

Fr. John Creagh C.S.S.R. Social Reformer 1870-1947

Fr. John Creagh is mostly remembered for his sermons on Jewish trading methods and the hostility towards the Jewish community that followed in Limerick just one hundred years ago. Historians, even amateur ones like myself, have also focused on January 1904 and the events which followed. We have failed to look at a broader picture of that era or Fr. Creagh's efforts to help the less well off in society, or to put him into a proper perspective: to look at him in the way that he should be looked at, that is, as a social reformer.

John Creagh, junior, was born on the 19th of August 1870. Originally he had been educated by the Christian Brothers, then his father sent him to St. Munchin's diocesan seminary, which at that time was a building on the corner of Hartstonge Street and Richmond Place (the Crescent), but when that closed around 1882,¹ he went back to the Christian Brothers. He entered the Redemptorists in 1884 at the age of fourteen. He studied for three years in the juvenate with the order before going to Liverpool, where he did his novitiate. He then went to Teignmouth, a seaside town in South Devon, and was professed on the 18th October 1888. He was ordained on the 1st September 1895. He spent the next five years as a professor of scripture and theology in England.²

It was around 1900 that John Creagh returned to Ireland. He was sent to Clonard Monastery in Belfast, where he taught history, and from there he went to Esker, Athenry, County Galway. He arrived in Limerick in mid-April 1902 to take over, from Fr. Tierney, the Directorship of the Holy Family Confraternity. One of the local newspapers commented that it would be a great source of compensation to the members to know that a "townsman of their own, in the person of the Rev. Fr. Creagh, the son of an old and worthy family, was to be the new Director."³ On the nights of Monday, April 28th and Tuesday 29th, Fr. Tierney gave his farewell address to the members of the Confraternity. Not only was he moved to tears, but many of the men were also effected by the emotional atmosphere that prevailed. Just before the meetings ended, Fr. Creagh was introduced to the men and was given the customary raised hand salute. In a short speech to the gathering, Fr. Creagh told them that he sympathised with them in their sorrow and also declared his fear of undertaking such work (as Director of the Confraternity), but trusted in the goodness of God to help him to continue the splendid work. He

by Des Ryan

said that, "if necessary, he was ready to lay down his life for the Confraternity."⁴ Fr. Creagh began his term of office by giving a series of lectures on local history, the story of St. Mary's Cathedral, which was drawn out over a period of a few weeks. During the course of the lectures he had an accident and was confined to his room. In the meantime, Fr. Campbell filled in for him. He was back on his feet again by late July, and on Sunday the 3rd of August, he gave a homily on the founder of the Redemptorist Order, St. Alophonsus Ligouri, at a special Mass for the occasion.

Friday, September 26th, was the day for the renewal of publicans licenses and the following magistrates were in attendance at the court house: Mr. John Guinane, the Mayor Mr. J.F. Barry, Mr. Poole Gabbet, and Dr. O'Shaughnessy D.L. Fr. Creagh, who was also present, received the permission of their worships to address them on the subject of the twin evils of drink and gambling in the city. "He had to bring under their notice," he said, "a crying evil in the city. He would not do so were he not responsible for the welfare of so many thousands of men." Limerick at that period was much smaller city that it is now, with a population of about 38,000 people, and an estimated 300 public houses. Mostly, Fr. Creagh was concerned with the illegal selling of alcohol during the hours in which public houses were supposedly closed. He told his captive audience that publicans were using numerous devices to flout the law, and this, he said, was going on all over the city. He then went on to outline how this was happening. Drink was being sold to men on their way to work, through the backdoors of public houses. If a public-house stood at the corner of a lane, the alcohol was passed out through the backdoor to the people down the lane. He knew even, he said, of porter being conveyed in a tub. There were also cases where parents sent their children to buy the drink and also cases where children bought drink themselves. These abuses were, according to Fr. Creagh, going on all over the city and he had witnessed some of them. On Sunday mornings, between 6.00 and 9.00 am, he pointed out, there were no policemen on the streets.

He knew of certain hotels which sold drink late at night and allowed gambling on their premises till all hours; gambling, he maintained, was also a problem on the city's streets. He need scarcely dwell on

the consequences for the city if this state of affairs was to continue.

Fr. Creagh then suggested again, with the permission of the magistrates, ways in which to remedy the situation. He said that there should be a complete isolation of a dwelling house from the licensed premises, that the magistrates should enforce the laws strictly and deal out the severest punishment to publicans who break them. It was a waste of time imposing fines on them because it was easy for them to make the money back. It had been said - but he did not believe it - that the magistrates were sometimes canvassed. It was, continued Fr. Creagh, his painful duty to bring these facts before the magistrates and he hoped that they would put an end to the practice of selling drinks out of hours; in doing so they would be contributing to the material, moral and social happiness of the people.

So, what was the magistrates response to all this? Dr. O'Shaughnessy was the first to speak. He thanked Fr. Creagh for his observations and suggestions; he agreed that there were problems, but there were also many difficulties, and if cases against publicans were dismissed, there was a reason for it. Mr. Guinane's response was to the effect that some of Fr. Creagh's suggestions would require legislation, for the law to be changed. The police, he maintained, were keeping an eye on the publicans, and that magistrates never dismissed a case except on very solid grounds. District-Inspector O'Hara, who was also present, objected to the tone of Fr. Creagh's remarks about wholesale drinking going on in the city on Sundays, but agreed that there was a connection between a public house with private living accommodation attached. It wasn't fair to comment on the police who, he said, had exceedingly difficult duties to perform. D-I. O'Hara was of the opinion that people brought drink home on Saturday nights to drink on Sunday, and that's why men were to be seen around the city on Sunday mornings with signs of drink on them. Mr. Guinane intervened to say that it would be no harm to change the law to the effect that no cottiered house should get a public license. Later on, after Fr. Creagh had thanked the magistrates and had withdrawn from the proceedings, D-I. O'Hara reminded the magistrates of a case where five men were caught in the hallway of a house and when questioned, said that they were going up stairs to see the lodgers and the prosecution failed. Although he wasn't going to take action this year to oppose the renewal of licenses against such businesses, he would, he said, next



Fr. Creagh and the bellringers of Mt. St. Alphonsus, c.1904

year if they weren't properly conducted.⁵

After reading an account of his statement to the magistrates in one of the local papers, Fr. Creagh decided to address two meetings of the men's confraternity on the Monday and Tuesday night of the following week. He spoke to the men in religious, if not biblical, tones. "You have been told," he said, "that drink is the enemy of the Cross; that the drunkard's god is his belly, as St. Paul says, and that the drunkard's end is perdition. I read in one of the papers this week that the conscience of these publicans should be appealed to. Appeal to their conscience, indeed! What appeals to their consciences is money - blood money - money, the price of souls - the money of Judas. Appeal to their conscience; nothing will appeal to them but the prison cell or the lash of the convict. Another paper says: "Is all this true? Give proof." How can it ask for proofs in the face of what the oldest magistrate on the Bench said when he stated that I had not exaggerated in the least. My own experience is proof. What I have seen with my own eyes is proof. I am not a liar. I must speak strongly to-night, because I am dealing with a frightful evil."

"We are told that there are houses not fit to be licensed, and that next year the licenses will be opposed. If they are not fit to be licensed now, why not oppose them at once and put down the evil as it should be put down. Seven o'clock (in the morning) is the legal opening hour, but men on their way to work before six o'clock can get drunk in certain houses in the town - I know them well. If you are vigilant and walk about the city on Sunday mornings, you cannot help but see men with the faces of drunkards, knocking at certain houses where they know they will obtain liquor. On Sunday nights drink is also sold out of hours. The poor men who are looking for drink early in the morning are to be pitied. I pity them from my heart. Medical men tell us that the man who takes drink in the morning goes down to

an early grave. It is not the respectable public houses that open during those hours, but it is publicans that sell the vilest stuff, which is nothing but pure poison that sets men out of their minds. When a man gives way to drink, he hardly knows what he is doing. His money, of course, runs out and when he has no money to buy drink, what do these publicans do? They give him drink ON CREDIT. Its not enough to starve the wife and children, but when a man is drinking thus his debts must run up, and therefore a millstone of debt is hung around his neck. May God forgive the publican who sells drink to any such man. The law of God and man binds a publican not to give drink to a man who has already to much drink taken."

As he reached the conclusion of his lecture, he referred to the sale of drink to children and to the fathers who sent their children to buy drink for them. Taking sips of it on the way home, he maintained, was how children acquired a taste for it, and they would, before they had reached the age of sixteen, be confirmed drunkards.

What did Fr. Creagh think was the remedy to all this? He told the men that "as long as God will give me breath in my body I will continue to fight this illegal sale of drink in this town." As an individual, he felt powerless, but he was certain that if "the men of the confraternity would grapple with this evil, it would be completely wiped out. Those in charge of the laws," he said "must do their duty, but apart from all the laws, we ourselves can put it down." He appealed to the men of the confraternity to band themselves together "to fight against the illegal sale of intoxicating drink." "We," he continued, "the men of the confraternity, represent the city. You come from different quarters of the city, and if you would only join together with one spirit, you would soon have no more of this evil in the town." Finally, he asked the men to make a promise that they would never break the law, that they would never drink in a

public house out of hours, weekday or Sunday, and to do all in their power to put down this crying evil. "In that way," he said, "you will render a service to yourselves, to your country and to your God."⁶

Fr. Creagh's lectures, and further remarks made by Dr. O'Shaughnessy in a letter to the *Munster News*, elicited a large response in letters to the local newspapers. The *Limerick Leader*, under a heading titled "Temperance Crusade" praised Fr. Creagh for his zeal and determination and the practical way he went about his great work.⁷ In another column, it reported that Fr. Creagh was about to start a series of lectures to the confraternity on the "History of the church in Australia." Meanwhile the debate on alcohol and the question of magistrates duty to control its abuses continued in the newspapers. It was said in the last issue of the *Limerick Leader* on December 31st, and incidentally New Years Eve, that in the United Kingdom, of which we were a part, that 162 million pounds was spent on drink and that out of this, Ireland contributed £13 million. The amount of licensed and unlicensed houses, it continued, was appalling and also the fact that more money was spent on drink then on food and clothing.⁸

So what was the end result of Fr. Creagh's efforts? Maybe we should let some of today's newspaper headlines, a hundred years later, local and national, answer that: "Liquor reforms may be Irish solution to Irish problem"⁹; "Alcohol is the main cause of Limerick homelessness"¹⁰; "Councils may get legal powers to control drink sales"¹¹; and finally, "How drink puts teens at high risk", an article in *The Irish Times* telling us that the earlier teenagers drink alcohol, the more likely that they will become alcoholics.¹² Does that sound familiar?

Now we will look at the emotive issue of Fr. Creagh and the Jewish community of Limerick. Was there a pogrom? Was there a mass exodus of the Jewish comm-

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unity from Limerick? The answer to those questions is no. The Jewish community began arriving in Limerick from about 1884 onwards, some settling here, others moving on. The census returns for month of March 1901 indicate that there were 31 Jewish families living in the city. By that time they had split into two congregations over the issue of money lending, had two synagogues and two rabbis, Elias B. Levin and Moses Velitzkin. Those who had opposed money lending were led by Louis Goldberg. This split was further exasperated during a row over the buying of a cemetery at Kilmurry on the Dublin road, the Goldberg faction being eliminated from having any say in the running of it.

On Monday night, 11th January 1904, John Creagh gave a sermon which was directed against the business transactions of this small community of Jewish immigrants. Some would say that the language he used was a bit strong and that it was anti-Jewish, but was it any stronger than that which he used against the publicans who sold drink illegally? In both cases he used the same method and nobody was named, publicans or members of the Jewish community, and in both cases their business practices were classed as evils. What we have to ask here is why he gave this lecture. Was he anti-Semitic? Evidence of his missionary work in Australia suggests that he wasn't a racist.¹³ Another suggestion was that local business people prompted him. I haven't seen any proof to support that theory. So what did motivate him? I have pondered this question over a long period of time, and I think, after twenty years, I have found the answer.

Again, we have to go back to 1902, to October 1st. Fr. Creagh is reading the *Limerick Leader* which contains an account of his lecture to the men's confraternity on the sale of alcohol. Something else in the newspaper catches his eye. Under a heading of "Hebrews in Limerick", the *Leader* reprinted the following from *The Telegram* newspaper, Syracuse, New York: In his tour through Ireland, M.A. Hartigan made a close observation in every big town and city he visited, and in talking about the scenes and incidents he witnessed, he related one odd feature of life in the little green isle,

that he said was a surprise to him, and that was the large number of Hebrews who are to be found in Limerick. "In the city of Limerick," said Mr. Hartigan, "there is a large colony of Hebrews, and all of them are making money fast, while the Irish have to be content with making a few shillings. The Hebrews who live in Limerick are thrifty, saving and enterprising, and in the business of peddling they make money fast. They travel from town to town as do the Hebrew peddlers in this country (America), selling notions and fancy articles and household articles, and earn a good livelihood. I was surprised at the number of Hebrews that I met in Limerick. The Hebrews get along well with the natives, and they are on the most friendly terms with them. In other towns in Ireland, you will find Hebrews who make a good living."

Mr. Hartigan went on to say that if England established industries in Ireland there would be less emigration. Irish people were forced to leave their native land and go to America to make a living. He also blamed wealthy absentee landlords for not developing their lands and giving the Irish people a chance to make money. American investment to develop industries in Ireland, he maintained, would help stop the influx of Irish immigrants to America.¹⁴

This, I believe, was the motivation for Fr. Creagh's sermon in January 1904. After that there were a number of assaults on members of the Jewish community and it is said that people stopped dealing with them, that they were boycotted and that the boycott lasted two years (1904-1906) and during that time, eighty members of the community left Limerick. The census returns for 1901, as I have already mentioned, show that there were 31 Jewish families living here. Some of these had lodgers who were also Jewish. Although there were 31 Jewish families in Limerick at that time, there were only 27 family names, as some of them were brothers, married with their own families. In a letter written by Rabbi Levin in July 1904, he gave a figure of 24 families. That means that 6 families had left since 1901, some possibly because of the boycott. Later that year, in December, Rabbi

Levin's congregation took over the lease of the Goldberg synagogue. The 1911 census returns, and other records, show that there were at least 22 Jewish families living here at that time and that 13 of those were from the original community. The same census returns also show that the events of 1904-1906 did not deter new Jewish families, or stop some of the lodgers from getting married and settling here. Even in 1911, Rabbi Levin was involved in a dispute with the Limerick Workhouse over the treatment he had received when he went to visit a sick Jewish inmate, a man by the name of Cohen.¹⁵

When war began between Britain and Germany in August 1914, the Jewish community put a notice in a local newspaper stating that they were Russian, and not German, Jews.¹⁶ At the synagogue, prayers were said by the new Rabbi, Rev. J. Rabinovitz, for a just and speedy end to the war.¹⁷

Fr. John Creagh left Limerick to do missionary work in the Philippines in May 1906. He was one of the founder members of the Redemptorist Philippine missions. This was just a few years after the Spanish-American War and there was a shortage of priests in the area. Later on he went to Australia and then to New Zealand. Before he went he had set up the Workmens Industrial Store, where Irish-made clothing could be bought, and a savings bank, in order to encourage thrift amongst the members of the Confraternity. This bank lasted until 1932.¹⁹ It is thought that he never returned to Ireland, but on Friday, August 28th, 1925, he arrived in back Limerick for a holiday. The following Monday and Tuesday night he addressed the members of the Confraternity on the subject of his missionary work in the Philippines, Australia and New Zealand. John Creagh died on the 24th January 1947 at Lewisham Hospital, Wellington, New Zealand.

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