

OUR ROMAN LETTER

(By "SCOTTUS.")

MONSIGNOR O'RIORDAN.

It is three and twenty years since the name of Dr. O'Riordan first came under my notice in anything like a conscious way. I then formed one of a group of some eight or ten young Irishmen, some of whom are now no more, while the others are severed by mount and stream and sea—and perhaps by other things as well. We were out to while away the morning hours amid the mournful olive groves decking the slopes of the Sabine Hills that look down on the city of Rome away in the dim distance and afford but poor shade from the scorching heat of an Italian summer sun. To fill up the hours that passed slowly enough, some of us had brought out books or papers, among the rest a copy of the current *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, which happened to contain an article signed by M. O'Riordan, D.D., D.Ph., D.C.L., on John Baptist de Rossi, the Columbus of the Catacombs, who had passed to his reward some time previously. As anything connected with the Catacombs could not but interest one living in Rome, I read the article; and as the reading of it naturally interested me in the writer of it, I asked one of my companions, a Limerick man, if he knew him. "To be sure I do," was the reply; "he was one of my professors in St. Munchin's, and many is the time I have heard him tell his class of the Catacombs and of the other wonders of Rome—in fact, I am afraid we often took advantage of his enthusiasm in this regard to set him going on some such theme when we were not well prepared with the day's work for his class and when any red herring drawn across the trail of business was a God-send to young schemers like us."

When next I heard his name in a way to be remembered, half a dozen years had passed, and I was then on the plains of Kildare. The *Leader*, which had been recently founded, had been slowly and perhaps painfully pursuing the unbeaten and difficult path of trying to make Irishmen think for themselves. It had not been long in existence when a series of trenchant articles began to appear in its columns over initials that were destined soon to become household words. In the course of a visit from a distinguished Irishman who had some share in floating the *Leader*, I asked if he knew who was M. O'R.; and he told me it was Dr. O'Riordan, of Limerick.

Two or three years later a prominent seminary professor, whom I happened to meet shortly before returning to Rome after the summer vacation, gave me his parting advice to buy two books which had just appeared and which he said were the most remarkable productions of the season, Father Tyrrell's *Lee Ordini* and Dr. O'Riordan's *Catholicity and Progress*. I do not know what he now thinks of the former; but I believe imperialistic concerns have since led him to moderate his enthusiasm about the latter.

It was All Saints' Day, 1905, when I met Dr. O'Riordan for the first time as he entered the Irish College to take up the position of president, to which he had been appointed a couple of months earlier. He was then in his 49th year, a man of medium height and robust build, with a distinctly Irish face, surmounted by a massive forehead crowned by a profusion of fair hair that had just begun to exchange its glossy texture for the more sober tints of middle age; and over all the peculiar shovel hat of Roman design and Irish make, which those who knew him well remember and to which he had tenaciously clung since his ordination in Rome more than 30 years before.

The head of a college may be and doubtless is a very interesting personage to the students under his charge; and after themselves there is no one who has it so much in his power to make them happy or the reverse. But while 50 students may very legitimately be interested in their own welfare or the reverse, the subject is not likely to interest the public at large, and one may doubt whether even the intelligent readers of these pages would thank me for wasting their time on the details of a college which in itself differs but little from thousands of colleges all over the world or from some dozens of colleges in Ireland. In any event, colleges live and move largely along traditional lines; and as these lines had been in formation in the college over which Dr. O'Riordan had come to preside for well nigh 300 years (it will celebrate the tercentenary of its foundation on January 1, 1928), they have had at least time enough to mature and become sufficiently fixed in the interval.

The great difference of public importance between colleges in Rome and colleges in Ireland is found in the fact that while collegiate rivalry or competition in Ireland is between college and college or between individual and individual, it is international in Rome, the students of

one national college being necessarily brought into competition with those of other national colleges; and the ecclesiastical world of Rome very naturally forms an estimate of a particular country according to the place taken by that country's college in the intellectual arena of the Eternal City, somewhat in the same way as the Rome of ancient days estimated a country's fighting qualities according to the prowess displayed by the gladiators and athletes it sent to make a Roman holiday on the floor of the Coliseum. The foundation on which that estimate is based may be mistaken, but it is there, and has to be reckoned with. Cardinal Franzelin, no mean judge, is said to be responsible for the statement more than 50 years ago that the Irish students he had come in contact with surpassed those of every other nation in intellectual fitness; and if owing to a variety of circumstances over which few had any real control less glorious days followed those of the Cardinal, it is not too much to say that subsequent to the revival of the Irish College in 1892 its students proved themselves second to none in the lecture halls they frequented. In this respect no higher praise can be given to Mgr. O'Riordan's rectorship than this, that during his time his college maintained or more than maintained the standard already reached in the years preceding his arrival.

Important as this aspect of the situation may be from a public or national point of view, it recedes into a very secondary place in comparison with another function the rector of the Irish College is often called on to discharge, not so much through any particular act of volition on his part, as through a set of circumstances which in one way or another takes him outside the quiet, calm atmosphere of college halls into the glare and sometimes the turmoil of public activity. For a thousand years, if not for a much longer period, it has been a matter of course or of necessity for dioceses or groups of dioceses or national churches to have an agent in Rome to transact routine business with the Roman Curia, promote the interests and generally to voice the views and wishes of the body he represents. I am not aware of any records concerning the existence of an Irish representative resident in Rome prior to the Anglo-Norman invasion; and from that date onward, almost for 500 years, I am afraid England took good care that none but an Englishman should represent or misrepresent Ireland, or speak of it to the good people of Rome, who cannot be severely blamed if they came to look on it as little more than a goose's nest perched out on the verge of England. The situation created by the Protestant Reformation and by the events arising out of it naturally brought about a change in this respect. Shortly after the accession of good Queen Elizabeth frequent mention is found of Irishmen coming to Rome in what may be called a representative capacity; and from that time on through weal and woe Ireland has had a place more or less well defined in the ecclesiastical solar system that revolves round the Vatican Mount. In the beginning indeed the Irish Constellation was sufficiently erratic, and often moved in the Spanish orbit; but towards the close of the sixteenth century something like stability began to attack to its course, particularly when Hugh O'Neill supported by the few Irish bishops then in Ireland constituted Dr. Lombard his representative at the Papal Court, a position he continued to hold, with varying fortunes after his elevation to the See of Armagh in 1600 down almost to the day of his death in 1625. In the next generation the work was done in the main by his relative and fellow Waterford man, the famous Franciscan Luke Wadding, assisted by other members of the Irish Franciscan house of St. Isidore's which Wadding had built just outside the Gardens of Sallust, as well as by other ecclesiastics, such as Dr. Roche, afterwards Bishop of Ferns, representing individual bishops or groups. Confederate and post-Cromwellian days saw a succession of representative Irishmen in Rome whose names are inscribed on the golden book of Irish history—Dr. O'Dwyer (afterwards Bishop of Limerick), Dr. Burgatt (afterwards Archbishop of Cashel), Dr. Brennan (afterwards Bishop of Waterford and subsequently Archbishop of Cashel), and for a brief time, Dr. Plunkett, whom we now know as the Martyred Primate of Armagh. The accession of James II. led to the Irish representation in Rome, passing largely into the hands of the Irish Dominicans who were his special pets, and who as long as the Stuart influence weighed like an incubus on the Church in Ireland, continued to speak in the name of our country. Nor did their influence cease with the final declension of the Pretenders, but it continued on under the Georges and all through the Veto days, with what success remains to be told some fine day or other.

The dawn of that high-sounding thing, Catholic Emancipation, and the new order brought about as a consequence of the supposed passing away of the penal days, gradually led to a consolidated hierarchy at home and a more definite line of representation in Rome which eventually

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