Pittsburgh’s First Bishop and the Dogma of 1854

By Craig Maier

The popular feeling surrounding the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in December 1854 was deep. The January 13, 1855, edition of the Pittsburgh Catholic, full of eyewitness reports of the deliberations in Rome, captured the sentiment.

“This day has witnessed, I will not say a triumph only, but a prodigy,” one particularly excited monsignor wrote. “This very examination has renewed the discussion upon the whole subject... that the pastors returning to their dioceses might be all of one speech, as they had ever been of one faith.”

The same issue also carried a humble article, only a paragraph long. “Our beloved Prelate writes from the Vatican, where he is a guest of His Holiness,” it reads. “He is in good health and spirits, and hopes to return home by the end of the present month.”

The Prelate in question was the first bishop of Pittsburgh, Michael O’Connor. But while the article does not suggest it, O’Connor was more than a guest. He participated in the deliberations—becoming one of the first American bishops ever to participate in a significant discussion in Rome.

For American Catholics today, the idea that there was a time when the American church did not participate in the wider affairs of the church seems strange. But as the Jesuit historian Father James Henessey has observed, the American church at the time rarely participated in Vatican discussions and is often considered “a theological desert.” American bishops only really began participating in force during the First Vatican Council in 1870.

Among his biographers, O’Connor’s role in the development of the dogma is typically mentioned only in passing. O’Connor’s role was not decisive, and the episode seems to be only a footnote in the long career of a distinguished churchman. In those few days of debate, though, O’Connor proved himself to be as true a trailblazer as he was in the rest of his ministry.

From Ireland to Rome to Pittsburgh

Born in 1810 near the city of Cork on the south coast of Ireland, O’Connor was a gifted child, and he showed tremendous promise as a theologian during his education in Paris and Rome. His doctoral defense is said to have been so remarkable that Pope Gregory XVI congratulated the young priest by wrapping his handkerchief around O’Connor’s head, saying, “If it were a crown of gold, you would deserve it.”

One would expect anyone who received such recognition to have been destined for bigger and better things. So why would he come to Pittsburgh?

An easy answer is to see O’Connor as motivated by missionary zeal. This view is sustained by O’Connor’s situation—the American church was still in its infancy and governed by the Society for the Propagation of the Faith—and his own correspondence, which he sometimes signed, “M. O’Connor, Missionary priest, Bishop of Pittsburgh.” Even so, the explanation is incomplete. If he wanted to be a missionary priest serving a heathen people, there would have been countless opportunities for him to be one, and none of those opportunities would have involved Pittsburgh, no matter how young the church in Pittsburgh was.

To get a more complete idea of what could have been driving O’Connor, we have to imagine what it must have been like to be brilliant, young and Irish in his time. By all accounts, O’Connor was interested in a seminary appointment, and seminary appointments, like academic positions today, were incredibly difficult to come by. To get a decent position, he would have had to contend with hundreds of Italian, Spanish, German and French priests with CVs as good as or better than his.

As Father Henry Szarnecki wrote, O’Connor’s already difficult quest for a position was interrupted by the death of his mother, and he spent three years as a chaplain at a convent near Cork as he put his family’s affairs in order. By the time he applied for a position at the seminary in Maynooth, near Dublin, he had been out of academic circles for three costly years, and his stellar education in Rome meant nothing to a hiring committee apparently more interested in local ties.

His candidacy in danger, he ran into another young priest named Peter Kenrick, an alumnus of Maynooth, who had come on a mission from his brother Francis Kenrick, the coadjutor bishop of Philadelphia, to bring priests to

Continued inside.
America. Though he may have been looking for a good word from Kenrick, O'Connor received an invitation to teach at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in Philadelphia instead. It’s not difficult to imagine why the position, and a ministry in America, would have been easy for O’Connor to accept. He could teach what he wanted in a place where he could have a ministry that mattered. At the age of 29, he jumped at the chance.

O’Connor did well in Philadelphia, becoming rector of the seminary quickly after his arrival. But the diocese was in desperate need of priests with O’Connor’s gifts, and he did not stay in academics for long. Bishop Kenrick quickly became a mentor to the priest 14 years his junior and, in 1841, made him vicar general in Pittsburgh to prepare him for the episcopacy.

O’Connor’s path to bishop, though, did not come without resistance—from O’Connor himself. O’Connor wanted to become a Jesuit, perhaps longing to return to the more scholarly life impossible in diocesan administration. When it became clear that he was to become a bishop, he attempted an end-run in Rome, but his efforts failed. Pope Gregory XVI refused his petition, saying, “You shall be a bishop first and a Jesuit after.” In 1843, just four years after coming to the United States and a month before he turned 33, O’Connor became bishop of the new Diocese of Pittsburgh.

The situation in the new diocese was far different from the theological debates O’Connor relished during his earlier career. Already in the throes of industrialization, Pittsburgh had 45,000 mostly Irish and German Catholics spread over two-thirds of the state of Pennsylvania, 21 priests, little money—and an increasingly hostile group of anti-Catholic Know-Nothings.

Beset on all sides by pressing problems, O’Connor’s days of erudition and scholarship were essentially over. He would never become a major theologian or write anything of note. He gave his life to the church in Pittsburgh, organizing and building it into what it is today.

In October 1854, though, a new opportunity presented itself—an opportunity for which O’Connor was uniquely prepared.

“Unexpectedly letters have come,” wrote Francis Kenrick, who had by then become Archbishop of Baltimore, to his brother Peter. “It is the Pope’s wish to have some Bishops of the United States present at the definition of the doctrine of the [Immaculate] Conception, and on me is laid the obligation of carrying out the Pope’s wishes.”

Kenrick chose several bishops, including his protégé O’Connor and the former Pittsburgh priest and future saint John Neumann, to accompany him. When they arrived in Rome in late fall, the city was astir. But there was a problem: The American bishops and their entourage found that they were joining a larger group of bishops than anticipated.

“The Pope did not count upon the coming of such a number,” Kenrick wrote. “He wished to have about two to represent each country.” It was decided that Kenrick and O’Connor were to be the two American contributors to the dogma, presented in the bull Ineffabilis Deus.

Background of the Dogma
As Owen Chadwick has noted, it is hard to underestimate the depth of Marian devotion during the middle of the nineteenth century. The excited articles in the Pittsburgh Catholic reflected a real sentiment that was even more intensely felt by American Catholics, who had declared Mary their patroness in 1845.

But important as the devotional value of the dogma was, it is also interesting to see how two very different anti-Catholicisms, the anti-Catholicism in Europe and the anti-Catholicism in America, influenced both Pius IX’s desire to define the dogma and the American bishops’ response to it.

In Europe, the church had to contend with the Age of Reason, which sought to secularize European politics in favor of liberalism, freedom and democracy. European anti-Catholic sentiment took the form of anti-clericalism, which focused on the person of the priest and the ecclesiastical and political order he represented. As Diderot wrote in the eighteenth century, “Man will never be free until the last king is strangled with the entrails of the last priest.”

Though the European turmoil was a subtext to the Syllabus of Errors of 1864 and the First Vatican Council of 1870, there is evidence that it also played a part in the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. In his study of the American involvement in the definition, James Hennesey noted that Pius IX renewed his support for defining the dogma while in exile during the revolutions of 1848 and suggested that at least some of Pius’s European associates saw the dogma as refuting the democratic sensibility of the time.

Regardless of motivation, it was clear to everyone involved that the dogma was coming about in a unique and potentially controversial way. “All the possibility of defining, dogmatically, the Immaculate Conception, and the expediency of such a definition, are points already determined,” the ebullient monsignor wrote in the Pittsburgh Catholic. “But it was a providential thought of the Sovereign Pontiff to ask the advice of the Bishops assembled at Rome, as to the tenor of the Bull.” Before then, dogma typically emerged...
from unquestioned Church tradition or an ecumenical council. Here, though, the pope himself was pronouncing dogma *ex cathedra*—literally "from the chair" of St. Peter. As the article revealed, the fact that the dogma was to be pronounced was not up for debate. The bishops were merely to debate *how* the dogma would be justified and communicated.

Of course, the pope acted with the near unanimous consent of the faithful and, no doubt, shared their sentiment. Yet, the Immaculate Conception, taught for centuries but never formalized, also seems to have been an incredibly popular experiment in papal power. In addition to responding to the deep devotion al feelings of the faithful, Pius IX could be seen as making a first move toward a uniquely modern and powerful understanding of the popacy in response to an increasingly secular European culture.

**The American Response**

Archbishop Kenrick and his hastily assembled band of American bishops, though, were dealing with a completely different set of anti-Catholic pressures and concerns. If European anti-Catholicism was essentially *political*, American anti-Catholicism was deeply *personal*. In the United States, Catholics in the pew were humiliated, shunned and harassed for their faith and were deemed by a hostile Protestant culture to be defective, superstitious, stupid, traitorous and sexually perverse.

The political power of the priest was not the problem for American anti-Catholics; it was Catholics themselves.

*The Pittsburgh Catholic*, first published in 1844 with O'Connor's approval, responded to this everyday anti-Catholicism, and one can see its efforts even in the issue commemorating the definition of the Immaculate Conception. Amidst the articles praising the definition, the local coverage demonstrates the day-to-day battles occurring in Pittsburgh's streets. One article aims to dispel the myths perpetuated "by political tricksters" that Catholics were traitors held in the thrall of the pope. Another, entitled "Know-Nothingism Knocked in the Head," discusses the defeat of a Know-Nothing candidate in the mayoral race just a week before.

James Hennessey's summary of the Americans' participation in the deliberations shows how they brought these experiences to bear. Discussion focused on justifying the dogma, particularly the selection of supporting texts and on the theological issues involved in defining dogma in the first place, and here the Americans were frank. "O'Connor reminded his fellow bishops that Protestants would also study the text of the Bull," he wrote, "and he saw no reason why supporting arguments should be used which were harder to defend than the dogma itself."

We should not immediately conclude that O'Connor and Kenrick objected to the dogma. O'Connor himself had dedicated the Diocese of Pittsburgh to Mary under the Immaculate Conception at the diocese's founding. Instead, it is better to see O'Connor and Kenrick as practical men who knew that while European Catholics would accept the dogma as a matter of course, a weakly justified dogma would not satisfy American anti-Catholic Protestants, who would have seen it as an example of the papacy run amok. Their intervention seems to have been an attempt to raise the standard of scholarship to give the dogma the best defense possible.

O'Connor, for instance, focused on the inclusion of two quotations from Augustine and Ambrose that could have been misinterpreted by Protestants. "His basic principle was that no authority should be cited unless it was beyond criticism," Hennessey wrote. "The text from Augustine spoke of actual sins and not of original sin, while the Ambrose was not referring to Mary at all, but to the virginal flesh of Christ." He was also concerned with language that seemed to suggest that the teaching had evolved over time, which could have been taken to mean that church tradition created, rather than confirmed, the teaching.

It is important not to overestimate O'Connor and Kenrick's role in the deliberations. They were playing the part of copyeditors on a text that had already been decided. Yet, as Hennessey has argued, the presence of the two American bishops showed the world that America had theologians of its own and began the unique relationship between American prelates and the larger Church that would come into full flower during Vatican I. O'Connor and Kenrick represented an American church led by eminently practical men who needed to defend the faith against prejudice.

**Conclusions**

As the deliberations ended, O'Connor had only six years until the end of his episcopacy. In 1860, suffering from ill health, O'Connor resigned his post, and he was finally able to enter the Society of Jesus. He would teach at Boston College and serve the order in other ways until his death in Woodstock, Maryland, in 1872.

In December 1854, though, O'Connor showed what he had become. While his erudition gave him the ability to speak to the scholarly issues involved in the dogma, he was no longer the academic of his youth. And though O'Connor's presence at the definition was a high honor, it is to his credit that the Church of Pittsburgh remembers him for much more. He had nurtured an infant diocese, recruited priests, faced funding crises, weathered anti-Catholic prejudice, built schools, orphanages and hospitals, and mediated often intense conflicts. He spent himself laying the groundwork for everything that has come ever since in the church of Pittsburgh.

In other words, he had become a bishop.

The author, Craig Maier, is Coordinator of Special Projects at St. Paul Seminary, Chcrafton. This article is adapted from a paper he presented Oct. 19 as part of the Historical Society's annual lecture series.
Three members of the Historical Society's board of directors were selected to present papers at the close of the annual convention of the American Catholic Historical Association (ACHA).

The three presenters (shown above, left to right) were board president Anthony P. Joseph; Kathleen M. Washy; and John C. Bates.

The convention was held March 28-29 at the University of Scranton.

Joseph, Bates and Washy served as the panel on “An Overview of Pittsburgh Catholic History.”


Also presenting at the convention was former board member Father Joseph Linck (now working in the Diocese of Bridgeport, Conn.), who spoke on St. John Neumann’s promotion of Forty Hours devotion in Philadelphia.

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