

LETTER I

[*New-York Weekly Register and Catholic Diary*, February 7, 1835]

St. John's Episcopal Residence, Newfoundland,
September 24, 1834.

Very Rev. and Very dear Sir—The anxious solicitude you have always entertained for the advancement of the Christian religion; the deep interest you have been pleased to take in the mission of Newfoundland, and, above all, the ardent friendship you have testified to me, and of which I have received so substantial a proof, in the handsome present of books you were pleased to make me on my departure from Ireland last year, would prompt me to gratify you, by giving you a brief account of the progress of religion in this country, were I not under the obligation of a promise to do so—a promise, the fulfilment of which I was induced to defer to the present moment, that I might be able to give you an idea of the extraordinary advantages likely to be derived by this colony from the establishment of a Presentation convent.

You are aware, of course, that the colony of Newfoundland is one of the youngest of those of British America; that until the beginning of the last century the island was scarcely inhabited, except during the fishing season, that is for four or five months in the summer; and then only by those immediately employed in the taking or curing of fish, or furnishing the supplies necessary for the promotion of the fishers; while the difficulties thrown in the way of the settler amounted to a total forbiddal to allocate upon these shores.

During this period it is necessary to remark that religion made but little progress. The Irish Catholic settler found here all the asperity of the penal code, becoming daily more intense, according as the spirit of freedom dissipated the clouds of persecution from his native shores in Europe; and to harbour a Catholic priest was a crime punishable in a manner the most exemplary—the most summary.

Still was the Catholic population daily increasing, and at length it was found when the American States had asserted their independence, and the Canadas threatened to follow their example, while a desolating European war called forth the exertion of all the power of Britain to maintain her dignity among nations, the allegiance of the colonists of Newfoundland could only be secured through the instrumentality of the Catholic priests, and the Right Rev. Dr. O'Donnel was *encouraged* by the British Government to settle in the island.¹

¹ James Louis O'Donnel was born in 1737 at Knocklofty, County Tipperary, Ireland. Entering the Franciscan Order, he pursued his studies at the Irish Franciscan College in Prague, Bohemia, and was apparently ordained in that city. After some years of service on the Continent, he returned to Ireland in 1775. He served successively as Superior at Waterford and as Provincial of the Irish Province, and in 1784 was named first Prefect Apostolic of Newfoundland. In 1796 the Prefecture was raised to the

Upon his arrival in this country, this zealous missionary found, as might naturally have been expected, that the absence of a ministry, and the consequent want of spiritual instruction, had produced considerable demoralization. The holy sacrament of matrimony degraded into a sort of "*civil contract*," administered by skippers, by constables, by magistrates, and frequently by women. The sacrament of baptism profaned in like manner, or by itinerant celebrants, applying to children the names of heathen gods and goddesses. The fasts of the Church dispensed with by nurse-tenders—no house of worship, or place devoted to community of prayer. The last rites of religion lost to the dying, and Christian sepulture to the dead. The social ties, too, that form the great bond of peace which binds up Christians in one common family—the ties of kindred, creed, and country, *all* were severed; and, in the absence of spiritual instruction, kinsman stood arrayed against kinsman, and Catholic against Catholic, and Irishman against Irishman, in a senseless and infuriated struggle for the mastery of Leinster over Munster.

Such was the state of society upon the arrival of the first missionary in St. John's, and with such accumulated difficulties at every step to be surmounted, it is not to be wondered at that religion should have made comparatively but little advance during the incumbency of the three prelates who preceded me in the episcopal chair of Newfoundland. The difficulty of procuring priests, too, was considerable; the Right Rev. Dr. O'Donnel brought over only two to assist him, and for several years after the establishment of this mission, there were no more than three individuals to administer to the spiritual wants of the entire island.² Upon assuming the functions of the prelate, Dr. O'Donnel laid the foundation of the church of St. John's, and in a few years others were built—that of Harbor Grace, Placentia, and Ferry-land; and the erection of the cross in these places immediately proved an attraction to the faithful and the wanderers, who, in the absence of the shepherd, had strayed into the folds of the stranger; and those who rioted in the wilds of infidelity began to return to the bosom of Christianity.

rank of a Vicariate Apostolic and Father O'Donel was named Bishop of Thyatira, *in partibus*, and Vicar Apostolic of Newfoundland. On September 21, 1796, he was consecrated in the Cathedral of Quebec by Bishop Hubert. Bishop O'Donel divided Newfoundland into four missionary districts, formulated the first local ecclesiastical Statutes (1801) and in general laid the foundations of organized Catholic life in Newfoundland. Resigning because of ill health, he returned to Ireland in 1807, and died four years later. (Howley, *op. cit.*, 186-224; Thomas Mullock, O.F.M., "Notizie storiche intorno a Terra Nuova nell' America settentrionale, e intorno a' Frati Minori che v' introdussero il Cattolicismo . . .," *Operazione Dei Frati Minori circa La Propagazione Della Fede*, Vol. I (maggio e giugno, 1861), 312-317, an excerpt from Mullock's *Two Lectures on Newfoundland*).

²The petition of the priests and faithful of Newfoundland to the Holy Father, November 20, 1794, asking that Father O'Donel be raised to the episcopate and Newfoundland be made a Vicariate, contains the names of three priests, Fathers Edmund Bourke, O.P., Thomas Ewer, O.F.M., and Patrick Phelan, O.F.M. Howley (*op. cit.*, 196-199) prints this petition and also lists the names of three other priests who were in Newfoundland at the time, Fathers Michael O'Donel and John Whelan, and a Father Fitzpatrick.

Dr. O'Donnel was succeeded by Dr. Lambert³, and though many difficulties were softened down, yet during the incumbency, from delicacy of health, and other causes, little could be done to advance the mission; so that upon the accession of Dr. Scallan⁴, my predecessor, to the see, though the number of churches had increased, the number of priests were only seven⁵. But I must here beg leave to observe, that in the church there existed no prelate whose heart more earnestly responded to the call of religion than that of Dr. Scallan; but, unfortunately, when his plans were arranged for the advancement of this great object, he was attacked by a paralysis of the limbs, which rendered him incapable of further exertion, and which after a few years deprived the church of the most zealous prelate that ever sat, or perhaps ever would, in the episcopal chair of Newfoundland.

Before my consecration, which took place on the 28th day of October, 1829, I passed six years in the island as a curate, during which time, in the discharge of my duty, I had visited every port and creek in the district of St. John's, and also of Conception Bay; and I felt a peculiar interest in studying the manners of the people, and entering into their wishes, with a view to discover the best mode of supplying their wants, and improving their condition; and every day's experience taught me, that much as clergymen were wanted, yet that a virtuous, a religious education, and particularly amongst the female portion of the community, would be, if possible, of greater importance for the diffusion of the principles of religion.

I need not tell you that the population of this country is by no means proportioned to its extent, for you have not in the entire island a village one mile from the shore. And then this population so scattered—in one harbour

³ Patrick Lambert was a native of County Wexford, Ireland. Entering the Franciscan Order, he was sent for his theological studies to the famous Irish Franciscan College of St. Isidore, in Rome. After his return to Ireland, he seems to have been employed for the most part as a professor at the friary of Wexford, and for a time served as Provincial. Appointed Vicar Apostolic of Newfoundland in succession to Bishop O'Donnel, he was consecrated in the chapel of the Franciscan friary in Wexford, in April, 1806. Finding his strength unequal to the demands of his arduous charge, he resigned the Vicariate in 1817, and returned to the friary of Wexford where he died a few years later (Howley, *op. cit.*, 236-239).

⁴ Thomas Scallan was, like his predecessor, a native of Wexford. His higher studies were pursued at St. Isidore's, Rome, where, after ordination, he taught philosophy. He was assigned to the friary of Wexford in 1794, after having spent eighteen years on the Continent. At Wexford he was engaged in the role of professor until 1812, when he came to the assistance of his fellow Franciscan, Bishop Patrick Lambert, in the Newfoundland missions. Some two years later he was recalled to Ireland, but was later named Bishop of Drago, *in partibus*, and coadjutor to Bishop Lambert. He was consecrated on May 1, 1816, at Wexford, by Archbishop Troy of Dublin. Succeeding Bishop Lambert on the latter's resignation the following year, he governed the Vicariate until his death at St. John's on May 29, 1830 (Howley, *op. cit.*, 240-254).

⁵ These were apparently, Fathers Thomas Ewer, O.F.M., William Hearn, Nicholas Devereux, Dennis Mackin, Patrick Cleary, and Fathers Brown, O.S.A., and Morrison (Howley, *op. cit.*, 263). Bishop Fleming was able to add six priests to his missionary forces early in 1831: Fathers Edward Troy, Pelagius Nowlan, Charles Dalton, O.F.M., Edward Murphy, Michael Berney, and a Father Keilly (*ibid.*, 264-267).

a hundred families, six miles farther another with three, then with two, and often only with one family, and all these having no possible communication in summer but by sea, while the intercourse by land, which only can be in winter, is often attended with danger of loss of life, interrupted as it is by immense ponds of fresh water, the ice on which is frequently, owing to the existence of strong springs within them, in many places incapable of sustaining the weight of a man.

It will strike you immediately, when the district of a priest reaches one, or perhaps three hundred miles along a coast, the population of which is so circumstanced, that it often must occur that individuals will die in want of those attentions and spiritual aid that it is the peculiar province of the ecclesiastic to bring; and that human passions, in the absence of religious instruction, so prove at all times to run riot, are peculiarly liable to wanton in the hearts of the uneducated in these sequestered situations, when the activity of the fishing season is succeeded by the morbid musing and listless lassitude of a wearisome winter's idleness.

I saw, then, the characteristic want of the people, and long sighed to have it in my power to bestow upon this (the country of my adoption) a system of education that would by-and-bye place in those isolated spots mothers and sisters, who would smooth the pillow of sickness, and soften the rigours of winter, by the diffusion of true Christian feeling; and to this end were all my efforts directed since my elevation to the prelacy.

In Saint John's, up to this period, there was no opportunity of procuring education of any kind for the female poor, but intermixed with boys; and this system, in all places objectionable, appeared to me as particularly calculated, in this country, to obstruct improvement in morality. Boys of seven, nay of six years of age, will readily, in summer, get employment upon our warves, handling and managing fish, and receiving some shillings a week wages; and thus are they, at a very early age, able to contribute so far towards their support as to render them considerably independent of their parents; and the consequence is, that free from all domestic control, and subject to the temptation that an allowance of grog, which long-established usage commands to be served out to them thrice daily, calls up; the time passed at school is so limited, that an association with them, in all the familiarity of school intimacy, is by no means calculated to secure the acquirement of virtues, or strengthen the morality of the female.

We had three public schools, however, for the education of the poor generally, one of long standing, "The Saint John's Charity School," maintained partly by government, and partly by the subscriptions of all classes of the community, without distinction of sect or creed. To this institution the Protestant minister subscribed as well as the Catholic priest, and the Catholic merchant as well as the Governor. To this I myself have contributed very largely in proportion to my means; and, yet, never was there a wish expressed to place a Catholic master or mistress over the institution.

This institution, therefore, continued to hold the public confidence for years; nor was that confidence in any wise shaken when the "Benevolent

Irish Society School" sprung into existence, because their school was based upon similar principles. And, indeed, so jealous were the latter body of the character they had acquired, that, although for some years a single Protestant child had not been sent to the school, yet, not only would the committee of that almost exclusively Catholic body not permit the Catholic catechism to be taught, merely as a task in the school by the master, but they stood up in opposition to the priest who attempted to give the children religious instruction even after school hours.

The third establishment was erected by one of the numerous British Bible Societies, the North American School Society, for the purpose (as usual) of proselytising the children of Catholic parents but as the British government have withdrawn their support from this and the St. John's Charity School, and, as in the *ex-Attorney-General of the Canadas*, ("Boulton"), the late Secretary of the Colonies, Mr. Stanley, has given a chief justice to Newfoundland, most zealous to promote the goodly work of proselytism, an amalgamation of the two has latterly occurred, suggested by that gentleman, and thereby that last *apparent* rallying point of liberality—that focus where all the rays of benevolence, of whatever creed, *could* converge for the advantage of the poor, was torn down by the most powerful and influential interest in the island.

We had had, as I remarked, these three schools, when, after much reflection, I determined to bring out a community of nuns, to render certain the accomplishment of my views—views that all the existing institutions were incompetent to fulfil. But here was to be surmounted *in limine*, that difficulty which always stares the Catholic priest in the face, when he proposes to himself to effect a substantial good. *I had no friends*, and my revenue was scarcely sufficient to meet my current expenses.

The general wants of the mission were pressing me on every side. The districts or parishes that had been laid out by my predecessors I saw were too extensive for the spiritual interests of the people, the island being portioned out to four priests, or into four parishes. I therefore resolved to subdivide these into as many districts or parishes as would enable me to fix a priest wherever an adequate support would be given him. I saw that this at first would be attended with some difficulties; I therefore began with my own district, and took off a portion sufficient to maintain a priest respectably; and having thus given the example in my own person, I found no difficulty in subdividing the large districts. Thus, the district of Conception Bay, for example, has been, *for the present*, divided into two parishes, thereby enabling me to have five priests in the bay, instead of three; and so on with the other districts.

While thus engaged reducing my revenue, I thought the interests of the people of my own district required the presence of a third curate at St. John's and, at the same time, I was engaged in the erection of Hetty Harbour, Torbay, and Portugal Cove churches, in my own district, all of which circumstances, together with the claims of the poor, left me literally pennyless; and yet, trusting in the benevolence of my people, but still more in Him who watches over the welfare of His little ones, I took my

resolution at once, and established in St. John's a Presentation Convent entirely at my own personal cost.

You will say that with a district now partitioned, and thereby rendered, of course, considerably less productive than it had been to any of my predecessors, and this contracted district charged with the support of *three* curates, while none of my predecessors had ever had (with the exception of a few short intervals), to maintain more than one in the undivided one. With this contracted income, still further embarrassed by the erection of so many churches, because the inhabitants of the harbour in which they were built were unable in some instances, to subscribe a single shilling towards defraying the expenses; nay, in some instances, so poor were they, that the entire harbour never returned (with the exception of one individual, who paid ten shillings), one penny towards the dues for the support of the priests who administered to their spiritual wants.

You will say, perhaps, that with all these embarrassments there was some degree of imprudence in charging myself with the support of an establishment so weighty, and to this I can only reply, that so strongly was I impressed with its necessity, that there is no sacrifice that I would not be ready to make for its accomplishment, and to insure its stability. I did lay aside many comforts that I had been accustomed to. I was obliged to reduce the number of my domestics, and to content myself with the services of one general servant and a boy, and to retrench at table to such a degree as to subject myself to a charge of parsimony. I had, heretofore, been able to keep a pair of good horses, and what we here call a carriage. I am now forced to surrender the latter, and limit my stud to a single little horse. But here I am, then, after all—after having been able, at the expense of these paltry privations, not only to maintain this interesting establishment up to this hour, but to defray every shilling of their expenses, from the instant they left their convent in Galway, in their long journey through Ireland, and their voyage across the Atlantic—in the arrangement of their first residence upon their landing, and their transfer to the elegant dwelling they now inhabit, and in the erection of their beautiful school-house, which can give accomodation to twelve hundred children, and all this without owing a single shilling to a human being.⁶

I have already, as I said, reaped my reward. I have accomplished my object. I have seen, I see almost daily, these excellent ladies, (who have expatriated themselves for the love of God), surrounded from ten o'clock in the morning till three in the evening, by eight hundred and fifty children. I have heard the parents of these little ones offering up their orisons for blessings on the benefactors of their offspring. I have witnessed the rapid change—a change even now perceptible in the most marked degree—the change from semi-barbarism to comparative intellectuality, and

⁶ The first group of nuns to come to the assistance of Bishop Fleming, four in number under the superiorship of Sister Mary Bernard Kirwan, left the Presentation Convent, Galway, Ireland, on August 12, 1833. Sailing from Waterford on August 28, they arrived at St. John's Newfoundland, late the following month. An account of their early labors in Newfoundland will be found in Howley, *op. cit.*, 275-300.

have observed the tear excited by the touching instructions of the mild and benevolent nun, tremble on the lid of her whose lips had heretofore only moved to mutter imprecation. I have witnessed all this, and could fancy that I saw in the distance the untold benefits that would result to the country when the tomb closes upon *me*—when mothers thus educated, (far removed from the means of procuring instruction for their children), will pour into the tender ear of their lisping babes the lessons of virtue, of religion, of true wisdom, thus acquired, and perchance may teach them to raise the voice of prayer for him whom Heaven had made His humble instrument in communicating these great blessings.

And yet, I must confess, that often does a tear arise from the reflection that my successor may not be equally ardent in the cause, or may not take the same view of the subject that animates me to exertion, and upon these occasions, I confess, I feel acutely all the pangs of the parent, who sees himself about to descend into the grave without the means of future subsistence for his little family.—Every single penny of my income do I spend, and not one single shilling am I at this moment worth in the wide world. God only knows, then, how the convent is to be maintained, when I sink into my grave. While I live they will be well supported, for I am ready to make any sacrifice; even, if necessary, to sell my bed to make them happy.

Oh! would to God, that Heaven, which denies me the means, would inspire some of those upon whom He has in His bounty poured wealth—into whose lap He has showered riches—that some of my countrymen may be induced to remember (if not at the present moment) at least in the last distribution of their temporal substance, the wants of so many thousands of their fellow-creatures in this remote region, and by appropriating a something of that which God has bestowed upon them so abundantly here, for the promotion of religion, for the advancement of His glory, to realise for themselves the never-wasting wealth of happiness eternal.

But I find I have already far transgressed the ordinary limits of a letter, and ought to apologise for trespassing so long upon your time as well as on your attention. In the topics which I have touched, my own feelings are deeply interested, and I feel, too, that to you they will not appear tedious. I have spoken freely and given my opinions without reserve, because I feel that you will not unkindly attribute it to egotism. I have done so in the spirit of truth and sincerity, conscious that you will readily enter into my view, and justly estimate my sentiments; and now I shall close, promising to resume the subject of this mission as soon as I can again spare an hour to commune with one whose friendship I so much value.

With best regards to your respectable community, believe me to remain, with great respect and esteem, your much obliged and faithful servant,

✠ Michael Anthony Fleming,
Catholic Bishop of Newfoundland.

The Very Rev. John Spratt, Dublin.