FAITH
AND
ACTION
PART

ONE

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IMMIGRANT CATHOLICISM

1821–1870s
Introduction

From the time of its founding in 1821 to the late 1870s, the diocese of Cincinnati, under the leadership of its first two ordinaries, Edward Dominic Fenwick and John Baptist Purcell, experienced its most spectacular growth. They both traveled and preached extensively and helped increase the scattered congregation by frequent conversions. At the same time that they developed an American Catholicism congenial to the American situation, they helped bring the Catholic population into an organized and disciplined relationship with the church.

Under Bishop Fenwick’s leadership the first ten years of the young diocese constituted a period of solid growth. Effectively carrying out his administrative duties, he also helped supervise the construction of diocesan buildings. At a time when the obstacles to growth were particularly demanding, by 1831 the diocese had both a college and a seminary. Fenwick also secured missionaries and teachers for Cincinnati and for the remote areas of his diocese. Fully understanding his jurisdictional responsibility and role over the Northwest, he took a special interest in ministering to the Native Americans and sent priests to work with them. Not one to try to impress others with his accomplishments, Fenwick often minimized, almost to a fault, his ability to handle the responsibilities of his office. In the end his ministry was significant not only in the founding and development of the diocese of Cincinnati but also in the American church’s goals of meeting the spiritual and temporal needs of Catholics. Espousing the American system of separation of church and state, religious liberty, and the education of a native-born clergy, Fenwick, like some of his contemporaries, was sensitive to the American situation. During his administration the local church established the first parochial school in the diocese, built a cathedral, seminary, and college, and founded a newspaper, institutions that were appropriate to a well-developed see.

From the 1830s to the 1870s the American church grew at an astonishing rate to become a major force in American religious life. For nearly a half century, Purcell, as bishop and archbishop, worked incessantly and untiringly for the advancement of the church. Like his counterpart Bishop Paul Lefevre of Detroit, he headed, as a more recent historian has noted, “a missionary see.” Spending most of his time building and strengthening the diocese, he proved to be one of the most pragmatic and remarkable church leaders in the American hierarchy in the nineteenth century. Purcell’s brilliance of mind, energy, and administrative talent were perhaps his most notable characteristics. Because he was so well known in Europe he was able to persuade several mission societies to help support the local church as well as persuade
numerous religious congregations to come to his diocese. Notwithstanding the local church’s financial debacle of 1878, which was a singular moment in the history of the archdiocese, Purcell left his diocese rich in tradition and institutions.

The most spectacular growth of the Province of Cincinnati occurred during his administration. Through personal sacrifices and devotion, the clergy, religious, and laity helped build the many ecclesiastical institutions. The initiative taken by the immigrants, especially the Germans and Irish, in building the churches, schools, and other organizations remind us of the profound influence that ordinary folks exerted on the development of the local church. When Purcell arrived in Ohio in 1833, there were 16 churches and 14 priests. Fifty years later there were 544 churches and chapels, 480 priests, and a Catholic population of about 500,000 in the state. The majority of Catholics lived near a church with a resident priest. By 1883, there were eleven orphanages tending to 1,454 children, nine hospitals, and 238 parochial schools with an enrollment of approximately 48,446 students. The formation of the Catholic school system during Purcell’s years of leadership is one of the great success stories of the local church. Commitment to transmitting the faith to the next generation and concern over the Protestant tenor of many educational and social institutions drove Catholics in the archdiocese to invest heavily in their own religious and social institutions. As they and their counterparts in other dioceses participated fully in American life, their institutions, whose development differed from place to place, helped foster the development of a unique Catholic identity.

Despite the creation of the dioceses of Cleveland and Columbus out of the archdiocese, in 1883 the local church had 157 churches, thirty-two chapels, two orphanages tending to 546 children, three hospitals, and eighty-eight parochial schools with an enrollment of 20,000 students, and eighty-nine priests attending to 150,000 Catholics. There were also nine suffragan sees attached to the archiepiscopal see, whose combined area included the states of Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, and the greater portion of the state of Michigan. Over a fifty-year period Purcell had helped transform the scattered missionary diocese that he inherited from Fenwick into a vigorous archdiocese of first rank and importance. In the process his strong commitment to American liberties won him many Protestant and Catholic supporters.

By the time of the elevation of the diocese to the status of an archdiocese at midcentury, it had become more hierarchical. As Catholics and the American hierarchy remained committed to the republican ideas of the separation of church and state and religious liberty, U.S. bishops resisted Roman centralization of administration. As the supply of clergy, especially the foreign-born with their understanding of European Catholicism, increased, and
Purcell's ecclesiastical authority in religion, finances, and education grew, there developed more clerical control. More and more priests became involved in parish life. What also contributed to more clerical control was the loyalty and gradual strengthening of the papacy in the nineteenth century. As the traditional hierarchical view of authority in the Catholic Church was strongly reasserted by Vatican officials, there nevertheless developed a sense of episcopal autonomy and collegiality among U.S. bishops. During the course of the nineteenth century the bishops largely governed the American church by means of councils, holding thirty-four such gatherings. In the process their authority grew. In leading the local church with firmness and control, Purcell set the tone for his episcopal predecessors in the archdiocese for the next century.⁴