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Art for Catholic Ireland: The Irish Ecclesiological Society

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Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Irish built environment was transformed by ecclesiastical architectural expansion. Building types ranged from churches and cathedrals to monasteries, convents, and sites of education, healthcare, leisure, and reform. While this architectural activity was evident across denominations, Irish Catholics invested their time, capacity, and resources in building to an extraordinary degree.[1] An initial phase of building can be observed in the early decades of the nineteenth century, particularly after the achievement of Catholic Emancipation in 1829, while the latter half of the century was dedicated to expansion and the expression of a magnificent and

1 Presbyterian churches, Quaker meeting houses, synagogues and mosques are considered by P. Larmour, D. M. Butler and K. James-Chakraborty in sections of the chapter, 'Ecclesiastical Architecture', in 'Architecture 1600–2000', ed. by R. Loeber, H. Campbell, L. Hurley, J. Montague and E. Rowley, *Art and Architecture of Ireland*, 4 (Dublin and New Haven, CT, Dublin and London, 2014), pp. 287–328, at pp. 317–23. Short bibliographies are provided for each section. Jeanne Sheehy provides an overview of Catholic building during this period in J. Sheehy, 'Irish Church Building: Popery, Puginism and the Protestant Ascendancy', in *The Victorian Church: Architecture and Society*, ed.by C. Brooks and A. Saint (Manchester, 1995), pp. 133–50, at p. 134. A close study of the work of one architect in Dublin is provided in B. Grimes, *Majestic Shrines and Graceful Sanctuaries: The Church Architecture of Patrick Byrne, 1783–1864* (Dublin, 2009).

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triumphant architectural identity.[2] This architectural expansion was led by multiple individuals and organisations, including parochial and diocesan structures, religious orders, and lay organisations associated with the church. As Sarah Roddy has demonstrated via her 'Visible Divinity' project, and as Brendan Grimes has shown via his analysis of church-building in Dublin, the funding and management of these projects was organised by these diverse agents, at local level, rather than reflecting a central organising system.[3] This relatively dispersed framework for development is reflected in the stylistic *diversity* evident in the churches and cathedrals across the country. Choices regarding style often reflected the tastes, preferences, and experiences of individual religious personnel involved, with architects also playing an important role in mediating contemporary ideas about religious aesthetics.[4]

Church building practices were also informed by local circumstances such as the level of available funding, the available site, the architect employed, and more general concerns and principles, such as liturgical requirements, canon law, and texts of long-standing significance like Carlo Borromeo's 1577 manual on the design, organisation and layout of church buildings.[5] Specific affiliations with particular religious orders could also play a role in

2 Catholic architectural activity in the latter half of the nineteenth century are explored in A. Wilson, 'The Building of St Colman's Cathedral, Cobh', *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies,* 7 (2004), 233–65, A. Wilson, 'The Material and Visual Culture of the Construction of Irish Catholic Identity: St. Colman's Cathedral, Queenstown, County Cork', in *Material Religion in Modern Britain: The Spirit of Things*, ed. by L. Matthews-Jones and T. Willem-Jones (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 37–55. and N. NicGhabhann, "'A Development of Practical Catholic Emancipation:" Laying the Foundations for the Roman Catholic Urban Landscape, 1850–1900', *Urban History*, 46 (2019), pp. 44–61.

3 The large-scale fundraising programmes for Roman Catholic devotional infrastructure (churches, schools, convents and other related buildings) were the subject of the 'Visible Divinity: Money and Irish Catholicism, 1850–1921' project led by Dr Sarah Roddy at the University of Manchester: http://gtr.ukri.org/projects?ref=ES%2FN002105%2F1 (accessed 28 October 2021); B. Grimes, 'Funding a Roman Catholic Church in Nineteenth-Century Ireland', Architectural History, 40 (1997), pp. 222–40.

4 Cardinal Paul Cullen's views and preferences in relation to architecture are explored in J. Montague, 'Paul Cullen, J.J. McCarthy and Holy Cross Church, Clonliffe: The Politics and Iconography of architectural Style', in *Cardinal Paul Cullen and his World*, ed. by D. Keogh and A. McDonnell (Dublin, 2011), pp. 260–76, and E. Kane, 'Paul Cullen and the Visual Arts', in the same volume, pp. 99–114.

5 Brendan Grimes describes Borromeo's 1577 *Instructiones Fabricae Et Supellectilis Ecclesiasticae* as the 'most important document on church planning published since the Counter-Reformation' and while no evidence has been found that it was used directly as a guide in the planning of Dublin churches, they 'conform to his advice in most respects', reflecting its influence as 'an agreed architectural language'. B. Grimes, 'The architecture of Dublin's neo-classical Roman Catholic temples, 1803-62', Doctoral thesis, Dublin, National College of Art and Design, 2005, p. 181-182.

determining architectural decision-making, for example the Gesú in Rome was an important model for the churches of the Jesuit order. Notwithstanding the level of architectural activity, and the associated investment in church decoration, sculpture, furnishings and artwork, *decision-making* appears to have remained at a local, project-by-project level, rather than being informed by official or centralised guidelines.

However, despite this relatively dispersed framework for development, groups were developed in order to inform Roman Catholic aesthetic decisions. The Irish Ecclesiological Society was founded with this explicit aim in 1849. A short history of the Society was published in *The Irish Monthly* in 1859, noting that it lasted only for seven years.[6] However, despite its short tenure, it is significant as an example of a centralised attempt to guide Irish Catholic aesthetic and design decisions. It is also of interest for what it reveals about Irish engagement in broader networks of religious art, in its attempt to create a corollary to established institutions elsewhere, and as an example of the Roman Catholic church in Ireland taking part in a much broader transnational discourses around religious art and architecture.

The account published in *The Irish Monthly*, written by Rev. Matthew Russell (a nephew of Dr Charles Russell), records that the idea for the Society was first suggested by architect James Joseph McCarthy.[7] The distinctly Puginian tone evident throughout the Society reflects the influence of Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin on McCarthy. Russell noted that the curate of Glendalough, Rev. John Gowen, with McCarthy, had 'many a talk about the sad state in which many of our churches were at that time', and that 'these conversations led on to the project of a special organisation for the improvement of such matters in Ireland'.[8] This assessment of the poor state of ecclesiastical architecture by the mid-century was quite widely shared – in the *Dublin Builder*, for example, an 1859 article on the 'Progress of Ecclesiastical Architecture', noted that 'few countries in the wide circle of European civilisation were more deficient in the character of their edifices until very recently'.[9] As Jeanne Sheehy pointed out, McCarthy's involvement as the only architect in such a well-connected Society advanced his career significantly.[10]

6 'The Irish Ecclesiological Society', *The Irish Monthly*, 1896, Vol. 24 (275), pp. 275-277.
7 Ibid., pg. 275.
8 Ibid.
9 *Dublin Builder*, August 1, 1859
10 J. Sheehy, *J.J. McCarthy and the Gothic Revival in Ireland* (Ulster Architectural Heritage Society, 1977), pg. 9.

In order to ensure that the Irish clergy would have 'confidence in its teaching and its work', Charles Russell, President of Maynooth College, was approached to act as President. The full title of the organisation was 'The Irish Ecclesiological Society, under the patronage of Our Blessed Lady and St. Laurence, Archbishop of Dublin, for promoting the study of Christian Art and Antiquities, and for encouraging the practice of Ecclesiastical Architecture in Ireland'. The patrons were an influential and well-connected group, and included the Irish Archbishops, as well as the Rev. Nicholas Wiseman, leading antiquarians like Count de Montalembert from France, leading English Catholics like Lord Shrewsbury, activist figures such as Charles Gavan Duffy, and Bartholomew Woodlock, who succeeded Newman as rector of the Catholic University.[11]

There was a significant emphasis on the study of 'Catholic antiquities' in the rationale outlined for the Society, reflecting the influence of the Cambridge Camden Society, and the engagement of individuals such as Montalembert, who was active in Irish antiquarian circles.[12] Indeed, the establishment of the Irish Ecclesiological Society was rather fulsomely noted by that institution in their own publication, *The Ecclesiologist*, in 1850, in which the name of the new Irish society was described as a 'unconscious homage' to the Anglican body. The foundation of the Irish Society was seen as a positive step, 'saving our position as members of the Church of England', as 'no Christian-minded man can fail rejoicing to see decencies of external religion cared for in a portion of the Universal Church from which they have been so long exiled'.[13]

The Objects of the Irish Ecclesiological Society included the provision of guidance on the construction of new buildings or the refurbishment and decoration of existing structures, as well as reading 'papers on all subjects relative to Christian Art, whether Architecture, Painting, Sculpture, Church Music, Stained Glass, Church Furniture &c. ,' and the exhibition of sketches, drawings, engravings, or models. Objects III and IV were aimed at raising the level of general awareness about Catholic art and communicating to clergymen about the principles of proper church design. The Society also aimed to provide priests with architectural plans and templates, should they not be able to commission their own. Finally, the Society aimed to support the foundation of Altar Societies, which would promote the appropriate decoration and

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., pg. 276. Montalembert was part of a network of Irish antiquarians, and dedicated a volume of his *Monks of the West* to Edwin Richard Windham Wyndham-Quin, the third earl of Dunraven.

13 'The Irish Ecclesiological Society', *The Ecclesiologist,* No. 76 (1850), pg. 322.

maintenance of churches.[14] J.J. McCarthy's 1851 published paper, 'suggestions on the arrangement and characteristics of parish churches', provided clear guidance to the clergy on the use of medieval styles, and the Gothic as the most appropriate for church building, strongly reflective of Pugin's own publications.[15]

Although the organisation was relatively short-lived, *The Irish Monthly* recorded that 'an excellent authority has stated that the enlightened and zealous efforts of the Ecclesiological Society were among the chief causes of that magnificent movement which within the last sixty years has covered Ireland with stately churches and other religious edifices in some measure befitting the worship of God'.[16] The *demise* of the Society is described as being due to the increasingly busy work schedule of McCarthy, who appears to have played a central role throughout. The activities of the Society are reflected in a range of sources, including their own publications, newspaper reports, and in *Battersby's Registry*, which provides detailed accounts of meetings. These activities included, for example, liaising with silk manufacturers in Dublin on order to address a regret of the Dr. Derry, Bishop of Clonfert 'at the want of a native manufacture in the construction of articles connected with the Catholic church, and emblematic of the saving truths of the Catholic faith'.[17] This did, it appears, lead to some success, as a report in 1852 on the 'Manufacture Movement' in the *Freeman's Journal* mentioned the exhibition of a set of 'Irish manufactured silk vestments', made for the Very Rev. Dr Moriarty, president of All-Hallows College, 'woven in Ireland, according to a design by Pugin, in strict accordance with the style adopted by the Irish Ecclesiological Society', with a resolution to present them to Cardinal Paul Cullen for inspection.[18]

The idea of church building and decoration as an economic stimulus, supporting Irish industries and employing Irish people, was increasingly promoted throughout the second half of the century, countering criticism about the expense of such projects in the midst of economic hardship. However, as both Lisa Godson and Caroline McGee have demonstrated, goods such as vestments, church plate and devotional objects as well as stained glass and mosaic work from England, France, Belgium, and Germany, remained extremely popular in church decorative

14 The 'objects' of the Society are listed in full in 'The Irish Ecclesiological Society', pp. 276-277.

15 J.J. McCarthy, *Suggestions on the arrangement and characteristics of parish churches* (Dublin, 1851)

16 Ibid., pg. 277.

17 'Irish Ecclesiological Society', *Irish Examiner*, 12 February, 1851.

18 'Manufacture Movement', *Freeman's Journal*, 14 May 1852.

schemes, reflecting the limited impact of the Society overall.[19] The publications of the Irish Ecclesiological Society provide a clear statement of what this group wanted to promote as appropriate Roman Catholic aesthetics, from church architecture to domestic devotional objects. These various sources produced by, or associated with, the Society are rich in description and detail, providing an insight into the intellectual and ideological contexts for the aesthetic values being promoted and advanced.

In the first *Address* of the Society, published in the *Nation* newspaper as well as in pamphlet form, Ecclesiology is defined carefully in opposition to antiquarianism, with the former being described as a practical, engaged activity focused on using art and design as part of spiritual life, and the latter as 'insipid', and as 'dealing with materiality only'.[20] A lack of discernment is at the centre of this disparagement of antiquarian ideals, with the *Address* claiming that everything from the 'Etruscan vase, the stone celt, the cromlech, the pyramids, the Egyptian mummy, the saint's shrine, the cave-temples of India, and the soaring ministers of western Christendom' were of equal value in the eyes of the 'virtuoso' sitting in his museum. By *contrast*, the work of Ecclesiology is defined as the study and promotion of art that will be a 'material expression of the faith and hope and moral sentiments of Christendom'.[21] Irish antiquities were presented at meetings, including one crozier which matches the description of the O'Dea Crozier, presented by Dr Ryan, bishop of Limerick.[22]

This reflects an important *counter-current* to the popular antiquarian discourse of the period, typified by organisations such as the Kilkenny Archaeological Society which aimed to examine antiquities in a secular environment.[23] This countermovement, as reflected in the Society's publication, insisted on the specifically Catholic meaning of objects, buildings and histories. The influence of McCarthy, and by extension, Pugin, is overwhelming evident in the *Address*, particularly in relation to its treatment of classical architectural styles. According to the Society, the 'revival of classical learning' during the previous three centuries can be seen

19 L. Godson, 'Charting the Material Culture of the "Devotional Revolution": The Advertising Register of the Irish Catholic Directory, 1837–96', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy, Section C: Archaeology, Culture, History, Literature,* 116 (2015), pp. 265–94; C. McGee, Art industry, religion and cultural identity in Ireland, 1850-1922, Ph.D. thesis, Trinity College Dublin (2016).

20 *The Address of the Irish Ecclesiological Society* (Dublin, 1849).

21 Ibid.

22 'Irish Ecclesiological Society', *Irish Examiner*, 12 February, 1851. An image of the O'Dea Crozier, now in the Hunt Museum collection, can be seen at https://www.huntmuseum.com/collection/o-dea-crozier/ (accessed 28 October 2021).

23 The tensions between explicitly religious and antiquarian-secular interpretations of aspects of Irish heritage are explored in N. NicGhabhann, *Medieval ecclesiastical building in Ireland, 1789-1915: building on the past* (Dublin, 2015).

as a kind of 'imperialism in the arts which destroyed their energy and originality', and to attempt to create a Christian art in this idiom would be to 'express Christian and living conceptions in the effete forms of a disinterred heathenism'.[24] These statements reflect the Society's clear aim to establish medieval revival styles such as Gothic as the *preference* for church-building projects in Ireland.

The decision of the Society to make prints available for people to display in their homes provides another insight into the connections and ideals of the Society. At a meeting in 1851, a letter to the Society from the 'celebrated Christian painter' Frederick Overbeck was read, together with a report on the Dusseldorf Christian Art-Union, from which the Irish Society would procure the prints. The Irish Ecclesiological Society aimed to become the 'Irish branch' of the Union, which provided specimens of its engravings by 'both ancient and modern artists'. The Dusseldorf Christian Art-Union was clearly considered a reputable institution, with high artistic standards, as an article in the *Irish Examiner* of 1850 described it as being 'truly admirable' and 'widely celebrated', providing 'good service to Irish Catholicity'.[25] According to this report, access to the Dusseldorf Union would introduce Catholic art into 'our schools and homes – into the cabins of the poor, that they may dignify them, and into the abodes of the opulent, that they may grace them', and that 'though small, and of positively unequalled cheapness', the prints were described as being 'in the purest taste and of the most delicate finish'.[26] The provision of reproductions of the 'rarest trophies of ancient and modern Christian art' was described as a 'service to popular taste and religious feeling, which none but the most thoughtless stupidity or the most Utilitarianism could despise'.[27]

Art works from Germany and Italy, and from the Nazarene school in particular, were defined as being entirely different to the 'London trash' and 'Parisian daubs' which, according to the author, adorned too many homes.[28] As Cordula Grewe has outlined in her work on the Nazarene movement, this characterisation of these different schools of painting in the Irish press reflects current debates on religious painting across Europe.[29]

24 Ibid.

25 *Irish Examiner,* 23 October 1850.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Grewe outlines the extent to which French art was associated with modernist formal invention during the nineteenth century, whereas German art (and particularly that of the Nazarenes, was associated with a conceptual, symbolic approach, concerned with the 'inner life' of the image. Cordula Grewe, *Painting the sacred in the age of Romanticism,* (Farnham, 2009).

The Society wished to provide access instead to the 'solemn and pure creation of the oldest Christian Art', as opposed to a 'motley bazaar of modern attitudinising, fashionable fripperies, sensual vulgarities, and corrupt sentimentality'. This investment, in order to support and encourage religious feeling, was justified in the face of the 'stern pressure of constant poverty, the rough shocks of intermittent famine' and 'the awful visitations of periodic pestilence'.[30]

This rich descriptive article provides an insight into the values that were being ascribed to visual art and to aesthetics, with an *emphasis* on a sense purity and connection to a Christian tradition, as opposed to modern innovation or sentimentality. Cheapness is seen here as a virtue, presenting the visual image as something to be used and engaged with as part of a religious life, as opposed to a material, luxury object to be displayed. This emphasis on the semiotic content of the image, at the expense (and even opposed to) the hand-made quality of the artwork itself, reflects a positive approach to mass production and reproduction. It is interesting to note that George Francis Mulvany, keeper of the Royal Hibernian Academy between 1845-64, published an open letter to Russell as chair of the Society in response to the enthusiastic alliance with the Nazarene School, urging him instead to consider supporting a native Irish school of religious art.[31] While the letter reiterated the significance of the artists identified by the Society as being of particular importance, such as Giotto and Cimabue, Mulvany suggested that Catholic leaders could engage with 'Irish talent, Irish mind, and manual power' as far as possible in the decoration of churches, reflecting the importance of the Church as a patron of the arts and of architecture during this period.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, although the Irish Ecclesiological Society was relatively short-lived, it does provide an interesting insight into the different influences and ideals that were being promoted as most appropriate for Irish Catholic churches and homes. The alliances with specific national traditions and ideas around Irish manufacture reflect the extent to which the church had to position its expansion carefully, particularly in the context of economic scarcity. It also reflects a national church looking for an *aesthetic* tradition to be part of following the rupture of the Reformation – one which was ancient, and which was embedded in an idea of the European Middle Ages, as opposed to the interest in the Celtic Revival which

30 *Irish Examiner,* 23 October 1850.
31 'The Ecclesiological Society', *Nation*, 1 December, 1849.

emerged later in the century. Finally, it reflects the significance of 'material religion' in promoting devotion and adherence among congregations and citizens. As Lucinda Matthews-Jones and Timothy Willem-Jones have argued, material elements such as prints, vestments, or other decorative elements of religion should not be viewed as merely decorative or as 'end-products', but rather as objects that play an 'active, constitutive role' in 'constructing identities, social relations, and hierarchies of power'.[32] Objects, they write, are both 'shaped by people and culture', but also have 'the potential to shape and condition people'. The attention paid by the Irish Ecclesiological Society to the role and agency of material encounters, objects, and experiences in both the domestic sphere and the space of the church, reflects the importance of material religion in shaping Catholic culture in Ireland by the middle of the nineteenth century.

32 Lucinda Matthews-Jones and Timothy Willem Jones (eds.), *Material religion in modern Britain: the spirit of things* (Basingstoke, 2015), pg. 2.

Joining the Dots. This communication problem effectively means that we are able to continue to live our lives as normal – even if that normality is increasingly interrupted by peculiar weather events. The vast majority of us aren't yet being forced to 'join the dots' and link what we see around us in terms of the weather patterns, the floods and the forest fires to climate change.

– Lorna Gold, *Climate Generation* (Dublin: Veritas) p. 98.