

Fr Aengus Buckley, OP 1913-78

John Galvin*

The life and work of the noted Dominican artist is discussed and analysed. Born in Cork and ordained in Rome, he spent most of his life attached to St Saviour's church and priory in Limerick. He became one of the foremost religious artists of the twentieth century, specialising in fresco. A descriptive list of all his major works with their titles, locations and date of completion is appended.

James Buckley was born in Cork city on 4 July 1913. He was son of John Buckley and Helen née Cooney and he had one brother, David. His childhood home was at 61 Roche's Buildings. He was educated by the Christian Brothers at the North Monastery. After some brief study at the Cork School of Art he joined the Dominican order and was given the habit and the name Aengus, by which he was known for the rest of his life, at the age of nineteen at St Mary's Tallaght on 5 September 1932. In 1938 he left Tallaght for further studies in Rome at the Dominican university, the Angelicum. He was ordained to the priesthood on 13 March 1939 by Archbishop Passetto in the Leone College. He remained on in Rome for the next ten years, residing at the Dominican house of San Clemente. He took the four-year diploma course at the *Accademia delle Belle Arti*, graduating with distinction and was, incidentally, the first Irish student ever to graduate from the Academy. His studies in theology and canon law were the main casualty of this as he noted wryly in his personal diary 'I was sent to Rome for a degree but I spend more time looking at galleries than I did looking for degrees'.¹ He studied under Carlo Siviero, Italy's finest contemporary portrait and landscape painter, but it was the fresco artist, Angelo Landi who had the greatest influence on his artistic life. His lifelong admiration for, and friendship with Landi, began when he sat as a model for him for a figure of St Dominic.²

His earliest work was in portraiture and among his work from this early period are paintings of the Dominicans Fr Michael Browne [later elevated to the College of Cardinals] Fr Emmanuel Suarez, Monsignor John Kyne and the then Master General of the Dominican order, Fr Gillet. To this period also belongs the self-portrait, now in the University of Limerick³ [Fig. 1] and the large work *The Last Supper*. The latter, an oil on canvass 21' x 11', was painted at the request of the Irish ambassador to the Holy See, Joseph P. Walsh for his official residence and is now in the library of St Isidore's, the Irish Franciscan house in Rome.⁴

Fresco painting is one of the most technically difficult and laborious of the arts. Painting on wet plaster requires speed and accuracy in addition to artistic skill and inspiration. It is clear that Fr Buckley was particularly inspired by the work of the great Renaissance painter, the Dominican Fra Angelico.⁵ Among his early works in Rome are two frescoes around the arches of the Angelicum University, one depicting St Thomas Aquinas and the other Our Lady as Queen of Heaven, seated on a throne. In the university library he painted a fresco of St Catherine of Alexandria. During his summer vacation in 1947 at the Dominican summer house at Romeno he completed a fresco in

* 34 Lissaniska, Clauréen, Lahinch Road, Ennis, Co. Clare.

¹ Personal Scrapbooks of Fr Aengus Buckley OP [Dominican archives, Limerick] unpaginated.

² *Cork Examiner*, 10 September 1978.

³ Sarah Finlay, *The National Self-Portrait Collection of Ireland*, vol. 1, 1979-89 (Limerick 1989) p. 36.

⁴ R. M. Dowdall, *Memories of Irish Dominican Fathers and Brothers 1970-1980* (Dublin 1980) p. 121.

⁵ Personal Scrapbooks.

the recreation room there, entitled *Lago di Molveno* and an oil on canvas of St Brigid for another religious house in the nearby Don village. In the following year, his last in Rome, he painted two major works which are still housed in San Clemente: an oil on canvas of the crucifixion and a fresco *The Baptism of Our Lord by John the Baptist*.

On his return to Ireland in December 1948 he joined the Dominican community in Waterford city where he remained for the next five years. During 1949 he painted the first ever frescoes in any Irish church.⁶ These were in St Joseph's chapel, a fresco of the *Blessed Trinity* set above a central fresco of the saint. By the end of that year he had completed three panels in the upper part of the apse depicting the *Holy Spirit* in the central panel and to the right two panels showing two *evangelists*. He also produced the design for mosaics on the lower part of the apse. Further fresco work was done in this church during years 1950-1, particularly on the theme of the religious history of the city from Viking times. During his years in Waterford Fr Buckley painted various members of the hierarchy, Cardinals Griffin and Glennon, Archbishop Walsh of Tuam, Bishop Browne of Galway, Bishop Staunton of Ferns, Bishop Kyne of Meath and Bishop O'Doherty of Dromore. He also did a portrait of the Mayor of Waterford in 1952, Councillor James Croke.



Fig. 1 Fr Aengus Buckley OP, Self-Portrait (Rome 1945).

⁶ Hugh Fenning, *The Waterford Dominicans* (Dublin 1990) p. 10.

Fr Buckley's first work in Limerick was done in early 1951. This was the large fresco, *Triumph of the Cross*, over the high altar in St Saviour's Dominican church, inspired by Raphael's masterpiece, *The Adoration of the Sacrament*.⁷ The fresco depicts the central figure of God the father, accepting the sacrifice of his son on the cross, with three angels on either side of the throne of God. Above is the Holy Ghost surrounded by a host of cherubs and radiating from him in gold, the seven gifts. Below the Trinity the twelve doctors of the church are placed in a pyramid arrangement. This work, which aroused great public interest⁸, was soon followed by his major work on a set of Stations of the Cross for the same church. These were done in stages over the next three years, 1951-4. These frescos, surrounded by simple oak frames, were a radical departure from the traditional Stations of the Cross in Irish churches. Only the central figures of the passion story were included, often just the figure of Jesus, and his intention was to stress the willing sacrifice of Christ rather than suffering or brutality.⁹ During the year 1953 he also executed ten frescoes in the church illustrating the great Dominican saints. Four female saints are represented, Catherine of Siena, Catherine Ricci, Margaret, Queen of Hungary and Rose of Lima. In addition to St Dominic and Thomas Aquinas, Saints Albert the Great, Pope Pius V, Vincent Ferrer and St Peter of Verona. However in his own view, his finest work up to that point in his career¹⁰ was the fresco he painted in St Senan's church, Kilmacow, Co. Kilkenny in 1952. This work, *Coronation of Our Lady and the Adoration of the Trinity*, was inspired by Fra Angelico's *Coronation of the Virgin* (1410) now in the Louvre. He had, in that year, published a detailed study of the work of the great artist, entitled *Fra Angelico the Master Painter*.¹¹

In February 1953 Fr Buckley was transferred from Waterford to Limerick where he was to remain for the rest of his life. In these years he produced his major and best-known works of art. One of his first commissions on arrival in Limerick was a painting in oils of St Patrick for the woollen mills, named after the saint, in Douglas, Cork and this was followed later in the year by a portrait of Dr Jeremiah Kinnane, Archbishop of Cashel and Emly to mark his Episcopal silver jubilee and which was hung in Maynooth College. Early in 1954 he began work on a commission from which he derived much personal satisfaction.¹² This was a fresco of the Stations of the Cross for the church of Our Lady and St Michael in Ennistymon, Co. Clare, commissioned by the Bishop of Galway, Dr Michael Browne. The stations, the cartoons for which took him eight months to complete, form a continuous series or frieze along the length of the left side of the main aisle of the church forming an unbroken pictorial narrative of the passion story, 100 feet in length and 14 feet high. Shortly after completion of the Ennistymon work, he was commissioned by Bishop John Kyne of Meath to design a fresco for the Cathedral of Christ the King in Mullingar. This work, *The Resurrection*, was executed above the altar in the mortuary chapel. A second commission in the same diocese and county followed shortly afterwards, a fresco of the Blessed Virgin in the church of the Immaculate Conception at Gainstown. In 1956 he completed a set of Stations of the Cross, painted in oils, for St Mary's church in Newry. He did the paintings in situ, to ensure that they suited the poor lighting conditions in the church. They resemble the Limerick fresco stations in that the emphasis is on the central figures with background details omitted. While in Newry he also did a fresco of St Brigid for the church dedicated to the saint in the town, a painting in oils

⁷ Interview with Thomas Ryan, RHA, 5 August 1997.

⁸ Interview with Jim Kemmy, TD, 12 June 1997.

⁹ *Irish Independent* 7 June 1953, interview with Fr Buckley.

¹⁰ Interview with Margaret Foley, 22 July 1997.

¹¹ Published by the Kerryman, Tralee, 1952.

¹² Interview with Michael Vaughan, Lahinch, 27 June 1997.

of the annunciation and a portrait of the Bishop of Dromore, Dr Eugene O'Doherty, both now in the Episcopal residence. In that year he also did a portrait of Monsignor Edward Kissane of St Patrick's College Maynooth to mark his 70th birthday.

Among his portraits of lay people in this period was one of the Jewish Lord Mayor of Dublin, Robert Briscoe TD, in 1957 which was used as a frontpiece cover for the American edition of Briscoe's autobiography. In general he was reluctant to accept commissions for secular works, wishing to devote his talents to religious art work though he did relent for close friends. Among such works are portraits of Mrs Lilian Crehan, wife of a local doctor and of pharmacist Mr Maurice Power, president in 1961 of the Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland.

In October 1958 he did a fresco in Kilfinane church, *Baptism of Our Lord* which was a similar design to his 1945 work on the same theme in San Clemente. Later the following year, the parish priest of St Patrick's in Limerick city, Canon Cooper, commissioned him to do a fresco, *Crucifixion*, for the apse, above the high altar, of the church which was completed in March 1960. In the early 1970s, the then parish priest, Fr Gerald Griffin, had it removed much to Fr Buckley's dismay and deep regret.¹³ Ironically a statue of St Martin de Porres, which he produced for Holy Cross church in Sligo, suffered a similar fate in 1991. Happily his other known statue of St Martin survives in the special shrine of the saint in Limerick Dominican church.

In September 1961 he began one of his major commissions outside of Ireland. This was for a set of Stations of the Cross for St Stephen's church, Manor Park, East London. The parish priest, Fr Vincent Hurley was a native of Ennistymon and the commission was for a similar work to that in the church of his birthplace. The London fresco is in a more ornate style and is on both walls of the main aisle. The next year he produced a life size painting of the crucifixion in tempera on wood which was his first public work in this medium. These London commissions gained him widespread publicity both in newspapers and on television, details of which he carefully kept in his personal scrapbooks. He did two further frescoes in England, in the church of St Clement at Ewell in Surrey. These were a *Blessed Trinity* and yet another version of his *Baptism of Our Lord* already executed in Rome and Kilfinane. A fresco of the resurrection, completed in 1963 in the mortuary of St Saviour's Dominic St, Dublin echoes his work on the same theme in Mullingar. In 1965 he obtained his first and only commission for work in the United States. This was a fresco for the Academy of Food Marketing, St Joseph's Jesuit University in Philadelphia. It was commissioned by the University President, Fr William F. Maloney, at the urging of the head of the Academy, James O'Connor who had seen his work in Limerick. He first visited the College in January 1965 to inspect the proposed location and returned twice more before it was finally completed and unveiled in August 1967. Entitled *The Theology of Hunger* it offers a message and statement on the problem of famine (Fig. 2). He kept a copy of a review of the work which appeared in an American magazine in his scrapbook apparently approving of the analysis offered:

In this fresco, the group on the left symbolises the gamut of corrosive passions ranging from blasphemy to suicide as the figure of death leers above them. On the right of the fresco, an equally hungry group tries to life themselves out of their privations by aspiring to life's higher plane. Although death counts the inevitable hours, a bright angel prepares to crown the hopeful sufferers with a laurel wreath. The Saviour provides the key to the hunger problem, showing the importance of food conservation as a means of people helping themselves.¹⁴

¹³*Limerick Leader*, 4 September 1978.

¹⁴*The Hawk Magazine*, August 1967.

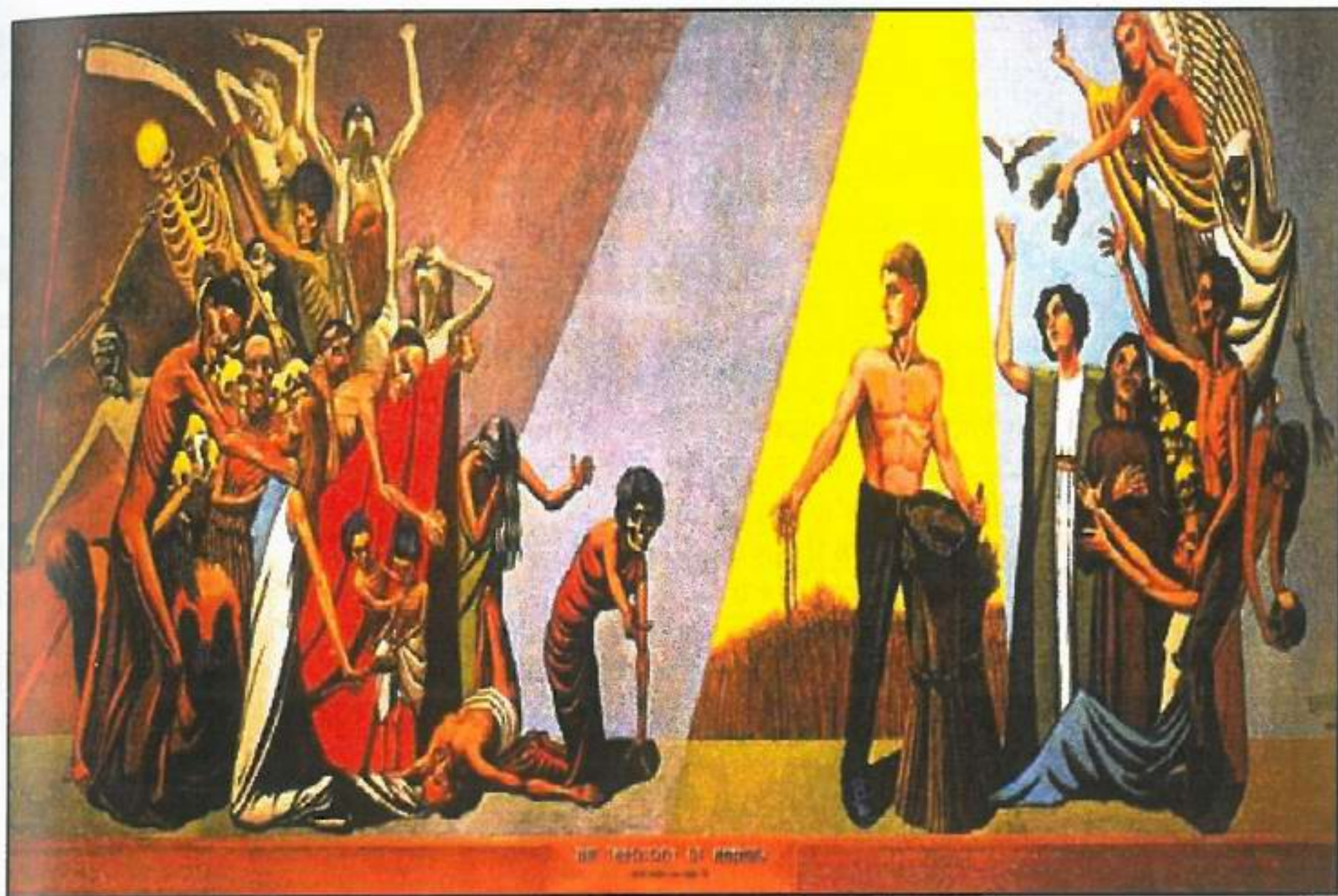


Fig. 2 The Theology of Hunger (St Joseph's University, Philadelphia, 1967).

A new cathedral, dedicated to Our Lady Assumed into Heaven and St Nicholas, had been opened in Galway in 1965. Four years later, Fr Buckley was asked by Bishop Browne to do two frescoes for the building. One was sponsored by Archbishop Terence Cooke of New York and was executed in the chapel dedicated to St Colman, forming the main backdrop behind the altar. It draws on the legends associated with the saint, the founder of the monastery of Kilmacduagh, showing the fly, mouse and cock who were his only companions as a hermit. The saint is shown dressed as a bishop, preaching vigorously in front of the round tower. Historical accuracy clearly was not a priority for the artist. Similar disregard for chronology is evident in his second fresco for the cathedral, where St Fachanan of Kilfenora has two of the later High Crosses as a backdrop.

His last significant commissions were completed in 1976, both in Limerick. Bishop Jeremiah Newman sat for an official portrait and Dr Edward Walsh chose him to produce a work of art to commemorate Ireland's entry to the European Economic Community in 1973. It was originally intended that this would be a fresco but the chosen wall surface was deemed unsuitable and it was executed in tempera on wood.¹⁵ Titled *Into Europe* it was inspired by the Irish eighteenth-century poetic form, the Aisling, and depicts Ireland as a young woman with flowing red hair, riding on a white horse, with banners of the four provinces and allusions to Ireland's medieval contribution to European learning.

Throughout his life, Fr Buckley had also worked as a graphic designer, particularly producing front cover designs for religious magazines such as the *St Martin de Porres Magazine*, *Blessed*

¹⁵ Interview with Mrs Stephanie Walsh 25 November 1998.

Martin Monthly, *Imeldist Magazine* and *Spotlight*. His final work was in this genre, designing a striking cover of a figure on a rearing horse for Mainchín Seoighe's history of the parish of Dromin-Athlacca.

In addition to his achievements as an artist, Fr Buckley lectured and gave workshops in art and aesthetics in UCD, UCC, UCG, and QUB. For many years, he taught in the Limerick School of Art and Design where he was highly regarded both by staff and students.¹⁶ He frequently spoke on art topics to local cultural groups, in the City Art gallery and to the Limerick Camera Club. A talented violinist, he had a deep interest in classical music and in 1966 was elected President of the Limerick Choral and Operatic Society. Another area of interest in which he was highly skilled was that of magic. A member for many years of the International Brotherhood of Magicians, he was elected first President of the Munster Society of Magicians, a few months before his untimely death. Shortly after the launch of Mainchín Seoighe's book, at which he was present to receive warm praise for his cover design, he was taken ill and hospitalised where he was eventually diagnosed as having leukaemia. He had planned a fresco in the Chapel of Perpetual Adoration at Parnell Square, Dublin and had also received a commission from Limerick Corporation to work on a restored tower at King John's castle but neither project was now possible. After a lingering illness, he died in the Bon Secours hospital, Glasnevin, Dublin on 30 August 1978. Bishop Jeremiah Newman presided at his requiem mass in Limerick and he was buried in Mount St Lawrence cemetery.

Appendix

List of Main Works by Fr Aengus Buckley

Date	Title	Medium	Location
1945	'Self Portrait Fr. A. Buckley'	Tempera on Linen	Plassey House, University of Limerick
1945	'Roman Street Scene'	Oil on Canvas	Private Collection, Limerick
1945	'The Last Supper'	Oil on Canvas	Irish Franciscan House, Rome
1946	Monsignor John Kyne'	Oil on Canvas	The Angelicum, Rome
1946	'Fr. Emanuel Saurez OP'	Oil on Canvas	The Angelicum, Rome
1946	'Fr Michael Browne OP'	Oil on Canvas	The Angelicum, Rome
1946	Fr Gillet OP'	Oil on Canvas	The Angelicum, Rome
1946	'St Thomas Aquinas'	Fresco	University of St Thomas Aquinas, Rome
1946	'Plato'	Fresco	University of St Thomas Aquinas, Rome
1946	'St Catherine of Alexandria'	Fresco	University of St Thomas Aquinas, Rome
1947	'Lago di Molveno'	Fresco	Dominican House, Romeno, Northern Italy
1947	'St Brigid'	Oil on Canvas	Religious House, Don Village, Romeno, Northern Italy
1948	The Baptism of Our Lord'	Fresco	Irish Dominican House, San Clemente, Rome
1948	'The Crucifixion'	Oil on Canvas	Irish Dominican House, San Clemente, Rome
1949	'Blessed Trinity'	Fresco	St Saviours Dominican Church, Waterford

¹⁶ Interviews with Jack Donovan, 16 May 1997 and Ursula O'Mara, 20 October 1997.

1949	'St Joseph'	Fresco	St Saviours Dominican Church, Waterford
1949	'Holy Spirit & The Evangelists'	Fresco	St Saviours Dominican Church, Waterford
1950	Religious History of Waterford'	Fresco	St Saviours Dominican Church, Waterford
1950	'Cardinal Griffin of Westminster'	Oil on Canvas	Westminster, London
1950	'Cardinal Glennon'	Oil on Canvas	Location unknown
1951	'Father Conleth Kearns'	Oil on Canvas	Location unknown
1951	Dr James Staunton'	Oil on Canvas	Location unknown
1951	Dr Michael Browne'	Oil on Canvas	Galway
1951	'Triumph of the Cross'	Fresco	St Saviours Dominican Church, Limerick
1951-4	'Stations of the Cross'	Fresco	St Saviours Dominican Church, Limerick
1952	Dr Joseph Walsh'	Oil on Canvas	Location unknown
1952	Cllr James Croke'	Oil on Canvas	Waterford
1952	Coronation of Our Lady'	Fresco	St Senan's Church, Kilmacow, Co. Kilkenny
1953	Archbishop Jeremiah Kinane'	Oil on Canvas	Maynooth College
1953	'St Catherine of Siena'	Fresco	St Saviours Dominican Church, Limerick
1953	'St Albert the Great'	Fresco	St Saviours Dominican Church, Limerick
1953	'St Pius V Pope'	Fresco	St Saviours Dominican Church, Limerick
1953	'St Catherine Ricci'	Fresco	St Saviours Dominican Church, Limerick
1953	'St Vincent Ferrer'	Fresco	St Saviours Dominican Church, Limerick
1953	'St Dominic'	Fresco	St Saviours Dominican Church, Limerick
1953	'St Thomas Aquinas'	Fresco	St Saviours Dominican Church, Limerick
1953	'St Margaret'	Fresco	St Saviours Dominican Church, Limerick
1953	'St Peter Martyr'	Fresco	St Saviours Dominican Church, Limerick
1953	'St Rose of Lima'	Fresco	St Saviours Dominican Church, Limerick
1953	'St Patrick'	Oil on Canvas	St Patrick's Woolen Mills, Douglas, Cork
1954	'Stations of the Cross'	Fresco	Our Lady and St Michael's Church, Ennistymon, Co. Clare
1955	'Dr. Kyne', Bishop of Meath	Oil on Canvas	Location unknown
1955	'The Immaculate Conception'	Fresco	Church of the Immaculate Conception, Gainstown, Co. Westmeath
1955	'The Resurrection'	Fresco	Cathedral of Christ the King, Mullingar, Co. Westmeath
1956	'St Brigid'	Fresco	St Brigid's Church, Newry, Co. Down
1956	'Stations of the Cross'	Oil on Canvas	St Mary's Church, Newry, Co. Down
1956	'The Annunciation'	Oil on Canvas	Bishop's Residence, Newry, Co. Down
1956	Dr Eugene O'Doherty'	Oil on Canvas	Bishop's Residence, Newry, Co. Down
1956	Mons. Edward Kissane'	Oil on Canvas	Maynooth College
1957	Robert Briscoe'	Oil on Canvas	Private Collection, Dublin
1959	Mrs Lillian Crehan'	Oil on Canvas	Private Collection, Spain
1960	The Crucifixion'	Fresco	St Patrick's Church, Dublin Road, Limerick
1960	'St Martin'	Sculpture in Bronze	St Saviours Dominican Church, Limerick

1960	'St Martin'	Sculpture in Bronze	Holy Cross Church, Sligo
1961	Maurice Power'	Oil on Canvas	College of Pharmacy, Shrewsbury Road, Ballsbridge, Dublin
1961	'Stations of the Cross'	Fresco	St Stephen's Church, Manor Park, East London, England
1962	'The Blessed Trinity'	Fresco	St Clements Church, Ewell, Surrey, England
1962	'The Crucifixion'	Tempera on Wood	St Stephen's Church, Manor Park, East London, England
1963	'The Resurrection'	Fresco	St Saviours Dominican Church, Dominic Street, Dublin
1965	Baptism of Our Lord'	Fresco	St Clements Church, Ewell, Surrey, England
1967	'Theology of Hungar'	Fresco	St Joseph's Jesuit College, Philadelphia, U.S.A.
1969	'St Coleman of Kilmacduagh'	Fresco	Cathedral of Our Lady Assumed into Heaven and St Nicholas, Galway
1969	'St Fachanan of Kilfenora'	Fresco	Cathedral of Our Lady Assumed into Heaven and St Nicholas, Galway
1976	'Into Europe'	Tempera on Wood	University of Limerick
1976	'Dr. Jeremiah Newman'	Oil on Canvas	Private Collection, Limerick