

HOW RELIABLE WAS ARCHDEACON CAVANAGH AT THE START OF THE SHRINE AT KNOCK?

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In a village of about a dozen homes and a Parish Church called Knock in Co Mayo, Ireland, a seemingly extraordinary occurrence was reported.

On the night of the 21st of August 1879 the Virgin Mary flanked by St Joseph and a bishop thought to be St John the Evangelist and an altar with a lamb and cross on it allegedly appeared on the gable wall of the Parish Church for a few hours. Fifteen people witnessed the vision including a child of five (page 60, *The Evidence for Visions of the Virgin Mary*) and stood watching it for two hours allegedly in torrential rain.

It is hugely significant that the witnesses did not set out to make a big thing of the vision. It could be that they had doubts. It was the priest, Archdeacon Cavanagh, who caused the stir. The vision did not create a huge impression with them and the village had very little interest in the vision for several decades.

The apparition is often thought to have been a hoax and that the parish priest Archdeacon Cavanagh was behind it. Another view is that it was an illusion and that the Archdeacon knew that and manipulated the situation to make it look like a convincing miracle. Whatever the truth, the Archdeacon did a lot of scheming.

Father Herbert Thurston might have disagreed but he was clear that he had found evidence that "the Archdeacon, as he was commonly called, was not the type of man whose judgment and stability could be relied on." [From 6th October 1883, *KNOCK: A RESURRECTED SHRINE*, HERBERT THURSTON, S.J.]. The Archdeacon could have deluded himself in the face of clear signs of fraud. He was up to his neck even if he did not command or set up the fraud.

Some wonder why it was Knock Church if it was a hoax and why not the other Church in the parish, Aghamore. But why not? We must remember that the Archdeacon's best friends were mostly to be found in Knock and these included the Beirm family who comprised most of the witnesses. Besides, Aghamore was less suitable for a "miracle" display outside than what the Knock Church was. The gable was ideal.

Cavanagh was at Maynooth College when Nicholas Joseph Callan (1799–1864) was conducting experiments there with light and electricity. What did Cavanagh learn from him? Or did he at least learn where to find somebody to produce an apparition hoax?

He was 58 and healthy at the time of the alleged apparition and could have carried out the hoax by himself.

He had no alibi when the apparition would have appeared or when it finished. His housekeeper saw him briefly in his house when the vision was in progress.

For all we know, cutouts may have been put on the gable and a light source shone on them. No wonder the priest Cavanagh was so keen on letting people pull pieces off the Church wall the next day. It helped get rid of the evidence for tampering.

The feast of the transfiguration took place just before the alleged vision at Knock. The story is that Jesus turned into an entity whose face shone and whose robes were white. The witnesses were a few apostles. They also saw Moses and Elijah appear with him. One wonders if the hoaxer set up a picture of the transfiguration which was misunderstood as being Mary Joseph and John. Catholicism depicts Jesus as very girly so his image could have been mistaken for Mary.

Those who wish to argue for a miracle focus on minor details that were not important to the witnesses. For example, Trench is supposed to have felt the ground under the vision of Mary and found it to be dry. The excessive importance given to minor details is fatal to the reliability of the evidence for a real miracle at Knock. The scope for error increases in such detail. The grass could have protected the area she touched from the rain. Or if her hands were wet she might have assumed the ground was dry though it was not. She might have reasoned that the wetness she felt was down to her hands being wet and not the ground being dry. She may have lied for there is only her word for it that the ground was dry. But we know her original testimony never mentioned this dryness so if she was not the liar then somebody else was. Cavanagh promoted and revered the deposition that was concocted in her name. Luckily the real one can still be seen in the museum at Knock.

Cavanagh was bottling water that allegedly came from rainwater hitting the gable. Was it really just an excuse for the gable having got a good wash after some trickery was implemented? Like paint or something?

Cavanagh snuggled up to the media and the publishers. He prepared a lot of material for them including his diary of cures. He even had his diary published in The Nation. He received letters from people who said they were cured. He wrote published on a number of them. How much money did he make?

Motive for possible fraud:

The Archdeacon was fanatically pro-landlordism and had got into considerable trouble for it. He lost lots of friends in his parish, the collection money was going down and also he lost the loyalty of many of the poor. The apparition was a good thing to help regain what was lost.

Some people might have been willing to create a pious fraud to halt the parish hostility to Archdeacon Cavanagh. The Archdeacon seems to have known about the plot and got involved or perhaps it was all his idea.

There were people who could afford to finance a fraud - "The inhabitants of Knock were not very rich, nor were they very poor. There were some of them well-to-do, that is, living comfortably on their little farms." Source Memories of Knock in the Early Nineteenth Century - Campbell.

During Mass in August 1879, he made such a vicious attack on the Land League though it was campaigning for the rights of the people and the poor farmers that the parish and people beyond protested outside his Church. The Connaught Telegraph reported that the crowd was estimated to be between 20,000 and 30,000 people.

Some time before the apparition, there had been a meeting in the parish to protest against him. Another motive could have been to create another Lourdes and to bring fame and employment and other improvements to a region in the grip of horrendous poverty.

The Archdeacon loved being seen as holy and keeping people talking about his "saintliness". He would not have been the first person to have been willing to forgo scruples in order to become a saint.

Cavanagh kept a diary of cures at Knock. He focused on the healings and never even considered the spiritual effects. True healings from God should be accompanied by greater holiness and peace of heart. The Archdeacon was only interested in the signs and wonders aspect. He wanted a God who magically shows off at Knock.

The Book THE APPARITIONS AND MIRACLES AT KNOCK ALSO, The Official Depositions of the Eye-Witnesses, PREPARED AND EDITED BY JOHN McPHILPIN NEPHEW OF THE ARCHBISHOP OF TUAM says, "Archdeacon Cavanagh is reputed along all the country-side as a man of simple piety, gentle manners, and a modest and retiring disposition. This character is justified by his appearance; he at once makes a favorable impression, and is about the last man in the world whom a stranger would look upon and suspect of anything but straightforward, honest conduct."

WHY GO OUT OF THE WAY TO STAY HE WAS BEYOND SUSPICION OF DISHONESTY? THERE WAS NO NEED FOR THAT ASSERTION IN THE CONTEXT. IT LOOKS LIKE IT WAS DIRECTED AT PEOPLE WHO WERE SAYING THE ARCHDEACON WAS SOMEHOW INVOLVED IN THE DECEPTION OF THE APPARITION. AND TO ARGUE THAT THE ARCHDEACON LOOKED HONEST AND THAT PROVED HE WAS HONEST IS A BIZARRE AND DESPERATE PIECE OF REASONING.

WE MEET THE SAME PROBLEM WITH CUSACK, THE NUN OF KENMARE. SHE WENT OUT OF HER WAY TO MAKE PEOPLE THINK THE ARCHDEACON WAS TOO DEVOTED TO THE BLESSED VIRGIN TO ENGINEER A HOAX.

"We have never heard one word of blame or disapproval uttered against this priest, except that he is supposed to be too devout to the Blessed Mother of God, and that he is supposed "to live very much in contemplation, and not to be so practical in matters of worldly business as he might be. Well, if this is a fault, it is one he shares with a great many of the Saints, and with some of the faithful."

SHE STATES THAT SHE SPEAKS OF THE PRIEST'S TREMENDOUS DEVOTION FOR PURGATORY FOR THE CASE FOR THE APPARITIONS NECESSITATES IT. BELIEVERS SAY THAT THE APPARITION TOOK PLACE WHEN HE FINISHED A NOVENA FOR THE PRISONERS OF PURGATORY. SHE DOES NOT SAY ANYTHING ABOUT THAT UNTIL THE NEXT PAGE. SHE SEEMS TO BE SAYING HERE THAT HE IS TOO DEVOUT TO HAVE BEEN UP TO ANY FUNNY BUSINESS IN RELATION TO THE CASE OF THE APPARITION - THE CASE OF THE

APPARITION AS IN FACT TO BE SOLVED. SHE WROTE THAT NOBODY HAD A BAD WORD TO SAY ABOUT THE PRIEST ONLY THAT HE WAS TOO DEVOTED TO OUR LADY. THAT WAS A BARE-FACED LIE. HALF THE PARISH HATED HIM. SHE IS TRYING TOO HARD TO DEFLECT SUSPICION FROM HIM THAT HE WAS BEHIND THE VISION. DEEP DOWN SHE SUSPECTED IT HERSELF.

THEN SHE SAYS THE PRIESTS SECRETS ARE HIS OWN AND NOBODY ELSE'S BUSINESS. SHE DOES NOT CLARIFY WHAT SHE MEANS. SHE MUST MEAN THAT IF THE PRIEST IS NOT DEVOUT THEN THE APPARITION IS SUSPECT. SHE THEN SAYS ABOUT HIS SECRETS BEING SACRED AS IF TO DISCOURAGE ANYBODY FROM WONDERING IF HE HAD SOMETHING TO DO WITH THE APPEARANCE. SHE INDICATES THAT HE WAS UNDER SUSPICION.

"Pray for the souls in Purgatory. To do this, we have said, is one of this priest's great devotions. If he were not living, we could say more. It is only from the necessity of the case that I feel I can be pardoned by him for saying so much. Nor would it be said at all, were it not that the matter has such an important bearing on the subject of the apparitions at Knock. The secrets of this priest are his own; with his interior life the world has no business, and would have little sympathy. Does not all the history of the Church teach how even some of the children of the Church turn with contempt or incredulity from that which they should honour?"

SHE PRESERVES THE ARCHDEACON'S TESTIMONY THAT HE HAD PEOPLE IN HIS HOUSE LOOKING AT THE MIRACLE LIGHTS INSIDE IT. DID HE KNOW HOW TO MAKE THE LIGHTS HIMSELF?

I see heavenly lights in my room very often, both at night and in the morning. I saw these lights distinctly for the first time on the Feast of St. Francis Xavier, A..D. 1880, and on the Feast of St. John the Evangelist, on the Epiphany, and during the octave. I very frequently saw these lights this year, and last year oftener than I would relate. I called my niece and my servants on two or three occasions to witness these lights, and they saw them for nearly an hour each time, as they can testify. A great many other manifestations took place, which I would not wish to speak of.

"BARTHOLOMEW CAVANAGH, " P.P., and Archdeacon."

Cavanagh and the Commission

Cavanagh was one of the priests who investigated the apparition in 1879 and 1880.

The commission was dishonest. One of the priests forged Judith Campbell's signature (page 185, Knock The Virgin's Apparition in Nineteenth Century Ireland) on a witness report.

There is no reason to rule out the chance that Cavanagh lied about what the witnesses testified to (page 186, Knock The Virgin's Apparition in Nineteenth Century Ireland). So little is known about how the commission worked that it is possible that Cavanagh wrote their testimonies to please himself and read back to them the bits they gave him because they couldn't read. He could have left out the conflicts. Then he got them to sign their mark or name.

Mary O Loughlin's testimony has her explaining that she saw a cross behind the lamb on the altar and how it was a bit behind the lamb. Yet when this testimony was published in a newspaper she decided that a mistake by the newspaper was made for she never saw any cross (page 191, Knock The Virgin's Apparition in Nineteenth Century Ireland). Cavanagh could have altered her testimony to suit his wishful thinking (page 191, Knock The Virgin's Apparition in Nineteenth Century Ireland).

The commission of 1879 SUMMARISED (page 182, Knock The Virgin's Apparition in Nineteenth Century Ireland) what the visionaries told them. This makes the testimony useless for anything that reflected poorly on the vision could have been left out.

Archdeacon Cavanagh manipulated Fr Bourke who was involved in the commission as well. They controlled how the press reported the story of the apparition and even what witnesses the press talked to. For example, Judith Campbell was never encouraged to talk to a reporter but Mary Beirne was. That was odd for Campbell allegedly saw the vision close up.

The Archdeacon received many letters from people supposedly cured at Knock. He chose some to be published as part of his drive to promote Knock as a holy shrine. It has been found that when these letters referred to other places where Mary was allegedly appearing he put a line through those references. And also through anything that mentioned the allegedly cured person getting sick again.

To quote John White, Plymouth, Massachusetts, USA, a investigator at Knock who found many original documents regarding the alleged apparition and miracles "a Fanny Murphy wrote to Cavanagh in February 1881, describing how she spent two years on crutches, but left them at Knock. She then describes how she feels much better since coming home;

Cavanagh crossed out the part about feeling better, leaving the reader with the impression that Fanny came to Knock a hopeless invalid and threw her crutches away and was perfectly cured. R. McCarthy of Peckham Rye, London, was given cement from Knock by his parish priest. He describes how the cement cured his haemorrhages, but the part of the letter describing how he has had 'a slight return of the illness' is crossed out by Cavanagh prior to publication. While reports in The Nation and elsewhere might lead us to conclude that Archdeacon Cavanagh was an overly credulous man who would do anything to further the cause of Knock, these letters and his handling of them prior to publication show just how far he was willing to go to channel devotion to his church."

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Cavanagh was happy to make a partial cure or an emotional cure into a miracle cure of a cripple just by omitting certain lines and phrases. Such an approach showed he had no true respect for the people who wrote to him. It was all about making sure the Knock apparition would be seen as a miracle in the public perception.

CONCLUSION:

The Archdeacon was capable of religious fraud and knew more about the alleged apparition than he let on. He was central to the whole story and how it was told which was why the story is fairly coherent for his parishioners were unwilling to go against him. That is proven by his irresponsible and continual proclamations of miracle cures despite the person dying of what they were supposedly cured from and his getting away with it with NO challenges at all.

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