

The Confraternity and the Jews

Fr Brendan McConvery, C.Ss.R. recalls a shameful chapter in the history of Mount St Alphonsus

From its beginning in 1868, the Men's Confraternity in Limerick was a phenomenal success. Each week, several thousand men and boys gathered for a one-hour service of prayer and instruction. Most of the members of the confraternity belonged to the working and lower middle classes. Those were hard times for working people. Unemployment, alcoholism and early death from industrial injuries were endemic. The confraternity aimed to better the lot of its members by inspiring them to imitate the Holy Family, especially in the virtues of thrift and sobriety. Appearing weekly before such a large audience of men, the director of the Confraternity was both spiritual guide and social commentator. His most important asset was a commanding pulpit presence – a strong speaking voice and a colourful and direct way of speaking.

John Creagh, a native of Limerick, was appointed director of the confraternity in 1902 at the early age of 32. He was only six years ordained, a short time for such a prominent role. Fr Creagh established himself from the beginning as a fiery preacher, not afraid to call a spade a spade. He attacked the publicans of the city, for example, for their part in the problem of alcoholism, branding them 'Judases' who would "sell souls for the price of a pint of stout or a half-glass of whiskey."

In January 1904, Creagh announced that he would address an important topic the following week. The men flocked in larger crowds than usual. Creagh announced that the topic of his sermon was moneylending, and identified the main culprits as the members of the small Jewish community centred

around the synagogue in Colooney Street (now Wolfe Tone St) not far from the Redemptorist church. Jews were recent arrivals in the city. Today, they would be called 'asylum seekers' fleeing the pogroms of Eastern Europe for a better life in the West. They kept small businesses in the city or peddled their wares from door-to-door in the country districts. Unlike the businesses of the city, they were prepared to accept payment on an installment basis. Some

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probably acted as informal moneylenders. The main figures in the moneylending business in Limerick, however, were not Jews, and Creagh probably got much of his information from Christian business people who feared the Jewish peddlers as unwelcome competitors.

There can be little question that Fr Creagh's denunciation of moneylending was motivated by concern for the welfare of the poor. What has made his denunciation infamous is the way it demonised a whole community, drawing on the worst of Christian anti-Semitic legends and twisting passages from the Gospels into a vicious tirade. The sermons, reprinted in full in the Limerick press, make horrifying reading today. Jews are universally detested, he claims, because they had called down on themselves the blood of Christ. If they no longer kidnap Christian children, he alleges, "they will not hesitate to expose them to a longer and more cruel martyr-

dom by taking the clothes off their back and the food out of their mouths." His concluding warning to have nothing to do with the Jews was widely taken as a call to boycott Jewish business. Creagh preached another sermon the following week, every bit as robust as the first, this time blaming the Jews for the recent persecutions of the Church in France.

The boycott of Jewish business lasted several months. Several families were financially ruined, others were forced to leave. There were isolated acts of violence against Jewish people and businesses. As news of Creagh's sermons reached the national newspapers, it became a topic for debate both in Ireland and abroad, sharply dividing opinion in the country. Some prominent people, like

Michael Davitt and John Redmond, were unhesitating in their defence of the Jews. Others, like Arthur Griffith, took Creagh's side.

'Fr Creagh and the Jews' is a shameful chapter in the history of Mount St Alphonsus. Redemptorists today will offer no defence for their dangerous racism or for the bitterness they unleashed in a community. We will ask, however, that John Creagh, one of our brothers, be judged in the light of his whole life. The bank, shop and Workmen's Industrial Association he founded "to supply the poorer classes with clothing, etc. on the installment system" in the weeks following his sermons are often unmentioned. From Limerick, he went to the Philippines as a member of the pioneering mission team. His last years were spent among the pearl fishermen of Northern Australia where he proved himself once more a stubborn defender of the rights of the poor.