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Opposing the "Modern World": The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Ireland, 1965-85

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

Opposing the Modern World: The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Ireland, 1965-85

James S. Donnelly Jr. (bio)

The material, cultural, and religious change that began to sweep through Ireland in the 1960s dethroned Marianism from its central place in Irish Catholic popular devotion. The remarkably strong economic expansion that commenced in the late 1950s inevitably quickened the acquisitive instincts of a society that had long known widespread poverty and lagged far behind the performance of the more robust European economies. At last materialism in the sense of valuing the consumption of an increasing range of consumer goods was taking firm hold of the Irish popular consciousness. At the same time, the country, for good and ill, was opening up to the outside world to an unprecedented degree, not only economically but culturally as well—in popular music, in reading matter, through the cinema and now especially television, and soon enough to foreign notions or standards of appropriate sexual conduct. In this major alteration of ideas and (eventually) behavior, television played a role that is difficult to exaggerate. Where religion was concerned, both the speed and the force of its impact far exceeded that of the cinema and the radio earlier. The wider world on which television opened such a big window for Irish viewers in the 1960s was one in which Communism seemed much less menacing as the decade advanced. If Soviet Russia was still Red, it did not appear anxious to press the nuclear button and was generally less bellicose toward the United States and Western Europe. As a result, the vehement anti-Communism **[End Page 183]** which had given such a boost to Marianism in the period 1930–60 abated considerably in the 1960s and 1970s.

All of these changes were bound to weaken the inherited strength of the Marian current in Irish Catholicism, but compounding their deeply corrosive effects were those of the far-reaching alterations in liturgy, theology, and church governance associated with the great Second Vatican Council (1962–65). In the aftermath of the council Catholic traditionalists protested loudly that there was no warrant in its decrees and other documents for downgrading devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary or withdrawing support from long-established Marian organizations. But the reformers, who espoused a Christological emphasis, privileged interior spirituality over "externalism," and sought to come to terms with

"the modern world," saw this whole matter very differently. Gradually, the reformers in the Irish Catholic church gained the upper hand, succeeding more rapidly and completely in some regions or dioceses than in others. Nevertheless, the strength and vigor of the Irish Marian tradition were such that those who opposed the dethroning of Marianism—a very vocal and active even if steadily dwindling minority—were able to sustain a long and partly successful rearguard campaign, one which enjoyed significant clerical and episcopal support.

Rapid Decline of the Rosary Devotion

The dethronement of Marianism in the 1960s and 1970s began with what traditionalists regarded as the near-collapse of the rosary devotion, particularly the praying of the family rosary. In his column in the *Irish Catholic*, John O'Brien remarked sourly in October 1967 that the "banalities offered by television" had relegated the family rosary "either to obscurity or to a time that suits individuals" instead of the entire family. This development, he added, was "a sad reflection on our Catholicism" in the jubilee year of the Fatima apparitions.¹ In a letter to the editor of the *Irish Catholic* in February **[End Page 184]** 1969 a resident of Emyvale, Co. Monaghan, asserted with some exaggeration: "Television and films have finished the family rosary even in the most backward country homes. The filthiest and lewdest films now take its place."² Unrealistically, many traditionalists came to believe that RTE itself could repair the damage inflicted by the "black box." "Up to now television has done immense harm to the rosary," asserted an "old I.R.A. man" from Kilbeggan, Co. Westmeath, in the same month. "If they decide now to televise the rosary every night, it would reverse the situation."³ Loudly echoing this call was the prominent Dominican priest Fr. Gabriel M. Harty, still the director of...

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Love through Anarchy, comparing the two formulas, we come to the following conclusion: the distillation is demanding for creativity.

Medjugorje, buler.

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