

SOME WILLS OF PENAL TIMES

HOW did our Catholic forefathers live in penal days? Was life an unceasing nightmare? Was every other man they met a Topcliff? After the death of Elizabeth it would seem that persecution went by fits and starts. The protracted negotiations for the Spanish marriage, from 1617 to 1623, meant a decided lull in active measures against recusants, though when those negotiations were broken off there was a recrudescence of brutality. It was the same after the ill-fated rebellion of 1715, and a milder outbreak recurred in the Lord George Gordon riots. But such happenings tell us little of the ordinary life of Catholics at the time when persecution was not active.

A great deal of material is at hand now in the publications of the *Catholic Record Society*, also in several volumes brought out by Mr. John Orlebar Payne. As we peruse these records many curious facts emerge. Apostasies were, of course, numerous. This was inevitable when life became more and more burdensome day by day. Still it is sad to read that whereas in the year 1750 the Catholic congregation at Upton in Berkshire totalled ninety-eight exclusive of the members of the principal family there—Perkins—‘it is curious to notice how many of the families whose names are there given still exist in the neighbourhood, although there is not now a single Catholic among them.’ The sequestration of estates was hard to bear and there is pathos in the will of John Purcell, of the Hays in Shropshire, who in 1729 said: ‘My will and desire is that the penal statutes be never taken against my mother or any of my brothers and sisters except my brother-in-law Thomas Penson so long, that is, as they do not seek to secure more than the annuities allowed them.’ We can understand apostasies of this sort, but the story of Thomas Fletcher, ‘formerly a

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Papist, but now a Protestant ' is less easy to understand. He became a common informer and seems to have had a peculiarly malign interest in the doings of the clergy and the seminaries. He secured the estate of the chivalrous Sir Henry Fletcher, who died at Douay in 1712 in the convent of the Franciscans, where he had built a magnificent chapel. But the apostate Fletcher died without issue and the estate passed to the Vanes. What monetary reward Fletcher received at different times is not clear, we have entries of £21 10s. and £27 12s. 6d. as paid to him in 1717 and 1718. Another apostate was William Aylmer, ' lately Professor of Divinity in the Roman Church.' In 1713 he preached at St. Martin's, Oxford, ' A Recantation Sermon against the errors of Popery, particularly Transubstantiation,' and in the following year became Vicar of Warton, in Lancashire, where he died twenty years later.

This is the sad side of the story, and it could be amplified; the doings of the wretched Richard Hitchmough are a good example of the adage *corruptio optimi pessima*. But there is the brighter side, and it appears more particularly in the wills of these sufferers for the faith. Thus Lady Dormer in 1750 leaves a picture of the B.V.M. in silver filigree frame, a locket of Lord Derwentwater's hair set in gold, ' my sedan chair now left with the widow Lady Jernegan in Winchester, a picture of our Blessed Saviour on the Cross, a gilt chalice and paten, a silver box to carry the Blessed Sacrament in, and another silver box to carry the Holy Oils.' Charles Eyston leaves a wonderful relic which all must have prized then, viz. ' Bishop Fisher's staff.' Walter, Lord Aston, leaves £100 for prayers for his soul, viz., £50 to the two Bishops in London, Mr. White¹ and Mr. Challenge (*sic*) to give

¹ An *alias* for Bishop Benjamin Petre; Dr. Challoner was his coadjutor.

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to the most pious and wanting of their clergy to pray for me . . . £40 and £10 for the poor Catholics that come to the Chapel at Tixall, ' and I think if the Religious Orders came in for a share it might do very well.'

The poor were not forgotten. Lady Dormer had left £5 for poor Roman Catholics of Idsworth; Jeremy Norris of Norwich leaves £120 to poor Catholics of the city of Norwich to be put out at interest in perpetuity.' In quaint contrast Thomas Berington leaves to Lady Fleetwood ' five guineas and my spring clock that strikes the quarters.' The will of William Plowden, 1739, is too long to quote but it should be read if only for its tender and unaffected piety. On his tombstone he would have cut *Pro fide, pro rege, mala patienter sustinui*.² Walter Fowler, of St. Thomas's, Stafford, left to his brother ' a gold medal of Pope Clement X, given him with his own hands.'

Once more the poor are not forgotten: ' Whereas the miserable condition and sufferings of the poor Catholics of England is very deplorable, in consideration thereof I bequeath to the poorest and most needy of them £250, to be divided amongst 500 poor, which is 10s. apiece,' thus John Weston, of Sutton Place, Surrey, in 1724. ' My dear Jacky,' writes Mary Stapleton to her son, ' I am sure you'll never forget to pray for my poor soul.'

One curious feature about these wills must not be omitted. Great numbers of the children of these persecuted Catholic families went into Flanders and became Religious. Yet this seems to have been disapproved of in many instances. Thus Thomas Stonor, of Stonor, says that any of his sons ' entering a Religious Order under 21 years of age (is) to have only

² J. Orlebar Payne, *Records of the English Catholics of 1715*, p. 54.

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£500,' Jan., 1723. So, too, James Fermor, ' £5 only to any of his five younger children who turn Religious,' 1722; his son Henry writes twenty-five years later ' any younger child turning Religious between the ages of 21 and 30 to have only £500, but any doing so after 30 years of age to have her full share, viz., £2,000.' Dame Ann Throckmorton, in a codicil, revoked £200 given to her grand-daughter Frances Wollascott, she ' having entered into Religion and become a professed nun ' ; but William Wollascott is ' to have one large silver candlestick that was generally used to light me up and down.' Once more: Nicholas Stapleton ' any daughter entering Religion to have only £500.'

These stray notes afford us a glimpse of a life that must have been very strange and very sad. Naturally enough only those who have anything to leave make wills; what, then, of the poor who had nothing? Is it to be wondered at that the faith was almost completely trampled out in parts? The real marvel is that it persisted despite all these miseries: ' They have laboured and we have entered into the fruit of their labours! '

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