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The Visual Representation of the Crown of Thorns Motif in Irish Stained Glass: A Symbol of Universal Suffering for the Catholic Revival in France and Ireland in the Early Twentieth Century

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Abstract: The fire that broke out on 15 April 2019 in Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris was devastating for the French nation, as the cathedral had long been regarded as a symbol of French religious and cultural patrimony, described by the Washington Post as “the spiritual heart of France”. The heroic rescue of the relic of the crown of thorns by the chaplain of the Paris Fire Department, Père Jean-Marc Fournier, offered some consolation in a night of national trauma. World attention was focused on the relic, its history, and what its loss would signify to the people of France, and to the world. This paper will examine the importance of the relic to the people of France, and its enduring legacy as a symbol of universal suffering. It will demonstrate how the motif of the crown of thorns, as attested to in three of the canonical gospels, has acted as a powerful source of inspiration for the proponents of the French Catholic Revival of the early twentieth century. It will also examine the appearance of the motif in the earliest stained-glass windows produced for Loughrea Cathedral, Co. Galway at the beginning of the twentieth century, during a period of extensive building of churches and cathedrals following Catholic Emancipation in Ireland in 1829. Finally, it will reveal the largely undocumented link between the French Catholic Revival (*le renouveau Catholique*) and the sacrificial politics of early-twentieth-century Ireland.

Keywords: crown of thorns relic; Notre Dame Cathedral; French Catholic Revival; Loughrea Cathedral; Galway; early twentieth century



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1. Introduction

The news of the fire that devastated the Cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris on 15 April 2019—the Monday of Holy Week—generated an enormous response throughout the world. For several hours during that evening, it appeared that the iconic medieval building, a symbol of the religious and cultural patrimony of France, might be lost forever in the flames. When news finally emerged that the damage, though extensive, was not beyond repair, there was a worldwide sense of relief. The fact that the twelfth-century rose window and much of the stained glass had survived the flames was little short of miraculous. Reports that the chaplain of the Parisian Fire Department, Père Jean-Marc Fournier, had heroically saved the Blessed Sacrament and the relic of the crown of thorns provided some solace following the dramatic collapse of the spire on the night of the fire. The incident, which attracted considerable attention in the international press over the following days, highlighted the highly significant role that Catholicism had once had in the religious and cultural history of France. For, although officially secularized in 1905, in the years following France's Act of Separation through the Second World War a resurgence of Catholicism emerged among a group of intellectuals, artists, and writers, for whom the motif of the crown of thorns represented a symbol of the suffering of the individual and the French nation. Indeed, according to Richard Griffiths, the doctrine of vicarious suffering

underlying the revival of French Catholicism at this time held that “an individual’s suffering could atone for the political sins of impious France that had begun with the revolution and had continued with the secularizing process of *laïcité*”. Burton’s analysis of the culture of suffering, particularly among French Catholic women of this period gives a fascinating insight into this aspect of French Catholic spirituality (Griffiths 1966; See also Burton 2008).

In Ireland, towards the latter part of the nineteenth century, following Catholic Emancipation in 1829, a similar revival of Catholicism took place, albeit for different reasons. With the removal of many of the restrictions that had been in place for Catholics with the introduction of the Penal Laws in the seventeenth century, a wave of building of Catholic churches and cathedrals began in Ireland. This created the need for an indigenous Arts and Crafts movement, where artists emerging from a post-emancipation Catholicism could turn their attention to the design and production of stained glass for early-twentieth-century churches and cathedrals. Edward Martyn (1859–1923), a wealthy Catholic landowner from Co. Galway, was an important figure in the development of stained glass in Ireland in the early twentieth century. Together with Sarah Purser (1848–1943), a well-connected Dublin artist, he set up *An Túr Gloine* (The Tower of Glass), a stained-glass company in Dublin. He also set up classes in the Metropolitan School of Art for Irish artists to learn the art of stained-glass production. From this studio emerged some of the finest stained glass produced in Ireland, by artists such as Michael Healy (1873–1941), Catherine O’Brien (1881–1963), Wilhelmina Geddes (1887–1955), and Evie Hone (1894–1955). When the new cathedral in Loughrea, Co. Galway was being built, Martyn engaged the services of A.E. Child (1879–1939), a pupil of English stained-glass artist Christopher Whall, to execute the first three windows for the cathedral.

These three windows appear in the apse and depict *The Annunciation*, *The Agony in the Garden*, and *The Resurrection*, all completed and erected in 1903. The final window erected by Child is *The Baptism of the Lord*, located in the baptistry and completed in 1904. Although these early windows are of very high quality, they lack the innovation and imagination which are a feature of the later windows executed by Michael Healy. However, they do contain one very unusual feature: each of the windows includes a visual representation of the thorn motif. *The Annunciation* window portrays an angel carrying a lamb surrounded by a crown of thorns in the rose window in the tracery. In the *Agony in the Garden* window, the image of thorny briars covers the lower section of the two lights, while *The Resurrection* window contains the image of the resurrected Christ still bearing the crown of thorns. Finally, most unusually, *The Baptism of the Lord* window also portrays the figure of Christ being baptized by John the Baptist, with the crown of thorns etched into the halo on Christ’s head. This poses the question as to why this motif is introduced at points of the gospel narrative before the Passion has taken place. We have seen how the motif of the crown of thorns became an important feature of the French Catholic Revival, representing the idea of a suffering nation lost in a world of positivist ideology and secularism. We will now investigate whether the connections that were in place between those involved in the decoration of the cathedral in Loughrea and proponents of the Catholic Revival in France may have contributed to the inclusion of this unusual feature in the stained glass produced in the early days of the twentieth century in Ireland.

2. The Significance of the Crown of Thorns to the French Catholic Revival (1885–1935)

The story of *la Sainte Couronne*, the crown of thorns placed on the head of Christ during his Passion, is recounted in three of the canonical gospels, and was referred to by the early Church Fathers, including Clement of Alexandria and Origen. According to tradition, the crown was removed by the Virgin Mary following the crucifixion and kept by her as a memento of her son. Three centuries later in 326, St. Helena, the mother of the emperor Constantine travelled to the Holy Land seeking relics of the true cross. After substantial excavations, she is said to have been successful in the mission, having located the cross and other important relics, including the crown of thorns. According to Horne, the crown of thorns began to make an appearance in Western art following the acquisition

of the relic of the thorns by King Louis IX of France in 1238. Up to this point, the figure of Christ at the crucifixion had been portrayed either bareheaded or wearing a kingly crown.¹ This suggests that devotion to the relic in France had an enormous influence on how the Passion and death of Christ came to be portrayed by artists throughout the centuries (See Španjol-Pandelo 2008).

The significance of the relic of the crown of thorns for the French nation was particularly highlighted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when a group of French intellectuals who had converted to Catholicism adopted the motif of the crown of thorns as a symbol of suffering. In her study of the role of suffering in the French Catholic Revival (*le renouveau Catholique*), Brenna Moore cites the importance of the motif of the crown of thorns to this group of artists and intellectuals as follows:

One popular devotional image found in many nineteenth and early twentieth-century pamphlets, prayers, iconography and statuary depicted the Infant Jesus (*le Petit Roi d'Amour*) carrying a tiny basket of thorns and hammers, dreaming of the suffering he would endure as an adult, and summoning devotees to join him in his agony on account of a sinful, secular modern nation. (Moore 2013, p. 6)

This motif found expression in the poetry of Raïssa Maritain, wife of the philosopher Jacques Maritain, whose poem *La Couronne d'Épines* (The Crown of Thorns) Moore describes as “a vivid account of Jesus’ fear on the Mount of Olives before his crucifixion”.² A contemporary of Maritain’s, and a fellow convert to Catholicism, Charles de Foucault, referred in his *Méditations Sur L’Ancien Testament* to partaking in Christ’s suffering by wearing the crown of thorns in solidarity with him.³ The identification with the suffering of Christ by this diverse cohort of French Catholic converts was a defiant attempt to find meaning in “a modern bourgeois culture that denied the reality of suffering and death” (Moore 2013, p. 3). The roots of the French Catholic Revival can be traced to the 1880s, when secular legislation began dismantling what remained of the legal heritage of Christianity in France. Writers such as Charles Péguy (1873–1914), Léon Bloy (1846–1917), and the artist Georges Rouault (1871–1958), among others, were motivated by an attempt to counter these trends towards secularisation, and their influence can be detected in the documentation of this period by Frédéric Gugelot, who described it as “an avant-garde cultural turn”.⁴ Influenced by the philosophy of Henri Bergson and fuelled by an increased interest in medieval mysticism, one of the most notable aspects of this revival was a renewed emphasis on the Roman Catholic concept of vicarious suffering, symbolised by the image of the crown of thorns. Emphasising that, through acceptance of suffering, an individual could atone for the sins of the French nation culminating in the process of *laïcité*, it focused on symbols and practices centred on *souffrance*. The revival attracted converts, atheists, and lapsed Catholics in early-twentieth-century France. By examination of some intriguing links to early-twentieth-century Irish Catholic intellectuals such as Edward Martyn, Fr. Jeremiah O’Donovan, and the Bishop of Clonfert, John Healy, it is possible to detect considerable evidence of their influence in the decoration of Loughrea Cathedral in County Galway at the beginning of the twentieth century. Equally intriguing is the evidence of the influence of the French Catholic Revival on the sacrificial politics of early-twentieth-century Ireland.

3. The French Influence on the Irish Celtic Revival

The link between the French Catholic Revival and prominent figures from the Irish Celtic Revival has been documented by W.J. McCormack (2012). This link lends an intriguing dimension to the work commissioned for St. Brendan’s Cathedral, Loughrea, Co. Galway at the beginning of the twentieth century, and is worth examining in more detail. The artists of *An Túr Gloine* were responsible for producing much of the stained glass which adorns many of the churches decorated in the early years of the twentieth century in Ireland. While engaging the services of A.E. Child to teach in the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art, Martyn also succeeded in persuading Sarah Purser to open the studio where Child could teach the art of stained glass. Child was a student of Christopher Whall, a follower of William Morris, who was responsible for the reform of the applied arts and who had

championed the return of the principle of medieval craftsmanship in England. Martyn employed Whall to design a window for his family church in Ardrahan, Co. Galway, and through his influence the commission for the first three windows for the newly built cathedral at Loughrea was given to Whall, with the proviso that the work should be executed in Ireland and that his Irish assistants could learn the craft. Unable to work continuously in Ireland, Whall arranged with Sarah Purser to send Child, his chief assistant, to execute his designs, and in collaboration with the Metropolitan School of Art he set up a class in the school which would produce artists of the calibre of Harry Clarke and Michael Healy, as well as Evie Hone, Catherine O'Brien, and Wilhelmina Geddes.

Martyn's belief that Irish identity could be fostered and developed through the revival of Irish ecclesiastical architecture, as well as encouraging integration within the wider European culture, was central to his commitment to both Catholicism and nationalism. This commitment was a powerful motivation, providing the underlying framework for all his cultural undertakings. As part of "a neglected chapter of the intellectual history of modern Ireland", Martyn's involvement deserved closer examination, according to F.S.L. Lyons (1964). The work of A.E. Child, and the early work of the Irish stained-glass artists, owes much to the influence of the European intellectual tradition with which Martyn was familiar from his many travels abroad and from his family connections.⁵ Their work represents a powerful statement of the beliefs, values, and religious focus of the artists themselves, as well as a compelling indicator of the religious self-identification of the particular communities from which they emerged.

The earliest windows by Child and the fledgling studio contain intriguing details that, upon closer examination, reveal some of the preoccupations of those involved in their execution. The influence of the French Catholic Revival is suggested by the inclusion of the thorn motif in the first three windows in Loughrea.

McCormack has highlighted the links between Edward Martyn and his French Catholic counterparts. As well as the family relationship connecting him to Count Florimond de Basterot (1836–1904) and his friends, Maurice Barrés (1862–1923) and Paul Bourget (1852–1935), he was also a regular visitor to France with his cousin, the Irish writer, George Moore (1852–1933). Moore, who lived in France from 1873 to 1880, was acquainted with many of the French artists and writers of the age, including Léon Daudet (1867–1942), one of the key figures of the Catholic revival in France. Indeed, as Lyons points out, following their education in England at Oxford and Oscott, respectively, both Martyn and Moore completed their real education on the continent, with Moore "following the Impressionist painters from café to café in Montmartre, Martyn pursuing the music of Palestrina from cathedral to cathedral in France and Germany." (Lyons 1964). They also both cared deeply for literature, according to Lyons, so it is unlikely that Martyn would not have been acquainted with the literature of the Catholic revival in France.

McCormack convincingly demonstrates that the influence of the French Catholic Revival continued up to and included the Irish Easter Rising of 1916, having had considerable influence on the leaders of the Rising, particularly on P.H. Pearse (1879–1916), the Irish poet, teacher, and barrister, who adapted the powerful ideology of sacrifice inherent in the French Catholic Revival to an Irish context (McCormack 2012, p. 143). Martyn and Pearse were on familiar terms, and Pearse was undoubtedly influenced by the older man. As a student at the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art, Pearse's brother Willie would have been known to the artists of *An Túr Gloine*, and he later worked as an ecclesiastical sculptor, as had his father, James Pearse. As early as 1905, the *Irish Times* recorded a meeting of the Gaelic League in Dublin to discuss the condition of Irish education, which was attended by both Martyn and Pearse (See *Gaelic League and Education: Meeting in Rotunda Speeches by Mr. Redmond and Others* 1905). Their common interest in Irish political and cultural matters ensured that they would have met regularly in the rarefied intellectual circles of early-twentieth-century Dublin. Although both men were Catholic cultural nationalists, Martyn's main attachment was to the cultural revival, and as Lyons demonstrates, as politi-

cal tensions grew in Ireland, all the cultural objectives he had worked for were forgotten in the gathering political storm (Lyons 1964, pp. 28–29).

The motif of thorns displayed on the windows in Loughrea can plausibly be traced to the prominence of this imagery in *fin-de-siècle* Catholic intellectual circles. McCormack shows how the influence of the French Catholic Revival continued to inspire the leaders of 1916, citing Charles Péguy as a “central figure in the sacrificial politics of Francophone Irish Catholics”.⁶ This influence was particularly evident in the case of Pearse and Joseph Plunkett (1887–1916), both of whom were fluent French speakers and readers. Close examination of the windows presents a convincing case that the sacrificial politics underlying the 1916 Rising may have had an early manifestation in the visual representations of the Christ figure in Loughrea Cathedral. While all artistic representation both reveals and conceals the artist’s intentions, the concealment of subversive ideology has a particular significance within a colonial context. An examination of three windows—*The Agony in the Garden* and *The Resurrection* located in the apse, and *The Baptism of the Lord* in the baptistery—reveals a subtle subtext to these seemingly conventional portrayals.

The window in the central apse, the *Agony in the Garden* is adapted from a previous window executed by Whall in 1902 as part of the south transept window in Canterbury Cathedral. The narrative of Christ’s deep distress in the garden on the Mount of Olives is common to all the Synoptic Gospels, although the details vary (Matt. 26:36–57), (Mark 14:26–53), (Luke 22:39–54). While John records Jesus going to the garden, he presents him as less anguished and more in control (John 18:1–12). Child’s portrayal shows his anguish as he bows his head in prayer to his Father, as recorded in Matthew 26:39: “And he went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying ‘O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me, nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt’”. Mark and Luke record a similar prayer to the Father to remove the cup, but Luke is the only one to refer to an angel appearing from heaven to strengthen him (Luke 22:43), and to his sweat appearing as “great drops of blood falling down to the ground” (Luke 22:44). Child’s portrayal would therefore appear to be based mainly on Luke’s account, as he includes two angels in the second light, both of whom are holding up a chalice symbolising the cup which Christ must accept to do the Father’s will. There is a sundial on the rock on which his head is laid, perhaps symbolising the hour which has finally come, and thorny briars cover the lower part of the two lights, representing both the curse pronounced in Genesis 3:17–18, and an anticipation of the crown of thorns as portrayed in the gospel narratives.

The third window in the apse is a portrayal of the Resurrection and adds continuity to the overall iconographic content of the apse. Once again, this window was designed by Whall, and there is a similarity between this window in Loughrea, and St. Ethelbert’s, Herringwell, Suffolk (1902). While there is little innovation in the portrayal, it is notable that the figure of the risen Christ is still wearing the crown of thorns. The first light contains the figure of the risen Christ, dressed in red, symbolising his recent Passion, and holding the triumphal cross (*crux longa*) with a banner signifying his conquest over death and hell. Two angels bow in supplication before him in the second light, and the Roman soldiers lie sleeping with their spears in the two lower panels. There is a gold cross suspended over Christ’s head, and a gold crown is represented in the top panel of the second light over the figures of the angels, signifying the victory of the cross, and the kingship of the Resurrected Christ. None of this imagery has any direct basis on scripture, as there is no direct account of the Resurrection in the gospel narratives. All four gospels refer to eyewitness accounts of the risen Christ after the discovery of the empty tomb, but none of them give an account of the Resurrection itself, as there were no eyewitnesses to the event. The Resurrection is one of the most difficult Christian themes to represent visually, and historically it has been approached with a good degree of reticence in art. For over a thousand years, it was not represented directly but symbolically, using the Chi Rho sign surrounded by a wreath, signifying victory over death. There are no depictions of the Resurrection in the catacombs; the early Christians chose to express the image through the depiction of the raising of Lazarus, the image of Christ as the Resurrection and the

Life (John 11:25), and the story of Jonah. During the medieval period, the Resurrection began to be portrayed in mystery plays and poetry, and it was during the Gothic period that direct images began to appear. From the Renaissance, many artists have depicted the Resurrection, with Piero della Francesca and El Greco, among others, producing powerful portrayals. None of these artists represent the Christ figure wearing the crown of thorns, however, indicating the highly unusual character of the inclusion of this detail in Child's portrayal.⁷

Each of these windows was put in place by the end of 1903, barely a year after the opening of the studio in January of that year. The speed with which they were executed is probably accounted for by the fact that they were based on previous windows executed by Whall for various English churches. This may also explain the many Pre-Raphaelite-style features contained within them. However, this does not detract from the fact that, as Egan points out, "because they mark the beginning of the Irish stained-glass revival and because they were executed by a master of the craft, they are of very high quality and of first importance in the history of the movement" (Egan 1986).

The Child window *The Baptism of the Lord* (1904), located in the baptistery, is a two light window featuring two winged angels in the first light who appear to be holding a red robe, which presumably belongs to Christ. The baptism is recorded in each of the Synoptic Gospels (Mark 1:9–11, Matt. 3:13–17, Luke 3:21–22). John the Baptist is dressed in accordance with Matthew's description: "Now John wore a garment of camel's hair, and a leather girdle around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey" (Matt. 3:4). He is portrayed in the act of pouring water from the river over the head of Christ. Both men have halos over their heads, but on close observation it is startling to observe the crown of thorns which is etched into Christ's halo, at a point in the gospel narrative before the Passion has taken place. The crown of thorns has been used historically in Christian art as a symbol of the curse that Christ took upon himself for the sins of mankind based on the motif of thorns in Genesis 3:17–18, where God curses the ground declaring that it will bring forth "thorns and thistles" for Adam, following his disobedience. The mystery of the crown of thorns can therefore be traced back to the origin story in Genesis. This mystery is hidden behind the poignant event in Christ's Passion as portrayed in the gospels. The curse in Genesis did not only strike the earth, but it also struck at the heart of humanity and has historically been interpreted as a symbolic representation of humanity's suffering because of sin. However, this does not satisfactorily explain why this window representing the Baptism of the Lord, which took place early in Christ's ministry in all the gospels, contains this feature. The influence of Edward Martyn and Christopher Whall may be detected in this imagery. According to Caron, Whall's letters reveal that he spent some time in Ireland in early 1903, staying with Martyn in his ancestral home in Tulira, Co. Galway, and working on the windows in Dublin, as well as instructing the artists at this early stage of their careers. Caron suggests that Whall came from England to help Child, who had not designed any figurative windows up to this point, and perhaps found the prospect of executing three windows daunting; Child was just twenty-eight years old at this point (Caron 1991, p. 4). Following a dramatic conversion experience in Italy, Whall had decided to devote his life to Roman Catholic art. As Martyn had an enormous input into the decorating of Loughrea from both the financial and aesthetic viewpoint, it is inconceivable that he would not have had detailed discussions with Whall and Child on the iconography of the windows.

As well as Martyn and Whall's input, however, it is safe to assume that John Healy, the Bishop of Clonfert (1841–1918), and the curate Fr. Jeremiah O'Donovan's (1871–1942) considerable interest and knowledge of religious art would have been considered. These two clerics were atypical of the type of patrons who normally commissioned religious art in Irish Catholic churches of the period. Healy and O'Donovan's openness to innovation is evidenced by their willingness to entrust the decoration of the Cathedral to the newly established stained-glass company. All three men aspired towards creating a building that reflected a profound sense of Catholic identity. They were also all intensely nationalistic in outlook: Martyn had originally been a unionist, but by the late 1890s he had become a

nationalist (Lyons 1964, p. 27); Bishop Healy, who was “fascinated by the vision of ancient Celtic Ireland”, was Martyn’s tenant (Caron 1991, p. 13). Each of these factors suggest that the underlying ideals of the decoration of Loughrea encompassed a strong emphasis on Irish Catholic identity. The imagery used drew on the idea of suffering as a redemptive force, an idea which was an important motivating energy underlying the ideals of the Easter Rising. Dudley Edwards has pointed to Pearse’s “obsessive need to bedeck word and action with a profusion of religious images” (Edwards 2006, p. 213). The development of his ideas of blood sacrifice had strong messianic connotations, and his declaration that “One man can free a people as one Man redeemed the world” suggests that Pearse self-identified as a Christ-like figure who would suffer on behalf of his people (Edwards 2006, p. 247). The fusion of Irish nationalism with Irish Catholicism was a potent mix in the early part of the twentieth century, and has been well documented. According to historian Ian McBride, “the idea of a crucified nation is difficult to disconnect from the decisive shift towards the new nationalism that took place at the end of the 19th century.” (McBride 2001, p. 35). Gugelot points to a similar fusion between Catholicism and nationalism in his study of the French Catholic Revival of this period (Gugelot 2007). This was particularly evident in the case of Charles Péguy, who interpreted the suffering of the French nation in the light of its rejection of its ancient faith. For Péguy, Catholicism was synonymous with his love of France, which for him became a reality when he died on the battlefield of the Marne in 1914, fighting for his beloved France. His poetry reflected his profound belief in suffering and self-sacrifice as a means of making amends for the sins of his country. One of his poems, *Le Porche du mystère de la deuxième Vertu*, is a reflection on Christ’s Passion in the light of hope, the second theological virtue. This poem suggests that the crown of thorns worn by Christ as a symbol of suffering and sin becomes an eternal crown of hope for humanity: “Une couronne aussi a été faite/une couronne de sève/une couronne éternelle/Et c’est la couronne/le couronnement de l’espérance” (A crown was also made/a crown of sap/an eternal crown/and this is the crown/the crown of hope). This poem was chosen to be read in Notre Dame Cathedral for a special celebration of prayer and veneration of the crown of thorns on 10 April 2020 (Legry 2020).

The influence of the sacrificial politics of the French Catholic Revival on their counterparts in Ireland can be detected in an account of a visit by Thomas McDonagh (1878–1916), one of the leaders of the Rising, to Edward Martyn days before the 1916 Rising, given by Eoin Leenane, a lifelong friend of Martyn’s. Leenane recalls overhearing Martyn saying to McDonagh: “Remember my dear boy, you’ll be shot, and a lot of you will be shot.” (The Turret Room—Edward Martyn 1956). This conversation suggests that Martyn was aware of the plans for the Rising. McDonagh was involved with both Martyn and Joseph Plunkett in the foundation of the Irish Theatre in Dublin in 1914. Martyn was also closely associated with Eamonn Ceannt (1881–1916), the musician and revolutionary with whom he had founded The Piper’s Club (*Cumann na bPíobairí*) in February 1900. While Edward Martyn was personally opposed to the use of physical force to achieve it, he nonetheless shared the aspiration for Irish independence with all involved in the Rising. Considering his close association with all of them, there can be little doubt that he was at least aware of the leaders’ plans. As a friend of most of the main protagonists, he was grief-stricken following their execution. In fact, after 1916, Martyn retreated from public life, suffering ill health until his death in 1923. On his own instructions, his body was used for medical research, and he was buried in an unmarked grave. He bestowed the contents of his extensive library, as well as his letters and correspondence, to the Carmelites in Clarendon Street in Dublin. The fact that Martyn’s letters and papers were mislaid, never to be recovered to date, remains a tragedy for historical research into the social, cultural, and political context of the period.

4. Conclusions

Having examined how Catholics in France and Ireland in the early twentieth century saw the crown of thorns as a symbol of their own suffering nations, as well as of a humanity

scarred by sin and suffering, we may conclude that for Catholics such as Charles Péguy in France, and Edward Martyn in Ireland, Catholicism was closely allied to nationalism. The period in which they lived was followed by the immense suffering inflicted on the world by two world wars, and the internal turmoil in Ireland beginning with the Easter Rising in 1916, followed by a War of Independence (1919–1921), and culminating in a bitterly divisive Civil War (1921–1923). The decoration of the Cathedral in Loughrea came to a halt in 1912, and did not resume until 1925, when the new state had achieved some level of stability. It is notable that the crown of thorns motif does not appear in any representation of Christ in the stained-glass windows executed after 1925. As Edward Martyn had died in 1923 and no longer had any influence over the decoration of the cathedral, the stained glass produced from 1925 onwards saw the development of Michael Healy's career, whose more innovative style reflected the progression of the new Free State. The rupture caused by the cataclysmic events of the mid-twentieth century led to a new approach towards co-existence in Europe. Philosopher Jacques Maritain, who had been deeply involved in the Catholic revival in France, became an important advisor to those attempting to draw up plans for this new way of co-existence in Europe (Jacobs 2018). In Ireland, the suffering nation—for which the leaders of 1916 had given their lives—began its slow and sometimes painful journey towards becoming a Free State. The influence of the Catholic Church in that struggle has been well documented.

When viewed through the lens of the Catholic revival, both in France and in Ireland in the early twentieth century, it is possible to understand how the crown of thorns motif was adopted as a symbol of human suffering. From the time of humanity's fall from grace recounted in Genesis, suffering and death, symbolized by the thorns of Genesis 3:18, became an inevitable consequence of existence. The Catholic doctrine of vicarious suffering, symbolized by the crown of thorns, was embraced by the proponents of the French Catholic Revival, and it appears to have been adopted by their Irish counterparts. Because of the loss of Edward Martyn's papers, it is not possible to prove conclusively that Martyn, Child, and the other individuals involved in the creation of the stained-glass windows in Loughrea in 1903 were directly influenced by their links to French Catholics of the period. However, the strong links that Martyn had with European—particularly French—culture, and his devout Catholicism suggest that he would have been in sympathy with Péguy's belief that “for the true Christian, suffering is a source of immense wealth. It is the only gift that man's love can offer to God. The suffering of the Christian is united to the suffering of Christ” (McLeod 1937). Despite Martyn's considerable wealth, he lived an austere, almost monk-like existence, sharing the opulence of his ancestral home, Tulira Castle in Co. Galway with his friends, but living himself in a room in the tower, “bare and uncompromising as a monk's cell”, according to Lyons (1964, p. 12). This lifestyle was in keeping with a life of spiritual poverty, adopted also by his French counterparts, as described by Gugelot (Gugelot 2007, pp. 340–42).

Having seen how the crown of thorns motif was adopted by French and Irish Catholics as a symbol of suffering humanity at the beginning of the twentieth century, we will conclude by returning briefly to the night of 15 April 2019, when the fire in Notre Dame highlighted the significance of the relic of the crown of thorns to the French nation, and demonstrated that secular France still maintains a link, however tenuous, with its religious patrimony.

The crown of thorns has been seen as a symbol of the suffering and anguish of humanity from the time of the curse pronounced in Genesis 3:17–18, which became a symbol of hope in the light of Christ's Passion and death, reflected in Péguy's poem. It would appear that the crown of thorns motif, which became a feature of the iconography of the crucifixion in the thirteenth century, also found resonance with early-twentieth-century Catholicism both in France and in Ireland. It is hoped that this study, despite its limitations, has contributed to the understanding of why this motif, as a symbol of suffering, has provided inspiration for artists and writers throughout the centuries. It is

almost certain that the events of 15 April 2019 will be added to the intriguing narrative of the relic of the crown of thorns as it continues its journey through history.

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Notes

- ¹ (Horne 1935). For comprehensive treatment of the significance of the Crown of Thorns and its iconographic representation see also (Pysiak 2021).
- ² (Moore 2013). “La Couronne d’épines” appeared in the 1931 inaugural issue of *Vigile*, a short-lived Catholic literary journal.
- ³ (Foucauld 1958, p. 59). Blessed Charles de Foucauld was canonised by Pope Francis on 15 May 2022. Following his conversion and return to Catholicism, he served as a priest among the Tuareg people in the Sahara Desert in Algeria, where he was killed by bandits on 1 December 1916.
- ⁴ (Gugelot 2007). Gugelot documents a very considerable number of converts, including writers such as Bloy and Péguy, philosophers such as Maritain, artists such as Georges Rouault, and musicians such as Erik Satie to name but a few.
- ⁵ Martyn was related through marriage to the French writer Count Florimond de Basterot, whose North Clare estate, Parkmore, hosted visits from Guy de Maupassant, a cousin of de Basterot, the novelist-politician Maurice Barrés (1862–1923), and Paul Bourget, the Catholic novelist. Martyn was a regular visitor to Parkmore, as were W.B. Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory. Indeed, the decision to set up the Abbey Theatre resulted from a conversation held in Parkmore between Martyn, Yeats, and Lady Gregory.
- ⁶ (McCormack 2012, p. 143). See also (White 1993, pp. 383–88) where White highlights similarities in the sacrificial politics of Pearse and Péguy.
- ⁷ See The Right Rev. Lord Harries, Christian Themes in Art: The Resurrection in Art, www.gresham.overthrownmotherhood.co.uk/lectures-and-events-christian-themes-in-art-the-resurrection-in-art (accessed on 21 April 2022).

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