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In October 1646, five Irish Vincentian missionaries stepped onto the deck of a ship about to depart from the small port of Saint-Nazaire, situated at the mouth of the river Loire in Brittany.¹ Headed to either Cork or Waterford port, they were accompanied by the coadjutor bishop of Limerick, Edmund O’Dwyer (c.1590-1664), and a number of other clerics. A few months later, another confrere followed in their footsteps. This was a young man called Thadee Lee (1623-51/2), originally from Tough, about four kilometres north-west of Adare. At the age of twenty-three or four, Lee was the youngest and probably the least experienced Vincentian in this group, but three of his fellows were hardly much older.

It takes a leap for us to imagine the feelings of these men as they set sail from the harbour at Saint-Nazaire that day. Their departure and journey were documented with a mix of hope and concern by their Superior General Vincent de Paul (now Saint Vincent de Paul; 1581-1660), who was acutely aware of the uncertain futures they faced. Although they themselves have not left any record of their feelings, they must have been anxious about the risks ahead, while also being buoyed up by a sense of anticipation about their mission and what they might achieve. As events unfolded, their experiences included moments of high drama, brutality, and kindness that are alternatively sickening and heart-warming. Indeed, the young Thadee Lee would never return to France as he met a horrific death at the hands of Cromwellian soldiers. He and his fellow missionaries have lived on in the traditions of the Vincentian order, and in the local history of the Limerick region.

Vincent de Paul was a prolific letter-writer (over 3000 of his letters survive), and he passed on news of the men’s departure for Ireland in many of the letters that he sent in late October 1646. By way of explanation, he said that he ‘had been pressured about this both by Rome and by the prelates of [Ireland].’ To understand the enthusiasm of the hierarchy, the journey must be set within the wider political and religious context of events in Ireland and internationally. With the support of the papacy, a number of Irish bishops exiled in France had approached de Paul in the mid-1640s to request that he provide missionaries to serve in Ireland, where their own priests were under increasing strain. That they were so lay in the fact that Ireland was riven by war; after a rising in Ulster in 1641, the Catholic Confederation had been formed in 1643 with the goal of gaining political rights and religious tolerance for Catholics. In 1646, Limerick lay in the Confederation’s control, and it had recently welcomed the papal

¹ The Vincentians were known as the Lazarists or the clerics of the Congregation of the Mission in the seventeenth century, but have been commonly known as the Vincentians in Ireland since the nineteenth century.

nuncio, Giovanni Rinuccini (1592-1653). He was committed to the full restoration of the Catholic Church and faith in Ireland. So it seemed both necessary and opportune to look for a group of Irish clergy who were prepared to meet this purpose.

Since de Paul had founded them in 1625, the Vincentians had welcomed a number of Irishmen, some of whom were prepared to return on mission to Ireland. These men had been formed in the Vincentian calling: well-known in France as missionaries of charity, they specialised in carrying out missions for the rural poor as well as helping 'seminarians and priests to grow in knowledge and virtues, so they can be effective in their ministry.' They already carried out missions from November to June in France and had helped to establish a number of seminaries there. Now it was Ireland's turn to receive their assistance.

Of the six Irishmen who returned, two were from Limerick: the aforementioned Thadee Lee and the older George White (1608-c.68). Their companions were also natives of central and east Munster (born in the dioceses of Cashel, Emly and Cloyne). Even so, little in their training with the Vincentians could have prepared them for what they encountered as conditions in Ireland deteriorated. At first, it appears that they were well-protected and they busied themselves organising many missions in the dioceses of Limerick, Emly and Cashel, at which large crowds gathered to be catechised, confess and receive communion. This included one in the twelfth-century cathedral in the heart of Limerick city, which had temporarily been restored to Catholic possession. So confident were the missionaries of the future that they even expected to acquire the parish of Saint Munchin and establish a seminary adjacent to its church. But, by 1649, they were writing reports to their superior general which showed trouble was brewing and by the end of that year three had been forced to flee back to France. Worse was to come.

In 1651, the people of Limerick endured a dreadful outbreak of plague and a six-month siege before surrendering to the forces of Cromwell's (1599-1658) son-in-law, Henry Ireton (1611-51), in October. In France, a horrorstruck de Paul shared the shocking news that leading citizens had been executed and that dozens of clergy had been rounded up. Bishop O'Dwyer managed to escape, but the bishop of Emly, Terence O'Brien (1600-51), was executed and his head exposed on Saint John's Gate in the city, after he was discovered ministering to the sick.

For a time, nobody knew what had happened to the Vincentians, but eventually news came that they had managed to escape 'all disguised and mixed in with the soldiers from the town', before being forced to part ways in great fear and sorrow. They then had to throw themselves on the kindness of local people to survive. One man, Gerald Brin (c.1618-83), managed to reach relatives in Cashel who sheltered him, while another, Edmond Barry (1613-

80), headed to the mountains in Tipperary where he found refuge with ‘a charitable woman’ for two months. Eventually they managed to return to France, and it was only there that each realised that the other had not been hunted down and killed.

The protectors of these priests risked their lives to help them in a region that was crushed by Cromwellian troops. Their fellow missionary, Thadee Lee, was not so fortunate, and ultimately it was he who was to sacrifice himself after a further year of serving the beleaguered. At the time he was captured, he was with his mother, probably in Tough where he had been born nearly thirty years before. Before her eyes, soldiers ‘smashed his skull’, then violated his body by cutting ‘off his feet and hands.’ As a later Vincentian account put it, he suffered ‘an inhuman and barbarous death which served to show the priests what they might expect should they be caught.’ When word of his death eventually reached Paris, Vincent de Paul could not but be reminded of another young man who had died before his grief-stricken mother at the foot of the cross. ‘The blood of those martyrs shall not be forgotten before God’, he prayed, ‘but sooner or later it shall be the seed of new Christians.’

Further Reading

Patrick Boyle, *St. Vincent de Paul and the Vincentians in Ireland, Scotland and England, AD. 1638-1909* (London 1909).

Alison Forrestal, ‘Irish Entrants to the Congregation of the Mission, 1625-60’. *Archivium Hibernicum*, 62 (2009), pp. 37-149.

Alison Forrestal, *Vincent de Paul, the Lazarist Mission, and French Catholic Reform* (Oxford 2017).