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Gerard Madden

## Devotional Catholicism in the workplace in 1950s Ireland: the case of the Industrial Rosary Crusade

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The Marian Year, 1954, which was called by Pope Pius XII to commemorate the centenary of the promulgation of the dogma of the Blessed Virgin Mary, witnessed a notable increase of Marian devotion across the Catholic world. This was the case in Ireland as in other countries, and the year was a watershed moment in Marian devotion in a period in which the Catholic Church's influence over state and society in independent Ireland was itself at its height. This was visible at the centre of Marian devotion in Ireland, Knock Shrine. The Mayo shrine was, in James S. Donnelly's words, 'both the beneficiary and a leading promoter of the extraordinary Marian piety which gripped the Catholic laity and clergy of Ireland in the early 1950s'. It witnessed a strong revival in attendance from pilgrims from 1949 onwards, and in the 1953 season alone attracted 250,000 pilgrims. It was finally accorded Vatican recognition in 1954 after decades of efforts by the Archdiocese of Tuam and the lay leaders of the Knock Shrine Society, cementing its status as the 'Irish Lourdes'.<sup>1</sup> 1954 also saw Ireland host the Rosary Rallies of the Mayo-born Irish-American Rosary priest, Fr Patrick Peyton, and his Family Rosary Crusade, which attracted large attendances in dioceses across Ireland that year from Belfast to Loughrea. His rally in Knock attracted 18,000 pilgrims, with an additional 30,000 in Galway and 20,000 in Sligo. As Síle de Cléir notes, Peyton's 'new promotion of the Rosary, building on what was already a substantial base, was to ensure the devotion's continued popularity

1 James S. Donnelly, 'Knock Shrine and the Marian Year of 1954' in John Cunningham and Niall Ó Ciosáin, *Culture and Society in Ireland Since 1750: Essays in Honour of Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh* (Dublin, 2015), pp. 322-323.

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Gerard Madden PhD is a founding member of the Irish Centre for the Histories of Labour and Class. He has published articles in *Saothar: Journal of the Irish Labour History Society*, *Irish Historical Studies* and *Contemporary British History*.

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– up to the 1970s and 1980s'.<sup>2</sup> This increased focus on Marian devotion was also visible in workplace environments. The impact of the Marian Year on labour cultures across Ireland was instanced by the construction of statues of the Blessed Virgin in factories around the country. To give one example of a workplace where the author of this article has a family connection, a Marian Shrine was constructed in Dubarry's shoe factory in Ballinasloe, Co. Galway, which was fundraised by workers in the factory's branch of the Irish Shoe and Leather-Workers' Union and is still extant in the factory's new location on the other side of the town.<sup>3</sup>

### THE INDUSTRIAL ROSARY CRUSADE

This article will discuss one aspect of how devotional Catholicism impacted on trade unionism in Ireland by examining the Industrial Rosary Crusade, an important and remarkably understudied organisation active in 1950s Ireland which sought to promote the communal recitation of the rosary among workers in industrial and workplace settings across Ireland, including in the Guinness Brewery, Dublin, Jacob's Biscuits, Dundalk, Shannon Airport and other workplaces. The crusade serves as an important case study which shines significant light on how working-class Irish Catholics practiced their faith in the 1950s, and how devotional Catholicism expressed itself in workplace environments. It will discuss the role of the Dublin Dominican Fr Gabriel Harty, who was the moving force in the Crusade's growth. The article will also situate the Industrial Rosary Crusade within the increase of clerical interest in the Irish trade union movement in the immediate post-war period and how the rosary crusade related to contemporary Catholic concerns about communism during the Cold War. James S. Donnelly has traced how Marian devotion interweaved with Catholic anti-communism, the former influenced by 'the growing cult of Our Lady of Fatima and by the anti-Communist messages associated with the apparitions there in 1917'. Given the concerns of leading clergymen such as Archbishop John Charles McQuaid of Dublin that liberal and secular – and potentially socialist and communist – ideologies could gain influence within Ireland's labour movement, it is unsurprising that the Crusade's output was particularly anti-communist. This reflected the wider Marian anti-communism of the period, as instanced by the anti-communist sermons given by clergy at Knock Shrine, and the Crusade's literature and the rhetoric of its clerical promoters during

2 Sile de Cléir, *Popular Catholicism in 20th-century Ireland: locality, identity and culture* (London, 2017), p. 90.

3 *Connacht Tribune*, 3 September 2009.

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pilgrimages was evinced by a strong anti-communism aimed at a working-class audience.<sup>4</sup>

The Industrial Rosary Crusade was strongly associated with the Irish Dominican Order and with a charismatic young Dominican preacher, Gabriel Harty. While not the Crusade's founder, Harty became the crucial figure involved in it and was inextricably associated with its public activities. Born in Dublin in 1921, Harty entered the seminary in Clonliffe College, Dublin and on 26 May 1945 was ordained to the priesthood in the seminary chapel by Archbishop McQuaid. His perusal of *The Inner Life of the Very Reverend Père Lacordaire*, O.P., by Fr Bernard Chocarne, O.P., revived his interest in the Dominican Order, and prompted him to approach Archbishop McQuaid regarding a vocation to the Order. A year later, Fr Gabriel, 'a lapsed secular', received the habit at St Mary's Priory, Cork, on 14 September 1949, and his particular interest in Marian devotion which would define his priestly ministry was evident from this time. After his first profession on 15 September 1950, he was assigned to St Mary's Priory, Tallaght, where he studied philosophy for one year and theology for another. Due to his interest in Mary and the Rosary, Harty was assigned to Collegio San Clemente, Rome, in 1952, in order to attend the Institute of Spirituality at the Pontifical International Athenæum of the Dominican Order, the Angelicum. There, he obtained a diploma, consulted theological treatises on the Rosary and its representation in art, and travelled to Lourdes to prepare for the work of preaching the Rosary on his return to Ireland. Almost immediately after his solemn profession on 15 September 1953 at the Dominican Priory in Tallaght, Fr Gabriel was appointed assistant to Fr Gabriel Keenan, O.P., Director of the Rosary Crusade. Fr Harty was more proactive than his older predecessor and the different temperaments of the two would become visible during their work on the Rosary Crusade, with Harty, who soon learned to drive on his return to Ireland, travelling extensively across the country to promote it.<sup>5</sup>

The Industrial Rosary Crusade attracted support from other Marian organisations, and with the Legion of Mary supporting Harty's efforts it expanded significantly. By 1958 an office was established at 48 Parnell Square for its effective organisation. Under Harty's tutelage, and emulating Patrick Peyton's role in the Family Rosary Crusade, the Industrial Rosary Crusade fostered the recitation of the rosary in numerous factory and workplace centres across Ireland, not just in large urban centres but also in

4 Donnelly, 'Knock Shrine and the Marian Year of 1954', pp. 323-324.

5 Luuk Dominiek Janssen OP, 'Fr Gabriel Harty', <https://dominicans.ie/fr-gabriel-harty-o-p/>, accessed 4 October 2021.

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smaller towns. It also organised numerous pilgrimages for factory workers, as instanced by the 1957 pilgrimage by workers in Urney Chocolate Factory in Tallaght, Co Dublin, to the national Marian Shrine in Knock, Co. Mayo, which was part of a wider wave of Marian pilgrimage to Knock in this period.<sup>6</sup>

The *Rosary Letter*, the group's main periodical, is an important example of Catholic devotional literature from the period aimed at trade unionists and contains extensive information on workplace rosary rallies across Ireland as a whole. The publication was one example of the tensions between Harty and Keenan, as Harty found the Crusade's early literature uninspiring and uninviting and Fr Keenan found it difficult to engage with the idea of a newsletter. Fr Gabriel took charge of publishing the periodical and the first issue of the *Rosary Letter* appeared on 25 March 1954. At its height, *The Rosary Letter* enjoyed a circulation of 100,000 and was dispatched on a vast international basis.<sup>7</sup>

The periodical retained a strong anti-communist stance throughout the period, which was indicative of the sentiments within Catholicism and wider Irish society at the time and reflected the wider anti-communist aspect of Marian devotion as discussed above. Father Harty's own public statements warned about the threat of communists to Irish society in a manner which was hyperbolic, given the weakness of the Irish communist movement in the period. Inaugurating the Crusade among workers in Irish Tanners Ltd in Portlaw, Waterford in 1957, Harty told the workforce that there were seven to eight hundred active communists in Dublin alone and that they were trying to involve themselves in the trade union movement and the industrial sphere.<sup>8</sup> This was certainly an exaggeration of the membership of the Communist Party of Ireland - then known as the Irish Workers' League - which was significantly smaller than the number offered by Harty, who asserted that the Rosary Crusade was a way which 'the Mother of God should prepare an army of men and women to fight against the enemies of the Church'.<sup>9</sup>

This rhetoric was reflected in the *Letter* itself, which regularly included claims about communist growth and infiltration similar to those made by Harty. A 1955 issue of the *Letter*, for instance, warned that 'here, in this island fortress of the faith the spectre of Communism lurks as it does in London, Paris or Berlin' and went on to assert that the Communist Party of Ireland had 500 card-holding members and was able to mobilise up to 750 people

6 Donnelly, 'Knock Shrine and the Marian Year of 1954', pp. 331-332; *Drogheda Argus*, 22 June 1957.

7 Janssen OP, 'Fr Gabriel Harty'.

8 *Catholic Standard*, 3 May 1957.

9 *Ibid*, 4 June 1954.

at election time. It went on to dramatically claim that ‘there was a house in the centre of Dublin that once had a picture of the Sacred Heart with a red lamp before it. The red lamp is still there, but the picture has been replaced by one of STALIN!’. The *Letter* also emphasised the need for responsible trade unionism; while it concluded by urging workers to consecrate themselves to the Sacred Heart of Mary and reciting the rosary every day, it asserted that ‘taking up the cross of an honest day’s work’ was ‘the penance Our Lady especially wants’.<sup>10</sup>

This argument by the *Rosary Crusade* – that trade unionists should be diligent workers and should approach trade unionism in a responsible manner, eschewing recklessness and radicalism – was indicative of the broader approach of the Catholic Church towards trade unionism in this period, reflecting Catholic Social Teaching as articulated in Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* and subsequent encyclicals. The rosary rallies were encouraged by Archbishop John Charles McQuaid of Dublin whose interest in the Crusade is unsurprising within the wider context of the Church’s increased attentiveness to trade union developments in the early Cold War years. There was a significant increase in trade union density in Ireland during the early Cold War, prompted by the relative health of the economy in the immediate post-war years, and this was paralleled by a sharp increase in strikes, both official and unofficial, across the country. The Catholic hierarchy took a keen interest in this noted increase in trade union involvement and the movement’s internal politics, and individual bishops, notably John Charles McQuaid – but also key ones elsewhere, such as Bishop Michael Browne of Galway and Bishop Cornelius Lucey of Cork – played important roles mediating industrial disputes in their diocese. In particular, McQuaid’s notable role in successfully mediating a transport strike in 1951 won him significant praise from CIÉ, transport workers and the public, as the trade union section of his archives extensively attests.<sup>11</sup> The founding by the Irish Jesuit Order in 1951 of the *Catholic Workers College*, a Dublin-based educational institution which sought to educate trade unionists in a framework shaped by Catholic social teaching, was but the most prominent example of the growth of Catholic workers’ education in the period motivated by the labour movement’s expansion.<sup>12</sup>

While clergymen certainly expressed support for the Crusade

10 Copy of the *Rosary Letter*, c. 1955.

11 Gerard Madden, ‘“We here in Ireland are not outside this struggle”: the Irish Catholic Church, anti-communism and the Cold War, 1945-1965’ (PhD, Dublin, 2018).

12 Aidan Seery and Liam McKenna, ‘The Catholic Workers’ College Dublin: a personal history’, *Saothar: journal of the Irish Labour History Society*, vol. 39, no. 1 (2015), pp. 45-53.

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and its role in encouraging devotional Catholicism among the working class, others had *concerns* about its reverence. Writing in *The Furrow*, then nearing the end of its first decade of publication, Father Joseph Cunnane, a teacher in St. Jarlath's College who later became Archbishop of Tuam, argued that 'the Industrial Rosary Crusade can help our urban population, provided it keeps its ideals high and does not allow the Rosary to degenerate, as it so easily can in Ireland, into a mere formality to be gone through before closing-time, as mechanical as the work man's putting on his coat or the office-girl her lipstick; provided it is kept clear that only a man or girl who has done an honest day's work can with a clear conscience kneel down at the end of the day to offer a Rosary'.<sup>13</sup> Despite these concerns, the Rosary Crusade succeeded in promoting the rosary amongst working-class people across Ireland.

### CONCLUSION

The Industrial Rosary Crusade remained active into the late 60s, before declining from then onwards. Its dissipation was related to the broader decline of lay Catholic groups in the period, as well as Fr Gabriel Harty's appointment as superior of St Saviour's Priory, Waterford and later election as prior of St Mary's Priory, Cork, an office to which he felt unsuited and from which he resigned in 1969. The following year, the Irish hierarchy appointed him the National Spiritual Director of the Blue Army of Our Lady of Fatima, an American lay Catholic group which had been active in Ireland since the 1950s. However, in the wake of Vatican II the Apostolate of the Rosary found it more difficult to operate, paralleling the same factors which had similarly led to the dissipation of the Industrial Rosary Crusade.<sup>14</sup> By studying groups such as the Industrial Rosary Crusade, we can uncover the role Marian Devotion played in the working lives of ordinary Catholics in 1950s Ireland, deepening our understanding of how Catholicism shaped their everyday lives and the ways in which religiosity intersects with class, and uncovering novel new perspectives on the everyday Catholicism of ordinary Catholics in mid-twentieth century Ireland. This article also underlines the impact of the Marian Year in increasing the growth of Marian devotion in Ireland, and how Marianism intersected with both contemporary Catholic anxieties about industrial unrest in Ireland and the threat of communism during the early Cold War.

13 Joseph Cunnane, 'The doctrinal content of Irish Marian piety', *The Furrow*, vol, 10, no. 2 (Feb., 1959), pp. 89-103.

14 Janssen OP, 'Fr Gabriel Harty'.