

“Heroic Virtue”: The Catholic Temperance Crusade in Toronto during the 1870s

by Brian P. CLARKE

University of Toronto

For some time now historians have differed as to the character and significance of Catholic temperance movements during the nineteenth century. One line of historians, from Joan Bland’s *Hibernian Crusade* (1951) to James Hennesey’s *American Catholics* (1981), has maintained that Catholic temperance was essentially a movement for social improvement and moral uplift that differed little from the contemporary Protestant temperance crusade.¹ While social uplift was certainly a crucial aspect of the various Catholic temperance movements that arose during the nineteenth century, this approach mistakenly discounts the religious impulse that propelled Catholic temperance.

In recent years a number of historians, most notably Jay Dolan in the United States and Nive Voisine in Quebec, have drawn attention to the religious dimension of Catholic temperance.² Both Dolan and Voisine have located Catholic temperance primarily in the parish mission, the Catholic version of the revival meeting. Nevertheless, there was much more to temperance than the parish mission, as the founding of parochial temperance

¹ Joan Bland, *Hibernian Crusade: The Story of the Catholic Total Abstinence Union of America* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1951), pp. 267-8 and James Hennesey, *American Catholics: A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 231-2.

² Jay Dolan, *Catholic Revivalism: The American Experience* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), pp. 147-58 and Nive Voisine, “Mouvements de tempérance et religion populaire” in *Religion populaire, religion de clercs?*, Benoît Lacroix and Jean Simard, eds., (Québec: Institut québécois de la recherche sur la culture, 1984), pp. 67-78.

societies illustrates. Unfortunately the parochial societies themselves have rarely interested historians.

In this paper I will examine the temperance societies in Toronto during the 1870s in order to delineate the religious, social, and cultural factors that shaped Catholic temperance. Specifically, I will argue that temperance in Toronto was shaped by the conflict between the culture of Catholic men and the new forms of piety introduced by the clergy during the middle of the nineteenth century in what is known as the ultramontane revival. The contrast between the popularity of this piety among laywomen and its failure to take root among laymen led the clergy to use temperance as a way to reform the religious behavior of Catholic men. Through temperance societies, which overtly emphasized secular pastimes, the clergy sought to introduce indirectly the devotional life of the church to Catholic men. The true object of these societies was religious, but implicit in the ideal of temperance were the virtues of industriousness, self-discipline, and self-improvement. This particular combination of secular and religious objectives of the Catholic temperance movement in Toronto during the 1870s was to have consequences unintended by the clergy and would eventually undercut the religious impulse of the parochial temperance societies.

In order to place the temperance movement that emerged in Toronto during the 1870s in context, it is first necessary to review briefly the origins of Catholic temperance and then to examine the Toronto temperance crusade of the 1850s. The contrast between the temperance movement of the 1850s and that of the 1870s reveals substantial differences in the goals and the constituencies of the two movements.

The moderate use of alcohol, as of all things created by God, had, of course, long been accepted by the Roman Catholic Church. The emphasis upon the virtue of temperance, however, did not necessarily give rise to temperance societies, nor did it necessarily entail total abstinence. The total abstinence campaign of Father Theobald Mathew in Ireland during the 1840s represented a turning point; the impact of his drive was to change Catholic attitudes to teetotalism. Father Mathew's spectacular crusade, with thousands taking the pledge at a time, persuaded some Catholics to accept the total abstinence platform. Then, at least, total abstinence was the object of legitimate debate within the Catholic community – a sure sign that it was increasingly considered to be a respectable way of life for Irish Catholics.

Father Mathew's campaign, relying as it did on the individual's unaided pledge, was nevertheless inherently unstable. Without an organizational structure, it was certain that the movement would collapse. The failure of his pledge movement was to result in the reformulation of Catholic efforts in curbing intemperance. For some of the Catholic hierarchy in North America,

the main weakness of Father Mathew's promotion of total abstinence was that he excluded religious influences from his pledge. The response of many in the hierarchy was a concerted effort to incorporate temperance within the Catholic Church and to establish temperance societies on a parochial basis. Temperance, many clergy maintained, was not the result of willful effort, an exercise in self-help, but rather an integral part of the life of the church. Prayer and the sacraments of the church were essential aids for the development and perseverance in an abstinent, Christian life based upon temperance as a true, Christian virtue.³

When Bishop Armand de Charbonnel arrived in Toronto in 1850, he could easily draw upon this sacramentalized interpretation of temperance in order to forge a Catholic consensus. Much as the clergy or laity may have disagreed over the relative merits of total abstinence versus temperance (the abstention from hard liquor only), the connection between temperance, however it was interpreted, and the church was unquestioned. Temperance societies were established for one purpose – to save souls.

Toronto's Catholic population was largely made up of Irish-Catholic immigrants who had arrived in the city during the Great Irish Famine of 1846-49 or shortly thereafter. Many, perhaps even the majority, of them did not fulfill their canonical obligations of attendance at Sunday Mass or of the Easter duties of confession and communion. Imbued with the spirituality of the ultramontane movement, Bishop Charbonnel hoped to effect what Emmet Larkin has described as a devotional revolution, a dramatic change in popular religious practice.⁴ In this devotional revolution the laity's performance of canonical obligations was to become more regular, and the new private and public devotions promoted by the papacy and identified with the ultramontane movement – the rosary, the stations of the cross, the forty hours' devotion, to name only a few of them – were to become part of the laity's devotional repertoire.

Bishop Charbonnel was further concerned about the social and moral life of Toronto's Irish Catholics, particularly the poor. He singled out drunkenness as a disastrous disease among the Irish, and he was certain that the poor were especially prone to this vice. "Indigence, idleness, mediocrity [*sic*], intemperance, and all immoralities," the bishop affirmed, "are too often

³ Elizabeth Malcolm, "The Catholic Church and the Irish Temperance Movement," *Irish Historical Studies* 23 (1982): 2, 11, and 13-15; A.E. Dingle and B.H. Harrison, "Cardinal Manning as Temperance Reformer," *Historical Journal* 12 (1969): 495-6; Bland, *Hibernian Crusade*, pp. 27-30 and 45-9.

⁴ See Emmet Larkin, "The Devotional Revolution in Ireland, 1850-75," *American Historical Review* 77 (1972): 625-52.

sisters living together.”⁵ This spectacle of human misery was especially disheartening to the Catholic clergy. The degradation it entailed and, moreover, the loss of souls that it caused demanded a response. Although the bulk of Irish Catholics were not in nearly so desperate circumstances, Bishop Charbonnel was convinced that their way of life, in which frantic periods of work were followed by equally intense rounds of celebration, undermined the orderly and disciplined life that was necessary for the punctual and dignified discharge of religious duties.⁶

To accomplish his twin goals of moral and spiritual renewal, Bishop Charbonnel founded a wide variety of religious associations, including temperance societies that were open to both men and women. These societies, which Charbonnel began to establish in 1851, were one of the most effective parochial organizations in reaching the laity, and by 1854 they had over 4,500 members out of a Catholic population of about 8,000. In the temperance societies the laity were exposed to the virtues of sobriety, industriousness, and self-discipline. In this sense the temperance societies were fulfilling a self-proclaimed civilizing mission of moral uplift among the Irish. At the same time, these societies also introduced their members to the parish church and its devotional life. The pledge to abstain from intoxicants was in effect a religious conversion sealed by the regular reception of the sacraments and the daily performance of private devotions such as the rosary.⁷

Between the 1850s and the 1870s Catholic temperance in Toronto underwent a fundamental shift both in its constituency and its character. The most notable shift was that the parochial temperance societies became organizations exclusively for Irish-Catholic men. Secondly, as a result of this change, temperance was no longer a mass movement. Evidence that the temperance societies had become more exclusive is to be found in the occupational profile of their membership. Temperance activists were of the middling sort – modest businessmen, clerks, and workers who had managed to become householders.⁸ Temperance was no longer a crusade to reform the

⁵ Archives of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Toronto (hereafter cited as ARCAT), Charbonnel Papers, Bishop Charbonnel to Cardinal Fransoni, 18 May 1852.

⁶ ARCAT, Charbonnel Papers, Pastoral, 10 February 1859, and “Regulations for the Retreat preceding St. Patrick’s Feast,” 1859.

⁷ *Mirror*, 23 February 1852 and 17 March 1854.

⁸ This profile of temperance activists is based upon the annual list of officers for two temperance societies, the Saint Patrick’s Temperance Society and the Father Mathew Temperance Association, that appeared in the *Irish Canadian*.

whole Irish-Catholic community, but rather a movement aimed at Irish-Catholic men who were relatively well-off.

The major reason for these dramatic changes in the Catholic temperance movement is to be found in the sex-specific character of the devotional revolution that occurred in Toronto during the 1850s. By 1864 some 70 per cent of Irish Catholics fulfilled their Easter duties, a figure which probably reflects the rate of attendance at Sunday Mass.⁹ These aggregate statistics do not reveal one major change in popular religious behavior – the feminization of Catholic religious practice, particularly the adoption by women of the devotions so favored by ultramontane reformers. One indication that the devotional revolution was dominated by women was their enrolment in the parish confraternities. Most confraternities, though technically open to both women and men, were exclusively supported by women. In those few confraternities that did enrol men, they never accounted for more than a tiny proportion of the membership. Other parish organizations, like the Saint Vincent de Paul Society and the parochial literary societies, faced such extreme difficulties in recruiting Irish-Catholic men that they reached no more than a mere fraction of the adult male population.¹⁰

One of the reasons why the clergy failed to create a parish-based associational life for men was that the neighbourhood tavern was the church's chief competitor as a social institution for Irish-Catholic men. The tavern was the one social club that Irish-Catholic men could call their own. In the tavern they could meet with their friends, discuss the issues of the day, share neighborhood gossip, play a few rounds of quoits, and in a pinch find a job.¹¹ The culture of the tavern undermined the clergy's attempt to popularize ultramontane piety among the male population in at least two ways. First, the exuberance and spontaneity prized by tavern culture was the very antithesis of the pious reverence and self-discipline associated with ultramontane piety. In addition to this conflict of values, the tavern also separated male recreation from the parish. Temperance seemed a promising way to reform the social life of Irish-Catholic men and at the same time to incorporate them in the parish.

The purpose of the temperance societies was openly religious. In delivering this message of religious salvation, temperance advocates repeatedly drew graphic pictures of sin as manifested by intoxication and

⁹ ARCAT, Lynch Papers, "State of the Missions of the Diocese, 1865."

¹⁰ See, for example, "Register of the Saint Joseph's 'Bona Mors' Society," 1863-1873, and Saint Vincent de Paul Society, "General Register," 1860-66, ARCAT.

¹¹ *Globe*, 16 April 1857, 7 June 1859, and 21 October 1868.

purity as exemplified by sobriety. These appeals can tell us a great deal about the religious aims of the temperance societies. Intemperance, “the curse of curses,” declared a member of the Father Mathew Temperance Association (FMTA), destroyed both “body and soul.” “The hydra whisky,” he continued, “has filled the graveyard with the youth as well as the aged of the land.”¹² Drunkenness, besides hastening men to early graves, also sealed their eternal fate. Because drink “foments our passions and disturbs our guiding principle, the brain,” declared Father Michael Stafford, the best-known Catholic temperance lecturer in the province, it was obvious that alcohol was “the only thing in creation that will make a man do immoral acts.”¹³

In addition to being a sin itself, drunkenness was also the immediate occasion of grievous sin, for by robbing people of their reason and their natural affections, alcohol ensured that no drunkard could inherit the kingdom of heaven.¹⁴ “By degrees a cold indifference ... takes possession of his mind,” observed Archbishop John Joseph Lynch of Toronto, until finally “he ends giving up the duties which, as a Christian, he owes to God.”¹⁵ Hardened in his habits, the drunk was a classic example of a sinner. Having turned away from God, he refused to receive the benefits of the sacraments of the church, the one sure way to secure his reform and to gain his salvation. Not only was the drunkard unable to lift himself out of the gutter, he was incapable of realizing the true precariousness of his situation.

These descriptions of the drunkard should not be taken as literally applying to the members of the temperance societies, as few of them were reformed alcoholics. Unlike the temperance crusade of the 1850s, temperance societies during the 1870s did not attempt to rescue the poor ravaged by drink, nor did they publish accounts boasting of the number of drunkards, whether poor or well-off, they had reformed. The image of the drunkard as the embodiment of sin did prove useful in encouraging moderate drinkers to abstain and in leading them to the religious life of the parish: temperance activists were primarily concerned with prevention. Teetotal supporters urged moderate drinkers “who pride themselves on their great resolution” to take the pledge.¹⁶ Father E.B. Kilroy of Saint Mary’s Parish in London estimated that one out of every six drinkers became an alcoholic.¹⁷ The occasional drinker, the temperance societies’ supporters concluded, had

¹² *Irish Canadian*, 18 July 1874.

¹³ *Irish Canadian*, 20 November 1878.

¹⁴ *Irish Canadian*, 8 September 1874.

¹⁵ *Canadian Freeman*, 23 March 1871.

¹⁶ *Irish Canadian*, 13 January 1875.

¹⁷ *Irish Canadian*, 27 October 1875.

to be rescued “from the brink to which their self-sufficiency is hurrying them.”¹⁸ The image of the drunkard thus served to confirm the wisdom of the individual’s conversion to temperance.

Catholic temperance was not to be an exercise in self-help. The pledge was first and foremost a religious commitment to enter the sacramental life of the church. The “help and the strength necessary to draw the sinner from the depths of vice” came from God alone.¹⁹ Only through conversion, by turning himself to God and availing himself of the means of grace – the sacraments of the church – could he hope to persevere in faith and sobriety. As a “heroic virtue”, total abstinence was a gift of God. “We rely,” declared William Lee, a member of the Father Mathew Temperance Association, “for success upon the grace of God, communicated to us through the sacraments of the Church.”²⁰

The contrast between purity and sin, between temperance and intemperance, in these temperance appeals was thus an expression of the religious impetus of the Catholic temperance movement. If intemperance symbolized the complete degradation of sin, the pledge represented the way of salvation. Temperance was thus a way of strengthening the emotional commitment of Irish-Catholic laymen to the Catholic Church. These societies were to be the means of integrating the sacraments and the devotions of the church into the lives of the male laity. Members of the societies were encouraged to receive communion as a group at least twice a year and were expected to receive communion frequently as individuals. Besides attending evening vespers and the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, members were usually invited to participate in the processions of Corpus Christi and at diocesan synods.²¹

The way temperance societies attempted to make Catholic devotionism palatable to men was very different from the parish confraternities’ appeal to women. Men were to be introduced to Catholic devotions indirectly in a social context that stressed recreation. Not only did the manner in which men were initiated into Catholic piety through the temperance societies differ from that of the women’s confraternities, but the range of devotions practiced by temperance society members was substantially narrower than that observed in the confraternities and sodalities.

¹⁸ *Irish Canadian*, 13 January 1875.

¹⁹ *Irish Canadian*, 19 July 1876.

²⁰ *Irish Canadian*, 27 October 1875

²¹ *Irish Canadian*, 29 May 1872, 5 June 1872, 16 November 1872, 5 October 1873, and 25 October 1875.

Temperance men were expected to attend Sunday Mass and regularly receive communion, but the daily round of private devotions that religious women usually performed was not part of temperance life.

The clergy understood that temperance societies could only bring Irish-Catholic men into the parish if these societies met the laymen's aspirations to respectability and independence. Consequently, temperance societies emphasized recreation and other secular pursuits devoted to self-improvement. "Literary effort and improvement," asserted Brother Arnold, president of the Father Mathew Temperance Association, "are second only to the main object" of temperance.²² By joining temperance societies, as Archbishop Lynch succinctly put it, Irish Catholics would "be able to lay by some money" and thereby "add to their respectability."²³ Not only would temperate Irishmen be able to lay up money for the support and education of their children but they could also save enough to buy a nice house.

Temperance was a "holy war and grand cause ... involving no less than the prosperity and well being of our people in this life, and their eternal happiness in the next."²⁴ The connection between salvation and prosperity was both obvious and direct. Temperance, Archbishop Lynch declared, would result in a "marked improvement, spiritually and temporally, among our people."²⁵ Temperance promoted industry, self-improvement, and thrift. By leading sober and industrious lives, Irish Catholics could attain prosperity and make happy homes for themselves. The ethic of the self-made man was central to the temperance message.

This form of self-help, however, implied a way of life different from the working-class culture centered in the tavern. To reinforce their members' commitment to industriousness and sobriety, temperance societies had to offer counter-attractions which fulfilled many of the same social needs met by the tavern: temperance societies had to offer an alternative way of life. Catholic temperance societies offered their members a continual round of meetings, reunions, lectures, gala concerts, picnics, and excursions. At their regular meetings, held weekly or twice a month in the parish hall or school, the temperance societies strove to provide a varied program of songs, recitations, and debates in addition to a forty-five minute temperance lecture, all in the name of rational recreation. Notably absent from the temperance societies' weekly program were the devotions and prayers that marked the meetings of the parish confraternities, and at times the message of

²² *Irish Canadian*, 17 February 1875.

²³ *Irish Canadian*, 21 September 1872.

²⁴ *Catholic Weekly Review*, 21 April 1887.

²⁵ *Irish Canadian*, 13 January 1875.

self-improvement and self-help obviously dominated the weekly temperance reunions.

The Catholic temperance societies attempted to provide their members with an environment which fostered an alternative way of life, devoted to sobriety and self-help. The clergy's desire to satisfy the social ambitions of those Irish-Catholic men who sought respectability had a decisive impact upon the character of the social life offered by the parochial temperance societies. These efforts, however, committed all the energy and resources of the temperance societies to a social program that overshadowed the original devotional impetus of Catholic temperance.

Is it possible, then, that the clergy's emphasis upon the gospel of success and self-improvement compromised the religious goals of the temperance societies? Many years later, when looking back upon his involvement in the Father Mathew Temperance Association, Patrick Boyle nostalgically recalled that "it was a real pleasure ... to come together for a few hours every week, exchange views, and cement closely [*sic*] friendships already formed."²⁶ As a former vice-president and president of the association, Boyle's testimony cannot be easily ignored. For him, and undoubtedly for many others as well, the chief attraction of the temperance society lay in its being a male social club.

This emphasis upon social activity does not mean that the societies failed to bring their members into contact with the sacraments of the church – they most certainly did not fail in this task. Unlike the parish confraternities for women, though, the repetitious round of devotions did not dominate the temperance society meeting, nor were these devotions ever to become part of the daily life of most Catholic men. The clergy fully expected the religious behaviour of men and women to differ substantially, and they anticipated that men and women would respond to different inducements. The religious observance of men in Catholic temperance societies far exceeded the canonical minimum, but in the temperance meeting, religion was introduced obliquely in the guise of the gospel of success and of literary improvement.

Even so, the temperance societies during the 1870s had mixed success in recruiting Irish-Catholic men. Four temperance societies were established in that decade, but only two of these societies, the Saint Patrick's Temperance and Benevolent Society of Saint Patrick's Parish and the Father Mathew Temperance Association, which in the main drew its membership from Saint Paul's and Saint Michael's Parishes, lasted the decade and recruited laymen in large numbers. By 1873, the Father Mathew Temperance

²⁶ *Irish Canadian*, 6 October 1883.

Association hit a peak of 188 members.²⁷ In contrast, the Saint Patrick's Temperance Society never exceeded 100 members.²⁸ As the other temperance societies during their brief existences probably had between forty to fifty members each at the height of their influence, the maximum adult membership of all the Catholic temperance associations during their heyday in the mid-1870s was between 300 to 350 men.²⁹ If one further assumes that almost 28 per cent of the Irish-Catholic population was male and of an age to join these temperance societies, then between 8 to 9 per cent of all Irish-Catholic men joined the societies.³⁰ During much of the decade, however, the membership probably ranged between 200 and 250, or from 5 to 7.5 per cent. By the end of the 1870s, however, the temperance movement had lost its vitality. Of the two surviving temperance organizations, the Saint Patrick Temperance Society folded in 1881, and when the Father Mathew Temperance Association dissolved in 1883 it had no more than thirty men on its membership roil.³¹

After a promising beginning, the decline of Catholic temperance in the 1880s indicated that the movement lacked not only momentum but also institutional stability. Temperance societies were essentially religious associations, and as such only the clergy could legitimately claim to lead them. All the temperance societies in Toronto, with the exception of the Father Mathew Temperance Association which was led by the director of the Christian Brothers, were founded and usually maintained under the presidency of the parish clergy. As the driving force of the temperance cause, the clergy were directly involved in the operation of the temperance societies. They recruited new members, drew up the entertainment program, and chaired the weekly meetings. The clergy's leadership was one of the strengths of the Catholic temperance movement but it was also one of its weaknesses. The laity were expected to support and aid the clergy in the operation of the temperance societies, the provincial council of 1875 affirmed, but only so far as the laity's "limited means and respect due to

²⁷ *Irish Canadian*, 19 March and 20 August 1873.

²⁸ *Globe*, 7 March 1873.

²⁹ Membership data for the two other temperance societies are scarce, and this estimate has been based upon the enrolment of the Saint Mary's Temperance Society in 1875, *Globe*, 18 March 1875

³⁰ If the Catholic population were similar to that of the city as a whole, a little over half of the population was excluded from membership on the basis of sex, and some 45 per cent of all Catholics were too young to join. Thus, of the total Catholic population only 27.7 per cent were eligible to join these temperance societies. See *Census of Canada, 1870-1* (Ottawa, 1873), 1: 17, 114, and 2: 30-33.

³¹ *Globe*, 8 February 1883.

ecclesiastical authority permit.”³² Temperance with its emphasis upon total abstinence was inherently a minority movement. The very real constraints upon lay initiative in Catholic organization further limited its appeal to Irish-Catholic men who were accustomed to an autonomous social life. As a result of these obstacles Catholic temperance could only flourish under exceptional clerical leadership. Few parish priests, no matter how zealous, could attend to their normal duties and still spare the energy and effort needed to sustain the temperance cause. Those who could were sooner or later transferred to other parishes, and with their departure the temperance society usually disappeared.

The gospel of success was the clergy’s response to the inherent minority status of Catholic temperance. Not only did the gospel of success appeal to the social aspirations of a substantial segment of the Irish-Catholic laity, but it also appeared to sanction lay activism in an undoubtedly Catholic context. Yet, the gospel of improvement had serious if unanticipated consequences for the religious mission of Catholic temperance. As a result of the emphasis upon the gospel of success, the social-club atmosphere of the temperance society easily eclipsed the importance of its religious purpose for many of the laity. Although ultramontane piety was introduced obliquely and, consequently, the religious practice of the temperance society members exceeded that of most church-going men, the temperance societies in effect sanctioned the sexual division of religious observance among Irish Catholics. Women were expected to imbue their life with the repetitious devotions of the church; for men, it would seem, the clergy were relieved if they attended Sunday Mass and occasionally participated in other devotions such as vespers and the reception of the sacraments. If temperance was a display of “heroic virtue”, so too was this moderate degree of piety for most men.

³² *Irish Canadian*, 27 October 1875.