

# The Appointment of Catholic Bishops to Killaloe Diocese, 1819-1851

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In the early part of the 19th century up to 1829 there was no precise method for the recommendation of candidates for bishoprics in Ireland. Some vacancies were filled on the recommendation of a single bishop. In other cases suggestions came from the bishops of the province, the parish priests of the diocese, or a variety of other sources. In about one-third of the appointments made during the period 1801-1829 only one name was supplied to the Roman Congregation de Propaganda Fide, which was in charge of Irish affairs. In roughly a similar number of instances one candidate was so clearly favoured by the evidence that Propaganda did not have an effective choice. Finally, in slightly less than one-third of the appointments Propaganda had to make the decision because the evidence from Ireland did not favour any one candidate.<sup>1</sup>

## Patrick McMahon

The bishop of Killaloe in 1819 was James O'Shaughnessy, who resided at Mogullane, Newmarket-on-Fergus. He had been appointed coadjutor bishop in 1798 and succeeded Michael Peter McMahon, O.P., in 1807. In 1819, when he was 73 years old, he decided to apply for a coadjutor on the ground of serious infirmity which made it impossible for him to attend to his pastoral obligations.<sup>2</sup> However, even an active man in good health would have found it difficult to look after a huge diocese which extended from Kinnitty to Loop Head. In 1834 it was the fifth largest diocese in Ireland with a population of 359,585 Catholics.<sup>3</sup>

In 1817 a proposal to regulate the method of selecting Irish Bishops was sent from Ireland to Propaganda but eventually rejected on the ground that it would place too much power in the hands of the diocesan clergy.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, when Bishop O'Shaughnessy was preparing to ask Propaganda for a coadjutor, he decided to consult the parish priests of his diocese. Because of a shortage of priests in the diocese at this period, all age groups were represented among the parish priests, many of whom had been appointed very soon after ordination. This meeting was held in the town of Killaloe on 12 January 1819 and its decisions were immediately communicated for publication to the *Dublin Evening Post*<sup>5</sup> and *Clare Journal*<sup>6</sup> by the meeting's secretary, Rev. Ambrose O'Connor, P.P. Nenagh.

The meeting in Killaloe was attended by 45 out of the 48 parish priests in the diocese, and 41 of these voted in a secret ballot for Dean Patrick McMahon, P.P. Quin. In an editorial comment on Fr. O'Connor's letter under the heading "Domestic Nomination", the *Dublin Evening Post* clearly regarded the meeting in Killaloe as a milestone. "It proves that among the Catholic Hierarchy, the principle so long advocated in this Journal, and

<sup>1</sup>John H. Whyte, "The Appointment of Catholic Bishops in Nineteenth-century Ireland", *Catholic Historical Review*, April 1962, pp. 13-14.

<sup>2</sup>*Propaganda Fide Archives, Acta*, vol. 182 (1819), 168r.

<sup>3</sup>Donal A. Kerr, *Peel, Priests and Politics*, Oxford 1982, p. 33.

<sup>4</sup>Whyte, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>5</sup>*Dublin Evening Post*, 16 Jan. 1819.

<sup>6</sup>*Clare Journal*, 18 Jan. 1819.

so popular among the Second Order of the Clergy, and so necessary as an admission of their rights, has made the most rapid advances." The *Clare Journal* reports also referred to Bishop O'Shaughnessy's willingness "to restore to the clergy of his diocese their long lost privileges by giving them the power of election." At the same meeting the bishop promised to re-establish the chapter of canons, a promise which remained unfulfilled until 1903.

Two points about the Killaloe meeting are worthy of note. Firstly, a report on the voting at the meeting was immediately communicated to the press by the meeting's secretary. Secondly, it seemed to be taken for granted that the choice of the priests would be confirmed automatically by Propaganda. Indeed, the first brief report on the meeting in the *Clare Journal*<sup>7</sup> stated that Dean McMahon had been *appointed* coadjutor bishop.

On 15 January Bishop O'Shaughnessy wrote to Propaganda requesting the appointment of Dean McMahon as his coadjutor. The documents in the *Acta* of Propaganda<sup>8</sup> do not contain his letter but give its main points. It is clear that its emphasis was rather different from that in the newspaper reports and no reference appears to have been made to the voting at the Killaloe meeting. However, a request for Dean McMahon's appointment was included signed by 72 priests, including parish priests, curates and religious. Two bishops of the province, Bishop Tuohy of Limerick and Bishop Archdeacon of Kilfenora, also wrote to Propaganda stating that Dean McMahon was endowed with all the qualities necessary in a bishop.

In the submissions to Propaganda there is no hint of problems or dissensions in the diocese. However, there was strong resentment at the favour shown by Bishop O'Shaughnessy to a number of his nephews who were priests—and this resentment became more marked in the 1820s, when Bishop McMahon was seen as the focal point of the anti-O'Shaughnessy group. The Canon Clancy Papers in the Killaloe Diocesan Archives contain a copy of a letter from Fr. Francis Stenson of Newmarket-on-Fergus to Propaganda. This letter, dated 5 July 1819, was a clear attempt to block Dean McMahon's appointment. "He [McMahon] is at the head of an insubordinate turbulent set of priests.... He is heavy, without activity or energy either of mind or body. Through life he has shown an incapacity for public instruction; he neither preaches, teaches, or instructs...." Francis Stenson was a nephew of Bishop O'Shaughnessy and was in charge of Newmarket-on-Fergus parish, in which the bishop himself resided. As there is no reference to the letter in the Propaganda dossier, it is likely that it did not arrive in Rome until after the appointment was made.

At a General Congregation of Propaganda on 2 August 1819, Bishop O'Shaughnessy's request was considered and the decision was taken to recommend to the Pope that Patrick McMahon be appointed. No other candidate was considered. The Pope gave his approval on 8 August and the brief of appointment was issued on 24 August 1819.<sup>9</sup>

The new bishop had been educated at the Irish College, Nantes. He was appointed parish priest of Quin in 1790 and Dean, a position in importance next after the bishop, in 1814. In 1819 he was almost 60 years of age, which is rather surprising in view of the fact that he was chosen to assist an ailing bishop. Furthermore, as Bishop O'Shaughnessy continued as bishop until his death in August 1829, Bishop McMahon was almost 70 years of age when he became bishop of Killaloe. He continued to live at Wellpark, Quin.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup>*Clare Journal*, 14 Jan. 1819.

<sup>8</sup>*Propaganda Fide Archives, Acta*, vol. 182 (1819), 168r.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 182r.; Rev. J. Clancy, "Patrick MacMahon, Bishop of Killaloe 1829-1836", *Molua* 1941, 28.

<sup>10</sup>John Clancy, "The Episcopal Succession of Killaloe, 1616 to Modern Times", *Nth. Munster Antiq. J.*, 2 (1940-41), 116-117.



## Patrick Kennedy

Following conflicts in various dioceses about appointments during the 1820s new proposals were submitted by the Irish bishops in 1829. These proposals were accepted by Propaganda and given legal standing in a decree of 1 June 1829.<sup>11</sup> They were to regulate episcopal appointments in Ireland for the remainder of the century. Every step in the process was now carefully laid down, with slightly different regulations when a diocese was vacant or when a coadjutor was being appointed. Where a coadjutor was involved the bishop of the diocese summoned the parish priests together and presided as each cast his vote in secret ballot. The names of the three priests receiving the highest number of votes were sent to Propaganda. After the parish priests had made their choice, the metropolitan (in the case of Killaloe diocese, the Archbishop of Cashel) met with the bishops of the province and forwarded their comments on the candidates to the Holy See. The bishops of the province were not authorised to suggest further candidates themselves.

In November 1834 Bishop McMahon applied to Rome for permission to start the procedures for the appointment of a coadjutor with the right of succession. The reasons he gave were poor health and advancing years. His poor health about this time is confirmed by reports in the *Clare Journal*. In early September 1834 he became very seriously ill and for a while was on the point of death. And in early December of the same year Bishop Ryan of Limerick had to deputise for him at a reception in the Ursuline Convent, Ennis.<sup>12</sup>

By mid-December 1834 Bishop McMahon had not received a reply from Rome to his request. However, as his health was deteriorating and anticipating a positive answer, he decided to hold a meeting of the parish priests in accordance with the provisions of the decree of 1829. This meeting took place on 15 December 1834 at Newmarket-on-Fergus. All the parish priests were present except three, who could not travel because of illness. Bishop McMahon presided, while four other bishops were also present—Archbishop Slattery of Cashel, Bishop Murphy of Cork, Bishop Egan of Kerry and Bishop Ryan of Limerick. The presence of these four bishops is rather surprising as it was not required by the 1829 decree. Perhaps they had hoped to have the required meeting of the bishops of the province immediately after the parish priests' vote, but were unable to do so because three members were absent, the bishops of Cloyne & Ross, Waterford, and Kilfenora.<sup>13</sup>

Bishop McMahon's report of the meeting to Rome was extremely brief and simply gave the names of the three priests who were chosen—Patrick Kennedy, P.P. Birr; Charles Fahy, P.P. Tulla, and Daniel Vaughan, P.P. Killaloe. In this he fulfilled the minimum requirements of the 1829 decree. Without expressly adverting to the fact he gave the names in the order of the parish priests' choice. On the day after the meeting newspaper readers in Ireland got a clearer statement than that sent to Rome—Patrick Kennedy, dignissimus; Charles Fahy, dignior; Daniel Vaughan, dignus.<sup>14</sup> A report of the Newmarket-on-Fergus meeting, the same as that sent to Rome, is preserved in the archives of Cashel Archdiocese. Bishop McMahon's signature is clearly that of a very feeble person.<sup>15</sup>

Almost two months elapsed before the bishops of Cashel province were able to meet. When they finally got together in Dublin in mid February, two were absent—the Bishop of Cloyne & Ross and Bishop McMahon. Archbishop Slattery acted as procurator for both

<sup>11</sup>Whyte, *op. cit.*, p. 17. A copy of the 1829 decree is to be found in *Decreta Synodi Plenariae Thurlesianae*, Dublin 1873, pp. 163-165.

<sup>12</sup>*Clare Journal*, 15 Sept. 1834; *Limerick Star & Evening Post*, 12 Dec. 1834.

<sup>13</sup>*Propaganda Fide Archives, Acta*, vol. 198 (1835), 155-156, 163-164.

<sup>14</sup>*Limerick Star & Evening Post*, 16 Dec. 1834.

<sup>15</sup>*Cashel Diocesan Archives, Slattery Papers*, 1834/12.

of them. In their remarks on the three candidates the bishops were strongly in favour of Patrick Kennedy. They commented on his outstanding academic record as a student in Maynooth, his good character and praiseworthy diligence. He had been a vicar general in the diocese for many years and as parish priest had to contend with the problems of the Crotty schism in Birr. Daniel Vaughan's health was poor and in learning he could not compare with Patrick Kennedy. Finally, although they regarded Charles Fahy<sup>16</sup> as an excellent priest, they were opposed to his appointment as he was a nephew of Bishop McMahon. There had been much trouble and scandal in the diocese from the favour shown by the previous bishop (O'Shaughnessy) to his relatives and they wished to exclude even the appearance of nepotism. This is also probably the background to the caustic comment in the *Clare Journal* that the choice of Patrick Kennedy was "to the great discomfiture of nepotism, which instead of a mitre received an extinguisher."<sup>17</sup>

On 25 May 1835 the Killaloe appointment was one of a number of matters considered at a general congregation of Propaganda and it was decided to recommend Patrick Kennedy to the Pope. Pope Gregory XVI confirmed Propaganda's choice and the formal decree of appointment was issued on 6 June 1835.<sup>18</sup> On 8 June Paul Cullen, Rector of the Irish College, Rome, wrote to Archbishop Slattery:<sup>19</sup> "In consequence of that which was written in your name and the name of the other bishops of the province the Revd. Mr. Kennedy has been a few days ago appointed Coadjutor Bishop of Killaloe. There was no opposition made to his nomination." Four weeks later the *Clare Journal* reported that news of the Pope's decision had been received.<sup>20</sup> After that there was a very unusual delay of six months before Patrick Kennedy was consecrated bishop in Birr on 7 January 1836. This was probably due to the continuing problems in Birr with the Crotty schism, including a court case for slander and defamation against Bishop McMahon.<sup>21</sup>

Five months after his consecration, Bishop Kennedy succeeded Bishop McMahon, who died on 7 June 1836. Bishop Kennedy was born in Nenagh in 1786 and ordained in Maynooth on 16 June 1810. He was the first Maynooth-trained priest to become bishop of Killaloe. In 1826, at an early stage of the Crotty troubles, he had been appointed administrator of Birr and his role in this controversy had given him a high degree of prominence and probably played a significant part in the priests' choice of him as bishop.

### Daniel Vaughan

Patrick Kennedy died on 19 November 1850 after a protracted illness. This was the only time during the 19th century that the diocese of Killaloe became vacant. On the other occasions when the death of a bishop occurred, he was immediately succeeded by a coadjutor with the right of succession.

<sup>16</sup>Charles Fahy was transferred from Tulla to Newmarket-on-Fergus as parish priest in 1837, and died there at the age of forty in January 1839.

<sup>17</sup>*Clare Journal*, 18 Dec. 1834.

<sup>18</sup>John Clancy, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

<sup>19</sup>*Cashel Diocesan Archives, Slattery Papers*, 1835/3, Paul Cullen to Slattery, 8 June, 1835.

<sup>20</sup>*Clare Journal*, 2 July 1835.

<sup>21</sup>*Clare Journal*, 16 Nov. 1835. The Birr schism began in 1826 when Fr. Michael Crotty, formerly curate of Birr, got the backing of a significant number of parishioners in a dispute with Bishop O'Shaughnessy and Bishop McMahon. Attempts to resolve the problem failed and Crotty continued to officiate for his congregation in a temporary chapel. In 1832 he was joined by his cousin, Fr. William Crotty. Eventually, in 1839, Michael Crotty left Birr and joined the Established Church in England. About the same time, William Crotty and his congregation (by now much reduced in size) joined the Presbyterian Church.



Archbishop Slattery of Cashel presided at the meeting of parish priests held in Nenagh on 18 December 1850. Forty-nine were present and voted.<sup>22</sup> Three names were chosen to be submitted to Rome in the following order—

1. Daniel Vaughan, P.P. Nenagh and vicar capitular<sup>23</sup> of the diocese
2. Thomas Blake, P.P. Roscrea
3. John Kenny, P.P. Ennis.

Two months later, on 15 February 1851, the bishops of Cashel province met in Thurles to formulate their comments. All were present except the bishop of Kilfenora, for whom Archbishop Slattery acted as procurator. Their remarks were extremely brief, unanimously backing the candidature of Daniel Vaughan and totally ignoring Blake and Kenny. In their opinion Daniel Vaughan was a good pastor, a man of piety and integrity and endowed with the other qualities required in a bishop. He had also received by far the greater portion of the votes of the priests. Finally, he was a very prudent and calm man and therefore particularly suitable to put an end to the dissensions which had recently been a feature of Killaloe diocese. This is a reference to the fact that Bishop Kennedy had been involved in a number of ugly disputes with priests in the diocese, disputes which had been due at least in part to his difficult temperament. Daniel Vaughan was clearly strongly backed by the bishops of the province. It is interesting, then, to compare their remarks on this occasion with their brief dismissive comments in 1835 when he was third in the terna.

As often happened up to the early 1850s the newspaper reports provide more information than Propaganda had available to it. It is from this source we learn that only one parish priest was absent, through illness, from the voting. Fr. Vaughan tried to decline being nominated but, despite his repeated objections, he was voted into first place by an overwhelming majority. This report of Daniel Vaughan's protestations was confirmed by Fr. Nicholas Power in a sermon at the Month's Mind Mass after his death.<sup>24</sup> The votes for Thomas Blake and John Kenny were equal and as a result a second ballot was held. Before this took place John Kenny stated most emphatically that he would not accept the appointment if offered it. Thomas Blake was then voted second on the list by a big majority.<sup>25</sup>

At a general congregation of Propaganda on 24 March 1851 it was decided to recommend the appointment of Daniel Vaughan to Pope Pius IX—and this appointment was confirmed by the Pope on 30 March. A little over two months later, on 8 June 1851, Daniel Vaughan was consecrated bishop in Nenagh. The new bishop was a native of Kilbane, Co. Clare. He was born about the year 1790, studied for the priesthood in Maynooth and was ordained in 1815. Three years later he was appointed parish priest of Scariff, became parish priest of Killaloe and vicar general in 1827 and parish priest of Nenagh in 1850. He was over sixty years old when appointed bishop and six years later applied for a coadjutor on the grounds of advanced age and poor health. In 1858 Fr. Michael Flannery was appointed in response to his request and in the following year, 1859, Bishop Vaughan died.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>*Propaganda Fide Archives, Acta*, vol. 213 (1851), 2-8.

<sup>23</sup>The vicar capitular was the priest chosen to take charge of a diocese during a vacancy.

<sup>24</sup>*Limerick Reporter & Tipperary Vindicator*, 9 Sept. 1859.

<sup>25</sup>*Limerick Reporter & Tipperary Vindicator*, 20, 24 Dec. 1850.

<sup>26</sup>Clancy, *Nth. Munster Antiq. J.*, 2(1940-41), 118.

## CONCLUSION

In the case of the three appointments we have considered it is clear that the choice was made at local level and that Propaganda did little more than endorse the names presented to it. It is also evident that the amount of information which Propaganda had available to it even about the successful candidates was very meagre and that no attempt was made to get any further details. The newspapers were supplied with information about how the parish priests had voted, which meant that if Propaganda passed over the parish priests' first choice, this would be generally known.

At the end of December 1849 Paul Cullen, Rector of the Irish College in Rome, was appointed Archbishop of Armagh. Two and a half years later he was transferred to Dublin. As John H. Whyte has pointed out, there is no evidence that in making this appointment the Holy See intended to inaugurate a new era in the selection of Irish bishops.<sup>27</sup> However, even though the regulations of 1829 remained in force, there were so many differences after Cullen's arrival in Ireland that a fresh period could be said to have begun. This is particularly evident in the amount of information about candidates which Cullen supplied to Propaganda. Although Daniel Vaughan was appointed after Cullen had become Archbishop of Armagh, his influence was not yet evident. But Rome's new approach can be clearly seen in the appointment of Daniel Vaughan's coadjutor in 1858. The procedures followed on this occasion were rather unusual and, for the first time, Archbishop Cullen was consulted by Propaganda about an appointment to Killaloe diocese.<sup>28</sup>

### Postscriptum

Since writing the above I have found Fr. Stenson's letter (see p. 64) in the Propaganda Fide Archives (*Scritture riferite nei Congressi, Irlanda*, vol. 22, ff. 203r-204r). A reply to Fr. Stenson (*Lettere*, 1819, f.874) confirms that the appointment had already been sanctioned when his letter arrived.

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<sup>27</sup>Whyte, *op. cit.*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>28</sup>Ignatius Murphy, "The Appointment of Bishop Michael Flannery and Proposed Revival of Roscrea Diocese, 1858", *Éile, Journal of the Roscrea Heritage Society*, No. 2 (forthcoming).