

Bishop Smyth, 1858-1865

At the death of Mathias Loras in February of 1858 Bishop Clement Smyth became the second bishop of the Iowa Catholic Church. This was a singular thing, this withdrawing a monk from behind cloistered walls and placing him on an episcopal throne. For Clement Smyth came from that strictest of all monastic orders vowed to penance and wed to silence, the Cistercians, a branch of which, the Irish Trappists, had established their foundation just a few miles outside of Dubuque in 1849 — the monastery of Our Lady of New Mellera. A year later another monk from that same house, James Myles O'Gorman, was appointed the first bishop of Omaha. Strangely enough, both of these gentlemen were graduates of that great Protestant institution of learning in Dublin — Trinity College. Yet far stranger and far more extraordinary is the fact that for more than three hundred years in the entire Catholic world these appointments of Iowa monks to bishoprics are the sole instances where men vowed to the severest kind of quiet and contemplative life were ever permitted to leave their Cistercian order to become leaders of a diocese.

Another interesting fact to be noticed with the

appointment of Bishop Smyth is the change from the French nationalistic rule dating from Bishop Rosati of St. Louis — a Neapolitan Italian but a Gallic churchman with a French administration for all of that — and from the sons of old Lyons, Loras of Dubuque and Cretin of St. Paul, to the rise of the Irish ascendancy in the Church of the Northwest. From the days of Father Marquette and Julien Dubuque the atmosphere of the Upper Mississippi Valley had been that of the *ancien régime* of France. In the 1830's and 1840's a heavy Irish and German immigration had begun to penetrate to the West; and a few years before Loras' death Bohemian or Czech settlements had sprung up in the vicinities of Iowa City, Cedar Rapids, and Fort Atkinson. Thus these elements form the national extractions of contemporary Iowa Catholicism.

Bishop Clement Smyth was cast as the actor of a melancholy role in the drama of the development of the Iowa Catholic Church. Working courageously with his fellow monks through painful years to hew out of the early Iowa wilderness a monastic house of prayer, he had the episcopal honors thrust on him rather suddenly. He had been called in to the see city from his rough-hewn Trappist halls to uphold the faltering arms of the dying Loras. Less than a year later the state and the nation were plunged into a deep economic crisis. A national financial and industrial crash had

occurred in 1857, and Iowa began to feel it keenly in 1858. Yet during these years of distress and destitution Bishop Smyth succeeded in completing the building of a new cathedral, which had been started under Bishop Loras, and in paying off the major portion of its huge cost.

Hardly had Bishop Smyth emerged from this period of economic despondency when he beheld Iowa and the Union sucked into the bloody maelstrom of the Civil War. Although the Catholic population of Iowa showed a steady increase even during the Civil War, the number of Bishop Smith's clergy failed to increase. He lamented the fact that he could not develop a native clergy, and annually brought into the diocese numbers of priests from abroad, a goodly percentage coming from one institution, All Hallows College in Ireland. Whatever the cause, a surprisingly large number of priests left Iowa during the seven or eight years of his episcopal regime.

While the income from the diocese was gradually shrinking, and while the funds that were collected were being applied to payments for the new cathedral, the bishop felt compelled to abandon the upkeep of several of the diocesan institutions. Mount St. Bernard's College, so hopefully built by Bishop Loras, had been gradually declining and was allowed to slip into temporary somnolence. The Brothers of the Sacred Heart, whom Bishop Loras had brought from France, and who taught a

high school near the cathedral as well as in the college, departed from the diocese and left their vacant buildings as testimonials to the depressing times. The hospital which Bishop Loras had built with much patience and grief was another institution which soon passed into "innocuous desuetude."

Yet Bishop Smyth's zeal never diminished; it carried him on extensive journeys through his large diocese. During one year he traveled over three thousand miles in Iowa, and the major portion of this was done in the heavy open wagons of the farmers as the railroads covered as yet very limited distances. On these long and frequent trips he found a great increase in the number of orphans, due principally to the deaths of the fathers on the battlefields and in the hospitals. A number of Catholic orphans were being adopted into non-Catholic families. What worried Bishop Smyth still more was the fact that the great State Orphan Asylum which the Iowa authorities were contemplating building for all the orphan children of deceased soldiers would be, as he believed, completely under Protestant sectarian influence, "whereby many of our poor children would be perverted and lose their faith." So he proceeded to erect a Catholic home for orphans at Dubuque. He further feared a loss of faith among the children due to their attendance at the public schools in some of which at that time he felt convinced that

he had detected anti-Catholic influences and in which the Protestant Bible was read and taught. He had in Iowa at this time a few Catholic schools, and realizing the need of extending the Catholic school system, he arranged to introduce the Christian Brothers, a teaching order, into the diocese.

What was gratifyingly clear to all patriots during these troublous times was the staunch loyalty of Bishop Smyth to the cause of the Union. Bishop Loras, up to the time of his death, had been fairly sympathetic toward the views of the South. His long and happy residence in Mobile and the Southland as well as his former status as a slaveholder and a leader among the Southern aristocracy probably influenced him in his sympathy. Clement Smyth, however, throughout the war years was a strong upholder of the principles of the North.

In the spring of 1865 the news of the complete fall of the South and of the assassination of President Lincoln had aroused mingled feelings in Dubuque and especially in the cathedral parish where there were a number of Copperheads, anti-administration critics of the war policies. Bishop Smyth received anonymous letters demanding that he cease denouncing the assassins of Lincoln and applauding the North in his sermons, sermons in which he had really appealed to the people to forget the rancors of the war and to rededicate their national and civic life to Christian unity. The

bishop on a later Sunday finally replied publicly to these criticisms. That very night incendiaries set fire to his coach house, and the structure as well as his horses and his carriage were totally destroyed.

The feeling of indignation over this outrageous act was very pronounced among the people of Dubuque and elsewhere in Iowa wherever the news was heard. During the mid-summer Bishop Smyth made an extended confirmation tour to Des Moines and other points in Iowa, and on his return he was astonished and gratified to find awaiting him a striking gift from the people of the city. His published letter of gratitude in the newspapers of Dubuque contained this paragraph which indicates the reason for his surprise and happiness:

During my absence in Des Moines the citizens of Dubuque had the coach house, etc., built up anew, and lest that house should remain untenanted, those same generous friends on last Saturday presented me with a beautiful new carriage, horses, etc., of which even European nobility might well be proud. Were this the gift of Catholics alone I should feel truly grateful, but how deep and lasting must be my gratitude for this gift, since gentlemen of every religious denomination had united and generously contributed to purchase for me this solid proof of their friendship.

Father John F. Kempker, in his *History of the Catholic Church in Iowa*, states that under Bishop Smyth's "most exemplary and Christian administration, the diocese had obtained the number of about 48 priests, 80 churches, 20 stations or out

missions, and a Catholic population of about 90,000 inhabitants." In discussions and disputes Bishop Smyth never failed to bring about a reconciliation even among the most bitter enemies.

Clement Smyth had never possessed a strong constitution and he felt keenly his heavy burdens. His life had been quiet and saintly with little touch of the dramatic about it; so was his death, which occurred on September 23, 1865.

M. M. HOFFMAN