

The Matt Talbot Story

For supporters of Gaelic games, 1884 is remembered as the year that Michael Cusack, from Carron in Co. Clare, founded the Gaelic Athletic Association in Hayes Hotel, Thurles, Co. Tipperary. It was also the year that a young Dublin man, Matt Talbot, at the age of twenty-eight, changed his life completely.

On 19 September 1853, Charlie Talbot, aged thirty, married Elizabeth Bagnall, in her late teens, in Clontarf Church, Dublin. Both came from a working class background where poverty and excessive use of alcohol were prevalent. These were the years immediately after the Great Famine when people struggled just to survive.

Charlie and Elizabeth were parents to twelve children, nine of whom survived beyond infancy. Their second child, Matthew, was born on 2 May 1856. Matt's parents were good people who passed on a very solid faith to their children. The Talbot family were noted for their honesty and practice of the faith. While poor in the eyes of this world, they were rich in their love for God. Charlie was a good worker whose only weakness was that he drank too much, with inevitable consequences for his poor family. They lived at eighteen different addresses over a period of forty-one years. Through all their difficulties, the family prayed the Rosary together each day.

Matt, like so many other children of his time, did not avail of the opportunity for education offered by the new emerging religious orders and his school attendance was sporadic. He was eleven years old when he undertook a crash course in religious knowledge and what was then known as 'the Three Rs' but he was not a diligent student. In fact, the roll book of the Christian Brothers school in North Richmond Street where he attended for a year noted that he 'mitched' during much of his time there.

He had no interest in sport, literature, the arts or music. Lacking education, he frequently stole and was rough spoken. He was destined to join the countless number of unskilled labourers who drank heavily while attending to the externals of their religion by attending Mass on Sundays.

Matt began working at the age of twelve. His first job was with a wine merchant where he began sampling the drink he was bottling. One evening he came home drunk and his father changed his employment, hoping it would help. He moved to the Dublin Port and Docks Board, where he acted as a messenger, but his addiction to alcohol was further fuelled by the whiskey that was available to him in the bonded stores there. At seventeen he started work with Pemberton's as a builder's labourer.

By now Matt was a chronic alcoholic. His whole world completely centred on drink. Often this would involve telling lies, being self-centred, neglecting responsibilities and obligations. When Matt was drinking he became very hot-tempered, got into fights and swore.

Matt's drinking worried his mother deeply, as she could see her son following a pattern already set by his father. Matt began to suffer from hangovers, feelings of guilt and a sense of hopelessness. While he was still very conscientious about attending Mass on Sunday, he had already drifted from the Sacraments.

Workmen in those days were usually paid in the pub on a Saturday where most of their income was then spent, if it hadn't been already chalked up on credit or 'tick'. It was a

regular feature of Matt's drinking that he would be broke on the Monday after payday. This meant that he was constantly on the slate for his alcohol supply. When his credit was all done, he would pawn his boots to buy drink, and was often spotted walking home from the pub in his bare feet.

From his early teens until the age of twenty-eight, Matt's only achievement was that he became a very heavy drinker. In 1884 he found himself out of work for a week and, with no money, he was unable to get any drink. His brothers, Phil and Joe, found themselves in the same position. Matt stood outside O'Meara's pub in the hope that his drinking friends, with whom he had often shared his money in the past, would return the favour. But they left him standing on the corner. Dejected and hurt, Matt made his way home.

He then made the biggest decision of his life. At the age of twenty-eight and at rock bottom, he told his mother that he was going to take the pledge. His mother prayed that he would have the strength to keep it. He went to Holy Cross College at Clonliffe and there he vowed to abstain from all alcoholic drink, initially for a three-month period. On that Saturday he also went to confession, followed by Mass and Holy Communion on Sunday. This was to become part of his daily life until his death.

It was by no means easy for him. He was still a builder's labourer in Pemberton's and was ridiculed by colleagues and so-called friends. While his mother prayed for strength for him, his former drinking pals expected him back in the pub at any time. Through the difficulties of withdrawal symptoms and the constant yearning for just one more drink, he turned to the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist and devotion to Our Lady through the Rosary for help to stay sober. He subjected himself to severe penance in the form of kneeling when praying, fasting for long periods and sleeping on timber planks with a board for a pillow. He attended Mass every morning before starting work at 6 a.m. During this time he tried hard to persuade his brothers to give up alcohol but to no avail. He took further pledges, leading eventually to his pledge to abstain from alcohol for the rest of his life. The Pioneer Total Abstinence Association of the Sacred Heart was founded in St Francis Xavier Church, Gardiner Street, Dublin, on 28 December 1898 by Fr James A. Cullen and Matt became a member in May 1890.

As time moved on, he was eventually conquering old temptations and bad habits. He learned to read and write, which opened many opportunities for him to read the psalms and the lives of the saints. He read biographies of St Teresa of Avila, St Thérèse of Lisieux and St Catherine of Siena. He also conquered discouragement and became obsessed with honesty. During his drinking years, he had stolen a fiddle from a poor musician, sold the fiddle and used the money to buy drink. In later life, he searched unsuccessfully for the man to try to make restitution for the theft. Matt was also a good singer and he loved to sing hymns in church at Mass and devotions.

Personal prayer took up a lot of his time each day and he was also being guided by a spiritual director. As he advanced more in his prayer and spiritual life, although he became more withdrawn, he was keenly aware of his fellow workers' struggle for social justice. He became a permanent employee of T&C Martin, where he worked in the timber yard as a labourer until his death. He joined a trade union, the Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU), now part of SIPTU. He gave all his wages to the needy and to the missions, keeping only the bare minimum for his meagre needs.

The true personality of Matt eventually began to shine in his truthfulness at all times, his loyalty to the faith, to his family and friends, and his sense of responsibility at work. His father died in 1899 at the age of seventy-three and Matt took good care of his mother until

she died in 1915 at the age of eighty-one. Matt's mother died knowing that her prayers for her alcoholic son were answered. She had lived the last years of her life with him and experienced great joy, peace and happiness. Their story was very similar to that of St Augustine whose mother, St Monica, prayed for her son's conversion and he became living proof of the power of prayer. As St Paul reminds us, 'I can do all things in him who strengthens me' (Philippians 4:13).

Matt's decision to abstain for life from all alcoholic drink was the beginning of a long and challenging road. These changes in attitude were not miraculous; they took time, effort and a lot of soul searching. The practice of self-discipline was as hard for Matt as it is for all of us.

His prayer life was very much influenced by his membership and attendance at the Rosary Confraternity in the Dominican Church, the Sodality of Our Lady in the Jesuit Church in Gardiner Street and, for the last thirty-five years of his life, being a member of the Third Order of St Francis, known today as the Secular Franciscans, in Merchant's Quay. His daily attendances at Masses in various city-centre churches as well as his attendances at Missions and Retreats each year all helped him in his spiritual journey.

As a lay follower of St Francis of Assisi, Matt was very influenced by the way Francis made Christ the centre of everything; so too did Matt in his life. Matt formed by his participation in the Secular Franciscan way of life and Franciscan spirituality a life of love and sacrifice that appealed to him. A very simple approach to God by personal prayer and devotion to the Eucharist, Our Lady and the Stations of the Cross all helped to mould, encourage and guide Matt to achieve sanctity and a love of Christ and his mother.

In 1923, two years before his death, Matt was in hospital twice, with kidney and heart problems, and in the last few months of his life he suffered from chest pains and a shortness of breath. During these spells in hospital he continued his adoration of the Eucharist in the hospital chapel. In the eyes of the world, he was destitute; he drew from the National Health Allowance for twenty-six weeks the sum of fifteen shillings a week, after which he received a disability allowance. The local conference of St Vincent de Paul also supported him during this time, when he was out of work due to ill health.

In the spring of 1925, he returned to T&C Martin and continued to work there until the day before he died. On Trinity Sunday morning, 7 June 1925, he returned from early morning Mass to have a light breakfast which he had been doing since he had been in hospital and, as he returned to the 9 a.m. Mass in St Saviour's Church, Dominick Street, a twenty-minute walk for him, he collapsed on the path of Granby Lane; he died instantly. His death certificate stated heart failure as the cause of death.

His body was taken to the nearby Jervis Street hospital. He lay among strangers as there was no identification on him. It wasn't until the following day that his sister called to the morgue to formally identify him. Matt was sixty-nine years and one month when he died, a pauper, unknown and unidentified. On examination of his body at the time of death a cart chain was found around his waist with religious medals on it, a lighter chain around one arm and his Third Order of Saint Francis cord tied around the other arm. On one leg there was a light chain, with a rope tied around the other.

He was laid out in his Franciscan habit as a member of the Secular Franciscan and his remains were brought on the eve of Corpus Christi to the Jesuit Church of Saint Francis Xavier in Gardiner Street, where his funeral Mass took place on Thursday 11 June, the Feast of Corpus Christi. The burial took place in Glasnevin Cemetery.

In 1931, Archbishop Byrne of Dublin began the process of investigating his life. In 1952, his remains were exhumed from his grave in Glasnevin Cemetery and placed in a vault in the cemetery. Ten years later in 1962 his remains were brought to the Church of Our Lady of Lourdes in Sean McDermott Street where his coffin was placed in a granite tomb with the inscription ‘The Servant of God, Matthew Talbot, 1856-1925’. Today, thousands of people visit this church and tomb each year, seeking Matt’s intercession and praying for his canonisation.

Matt was not a colourful character; he had a very simple personality. He was a man who had great faith rooted in prayer and the Eucharist; he possessed a great sense of justice, especially for workers. Matt was a man who overcame addiction by using primarily the spiritual resources that are available to all who suffer addiction. He acknowledged that he broke his mother’s heart on so many occasions, yet in his sobriety he did everything possible to make amends.

Matt was not a mentally ill man; the chains found on his body at death were very much a symbol of the great love he had for his faith. His conquering of addiction was with free will and the help of God. Today those who suffer from addictions or compulsions can and should avail of the necessary help of medical professionals. But the two ingredients of free will and of God’s help are also still available to all in the journey of life and in the battle with addiction.

Matt’s life and story is not time-bound. His story continues to be heard in our world today.

Written by Fr Tom Ryan