ARCHBISHOP JOHN IRELAND and the Church-State Controversy in France in 1892

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Archbishop John Ireland of St. Paul has been praised for being “of commanding appearance, a magnetic speaker, militant and yet conciliatory, startlingly frank” and “an ideal tribune of the people.” Several of these traits were evident in 1892 during a relatively little-known phase of his career in which he acted as an intermediary in a crisis between the Roman Catholic church and the Third Republic of France.

This peacemaking role grew out of a much more combative one that took the prelate to Rome early in 1892 to defend himself against his conservative critics in the so-called “school question” or, in Minnesota terms, the “Faribault-Stillwater agreement.”

The latter, beyond the scope of this article, has been described as “perhaps the most interesting compromise” between church and public schools to be suggested by a member of the Catholic hierarchy. In actual operation in Faribault and Stillwater for a short time, the arrangement provided in part for leasing of parochial buildings to school districts for use during school hours. Protestants and many Catholics objected so strenuously to this and other provisions of the agreement that Ireland felt prompted to make the trip to Rome, where he defended his stand successfully. He did this at a moment when a new era in the church’s accommodation to the contemporary world was opening under the direction of Pope Leo XIII and the hierarchy was seeking a general solution to church-state conflicts everywhere.

At that particular time the situation in France was complex. It arose out of the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, the tragic events of the revolutionary Paris Commune of March 18 to May 28, 1871, and the founding thereafter of the Third Republic which was officially a secular state. Ever

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since the promulgation of the constitution, secularists had been locked in bitter controversy with Catholic royalists who had strong religious affiliations and at the same time rejected the concept of a republican form of government and aspired to the restoration of the monarchy.

Contemporaries of these events agreed that the war and its aftermath had stopped the natural development of French culture and thought. They agreed, too, that the crisis was a logical consequence of the depraved ways of living during the Second Empire (1852-70) under Napoleon III. The points of departure between liberal secularists and Catholic royalists varied, however, according to the philosophical, political, and social ideals of each group. As a result, both liberals and rightists condemned the preceding period, but they based their criticism on contradictory grounds—such as the lack of religious thought or the religiously passive acceptance of fate. Both parties, though, blamed the Second Empire for the decadence of France and vigorously proclaimed her desperate need for a moral rebirth.

The years after the French defeat at Sedan in 1870, then, constituted an era of groping to find solutions for the moral crisis. The generation of the 1880s turned to rationalism, as illustrated in the works of naturalist Charles Darwin and of French philosopher-critics Ernest Renan and Hippolyte Adolphe Taine. A reaction followed in the 1890s. Young men of that generation complained bitterly that their elders left them a "wasteland" in which to live. They now aspired to find the spiritual values of life.

One of the most significant manifestations of this latter attitude was a movement called the Union for Moral Action, founded in January, 1892, by philosopher Paul Desjardins (1859-1940), a professor at the Ecole Normale Superieure de Sevres. Desjardins was to remain the central figure of this social and religious movement, called the Union for Truth after 1905, until it was disbanded at the beginning of World War II. The movement's function was to bring leading French and European intellectuals together in free discussions for the cross-fertilization of moral, literary, and social ideas.

The success and influence of Desjardins' endeavors can be seen in the world-famous personalities who participated in discussions: Andre Gide, Jean Paul Sartre, Paul Valery, Roger Martin Du Gard, Marechal Hubert Lyautey, Albert Thomas, and Albert Schweitzer, to name only a few. The members possessed diverse interests and backgrounds and their views on church matters ranged from the deep religiousness of Paul Claudel, through the indifferent neutrality of Gide, to leftist antagonism of Sartre and Andre Malraux.

THE CHURCH was aware of the situation in France. Pope Leo XIII tried to find a solution for the church-state tensions by supporting the young Third Republic. The church entered the struggle when Cardinal Charles Lavigerie gave the "Alger toast" in November, 1890, at an assembly of naval officers in Algiers, inviting French Catholics to give their support to the republic. The speech created a great deal of commotion because the majority of French Catholics remembered all too vividly how the Third Republic secularized schools and expelled the religious orders.

In May, 1891, following the "Alger toast," the problem became more acute when the pope published his encyclical, Rerum novarum, in which he discussed the conditions of the working classes. This papal letter heightened the hopes of secular thinkers who saw in it a progressive attitude and a new understanding of worldly problems on the part of the church. The pope faced the problem directly in February, 1892, with another encyclical in which he emphasized the necessity of French Catholic support for the constitutional republic. In general, progressive writers and thinkers felt that a new era was beginning, but they were conscious that there would have to be a violent struggle with conservative forces before their ideals could be realized.

When Archbishop Ireland visited France in June, 1892, he found the country seething with bitter conflict: republicans versus Catholic royalists, rationalists versus believers, all condemning the Second Empire and all claiming to have the solution to France's desperately needed renaissance. According to the archbishop's biographer, Ireland went to Paris on an unofficial mission for Leo XIII after the "school question" had been satisfactorily solved in Rome. His charge was to help assuage the friction between the Catholic royalists who still refused to recognize the French republic and their liberal opponents.

From the French point of view it did not seem that Ireland was an emissary, official or unofficial, of the pope. Rather, he was only accepting an invitation extended to him by a group of personal friends, headed by Vicomte Eugene Melchior de Vogüe, a writer and diplomat. It was logical that the archbishop would accept an invitation from a liberal Catholic friend like Vicomte de Vogüe. Not long before, he had published an article in which he prophesied the renaissance of the church and its union with the state in a joint exercise of religious and secular power. Others whom the archbishop could count as personal friends in France

* James Moynihan, John Ireland, 136.
included Albert de Mun, a member of the chamber of deputies and a long-time admirer of Ireland's work in the United States; Henri Lorin, who had been with the archbishop in Rome; and Max Leclerc, who had visited the prelate in St. Paul in 1890.

The availability of the archbishop and the presence of a circle of his friends in Paris gave the pope an opportunity that he seized to support the collaboration of church and state. He doubtless realized that Ireland would be an able intermediary because he was from a nation that had already achieved a desirable balance between the two forces and also because he could speak French and was a powerful orator. The archbishop, then, visited France in response to a personal invitation. Even though he was not an official envoy of Leo XIII and spoke only in his own name, he nevertheless presented the pope's point of view in the controversy raging in France at that time.

IRELAND SPOKE on “Conditions in America” on June 18, 1892, in the Hall of the Geographic Society in Paris. Both the French religious and secular movements were well represented in his audience of twelve hundred. It comprised “the intellectual and social elite of Paris — diplomats, authors, priests, senators, ambassadors.”

After being introduced by Vicomte de Vogiie, the archbishop began his speech by underlining his deep love for France, where he had spent part of his youth and had prepared for the priesthood. (Bishop Joseph Cretin of St. Paul had sent Ireland and another candidate to the preparatory seminary at Meximieux, France, in 1853. After four years of classical study there, Ireland completed another four years of theological studies at the scholasticate of the Marist fathers at Montbel, near Toulon, France, before returning to St. Paul to be ordained a priest on December 21, 1861.) Ireland then spoke of his admiration for the French dedication to the struggle for freedom and enlightenment in the world and for French contributions to the creation of the United States. As a Minnesotan, he took pains to point out the importance of early French exploration in the Northwest by Father Louis Hennepin, Daniel Greysolon, Sieur du Luth, and others.

The most significant part of his speech, however, was a discussion of the problem then vital to French society, the relationship of church and state. “In America,” he maintained, “we have a free church in a free country, and the Church is happy in her freedom. ... The Church in America is the church of the people. ... To the praise of the American people, Catholic and Protestant, I must say that they are pleased to see clergymen taking part in the social and political affairs of the country. They desire to enlist in behalf of public interests all the intellectual and moral forces of the land.”

Ireland urged the gathered clergy and secular thinkers to adopt the pope’s invitation and support without reservation the constitutional republic. He repeated what he “heard from the summit of the Vatican Hill: ‘Of all the forms of civil government which the Church has recognized, and of which she has made trial, she cannot say from which she has received more harm or more good.’ Just now,” the archbishop concluded, “she is resolved to make trial in France of the...
republic; and I, as a citizen of a republic, say to the Church: 'In this experiment thou shall succeed.'

The liberal Catholics and secularists could conclude that the church was not only preaching collaboration with the republic in France but was actually supporting this form of government in the United States. The progressives received the impression of a "conversion" of the church, and Desjardins expressed the liberals' optimism in an article, "The Conversion of the Church," in the Journal des Débats in November, 1892. Leo XIII again demonstrated the validity of that conclusion when, on June 22, 1892, four days after Archbishop Ireland's address to the French Catholics in Paris, he wrote to the archbishop of Grenoble, praising him for his interpretation of the pope's desire for collaboration with the new constitutional republic of France.

Following such a clear statement of the pope's attitude, and impressed by Archbishop Ireland's speech, Desjardins decided to ask for an audience with Leo XIII in order better to prepare himself and the Union for Moral Action for a collaboration with Catholic thinkers. Using the auspices of Vicomte de Vogüé, Desjardins wrote to Cardinal Mariano Rampolla and through him sought an audience with the pope. It was arranged for September, 1892. This was to be the first crisis in the development of the Union for Moral Action.

Archbishop Ireland's visit and speech came at the most opportune time. He added considerably to the intellectuals' understanding of the papal position toward church and state. He also strengthened the argument of the liberals and calmed the fears of the conservatives by showing that the two forces could exist peacefully together and help create a strong and vibrant society. The American experience confirmed this.

These were exactly the views and desires expressed in the letter Desjardins wrote to the pope:

"The Moral Union, in what can be called a Christian spirit, comes to fight side by side with the living and reigning Holy Scriptures against the theoretical and practical positivism, the influence of the masters of an antispiritual and anti-Christian era, to destroy the narrow-minded party allegiance as incarnated mainly in the Freemasons, to preach propaganda against the secularization of hospitals and asylums, and to speak on the contrary in behalf of the freedom of religious congregation and the freedom of education."

Following the expression of these views came the audience Leo XIII granted Desjardins in September, 1892. Right after the meeting, Desjardins wrote his grandmother, Madame Emile Picot, an account of it. The letter shows not only that the audience made a deep impression on Desjardins but also provides a

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5 Ireland, The Church and Modern Society, 1:390.
At this moment Leo XIII got up and there were tears in his eyes. I shall never forget this moment. And he added: 'Yes, I love France with all my heart, as if it were my own country. I carry in myself, in sinu meo, the absolute faith she will rebuild herself. I shall not see this because I am too old. I shall be in eternity, but my successors will see it, and I hope they will help achieve this.'

Archbishop Ireland's concept of the interaction of church and state, and his influence in the French struggle, have been given full value in France in the work of l'Abbé Félix Klein, who in 1892 was a member of the Union for Moral Action and a young professor at the Catholic Institute in Paris. He dedicated himself to collecting Ireland's speeches in France and the United States and published a French translation and adaptation of them in 1894. Among speeches included in the book was not only the June 18, 1892, one at the Hall of the Geographic Society but also "The Social Action of French Youth," an address Ireland gave a week later (June 25, 1892) to students of the Catholic Circle in Paris.²⁶

Archbishop Ireland, by his speeches and reasoning, his tactful presentation of the pope's views, and his depiction of relations between church and state in the United States, helped strengthen the liberal forces in France. While the solution to the French church-state problem was still far away, his contribution was important and enduring.