

## The Faith: The Nation: Prime Principles of Survival

These items could be separate and distinct. After a fashion a place could be regarded as holy, and yet it could be deficient in regard to spreading the Faith. There is such a thing as selfish faith and there is also a faith which does not understand that it must communicate itself. Both of these types lack light and survival power.

It is also possible for a country to possess little faith and at the same time play a remarkable part in evangelisation. A case in point would be the France of preceding centuries which has vied with Ireland as the leading missionary land. Devoted missionaries thronged out into the mission-field and did wonders, while at the same time there was no converting spirit at work in France itself and the people were allowed to drift away. Pope Leo XIII describes this as a ghastly tragedy.

So it would be possible in theory for Ireland to be holy in itself but neglectful of the world; or alternatively to be

missionising in great style and to rot at home. It is to be remembered that a moderate number of good Catholic families can produce a considerable band of missionaries; that is how France has made such a brave show in that department.

But in the third place, it would be possible, and a much more natural phenomenon, for Ireland to be truly holy, that is possessed of a multitude of holy families out of which would proceed a host of missionaries who would convert on a grand scale. In that would be none of the anomaly which has characterised France, and surely it must be our goal that the holiness of Ireland should evangelise the whole world.

There is a further element in the up-to-date position which must be reckoned with because it is the most significant of all. It is the presence of the Legion of Mary. Why is this so important? Because it could transform the domestic position and the missionary one. I feel that without the full play of organisation such as the Legion, the future is going to be worse than the present position which is most unhappy.

I fear that the majority of our people have but a mechanical goodness. They attend Sunday Mass and the sacraments but have no depth in their religion. They do not know it properly nor live their lives according to it. They can be quite undutiful, neglectful of the principles of honour, devoid of apostleship which the Vatican Council has proclaimed to be a basic element of Catholicism. We are bringing forth little better fruits than respectable paganism would. Drinking has now become the new deluge. We are not being protected from the slaughter on the roads nor from the criminal. Many aspects of life are a shambles. It is no answer to say that the same applies to

other countries. We would be doing better if our religion were real.

It has always been imagined by us that the Irish people have a unique regard for the Mass. Therefore it is a shock to encounter proofs to the contrary. I have now covered a good deal of the surface of the country and I tell you our experience in regard to daily Mass, which surely is the test of appreciation. The attendance is miserable in proportion. Yet in the smaller places there is nothing doing at that time and the majority *could* attend. I specify one case where we had a priest with us and offered a week-day Mass to a village which normally has one on Sunday only. Not a single local person turned up for it. Other places would be better but not much better. Does that sort of thing afford justification for our alleged love of the Mass?

Quite evidently that degree of religion is not going to stand up to the adverse influences, which are every day thickening and marshalling themselves. Therefore we find ourselves at a crisis point of religion. The thought forces itself upon me: Is it possible that the tragedy of France and so many other countries is going to reproduce itself in Ireland? We are walking on a slippery slope at the moment. That cannot continue. It improves or it deteriorates – usually the latter.

It was not possible to save France, Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Holland, all of which have lost the Faith in the main. Acute French observers, coming here soon after the Second World War, declared that they saw a remarkable likeness between the Ireland of that time and the France of two hundred years previously: the same characteristics and the same weakness. Two hundred years ago would have been the period in which France would have prided

itself on being the most Catholic country in the world, that is immediately preceding the French Revolution. The Revolution did not create all the hollowness and the hatred of religion which then appeared. It only revealed what was there. It was like taking off a mask.

Spain and Portugal spread the Faith over great tracts of the world's surface, but those supreme services to the Church did not mean that the keeping of the Faith was guaranteed to them in perpetuity. They plunged into the most hideous phase of anti-religion which could exist and set themselves to propagate it over the world. It could not be said that the people in those countries put up any fight worthwhile against that horror. After a little flurry of resistance they abandoned themselves to the irreligion which their governments decreed. Even though the more violent aspects of atheism have worn off, the percentage of belief and practice there is negligible and it cannot be claimed that things are improving.

Does that likeness of conditions discerned by the French observers suggest that we will in due course slide into what they have become? We would be insane if we just shrugged off that possibility.

In the first place, let us see how those calamities could happen; how Catholic peoples can let their heritage of faith pass away from them and subsequently prove impervious to re-evangelisation. I would fear that the explanation is that they never really had a proper measure of the Faith. It was a way of life into which they had been born and which touched their inner core but little. They were ready to abandon that possession under comparatively mild pressure.

But why? Were they not receiving the Catholic teachings and maintaining a practice of some sort? Yes, but these



things are not enough, as history so consistently shows. They can keep a people in apparent fidelity if the general circumstances and atmosphere are propitious and act as a cushion. Otherwise they will not preserve the people. To contend otherwise would be to deny the universal lesson of history. Yet, throughout the past the folly has always been committed of being content with that cushioned Catholicism and the result has always been the same. After some time the cushion was taken away; religion became the target for hostile forces and did not have the quality to stand up to them.

To this the retort will be made in the case of Ireland that it withstood the longest and most intense religious persecution of all history. But this argument is not valid. As I have already contended, past services provide no guarantee for the future. In the second place, persecution could be a safeguard. It was in our case a perfect insulation for the Faith: in addition to which the faithful bearing of persecution is in itself most high virtue. But that is not at stake now. The point is that the insulation of persecution is no longer there and the cushioning against the current evils has removed itself. What really corrodes the Faith are the materialisms, the sophistries, the alleged science, the sneers which search out the weak spots and do the deadly work on people whose appreciation of the Faith is not sufficient.

The old pastoral formula cannot be expected to cope with those sophisticated conditions. That formula is the shepherd and the big flock of sheep. The shepherd could manage to keep the fold intact in a simpler order of life; but when wolves and robbers are multiplied, that formula is no longer effective. Then the fold can only survive if the sheep are rendered able to defend themselves. That

toughening of the sheep was not part of the old pastoral formula. It could not be, for the pastor could not establish with each soul under his care the degree of contact necessary to turn sheep into warriors and evangelists. He could only bestow general care and tuition whereas it is essential that each individual be nursed and formed. That general treatment may seem to be adequate in some conditions. It is almost useless in the current situation where every person is subject to anti-religious solicitation of some description. Recently on the occasion of a visit of a large USA party, it was stated by them that the American problem today resolves itself down to this: that *every* family, including the Catholic ones, is a problem. It would be foolish to suppose that Ireland is not maturing towards the like. Accordingly, each family and each one in it must be given such degree of individual inoculation as will fit him to withstand the modern germs.

It would be wise to regard that formula of the one man and his flock as being insufficient in any state of things. It is positively preposterous in what we might call advanced conditions. That formula has to be supplemented. A teacher in a class would only be considered able to deal effectively with, say, twenty pupils. How could a priest build up fifty times that number in religion, which has many more facets to it than secular education? Knowledge is only one of those facets.

In what way is the priest to be supplemented?

By something in the nature of the gearing system which accommodates engine-power to the need of the moment. That is the function of the Legion. It is a gearing system for the priest. It places at his disposal human cogs which enable him to reach out to all the aspects of his task of shepherding. But unlike the ordinary cogs, these human

ones are spiritualised in the process and add their own quota of power, meaning that multiple purposes can be covered. If the priest despises that supplemental aid – as can happen – it will be at a dismal price, that of not fulfilling the pastoral duty of bringing souls to maturity in Christ, thus sowing seeds of future problems.

The Monks of the Peregrinatio, though limited in numbers, re-built the Church which had fallen with the collapse of the Roman Empire.

But we also know what took place when that wonderful wave spent itself. The shepherding was not adequate; decline set in and a new downfall was staged for some future group of saints to deal with. That is the unhappy experience of the ages in all places. The Church is happily built up and next thing it is tumbling down on us. Why must this imitation of the tides afflict us thus, bearing in souls to salvation but then changing and carrying them off to destruction? Grace is always there for the asking. God gives without stint. So there must be serious fault in us that we do not draw it down. Surely we should be helping grace to flow evenly and cumulatively so that in each place it will tend to overflow its own banks and go forth fruitfully to other places.

But of course our problem goes beyond that of inability to hold on to weak material. There is the question of giving Catholicism to the whole world. This can only be realised if every Catholic is made instrumental in the process. Supposing that every Catholic did lend himself energetically to such a campaign, it would mean that eighteen per cent of the world population would have to convert eighty-two percent. Having regard to the fact that hardly any Catholic ever attempts to convert, that would be a large order. But things are far more difficult



than those figures suggest. A very large proportion of that eighteen per cent are children. Then a further immense proportion are non-practising, not concerned about their own salvation and still less about their neighbour's. There remain the practising ones, but I have just said that the ordinary Catholic never thinks in terms of making a convert.

Where does all that leave us in regard to a programme of evangelising the whole world? The answer is that it only leaves us at the starting post.

The formula for the mission-field has, likewise, been that of the one man facing the millions. Dealing with simple populations, it did gain commendable results. It could convert pagans but it did not do so well against the more formal religions such as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Protestantism. And it lost ground wholesale against organised materialism. A mere handful of atheists were able to sweep away the old religion of Russia and to keep it from the people ever since.

It is now a long time since the crest of the wave of Christian advance was passed and the Catholic proportion of the world's population continues to fall steadily. The statisticians say that we will have sunk to five per cent by the end of this century – without assurance that this fall will not go on. So religion faces a crisis.

A special phenomenon shows itself universally. It is that the industrial classes tend to abandon religion. This is a major problem because the world is marching steadily into industrialism. It is certain that the moment an industrial class creates itself, it will be subjected to the play of proletarianism, that is the exploiting of the grievances of the working people. In more modern times this has been effectively organised under the auspices of



Communism. Class warfare is deliberately created and religion is presented as the tool of capitalism. The Church is paraded as the ally of the enemy and its teachings as mere opium to keep the masses quiet.

Possibly the first human instinct is that of taking sides, so it will be realised how deadly this campaign will be. Unquestionably it will secure acceptance. Those who hold on to religion will be systematically derided. Faith enjoys a poor chance in those circumstances. Only a devoted section will hold fast, and those do not even seek to exert an influence. In such conditions there is the tendency to abandon a purely religious approach to the lost sheep, and to substitute a policy of out-Marxing Marx. The idea is to show that the Church is really as radical as they and therefore that they should return to religion. The childishness of this should be evident. To hope to convert by keeping religion in the background and talking social science and radicalism is just senseless. But there it is: that plan is being earnestly tried.

We can make another mistake, that of relying on the mass media or mechanical means for the getting of religion over to the people. Those media play an effective part in moulding opinion today, so why not enlist them in aid of religion? To put it thus sounds like common sense. But it would be wrong to pin one's faith to short-cuts of the kind. Use it as an incidental aid but do not depend on it. Look at the past. First came the universal diffusion of printed matter; then the radio; and then television. These easy ways of giving the truth to the multitudes have now been put into the service of religion for a century. Likewise that century has been a time of religious shrinkage. One hears of very few conversions as due to reading, and I have never known of the one proceeding from the radio

or TV. Whatever those mass media have done in regard to secular subjects, I cannot see them as having produced any religious influence. St Paul says that faith comes by hearing (Rm 10:17), and it looks a little as if the conserving as well as the spreading of the Faith is a matter of hearing in the narrow and particular sense of one speaking and another listening. However that may be, it is evident that direct religious approach must be the centre of any system of evangelisation.

Formerly the notion of using the ordinary people in the process of evangelisation would not have been thought of. The advent of the Legion has shown it to be a practical proposition and absolutely without limit as to the extent of its development. The legionaries are quite typical of the communities in which they live. It is doubtful if the Vatican Council would have insisted on the universal duty of Catholics to be apostolic if the Legion had not been there to prove that it was possible.

Moreover, that legionary method was pointed to in advance by Pope Pius X when he insisted that a spirited nucleus was the pre-eminent and essential means of leavening the community. He was but echoing Our Lord's own words on that subject. The Legion is not merely an assertion of that principle. It is also a pattern of Catholic doctrine and practice. It is, likewise, a mechanism for weaving that pattern into the lives of the people. It shows Catholicism as a working proposition, and it is as a practical and not merely an intellectual proposition that Catholicism will prevail.

The Legion has done more than prove that the ordinary Catholic can be apostolic. It has shown that the ordinary people can *convert* and can cope with the problems. It is going not only to pagans but to all the formal religions in

the world and demonstrating ability to make conversions on a large scale.

The purpose of this conference of ours is the audacious one of measuring up the crisis of religion with a view to making a stand against it and of reversing drastically that falling Catholic percentage. In other words, in the spirit of faith in Jesus and love of Mary we aim at world conquest. But the roots of such an enterprise lie in our own soil. The impulses which could achieve it must represent a total national mobilisation and nothing less. In other words we must reduce to reality that slogan of ours; we must seek to evangelise the world by making Ireland holy.

So let us take stock of ourselves, not yielding to the inevitable tendency to exaggerate. But neither should we avoid that extreme by going to the opposite one of suggesting that things are really not so bad and that we will come through nicely somehow. To be optimistic in that way would amount to sheer recklessness in regard to the Faith.

Perhaps our worst feature lies in the neglect of common duty. People do not fulfil duty. They do not give value for their lives. Therein they disregard the solemn ordinance of God laid on man as the penalty for sin. He said to Adam: 'With labour and toil shalt thou eat all the days of thy life' (Gn 3:17). 'In the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat bread' (Gn 3:19). In spite of the solemnity of that, duty is not being done; value is not being given. That primary law is being deliberately and systematically transgressed. This cannot be done with impunity. For it was given at the very beginning and might be called the human charter. Man has offended by sin; man must repay by work. 'Take what you want' is an old saying put on the lips of God, 'but pay for it'. You must not



steal; you must give value. Yet the direct dishonesty of theft and the indirect theft of idling is universal practice, encouraged as a guarantee against unemployment. But that is folly even in the human order because it sets in motion a vicious circle of increasing costs of production and the culmination known as 'pricing oneself out'. Markets are lost; prices rise and then everyone is hard put to it to live. Necessary public works cannot be undertaken because of the cost, and the prohibitive cost is due to the fact that the work output of a man is far below easy capacity.

Count de Montalembert in his masterly work on *The Monks of the West* ascribes the fall of the Roman Empire to the overwhelming taxation which reduced the people to the level of state slaves. Responsibility and effort died, and resentment against the government became universal so that it could not get the co-operation without which government is impossible. The empire was strangled by taxation.

God is economic in his nature. He must get value out of everything he has created, and this is why even common waste assumes a grave complexion. It is not getting value for God out of the things he has given us. Yet waste is the very principle of the day. Waste so that the wheels of industry may be kept going to replace what was thrown away! This not only reverses God's idea but it turns common sense against itself: Throw away in order that you will have! Leon Bloy used to wonder why buildings continued to stand which had been constructed in defiance of the Lord's command that the Sabbath be kept holy. We; might extend this thought and have fears in respect of the lives of those who disobey that other command of God that they honestly earn their bread.



Obviously all this constitutes a danger signal for us in Ireland. We have arrived at the point when taxation has become oppressive and we know it is going to get heavier. At what stage will it amount to a taking over of our entire lives by the State? Then there will be no more effort, no more initiative. An eminent man of our own times has said that it is impossible for a dishonest people to become a great nation. I would amplify this thought and say that a people which does not give value, cannot hope to keep the Faith.

The mere contemplation of such a nest of problems is enough to paralyse. Solution must be attempted in a spirit of pure faith. The crisis is as great as any of the classic ones of the past. So Legionaries of Mary will, quite naturally, turn to her who is the help of Christians, the destroyer of all heresies, the woman of perpetual succour, to whom recourse has never been made unavailingly.

The place of Mary in the divine order must be recognised. History no less than doctrine testifies to this. Every great saving of Christianity from what seemed to be a destruction, was in some fashion accomplished under her auspices. We are entitled to suppose that what has always proved to be the case will continue so. Therefore we may presume that the future rescue of the Faith will not be otherwise brought about. This is a roundabout way of saying that it would invite failure to face the present crisis without her.

But what does bringing her into the crisis mean? Surely it means that we must know her place in the divine scheme. But what proportion of the people of Ireland know her in that sense? True, there is still plenty of sentimental devotion to her but this is not enough. Should not every Catholic in Ireland know what is set forth in the Legion handbook about her?

The handbook depicts Mary as the Vatican Council has done. What then, of those who show her as less than that? The council professedly set out with the intention of proclaiming no new doctrine. Therefore what it did teach about Mary is what had been established as her position in the Church; it is not new. It coincides precisely with what the handbook has been transmitting to you. Is that picture of Mary, which the Holy Father declared to be the very culmination of the legislation of the council, being exhibited to the people of Ireland? I do not think it is. Then there is a vast discordance. For that teaching represents the first time the council or Pope has attempted to synthesise Our Blessed Lady. All the previous pronouncements on her have been in respect of her privileges. Now the higher step has been proceeded to of displaying to us her extraordinary position as the Co-operator in Redemption, Mother and Mediatrix of all graces, mother of all men. Therefore it fits into our programme that she must be fully valued in Ireland. It is imperative that every Catholic should absorb that teaching in its fullness for it is part of the Faith. Within it Catholic doctrine would not be completely presented and certainly only partially understood. The whole idea of the Redemption is the reversal of the Fall. In that reversal the parts played by Adam and Eve in the original disaster are precisely filled by Jesus and Mary, the new Adam and the new Eve. Though the human race did not fall in Eve but in Adam, and though man rose again in Jesus and not in Mary, nevertheless the co-operating parts of Eve and Mary respectively were such that they cannot be separated from the sequels which ensued. Eve and Mary were brought in by God as essential participants.

That idea which has always been proposed in the Legion represents likewise the earliest method of presenting Our

Lady's role; it belongs to the apostolic era. Yet many persons took up the line that the legionary devotion was an exaggeration and for that reason withheld support from the Legion. Now the *De Ecclesia* decree demonstrates that the Legion faithfully reflects the authentic Catholic doctrine on the subject of Mary the Mother of God and the mother of men, and furthermore that it effectively unites that doctrine to its apostolic method, rendering a visible exposition of the doctrine of the Mystical Body.

It is essential that the people of Ireland be put into possession of what the council has thus taught. I think that for this reason alone they should understand the Legion which is probably the simplest showing forth of that teaching.

Above I have been stressing the Mariology of the Legion, but the same considerations would apply to the other aspects of Catholic doctrine which necessarily enter into the Legion and which receive attention in the Legion handbook. I think it can be asserted that there is not one unnecessary word in the handbook. I mean this literally. The first idea at work in the handbook was that of compression. On the one hand, everything had to be explained and on the other hand the resulting document would have to be of a size which would make it available to the multitude. The book which is there is the result. In less than 300 pages it describes the Legion of Mary. It is intriguing to find that, incidentally, it is giving a description of the Catholic Church which covers its doctrine, its devotions and its apostolate in a way which will not be so readily accessible elsewhere. What is in the handbook has been deemed necessary knowledge for the legionary. The latter is not supposed to be a special type of Catholic, but only a person who is aiming at living on the



level which seems to emerge from the council legislation. It would be outrageous to regard this standard of normal Catholicism as beyond the reach of the people of Ireland.

It follows from this that legionaries simply must try to get over to people the same degree of knowledge that has been deemed necessary for themselves, and which every legionary is found declaring to be useful to him.

By way of contrast between the legionary Catholicism and that possessed by so many in the ordinary community, I give you the following account of a discussion held between two legionaries and two professional or whole-time Mormon missionaries. It occupied an entire evening.

At the end the Mormons declared that they were overwhelmingly impressed by the faith of the legionaries; that they had never encountered anything like it in their visitation of Catholic homes. They stated that the Catholics know hardly anything about their religion and were incapable of arguing about it or even replying to simple questions about it.

That is a sorrowful indictment. It is not enough to reply to it by saying that the Catholics have probably been warned not to enter into controversy with the sects, because in fact they had done so and were discussing religion with them.

Our first thought is that there is a dire need for the Patricians which would teach Catholics to make some sort of show in such circumstances.

But the main thought is one of shock. Is that what the average Catholicism of Ireland amounts to? Quite evidently that degree of knowledge would not provide a stable foundation for faith. Faith must have something to stand on. If it has nothing sufficient, it is like the house mentioned in scripture which is built on sand. We



must realise that in the circumstances pictured by those Mormons their visitation of the Catholic homes was ploughing a furrow of devastation – like what a bulldozer would drive through ruins which it is demolishing.

I think it would be unpardonable to proceed to find excuses for such a Catholicism and to bluff it out that really everything is just all right. It is *not* all right. It is a deplorable fact that Catholicism means very little to a large proportion of our people and that for them it is on its way out. It is terribly like the position which precluded the fall of the Faith in the other European countries. I have already invoked the image of the house built on sand. I now propose the image of the ostrich which hides its head in the sand because it does not want to see what it fears, and because it thinks that it abolishes the danger by not seeing it. We must not imitate the folly of that witless bird.

## St Brigid

Our people are peculiar in many respects. Our thought is to see other countries rather than our own, to accept models from abroad rather than try to create our own, and particularly to be enamoured of distant saints rather than our own very marvellous ones. This latter is a correct classification. If you go through the early annals of our people you cannot but be struck by the extraordinary figures which march across the stage of our Christianity.

Among those giants who are taken so casually is the one I am about to discuss, that is the mighty Brigid. She is regarded as having been the mother of all the saints of Ireland just as St Patrick has always been regarded as their father. St Patrick's personality exceeded all other great men in Ireland, so St Brigid's brilliant, generous, joyous figure eclipsed all other women. She was picturesquely styled a dove among birds, a vine among trees and a sun among stars. Quite evidently she caught the imagination of the people who lived nearest to her own time. A poetical derivation of her name was the Fiery Arrow which effectively describes her fiery character.

It is popularly supposed that she was the first girl to become a nun in Ireland, but this is a mistaken idea. St Patrick had received the vows of a number before her. Moreover he did not receive her. According to the generally accepted chronology she was only about eleven years old when St Patrick died. So another fond idea has to be sacrificed, namely that it was she who wove with her own hands his winding sheet. That could not have been the case because of those figures.

If she was not the first nun, who were the first nuns in Ireland? Fidelma the red-haired and Eithne the golden-haired, who were blood sisters. An overwhelming circumstance attended their reception. They received the veil together followed by Holy Communion, and then they died at once. They were laid out on the same couch. This manifestation represented a taking by God of the first fruits. It was a phenomenon reminiscent of that of the Holy Innocents themselves, and it must have been accepted as an indication of the abundant crop of vocations which were about to crop up in Ireland.

St Brigid is generally believed to have been born of noble Christian parents, but this again is not completely accurate. It is true that her father was a chieftain, or minor king, but he was a pagan. Her mother Brocessa was a slave and a Christian. Brigid was illegitimate and was born into slavery. It must be significant that St Patrick too was a slave. God has unusual ways of working. The first shall be last and the last shall be first.

Through one or other of her parents, Brigid was kin to St Columba whose birth she foretold, and with whom she was eventually to lie in the same tomb. She was born about the year 450 at Faughart, two miles north-east of Dundalk. It was Cuchulain's territory and it is certain that

her childish fancy was exalted by the stories of his exploits. Her mother was sold to a druid. Brigid went along with her, but remained the property of her father, who bore the same name as I do! She was claimed back again when she reached some little size and was likely to be useful about the place. She took the place her mother had formerly filled in working the little mill which ground the corn; washing the feet of guests; tending the sheep and farm animals, looking after the dairy. In these occupations she was described as being submissive but not happy.

By reason of those duties of hers, she has been regarded as the patron of livestock. Bear that in mind: any of you whose lives are cast in that department. The Scottish Gael invokes her at sheep-shearing and the Scottish weaver as he chooses his coloured wools.

At this time she is marvellously beautiful; bright eyed with an abundance of golden-brown hair; physically very strong. It is usually thought that her father's wife was cruel to her, but we have to be reserved in regard to that. For a feature of young Brigid's character has to be reviewed. Already she has become holy, conspicuous for her faith and generosity. As she said herself: 'Since my mind was first set on God it never departed from him.' She understood the primary doctrine that Christ lives in each one of us and this made it hard for her to refuse anyone who appealed to her. The supplies committed to her care often suffered. Stories which have their amusing side are told of some deficiencies being made good by miraculous action. She remained incorrigible in this respect though spoken to again and again. The provisions were found missing just when they were wanted, and this beggar and that beggar had benefited! But it is of interest, and this should be set off against that stepmother story, that she



does not seem to have been physically ill-treated. She was not beaten in spite of her misdeeds. Her saying was: 'I find it hard to deny Christ his own food.' Finally her father and his wife resolved to get rid of this valuable but most embarrassing girl.

At this time her heart had but one aspiration, and that was to become a nun. Her father freed her from slavery and offered her as wife, some say to the king of north Leinster, others say to a well-known poet. Known to all is the legend of her prayer that she would be saved from this marriage, and of the ensuing facial disfigurement. The love-sick swain did not want a disfigured wife. So the match was called off and she had her way.

She received the veil along with seven others whom she herself had assembled, from the hands of Bishop Mel at Croghan Hill near Tyrrell's Pass in Co. Westmeath. She recovered her beauty at the moment of her consecration, and retained it until the end of her life. St Mel is supposed to have been a nephew of St Patrick, and St Brigid was at that time between 15 and 17 years of age. It is astounding that one of her youth should be showing such capacity for leadership.

This foundation at Croghan Hill was a unique event, because it represented the introduction of community life among nuns. Those who had been consecrated up to that time had not lived in community. It has been said that she was the first woman engaged permanently in the service of the Church. It may be a large order to apply that to the whole Church but it is probably correct to ascribe it to her in respect to Ireland.

After this she went to Kildare in her father's territory and she founded the famous church of Cill Dara, the church of the oak. It was thus called from the beautiful tree in whose

shade she built the church, sometime between the years 480 and 490. That tree remained until the end of the tenth century. The foundation grew rapidly. She established two separate monasteries, one for men, the other for women, both under her own supervision; so the Legion of Mary was not the first mixed organisation in Ireland in which women have played a governing part. Later on, I suppose as a sort of gesture to public opinion, she appointed St Conleth to carry on this task jointly with her.

The church itself was magnificent; lofty and richly decorated. This was not a time when you just covered a wall with paint and you were finished! The walls of the churches in those days were beautifully illuminated, sometimes covered with leather, and the leather itself embossed, coloured and beautifully rendered. A screen separated the altar from the congregation, a practice which still prevails among sections of the Byzantine Church. The monks were on one side of the church, the nuns on the other, and there was a partition down the centre of the church separating them. That is a custom which has in places persevered among the people up to this day; not separation by a screen but by allocation of section.

Kildare became a great religious city, possessing many different schools and attracting people from far and wide. St Brigid herself enjoyed an ascendancy which we must regard as amazing. Her great mind and her talents were universally recognised. She was invited all over Ireland, strange to say for the purpose of preaching. In her lifetime she was everywhere venerated and her miracles were innumerable. In circumstances of difficulty a phrase was often heard on her lips: 'Leave that to me.' And it was invariably followed by the working of a miracle.

One story told of her is that there was a gathering of people in circumstances of difficulty, perhaps some sort of climatic trouble such as tempest. The crowd had nothing much to do; I suppose they spent some of their time at prayer. St Brigid pointed to a harp on the wall and asked if anybody knew how to play. Nobody did. Then she said to one man: 'Take that harp and play it.' Though he did not know a thing about music he took the harp and entertained the company with most delightful strains.

Her travelling was mostly done in a chariot, drawn by two horses and with a driver. Usually she would have a couple of other nuns with her. Once coming to the Shannon at Athlone, a scandalous charge was demanded by the ferryman. She was determined not to pay this so she set herself to pray and it is alleged that the depth of the water diminished so much that the river could be forded.

The great woman is strangely reminiscent of St Teresa of Avila, who likewise journeyed much. St Brigid is hailed as a patron of travellers.

We have little record of her scholarship but probably it was of a considerable order. Otherwise she could not have made the mark on her day which she did. We know that she wrote a poem on the virtues of St Patrick and a little work called: 'The Quiver of Divine Desires.'

One day on a journey she met a young man called Nindid who was obviously in great haste. She asked him why, and he replied: 'I am hurrying to Heaven.' Brigid retorted: 'Happy is he who goes that journey, pray for me that I may find the way.' This led to a happy acquaintance and she prophesied that it would be he who would give her the Last Sacraments. He took this seriously and ever afterwards he wore a glove on his left hand, the hand

which he considered was destined to perform that service to her. He became a priest. Later on in Rome he was summoned home, naturally or supernaturally, in time to give her the Last Rites.

She was the mother of 13,000 nuns. She died between 521 and 523 which would make her about 72. She was buried at the right of the high altar in Kildare. St Conleth, her coadjutor at the other side; and there she lay for three-and-a-half-centuries. About the year 830 the Danes began to ravish that part of Ireland so St Brigid's relics were brought to Downpatrick. The whereabouts of her grave were for a long time unknown, but in 1185 St Malachy, then Bishop of Down and Conor, prayed for that knowledge and a miraculous light shone on the spot where she lay along with St Patrick and Columcille. In 1186 in the presence of a Papal Legate, Mgr Vivian and fifteen other bishops, the remains of her body were solemnly honoured, but later the tomb was destroyed by the Protestant Reformers. The head of St Brigid was said to have been taken to Neustadt in Austria and eventually to Lisbon.

All the ancient buildings of Kildare have disappeared with the exception of the noble round tower which is still there, and which has a height of 136 feet. In it the celebrated falcon of St Brigid is alleged to have lived until the twelfth century, being killed in the time of King John.

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