

The first Confraternity Procession through the streets of Limerick

by Des Ryan

In 1877 Roman Catholics all over the world celebrated the Golden Jubilee of the ordination of Pope Pius IX as bishop, in 1827. He was born Giovanni Maria Masai-Ferretti, on 13 May 1792, in one of the Papal States in Marche straddled across central Italy. He was elected to follow in the footsteps of St. Peter on 16 June 1846, and was the longest reigning Pope in the history of the Catholic Church, serving for thirty-one years.¹ In 1854 he defined the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, the belief that the Virgin Mary was conceived without sin.² Ten years later he issued a document known as the Syllabus of Errors and declared it impossible for the papacy to accept³ 'progress, liberalism and civilization as lately introduced.' In the final years of his papacy he convened the First Vatican Council [1869-70] which decreed papal infallibility, but this was cut short by the war over Italian Unification which resulted in the loss of the Papal States. At one stage in his papacy he entrusted a Byzantine icon which he named 'Our Mother of Perpetual Help' to the religious Order of the Most Holy Redeemer, more commonly known as the Redemptorists. A copy of this icon, dating back to 1867, may be seen at the Redemptorist Church, Limerick.

The Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer was founded in Naples in 1732 by Alphonsus Liguori, a young Italian nobleman, who wished to preach the Christian message to the poor, especially by giving missions in remote country districts.⁴ Just over a hundred years later the Order had branches in Warsaw, Vienna, Belgium, Holland, and in 1848, London. It was believed that Ireland, in the aftermath of the Great Famine was a place in need of spiritual and pastoral care. The Synod of Thurles in 1850 advocated the use of parish missions as a way of revitalising the faith of the Irish people. At the instigation Mr. William Monsell,



Pope Pius IX

M.P., of Clarina, County Limerick, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Limerick, Dr. John Ryan, invited the Redemptorists to come to the city to preach a mission at St. John's Church on Ramper's Road [now Cathedral Place]. Five Missionaries arrived in October 1851, and it was an international team, an Austrian, Russian, two Belgians and a Scot. The mission

proved to be a great success and when it ended on 2 November, Dr. Ryan asked them to make a return visit the following May to give a similar mission in St. Michael's Church on Denmark Street.⁵ On their return to Limerick, they rented a house in Bank Place, which was quite close to the church. A decision was taken to remain in Limerick and in November 1853, the house was formally established as the first Redemptorist community in Ireland. At first there were only three priests and a brother; shortly afterwards they were joined by three others. One of the ground floor rooms of the house was turned into public chapel.⁶ Limerick, in that period was a busy sea-port, and for many people emigrating to America or other parts of globe, a visit to the chapel was possibly their last port of call. Within a short space of time the Redemptorists acquired some property at Courtbrack, on the southern end of Henry Street. By May 1854, a temporary church, 120 feet long by 40 feet wide, had been built. The foundation stone for a monastery was laid of the Feast Day of St. Alphonsus, in 1856, and the foundation stone for a permanent church was put down in 1858 when the monastery was finished.



St Alphonsus (Sant Alfonso Maria de Liguori)



Thomas Edward Bridgett, C.S.S.R. (1829-1899) founder of Limerick Confraternity



Early depiction of the Redemptorist church and monastery in Limerick

The one factor that was synonymous with the Redemptorists in Limerick for many years was the Confraternity, a religious association of working men. The Confraternity of the Holy Family was founded in Liege, Belgium by a young military engineer named Henri Belletable.⁷ Its aim was to foster a Christian life among working men. It was put under the guidance of the Redemptorists who promoted it in their churches on the continent. The first branch of the Holy Family Confraternity in Ireland was set up, in 1862, by the Christian Brothers at their school in Ennistymon, County Clare. Other branches soon followed, usually following Redemptorist missions, in Carrick-on-Suir (1862), Dublin (1866), Mullingar, Mitchelstown and Limerick (1867), Cobh and Wexford (1868).⁸

When the first copy of the icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Help was unveiled at the Redemptorist Church in Limerick, in December 1867, it was followed by a mission for men. At its conclusion, Fr. Bridgett, the Rector, invited the men to form a branch of the Confraternity in Limerick. It is estimated that around 1,300 men put forward their names. The first meeting took place on 2 January 1868. The Confraternity was based on the parishes in the city, then on the streets in a parish; ten or twenty men from a street were allocated a seat or two in the church-and they were known as a section. Each section was named after a saint and two of its members were given the title of Prefect and Sub-Prefect; their job was to keep a record, in the section book provided, of those who attended the Confraternity meetings. Eventually the

Limerick Confraternity developed into one of the largest religious organisations for men in the world.⁹

On Sunday 3 June 1877, on the 50th anniversary of Pope Pius IX's consecration as a Bishop, it was planned that the Confraternity would make its first public procession through the streets of Limerick. On the afternoon of Saturday, 2 June, Limerick was a hive of activity as people began to decorate their houses and the main thoroughfares of the city. Every shop in the city was tried for bunting or flags in the papal colours; scores of new flags were made up and trees and shrubs were brought in from the country. Bodies of men, starting at the Redemptorist Church, began the task of decorating the streets. In the old town area of the city, houses were so densely covered with foliage and streets planted with trees that it began to look like an opening in a forest.¹⁰

A cross, in burnished gold and surrounded with roses, was placed on top of the Treaty Stone. The pedestal on which it stood was covered with a white cloth embroidered with crosses in different colours and inscribed with the motto 'God Bless the Pope', the base was encircled with roses. Between Thomond Bridge and Nicholas Street two triumphal arches were erected; on one of them had the words: 'Long live Pius the Ninth'. The entrance to Arthur's Quay, from Patrick Street, was very picturesque. Two large palm trees were planted there, with a large banner strung across. From the upper windows of Cleary's Hotel [Cruise's] on George's Street, a massive garland of leaves and flowers and coloured bunting stretched

across the road to the windows of Cannock & Co. At the Crescent the statue of Daniel O'Connell was covered with a canopy of flowers and foliage, while a vast garland, supported by poles, stretched from one side of the Crescent to the other. William Street was also decorated with foliage and the words 'God Bless the Pope' woven from wire and foliage hung across the street. Further up the street, workers from Matterson's and Shaw's put up their own ornamentations. The pig buyers from St. Mary's parish erected a grand triumphal arch opposite the Markets, and the houses in Cathedral Place were decorated with a tasteful display that eclipsed all the others of the kind in Limerick. At St. John's Cathedral a canopy was placed over the main entrance and flag poles were put up at each side. By evening the city was a sea of colour.¹¹

The arrangements for the procession through the streets on Sunday, 3 June, were as follows: the chief participants were the men of the Confraternity, its members being made up of every public body and class in Limerick. The only other groups to take part were the pupils of the Christian Brother's schools. The members of the Confraternity would march in two single columns - one on each side of the street. In between them, in the centre of road, would march the banner bearers, the Foresters Band and the Band of the Industrial School. The procession would start from outside the Redemptorist Church and proceed to the Cathedral by way of George's Street, William Street and down Cathedral Place.¹² Once the Pontifical High Mass¹³ was over the assembled Confraternity men would sing the 'Te Deum' before entering the church. Afterwards, the parade would make its way down John Street, over Baal's Bridge, on through Mary Street, down Bridge Street and on to Rutland, Patrick and George's Street and returning to the Redemptorist Church.¹⁴

On Sunday morning, 3 June, the people of the city awoke to find that it was raining persistently. At St. John's Cathedral the final preparations were made for the Papal Jubilee Mass. As 12 o'clock approached crowds of people entered the cathedral, some pulling up at the gates in horse and carriage. The Bishop, Rev. Dr. Butler and other members of the clergy entered by the sacristy door;

so also did the acting Mayor, Alderman John Quin, followed by the councillors in their robes, and the Mace bearers in their handsome uniforms.¹⁵ Outside the rain fell continuously throughout the afternoon. In the meantime Fr. Berghmann, the spiritual director of the Confraternity, after some consultation, arranged for the procession to be deferred until two o'clock. By now the streets were crowded with pedestrians, some of whom had travelled to Limerick by train to take part in the festivities. With no let-up in the rain it was agreed to postpone the procession until the following Sunday.¹⁶ But all was not lost, the Foresters Band and the Industrial Schools Band, and some of the local bands played throughout the day and evening. At 10 p.m. that night, tar barrels blazed from the top tower of St. Mary's Cathedral, lighting up the sky while people stood by amazed by the spectacle. The crowds stood around until the barrels burned out around midnight.¹⁷ That same day a burning effigy of the German Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, was dragged through the streets of Kilrush, County Clare.

Germany only came into existence as a nation state in 1871, and within two years Bismarck was responsible for a campaign against German Roman Catholics.¹⁸

Sunday, 10 June, was a beautiful day, the sun shone in mid-summer splendour. The street decorations had been renewed with increasing beauty. All the principal streets were spanned with fresh garlands and the triumphal arches were re-erected. The flags of several trades and nations could be seen hanging from the windows of houses; the fronts of many houses were enhanced by portraits of the Pope. Overall the appearance of the city created a gala atmosphere. Over 100,000 people thronged the streets and many of the visitors came by special trains from every direction. An excursion steamer came from Kilrush, with four hundred and fifty passengers who were entertained as they came up the Shannon by the local Kilrush Band. There were also a number of visitors from County Kerry.

Meanwhile, around one o'clock, the men



Effigy of Pius IX used in the Confraternity Procession in 1877

of the Confraternity began to assemble on the streets near the Redemptorist Church. As soon as they arrived they took up their positions, around their necks they wore the long green ribboned medal of membership. Next to come were the pupils of the Christian Brothers School, all in holiday attire and sporting red scarves and blue rosettes; and with them the Band of the Industrial Schools, followed by the boys of the institution.¹⁹ At 2 p.m. the procession began. Those carrying the banner of the Christian Brothers, a large painting of their founder Edmond Rice were first off, behind them came the Band of the Industrial School wearing their blue and white uniforms. Then followed the children from the Industrial School all neatly and uniformly clothed. Next were the pupils of the Christian Brother Schools. Following closely behind were the four thousand strong members of the Confraternity, led by a colour party carrying the 'national banner' a beautiful painting of St. Patrick on a rich green velvet background with fringes of gold. At the head of each section a banner was carried by a prefect or the sub-prefect; also wearing their medals and satin rosettes in the Papal colours, with a tinge of green. The men marched three abreast on each side of the road. The Forester's Band marched in the middle of the road with their green and gold caps, the choir singers of the Confraternity, the Congregated Trades Band, the Victualler's Band and the Boherbuoy Band. Following along at



Chancellor Otto von Bismarck

Centre of Street			
1 St Alexis	Founders' Band	1 St Aloysius	
2 St Boniface		2 " Camillo	
3 St Catherine		3 " Celine	
4 St Felix		4 " George	
5 St Henry		5 " John of God	
6 St James		6 " Lewis	
7 St M Magd	Big Banners	7 " Our Lady of Grace	
8 Phil Neri		8 " Pius	
9 St Stanislaus		9 " Vl Ferrer	
10 St Coleman		10 " Denis	
11 St Esmo.		11 " Bastian	
12 St Ivo		12 " Elzias	
13 St Gaul		13 " Fr Xavie	
14 St Man		14 " S W King	
15 St Adia	Singing Sections of	15 " Ambrose	
16 St Anne	St Rose of Lima and	16 " Anthony	
17 St August	St Cecilia	17 " Bartho	
18 St Camille		18 " Charles	
19 St Christo		19 " David	
20 St Dominic		20 " Fran. C.A.	
21 St Gabriel		21 " Amasi	
22 St Stanislaus		22 " Gregory	
23 James Linn	Big Banners	23 " James Greater	
24 St John		24 " Jos him	
25 St Kieran		25 " Julian	
26 St Laur		26 " Kellan	
27 St Malachy		27 " Lolo	
28 St Martin		28 " M. Pt	
29 St Matthias	Big Banners	29 " Matthew	
30 St Nicholas		30 " Michael	
31 Our Lady of Immac		31 " Norbert	
32 Our Lady of Lourdes		32 " Our Lady Immac.	
33 Our Lady Star of Sea		33 " Our Lady of P Sac.	
34 St Paul	Band	34 " Patrick	
35 St Polycarp		35 " Phillip	
36 St Rock		36 " Raphael	
37 St Synon		37 " Stephen	
38 St Theod	Banners	38 " Thomas	
39 St Theodo		39 " Alphonse	
40 St Thomas		40 " Andrew	
41 St. Bernard		41 " Bernard	
42 Divine Infant	Band	42 " B Peter	
43 St Victor		43 " S Sebast.	
44 St Basil		44 " Thomas of Aquin	
45 St Br nda		45 " Benedict	
46 St Celestine		46 " Bridget	
47 St Clement	Banners	47 " Clare	
48 St Cornelius		48 " Columbilla	
49 St Philbar		49 " Edward	
50 St Rochodo		50 " Francis of Sales	
51 Irish Mary	Band	51 " Ignatius	
52 St Jerome		52 " Isidore	
53 St Leonard		53 " John Baptist	
54 St Neman		54 " Maurio	
55 St Paul of Cross	Banners	55 " Our Lady of Victo	
56 St Simon		56 " Peter	
57 St Vincent de Paul		57 " Timothy	

Marching order of Confraternity sections, under the names of saints, at each side of the street, with bands and banner carriers in the centre, published in the *Munster News* 13 June 1877.

References

1. See: https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pope_Pius_IX
2. David Gilmore, *The Pursuit of Italy* (London, 2012).
3. Ibid.
4. *Church of Mount St. Alphonsus; 150th Year Anniversary Guide*, (Limerick, 2013).
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. *The Munster News*, 6 June, 1877.
10. Ibid.
11. *The Munster News*, 2 June, 1877.
12. *The Munster News*, 6 June, 1877.
13. *The Munster News*, 2 June, 1877.
14. Ibid.
15. *The Limerick Chronicle* 5 June, 1877.
16. *The Munster News*, 2 June, 1877.
17. *The Munster News*, 13 June, 1877.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. *Church of Mount St. Alphonsus- 150th Year Anniversary Guide*, (Limerick, 2013).

the end of the procession was a life size figure of Pius IX, clad in his pontifical robes. He was seated in a chair of state which was covered with crimson velvet bordered with gold. The chair was attached to a carpeted platform and was carried on the shoulders of members of the Confraternity. It was preceded by a number of young men dressed in uniforms resembling those seen in the Vatican. Limerick veterans of the Irish Brigade who had taken part in the defence of the Papal States in 1860 carried a large Papal flag. These veterans; George Mannix, Patrick Ryan, Thomas Ryan, Daniel Mullins, Daniel Doyle, Patrick Birch, John Peacon and Mr. Thornhill from Croom; all took part in the fighting at Spoleto.

It was estimated the procession was a mile long. The pavements along the entire route were packed with people of all ages and the windows of every house were occupied with spectators. On reaching the cathedral the assembly was addressed by the Bishop, Dr. Butler. After the Bishop had concluded his homily the Confraternity joined in the singing of the Te Deum [Thee, O God we praise], an early Christian hymn, after which they left the church and formed up in the same order as before. They made their way back to Mount St. Alphonsus by way of the Old Town, Rutland Street, Patrick Street, and George's Street. When they reached the Redemptorist Church the men dispersed and returned to their homes. The Superior General of the Redemptorists in Rome, Fr. Mauron, wrote to Fr. Berghmann to relay how impressed the Pope had been when he described the event to him.²⁰

Des Ryan is a native of Limerick city and has devoted much time to researching the history of the city and its people. He is the longest running contributor to the *Old Limerick Journal* and is an active member of the editorial committee. His wide ranging interests include Limerick Military history, Jewish Limerick and the Spanish Civil War.