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Title	The Catholic reformation in seventeenth-century Ireland: Vincent de Paul's Missionaries in Munster
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Publication Date	2012
Publication information	Forrestal, Alison. (2012). The Catholic Reformation in Seventeenth-Century Ireland: Vincent de Paul's Missionaries in Munster. In Salvador Ryan & Brendan Leahy (Eds.), Treasures of Irish Christianity. Dublin: Veritas.
Publisher	Veritas
Link to publisher's version	http://www.veritasbooksonline.com/treasures-of-irish-christianity.html
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/6489

The Catholic Reformation in Seventeenth-Century Ireland: Vincent de Paul's Missionaries in Munster

‘You have given yourself to God to stand firm in the country in which you are now, preferring to risk death rather than fail to assist your neighbour, in the midst of dangers.’

By the time that the superior general of the Congregation of the Mission (Vincentians), Vincent de Paul dispatched this message of encouragement and praise from Paris to his confrere Gerard Brin in Ireland in April 1650, King Charles I had been beheaded, an English commonwealth had been established without a king or house of lords, and Oliver Cromwell, had arrived in Ireland (August 1649). Cromwell's immediate task was to reconquer Ireland, unsettled by war since the Ulster Rising in 1641, and to secure it against future rebellion. Until his departure from Ireland in May 1650, he tackled the military resistance of royalists and the Catholic Confederate army, and implemented a policy of confiscation and resettlement of lands held by Catholic rebels. By the end of 1650, only Connaught held out against parliamentary troops, and in April 1653 the last of the royalist forces surrendered in Cavan. War was accompanied by social and economic destruction, most notably in urban areas such as Limerick, whose population endured a dreadful outbreak of plague and a six month siege before surrendering to the forces of Cromwell's son-in-law, Henry Ireton, in October 1651.

In the midst of this turmoil, five Irish priests and clerics, including Gerard Brin, a native of Cashel diocese, represented the Congregation of the Mission in south-west Ireland, along with two or three French colleagues. The Irish of the cohort all originated from Munster, and their familiarity with the region meant that it was there that they ministered principally after they left Paris in October 1646. In the dioceses of Limerick, Cashel, and Emly, they carried out preaching and catechism, and offered sacramental care, each key elements of the ministry to which their association was dedicated; on its foundation 1625, de Paul dedicated the Congregation of the Mission to the evangelization of the rural Catholic poor, and it became representative of a massive recovery of Catholic institutions and piety after the Council of Trent (1545-63) as its membership grew under his stewardship. To 1660, when de Paul died, twenty-three or perhaps twenty-four Irish clerics joined the Congregation, most having left Ireland to pursue their study for the priesthood on the continent.

De Paul's decision to send five of these men to Ireland in 1646 was more pressing than a basic desire to serve the rural poor, however. In the mid-1640s, he was approached by a number of Irish bishops exiled in France who requested that he provide missionaries to serve in Ireland, where their own priests were under increasing pressure to provide pastoral services. The Congregation missionaries encountered similar troubles, and most returned to France within two years of their arrival because of the dangers that they encountered, while a third died in Ireland in 1649; in one of his infrequent reports to their superior general in Paris, Brin reported that after the siege of Limerick was broken, he and his confrere, Edmond Barry, originally from the diocese of Cloyne, left the city ‘with one hundred or one hundred and twenty priests and monks, all disguised and mixed in with the soldiers from the town, who left the day the enemy was supposed to enter it.’ Fearing for their lives, they parted in order to escape; Brin headed to his home place in Cashel before boarding a ship to France, while Barry sought refuge in the mountains. As missionaries in Ireland often did, he relied on the charity of a local Catholic woman for two months before also returning to France. Others were not so fortunate: amongst the citizens excluded by name from protection of life and property when Limerick capitulated was the bishop of Emly, Terence O'Brien, who was executed and his head exposed on Saint John's Gate in the city, after he was discovered ministering to the sick.

The first Vincentian mission to Ireland thus ended in failure in 1652, and it was not until the nineteenth century that the Vincentians took up permanent residence in Ireland. Isolated from their

superior in Paris, and often separated from their colleagues once they arrived in Ireland, de Paul's men were utterly reliant on the goodwill of local citizens to carry out their pastoral duties. Objectively judged, their mission had little hope of success, given the small number sent, and the treacherous conditions under which they operated. De Paul appears to have been persuaded to assist the Irish because of his personal loyalty to exiled Irish clergy, notwithstanding the risks inherent in this enterprise; indeed, he was convinced that the missionaries' exposure to danger and possibly death imitated the example of a suffering Christ; in the spirit of the Catholic Reformation, there was no more 'fruitful' or 'necessary mission' than that of assisting Catholic brethren in need.