

# Terence Albert O'Brien, O.P., Bishop and Martyr

OVER 50 years ago - in 1927 - the Dominican Fathers of Limerick received a very precious legacy. It was the small silver pectoral cross of Terence Albert O'Brien. The cross had been preserved in the O'Brien family whose tradition was that the Bishop had handed it to his mother before his execution. The cross is Spanish mid-17th century and is unusual in that as well as the figure of the crucified, it bears on the reverse a figure of Our Lady with the crescent moon beneath her feet. This precious heirloom cross is a perfect memorial

Thaddeus Moriarty - last Prior of the old Dominican Priory of Holy Cross, Tralee, was hanged at Killarney in the following year, 1653. With him was hanged the patriot poet, Pierce Ferriter.

His studies completed, Terence Albert returned to Ireland where he filled the post of Prior, once at Lorrha, near Portumna, and twice at Limerick. It was during his second term as Prior of Limerick that the Sarsfield Chalice was presented.

It bears the inscription: Pray for the souls of Patrick Sarsfield and Eleanor White who had this chalice made in 1640. It belongs to the Convent of St. Saviour's Limerick of the Order of Preachers. Patrick Sarsfield was the

For the next two years, he left nothing undone to succour and console his flock, now grievously harried by the incursions of Inchiquin, the sanguinary "Murrough of the Burnings". The weakening of the

The story behind the Limerickman to whose memory the beautiful memorial chapel, with its brilliant stain-glass windows, was opened this year in the Dominican Church

Terence Albert made no attempt to escape. He was taken in the Pest House, a building on the north side of Mungret Street, where he was ministering to the wounded and fever-stricken. The Siege Diary fixes the date of his capture as Thursday, October 30th.

Ireton, in his dispatch to the Commonwealth Parliament, wrote: "It hath pleased God since the surrender to deliver into our hands two persons of principal activity and influence in the obstinate holding out of Limerick, the Bishop of Emly and Major General Purcell . . . whom we presently hanged and have set up their heads on the gates".

### Court martial

Ludlow, Ireton's second-

tion the high point of drama which took place during that grim court martial in St. Mary's Cathedral. The Bishop suddenly raised his voice, and cutting through the haze of cant and hypocrisy of Ireton, told him that he was a Bishop, that all they could condemn him for was the faithful discharge of a Bishop's duty, and for that he was prepared to die.

### Eyewitness accounts

Two priests of the Limerick Dominican community were present at the end. Fr. Fabian Ryan and Fr. Denis Hanrahan. They have left it on record that he was executed on the Eve of All Saints.

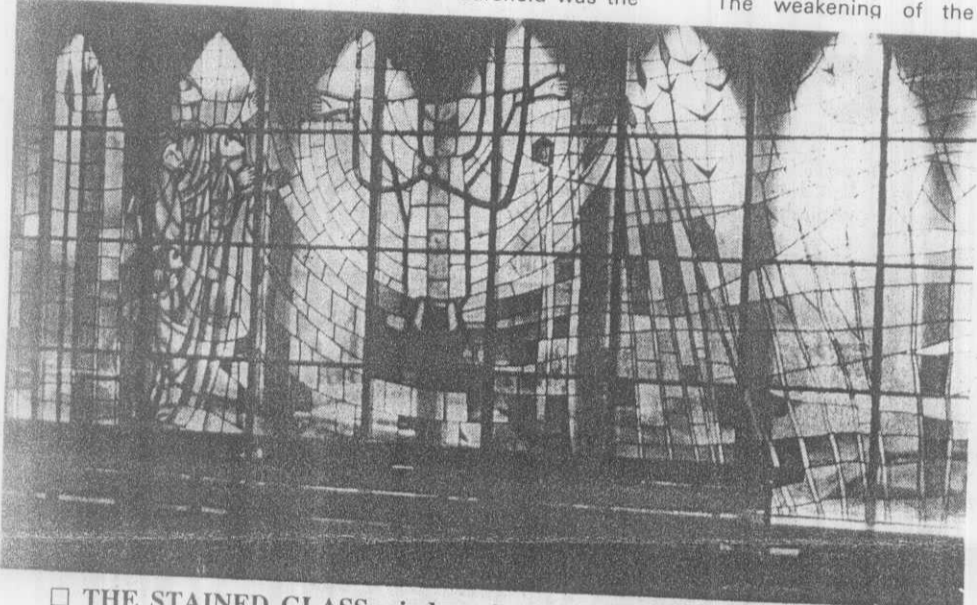
One of them, Fr. Hanrahan, heard his last confes-

O'Brien. He was as good as his word. When the Bishop was sentenced to death, he warned Ireton that he too would soon appear before the tribunal of God. Ireton died three weeks later, on November 26th, within the Walls of Limerick, the city he had captured. Eyewitness accounts of his tormented ending, haunted by remorse and acknowledging that the innocent blood of the Bishop was the cause of his own dying, do not make pleasant reading.

### Fr. Hanrahan's testimony

Terence Albert knew that a terrible death awaited him. He faced it with serenity and with joy. He could have not foreseen the gruesome horror of the outrage which his body was to receive, how the soldiers would deride the hanging body for three hours, swing it to and fro, hacking and beating with muskets until it lost all human semblance.

Fr. Hanrahan, the eyewitness, pictures the manacled and fettered figure moving to the gallows as on a triumphal progress. Calm and unmoved, the felon Bishop of Emly, sometime Prior of St. Saviour's, passed through the Kilmallock Gate, more usually known as St. John's Gate, on his way to the common gallows outside. Through St. John's



THE STAINED GLASS windows in the Memorial Chapel to Terence Albert O'Brien in the Dominican Church, Limerick.

symbol of the great-hearted prelate who once wore it and who left it as a legacy to his kinsmen and his brethren. It takes its place most fittingly among the other precious heirlooms of the Limerick Dominicans which link them with Terence Albert, namely the Statue of Our Lady and the Sarsfield Chalice. Both were given to Terence when he was Prior of St. Saviour's in 1640.

### Chalice

During the last ten years of his life, Terence must have used the chalice at Mass many a morning. The pectoral cross forms the perfect and indeed inevitable link, uniting in itself the Sacrifice of Calvary and the Blessed Mother of God - Chalice and Statue.

Terence or Turlough O'Brien belonged to the branch of the family known as the O'Briens of Ara from the Arra mountains. He was born in the fortified residence of Tuogh, near Cappamore. Terence was received as a novice in Limerick by the Dominicans of St. Saviour's in 1621. At his reception he took the name of Albert after the Dominican saint, Albert the Great, teacher of St. Thomas Aquinas.

After his year's probation in Limerick, Brother Albert O'Brien was sent to Toledo in Spain for his studies. In the list of 50 Irish students residing in Spain sent to Propaganda in 1627 we find the names of Br. Albert O'Brien, Br. Arthur Geoghan, Br. Thaddeus Moriarty and Br. John Collins. All four Dominicans were destined to receive the crown of martyrdom.

Br. Arthur Geoghan was barbarously executed at Tyburn. Fr. John Collins, a son of St. Saviour's, Limerick, also, was hanged in Limerick in 1652 - a year after Terence's execution. Fr

nephew of the infamous Sir Dominic Sarsfield, the judge who sentenced Sir John Burke of Brittas to death in 1606 for having Mass said in his castle on Rosary Sunday by the Limerick Dominicans. Patrick Sarsfield became Recorder of Limerick and in 1640 in reparation for the crime of his uncle, he and his wife Eleanor White donated a chalice to the Dominican Church. To this year also is ascribed the giving of the Statue of Our Lady.

### Our Lady of Limerick

Although any factual evidence is missing, it is presumed that the donors of the chalice were also donors of the Statue. It may have been at the suggestion of Fr. Terence O'Brien - the energetic Prior whose devotion to Our Lady was well-known - that a new statue would be an essential requirement for the recently re-occupied Dominican Church.

For over 80 years the Church had been in secular hands while the friars led a hunted existence, possessing the mere essentials for offering the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

The Statue then, would have been installed by the Prior in the old priory of St. Saviour's which formed part of the city walls, and it would have remained there during the Confederate days, right down to the Cromwellian siege.

### Bishop of Emly

In 1642, Terence Albert was made Provincial of the Irish Dominicans, who at that time numbered about 600. Six years later, on April 2nd, 1648, he was consecrated Bishop of Emly, his native diocese, by the Papal Nuncio, John Baptist Rinuccini in Kilkenny.

power of the Confederate Catholics, and the final departure of the Nuncio Rinuccini from Galway in 1649, made it increasingly difficult for Terence to minister to his diocese.

Then, as the full force of the Cromwellian persecution was unleashed upon the country, he took his place at the centre of the Catholic Resistance, the city of Limerick, soon to come under siege by Ireton.

When Limerick surrendered in October, 1651, after a protracted siege of five months, the Governor Hugh O'Neill tendered the keys of the city to Henry Ireton. The shameful surrender terms excluded from pardon a score of persons principally responsible for the obstinate refusal to surrender.

### THE STAINED-GLASS windows in the Memorial Chapel to Terence Albert O'Brien in the Dominican Church, Limerick.

The sombre figures of the sorrowing women of Ireland emerge from the dark shadows of Ireland's tragic past. Their hands are raised in gestures of supplication as their stricken faces turn towards the figure of the persecuted Bishop Terence Albert O'Brien. The martyr triumphs amid the crumbling walls of Limerick.

Although noosed and chained, yet he is free; triumphing over suffering, his serene gaze rests upon the peaceful hills of Ara. There is a strong analogy here with the Women of Jerusalem to whom Christ said: Do not weep for me. Beside the Bishop's crozier is a silver birch tree, the delicate peeling bark like teardrops - Lacrimae Rerum. The threatening spears, hafted with Ash give way to Ash trees with withered leaves - the Agony in the Garden of Eoin, Garrai Eoin.

Beneath the Coat of Arms of the Dominicans of Limerick is the Martyr's final testimony to the truth, spoken from the gallows. The vine leaves and clusters of grapes lead on to the Sarsfield Chalice and the Bishop's pectoral cross, preserved in St. Saviour's, Limerick. The history of Limerick continues with an inset of Sarsfield's ride

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in-command, wrote an account of the Siege and its aftermath. He describes what happened after the arrest of the Bishop: "A court martial was assembled and the Bishop of Emly and Major General Purcell were asked if they had anything to say why they should not die according to the sentence passed upon them.

The Bishop said that having many sins to confess, he desired time to prepare himself for that purpose, which was granted. Major General Purcell begged for his life, which was denied. The Bishop died with more resolution".

But Ludlow did not men-

sion. He also left a moving account of the Bishop's last hours of life. Fr. Ryan, the other Dominican eyewitness, is explicit about the link between the Bishop's execution and Ireton's own death.

His testimony is that during the siege, Terence Albert had spurned a message from Ireton offering a free pass and 40 thousand gold crowns if he would desist from encouraging the defenders. The Cromwellian general estimated correctly the Bishop's power but not his character. Stung by the refusal, Ireton vowed that if he ever got possession of Limerick he would immolate

Gardens the escort would have gone, the place called by the people Garrai Eoin.

A great throng clustered around the gate for a last glimpse of the erect and vibrant figure of this indomitable man, who seemed at that moment to embody all the heroic qualities of his race - the unyielding resistance to evil, the rocklike quality of unshakable faith.

He had the serenity of one who has glimpsed eternity and now all else has become an irrelevancy - the dance of gnats over a summer stream - a shadow at sunset. What were the taunts and obscenities of the soldiers to the man whom joy hath overtaken as a flood. What indeed, to the man who knew that the springtime of his life had come.

The scaffold stood on the hill of Cluain - near to where the Good Shepherd Convent stands today. From that grim vantage point, full in his gaze, reared the blue-grey hills of Ara - the hills of home. His vision ranged beyond them - his eyes were on the eternal hills. The drops of his time were precious now. What was to be said must be said briefly.

But he was to make his last proclamation of the truth - ringingly - as a bishop should, as a preacher should.

The arrows of his words pierced the hearts of the weeping people about the gallows: Preserve the faith; keep the commandments; be resigned to the Will of God. For thus you will possess your souls. Do not weep for me, but pray that being firm and unbroken amidst the torment of death, I may happily finish my course.