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Bishop Edward Thomas O'Dwyer and the Fall
of Parnell: A Reassessment

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THIS year marks the sixtieth anniversary of the death of Bishop Edward Thomas O'Dwyer, of Limerick, who occupied that See from 1886 until 1917. For most of that time he was very much in the public eye in Ireland, since from the beginning of his episcopate he applied himself to the political and social movements of his day with a zest and tenacity that were second to none. Regarded by many of his contemporaries with mixed feelings of respect and dislike he achieved early and lasting notoriety for the singular, and mostly unpopular, views he held on various issues of national import. His unreserved acceptance and implementation of the Papal Rescript, which condemned the practices of Boycotting and the Plan of Campaign as immoral, as well as his open hostility towards Dillon, Harrington and O'Brien when these were at the height of their popularity, are but two well-known examples of his independent and forceful character. It was due to such outspoken divergence from the feelings and outlook of the majority of his countrymen, including the episcopacy, that he incurred the public odium, and the derogatory appellation, "Castle Bishop", early in his episcopate. Although his efforts for higher and technical education for his co-religionists, as well as his open avowal of the separatist principles of the 1916 leaders later, did much to alter the public's opinion of him, historians in general have not conformed. For many writers O'Dwyer has remained the self-willed, contentious prelate, whose ambition did not stretch beyond the desire to assert himself at every possible opportunity. In all fairness his authoritarian and unbending approach towards the controversial issues already mentioned have contributed greatly to this adverse opinion of him. It is not surprising, then, that his singular attitude to the Parnell

crisis in 1890-1891 is also regarded in this light. Historians have tended to judge his actions at this time as being typical of a man who consistently sought to have his own way. Emmet Larkin, for example, when referring to the Hierarchy's condemnation of Parnell in June, 1891, and when Dr. O'Dwyer still held out against having his name go forward with the rest of the bishops, states that the isolated action of the Bishop of Limerick was inspired by "a special delight in crossing his colleagues at critical moments".¹ A closer study suggests, however, that there was more to O'Dwyer's action than harmful caprice. In fact there is to be found in it a certain logic and consistency with his overall approach to politics at the time, and for which most historians have failed to give him sufficient credit.

That Bishop O'Dwyer was aware of Parnell's liaison with Mrs. O'Shea is evident from letters that passed between himself and Captain O'Shea as far back as 1888. A communication from the latter, dated November of that year, put him in the picture.² Although the purpose of this letter is not quite clear, O'Shea went to great lengths in it to protest his own innocence, and to show that, as a sincere Catholic, he was striving "with every effort" to save his children from the impending scandal. L. P. Curtis mentions that, when Captain O'Shea filed a petition for divorce in December, 1889, naming Parnell as co-respondent, he also enclosed "a communication" from one of the "Castle Bishops", namely, Dr. O'Dwyer, "concerning the charges of adultery."³ Although he does not go on to reveal the contents of this "communication" it seems from the context that he is suggesting that O'Shea had enlisted O'Dwyer's support against Parnell. Yet, in writing to the bishop a month before he took this action, O'Shea's purpose seems to have been no more than to thank O'Dwyer for his "kind letter" of sympathy in his domestic difficulties.⁴ There is no allusion to any offer of help from the bishop in his suit against Parnell. Three months later O'Shea was expressing to O'Dwyer his disappointment with Cardinal Manning. It appears that he had hoped that the Cardinal would stand by him, but that such support was not forthcoming.⁵ Later again he was writing to O'Dwyer about the bishop's own lack of enthusiasm for his case. Even though he had gone to the trouble of sending O'Dwyer the correspondence that had passed between himself and Manning he was dismayed that he had not received any reply from Limerick to acknowledge that fact. But, he concluded, he could perfectly understand why the bishop was making no comment "at present".⁶ In these letters, although there is definite evidence that O'Shea valued

¹ Emmet Larkin, "Launching the Counterattack: Part II of the Roman Catholic Hierarchy and the Destruction of Parnellism" in *Review of Politics*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 3 (July 1966), p. 378.

² O'Shea to O'Dwyer, 3 Nov., 1888, O'Dwyer Papers, LDA.

³ L. P. Curtis, *Coercion and Conciliation in Ireland, 1880-1892: A Study in conservative Unionism*. Oxford University Press, London, 1963, p. 310.

⁴ O'Shea to O'Dwyer, 7 Nov., 1889, O'Dwyer Papers, LDA.

⁵ Same to Same, 7 March, 1890, O'Dwyer Papers, LDA.

⁶ Same to Same, 29 March, 1890, O'Dwyer Papers, LDA.

and desired to have O'Dwyer's support, there is not sufficient to tie the bishop in with any alliance against Parnell.

When it was becoming clear that Parnell would not emerge vindicated from the divorce suit, Michael Davitt warned Archbishop Walsh that, as far as English support went, it was to be either Parnell or Home Rule. Both could not survive the outraged Nonconformist conscience. He therefore urged the archbishop to bring his influence to bear on the members of the Irish Party not to retain Parnell as their leader, or else, he wrote, it would be "goodby for this generation to Home Rule, and God help Ireland".⁷ In replying to Davitt, Walsh agreed that the choices left open were very limited. He was relieved that the Hierarchy had "no voice" in the consideration of the matter, either "in principle or in detail". Speaking for himself he saw no other option than to stand aside, and for the future to refrain from intervention in political affairs.⁸

As for Archbishop Logue, he seemed to have been more annoyed than shocked. Writing to Archbishop Walsh, he stated that he could not understand how a man in Parnell's position, "having the destinies of a people in his hands", could think of bartering it "for the company of an old woman". For his money, such a person was not one to beget confidence.⁹ It was a time of intense embarrassment for the Hierarchy in general, since most of the bishops had given their support to the movement for self-government under Parnell's leadership. They now realised all too clearly that, since it was almost certain that the Nonconformists in England would advance the moral implications of the case, they could not remain silent for too long.

Both Archbishops Walsh and Croke were in agreement that the best course for Parnell to take was one of voluntary, if temporary retirement from the leadership of the Party. When Parnell refused to accept this solution, Walsh, although still refraining from public action, began to take positive steps against him. In his capacity as chairman he called a meeting of the standing committee of the bishops for December 3rd., 1890. This was a few days before the Parliamentary Party was due to meet to deliberate on their choice of leader. The outcome of the bishops' meeting was a statement that Parnell was unfit to be the Irish leader any longer. This unfitness, it read, was not political, but stemmed directly from the light thrown on his character by the evidence revealed in the divorce court.¹⁰ The statement was released to the press and carried the signatures of the four archbishops and nineteen bishops. The names of Bishops Healy (Clonfert), Coffey (Kerry) and O'Dwyer, however, were not attached. Two days later Parnell was deposed as leader of the Parliamentary Party.

⁷ Emmet Larkin, "The Roman Catholic Hierarchy and the Fall of Parnell" in *Victorian Studies*, Vol. IV, No. 4 (June, 1961), p. 318.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 319.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 334.

¹⁰ *Freeman's Journal*, 4 Dec., 1890.

As the months went by, and the dispute between the Parnellites and the anti-Parnellites reached new levels of bitterness, O'Dwyer refused to be drawn into the controversy. However, from the beginning he was in constant communication with Archbishop Kirby, who was then rector of the Irish College in Rome.

In November, while Davitt was writing to Walsh, O'Dwyer was informing Kirby of the impending disaster in Ireland. He was certain that the archbishop, along with his Irish episcopal colleagues, felt not only "the disgrace of recent events", but also "the anxiety as to the future", which, at this time, was weighing heavily on the minds of all thinking Irishmen.¹¹ He then launched into an attack on the *Freeman's Journal* for its "unsound and dangerous doctrines", and, in particular, for trying to get it across to the people that private morality should not be taken into account in the conduct of public affairs. If both the *Freeman's Journal* and Parnell were to triumph, he declared, "a period of great unsettlement and confusion" was most certainly on the way for the country. He was convinced that the Hierarchy should adopt a cautious attitude, and "beyond whatever suggestion it may find it necessary to make confidentially through individual bishops", he did not favour any direct intervention from the Holy See. Tempers were so frayed, and passions so inflamed, he explained, that men were likely to "turn fiercely on *any one* who may be suspected of interference with their 'projects'." At the outbreak of the scandal, then, O'Dwyer made his mind clear on the situation. While in no way approving of Parnell's continued leadership, he believed that, in the light of the delicate situation then prevailing, the Church leaders should be cautious in their public statements.

In a later communication to Kirby he mentioned his own disapproval of Parnell, and expressed his surprise that in a Catholic country such as Ireland there were numbers of people who lent their support to "so disgraceful a character".¹² The only explanation he could find for such support was that over the previous decade the moral sense of the people had been blunted, and they had learned "to put expediency before principle". He was here returning to a theme which he had frequently repeated since he became bishop four years before. He explained to Kirby, moreover, that while he fully agreed with the decision of the bishops' standing committee, he saw no reason for adding his name to the statement since it was already widely known that he had never been a supporter of Parnell. He implied by this, perhaps, that, although his views had not undergone transformation, it was not the same with the rest of the Hierarchy, whose attitude to Parnell had suffered such a radical change in so short a space of time.

In Limerick itself the initial reaction to the divorce case was one of strong support for Parnell. On November 20th., the city branch of the National League unanimously passed a vote of confidence in him. The point was made that the Irish people alone

¹¹ O'Dwyer to Kirby, 28 Nov., 1890, Kirby Papers, ICRA.

¹² Same to Same, 6 Dec., 1890, Kirby Papers, ICRA.

were the judges of "the leader to whom they should entrust the presentation of their cause".¹³ When the news reached Limerick in December that Parnell had been deprived of the leadership of the Parliamentary Party the Sarsfield branch of the League protested its confidence in him. It further resolved, with only two dissenting votes, that the local nationalist M.P., Francis A. O'Keefe, was "unworthy of their representation" because he had voted against the wishes of his constituents by opting for Parnell's removal from the leadership.¹⁴ However, at a special meeting of the Corporation the following week, and at which some of the clergy were present, a vote of thanks was passed to those in the Parliamentary Party who had so "ably upheld the honour and interest of Ireland" by rejecting Parnell's leadership.¹⁵ This was the first indication of a swing away from Parnell in Limerick.

As the bishops one by one openly expressed their disapproval of Parnell, O'Dwyer still abstained from making any public comment. However, he continued to send his observations on the situation to Kirby. In a letter to Rome early in the new year he expressed his concern at the support that was still being given to Parnell, and he put this forward as further evidence of the lowering of the moral tone of the people. He once more made the point that this had been occurring gradually during the previous decade when crime was "connived at for political purposes".¹⁶ That Parnell should go was imperative, but the alternative to his leadership was by no means inviting. Those who would succeed him had but a short time before repudiated the authority of the Holy See "even within its own sphere of moral teacher". This, of course, was an allusion to the stand taken by the national leaders in opposing the Papal Rescript. While in no way wishing to favour Parnell, O'Dwyer declared that he found it impossible to speak out for his opponents. These included men such as John Dillon, William O'Brien and Francis A. O'Keefe, who in the previous autumn had organised a large demonstration in Limerick to protest against his own opposition to the implementing of the Plan of Campaign in his diocese. In these circumstances he considered that the only honourable thing for him to do was not to become involved in the controversy at all.

When Parnell arrived in Limerick on January 11th., he was given a tumultuous welcome.¹⁷ Later, when he addressed the meeting, from which the clergy were absent, he claimed that the Hierarchy was opposing him on purely political grounds. O'Dwyer wrote to Kirby the following month to give him an account of this event. In his view Parnell had by this time shot his bolt.¹⁸ He was by now "so discredited" that he could

¹³ *Limerick Chronicle*, 22 Nov., 1890.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 9 Dec., 1890.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 16 Dec., 1890.

¹⁶ O'Dwyer to Kirby, 4 Jan., 1891, Kirby Papers, ICRA.

¹⁷ *Limerick Chronicle*, 13 Jan., 1891.

¹⁸ O'Dwyer to Kirby, 13 Feb., 1891, Kirby Papers, ICRA.

never recover. The Limerick meeting was "a regular fiasco", and he explained the large attendance by the fact that those present at it were motivated mainly by curiosity. Nevertheless, shortly afterwards he was writing to Rome again to express his concern at the turn political events were taking. Parnell's followers, he declared, were beginning to show "a daily increasing hostility to ecclesiastical authority".¹⁹ He rounded off his letter with a thinly-veiled reference to the policy of the Hierarchy at the time of the Papal Rescript, and suggested that the present plight of the Irish Church was a "retribution" for its "disloyalty to Rome". Later still he expressed to Kirby his growing fear at the "way things were going in Ireland".²⁰ The "wretched movement in favour of Parnell" was growing. But he saw the hand of Providence at work, too, in the breaking up of the Irish Party before Home Rule became a reality. He was convinced that if these politicians were to obtain an independent parliament, they would certainly proceed to enact anti-Catholic laws for the country.²¹

Following a second reception for Parnell in Limerick, at which once again no priests were present, O'Dwyer sent his views on it to Kirby.²² He also took the opportunity in this letter to thank the archbishop for endorsing his own "action or rather inaction in the present political crisis".²³ He reaffirmed his belief that there was not the slightest doubt as to Parnell's "utter unfitness" for the position of leader of a Catholic nation. He also assured Kirby that in his own diocese there would not be any support forthcoming for Parnell from his clergy. But he went on to remind him that it would be out of the question for himself to urge support for Parnell's opponents. Referring to Francis A. O'Keefe as the "anti-Parnellite member" for Limerick, O'Dwyer recalled how he had surpassed the bounds of decency in his remarks about Mgr. Persico and the Holy See only a short time before, and how he had also directed insults at himself. It would be unthinkable, therefore, that he should lend O'Keefe any support until such time as he withdrew "these outrages" and apologised for them. In the same way, he continued, he could never ally himself with the Party's representative for the county, William Abraham, who was "one of the worst of libertines". To expect either himself or his priests to co-operate with such men "in the name of morality" would be excessive. This was the first indication that pressure was being brought to bear on him to come out against Parnell. It also carried the implication that he was willing to put his weight behind opposition to the Parnellites for a consideration, namely, the removal from the political arena of those in Limerick who had come out against the Holy See and against himself the previous autumn. He ended the letter by repeating his concern at "the continuous sapping of the people's faith in the Holy See".

¹⁹ Same to Same, 27 Feb., 1891, Kirby Papers, ICRA.

²⁰ Same to Same, 4 March, 1891, Kirby Papers, ICRA.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Limerick Chronicle*, 7 March, 1891, for an account of the meeting.

²³ O'Dwyer to Kirby, 18 March, 1891, Kirby Papers, ICRA.

A week before O'Dwyer wrote this letter to Rome Timothy Harrington had remarked at a meeting of the National League that there was a lack of unity among the bishops over Parnell.²⁴ To prove his point he mentioned the different reactions to Parnellite meetings in several Irish dioceses. There was the vain attempt by the Newry clergy to hinder the people from turning out to greet Parnell when he arrived there on March 8th. There was, as well, the letter which Archbishop Croke had written to his clergy giving them the freedom to take whatever side in the dispute they judged to be the right one. This, in point of fact, was not at all the case in Cashel. Croke issued a confidential communication to his priests at the beginning of March instructing them to spell out for the people why Parnell was unsuitable for the leadership of the Irish Party. They were to tell them that he had "sinned against the Christian code" and that he had "broken up the great Parliamentary Party".²⁵ Because of his action he had endangered, if not altogether destroyed, the cause of Home Rule. The priests were to leave the people in no doubt that the archdiocese was "fully in line with the other Diocese of Ireland", in that it was solicitous to uphold "the social purity of our race". For his third example Harrington went to Limerick, where, he claimed, the bishop "had forbidden the priests to speak either for or against" Parnell. This was more in line with the facts of the situation. At an inaugural meeting in Limerick of the newly-founded National Federation, which was composed of the breakaways from Parnell, and which had the backing of the Hierarchy, none of the Limerick priests were present.²⁶ This is not surprising since, when the organisation was launched on the nation the week previously, O'Dwyer was not one of the seventeen prelates who wrote letters of approval for it.²⁷ On the day after the Limerick meeting the *Munster News* published a letter from a "Limerick Priest" explaining why none of the clergy had attended.²⁸ The priests of Limerick, it ran, had "for some time past" refrained from attending all political gatherings, and more recently had opted for a policy of non-interference "in the present grave crisis". This applied even to meetings that were called "in resistance of Mr. Parnell's dictatorship", for otherwise it might seem as if the clergy were identifying themselves with men such as Francis A. O'Keefe. If he were to retire from political life, however, things could be different. But as long as he continued to represent the city in Parliament the priests would be compelled to refrain from taking an active part in the political life of the community.

In tone as well as content this letter resembled very closely the style and views of the bishop himself, and most probably it was his own composition. This was, in any event, the view taken by Francis A. O'Keefe, who replied to the letter as if it had

²⁴ *Limerick Chronicle*, 10 March, 1891.

²⁵ Croke Papers, CDA, Item 23.

²⁶ *Limerick Chronicle*, 21 March, 1891.

²⁷ *Nation*, 14 March, 1891.

²⁸ *Munster News*, 21 March, 1891.

come from O'Dwyer.³⁹ He explained that the "cowardly criticism" of himself was a retaliation for the part he had played in the Limerick demonstration. He also stated that he had been assured by "an undoubted authority" that the priests of the diocese were in "perfect accord" with their colleagues in other dioceses, and that the "anonymous libeller" in the *Munster News* spoke for nobody but "his own nonentity".

Parnell's marriage to Mrs. O'Shea provided the occasion for another statement from the bishops in June, 1891. As a result of Parnell's public action, and also because of the "open hostility to ecclesiastical authority" shown by his "recognised agents", the bishops considered him to be "wholly unworthy" of the confidence of Irish Catholics. They felt it incumbent on themselves, therefore, to call upon the people "to repudiate his leadership"⁴⁰. O'Dwyer was the only member of the Hierarchy who did not sign the statement.

Some of Parnell's supporters mistakenly interpreted O'Dwyer's action as an indication that he favoured their cause. At this time the Parnellites, following the defeat of their candidate at a by-election in Carlow, were beginning to grasp at straws. They consequently fastened on the bishop's refusal to sign as proof that the bishops were not united in their attitude towards the fallen leader. At a Parnellite convention in Limerick one of the speakers, W. A. MacDonald, the nationalist M.P. for Queen's County, commended O'Dwyer's action in not following the example of his colleagues.

To avoid further confusion on the matter the bishop finally broke his silence, and wrote to his Vicar General, Dr. Moloney, stating unequivocally what his views on the situation were. This letter was published in the local press on the following day.⁴¹ He feared, he began, that the remarks made at the recent Parnellite convention might have created the impression that he was on Parnell's side. For this reason mainly, although "very reluctantly", he now interposed in the quarrel which was agitating the country. The present communication to his Vicar General intended to define "to some extent" his own personal position. He wanted it to be clearly understood that he was not a supporter of Parnell. His "sense of national decency" would not allow him to follow that road. He could never be brought to support a man "stained by the offences against the moral law" of which Parnell had been convicted in open court. Not even "political expediency" would pardon any such support from the people of a Catholic nation. He stated further that, far from being at variance with the rest of the bishops on the Parnell question, he concurred "most heartily in the resolution which they had recently passed in Maynooth".

Here, then, was a clear enough exposition of O'Dwyer's attitude from his own pen. But he left the question of his refusal to sign the Maynooth statement unanswered.

³⁹ *Freeman's Journal*, 23 March, 1891.

⁴⁰ *Limerick Chronicle*, 4 July, 1891.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 16 July, 1891.

He had claimed in his letter that he was making his views on Parnell quite clear, but he also added that he was doing so "very reluctantly", and only "to some extent". There is, however, an interesting document preserved among his papers which may help to throw light on why, after refusing to sign the Maynooth statement, he later gave it his public assent. Bishop Healy had sent him a copy of the bishops' statement, and, marking it confidential, had added in pencil the following note: "I have no doubt that it is the wish of the Holy Father that we should sign this, --J.H."³² Knowing well his reverence for the wishes of the Holy See, Healy played on it to effect his colleague's public compliance with the action of the rest of the Hierarchy. It would seem that if he had been allowed to follow his own wishes O'Dwyer would have continued to observe an isolated silence. The events in Limerick during the previous autumn had placed him on the horns of a very difficult dilemma. At that time he had stated unreservedly his opposition to both the Plan of Campaign and Boycotting, and he had based his arguments for doing so on the thesis that politics were subject to the laws of morality. His position was strongly challenged by Dillon, O'Brien and most of the other national leaders. Now in the Parnell crisis these same men had made generous use of arguments from morality to remove Parnell from the leadership. This was, perhaps, more than O'Dwyer could take. Besides, they had also openly criticised him in his cathedral city, and all because he had applied the rulings of the Holy See to the land situation as it had presented itself in his diocese. If he had openly opposed Parnell subsequently he felt it would have looked as if he were supporting Dillon and O'Brien, which, of course, he had no intention of doing. From a political standpoint, therefore, neutrality, or failing this, total silence, was the only avenue open to him. And this was the course he determined to take until the politicians themselves forced him into the open by pitting him against his episcopal colleagues, and until these in turn brought forward the argument of obedience to the wishes of the Holy See to influence his action.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CDA: Cashel Diocesan Archives.
ICRA: Irish College, Rome, Archives.
LDA: Limerick Diocesan Archives.

³² O'Dwyer Papers, LDA, File U.