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Confidantes or Competitors? Women, Priests, and Conflict in Post-Famine Ireland

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Confidantes or Competitors? Women, Priests, and Conflict in Post-Famine Ireland

Cara Delay (bio)

In the mid-nineteenth century, John O'Sullivan began his career as a young curate in Dingle. In *Praxis Parochi in Hibernia*, his training manual for Irish priests, O'Sullivan described his first day on the job. When the young O'Sullivan arrived in Dingle, he immediately encountered a woman who needed to be churched after giving birth. O'Sullivan performed his duty, and another young mother appeared asking for the same service. Dingle's women continued to seek out O'Sullivan throughout the day, and by the evening he had churched twenty of them. The women seemed thrilled with their new curate; one of the last women to see O'Sullivan "threw herself [End Page 107] on her knees" and kissed his feet. O'Sullivan, elated but also puzzled by both the women's reaction to him and the demand for his services, asked the parish clerk for an explanation. The clerk replied that all of the commotion was "because you are churching them all for nothing, and the parish priest will be stark staring mad when he comes home and hears it."²

The Dingle women's interactions with their new curate illuminate much. First, they point to the power and status that many priests gained when they began their clerical duties. By kneeling in front of him and kissing his feet, John O'Sullivan's new parishioners treated him as an almost Christ-like figure. But the almost comic ignorance of the young O'Sullivan, who later claimed that he "never knew at the time that there was such a thing as payment for churching," also suggests the vulnerability of novice Irish priests, who, the records suggest, sometimes fumbled through their first few days, weeks, and even months as curates.³ John O'Sullivan's amusing anecdote also hints at the complicated relationship between priests and women in Ireland from the 1840s and 1850s to the dawn of the twentieth century. For some women, in an age of church revival and renewal, the priest came to represent a caring and trustworthy authority figure, even a confidante. The relationship between women and priests, however, could be complex and controversial, marked by struggles for power and influence.

Both women and priests held a central yet sometimes precarious position in parish life. Women, although influential in the home, found

their public roles constricted in the late nineteenth century; priests, meanwhile, held substantial public power but found this authority challenged, sometimes by women. Even the seemingly innocent interactions between John O'Sullivan and the women of Dingle point to a deeper, more difficult association between female parishioners and their clergy. The women of Dingle undoubtedly knew that they should pay their priest to be churched. Were these **[End Page 108]** women, then, deliberately taking advantage of their new young curate and his eager ignorance? As they kissed his feet, were they expressing genuine gratitude or were they demonstrating the irony of a newly minted, professionally trained priest being duped by local women? Since so many of the parish's women sought out his services, it seems that, at the very least, women's social networks were responsible for spreading the word about the new curate's gullibility and encouraging other women to capitalize on it. The women of Dingle appeared to show their reverence and respect for their new priest, but they also may have been taking advantage of him and complicating his position in the parish, getting him in trouble with his new parish priest. John O'Sullivan's first day on the job in Dingle therefore exposes the multifaceted relationship between women and priests in Catholic Ireland, a relationship that was at times defined by strategy and maneuvering, by small yet significant contests for authority and autonomy.

In the post-famine decades, in Ireland's southern and western Catholic parishes, despite popular impressions of a close connection between the clergy and lay women, priests and women clashed surprisingly often. Clerical-female conflicts took many forms. They involved harsh words, spoken by priests, who denounced transgressing women from the altar, and also by their female parishioners...

CARA DELAY

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1. This article was written with the help of many people. Sister Cabrini Delahunty of Cloyne, Tom May of Galway, and Margaret de Brún and Fr. Kieran O'Shea of Kerry gave much-needed assistance in the diocesan archives, as did the staff of the National Library of Ireland, Dublin, with manuscript sources and newspapers. The Sachar Foundation, the Women's Studies Program at Brandeis University, the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Brandeis University, and the American Association of University Women provided financial support during the research and writing of this piece, and Lori Harrison-Kahan, Jessica Lang, Rachel Prentice, Sarah McKibben, Katherine Kendall, and Jennifer Sartori lent helpful comments. I also gratefully acknowledge my colleagues from the "Irish Catholics: Belief, Practice, and Representation" conference at the University of Notre Dame in April 2003 for their questions and suggestions on the original oral version of this paper. Previous versions of this essay were also presented at the American Historical Association annual meeting, the Symposium on Women's and Gender History at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and the Boston College Graduate Irish Studies Conference. I thank all audience members for their feedback and suggestions.



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