A Conclusive Reply

One of the most recent replies made to Sir Horace Plunkett's ridiculous attack on the Irish Catholics for building too many churches is that of 'M. O'R.' in the 'Dublin Leader.' He adduces some facts, and figures which will be a surprise even to those most intimately acquainted with the subject :—

In Ireland there are 2,417 Catholic Churches for 3,308,000 Catholics.

In Great Britain there are 1,954 Catholic Churches for 2,013,400 Catholics.

In the United States there are 11,000 Catholic Churches for 12,000,000.

That is to say :—In the United States every 1090 Catholics are provided with a church ; in Great Britain, every 1030 Catholics are provided with one ; in Ireland, there is a church for every 1368 Catholics.

Again, there are in Ireland, 1362 Protestant churches for 581,009 Episcopalian Protestants—I am leaving out the Presbyterians, Methodists, and others. That is to say, whilst every 426 Protestants are provided with a church, there is only a church for every 1368 Catholics. I will be reminded that 426 Protestants could better afford to build a church than 1368 Catholics. I admit it. I am not at all accusing them of extravagance in church-building. Far from it ; their churches are to me a symbol, not of their extravagance but of their 'economic sense,' inasmuch as most of these have been built at the expense of Catholics. I do not refer to the old churches of which they despoiled our forefathers; I refer to modern churches built even within the 19th century. Sir Horace Plunkett has not made a full indictment of extravagance in church building against the Catholics of Ireland. I take leave to add another item to the charge. He indicts Catholics only for extravagance in building churches for themselves ; I indict them for the additional extravagance of building churches for Protestants also.

Amongst the most shameless iniquities which the Catholics of Ireland have had to bear in modern times were the Vestry Laws. A few Protestants met together, and, without let, hindrance, control, or responsibility of any sort, levied a cess at their discretion or caprice on the Catholics for the building or repairing of their church, for cleaning it, for ringing the bell, for washing the parson's surplice, buying wine for the Communion, paying the parish clerk, the pew-openers and vestry-maids, etc. It was bad enough that Catholics should have to bear these burdens at all, but it was worse that they should not dare to ask if they were necessary, had no option but to pay whatever applotment it pleased the vestrymen to levy. From 1725 when Catholics were excluded from having a voice in vestries, their powers passed through three processes of extension till it came to this, that the Protestant bishop was empowered to unite for any such cess process any parish he chose, even though there was not a Protestant in it, to another parish where the vestrymen determined to build or to repair a church. It depended on them to assign what value they thought fit to each one's property, to levy a cess accordingly, and then let the church wardens loose upon the Catholics whom they had decreed to fleece. Thus wealthy Protestants could escape scot-free, whilst the poor Catholics, already fleeced for their rents, were fleeced anew for their churches. Thus the Catholics of a district were often made to bear the burden of building a church for Protestants who perhaps lived fifty miles away.