Father John Spratt, O.Carm.

Fr Peter O'Dwyer. O.Carm.

Introduction

ON the 27th May, 1871, Fr. John Spratt died in the monastery at Whitefriar Street, aged 76 and in the forty-ninth year of his priesthood. The daily paper (Freeman's Journal) to which he had frequently contributed carried a touching and eloquent tribute-"The mournful tidings of Father Spratt's decease have reached before this the most distant corner of the land, and wherever they have been told, they have been received as the message of an almost national calamity. There is scarcely one amongst the clergy of this country whose name was more widely known, and not even one whose name was linked with nobler works for God, for country and for kind, than that of the benevolent Carmelite whose death we all deplore to-day.

In this city where he was born and where he has been toiling for nearly half a century, that name has been familiar as a household word and many a poor family away in some dingy attic will sadly miss his presence and regard his death as a domestic calamity. He realised in its entirety the glorious popular idea of an Irish priest and was at all times the 'all in all' to the devoted people amongst whom his life was cast.

For nearly forty years he never rested from his labours of love in the cause of temperance. For years upon years there was scarcely a Sunday that he was not present, as its life and soul, at a meeting held in Dublin or in some provincial town, in furtherance of the holy object. The cast-aways in lanes and by-ways -families starving in garrets, with fathers and mothers who had seen better days and shrank from the glare and degradation of beggary in the streets - children (the ever-present 'waifs and strays' of our large cities) with no one to care for them - poor servants out of a place, and whom he was almost always sure to provide for - these were the people who mostly claimed his care and on whom he spent it with ungrudging abundance.

It was his intimate familiarity with misery like this that made him so earnest in every project that had the welfare and the assisting of the poor for its prominent purpose. Hence he was a member of the Roomkeepers' Society, and for a quarter of a
century one of its honorary secretaries. He was a member of every association formed at various and frequent periods for the relief of civic, national or foreign distress and was scarcely ever absent from a single one of their meetings. Nay more, he advocated and urged the cause in ways that people little dreamt of; and hence it came - his philanthropy and benevolence coming to be so widely known of—that more money for charitable objects passed through the hands of Dr. Spratt than through those of any other individual in the country. He has left behind him a name that will be held in benediction; he has impressed his mark on several of the benevolent institutions of our city, and his death is a visitation that our poor will find it hard to realise till, practically and in fact, they come to feel that their benefactor is gone from amongst them"

The following pages are an effort to appreciate and evaluate this encomium and it is fitting that we should pay this tribute to his memory this year which is the centenary of his death.

(This booklet is a summary of a Doctorate thesis on Fr. Spratt)

Summary of his life

Two years prior to the insurrection of 1798 John Spratt was born in Cork Street, Dublin. On January 5th, 1796 he was baptised in the parish church of St. Catherine's, Meath Street. He was the son of James and Elizabeth Spratt (nee Bollard) and had a brother James who became an Augustinian friar. He attended school in Dolphin's Barn which lies in the vicinity of Cork Street. At the age of ten he received Confirmation in his parish church at the hands of Archbishop Troy in April 1806. Reared by respectable catholic parents he was introduced at an early age to the lives of the saints and martyrs and was deeply impressed by the Sacred Passion of Our Lord. He seldom joined the young people of the surrounding district in their games and amusements but was more attracted to private reading or to church services. He often read aloud sermons of Dr. Gahan at night, standing on a chair and was greeted with the title "Fr. Spratt" by his brothers and sisters.

From his early childhood he developed a great love for the poor and, encouraged by his mother, he never refused them any help he could give them. He generally gave the alms to the youngest for the Infant Jesus' sake. While still a youth he had occasion to exercise this charity in another sphere. He found a man under the influence of drink driving home a horse through the busy
thoroughfare of Cork Street. The driver had fallen asleep and John, seeing the danger, led the animal into a nearby yard. He fed the horse and stood by till the man slept off the ill effects. On waking up the man noticed the strange surroundings and, remembering that he had received a large sum of money for sales made, instantly put his hand in his pocket to see if it was safe. Finding it there he understood what had taken place. Had he been allowed to continue his journey asleep he would almost certainly have been robbed. As a token of his gratitude John asked him to promise to give up intoxicating liquor, which he did. This man called frequently to see his young benefactor and never lost interest in him when he joined the Order.

The Carmelite monastery in Dublin was situated in Ash Street near the Coombe and close to Cork Street until 1806 when the friars were forced to move to French Street, which lay between Cuffe Street and York Street. John's mother attended the Ash Street friary and was a member of the Carmelite Confraternity. John served Mass there and became interested in the Order.

One of the priests Fr. O'Farrell taught him Latin and Greek and when the youth applied later for admission to the Order Fr. O'Farrell, who was then Provincial, decided on the 20th August 1816 to send him and another aspirant Robert O'Neill, to Spain to be received and educated in the Carmelite Province of Castille, as the Order had no houses of formation in Ireland at the time. They went to Liverpool where they embarked for Cadiz. Their voyage was rough and one passenger was washed overboard and drowned.

From Cadiz they travelled to Cordova to the College of St. Albert which was to be their first home in Spain. At the time Spain was suffering from the effects of the French occupation (1808-1814). Church property had been confiscated in 1806 and many of the liberal atheistic principles of the Revolution were included in the Constitution of Cadiz 1812.

The two youths made a very favourable impression on the Spanish community but the Prior remarked that their progress in the Spanish language was rather slow. John Spratt was received into the Order on December 5th, 1816 and at the end of his novitiate was professed on December 31st, 1817, as a member of the Irish Province. In accordance with the custom prevailing in the Spanish Provinces of the Order he took a vow to defend the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady. He was ordained on February 26th, 1820 by Petrus Antonius de Trevilla, bishop of Cordova. He had completed two years study in philosophy and two more in theology. The Spanish Provincial wished to give him the benefit of a year's
theology in the College of St. Albert at Seville but the troubled
state of the country forced him to continue his studies at Cordova
till March 1821 when he concluded them. The following month he
went to Seville and before returning to Ireland paid a visit to Granada.
He was highly esteemed by his Superiors in Spain and kept up
correspondence with his Spanish Prior after his return to Dublin
in 1822.

At the Provincial Chapter of 1823, a year after his return,
Fr. Spratt was made Prior of the principal monastery of the
Province, French Street, Dublin. There were some thirty priests in
the Order in Ireland and they were serving the monasteries in
Dublin, Kildare, Knocktopher (Co. Kilkenny), Kinsale (Co.
Cork), Moate (Co. Westmeath), Leighlinbridge (Co. Carlow),
Tohergar (Co. Roscommon) and Ballinasmale (Co. Mayo). The
appointment of such a young man to one of the most important
posts indicates that his talents were already recognizable.

In French Street he found two special outlets for his zeal.
He established a school in Longford Street in 1822 and he took an
active part in the conversion of Protestants. A Rev. Mr. Murphy who
had conformed to the Protestant religion was received back into the
Catholic Church through his good services. We may surmise that
the following notice from a daily newspaper refers to his activities
also: "On last Saturday and Sunday a clergyman of French Street
Chapel received seven Protestants into the bosom of the Catholic
Church and the same respectable clergyman received within the

Church at Cuffe Lane 1806-1827
last six months upwards of sixty, who from pure conviction renounced the 'Law Church' and embraced the Catholic faith."

In 1825 an opportunity occurred which Fr. Spratt availed of immediately. He acquired the site of the thirteenth century Carmelite monastery in Whitefriar Street, Dublin, which had then become vacant. He was able to inform the public that the ceremony of blessing and laying the first stone of the new chapel would be performed by the Archbishop of Dublin, Dr. Murray, on Tuesday the 25th of October at 2 p.m. The ceremony was followed by a concert of sacred music, the proceeds of which were added to the collection taken up during the ceremony to help towards the new building. Several priests and a large gathering of people attended. Two years later the church was built by George Papworth, a noted architect, and was consecrated by Dr. Murray on November 1827. Built of stone and covered with Roman cement it measured 200 feet long, 34 feet wide and cost £4,500. Due to Fr. Spratt's foresight the ancient statue of Our Lady of Dublin, which had been desecrated in Reformation times, now finds its resting place in the Carmelite church.

On May 8th, 1826 the new Provincial, Fr. Kinsella, reappointed Fr. Spratt Prior of Whitefriar Street and made him his principal councillor also. Though Emancipation did away with the major disabilities under which Catholics laboured there were certain clauses in the legislation which restricted members of Religious Orders particularly in the matter of charitable bequests. Fr. O'Connor, O.S.A., Fr. Leahy, O.P. and Fr. Spratt went to Carlow with a document which had been drawn up to protect the Orders and discussed the matter with the Augustinian bishop Dr. Doyle on March 20th, 1829. It is very probably due to these efforts that the Bill lost most of its sting.

When he was close on forty years old, Fr. Spratt visited Rome for health reasons and on matters of business. His journey lay through Liverpool, London, Brussels, Cologne and Milan. He arrived in Rome on December 15th, 1835. During his stay he was invited to preach in the principal church of the Jesuits on February 28th, 1836 and was conveyed there in the carriage of Cardinal Weld, who was Pope Gregory XVI's adviser on affairs in Ireland and England. He left Rome shortly after April 8th and visited Loreto, Paris and London on the return journey. He obtained the body of St. Valentine, a third century martyr, which was transferred from the cemetery of St. Hippolitus in Rome to Dublin later in the year. It was brought to Whitefriar Street on the morning of November 10th, 1836 and laid on a special elevation in the
sanctuary during the High Mass at which Dr. Murray presided and Fr. Spratt preached.

The need of some personal representative of the General in England led to Fr. Spratt's appointment as Commissary General of England on April 27th, 1838 for six years. The General hoped that this would be the beginning of the restoration of the English Province. No doubt Fr. Spratt’s work for the Dublin monastery and his dexterity in his dealings with clergy and laity influenced the General, Fr. Calamata, in his choice.

Since Emancipation in 1829 Daniel O'Connell, the political leader of the country, had turned his energies towards the repeal of the Union. This agitation stirred the whole country from 1835 and was marked by a series of Monster meetings from 1840 onwards. The British Government had been watching proceedings quietly but carefully. When O'Connell announced a monster meeting for Clontarf, near Dublin, on October 8th, 1843 the Government forbade it. O'Connell obeyed and called off the meeting. Nevertheless he was arrested that month and charged with forming a conspiracy to change the country's Constitution by unlawful means. He was tried in January 1844 and received a sentence of twelve months imprisonment. Fr. Spratt was in close touch with him and on his 70th birthday, August 6th, he arranged for two Masses and other religious exercises to mark the day.

In the same year a body of officials known as *The Commissioners of Charitable Donations and Bequests in Ireland* was established by Act of Parliament. They were entrusted with the administration of charitable funds in Ireland. The Board consisted of three ex-officio members, all Protestant, five Catholics, appointed by the Government, and five Protestants. Dr. Murray agreed to act on the Board but Dr. McHale, Archbishop of Tuam and Daniel O'Connell did their best to render the Act void. They held that it was an obstacle to the liberty of the Catholic Church in Ireland that it interfered with the rights of bishops and would deprive the Religious Orders of property. Fr. Spratt was particularly interested and opposed the Act. The Bill was not changed but it gave no offence to the opposition from the manner in which it was applied.
The Carmelite Church, Whitefriar Street, in 1827

The following press references to his activities in 1844 help us to form some idea of his interest in his people:

January 14:
He held a temperance meeting in Classons Hall.

January 15:
He attended the meeting and Ball of his Juvenile Temperance Association.

January: Fr Spratt's efforts in promoting Temperance was praised.

January: He presided at the annual dinner for St. Bridget's Orphan Society.

March 13:
He took the chair at an extraordinary meeting of the Dublin Catholic Institution.

April 1:
He took the chair at an aggregate Temperance meeting

April 8: He participated in the Temperance Parade.
June 8:
He was present at the meeting of the Christian Doctrine
Confraternities in French Street to show sympathy with
O'Connell.

June: He attended a meeting to help O'Connell's release.

June:
He spoke at Temperance Meetings at Donnybrook, the Coombe,
Harold's Cross and Kingstown.

August 6: He celebrated O'Connell's 70th Birthday.

August:
He attended a Temperance Party in Stafford Street.
He presided at Temperance Festivals at Donnybrook, Irishtown
and at the Metropolitan Hall.
He addressed another Temperance Meeting at Donnybrook.
He proposed a special resolution at a meeting of the sick and
Indigent Roomkeepers Society.
He took the chair at the Temperance Meetings at Classons Hall.

October: He called a meeting to help Fr. Mathew in his
difficulties.

November 1: He acknowledged donations for Fr. Mathew.

November 4:
He took the chair at another meeting to help Fr. Mathew.

November 6:
He addressed a letter to the public, informing them of Fr.
Mathew's gratitude.

November 12: He held another meeting to help Fr. Mathew.

November 14: He acknowledged £5 from Dr. Blake for Fr.
Mathew.

November 15: He received a letter from Fr. Mathew.

November 16: He acknowledged £148 8s 5d from Fr. Mathew.

November 18:
He was present at a meeting of the Juvenile Temperance
November:
He sent £2 9s 8d to Fr. Mathew.
He received a special letter from a doctor who wished to help Fr. Mathew.

December 3: He agitated against the Charitable Donations Act.

December 26:
He spoke at the Temperance Meeting at Beresford Place to help Fr. Mathew.

December:
He sent £4 to Fr. Mathew.
He sent £150 to help him.
Fr. Mathew thanked him.
He undertook to co-operate fully with the Cork Committee who were formed to help Fr. Mathew.
He was a patron and helper of the Hartfield Mental Home.

To fit these properly into the picture we should remember that he had his ordinary duties as a member of the Whitefriar Street community. He was available to give the pledge every day and he held a Temperance Meeting in French Street every Sunday and visited the Night Refuge (founded in 1860) nightly. He rarely missed the monthly meeting of the Sick and Indigent Room-keepers' Society.

In the early months of 1847 Daniel O'Connell died. The whole country had supported him till the ominous division between the Young Irelanders and the O'Connellites took place in 1845. They disagreed as to whether recourse might be had to physical force to obtain the repeal of the Act of Union. The Young Irelanders favoured recourse while the others were strongly opposed to it. Feeling between both parties ran high and some of the O'Connellites suggested that the Liberator's death was hastened by the action of the Young Ireland Party. As his body was on its way back to Ireland from Genoa, Fr. Spratt addressed a public letter to the citizens of Dublin, urging them to avoid any political manifestations during the funeral.

He was highly respected by Lord Cloncurry who was a Protestant landlord in Co. Kildare. A friendship grew up between
them from the charitable interests which both had. Fr. Spratt was
the medium used by Cloncurry to give donations not only to
Catholic but also to general charities. Indeed the author of the book
*Cloncurry and his Times* states that "Fr. Spratt had more of
Cloncurry's confidence from 1850 to 1853 than any Catholic
prelate and many Protestant ones. His Temperance labours rank
next to Fr. Mathew's and he may be regarded as his authorised
representative and successor. His exertions in philanthropy were
inferior to none of his clerical contemporaries."

An indication of his standing in Dublin may be had from his
presence at the banquet given by the citizens of Dublin to the Lord
Mayor on July 9th, 1850. He was invited to say the Grace. In 1851
he was chosen to preach the panegyric on the feast of the principal
patron of the Archdiocese, St. Lawrence O'Toole, at which the
Archbishop presided. From 1855 he is the member of the Province
who seems to have most dealings with the General. The Provincial
at this time, Fr. T. A. Bennett, was also a member of the staff of the
Missionary College of All Hallows, Dublin. He was a very busy
man and his correspondence with the General was very intermittent.
The General wrote to Fr. Spratt in 1855 telling him to convene the
members of the Province for the Provincial Chapter. The latter
got to the Archbishop of Dublin, Dr. Cullen and asked that the
same Superiors and officials be renewed. This course was
followed.

On June 19th, 1863 Pope Pius IX made Fr. Angelus Savini,
General of the Order. Fr. Spratt pointed out to him in September
that the time for the Irish Provincial Chapter had arrived. Fr.
Bennett, the Provincial, had handed over the seals of his office to
him on the third Sunday after Easter since he was First Definitor and
Magister Senior. The General told Fr. Spratt to take charge of
the Province in the interim. The latter suggested that Fr. Bennett
be made eligible once again for the office of Provincial and cited a
precedent for it. The Archbishop, he added, agreed with these
proposals. In actual fact Fr. Spratt was appointed Provincial by the
General in 1863.

The Irish Province throughout its long history had had very little
contact with Rome. In the previous century the main links had been
with the Order in Spain, France and Belgium. Fr. Spratt's
predecessor, Fr. Bennett, had read a very fine course of theology in
Belgium, at Louvain, and had been appointed President of All
Hallows College, Dublin. Fr. Spratt was anxious to send novices
and students to Rome so that they could get the best training and
education.

Fr. Savini raised the question of an English foundation. The
previous January he had delayed writing to Bishop Grant as he wished to know what Fr. Spratt could do towards supplying priests for the project. He enquired if he had priests available for it. Fr. Spratt replied that it would be hard to send them as they needed all they had at the moment and added that there was a certain antipathy to Irish clergy among the clergy and layfolk in England. He was exerting himself to the utmost to get vocations and to pay a debt of £2,000 left by his predecessor. From 1863 to 1865 he sent nine young men to Rome to do their novitiate.

His three-year term of office was almost concluded on April 20th, 1866 but as first Definitor he held the seal of office until the appointment should be made known. He was reappointed with no definite term of office. He felt that the students were receiving a poor education in Rome and asked that they receive a course as good as the students of the Irish College especially in Dogmatic and Moral Theology.

It was obvious that Fr. Spratt was finding it difficult to combine his duties as Provincial with his almost superhuman activity outside his monastery. This is referred to by Archbishop Cullen in a letter to Rome: "Frequently in my correspondence with your Eminence I have spoken in praise of the Calced Carmelites of this city. Under Fr. Bennett's rule these fathers made very great progress. He introduced the observance of common life; the students were well educated; the fathers opened good schools for the middle class.

The monastery and church of the Order were reconstructed and redecorated and much was done in instructing the people in sermons and hearing confessions. Some years ago the Fr. General thought fit to remove Fr. Bennett from his post and to substitute Fr. Spratt, the present Provincial, in his stead. This latter father is an excellent religious and highly esteemed here in Dublin. He does much for the cause of Temperance, maintains an orphanage and schools for the poor. He has founded a night refuge for all who cannot pay the rent. But despite all these good qualities, he has not been able to maintain the religious system introduced by Fr. Bennett. It may be that he is too occupied with external matters and that he does not attend sufficiently to the affairs of the monastery." But Fr. Spratt does seem to have found a solution for this problem in the closing years of his life.
Shrine of Saint Valentine
Whitefriar Street Church