

Dominican Ideals in Early America:

The Example of Edward Dominic Fenwick

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In this article I would like to focus attention on the unique American religious experience as it relates to Thomas Aquinas. For the ideals articulated by Aquinas and his Dominican associates in the medieval university, especially the left bank academic institutions which eventually became the University of Paris, deeply influenced the founder of the American Dominicans, Edward Dominic Fenwick.

To remember, at this time, Fenwick and the historical context in which he devoted his life is quite appropriate. For not only is this the anniversary year of the founding of the Diocese of Columbus, which has offered one hundred and twenty-five years of service to central and southern Ohio, but it is also the one hundred and seventy-fifth anniversary of the founding and dedication of the first Roman Catholic Church in Ohio: St. Joseph's near Somerset. The person who founded and dedicated St. Joseph's was the Dominican friar, Edward Dominic Fenwick. It is, in addition, the one hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary of the establishment of the religious community of St. Mary of the Springs where this article was first delivered in lecture form.

In 1822 Fenwick became the first Bishop of Cincinnati, Ohio. He laboured in the vineyard with a commitment second to few in the history of American Catholicism. Fenwick and Somerset are also important historically to the Dominican Community of St. Mary of the Springs, for before coming to this location in Columbus, Ohio in 1868, this community of religious women spent nearly forty years in Somerset, dedicated at that time to the education of young women. Fenwick assisted in the work establishing the early constitutions of Dominican religious women in the United States and also bringing the pioneer Dominican sisters to Ohio.

This is, therefore, a significant anniversary year for Dominicans in America, a time to consider the heroic efforts of those women and men dedicated to Dominican ideals in the early nineteenth century. So many facets of religious history and their important anniversaries come together now that it is appropriate to consider the career of Edward Dominic Fenwick, the founder of the American Dominicans, the first

extended Catholic missionary in Ohio, the founder of the first Church in Ohio, and the first bishop of Cincinnati and a prominent missionary to the Native American Indians in his diocese. Yet Fenwick's contributions to the history of American Catholicism are not well known. His role in this important narrative is significant and noteworthy; it needs to be remembered.

Edward Fenwick was American born into a family came to Maryland in the 1630's and were established citizens by the time Edward was born in 1768. The Fenwicks were longer lived in Maryland than the other more famous Catholic Family, the Carrolls, from whom came Charles, the only Catholic signatory of the Declaration of Independence, and John, the first bishop of Baltimore. Young Edward, like most sons and daughters of moderately wealthy Marylanders, was sent to Europe for his education. Had the Jesuits not been suppressed at this time, he probably would have been sent to a Jesuit college. As it was, he was sent to the College of the Holy Cross at Bornhem, Belgium, then run by the English Dominicans in exile. There Edward began his educational programme and eventually became a Dominican friar.

However, the calm life of a student was not to be his. The French Revolution was well underway at this time, and while the Dominican institutions had always accepted the goals of "liberté, fraternité and égalité"—nonetheless, professed monks, friars, and sisters were not seen as persons advancing the cause of the revolution. Hence, when the French troops came into Belgium, the English Dominicans left rapidly, leaving the American Fenwick there. The English hoped that the French would not bother a young American from the United States, a young country which had successfully revolted against British rule. The French were not accommodating, however. Fenwick was imprisoned, almost dying in the French revolutionary dungeons. Hence, Fenwick's education was interrupted and limited in scope and depth, a fact he often referred to later in his life.

Yet Fenwick did complete some semblance of a programme of studies. He returned to England where he remained for almost ten years. Fenwick's biographer, Victor F. O'Daniel, frequently reminds us that Fenwick had an enduring dream of establishing a branch of his Order in the United States. A member of the English province of the Dominicans, Fenwick needed the requisite permissions to embark on this project. Always persistent, Fenwick eventually acquired all of the items necessary to implement his dream. He also secured the service of three fellow Dominicans, Fathers Samuel Wilson, Tuite and Angier. He thus returned to his Maryland home with the idealistic dream of establishing a college like Holy Cross in Belgium for young Americans.

Fenwick Arrives in Maryland

The Baltimore Archdiocesan Archives contains the following letter from Fenwick to Bishop John Carroll indicating his plans and expressing his hopes,

The long conceived project of endeavouring to form an Establishment under your Lordship's patronage for the education of youth. . . .

. . . I should flatter myself with being able to execute in Miniature the plan of Bornhem College and Convent. Yes, my Lord, the education of Youth, the propagation of St. Dominic's Order, in fine, the cause of Religion is the object of my ardent wishes and ambition and feeble prayers.¹

It is clear that right from the start Fenwick's goal was to institute a college for young persons in his native Maryland, modelled after the English Dominican college at Bornhem, Belgium. In 1804, Fenwick arrived in Baltimore, full of youthful enthusiasm and energy to embark on his long cherished dream.

Kentucky Rather than Maryland

But John Carroll had other ideas. Carroll informed Fenwick that he already had two colleges in Maryland, enough, he thought, to care for the education of young people in the area. But, Carroll suggested, there was a rapidly rising community of Catholic Marylanders now residing in central Kentucky who not only needed clerical ministry but would be willing to have a college. Catholics from Maryland were attracted to the state of Kentucky area both for religious freedom and by the promise of better land for farming and other agricultural pursuits. Travelling across western Maryland and then western Virginia, these new settlers journeyed through the Cumberland gap and then onto the farm regions of central Kentucky. Many of these settlers stopped near Bardstown and Springfield, about fifty miles south of present-day Louisville.

Fenwick travelled the six hundred miles plus to central Kentucky—what records are available suggest that he journeyed over the Cumberland Road to Wheeling, then boarded a flatboat and travelled by water down the Ohio River to Maysville, Kentucky. From there he walked and rode the final one hundred miles to the Bardstown-Springfield area.

Once in Kentucky, Fenwick met Stephen Badin, a Frenchman who is important historically as the first person to receive holy orders in the continental United States. Badin, at that time, had as his missionary area

the entire state of Kentucky, ranging from the Appalachian mountains to the Mississippi river. Fenwick and Badin discussed the problems to be faced in Kentucky. Undaunted, Fenwick returned to Maryland and agreed to start his Dominican foundation in Springfield with both a priory and a college.

In 1806, Fenwick dedicated St. Rose of Lima Priory in Springfield, named after the first Dominican saint of the New World. This was the first Dominican foundation in the new world's Northern Hemisphere and the first major religious order to be established in the United States by a native born American citizen.

Within a year, Fenwick had built his long desired college and dedicated it to the patronage of St Thomas Aquinas. Samuel Wilson, a fellow Dominican, became the principal teacher in this foundation and was charged with the education of the young men attending both the secular and the clerical parts of the institution. Fenwick needed philosophical and theological education for his religious order, for he hoped to recruit many vocations to the Dominican Order from Kentucky's Catholic families. Moreover, Fenwick realized that the Dominican tradition of moderation in virtue, found in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, was needed as an alternative to the rigours and extremism of Jansenism then being asserted by the French missionaries in Kentucky.

It might be asked if Fenwick was too compliant in his dealings with John Carroll? Being a "person of action," a person never to permit the grass to grow under his feet, it would perhaps have been more consistent with his character if he had countered Carroll's suggestion and remained firmer about establishing his college in Maryland. The dirt-poor frontier was hardly a place to begin a college. But Fenwick, endowed with the spirit of his religious founder, St. Dominic, plodded forward with a hymn in his heart and the faith in his intellect to begin doing the Lord's work in the rough and tumble hardscrabble frontier world of Kentucky—and then of Ohio.

St Thomas Aquinas college functioned in some form or other until 1828, when it was suppressed. One famous graduate was Jefferson Davis (the President of the Confederacy during the American Civil War), who travelled from his Mississippi home to be educated by the Dominicans in Kentucky. Many frontier priests received their early education from Wilson at the Dominican college in Springfield, modelled - as was Fenwick's wish - on the College of the Holy Cross in Belgium. Had this Dominican college prospered, it would have been, I believe, the third oldest Catholic educational institution in the United States, following only Georgetown in Washington, D.C., and Mount

Saint Mary's in Maryland.

Several letters remain giving an impression of Fenwick's human qualities and suggesting something of his "down to earth" nature. On one occasion, Fenwick wrote to his brother-in-law:

Fill up the wagon with dried smoked herrings if possible. That will be such a treat for my good friends here. For my part, I am so well and happy in my mind that I want for nothing but money and a now and then good chew of tobacco . . . (I hope) you will . . . send me when the opportunity offers, a few twists of good James river tobacco.²

A hard worker all of his life Fenwick wrote the following in 1807:

With the cooperation of the people in our congregation, both Catholic and Protestant, we made and burnt last near 360,000 bricks for the purpose of building a Church to the honour of St. Rose, as our desire is to have the church under her patronage, and the College when built under the patronage of St. Thomas Aquinas. . . . Our church 100 X 40 feet will be the first in the State and I hope equal to any in America, except the Cathedral at Baltimore. . . .³

Fenwick in Ohio

There is an interesting existential paradox about Fenwick. For a person who was so good at administration, he continually avoided administrative duties. This characteristic pervades Fenwick's personality until his early death in 1832. Yet he served so often in administrative roles—and served with distinction no less—that one feels sorry that he was unable to achieve some of his goals because he was in charge of one institution or another for most of his life.

In 1808, however, Fenwick turned the mantle of leadership of the Dominicans in Kentucky over to Samuel Wilson. Freed from administration, Fenwick hurried to Ohio, the neighbouring state north-east of Kentucky, so he could be a frontier missionary totally. He met the Dittoe family near Somerset and established a set of contacts which turned out to be extremely important for the foundation of the first church in Ohio a decade later.

Why Somerset you might ask? Well, the persistence of Jacob Dittoe for one. The Baltimore Archives contain several letters from Dittoe to John Carroll requesting a cleric to minister to the religious needs of the early Perry County residents. German Catholic families from near Somerset, Pennsylvania, emigrated to Perry County in the early 1800's, bringing with them a strong sense of their religious heritage. Somerset is

strategically placed on what was called Zane's Trace, the famous frontier road from Wheeling to Zanesville through Somerset and Lancaster to Chillicothe and then through southwestern Ohio to Maysville, Kentucky and finally on to Lexington and the Bardstown area. Returning to Maryland, Fenwick, at Carroll's suggestion, sought out the Dittoe family while riding his horse on Zane's Trace near Somerset. A traditional tale tells it that Fenwick heard the sound of an axe felling a tree and as he followed the chipping sounds of the axe, he discovered Jacob Dittoe hard at work clearing the primeval forest.

Fenwick met with the Somerset families as often as he could during the next ten years. He enjoyed the rough and tumble life of the frontier missionary. He once wrote the following narrative to a European friend:

It often happens that I am compelled to traverse vast and inhospitable forests wherein not a trace of road is to be seen. Not infrequently, overtaken by night in the midst of these, I am obliged to hitch my horse to a tree and, making a pillow of my saddle, recommend myself to God and go to sleep with bears on all sides.⁴

The First Permanent Church in Ohio

Fenwick, using his innate sense of administrative direction, realized that Ohio needed a centre of Catholic activities. Dittoe also wanted a permanent ecclesiastical institution, preferably near Somerset. Dittoe gave Fenwick over three hundred acres of farmland southeast of Somerset. On this site in 1818, the first permanent Roman Catholic Church was constructed. Dedicated by Fenwick—and his Dominican nephew, Nicholas Dominic Young—on December 6, 1818, St. Joseph's Church finally provided Catholicism with a permanent home in Ohio. Fenwick used this as his Ohio base for the next four years, until once again he was asked, or rather required, to accept the duties of administration when he was named the first bishop of Cincinnati, Ohio.

St. Joseph's in Somerset served as the focal point of much apostolic and institutional activity for most of the Nineteenth Century. Yet its importance has often been overlooked by the general historian of Ohio. For instance, in his second volume of *The History of the State of Ohio, the Frontier State: 1803-1825*, the late Professor William Utter, in discussing the origin and development of religious bodies in Ohio, wrote that "...the early Catholic centre near Somerset...did not affect the great body of Ohio's population."

Utter's claim may be countered by evidence suggesting the scope of Catholic activity in the state. From Somerset, through the ministry of Fenwick and Young, came the second church, St. Mary of the

Assumption in Lancaster; the third, St. Patrick's in Cincinnati [both in 1819], the fourth, Holy Trinity in Zanesville, the fifth, St. Barnabas in Morgan County, the sixth, St. Paul's in Columbiana County and the last before 1825, St. Luke's in Danville. From St. Joseph's also came several Dominican bishops: Richard Miles, named the first bishop of Nashville; his successor, James Whelan; Joseph Alemany, named the first bishop of Monterey and then Archbishop of San Francisco, Landon Thomas Grace, the first bishop of St. Paul, and, of course, Edward Fenwick, the first bishop of Cincinnati. The first formal Dominican studium or major seminary in the United States recognized by Rome was established at St. Joseph's, and a secular college of the same name was extant in the middle years of the century. And, of course, Somerset was the original foundation of the Dominican Sisters which eventually became the Congregation of St. Mary of the Springs, whose members have served with distinction throughout the east and the mid-west, especially in Ohio. All of these apostolic activities came from Fenwick's foundation following the sound of the axe felling the tree. How much more could one expect from a frontier mission church? Utter's claim is totally without merit—one which came about, I suggest, because the narrative of Fenwick's contribution to American Catholicism is almost totally neglected in both secular and religious accounts of the history of Catholicism in the United States.

Fenwick Named Bishop

In 1822, Fenwick was named the founding Bishop of the newly created diocese of Cincinnati. Once again he was asked to assume the duties of administration, and these duties he carried out with distinction and heroism for the next decade. One story is told that Fenwick hid out in the forests of Ohio so he could not be found and thus receive his bull of appointment as Bishop of Cincinnati. The newly formed Diocese of Cincinnati then encompassed all of Ohio, all of Michigan, and what was then called the Wisconsin Territory. With these last two areas, Fenwick inherited the many Catholic tribes of Native Americans—a new aspect of his apostolic activities.

Fenwick embarked upon his new duties of bishop with his customary zeal and enthusiasm. Before 1830, he built a cathedral in Cincinnati, it stands today as the beautiful St. Peter in Chains. He also established a seminary for the education of a local, secular clergy, began a college, and oversaw the establishment of new churches. Fenwick also invited the Dominican Sisters from St. Catherine's in Kentucky to establish a foundation in Somerset. This group evolved into today's Dominican community of St. Mary of the Springs. Writing on February

25, 1830, to a friend in France, Fenwick noted the following about the Dominican sisters:

I have placed some Sisters of the Order of Saint Dominic at Somerset, one hundred and fifty miles from this place (i.e., from Cincinnati). They have opened a school. I shall put others at Zanesville and Canton, where there is a great deal of good to be done.⁶

Since at this time, his poor diocese needed a constant influx of fresh capital, Fenwick decided on a voyage to Europe begging cup in hand seeking donations so he could continue his vast and varied ministries. In 1823, Fenwick wrote to Leo XII that his diocese of Cincinnati was “. . . the most destitute of all spiritual and temporal resources in the whole Christian world.”

Writing of her visit with Bishop Fenwick in Cincinnati, Frances Trollope, a member of the well known English literary family, had the following to say about Fenwick:

I had the pleasure of being introduced to the Roman Catholic bishop of Cincinnati, and have never known in any country a priest of a character and bearing more truly apostolic. He is an American, but I should never have discovered it from his pronunciation or manner. He received his education partly in England, and partly in France. His manners were highly polished; his piety active and sincere, and infinitely more mild and tolerant than that of the factious sectarians who form the great majority of the American priesthood.⁷

The Indian Missions in the Northwest

One of the most interesting yet often neglected aspects of Fenwick's tremendously productive life is his work with the Native American Indians in what was then called "The Northwest." Today this is the area of Michigan and Wisconsin. It may be surprising to us that the Native American populations in the then northwest were predominantly Roman Catholic in religion. Long serviced by the Jesuits in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries, these Indian peoples had firmly entrenched Christian beliefs. Yet with the suppression of the Jesuits in 1773, there were few clerical ministers to care for the spiritual needs of these tribes. Fenwick realized the importance of the work that had fallen upon his shoulders. He embarked upon the re-evangelization of the Indians in his diocese with his usual vigour and enthusiasm. As early as 1825, we find him sending a priest to visit the Indians in what today is Mackinac

Island and Harbour Springs in Michigan and Green Bay in Wisconsin. Fenwick always attempted to establish schools whenever possible in the Indian communities. Fenwick himself travelled to these areas three times, and he died while on his return trip to Cincinnati from Michigan.

Possibly some of his most rewarding work as Bishop took place during these visits with the Native American Indian peoples. One letter contains the following passage:

I would gladly exchange my residence in populous Cincinnati, together with my dignity, for a hut and the happy lot of a missionary among these good Indians. . . . I believe that I found more piety, faith and respect [in Arbre Croche] than on any similar occasion [i.e., the feast of Corpus Christi] among our American Catholics.⁸

Fenwick saw to both the spiritual and material needs of these original Americans. In fact, he sent two young Indian men to study in Rome in preparation for ordination. Unfortunately, neither reached ordination yet, nonetheless this was an early attempt, perhaps even the first, to enlist Native Americans for philosophical and theological study in Rome as a preparation for ordination. In addition, in 1830, Fenwick witnessed the investiture ceremony into the Dominican Order at St. Rose of Lima Priory in Kentucky of two young Indian men. This is, so O'Daniel wrote, the first event in which native American Indians became members of established religious orders. Moreover, Fenwick appears to have been instrumental in having Ursula Grignon, a young Native American woman from Wisconsin, become an early member of this community of Dominican sisters when they still resided at Somerset.

Death of Bishop Fenwick

Fenwick died in 1832. His death, from the tragic scourge of cholera, came in his sixty-fourth year while he was returning from a lengthy trip visiting the Indians in Michigan and Wisconsin. Stricken with cholera on board ship while on his way to Mackinac Island, Fenwick never sufficiently recovered his strength to complete the journey home to Cincinnati. Fenwick died separated from his religious and clerical friends in a hotel room in Wooster, Ohio, eighty miles northeast of Columbus, Ohio.

O'Daniel writes almost poetically about Fenwick's last hours. This paragraph is a fitting tribute to a great American Bishop whose apostolic concerns far outdistanced his limited strength and resources.

But God had decreed that the good bishop should not again see his beloved episcopal city. He had been unwell through all of his journey. On leaving Canton he complained of being weak and dizzy. Nor had he proceeded far on the way when he was taken violently ill with the cholera. At times, his suffering was so great that he stood upright in the stage-coach. He arrived at the Coulter Hotel, Wooster, at sunset, took a cup of tea and went to bed. The people in the hotel feared to go near the sick prelate. Fortunately, a Catholic lady, Miss Eliza Rose Powell, had travelled in the same conveyance from Canton. Through her, Doctors Stephen F. Day and Samuel N. Bissell were summoned to the bedside of the stricken apostle, while a messenger was dispatched for Father Henni at Canton. The bishop himself gave orders that the priest should be instructed to bring the Blessed Sacrament and holy oils. Although they had despaired of the saintly man's recovery by eleven o'clock, the two physicians worked over his prostrate form until after sunrise in the vain hope that he might rally. With them were Miss Powell and a negro man who took turns with the doctors in their efforts to allay the bishop's tortures by massages, applications and sedatives. In the morning, he lapsed into a state of lethargy from which he could be aroused only with great difficulty. On one of these occasions he said: "Come, let us go to Calvary!", words that reveal the thoughts which were ever uppermost in his pious mind. On another, it is stated, he declared that he had nothing further to do with the affairs of this world. While the man of God lay thus on his bed of pain, the landlady of the Coulter came to the sickroom. As she looked at the prostrate form, she remarked, doubtless in heartfelt pity: "He has administered to many; but there is no one to administer to him now." So it was to be. At the noon hour, Wednesday, September 26, 1832, Right Rev. Edward Dominic Fenwick, Ohio's apostle, breathed forth his pure and noble soul to God. Owing to fear of the cholera, of which he died, he was buried at once. Father John M. Henni arrived from Canton later in the day, but saw only the little mound that covered the mortal remains of the great Friar Preacher, missionary and bishop.⁹

So his biographer, Father O'Daniel, tells us about the last hours of Edward Fenwick.

In ending this commemoration of Edward Fenwick, I would like to reflect on how he implemented the ideals of Thomas Aquinas. Fenwick was always interested in establishing schools and colleges for the education of young people, both secular and clerical. Thomas Aquinas, the patron of the schools in Roman Catholicism, spent most of his religious life under the umbrella of various European colleges and universities. The importance of education was always first in Fenwick's thoughts.

Fenwick's zeal for missionary work is well documented. Thomas Aquinas wrote the *Summa Contra Gentiles* with the expressed purpose of providing a compendium of philosophy and theology for the use of Dominican missionaries in Islamic areas, notably Moorish Spain.

Fenwick, steeped in the Dominican tradition of moderation, helped liberate the Kentucky Catholics from the extreme rigors of Jansenism. Aquinas—following his Spiritual father, St. Dominic—argued against extremism in matters of religion while at the University of Paris.

Steeped in the philosophical and theological insights of his intellectual mentor, Thomas Aquinas, Edward Fenwick lived a life committed to religious perfection and intellectual aspiration. Like Aquinas, Fenwick viewed the intellectual life as important for religious development.

In ending, allow me to quote the following passage from James's Epistle, found in the Votive Mass for Peace. This passage sums up, I suggest, the energetic and committed life of Edward Dominic Fenwick:

if one of you is wise and understanding, let him show this in practice, through a humility filled with good sense. . . . Wisdom from above is first of all innocent. It is also peaceable, lenient, docile, rich in sympathy and the kindly deeds that are its fruits, impartial and sincere. The harvest of justice is sown in peace for those who cultivate peace.

James 3:13—18

Edward Dominic Fenwick played a significant role in the Roman Catholic Church's aspirations to meet the spiritual and temporal needs of both immigrant and Native Americans. The Jesuit missionary activities are well known and part of the canon of religious studies central to American Catholicism. Fenwick's fruitful apostolate and striking success are less well known in that important story. Yet it is a part of the narrative rich in aspiration and strong in achievement. It needs to be remembered.

This presentation served as the annual Aquinas Lecture given at Ohio Dominican College, Columbus, Ohio, January 27, 1993.

1 R.M. Coffey, *American Dominicans* (New York, 1970) pp.10–11

2 Coffey op cit., pp. 38–39.

3 Coffey, op cit., p. 43.

4 O'Daniel, op cit., p. 215.

5 Utter, p. 381.

6 O'Daniel p. 371.

7 Coffey, op cit., p. 18.

8 O'Daniel op cit., p. 389.

9 O'Daniel, op.cit., pp.424—425.