GOING TO HOLY CROSS

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The "Liber Niger" certifies that a man who had murdered his own son, had duly performed the penance imposed on him, viz. a pilgrimage to Skelligs Rock, to Aran, to Lough Derg, and to Holy Cross of Tipperary.

Sir Henry Sidney, reporting on his tour of Ireland in 1567, wrote to Queen Elizabeth: "No small confluence of people is still resorting to the Hollie Crosse." In 1584, Archbishop Dermot O'Carroll, having landed unnoticed at Drogheda, succeeded in fulfilling a vow he had made to venerate the relic of the Holy Cross, a few months before suffering martyrdom. Two years later, Camden is wondering "what a concourse of people still throng hither out of devotion." Hugh O'Neill encamped with his troops near the gate of the monastery, early in the year 1600, and the Four Masters tell that the Irish presented great gifts to the keepers of the relic in honour of the Lord of the elements.

The origin of this relic of the Cross, and of the monastery which was erected in its honour, is still veiled in obscurity. Such relics were brought back from the East by the crusaders. It has been held that this portion of the True Cross was presented, in the year 1110, by Pope Pascal II (1099-1118), a Clunian monk, to the King of Munster, Murgherdach O'Brien (1086-1114). In 1096, Murgherdach had written, as High-King, to St. Anselm in support of the people of Waterford, who had elected as their first bishop an Irishman who had taken Benedictine vows at Winchester. The same king obtained the nomination of another friend of Anselm of Bec, Gislebert, as bishop of Limerick (1). In 1101, King Murthough handed over the Rock of Cashel to the Religious, state the Four Masters, as the seat of the new archbishopric,—of which the first titular was that first bishop of Waterford (2). There is a tradition in Cashel that there have been Black Monks on the top of the Rock in the twelfth century. This would have been a cathedral-monastery on the English model, as there was in Dublin for a few years before 1100 A.D.—and later at Dowapatrick for more than three centuries. Murgherdach took part in the synod of Rath Breasail (3).

Although this important fragment of the instrument of our salvation is no longer in County Tipperary, you can still go on pilgrimage, as did your ancestors, to the site where it was enshrined.

From Limerick city you have the choice between a level road and a shorter one across the mountains. Both ways, you start by crossing through the barony of Clanwilliam—named after William de Burgo, the ancestor of the Burkes. If you choose the level road, you are passing next through the barony of Owneybeg, which had been given as a fief to the Cistercians, at the time when Uaithne Clic was still a dense forest, one of the places where the pre-Celtic population had found refuge, and where other sons of Saint Benedict have found an abode now. If you go over the hills, you are in the ancient territory of the Owney and Aradh. Either way, you have afterwards to go right across Kilnamanagh, the patrimonial territory of the O'Dwyers: be it from Cappagh White to Clonoulty, or from Kilcommon to near Holy Cross. Clonoulty was in Cistercian times a preceptory of the Knights Templars. The 1902 edition of the Ordnance Survey Map of Co. Tipperary 39, located at the above-named Kilcommon the foundation, which was
made in Co. Tipperary by Philip de Wigormia, in 1184, for Benedictines from Glastonbury. It was Archdall, in his Monasticon Hibernicum of 1786, who placed it there in North Tipperary. But the barony of Philip of Worcester is not likely to have extended so far north: his headquarters were at Knockgrafton, in South Tipperary; and there was another Kilcummin close by his castle of Cahirm. Cahirm, however, has also been within de Braose's "Honour of Limerick"(14).

The mountainous district of Kilcommon in North Tipperary is rich with the monuments of the pre-historic population of Ireland. But the Elizabethan maps all have a blank north of Slieve Phelim. The Anglo-Normans had disappeared from North Tipperary after Bruce's invasion, and the tribal uprisings which followed. The Butlers came back only two hundred years later. In the eighteenth century that region was the haunt of highwaymen and outlaws—as would be the case for such regions in any European country at that period. In the middle of the eighteenth century the Lord Chancellor Jocelyn, whose residence was on St. Stephen's Green and at Mount Merrion House, Dublin, was created Baron Newport, taking his title from an estate he possessed in this village. His sister married Samuel Waller, ancestor of the baronets of Castle Waller, who owned Newport at the beginning of the 19th century.

To allow troops to purge that wild region, Viceroy Anglesey built the road from Thurles to Newport, and another one from Nenagh to Tipperary town. Considering that there was no road over the mountains in the Middle Ages, the pilgrims from Limerick would naturally have gone the other way. They would generally have been travelling on foot or on horseback, in those days, stopping most likely at the Cistercian Abbey of Owney (called Abington after the suppression), and at the preceptory of Clonoulty. On the way they might have paid a visit to the holy well of St. Fintan of Duleng, in the present parish of Doon, in the barony of Coonagh. Rivers and streams had usually to be forded by travellers. When a stone bridge was built over the Mulkern near the Abbey of Owney, it had only the width required for a packhorse with his leader. The countryside was still thickly wooded at that time.

Holy Cross itself is situated in the barony of Eliogarty, the southern portion of the ancient tribesland of the Uí Lughdhaech or Illagh. By the time the Cistercians came, the barony was in the hands of the O'Fogartys. The O'Dwyers had one of their castles only four miles away: at Clonharpe.

In the Anglo-Irish political division, the whole of North Tipperary fell, in 1201, under the sway of Theobald Butler(5), of whom a descendant was made Earl of Ormond in 1328 with full Palatine rights(6) over the whole of North Tipperary. The Church lands, however, formed "the county of the Cross of Tipperary"(7)—the only Irish Crosslands which survived until 1612, or even 1663. The Abbot of Holy Cross sat in Parliament as a spiritual lord.

The smiling village of Holy Cross has no longer the miserable appearance which repelled eighteenth century travellers. The ruins picturesquely situated on the western bank of the Suir, have been cared for as a monument for the last hundred years.

The church, of which the walls are still standing, has been rebuilt for the greater part, in the fifteenth century(8). It contains remarkable stone carving(9), graffiti (10), and remains of mural painting rare in this country(11). Some have attributed this richness to the gifts of the pilgrims(12), others to the generosity of the house of Ormond, who had taken the place of the O'Briens as patrons of Holy Cross(13). The late Canon Power has remarked(14) that the smallness of the
chapter-room points to a community of not more than eighteen or twenty members; whereas the guest-house is larger than elsewhere: owing to the pilgrimage to the relic. The Board of Works has re-erected, some thirty years ago, a gothic cloister—arcing in the monastery garth.

The Cistercian Father Hartry, who wrote the "triumphant chronicle" of the monastery, in the middle of the seventeenth century, speaks of three successive foundations of the abbey: first by Murtagh O'Brien, after he had received the relic in 1110, and then in 1169 by Donald O'Brien, who founded three other Cistercian abbeys and three cathedrals. His charter is reproduced by Gilbert.(15) Hartry states expressly that the original Benedictine foundation took on the Cistercian reform years after the start by Donald Mor. That would have been in 1213 or 1214, according to parchments which were found at Clairvaux in Hartry's time. The archives of St. Mary's abbey in Dublin, however, put the date of the transfer in 1182. Many documents have been lost through Cromwellian vandalism.

The Statutes of the General Chapters of the Cistercian Order report that by 1227 this abbey had declined so much in material means that it should be united to Owney (Abington) as not being self-supporting. In 1278, however, it became again affiliated to Neney on the Maigue, as before.

The dissolution of the monastery came in 1536: the buildings were completely profaned.(16) But in 1589 Cistercians came back, under the protection of a catholic earl of Ormond. In 1603 the monks obtained a miraculous statue of Our Lady from the wreck of a Spanish ship at Kinsale. And it is only at that time that the miraculous well started.(17) In 1637, Abbot Cantwell built a new dwelling for the monks and re-roofed part of the church. We still find a parish priest of the Cistercian Order at Holy Cross in 1704; and the last Abbot died here in 1724. The last monk of Holy Cross died in a cell among the ruins as late as 1752.

The last cure by the relic is reported in 1723(18).

REFERENCES
(1) Rev. Casey, in Irish Ecclesiastical Record, 1934, p. 395.
(5) Gilbert's Facsimiles of National MSS, vol. II, Plate LXVII.
(11) Ibid., XLV, p. 149, f.
(15) Facsimiles of the Irish National MSS, vol. II, Plate LXII.
(16) Hartry, Illustration V: Triumphalia Chronologica Monasterii Sanctæ Crucis.
(17) Hartry 1640, Illstr. IV, ed. D. Murphy, 1895.