Roman Catholic Clergy of St. Mary’s Parish (Part 1)

by John Carroll

During the eighteenth century the people of St. Mary’s parish were fortunate to have an unbroken line of priests to minister to their spiritual needs. The custom of celebrating Mass in the homes of the people continued even though Mass-houses of the 1730’s were being replaced by more solid structures. In medieval Limerick city there were six original parishes: St. John’s, St. Mary’s, St. Nicholas’s, St. Michael’s, St. Munchin’s and St. Patrick’s. The evolution and expansion of the city, particularly in the second half of the twentieth century, saw the creation of St. Nicholas’s parish by Bishop Jeremiah Newman in 1991 to accommodate the increased population in the Corbally area. Prior to October 1961, Corbally formed part of St. Patrick’s parish. At the dawn of this millennium the population of St. Mary’s parish numbered around 6,000.1 Today the combined parishes of Parnell and Gratloe, St. Mary’s and St. Nicholas’s form the present Clare Island cluster.

St. Mary’s parish is probably the oldest parish of Limerick city, being in existence before the Synod of Rathbrassil in 1111, which created the Irish Roman Catholic archdioceses and dioceses we know today. In that year the parish church was also raised to the level of a cathedral by the then Bishop of Limerick, Gilbert. With the coming of the Reformation the present St. Mary’s Cathedral passed into the hands of the Established Church.2 It is unclear whether the site of the present cathedral was the actual site of the original church of St. Mary’s parish.

Within the parish is King John’s Castle, which was built in the early thirteenth century and is a popular tourist attraction. The present Roman Catholic church was built in the early 1930’s under the pastorate of Canon Hannan and replaced an earlier edifice, dating back to 1749, which was demolished. The church is dedicated to Our Lady of the Assumption and is built of limestone in Hiberno-Romanesque style. The limestone was brought from Redgate, County Clare.3 All that remains of the 1749 church is a holy water font and a plaque which are at the rear of the present church. Through the centuries there were also places of worship at Little Island and near the present St. Munchin’s Church, at Thomondgate. According to Westropp, a Dominican friary also existed at one stage in the parish.4

Succession of Parish Priests in St. Mary’s Parish:

1632 – James Galwey is listed as a signatory on a petition dated 15 July 1632 requesting Rome to appoint a bishop to the then vacant diocese of Limerick.5

Pre-1699 – Matthew Molony was P.P. from the reign of Charles II until 1704. Archdeacon John Begley states that upon Dr. John O’Molony’s departure to France during the 1690 Siege of Limerick, Fr. Matthew Molony who may have been a nephew of his predecessor, was given jurisdiction of the Limerick diocese with Fr. James Stritch, P.P. of Rathkeale. He took a leading part in the defence of Limerick city against William of...
Orange. After the signing of the 1691 Treaty of Limerick he was called on to surrender the keys of St. Mary's Cathedral which he was in possession of during the siege. On refusing to do so he was jailed in 1698 and at the following year's Assizes was convicted of being a Popish Vicar-General. In September 1699 he was transported from Cork and little is heard of him afterwards. He returned to Limerick, possibly when he had retired from the priesthood, as he is buried in Kilquane graveyard. The date of his death is unknown.

Pre-1704 - William Ryan who was born circa 1660 and hailed from the Cashel and Emly archdiocese, succeeded Fr. Moloney and remained P.P. until 1724 when he resigned on pension. He was possibly P.P. of Knocklong from 1686 until the early 1700's, but there is no confirmation available.

1724 - Dean Richard Hennessy, a Cork priest, became Coadjutor P.P. in 1724 and was appointed P.P. and Dean in 1728 and Vicar General in 1734. His name disappears from all records in 1736.

1736 - Archdeacon Peter Creagh became P.P. in 1736 and remained in situ until 1745 when he was appointed Bishop of Waterford and Lismore, a position he held until his death in 1775. While Bishop, he resided at Carrick-on-Suir and was particularly prominent in condemning the activities of the Whiteboys, who were very active in south Tipperary at this time. He was reputed to be a very spiritual pastor and was a nephew of Dr. John Creagh, Archbishop of Dublin.

1745 - Dean John Creagh D.D., a brother of his predecessor, studied at Rome and became P.P. and Dean in 1745 and remained so until his death in October 1790. A report from 1784 states that there were 5,723 Catholics, 1,781 Protestants, 64 Quakers and 46 Dissenter (Presbyterians) living in St. Mary's parish. Four chapels existed, in addition to two convents, one nunnery, one Protestant church and two places of worship each for Quakers and Dissenters. All churches were reported to be in good repair.

1790 - John Young D.D. was baptised on 10 March 1746. A native of St. John's parish where his father William was an eminent merchant, he studied at Louvain and obtained an M.A. and a D.D. prior to his ordination in 1770. Shortly after his ordination he was appointed C.C. of St. John's parish and held this position until 1781 when he became Administrator of Bruff parish. Dr. Conway appointed him P.P. of Bruff on 5 January 1782 where he lived at Glenogra Castle and was assisted by a curate. On 9 February 1791 he was appointed P.P. and Dean of St. Mary's parish. In December 1792 he was appointed Coadjutor Bishop of Limerick, becoming Bishop in 1796. While Bishop, he purchased Park House, Corkbally in 1809. Prior to this he resided at Rathbrane, Park House served as the residence of a number of succeeding Bishops of Limerick and later as the parochial residence of St. Patrick's parish until the 1960's when it was demolished. Bishop Young died on 22 September 1813 and is buried in St. Patrick's (old) graveyard in St. Patrick's parish.

1792 - Sylvester Goonan was ordained in Paris in 1778 and was P.P. of St. Mary's parish until his sudden death aged 46 on 14 July 1796, at his residence at Peter's Cell. He is mentioned as C.C. of St. John's parish in 1782 and became C.C. of St. Mary's parish in 1784, becoming P.P. eight years later. He was reputed to have been an eloquent preacher and discharged his duties with great zeal and an eloquence which endeared him to all. His brother-in-law, John Leonard was proprietor of a woolen-drapery business at Broad Street at the time of his death. In 1798 his sermons were published in book format.

1796 - Timothy (Thady) O'Flynn was ordained at Limerick in October 1764. After his ordination he went to Nantes (France) and became a D.D., and a professor while there. He returned in 1794 when he was appointed C.C. of St. John's parish and remained there until his appointment to St. Mary's parish. In 1797 he took a position of lecturer in theology in the newly-formed St. Munchin's College in addition to his pastoral duties and held this position for the rest of his life. In May 1807 he became P.P. of St. Michael's parish until his death, which is recorded in the Limerick Chronicle dated 14 April 1813 as follows:

Yesterday, at his house, Bakerstreet, the Rev. Thadeus O'Flynn, Titular Dean of the Diocese of Limerick - a gentleman of extensive learning, whose tenacious piety, and unbounded charity, bore a long and tedious illness with that meekness and resignation which distinguished him through life and his death is sincerely lamented by every individual that had the pleasure of his acquaintance.

Rev. O'Flynn is buried in St. Michael's Church and he was an uncle of Michael Murnane P.P. of Kilmallock from 1813 until 1837.

1807 - Gerard Herbert served as C.C. of St. Mary's parish from May 1791 until his appointment as P.P. of St. Munchin's parish in 1796 and had a church built which was badly needed. The church, which opened for public worship in October 1799 and was built by public subscriptions, stood to the left of the present St. Munchin's church and replaced the structure which had been erected in 1743. Mr. Owen Madden, a wealthy parishioner, supplied the altar and in 1808 presented a large painting of the Ascension by Henry Singleton, A.R.A. at a cost of fifty guineas. Fr. Herbert returned to St. Mary's parish as P.P. in May 1807 and died on 13 April 1813 at his residence on George's Quay, Limerick on the same day his predecessor Rev. O'Flynn died.

1813 - Charles Hanrahan, a native of Limerick city, was born in early 1784 and ordained in 1810. He was a professor at Park College until his appointment to St. Mary's parish in 1813. He was appointed Dean of the diocese in 1839 and died at his residence on George's Quay the following year. He was interred in the old church, the site of which now forms part of the grounds of the present church, where his tombstone reads:

Here reposeth the remains of Dr. Charles Hanrahan, Dean of the Diocese and P.P. of St. Mary's for 28 years. He was a good and faithful Pastor. He died on the 29th Febr. 1840 aged 56 years. May he rest in Peace. Amen.

1840 - John Brahan was appointed C.C. of St. Mary's parish in August 1822 and remained so until October 1837 when he was appointed Administrator of Kilmallock parish, a position he held until his return to St. Mary's as P.P. in March 1840. In 1857 he was transferred to
Newcastle West, where he remained until his death in 1861. Archdeacon Begley states that he died at Kingstown (Dun Laoghaire) while recuperating his health. He is interred in Newcastle West church.

1857 — Dean George Butler was born in Limerick on 14 February 1815. He was educated at St. Patrick’s College, Maynooth and ordained at Limerick in 1838. After ordination he spent two years ministering in Trinidad until his recall to Limerick in 1840 when he was appointed C.C. of St. Patrick’s parish. In 1844 he took up curacy at St. John’s parish and later that year was transferred to St. Michael’s parish where he remained until 1857 when he was appointed P.P. and Dean of St. Mary’s parish. While at St. Michael’s he resided at Cornwallis (now Gerald Griffin) Street. In October 1860 he became Vicar General and on 25 July 1861 was appointed Coadjutor Bishop of Limerick, but remained as P.P. of St. Mary’s parish until Bishop Ryan’s death in 1864. He was appointed Bishop of Limerick on 4 June 1864 and ministered until his death on 3 February 1866 aged 70. During his tenure as Bishop the Ardagh chalice was discovered, the Black Book of Limerick was loaned to Maynooth, the tower of St. John’s Cathedral was constructed and many churches and schools were built in the diocese. He is interred in St. John’s Cathedral.

1865 — Richard Scott, of the Cashel and Emly archdiocese was C.C. of Dromcollogher from 1838 to 1840 when he took up curacy duties at Kilmallock. In 1841 he was appointed C.C. of Bulgaden and the following year was transferred to Patrickswell, where he remained until he was appointed P.P. of Killeedy in 1850. He held this position until 1863 when he took up parochial duty at St. Munchin’s parish. Two years later he was transferred to St. Mary’s parish where he remained until his death in 1870. He is interred in the crypt of the chapel at Mount St. Lawrence cemetery.

1870 — Michael Fitzgerald, a native of Glin, County Limerick, became C.C. of the parish in 1853, probably after his ordination, and remained there until 1861. He was appointed C.C. of St. John’s parish that year and also became Administrator the following year and held these positions until 1870 when he returned to St. Mary’s parish, this time as P.P. He also became Vicar General around this time. He died at Tervoe House, Clarina, the residence of Lord Emly, on 31 May 1871 aged 42 and is interred at St. Mary’s church grounds.

1871 — Michael Casey, a native of the parish, was ordained in May 1838 having studied at Maynooth. After ordination he served in Scotland until his appointment to Adare as C.C. in 1839. The following year he was transferred to St. John’s parish and remained there until May 1850 when he was appointed P.P. of Mungraet. While there, he completed St. Nessan’s Church at Raheen in 1856, which was begun by Fr. Jeremiah Halpin, one of his predecessors in Mungraet. Fr. Casey was transferred to St. Mary’s parish on the death of Fr. Fitzgerald and was also made Vicar General. While at St. Mary’s he also served as chaplain to the City Gaol. He died on 10 June 1878 and is interred in the crypt of the chapel at Mount St. Lawrence cemetery.

1878 — Daniel Fitzgerald, a brother of the aforementioned Michael and who was also a native of Glin, was ordained on 9 September 1860 having received his education at Maynooth. His first appointment was as C.C. of St. Mary’s parish in 1861 — succeeding his brother — and remained there until 1870 when he became C.C. of St. Michael’s parish. He also served as Administrator of this parish in the period between the departure of Dean Butler and the arrival of Fr. Scott. He became Administrator of St. Michael’s parish on 14 May 1877 (St. Michael’s was a menal parish from 1838 until 1973) and held this position until his return to St. Mary’s parish on 20 June 1878, this time as P.P. During his term he also served as chaplain to the City Gaol and was actively involved with several charitable organisations in Limerick city. A zealous and popular clergyman who took a keen interest in the needs of the poor, he died on 10 November 1894 aged 62, having been ill for some time prior to his death, and is interred at St. Mary’s church grounds. He bequeathed £500, towards the building of a new church in St. Mary’s parish, in his last will and testament.

1894 — Denis Hallinan, D.D., a native of Coolcappa parish, was born on 14 November 1849. He attended the Irish College at Rome where he was ordained in 1874, also obtaining a Doctorate of Divinity. He served as temporary curate at Shanagolden, Rathkeale and Ballingarry respectively before being appointed C.C. of Newcastle West on 19 March 1875. He remained there until 3 November 1886 when he was transferred to St. Michael’s parish, becoming Administrator there on 13 June 1882. He became P.P. of St. Mary’s parish on 20 November 1894 and remained so until 8 September 1898 when he returned to Newcastle West to take up parochial duties there. He also became Vicar General at this time. On 10 January 1918 he was appointed Bishop of Limerick, having been appointed Vicar Capitular the previous August. During his ministry he was noted for his close attention to the needs of the poor. While Bishop, his achievements included the introduction of the Order of St. Don Bosco and the Salesians to the Limerick diocese at Pallaskenry. Regrettably he was not of a robust constitution and passed away following a short illness on 2 July 1923, aged 73. He is interred at St. John’s Cathedral and was a relative of John Hallinan who served as P.P. in the parishes of Cappagh and Ardagh respectively prior to his death in May 1917.

1898 — Denis Shanahan was educated at Carlow College and All Hallows College where he was ordained on 24 June 1868. His first assignment was in the diocese of Waterford and Lismore. In 1869 he was appointed C.C. of Glenroe-Ballyvorg and the following year took up curacy at Coolcappa-Kilcolman. On 20 January 1872 he became C.C. of Askeaton-Ballysteen and on 29 July 1878 was transferred to Ballingarry-Granagh, where he served under the pastorate of
his brother Timothy. During this period he spent some time in the U.S.A. and collected a substantial sum of money for the building of Ballingarry church, which was opened in 1879. On 19 October of that year he was appointed C.C. of St. John's parish. While at St. John's he also served as chaplain to the Mercy Convent. On 20 July 1882 he was transferred to St. Michael's parish and remained there until 14 September 1889 when he returned to Coolcappa, this time as Administrator. On 25 September 1890 he returned to St. Michael's parish as C.C. and held that position until 18 February 1892 when he returned to Askatoon, this time as P.P. The following year he was transferred to St. Patrick's parish on 13 June and remained P.P. there until he resigned that parish on 9 September 1896, at which stage he became P.P. of St. Mary's parish. From then until 1904 he also held the position of chaplain to the City Gaol. In 1917 he retired from the priesthood due to ill-health and died on 28 June 1924 aged 80 at St. John's Hospital, having resided in Dublin for some time after his retirement. A zealous and devoted pastor, he is interred at Mount St. Lawrence cemetery. His aforementioned brother, Timothy, was C.C. of St. Mary's parish from 1859 until 1863 and was P.P. of Ballingarry-Granagh from 1874 until 1894 and of St. Munchin's parish from 1894 until 1910. Another brother, Gerard, served as P.P. of the parish of Thornboy-on-Tees in the diocese of Middlesbrough, England, while another brother, Patrick, was ordained for the archdiocese of Melbourne, Australia in June 1868. The Shanahans were natives of Ballinamara, Killianane and were nephews of Michael Shanahan who was C.C. of St. Mary's parish from 1815 until 1817 and was P.P. of Dromcollogher-Broadford at the time of his death in 1835.

1917 – Jeremiah O’Connor hailed from Newcastle West and was baptised on 9 January 1868. He studied at Maynooth and was ordained there on 24 June 1891. After ordination he went on mission to the archdiocese of Westminster in London where he ministered in the Pro-Cathedral at Kensington. In May 1895 he was recalled to the diocese and was appointed C.C. of St. John's parish and also served as chaplain to St. John's Hospital and the Presentation Convent. In November 1901 he took up curacy at St. Michael's parish and on 2 December 1908 became Administrator there, a position he held until his appointment to St. Mary's. He died on 14 October 1927 aged 59.

1927 – Michael Hannan was born on 5 December 1873. A native of Croagh, he entered Maynooth in 1892 and was ordained there on 18 June 1899. His first appointment was to the diocese of Galloway, Scotland where he ministered at the parishes of St. Andrew's and Sacred Heart respectively. On 11 July 1905 he returned to Limerick when he was appointed C.C. of St. Michael's parish and the following October was transferred to Glin where he remained until 7 September 1907 when he returned to St. Michael's, where he also served as chaplain to the Mercy Convent and Mount St. Vincent Orphanage. On 23 March 1926 he became Administrator of St. Michael's parish until 10 December 1927 when he was appointed P.P. of St. Mary's parish, becoming Canon in October 1932. While at St. Mary's he oversaw the construction of the present church. He was transferred to Newcastle West on 25 August 1938 and also became Vicar General at this time. On 6 March 1943 he became Vicar Capitular and in 1951 he was appointed Dean. He died on 12 November 1964 aged 90 and is interred at Newcastle West church grounds.

1938 – William Harty, a native of the parish, was baptised on 4 March 1885. He received his education at Maynooth and was ordained there on 20 June 1909. After ordination he ministered at the archdiocese of Westminster until 19 April 1912 when he was appointed C.C. of Effin. In 1917 he took up curacy at Glenroe-Ballyvorgan and in November 1918 was transferred to Ballingarry. In September 1921 he became C.C. of Rathkeale and remained so until December 1924 when he was transferred to St. Michael's parish. On 12 June 1932 he became Administrator in his new parish and held this position until 12 February 1937 when he was appointed...
PP of Ballyseedy. On 1 September 1938 he was appointed to St. Mary's parish until 14 April 1944 when he was transferred to Askeaton-Ballysteen. In March 1948 he stepped down from active ministry due to health issues related to alcohol. He subsequently resided at St. John's Park in Waterford and died on 16 March 1954 aged 69. He is interred at Mount St. Lawrence cemetery.

1944 – Patrick J. Lee was born in Kilfinane on 5 April 1896. He was ordained on 20 June 1920 at Maynooth and after ordination was appointed Dean of St. Munchin's College, Henry Street, a position he held until his appointment to St. Mary's parish. He was created Canon in 1950, Monsignor and Vicar General in 1954, and Vicar Capitular in 1973. He retired as P.P. in August 1980 and went to reside at Milford House where he died in 7 December 1983. He is interred at Mount St. Lawrence cemetery. He was a keen G.A.A. follower and referee, and trained the St. Munchin's College hurling team that won their only Harty Cup title in 1922.

1980 – John (Seán) Condon, a native of Glenroe, attended Maynooth and was ordained there on 23 June 1957. In 1961 he was appointed C.C. of Askeaton-Ballyseedy and in 1962 was appointed chaplain to Sarsfield Barracks, a position he held until 1967 when he took up duty in San Augustine diocese in Florida, U.S.A. While attached to Sarsfield Barracks he also spent a period ministering to the Irish troops in the Congo. He returned to Limerick in 1971 when he was appointed C.C. of St. Mary's parish and became P.P. there on 1 September 1980. In July 1985 he went to Nigeria where he ministered in the diocese of Minna, remaining there until June 1990 when he was appointed P.P. of Kilfinane. In September 1991 he was assigned to Bruff and while there spearheaded a major renovation of the three churches in that parish. In September 1995 he took leave for twelve months to pursue a pastoral ministry and spiritual renewal course at Dalgan Park, Navan, and in August 1997 he went to the diocese of Orange, U.S.A. on a pastoral assignment and has remained there to the present. He is a nephew of Canon Edmond Condon who was P.P. of Bruff from 1958 until his death in 1973.

1985 – Brendan Connellan was born on 22 March 1928. A native of Knockaderry, he studied at St. Munchin's College and Maynooth, where he was ordained on 22 June 1952. In 1953 he was appointed to the teaching staff of St. Munchin's College, teaching religion and French, and also became chaplain to the F.C.J. Laurel Hill and Reparation convents. He held these positions until 5 July 1967 when he became C.C. of Mungret, remaining there until 23 August 1978 when he was appointed P.P. of Holy Family parish in Southill. He remained there until his appointment to St. Mary's parish on 16 July 1985. In October of that year he was created Canon and on 11 May 1990 was appointed Canon Theologian. He retired as P.P. on 23 March 2002, but remained in the parish as Pastor Emeritus. He finally retired to Milford Care Centre on 5 December 2009 and died at the Regional Hospital later that month on 29 December. He is buried at St. Mary's church grounds and was author of the 2001 publication Light On The Past which documents the history of St. Mary's parish.

2002 – Canon Donough O'Malley was born in 1941. A native of Barrington Street, he studied at St. Patrick's College, Thurles and was ordained there in June 1965 for the diocese of Southwark, England. From his ordination until his recall to the Limerick diocese, he served in South London in the parishes of Putney (1965-1972), Anerley (1972-1978) and South Norwood until 2 September 1981 when he was appointed C.C. of Our Lady Queen of Peace parish at Janesboro. In September 1991 he became Administrator of Our Lady of Lourdes parish at Ballincollig and two years later was appointed P.P. there, where he remained until his arrival to St. Mary's parish in September 2002, when he was also created Canon. On 5 July 2016 he was appointed Chancellor of the Diocese and retired as Parish Priest of St. Mary's. He is now assisting the team of priests serving the parishes of St. Joseph's, St. Saviour's and Our Lady of Lourdes.

2016 – Derek Leonard is the present incumbent. A native of Woodview Park, he was ordained at St. John's Cathedral on 16 June 1996, having studied at Maynooth and obtained a Doctorate in Divinity in doing so. The following 7 September he was appointed C.C. of Mungret and on 15 October 1998 also took up the
position of Assistant Diocesan Secretary. In December 2003 he went on mission to Peru and ministered in the parish of El Resucitado (The Resurrected One) in an eastern suburb of Lima. Together with a fellow Limerick priest and native of Corbally, Fr. David Costello, he opened the Sagart workshop there in May 2010. This project manufactures industrial textile and is aimed specifically at women who have little skills and no source of income. This enterprise was made possible by the generosity of Limerick pilgrims who travelled to Lourdes with the Sagart pilgrimage from 2000 on. In late 2013 he was appointed P.P. of the parish of St. Nicholas and on 5 July 2016 he succeeded Canon O'Malley as P.P. of St. Mary's, while remaining in the parish of St. Nicholas.

1. Diocese of Limerick Heritage Project at: http://www.limerickdioceseheritage.org
2. ibid.
3. ibid.
4. ibid.
5. Archdeacon John Begley - History of the Diocese of Limerick - Volume II (p.436)
7. ibid (p.233)
8. ibid (p.223)
9. Limerick Chronicle, 14 April 1813.
10. The recorded date of death on the tombstone (29th Febr. 1840) appears to be incorrect, as according to the Limerick Chronicle Wednesday 26 February 1840, the death occurred on the previous Saturday morning 22 February. The death notice also remarks on the advanced age of the cleric, which is hardly consistent with the aged 56 on the tombstone.
11. Freeman's Journal 5 March 1840.

**General Sources:**

- Directories of Limerick Diocesan Clergy.
- Archdeacon John Begley - History of the Diocese of Limerick - Volume II and Volume III.

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**Saint Mary's Presbytery, 2016 (Courtesy of Tom Donovan).**

**Saint Mary's Church, 2016 (Courtesy of Tom Donovan).**

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