

# Monsignor Hugh O'Flaherty

– An Extraordinary Man



Mary Gaffney recalls the life of Monsignor. Hugh O'Flaherty, the Irish priest with Cahersiveen connections who became known as the 'Vatican Pimpernel' for his remarkable work in saving thousands of Jews and Allied soldiers from the hands of the Nazis.

'In Rome, I crossed the vast expanse of St. Peter's Square and made my way to the top steps of the Basilica. At last I was here. It had taken me many years but now I was walking in his footsteps. Because this was where so often during the German occupation of 1943-44, Monsignor Hugh O'Flaherty, the Kerry priest who became known as the Vatican Pimpernel, would stand large as life.'

Six foot two in black soutane, bent over his breviary, glasses glinting, he would scan the Square for a familiar figure while murmuring Latin in his Kerry brogue. To sightseeing Wehrmacht soldiers, he was just another priest at prayer. Nothing about him suggested that this was the Vatican Pimpernel, up to his clerical collar in wartime intrigue.

As a theologian for the Holy See, Mgr O'Flaherty officially dealt in Catholic dogma. But ex officio he led an underground organisation in Rome which saved the lives of more than 4,000 Allied soldiers and Jews from imprisonment, torture and death by the Gestapo. The monsignor's amazing success was due to his awesome courage, sharp wits and overwhelming compassion. Those who knew him say he had more compassion than anyone they had ever met.

## Sent to Rome

As a young seminarian from Killarney, Hugh O'Flaherty was posted to Rome in 1922, the year Mussolini's dictatorship began. By 1934 he was a Vatican monsignor deeply devoted to good works and to golf.

He was in fact the amateur golfing champion of Italy and played golf regularly with Count Ciano, Mussolini's son-in-law, and with ex-King Alfonso of Spain. He was a formidable boxer, and a good handball player and hurler. Mgr O'Flaherty was also a skilled diplomat and served with distinction in such far-flung posts as Egypt, Haiti, San Domingo and Czechoslovakia, until he was recalled to Rome and appointed to the

## Holy Office.

In the early war years, he toured Italian prisoners of war camps seeking out prisoners who had been declared 'missing in action,' returning to Rome each night to reassure their families through Vatican Radio. After the Allied forces landings and Italy's capitulation in September 1943, thousands of POWs were let loose. Many reached Rome just as German troops seized it. Remembering the visits of the monsignor to the POW camps, the ex prisoners turned to him for help. He concealed more than 4,000 in convents, crowded flats and outlying farms. He secured aid from monks, nuns, communists, a Swiss Count and Free French secret service agents.

He knew everyone, and they all adored him. The work was hazardous, requiring frequent trips outside the Vatican to co-ordinate with Roman friends in securing food and shelter. Disguised as a beggar, a postman, a nun, even a Nazi, the monsignor operated the escape line without the knowledge or permission of his superiors and in the face of constant death threats.

Chief of SS forces in Rome, SS Colonel Herbert Kappler, gave top priority to wiping out Mgr O'Flaherty's network but he could never capture the Irish Scarlet Pimpernel. An attempt to assassinate him in St. Peter's failed.

### **Many escapes**

The number of times he escaped either capture or death is legendary as he ranged through a city where the Gestapo were determined to shoot him on sight. When the Allies entered Rome in June 1944, more than 3,900 of those saved by Mgr O'Flaherty were still alive. Of those recaptured, tortured and murdered, no man or woman betrayed the Pimpernel.

But the monsignor could not stop there. Overnight, his boundless compassion embraced the foe as well. They were now the underdog and when US General Mark Clark came to pay his respects, the monsignor quizzed him sharply to make sure German prisoners were well treated. In a plane, loaned to him by the Allied commander-in-chief, General Sir Harold Alexander, he flew to see thousands of Italian POWs in South Africa, then visited Jewish refugees in Jerusalem.

Colonel Kappler, the monsignor's arch enemy, was among those tried by the Allies for war crimes. He was sentenced to life and was incarcerated in Gaeta Prison between Rome and Naples. In prison, the colonel's only visitor was Mgr O'Flaherty, They became firm friends, and in March 1959, Kappler, the Nazi butcher of Rome, was baptised into the Catholic Church by his friend. Mgr O'Flaherty was awarded the highest honours six countries could bestow on him, including the CBE and the US Medal of Freedom with Silver Palm. But when Italy's first post-war government awarded him a life-time pension, he refused to take one lira of it. He wanted nothing for himself.

### **Return to Ireland**

In 1960 Mgr O'Flaherty suffered a stroke while saying Mass, and returned to Ireland to live with his sister, Mrs. Bride Sheehan, in Cahersiveen. He remained as active as possible, saying Mass in the local church, going for drives and, in spite of the stroke, continuing to play golf.

In 1963 the BBC decided to devote a *This is Your Life* programme to the monsignor, but because of his poor health, it was decided to feature instead Colonel Sam Derry, who was in charge of the British forces in Rome during the Nazi regime. The monsignor took part in the programme. He was filmed first in Cahirciveen and then, in spite of his failing health and his doctor's warning not to travel, flew to London to appear on the programme, which was seen by eight million viewers. He was the last guest on the show and when he walked slowly out on stage, the studio erupted with clapping and crying.

Within months he was dead at the age of 65. His death was reported on page one of the New York Times, and taken up by papers all over the world where his wartime activities were remembered, under the heading "The Pimpernel is Dead." He is buried in the grounds of the Daniel O'Connell church in Cahirciveen under a simple headstone.

The saintliness and heroism of Mgr Hugh O'Flaherty, whose love and concern embraced everyone, irrespective of race or creed ("God has no country," he would say) has remained unsung in Ireland for 35 years. But people continually visit his grave to seek his help in trouble. They know that the man who in life never turned his back on anyone will not in death fail them.

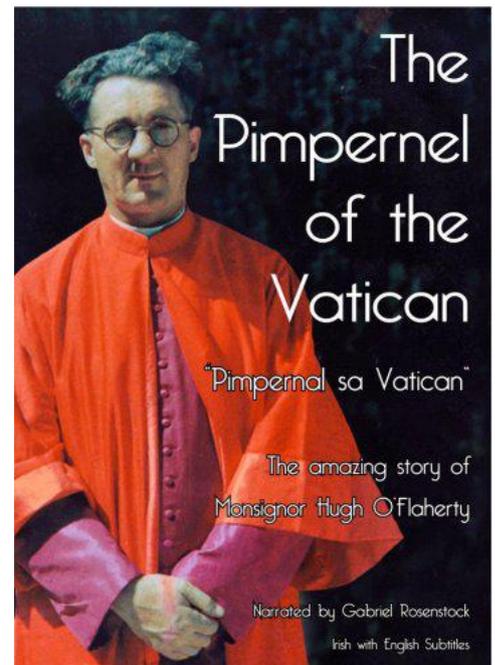


"This is Your Life"

The famous 'This is Life' BBC program in 1963 to honour the fabulous work by the Monsignor and his Rome organisation

This article first appeared in Reality (July/August, 1999), a publication of the Irish Redemptorists.

Hugh O'Flaherty's Trees, by Brendan Kennelly  
*There is a tree called freedom and it grows  
Somewhere in the hearts of men,  
Rain falls, ice freezes, wind blows,  
The tree shivers, steadies itself again,  
Steadies itself like Hugh O'Flaherty's hand,  
Guided trapped and hunted people, day and night  
To what all hearts love and understand,  
The tree of freedom upright in the light.  
Mediterranean Palm, Italian Cypress, Holm Oak, Stone Pine,  
A peaceful grove in honour of that man,  
Commemorates all who struggle to be free.  
The hurried world is a slave of time,  
Wise men are victims of their shrewdest plans.  
Pause, stranger. Ponder Hugh O'Flaherty's tree*



For more, go to  
[www.hughoflaherty.com/](http://www.hughoflaherty.com/)

(One of many books written about Monsignor Hugh O'Flaherty)

WATCH THE SCARLET AND THE BLACK ONLINE (Film about Hugh O'Flaherty - 2hrs 47 minutes long.)

<http://putlockers.ch/watch-the-scarlet-and-the-black-online-free-putlocker.html>

Then move down the page and

Click on the JWPLAYER to avoid ads. Pause for a few minutes to allow the film to load, Enjoy

