Begging, Charity and Religion in Pre-Famine Ireland

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Introduction

Mary Aikenhead, foundress of the Irish Sisters of Charity (later Religious Sisters of Charity), attributed her conversion to Catholicism and her call to devote her life to the poor to the influence of hearing the parable of Lazarus the beggar (Luke 16:19–25) as a young girl. Around 1802, shortly after the deathbed conversion of her father from Anglicanism to Catholicism, Aikenhead heard a preacher recount the gospel parable, in which the starving mendicant Lazarus pleads for crumbs from the table of the rich man (Dives); Lazarus subsequently dies and is accepted into the bosom of Abraham, while Dives is banished to Hell. Aikenhead subsequently followed her late father in converting to the Roman church and in 1815, with the assistance of Fr (later Archbishop) Daniel Murray, she founded the Sisters of Charity, whose fourth vow of service of the poor distinguished this congregation of female religious as a significant presence within Irish Catholicism and Irish society.1 Aikenhead serves as a useful entry-point into this discussion of Catholic perceptions of and responses to beggary in pre-Famine Ireland. Her congregation was founded for the express purpose of attending to the poor and their foundation in 1815 represented an important moment in the history of Catholicism and also philanthropy in Ireland. Through her private and public utterances, Aikenhead expressed views of poverty and charity that differed noticeably from those of many (male) clergy, yet the charity practised by Aikenhead and other female religious nonetheless framed the recipients of assistance

1 [Mary Padua O'Flanagan], The life and work of Mary Aikenhead, foundress of the congregation of Irish Sisters of Charity 1787–1858 (London, 1924), pp. 8–9; S.A. [Sarah Atkinson], Mary Aikenhead: her life, her work, and her friends, giving a history of the foundation of the congregation of the Irish Sisters of Charity (3rd edn, Dublin, 1911).
in terms of the meritorious and the unworthy. Aikenhead’s example not only allows for a consideration of women’s perspectives on perceived social problems, but, crucially, highlights the difficulty in talking universally about the attitudes and responses of members of a particular confession. This discussion will analyse distinctions in how Catholic teachings on charity and good works were understood by Catholics and Protestants, with both sides perceiving disparate moral consequences for both giver and receiver in the alms-giving transaction. As Brian Pullan has urged, consideration of distinctly Catholic approaches to poverty and begging ought not to be confined to the question of good works and alms-giving. Instead, the evolution of Catholic attitudes and responses to poverty and begging in the pre-Famine period requires contextualisation with reference to the wider movement within European Catholicism for revival and reform, as reflected in the archbishopric of Daniel Murray. The exploration of Catholic approaches to poverty, mendicancy and alms-giving will be presented in two sections – the first analysing discourses, the second examining actions. Such an approach, to be mirrored in the succeeding chapter on Protestantism, facilitates a discussion of how Catholics perceived and responded to begging and alms-giving. Owing to the predominant position of men in the public sphere, and particularly within the patriarchal Roman church, male clerics dominated the discourses discussed in the first section. The second section will centre attention on how Catholics responded to mendicancy, either on an individual or a corporate level.

Discourses

Roman Catholic Teaching on Alms-Giving
In considering Roman Catholic approaches to charity in this period, it is useful to start with a contemporary Catholic catechism which outlined the church’s basic teaching on such matters. Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin, James Doyle published a revised catechism in 1828, based upon the earlier version of the Archbishop of Cashel, Dr James Butler. The publication of a revised catechism was part of Doyle’s wider programme of pastoral


3 Butler’s catechism proved extremely popular and the Catholic Book Society published a 26th edition in 1836: The Most Rev. Dr James Butler's Catechism: revised, enlarged, approved and recommended by the four R.C. Archbishops of Ireland, as a general catechism for the kingdom (26th edn, Dublin, 1836).
revival in his diocese, where he oversaw the development and expansion of Sunday school catechesis, confraternities and chapel libraries. Unlike the Roman Catechism, which was disseminated among parish priests, Doyle's publication was designed to be accessible to Catholic children, who were urged to be diligent in studying the text at home and in school. While alms-giving was not specifically addressed in the catechism, a section pertaining to good works is pertinent to the question:

Q. Will strict honesty to every one, and moral good works, insure salvation, whatever church or religion one professes?
A. No; unless such good works be enlivened by faith that worketh by charity. Galatians 5:6.

Q. Why must our good works be enlivened by faith?
A. Because the scriptures say, without faith is it impossible to please God – and he that believeth not shall be condemned. Hebrews 11:6. Mark 16:16.

Q. Are we justified by faith alone, without good works?
A. No; as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead. James 2:26.

Here, the Catholic emphasis on good works is clear, but good works must complement faith in God. Through good works, an active and living faith is fostered. The Presentation Sisters, for instance, were beseeched in the mid-nineteenth century to ‘lay up treasures of virtue and good works which shall follow us beyond the tomb’. According to the Catholic archdeacon of Limerick, Michael Fitzgerald: ‘Faith is a vital and active principle. Faith, working in charity, is a fire that consumes the dross of selfishness, lights up generous emotions, and warms the heart with the glow of high and holy purposes’. The poor man’s catechism, a tenth edition of which was published

5 James Doyle, The general catechism, revised, corrected, and enlarged, by the Right Reverend James Doyle, D.D., Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin, and prescribed by him to be taught throughout the dioceses of Kildare and Leighlin (Dublin, 1843), p. 2.
6 Ibid., p. 21.
7 ‘Short sketches of the lives of some of the nuns who entered the community from 1790 to 1870’, [c.early twentieth century], p. 38 (Presentation Convent, George’s Hill Archive, Dublin, GHAD/P/16). The language here was inspired by Matt. 6:20–21: ‘Lay not your treasure on earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, but lay up for yourself treasures in Heaven’.
8 Fitzgerald, Wickedness and nullity of human laws against mendicancy, p. 50.
by the Catholic Book Society in Dublin in 1832, outlined that a perfect faith was one which was firm, entire and active:

As you believe, so you must practice; you must join good works with faith. A faith without good works, is a dead faith, and will turn to your confusion at the last day. God will then examine not only how you believed, but also how you lived. As the body is but a dead carcase without the soul, so faith also is dead without charity and good works. *Though your faith be strong enough to move mountains, without charity it availleth nothing.* – 1 Corinthians 13:2.

Such views contrast with Protestant teachings, which since the sixteenth century stressed salvation by faith alone (*sola fide*). Indeed, the twelfth of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Anglican Communion asserts that good works ‘cannot put away our sins’. As will be seen, for some Protestant commentators in this period it was to these fundamental tenets of Roman Catholicism that Ireland’s endemic poverty and beggary was to be attributed.

**Roman Catholics and Indiscriminate Alms-Giving**

Throughout Europe since the Reformation, among the most common perceptions of Roman Catholics long held by Protestants was that the Catholic emphasis on good works encouraged indiscriminate alms-giving to the poor, which in turn supported pauperism and beggary among the lower orders. This argument centred on the perception that Catholics believed they could atone for sin by engaging in good works. It followed that it was in an individual’s interest not to distinguish between the ‘deserving’ and

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9 [John Mannock], *The poor man’s catechism; or, the Christian doctrine explained; with suitable admonitions* (10th edn, Dublin, 1832), p. 9. This work was first published by Mannock (1681–1764), an English Benedictine monk, in 1752: see Philip Jebb, ‘Mannock, John’ in *ODNB*, xxxvi, pp. 520–1.

10 Another Catholic catechism from this period explicitly contrasts the Roman church’s doctrine of good works with the teachings of ‘Luther, and other heretics’: [John Joseph] Hornihold, *The real principles of Catholics; or, a catechism by way of general instruction, explaining the principal points of the doctrine & ceremonies of the Catholic Church* (4th edn, Dublin, 1821), p. 314.


‘undeserving’; the more alms one gave, the more likely it was for their sins to be forgiven. The indiscriminate furnishing of alms was incentivised for the giver, as well as encouraging dependency in the receiver. Self-sanctification bred beggary. Alleged Catholic recklessness in alms-giving undermined the traditional distinction between the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor. Beggary was, thus, not merely enabled, but encouraged. The natural conclusion which Protestants drew from this line of reasoning was that Roman Catholic views and practices regarding poverty and charity led to moral and temporal impoverishment. Among the proponents of this argument was the Church of Ireland minister Rev. John Graham (1766–1844), an evangelical controversialist and author at the height of the ‘Second Reformation’ of the 1820s and 1830s who was ‘a zealous and even fanatical participant in Protestant commemorations of the Williamite period’.13 For Graham, who identified ‘a very perceptible connection between Popery and idleness, mendicity and disease’, ‘the Papist’ was habituated into idleness and vice. ‘He is taught that poverty confers a degree of merit, both upon him who suffers under it, and the person who relieves him’.14 The reverence for mendicant clergy – ‘the bare-footed Friar’ – diminished the ‘horror of beggary’: ‘he is led insensibly to admire not only the costume of mendicity, but the address and the artifice of the mendicant; he smiles at the assumed crutches of the light-footed cripple, or the pretended blindness of the clamorous impostor on the bridge’.15 ‘Turning his attention to the question of the distinctive Catholic emphasis on good works, Graham held forth on the inherent relationship between this distinctly Catholic belief and the country’s endemic beggary:

The doctrine of works atoning for sin, is the sheet-anchor of mendicity in Ireland: and it would require an East Indian Treasury to remedy this progressive evil – if no other remedy exists but almsgiving. The most selfish and uncharitable contribute to perpetuate this nuisance, by giving alms to all who solicit it with sufficient importunity, merely because they trust it will purchase to themselves a licence to commit sin with impunity, or prove the means of liberating their departed relatives from purgatory.16

Graham’s views must be seen in their particular historical context. During the 1810s, a small group of ultra-Protestants were exhibiting a disproportionate

14 John Graham, God’s revenge against rebellion: an historical poem on the state of Ireland, with notes and an appendix, consisting of a pastoral epistle from Rome, and two letters to the editor of the Dublin Evening Post (Dublin, 1820), p. 48.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., p. 50.
level of influence in Dublin city in their campaign of opposition to Catholic Emancipation, while a growing evangelical sentiment would become emboldened two years after the publication of Graham’s work, with the launching of the ‘Second Reformation’. Graham’s work was but one of many in which polemicists sought to convince their Protestant audiences of the moral impoverishment of a rapidly advancing Irish Catholicism. To these commentators, the trope of the beggar was a useful rhetorical device which personified the nefarious impact of indiscriminate alms-giving.

The Presbyterian minister Rev. James Carlile, based at the Abbey Street congregation in Dublin, wrote to the evangelical Church of Scotland preacher and Poor Law reformer Rev. Thomas Chalmers on the misguided Catholic practice of indiscriminate alms-giving, noting that this was carried out largely through a belief that such works atoned for sin. In his letter, dated April 1830, Carlile wrote of Irish Catholics: ‘They regard giving to the poor as one of the first if not the very first duty of Christianity’, adding that there was ‘much error & superstition’ associated ‘with their means of charity. The idea of its being highly meritorious in the will of God is almost universal and accompanied I fear not infrequently with the notion that it makes atonement for sin’. This last point is crucial to understanding how non-Catholics, such as Carlile, viewed Catholics’ seeming overindulgence when it came to relieving beggars. The cause of the mendicant’s penury did not matter and was not to be considered. What counted was that charity was being sought and the prospective giver was presented with an opportunity to atone for sin. According to Carlile, ‘much of the alms giving however that is provided on this principle is given to beggars indiscriminately, crowds of whom are usually to be found at the doors of certain places of worship on occasions of peculiar solemnity’.

The novelist William Carleton, who converted from Catholicism to the Church of Ireland in the early 1820s, also drew his readers’ attention to what he alleged was the distinctly Roman Catholic practice of indiscriminate alms-giving to beggars. ‘They act under the impression that eleemosynary good works possess the power of cancelling sin to an extent almost incredible’.


18 James Carlile to Thomas Chalmers, 26 Apr. 1830 (PRONI, Cooke and Chalmers papers, T3307/12B).

19 Carlile to Chalmers, 26 Apr. 1830. For his thoughts on the nature of repentance, see James Carlile, A series of sermons, on the nature and effects of repentance and faith (London, 1821), pp. 22–42.
Such a belief led directly, Carleton argued, to the conclusion that any sin, no matter how gross, can be atoned for through alms-giving. ‘The principle of assisting our distressed fellow-creatures, when rationally exercised, is one of the best in society; but here it becomes entangled with error, superstition, and even with crime – acts as a bounty upon imposture, and in some degree predisposes to guilt, from an erroneous belief that sin may be cancelled by alms and the prayers of mendicant impostors’. These words were first published in 1833, a crucial point in Carleton’s literary career, when he was moving in evangelical Church of Ireland circles in Dublin and had formed an important friendship with the polemicist and publisher Rev. Caesar Otway, who published Carleton’s first writings in his Christian Examiner.

Outside of Ireland, the association between Catholic teaching and indiscriminate alms-giving was stressed by Protestant commentators. According to one contributor to the Westminster Review in 1844:

The duty of public and most indiscriminate almsgiving is one of the most fatal errors of the Roman Catholic church. When proclaimed from the pulpit, as it often is, a country is inevitably demoralized. Protestantism was favourable to industry, for it led men to reflect that heaven could not be purchased. Catholics do not say that it can, but they dwell more upon what are called good works. Beggars therefore swarm, and swarm most in Roman Catholic states; witness Ireland, Italy, Spain.

The Church of England minister and Poor Law commentator Joseph Townsend (1739–1816) attributed the abundant number of beggars in the Spanish city of León to the alms received (in the form of food) at convents and the bishop’s palace: ‘On this provision they live, they marry, and they perpetuate a miserable race’. Negative views of Catholic charity were

20 Carleton, ‘Tubber derg’, p. 386. In an infamously anti-Catholic passage in his first published short story, but omitted from later reprints, Carleton expounded on this simplified thesis that a life-long sinner can effectively wipe his slate clean through the Catholic sacrament of penance: [Carleton], ‘A pilgrimage to Patrick’s Purgatory’, pp. 268–71.


23 Joseph Townsend, A journey through Spain in the years 1786 and 1787; with particular attention to the agriculture, manufactures, commerce, population, taxes and revenue of that country; and remarks in passing through a part of France (3 vols, London, 1791), i, p. 379.
not unique to Ireland and Britain and, as demonstrated by Alan Forrest and Olwen Hufton, the second half of the eighteenth century in France saw Enlightenment thinkers question the indiscriminate nature of Catholic charity, with abbeys and monasteries receiving the butt of criticism for allegedly attracting and encouraging groups of vagrant beggars. This manner of charity, it was argued, benefited not the poor but the givers of alms. Furthermore, Catholic practice was actually failing the poor, by increasing their numbers and providing no incentive to industry and self-dependence.\textsuperscript{24}

Implicit in these criticisms was that Catholic poor relief was confined to casual, private exchanges and did not benefit from organisation, inspection, and oversight, reflecting the general backwardness and irresponsibility of ‘Popery’. The reality, however, was more complex. The multiplication of charitable societies throughout Ireland from the middle of the eighteenth century included many Catholic-ethos organisations, mirroring their Protestant counterparts in having a formal structure of patrons and personnel, a system for the investigation and relief of distress, and published annual reports including accounts. The \textit{Catholic Directory} for 1821 lists numerous Roman Catholic orphan schools, free schools, Magdalen asylums and widows’ homes in Dublin city,\textsuperscript{25} while the emphasis on inspection and discrimination is evident in the \textit{First report [of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in Limerick]}, which assured its supporters that the charity carried out ‘the strictest enquiry into the circumstances and merits of each case’ and ‘has never encouraged the practice of casual and indiscriminate relief to the poor’.\textsuperscript{26} The success of the Society of St Vincent de Paul movement within global Catholicism in the mid-1800s – in the two decades following the founding of the first society in Paris in 1833, 500 conferences were established throughout the United Kingdom, Europe and North America – further attests to the importance of organised, corporate poor relief initiatives within nineteenth-century Catholicism.\textsuperscript{27}


The matter of Catholic teaching surrounding sin and atonement was one of the questions asked of a number of senior Catholic clergymen by an 1825 parliamentary select committee. The committee’s predominant objective was to investigate the state of Ireland, with particular regard to the agrarian disturbances and outrages of the early 1820s. Throughout the extensive reports and witness testimonies, however, it is clear that the state of Irish Catholics and their religion ‘formed, as might have been expected, the leading topic of Examination’. In his testimony, Archbishop of Dublin Daniel Murray gave a comprehensive and convincing denunciation of the suggestion that Catholics operated under the principle that a certain amount of good works would cancel out an equal number of sins; by this argument, Catholic doctrine thus facilitated the committing of bad works in the expectation that a subsequent good work would negate the sin. ‘I cannot find any language sufficiently strong to mark my abhorrence of that demoralizing doctrine’, said Murray, adding that he felt ‘wounded’ and ‘grieved’ at the suggestion being made. Murray explained that good and bad works were not credits which could be accumulated, with the goal of merely collecting more of the former than the latter. Rather, the only means by which sin could be annulled was through true repentance:

How then, according to our doctrine, is this sin, once committed, to be blotted out? Upon no other condition, than that of sincere and deepfelt repentance. No other good works that we can perform, will ever remove the stain that has been fixed upon the soul. We may fast, we may pray, we may give alms, we may go to confession and receive absolution; all is nothing towards the effacing of that sin, until the heart is changed by contrition and repentance, and that repentance must be so intense, and our hatred to that sin must be so sincere; that rather than commit the same or another grievous sin in future, our resolution should be to incur in preference a thousand deaths.

Having expressed genuine contrition, the sinner ought to seek an amendment of the wrong and also seek absolution through the sacrament of penance, administered by the appropriate authority – that is, an ordained priest.

28 These clerics were Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin James Doyle, Archbishop of Armagh Patrick Curtis, Archbishop of Dublin Daniel Murray, Archbishop of Tuam Oliver Kelly, and Bishop of Ardagh James Magaurin.
29 Report from the select committee on the state of Ireland: 1825, p. 3, H.C. 1825 (129), viii, 3.
30 Second report from the select committee on the state of Ireland, pp. 225–26, H.C. 1825 (129), viii, 235–6.
31 Ibid., p. 226. This was also asserted by Archbishop Kelly (ibid., p. 251). For Archbishop Doyle, see ibid., pp. 193–5.
Leaving aside the rights or wrongs of the aforementioned Protestant writers’ conclusions (a matter, surely, for theologians), one can at least appreciate how their views may have been formed. John Mannock’s Catholic-ethos Poor man’s catechism, for instance, appears to advocate for indiscriminate poor relief in line with scripture: ‘let your beneficence extend itself to all (Galatians 6:10), both good and bad, thankful and ungrateful, deserving and worthless; for it is in this manner that God does good to us’.\(^{32}\) Similarly, the widely read Augustinian friar William Gahan spoke of the spiritual rewards of alms-giving: ‘Water does not so easily wash away the spots off our clothes, says St. John Chrysostom, as alms wash off the spots of our souls, and blot out the stains of our sins … In fine, alms deeds are more beneficial to the charitable giver than to the distressed receiver’.\(^{33}\) As Catholic theology asserted that Christ manifested himself in the poor, to relieve the beggar was to relieve Christ; on the other hand, to turn away from the soliciting mendicant was to refuse assistance to Christ. The poor possessed a spiritual significance, given that they presented the prospective giver with the opportunity to provide alms and to sanctify oneself. Their distress served as a reminder of Christ’s suffering on the cross and to many Catholic charity workers and commentators, the poor constituted ‘the elect of God’.\(^{34}\)

In the view of Rev. Michael Fitzgerald, the Catholic archdeacon of Limerick, alms-giving was a sacred duty for better-off Christians as much as alms were an imperishable right for the poor. Fitzgerald shaped his views around what he considered to be the benevolent mode of poor assistance in Catholic countries, contrasting this with the follies and cruelties of Protestantism, the English workhouse system and the science of political economy. For Fitzgerald, the Calvinist portrayal of good works as being non-essential for salvation was contrary to fundamental Christian principles and served to ‘cut up the roots of good works and seal up the fountains

\(^{32}\) [Mannock], *Poor man’s catechism*, p. 241. A later example of such sentiment is the use by Archbishop of Dublin, Paul Cullen of a passage from the Book of Tobit (4:11): ‘Alms deliver all from sin’, *Weekly Telegraph*, 21 Feb. 1852. Interestingly, while being included among the books of the Bible in Roman Catholicism, Tobit is not considered a canonical text in Protestantism and appears in the Apocrypha in the Authorised (King James) Version.

\(^{33}\) William Gahan, ‘On the necessity and signal advantages of alms and works of mercy’ in William Gahan, *Sermons and moral discourses, for all the Sundays and principal festivals of the year, on the most important truths and maxims of the gospels* (3rd edn, 2 vols, Dublin, 1825), ii, p. 25.

of Christian benevolence’. The Irish Poor Law system post-1838, which centred on indoor relief limited to the workhouse, represented the ultimate degradation of the poor exemplified in the dehumanising label of ‘pauper’ being applied to inmates. He asserted:

The word pauper – that horrible word which Christian lips should never apply to a fellow-being – is of pure English coinage. To English ears it sounds as something worse than felon; and it was evidently devised for the purpose of conveying as much of hatred, contempt, and abhorrence for the poor, as two small syllables could be made to contain.

Furthermore, the increasingly popular science of political economy, characterised by its ‘iron-hearted calculations as to the treatment of the poor’, served to criminalise and vilify alms-giving.

Fitzgerald argued not only that alms-giving was ‘a sacred duty – a part of the sacrificial duty of Christianity’ but also that the poor enjoyed a moral entitlement to assistance from their fellow men. ‘If your brother be poor, he has a right to your alms by the magna charta [sic] of the everlasting empire of Christ’. Obligation and right were correlative concepts which shaped how Fitzgerald viewed this relationship between giver and receiver. To refuse alms to a beggar was to refuse assistance to Christ, who preached, ‘Verily, I say unto you, in as much as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me’ [Matt. 25:45]. Fitzgerald’s views were part of a wider discourse in which medieval monastic systems of charity were contrasted with modern Poor Law initiatives, which were associated with Catholicism and Protestantism respectively. The First report of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul (1846), founded in 1844, bemoaned the Elizabethan Poor Law in England ‘which was passed as a substitute for the relief formerly given freely and received gratefully at the doors of monasteries, in the name of God and the saints; and which turned out to be one of the most devouring plagues of England’. An early nineteenth-century English pamphlet which sought ‘to vindicate the Catholic Clergy and People’ from the frequent accusations of superstition, ignorance and error defended in a fascinating manner the medieval monastic approach to assisting the poor. The anonymous author sarcastically contrasted, through text and imagery, ‘The Dark Ages of

36 Ibid., p. 19.
37 Ibid., p. 5.
38 Ibid., p. 27.
39 For the use of this scriptural passage, see ibid., p. 3.
Popery’ and the ‘Enlightened Days of Protestantism’.\textsuperscript{41} As seen in Figure 6.1, the former were represented by a group of regular clergy bestowing generous portions of food upon a group of paupers. The countenances on the faces of both givers and receivers are ones of contentment and affability. ‘The Enlightened Days of Protestantism’, on the other hand, were represented by a labouring family in their wretched abode, with ragged clothes and no food. Each member of the family is idle, while a famished infant cries at its mother’s breast. The contrast between the two images – Christian endeavour versus idleness, abundance of food versus penury and malnourishment, sociability versus loneliness, contentment versus despondency – is stark.

\textit{Catholics and a Statutory Provision for the Poor}

Part of the challenge in discussing attitudes and responses within Catholicism towards poverty and beggary is that ‘Catholics did not always think or act in the same way, that there was a spectrum of opinion in the Church rather than a core of agreed and accepted precept’.\textsuperscript{42} On what was arguably

\textsuperscript{41} Anon., \textit{People of England!} (n.p. [London?], [early nineteenth century]), pp. 1–2, consulted at NLI (P 1211(3)).

the central social question of the first half of the nineteenth century in Ireland – whether a Poor Law should be introduced – Irish Catholics were by no means united. Archbishop Murray and Anthony Richard Blake were among the Poor Inquiry commissioners whose final report in 1836 rejected the suitability of the English workhouse system for Ireland and instead proposed a system based on the voluntary model of relief, while Lord Killeen was one of three commissioners who dissented from the inquiry’s conclusions regarding the suitability of voluntary relief. Since the 1820s, Daniel O’Connell had been making ambivalent statements about an Irish Poor Law, before finally committing himself to opposing what became the Irish Poor Relief Act of 1838. On the other hand, many priests and senior clerics, such as the archbishop of Armagh, Dr William Crolly, and most notably the bishop of Kildare and Leighlin, James Doyle, supported a legal provision for the poor. Doyle’s arguments for a state provision for the poor arose from his perception of a moral and economic crisis in the mid-1820s and he believed that the state was the only possible agent capable of effecting the long-term alleviation of Ireland’s endemic distress.

Among the most prominent Roman Catholic clergymen who promoted a statutory provision was Rev. Thaddeus Joseph O’Malley, a curate at the Marlborough Street chapel in Dublin city. O’Malley was a well-known social radical who engaged with various political theories and among whose most controversial proposals was for a commune-style system of residence and employment for the urban working classes. O’Malley followed in the tradition of Bishop Doyle in espousing a liberal Catholic viewpoint that has been identified by Peter Gray as exerting a significant influence on

43 *PI*, third report. In his testimony to the 1830 parliamentary committee on the state of the poor in Ireland, Blake asserted that ‘a compulsory provision for the poor would tend to prevent the growth of those independent feelings and industrious habits, through which alone I look for the regeneration of Ireland’: *Second report, state of the poor select committee, 1830*, p. 343.

44 *PI*, Appendix H, pp. 8–9.


48 Thaddeus O’Malley, *An address to mechanics, small farmers, and the working classes generally, upon a feasible means of greatly improving their condition; with a word in their behalf to employers and landlords* (Dublin, 1845). O’Malley’s proposals were dismissed in a review published in the politically nationalist *The Nation* as Benthamism bordering on socialism, with the reviewer writing that ‘we would rather see the family of a tradesman inhabiting the poorest room in the Liberty, with his wife and children, than crowded in Mr. O’Malley’s household, if they were to gain by it the diet and lodging of Prince Albert’: *The Nation*, 4 Oct. 1845.
government policy in the 1830s. ‘The Irish Catholic case, paralleling that of French liberal Catholicism, was principally for public welfare relief as a social entitlement, a moral bonding agent which would create equitable relationships in a fractured society by imposing fiscal responsibilities on the propertied, while offering the destitute poor an alternative to self-defeating agrarian or trade-unionist violence’.\(^{49}\) O’Malley mirrored the views of fellow social commentators of this period in espousing a paternalistic concept of society, according to which the profligate lower orders were in need of moral guidance from the wealthier classes. To O’Malley, ‘the best if not the only chance of giving them a right direction is, to subject them like children to the guiding control of a parental authority’.\(^{50}\)

As well as in his published works,\(^{51}\) O’Malley’s views can be gleaned from contributions he made to public meetings and which were subsequently published in the press. At the 1838 annual meeting of the Dublin Mendicity Society, the Church of Ireland Archbishop of Dublin, Richard Whately, a well-known critic of an entitlement to relief for the able-bodied poor, claimed that the experience of England demonstrated that a legal provision aggravated, rather than mitigated, the levels of misery and pauperism. For Whately, the only effective way to suppress street begging was for inhabitants to support the mendicity society financially. O’Malley responded by claiming that, on the contrary, the case of England pointed to the virtues of a legal entitlement to relief, and beseeched Whately to name a country in which there were fewer mendicants than in England, adding ‘and to what other cause can we attribute that most striking result than to its assured legal provision for the poor? … And how could we compulsorily put down the trade of mendicancy without a compulsory provision for the really destitute?’ Taking up O’Malley’s challenge, Whately asserted that there was less pauperism in Scotland than in England – implicitly championing the traditional Scottish system of voluntarism and minimalism in poor relief – to which O’Malley replied: ‘There is a legal provision for the poor there also’.\(^{52}\) Some degree of tension can be identified in this exchange between Whately and O’Malley,


\(^{50}\) O’Malley, Poor Laws – Ireland, pp. 59–60.


\(^{52}\) *FJ*, 17 Jan. 1838. Just weeks later at another public meeting called by the Mendicity Society, Whately’s contribution was directly followed by a sharp rebuttal by O’Malley: *FJ*, 21 Feb. 1838. Whately’s admiration for the Scottish system can be identified in the reports of the Poor Inquiry, which he chaired, wherein the voluntarist model was credited with keeping Scotland free from the ‘extensive, exhausting, demoralizing
which is compounded by the newspaper report’s recording of cries of ‘Hear, hear’ to some of O’Malley’s – and only O’Malley’s – assertions. While it is tempting to attribute this friction to interdenominational tensions seeping into the meetings of the non-denominational Mendicity Society, it is also possible that Whately was merely the latest target of O’Malley’s notoriously disputatious temperament. The tension of the exchange was certainly compounded by the fact that the question of poor relief was one about which both these men thought deeply and felt strongly. Interestingly, just a few months earlier, O’Malley had expressed his support for Whately’s thoughts on the need for encouraging civilising influences among the lower orders.

In setting out a vision for a national provision for the poor, O’Malley addressed general Catholic, as well as his own, attitudes to mendicancy and alms-giving. He presented begging as an evil practice which the vast majority of Irish Catholics, both lay and clergy, would gladly see suppressed. When asked by a parliamentary inquiry whether alms-giving to beggars at the door was a duty for Catholics, he replied: ‘But I would not have the Beggar come to their Door. The Trade of Mendicancy I look upon as almost necessarily immoral. The impudent Hypocrite fares best by it. For the really deserving and silently suffering Poor it is a cruel Resource, to which it is a Disgrace to the Legislature to condemn them’. He added that only beggars themselves would complain of the prohibition of mendicancy and a vagrancy act which criminalised this practice would, therefore, serve as a measure for the relief of the industrious poor.

**Roman Catholics and the ‘Deserving’/‘Undeserving’ Distinction**

The distinction between the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor prevailed in Catholic thought, as promulgated by the clergy. Archbishop Daniel Murray shared the views of most senior clerics (including his successor in the see, Paul Cullen) in singling out the ‘virtuous poor’ for charity, exhorting his flock, in a pastoral letter in favour of the Dublin Mendicity Society, ‘that mendicancy’ as seen in Ireland or the ‘still more extensive and ruinous public pauperism’ created by the English Old Poor Law: *PI, Appendix H*, p. 464.

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53 During his life, O’Malley fell out with a priest and bishop in Philadelphia, for which he was briefly excommunicated; clashed with Archbishop John McHale, for which he was suspended in 1840; was dismissed two years later by the government from his position as rector of the University of Malta; was dismissed in 1862 from the chaplaincy of the Westmoreland Lock Hospital; and on foot of writing a controversial pamphlet in 1870, which proposed changes to ecclesiastical discipline, O’Malley was dismissed as chaplain to the Presentation Sisters and forbidden to perform sacramental functions: David Murphy and Sinéad Sturgeon, ‘O’Malley, Thaddeus Joseph’ in *DIB*, vii, pp. 681–2.


55 *[Report, select committee, relief of the destitute poor, and medical charities, Ireland]*, p. 837.

56 Virginia Crossman, “Attending to the wants of poverty”: Paul Cullen, the relief of
in the distribution of your Charities, you will have that excellent Institution in view, as it is certain that your Alms would be much more profitably employed, for the relief of the real Poor, if given thro’ it, than when bestowed indiscriminately on the Mendicants, who solicit your aid thro’ the Streets’. Among lower clergy, such views were also to be found. Rev. Patrick Coleman, Parish Priest of St Michan’s parish in Dublin, told the Poor Inquiry in the mid-1830s that ‘By far the greater number [of the parochial poor] are deserving of Charity’, while other priests in Dublin city parishes marked out their local poor as being genuine by way of their being ‘disposed to work’. To the Augustinian friar and renowned preacher William Gahan, whose works were widely published and disseminated among the populace, alms-giving was an ‘indispensable duty’ for good Christians, yet he refrained from recommending indiscriminate charity:

Prudence and discretion are indeed to be used in the choice of proper objects; but as St. John Chrysostom observes too anxious an inquiry and an over-great suspicion of imposture are to be avoided, as being contrary to Christian simplicity and fraternal charity.

Kilkee parish priest Rev. Michael Comyn described a class of beggars known to be impostors and the local habit of not entertaining such individuals’ pleas: ‘Strollers often bring recommendations with them, but we pay little attention to them … because we know them to be forged. There is a set of people going about the country, called wandering sailors, who are in general impostors, and these carry about plenty of letters and documents’. The existence of a category of ‘undeserving’ poor was also alleged by the Franciscan Christopher Fleming, labelling some mendicants as ‘half-naked assemblies of vagrants,


57 Daniel Murray, A sermon, preached on the nativity of our Blessed Saviour, in the Church of the Conception, Marlborough-Street, on the 25th December, 1837, by the most Rev. Doctor Murray, and published for the benefit of St. Vincent’s Hospital, Stephen’s Green, at the desire of some friends of that charitable institution (Dublin, 1838), p. 16; Draft of pastoral by Archbishop Daniel Murray regarding the Dublin Mendicity Society, 12 Nov. 1836 (DDa, DMP, 31/5/27).

58 Return of answers to queries from the Poor Inquiry, by Rev. P. Coleman, P.P. St Michan’s parish, Dublin, [c.1833–4] (DDa, DMP, 31/4/34).


61 PI, Appendix A, p. 625.
[with] their oaths, their blasphemies, their riots, their ignorance, [and] their total neglect of religion. These instances, however, are not necessarily representative, as they only reveal the views of (male) clergy. They exclude the perspectives of Catholic women (both lay and religious) and lay men, and they do not illuminate how Catholics of both sexes and all social classes actually responded to beggary on a practical level. In dealing with a soliciting mendicant, did the actions of the Catholic laity conform to the moralising urgings of their clergymen? The evidence makes clear that indiscriminate alms-giving was widespread among the largely Catholic lower classes, suggesting the limitations of priests’ influence over the private lives of their flock. Yet, the poor were known to employ models of discernment. According to a priest in County Galway, those living in his locality drew a line between the public solicitation of alms and private requests for charity, supporting the thesis that the lower classes exhibited some level of discrimination in how they negotiated mendicants’ solicitations: ‘There is a feeling against street or public beggary peculiar to the inhabitants of this country. Alms are given privately in provisions, and to some in money’. The suggestion here is that the line of demarcation centred on the visibility of beggary and alms-giving, practices which ought to be kept out of public sight.

Female Religious and Alms-Giving: The Case of the Religious Sisters of Charity

Donal Kerr identified Daniel Murray’s role in the establishment of the Sisters of Charity, of Mercy, and of Loreto as his greatest achievement, and the particular instance of Mary Aikenhead and the Irish Sisters of Charity serves as an interesting case study for examining how female religious approached poverty and alms-giving. A number of female religious orders and congregations targeted the poverty and ignorance of the lower classes and driven by a zeal characteristic of philanthropists of all denominations in this period they undertook moralising missions among the poor of towns and cities. While these female religious sought to improve the temporal conditions of the impoverished, the main thrust of their work was to introduce the poor to religious instruction through catechesis. Outlining

64 *PI, Supplement to Appendix A*, p. 4.
the system of instruction for poor girls in her institution in George’s Hill
in Dublin city, founded in 1766, Teresa Mullally stated that ‘besides the
spiritual instructions I hope they will be trained to morality, decency &
industry which is so much wanting among our poor’. The founding
documents of the Presentation Sisters’ convent in Cork stated explicitly:
The Principal End of This Religious Institute is the Instruction of Poor

While numerous female congregations and orders were founded in
Ireland between the late eighteenth and the late nineteenth centuries, the
establishment of the Religious Sisters of Charity in Dublin in 1815 marked
a new departure in Irish social and religious history, as this nascent congre-
gation pioneered social work by female religious in the wider community.
Aikenhead’s congregation adopted the model of non-enclosure pioneered
by the Daughters of Charity in seventeenth-century France, who, in not
being restricted within the convent walls, were unique in publicly working
among the sick and poor of their locality. The observation of the French
community’s co-founder, St Vincent de Paul, that ‘their monastery being
generally no other than the abode of the sick; their cell, a hired room;
their chapel, the parish church; their cloister, the streets or wards of
hospitals; their enclosure, obedience’ may be applied to the nineteenth-
century Irish Sisters of Charity. Aikenhead’s entry into religious life was
couraged by Daniel Murray, who arranged for Aikenhead to serve her
noviceship in the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary at York, escorting
her and an associate there in 1812 and making the same journey three years
later to accompany them back to Dublin. During Aikenhead’s time in the
northern English convent, Murray was a regular correspondent, outlining
his plans for a new congregation and the rules upon which the new body
would be based. In one letter Murray wrote to Aikenhead: ‘you will not

67 Teresa Mullaly to Archbishop John Thomas Troy, [c.1802] (Presentation Sisters,
George’s Hill Archive, GHAD/FD/146).
68 ‘Rules and constitutions of the Religious Congregation of the Charitable Instruction
established in the Convent of the Presentation of our Blessed Lady in Cork agreeable to
the bull of His Present Holiness Pope Pius VI’, [c.1809] (Presentation Sisters, George’s
Hill Archive, GHAD/C/5). See also Rules and constitutions of the Institute of the
Religious Sisterhood of the Presentation of the Ever Blessed Virgin Mary, established
in the City of Cork, for the charitable instruction of poor girls conformably to the rules of the
late Pope, Pius VI … (Cork, 1809), pp. 11–15, held at GHAD/C/7(1).
69 In 1800, there were 120 nuns living in 18 houses across Ireland; by 1851, the number
had increased to 1,500 nuns in 95 convents: Luddy, ‘Religion, philanthropy and the
state’, p. 160.
70 Susan E. Dinan, Women and poor relief in seventeenth-century France: the early history
71 Cited ibid., p. 46.
be surprised at my reminding you that your family in future are to be the 
poor of Jesus Christ'.

Until his death, Murray retained a close association with Aikenhead and the Sisters of Charity, preaching sermons on behalf of the community’s poor schools and orphan houses and bequeathing money to the congregation ‘for the purpose of being distributed amongst the Sick Poor whom they shall visit’. Concern for the poor was central to Murray and Aikenhead’s world view and this was reflected in the distinctive stipulation that the Sisters take a fourth vow of ‘perpetual service of the poor’ in addition to the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience commonly taken by female religious congregations and orders.

The emergence of lay and religious female activists at this time was influenced by a number of factors: the growth of a Catholic middle class from the mid-eighteenth century, confident in its strengthening social and economic influence; the Catholic revival in the early years of the new century; and the broader appeal of philanthropy to women of the wealthier classes. Female philanthropy flourished across all denominations, as well-off women brought to their work with the poor a middle-class sense of morality which was ‘suffused with religious rhetoric and imagery’. The work of female religious, however, was influenced by a distinctly Catholic framework, wherein charity benefited both the giver and the receiver, as the bestowing of relief served to bring about the spiritual redemption of both parties. The constitution of the Sisters of Charity asserts this sentiment: ‘The end of this Congregation is, not only that its members, aided by Divine Grace, attend to the salvation and perfection of their own souls, but also that, assisted by the same, they labour seriously in works of spiritual and corporal mercy, for the salvation and consolation of their neighbour’. To Mary Aikenhead, providing assistance to the poor contributed towards ‘our own perfection and the salvation of our neighbour’.

72 Daniel Murray to Mary Aikenhead, 26 Jan. 1813 (Religious Sisters of Charity Archives, Caritas, Sandymount (RSCA), 1/B/4) cited in ‘Dublin cause for the beatification and canonization of the servant of God Mary Aikenhead foundress of the Sisters of Charity (1787–1858). Positio on the life, the witness and the fame of sanctity of the servant of God (2 vols, 1994), volume I’, held at RSCA. For Murray’s involvement in Aikenhead’s novitiate in York, see [O’Flanagan], Life and work of Mary Aikenhead, pp. 20–36.
75 [O’Flanagan], Life and work of Mary Aikenhead, pp. 39–42.
76 Luddy, Women and philanthropy, p. 2.
77 Cited in Mary Aikenhead to unidentified priest, 13 June 1840, in Letters of Mary Aikenhead (Dublin, 1914), p. 519.
78 Mary Aikenhead to Mother Francis Magdalen, 5 Sept. 1840, ibid., p. 327.
A letter (dated December 1833) from Mary Aikenhead to the Whately Poor Inquiry, outlining the work of the Sisters of Charity, constitutes a rare public statement by a Catholic woman, and illuminates Aikenhead’s views on the causes and nature of poverty:

The object of our institution is to attend to the comforts of the poor, both spiritual and temporal, to visit them at their dwellings and in hospitals, to attend them in sickness, to administer consolation in their afflictions, and to reconcile them to the dispensations of an all-wise Providence in the many trials to which they are subject. The education and relief of orphans, and religious instruction of the lower orders, is part of our duty.

The prevalence of destitution in the suburbs and villages to the south-east of the city (Irishtown, Ringsend, Beggar’s Bush and Ballsbridge) was attributed to a want of employment, the unavailability of satisfactory medical treatment and the consumption of unwholesome food. Poverty was caused by external factors, not by the poor themselves. While the taking of spirituous liquors by the poor was acknowledged by Aikenhead, this practice was explained away with the qualifying statement: ‘they often resort to it in despair, to drown the recollection of their sufferings’. Aikenhead asserted: ‘The poor are, generally speaking, very docile and remarkably patient under their sufferings and privations; they are grateful beyond measure for the least kindness shown to them, and are most anxious to procure employment even at the lowest wages’.79 Her fellow Sister of Charity, Mother Catherine (née Alicia Walshe) identified the suffering of the poor as being caused by their sheer poverty and not by any moral flaw on their part: ‘poverty seems for the most part the causes of most of their sufferings. That is the general cause of their sickness’.80 To these female religious, the poor of Dublin suffered temporal poverty with admirable fortitude and were presented as possessing the traits of appreciation and industriousness. The language used by the female religious speaks of the sanctifying impact on the poor of their suffering the trials of poverty and want. They were not the idle, imprudent and wicked poor so often criticised in public discourse. Yet, while there is an absence of explicit moral judgement of the poorer classes in Aikenhead’s letter, and indeed an absence of direct references to mendicancy and the giving of alms to beggars, this does not allow one to conclude that the Sisters did not distinguish between the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor. Women-run philanthropic initiatives – those run

79 PI, Appendix C, Addenda to Appendix A, p. 25e.
80 Diary of Mother Catherine, 12 Mar. 1818, p. 12 (RSCA, MS RSCG/1/C/15).
by either lay or religious, Catholic or Protestant women – focused their resources on women and children, the archetypal virtuous poor, while the category of ‘fallen women’ were admitted into Magdalen asylums so as to be, in the views of the institutions’ managers, reconstructed as ‘members of the ‘deserving’ poor, entitled to the support of the public’.

In assessing the views of male and female religious towards alms-giving and begging, the fact that these individuals were themselves engaged in alms-seeking is of interest. Priests sought alms ‘when at mass and at other times they solicited contributions to fund church expenditure of various kinds, including the parish’s own informal poor relief structures, such as they were’. Ó Ciosáín suggests that priests, therefore, looked on beggars with suspicion, as potential rivals to the alms of their congregations. This sentiment was expressed by Michael Comyn, parish priest of Kilkee, County Clare to the Poor Inquiry:

Notwithstanding the influx of beggars to this place in summer, I never saw more than two of them begging at the chapel; this is because I beg myself for the chapel to pay for its building, and the people give to me in preference to them. If I were to stop there would be plenty of them.

Meanwhile, female religious communities also largely survived on voluntary donations, in addition to the dowries brought by its members. Colin Jones notes that the seventeenth-century French Daughters of Charity were both charitable donors and recipients, receiving and providing ‘spiritual as well as material benefits’. The same can be said of the main female communities in pre-Famine Ireland, who both collected and dispensed charity. When the Sisters of Mercy arrived in Charleville in 1836 to establish a new convent, the apparent absence of a local middle class caused dismay, as it threw into doubt the prospect of support ‘for the sisters or for the poor’. The financial uncertainty that characterised such sources of income for religious communities was appreciated by Catherine McAuley, foundress of the Sisters of Mercy, who in 1839–40 blamed the newly introduced Poor Law rate for ‘breaking up all contributions’ and for having ‘deprived us

82 Ó Ciosáín, *Ireland in official print culture*, p. 119.
83 PI, *Appendix A*, p. 625.
of much help. We find it very difficult to keep up the poor Institution.'

86 Aikenhead and her colleagues in the Sisters of Charity oftentimes took to soliciting donations directly from the public, either through door-to-door canvassing or, in one instance, sending out 3,000 ‘begging notes’ to Dublin’s citizens. The language of mendicancy was common in the parlance of female religious communities, especially regarding their own endeavours in collecting donations and subscriptions; for example, members of the Sisters of Nazareth in England went on ‘begging tours’ in the second half of the nineteenth century to raise income for their community. However, this is not to suggest that female religious saw themselves as beggars on the same level as the mendicant poor. Many of the members of religious congregations in the nineteenth century came from middle-class Catholic families, and life within these communities mirrored wider social divisions, most notoriously in the division between lay and choir nuns; as such, it is not surprising that female religious adhered to the conventional moral framework of distinguishing between the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor.

Shifting the focus from male and female religious towards the Catholic laity, we see that another viewpoint can be gleaned from Irish-language sources. The lower classes appear regularly in the diary of the Callan schoolteacher and draper Amhlaoibh Ó Súilleabháin (1783–1838), whose Irish-language journal, although clearly written for a public readership, contains copious observations on the weather, nature and social conditions, and is a rare example of this genre of writing. Ó Súilleabháin was a prominent member of his local community, being actively involved in the local branch of the Catholic Association (Daniel O’Connell’s mass political movement that campaigned for Catholic Emancipation), serving on a number of coroners’ juries and socialising with shopkeepers, clergy and the local doctor. As such, his attitudes towards poverty and other social matters reflected the perspectives of his social position and peers.

87 Mary Aikenhead to Mary de Chantal, 3 Jan. 1837 in Letters of Mary Aikenhead, p. 71. See also Mary Aikenhead to Mary de Chantal, Feast of the Epiphany 1842, ibid., p. 126; Mary Aikenhead to Mary de Chantal, 16 Dec. 1843, ibid., p. 158; [O’Flanagan], Life and work of Mary Aikenhead, p. 301; Diary of Mother Catherine, 29 Aug. 1819, p. 26.
wrote sympathetically of the poor, noting the high price of potatoes at a
times of crisis; his observation in April 1827 that ‘There are not even alms
for the paupers’\(^91\) points to mendicants’ dependency on the poor (that is,
those only slightly removed from destitution) for assistance. Later, the diarist
recorded that ‘The small farmers are very good people. It is they who, almost
on their own, feed the poor people of Ireland … Tradesmen and shopkeepers
are also generous in giving alms to God’s poor’.\(^92\) The reference to beggars
as ‘God’s poor’ displays an inherently Catholic perspective and the giving
of alms is portrayed in a positive light. Despite this sympathy for what we
may term the ‘deserving’ poor, Ó Súilleabháin identified an immoral element
among the local lower classes, perhaps revealing an urban prejudice against
the rural poor: ‘The street mob were very noisy at three in the morning.
Some of them are still very drunk. It’s not harm to call them ‘mob’ (coip)
for they are the froth (coipeadh) of the lake-dwellers, bog-dwellers, and dirty
mountain-dwellers with no respect of manners’.\(^93\) He later refused to support
‘the town rabble going from door to door with a wren in a holly brush’ (a
reference to the St Stephen’s Day Wren’s Boys tradition in Ireland); when
recording the 1832 phenomenon of crowds of people running through the
countryside with lumps of burning turf, in the belief that dividing the turf
would stave off the rapidly advancing cholera epidemic, the diarist’s tone
displays his condescension towards the ‘credulous’ and ‘foolish’ ‘poor people
of Ireland’, but also his embarrassment at the conduct of his co-religionists,
who made themselves ‘a laughing-stock for the Protestants’\(^94\).

In his poem ‘Ceol na mBacach’ (‘The song of the beggars’) the Ulster
poet Aodh Mac Domhnaill (1802–67) lashed out at the Roman Catholic
authorities in Famine-era Belfast for what he considered their collusion with
the Presbyterian and Anglican authorities in suppressing beggary with an
unduly heavy hand and, according to one recent commentator, ‘trying to
 ingratiating themselves with Belfast’s ruling classes at the expense of their
own flock’.\(^95\) The target of the poem was the Bishop of Down and Connor,
Cornelius Denvir, who in July 1847 was among a number of the town’s
clergymen and gentlemen of different denominations who agreed at a public
meeting to impose a strict regime of clearing the streets of beggars and

\(^91\) Tomás de Bhaldraithe (ed.), *The diary of an Irish countryman 1827–1835: a translation of Cín Lae Amhlaoibh* (Cork, 1979), p. 16. See also ibid., p. 84.
\(^92\) Ibid., p. 84.
\(^93\) Ibid., p. 20.
\(^94\) Ibid., pp. 68, 119–20. This incident is best described by S.J. Connolly, ‘The “blessed
turf”: cholera and popular panic in Ireland, June 1832’ in *IHS*, xxiii, no. 91 (May 1983),
pp. 214–32.
\(^95\) Antain Mac Lochlainn, ‘The Famine in Gaelic tradition’ in *Irish Review*, no. 17/18
quarantining the sick poor in an effort to prevent the spread of contagion.\footnote{For this municipal crack-down on beggars, see BNL, 30 July 1847.}

Mac Dhomhnaill wrote:

\begin{quote}
There sat a Bishop from the Church of the Pope  
And a hundred parsons of the English kind  
To issue decrees and warrants of arrest  
Against those who supported them all of their lives …  
But I’ll never believe, from priest or from brother  
That it’s wicked to be destitute, abandoned or poor  
For I’ve heard it said, by poets and authors  
That Jesus was born among those who were poor  
Colm Cille preached to men and to women  
From the time of the prophets it’s always been taught  
That every proud man who places his trust in riches  
\end{quote}

To Mac Dhomhnaill, Denvir’s co-operation with the mostly Protestant authorities constituted a traitorous abandonment of his own flock. Yet, other themes emerge from this piece, namely the corruption of Denvir’s (Catholic) benevolence through his association with Protestants, but, more significantly, the undermining of the bishop’s humane empathy, and subsequently his pastoral efficiency, through his fraternising with the moral trappings of wealth. To the poet, the poor were not to be dismissed as a category of people that can be coldly pigeonholed and vilified as being deviant but were in fact those who demonstrated the true virtue of Christian suffering.

\textbf{Actions}

The approaches of the Catholic middle-class laity differed significantly from their poorer co-religionists: the former partook in organised corporate relief initiatives, reflecting the associational culture popular in ‘respectable’ society in the Atlantic world, while the latter’s responses were largely limited to individual and casual exchanges with mendicants. The survival of source material relating to these varied approaches is weighted heavily in favour of the middle-classes’ charity work and, as such, the historian must be careful not to ignore the extent and significance of private, unrecorded charity. In urban centres men from the rising Catholic mercantile middle
classes engaged in religious and philanthropic initiatives, influenced by a combination of economic self-interest and a genuine feeling of religious benevolence. These men joined members of the Protestant middle classes in establishing and running mendicity societies. An 1832 return from the Dublin Mendicity Society, sent to the Commissioners of National Education regarding the charity’s poor schools, identified 12 Roman Catholics among its managing committee of 58 men. Of these 12 (comprising just more than one-fifth of the membership of the committee), four were clergymen, while the remaining eight were laymen. These Catholic laymen included barrister and MP Daniel O’Connell (1775–1847), lawyer and government adviser Anthony Richard Blake (1786–1849) and Queen’s Counsel and Commissioner of the National System of Education John Richard Corballis (c.1797–1879). Within Irish Catholicism at this time, a wave of philanthropic endeavour reflected a spirit of revival and reform, drawing inspiration from precedents within European Catholicism. The numerous confraternities that emerged since the mid-to-late eighteenth century were part of the Church’s infrastructure to reform the spiritual guidance of Catholics. While most confraternities concerned themselves with the encouragement of devotional practices among members, some bodies carried out poor relief work, most notably the Society of St Vincent de Paul, a lay Catholic charity. The Society was founded in Paris by Frederic Ozanam in 1833 and by the time the first Irish conference was established in Dublin 11 years later, there were 130 societies across Europe. The emergence and rapid nationwide growth of the Society of St Vincent de Paul local conferences occurred during the Famine and post-Famine period, and within six years of the founding of the inaugural Dublin society, 50 conferences were established throughout Ireland. While the early development of this movement regrettably falls outside the scope of this study, a few brief remarks, drawing on sources from the late 1840s, will add to our understanding of contemporary Catholic thinking on social problems, such as poverty and mendicancy. The Society advanced Vincentian traditions of poor assistance, seeing the presence of

99 Dublin Mendicity Society application to National Commissioners for Education, 19 Jan. 1832 (NAI, Commissioners of National Education papers, ED/1/28/1).
100 O’Connell and Corballis were also among the general members of the Dublin Chamber of Commerce in 1836, although the officers appear to have all been Protestants, mainly Anglicans and Quakers: *Report of the council of the Chamber of Commerce of Dublin, to the annual assembly of the members of the association, held on the 1st of March 1836* (Dublin, 1836), pp. 34, 38.
Christ in the poor person, whose suffering was sanctified by that very presence. Charity sanctified the givers of alms, who were beseeched to conduct themselves with humility in their charity work, which centred on visiting the sick and poor in their own homes. Local conferences of the Society employed moralising and gospel-driven language similar to that used by Protestant charities, seeing the relief of temporal poverty as of equal importance as attending to the spiritual privation of the poor. Reports spoke of their objectives as being ‘to stimulate and encourage industry and habits of religion among the poor’. The societies wished to encourage independence in the poor and during the Famine years particular emphasis was placed on removing children from the streets and exposing them to the fruitful rewards of education and religious instruction. The St Mary’s conference in Clonmel paid particular attention in 1848 to those children who ‘spent the day in the street exposed to the worst examples of vice and immorality, mendicancy, and idleness’.

Wealthy Catholics also carried out their philanthropic duties through their wills and charitable bequests, and charities aimed at suppressing begging regularly benefited. Among the 12 charities and causes which each received £50 through the bequest of the Catholic gentleman John Moore of Portland Street, Dublin were the Mendicity Society and the Sick and Indigent Roomkeepers’ Society, both flag-bearers for the urban middle classes’ drive to suppress street begging and distribute alms according to strict criteria of eligibility. The Dublin Mendicity Society, as well as poor relief schemes in Galway, was included in the will of a Thomas Bennet, who bequeathed more than £2,000 to relatives, friends and charitable causes.

As well as their lay co-religionists, Catholic clergymen responded to begging through corporate means, most notably through their support for and involvement in running charitable societies. Daniel Murray’s archbishopric of Dublin (1823–52) witnessed an upsurge in corporate philanthropic endeavour and the multiplication of bodies with a duty of service to the poor, particularly through his encouragement of male and female religious communities that focused on educating the poor.

102 Report of the proceedings of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, in Ireland, during the year 1848 (Dublin, [c.1848]), pp. 14, 16.
103 Extract from the will of John Moore (d. 7 June 1828), Portland Street, Dublin, [c.1833] (DDA, JHP, 35/2/77).
104 Last will and testament of Thomas Bennett, 9 May 1828 (DDA, DMP, 33/9/14/1).
105 To focus here on charity work during Murray’s episcopacy is not to ignore the fact that his predecessor, Archbishop Troy, was also engaged on such social questions and his reign also witnessed an upsurge in the number of religious communities in Dublin relieving the poor: Cormac Begadon, ‘Laity and clergy in the Catholic renewal of Dublin, c.1750–1830’ (PhD thesis, Maynooth University, 2009), pp. 71–2.
episcopate that the Sisters of Mercy, the Sisters of Charity, the Ladies’ Association of Charity of St Vincent de Paul and the Society of St Vincent de Paul, all of whom worked among the poorest classes, were established in Dublin city and it was upon Murray’s suggestion that Edmund Rice deputed two of his Christian Brothers to establish the congregation in Dublin, with the aim of catering for poor boys in St Andrew’s parish. 106 That Archbishop Murray and his predecessor, Dr John Troy, were prepared to co-operate with other denominations in tackling the city’s social problems, and most relevantly to this study, in suppressing street begging, is seen in their service as Vice-Presidents of the Mendicity Society. 107 They were not the only Catholic clerics to serve cross-denominational corporate initiatives suppressing mendicancy, with clergymen in Galway, Sligo, Ballymena and Drogheda active in the work of their local society as well as in encouraging their flock to contribute to the charities. 108 The members of the Dublin society’s managing committee included Fr Thaddeus O’Malley, Fr James Monks (who had previously served as the Catholic chaplain to the House of Industry) and Fr Matthew Flanagan. 109 The Bishop of Down and Connor William Crolly subscribed to and chaired meetings of the Belfast House of Industry (mendicity society), 110 while his successor in the see, Cornelius Denvir, served as a collector of donations for the same institution alongside a number of Protestant ministers and laymen. 111 Denvir also served as governor of the town’s Charitable Society 112 while the temperance campaigner Fr Theobald Mathew served as a governor of the House of Industry in Cork city. 113 In April 1840, the proceeds of one of Fr Mathew’s public speaking engagements in the Royal Exchange in Dublin city, attended

106 William Meagher, Notices of the life and character of His Grace Most Rev. Daniel Murray, late Archbishop of Dublin, as contained in the commemorative oration pronounced in the Church of the Conception, Dublin, on occasion of His Grace’s months’ mind. With historical and biographical notes (Dublin, 1853), p. 93; Kerr, ‘Dublin’s forgotten archbishop’, p. 248.

107 Report, Dublin Mendicity Society, 1818, [unpaginated], f. 2; Troy and Murray also chaired meetings of the society at times: FJ, 15 Feb. 1820, 1 Feb., 27 Apr., 3 May 1830; Dublin Mendicity Society minute book, 5 June 1821.


109 Twenty-second report, Dublin Mendicity Society, 1839, p. 5. For Monks, see John Thomas Troy to Charles Grant, 30 Nov. 1820 (NAI, CSORP, CSO/RP/1820/1300).

110 BNL, 4 Apr. 1834, 5 Mar. 1830. On at least one occasion Crolly also preached a charity sermon in aid of the House of Industry: BNL, 17 June 1817.

111 BNL, 24 Nov. 1837. In 1817 a charity sermon was held in the Catholic chapel in Belfast in aid of the town’s House of Industry: BNL, 13 June 1817.

112 BNL, 16 July 1847.

by an estimated 2,000 persons paying 6d. per head, were allocated to the city’s Mendicity Society.  

Edmund Rice, founder of the Christian Brothers in Waterford at the turn of the nineteenth century, was also active in corporate efforts to suppress begging, through his involvement in the southern city’s mendicity society. Rice served as chairman of this charity, which, like other mendicity associations, attracted the financial support and goodwill of both Catholic and Protestant middle-class supporters, and drawing on his substantial wealth from his mercantile career was a relatively generous contributor to the charity’s coffers. Rice, whose piety was influenced by European Catholic spirituality, especially the lives and teachings of Ignatius of Loyola and St Teresa, founded schools for poor boys in Waterford, which sought to effect a moral reformation in these children by introducing them to Catholic instruction, through catechesis, and by encouraging discipline, industry and sobriety.  

The Catholic middle classes (both lay and clerical) were as likely as their Protestant counterparts to champion poor relief initiatives that sought to instil ‘habits of industry’ among the lower orders without undermining the independent, industrious working poor. Bishop of Dromore, Michael Blake, promoted the work of the Newry Mendicity Society, which relieved ‘poor strolling mendicants in the manner best adapted to reconcile them to a life of labour and to virtuous habits’.  

Daniel Murray’s interest in poverty and charity extended beyond his involvement with the Dublin Mendicity Society. The archbishop was one of three Catholic prelates appointed to serve on the newly established Board of Charitable Bequests in 1844, and was also an active member of the Commissioners of National Education (who oversaw the establishment of the national school system from 1831) and the Poor Inquiry of 1833–6. Murray also chaired meetings of the civic and cross-denominational Mansion House Relief Committee, and served on the managing committee of the Charitable Infirmary. The fact that these positions were open to Catholic clergymen

114 Nenagh Guardian, 11 Apr. 1840.
117 Draft of letter from Michael Blake to editor of Newry Commercial Telegraph, c.1833 (PRONI, Dromore Diocesan papers, DIORC/3/1, ff. 30–31).
118 The others were Archbishop William Crolly of Armagh and Cornelius Denvir of Down and Connor. The three prelates’ involvement with the Board attracted criticism from some quarters, as the recommendations of the Board were seen as being anti-Catholic and infringing on episcopal independence: see FJ, 20 Jan. 1845.
reflected, as Seán Connolly has illustrated, ‘the new respectability of the
Irish Catholic hierarchy’, as ‘the first half of the nineteenth century saw a
steady growth in the degree of recognition offered to Catholic churchmen
by the Irish establishment’.120 This growing recognition of the Catholic
Church’s role in the public sphere was reflected in the decision to postpone
the 1838 annual meeting of the largely Protestant-run Dublin Mendicity
Society owing to the absence, due to illness, of Archbishop Murray; the
meeting was adjourned to a future date ‘so as that it should be honoured by
his grace’s presence’.121 In February 1831, at the annual general meeting of
the Sick and Indigent Roomkeepers’ Society, the chairman, Lord Mayor Sir
Robert Harty, was accompanied on the speakers’ platform by two represent-
atives of the city’s Roman Catholic and Anglican communities – Archbishop
Murray and Rev. Franc Sadleir of Trinity College respectively.122 The Sick
and Indigent Roomkeepers’ Society and the Mendicity Society were both
cross-denominational bodies, as seen by the various shades of Christianity
represented among its officers and membership, and the fact that these
two charities were listed alongside Catholic-ethos societies in the Catholic
directory further affirms that they were viewed by church authorities as
acceptable organisations which Catholics could support.123

Conclusion

Can we speak of a Catholic attitude to poverty, beggary and alms-giving in
pre-Famine Ireland, as being distinct from a Protestant approach? In the
above discussion, some nuance has been brought to our understanding of
the most frequently arising tropes pertaining to Catholic charity prevalent
in the discourse of poverty and poor relief. The accusation of indiscriminate
alms-giving arising from an emphasis on good works was common, yet when
levelled at the Roman faith was usually couched in sectarian vituperation.
Alms were commonly doled out without discrimination by Catholics to
mendicants but, as will be seen in the next chapter, Protestants were also
known to engage in this practice. Furthermore, the poorer classes, along
with their wealthier co-religionists, were known to draw upon concepts of
deservedness when dealing with mendicants. Catholic charitable works, and
Catholics’ dealings with beggars, were not confined to casual, unorganised

120 Connolly, Priests and people, p. 10.
121 FJ, 11 Jan. 1838.
122 FJ, 5 Feb. 1831.
123 Complete Catholic registry, 1836, pp. 108–9; Complete Catholic directory, almanac, and
registry for the year of our Lord, 1838, pp. 337–9.
exchanges. Rather, the pre-Famine period witnessed the introduction of a level of sophistication in Catholics’ work with the poor, whether through denominationally based initiatives or in cross-denomination entities. Middle-class Catholic men co-operated with their Protestant social peers in mendicity institutions and other charitable societies, while the majority of Catholic clergymen who contributed to the discourse on poverty stressed the virtues of honesty, industry and self-dependence among the poor, and the evils of reckless alms-giving. In all of these examples, the similarities between Catholic and Protestant approaches are greater than the differences.

Catholic commentators on social questions regularly turned their attention to the questions of begging and alms-giving. A concern with the ubiquity of beggary was not limited to Protestants, as Catholics were also prominent in the public discourses on poverty, Poor Laws and mendicancy. Contributions by Catholics to these debates were not, however, marked by consensus. Archbishop Daniel Murray and Thaddeus O’Malley echoed wider middle-class concerns over indiscriminate alms-giving, seeing this practice as encouraging pauperism rather than industry and self-dependence. Other figures, such as Michael Fitzgerald, appealed to the monastic tradition of indiscriminate assistance to the sick and poor, associating this tradition with Catholicism and contrasting it with the perceived harshness of Protestant approaches to poverty. While Fitzgerald did not appear to frame his world view in terms of the ‘deserving’/‘undeserving’ poor distinction, many of his co-religionists, both clerical and lay, did embrace such concepts, either explicitly, such as Murray or O’Malley, or implicitly, such as Aikenhead. What is clear is that Murray and O’Malley’s views were more in line with those of their fellow Catholic clergymen than Fitzgerald’s, as Catholic clergy in the pre-Famine period ‘appear to have fully absorbed the conventional economic and social doctrines of their day, and there is little to indicate that their outlook on most issues would have been significantly different to that of their Protestant counterparts’.124

One field in which a distinctive Catholic ‘flavour’ to charity work was evident was in the work of Irish convents.125 Convents became the most important providers of charity in nineteenth-century Ireland and were influential in cementing the power of the Church in Irish society, largely through their running of schools. Despite the prominence of poverty and charity within the public and private writings of these communities and the women therein, we do not know how they dealt with beggars on a

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125 A study of the post-Famine period could also draw upon the proliferation of conferences of the Society of St Vincent de Paul as evidence of a distinctly Catholic approach to poor relief.
practical level. It is noteworthy that while Aikenhead and her fellow Sister of Charity, Mother Catherine, did not appear to blame the poor for their indigence – perhaps owing to the Sisters’ regular visiting with the sick and poor, circumstances which could enliven sympathy and empathy with the poor, and humility among the nuns – there was no attempt in their writings to grapple with the underlying structural causes of poverty in Irish society. Contributing to the public discourse pertaining to such matters fell outside the remit, and the gendered roles shaped by social expectations, of nineteenth-century philanthropic women, whose work was focused on the provision of spiritual and temporal assistance to the most ‘deserving’ – namely, women and children. There were no equivalent communities within Irish Protestantism, which will be examined in the next chapter.