An Irish Franciscan Miscellany in the Spanish Netherlands

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The Franciscan Legacy from the 13th Century to the 21st.

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5/11/2019
One of the most fascinating aspects of Irish history in early modern period is the ‘continental college movement’.

1578-1700: The Irish founded 45 colleges in Europe, 22 for the diocesan clergy, 23 for religious. This movement was less a response to the directives of Trent than one dictated by necessity, given the total impossibility of preparing young people for priesthood and religious life during the Elizabethan conquest of Ireland (1558-1603), with its corresponding attempt to suppress Catholicism and impose the state religion.
The Irish Franciscans founded 7 colleges:

- St. Anthony’s Louvain: 1607-1793; 1927-84
- S. Isidoro Roma: 1625-2019
- Collego of Immaculate Conception Prague: 1629-1786
- Wielun (Poland): 1645-53
- Paris (residence): 1622-1627; 1653-1668
- Capranica: 1656-1983
- Boulay (Lorraine): 1700-1790

S. Isidoro is the only one still functioning both as a religious house and a house of formation.
The General Chapter of the Observant Franciscans at Toledo 1606 chose Flaithrí Ó Maoil Chonaire/ Florence Conry as provincial of the Irish friars. (not elected by provincial chapter, unsettled state of Ireland). Conry member of a Gaelic hereditary literary family that served as historians to the kings of Connaught. Abandoned his profession c. 1590 and went to Spain to study for the priesthood. After a dispute with the Jesuit rector of the Irish college in Salamanca he transferred to the Spanish Franciscans.
1606 Philip III granted permission to Conry to found a college for the training of young Irish friars in Leuven in the Spanish Netherlands. This was the first Irish religious college on the continent.

In addition to the training of young men for Franciscan priesthood, the friars undertook a three-pronged publishing campaign:

i) The publication of the lives of the Irish saints.

ii) The publication of the history of Ireland.

iii) The publication of catechetical works in the Irish language.
First novices were admitted on 1 November 1607. 2 of the 7 were members of the hereditary Gaelic learned classes. Giolla Brighde Ó hEoghasa (Hussey) belonged to a poetic family that served the Maguires of Fermanagh. Went overseas to study for priesthood in Douai, obtaining an MA in 1604. Then decided to join Franciscans, He mentioned in a letter the superior quality of learning in Leuven. Took the name Bonaventure in religion. Diarmuid Ó hIceiladha was a member of a medical family that served as physicians to the Earl of Thomond. He took the name Anthony in religion. He became a prominent Scotist scholar and helper to Luke Wadding in Rome.
Ó hEoghasa was ordained in Mechelin/Malines 4 April 1609.

Lectured in philosophy and theology in St. Anthony’s College.

Archdukes Albert and Isabella gave the Irish Franciscans permission to produce catechetical work in Irish language, despite protests from English ambassador in Brussels.

On 20 June 1611 more specific permission to Ó hEoghasa to publish:

ung livre intitulé Catechismus qui a esté exhibé à leurs dictes Altezes en la langue hibernicque pour servir à la jeunesse et aultres Braves gens dicelluy pays contre la faulse doctrine des autres religions contraires a nostre sancte foy et nostre mère la Saincte Eglise Catholique de Rome.
Printed by Plantin in Antwerp, this was the first printed Counter-Reformation work in Irish. Plantin not interested in any more work in Irish. Small print run and special characters not an economic proposition.

May 1614 Ó hEoghasa got permission for the Irish friars to acquire their own printing press:

pour obvier au péril et danger au quel le people d’Irlande est apparent de tomber par la publication de plusiers livres hérétiques que le enemys de nostre saincte foy y vont journellement semant.

The Louvain edition of the catechism is undated. Copies are very rare but the Cambridge copy has the date 1619 written in hand. Ó hEoghasa himself died of smallpox 15 November 1614. We do not know whether the Leuven edition is posthumous or not. Scholars are in agreement that its publication was closer to 1614 than 1619.
Inside folios 77 and 78 of the Cambridge copy there is a little booklet containing three poems by Ó hEoghasa. It has no frontispiece and is undated. Scholars have taken it as a mere testpiece for the new printing press.

Internal evidence, however, shows that there was much more involved. The first poem begins with the word *truagh*/pity and the final word of the last poem is *fíorthruagh*/true pity, thus providing closure to the whole series of poems. This *dúnadh*/closure was a regular device of the professional poets, and in this case shows that the three poems were conceived as a unit.

The series can be conceived as a set of instructions for Irish speaking novices who were joining the Franciscans in Leuven, with neither religious material, nor specifically Franciscan material, available in their own language. An in-house production.
Poem 1: *Truagh liomsa, a chompáin, do chor/I pity your plight, my friend* is preceded by a prose introduction explaining that the poem was composed by Ó hEoghasa, Guardian of the Irish friars of Leuven, for a friend who had fallen into heresy. I suggest that this is a literary fiction to awaken interest of reader/hearer.

The first part of the poem deals with correcting the darkness of the intellect which takes up 62 of the 90 stanzas. Very similar to a poem published in 1602 that was popular among English Catholics at the time: *I Pray thee Protestant beare with me*. It seems that this poem derives from the short version of Cardinal Allen’s *Articles* published in 1575 and deals with the essential feature of the true church of Christ, *Catholicke, Continuance, Visible, Unitie, Holy, Heretickes* (Alison Shell, *Oral Culture and Catholicism in Early Modern England* (CUP, 2007), 95-103).
Ó hEoghasa’s poem follows the same sequence, the only substantial difference being the substitution of St. Augustine by St. Patrick in the Irish poem. Given Ó hEoghasa’s presence in Douai from 1604 to 1607, it would have been quite likely that he came across Allen’s work. If Allen saw Douai as the new Oxford, the Irish friar could have easily envisaged a similar role for the Franciscan college of Leuven.

Before delving into the details of the distinguishing features of the true church, the poet makes great play of the imagery of light and darkness in a very Platonic manner. Renaissance scholars like Marsilio Ficino (1430-1499) went to great lengths to reconcile Christianity with Platonic thought and referred to seekers of wisdom as physicians of the soul, a metaphor that is used twice by Ó hEoghasa in the introductory verses.
Before leaving the role of the intellect in matters of faith, it bears noting that this section ties in with Chapter 2 of Franciscan Rule on reception of candidates to order: let the Ministers examine them carefully in the Catholic faith.

Ó hEoghasa devotes the final third of his poem to the role of the will. While the will’s function is to always hate evil and do good, *fuath don ulc is grádh don mhaith*, it is nonetheless a wild horse/ *each fiadhtha* that neither Samson, Solomon or David was able to control. Despite Ó hEoghasa’s negative assessment of human volition, he still asserted against Luther that people remained free to choose between good and evil, believing that the steed of will, however wild, could be controlled by the rider’s reins. The poet again uses Platonic imagery, describing the body as a dark prison and a murky cave for those who have seen the light. What a great pity to be dazzled by ephemeral worldly wealth and lose eternal wealth as a result

The first poem of the friar’s trilogy sets out the basics of Christian living: knowledge of the true faith and then choosing to commit oneself to it, intellect and will. Stylistically he seems to have absorbed the language and imagery of Platonism and also shows his familiarity with English Recusant literature. It is only when a person has already committed himself to Christianity that he is able to consider religious life and Franciscanism in particular. The is the topic of the second poem: *Gabh aithreachas uaim* / Accept repentance/penance from me.

Once more it is prefaced by a prose introduction, on this occasion very brief: The same friar on abandoning the world, for the poor life in which he finished his days.

Again I would suggest that the autobiographical note is a literary fiction and that the poem is directed at novices who have just entered the order in Leuven.
This brief introduction also resonates very much with the beginning of the Testament of St. Francis: The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, thus to begin to lead a life of penance. Whilst I was yet in sin, it seemed to me an intolerably repulsive thing to see lepers, and the Lord Himself drew me into their midst and I worked with compassion among them. When I came away from them, what before had seemed bitter to me, became for me a source of sweetness in soul and body. Then after awaiting a little while, I left the world.

Ag tréigeadh an tsaoghail dó / I left the world
Aithreachas/ repentance/penance
Sin: the whole poem is taken up with sins the friar novice has committed prior to leaving the world.
2 meanings to word *aithreachas*:
Repentance for the sins of the past and then entering the Franciscans for a life of penance in the future. One who has failed to control the unruly wild steed in the past, but will try to regain the reins of control in the Franciscan order.

Continuity between first and second poem.

The poet focuses on the senses that committed the sins rather than numbering the sins themselves.
The senses that he has used to offend the Lord in the past are now offered for use in the Lord’s service.
The poet recalls the sufferings of Christ in his passion, especially those of his hands and feet.
It is also possible that he poet had the Stigmata of St. Francis in mind as he composed these verses.
Ó hEoghusa concludes with a witty pun contrasting the two meanings of *iodhbairt*, *sacrificium* and *offertorium*.
The novice offers himself both body in soul to the Lord in compensation for the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.
It might not be much but it is all he has.
The third poem is an adaptation of *Cur mundus miltat?*, often attributed to Bernard of Clairvaux.

While the original has 10 verses in Alexandrines, 12 syllables per line, the Irishman has 17 stanzas, but chose the closest metre in Irish to the Latin with twelve syllables to the couplet instead of the line.

The friar follows the same order of the original:

1) Sic transit Gloria mundi (verses 1-6)

2) ubi sunt (verses 7-10)

3) chastisement of the flesh (verses 11-15)

4) exhortation to reflect on eternity (16-17).

While Bernard begins with a question: why is the human condition miserable, Ó hEoghasa simply makes a declaration to this effect, it already having been raised in the previous poem: *Truagh cor chloinne hÁdhaimh/Miserable the condition of Adam’s children.*
• In fact the whole poem could be taken as a reflection on the exhortation of St. Francis at the end of his rule.
• Ó hEoghasa’s list is more eclectic, retaining Samson and Solomon, omitting Dives, while adding Cú Chulainn from the Gaelic tradition as well as adding Hercules, Hector, Achilles and Alexander from the classical world.
• The use of Hercules may have been very deliberate as Renaissance art made great play of Hercules’ choice between vice and virtue, thus linking up with theme of free choice and will in the first poem.
The section on the chastisement of the flesh is close to the mind of the author who wrote the long version of Letter to all the Faithful, but we know that piece of Francis’ writings was not available in the 17th century.

It is in the final two stanza of the poem that Ó hEoghuasa really replicates the exhortation of St. Francis:

Such is the end of your love for the deceitful world:
destroy not yourself with its devices.

Unless you demonstrate humility, patience, and unchanging, universal love,
Miserable indeed will be your final end.
Compare with the words of St. Francis:
O most beloved brethren and eternally blessed children, hear me, hear the voice of your father.
We have promised great things, still greater things are promised unto us. Let us keep the former and strive after the latter.
Pleasure is short, punishment is everlasting.
Suffering is slight, glory is infinite.
Many are called few are chosen;
But all shall receive Retribution. Amen.

Ó hEoghasa adds some technical philosophical terms in his last two verses that are found neither in St. Bernard nor St. Francis; Críoch/end/finis and foirceann/final end/finis ultimus.
The final end of humanity is union with God but we should beware of messing up or else our final end will be truly miserable.
The very virtues that the poet specifies to avoid this miserable end: humility, patience and love are those that he specifically attributes to Christ in his catechism. If Imitatio Christi is the norm for all Christians, it must be especially so for followers of St. Francis, the alter Christus.
Conclusions:

1) Ó hEoghasa is using his poetic skills in Irish to summarise the Rule, Testament and Exhortation of St. Francis to indicate a way of life for Franciscan novices in Leuven.

2) In the process he makes use of English Recusant literature, especially Cardinal Allen’s articles.

3) He also taps in to Renaissance fondness for Platonic thought.

4) In applying the epithets coitcheann/universal and gan chlaochlódh/unchanging to grádh/love in the final stanza of the third poem, the poet holds that human acts of love are virtuous because they participate in the Idea of Love that is located in the mind of God, this idea of Love being none other than Jesus Christ incarnate.

For a Franciscan this means the observance of the Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ.