

The Canonisation of St. Oliver Plunkett

Confirmed Venerable on the 9th December 1886, the campaign for Archbishop Oliver Plunkett's beatification could then begin. Declared Martyr, by the Church on St. Patrick's Day 1918, he became Blessed Oliver at a beatification ceremony in St. Peter's Basilica, Rome on Pentecost Sunday 23rd May 1920, during the pontificate of Pope Benedict XV. Following the 1932 Eucharistic Congress in Dublin, there was renewed interest in Blessed Oliver and a league of prayer was initiated to pray for his canonisation.

In 1958, an Italian woman, Mrs. Giovanna Martiriggiano who was gravely ill in hospital in Naples, was unexpectedly cured of her illness. A sister of the Irish Medical Missionaries of Mary, Sr. Cabrini Quigley from Donegal who was working in the hospital, prayed with the lady's husband Nicola, regularly throughout the night to Blessed Oliver, for a cure of the patient who was expected to die overnight.



The lady who was expecting a child and was full term, was found unconscious at home. After many hours in this state, she was brought to hospital where it was found that she had lost the large baby girl and that some of the mother's internal organs were severely damaged and almost nonexistent as a result. The surgeon attending her, knowing that death was imminent, only loosely stitched her up in theatre and he arranged that she should be placed in a side ward not wishing her to die in 'his' theatre. Overnight, surprise was expressed on several occasions that she was still alive and hospital staff were astonished the following day when the patient revived. She soon made a complete recovery without the need of any further medical intervention whatsoever. Within a month, some of the sisters from the Medical Missionaries of Mary order went to visit Giovanna in her home, but missed her as she was out shopping. She subsequently lived a healthy life for a further fifty years. This cure was thoroughly investigated by panels of independent doctors. It was accepted as miraculous and attributed to Blessed Oliver.

Pope Paul VI declared him a saint in a canonisation ceremony, held on 12th. October 1975. Giovanna along with her husband Nicola and son Enzo took part in the canonisation ceremony. News of the canonisation was received with great joy by the Irish Church and diaspora. Many Irish dignitaries from Church and State attended, along with an estimated twelve thousand Irish pilgrims who had travelled out from Ireland. A combined choir from Dundalk and Drogheda had the privilege of a lifetime by performing at the ceremony. During the canonisation ceremony, Archbishop Bafale, Pro-Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Causes of Saints, and Mgr. John Hanly, Postulator of St. Oliver's Cause, formally requested the Holy Father to place the name of Oliver Plunkett on the list of saints.



The Irish Episcopal Conference issued a pastoral letter to mark the occasion of the canonisation, which included the following excerpts:

“We thank God for having given him to us to show us an example in these troubled times and to be our Patron in Heaven.”

“He travelled the country for ten years, often in disguise and sometimes barely ahead of his pursuers, until his capture and imprisonment put an end to his labours. During these ten years he had done as much as any man since St. Patrick to strengthen and preserve the faith in Ireland.”

“We ask him today for all the graces we need for ourselves and for our country. We ask that we may be as he was, steadfast, courageous and devout, untiring in our work for peace and reconciliation, loyal to the Church and firm in our faith even unto death. St Oliver Plunkett pray for us.”

The Canonisation Picture



The Canonisation Picture displayed over the Shrine is the original one, which hung from St. Peter's Basilica in Rome during the canonisation ceremony in 1975. Full of symbolism it was painted by Professor Alfovino Missori a noted Italian artist.

Suggestion: When coming to the National Shrine in Drogheda, stand before the Canonisation Picture and the history of St. Oliver's life will unfold before your eyes. It now becomes much easier to remember and to explain his story.

St. Oliver is depicted as bishop: Born in 1625 near Oldcastle Co. Meath, he went to Rome in 1647 and returned to Ireland in March 1670 as Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of Ireland, after a period of almost 23 years there. A student for the priesthood at the Irish College he was unable to return home after his ordination because of the Cromwellian Conquests, which had just peaked at that time. So he undertook

further studies, gaining a doctorate in canon and civil law, than becoming a professor for 12 years in the famous Propaganda College where it is said he helped to improve standards a great deal. He was ordained Archbishop of Armagh at a quite ceremony in Ghent, Belgium on his way back to Ireland, lest a well-publicised ceremony in Rome might antagonise the government back home. As spies were on the lookout for him upon his return, he travelled for some months in disguise as a Captain Brown complete with wig, sword and pistols as befitted an officer.

With a halo and rays of light: This signifies that he is holy and a canonised saint of the Church.

A father is seen on the right presenting his son to the Archbishop to be educated: He built and equipped from the foundations up, a school in Drogheda, which catered for one hundred and fifty boys, also a college in the same building for the education of up to fifty-six priests. This was badly needed after the turmoil of the Cromwellian persecutions, barely 20 years earlier. No catholic schools were allowed at that time, and he was called before the Council in Dublin on at least nine occasions to defend them. Three and a half years later, they were knocked to the ground by the authorities and this action caused St. Oliver considerable sadness.

In the foreground a newly ordained priest is shown holding a chalice: He probably ordained about 200 priests in total, and he went to great lengths to ensure that they were all properly trained and educated, before and after ordination.

The kneeling figure represents the great loyalty of the Irish people to the Catholic faith over the centuries: The Irish gave up their land, property and positions, rather than give up the great treasure of their Catholic faith. On several occasions he wrote of his admiration for the deep faith of the Irish people.

A confirmation scene is portrayed outdoors under a tree, and is set close to a ruined church: For several years, St. Oliver was the only active Bishop in the eleven dioceses of the northern province and he performed countless confirmation ceremonies, 48000 in his first three years as Archbishop, usually held at mass-rocks, as there were only a handful of catholic churches allowed in the whole of the province at that time. He wrote shortly after his return to Ireland: "There are bearded men of sixty who have not yet received the sacrament of confirmation."

This ruined church to the left of the tree, contrasts greatly with St. Peter's Basilica Rome, which is in its background: This symbolising St. Oliver's strong loyalty to Rome. He willingly came back to help the Irish Church which was impoverished, and in quite poor shape with no church buildings.

The broken pike at the bottom of the picture: This symbolises the decommissioning of weapons at his request by the Raparees or Tories, having negotiated a peace agreement between them and the Government. Interestingly this has some similarities with the more recent Good Friday Agreement as it also included the laying down of arms and the release of prisoners. Without leadership for several decades, the Irish Church was often divided and there were very strong divisions and disagreements within it. He also brought peace to each diocese in turn on his many visitations.

The gallows scene recalls his death as a martyr: During his nineteen months in jail on false conspiracy charges against the government he prayed and fasted yet all the while he remained cheerful despite his various illnesses, and two incredibly harsh winters. His trial in Westminster Hall London was a travesty of justice, where the packed jury returned a guilty verdict after only fifteen minutes deliberations. St. Oliver replied: 'Deo gratias' or 'God be thanked.' His martyrdom took place on 1st July 1681 at Tyburn where he was hung drawn and quartered. In a moving speech he forgave all those who had any part in his downfall. His holiness was plain for all to see and as a result he became the very last Catholic martyr of Tyburn.

The tower on the top right hand corner of the picture: This a motif of the Plunkett family.

The shamrock on the top left hand corner of the picture: This symbolises the faith of St. Patrick, which St. Oliver as his successor helped to preserve and to hand down to the present day. In a pastoral letter from the Irish Bishops to mark St. Oliver's canonisation in 1975 they wrote: "He travelled the country for ten years, often in disguise and sometimes barely ahead of his pursuers, until his capture and imprisonment put an end to his labours. During these ten years he had done as much as any man since St. Patrick to strengthen and preserve the faith in Ireland."