

A short history of the Irish rural tradition of the 'station mass'.

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Analysis: These major open house celebrations of the spiritual, sacred and social for neighbours and friends required significant preparation and expense

In 1883, Irish painter Aloysius O'Kelly, produced Mass in a Connemara Cabin. The mass in this painting is often interpreted as a representation of a 'station mass', an open house-based celebration of the spiritual, sacred and social for neighbours and friends.

This house mass was often simply called 'the stations' and lá na stáisiún. The term 'station' derives from the Latin stationem meaning a standing or a post. It was borrowed by the early church in Rome to describe the movement of the Pope between the different station churches to celebrate community-based masses on the different feast and saint days of the liturgical year. In Ireland, the station mass was linked to Penal-era restrictions when travelling priests made circuits of their communities to mass stations (pre-selected points on the landscape), farmhouses and outbuildings. Even after Catholic emancipation, the stations survived and thrived, making the mass a dynamic feature of religious rural practice until the recent past. Station masses originally took place across the four yearly quarters. Hosting the mass was taken in turns by different households in townland parishes and the circuit from one house to the next often took several years to complete before it was your turn to 'hold the stations' again. This spreading of obligation was welcomed by parishioners given the time, effort and expense involved. For some, the custom was a way of demonstrating piety as well as strengthening community ties of neighbourliness and social connection. The mass was undertaken in each household with the understanding that efforts were reciprocal and would be repaid as the mass moved from one station house to the next. The station mass was a defining feature of Irish rural life that combined Catholic duty with an element of social cohesion and remained an important cultural event until the late 20th century. While the practice has declined in more recent times, the stations are still held in some parishes as a voluntary endeavour rather than a required duty.

The day was clearly divided into the sacred and the social. As the house was open to neighbours and friends, the organisation of the day, house decoration and farmyard neatness were crucial concerns. The presence of the neighbours in the kitchen and parlour left the household vulnerable to judgement and inquisitive inspection. Activities around creating the right impression occupied the weeks leading to the mass. Outside, farm sheds, walls and gates were repaired, painted and whitewashed. Inside, floors were repaired or laid anew, walls and furniture were painted, new curtains hung, neglected repairs were seen to and every spot and corner was cleaned. In more recent times, new kitchens were often installed and bathrooms upgraded. In the days leading up to the station mass, the kitchen table that served as the altar was scrubbed and the white linen tablecloth prepared to receive the liturgical vessels for the mass. In older houses where the internal thatch scraws were exposed, 'sheets or white-washed bags were nailed to the roof over the Mass-table' to prevent the 'soot collected on the rafters and pieces of scraws... falling on the Mass-table or into the sacred vessels' according to one folk account from Co Mayo in the National Folklore Schools' Collection. On the morning of the stations, fires were lit in the kitchen and the parlour, the kitchen table was dressed and raised on chairs if it was deemed too low for the celebrant. Water was collected for blessing along with salt for the water and both set aside near the altar. Breads and cakes that needed the same-day baking were prepared and the table in the parlour was set for the priests' breakfast. The priests, sometimes accompanied by a curate, arrived around 8.30am and they set up to hear confessions in the parlour, once welcomed and the altar organised. Those in the townland who were ill or unable to travel to the station house were visited by one of the priests, who later returned for the breakfast. Following confessions, mass was celebrated, the salted water was blessed, and the priests examined the catechism of the younger attendees. Finally, the church dues were collected and recorded in the 'stations book'. Afterwards, the sacred moved to the social as the priests sat down to the station breakfast, which was prepared with meticulous attention to detail. The meal balanced three elements: the food preferences of the priests for something savoury and sweet; items that demonstrated good and skilful housewifery and the generosity of the hosts in sparing no expense. The interplay of different understandings of quality determined the character of the breakfast. For the homemade products, 'fresh' was a central quality expectation for eggs, butter and baked goods.

Boiled hens' or ducks' eggs were a popular choice along with soda bread and sweet caraway seed sodas, apple cakes and tarts and an occasional cream cake. Wealthier households offered a meat breakfast with bacon or roast mutton, which evolved into a later morning meal of different salad items and cold meats. Shop-bought items for the station breakfast were mandatory, and tea, sugar and baker's yeast loaves were standard. One Co Cork account from the National Folklore Collection details the effort of travelling to the city to purchase the best 'Cork' bread from the large commercial bakeries, O'Shea's and Thompson's. In this instance, local bread was by-passed in favour of the perceived superior value and luxury status of city bread. Procuring the best-quality shop-bought goods communicated the respect of the hosts towards the priests and the sanctity of the day. Imported and expensive commercial goods were considered luxury items in contrast to the everyday nature of homemade foods. The shop-bought goods spoke to the effort and expense involved in their procurement and imparted an air of sophistication. The care given to butter-making and its presentation at the table were very clear and tangible expressions of the woman's skills and hospitality. In detailing the work routines of one local woman renowned for her butter-making, the following West Cork account from the National Folklore Schools' Collection outlines the priority given to making fresh-tasting butter for the station breakfast:

"The depth of the milk in the Ceilers [keelers] was half a finger. For the best butter she let stand in the ceilers for two days before skimming. She churned that cream within twenty-four hours of skimming. This was very special butter for instance for the priests' breakfast at the stations for matchmakers and for people whose health was not too good.... She washed the butter in four waters and added a handful of salt to the water. Sometimes she washed it six times". The sugar for the station mass was ideally in the form of sugar lumps while the freshly churned butter was decorated with a butter stamp or else skilfully patted into balls or curls and taken with the best quality loose-leaf tea and yeast-raised, fluffy oven-crust loaves. That these items had a fixed association with the station mass is remembered in folk memory where the terms priest's bread (bakery bread) and priest's sugar (lump sugar) carry cultural and symbolic meaning that affirms the social value of these commercial goods and their suitability to sacred occasions. Such food items expected equally fancy material supports: the china teapot; cups and saucers (also

called the priest's cups); egg cups and spoons; sugar tongs; the good cutlery, and the best table linen. These items had a fixed association with the station mass with terms like priest's bread (bakery bread) and priest's sugar (lump sugar) To fortify this heavily constructed sense of the sacred and the special, the breakfast table company was carefully chosen. On occasion, the priests ate alone or in the company of the men of the house. If women joined the table, they were often professionals in the locality who were chosen to generate respectable conversation. After breakfast, the priests left and food was distributed to the congregation. The women might stay on to chat over bread, cake and tea or a glass of sherry, while the men attended to farm work. Later that evening, the neighbours returned to the house to enjoy the remaining food together with drink, music, dancing, and song for a party known as the 'priest's wedding.'

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