

Review

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## Book Reviews

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***Oracles of God: The Roman Catholic Church and Irish Politics*, by Patrick Murray, Dublin: University College Press, 2000, pp.493.**

Patrick Murray's ground-breaking study examines the political role of the Catholic Church in one of the most divisive and controversial periods of Irish history. As he observes in his introduction, the energetic political activity of the post-Cullenite Church was facilitated by the absence of any effective secular leadership between the death of O'Connell and the rise of Parnell. In fact, the decrees of the National Council of Bishops in 1854 had forbidden clergy to discuss politics inside churches and to engage in political controversy with other clergy either in the press or public meetings. This was reiterated at the Plenary Synod of Maynooth in 1900 but since priests were also instructed to help secure the election of "men of integrity" who were "favourable to the Catholic religion", the rationale for clerical political involvement was easily justified. The hierarchy itself saw off Vatican intervention in 1888 over the Plan of Campaign. But in the aftermath of the Parnell split there was clear resentment among senior members of the hierarchy at the way they had been sidelined by the fallen leader and his party. Murray quotes Archbishop Logue's aggrieved complaint to Archbishop Walsh that Irish Party MPs had "climbed to their present influential positions on the shoulders of Irish priests and Irish bishops". The clear implication was that the political debt now owed to them was a restoration of the influence they had lost under Parnell.

In the quarter century after Parnell's death the Church and the Party bided their time until Home Rule came to the boil again after 1910. Then came the Rising which brought the Catholic Church face-to-face with a new and more aggressively self-confident generation of nationalists. It also revived the long-standing tensions in the Church's relationship with radical nationalism, the complexities of which had been demonstrated with the Fenians. By 1916 the younger clergy were considerably influenced by the new cultural and nationalist movements that had sprung up since the 1890s. Murray only briefly refers to the landmark O'Hickey controversy over compulsory Irish in 1909 which revealed the distance opening up between the younger and senior clergy and which came to a head during the War of Independence and Civil War. The challenge posed to the Church by the 1916 rebels, as Murray writes, lay in the fact that many were Catholic mystics and idealists who invoked Christian imagery, particularly its sacrificial aspects, "to justify a

rebellion which clearly contravened explicit Catholic teaching on the subject". As the War of Independence got under way, the Church's dilemma intensified. In November 1920 the former Rector of University College Dublin, Father William Delany S.J., who had experienced armed revolution during his time in Rome, complained to Archbishop Walsh that the "abominable assassinations" mounted by Collins and his squad could never be justified in the light of traditional Church teaching and should have incurred immediate excommunication. But Walsh and his Episcopal colleagues were walking a tightrope - trying to accommodate a successful and popular revolt against British rule without alienating the potential rulers of the new independent state by condemnation of their methods.

Murray's account of the period up to and after the Civil War breaks new ground in its unprecedented access to diocesan records around the country and in his thorough and rewarding trawl through the provincial press. In previous publications Dermot Keogh got access to diocesan records in Dublin and Armagh but Murray has consulted archives in Ardagh and Clonmacnoise, Clonfert, Clogher, Cloyne, Dromore, Elphin, Galway, Kerry, Killaloe, Kildare and Leighlin, Limerick, and Tuam. This range of material redresses the balance by highlighting the views of the other members of the hierarchy who have been frequently overshadowed by the primates of Dublin and Armagh. As a body the hierarchy firmly supported the Treaty but as the situation deteriorated in 1922 it encountered recalcitrant republicans not amenable to episcopal exhortations. Murray's analysis of this is cogent. "Underlying much Episcopal discourse in the post-Treaty period was the principle that it was the exclusive right and duty of the bishops themselves to determine what issues, political or otherwise, came within the sphere of their authority. There was the further principle that once the Episcopal body, or indeed an individual bishop, had decided that a pronouncement was justified, anybody wishing to remain a Catholic was obliged to accept and act upon the teaching mediated in the pronouncement". There was also a clear sense that the bishops regarded their relationship with the laity as "resembling that between master and servant, their function being to order and direct, that of the laity to listen and obey". The language of power, mastery, subjection and unflinching obedience was "the distinguishing mark of Episcopal discourse, particularly in 1922 and 1923".

The 1922 Lenten pastorals emphasised the need to support the new Provisional Government; Murray considers that the pastoral of Archbishop Harty of Cashel "might well have served as a Treaty Party election manifesto". The support of the bishops was sought again in October 1922 just four months after the start of the Civil War but within weeks many bishops and clergy realised, too late, that for the Provisional Government their October pastoral provided an all too handy justification for its executions

policy. Murray detects signs of haste and lack of preparation in the composition of the October pastoral which in places was "contradictory and even absurd". "Our Catholic people" were told that the pastoral's teaching was "authoritative" but "subject, of course, to an appeal to the Holy See". In fact, the Vatican studiously avoided making any comment on the pastoral and when a Vatican representative, Monsignor Luzio, came to Ireland the following spring to investigate republican complaints against the Church, he was comprehensively cold-shouldered by the Church authorities and by the government.

Murray details pro-government clerical involvement in the elections of 1922, 1923, 1925 (which saw senate and local elections, as well as important by-elections) and 1927. In the 1925 senate elections there was clerical opposition to the candidacy of Alec McCabe who had resigned from the Dáil after the Army Mutiny. The eight priests at the nominating convention ensured his defeat. In Roscommon Canon Cummins called on his flock to "Vote out those pests. Vote out the vanity of the biggest political criminal whose baneful shadow ever crossed the face of Ireland. Put a silencer on the Spaniard". In the June 1927 election there were thirty-three priests involved in the campaign in the Galway constituency, all but five of whom were government supporters. Of the bishops, Morrisroe of Achonry and Keane of Limerick nominated their local *Cumann na nGaedheal* candidates

But this was not the whole picture, as Murray demonstrates in his comprehensive analysis of pro-republican clergy and bishops. These ranged from the Rector and Vice-Rector of the Irish College in Rome, Monsignor John Hagan and Father Michael Curran, to prominent clerics in the Diaspora like Archbishop Daniel Mannix, Father Peter Yorke and Father Peter Magennis, to the fiery Michael O'Flanagan from Elphin, the Browne brothers in Maynooth, to more humble curates who braved their bishops' wrath (the local press is a particularly good source for the latter). The existence of these sympathisers was to be of vital importance since it meant that de Valera and his supporters were never without ecclesiastical backing. If they had lacked such support, it is probable that a more virulent strain of anti-clericalism would have developed among republicans in the aftermath of the Civil War. As it was, by 1926 several key members of the hierarchy, notably Cohalan of Cork and Cardinal O'Donnell, were urging the new Fianna Fáil party to enter the Free State Dáil. Their relief was palpable when this happened the following year.

As Fianna Fáil approached power in 1932 there were some clerical attacks on de Valera and his party but they were more muted than the fulminations of a decade earlier. In the years after 1932 some churchmen changed their political allegiance while others made their peace with the new leader; in 1933, for example, two of his most hostile clerical critics in Mayo invited

him to tea. Murray makes an interesting observation when he comments on the way that de Valera himself began to simulate a quasi-clerical voice and style, "his utterances on the economic, social and educational issues being often indistinguishable in tone and content from Episcopal pastorals or even papal encyclicals. He gradually assumed some of the style and functions of a lay cardinal". Church criticism of de Valera after 1932 focused more on his economic and foreign policies, especially the Economic War, sanctions against Italy and then the Spanish Civil War.

*Oracles of God* touches on similar aspects of Church history which should open the way to further scholarly study of similarly neglected areas, notably, the social background of the clergy, the role of the various seminaries in the training and education of priests, the Church and the Diaspora, and last, but by no means least, the emergence of an educated laity. The book represents a major contribution to the history of the post-independence Church in Ireland.  
**Deirdre McMahon.**

***Grace Gifford Plunkett and Irish Freedom: Tragic Bride of 1916*, by Marie O'Neill, Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2000, pp.117.**

Grace Gifford was one of twelve children of a wealthy Dublin Unionist family. She went to the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art when she was sixteen. A very talented student, she won a number of prizes. She spent a year studying Fine Art at the Slade School of Art in London when she was twenty. Her special talent was caricature and she returned to Dublin to try to make a living, an extremely difficult task which often left her despondent and thinking of emigration.

Brought on a visit to St Enda's School in 1908, shortly after it opened, she met both Patrick Pearse and Thomas MacDonagh. It was at St Enda's that she met Joseph Plunkett but not until late 1914 or early 1915. Grace was moved at the grinding poverty she saw around her in Dublin and she worked with Maud Gonne and others to provide school meals to the poor. She joined the Irish Women's Franchise League at its inception in 1908.

Brought up in the Protestant faith, she became increasingly interested in Roman Catholicism in her twenties. Plunkett was a very devout Catholic and, as he taught her about the Catholic religion, a deep friendship developed between them that blossomed into love. He was in many ways a taciturn and serious young man but his love letters to her, cited in the book, show his tender and humorous sides as well. They got engaged at the end of 1915 but Grace did not tell her parents because she knew they would not approve.

She decided to take instruction in Catholicism in preparation for her marriage. Their engagement was formally announced in February 1916 and she was formally received into the Catholic Church in early April. The couple planned to marry at Easter. She was unaware of the advanced plans