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The theft of the relic of Holy Cross Abbey

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Introduction

In the Wadding papers there is a printed letter from Pope Gregory XV addressed to the archbishops, bishops and vicars apostolic of Ireland, dated 19 May 1623, that contains a reference to the theft of a famous relic that belonged to the Cistercians of Holy Cross abbey in county Tipperary, and that was said to have been taken by a person named O’Kearney.¹ It is a broadside that has been trimmed and now measures 36 x 22.5 mms. Above the name of the pontiff there are two medallions of St. Peter and St. Paul, one on either side of a papal coat-of-arms.² The initial V of *Venerabiles* is in a square, 4.5 mms, decorated with another papal coat-of-arms.

The letter bears a seal and the written signature of an apostolic notary, and consequently is judged to be the original document intended for the Irish hierarchy. It gives rise to some questions. Why was it not mentioned by a contemporary Cistercian in his history of Holy Cross abbey and its relics? Is anything known about the alleged thief? When precisely did the theft take place? Which of two relics connected with the abbey was in question? Were there any archbishops or bishops in Ireland in May 1623? Why was it found among the papers of Luke Wadding, O.F.M., at Rome?

John Hartry and the Kearneys

The Cistercian John Malachy Hartry completed in 1640 his work in Latin on the chronological triumphs (or a chronology of the triumphs) of the monastery of the Holy Cross in Ireland. He was born in Waterford in 1579, studied the humanities at the Irish College in Lisbon, and in 1609 joined the Cistercians in Spain. He was back in Ireland by 1619, and described himself on the title-page as an apostolic notary. It seems strange today that he mentioned neither the theft nor Pope Gregory’s letter – although he depicted robbers on the title-page.³

Even if he did not know about the letter (and that is possible), one would expect him to have known about the theft – if there was a theft. Perhaps he did not think there had been one, or did not want to write about it then for some reason. Such a reason may, possibly, lie in the name of the alleged thief, O’Kearney. The Pope in his letter showed concern for him and others like him, and was anxious that they be freed as soon as possible from the sacrilege involved in the taking of holy things.

It so happened that the Archbishop of Cashel at that time was David Kearney (1603-24), who had probably left Ireland by 1623. He may have wanted the problem solved quickly, and the matter kept quiet, for the sake of the family name. But if so, why did he tell the Pope the name of the thief – if he did? The most likely person to have reported the sacrilege to Rome was the bishop of the diocese where it took place, Kearney.

But there was a higher Irish ecclesiastic in Rome at that time: Peter Lombard, Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of Ireland (1601-25), who had never been in Ireland as archbishop, but



who had great influence at Rome in all matters relating to his country. Any document destined for the Irish hierarchy at home (such as the letter was) would have been discussed with him, especially if it dealt with the general situation in which the Church found itself there, surrounded by enemies, with robbery and destruction of churches and the resulting sacrilege quite common. Also, the Pope may have wished to show special favour to the two Archbishops, Kearney and Lombard, with whom he shared a common liking for the Jesuits who were building effective defences against the inroads of Protestantism.⁴

Hartry's *Triumphalia* has a reference to O'Kearneys who had rented "the temporalities and spiritualities" of the abbey and its lands for 140 pounds sterling (no date given; p. 180). One wonders if the alleged thief O'Kearney in 1623 thought he was entitled to possess the relic of Holy Cross. It is recorded that on one occasion in 1619 a Maurice Kearney accompanied the parish priest who carried the relic on a pastoral mission; and a man with the same name died on 11 September 1643 and was buried in the abbey (pp. lviii, 138-9). The father of the Barnabas O'Kearney whose monument in the abbey he inscribed in 1646 was known as Edmund of the Holy Cross O'Kearney (p. lix).

A Michael Kearney (1635-65) who translated into English Seathrún Céitinn's *Foras Feasa ar Eirinn* was said to be from "Ballyloskye, in the County Cross of Tipperary".⁵ From these references one writer has concluded that O'Kearney the thief was a lay official of the diocese living in Cashel, that his nephew erected a monument in the abbey, and that O'Kearney "farmed the tithes of the abbey under the house of Ormonde".⁶ The Ormond connection will be referred to further on. One may conclude, perhaps, that there was some kind of a connection between the O'Kearney family and the relic; but whether that amounted to a right of use or of possession is not clear.

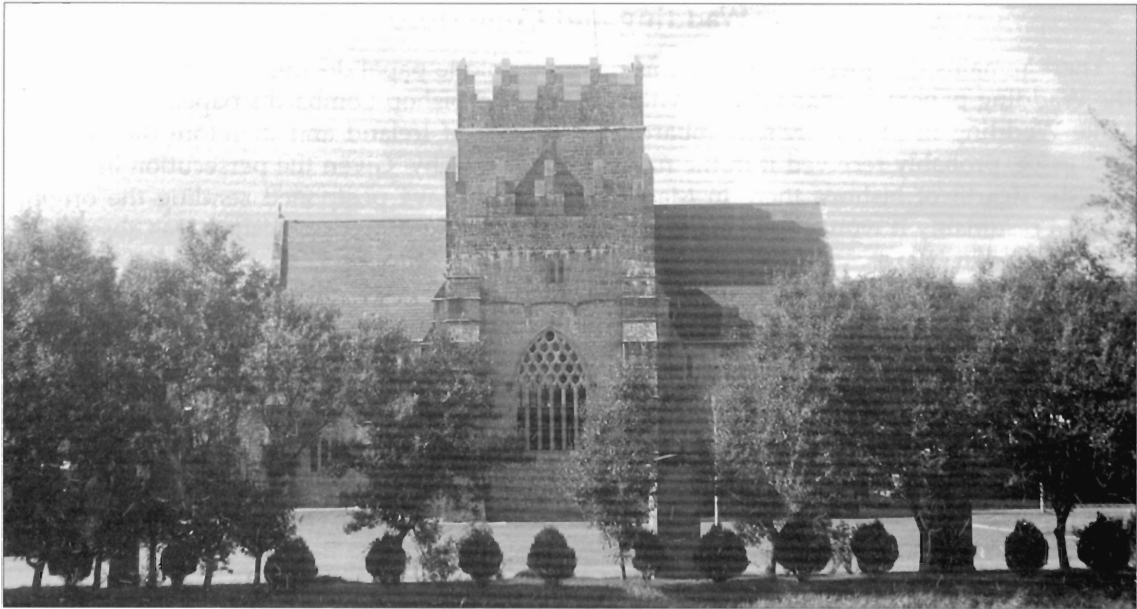
The Archbishop and the Relic

How long the relic was in the possession of the alleged thief is not clear either. The *Triumphalia* mentions that it was used in the case of Terence Ballagh in 1619 (pp. 136-7); possibly carried from the abbey itself (still in use, at least in part), for which a chalice was made in 1620 (see footnote 3). Fr Hartry states that he saw the holy relics of the Cross (*sacrosanctas Crucis Reliquias*) placed on the altar of the Reverend Lord Abbot in his public oratory in Kilkenny, and that he venerated them together with a crowd (*turba*) of Catholics of all kinds (*gradus*) on the day after the feast of Corpus Christi [15 June] 1623; that is, less than a full month after the date on the papal letter (pp. 158-9).

It would have taken some time for that letter to have been obtained, and we do not know how much time passed before the loss of the relic was reported to Rome. Archbishop Kearney, as soon as he knew about it (for he may have left his diocese before the theft), could have informed someone by letter; perhaps Archbishop Lombard or an agent acting for the Irish dioceses, either John Roche of Ferns or Luke Wadding, O.F.M. Roche was officially appointed agent on 14 June 1622.⁷ Since the archbishop's name is not on this official certificate, it seems that Kearney had left Ireland by then, driven out by persecution, with a price on his head.

In fact, he may have been gone from his diocese by 27 June 1621, the date of a testimonial letter in favour of a society of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Cashel (begun by the Jesuits some years before) issued by his vicar general, another Kearney – Daniel, not David.⁸ The Archbishop was still there on 30 September 1618, when he wrote a letter to the acting head of the Jesuits in Rome; but by 31 December of that year it was being rumoured that he had left for Rome – a difficult thing to do, for the ports were being closely watched for ecclesiastics leaving or





The present-day view of the east facade of Holy Cross Abbey Church. – Photo copyright W. J. Hayes.

returning. Kearney was certainly absent by 25 September 1622 when the bishops-elect of Émly and Limerick (Maurice Hurley and Richard Arthur), whom he had left in charge of his archdiocese, wrote to John Roche in Rome about the possibility of their being consecrated by David Rothe of Ossory, the only bishop available.

In May 1623 when the papal letter was written, the four archbishops of Armagh (Lombard), Cashel (Kearney), Dublin (Eugene Matthews) and Tuam (Florence Conry, O.F.M.) were on the continent. So too, probably, was the new Bishop of Cork/Cloyne (William Tirry), who had been consecrated in Brussels on 4 April; and apart from Rothe, the only other bishop in Ireland was probably the recently returned Thomas Dease of Meath, who had been consecrated near Paris in May 1622 and had set out for Ireland in the following October. There were two bishops-elect (mentioned above), and seven dioceses without a named vicar apostolic.⁵ It is thought that Archbishop Kearney went first to Rome, then to Spain, and on his way home to Ireland died at Bonlieu near Bordeaux on 14 August 1624.¹⁰

It seems that the relic which was said to have been stolen could have been one of two associated with the abbey of Holy Cross. According to the story handed down, one was presented by the traditionally accepted founder, Domhnall Mor Ó Briain, whose grandfather had received it from Pope Paschal II; and the other by an English queen named Eleanor (there were three), or Isabella, the widow of King John. The relic may have been taken from a large portion of the Cross brought back from the Holy Land by Richard Coeur-de-Lion.

There were also other relics of the True Cross mentioned after the dissolution of the abbey in 1538. Fr Malachy Hartry gives a drawing of the Holy Cross relic as he knew it, a piece of wood, several inches high with two crossbars. Just such a relic is now in the Ursuline convent in Cork, and its provenance can be traced back to the fervent Catholic, Walter Butler of Kilkash, the eleventh Earl of Ormond (1569-1633); but its connection with the abbey of Holy Cross is disputed.¹¹



Wadding and Comerford

There remains the question of how this possibly unique papal document came to be among the Wadding papers. Perhaps it was with some of Archbishop Lombard's papers that reached Luke Wadding in St. Isidore's. Lombard, the Primate of Ireland and therefore the principal addressee, probably received it in the name of the hierarchy. Given the persecution in Ireland and the dearth of bishops there in May 1623, he may have postponed sending the original letter. Presumably it would have been sent to Cashel first; but the archbishop was absent, and then he died in 1624.

If the relic was back in use by the middle of June 1623 (see above), Lombard may have thought that he need not send it immediately. He died at Rome in 1625, and Luke Wadding (a relative of his) was later asked by Bishop David Rothe of Ossory, who had been Lombard's secretary and then his Vice-Primate in Ireland, to keep an eye out for any papers he may have left. Because of that, the papal letter could have found its way into Wadding's papers; and its existence could have remained unknown to Fr Malachy Hartry when he was gathering material for his *Triumphalia Chronologica*.

However, it seems that copies were made. Fr Patrick Comerford, OSA, later Bishop of Waterford & Lismore (1629-52), made an interesting reference to the letter in a work that he was writing in the 1620s but that was not printed until 1644: 'What shall I say to those that detain holy Images, and Reliques, and put them into the custodie of clownes... let them look upon the late Breve of the Pope Gregory the XV sub annulo Piscatoris, Anno 1623, 19 Maii; which beginneth, Manus impias caelo infert, and directed to the Archbishops and Bishops of Ireland.'

In fact, the papal brief or letter begins (after the salutation) with the words "Thesaurus caelestis benedictionis sacrae Reliquiae sunt;" the words Comerford quotes are at the beginning of the fourth sentence.¹² His scathing reference to persons who "detain" relics and give them to "clowns" for safe keeping is revealing. He seems to have had a particular case in mind; if that was the Holy Cross affair, he does not call it a robbery; but he does not, either, think much of the person or persons involved in it. Whether or not Malachy Hartry knew about the letter (through a copy, perhaps) or about the robbery itself we cannot yet be certain.

The Text

(Punctuation has been modernised, the ampersand (&) changed to "et", and "Fraternitates Vestrae" given as "my Brothers".)

Venerabilibus fratribus Archiepiscopis et Episcopis Hiberniae,
necnon dilectis filiis Vicariis Apostolica
auctoritate ibidem constitutis.
GREGORIUS PAPA XV

Venerabiles Fratres et dilecti filii salutem, etc. Thesaurus caelestis benedictionis sacrae Reliquiae sunt, quas desiderabiles super aurum et lapidem pretiosum Catholica Ecclesia possidet & veneratur. Proin ea templa quae ejusmodi divitiis Divina liberalitas locupletavit, cuilibet aerario sunt anteferenda quamvis congestis utriusque Orbis opibus referciatur. Quare



ut sapienter legum autoritas publicas pecunias gravium poenarum terrore contra sceleratorum latrocinia munivit, ita fas est eam caelestis Regni supellectilem contra sacrilegorum rapinas Canonum minis et Praesulum excubiis custodiri. Manus enim impias caelo infert et populatur Sanctuarium Dei omnipotentis, qui vel insidiosae vel violenter Catholicis aris sacrosanctas Reliquias aufert. Id autem dolemus in Hibernia accidisse Monasterio Sanctae Crucis Ordinis Cistenciensis in dioecesi Cassellensi. C[um] enim ibi particula Sanctae Crucis servaretur, quae assiduis colebatur fidelium elemosynis, audivim[us] eam ab Okearneo quodam sublatam esse, ut Catholicorum oblationes, quae sunt patrimonium Christi et pretium peccatorum, in propriam domum derivaret in suamque utilitatem converter(et). Id vero quam iniquum sit et non ferendum, vident Fraternalitates Vestrae. Neque enim instrum(en)tum humanae redemptionis par est fieri avarae rapacitatis praedam. Quare providendum est ne (eo)dem ligno diabolus uti possit ad animas decipiendas, quod Servator noster elegit ad ejus caput c(on)terendum. Porro autem ne res sacrae iniusto quaestui servientes fiant opprobrium, et deris(um) eis qui oderunt nos. Monemus ego Fraternalitates Vestras ut quoscumque sacraum Reliquiarum et praecipue illius particulae usurpatores tanti sacrilegii dedecore liberandos quamprimum curetis: tum etiam ut Ecclesiasticarum censuram formidine eos ad restitutionem cogatis: omnino date operam ut in domo Domini diligentissimi Patres-familias et vigilantes sacrarum opum custodes habeamini. Caeterum Fraternalitatibus Vestris Pontificium patrocinium pollicemur, tum etiam hortamur ut cum vos in istis haeresum triumphantium propugnaculis Pater misericordiarum selegerit haereditatem sibi, dignos vos tanto Divinae clementiae beneficio praebatis, fidemque ac pietatem vestram Angelis, hominibusque approbetis. Neque enim labores ac sollicitudines vestras exigua praemia manent, scilicet populorum salus, Divini nominis gloria et caelestis beatitudinis immortalitas. Tantarum laudum ut non solum cupidi sed etiam compotes sitis, assiduis precibus a Deo flagitabimus, ac Fraternalitatibus Vestris Apostolicam benedictionem peramanter impartimur. Datum Romae apud Sanctam Mariam Maiorem sub annulo Piscatoris die xix Maii MDCXXIII Pontificatus Nostri Anno Tertio.

Ioannes Ciampolus.

Romae, Ex Typographia Reverendae Camerae Apostolicae. M.DCXXIII.
Eiusdem? Camerae Apostolicae notarius (seal)

(signature) Sanetes Floridus car—s?

Translation

Sacred relics are a treasury of heavenly blessings, more to be desired than gold or precious stone, that the Catholic Church possesses and venerates. Likewise, those churches that have been enriched by the divine generosity with such wealth, are to be preferred to any treasure-house, however filled with the piled up riches of both hemispheres. Therefore, just as the legal authority wisely uses the dread of severe penalties to defend public monies against robbery by evil-doers, so too it is right to protect the property of the heavenly kingdom from pillage at the hands of the sacrilegious by the threat of canon law and the watchfulness of prelates. Those who take sacred relics by insidious or violent means from Catholic altars raise impious hands



against heaven and plunder the sanctuary of the omnipotent God. And indeed that is what has happened in Ireland to the monastery of Holy Cross belonging to the Cistercian order in the diocese of Cashel. For a fragment of the Holy Cross was preserved there, for which the faithful frequently brought alms, and which, we have heard, a certain person named O’Kearney has taken away, so that he might divert into his own house the offerings of the Catholics, which are the patrimony of Christ and a price paid for sin, and make use of them himself. You can see, my Brothers, that such an evil cannot be tolerated. Neither is it right that the instrument of human redemption [the Holy Cross of Christ] should become the prey of greed and rapacity. Wherefore you must guard against the devil using, for the deceiving of souls, the same wood [cross] that our Saviour chose to crush his head; and see moreover, that holy things, used to gain an unjust advantage, do not become a scandal and laughing-stock to those who hate us. We advise you therefore, my Brothers, to see to it that all usurpers of holy relics, and in particular of those fragments [of the Cross], be extricated from the shame of such a sacrilege as soon as possible; and likewise that you urge them through fear of the ecclesiastical censures to make restitution. Take the greatest care that in the house of God you are found to be most diligent householders and the watchful guardians of the holy service. For the rest, to you, my Brothers, we promise the pontifical patronage; and we encourage you who have been chosen by the Father of mercies for his own inheritance in these battles with heresies triumphant, to show yourselves worthy of such a favour of the divine clemency, and prove your faith and dutifulness to angels and mankind. For, no small rewards await your labours and solicitude, that is, the salvation of the people, the glory of the divine name, and an immortal life of heavenly blessings. That you may not only desire such glories but also come to possess them, we will earnestly plead in assiduous prayer to God; and we very lovingly impart to you, my Brothers, the apostolic blessing.

FOOTNOTES

1. Franciscan Library, Killiney (F.L.K.) MSS D3, p. 281. Since the letter does not appear under Pope Gregory XV in the *Bullarium Romanum*, xii (Turin, 1867), it may be an unique document.
2. Not the same as the coat-of-arms for Gregory XV in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vii (New York, 1913), 5.
3. His *Triumphalia Chronologica Monasterii Sanctae Crucis in Hibernia* was edited, together with his *De Cisterciensium Hibernorum Viris Illustribus*, by Denis Murphy, S.J., Dublin, 1891; see pp. lxx-lxxi for Hartry. The original manuscript is in St. Patrick’s College, Thurles. Hartry’s illustrated title-page has, at the bottom, a gruesome scene: eight pairs of bleeding hands grasping a tree (that bears the text of the title), and four robbers with blood streaming from their wrists staggering under it. Laurence F. Renehan, *Collections on Irish Church History*, ed. Daniel McCarthy, i (Dublin 1861), 269, mistakenly says the hands are supporting the tree; but Hartry gives the legend of the robbers resisting the miraculous tree and having their hands cut off by the abbey’s reputed founder, Domhnall Ó Briain. The eight hands (*ocht lamha* in Irish) were supposed to refer to the abbey’s old name, Ochterlamhan (pp. 26-31). Woghterlaun is the name on a chalice made for the Lady chapel at Holy Cross abbey in 1620; J. J. Buckley, *Some Irish Altar Plate* (Dublin, 1943), p. 40; perhaps Uachtar Leamhain (Upper Leamhain), as distinct from another abbey south of it, also on the R. Suir, Inis Leamhnachta (Inislounacht or the Abbey of the Suir on “New Milk Island”); see Aubrey Gwynn and R. Neville Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses Ireland* (London, 1970), 468, 478; Edmund Hogan, S.J., *Onomasticon Goedelicum* (Dublin, 1910), 659, has Uachtar Lamand and Mainistir Uachtair. The title of Hartry’s work incorporated a common expression, ‘Triumphus crucis’, the triumph of the Cross, well known from Savonarola’s *Il Trionfo della Croce* (Florence, 1498), which was translated into Irish as *Buaidh na Naomhchroiche* and prepared for the press in 1650 by Bonaventure O’Connor, O.F.M., but was not published until 1972, when it was edited by Pádraig Ó Súilleabhain, O.F.M.



4. "Twelve days after the death of Paul V, that is, on the 9 February 1621, Alessandro Ludovisi was elected Pope; he was a cardinal priest with the title of Santa Maria in Trastevere, and Archbishop of Bologna, where he had been born sixty-seven years before. He was crowned with the tiara six days later [inclusive, 14 February]. He was Pope for two years and five months ... He died on 8 July 1623, and was buried in the basilica of the Prince of Apostles, and from there his body was transferred to the church of Saint Ignatius"; *Bullarium Romanum*, xii (Turin, 1867), 483. He had studied under the Jesuits in Rome, and canonized St. Ignatius of Loyola in 1622; he died less than two months after his letter to Ireland was printed. The Jesuit missionary and author, Barnabas Kearney, was a brother of Archbishop David who himself was a friend of the leading Jesuits in Rome (see n. 9 below). Born at Cashel in 1565, Barnabas died there aged 75, in August 1640 – the year in which Fr Malachy Hartrey finished his *Triumphalia*, without mentioning the O'Kearney connected with the robbery of the relic, or the robbery itself; Oliver, *Collections towards illustrating the biography of the Scotch, English, and Irish members of the Society of Jesus* (London, 1845), 252-3. The Barnabas O'Kearney whose name was inscribed on a monument in Holy Cross abbey in 1646 by his parents can hardly have been the old Jesuit; see *Triumphalia*, lix.
5. John Daly in *Transactions of the Kilkenny Archaeological Society*, ii (1855), 378; Ballylusky, near Cashel. The County Cross of Tipperary may be a mistake for the County (or country) of the Holy Cross of Tipperary. William Camden, who died in 1623, the year of our papal letter, said that the region adjacent to Holy Cross abbey was popularly called "Comitatus Sanctae Crucis Tipperariensis"; Guilielmus Camdenus, *Brittania...*, epitome of 6th. edn. (Amsterdam, 1617), 641.
6. An Irish Doctor, "History of Holy Cross Abbey and its Relics – III", *The Catholic Bulletin*, xxix (Jul.-Dec. 1939), 673. This interesting series of five articles is in the same volume, pp. 547f, 600f, 669f, 724f, 792f. The author defends the view that the relic that was reported as stolen was the one then in the possession of the Ursuline nuns in Cork; see further on. Note should be taken of the three articles by John G. A. Prim and T. L. Cooke on the sedilia/tomb, and incidentally the relic, at Holy Cross abbey, *Trans. Kilk. Arch. Soc.*, i (Dublin, 1853), 51-83. William P. Burke, *History of Clonmel*, p. 434, in a footnote, says: "The O'Kearneys were hereditary custodians of the pastoral staff traditionally said to date to the time of St. Patrick ... Like the Myers of Armagh, they were endowed with lands for the maintenance of their high office". See also Thomas O'Carroll, PP, Clonoulty, "Holycross Abbey", in *Irish Eccles. Record*, ix (1873), 550-69, & x (1874), 28-39 and 531-2, for an interesting letter from Archbishop Kearney dated 10 July 1612 on the persecution expected in Ireland. A good account of the importance and use of the relic, and of the abbot's power to control its use by others, can readily be found in this Journal for 1991, pp. 170-80, in R. Gillespie, B. Cunningham's "Holy Cross Abbey and the Counter-Reformation in Tipperary". For the architecture and the Abbey lands, with many photographs, see Geraldine Carville, *The Heritage of Holy Cross* (Belfast, 1973); also Colmcille O'Conbhuidhe, OCSO, *The Cistercian Abbeys of Tipperary*, ed. F. Donovan (Dublin, 1999).
7. The original certificate for Roche's appointment is in F.L.K., MSS D3, 247; see G. D. Burtchaell and J. M. Rigg, *Report on Franciscan Manuscripts... Dublin* (Dublin, 1906), 73, which gives old pagination. It is signed by David Rothe, Bishop of Ossory and Vice-Primate of Ireland, the two bishops elect of Emly and Limerick, three vicars apostolic (Kildare, Ferns and Ross), and two vicars general (Armagh and Waterford/Lismore; Archbishop Lombard was administrator of the latter diocese just then).
8. Patrick Francis Moran, *Spicilegium Ossoriense. ...*, i (Dublin, 1874), 129. Renehan, *Collections*, 266, end: price on his head; 275, end: David instead of Daniel, V.G.
9. Renehan, op. cit., 264-5, 273-5 gives six letters from Kearney to his friends, the leading Jesuits, Acquaviva, Mutelleschi and another. For Kearney's going to Rome, see John Walsh's letter to Daniel Hegan in Rome, 31 December 1618, in F.L.K., MSS D3, 151; *Wadding Papers 1614-38*, ed. Brendan Jennings, O.F.M. (Dublin, 1953), 11; for the bishops in Ireland see B. Millett and C.J. Woods, "Roman Catholic Bishops from 1534" in *A New History of Ireland*, eds. T. W. Moody, F. X. Martin, F.J. Byrne, ix (Oxford, 1984), 333-91; for Bishop Dease see A. Cogan, *The Diocese of Meath*, ii (Dublin, 1867), 23.



10. Renehan, op. cit., 271-5.
11. *Triumphalia*, chapter x; *Catholic Bulletin*, xxix, 547-51, 600-06, 669-76. Part of the relic was recently donated to the restored church.
12. For Lombard's papers, see Ignatius Fennessy, OFM, "Patrick Roche of Kinsale and St. Patrick's College, Rome", *Jn. Cork Hist. & Arch. Soc.*, c (1995), 96-7. Lombard was about four years dead when Wadding was asked not to let his papers be lost. John Roche, then Bishop of Ferns, had also been contacted by Roche about Lombard's papers. For Comerford, see R.F.P.C. of the Order of St. Augustine & Doctor of Divinity, *The Inquisition of a Sermon... Waterford in February 1817. &c. by Robert Daborne* (Waterford, Thomas Bourke, 1644), 221.

