The Franciscan House in Thurles

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In the medieval period the Irish Franciscans had a friary at Cashel, as well as two, that at Galbally and a short-lived one at Killeenagallive, in the diocese of Emly. The friars continued to live near Galbally until well into the eighteenth century when they transferred to Mitchelstown in the diocese of Cloyne. The last friar of Galbally died there, probably in 1804. In the meantime the friars of Cashel had moved to Thurles.

The Franciscan friary at Cashel dates to about 1265 and was known as Hacket’s Abbey after its founder, Lord William Hacket. The friary remained loyal to Anglo-Irish principles down the centuries and for many years was the head house of a custody which included the friaries of Clonmel, Kilkenny, New Ross, Waterford and Youghal. It became Observant in 1538, just before it was officially suppressed and rented to Edmund Butler, archbishop of Cashel. The friars were, however, able to remain in the area until about 1550. They returned in 1618 and were there until the Cromwellian period. By 1658 they had re-established themselves in the region, since the friary was one of the few to which a Guardian was appointed at the provincial chapter of that year. Father Peter Comin obtained a chalice for the friary in 1663, and Francis Saul, O.F.M., obtained a pyx around the same period. The chalice is now in Carrickbeg friary, while the pyx is in the Hunt Museum attached to the N.I.H.E. in Limerick.

The friars seem to have left Cashel soon afterwards. The title of guardian of Cashel remained in use until 1872 but was purely titular. There are no substantial ruins of the medieval friary in Cashel, although at least eight pieces of sculpture belonging to it still exist in the town.

When references to Cashel become scarce, the name of the friary of Derrynaulfan appears. It occurs in the Irish Franciscan Chapter Bills from 1676 to 1724, but is always given as vacant. This place of refuge has been identified with a site on an island of that name in the bog of Lurgoe, near Horse and Jockey. It has been suggested that the friars of Cashel withdrew to Lurgoe during the Cromwellian persecution, and again at the time of the Titus Oates Plot. From there to Thurles would be an easy step.

The first suggestion that the Franciscans were in Thurles is found in the will of John Grace of Brittas in 1684. By 1714 they were renting a house from George Mathew. The Mathews had come to Thurles in 1620 when Lady Thurles married

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3 This is the opinion of the doyen of Cashel historians, the late Father Walter Skehan. My thanks are due to Fathers C. O'Dwyer and M. Dooley of Saint Patrick's College, Thurles, for their help with the Skehan papers. Efforts have been made to identify Derrynaulfan as Derrynullane near Ballindangan in North Cork, or as the Dominican foundation at Derbivan near Glanworth.
4 Copy in the Skehan papers kept in the Cashel Archdiocesan Archives in Thurles.
5 Ibid., a brief history of the Mathew family may be found in the booklet Blessing and Solemn Opening of the Church of St. Joseph and St. Brigid, Thurles 1971, p. 16.

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George Mathew. The family occupied Thurles Manor and Castle until about 1740, when George Mathew the Younger conformed nominally to the Church of Ireland and went to live at Thomastown. In practice he and the family remained Catholic until the next generation. Thus in 1744 George Mathew retained John Wall, O.F.M., as his chaplain at £25 per annum. At this same period Fathers Valentine Delany, O.F.M., and John Hogan, O.F.M., were reported to be living in Thurles, probably at Friar Street, while Father John Ryan, O.F.M., was an occasional visitor in the town.

The number of Franciscans resident in Thurles was only two or three for the rest of the century. Fr. John Hogan, O.F.M., probably remained there until his death in 1765. Father John Ryan, O.F.M., died in 1760, while Father Denis Bourke, O.F.M., was in Thurles from 1754 to 1759. At this time we have the first evidence of the sort of work being done by the Thurles Franciscans. They helped in hearing confessions and saying Mass in the neighbouring parishes, and were available to counsel those in trouble. They also acted as advisers and confessors to the local clergy. Fathers Thomas White, O.F.M., and Thomas O’Donnell, O.F.M., took the oath of allegiance in Thurles in 1775. Father James (Francis) Ryan, O.F.M., came to Thurles soon after his ordination in Belgium in 1786. At about the same time Father Timothy (Michael) O’Brien, O.F.M., was a curate in Thurles and later at Borrisoleigh. Father John (Anthony) Laffan, O.F.M., worked in Thurles during the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Father John (Felix) O’Brien, O.F.M., was there from 1827 until 1830, and is reputed to have died in Mexico in 1836.

The most famous friar in Thurles during the last century was Father James McNamara, who received but hardly ever used the name Theodosius when he joined the Franciscans in 1834. Some of the older people still recall him as Friar Johnny Mac, or occasionally Father Mack or Mick. He was born on the 19th September, 1796, near Fedamore in County Limerick, and was a late vocation when he began his novitiate in the Italian friary of Cori. He was professed on the 19th May, 1825, and was ordained in Rome just a year and a day later. On his return to Ireland he was assigned to Limerick friary for a couple of years before coming to Thurles in 1830 or 1832. He settled in immediately and never left, even though he lived on his own for many years. He slowly became an intrinsic part of the local community, being an adviser to the archbishop and the clergy, an able confessor at the Cathedral and a friend of a large section of the population in the huge area covered by the Thurles quest. Later in life he suffered from ill-health and became a little difficult to live with. He died on the 16th December, 1881, and is buried in Saint

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6 Inquiry into the State of Popery in 1744: Thurles.
8 Information in the Skehan Papers, Thurles.
9 Based on various Franciscan sources. While Father James was in Thurles, his official titles in the various Irish Franciscan Chapter Bills were: 1830, Guardian of Castlelyons; 1831, Guardian of Ardfer; 1832-37, Guardian of Cashel; 1840-42, Guardian of Nenagh; 1843-57, Guardian of Cashel, and also President of Thurles in 1848-53; 1860-66, Guardian of Nenagh; 1867-69, Guardian of Castlelyons and President of Thurles; 1870-72, Guardian of Clane—see note 2 above.
Mary's, Thurles. As a final twist of fate, the wrong year, 1883, was engraved on his tombstone!

When Father James arrived in Thurles, his companion was Father Peter Higgins, O.F.M. Father William (Peter) Quirke, O.F.M., arrived as superior soon after and began to keep proper records. The Minister Provincial, Father Henry Hughes, came to Thurles on visitation in 1838. On the instruction of the Minister General, he was trying to initiate certain reforms among the Irish Franciscans. These included such matters as keeping churches and sacristies clean, proper observance of rubrics during divine services, the need for the religious to lead a common life, the necessity of a good library and regular study, the keeping of proper accounts, and the legal obligation on friars to make a will governing the property which they held in trust for the Franciscan Order. In regard to the situation in Thurles, he ordered the keeping of account books, the roofing of the stable, and especially that consideration be given to the erection of a small oratory where the friars might say Mass.

This visitation reveals much about the way the friars lived in Thurles. Their residence was a small cottage in Friar Street. Parts of this have been incorporated in the modern photographic studio which stands beside Dr. Moloney's house. The cottage consisted of some bedrooms and a living room. It was only much later that a tiny private oratory was added. The friars had a small staff: a lady housekeeper and cook, a handy-man, and a boy. Income came from a little market-gardening, mainly onions and potatoes grown in a field behind the friary, and from the sale of other farm products, especially manure. Father James kept pigs—he bought these at the pig fair of Urlingford and sold them to local butchers. His knowledge of pig-rearing was considerable and many local farmers came to him for advice. Another source of income was the spiritual services provided by the friars: mass stipends, stole fees, and gifts for various blessings. One other major source of finance was the quest which was done in a huge region bounded by a line running from Ballylanders to Drangan to Urlingford to Templemore to Kilcommon to Herbertstown and back to Galbally, an area nearly forty miles long and twenty miles wide. When the quest was at its height in the 1600s, it included such places as Templemore, Drangan, Knockainy, Kilcummin, Ballylarry, Ulla, Golden, Boherlahan, Borrisoleigh, Moykarky, Loughmore, Castlelucy, Gortnaheo, Cappawhite, Holy Cross, Mine, Two Mile Borris, Upperchurch, Nicker, Herbertstown, Cashel, Clonulny, Knockaville, Knocklong, Lattin, Cullen, Drom, Inch, Templebracden, Ballylanders, Killeely, New Birmingham, Moyne, Hospital, Solohead, Doon, Inch and Galbally. The friars would hire a pony and trap on a Sunday or a feastday. Having arrived at the church where they were going to quest, one of them would make an appeal from the altar.

10 The Thurles House Account-books are now in the Franciscan Library, Killiney (FLK). C100 covers the period 1838-47 and is in the hand of Father Quirke to October 1840, Father de Courcy to March 1843 and Father McNamara to 1847. C101 covers 1847-65 and is in the hand of Father McNamara. C102 covers 1865-75 and was rather badly kept by Father McNamara until Father Fitzgerald took over in 1872. C102 was begun by Father Fitzgerald in 1875 and taken over by Father Degette in 1884. It ends with the paying off of the staff in 1890-91.

11 FLK C100 under 1838.

12 FLK C102 under 1866-69. The original spelling of placenames has been retained.
The friars would then wait outside the chapel after Mass and the people would volunteer offerings in kind—oats and occasionally wheat in the area of the Thurles quest. The friars would take some of this home but would usually arrange for the remainder to be sold. The country quest from Thurles was already well established by the 1830s and continued down to the 1880s. A town quest in Thurles began in 1849 and continued until the closure of the friary.

The financial administration of a small house like Thurles was rather complicated during the last century. Some monies were used to pay common debts: wages, small sums for the expenses of the Minister Provincial, money for the students at Saint Isidore's College in Rome, and repairs to the house. Each friar had his own funds which he used for food and drink, snuff and tobacco, holidays and travel, even for his own hosts and wine for Mass. The lack of common life may seem strange to us today. It was the result of gradual adaptation to centuries of persecution and it took nearly fifty years of effort before it was replaced by real community living. The account books remind us that life was more primitive then than it is today. Buckets had to be purchased for the transport of water, the roof had to be rethatched regularly, turf had to be brought in for heating, while candies had to be obtained for light at night.

At this period the main work of the friars continued to be that of hearing confessions both in the Cathedral and also in their little house, as well as supplying for the sick priests in outlying areas. There was no possibility of their having a public church, both from a legal viewpoint, since the house was not a full canonical foundation, and also from the pastoral aspect in that all worship was centered on the cathedral. This tradition of worship only at the cathedral has only recently been broken by the erection of the Church of Saint Joseph and Saint Brigid. The friars said mass occasionally in the Workhouse, which had been erected in 1840. After 1860 they seem to have served as full-time chaplains there, using their own vestments and chalices which they kept in the Workhouse.14

Following the visitation by Father Hughes, O.F.M., in 1838, Father William Quirke, O.F.M., continued as superior until his death on the 8th August, 1841. His successor was Father Patrick (Bonaventure) de Courcy, O.F.M. He was replaced by Father James McNamara, O.F.M., towards the end of 1842, and he retained this post until 1872. Various friars assisted him during these years. Father John (Francis) Forde, O.F.M., was assigned to Thurles in 1847 but died before he could arrive.15 Father Joseph Hally, O.F.M., served there up to 1852. Father Anthony Dardis, O.F.M., the Minister Provincial, came to Thurles on visitation in 1853. He had brought pressure to bear on Father James so that the friary would be kept in good repair and was delighted to comment on the improvements which had been carried out. Soon the financial difficulties of the friary eased considerably.16

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13 P. Conlan, O.F.M., Franciscan Ireland, Dublin and Cork 1978, pp. 49-57.
14 The Catholic Directory gives one of the diocesan clergy as chaplain in the Workhouse during all this period, while Franciscan sources, in particular the account books, show that the friars were the chaplains. In this, as in other instances, the Catholic Directory reflected the legal rather than the real situation.
15 FLK C101.
16 FLK C101 from 1864 on.
A Belgian Franciscan, Father Bernard van Loo, was appointed visitor of the Irish friars in 1857. His visitation was important in the long-term history of the Franciscans, but he had few comments to make about Thurles.\textsuperscript{17} The Minister Provincial had reported in the previous year that Father James was the sole religious living in the friary of Cashel, \textit{i.e.} Thurles.\textsuperscript{18} In the aftermath of Father van Loo’s visitation, the new Minister Provincial, Father Laurence Cosgrove, O.F.M., decided to close the house in Thurles, on the plea that Father James would be more useful elsewhere and better able to live a religious life.\textsuperscript{19} Archbishop Leahy protested vehemently against this decision. Thurles was the sole remaining link between the Franciscans and the archdiocese of Cashel. Priests from the friary had done tremendous work in helping both in the Cathedral and throughout the diocese. They had often accompanied the archbishop during his visitation of the diocese. This was especially true of Father James, who had served faithfully in Thurles for over twenty-five years. Dr. Leahy added that he would consider requesting that Father James should leave the Franciscans and join the diocesan clergy if the Thurles residence were closed. The archbishop pointed out that the site had been given to the friars by the Mathew family and that the closure would violate their wishes.

In addition to writing directly to the Minister Provincial, Dr. Leahy also contacted Dr. Cullen, the Archbishop of Dublin, who persuaded Father Cosgrove, O.F.M., to delay the closure. Both Dr. Leahy and Dr. Cullen approached Propaganda Fide in Rome. Propaganda pressurized the Minister General of the friars. Negotiations proceeded. The friars stressed that their main aim was to improve the standards of religious observance by closing small houses. Dr. Leahy countered with the suggestion that he would welcome another Franciscan in Thurles. He would give diocesan faculties to this second priest, something which his predecessors had never granted. The friars accepted this offer. They also requested permission to have a private oratory in their residence. Dr. Leahy agreed to this. The Delegate General in Rome, Irenaeus a Plonis, O.F.M., wrote to the Irish Minister Provincial on the 3rd January, 1860. He recommended that the friars remain in Thurles and accept the gesture made by Archbishop Leahy. Continued residence in the town would do nothing but good for the Order. There was no possibility of obtaining permission for a public church, but circumstances would possibly change in the future. Father Cosgrove, O.F.M., accepted the recommendation. Father James, O.F.M., continued in Thurles on his own, since it took some years before a companion could be found to share the friary with him.

In those years the friars held the property in which they lived in their own name. Through long years of residence, legal ownership of the Franciscan house and land in Thurles had passed to Father James. The Minister Provincial, as part of the reform

\textsuperscript{17} P. Conlan, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 52-53.
\textsuperscript{18} The Franciscan General Archives in Rome (GAdf), MS Hibernia 5, f. 77.
of the Irish friars, decided that all property be transferred into the joint trustee-ship of a group of friars. Father James initially refused to sign over the Thurles property, but Archbishop Leahy persuaded him to change his mind.20 On 18 October 1861 Father James signed an indenture making over "the dwelling place and plot of land (around one Irish acre) in Garryvohceen street to Fathers Bonaventure Murphy, O.F.M., John Toomey, O.F.M., and Edmund Hogan, O.F.M., for the sum of ten shillings ... they would hold it in trust and he would have the exclusive use of it for the rest of his natural life, and to be theirs afterwards". Father John Toomey decided to leave the Order in 1866 and a second indenture was signed; Father Toomey’s name was replaced by that of the Minister Provincial, Father Michael Aloysius Cavanagh, O.F.M.

Father James began to suffer repeated illnesses and was replaced as Superior in 1872, by Father James (Peter) Fitzgerald, O.F.M. The next President, Father James Gavan, O.F.M., died in office in 1880. He drew up a list of the altar plate belonging to the friars in 1875.21 In the Workhouse were a ciborium obtained by Father James McNamara, O.F.M., on the 27th March, 1865, and a chalice bought by Father William Quirk, O.F.M., in 1838—the ciborium is now in the Franciscan Friary, Multyfarnham, while the chalice is in the Franciscan House of Studies, Killiney. There were two chalices in the friars’ oratory. One had been purchased for Cashel friary by Father Peter Comin, O.F.M., in 1663. After the closure of Thurles it passed into the possession of the Jackman family, and was presented by them to the friary of Carrick-on-Suir in 1933. The other chalice had been given to Clonmel friary by Francis and Catherine Moroney in 1720, and has since been returned to Clonmel.

In the early 1880s Thurles friary went into decline. Fathers James McNamara and James Gavan died. Father John (Jarlath) Kelly, O.F.M., better known as a novelist of some repute, was Superior for a short while until he was replaced by Father William (Daniel) Murphy, O.F.M. Little care was taken over the administration of the house until Father George (Pacificus) Dogette, O.F.M., was appointed Superior in 1884. A Louthman, he was born in 1845 but did not enter the Order until he was thirty years old. After his ordination in 1881, he served in Multyfarnham, from whence he came to Thurles. He returned to Multyfarnham after the closure of Thurles in 1892, and died in Dublin in 1918.

Father Dogette, O.F.M., began a vigorous campaign to rectify the state of the affairs of the friars in Thurles. By 1885 the house accounts were breaking even, but it was not until 1890 that all outstanding debts had been paid. A new housekeeper, Bessy Downey, was employed, together with a workman. Brother Anthony (Bolger), O.F.M., helped for a number of years. By now the efforts to reform the Irish Franciscans were reaching a climax.22 The Minister Provincial in Ireland was extremely keen to prove both his zeal for reform and the shortage of priests to staff the Irish friaries. An obvious way of doing this was to close the only house where a

20 Leahy to Dr. Cullen, 8 April 1861, in Dublin Diocesan Archives. The indentures of 18 October 1861 and 10 November 1866 are in IPAofM (Dublin), MS L144.
21 FLK C103.
22 P. Conlan, op. cit., pp. 55-57.
friar was living on his own, with a housekeeper,23 and move him to another place where he could live a better religious life in community.

The visitor of the Irish Franciscans in 1891 was Father Aidan MacCarthy, O.F.M., a member of the English province. Following the provincial chapter, the capitular congress met in Dublin and on the 15th January, 1892, it was decided to apply to the Minister General for permission to abandon the Thurles residence.24 There is a verbal tradition that Father Aidan, O.F.M., forced the Irish friars into this decision, but a letter from Father P. J. Cleary, O.F.M., Minister Provincial, to the general curia in Rome on the 23rd January, 1892, shows that the Irish friars left Thurles of their own free will. A letter had been received from Dr. Croke, Archbishop of Cashel, objecting to the decision to close Thurles residence. A sudden withdrawal would be gravely inconvenient for the archbishop, since Father Dogette, O.F.M., said Mass daily at the Workhouse, which was near the friary but far from the cathedral. Further, he acted as confessor to about fifty Ursuline Sisters. A delay until July would be essential. The Minister Provincial commented that Dr. Croke was only concerned about his own convenience, and that he had always been opposed to the friars.25 He had repeatedly refused permission for a small public chapel or oratory for the friars in Thurles. When the parish priest of Tipperary town had invited the friars to make a foundation there, Dr. Croke had rejected the idea. The Minister General was aware of how short-handed the Irish friars were and that it would be a serious inconvenience to leave even one friar in Thurles, especially since they were trying to live a more regular life in other convents. Father Dogette, O.F.M., had just been appointed Guardian of the community in Multyfarnham. All the members of the provincial definitory were in favour of closing the house in Thurles and would agree to remain there only if Dr. Croke gave permission for a small public chapel.

Dr. Croke tried to use his influence at Propaganda Fide in Rome in order to bring pressure on the Franciscans.26 The friars would not change their decision. Father Dogette, O.F.M., went to Multyfarnham. The housekeeper was paid off. On the instructions of W. Carrigan, a Thurles solicitor, the property was auctioned by J. G. Mochler on the 22nd July, 1892, and was purchased by Mr. B. Jackman for £485.27 Thus came to an end the Franciscan presence in the town of Thurles and the archdiocese of Cashel.

23 The Franciscan authorities in Rome conducted an official investigation into the number of housekeepers in the Franciscan houses in Ireland in 1890-91. On Thurles see GAofm, MS Hibernia 4, ff. 263-5.
24 The minutes of the capitular congress are in IPAofm (D), MS P27 and in GAofm, MS Hibernia 4, f. 339. The letter from Father Cleary to the Minister General is in GAofm, MS Hibernia 4, ff. 434-5, with a draft copy in IPAofm (D), MS L144. See also Father Cleary to the Minister General, 19 May 1892, in which he presses for a decision, in GAofm, MS Hibernia 4, ff. 377-8.
25 A possible reference to the dispute between Dr. Croke and the Italian Franciscans in New Zealand, when he broke up their mission and forced them to leave the country. This dispute and the one under discussion are not given due consideration in M. Tierney, O.S.B., Croke of Cashel, Dublin 1976.
26 Domenico Jacobini, secretary of Propaganda Fide, to the Minister General, 30 May 1892, urging that the friary of Cashel (sic) should be retained, in GAofm, MS Hibernia 4, f. 393.
27 IPAofm (D), MS L144, and FLK C100. Mr. Jackman was a brother of Father John (Alphonsus) Jackman, O.F.M., and opened a medical practice on the site—at present it is a photographic studio.