



# Hospice and charity

## The Lazarists of the Irish College, 1870-1945

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"Being charitable towards your neighbour...will always be the rule among us. No one else on earth is more called to be charitable than we are; no other community must be more dedicated to the outward expression of heartfelt acts of charity."  
Saint Vincent de Paul, Conference on 30 May 1659.

The great saint of charity, Vincent de Paul (1581-1660), addressed these words to the Lazarists, or the disciples of the Congregation of the Mission, an organisation he founded in 1625. **The Lazarists dedicate their lives to following the principles of their founder and have always practised charity in their institutions**, mission houses, parishes, and hospitals. Moreover, the Congregation was a powerful educational organisation. When the French Revolution broke out in 1789, the organisation controlled three-quarters of the diocesan seminaries in France. Disbanded and then subsequently restored under Napoleon Bonaparte, the Congregation of the Mission experienced another period of rapid growth in the nineteenth century during which it took over numerous religious, educational, and charitable institutions, including the Collège des Irlandais de Paris (Irish College in Paris) in 1858.

## I. The Irish Colleges: centres for training

In 1873, an article in the French newspaper *Le Monde* stated: "The Parisian establishment called the Irish College is merely a large ecclesiastical seminary—the Saint-Sulpice of Irish dioceses." **At the time, the Irish College belonged to a group of assorted institutions in charge of training the Irish clergy in Europe**, in Rome, Lisbon, and Salamanca among other places. However, the Irish Colleges were much more than centres for education and training. Some of them had a profound influence on the development of Catholicism in Ireland during social and economic crises, while others fulfilled a diplomatic role by facilitating dialogue between their host countries.

Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, waves of Irish immigrants came to France, driven south by war, famine, and disease. The same held true for members of the Irish clergy, who came to Paris to study following Oliver Cromwell's persecution of the Catholics in the 1500s.

Subsequently, **the Irish, who were often considered to be destitute, were only able to pursue their education abroad through the donations of pious benefactors.** In 1578, Reverend John Lee, who had arrived in Paris with a small group of Irish students, was "charitably received" by the Collège de Montaigu. In 1624, when the Collège de Navarre became the home of the Irish students in Paris, the bishops of Ireland wrote a letter to French Catholics recommending the institution to their charity. Prominent French laymen such as Councillor of State Jean de l'Escalopier also helped by financially supporting these small communities of priests.

**The college became a charitable institution in its own right thanks to the actions of King Louis XIII and King Louis XIV.** Louis XIV's letters patent dated January 1672 highlights the difficulties encountered by the "poor student-priests [...] seeking refuge in our city of Paris" (have a look at the complete digitized document [http://archives.centreculturelirlandais.com/phototheque/expo\\_visu\\_img.php?ref\\_id=4389](http://archives.centreculturelirlandais.com/phototheque/expo_visu_img.php?ref_id=4389)). In Ireland, Catholic priests were persecuted, hunted down, sentenced to death, or exiled. As refugees in France, they "did not have the means to survive without alms". The king's intervention allowed the community to finally "receive [...] donations and alms", thereby allowing them to meet their needs while living in the capital. They were also permitted to buy the Collège des Lombards, which was intended to **"serve as a college and hospice for their compatriots"**.

## II. Lazarists at the Irish College

Up until 1858, the Irish College was run by diocesan priests sent over by the bishops of Ireland. In 1858, through an agreement concluded between the Irish bishops and the representatives of the Congregation of the Mission in Ireland (Philip Dowley), **administration of the College was entrusted to an institute of missionary priests for the first time in its history** (have a look at the complete digitized document

[http://archives.centreculturelirlandais.com/phototheque/expo\\_visu\\_img.php?ref\\_id=4127](http://archives.centreculturelirlandais.com/phototheque/expo_visu_img.php?ref_id=4127)). This decision was influenced by the Congregation's excellent reputation.

Founded in 1625 by Vincent de Paul (1581-1660), the Congregation's mission was to preach the gospel to the most impoverished people living in the countryside. When the French Revolution began, the organisation comprised 150 establishments in France, including a large number of seminaries. As a result, **during the period leading up to its nomination to the Irish College, the Congregation had already established strong links with Ireland**, where it had been present since 1839. In 1838, they had been appointed to their first settlement in Ireland – the parish of Saint Peter's in Phibsboro in Dublin, with others following soon after in Cork and Armagh. In 1888, the Lazarists became involved with several education institutions, including St. Patrick's College in Maynooth, and All Hallows College in 1892.

In May 1858, a few months after the agreement was signed, the Archbishop of Dublin, Paul Cullen, spoke out in favour of the Lazarists' nomination to the head of the college, maintaining they would "produce good priests". In actuality, **their nomination breathed new life into the institution's charitable mission**. According to Article X of the treaty, the rector was "allowed to offer hospitality insofar as civility and propriety demand[ed]".

As a result, during the Lazarists' administration from 1858 to 1945, the Irish Catholic community, heretofore dependent on charity, was instead able to provide it in Ireland and France. Several documents from its Historical Archives show that **the Irish College became a focal point for charity and alms-giving at the heart of Paris' fifth arrondissement**. It also provided relief to the Irish people, especially during the "Lesser Famine" of 1880.

The college sometimes hosted over one hundred people and was home to a teaching staff of eight, ninety students, and seven servants at its height. The months or years spent in the seminary forged strong, long-lasting ties between students and professors, who then went on to become generous benefactors for all of the college's charitable efforts.

### III. A centre for charity

**As soon as they were appointed to the Irish College, the Lazarists practised charity in accordance with their vocation.**

The account books show to what extent the institution and its community refused to close themselves off from the rest of the world, instead working hard to distribute donations both in France and abroad. **The college's renewed commitment revealed the strength of its human resources and wide-reaching charity networks.**

The treasurer often gave small amounts of money to missionaries for them to give out as they saw fit in the streets of Paris or in front of churches. The account books from 1862 give a clear account of this practice (have a look at the complete digitized document:

[http://archives.centreculturelirlandais.com/phototheque/expo\\_visu\\_img.php?ref\\_id=1117](http://archives.centreculturelirlandais.com/phototheque/expo_visu_img.php?ref_id=1117)). Philip Burton, a Lazarist and philosophy professor at the Irish College, received 4 francs to hand out on 3 February ("Mr Burton charity money"), and again in March. In addition, the community owned a country house in Arcueil that often received charitable donations. In February 1862, 4,20 francs were given to the poor, and 20 francs were directed towards the charity in Arcueil. In 1862, the small amounts of money given to the Lazarists for their distribution to charitable causes came to 62 francs and 70 cents.

While the recipients of these small alms remain unknown, **the archives have kept a record of the support the community provided to certain local institutions.** For example, on 21 November 1873, the Irish College gave 10 francs to the parish priest of Montrouge, and on 4 December, it donated 25 francs to the British Charitable Fund. The goal of this organisation, founded in 1823 and placed under the distinguished patronage of the Ambassador of England, was to assist poor English nationals living in Paris, regardless of their faith.

**The Irish College generously donated to charitable efforts in Ireland as well.** On 20 February 1862, the Lazarists paid a "subscription for the poor in Ireland" of 125 francs. Later, on 27 September, the missionaries gave 50 francs as "charity money to Ireland". While specific details about these donations are usually omitted, some payments mention the name of their recipients. In this respect, the year 1862 is doubtless the most noteworthy. The record mentions a gift of 25 francs given on 1 December to a "Miss Aylward". This entry almost certainly refers to Margaret Aylward, the founder of a new religious congregation in Dublin in 1857. Known as "the Sisters of the Holy Faith", they took care of Catholic orphans.

**However, the charity of the Irish College community did not stop at the borders of France and Ireland. Indeed, their generosity reached even the most distant shores.** Two payments of 10 francs were given that same year as a "subscription to [an] English priest" and a as a "subscription to [an] Asylum Calcutta". China was another recipient of the generous gifts of the Lazarists through a "contribution to China" in November 1862.

#### IV. Aid to a stricken Ireland

**The Irish College community was also able to effectively help the Irish people in times of crisis.**

The organisation founded a committee that included the Archbishop of Paris, the secular and regular clergy, and the faithful. In the Administration and accounting register of 1849-1890, the entry dated 19 February 1880 specifies that the "College sent 1,800 francs (£72) to the Committee to Relieve the Distress in Ireland, of which more than 15 pounds were donated by professors and the rest by students". Following successive crop failures from 1877 to 1879, Ireland experienced a "Lesser Famine" that year. While it was less serious than the "Great Famine" of the 1840s, the entire country felt its effects.

During the same period, the register made note of particularly difficult weather conditions, noting that the "Seine froze from its source to its mouth" in the winter of 1879-1880. Despite these challenges, the Rector of the Irish College, Thomas Mac Namara, discussed the **efforts of the Irish community in Paris to help their compatriots** in his Annual Report to the bishops of Ireland in 1880 (have a look at the complete digitized document [http://archives.centreculturelirlandais.com/phototheque/expo\\_visu\\_img.php?ref\\_id=4383](http://archives.centreculturelirlandais.com/phototheque/expo_visu_img.php?ref_id=4383)). Mac Namara himself acknowledged that "the winter was exceptionally severe and long" and that the members of the college were "happy to avail [them]selves of [their] position here in Paris to reach a helping hand towards the relief of the distress in Ireland". The college organised a community-wide charity drive, as Mac Namara explains: "We ventured to address a Memorial to the Cardinal Archbishop of Paris [Joseph-Hippolyte Guibert], begging his Eminence to appeal, on our behalf, to the faithful of the diocese, in the hope that the example of the Metropolis would be followed throughout the country. Our Memorial found his Eminence quite disposed of himself to come to our aid."

The efforts of the Parisian diocese brought together several members of the clergy, including the Rector of the Irish College as well as "the most illustrious members of the French nobility" such as Princess Amédée de Broglie, the Duchess D'Estissac, and Marshal De Mac Mahon. A charity fair was held in addition to a **public sermon to plead the cause of the Irish people**. The sermon was delivered on 18 April 1880 in the Madeleine Church by the Dominican and famous preacher from Notre-Dame Cathedral, Jacques-Marie-Louis Monsabré. In his homily, he recalled the tradition of mutual charity between France and Ireland. He pointed out that France "opened its doors and offered generous hospitality to Irish exiles", allowing them to "found seminaries and colleges near our educational institutions". He concluded by "I ask—I beseech—those who are listening to put all their heart into the act of charity that I am asking of them."

This sermon proved very effective. According to Mac Namara's report, the collection that followed the sermon raised more than 25,000 francs, over 1,000 pounds. The capital's example was soon followed by national collections, and other French bishops asked their faithful to contribute as well. A sum of 600,000 francs was sent by the aid committee in Paris to the Irish bishops. In addition, the Catholic newspaper L'Univers raised 100,000 francs when it put out a call for donations.

## V. A military hospital in the winter of 1870

**The college acted as a refuge and provided shelter during the wars that peppered the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The aid provided at the Irish College helped strengthen the relationship between France and Ireland.**

Beyond its walls, the community could count on the support of the Irish bishops, including twenty-six diocesan bishops who took a constant interest in the affairs of the College. They always gave their approval for the building to be used during times of war, and some of them, such as the Bishops of Clogher and Tuam, even committed themselves personally to the cause. The actions of Charles Ouin-La-Croix during the War of 1870 demonstrate the cooperation between France and Ireland, a partnership that played an important role in the site's history.

**During the Franco-Prussian War, between July 1870 and January 1871, Lazarists, professors, and students were forced to evacuate the premises.** Nevertheless, the college remained open so its charitable works could continue. In his letter to Rector Thomas Mac Namara dated 20 February 1871, Charles Ouin-La-Croix, who served as administrator from 1859 to 1873, wrote that the college had been fully converted into a military hospital (have a look at the complete digitized document [http://archives.centreculturelirlandais.com/phototheque/expo\\_visu\\_img.php?ref\\_id=35](http://archives.centreculturelirlandais.com/phototheque/expo_visu_img.php?ref_id=35)). This initiative formed part of the vast war effort in Paris. **The temporary military hospital was the first of its kind to be financed by the *Comité de la Presse* (Committee of the Press).** Created in the wake of a patriotic subscription effort publicised by the French press, the committee set up several military hospitals and medical outbuildings in Paris. The college welcomed injured soldiers from September 1870 to February 1871. Here, Charles Ouin-La-Croix writes about the fifty or so "pious and charitable Ladies" of the neighbourhood, three Sisters of Hope, and six Brothers of the Christian Doctrine who took care of about three hundred sick and wounded soldiers.

The support the college's military hospital received was not limited to the personal efforts of Charles Ouin-La-Croix and his many French collaborators. Although funding was mainly provided by the Committee of the Press, Ireland also sent **aid and donations to assist the treatment of French soldiers in the college** (have a look at the complete digitized document [http://archives.centreculturelirlandais.com/phototheque/expo\\_visu\\_img.php?ref\\_id=1163](http://archives.centreculturelirlandais.com/phototheque/expo_visu_img.php?ref_id=1163)). The most substantial donations recorded were made by two Irish bishops: Archbishop of Tuam John MacHale and the Bishop of Clogher contributed 2,000 and 1,000 francs, respectively. The absent Lazarists of the College also donated significant amounts. Rector Mac Namara gave 3,287.50 francs, and Treasurer Thomas Murphy donated 1,072 francs. "Mr Byrne, on behalf of the people of [the city of] Athy" in Ireland contributed 250 francs, while an anonymous Irish donor gave 25 francs to the cause. The total of these donations came to 7,634.50 francs.

**The many donations covered the field hospital's** considerable expenses, both in terms of supplies and building maintenance. According to Charles Ouin-La-Croix, the monthly cost of medicine, bandages, and food rose to between six and eight thousand francs. For example, the 1,000 francs donated by Mgr Donnelly, the Bishop of Clogher, were used to supply the hospital with food and other necessities (have a look at the complete digitized document [http://archives.centreculturelirlandais.com/phototheque/expo\\_visu\\_img.php?ref\\_id=62](http://archives.centreculturelirlandais.com/phototheque/expo_visu_img.php?ref_id=62)). The records mention several local traders in Paris: Mr Mégissier-Soubiran supplied wine (19 francs 35 cents), Mr Scherer sold two geese for the convalescents (24 francs), and Mr Dubuc sent butter and cheese (70 francs). **This support also meant the college could continue to give alms to beggars and the poor.** Out of the amount donated by Mgr Donnelly, 112 francs 50 centimes were set aside for this part of the population in January 1871, and 61 in February of the same year.

## VI. The college during World War II

**During World War I and II, the Congregation of the Mission, with the approval of the Irish bishops, dedicated the facilities to a range of humanitarian, charitable, and religious causes. The building was again evacuated in 1914 at the start of WWI, and then later housed approximately sixty soldiers wounded at Verdun in 1916.**

During World War II, Rector Patrick Travers, a major figure in the college's history, dedicated the building to serving the needs of the country. He maintained a correspondence with the bishops of Ireland, the French and Irish authorities, and the Irish ambassadors in France and Europe to ensure the premises remained neutral. **In his letter, dated March 1944, he mentions the permission he gave in 1943 to the *Commission de Ravitaillement (Supplies Commission)* to store emergency food supplies** as "this purpose, besides being a humane one, could not in any way compromise [the] neutrality [of the college]". In total, around three hundred tonnes of food were stored in the college until the German troops retreated from Paris in 1945. **He thus participated in passive defense, the aim of which was to protect civilians during war time.**

In 1945, just like other Parisian institutions, **the college was asked to serve as a temporary housing centre for French and foreign prisoners of war brought back to France after the Liberation.** When the mayor of the fifth arrondissement asked Travers for help, he agreed (have a look at the complete digitized document [http://archives.centreculturelirlandais.com/phototheque/expo\\_visu\\_img.php?ref\\_id=1917](http://archives.centreculturelirlandais.com/phototheque/expo_visu_img.php?ref_id=1917)). Later, he explained that he accepted to lend the building "as long as certain repairs were made to the electrical and plumbing systems". While the exact dates are unclear, it seems the college fulfilled this role for around six months. Few French prisoners were sent to the college, but Dutch prisoners were kept there for two weeks, followed by a group of Polish officers who stayed there for three weeks.

The American army also struggled to house its displaced nationals. In July 1945, Travers thus graciously offered up the use of all inhabitable parts of the building, and approximately one hundred refugees stayed there from 18 July to 6 December 1945. At the end of the year, an inventory of the damages to the college made note of a significant number of broken objects, including 50 windows, 20 water jugs, 20 sinks, and 40 soap dishes. In addition, Travers notified the authorities that a photograph had been stolen from one of the staff rooms. The incident was quickly resolved. In a letter dated 10 December 1945 (have a look at the complete digitized document [http://archives.centreculturelirlandais.com/phototheque/expo\\_visu\\_img.php?ref\\_id=1922](http://archives.centreculturelirlandais.com/phototheque/expo_visu_img.php?ref_id=1922)), the American commander Frank A. Allen writes that he had he had "given orders that this damage should be repaired [...] to the full extent possible and with all necessary dispatch". He went on to praise the charity of the Irish Catholic authorities. "It is appropriate at this time that I should again express to the Irish Bishops, through you, **the sincere and warm appreciation of the United States Army for their generosity in permitting us the use of the College as a Centre for Displaced Persons claiming American citizenship.** The premises have been ideal for our purposes."

## Conclusion

**Since its foundation, but especially under the administration of the Lazarists, the Irish College has been much more than a seminary. The Congregation of the Mission, in addition to fostering an educational environment, succeeded in cultivating a real spirit of charity in these places.**

According to Charles Ouin-La-Croix, "the military hospital [of 1870] helped the college as much as the college helped the hospital. By doing good, the college helped itself."

The decision by the college's leadership to open its doors meant it could satisfy both its interests and its mission of hospitality. By offering up its buildings to charitable and humanitarian causes, the college continued to serve the core of the Congregation's ministry. This strategy also spared the college from the threat of requisition by the army and protected it despite the war's unstable conditions.

Thanks to this exhibition, unique documents from the Historical Archives of the Centre Culturel Irlandais reveal entire swaths of the College's history that were not very well known until recently.