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Irish immigrants, unbanned

Letters archived by the Pittsburgh Catholic Diocese document the horrors of the Irish famine 170 years ago, writes freelance journalist **MARK HOLAN**

About 1.5 million Irish immigrants sailed to U.S. ports during the Great Famine of the mid-19th century, most of them starving and disease-weakened. Their arrival prompted plenty of news coverage and debate, much like today's reporting about immigration and the Trump administration's travel ban.

Stories of Ireland's calamity also reached America in private correspondence bundled aboard the same immigrant ships, the commercially valuable mail perhaps treated with more care than the poorest passengers.

"When I wrote you last I gave you an account of the probable loss that would attend the failure of the potato crop," begins a Feb. 17, 1847, letter from Thomas Maher to Father Thomas Heyden, a Catholic priest in Bedford, Pa. "I was very far from knowing the real loss, but now, alas, I know it at my own expense."

Father Thomas had emigrated from County Carlow, Ireland, at the turn of the 19th century as a toddler in tow with his parents. News of the potato blight and the London government's indifferent and insufficient response reached the middle-aged priest in at least four letters that survive at the Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh Archives and Records Center.

"You must have seen through the press the number of deaths from starvation and its concomitant diseases [of] fever and dysentery. And do not imagine there is any exaggeration in the reports," Maher wrote to Father Thomas.

Maher's location in Ireland and his relationship to the priest are unclear. He writes of consuming seed corn and selling cows to pay his rent. But he needs help.

"Your timely interferences will save us from the destitution many of our poor countrymen and women have met, and has brought some thousands to their last end," Maher wrote.

Father Thomas also received at least two letters from Dan Whelan, a seminarian at Mount St. Mary's College in Emmitsburg, Md., about 90 miles southeast of Bedford. Father Thomas had been ordained there in the 1820s.

"The state of affairs in Ireland is deplorable," Whelan wrote May 21, 1847, on behalf of his father in Ireland. He explained how Parliament had just amended the Poor Law, a pre-famine property tax that funded Ireland's workhouse relief system, and he worried that landowners now would shift the cost to tenants.

"This will add to the already enormous rent charge at least 40 percent," Whelan wrote. "The farmers cannot pay this under existing circumstances."

Whelan said his father was "determined to come to this country" and buy land in Bedford County with capital of £200 (about $27,000 today). "Two or three other families have come to this same determination. If you know of any place in the vicinity that would suit, in my father's name I humbly entreat you to let me know."

Eleven days later, Whelan replied that he "just received [Father Thomas'] kind and welcome letter," which greatly eased his concerns.

"Thanks to you I can direct [my father] to where he may find a life last home … May this opportunity which you have offered a son of directing his father to what I hope will prove a happy home be remembered by Him who is our common Father."

Father Thomas' offer, which is not detailed in the second letter, would be "a strong invitation to the other families, of which he speaks in his letters, to come." Whelan said his father would arrive in

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