



TREASURES OF
Irish Christianity

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TO THE ENDS OF
THE EARTH

Edited by
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On the Other Side of the Ocean:
John Stritch SJ (1616–81)
and Irish Catholic Missionaries
in the West Indies

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THE ACTIVITY of the Irish missionaries in the West Indies during the seventeenth century was characterised by two crucial features: paucity of resources and insufficient number of priests for the task they had to fulfil. Beginning with the first mission in 1638, mooted by Malachias O'Queely, Bishop of Tuam, and concluding with the last missionary venture in the years 1668–9, only six priests operated in a wide area which mainly focused on the islands of Barbados, Guadalupa, Montserrat and St Christopher. Compared to the other Catholic missionaries who operated in that area and who worked both amid the European settlers and the aboriginal people, the Irish priests always remained focused on the spiritual welfare of the growing Irish communities who, from the early 1630s, left Ireland to establish themselves in the Leeward Islands.

There are very few sources for reconstructing the daily activity of the Irish missionaries and, particularly, how they operated among the Irish settlers. The best surviving account which offers a glimpse on the Irish missionary experience is that written by Pierre Pelleprat, a French Jesuit missionary (1606–67) who was active in the 1650s in the West Indies. The fifth chapter of his account is dedicated to the mission of the Irish confrere, Limerick native, John Stritch (1616–81) who, from 1650 until 1662, worked among his fellow countrymen at St Christopher, the external part of the island that was under English control. Stritch's activity looked to a certain

extent like that of a frontier mission, for he established his activity at Point-de-Sable in the French part of the island and very close to the English border.

The establishment of the mission, but especially the presence of the Irish Jesuit, was welcomed with joy by the Irish settlers. Pelleprat highlighted that many of them, upon receiving word that 'a Father of their nation' had arrived, forgot the 'danger to which they exposed themselves; because they went in mass, and without hiding to salute a man that God sent to their succours'. Slowly Stritch's activity began to have a routine aspect similar to that carried out in Europe by the parish priests. The Jesuit was reported to be all the days at the chapel of Point-de-Sable where he administered the sacraments, and dedicated himself to confess and baptise the children of the Irish settlers. Using St Christopher as a base, Stritch also visited the Irishmen of Montserrat, where the priest went disguised as a wood trader because of the possible persecutions of Protestants. On this island, the Jesuit relied on the cooperation of the Irish settlers who helped keep his presence hidden by cutting and bringing some wood each time they met with the missionary.

Once returned to St Christopher, Stritch continued his apostolate which was no longer tolerated by the English authorities who prevented Irishmen from frequenting Point-de-Sable, and even expelled one hundred and twenty of them from the island. Such a growing context of risk forced Stritch to redeploy his mission to Guadeloupe. There, in 1653, the Jesuit made an agreement with Charles Houel, governor of the island, who allowed the arrival and the establishment of a certain number of Irishmen from St Christopher. Until 1662, the year of his return to Ireland, the Jesuit based himself at Guadeloupe but also continued to secretly toil at St Christopher.

The last Irish missionary venture in the West Indies during the seventeenth century was that of John Grace, a secular priest from the Diocese of Cashel. His arrival there was part of a missionary strategy elaborated and promoted by Dermot Hederman, another secular priest and founder of St Barbara's College in Paris, who aimed to provide a missionary to cater for the spiritual needs of his fellow countrymen. Like Stritch, Grace had to carry out his activity alone, without any concrete form of support and within a risky context. His letters to *Propaganda Fide* in Rome, the

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Giovanni Pizzorusso
John Grace, an I
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Roman ministry founded in 1622 to supervise worldwide mission activity in Protestant and non-Christian countries, portray a vivid description of Grace's work. What emerges from his correspondence is a disappointing picture of a lone priest who struggled to move from one island to another and who, except for a scarce subsidy granted by *Propaganda*, did not have the necessary resources to assist the 'ten thousand Irish Catholics so oppressed by the English heretics' that Grace estimated to live in that area.

After Grace, no other Irish missionaries operated in the Caribbean during the last three decades of the seventeenth century. Only in the eighteenth century would they return to the West Indies, but this is an experience that still awaits scholarly investigation.

FURTHER READING

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