



A fearless Faith: The Secret seminary of Scalán

— More than 300 years since its formation, Fr Michael Briody tells the story of how priests were trained at Scalán when Catholicism was outlawed, government troops destroyed seminaries and the faithful spoke in code words.

This year marks the 303rd anniversary of the foundation of the Secret Seminary at Scalán in the Braes of Glenlivet in 1716. Why was such an institution established and why did it have to be secret?

New ideas about Christianity had been sweeping across Europe. These were at odds with the beliefs held for the previous 1,500 years and this led to confrontation.

In those days, Kings and Queens, and rulers generally, were members of the Church, and Church and State were very closely connected. These disputes inevitably involved them, because they considered that they threatened the unity of their people.

New or Old

They ended up taking sides and attempting to decide for their subjects whether they would follow the New or the Old Religion, as they came to be called.

The monarch's word was law, and there were severe punishments for those who followed the 'wrong' religion, including the death penalty. The result in Scotland was that the Old Religion went 'underground.'

The Scottish Parliament met in Edinburgh in 1560 and passed what Catholics call the Penal Laws.

These laws forbade the celebration of the Mass in Scotland; priests were prohibited from being in Scotland at all.

Further laws of a similar nature were enacted over the next 150 years. Mass, therefore, could only be celebrated in secret. Priests couldn't stay in the same place for long. Church matters had to be conducted with great secrecy.

Communications with Rome were fraught with difficulty. Church matters had to be conducted clandestinely. This gave rise to all kinds of subterfuge.

Code words

In writing letters, Latin and Italian were often employed but, when English was used, code words became common parlance: Rome was 'Old Town' or 'Hamburg'; a priest was a 'labourer,' Scalán was 'the shop' and its students were 'prentices.'

Aliases were also used. Bishop Hugh MacDonald was 'Mr Marolle' after a French benefice which gave the Scottish Mission financial support; Bishop John Geddes was 'Mr Maroch' because he was titular bishop of Morocco.

The following is a description of how Mass was celebrated in those difficult times. This comes from the memoirs of Bishop Geddes (1735-99) who built the house of Scalán that we can visit today.

Jacobite Uprising

This description refers to the time immediately after the failed Jacobite Uprising of 1745 which brought great retribution to the Highlands in general and Catholics in particular:

"The priest said Mass in various places, commonly in barns, and always in the night-time. Towards the end of the week, he bespoke some barn that happened to be empty, in a place proper for the meeting of the people in the night, between the approaching Saturday and Sunday, and some trusty persons were sent to acquaint the heads of the Catholic families of this determination.

"On Saturday, when it was late at night, the Catholics convened at the appointed place. After midnight a sermon was made, Mass was said, and all endeavoured to get home before daybreak.

"These meetings were often very inconvenient, from the badness of the weather and of the roads, and from the people being crowded together without seats; but all was borne with great alacrity and cheerfulness.

"They seemed to be glad to have something to suffer for their God and for the profession of his holy religion."

Priestly training

The Council of Trent (1542-62) which had been convened by the Pope to help the Church respond to the upheaval of the Reformation, had, among other measures, decreed that there should be specialised institutes established for the proper training of priests.

These had not existed before, strangely. There had been no standardised and little professional formation of the clergy. This was considered to be one of the weak points contributing to the failure of the Church to take part in the battle of the new ideas.

The Penal Laws made it unthinkable, at least at first, to have these establishments anywhere in Scotland, and so we looked to friendly parts of Europe to give us a home for these seminaries, as they were called. In time Scots Colleges were to be found in Rome, as well as France, Bavaria and Spain.

Dissatisfaction

With the passage of time, the bishops had some dissatisfaction with the seminaries on the continent. Too many students were leaving.

A common problem was that they were not really prepared for the demands of the teaching institutes which they attended on the continent.

There was also a desire to prepare men for priesthood entirely on Scottish soil despite the law against it. There was also a more recent penal law which prohibited parents sending their offspring abroad for education.

This all led to the creation in 1714 of the first seminary in Scotland on Eilean Bàn, an island on Loch Morar in the Western Highlands.

Discovered

Unfortunately, it was discovered and destroyed by government troops, the 'redcoats,' in 1716, as they laid waste much of the Highlands in punishment for the Jacobite Uprising of 1715.

Its successor was Scalan, a name which possibly encapsulates not only the Penal Times, but hopes for and the beginning of a better future for Scots Catholics.

It was situated in the Braes of Glenlivet, eight miles from Tomintoul, in the lands of the Catholic Duke of Gordon who, along with its remote location, provided it with some security.

Between 1716 and 1799 it prepared about 64 priests for Scotland at a crucial time. It did not escape entirely the attentions of the authorities and was completely destroyed after Bonnie Prince Charlie's failed 1745 Jacobite Uprising. Catholics were presumed to be Jacobites.

Oppression

As Bishop John Geddes wrote: "The Scottish Catholics were generally desirous of the restoration of the family of the Stuarts to the throne of Britain; nor is this to be wondered at... The Scottish Catholics were discouraged and much exposed to oppression—it was natural for them to hope for an event that was likely to relieve them and put them again in possession of the privileges of free-born citizens."

By this time, the authorities were not particularly interested in how we worshipped God but they were mightily concerned about our politics, and when Bishop Hay instructed Catholics in 1780 to start praying for the King in London rather than the 'King over the water' it was a significant step in helping Catholics to emerge from the catacombs and to begin to play a fuller part in Scottish society.

Keeping the fires of Faith burning

A group of 32 left St Michael's, Moodiesburn, on Friday, 14 June, on a three-day pilgrimage whose eventual destination was Scalan.

At Mass before leaving, Fr Michael Briody, parish priest and pilgrimage leader, spoke of how pilgrimages we undertake from time to time are a way of sharpening up our awareness that we are always on a pilgrimage—from our Baptism to the Judgement.

The pilgrims headed for Culloden, scene of the battle that ended the Jacobite Uprising of Bonnie Prince Charlie on April 16, 1746. It was a way of remembering that Bishop George Hay, whom the group were to honour at Scalan, got caught up in the Uprising as a young medical student in Edinburgh, aged 16, by going out to help the wounded after the Battle of Prestonpans.

Bishop Hay followed the Jacobite army down to England, and on its retreat opted out at Edinburgh to return to his family. He was also quite ill after his experience. Later he was advised to admit to the authorities that he had been involved but only in a medical role.

Imprisoned

This did not impress the authorities and he spent 18 months in prison in Edinburgh and London.

It was here he came into contact with the prison-visiting Catholic bookseller Thomas Meighan and, on his return to Scotland, read 'The Papist represented and Misrepresented' by John Gother. He was received into the Church in December 1748, aged 19.

On the second day the pilgrims visited Pluscarden Abbey and celebrated Mass there.

Bishop William Nolan of Galloway spoke of how whenever we celebrate Mass we should be conscious of the whole Church around the world celebrating the Mass in all sorts of different places, how we are united to them, and how our Masses are never private local affairs but are always an action of the whole Church represented by ourselves.

Pluscarden

He also encouraged us to think of all who had celebrated the Mass before us in places like Pluscarden centuries ago, a thought that made sense of a visit later in the day to the ruins of the medieval Elgin Cathedral only a few miles away.

On Sunday June 16, the pilgrims arrived at Scalan. More than 200 attended the anniversary Mass concelebrated by Bishop Hugh Gilbert of Aberdeen, Bishop Joseph Toal of Motherwell, Bishop Nolan, Archbishop Emeritus Mario Conti and 13 priests.

Deacon Tony Schmitz assisted the bishops and Fr Colin Stewart, local parish priest, helped with the music and sound system.

Mission of the Church

Bishop Gilbert provided a homily worthy of the occasion, tracing the life and character of Bishop Hay, the various issues he dealt with and the contributions he made to Catholic life in those days.

He concluded with a challenging thought: Bishop Hay not only kept the fires of Faith burning, but took good opportunities to move forward and advance the mission of the Church, and each of us must be on the lookout for all ways, large and small, in which, inspired each day by the Holy Spirit, we can move forward the cause of Christ in our present times.

At the end of the Mass, Fr Briody, president of the Scalan Association, gave thanks to all who had come and encouraged those present to thank the Lord for a dry, if slightly chilly, day which contradicted the rather pessimistic weather forecasts. Scalan, as always, is a world apart.