

# A Fifteenth-Century Precentor of Limerick

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*The career of Alan Olongsygh, son of a priest, pluralist, simonist and "public and notorious fornicator", illustrates some of the abuses within the later medieval church in Munster.*

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The name Alan Olongsygh appears in eleven documents contained in the *Calendar of Entries in the Papal Registers* dated between 1411 and 1461 (CPR 6, pp. 278–79; CPR 8, pp. 48, 400–401 and 454; CPR 9, pp. 522–523, 532 and 534; CPR 10, p. 519; CPR 11 pp. 10 and 658; CPR 12, p. 116–117). There are several variant spellings of both Alan and Olongsygh but the internal evidence of the documents shows them to concern the one individual.

The first of the documents, a mandate dated 1411 (CPR 6), states that Alan was an Irishman who had studied canon and civil law at Oxford and was already a clerk of the diocese of Limerick. He was also "the son of a priest and an unmarried woman" and, therefore, had to have special dispensation from the Pope, on account of his illegitimacy, to enter the church. Despite this background, it can be deduced that Alan came from a well-to-do family which could afford to send him to England to complete his education. In the mandate Alan was created a canon of the Augustinian priory of Killagh in Co. Kerry, which was probably a contentious appointment because it was an English house. The mandate states that in the priory's foundation charter it was specified "that no Irishman can be prior", while a papal confirmation of 1403 more explicitly decreed that only Englishmen could join it (Gwynn and Hadcock 1970, p.182). Nothing is then known about Alan until in 1427 when he is named in a mandate as having held the vicarage of Dangyn [Dingle], for more than a year without having been ordained a priest. The vicarage was then assigned to one John Oconnchur who was himself the son of a priest (CPR 8, p. 48).

That Alan was the son of a priest was a quite common occurrence in the fifteenth century since the canon law requiring clerical celibacy was largely ignored. It is possible to get an impression of how widespread this problem was because the preambles to appointments contained within the Registers usually record dispensations for illegitimacy and note the status of the appointees' parents. From an analysis of all the appointments in the dioceses of Limerick, Killaloe and Kilfenora contained in two volumes deliberately chosen to represent either end of the fifteenth century (CPR 6 and CPR 16, and see Appendix), it is clear that just over a quarter of all appointees to benefices were sons of clergy. Of the 58 individuals in the former volume (anyone appearing twice or more was counted just once), 23 are described as illegitimate and, of these, 13 were sons of priests, 2 sons of deacons and 2 sons of sub-deacons. The figures from the latter part of the century show a similar pattern, with 19 of 49 appointees stated to be illegitimate and of these 10 were sons of priests, 3 sons of clerics and one the son of "a brother of St. John of Jerusalem". The non-observance of celibacy must, however, have been much more widespread than the above figures imply since not all sons will have followed their fathers into the church and daughters of clergy are not even mentioned.

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This theme of the loose sexual mores within the church can be further demonstrated with the third document dated 1432, the grant of the church of St. Catherine, Oconyll to Alan (CPR 8, pp. 400–401). The Bishop of Limerick was instructed to investigate conditions at the monastery of St. Catherine [Monasternacallowduff], suppress it if the allegations regarding it were true, and give its church to Alan. The prioress and nuns, “or several” of them were accused of “leading a dissolute life”, and that they had “wasted in lubricity and converted to unlawful uses the goods of the said monastery, whose church was parochial and that the only remaining nun had married a layman, by whom she had had offspring”. Unfortunately the outcome of the enquiry is not recorded. Gwynn and Hadcock (1970, p. 324) state that there is no evidence that the abbey was suppressed and record the fact that the priory was granted to Sir Warham St. Leger in 1567 but, interestingly, Wardell (1904, p. 50), apparently unaware of the 1432 reference, noted that, “at the beginning of the late century the country people were wont to declare that, *prior* to the Reformation, the Abbey had been dissolved by the Pope on account of the bad conduct of the then prioress”. Monasternacallowduff or the monastery of the black hag, according to this tradition, takes its name from the last nun who, after the suppression, stayed on at the abbey into old age and was regarded as a witch. Local tradition thus supports the idea of early suppression and the absence of the abbey from the written record between 1432 and 1567, though negative evidence, may also be a pointer to the fact that suppression actually took place.

A second grant, bearing the same date as the above, gave Alan the precentorship of Limerick and states that he already held a canonry and prebend of Inyshkathych [Scattery] in the diocese of Killaloe (CPR 8, p. 454). Alan was specifically dispensed to hold all three benefices at the same time, a typical example of the pluralism which was rife at this stage in the church’s history. St. Catherine’s was worth 20 marks, the precentorship 32 marks and the prebendry 30 marks, which together would have given Alan quite a substantial income. The seeds of future problems had been set, however, by the grant of a canonry and prebend of “Inyscathayg” to one Odo Maccrayth, some two months prior to Alan’s grant (CPR 8, p. 425). The terms of Odo’s grant make it clear that Rome was unaware of Alan’s claim to the post, stating only that Robert Okaelley was currently in unlawful possession.

Pluralism brought its own problems because it was quite normal to take appointments simply for the income they generated, while leaving the ministration of the benefice to a humbler ill-paid cleric, who was usually poorly trained and, often, not even ordained. Given the poor communications of the period, such men often found themselves ministering to the people long after the benefice holder had resigned the post or died. It was therefore quite common for someone seeking a benefice to search out such irregularities and petition Rome for the position on the grounds that the incumbent was neither properly appointed nor ordained. In fact any supposed irregularity in the appointment to, or the conduct of an individual in a benefice could be used as an excuse to petition for a benefice. So widespread was the practice that it was given the name of “Rome running”.

Thus in 1445 Alan found himself and Cornelius Olongsyck, the rector of Croma [Croom], accused as “notorious fornicators” who had “dilapidated the goods of their respective benefices and committed other excesses and crimes” (CPR 9, p. 522–523). Their accuser, Cornelius Ohymayr, had previously been judicially removed from Croma, by Cornelius Olongsyck, for holding the rectory without being ordained priest or being dispensed to do so (*ibid.* and CPR 9, p. 198). The mandate, addressed to the “official of Limerick” ordered an investigation and allowed



for the transfer of the benefices to Cornelius Ohymayr, if the allegations were proven. Alan obviously weathered this storm because a mandate dated 1451 still refers to him as precentor (CPR 10, p. 519), but the outcome of the case against Cornelius Olongsyck is not recorded. The loss of Croma, if it occurred, would not, however, have reduced Cornelius to beggary because he had dispensation to hold up to five benefices simultaneously (CPR 9, p. 199).

The year 1445 saw a second attack on Alan's position, which has its origins in the grants of 1432 (*vide supra*). The mandate (CPR 9, p. 532) states that Odo Mecrayth had received the canonry and prebend of Ynyskayd upon the death of Nemeas Okaellay but he did not get possession of it until he had successfully taken a case against Robert Okaellay who was unlawfully detaining it. Once in possession Odo, still fearful of Robert, had with the consent of the bishop promised to pay Robert 10 marks sterling a year until Robert's death. Once Robert died, Alan claimed an interest and, after arbitration, Odo had promised to pay him 20 marks sterling. In order to have peaceable possession, Odo had granted part of the benefice to farm to a layman, thereby laying himself open to the charge of simony, the sale of a benefice. So Alan had accused him before the bishop and obtained possession of the benefice. Odo appealed to Rome and the mandate in question was designed to absolve Odo from the excommunication resulting from Alan's case against him and to rehabilitate him. The mandate is repeated in a second one, dated the same year (CPR 9, p. 534), which goes somewhat further to state that apparently neither Alan nor Odo had any rights in the canonry but that the case should be investigated and the canonry awarded to Odo, if that were the case. Odo does not seem to have lived long enough to enjoy this apparent victory for, the following year, the canonry was granted to Thady Macrayth, the son of an abbot, "upon the voidance by the death at the apostolic see" of Odo (CPR 9, p. 582). Thady later rose to be Bishop of Killaloe and on his election he had to give up his interests in Ynyskayd (CPR 11, p. 415 and CPR 12, p. 187).

Alan survived as precentor, though his behaviour was still questionable because in 1451 the charges against him were resurrected by Thomas Oronan (CPR 10, p. 519). Again he was accused of being a "public and notorious fornicator" and dilapidating the possessions of the precentorship, but this time the extra charge of simony was added. Thomas, possibly mindful of the fact that the previous case had been investigated in Limerick, Alan's home territory, stated that "from fear of Alan's power" he had "no hope of obtaining justice in the city and diocese of Limerick". So the case was heard by clergy from the neighbouring diocese of Cloyne and this time the charges stuck and Alan was deprived of the precentorship. In 1455 Thomas Oronan was permitted to exchange the precentorship, which he had won by his accusations against Alan, for the rectory of Baleingadig [Ballingaddy] which one Richard Fitzharry alias Fitz Nicoll then held (CPR 11, p. 10). This exchange led to further complications because in that same year a separate mandate granting the precentorship was issued in favour of one Richard Pursel (CPR 11, p. 685). In a mandate of 1461, designed to regularise Pursel's position regarding possible irregularities in his position as precentor, it is stated that the matter of the precentorship was finally resolved in Pursel's favour after arbitration by the Bishop of Limerick, and Fitzharry had to recompense Pursel with "a certain sum of money and certain cattle" (CPR 12, p. 116). In all three of the last quoted mandates Alan is named as a former precentor and with the last mention Alan disappears from history.

## APPENDIX

### Page references for documents used in survey of clerical celibacy.

CPR 6: pp. 23, 26, 32, 33 (x2), 36 (x2), 37 (x3), 38, 39, 41, 42 (x2), 43, 44, 45, 46, 49, 85, 91, 103, 116, 117, 120, 122 (x3), 123, 129, 189, 231, 233, 241, 252, 255, 256, 263 (x4), 264 (x2), 266, 270, 290, 301, 313, 367, 397, 399, 423, 427, 429, 432, 435, 459, 467, 470, 472, 478, 479 (x3) and 480.

CPR 16: pp. 17, 24, 39, 48, 50, 51, 59, 60, 61, 88, 89, 91, 95, 103, 104, 110, 173, 225, 231, 236, 243, 246, 247, 262 (x2), 290, 295, 302, 313, 314, 366, 372, 374, 410, 414, 438, 454, 456, 480, 481, 487, 497 (x2), 506, 511, 517, 574, 586 and 620.

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| CPR:-                     | <i>Calendar of Entries in the Papal Registers, Relating to Great Britain and Ireland</i> , vols 1-16, 1893 on-going.              |
| A. Gwynn. & R. N. Hadcock | <i>Medieval Religious Houses: Ireland</i> , London 1970.  |
| J. Wardell, 1904          | "The History and Antiquities of St. Catherines Old Abbey, Co. Limerick." <i>J. Roy. Soc. Antiqs. Ireland</i> , Vol. 24, pp.41-64. |