Rectifying the Fatal Contrast: Archbishop John Purcell and the Slavery Controversy among Catholics in Civil War Cincinnati

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Historians who have documented the American Catholic response to the Civil War and slavery have largely focused on the thinking of a few prominent northern ecclesiastical and intellectual leaders. Men such as Archbishop John Joseph Hughes of New York, theologian Bishop Francis Patrick Kenrick, and Catholic newspaper editor James McMaster dominate the landscape of historical inquiry.[1] These northern Catholic intellectuals adopted a consistently conservative approach to the difficult questions of the day. They supported reconciliation between North and South, criticized abolitionism, tired of emancipation quickly, and supported the Constitution. Though such sentiments dominated the thinking of the Catholic leadership of the time, other voices did emerge throughout the war that would challenge the approach of these leading thinkers.

Archbishop John Baptist Purcell of Cincinnati was one of these minority voices, the first American Catholic bishop to offer public support for immediate emancipation of slaves. Through his teaching and the influence of his diocesan newspaper, the *Catholic Telegraph*, Purcell attempted to convince his readers of the inconsistency of slavery's existence in a free nation while striking at the racial, religious, and political discord that shaped the loyalties of Catholics in antebellum America. Historians have largely ignored Purcell's contribution to the intellectual and moral conversation of the period, mentioning him only in passing as an example of a divergent opinion. Yet his presence in Cincinnati was critical in shaping the ideological climate of the Ohio Valley during the Civil War era.[2]

The United States in the middle of the nineteenth century was in the midst of a great struggle, weakened by sectional conflict and torn over the practical and moral repercussions of slavery. For many, slavery was not simply a question of human dignity or personal liberty, but rather fit within the ongoing debate over the concept of states' rights and the appropriate relationship of labor and economic gain. Americans of every locality and viewpoint entered into the debate, which soon grew to encompass the status of the country and its future. Many, especially in the South, wished to preserve the nation as it was, with local autonomy and the ability to maintain or even expand the institution of slavery. For abolitionists in the North, however, slavery symbolized all that prevented the country from achieving political, social, and moral purity.

Religious belief was central to the debate and, with its language common to the North and South, often meshed with political and ethnic ideologies to lend strength to the slavery controversy. Religion was used as a means of affirming the practices of both the slaveholder and the abolitionist. As President Abraham Lincoln stated of the North and South in his second inaugural address, "Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other."[3] Consequently, religious schism often preceded political separation as religious groups became polarized over slavery. The Presbyterians and Baptists attempted to preserve institutional unity until the outbreak of the war while the Methodist Church split into two factions in 1845, a separation caused by some members' refusal to agree to a slave holder's becoming bishop. Even when attempts to preserve unity appeared successful, internal division

often existed. In 1837 when the Presbyterian Church had divided into New and Old Schools, the former became increasingly antislavery and found its greatest strength among New Englanders while the latter was composed of conservative members, mainly southerners.[4] In the midst of this sectional conflict and religious disunion, the Roman Catholic Church in America attempted to bridge these divisions in order to be true to its model as one, holy, catholic Church. Unlike the religious denominations that failed to preserve unity, the Catholic Church officially identified with neither the abolitionists nor the slave holders, both of whom it considered radicals. Marked by its conservatism, the Catholic Church during this period spoke in favor of moderation and compromise, not rash action. Most American Catholic bishops rallied for unity and reconciliation, hoping to act as witnesses to peace and calm in a troubled nation.[5]

One episcopal voice that pierced the silence of the Catholic hierarchy was that of Archbishop John Baptist Purcell of Cincinnati. By publicly supporting the immediate abolition of slavery, Purcell faced considerable opposition from numerous fronts. Clergy and laymen throughout the country, his fellow American bishops, as well as religious and secular publications discouraged his meddling in what many considered a political matter, unrelated to religion. Even when opposition was not overt, Purcell found it necessary to contend with an ambivalent immigrant Church, largely disinterested in the slavery question from the standpoint of morality yet aware of the potential for slavery's demise to affect the economic balance of community life in both the North and South.

Beginning with mild protestations against slavery, Purcell eventually became an outspoken proponent of the war and emancipation. Purcell worked to temper anti-war sentiment, to help purge Catholics of their racist tendencies, and to convince his flock of the moral and practical necessity of emancipation. Though largely unsuccessful, Purcell helped ease tensions, curb discrimination, and bring attention to the moral and social ramifications of the slavery question. Acting as one of the few who bonded their Catholic faith with abolitionist views, Purcell heralded emancipation as a position consistent with the example of Christ and integral to the Church's mission of bringing unity, hope, and salvation to all people.

Irish by birth, Purcell was ordained a bishop in 1833 and appointed leader of the Catholic Church in the diocese of Cincinnati, a position he held for fifty years.[6] As the number of Catholics in Ohio increased, his role as spokesman for the Church in the West intensified. In 1837, as a young bishop, he took part in a week-long public debate on the nature of the Catholic religion with Alexander Campbell, a Baptist revivalist minister and founder of the Disciples of Christ. In reporting the debate, Cincinnati's secular press agreed that Purcell had helped to encourage Catholic toleration and to correct various falsehoods held about the faith. Newspapers throughout the country closely followed the debate and caused Purcell to become better known to the nation's Catholics and non-Catholics.[7]

Archbishop John Baptist Purcell

Early in his episcopacy, Purcell pronounced his own moral distaste for slavery yet seemed unwilling to assert these views to the Catholics of America or to become associated with the abolitionist movement. At a speech given in 1838 in his hometown of Mallow, County Cork, Ireland, Purcell spoke of the inconsistency between the Declaration of Independence and the existence of slavery. He later termed this inconsistency "the fatal contrast," acknowledging his belief that America could not tolerate the institution of slavery if it were to be faithful to its ideals. At the time of his 1838 speech, however, Purcell blamed the "virus" of slavery less on the Americans as much as the English, who had established it during the colonial period. Clearly, Purcell found it safer to be anti-English than to level charges against his fellow countrymen. The *Catholic Telegraph*, the official newspaper of the diocese of Cincinnati, reported Purcell's speech but quickly added that the Bishop understood that there were "a great many political improvements, however desirable, that a government could not from prudential motives, introduce as soon as it wished."[8] During the

years leading up to the Civil War, the *Catholic Telegraph* remained silent on the subject except for an occasional condemnation of abolitionism.[9] Purcell, too, refrained from taking a vocal stand in the decades before the war.

The climate and makeup of his diocese and the position of Catholic bishops throughout the country contributed to Purcell's lack of outspoken opposition to slavery. The diocese of Cincinnati, which had included only sixteen churches and fewer than seven thousand Catholics when Purcell arrived in 1833, swelled with German and Irish immigrants during the next three decades. In recognition of its increased population, Cincinnati became an archdiocese in 1850 and Purcell was elevated to the role of archbishop. Ten years later, in 1860, the archdiocese of Cincinnati, spanning approximately the southern two-thirds of Ohio, claimed 150,000 Catholics. Nearly 55,000 of the Catholics in the archdiocese lived in Cincinnati, accounting for thirty-five percent of the city's population.[10]

In the decades leading up to the Civil War, nativist sentiment was widespread in the Ohio Valley region and especially in Cincinnati. Anglo-Protestant employers and leaders often denied employment and participation in community affairs to Catholics and foreigners because they believed that these newcomers sought to undermine American ideals through their allegiance to a foreign dictator, the Pope. The Rev. Lyman Beecher, president of the Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati, warned fellow Protestants in 1834 of a "Popish plot" to take over the region in his tract, *A Plea for the West*.[11] Fears such as this gave rise to the American Party, popularly called the Know-Nothing party, which sought to bar Catholics from political involvement and delay naturalization for immigrants. Anti-Catholic hysteria reached its peak in Cincinnati in 1853 when a visit by Archbishop Gaetano Bedini resulted in rioting. Over five hundred protesters attempted to march to the episcopal residence behind the cathedral where Bedini was staying. Police, however, blocked the route and arrested sixty-five individuals.[12]

Occupying the lower classes of society and subject to discrimination, the Irish and German Catholics in general identified with the Democratic party, a natural affiliation, given many in the Republican party's support for prohibition, abolition, and nativism. Catholic immigrants considered all three to be detestable assaults upon their way of life.[13] Abolitionists were often nativists and the union of these ideals was not incidental. The Know-Nothing literature of the era asserted that the Roman Catholic Church and slavery were both "founded and supported on the basis of ignorance and tyranny" and that the two were natural co-workers in their opposition to "freedom and republican institutions."[14] Following the demise of the Know-Nothing party, the Republican party received many former Know-Nothings into its ranks and this close association of abolitionism and nativism resulted in solid support for the Democratic party among the Catholic immigrant population.[15]

Chief among the immigrants' fears was the abolitionist goal of emancipating the slaves. Emancipation, they believed, would result in the former slaves' mass exodus from the South to claim immigrants' jobs in Cincinnati. As early as 1841, tension between immigrants and free persons of color resulted in three days of mob violence in which both Irishmen and African Americans were killed. During the summer of that year a multitude of rumors, including the reported sexual advances of two black men toward a "very respectable lady," fueled the tension. The *Catholic Telegraph* blamed the nativist white population for the rioting and absolved the city's African Americans, though it admitted that there may have been "two or three Irishmen" among the troublemakers.[16] However sporadic, these incidents of violence were indicative of the overarching prejudice and fear on the part of the Irish that black migrants would surpass them economically.

The Germans in Cincinnati were in general less prejudiced toward the city's African Americans. As early as the 1830s, Cincinnati's German population included some abolitionists and by the 1850s the majority of Germans opposed the westward expansion of slavery. A number of German radicals in Cincinnati called for the repeal of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law and an end to slavery throughout the United States.[17] Despite the presence of abolitionist Germans in Cincinnati, the city's Germans and African Americans also clashed, though to a lesser extent than with the Irish, suggesting less direct occupational competition with the former.[18] Generally, the Irish in Cincinnati lived in closer proximity to its black residents; they were subject to lower literacy rates and property ownership than

other groups in the city; and they competed for the same low-paying jobs.[19]

The fear that black migrants would take jobs typically held by European immigrants only increased in the years before the Civil War as African Americans trickled north across the Ohio River. The *Cincinnati Enquirer* warned its readers of the perils to come:

> Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of slaves . . . will come North and West and will either be competitors with our White mechanics and laborers, degrading them by their competition, or they will have to be supported as paupers and criminals at the public expense.[20]

At the same time as Cincinnati Catholics feared emancipation for economic reasons, the Catholic bishops in the United States feared that the issue of slavery could destroy the unity of the Church. The Vatican in 1839, through Pope Gregory XVI's letter, *In Supremo Apostolatus*, had asked Catholics throughout the world to refrain from engaging in the slave trade. The letter stated: "We do admonish and adjure in the Lord all believers in Christ . . . that no one hereafter may dare unjustly to molest Indians, Negroes, or other men . . . or to exercise that inhuman trade by which Negroes, as if they were not men, but mere animals, are reduced into slavery."[21] The Pope had clearly written against the trading of slaves, but debate swirled about whether he disapproved of all forms of slavery.

Despite this admonishment from the Pope, American bishops in general supported the status quo in regard to slavery. A few bishops like John England of Charleston, South Carolina, wrote that Catholics should not interpret the papal letter as a condemnation of slavery in the United States.[22] For the most part the bishops agreed that abolitionists were fanatics, yet at the same time only a few southern prelates overtly defended the "peculiar institution." Even the most committed southern bishop recognized the abuses of slavery, believed that African Americans were human beings with souls, and advocated their natural right to maintain their families.[23] Bishop England, though a supporter of slavery, opened a school for black children in his diocese although intense local opposition later forced him to close it.[24] Most bishops occupied a middle ground that valued peace over justice as evidenced by the First Plenary Council of Baltimore (1852) in which the ordinaries were silent on the issue. Church historian Peter Guilday has written that the council helped solidify the role of the Church in America: "Catholics realized more acutely than ever the real meaning of the Church's place in American life, and non-Catholics appreciated the fact that there was a body of American spiritual leaders who meant to bring to the disturbed condition of the times the one asset the country needed: peace and calm."[25]

Not only did the Church hierarchy, which feared the ruin of its own ecclesiastical institution, express the Church's conservative position but Catholics in every locality echoed it, fearing that the slavery question could rip apart their states, communities, and families. The bishops of the Cincinnati Province, composed of neighboring dioceses in Michigan, Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana, met in Cincinnati twice during the years preceding the war. At each meeting the bishops issued a pastoral letter instructing the clergy and laity of their dioceses. When the local ordinaries convened the First Provincial Council of Cincinnati in 1855, the bishops followed the precedent set at the First Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1852 and refrained from taking up the slavery issue. Instead, the bishops advised their people to "fervently pray to God that He would bless and preserve the Union."[26] At the Second Provincial Council of Cincinnati held three years later, the bishops made no mention of slavery, seeking to distance the Church from what they perceived to be a political discussion.[27]

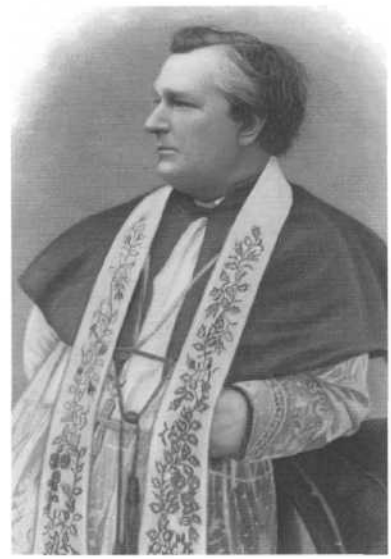
In Cincinnati, the *Catholic Telegraph* mirrored the opinion of the church hierarchy and the local citizenry by maintaining its desire for peace and unity. In an editorial on the topic of "Union and Catholicity," the editor wrote that the Church was not to blame for America's disunion because "the Catholic Church has never lent any strength to the excitement. She has said both to North and South be just, be moderate, patient, charitable. If the Union falls to pieces, now it will not be through her influence but through her want of influence."[28] Though committed to patience and peace, the Church's desire for calm could not quiet the impending storm that southern secession and rebellion would bring.

The storm of politics, religion, economics, and race that swirled around Purcell forced him to reconsider his response. Not deaf to the influence of the people of his diocese and his fellow bishops, Purcell allowed those individuals who were closest to him to

shape his opinions on slavery and emancipation. His chief advisors were his brother, Edward Purcell, and Sylvester Rosecrans, who became auxiliary bishop of Cincinnati in March 1862. Both men held positions of influence in the diocese. As editors of the *Catholic Telegraph*, the two were directly responsible for the expression of local Catholic opinion during the war years. Purcell was editor of the official newspaper of the diocese of Cincinnati for almost forty years, beginning in 1840, and acted as the financial manager of the archdiocese, and pastor of the Cathedral.[29] Rosecrans, the younger brother of Union General William S. Rosecrans, was co-editor of the newspaper with Purcell until he was named auxiliary bishop.[30] Both favored the Union and emancipation and the opinions expressed in the *Catholic Telegraph* never strayed far from Purcell's sentiments.

At the time of Lincoln's election in 1860 and the beginning of southern secession, Purcell, the *Catholic Telegraph*, and the Catholics of Cincinnati were generally united in their belief that compromise was necessary to preserve the Union. Politically, Catholics were an important source of support for the Democratic party and opponents accused them of tainting the electoral process by voting consistently with those who shared their religious and ethnic affiliations. Many believed that Democratic party bosses or, even worse, their religious leaders, controlled their votes.[31] Most of the Catholic community in Cincinnati supported the Democratic candidate, Stephen Douglas, for the presidency in 1860, even as Purcell himself publicly supported the Republican party and Lincoln. Despite their political leanings, the immigrant populace remained supportive of the Union and optimistic that the nation's leaders could achieve a peaceful compromise.[32] "At least, let us beg if we cannot have Union, we may have peace," Purcell wrote on January 4, 1861, "and that if these States cannot be sisters, they may be allies."[33]

The *Catholic Telegraph* itself employed its editorial column to denounce both northern abolitionists and southern extremists. An editorial on December 1, 1860,[34] which quoted a sermon that Purcell offered while preaching at the Cathedral, condemned Harriet Beecher Stowe's distortions in her controversial novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, as well as Preston Brooks' brutal attack on Charles Sumner in the chambers of the Senate and the violation of the Constitution by the secessionist states.[35]



Sylvester S. Rosecrans

Purcell attacked radicalism wherever he believed it existed, both in the North and the South.

As one of the few Catholic newspapers published west of Pittsburgh, the *Catholic Telegraph's* readership extended throughout the western states. By 1850 the weekly paper had received the episcopal approval of the dioceses of Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Vincennes, and Louisville, representing most of the dioceses in the Ohio Valley region and points northward. The diocese of Covington, Kentucky, later gave its approval to the paper but withdrew its support by November, 1861, as a result of what it perceived as the paper's failure to maintain political neutrality.[36] Though published in Cincinnati, the *Catholic Telegraph* clearly depended on both southern and northern subscribers before the war and up to its onset, a fact that may explain the paper's equal treatment of both northern and southern abuses prior to the rebellion.

As Purcell's opinion on the topic evolved, he became increasingly critical of the South as it became apparent to him that the states in rebellion sought to destroy the Union. Little more than a week after mentioning the possibility of compromising with the rebellious southern states, Purcell addressed the officers of the Catholic Institute, a short-lived local educational institution, and condemned the "rattlesnake of secession." The *Cincinnati Commercial* quoted him: "When you look around this hall, and see the beautiful stars and stripes which adorn it, pray, oh pray! that the hideous rattlesnake may never sting them, but that the rattlesnake of secession may be crushed to death, even as the Ever Blessed Mother crushed the serpent that caused our fall."[37] At the same time, the *Catholic Telegraph* issued a more conservative response in favor of peace, cautioning, "It is hoped that in these times of excitement no Catholic will so far lose his reasoning powers as to suppose

that our glorious institutions can be preserved and transmitted to posterity by fighting among ourselves."[38] Cincinnati Catholics remained hopeful that peace would prevail and that the dark clouds of secession would eventually dissipate.

After the attack on Fort Sumter, the hope for peaceful compromise vanished. The *Catholic Telegraph* came out in complete support of the Union and President Lincoln. The paper publicized a "Union Meeting" at Cincinnati's Catholic Institute to be held on April 20, 1861. An estimated four thousand "Irish patriots" attended and pledged their "lives, fortunes, and sacred honor" to the maintenance of the Constitution.[39] Many of these Cincinnatians would be among the two hundred thousand Catholic Americans who served in the war.[40] Purcell also wrote in support of the Union cause. He was no doubt aware that perceived disloyalty on the part of Catholics, especially immigrants, would only increase nativist fervor. Rising to the challenge, Purcell proclaimed to his flock that the "President has spoken and it is our duty to obey him as head of the nation. . . . It is then our solemn duty as good and loyal citizens to walk shoulder to shoulder with all our fellow citizens in support of the national honor."[41] To display public support for the cause, the priests of St. Peter in Chains Cathedral in downtown Cincinnati hung a large "Star-spangled banner," ninety feet in length, from its spire on April 23.[42]

Though the ecclesiastic hierarchy in America had among its ranks a number of strong Union men like Purcell, Rosecrans, and Hughes, their collective effort to boost Catholic enlistment achieved minimal results. Irish Catholics were the most under-represented ethnic group in the Union army in proportion to population, with German Catholics ranking just behind. As non-citizens, many Catholics were exempt from the draft, some opposed the war aim of emancipating the slaves, while others had little concern for what they perceived as a contest for economic power by the nation's affluent. Most Catholics who served in the Union forces either did so unwillingly or enlisted to obtain high enlistment bounties.[43]

During the war Purcell proved his loyalty to the Union not only in word but also in deed. Purcell and Rosecrans willingly visited Union army encampments where they preached, administered the sacraments, and met with army chaplains.[44] Purcell's journeys to the field set him apart from other bishops who were often unwilling to act in a manner that might be construed as political activism. Throughout the conflict, the army was in dire need of priests to serve as army chaplains and Purcell helped fill the ranks of the Union chaplaincy by encouraging priests to volunteer. Some bishops refused to send chaplains and consequently only forty priests, often called "Holy Joes" by the soldiers, were available to minister to the Union's two hundred thousand Catholic soldiers.[45]

In late April 1861, the Third Provincial Council of Cincinnati held a meeting of the bishops from eight neighboring dioceses. Among the items discussed was the political situation of the country. The pastoral letter drafted at the council spoke of the need for unity and peace. "While many of the sects have divided into hostile parties on an exciting political issue," the letter stated, "the Catholic Church has carefully preserved her unity of spirit in the bond of peace, knowing no North, no South, no East, and no West."[46] The letter specifically advised priests not to become involved in the political debate. "The spirit of the Catholic Church is eminently conservative," the bishops wrote, "and while her ministers rightfully feel a deep and abiding interest in all that concerns the welfare of the country, they do not think it their province to enter into the political arena."[47] The pastoral letter did not assign blame for the political crisis but highlighted wrongs by both the North and South. Bishop Martin Spalding of Louisville, Kentucky, rather than Purcell, was the primary author of the pastoral, which explains its failure to support the President and the Union cause as well as its uncritical stance on secession.[48]

After the conclusion of the council in June 1861, Purcell left Cincinnati for Rome and did not return until September of that year. During his visit Purcell requested permission to retire, a request possibly born of the tension that accompanied his support of the Union. The Pope, however, did not accept the sixty-one-year-old archbishop's request.[49] Upon his return, Purcell again spoke in favor of the Union cause, a position consistent with the general sentiments of the people of Cincinnati, though some had already sided with the "Copperheads," the wing of the Democratic party that opposed the Republican war effort and supported peace with the Confederacy.[50] The early months of the war brought with it a surge of patriotism, but the fervor began to die out as Cincinnati plunged into an economic reces-

sion that resulted from the cessation of trade with the southern states, the city's traditional market.[51] Cincinnati's economic growth having been stunted, the recession put financial pressure on business owners and laborers who hoped for a quick end to the war. As the prospects for a quick northern victory diminished, Union support often turned to cries for peace, even if that meant Confederate independence. Anti-war sentiment, especially prevalent in the Ohio Valley, certainly weighed on Purcell but did not cause him to waver in his support of the Union.

The *Catholic Telegraph* supported the war effort throughout the conflict, failing to ally with the "Peace Democrats" and the local anti-war movement that gained in popularity and influence under the leadership of James Faran, the Irish-American editor of the *Cincinnati Enquirer*.[52] As a staunch Democrat, Faran opposed Lincoln from the start, but gave qualified support to the northern cause at the beginning of the war. Later he criticized the manner in which the Republican administration and Congress were conducting the war and finally denounced the war effort completely in 1863.[53] The other Catholic newspaper in Cincinnati, the German-language weekly *Wahrheits-Freund*, exhibited an editorial position distinct from both the official diocesan newspaper and the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. The *Wahrheits-Freund* stressed neutrality, maintaining itself as a religious and not political newspaper.[54]

Though the *Catholic Telegraph* supported the war, it condemned emancipation of the slaves as an aim for the war. "The proposition to emancipate the slaves as a war measure," the paper declared, "seems to us incendiary and stupid. . . . Do the American people believe that we could be a nation with 4,000,000 free negroes in our midst?"[55] Negrophobia was widespread and emancipation was an inconceivable war aim among the immigrant population. On July 10, 1862, violence erupted in Cincinnati after German and Irish riverhands decided to strike for higher wages and employers hired black laborers in their place.[56] Irish-Americans set homes on fire and assaulted inhabitants of "Bucktown," the black section of the city located just east of downtown. African Americans retaliated in the section of Cincinnati known as "Dublin," enacting similar violence.[57] Sympathizing with the rioters, the *Catholic Telegraph* wrote that black labor was "fast undermining white labor along the Ohio. It is a question of bread and butter or starvation to thousands and nothing is more easily understood than jealousy in such a vital manner."[58] The newspaper clearly supported the interests of immigrant laborers, a position that it would try to maintain even while supporting emancipation.

James Faran

Almost as reprehensible as emancipation to the immigrant population was the suggestion of conscription. The *Catholic Telegraph* wrote in favor of the draft months before the government instituted it, though nearly every Catholic newspaper in the country denounced the plan for conscription.[59] "If you are drafted," the paper proclaimed, "*go you must*. When you talk of resisting the draft . . . you make yourself not only ridiculous but criminal."[60] Fortunately, riots did not erupt in Cincinnati as they had in New York City and elsewhere in response to the Conscription Act of March 3, 1863.[61] Though not responsible for a complete change in opinion, Purcell's leadership and the attitudes voiced in the diocesan newspaper helped Cincinnati's immigrant population accept this prerogative of the government.

Upon returning from a second trip to Europe on September 1, 1862, three weeks before Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, Purcell delivered one of his most important speeches of the war. Reiterating the content of his 1838 speech delivered in Ireland, Purcell said that he believed "a people could not long survive the fatal contrast between the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States, the one asserting that all men are born free, sovereign and independent, that the other millions may be slaves." Purcell further proclaimed that war could have been avoided if only the South had compromised, abolishing slavery "after a given period, say fifty, seventy, or a hundred years . . . and in the meantime, as the Northern States had done, fit

her slaves, by education, to be men."[62] Since compromise was then out of the question, Purcell went so far as to advocate emancipation of the slaves as a means of ending the war within three months' time. While not demanding immediate emancipation, Purcell's address stood in stark contrast to the beliefs and actions of his fellow Irish Catholics, some of whom had participated in racial rioting just months earlier.[63]

These statements in favor of even gradual emancipation drew criticism from both Catholic and secular newspapers and helped to shape the opinions expressed in the *Catholic Telegraph*. At the time of Purcell's September 1 address, the diocesan newspaper was not seen as friendly to abolitionism. However, it began to change its policy shortly thereafter, fiercely debating the journalists who were attacking the archbishop. Baltimore's *Catholic Mirror* reprimanded Purcell for his demands for emancipation and the *Freeman's Journal* dubbed him a "political abolitionist."[64] The *Cincinnati Enquirer*, trumpeting the slogan, "The Constitution as it is, the Union as it was, and the Negroes where they are,"[65] also accused General Rosecrans of being an abolitionist. Ironically, the *Catholic Telegraph* became more outspoken against slavery as it attempted to defend the archbishop and General Rosecrans by qualifying the position of each in regard to emancipation.[66]

Not until April 1863 did the diocesan paper officially join with Purcell in support of emancipation, though it had slowly been moving in that direction since September 1862. The editor, presumed to be Father Edward Purcell, wrote on April 8 that "slavery in every shape is condemned and reprobated by the Church." "What the Church would not or could not do," he continued, "the politicians have done. The door is now made open . . . and those who wish to despise the venerable Pontiffs and be the jailors of their fellow men, may endeavor to close and lock and bolt it. We take no part in any such proceeding." With this proclamation the *Catholic Telegraph* became the first diocesan newspaper to support emancipation. The newspaper, in effect, wished to wash its hands of the peculiar institution that it had previously supported. Having asserted its abolitionist views, the paper boasted, "If for telling these plain truths any subscriber wishes to withdraw his patronage, we hope he will do so at once."[67] In the face of sharp criticism from the New York *Freeman's Journal* and the *Metropolitan Record*, the *Catholic Telegraph* wrote, "[W]e do not shape our cause to please any particular class of men, but we endeavor to follow the dictates of truth and justice as they present themselves to our minds."[68]

Though no Catholic newspaper other than the *Quarterly Review*, published by Catholic convert and abolitionist Orestes Brownson, supported the *Telegraph*'s advocacy of immediate emancipation, the reaction toward the *Catholic Telegraph* was not completely negative. Edward Purcell claimed that he had received letters from every part of the country expressing satisfaction with a Catholic newspaper that was unafraid to support "the most oppressed people on earth."[69] In writing to Archbishop Purcell on May 28, 1863, Father William O'Higgins, chaplain to the Tenth Ohio Volunteer Infantry stationed in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, voiced his agreement. "God bless Father Edward for the triumphant vindication of our dear old Mother Church from the advancing blotch of slavery," Father O'Higgins exclaimed. "Yes, she always hated it. She hates it now, and would give the world's treasures to see such a rank smelling sin blotted from the face of the earth."[70]

The *Catholic Telegraph*, though abolitionist, attempted to maintain the precarious balance of supporting both the interests of Cincinnati's immigrant population and the rights of slaves to be free. It argued that emancipation would be beneficial to slaves as well as laborers, reversing the position it had taken as late as 1862.[71] The paper favored limitations on African American migration to northern states and assured its readers that countless immigrant families would be able to make claims on southern lands after the fall of slavery and the plantation system.[72] It wrote in support of white laborers and the free labor ideal. The restoration of peace would bring about "a peace profitable to the white man who earns his bread by the sweat of his brow. We wish to see him not so low, but that he may have one foot on the ladder by which he can ascend to fortune."[73]

The paper also affirmed the dignity of African Americans. "Those colored men," it proclaimed, "have a right to life and liberty as much as the white men, and they who oppress them without reason, and only to gratify an insatiable and disgraceful prejudice, are the enemies of order and religion."[74] The newspaper proclaimed its unique new identity as "the largest Catholic journal in the United States; opposed to

slavery and disunion; the advocate of justice and freedom."[75] Its abolitionist views, it maintained, were for the greater good of all peoples, black and white.

In a pastoral letter written to the people of his diocese on January 27, 1864, Purcell stated his position in the clearest of terms: "We go with our whole heart and soul for the maintenance of the Union and the abolition of slavery — against neither of which does the Supreme Pontiff of Christendom utter a single word."[76] Bishop Spalding of Louisville, in particular, condemned the letter, saying that if Purcell could not produce a non-partisan pastoral letter, it would be best not to issue one. In fact, the opposition to Purcell was so great that the bishops of the surrounding dioceses refused to attend the Provincial Council that Purcell had planned to take place in Cincinnati the fourth Sunday after Easter, 1864.[77]

Later that year Purcell issued a Thanksgiving pastoral message in which he prayed for the abolition of slavery, voiced support for the draft, and specifically condemned two Catholic New York newspapers, the *Freeman's Journal* and *Metropolitan Record*, for opposing the war and emancipation.[78] He blamed these newspapers for instigating their readers "to evil words and deeds" through deliberate duplicity and deception.[79] In Purcell's correspondence can be found two letters of support for his Thanksgiving message from clergy outside the Cincinnati diocese, which the very newspapers that he had denounced printed. Rev. William Everett thanked the Cincinnati ordinary "for the noble expression of patriotic sentiment" in denouncing "those impudent and wicked newspapers published in this city." Everett further argued that "[o]ur people have been put in a false, disloyal, and essentially uncatholic position by the politicians whose lead they have followed like sheep — aided by such 'religious' papers as those you have named."[80] Similarly, Rev. W. B. Sprague of Albany, New York, wrote to Purcell that he "was previously aware of the honorable position you had taken on this subject, and was the more deeply impugned by it from the fact that nearly all our Roman Catholic population in this part of the country have gone in the opposite direction. Your proclamation, my dear sir, will, of itself, I am sure, render your name imperishable in history."[81]

The prediction of Father Sprague begs the question of Archbishop Purcell's legacy to America, the Catholic Church, and the archdiocese of Cincinnati: what was Purcell's impact on the Church and his flock during the years of the Civil War? Clearly, only a minority of his fellow bishops and the Catholic press embraced his opinions. Similarly, the vast majority of Cincinnati's Irish and German residents were unreceptive, remaining committed to the Democratic party, opposed to abolitionism, and fearful of an African American exodus into Ohio.[82]

The experience of Cincinnati's Catholics throughout the Civil War years indicated that local ethnic loyalties and economic realities probably influenced them more than the moral and rational persuasion undertaken by their bishop and the *Catholic Telegraph*.

Though Purcell may have been unsuccessful in garnering widespread support for his ideals among the Catholic population of his diocese, he was successful in bringing attention to the moral and social ramifications of the slavery question. In emancipating the slaves, America resolved its "fatal contrast" and diminished Cincinnati's own conflict between race and religion. Purcell's leadership strengthened loyalty to the Union in the city, especially among its Catholics, and draft riots that other cities with large immigrant populations experienced did not occur in Cincinnati. Purcell also increased the visibility of the Catholic Church throughout the country, demonstrating that some Catholics were willing to stand in support of emancipation and the honor of the nation.

The climate of extreme Negrophobia began to change in Cincinnati under the archbishop's guidance. Near the end of the war, Purcell assisted in the formation of a Catholic church and school for African Americans known as St. Ann's Colored Church and School. Founded in 1866 under the leadership of a Jesuit priest, Francis Xavier Weninger, the parish was one of only several Catholic parishes for African Americans in the United States. In September 1868, the *Catholic Telegraph* announced the formation of the Blessed Peter Claver Society, an organization founded for the support of St. Ann's School.[83] Purcell wrote that the students of St. Ann bore the fruits of their training and "prove this every year by public examinations and exhibitions to the astonishment and delight of the citizens of Cincinnati."[84]

The words of Orestes Brownson might best suggest the legacy of Purcell and his contribution to the debate over slavery. "Peace is a good thing," Brownson wrote, "but justice is better . . . Give us the noise and contention of life, rather than the peace and

silence of the charnel-house."[85] Purcell preferred lively democratic debate to peaceful injustice, seeing it as the best hope for both America and the Church. Moreover, as evidenced by his words and actions, Purcell preferred justice to peace and noise to silence if it could stir men and women to examine the most perplexing questions of the age. In the face of opposition, Purcell added his own voice to the rhetorical cacophony of the Civil War era and committed himself to following the dictates of truth and justice wherever they led him. As the lone episcopal voice supporting emancipation, Purcell represents an important minority within the Church in America that deepens our understanding of the contributions of Catholics to the national political dialogue of the Civil War era.

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1 Two studies that focus on Northern Catholic opinion include Walter G. Sharrow's "Northern Catholic Intellectuals and the Coming of the Civil War," *New York Historical Society Quarterly* 58 (1974), 34-56, and Charles P. Connor's "The Northern Catholic Position on Slavery and the Civil War: Archbishop Hughes as a Test Case," *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia* 96 (1986), 35-48.

2 The only prior attempts to elucidate Purcell's contribution to the period are Anthony H. Deye's "Archbishop John Baptist Purcell and the Civil War" (M.A. thesis, University of Cincinnati, 1944) and Anthony H. Deye's "Archbishop John Baptist Purcell of Cincinnati, pre-Civil War Years" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 1949).

3 Ray P. Basler, ed.,*The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. 8 (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1959), 333.

4 Philip Paludan, *A People's Contest* (Lawrence, Ks.: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 343-45. See also Eugene Genovese, "Religion in the Collapse of the American Union" in *Religion and the American Civil War*, eds., Randall Miller, Harry Stout, and Charles Wilson, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 78-79. Genovese argues that the Presbyterian split was not primarily over slavery but was in response to theological disputes and questions of ecclesiastical governance.

5 Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 117.

6 Deye, "Archbishop John Baptist Purcell and the Civil War," 3.

7 Alexander Campbell and John B. Purcell, *A Debate on the Roman Catholic Religion* (St. Louis, Mo.: Christian Board of Publication, 1837); Alfred Stritch, "Political Nativism in Cincinnati, 1830-1860," *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia* 48 (September 1937), 239-40; John Nerone, *The Culture of the Press in the Early Republic — Cincinnati, 1793-1848* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1989), 189-91.

8 *Catholic Telegraph*, October 11, 1838.

9 Deye, "Archbishop John Baptist Purcell and the Civil War," 62.

10 Deye, "Archbishop John Baptist Purcell and the Civil War," 4-5.

11 See Tyler Anbinder's *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) for information on the rise and fall of the party and its connection to slavery.

12 See James Connelly, *The Visit of Archbishop Gaetano Bedini to the United States of America, 1853-1854* (Rome: Pontificia Universitas Gregoriana, 1960) for a description of Bedini's reception in various localities.

13 Frank L. Klement, "Catholics as Copperheads during the Civil War," *Catholic Historical Review* 80 (1994), 36.

14 Quoted in James Hennesey, S.J., *American Catholics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 145.

15 See Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 226-60 for a discussion of the link between the Republican party and nativism. Foner argues that Republicans viewed nativism as a political liability and tried to dissociate the party from anti-immigrant policies while courting the vote of former Know-Nothings. Catholics recognized that cultural nativism lingered in the Republican party even after political nativism had been disavowed.

16 Deye, "Archbishop John Baptist Purcell of Cincinnati, pre-Civil War Years" 255; *Catholic Telegraph*, September 11, 1841.

17 Bruce Levine, "Community Divided: German Immigrants, Social Class, and Political Conflict in Antebellum Cincinnati," in *Ethnic Diversity and Civic Identity: Patterns of Conflict and Cohesion in Cincinnati Since 1820*, eds., Henry Shapiro and Jonathan Sarna (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 70, 76-81.

18 Wendell P. Dabney, *Cincinnati's Colored Citizens: Historical, Sociological and Biographical* (Cincinnati: Dabney Publishing Co., 1926), 40, 49.

19 Nancy Bertaux, "Economic Change and Occupational Decline," in *Race and the City: Work, Community, and Protest in Cincinnati, 1820-1970*, ed. Henry Louis Taylor, Jr. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 140.

20 Quoted in Lyle Koehler, *Cincinnati's Black Peoples: A Chronology and Bibliography, 1787-1982* (Cincinnati: University of Cincinnati, 1986), 56-57.

21 Quoted in Davis, *The History of Black Catholics*, 39.

22 Kenneth J. Zanca, *American Catholics and Slavery, 1789-1866: An Anthology of Primary Documents* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1994), 128-29.

23 Zanca, *American Catholics and Slavery*, 110-11.

24 Hennesey, *American Catholics*, 146.

25 Peter Guilday, *A History of the Councils of Baltimore, 1791-1884* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 169-70.
26 *Pastoral Letter of the First Provincial Council of Cincinnati to the Clergy and Laity* (Cincinnati: John P. Walsh, 1855), 12.
27 *Pastoral Letter of the Second Provincial Council of Cincinnati to the Clergy and Laity* (Cincinnati: John P. Walsh, 1858).
28 *Catholic Telegraph*, December 1, 1860.
29 Deye, "Archbishop John Baptist Purcell and the Civil War," 57, 82.
30 Deye, "Archbishop John Baptist Purcell and the Civil War," 60.
31 Michael Holt, "The Politics of Impatience: The Origins of Know Nothingism," *Journal of American History* 60 (1973), 323.
32 Deye, "Archbishop John Baptist Purcell and the Civil War," 11.
33 *Catholic Telegraph*, January 5, 1861.
34 Deye, "Archbishop John Baptist Purcell of Cincinnati, pre-Civil War years," 434.
35 Deye, "Archbishop John Baptist Purcell of Cincinnati, pre-Civil War years," 438.
36 Deye, "Archbishop John Baptist Purcell and the Civil War," 57; Hennesey, *American Catholics*, 153 asserts that Covington's Bishop George Carrell, S.J., withdrew his support of the *Catholic Telegraph* as a result of the paper's political activism.
37 *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, January 16, 1861.
38 *Catholic Telegraph*, January 19, 1861.
39 *Catholic Telegraph*, April 20, 1861; April 27, 1861.
40 Klement, "Catholics as Copperheads," 57.
41 Quoted in Sr. Mary Agnes McCann, *Archbishop Purcell and the Archdiocese of Cincinnati: A Study Based on Original Sources* (Washington, D. C., 1918), 78.
42 *Catholic Telegraph*, April 27, 1861.
43 James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 606-607.
44 Roger Fortin, *Faith and Action: A History of the Catholic Archdiocese of Cincinnati, 1821-1996* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2002), 143-44.
45 Miller, "Catholic Religion, Irish Ethnicity, and the Civil War," in *Religion and the American Civil War*, 265-66.
46 *Catholic Telegraph*, May 11, 1861.
47 *Pastoral Letter of the Third Provincial Council of Cincinnati to the Clergy and Laity* (Cincinnati: John P. Walsh, 1861), 6.
48 Deye, "Archbishop John Baptist Purcell and the Civil War," 29-30.
49 Fortin, *Faith and Action*, 143.
50 Deye, "Archbishop John Baptist Purcell and the Civil War," 31.
51 Frank L. Klement, "Sound and Fury: Civil War Dissent in the Cincinnati Area," *Cincinnati Historical Society Bulletin* 35 (1977), 101.
52 Klement, "Catholics as Copperheads," 37.
53 Charles Wilson, *The Cincinnati Daily Enquirer and Civil War Politics: A Study in "Copperhead" Opinion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Libraries, 1934), 4, 8.
54 Deye, "Archbishop John Baptist Purcell and the Civil War," 88.
55 Deye, "Archbishop John Baptist Purcell and the Civil War," 65-66.
56 Koehler, *Cincinnati's Black Peoples*, 57.
57 Klement, "Sound and Fury: Civil War Dissent in the Cincinnati Area," 100.
58 *Catholic Telegraph*, July 23, 1862.
59 Klement, "Catholics as Copperheads," 48.
60 *Catholic Telegraph*, August 20, 1862.
61 Klement, "Catholics as Copperheads," 50-51.
62 Quoted in Deye, "Archbishop John Baptist Purcell and the Civil War," 32-33.
63 Deye, "Archbishop John Baptist Purcell and the Civil War," 35.
64 Madeleine Hooke Rice, *American Catholic Opinion in the Slavery Controversy* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1964), 127.
65 Deye, "Archbishop John Baptist Purcell and the Civil War," 34-35.
66 Deye, "Archbishop John Baptist Purcell and the Civil War," 68.
67 *Catholic Telegraph*, April 8, 1863.
68 *Catholic Telegraph*, January 13, 1864.
69 *Catholic Telegraph*, June 10, 1863.
70 William O'Higgins to Archbishop John Purcell, May 28, 1863, Historical Archives of the Chancery, Archdiocese of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, Ohio (hereinafter cited as HACAC).
71 Deye, "Archbishop John Baptist Purcell and the Civil War," 73.
72 Rice, *American Catholic Opinion in the Slavery Controversy*, 129.
73 *Catholic Telegraph*, January 20, 1864.
74 *Catholic Telegraph*, May 25, 1864.
75 *Catholic Telegraph*, January 11, 1865.
76 *Catholic Telegraph*, January 27, 1864.
77 Deye, "Archbishop John Baptist Purcell and the Civil War," 41.
78 *Catholic Telegraph*, November 16, 1864.
79 Quoted in Rice, *American Catholic Opinion in the Slavery Controversy*, 127.
80 William Everett to Archbishop John Purcell, November 21, 1864, HACAC.
81 W.B. Sprague to Archbishop John Purcell, November 21, 1864, HACAC.
82 Klement, "Catholics as Copperheads," 40.
83 Joseph Lackner, S.M., "St. Ann's Colored Church and School, Cincinnati, the Indian and Negro Collection for the United States, and Reverend Francis Xavier Weninger, S.J.," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 7 (1988), 145-47.
84 Archbishop John Purcell, *Circular Letter to the Reverend Clergy and the Faithful People of the Diocese of Cincinnati*, 1877, HACAC.
85 Quoted in Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1991), 189.