

“true men as we need them”

catholicism and the irish-american male

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“True men,” penned Father Bernard O’Reilly in 1878, “. . . combine in their lives so many heroic and Godlike features, that, although living in the turmoil of worldly affairs, they would be hailed as Saints by the holiest of priests or the most unworthy of ascetics.” Father O’Reilly, an immigrant from County Mayo, Ireland, and professor of Rhetoric at St. John’s College in New York echoed the sentiments of many Catholic writers. During the last three decades of the nineteenth century, a loose coalition of Catholic clergy, fiction writers and social critics sought to define and promote Catholic notions of masculinity. Through parish bulletins, advice books, pulpit sermons, sodality activities, novels and newspapers they created an image of the Catholic “true man.”¹

The creators of this late nineteenth-century Catholic culture were middle-class Irish men and women who had either immigrated to America or were children of immigrants. Some, like novelist Mary Sadlier, came from prosperous Irish families and carved themselves a place in the literary circles of the New World. Writers such as Sadlier, John McElgun, Con O’Leary and Maurice Egan had no theological training, but instead were astute observers of Irish-American Catholic life. Priests and their parish publications, however, were not only familiar with traditional Catholic thought, but also with advice literatures from France and England. While these reformers might differ on controversial Catholic issues of the time—

parochial schools, assimilation, labor unions—their views on manhood show a marked similarity.

Catholic social critics targeted their writing to an Irish community living in the major eastcoast cities of Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore. From the 1840s onwards, the Irish arriving in America were young, single, poor and unused to urban life. Their life of poverty in the New World included the social problems of alcoholism, violence, family abandonment and insanity. In the 1850s, Irish crime in New York exceeded by five times that of the native and German immigrant populations. A clannish group who suspected leaders of any kind, the mid-century immigrants continued the Irish patterns of same-sex bonding, high age at marriage and permanent celibacy. The American Catholic church struggled to minister to the number of arriving immigrants. In New York City during the 1840s the priest-to-people ratio was 1 to 4500 and in the western territories it grew to 1 to 7000. With little knowledge of Catholic tradition and a history of British religious persecution, the Irish were infrequent churchgoers and practiced a folk religion their clergy thought of as superstitious. They presented overwhelming social and religious problems to the American Catholic hierarchy.²

In a remarkably short period of time, however, the American Catholic church gained the attention of the Irish immigrants and integrated them into its structure. Benefiting from the “devotional revolution” which Irish bishops waged after the Famine to capture and refine the commitments of their people and the efforts of American bishops such as John Hughes of New York, American Catholicism took on a decidedly Irish flavor. By the closing decades of the century about half of the bishops were of Irish background and only four out of seventeen cardinals had not been Irish. The number of Irish priests and sisters increased rapidly, parishes raised funds to build churches, and in 1884 a mandatory parochial school system began. Although the newly arrived Irish continued to face the poverty of shanty towns and slums, by the end of the century an increasing number of Irish Americans took mass transportation to their suburban homes, read popular Irish-American literature and supported their local parish. We must not, however, overestimate this tentative entrance into the American middle class. The depressions of 1873-78 and 1893-97 and the rise of anti-Irish sentiments in the 1890s threatened the precarious position some Irish Americans achieved. The steady flow of Irish immigrants at the end of the century continued to demand attention, but now the church possessed the resources to minister to their religious and social needs.³

Catholic attempts to define masculinity accompanied a general move by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Americans to expound on the meaning of manhood. Historian Anthony Rotundo terms this late nineteenth-century concern a “dramatic shift of masculine ideals” and Joe Dubbert goes so far as to call it a “severe sociosexual wrench” which had “profound effects upon the personal attitudes of many men.” As with most historians, Rotundo and Dubbert limit their studies to Protestant, middle-class men, working in East Coast cities. The Victorian need to

dictate appropriate male behavior by creating the “true man” was not, however, limited to middle-class WASP culture. By constructing and promoting an ideal of masculinity, Catholic reformers hoped to curb disruptive and unsocial tendencies of Irish-American men. Rather than merely condemning dysfunctional activities, reformers asked Irish-American men to involve themselves in other recreations, uphold different values and support alternative institutions. Catholic efforts at describing what it meant to be “manly” served as one aspect of an over-all program to strengthen the American church and to create an enduring Catholic culture.⁴

Unwinding the meaning of manhood in Irish-American society is a difficult task. By focusing on parish life—an area which many Catholic historians ignore—research on Catholic education, the role of priests as models of masculinity and Irish urban folklore is left to other scholars. It must also be clear that Catholic reformers addressed problems in male behavior which *they* perceived as problematic. Other scholars must decide how accurate the reformers were in portraying the fabric of Irish-American masculinity and whether Irish-American men actually changed their behavior. This study begins this process by identifying three major conceptual and behavioral *ideals* which Catholic culture promoted as characteristics of the “true man”: regular participation in Catholic rituals and associations, leadership in domestic affairs and moderation in economic ambitions.

the realignment of religious activities

A story was told of an Irishman who used to say to his wife, “Mary, go to church and pray for us both.” One night the man dreamed that when he and his wife got to the gates of heaven St. Peter said, “Mary, go in for both.” As one parish calendar⁵ explained, the man awoke, and made “up his mind it was time for him to become a Christian on his own account.” Although we might think of the nineteenth-century Irish as inveterate churchgoers, it was only after years of revivals, vigorous church construction and Catholic cultural efforts in Ireland and the New World that the Irish became regular church participants. Religious devotion in pre-Famine Ireland centered around spurts of religious enthusiasm such as pilgrimages to holy wells and the everyday mixing of Catholicism with what the educated clergy saw as pagan superstitions. Regular participation in the sacraments and the mastery of basic Catholic tenets were Counter-Reformation goals unattainable until the latter half of the nineteenth century in both Ireland and America. After the Famine in the 1850s, bishops first in Ireland and then in America tightened clerical discipline, replaced traditional folk customs with popular devotions to the Sacred Heart and Mary and condemned drunkenness and the occasions which encouraged it. By 1900, according to Sheridan Gilley, the most astonishing change had come in the level of church-going: “Irish Catholics had

become what they had never been before 1850, the most 'practising' Catholics in the world.'⁶

The expectation of regular religious participation by men was a constant concern for Catholic reformers. In 1896 one Baltimore critic wondered why "the men crowd in the rear and vestibule of the church?" A Philadelphia parish calendar remarked that if "hanging around the door" struggling for "soft spots in the walls and pillars whereon to lean [a] weary shoulder" was not bad enough, consider the type of man who would "dive out at the Communion to improve the shining hour [by] smoking cigarettes in the Square?" *St. Agatha's Parish Kalendar* speculated that "you would fancy they were curious Protestants who dropped into the church and were afraid to take a seat lest they might stick to it and be made Catholics by force." It was not enough that Irish women attended mass and supported the church. Patriarchal Catholicism measured its health by the conduct of its male members. Faced with parishes made up of an unusually large number of single men not under the influence of mother or wife, priests and lay critics assumed the role of both educating and regulating the behavior of young Irish men.⁷

Catholic literature produced by and directed toward the Irish insisted that attendance at mass was not only a proper religious activity, it was a manly activity. In Mary Sadlier's novel *Con O'Regan: or, Emigrant Life* the fictional hero valiantly goes to mass, in spite of ridicule that "he ought to put on petticoats at once." James O'Rourke, a character from an 1873 novel by John McElgun, walks all Saturday night to get to a church for Sunday morning mass. A 1911 review of *Frequent Communion for Busy Men* explained that it is a mistaken idea to think that "to receive often the Holy Eucharist one must be a woman." Regular religious participation was not a mark of femininity, but a sure sign of manhood. "A young man should go to church like a gentleman," chided an 1897 parish calendar, "there is an air of respectability and good breeding about such a man that wins him the good word and good will of others and that helps him, too, materially in his life work, whatever it may be."⁸

Writers who detected a "feminized" American Protestantism eagerly sought to draw a distinction between the manly Catholic and the effeminate Protestant. Con O'Leary contrived a colorful portrait of the Reverend Ebenezer Sookes; "a Methodist, a Revivalist, a Baptist" whose sole field of missionary labor consisted of "gliding here and there to nice little evening parties, shaking hands—or, more properly speaking, finger tips—with ladies whose age forbade the custom of whole-hand shaking." This unfortunate Protestant antithesis to Catholic masculinity had to drink a little sherry and claret occasionally in order to elevate "whatever there was of manhood in his composition to thought of heroic work and conversion of sinners." Fighting a social climate where women were seen as innately more religious than men, Catholic devotions which stressed God's nurturing love, and a Catholic parish life often funded by women, Catholic reformers struggled to convince the Irish male that it was masculine to be involved in the church.⁹

To facilitate the “masculinization” of Catholicism, parishes set aside special times for male confession and communion. On busy Friday and Saturday evenings, some New York parishes established a type of “express lane” service for male-only confessions. At St. Ignatius in Baltimore men attended a special communion service every third Sunday, thus giving a “forceful example” to other men and having for themselves the “comforting assurance that [they are] safeguarding [their] own souls and helping in the apostolic work of saving [the] souls of [their] fellowmen.” Their parish calendar boldly stated that those who attended men’s masses were “men of affairs, men of business, men of means, men of all classes.” A convenient 8:30 a.m. weekday mass also allowed men to stop on their way to work so that “their business will be all the better for hearing Mass.” Thus the clergy not only associated religious participation with masculinity, they worked hard to facilitate male involvement.¹⁰

A more lay-controlled setting for learning the principles of manhood flourished in parish sodalities as well as temperance and benevolent societies. Although similar organizations date from the Counter Reformation, in the nineteenth century much parish life revolved around sodality and society activities. The Young Men’s Sodality of St. Francis Xavier’s church sought to form “habits of order and regularity” among its members, promote the “acquisition of good friends,” encourage receiving the Sacraments of Penance and Holy Eucharist and thus help to secure “a better chance of a good death.” Men and boys had a myriad of options: the Sodality of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the League of the Sacred Heart, the Holy Name Society (to prevent cursing and swearing), the Boys of the Infant Jesus Sodality, the Holy Angels, the Immaculate Conception Society, or the St. Aloysius Sodality. “Everyone in the parish ought to belong to one at least of our societies,” reasoned a parish calendar, “nowadays men band together in societies for mutual help and advancement.” Since most sodalities were sex-segregated they were excellent channels to encourage gender-specific behavior among their members.¹¹

Although parish priests encouraged men to join religious societies and sodalities, they also fostered lay-organized temperance and benevolent associations. Beginning after the Civil War and flourishing in the late 1870s, these societies provided social security for workers on a local level. For between fifty cents and a dollar per month, a man (or in some cases working women) could join a society and receive three dollars a week in sickness or disability insurance, be assured that sixty dollars would go to his widow upon his death, and if his wife died first to get thirty dollars compensation. The by-laws of these societies summed up what Catholic culture wanted men to do—to stop drinking and prevent drinking in others, to go to communion regularly in a group four times a year and to be a Catholic of “good moral standing.” Members of the societies sought to “elevate our characters as husbands, fathers, sons and brothers.”¹²

Explicitly both insurance *and* temperance associations, it was no coincidence that parish insurance societies upheld temperance causes. The Irish movement to stop drinking, begun in 1838 by the Capuchin Friar

Theobald Matthew, quickly spread to the United States. Temperance organizations included the Confraternity of the Sacred Thirst, the Catholic Total Abstinence Union of America, and various cadet societies for boys and auxiliaries for women. Unlike its Protestant counterpart, temperance for Catholics was very much a male affair—organized and run by men and directed against male drinking. The man who abstained from drink cultivated true manhood by being orderly in his religious observances—reciting *daily* certain prayers, going to mass *monthly* with the group. He took responsibility for his and his family's future by not threatening their security by the folly of drink and his immortal soul's future by avoiding the occasions of sin. Finally, he placed himself under the guidance of Catholic clergy who served both as president and spiritual director of the local temperance union.

The consumption of alcohol, however, formed an intrinsic part of traditional Irish masculine culture. It eased social interaction, cemented peer bonds, established levels of prestige, oiled the laborer's work and erased the sting of poverty—if only for a few hours. By attacking the role of whiskey in an Irishman's life, the Catholic establishment threatened to pull the keystone from the arch which was traditional male culture. If a man could not go to the local shebeen for a drink, where would he go? If he could not drink with his buddies, then who would be his friends? If whiskey was taken from the wake, then how would the dead be mourned? If conversation and good times could not be facilitated by the liberating effect of alcohol, then how would one endure the vagaries of life?¹³

Catholic culture aspired to provide the alternative to the vacuum left by a drink-free Irish-American culture. Parish societies, benevolent associations and home life were the proper places for social interaction. The bawdy and riotous activities of the drunkard should be replaced by "rational and improving entertainments, in which all exaggeration is avoided and literary and artistic taste cultivated." The scorn of poverty which alcohol produced would be eliminated as men kept themselves thoroughly occupied, for "idleness teaches much evil; no amount of resolution will hold out against this." With the saloon erased from the Irish-America environment the temperate true man would depend almost entirely on the Catholic establishment to provide him everything from recreation to spiritual sustenance. Likewise, Catholic reforms hoped that Catholic culture would successfully rival other sources of male bonding: Irish nationalist groups, street gangs, labor unions, secret societies and Democratic politics.¹⁴

By the end of the century, apprehensive Catholics feared that if boys were not following their fathers into the pubs, they were being lured into the Protestant enclave of the YMCA. As more Irish-American men aspired to join the middle class, some men rejected the working-class pubs in lieu of the social club. Catholic men busied themselves renovating houses into clubs containing billiard, chess and card rooms, formal parlors, a gymnasium and bowling alley, library and reading rooms, classrooms and a place to smoke. Although often under the guidance of a priest, such clubs

reflected the commitments of lay men. Using the same rhetoric to describe their clubs as Protestant reformers did, Catholic clubs directed Irish men into acceptable middle-class modes of competition. Controlled athletics provided a “safety-valve for the animal spirit within him” and the Catholic Athletic League hoped to “cultivate a clean soul with a healthy body.” Sports, debates and literary exercises saved Catholic young men “from pernicious influences around them.” Away from the pub, the pure but stifling home and the Protestant social club, Catholic men would discover their manhood. “Be always Christian men,” Archbishop Ryan told the 1891 Catholic Young Men’s National Union convention, “Be truly Catholic American men. Always true to your religion, always true to your manhood, always true to your country.”¹⁵

But which country? In 1891 the new quarters of New York’s Catholic Club not only contained the typical billard and reception rooms, it also owned a library complete with “Gaelic and Irish books.” Men’s clubs, which saw themselves as establishments where “intelligent Catholic gentlemen can meet in refined social intercourse,” encouraged their members not to bring Irish politics into the clubs. In 1890 the Ancient Order of the Hibernians introduced literary exercises into their division meetings and began funding libraries and reading rooms. Irish identity no longer solely meant involvement in the male domain of politics. Men could assert their national spirit through the arts, traditional Irish sports and the study of Gaelic.¹⁶

A quintessential Irish-American public expression—the St. Patrick’s Day parade—aptly summarizes this changing relationship between religion, ethnicity and masculine behavior. Traditional St. Patrick’s Day parades held in American cities expressed Old World notions of masculine attitudes toward religion and society. The parades demonstrated the traditional Irish male preference for infrequent enthusiastic displays of piety and patriotism, ritualized expressions of male bonding and a willingness to accept poverty tomorrow for a grand time today. The “patterns” of religious pilgrimages to holy wells familiar in Ireland and condemned as “an annual scene of confusion, drunkenness and debauchery, bearing a greater resemblance to a fair than an assembly for the purpose of devotion” was the parade’s Irish cousin. Like patterns, the St. Patrick celebrations were organized by laymen, not the clergy. Few official Catholic rituals were connected with them, only pietistic expressions. The festivities included drinking, flourishes of colorfully dressed marchers, speeches and general rabble-rousing. A tremendous amount of money was spent on the parade itself, and men usually lost a day’s pay by attending the festivities.¹⁷

By tracing the reports of St. Patrick’s Day parades in the Boston *Pilot*, a prominent Irish-American Catholic newspaper, we can see a movement toward redefining such expressions of masculinity. In 1875 “Veritas” wrote a letter to the *Pilot* stating that the usual public celebration of St. Patrick’s day should be dispensed with “and that the members of these societies [who made up the marchers] contribute the amount it would cost

them for the street parade to pay off the debt of this [a hospital] charitable institution.” More appropriate observances of the saint’s day would be attending mass and perhaps an evening lecture. Boston alone would spend over \$50,000 for the parade and “Veritas” asked why men should leave their work and “spend the day in a manner that brings disgrace on their faith and their country?”¹⁸

Others agreed. Men “covered all over with tinsel and green ribbon” could not impress anyone. Temperance people complained that dinners, carousing and toasts over the “flowing bowl” were hardly in the spirit of the day. Parades, banners, trappings and music drained the purses of the poor, and “Spartan virtues” were more properly Christian virtues. Societies who marched would be better off with “a course of economy, that will largely redound to their benefit.” Why not spend the money on Catholic colonization efforts in the West? “Why not go to work like the Germans, and build some hall where . . . meetings, fairs, balls, concerts, lectures [can be held] and not be obliged to patronize places where the sacred name of Jesus is blasphemed, and your religion and nationality sneered at and despised?” Men who paraded were not truly religious, “their enthusiasm lasts [only] during the day.” Another anonymous writer summed it up: “Have Irishmen and Catholics of Boston any very weighty reasons why they should be so anxious to parade their nationality and religion?”¹⁹

The criticism harmonized well with the changing views of appropriate masculine behavior and therefore did not fall on deaf ears. The Immaculate Conception Temperance Society from Lowell, MA “voted to dispense with music [on] St. Patrick’s Day and to divide the \$100 thus saved . . . [between] St. Peter’s Orphan Asylum and . . . a window in the new Church.” St. Catherine’s church in Ontario, MA had a parade, but only teetotallers were allowed to participate. In New York City the St. James Temperance Union refused to march, “the first time in twenty-five years.” While most of the major cities continued to have parades, in 1879 the *Pilot* remarked that in Boston “the most marked feature of the celebration this year, even more than last, is the growing tendency to prefer indoor to outdoor demonstrations.” Boston dispensed entirely with the festivities in 1880 “and in their place were substituted entertainments and demonstrations, the proceeds of which are to be devoted to the alleviation of the sufferers by the famine in Ireland.” There were no Boston parades in 1881, 1882 and 1884. By 1885 Boston paraded “quietly” and Philadelphia “celebrated the day in quiet fashion with a lecture . . . and a dinner by the Hibernian society.” Parading resumed in some of the larger cities in the late 1890s, but towns like Lawrence, MA, Wilmington, DE, and Philadelphia still had no parade. Even the New York parade had quieted down.²⁰

Financial and political reasons certainly exist for the decline of St. Patrick’s Day parades, especially during the rise of anti-Catholic sentiments at the end of the century, but we must not overlook the religious and social motivations of the Irish-American community. Timothy Meagher,

in his insightful study of Irish parading in Worcester, Massachusetts, points out the importance of St. Patrick's Day for strengthening community solidarity and power. While he does not comment directly on the issue of Irish-American masculinity, Meager's study supports the argument that *shifts in attitudes towards the parade reflect the perceived need for a realignment of male behavior*. True men showed their religious spirit by orderly, regular mass attendance, membership in sodalities, societies and Catholic clubs and by involving the clergy in their organizations. The parade, like the Irish pattern, too often lead to "drinking and faction-fighting" debasing its religious origins. True men were future oriented and therefore concerned about how they spent their money (like the "prosperous German race"). They avoided "occasions of sin" and supported the church and their family. Finally, true men spent their free hours in "a rational and enjoyable manner," taking their entertainment from literary circles and friendly bowling matches, not from the brass bands, barouches and the fancy dress of the parading Knights of St. Patrick. No one should forget the great saint of Ireland, but his name was to be honored with masses, pious and learned talks and serious reflection.²¹

domesticity and masculinity

The discussion so far has centered on public expressions of masculine behavior, but an important element in the shaping of Irish-American men was the effort by Catholic culture to push men into the private sphere of the home. Much of traditional Irish male life took place outside of the home, in the fields and the pubs. In America, reformers hoped to replace these public spaces with parish meeting centers and Catholic social clubs. Yet the foundation of such public activities—in true Victorian style—was to be the home. Irish-American men, noted for their disinterest in marriage and the family, were encouraged to find a wife and to make a home. Catholic writers assumed that high rates of male celibacy only fueled the saloon and caused social instability. They strove to incorporate the large numbers of single men and women into the nuclear family structure which they perceived as the "nursery of the nation." By establishing and providing for a family, the Irish-American male exemplified his willingness to order and regulate his life, focus his attention on the future and recognize his religious responsibilities.²²

In a sermon on marriage frequently delivered from 1868 to 1887, Father Parsons told his male parishioners that "it is not necessary for you to keep on distrusting [marriage proposals] until hesitancy shall have become a part of your nature." He recalled the Holy Family at Nazereth where "no picture [was] so grand as that of Joseph in the domestic circle, laboring for the support of his family. . . ." A writer for *Our Parish Calendar* of Laurence, MA decided that "true, some wives are better than others, but almost any kind is better than none at all, and a good wife will help you to heaven." Marriage would provide men "twice the comfort and

happiness.” Most single male characters in Catholic novels, after various adventures, find their Irish sweethearts and marry.²³

Catholic culture urged men to marry and to make their homes “the image here below of the House of God on high.” Women must not have the sole responsibility for family life, while men wandered off with their buddies. Maurice Egan wrote in 1889 that there was a “wretched and utterly vile tradition” found more commonly “among people of Irish birth and descent than among others” which stipulated that “children should be brought up principally by their mothers.” This practice, Egan concluded, “works well with animals but not among men.” As head of the household, the manly father “is the honor and mainstay of his home” and his “kind and strong rule keeps his children in the path of duty.” Fathers were to help their wives and “not leave to the mother of your children the great and holy work of the preservation of purity in their souls.” The true man proved his character by raising sons who reflected his masculine virtues.²⁴

To enable men to take up their proper roles as leaders in the household, women must create a pleasant environment. Catholic writers urged women to maintain a “refined Catholic home,” where “quiet, order, gentleness and kindness are the guardian angel.” “Christian women,” Cardinal Gibbons preached in 1894, “when your husbands and sons turn to you in the evening after buffeting with the waves of the world, let them find in your homes a haven of rest. Do not pour into the bleeding wounds of their hearts the gall of bitter words, but rather the oil of gladness and consolation.” In the opinion of both clergy and lay reformers, men who faced cheerless and darkened homes could hardly be blamed for preferring male companionship to that of their family.²⁵

If the home was to rival the saloon as a place of comfort and recreation, then men needed to learn that mixed company had its positive benefits. The true man felt comfortable not only with his male friends. The hero of Maurice Egan’s novel *The Disappearance of John Longworthy* preferred the company of the women who played the piano and sang, rather than the company of their brother who drank sherry in his den and told old stories. *Our Parish Calendar* observed in 1899 that brothers and sisters attended church, went to entertainments and public places, but “not together, the girls with their own friends and the boys with theirs.” If boys were to learn to relate to women, they needed to start by talking with their sisters. One way of weakening the same-sex bonding of Irish-American men was to introduce brothers to sisters, and to teach sisters to strive daily “often by self-sacrifice, to make [her] home as comfortable and enjoyable for her brother as circumstances will allow.” In order to facilitate the “masculinization” of the household Catholic reformers asked women not only to relinquish domestic authority to men, but to accommodate those men as much as possible.²⁶

In 1875 the Tara Club in Boston caused quite a stir by allowing ladies to be present at their annual St. Patrick’s Day supper. “The gallantry of this club is a good lesson for other societies in the future,” noted the *Boston Pilot*, “the most refined and enjoyable supper is the one at which the bright

eyes of the sex sparkle around the board.” The men from the Charitable Irish Society came over after their own dinner and were so “edified by what they witnessed” that they resolved “to have no banquet on St. Patrick’s night in [the] future without the ladies.” Women would have to be brought into contact with men in their male societies if appropriate male-female relationships were to be cultivated. In 1894, at the twentieth convention of the Catholic Young Men’s National Union, a resolution was accepted to create a ladies auxiliary. The organization hoped that the mothers of the parish would “give freely of their time and woman’s wit, their dainty handiwork and skill in cookery” to improve the local clubs. Women were to be included in reading circles, receptions and in music since “the musical talents of the young men can be better developed by the help of the ladies.” The Ancient Order of the Hibernians followed suit in 1895 and established a permanent ladies auxiliary. The *Pilot* noted that same year that “this is the first time in the history of the annual military banquet [for St. Patrick’s Day] that ladies are invited.” The 1902 national convention actually opened with an address directed to both “ladies and gentlemen.”²⁷

To be a true man within the Irish-American Catholic culture was not merely to assert one’s masculinity among men. As Father O’Reilly explained in *True Men as We Need Them*, when the wife is “suffering in her cold, cheerless, darkened home,” while her “self-ruined husband is parading his native generosity of disposition, and soliciting the sympathy of his old acquaintances” such “unmanly men forget all the most sacred feelings and imperious duties of the husband and the parent.” Honor, character, orderliness, future-orientation and piety ripened in the company of women. While Protestant and secular literatures often encouraged men to bond with other men in clubs and societies, Catholic culture pressured them to integrate their already too tight male bonds with domestic sentiments. Irish-American men had built up a male society which excluded women and the home, and the Catholic establishment credited this unmanly behavior with promoting drunkenness, wife and child abuse and desertion. It was essential for the truly masculine man to shift his allegiance from his male peer group to his family. While Catholic advice literature never inferred that men neglect their extended families in Ireland, it stressed the importance of a tight, nuclear family founded on “American-style” companionate marriage.²⁸

success and the catholic man

Late nineteenth-century American society increasingly measured a man’s level of masculinity not by his commitment to home, but by his financial circumstances. Historian Theodore Greene noted that in the 1890s there was a marked move away from defining male success in terms of character (honesty, industry, thrift) to demonstration of strength of will (courage, forcefulness, magnetic personality). Horatio Alger’s 135 books and Russell Conwell’s *Acre of Diamonds* preached a Gospel of Success which

associated monetary achievement with manly character. Economic independence served as a rite of passage into manhood, according to historian David Pugh, and the pursuit of wealth became the most convincing sign of truly masculine behavior. This was the era of self-improvement, progress and control by men over their destinies.²⁹

The relationship between notions of success, work and masculinity appearing in Catholic publications differ significantly from such popular beliefs. Catholic literature presented a set of values more consistent with Benjamin Franklin's proverbs than the powerful images in late-Victorian advice books. In keeping with its promotion of orderly religious behavior and orderly family life, parish calendars placed punctuality, thrift, diligence and scrupulous honesty high on its list of keys to worldly success. An 1896 article entitled "How to Get On in the World," told men to be "clean and tidy instead of dirty and disorderly . . . to be active and industrious, instead of idle and lazy . . . to be kind and forbearing, instead of ill-natured and quarrelsome"; in short to be attentive to duty. "Look at a man of business" another parish calendar asked boys, he is "prompt, reliable, conscientious, yet clear headed and energetic . . . the boy who is late at breakfast, late at school, stands a poor chance of being a prompt man." Catholics looked to instill a sense of commitment to work reminiscent of what Max Weber termed a "calling." When labor was a calling men "performed as if it were an absolute end in itself." Nineteenth-century Catholic culture, as Weber believed the Puritans did centuries earlier, attempted to create a work ethic in a capitalistic society.³⁰

One might think, then, that Catholic culture rewarded men who stuck to this work ethic with riches and fame. This is not, however, the case in popular Catholic novels. Male characters infrequently found satisfaction in monetary wealth. The unfortunate narrator of Mary Sadlier's *Confessions of an Apostate* achieves financial stability, but only after he commits the unconscionable act of marrying a Protestant. Simon eventually loses all, including his wife and child; returning old and friendless to Ireland. In an earlier Sadlier novel, *The Blakes and the Flanagans, a Tale Illustrative of Irish Life in the United States*, Mr. Blake grows rich and independent, but his son goes to Columbia University (a den of Protestants), joins the Masons (a condemned secret society) and marries a non-Catholic. Sadlier characters inherit wealth (*Old and New; or, Taste Versus Fashion* and *Willy Burke; or, The Irish Orphan in America*) or are given money as rewards for virtuous actions (*Con O'Regan; or, Emigrant Life in the New World*). The pursuit of wealth meant association with Protestants in education and social affairs, disruption of home ties and improper alignment of priorities. "What use is it [wealth, education, status]," asks a Sadlier character, "if it doesn't show us the way to heaven?"³¹

Male novelists did not vary the pattern. Maurice Egan, a layman whose associations with Teddy Roosevelt eventually won him the ambassadorship to Denmark, wrote "downward mobility" stories. Apostate Patrick Mahaffy changes his name to Perseus ("it gave him an air of 'Americanism'"), marries a Protestant and is caught up in a "fever of

money making.” Egan moralizes that “his life was wretchedly unhappy—but it was growing richer in this world’s goods every day.” In *The Success of Patrick Desmond* a lucky rise in the stock market helps Patrick realize his dream of “success at any cost.” Luckily for the basically good Patrick, an unpredicted fall in the stocks brings him back to his senses. Patrick “never attained what the world calls success,” Egan concludes, “and yet, when he looked at his dear old mother . . . he knew that he had succeeded; for the first prayer of every good mother is that her son may be an honest man.” In spite of Egan’s own personal success, he insisted that virtue, not wealth, produced true manhood. Wealth and virtue were almost mutually exclusive.³²

Unlike Max Weber’s Puritans, who saw continuous work and the accumulation of capital as a sign of God’s blessing, or Thorstein Veblen’s late Victorians who broke with this-worldly asceticism and consumed conspicuously, American Catholic culture perceived wealth as a symbol of betrayal. If initiation into economic independence was a rite of passage, then it meant to leave the childhood of Irish-Catholic life and enter into the adulthood of American-Protestant life. The virtuous man worked in a serious, regular manner but within his prescribed position in life. If he was a worker he should be an honest worker. If he owned the factory then he was to be a good employer. To move from worker to factory owner inferred that something was inherently wrong with labor, or at least that another type of work was preferable. With an American social reality of laboring Irish Catholics and Protestant American employers, striving for a higher position in life symbolized the rejecting of one’s heritage and religion. “It is better to choose poverty and faith,” warned Patrick Desmond, “rather than money and error.”³³

Catholic culture loudly announced the risks involved in continual work. Men obsessed with work turned away from their religion and their families. One parish calendar related a conversation about heaven between a little girl and her mother. Mary asks her mother if they will be in heaven together, and mother hopes that both she and father will join their daughter in heaven. “Oh, no,” the child responds sadly, “papa can’t go; he can’t leave the store.” The father had lost touch with his family and the “higher things in life.” By working incessantly, fathers failed to oversee the education of their children, love their wives, or monitor household affairs. Men who yearn for “better society” turn “their back on their own fireside and seek so much of this society as they can find on the neutral ground of certain clubs and associations.” The upwardly-mobile man who concentrated solely on his business neglected his religious and family duties with equal vigor as the man who turned from work to drink. In 1877 immigrant Michael Flanagan lamented that “in the midst of haste and hurry” in America, secular concerns “monopolise a man . . . body and soul, to the banishment of every vestige of . . . what the ideal Christian man should be.” The true man, however, balanced a regular work schedule with his domestic and religious duties. He worked hard, but not excessively.³⁴

Catholic advice literatures held up one saint as “the model of Catholic manhood” and an example of how men could balance work, family and religious duties. Although we might think that St. Patrick might be given this title—he escaped from slavery, converted a pagan nation and served as the patron of Ireland—it was bestowed on St. Joseph, the foster father of Jesus. Catholic culture heralded St. Joseph as the model of Christian manhood because he accepted his lowly state in life, faithfully cared for the Holy Family and respected the Virgin Mother Mary. Although not powerful like Moses or Joshua, Father Parsons believed he possessed the “hidden virtues of patience and moderation often enclosed in the circle of domestic duty.” Like Mary, the chaste Joseph directed all of his attention toward his family duties. His sacred devotion to his family, rather than the celibate spirituality of St. Patrick, marked Joseph as the saint men should emulate.³⁵

Most of all, however, St. Joseph submitted to the will of God and heavenly ordering. Father Parsons used St. Joseph to explain how God, as the Supreme Arbiter of destinies, creates public harmony based on a variety of social conditions. “We must go to God by the path that He has laid out,” Parsons concluded, “Joseph complained not at his almost object [sic] condition.” Father O’Reilly believed that Joseph’s protectorate role was “infinitely above the administration of the broad empire of the Pharaohs.” Joseph worked hard to support his special family, he kept them from harm and he obediently submitted to the responsibilities God gave him. As neither a rugged individualist nor a member of a socialist-inspired labor union, Joseph fulfilled the requirements of the Catholic reformers. Although both he and St. Patrick share March feast days, St. Joseph achieved the status of “true man” while St. Patrick remained a symbol of national, not personal, identity. Joseph’s, and by extension all men’s, ambitions needed to be directed toward fulfilling their roles to the utmost of their ability and not to strive after wealth and fame. “Modern industry, modern business,” explained Father O’Reilly, were like Eve in the Garden: “When the forbidden fruit has been plucked and tasted, [it] finds that the sweet savor lasts but a moment, leaving behind the bitterness of death.”³⁶

Masculinity, as understood by Catholic culture, did not automatically proceed from the male body. Catholic critics understood masculinity as a set of values and behaviors to be instilled and cultivated. By labeling one type of behavior “manly” and another “unmanly” reformers found a convenient and contemporary way of sorting out good from bad. What an earlier generation of Catholics might have termed sinful, was now termed “unmanly.” For the Irish-American Catholic this meant that certain activities brought from the Old World had to be exchanged for other values. In spite of rhetorical paeans for “tradition” and “old-fashioned ways,” Catholic culture told Irish-American men that to be sporadically religious, to bond primarily with men and to live day-to-day was childish and unmanly. This type of behavior, seen as “natural” to men (not merely a remnant of Irish society), should be transformed into something the

reformers viewed as “culture”—ordered, regular, reliable, future-oriented. While almost all Catholic writers agreed that Irish women were by nature religious and respectable, men needed to be *transformed* from mere males into true men.

Neither the means nor the end of this transformation had much in common with the elements of masculinity that captured the imagination of late-nineteenth century Protestant and secular writers. Catholic writers, for instance, were not fascinated by the male body. Unlike some men, Irish-American men did not feel detached from their physical strength due to too many years behind a clerk’s desk. On the contrary, to be relieved of laboring with hands and back pointed to the Irishman’s middle-class status. Catholic clubs included athletic equipment in order to compete with Protestant clubs and to refine the already problematic physical nature of the male. The stereotype of the brawling Irishman over-emphasized physical strength and prowess, the true man needed to show mastery over cultural activities.

Likewise, Protestant men’s wish to rid themselves of an oppressive, meddling and all-powerful woman’s culture by fleeing into football, clubs and muscular Christianity did not exist in Catholic literature. Secular men who refused to feel guilty about their religious skepticism, business aggressiveness, or display of wealth rejected the “feminine” values of piety, home orientation and auspicious attitude toward monetary success. Catholic advice literature, however, supports a trend in late-Victorian culture overlooked by many historians. Margaret Marsh calls this trend “masculine domesticity”—the encouragement of men to become involved “in the emotional and nurturing aspects of family life.” Women, and women’s ways, were not to be separated from men, but integrated into family life. March’s findings in secular advice literature come much closer to Catholic norms than earlier historians’ portrayal of the manly man as one free from women and the family.³⁷

Irish-American men already experienced the same-sex bonding which many working class men felt, and Catholic reformers pushed them to develop the middle-class ability to interact with women at home and in social settings. Although both male and female critics lamented the fact that Irish women had to work outside of the home, they acknowledged their Catholic loyalty and domestic sentiments. Irish-American women, while remaining strong Catholics, also worked outside of the home, cleverly managed their money and frequently functioned as the sole economic support of their families. Critics asked Irish-American men to imitate the dependability, hard work and future-orientation of their mothers, sisters and wives—a different form of “feminization” from what Ann Douglas saw in mid nineteenth-century Protestantism.³⁸

The concept of the “true man” comprises one aspect of an over-all trend in nineteenth-century Catholicism to create an ideology of the “Christian home.” Rather than focus on the traditional Catholic preference for a life of other-worldly celibacy, Catholics in both Europe and the United States turned their attention to the family. European Catholics

increasingly held up the family as a remedy for contemporary social problems. While Catholics typically preferred private devotions, late-nineteenth century writers began to encourage families to say the rosary together in the sacred space of the home. Redemption occurred not only through the Church and her sacraments, but through the nurturing effects of family life. Catholic true men, who followed in the footsteps of St. Joseph and not St. Patrick, upheld the family ideals preached from pulpits and published in advice books.³⁹

Catholic family ideology restricted the amount of attention that a man should devote to labor, thus promoting a variation of the industrial work ethic. In some ways the Catholic work ethic reflected the genteel traditions of the early nineteenth century, rather than the gregarious lust for wealth of the late Victorian. Many of the same sentiments expressed in Jefferson's Virginia appear in Catholic advice books and novels. Historian Jan Lewis noted that the men of early Virginia distrusted commerce and the mercantile economy, preferred security over risk, scorned the acquisitiveness and aggression required to reap profit and wealth and feared the effects of money on character development. Moderation, a clear conscience, and a debt-free life would produce the independence necessary for a republican government. Catholic culture, fueled both by European aristocratic traditions and medieval scholastic theology, maintained similar values in spite of existing in a radically different social environment.⁴⁰

There is no question that Catholic writers, especially priests trained in traditional Catholic thought, brought with them pre-industrial views on labor, social order and the fleeting character of worldly goods. Papal injunctions against modern social evils—socialism, female labor, religious pluralism, divorce—fueled the antagonism between Catholicism and secular society. The American Catholic establishment, often the focus of Rome's frustration with modern culture, adapted traditional thought in order to cope with the needs of the Irish-American community. By assuming a realistic view of the economic possibilities of the Irish in America, reformers tried to establish a Catholic alternative to the Gospel of Wealth. This was not merely the promotion of a passive Gospel of Resignation but a Catholic effort to temper the expectations of the Irish. The streets of America were not paved with gold. If a man could not find acres of diamonds in his backyard he could still be a true man. In an American society plagued by periodic depressions, financial scandals and worker exploitation the inroads which the Irish had made into American society appeared to be precarious. If a man lost his good job and was forced to return to manual labor, this did not mean he was less a man. For Catholic reformers virtue determined manhood, not wealth. As long as men worked steadily, cherished their families and preserved their faith they would eventually find ultimate fulfillment. Such reasoning served not as numbing opiate but as a balance to reckless American optimism.

Although Catholic clergy, journalists and fiction writers attempted to ease psychological stress caused by "achievement anxiety," aid in the acculturation of the Irish into American society and help stabilize the Irish-

American family, their primary concern was religious. Catholic writers supported what would best encourage the maintenance of the Catholic church in America. When traditional Irish folk religion challenged clerical control, such as with wakes or festivals, Catholic culture swiftly condemned such behavior. Political involvement, secret societies, labor unions, gangs and even saloon fraternizing threatened the commitment of men to the Church and alternative Catholic institutions were created. "Come gentlemen, we have business to attend to as Catholics," chided an 1898 parish calendar, "let us attend to it as American Catholics, with Irish enthusiasm, if you will, but all the time as loyal sons of Mother Church." In a patriarchal religion like Catholicism, it just would not do to have the most committed and conforming members be women. Catholic reformers evaluated the health of American Catholicism by male behavior and therefore promoted a standard of masculinity conducive to the growth of the institutional church.⁴¹

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notes

1. Fr. Bernard O'Reilly, *True Men as We Need Them* (New York, 1878), 3.
2. Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles* (New York, 1985), 320, 331-32.
3. Emmet Larkin, "The Devotional Revolution in Ireland, 1850-75," *American Historical Review*, 77 (June 1972), 625-652.
4. E. Anthony Rotundo, "Body and Soul: Changing Ideals of Middle-Class Manhood 1770-1920," *Journal of Social History*, 16 (Summer 1983), 23; Joe Dubbert, "Progressivism and the Masculinity Crisis," in Elizabeth Pleck and Joseph Pleck, *The American Man* (New York, 1980).
5. In the late-nineteenth century dioceses began printing monthly booklets (slightly altered for each parish) which contained schedules of masses, a religious calendar and description of holy days, regulations on baptism and marriage, as well as advice for parishioners.
6. *St. Ignatius Church Journal*, Baltimore (April 1902), n. pag. On pre-Famine religion see Sean Connolly, *Priests and People in Pre-Famine Ireland 1780-1845* (New York, 1982), chapters 3 and 4; Sheridan Gilley, "The Roman Catholic Church and the Nineteenth-Century Irish Diaspora" *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 35 (April, 1984), 192.
7. "For Men Only," *St. Ignatius*, (October, 1896), n. pag.; "A Word with Some of our Young Men," *St. Peter and Paul Calendar*, Philadelphia (January, 1897), n. pag.; "A Word to Young Men" *St. Agatha's Parish Kalendar* [sic], Philadelphia (March, 1899), 5. The full picture of Irish women's financial and moral support of Catholicism has hardly begun to be documented by scholars. Hasia Diner in *Erin's Daughters in America* (Baltimore, 1983) only briefly mentions that "women contributed the vast bulk of financial support for both parish maintenance and Catholic charitable work."
8. Mary Sadlier, *Con O'Regan; or Emigrant Life in the New World* (1864; rpt. New York, 1895), 261; John McElgun, *Annie Reilly, The Fortunes of an Irish Girl in New York* (New York, 1873), 185ff; review of *Frequent Communion for Busy Men, in America* (November 4, 1911), 92; *Sts. Peter and Paul*, (January 1897), n. pag.
9. Con O'Leary, *The Lost Rosary; or, Our Irish Girls their Trials, Temptations, and Triumphs* (Boston, 1870), 118.
10. *St. Ignatius*, (November 1898) n. pag. and (October 1899) n. pag.
11. *Church of St. Francis Xavier Parish Calendar*, New York (January, 1885), 12; *St. Ignatius* (October 1896), n. pag.
12. By-laws, Father Mathew Catholic Temperance and Benevolent Society, Philadelphia, 1871.
13. John Kingsdale "The Poor Man's Club: Social Functions of the Urban Working-Class Saloon" in Pleck and Pleck, *American Man*, 255-283 and James Barrett, "Why Paddy Drank: The Social Importance of Whiskey in Pre-Famine Ireland," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 11 (Summer, 1977), 155-166.
14. "Total Abstinence," *American Ecclesiastical Review*, 7 (1892), 257.
15. *The New York Catholic News* (February 1, 1891), 5; Rev. Francis Sullivan, *The Boy: Take Care of Our Boys by the Junior Holy Name Society* (New York, 1912), 6; Minutes, Eighteenth Convention of the Catholic Young Men's National Union (1892), 21; Minutes, Seventeenth Convention of the Catholic Young Men's National Union (1891), 33.

16. *The New York Catholic News*, (April 5, 1891), 4; Letter of the Catholic Club of Philadelphia between Stephen Farelly and Patrick Quinn, n.d. (c. 1880s). Convention report, Ancient Order of the Hibernians (1890), 29.
17. Connolly, 144.
18. *Boston Pilot*, (January 13, 1875), 6.
19. *Pilot* (February 13, 1875), 6; *Pilot* (February 20, 1875), 1; *Pilot* (March 20, 1875), 6; *Pilot* (February 16, 1885), 6; *Pilot* (February 6, 1877), 6; *Pilot* (February 10, 1877), 6; *Pilot* (March 10, 1877), 6.
20. *Pilot* (February 27, 1875), 5; *Pilot* (March 22, 1879), 1; *Pilot* (March 27, 1880), 1; *Pilot* (March 28, 1885), 2; *Pilot* (March 28, 1885), 3; *Pilot* (March 30, 1895), 2. During 1880 Charles Stewart Parnell and John Dillon came to the U.S. to raise money for Irish tenant farmers who had suffered from a year of famine. This publicity for the Irish cause certainly was a contributing factor for the lack of a St. Patrick's Day parade in Boston that year.
21. Timothy J. Meagher, "SP 'Why Should We Care for a Little Trouble or a Walk through the Mud': St. Patrick's and Columbus Day Parades in Worcester, Massachusetts, 1845-1915," *The New England Quarterly*, 58 (1985), 5-26. Connolly, 146; *Pilot* (March 3, 1877), 6; *Pilot* (March 6, 1875), 6.
22. O'Reilly, 12.
23. Rev. Dr. Parsons, "Marriage" (sermons delivered in Rosendale, New York 1868-1887), 50; Parsons, "Panegyric on St. Joseph" (1885), 259; *Our Parish Calendar*, Laurence, MA (July 1896), 13.
24. O'Reilly, 26; Maurice Egan, *Sacred Heart Review* (October 26, 1889), 9; *Parish Calendar*, Church of Our Mother of Sorrow, Philadelphia (June 1897), 4.
25. *Ibid.*, 2; Cardinal Gibbons, "The Dignity of Women," *Catholic Standard and Times*, Philadelphia (February 29, 1894), 2.
26. Maurice Egan, *The Disappearance of John Longworthy* (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1890), 29ff; *Our Parish Calendar* (June 1897), 28-29.
27. *Pilot* (March 27, 1875), 1; Report, Twentieth Convention of the Catholic Young Men's National Union (1894), n. pag.; Convention report, Ancient Order of the Hibernians (1896), n. pag.; *Pilot*, (March 9, 1885), 9; Convention report, Ancient Order of the Hibernians (1902), 68.
28. O'Reilly, 177.
29. Theodore Green, *The Changing Models of Success in American Magazines* (New York, 1970), 113; David Pugh, *Sons of Liberty: The Masculine Mind in Nineteenth-Century America* (Westport, Connecticut, 1979), 118-119.
30. *Our Parish Calender*, (September, 1896), 29. *Church of Our Mother of Sorrow* (February 1899), 4. The November 1896 issue cited obedience, honesty, piety and hard work as keys to success. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York, 1958), 62.
31. Mary Sadlier, *Confessions of an Apostate* (New York, 1864); Mary Sadlier, *The Blakes and the Flanagans, a Tale Illustrative of Irish Life in the United States* (New York, 1853), 327. These novels were re-issued in the late nineteenth-century when the Sadlier publishing company was purchased by P. J. Kenedy. William Thorp writing in *Catholic Novelists in Defense of Their Faith* (New York, 1978) comments that these early novels were "evidently read to pieces."
32. Maurice Egan, "How Perseus Became a Star" in Eleanor Donnelly, *A Roundtable of the Representative Catholic Novelists* (New York, 1897), 127, 133; Maurice Egan, *Patrick Desmond*, 20, 418.
33. *Ibid.*, 274.
34. *St. Ignatius* (May, 1903), n. pag.; O'Reilly, 127.
35. Rev. Reynold Kuehnel, *Conferences for Men: Intended in Particular for Holy Name Societies* (New York, 1917), 1; Parsons, "Panegyric on St. Joseph," 250.
36. *Ibid.*, 252; O'Reilly, 211, 447.
37. Margaret Marsh, "Suburban Men and Masculine Domesticity, 1870-1920" unpublished paper presented for the Seminar on the City, Columbia University.
38. Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York, 1977).
39. Colleen McDannell, *The Christian Home in Victorian America 1840-1900* (Bloomington, 1986), on Catholic domestic ideology, 15-16 and 52-76.
40. Jan Lewis, *The Pursuit of Happiness: Family and Values in Jefferson's Virginia* (Cambridge, England, 1983), 110, 115, 116, 165.
41. *Our Parish Calender* (April 1898), 39.