PART

TWO

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BUREAUCRATIZING
CATHOLICISM
IN THE ARCHDIOCESE
OF CINCINNATI
1880s–1920s
Introduction

After the dark days of the Purcell bank failure, Archbishops William Henry Elder (1883–1904) and Henry Moeller (1904–1925) helped put the archdiocese back in fiscal order. Elder’s successful management of the archdiocese in the 1880s would have to be his most significant accomplishment during his tenure. He dealt with the crisis with steadfastness, skill, and diligence.

During Elder’s and Moeller’s administrations episcopal and clerical authority continued to grow and the archdiocese of Cincinnati became more centralized. Up to this time rather informal methods had been followed in the various channels of episcopal and parochial administration. The two Provincial Councils of 1882 and 1889 and two synod meetings of 1886 and 1898 helped greatly improve the administrative organization of the diocese. Elder also helped systematize the inner workings of the archdiocese by introducing reforms that created system and order. Under his leadership the local church collected annual reports from all the pastors and administrators. These reports covered such items as the number of families and their ethnic and racial backgrounds, the number of teachers and pupils in the parochial schools, the parish debt, property holdings, and the parish’s annual collections and rental pews. He also instituted the office of Chancellor, established ecclesiastical tribunals and counseling bodies, organized examinations and conferences for the promotion of theological studies among the clergy, and created a matrimonial court and diocesan consultors. Increasingly, lay people were less involved in decision making in the government of the local church. Moreover, though in the wake of the First Vatican Council there was more Roman direction, the local church continued to seek greater autonomy. Both Elder and Moeller resented too much interference and meddling by Vatican officials in diocesan affairs.¹

As Elder and Moeller, like many of their episcopal colleagues, tightened their rule and exercised more authority over parishes and the regular clergy, there were parish feuds over territorial lines and parish raiding as well as tension between German- and English-speaking churches. As they dealt with these issues they wanted German Catholics to become more Americanized. Boundary feuds and parish raiding also intensified tensions between the archbishops and regular clergy.

During Elder’s twenty-four-year tenure the clergy and laity established twenty-six parishes and six new missions. At the time of his death, 294 priests attended to the spiritual needs of a population of about 200,000 Catholics. The archdiocese consisted of 151 churches with resident pastors, thirty missions with churches, and twenty stations. It had 103 parochial schools taking
care of 26,281 students. Furthermore, during his years the archdiocese established St. Gregory Preparatory Seminary in Mount Washington, east of Cincinnati, and reopened Mount St. Mary’s of the West Seminary. Besides becoming involved in the labor movement and attending to some of the needs of African Americans in Cincinnati’s west end, the local church, under the leadership of the Sisters of Charity, inaugurated the Santa Maria Institute, which began as a mission among Italian immigrants.1

Although Henry Moeller did not become official head of the Cincinnati diocese until 1904, his long-term assistance to Elder as well as his tenure as archbishop meant that he helped administer affairs in the archdiocese for forty-five years. He devoted practically all his time to the cares of his apostolic office, seldom taking time for social relaxation. As a churchman, Moeller occupied a high place among the Catholic hierarchy, serving as president of the American Board of Catholic Missions from its inception.

The physical side and visible part of the archdiocese grew much during the Moeller years, manifesting itself in stately and monumental places dedicated to the worship and service of God. New buildings for religious and educational or charitable purposes were constructed, costing in excess of five million dollars. By the end of his tenure in 1925 the archdiocese had overcome its financial problems and streamlined much of its administration. While thirty-nine new parishes were also organized during his administration, the number of churches increased to 190 and priests to 450. Among the building projects sponsored in the first quarter of the century was the new Mount St. Mary’s of the West Seminary, which was the crowning achievement of Moeller’s administration. The charitable and social welfare efforts undertaken by the clergy, religious, and laity kept pace with the work in education. A central bureau of Catholic charities helped coordinate the activities of the various charitable and social welfare institutions in the archdiocese. It also helped foster youth programs through the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, summer camp, and other recreational services. In addition, the national headquarters of the Catholic Students’ Mission Crusade was established in Cincinnati with Francis J. Beckmann, the rector of Mount St. Mary’s of the West Seminary, as its executive chairperson. The archdiocese also witnessed the growth of the Holy Name Society. During the last year of his term Moeller was working toward the establishment of central Catholic high schools.1

On January 5, 1925, the archbishop, who had been a sick man for two years, died at his episcopal residence. After meeting in the afternoon with the Sisters of Charity at the motherhouse and visiting with his own sister, Sister Henry Marie, the seventy-six-year-old prelate returned home and had dinner. Two hours after retiring to his study, Moeller complained of illness and
his physician was notified. He died later that evening. The next day, at a meeting of the consultors at the archbishop’s residence, Monsignor Louis J. Nau, rector of Mount St. Mary’s of the West Seminary, was chosen administrator of the archdiocese.