

The Shannonside Series

By Courtesy of RTE Radio 1

The Man Who Nearly Became Bishop

It's only an opinion, but if Limerick people stopped believing in the Curse of St. Munchin, it would go away.

Maybe I'd better explain for the benefit of listeners from outside the area.

St. Munchin is the patron saint of Limerick. But he didn't think much of a few of the tricks that were played on him, when he was alive so he cursed the place. In essence, he declared that outsiders would prosper here, while locals would bicker and argue and get nowhere.

We're growing out of it now. But this story shows how it was still in full operation in the early part of the last century. This is the story of how a whispering campaign deprived Limerick of its own bishop.

The story begins in 1775 or thereabouts. A county Limerickman, Timothy O'Meara married Grace McGrath from Mitchelstown. After a few years, they moved to Limerick City, where they started a family.

In the year 1786, they had a further child. He was William Aloysius, who was destined to be the centre of one of the most underhand whispering campaigns ever recorded in the area. And it was all the more underhand, because it was conducted by priests.

William O'Meara was educated at the local diocesan college in Limerick. Before he was ordained, however, he decided to transfer to the Franciscans. He was ordained at the age of 25, and sent to Cork. There, his goodness and hard work with the people made him something of a legend in a short few years.

than holy priest to be spirited away to the wilds of America, where work was more plentiful, and whiskey was less so.

Old bishop Tuohy managed to enlist the help of the archbishops of Armagh and Dublin, favouring Fr. O'Meara. They made their views known to their colleagues in the hierarchy.

But, back in Limerick, a number of priests came together and decided to dredge up any dirt that they could find. And they did it with a venom and a dedication which would put a modern espionage network to shame.

Led by Frs. Coll and Walsh, the whispering campaign started. They suggested that O'Meara's mother, Grace McGrath, had lived as the wife of a George Everard in Mitchelstown. They had separated, the story went, and the man had emigrated. She later met and married O'Meara's father, which was therefore a bigamous marriage. This meant, in turn, that Fr. O'Meara was illegitimate. He would not only be ineligible to become bishop, if this story were true, but would have to be thrown out of the priesthood altogether.

One of the priests, dressed in lay attire, and using an assumed name, went to Mitchelstown, and spent several days enquiring locally to try to get more dirt about the family.

But the old bishop recognised in O'Meara just the qualities that he felt Limerick to need. O'Meara was a dynamic man, a doer, ready to leap to the defence of the downtrodden. Again and again, he had discreetly performed services for people. He had even quietly arranged for a less

A second string to this campaign was a direct attack on the moral reputation of Fr. O'Meara. The attack took the form of letters sent to various people. They suggested that Fr. O'Meara had been writing matter of an immoral nature. But none of the letters indicated any details, or gave names, dates or sources.

The Hierarchy became distressed, and asked Bishop Tuohy to stay on while the problem was being sorted out. The Bishop agreed, but messed things up by requesting Rome to appoint Fr. O'Meara as co-adjutor. This was a time-buying exercise on the Bishop's part to keep Fr. O'Meara's case alive, as Rome had never considered whether Limerick should have such a co-adjutor, let alone who should get the job.

But this action by Bishop Tuohy infuriated his clergy still further. A group of no fewer than 38 priests of the Limerick diocese went over the head of their bishop, and wrote directly to Cardinal Francesco Aloysius Fontana, Secretary of the Congregation for Ecclesiastical Affairs. They repeated the accusations, and begged that O'Meara be not appointed as their bishop because of his unsuitability.

The Bishop countered with a stinging letter to Rome. He also organised other clergy to write to Cardinal Fontana. The religious orders also contacted the cardinal, saying that they were afraid that, if the diocesan clergy had

their way, they would throw all order priests out of Limerick.

Their letter to Bishop Tuohy accepted completely that there was no reason in canon law why Fr. O'Meara should not be raised to the episcopacy. But, and there was always a 'but', they said that they could not sanction O'Meara, as it would provoke division from among the clergy.

The clergy, with their favourites, were also knocked by Rome. The Bishop was asked, yet again, to stay on, and to start a search for a list of three priests from whose number Rome would make a choice. The condition was, however, that none of these three nominees were to have any connection with Limerick.

And so, Fr. O'Meara, born in Limerick, under the curse of St. Munchin, baptised in the Church of St. Munchin, and educated in St. Munchin's College, stayed as a priest in Cork for a further decade. The rest of his life was one of work, holiness, and some success. He became famous within the Franciscans, and his papers were meticulously preserved in the Irish College of the order in Rome. They are now held in Dublin.

So, when we hear stories about Limerick speaking with many voices, stories of lost opportunities, remember two things. Firstly, it goes back a long way, and, secondly, even though we're no worse than anywhere else, at least we have a fully-fledged saint to blame.

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