

Keeping the Faith. The role of the Irish house during the Penal era and beyond.

Despite widespread acceptance of the impact of the Penal Laws on Irish society, authors have focused on the more secular parts of society, tending to dismiss the religious aspect of Penal legislation as something of a 'sideline' to the main event and discounting vital dimensions such as faith and belief. Whilst there has been a shift towards an appreciation of the diverse nature of religious change during this period, few authors have attempted to discuss the link between persecution and the retention of Catholicism. This paper explores the role played by the Irish home in articulating Catholic identity throughout the Penal era and asks what this domestic space can tell us about the Catholic communities of the period. It analyses how this domestic space helped to reflect and reinforce very separate and different Catholic identities as religious communities were forced to create new spaces for worship and ritual, search for precedents and develop their own concepts of how space should be apportioned and organised. The paper concludes that Irish homes became the vessels of a sacred force that played a crucial role in maintaining Catholic identity and ensuring the survival of the Catholic faith. In an era of rapid cultural change, the Irish home continues to reflect, and help reconstruct, contemporary Irish identity whilst also providing a tangible and experiential connection to Irish heritage and tradition.

## Introduction and background

The Williamite revolution of 1690-1691 ensured the dominance of the Protestant minority in Ireland (Hill 1988, 99) and both Williamite and Jacobite forces had seen themselves engaged in a war of religion fighting for constitutional principles. It was the climax of the Reformation and of the long struggle between Protestant and Catholic political, social and economic rivalry for supremacy in Ireland (Hayton 2004, 10). The Treaty of Limerick marked the end of the revolution but Protestants believed its terms to be much too favourable towards the Catholics (Bartlett 1990, 1). They were deeply suspicious of the articles and believed that, whilst the Stuart Pretender continued to be recognised by the Vatican and Versailles, their position in Ireland would remain threatened (Bartlett 1992, 17).

The Penal Laws were passed between 1695 and 1756, although it is reasonable to argue that Ireland's Roman Catholics had remained in a state of suppression from as early as Tudor times. The degrading and dividing influence of the Penal Laws, which were enacted in defiance of a Treaty intended to guarantee Catholics freedom from oppression on account of their religion, and without the provocation of rebellion, extended to every field of Catholic political, professional, social, intellectual and domestic life (Lecky 1891, 52).

The introduction of the Banishment Act of 1697 required all regular clergy, bishops and those exercising ecclesiastical jurisdiction to leave Ireland. Their expulsion was carried out in a highly efficient manner and those regulars, such as the Jesuits and Franciscans that remained, or filtered back into the country, found refuge amongst wealthy Catholic families or remained under the pretext of being secular clergy, eventually registering under the Registration Act (2 Anne (1703) c.7 Section 1). All registered priests were required to take an oath of abjuration, denying the right of James III to the throne and accepting Queen Anne as the rightful and lawful Queen (2 Anne (1703) c.6 Section 15). Few priests took the oath and those that refused forfeited any legal status which the Registration Act had offered them resulting in a disruption to religious services. Priests were forced into hiding and the doors of the Catholic Mass Houses were closed (Connolly 1992, 276).

Whilst the Penal Laws managed to limit the public expression of Catholicism, they did not ensure the elimination of Catholicism or result in the mass conversion of Catholics (Bartlett 1990, 2). Despite chapels being appropriated by Protestant authorities and Mass Houses

being closed, Mass continued to be celebrated in secret at a number of locations in the open air in ditches, under trees and bushes and at altars known as Mass Rocks. It was also celebrated in barns and out-houses as well as in the private chapels of the wealthy and the houses of the rural poor.

This paper explores the role played by the Irish home in articulating Catholic identity throughout the Penal era and asks what this domestic space can tell us about the Catholic communities of the period. It begins by analysing how this domestic space helped to reflect and reinforce very separate and different Catholic identities as religious communities were forced to create new spaces for worship and ritual, search for precedents and develop their own concepts of how space should be apportioned and organised. It then focusses on the role played by the Irish home in maintaining Catholic identity and ensuring the survival of the Catholic faith before finally looking at the continued role of the Irish home in reflecting, and helping to reconstruct, contemporary Irish identity whilst also providing a tangible and experiential connection to Irish heritage and tradition.

### One Faith United but Divided

Using language sources it is possible to identify a shift in the use of ethnic terminology in Ireland relating to the Old English, new English and Gaelic Irish from Reformation times to the mid-seventeenth century, with a clear shift in the more exclusive term *Gaedhill* which was used to distinguish the Old English from the New English or *Nua-Ghaill* (Smyth 2006, 60). The Old English had founded their own religious houses throughout Ireland soon after their arrival, despite the survival of Benedictine houses. The religious houses of the Old English excluded the Gaelic Irish and remained distinct from those of purely Gaelic origin throughout the medieval period, being located primarily in Anglo Norman port towns (Meigs 1997, 45). Jefferies' analysis of diocesan possessions between 1485 and 1535 clearly highlights this division (Jefferies 2010, 41). Old English participation within the European reform movement helped them to articulate their very separate identity (Lennon 1986, 89) and the Gaelic Irish continued to harbour a strong hostility towards them (Kelly 1985, 433).

By the seventeenth century, the Gaelic Irish and Old English had evolved into very definable groups (Meigs 1997, 90). However, by the end of the century, the Old English found themselves merged with the mass of the Catholic population (Beckett 1976, 43) with the words 'Irishmen' and 'papists' being used as interchangeable terms (Beckett 1976, 36). Despite this, the country still remained highly fragmented with 'clearly varying and multiple shades' of Catholic identities (Smyth 2006, 61).

The medieval Mass had been a composite of two ritual traditions inherited from early Christianity; the tradition of public worship, practiced by whole communities, and that of the private, family, domestic cult (Bossy 1983, 51). During the Penal era, control of church buildings remained firmly in the hands of the state (Lennon 1986, 88) demanding a variety of new or alternative ritual spaces that reflected both private and communal worship as well as revealing the different strands of Catholicism that existed at this time.

### The Old English

Research shows that former Old English domination within the port towns and cities of Ireland during the Penal era is reflected in the existence of established and substantial Mass houses. In more rural Gaelic parishes the *Report on the State of Popery* of 1731 generally describes Mass Houses as 'mean thatched Cabbins' with 'many, or most of them, open at one end'. Those located within port towns and cities are, in contrast, described as being well established, large and, occasionally, sumptuous (Catholic Historical Society Ireland 1913). The 1731 report states that the Parish of Christ Church in Cork city had a public Mass house which had been 'considerably enlarged and beautified' (Catholic Historical Society Ireland 1913, 135). It mentions that there were also two new Mass houses in the city. One of these was slated and built in 1728. The other was built in 1730 'on a fine eminence, in a large sumptuous manner in the north suburbs on a new foundation' despite the fact that there was already 'a Large Convenient mass house' close to where the new Mass house was being built. Another Mass house existed in the centre of the city and this had been recently enlarged (Catholic Historical Society Ireland 1913, 131). In Kinsale there was already one Mass house but there was another house being built which authorities suspected as being designed for a new Mass house (Catholic Historical Society Ireland 1913, 140). Similarly, in county Tipperary, Butler confirms the widespread existence of Mass houses as early as 1670

and emphasises the relationship between these Mass houses and a safe-house support network of Roman Catholic gentry households. He draws upon a report written to the Vatican, in 1684, highlighting these close links. Of great significance is the fact that this report emphasises that these gentry desired private masses not only near their own houses but also in their own homes in order to avoid being associated with open-air masses and other indignities (Butler 2006, 142).

The Jesuits had played a vital role in the Counter-Reformation and their mission strategy often targeted affluent and influential members of Irish Catholic society (Jones 1995, 145). Their schools and colleges promoted a positive Catholic image and classrooms became powerful instruments of the Counter-Reformation cause (Jones 1995, 145). Catholic gentry and mercantile families often retained clergy in their homes, providing them with both financial support and protection (Lennon 1986, 82). Certainly within the Pale it was the fashion to retain a chaplain in order to hear Mass within the private sphere of the home and the early seventeenth century *Protestant Visitation Returns* confirm this, repeatedly stressing the frequency with which the gentry of the Pale retained chaplains and the use of their houses for the celebration of Mass (Gillespie 1993:14). The *Report on the State of Popery* acknowledged that most of the wealthy 'Papists' had private Chapels in their houses where Mass was often celebrated (Catholic Historical Society Ireland 1913, 131). In her research of county Cork, Bishop (2014, 48-49) demonstrates that the location of these private chapels strongly mirrored the Old English settlement patterns identified by authors such as McCarthy (2000), Dickson (2004) and Smyth (2006), reflecting a strand of Irish Catholic culture that was strongly influenced by Jesuit teaching. The number of private chapels returned to the Lords' Committees in 1731 totalled 54 (CHS 1912, 11).

The returns for the Diocese of Clonfert identify that, in the parish of Kilmcunna, the local Curate was under the impression that there were 'few Gent' of any fortune among the Papists' who did not have 'private Priests & Masses' (CHS 1914, 132). Mass was also often celebrated in private houses in the Diocese of Anchory (CHS 1912, 129) and the Lord Bishop of Ferns and Leighlin advised that Mass was celebrated in private chapels in both the Dioceses (CHS 1915, 175).

In America, as in Ireland, Penal legislation confined the practice of Irish Catholicism to the private sphere creating a similar gentry-centred religion. In Maryland, the home became the centre of ritual and devotion in eighteenth-century (Curran 2014, 176) as the Jesuits adopted a home ministry model in response to the changing socio-political conditions with Irish Catholic gentry such as Charles Carroll providing private chapels in their homes (Curran 2014, 175). By 1760 there were fifty private chapels in Maryland. Often large and commodious, they were often rooms that were made available to the priest and an adhoc congregation, occasionally they were a distinct addition to a manor house. Carroll even employed a full time chaplain who split his time between his Doohoragen Manor in western Anne Arundel County and his Anapolis home. Many of the private chapels were capable of accommodating congregations of a hundred or more and thereby helped to promote a distinctive communal identity for the Irish Catholics (Curran 2014, 177).

Reliance on these private chapels had far-reaching consequences for the social character of Irish Catholicism. Not only did the domestication of the Mass in the homes of wealthy Catholics leave the priest captive to the needs and desires of the gentry (Kaplan 2002, 1050), it also resulted in a weaker communal parish structure. Although some private chapels were luxurious, the display and communal ritual that was associated with the parish was lacking and, whilst the parish Mass removed social divisions, the domestication of the Mass helped to reinforce such distinctions (Gillespie 1993:15).

### The Gaelic Irish

The arrival of Christianity in Ireland could easily have eradicated the existing learning and institutions associated with paganism but this was not the case. Instead it achieved a remarkable symbiosis between native institutions and modes of thought (Mac Cana 2011, 48). Whilst the arrival of Christianity heralded 'a sea-change in ritual practice', its adaptation to the existing social order was aimed at achieving a smooth and unchallenged transition (Ó hÓgáin 1999, 199). The new religious orthodoxy permitted the complementary coexistence of two ideologies within the same Gaelic community; one explicitly Christian, the other originally pagan (Mac Cana 2011, 48). The success of this symbiosis which adopted a Christian mould without forsaking the native culture is reflected in the cultural distinctiveness of Early Christian Ireland (Bradshaw 1989, 18). Religious sites were cleansed

from pagan association by the blessings of the missionaries subsequently becoming a central focus for new religious and secular activities (Zucchelli 2009, 107). By 1500, the Christianisation of the landscape had all but displaced memories of ancient paganism in Ireland (Walsham 2012, 36) and by the time of the Penal laws Gaelic Catholic political culture was predominantly, but not exclusively, Irish speaking with rich traditions that fostered strong cultural unity and regional diversity and nurtured a potent belief in 'older' faiths (Smyth 2006, 61).

In 1670 Sir William Petty observed the social divisions that existed between Catholics in Ireland. He stated that 'as for the richer and better educated sort of them they are such Catholics as are in other places'. The religion of the poorer Irish, he argued, was full of superstition and based on a more traditional form of belief that revolved around the stories of saints, pilgrimages and tyrannical Priests (Gillespie 1993:14). George Storey, who was a Chaplain in the Williamite Army in South Ulster in 1689, noted that the houses of the Irish 'had crosses on the inside above the doors, upon the thatch, some made of wood and others of straw and rushes finely wrought, some houses had more and some less'. He understood that this was a custom amongst 'the native Irish' who set up a new cross every Corpus Christie day; the number of crosses equalling the number of years that they had lived in the house (Gillespie 1993:12). An entry in the Schools' Manuscript Collection of the Folklore Archive held at University College Dublin, collected in 1937/8, recalls that 'it was custom when it rose high enough for the roof timbers to nail two rough pieces of wood in the form of a cross and place four such cross at the corners joining the gables and side walls'. This was believed to keep evil spirits from the home (NFCS 320:96). An Austrian Redemptorist, whilst carrying out his mission in Enniskillen in 1852, revealed that the people there had never witnessed benediction of the Blessed Sacrament nor seen incense rise from a censer. In other areas too it is evident that such refinements were not common until the second half of the nineteenth century (Connolly 2001, 107).

Despite the differences that existed between the two Catholic communities, the Franciscans played a role in promoting a middle ground between the Jesuit style counter-Reformation Catholicism and the more 'traditional' strand of Gaelic Catholicism. Research undertaken by Gillespie (2009) demonstrates that the Franciscan order in Ireland had

undergone a dramatic transformation by the end of the seventeenth century. Whilst it had shrunk to a small fragmented organisation by 1600, a century later he reports that it was a 'well-established' body with almost 600 members by 1700 (Gillespie 2009:75). Gillespie believes that their success was due not only to their vision of themselves as distinctively Irish and distinctively Franciscan but also to the fact that many were trained in Europe (Gillespie 2009:75). Gillespie writes that 'the genius of the Franciscan order in seventeenth-century Ireland was ..... its ability to recognise the changing needs of successive generations of seventeenth-century Irish people and to maintain support from the ethnically diverse groups that the order served in that changing world' (Gillespie 2009:76). In the parish of Licmolassy Mass was celebrated by Fryars and took place in 'private houses' (CHS 1914, 132) but, in Donegal, in the Diocese of Raphoe, in addition to Mass being said in private houses, two priests also celebrated Mass 'in the open fields' (CHS 1912, 22).

So strong was the bond between the priest and his people that individuals were willing to sacrifice themselves in order to protect him. In 1697, under the Penal Laws, a statute was passed stating that anyone who knowingly harboured popish clergy were, in the first instance, to be fined £20. That sum was to be doubled for a second offence and, if found guilty on a third occasion, all lands were to be forfeit along with goods and chattels (William III C.1 1697). An act to prevent the further growth of popery in 1709 led to the active pursuit of priests. A reward of £20 was offered for the discovery of regulars or non-registered secular clergy leading to their apprehension and conviction (2 Anne C.3 1703 Sec 18). In folklore, stories abound of priest-hunters and in the *Grand Jury Presentment Book for the County of Limerick* at every assizes from 1711 to 1726, there were proceedings recorded against priests. Despite the dangers inherent in harbouring priests, the Irish used their houses to shelter their clergy in times of need (NFCS 289:321-322; 293:91) and often had secret passages connecting one house to another to aid the escape of the incumbent (NFCS 368:392-393).

Ryan (1957) explains that in Penal times the priest would have carried a station box. Having unhinged the sides and the front of the station box, the priest would have rested the station box on the flat surface provided by the table which would have acted as his altar. The station-box would have contained altar-stone, linens, crucifix, candles and charts and its compactness and portability would have allowed for a speedy departure should the need



have arisen (Ryan 1957:24). The box would often have been looked after in the house of one of the congregation. And in the 1930s, Father Leader who was Parish priest of Rath and the Islands, observed a box in the corner of the room of one of his parishoners. Upon opening the box he found vestments and two chalices. One of the chalices continues to be in the possession of the parish church of Timoleague. The other is in the possession of the Franciscans of Liberty Street, Cork city. (NFCS 319: 4-5).

Despite Catholic life starting to flourish again in the nineteenth century, the people remained poor and priests and churches scarce resulting in parish amalgamation. With the Penal Laws technically still in force and the possibility that they could be re-introduced at any time, Catholics remained cautious even when church building was possible. In the parish of Magherafelt, county Derry, stories were heard from parents and grandparents about Catholic worshippers passing off their plain church building as a farm building such as a barn to escape hostile attention in pre-Emancipation days (Bradley 2007/8, 275). Often due to the hostility of local Protestant landlords, central sites for church building were rare and so the distances that both priest and congregation had to travel for worship sometimes became unmanageable. The elderly, in particular, struggled to attend church and, with no means of transport, a system known as the stations, established during the Penal era, operated within the parishes across Ireland (Barry 1959, 140).

### The Stations and Catholic Identity

Although Mass had been celebrated, confessions heard and communion received, in private houses in Ireland since around 1650, it was done so in an informal way and had remained within the domain of the regular clergy rather than secular or diocesan clergy (Larkin 2006, 191). During the Penal era, particularly between 1697 and 1709 this informal set of religious practices was transformed into a more formal and parochial system that was dominated by the diocesan clergy (Larkin 2006, 192). At the Assizes for the Connaught Circuit in April 1715 Patrick Duffy, who had registered as a parish priest but was believed to be one of the Vicar Generals of the Diocese of Tuam, had said Mass at a private house belonging to Thomas Joyce in Westport; 'great numbers of people gathered about the house of Thomas Joyce, and the said Patrick Duffy came out of the said house about an hour after the Multitude of people that had been there were dispersed which gave cause to this

Examinat to suppose that they had mass said that day in the house of said Thomas Joyce' (Burke 1914).

The Irish proverb 'there is always enough sun on a Saturday to dry a priest's shirt' perhaps dates to this time. It is believed that shirts were often used as the landmarks for the community and were stretched on hedges near where Mass would be said the next day (Finn cited in McGarvey 1956:184). Danaher (2004) confirms that flags or cloths waved in the air or displayed in prominent places were obvious signals that could be arranged in advance. Such activities would mean little to those unaware of their true meaning; a woman coming out of the kitchen door and shaking a sheet or a table cloth as if to dust it, or a sheet spread on a certain bush or on the thatched roof to dry (Danaher 2004:22). Folklore sources confirm that when a station Mass was to be held in a house in the district or townland, 'a white sheet would be placed on a high bush or brier convenient to the house, where all the neighbours could plainly see it and it would not be removed for a week. Then a sheet would be placed outside some other house in another district and so on so that all the people would know that when the sheet is out Mass will be held in that house on that day of the week' (NFCS 344:30-31).

Whilst the origins of Mass celebrated in the houses of the Irish are firmly rooted in the struggle between the secular and regular clergy as available resources became restricted, particularly in rural areas, the eventual emergence of the 'stations' as a system, between 1750 and 1770, was the result of what Larkin describes as 'three long-term and inter-related historical phenomena'; the very significant increase in the Catholic population, the very sharp decline in the total number of clergy in Ireland and the inability of the Catholic community to increase church and chapel accommodation significantly (Larkin 2006, 193). He argues that it was these conditions that produced the necessary rationalisation for a more effective and efficient use of the clergy's time and energy in meeting the pastoral needs of an ever-burgeoning Catholic population (Larkin 2006, 194). In addition to this, the emergence of the stations is attributed to concerns about reducing religious practice as well as meeting the needs of the community, in that they allowed for the Tridentine requirements of Easter Communion and Confessions to be fulfilled in a more timely fashion. All this conspired to expand what had initially been a limited concept into a universal system across rural Ireland (Larkin 2006, 195). Hospitality and the bonds of mutual exchange were

central features of Irish society and, in stressing the obligation to one's neighbour, traditional Irish Catholicism fitted well with this long-established view of Irish society (Gillespie 1993:9) and the adoption of the 'stations'. For the purposes of this paper the word 'stations' will be used to refer to the custom of celebrating Mass within the home, something that Larkin refers to as the 'house stations' or 'stations of confession' (Larkin 2006, 191).

Essentially a rural system, the stations that had developed as a national system by 1750, have been described as the most 'important religious practice to emerge in pre-Famine Ireland' (Larkin 2006, 189-190). In small rural communities with few churches, houses remained the most convenient place to celebrate Mass a consolidation of this system took place in the years between 1770 and 1850 (McConvery 2012, 4). By 1800, the Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin described the stations as a common feature throughout Ireland (Larkin 2006, 196) and, in 1813, Archbishop Bray published very comprehensive instructions and regulations in respect to the stations (Larkin 2006, 202). His ardent approach brought the custom to the attention of church authorities in Rome, resulting in a continued debate as to whether the stations should continue to be tolerated or curbed (Larkin 2006, 204). The decision was finally taken in 1821 to defer for advice to the archbishop of Dublin and the subsequent judgement by the Irish bishops resulted in the custom becoming a firm feature of the Irish religious landscape for the next thirty years (Larkin 2006, 204).

The subject of the stations was to remain a feature of future ecclesiastical discussions with opinion often divided. The National Synod of Thurles, which took place just a couple of decades after Catholic Emancipation and played an important part in the newly developing Catholic life of the country (Barry 1959, 131), considered the Sacrament of Penance, namely the stations. They were eager for the future administration of the Sacraments to take place within church buildings and not in private houses, as had become the custom twice a year, before Christmas and during Lent (Barry 1959, 138). Dr Cullen focussed his concerns on the dangers posed by the stations for the clergy, especially the practice of hearing women's confessions in private houses without the protection of confessionals. His concerns focussed especially upon younger priests. In contrast Archbishop Slattery of Cashel advocated a real need for the custom to continue and the Bishop of Ross promoted the pastoral value of the station Mass; Priests did not simply hear confessions and distribute communion but were

pivotal in 'removing any scandals .... settling quarrels, cultivating friendship and charity with everybody and exercising the role of counsellors' (Cunnane 1968, 564). The result was a compromise and future Synods in 1853 and 1854, in Cashel and Dublin respectively, also failed to eradicate the stations (Barry 1959, 141). When the Provincial Synod of Cashel met in September 1853 it was decided that each individual Bishop of the province could decide for his own diocese whether the stations should continue or not. Despite a reduction in frequency, the practice of hearing confessions of both men and women in private houses on the occasion of the stations continued (Barry 1959, 142).

During the Famine years the ratio of priests to people and the availability of church and chapel accommodation was changed, impacting significantly upon the status of the stations as a national institution (Larkin 2006, 214). Despite population growth or demise, the stations nationally upheld a practicing core of Catholicism. Without this, Tridentine Catholic devotional practices could not have emerged as quickly as they did in post-Famine Ireland (Larkin 2006, 258).

In addition to providing the priest with an opportunity to encourage spiritual devotion, the practice of travelling to private homes throughout the parish in order to visit the elderly or the sick and to undertake the stations helped local clergy to make Catholicism a very personal experience for the Irish (Lowe 1976, 130). The stations offered the opportunity to encourage congregations to be more attentive to the practice of their religion (Lowe 1976, 131). Through the influence of the priest as a personality, the Catholic church secured a strong position within Irish communities and was able to shape the local parishes into energetic and practical social centres from around 1750 onwards (Lowe 1976, 132). Through the strong and tangible bond between the priest and people, the Catholic parish developed a vigorous social character (Lowe 1976, 133). Not only did the stations provide a means of bringing the sacraments of penance and holy communion to the people, they also provided a social occasion that placed the priest at the heart of the daily lives of his parishioners (Lowe 1976, 135). This resulted in a social, reliable and useful institution that became 'the most visible and enduring facet of Irish culture' (Lowe 1976, 140). The stations were also a crucial defence to the proselytizing efforts of the Established church (Larkin 2006, 215).

The Stations became an important social event and thus played a vital role in shaping both collective identity and social life. Indeed, they have remained so in many areas across Ireland. Both Allen's and Taylor's description paint a vivid picture.

*'I remember from my childhood that the day before, the parlour table would be covered with an embroidered linen tablecloth and the best china taken down from the dresser or the sideboard. Mass was usually said in the kitchen and the kitchen table was used as an altar. It was covered with a starched linen cloth kept specially for the purpose. On the day itself, fresh flowers were gathered, and adults and children were brushes and dressed up in their finery so that all was in readiness before the parish priest and curate arrived. The woman of the house and one or two friends would have been up since dawn, making final preparations for the breakfast after the Mass. There were fires to be lit, breads to be baked and butter balls to be made from the freshly churned butter. The neighbours, friends and relatives arrived first, and, as soon as the priest arrived, one began to hear confessions by the fire in the parlour while the other priest began to celebrate Mass and distribute Holy Communion. After Mass the next person to have the Stations would be decided upon and the dues would be collected. The priest would then sit down in the parlour with the assembled company to a breakfast of porridge with thick cream followed by a lavish fry-up served with a mountain of buttered toast, soda bread and copious cups of strong tea' (Allen 1992, 29).*

Taylor recalls that preparations for holding the stations could start as much as a year before the event with both the inside and the outside of the farmhouse being part of a 'big clean-up' that saw gates repaired, slates replaced and the white-washing of walls. Inside broken panes of glass were replaced and 'nothing escaped the paint brush' with ceilings, walls, tables and chairs all being painted. A good white linen cloth was preserved for use on the altar and the best china taken from the 'big ware press in the parlour' (Taylor, 1998, 11 – 13). The household was usually responsible for providing a table cloth, two candles, a crucifix, holy water and a small jug of tap water with the Priest providing the principal necessities for the Mass (Diocese of Cork and Ross 2017). It was a sign of respectability for a house to have their own Mass vessels (Timson 2000, 93) and a great cause for celebration when a priest performed his first stations in the home of his parents (Moycullen Historical Society 2008, 127).

In county Galway Gannon (1999, 116) recalls a dresser that had been propped up with two wooden blocks came crashing down, narrowly missing the priest and people, and the priest urging everyone to give thanks that no one had been hurt. Other stories tell of kitchen tables being propped up on biscuit tins so that they were the right height for the altar and covered in the best white damask table-cloth (Timson 2000, 93) which would be preserved especially for the occasion and placed carefully away at the end.

In recent decades the stations have become an evening affair, perhaps in response to contemporary working patterns (Irish Times 2011), and have evolved to include celebrants within worship through their participation in the liturgy or by reading, singing or leading in prayer (Diocese of Cork and Ross 2017). Timson recalls friends and neighbours arriving at the home of her mother at 7.30pm in the evening with candles for light and supper served on the kitchen table once the stations were over and the tablecloth removed (Timson 2000, 94). With a reduction in religious practice and declining numbers of priests the number of stations being held is decreasing so that, whilst the practice remains strong in some parishes across Ireland, they have ceased altogether in others. In Glanmire in county Cork, the stations have been renamed as 'house' Masses in an effort to disassociate them with the Penal Laws and are held multiple times across the year (Barry 2016). In county Mayo, Father Paddy Gilligan, has tried to preserve the custom in his parish that incorporates Cong, Cross and The Neale (McHugh 2014). Despite their decline, it remains a privilege and an honour to hold the Stations in one's home (Diocese of Cork and Ross 2017).

## Conclusions

This paper has explored the role played by the Irish house in articulating Catholic identity from the Penal era to more contemporary times. This domestic space helped to reflect and reinforce very separate and different Catholic identities as religious communities were forced to create new spaces for worship and ritual, search for precedents and develop their own concepts of how space should be apportioned and organised. The Irish house became a ritual space that reflected both the private and communal nature of worship and included private chapels in the houses of the wealthy as well as the homes of the rural poor.

The Jesuits had played a vital role in the Counter-Reformation and their mission strategy had often targeted the more affluent and influential members of society and wealthy

Catholic gentry and mercantile families retained clergy in their houses and heard Mass within the private sphere of their chapel. Jesuit schools and colleges promoted a positive Catholic image and their classrooms became powerful instruments of the Counter-Reformation cause. Their focus upon participation within the European reform movement (Lennon 2003: 81) helped the wealthier Catholics to articulate a very separate identity. The reliance on private chapels had far-reaching consequences for the social character of Irish Catholicism during this period and further re-inforced the social divisions that existed within the Catholic community.

The religion of the poor reflected a more traditional form of belief and their more informal set of religious practices of celebrating Mass and hearing confessions and communion in private houses were transformed during Penal times into a more formal and parochial system known as the stations. A significant increase in the Catholic population and a lack of available clergy and chapels, led to the eventual emergence of the 'stations' as an established system in Ireland..

The vital role that the Irish house played in maintaining Catholic identity and ensuring the survival of the Catholic faith during Penal times continues today. The stations helped to meet the needs of local communities and allowed for the Tridentine requirements of Easter Communion and Confessions to be fulfilled in a more timely fashion thus addressing concerns about reducing religious practices. The emphasis on hospitality and the bonds of mutual exchange and an obligation to one's neighbour were strong features of traditional Irish Catholicism providing a natural fit for the adoption of the Stations so that, by 1800, the Stations had become a common feature throughout the country.

In addition to providing the priest with an opportunity to encourage spiritual devotion, the practice of travelling to private homes throughout the parish helped local clergy to make Catholicism a very personal experience for the Irish and ensure that the church secured a strong position within communities. The Catholic Church was thus able to shape local parishes into energetic and practical social centres with a strong and tangible bond between the priest and his people. The stations not only provided a means of bringing the sacraments of penance and Holy Communion to the people, they also provided a social occasion that placed the priest at the heart of the daily lives of his parishioners so that the

church as an institution became the most visible and enduring facet of Irish culture (Lowe 1976, 140). Even with the onset of the Famine years, which impacted upon the status of the stations as a national institution, they upheld a practicing core of Catholicism across the country ensuring the rapid emergence of Tridentine Catholic devotional practices in the post-Famine period.

In an era of rapid cultural change, the Irish house continues to reflect, and help reconstruct, contemporary Irish identity. The Stations were an important social event and played a vital role in shaping both collective identity and social life. Indeed, they have remained so in many areas across Ireland. Whilst Catholicism remains intimately linked to Irish identity, Catholic communities appear to have replaced the more conventional observance of Catholic institutional rules and regulations, with a collective identity that stems from their religious heritage. This change has been reflected in the stations with changes in name and a more inclusive approach to worship. Despite this, through the celebration of Mass in the home, the Irish house continues to provide a tangible and experiential connection to Irish heritage and tradition.



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