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Gender and Religious Selfhoods in Manchester

As we have seen, Liverpool and Manchester's transformation ensured that their urban centres became increasingly associated with consumer culture. By implication, shopping had become fundamental to women's experiences of the city and their public demonstrations of status. Many historians have argued that the rise of modern consumer culture went hand in hand with a decline in religious belief and see the interwar years as key in the secularization of Britain.¹ Yet, more recently, secularization has been described as 'a broken concept, inapplicable to the British experience'. By implication, historians need to employ a 'more sophisticated and contextualised methodology for the study of religion, which takes religion seriously in the sense of recognizing the sophistication, complexity, and generative power of the values, practices, and ideas of the people of the past'.² These concerns pave the way for a more imaginative methodological approach to the scholarly analysis of religiosity and a greater interest in regional variations in popular worship to understand the role of religion in Britain more fully.

Indeed, historians of modern Britain have much to learn from the influential work of anthropologist Anthony Orsi, who demonstrates the importance of religion to Italian migrants in New York City but draws out the complexities around their religious beliefs and identities. For example, Orsi shows that Italian-Catholic women in New York City were able to balance their religious selfhoods with the emerging opportunities in consumer culture, leisure and employment that were increasingly becoming available to them.³ Most significant is Orsi's study of the festival of the Madonna of Mount Carmel in New York City as it offers a more flexible understanding of religion, its role in women's lives and its importance in shaping community and shared identities. His ethnographic approach reveals that during the festa, 'the community on these days was given the opportunity to see itself acting as a community. The essential and complex

structures of the social life of a community in transition were bodied forth in a highly visible manner, in the people's relations with each other and with the Madonna. ... Everyone who talks about the devotion to the Madonna of 115th Street takes care to mention that even those people who would not set foot in church faithfully attended the festa.⁴ Orsi's approach suggests that historians of Britain need to rethink how religious worship connected and intersected with other aspects of modern life, especially for women.

Manchester was also home to colourful Catholic processions, which is the focus of this chapter. Its processions first emerged in the nineteenth century, but, as this chapter argues, by the interwar period, they too had become crucial for nurturing and performing shared identities. Focusing on Manchester's annual Whit processions, the chapter shows their importance and significance peaked between the two world wars and was a product of the investment made in urban transformation, which not only revitalized civic and consumer cultures in Manchester but had significant implications for cultures of religion. The chapter first shows that one implication of housing reform ensured Catholic communities were broken up and widely dispersed throughout the new suburbs, making it necessary to find new ways to articulate their shared identity. Second, the new forms of commercial and municipal architecture and the revitalized culture of shopping that were emerging caused the city centre to become an increasingly important and emotive site to express religious collectivity. Third, the city centre became a stage for the performance of public, yet episodic, forms of Catholic identity by the 1930s, which allowed women to balance their religious identities with their interests in shopping, consumer culture and leisure. Like Orsi's study of Italian women in New York City, women's involvement in Manchester's Catholic Whit processions shows the centrality of religion to migrant women's expressions of belonging and shared identity in their adopted city. As a case study, the Whit processions reveal important details about the cultural meanings of the interwar city and contribute to an emerging field of cultural geography that explores the relationship between space and faith.⁵ At the same time, they offer an important contribution to the ongoing secularization debate in twentieth-century British history by demonstrating the central role of religion in urban culture between the two world wars.⁶

Manchester's Whit processions reflected a broader tradition of using public spaces for individuals to 'put themselves on display to others'.⁷ The Whit celebrations necessitated putting the self on display but to demonstrate a community identity, which is best understood through an analysis of how religious collectivity was itself constructed through the processions. The materiality

of processions 'create(s) a rich and varied field of symbols, ideal for semiotic investigation'.⁸ Thus, we can read shifts in the articulation of a Catholic shared identity through the changes in the icons and religious symbols in Manchester's Whit celebrations, which exposes the connections between the ritualistic nature of the processions and their relationship with collective identities. As anthropologist Anthony Cohen suggests, ritual 'confirms and strengthens social identity and people's sense of social location: it is an important means through which people experience community'.⁹ Cohen's analysis helps explain why and how Catholics increasingly relied on the ritual of Whit processions while Manchester's redevelopment disrupted their parish-based communities.

Existing accounts of the Catholic Whit processions draw on the local press and autobiographies to emphasize continuity in their role and expression over the period 1880–1939.¹⁰ In contrast, visual sources permit an anthropological reading of the shifting signs and symbols within the processions, which uncovers their changing cultural role. Around 40 per cent of available photographs of the Whit processions (both Catholic and Protestant) donated to local archives are used here, alongside film footage held by the British Film Institute and Pathé. Although not without limitations, these visual sources in conjunction with published sources and personal testimony offer some sense of how religious selfhoods were displayed through the Whit processions.¹¹ As recent scholarship on photographs emphasizes, they are constructed representations and are key as a way for individuals or groups to structure memory and signal the significance of their own lives.¹² Photographs reveal the emotional significance processions had in the lives of Catholics in Manchester. An analysis of such images in conjunction with other sources shows the form and expression of the Catholic processions became more distinct and exotic in comparison to their Protestant counterparts over the period. By implication, religious iconography became a much more prominent feature as the interwar period progressed. However, the nature of Catholic collectivity was episodic, which related closely to the specific form of Catholicism in interwar Manchester and the contribution of its migrant constituents.

Catholicism and urban redevelopment in the interwar city

Manchester's redevelopment had a profound impact on Catholic inhabitants throughout Lancashire, which the revitalization of the annual Whit processions came to reflect. Salford Diocese (which covered Manchester, Stockport in the

south, Preston in the north-east, Clithoroe to the north and Todmorden on the eastern edge of the Pennines) estimated there were 300,000 Catholics in 1936, within Greater Manchester's population of just over 2,700,000.¹³ Although the myths of 'Little Ireland' persist, there was no such thing as a Catholic ghetto in Manchester by 1918. Catholics did tend to be concentrated in the poorest working-class districts around the city centre, including Angel Meadow, Collyhurst, Hulme, Ancoats and Miles Platting.¹⁴ The Catholic population was also diverse and multiracial and not limited to Irish migrants. Significant numbers of non-Irish Catholics settled in the city during the decades prior to the First World War, notably from Italy and Eastern European countries including Poland and Hungary.¹⁵ Clusters of Catholics formed on a localized and parish (rather than ghettoized) level throughout the Greater Manchester area, in Ancoats, Oldham, Rochdale, Hulme, Plymouth Grove and Salford.¹⁶ Catholic migrants imported their own culture of religious celebration and had a significant impact on the Catholic community, shaping shared identity from within.

Catholicism remained strongly linked with poverty in interwar British cities such as Manchester. As noted earlier, overall unemployment rates in Manchester never met the national rate, but some parts of the city were particularly badly affected, which included the districts more heavily populated with Catholics.¹⁷ Ancoats was one of the most famous Catholic areas, known as 'Little Italy' because of its especially high number of Italians. These Italian migrants had a strong and visual and aural presence in the city as they sold ice cream, played traditional music and sung the Tarantella, a southern Italian folk song and dance, on street corners. Ancoats encapsulated the link between poverty and Catholicism in post-First World War Manchester. As one survey undertaken by Manchester University in the 1930s noted, around 35 per cent of Ancoats' inhabitants was Roman Catholic; 70 per cent of men earned less than £3 a week, and 53 per cent of households lived below the poverty line.¹⁸ Yet, the study also noted the longevity and stability of the Ancoats community, where over 40 per cent of inhabitants lived in the same house for over twenty years and some for over thirty years.¹⁹ Subsequently, the report concluded, 'Ancoats people have a great deal of pride and are attached to their neighbourhood through long association.'²⁰ Although the title suggests the survey was undertaken in 1937 and 1938, the introduction states the 'study occurred as Ancoats was scheduled for clearance in 1934.'²¹ The researchers were concerned about the future of the community as the Corporation targeted Ancoats for clearance, along with other Catholic areas.

As we saw in Chapter 1, housing reform was a priority for local politicians after 1918. Crucially for Manchester's Catholics, clearance focused on built-up areas adjacent to the city centre and especially affected their communities: whereas 40 per cent of all Catholics lived in seven parishes close to the city centre in 1890, the proportion had fallen to less than 25 per cent by 1939.²² Clearance destroyed traditional parish networks. For example, despite the cohesiveness of the Ancoats communities, the number of Catholics in the area halved during the 1930s, which ruined its micro-economy and forced local tradesmen (particularly the ice-cream sellers) to relocate.²³ Catholic churches near the city centre struggled to survive: the Corporation rehoused 2,000 parishioners of St Anne's Church in Ancoats by 1939, and the church nearly closed.²⁴ Salford Diocese was alarmed, particularly because Manchester Corporation ignored the Diocese's requests for members of Catholic parishes to be rehoused together.²⁵ The Diocese embarked on a building programme in those suburbs within its jurisdiction: in 1928 alone, Irlam, Bolton, Didsbury, Burnley and Blackley established new parishes.²⁶ Forty-one new churches were built and fifteen new parishes were formed during the episcopate of Thomas Henshaw, Bishop of Salford (1925–38).²⁷ However, other dioceses governed some of Manchester's larger housing estates, including Wythenshawe, which was part of Shrewsbury Diocese, and did not witness significant building programmes until the 1960s.

Despite Salford Diocese's best efforts, the splintering and dislocating effects of housing reform on communities were profound and, by implication, the Catholic population had to change the way in which their sense of community was expressed. Catholic identity in Manchester was traditionally flexible by nature and linked to class and ethnicity. Manchester's Catholics were 'neither simply Irish, Catholic or working class, but an amalgam of all three'. By implication, it 'was an extremely malleable identity, defined by ambiguity and equivocation, with vague boundaries and a viable character'.²⁸ Manchester's redevelopment caused Catholics to develop a less ambiguous, yet episodic, form of community. Cohen argues communities respond to change by asserting a stronger sense of collectivity, suggesting 'societies undergoing rapid, and, therefore, de-stabilizing processes of change often generate atavistically some apparently traditional forms, but import meaning to contemporary circumstance'.²⁹ Cohen's analysis helps explain why Manchester's Catholic population used the traditions of the Whit processions to assert a stronger sense of collectivity following Manchester's redevelopment and became important in displaying and performing community in similar ways to Orsi's analysis of Italian-Catholic festivals in New York.³⁰ To

understand this more clearly, the nature and significance of the Whit processions need a more direct examination alongside a consideration of why the city centre also became more important as a stage to perform shared identity.

Redefining the city as a spiritual space

Held annually from the early nineteenth century, Whit processions took place throughout Lancashire and provided the most dazzling and extensive religious celebrations in the country. Whit weekend (usually the last weekend in May) saw Catholics process on the Friday and Protestants on a Monday and they each competed for the most impressive celebrations, carrying banners, statues and flowers. The tradition probably originated from the arrival of migrants to Lancashire's new industrialized centres, bringing with them folkloric countryside celebrations of springtime. Catholics began to take part during the mid-nineteenth century, following the influx of Irish and Italian immigrants to the city and imbued the celebrations with a sense of religious difference.³¹ Although they took place throughout Lancashire, Manchester city centre drew the largest processions and crowds. Howard Spring's 1934 novel, *Shabby Tiger*, described the Catholic procession starting from Albert Square in front of the city's Town Hall:

The square was a huge black reservoir, and into it bright tributary streams were flowing from all the streets that had it as its centre. ... Soon the square was awash with the agitation of all that youth and colour, the wind taking the banners and filling them out like bellied sails. ... On the pavements wedged tight as they could be, the citizens had assembled behind the police barriers that guarded the sacred roads ... the heart of Manchester was sealed and impassable.³²

The processions were a unique moment when the religious difference was articulated and expressed collectively and publicly in a city largely untroubled by sectarian divisions and tensions, particularly in comparison to elsewhere in Britain.³³

Whit weekend traditionally represented a key moment when religious celebration took Manchester city centre over. Nevertheless, the impact of the processions became more emotive and significant as the city centre itself underwent notable change. As we saw in Chapters 1 and 2, significant investment in municipal architecture, public transport, civic celebrations and the publicity campaigns that accompanied such investment transformed and

revitalized Manchester's civic culture. Most notably, a more clearly defined civic area emerged following the great investment made by municipal leaders, which expanded the Town Hall and built a Central Library adjacent to it. As Chapters 3 and 4 demonstrated, urban transformation contributed to rich and innovative cultures of retail and the city centres became closely associated with shops and consumer culture. The Whit processions sought to subvert these powerful civic and commercial cultures that had emerged in Manchester city centre. The celebrations therefore represent an example of 'the attempted reimagination of a civic community by citizens of multiple races, ethnicities, religions, genders, and ages'.³⁴

The impact of the Whit processions became more emotive as the new civic and commercial architecture emerged. The Catholic procession started from Albert Square in front of the Town Hall and finished at Portland Street, beginning at 10 o'clock in the morning with the hymn 'Faith of Our Fathers', which told the story of Catholic persecution and subsequent triumph.³⁵ The route first took the Catholic procession along Deansgate, the most fashionable shopping district, and past Kendal's department store. Then, it followed on through Peter Street, alongside the Town Hall and the new extension, as well as the newly built Central Library, before moving up along Market Street and past the city's other shops and department stores, including Lewis's and Woolworth's. Finally, the walkers reached Piccadilly Gardens, the city's main transport terminus. Thus, the procession utilized the very areas of the city that underwent significant changes between the wars: Catholic walkers took advantage of the developing city centre and appropriated the space for themselves.

The importance of the Whit procession also increased with the involvement of Bishop Henshaw, who made a clear attempt to invest the celebrations with a more explicitly religious meaning. In 1927, for example, Henshaw compared the impact of the Catholic procession to that of the previous year's General Strike. During Whit, he wrote,

Commercial Manchester rests for a spell from its task of making money. The stock exchange is deserted; the shops are shut ... the real wealth of the nation comes out into the sunshine. ... The children of the poor invade the centre of Commerce.³⁶

As Henshaw's address suggests, Manchester's Whit celebrations disrupted the day-to-day workings of the city and there was a striking contrast between the commercial buzz of the city and the hymns, colour and religiosity of the Whit ceremonies. Yet the Whit processions also offered a form of amusement and

leisure. Street hawkers sold orange boxes for people to stand on, as well as flowers and unofficial handbooks that covered the day's events. Photographers and newsreel companies set out to record the events, women did no cooking that day and many combined it with a day in a public house. For many it was a leisure activity and remembered Whit was 'as good as going to Blackpool'.³⁷ Nostalgic representations emphasized the importance of Whit weekend for children; many of them remembered it because they received new clothes and considered it as a time of excitement and fun. The nature of the processions as a form of leisure suggests similarities with Italian-Catholic celebrations in New York, since Orsi also emphasizes the mix of the sacred and the profane, particularly due to the amount of gambling that took place during and in conjunction with the festa.³⁸ Nevertheless, although the role of Manchester's Whit celebrations in providing leisure and amusement is important, it has overshadowed the procession's importance as a religious ceremony and its role as a form of leisure was by no means incompatible with its spiritual significance. Furthermore, the emphasis on leisure is symptomatic of the broader neglect of religion in existing historical accounts of twentieth-century Britain.³⁹

Catholic processions actually became more popular after 1918, as the sheer quantity of photographs donated to local history archives indicates: sixty Whit photographs are from the period before 1918, nearly two hundred are from the period 1918–39, and just forty-one are from the post-1945 period.⁴⁰ Many of these photographs carry stamps from private photographic firms and it seems there was a significant market for Whit photographs interwar. Moreover, the desire to have photographs is a testimony to the importance assigned to the Whit celebrations because they provided a reminder of the emotional and financial investment associated with taking part. The number of available Pathé films of the event also illustrates the popularity of the Whit processions between the wars: of the seventeen films available on the British Pathé online archive, all but two are from the 1918–39 period.⁴¹ Their existence also testifies to the importance of the Whit processions, as Andrew Prescott's discussion scholarship on the Mitchell and Kenyon films explains:

For those who had been stuck behind an umbrella trying to watch the parade and had barely glimpsed a daughter in her hard-won costume, the film provided an important record of a major family event which went beyond the simple pleasure of recognising a face on the screen. In this way, there was a symbiotic relationship between the film and the social message of the procession, which was to grow increasingly intimate.⁴²

That so many families wished to have a photographic or cinematographic memento of the processions is indicative of the emotional and financial investment Catholics made in the celebrations and that this investment peaked in importance during the interwar period.

As Figure 5.1 illustrates, the rise in photographs of the celebrations was mirrored by a significant increase in the number of official participants in the Catholic processions between the two world wars: 16,000 people took part in 1903, but in 1929 (the centenary year of Catholic Emancipation) this rose to nearly 22,000 participants, and settled at around 20,000 into the 1930s. Nevertheless, although participation in the Whit processions became more important as an assertion of Catholic identity as the interwar period developed, this remained an episodic form of public selfhood and continued to be a rare moment in Manchester when sectarian divisions were clearly asserted. People expressed their allegiance through small, but highly emotive, acts such as refusing to wash their front step or by preventing their children from watching the procession.⁴³ Ivy Bolton and Edie Smythe (born in Manchester in the 1920s) recalled that when the sun shone on Whit Friday Catholics would say ‘God knows his own.’⁴⁴ Whit weekend drew out tensions and issues regarding collective identity and community, not normally witnessed in Manchester and the surrounding area. However, the shared religious identity that emerged during Whit remained flexible. Steven Fielding highlights the importance of Irishness in processions, writing ‘what emerged on Whit Friday was a collectivity defined by Catholic and Irish ideas and sentiments founded upon a past largely distinct from the rest of society.’⁴⁵ Although these aspects of identity and articulations of religious difference that

Figure 5.1 Number of participants in the Catholic processions, 1903–34

Source: Salford Catholic Diocese. *The Authorised Official Programme of the Catholic Whit-Friday Procession (Manchester), 1895–1934*.

emerged were traditionally associated with Manchester's Whit processions, the context of urban redevelopment combined with a greater involvement of non-Irish Catholics altered their expression between the two world wars. Differences between Catholic and Protestant forms of expression during Whit were limited at the start of the interwar period. As Catholic parishes were broken up, shared identity increasingly relied on the annual processions and their forms of expression became more exotic and overtly Catholic in iconography.

Parish identities and processional culture

Although the tradition of separate Catholic and Protestant processions existed throughout Lancashire since the mid-nineteenth century, there was little in their display or expression that offered a clear sense of religious difference. Indeed, at the start of the twentieth century they reflected a parish identity foremost. Figure 5.2 depicts a Catholic parish from Ancoats (home to many Italian migrants) in a Whit procession at around the time of the First World War. Despite the poverty of the area, women appear to be in their best dresses and are wearing hats, yet there is nothing about the walk that suggests that it is actually Catholic and the women do not carry any icons, just a banner which is probably for the parish. As we shall see, even Catholics from the poorest areas attempted to obtain white costumes in the later interwar years, suggesting poverty was not the reason these women did not wear matching white costumes. This scene is also echoed in a picture of St Paul's Methodist Church (also from Ancoats) taking part in the Whit procession of 1920, and indicates they were typical of the Whit processions around the time of the First World War.⁴⁶ As we saw earlier, the study undertaken by Manchester University in the 1930s highlighted a strong sense of community within Ancoats.⁴⁷ These images therefore imply the Whit processions were probably part of a broader processional tradition reflecting a communal identity, which was to evolve later in the interwar period. Not only were there few explicitly religious symbols in the Whit processions in the first two decades of the twentieth century, but the similarities between the expression and display of the Catholic and Protestant celebrations were strong. The following two pictures illustrate Whit celebrations from around 1918 and highlight little tangible difference between the Catholic and Protestant processions. Figure 5.3 depicts a Catholic walk as it left Albert Square to traverse through Market Street, Manchester's main shopping district. It shows girls wearing white dresses, they carry flowers and a banner that spells

Figure 5.2 St Michael's Roman Catholic parish, Ancoats, c. 1910s

Source: MCL LIC Ref m69150.

Figure 5.3 Roman Catholic walk, c. 1918

Source: MCL LIC Ref 1313026.

out 'JESU', but as in Figure 5.2, no part of the iconography of costume suggests the walk is Catholic. The large crowds are an important feature of the picture with observers six or seven deep leaning out of the windows, showing it was an important local event but not necessarily a proclamation of Catholic difference. Similarly, the *MEN*'s description of the scene in 1920 shows references to

religion in the Catholic procession perceived it as ‘picturesque’, rather than spiritual.

Record crowds witnessed the arrival of the Roman Catholic Guilds, which, for splendour and pageantry and attention of detail, are unexcelled outside Rome. This morning, many beautiful floral tableaux were portrayed. Youths dressed as Roman martyrs and gladiators lent a picturesque touch, while hundreds of banners were carried.⁴⁸

The article indicates that in 1920 the Whit celebrations were a time of celebration and festivity, but the form of Catholic expression was not narrowly prescribed: children were dressed as both martyrs and gladiators and banners were an important part of the processional culture.

There are difficulties in detecting visible differences between the Catholic and Protestant Whit processions in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Images of Protestant group of walkers depict girls wearing white dresses and flowers, which are very similar to those in the Catholic procession shown in Figure 5.3 and, again, there is little overtly religious iconography and the emphasis seems to have been on young girls in white dresses, carrying flowers, perhaps, in part, a celebration of springtime.⁴⁹ The theme also appears in newsreel footage of the processions, which indicates Catholic and Protestant Whit walks related to a broader processional culture in England during the early 1920s. Pathé newsreel shows both the Protestant and Catholic processions of 1921 composed of girls wearing white dresses, as they were in Figure 5.3, and they are also shown carrying shepherd’s crooks and flowers. The film footage, like the photographs, portrays few men in the Catholic procession (unlike the Protestant procession, the Catholic celebrations took place on a working day and few men were unable to participate because of work) with the exception of those holding the statues, which were very large and heavy. Pathé certainly perceived little difference between the processions in 1921 and gave the different newsreels similar titles, which again emphasized the scenic and decorative qualities of the processions. The Catholic procession was described as ‘Whit Friday Procession, Picturesque Scenes at Annual Parade’.⁵⁰ Similarly, Pathé titled the Protestant procession as ‘Protestant Procession, Picturesque Scenes at Annual Parade’. In both processions, the participants carried parish banners and the only explicitly religious icons were the Italian’s crucifix and a statue of the Madonna in the Catholic procession.⁵¹ Both the Protestant and Catholic processions seem to have been strongly related to traditional celebrations of springtime, related to a nostalgic vision of the countryside. The ribbons and banners carried are notably

similar to a Maypole, which is perhaps unsurprising considering the popularity of these traditions during the two decades prior to the First World War.⁵²

As the photographs and newsreel footage show, there were few prominent religious icons in either Protestant or Catholic Whit processions around the time of the First World War and this contributed to the similarities between their form and expression. It seems that not only did the celebrations not then articulate a narrowly religious identity, but that the collective identity was itself malleable in nature. For instance, during the Boer War, the Catholic parishes of St Johns and Holy Name dressed boys as soldiers and girls as nurses and marched them behind the Union Jack.⁵³ There were complaints about the lack of Irish music after the Manchester Catholic procession of 1904 and the musical bands were often non-Catholic, including the Primitive Methodist Prize Band, and by 1912 Catholic groups hoped to improve matters by introducing hymns to the procession.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, little had changed by the early 1920s and, in 1922, the *Manchester Guardian* reported the Italians brought a cross and the Madonna, 'the only religious emblems, beyond the processional cross and the banners'.⁵⁵ The absence of many explicitly Catholic icons may have reflected the problematic nature of Irishness in the first decades of the twentieth century. Catholic priests dissuaded Irish Catholics from promoting their identity in the Whit celebrations because feared the inflammatory nature of Irish nationalism. As a result, 'when Irish Catholics took to the streets it was usually to ostensibly express their Catholic faith rather than their Irish nationality'.⁵⁶ Irish nationalism was especially problematic in the years 1920–2, with several violent attacks on Manchester by the IRA.⁵⁷ Perhaps only the influence of other Catholic nationalities, alongside a decline in IRA terrorism, made Irish involvement and symbols associated with Irish nationality more acceptable in the Whit celebrations by the 1930s.

The relative sobriety of the costume worn by women and in Catholic processions such as in Figure 5.2 and the focus on children as seen in Figure 5.3 also coincided with a period of anxiety about religious women's roles in the wider world. As peace finally fell throughout Europe, the Catholic Church was one of many institutions that looked to reassert traditional gender relations in response to the chaos and destruction of the First World War.⁵⁸ In 1919, Pope Benedict XV outlined his perceived evils of the modern world in an address titled 'Women's Mission in Modern Society'. Pope Benedict specifically warned women against 'those exaggerations of fashions', declaring, 'We are filled with amazement at seeing those who communicate the poison seem not to realise its malignant action, and those that set the house on fire seem to ignore the

destructive force of the fire.⁵⁹ According to Rome, women's interest in fashion made them agents of immorality and invested them with the 'poison' of corruption. In response to this apparent problem, Pope Benedict called on all Catholic women to form leagues promoting decent fashions and to 'fulfil the strict duty of not giving scandal, and of not becoming a stumbling block to others in the path of virtue.'⁶⁰ The Pope's association between fashion, the emerging consumer culture and women's ability to manifest moral corruption was to have important consequences for the way Catholic leaders considered women's place in the post-war world. Manchester was no exception.

Pope Benedict's assertion led a group of women in Ireland to form an official league against 'Immodest dress'. Their oath pledged to avoid 'all impropriety in the matter of dress and to maintain and hand down the traditional purity, and modesty of Irish womanhood'.⁶¹ There was also a meeting in Ireland in opposition to 'the introduction of new forms of dancing into the city of Dublin', and an association was formed 'to place on record its apprehension that nightclubs such as exist in other places may be introduced into the city, and respectfully urges the citizens to take strenuous measures to prevent such an evil'.⁶² In Ireland, the association between the emerging consumer cultures, fashion and leisure with immorality was clear. These ideas also affected a large number of Irish immigrants and their descendants in North West England.⁶³ Opposition to women's interest in leisure and consumerism was not limited to the Catholic Church and Penny Tinkler argues secular concerns and discourse over women's leisure peaked during the Second World War.⁶⁴ Within specifically Catholic discourse, however, these fears were very prominent during the immediate post-war years.

Events in Ireland and Rome could not fail to influence Salford Diocese. In his Christmas pastoral letter to his diocese in 1919 the Bishop of Salford, then Louis Charles, called on women of the diocese to form a league 'against the evils of fashion'.⁶⁵ During the immediate post-war years, the perceived link between fashion and corruption was strong within Salford Diocese. In 1921, Bishop Charles's command was repeated through the Lenten pastoral letter: 'It has been reported to us on credible authority that at some of the dances among Catholics certain of these young people have appeared in costumes utterly repugnant to Christian modesty.'⁶⁶ Bishop Charles went even further and claimed that the modern world was in opposition to the Catholic idea of womanhood:

there is the matter of amusement, frivolity, worldliness ... there is an excess, resulting in a craving for constant, daily amusement, which grows like a taste for alcohol and drugs, and leads to a frivolous and dissipated state of mind, to extravagance and religious carelessness.⁶⁷

The Bishop advised women to abstain from attending the theatre, cinema, and dances during Lent and, in doing so, articulated the ways in which Catholic leaders elsewhere attempted to deal with the 'problem' of women's modernity.⁶⁸

Becoming a modern Catholic woman

These anxieties about femininity also shaped and influenced the nature and meaning of the Whit celebrations. In particular, the role of adult women, rather than predominantly children, grew in importance as the role of the Catholic Whit processions began to change in the 1920s, once the redevelopment of Manchester took hold. In particular, 1925 marked an important turning point as Thomas Henshaw become Bishop of Salford and was instrumental in transforming the celebrations into a vital spiritual event in Manchester's Catholic calendar. For instance, he renamed the celebrations as the 'Annual Catholic Procession', which distanced it from the Protestant Whit celebrations. Henshaw also introduced a personal address, published in the *Official Programme*, to directly invest the processions with a more overtly spiritual role. In his first address, he proclaimed the Whit celebrations were a symbol of Catholic rejuvenation and represented 'a noble and striking demonstration of the strength and power of the Church which is rebuilding itself in England upon the ashes of its martyred self'.⁶⁹ By 1932, Henshaw claimed that the annual celebrations permitted Catholic families of Manchester to 'feel that at least one right of citizenship is theirs equally with the rich, the right to parade the street of their own city'.⁷⁰ The Whit processions allowed Catholic leaders to nurture an alternative image of Manchester than that created by municipal leaders or businessmen through the new civic architecture or shops and businesses.

Just as Bishop Henshaw asserted the specifically religious role of the Catholic Whit celebrations from the mid-1920s, so the icons and items of dress used within the processions also changed. Figure 5.4 shows a Whit procession from a Catholic parish in Angel Meadow and illustrates how girls still wore white dresses and carried flowers in the mid-1920s, but there is a much stronger presence of Catholic iconography in comparison to the earlier Whit processions.⁷¹ For example, the image depicts a boy holding a crucifix and the two banners in the background portray religious icons. Salford Diocese prohibited non-Catholic symbols from the procession during the later 1920s and, in 1931, explicitly forbade the use of non-Catholic flags and emblems.⁷² The ruling suggests Catholic leaders were eager to clearly define the Catholic

Figure 5.4 St William's procession, Angel Meadow, Salford, 1926

Source: MCL LIC Ref N4101.

procession and made a conscious decision to make it different in expression than the Protestant Whit procession. Yet, it is clear that from the 1920s Catholic women were instrumental in negotiating the way the Catholic processions looked. Figure 5.3 illustrated it was very common for children to wear white dresses during Whit, but by the mid-1920s more adult women took part in the Catholic processions and wore costumes to emulate the Virgin Mary. Figure 5.5 illustrates a group of women dressed to participate in the Catholic procession of 1927 as 'The Children of Mary', which was a semi-formal religious group in Manchester. These women set themselves apart by wearing veils and emphasized their close relationship with the Virgin Mary. The tradition continued throughout the late 1930s as it became increasingly common for women to cover their heads during the procession. Salford Diocese even began a tradition of crowning a young girl 'Mary' during Whit from the mid-1920s. Margaret Kierman, born in Manchester during the 1920s, remembered the Diocese ceased the crowning of Mary for a period because it caused so many problems within the Catholic community as the honour was so great.⁷³ This was a clear link to Mary, Mother of God and a Catholic oppositional figure to the Rose Queen, who was crowned during the Protestant Whit celebrations. Newsreel footage from 1928 shows the crowning of a Rose Queen in Lancashire, the emphasis (as in the early Whit processions) was on springtime and many girls wore white dresses, some children wore Scout and Guide uniforms, and many carried flowers.⁷⁴ Thus, the iconography of the Rose Queen celebrations

Figure 5.5 Children of Mary, Catholic Whit procession, 1927

Source: MCL LIC Ref 905039.

mirrored some elements of the early Whit processions and, by the mid-1920s, the Whit processions incorporated English traditions with Catholic iconography to nurture a localized form of religious expression and imitating Mary was a strong expression of Catholic difference.

Catholics seem to have been especially concerned about the importance of obtaining specific costumes as the interwar period progressed, despite the poverty many families found themselves in. One Anglican cleric, who worked in Manchester in the early 1930s, recalled people falling into debt in their desire to provide the necessary costumes for the Whit processions, claiming ‘our Roman Catholic friends were more guilty of this sort of thing’ as ‘they made greater demands’.⁷⁵ His criticism reflects the complexities around the expressions of Catholic selfhood during the Whit processions by the late 1920s and early 1930s. On the one hand, the pressure to have the necessary items of dress and adornment was difficult for many families, but at the same time, participation in the processions was fulfilling and offered Catholics public and visible demonstrations of status and respectability. Nostalgic recollections of those who participated in the Catholic walks as children during the late 1920s often draw attention to the importance of clothing: children were ‘dressed up really nicely’ for Whit, recalled Winifred Kelly, herself Catholic, and noted the clothes were sometimes kept for a couple of Sundays ‘before they go into the

pawn shop'.⁷⁶ Similarly, Edith professed her mother 'did always try to buy you a bit of something', remembering slippers cost 4s. 11d. and socks 1s. 3d., and these small token items meant 'at least you'd got a bit of something new'.⁷⁷ In an essay on dress and identity, Carolyn Steedman questions the concept of 'the other' as an analytical tool in understanding collective identity. 'This other is a very big thing, and undetailed,' writes Steedman, 'Littleness, on the other hand, is the something tiny that can be held, and appropriated and incorporated *into* the idea of who you are.'⁷⁸ 'Little things', like the socks and shoes, helped articulate an increasingly stronger sense of difference between Catholics and Protestants during Whit. Protestants and Catholics not only defined their collective identity in opposition to each other, but also constructed a shared identity from within and performed publicly in the city centre during the Whit celebrations.

In order to participate in the Whit processions and obtain the 'little things' they needed, women found themselves obtaining clothes for Whit in the same imaginative and frugal ways they obtained more fashionable clothes, including home dressmaking made possible by wide access to the sewing machine.⁷⁹ These methods became essential as the period developed and participation within the processions was increasingly important as an assertion of collective Catholic identity while at the same time, problems of unemployment and poverty made it especially challenging for women to obtain the specific items of dress and adornment needed to take part. The Whit celebrations of 1926 were badly hit by the General Strike, but Winifred Kelly recalls how the Catholic community came together to ensure everyone could take part. Winifred remembered that her mother convinced Elworth's, a drapers on the corner of Deansgate and Market Street in the city centre, to sell her some dress material cheaply. As a skilled dressmaker, Winifred's mother used it to make matching Whit costumes for six or seven children.⁸⁰ Other oral testimonies echo this experience: Margaret Kierman remembered her mother saving in clubs all year to pay for Whit outfits, and Ivy recalled, 'My mother would save every penny she had to get our dresses ... mum used to save hard to make you look nice for the Whit Walk.'⁸¹ In 1934, the *Catholic Herald* celebrated the effort Catholics made to obtain the costumes needed for the procession, 'I cannot, and shall not, attempt to describe the overwhelming detail of this cavalcade of Catholicity ... I applaud the courage and sacrifice that had been obviously made in thousands of homes.'⁸² Yet not all families could afford to take part and many undoubtedly had to miss out. Andrew Davies' study of leisure and poverty in Manchester and

Salford includes the testimony of Mrs Phelan, whose father was unemployed during the 1930s and who spent much of his unemployment allowance on betting. Mrs Phelan recalled, 'We never had any Whit week clothes. We used to just look through the parlour window and see everybody else dressed up.'⁸³ That Mrs Phelan and her sister remained indoors and did not join the huge crowds outside is revealing of the isolation and marginalization they must have felt at not having the correct outfits. Manchester's Whit celebrations were clearly a moment of both emotional and financial investment for Catholics by the late 1920s and early 1930s but represented a difficult moment for those unable to participate.

Catholic women's appropriation of modern consumer culture for a religious event reflected the importance of Whit as a method of bolstering shared identity as the community underwent a period of change. Cohen's anthropological study of Whalsay, in the Shetland Isles, suggested inhabitants used change to boost their own sense of uniqueness and harden their collective identity. When threatened by change, inhabitants 'nurture a view of their own eccentric modernity'.⁸⁴ Again, there are parallels with the interwar Catholic Whit processions, which occurred within a background of broader social and cultural change. As we saw in Chapter 5, a populist culture of glamour and consumer culture emerged after the First World War and attracted the attention of young, working-class women, which alarmed the Catholic Church. Salford Diocese pursued its own campaign against fashionable dress and women's 'craving for constant, daily amusement, particularly the cinema and dances'.⁸⁵ Yet by the late 1920s and early 1930s, Salford Diocese (particularly under Henshaw's leadership) became noticeably more relaxed about modern forms of consumer culture and, as shown above, Catholic women incorporated them into the Whit processions to stress a stronger sense of difference from their Protestant counterparts and, as Cohen's inhabitants of Whalsay, fostered their own form of modernity.

Catholic women's greater autonomy in shaping the form and expression of the celebrations marked the Whit processions of the later 1920s and early 1930s. In around 1930 Salford Diocese, in recognition of the poverty so many Catholic families experienced, ruled against a stipulation for Whit costumes. The ruling meant white dresses were not compulsory and aimed to alleviate financial burdens, yet this caused a great outcry among Catholic women. Margaret Kierman recalls, the 'mothers all said "we want them to wear white dresses"' and the white costumes remained.⁸⁶ There was a mutual relationship between church leaders and Catholic women: they negotiated the form of expression

taken by the Whit walks and the façade of appearance offered Catholic women status and became increasingly specific to the Catholic processions into the later 1930s.

Adult women were also far more involved in the Catholic processions in comparison to Protestant women by the 1930s. Newsreel footage of the 1934 procession depicts greater numbers of statues and icons, larger and more ornate than in the earlier years. Rather than spelling out generically Christian inspired words such as 'PURITY', as the Protestant walkers did, flowers spelt out 'AVE MARIE' to accompany a large statue of the Madonna, also covered in flowers. Many girls were also dressed as peasants with their heads covered and young boys wore Eastern European satin suits with pointed slippers. Thus Catholic procession members in the later 1930s reflected a more exotic, and certainly non-English, expression of Catholicism because of the influence of immigrants to Manchester.⁸⁷ Those who were children in Manchester during the mid and late 1930s emphasized the impact of immigrant Catholics on the form and expression of the Catholic walks. Essie and Ronnie Strul, themselves both Jewish, recalled watching the walks in Manchester when they were children and remarked the Catholic processions were considered to be an especially great occasion because of the exotic costumes.⁸⁸ Alma Todhill remembered the Catholic walks were 'very colourful', particularly the Hungarian participants in national dress, whereas Ivy insisted the Irish in their national colours were the most noteworthy members of the procession.⁸⁹ In contrast, the Protestant processions were then dominated by patriotic banners and flags, with children in Scout and Guide uniforms and few white dresses or flowers.⁹⁰ By the later 1930s, the Catholic Whit processions were noticeably different to the Protestant procession and this was reflective of internally constructed forms of shared identity and of a popular and exotic urban religious culture.

The active role Catholic women played in shaping the form and expression of the Whit processions and their ability to incorporate contemporary cultures of fashion and shopping into the celebrations reflected the church's broader confidence in Catholic women's ability to navigate the modern world by the 1930s. As the Catholic Church in Manchester became more relaxed about women's perceived vulnerability to modernity, Catholic women were increasingly able to balance their religious identities with more secular endeavours, outside of the Whit processions. For example, Catholic leaders recognized the popularity of home dressmaking and sought to channel women's interest in fashion towards charitable Catholic endeavours. The Catholic Needlework Guild (which made clothes for poor people) was especially popular as Catholic leaders believed it

allowed Catholic women the opportunity to combine their interest in modern consumer culture with religious duties and principles. Salford Diocese engaged with the emerging spectacular consumer culture to provoke excitement and support for the Guild's achievements. In January 1932, *Harvest* (the monthly periodical for Catholics in Salford Diocese) reported the Guild's collection of garments: Maine Road, Manchester City's football stadium, 'was not far away, but even the crush of City would not rival the thrill of a "close up" of over 16,000 garments'.⁹¹ Leisure pursuits that allowed Catholic women to spend time together were also encouraged. *Harvest* described a tea party for Catholic Mothers in 1932 as a 'demonstration that Catholic faith is as strong and vigorous – that Catholic morals are still gloriously upheld'.⁹² The church saw these women-only pursuits as ways for women to enjoy modern forms of leisure but that also promoted Catholicism.

Manchester's Catholic leaders also recognized young women were entering formal employment in growing numbers.⁹³ Rather than condemn women's paid work, Salford Diocese encouraged Catholic women to choose professions that extended women's roles as nurturers. Catholic leaders directly persuaded women to become nurses or teachers because these jobs allowed women access to the public world through paid employment, but also considered as roles that promoted values Catholic femininity. One article in *Harvest* encouraged women's vocations to the nursing professions by stating, 'What a joy to every priest who has a hospital to look after to find a Catholic nurse in charge ... a Catholic nurse is beyond words of appreciation.'⁹⁴ By the early 1930s, the Catholic leaders in Manchester engaged with wider debates relating to growing work opportunities for women. They did not discourage or condemn women's work but offered a specifically Catholic feminine identity in the public sphere. Nor were Catholic women alienated from public issues and the Catholic Women's League was especially active during the 1930s to promote Catholic women's role in society and, in particular, campaigned to broaden women's knowledge about the modern world. They were adamant Catholic women should not be kept ignorant of the key debates relating to modern society, including birth control and social issues. In 1934, one of the Catholic Women's League leaders explained to Bishop Henshaw why it was essential to allow Catholic women to debate all issues:

[Imagine] a good Catholic, intelligent, but her only distraction the local co-operative women's guild. Some controversial subject comes up, and by a little strategy she manages to get the matter held over for a meeting or two. Meantime

she learns (or should learn) from the CWL (Catholic Women's League) magazine that 'such a' Diocese is discussing the matter and appeals for us to help.⁹⁵

Again, this shows there was a negotiation between Catholic women and Catholic leaders. It was surely no coincidence that Salford Diocese took on a more conciliatory attitude towards the opportunities arising for women in the modern world from the early 1930s.

Conclusion

In 1939, Salford Diocese reported to the Vatican,

From a spiritual point of view the state of the diocese is very satisfactory. Despite the fact that many Catholics have been moved to building estates just beyond the borders of our jurisdiction, and many others have been forced by circumstances to seek employment in the South, the number of Catholics in the diocese has increased.⁹⁶

Thus, Catholicism thrived in the face of some potentially crippling social changes and, for Salford Diocese, was a period of confidence: 'The Catholic community is recognised as an integral part of the city's life', the Diocesan weekly magazine declared in 1938.⁹⁷ Manchester's interwar redevelopment disrupted parish communities and widely dispersed the Catholic population. Many moved to the new municipal suburbs, such as Wythenshawe, which was beyond the jurisdiction of Salford Diocese. Salford Diocese's confidence was reflected in the ability of the Whit processions to allow the Catholic community to maintain an episodic, yet powerful, possession of the city centre. In the early twentieth century, a celebration of a parish and religious identity characterized the processions. By the 1930s, however, the parish identity had been diminished and Catholic shared identity dominated. The celebrations ensured Manchester's Catholic population retained a strong presence in local culture, when their sense of community was marginalized and under threat.

The importance of the Whit processions peaked interwar, which supports Cohen's understanding of the role of ritual in strengthening shared identity, particularly in times of change.⁹⁸ Nevertheless, the peculiarities of the Whit celebrations need further consideration. Manchester was, of course, not the only city to witness important religious or secular processions in the early

twentieth century and marching was an important aspect to cultures of Catholicism around the world and to sectarianism in Ireland and Britain.⁹⁹ The presence of Italian and Eastern European Catholics, alongside Irish Catholics was important: the diversity permitted a more fluid Catholic shared identity and ensured the Whit processions became more exotic in their expression as the period progressed. Thus, the changes to the Whit processions related closely to the nature of the Catholic community and the pressures it experienced between the two world wars.

Catholic processions were also noteworthy because they included greater numbers of adult women during the 1930s. At a time of great debate about Catholic women's role in the changing world, they offered women agency and fulfilment, despite the financial pressures, and some of the key turning points in the evolution of the Catholic processions interwar were products of assertions by women, particularly on dress. Whit walks allowed women to combine popular forms of consumer culture and spending, particularly in terms of dress, for more explicitly spiritual roles. Catholic women could forge their own form of 'eccentric modernity,' which contrasted with their counterparts elsewhere.¹⁰⁰ Callum Brown's secularization thesis argues the loss of women from churches in the 1960s was crucial in the de-Christianisation of Britain and may explain both the strength of the Catholic processions interwar and their subsequent decline. Brown suggests, 'British women secularized the construction of their identity, and the church started to lose them. ... The key to understanding secularization in Britain is the simultaneous de-pietisation of femininity and the de-feminisation of piety from the 1960s.'¹⁰¹ Thus, the relative strength of the processions between the two world wars lay in Catholic women's pietisation of femininity, which was to be lost by the 1960s.

The Whit processions never again reached the popularity of the 1930s. They declined significantly during the 1950s and collective Catholic identity tended to be expressed through St Patrick's Day celebrations, rather than more explicitly spiritual processions.¹⁰² The context of the interwar period and particularly the impact of Manchester's redevelopment can explain the popularity of the Whit processions and the changes in the expression of the Catholic celebrations. Thus, the Whit processions peaked at the same time as politicians' and planners' investment in the city. What made the city centre a powerful stage for the performance of a religious identity related closely to broader cultural meanings invested in the urban environment. Perhaps the best way to understand the relationship between urban space and religious identity is to look at the multiple

cultural appropriations of the urban environment: maybe the real power of the Whit processions lay in the commercial and civic urban cultures that the Catholics wished to overcome, even for just one day of the year. Nevertheless, as Chapter 6 explores, the Catholic Church in Liverpool invested in the transformed city centre in a very different, and arguably even more dramatic, way.