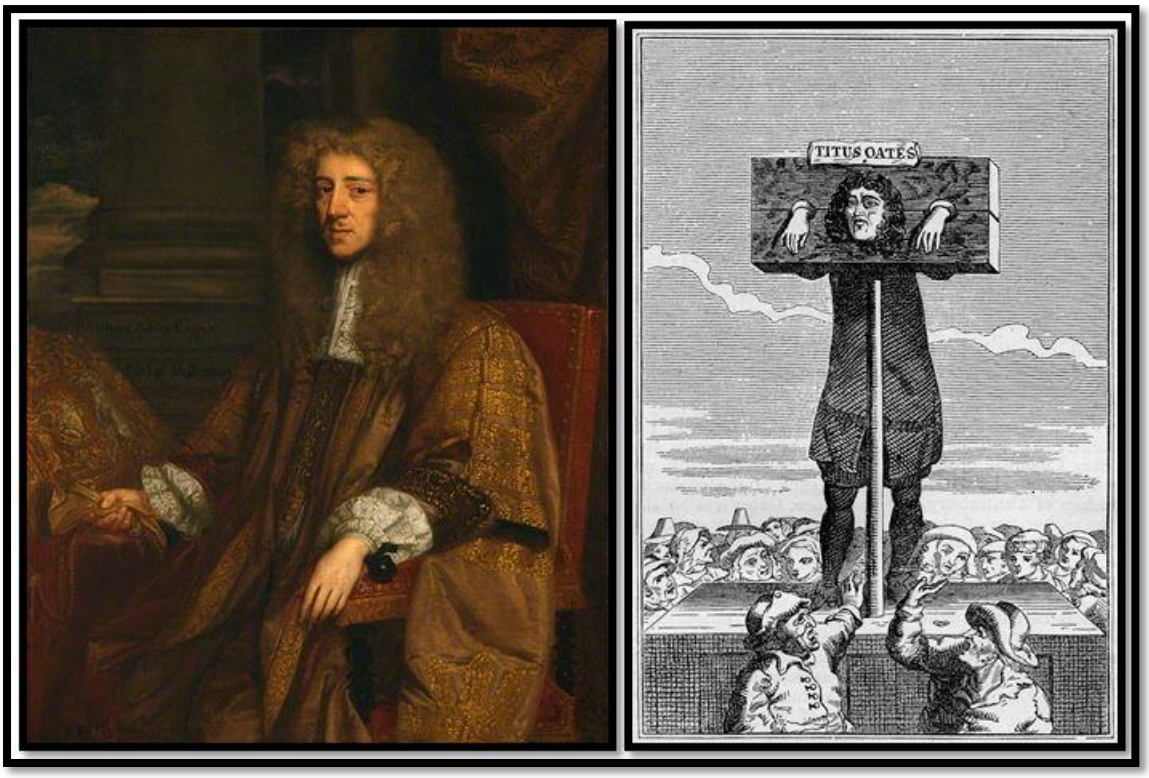
Back in prison as a condemned man, his treatment was less severe, being allowed visitors and pen and paper. It is thought that he was in contact both by letter and in person with Fr. Maurice Corker, president of the English Benedictines who was also a prisoner and that they heard each others' confessions. Fr. Corker, imprisoned for being a priest, had been earlier acquitted on a charge of treason. Oliver bequeathed his body, clothes and possessions to Fr. Corker. During his final days in Newgate he wrote a detailed rebuttal of the charges against him. He had not "levied monies from the clergy of Ireland to bring in the French and to maintain seventy-thousand men" and "I have never sent letter or letters, agent or agents, to Pope, King, Prince or Prelate, concerning any plot or conspiracy against my King of country" but "Neither will I deny, to have exercised, in Ireland, the functions of a Roman Catholic prelate…and by preaching, teaching, and statutes, to have endeavoured to bring the clergy, of which I had a care, to a due comportment, according to their calling, but some of them would not amend and had a prejudice for me, and especially my accusers…."



On 1st July, 1681, after celebrating mass in his cell, he was dragged through London on a sledge to Tyburn, the place of execution. Cardinal Moran wrote that "Dr. Plunket, surrounded by a numerous guard of military, was led to Tyburn for execution. Vast crowds assembled along the route and at Tyburn. As Dr. Brennan, Archbishop of Cashel, in an official letter to Propaganda, attests, all were edified and filled with admiration, "because he displayed such a serenity of countenance, such a tranquillity of mind and elevation of soul, that he seemed rather a spouse hastening to the nuptial feast, than a culprit led forth to the scaffold". He gave his long prepared speech which was well received. It started:-
"I have, some days past, abided my trial at the King's Bench and now very soon, I must hold up my hand at the King of King's bench, and appear before a Judge who cannot be deceived by false witnesses or corrupted allegations, for he knoweth the secrets of hearts."
Challoner in his "Memoirs of Missionary Priests" summarises the key elements of the speech thus:-
"Then having numbered upon the heads of the accusations against him and refuted them by the most solemn protestations of his innocency, and by showing not only the improbability, but even the impossibility of his being guilty of what was being laid to his charge.."
Oliver's speech continues:-
"You see, therefore, what a condition I am in, and you have heard what protestations I have made of my innocence, and I hope you believe the words of a dying man and that you may be the more induced to give me credit…"
He made a public act of contrition as follows:-
"Now, that I have (as I think) showed sufficiently how innocent I am of any plot or conspiracy. I would I were able, with the like truth, to clear myself of the high crimes committed against the Divine Majesty's commandments, often transgressed by me, for which, I am sorry from the bottom of my heart, and if I should or could live a thousand years, I have a firm resolution, and a strong purpose, by your grace, My God, never to offend you; and I beseech your Divine Majesty, by the merits of Christ and by the intercession of his Blessed Mother, and all the holy Angels and Saints, to forgive me of my sins, and to grant my soul eternal rest."

As he faced death he recited the psalm "Miserere mei Deus". The grisly execution took place but his death was described as "humble, heroic and holy". His head was thrown into a fire but was quickly recovered. A well respected young woman, from a highly regarded Catholic family, Elizabeth Shelton, petitioned the King to recover Saint Oliver's remains immediately after the execution. Father Corker employed a surgeon to cut off the forearms from the body and so Oliver's remains, less head and forearms were buried in two tin boxes in the churchyard of St. Giles in the Fields next to the bodies of five Jesuits who had been executed at Tyburn two years before. The record of this burial is still to be seen in the Burial Register of St. Giles. According to Challoner he was interred with a copper plate on his breast carrying the inscription:-"In this tomb resteth the body of the right reverend Oliver Plunket, archbishop of Armagh and primate of Ireland, who in hatred of religion was accused of high treason by false witnesses, and for the same condemned and executed at Tyburn, his heart and bowels being taken out and cast into the fire. He suffered martyrdom with constancy, the 1st of July, 1681 in the reign of King Charles the second."

There was considerable popular revulsion over the death of a man who was obviously innocent but who had fallen victim to the scheming of Shaftesbury and Oates. The day after his execution, Shaftesbury was arrested. The absurdity of the Popish Plot was gradually recognised and Lord Chief Justice Scroggs began to find some of the accused to be innocent. In 1681, Oates was arrested and imprisoned. When James II acceded to the throne in 1685, he had Oates retried and sentenced for perjury, stripped of clerical dress, imprisoned for life, and ordered him to be "whipped through the streets of London five days a year for the remainder of his life." He was in prison for three years but with the overthrow of James II he was released and given a state pension. Oliver had been the Plot's last high-profile victim and he was the last Catholic martyr to die at Tyburn.



Lord Shaftesbury and Titus Oates

Dom Maurus Corker had the remains exhumed some two years later in 1683, which were then smuggled to Lamspringe in Lower Saxony, Germany and interred in the crypt of the local Benedictine monastery. Fr. Corker became abbot of this monastery some seven years later. It is believed that that Fr. Corker took Oliver's head to Rome, giving it to the Cardinal of Norfolk, formerly Fr. Philip Howard, who had hidden Archbishop Oliver in St. James's Palace in London when he first entered England on his way to Ireland. It seems to have remained in Rome for about forty years until Hugh MacMahon, Archbishop of Armagh, brought it to Ireland in about 1722 where it was given to the Siena Convent, Drogheda, under the leadership of Catherine Plunkett, believed to be the archbishop's grand-niece. It was in 1881 that the other remains of Oliver were taken to Downside Abbey, Somerset where they are housed in a major shrine. Some of these were relocated after Oliver's canonisation in 1975.

As part of the research for this article, the authors contacted the Archivist at the Siena Convent, the nuns of which, being part of an "enclosed" order have little connection with the outside world, spending their day in work, meditation and prayer. She commented on the arrival of the Head and its subsequent removal.
"We do not know exactly when it arrived in our walls, but certainly after the sisters had moved from their mud cabin near the river Boyne, to the first convent in Dwyer Street (Drogheda). The first location would not have been a decent one to host such a relic. But we have no data allowing us to know when this move took place. Probably between 1725 and 1737, the year of the death of Rev. Dr Hugh McMahon, archbishop of Armagh, who bequeathed the relic to our Community, as can be read in his last will. But he could have given it before his death.
Then there is no record concerning the veneration of the relic, apart from the fact that numerous groups coming from far and near, were received in our chapel to venerate it. So much so that when Oliver was beatified, it was considered that the venue was not convenient, and the peace and silence of our - now - fully enclosed nuns should be respected. This is how the relic went eventually to St Peter's Church (Drogheda) where you can see it today. The translation occurred on 29 June 1921".

The expression "peace and silence" is perhaps inappropriate to refer to the period immediately before the relic's translation since this saw what the Irish describe as the War of Independence (1919-1921) which was

ended only by the partition of Ireland in the Anglo-Irish Treaty, 1921. There was a fear the Black and Tans, Temporary Constables of the Royal Irish Constabulary, notorious for their attacks on Catholic civilians and their property, would attempt to make off with the Head. Armed members of the Republican Army were stationed nearby to protect it.

The Head, as described in our initial paragraph, stands in a new shrine erected in 1995 which enables pilgrims to view it closely. The shrine also includes some bone, donated by Downside Abbey, and nearby is the door of the cell which Oliver would have occupied in Newgate Prison as he awaited execution.

It is appropriate at this stage to consider the Church's attitude towards relics. Being part of the body of a saint, the Head of Saint Oliver is viewed as a relic of the First Class. St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), the Church's greatest theologian and philosopher, wrote, drawing on St. Augustine's "Civitate Dei":- "we should show honour to the saints of God…..we ought to honour any relics of theirs in a fitting manner; principally

their bodies, which were temples, and organs of the Holy Ghost dwelling and operating in them, and are destined to be likened to the body of Christ by the glory of the Resurrection. Hence God Himself fittingly honours such relics by working miracles at their presence."
St. Jerome, writing in the fourth century, explained "We do not adore…but we honour the martyrs' relics, so that thereby we give honour to Him whose martyrs they are; we honour the servants, that the honour shown to them may reflect on their Master."

Canon Law covers the display, restoration and transfer of relics such as those of Saint Oliver Plunkett.
THE VENERATION OF THE SAINTS, SACRED IMAGES, AND RELICS (Cann. 1186 - 1190)
Can. 1186 To foster the sanctification of the people of God, the Church commends to the special and filial reverence of the Christian faithful the Blessed Mary ever Virgin, Mother of God, whom Christ established as the mother of all people, and promotes the true and authentic veneration of the other saints whose example instructs the Christian faithful and whose intercession sustains them.
Can. 1187 It is permitted to reverence through public veneration only those servants of God whom the authority of the Church has recorded in the list of the saints or the blessed.
Can. 1188 The practice of displaying sacred images in churches for the reverence of the faithful is to remain in effect. Nevertheless, they are to be exhibited in moderate number and in suitable order so that the Christian people are not confused nor occasion given for inappropriate devotion.
Can. 1189 If they are in need of repair, precious images, that is, those distinguished by age, art, or veneration, which are exhibited in churches or oratories for the reverence of the faithful are never to be restored without the written permission of the ordinary; he is to consult experts before he grants permission.
Can. 1190 It is absolutely forbidden to sell sacred relics.

The first moves towards the canonisation of Oliver Plunkett began in the 1860s with research on his letters and documents relating to his life and trial. On 9th December 1886 he was declared venerable by Pope Leo XIII; declared a martyr on St. Patrick's Day, 1918 by Pope Benedict XV who also beatified him on 23rd May, 1920. In 1932, following an Eucharistic Conference in Dublin, there was renewed interest in promoting his canonisation and a League of Prayer was formed. "The Drogheda Independent" of 21st January, 2013 reported that in 1938 convents around the country were represented by 1,200 girls who visited the shrine of the Blessed Oliver on the final pilgrimage of the season. Monsignor O'Callaghan addressed the girls. He explained how the Cause was progressing; there had been an examination of the sacred relic that had been in the town for 220 years by eminent doctors who pronounced it to be in a marvellous state of preservation, a thing in itself miraculous. There had been a marked increase in devotion to Blessed Oliver from all parts of the country and Europe and U.S.A.. There had been reports of cures and blessings, some of them he believed to be great or "miracles" such as those required by the Holy See as evidence for canonisation. He reminded the women of Ireland to preserve the Faith and hand it down:- "The modesty of the Irish ladies was spoken of in the whole world, and that was the inheritance that they have to carry on. They should pray to Blessed Oliver that they might be worthy to carry that great virtue on to the future generations."
In 1968, Monsignor John Hanly of the Irish College, Rome was appointed Postulator of the Cause and he steered the process of research and evidence gathering for seven years. In 1975, in a prologue to an article written for the "Osservatore Romano", he wrote that Oliver Plunkett was worthy of the title of saint "not only for the heroism and holiness of his own life and death, but as a representative for all those other Irish men and women who proved their faith by the shedding of their blood."

On 12th October 1975, the Blessed Oliver Plunkett was canonised by Pope Paul VI. Ireland had its first new saint for seven hundred years. In his Homily, the Holy Father said, starting in Gaelic:-
"Dia's muire Dhíbh, a chlann Phádraig! Céad mile fáilte rómhaibh! Tá Naomh nua againn inniu: Comharba Phádraig, Olibhéar Naofa Ploinéad. (God and Mary by with you, family of Saint Patrick! A hundred thousand welcomes! We have a new Saint today: the successor of Saint Patrick, Saint Oliver Plunkett). Today, the Church rejoices with a great joy, because the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, is reflected

and manifested in a new Saint. And this new Saint is Oliver Plunkett, Bishop and Martyr - Oliver Plunkett, successor of Saint Patrick in the See of Armagh - Oliver Plunkett, glory of Ireland and Saint, today and for ever, of the Church of God, Oliver Plunkett is for all - for the entire world - an authentic and outstanding example of the love of Christ. Let this then be an occasion on which the message of peace and reconciliation in truth and justice, and above all the message of love for one's neighbour, will be emblazoned in the minds and hearts of all the beloved Irish people - this message signed and sealed with a Martyr's blood, in imitation of his Master."

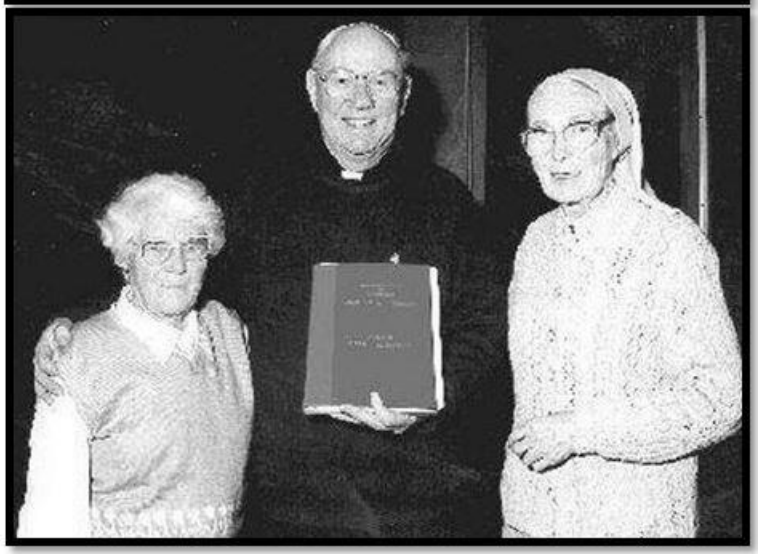
The Irish Episcopal Conference issued a pastoral letter to mark the occasion of the canonisation which included the following comments:-
"We thank God for having given him to us to show us an example in these troubled time and to be our Patron in Heaven….We ask him today for all the graces we need for ourselves and for our country. We ask that we me be as he was, steadfast, courageous and devout, untiring in our work for peace and reconciliation, loyal to the Church and firm in our faith even unto death…"

Giovanna Martiriggiano and Monsignor John Hanly

The miracle, evidence of which was used to support the Cause of the canonisation of the Blessed Oliver concerned Giovanna Martiriggiano of Naples. She suffered a ruptured womb during childbirth and was expected to die during the night. An Irish Medical Missionary nun, Sister Cabrini (Rita Quigley), who had great devotion to the Blessed Oliver, prayed over the woman during the night with the lady's husband, Nicola, and placed a prayer leaflet containing a piece of blessed linen on the woman. Medical staff at the hospital were astonished to observe that her condition improved considerably overnight. Giovanna recovered to full health. Two religious sisters, Medical Missionaries of Mary, working at The Clinica Mediterranea, Attracta Scanlon and Winnifred Newell, were witness to this event. After being investigated by a panel of independent doctors, who could find no reason for her recovery, the cure was pronounced to be miraculous and attributed to the intercession of the Blessed Oliver.

Sr. M. Cabrini Quigley

Nationality: Irish
Congregation Register No: 154
D.O.B. 04.06.1927
First Profession: 09.08.1948
Died: 18.09.1966 Aged: 39 years



Sr. Attracta Scanlon, Mgr. J. Hanly and Sr. Winnifred Newell

I. Papal Dispensation from the Requirement of a Second Miracle, 5 December 1974

SACRA CONGREGATIO PRO CAUSIS SANCTORUM

Prot. N. 24-40/974

ARMACHANA

Canonizationis
Beati OLIVERII PLUNKETT, Martyris
Archiepiscopi Armachani

Summus Pontifex PAULUS Divina Providentia PAPA VI, instante Rev. mo Domino Ioanne Hanley, Postulatore in Causa canonizationis Beati Oliverii Plunkett, archiepiscopi Armachani, ac referente infrascripto Cardinali Praefecto S. Congregationis pro Causis Sanctorum, in Audientia diei 5 Decembris 1974, attentis peculiaribus expositis adiunctis, benigne dispensationem concessit super praescripto canonis 2138 § 1 Codicis Iuris Canonicis, ita ut ad solemnem canonizationem praedicti Beati, deveniri possit uno tantum miraculo rite agnito et approbato.

Contrariis non obstantibus quibuslibet.

Die 5 Decembris 1974.

Aloisius Card. Raimondi
Praef

✠Josephus Casoria,
a Secretis.

A second miraculous cure of a man from Cavan suffering from thyroid cancer was not examined as Rome, exceptionally, accepted the Naples cure as adequate to support the Cause of canonsiation. Giovanna, her husband Nicola and son Enzo took part in the canonisation ceremony which was also attended by fifteen thousand Irish pilgrims.

St. Oliver has continued to be a source of hope and a symbol both domestically and internationally. There is an Annual Saint Oliver Plunkett Address given by a leading Church figure. On Whitsunday 2010 up to five hundred people took part in a procession in Drogheda to mark the ninetieth anniversary of the beatification of St. Oliver. The relics of St. Oliver were carried shoulder high in a glass reliquary on top of a red velvet cushion by four Knights of Columbanus, their off-white capes emblazoned with red crosses, accompanied by women from the Order of Malta wearing black capes with distinctive Maltese crosses and, on their heads, black lace mantillas. On 7th July, 2013 Cardinal Seán Brady led the annual Festival of St. Oliver, one of the features of which was the colourful "Procession of the Relics" of the saint. In a historic first, the relics proceeded three kilometres from the Diocese of Meath across the River Boyne to the Archdiocese of Armagh, ending at the National Shrine of Saint Oliver Plunkett in Saint Peter's Church, Drogheda after which mass began.

The Chicago Daily Observer of 7th June, 2010 reported over a thousand of Chicago's Irish Americans rallied round the family of a young Belfast family which needed help. A baseball bat-wielding coward attacked Natasha McShane and her friend Stacey Jurich in the early hours of April 23rd in the streets of Bucktown and injured them severely. Stacey was released from hospital but Natasha had a long road to recovery. In Chicago, Mary Dunn read the story. She had a brother in law who was a monsignor in Dunboyne, County Meath, who had attended the canonisation of St Oliver during which time he received a relic of the saint. He passed on it to his sister in law and she had brought the holy relic and its healing power to many in need. Mary planned to take it to the McShanes.

Saint Oliver has assumed a distinctive official role in Ireland, a role determined by the troubled and divided state of the country over the centuries which has led to serious sectarian violence. He has been seen as an agent for community harmony especially in Northern Ireland, remembering the part he played in stopping the bloody conflict between the Tories and the government. In 1997 he was made Patron for Peace and Reconciliation in Ireland. Emphasis on this position was evident during the celebrated visit of Pope John Paul II to Ireland in 1979. He landed at Dublin Airport and his first act on descending from the plane was to kneel down and kiss the soil of Ireland. He was flown by helicopter to Phoenix Park, Dublin where he gave an outdoor address to almost a third of Ireland's population.

Pope John Paul II at Phoenix Park

Then he went to Drogheda. His original schedule had included a visit to Armagh in Northern Ireland but the Vatican cancelled this aspect of the visit since this was a day after he I.R.A.'s murder of Lord Mountbatten and the ambush which resulted in the death of eighteen soldiers at Warrenpoint. He visited Killineer just outside Drogheda where a congregation of almost three hundred thousand had assembled.

Church officials take the Blessed Head of Saint Oliver Plunkett from St Peter's Church for the procession to Killineer

The head of Saint Oliver had been brought to the field, the first time it had left its resting place since 1921. The Pope knelt and prayed before the Relic of the Head. He recalled his own attendance at the canonisation service in 1975. He preached a sermon of peace and reconciliation, especially relevant given the events of the previous days, incidentally supporting the primacy of Armagh rather than Dublin. His message was:-
"Having greeted the soil of Ireland today on my arrival in Dublin, I make my first Irish journey to this place, to Drogheda. The cry of centuries sends me here. I arrive as a pilgrim of faith. I also arrive as Successor of Peter, to whom Christ has given a particular care for the universal Church. I seek first those places which carry in themselves the sign of the "beginning"; and "beginning" is connected with "firstness", with primacy. Such a place on Irish soil is Armagh, for centuries the Episcopal See of the Primate of Ireland….. "I have kept the faith". That has been the ambition of the Irish down the centuries. For many it has meant martyrdom. Here at Drogheda I wish to mention one Irish martyr, Saint Oliver Plunkett… As Bishop he preached a message of pardon and peace. He was indeed the defender of the oppressed and the advocate of justice but he would never condone violence. For men of violence his word was the word of the Apostle Peter, "Never pay back one wrong with another." He sealed by his death the same message of reconciliation that he had preached during his life. His dying words were words of forgiveness for all his enemies."
This speech, extensively reported, was thought to have given a real impetus to the peace process, later brought to a successful conclusion.

One of the authors was often taken to visit the Head by his family during their trips to Irish relatives in the early 1960s. He was too young to appreciate its historical context and spiritual significance, considering it

only as a frightful spectacle. Over the years, to the Faithful, the role of the Head has changed from a symbol of repression and a means of securing the intercession of a Catholic martyr, in the hope of receiving divine favour, to an illustration of the effects of intolerance and violence. It is the sentiment of Oliver as Peacemaker which is expressed in the Prayer to Saint Oliver:-

"Glorious Martyr Oliver
who willingly gave your life for your faith.
Help us also to be strong in faith.
May we be loyal like you to the See of Peter.
By your intercession and example
may all hatred and bitterness
be banished from the hearts of Irish men and women.
May the peace of Christ reign in our hearts
as it did in your heart even at the moment of your death.
Pray for us and for Ireland."

And what of the Holy Relic today? The website of St. Peter's Church Drogheda states:-
"Thousands of pilgrims visit the National Shrine of St. Oliver each month, making it one of the most popular attractions in Ireland. Coming from all counties of Ireland and various parts of the world; some come as sightseers, but many go away with an admiration for the loyalty in faith of those who have gone before us. Many pilgrims come to pray for various petitions and light candles. Many come to kneel and pray for peace and reconciliation in Ireland, before the Shrine of our patron saint for this cause in Ireland. Some come to give thanks to St. Oliver for his intercession and for favours already received."
The bravery of any man prepared to face a cruel death for his principles will always be recognised. However, in a world far more secular than that of Oliver's time, will the concepts of the sanctity of relics, the intercession of saints, prayers to a divine being, and justification by Faith rather than Reason maintain their hold on society? Will the head, shorn of its spiritual significance, become merely a tourist attraction?

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Acknowledgements.
We wish to thank Sister Pascale o.p., Archivist of the Siena Archives, for provision of additional information.

The painting on the cover, on display in the National Portrait Gallery, London, was painted by Edward Luttrell in 1681.

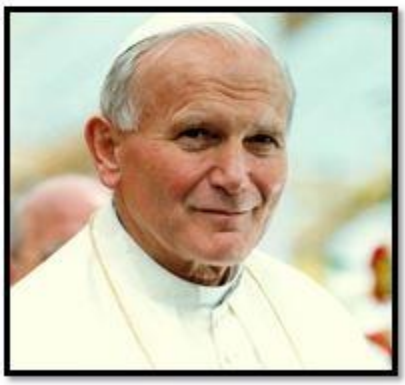
The Papacy and Saint Oliver

Pope Clement IX (1667-1669)
Created Oliver Plunkett Archbishop of Armagh, 1669

Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903)
Declared Oliver Plunkett Venerable, 1886

Pope Benedict XV (1914-1922)
Declared Oliver Plunkett a Martyr, 1918
then Beatified him, 1920

Pope Paul VI (1963-1978)
Canonised the Blessed Oliver Plunkett, 1975



Pope John Paul II (1978-2005)
Knelt and prayed before the Head of
Saint Oliver Plunkett, Drogheda, 1979

Painting of Clement IX, Carlo Marrata, State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia.