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Archbishop John Ireland and the German National Parishes in St. Paul

DANIEL F. DETZNER*

ABSTRACT — Archbishop John Ireland dominated the national debate on German language use in parochial schools at the turn of the century. Because of his outspoken desire that Catholics not be viewed as “foreigners” on American soil, Ireland has been portrayed by critics as a rabid Americanizer who was insensitive to the cultural heritage of non-English speaking Catholic immigrants. A review of Ireland’s correspondence and papers, interviews with individuals who knew him, and a search of the historical records of six German-Catholic national parishes in St. Paul reveal that Ireland’s public statements on Americanization and his archdiocesan policies regarding the German national parishes were often contradictory. In contrast to his public statements, John Ireland’s educational policies were pragmatic, culturally sensitive, and consistent. The archbishop not only tolerated widespread use of German language in parish schoolrooms, he promoted its growth by encouraging the development of national parishes and schools and by providing German-speaking priests and nuns to the congregations.

Introduction

Although German-speaking people first came to American shores more than 300 years ago, they did not begin to appear in large numbers in Minnesota until the last few decades of the 19th century. Spurred by Otto von Bismarck’s *Kulturkampf*, German-Catholics comprised the largest European nationality group emigrating to the United States between 1865 and 1900. Many German-Catholics left because they feared continuing religious persecution, laws restricting worship and education, and the expulsion of their priests. More than 1.2 million Germans left their homeland during this period for the promise of religious freedom in the United States, and it was a young Irish priest from St. Paul who was responsible for many of them coming to the frozen plains of the Upper Midwest (1).

Father John Ireland established the Irish Emigration Society in the late 1860s to encourage settlement of western Minnesota farmlands. Despite its name, the society encouraged newcomers from France, Belgium, England, and Germany, as well as Ireland. In addition to the frontier colonies that Ireland established, many German immigrants moved into previously settled German communities in New Ulm, St. Cloud, and St. Paul.

Wherever they settled, German-Catholics brought with them Old World traditions, language, and religious practice. Central to the maintenance of their identity were the German national parishes and the parochial schools. National parishes allowed individuals with a common ethnic background to worship, socialize, and learn together regardless of their geographic location in the city. In most cases, the priests and nuns of these parishes were speakers of the native tongue and conservators of the Old World traditions. The national parishes often became the focal point of the spiritual, economic, and social assistance needed by the new immigrants and their

families. The German national parishes were a familiar haven for millions of immigrants with the same symbols, sounds, and smells as their native churches in the old country. Catholic schools were the places where children learned from German-speaking nuns the same catechism lessons that their parents had memorized. The church and school were a refuge and a place to preserve, at least for a while, the German heritage that gave them identity (2).

Like other ethnic groups, German-Catholics had pride in their cultural background and a strong collective need to maintain as much of it as possible in the unfamiliar environment of the New World. After arriving in the United States, many German-Catholics were surprised to learn of the controversy surrounding ethnic identity, church unity, and language use in the parochial schools. They found the American Catholic church to be dominated by an Irish hierarchy that was not always sensitive to the non-English speaking immigrants who rushed into the United States during the last half of the 19th century. National parishes often became the battleground for ethnic tensions within the church and a symbol of the foreignness of Catholicism to those outside the church.

Although Fr. John Ireland appeared to be on friendly terms with German-Catholics early in his career, he has been portrayed by critics as an Irish prelate who lost his pluralistic vision as he moved up the hierarchy. When Archbishop Ireland proposed to lease Catholic schools to the city for \$1.00 per year in his 1890 “Faribault School Plan,” he was criticized by German-Catholic leaders from across the country for selling out the national parish schools. His exhortations against the evils of alcohol, primarily aimed at his own Irish brethren, were interpreted by beer-loving Germans as a cultural slap in the face. He was attacked repeatedly by the German language press in Milwaukee, Buffalo, and St. Paul for insensitivity to the needs of German-Catholic immigrants. Outside the church,

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laws were passed by several state legislatures restricting the use of the German language in the national parish schools. Clearly, German-Catholics who wished to maintain their heritage felt threatened, and their fears often focused on the domineering archbishop from St. Paul (3).

John Ireland was bishop of the St. Paul archdiocese from 1884 to 1917. He dominated the growth of Catholicism in the Upper Midwest at the turn of the century, and his reputation grew as he became an internationally respected spokesman for a unified American Catholic church. Throughout his religious career, Ireland was consistent in his themes — the Church must not be divided along national lines, assimilation into American society should follow a national evolutionary process, and Catholics of all ethnic backgrounds should be proud to be Americans (4). Although Ireland's oratory sometimes got him in trouble with German-Catholic leaders, his policies in the Archdiocese of St. Paul regarding national parishes and language use in parochial schools provide a much better insight into his priorities. It is time to reevaluate the man once described as the "consecrated blizzard of the Northwest" to see if his anti-German reputation is deserved or if, in fact, he was more culturally and politically sensitive than his critics contend.

Materials and Methods

Debates on Catholic education, ethnicity, language use in schools, and Archbishop Ireland's conflicts with his German-Catholic constituents were frequently reported in the local newspapers of the period. They are chronicled in the *St. Paul Dispatch*, the *Northwestern Chronicle*, and the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, available at the Minnesota Historical Society. Review of relevant articles from 1880 to 1920 was simplified by using the topical newspaper clipping files completed by scholars working for the Works Progress Administration during the 1930s. School records, curricula, and issues facing nuns in the parochial schools are revealed in the Sr. Helen Angela Hurley and Sr. Marie Elizabeth papers at the Minnesota Historical Society.

The Catholic Historical Society was founded by Archbishop Ireland in the St. Paul Seminary at the turn of the century. It is the repository of all Ireland's papers, correspondence with clergy and friends, the 47 scrapbooks he personally kept to document his life and work, and many personal artifacts including his desk, chair, cigar-holder, and vestments. It is here that the scope of Ireland's eclectic interests becomes apparent and here that the drama between Ireland and German-Catholics is documented. By reviewing the personal correspondence, files, and scrapbooks, a portrait of John Ireland, the pragmatic pastor, comes more clearly into view.

Interviews with elderly priests, nuns, and parishioners provided personal insights into Archbishop Ireland as a man and policymaker. Monsignor John Cullinan was a young assistant to Ireland at the St. Paul Cathedral from 1912 to 1917. Monsignor Joseph Etzel graduated from the St. Agnes national parish and became acquainted with Ireland as a seminary student. Monsignor Lawrence Ryan was the former rector of Cathedral parish and friend of Archbishop Ireland. Sister Mary John Ryan, Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, was a teacher in several St. Paul Catholic schools during the later years of Ireland's service. Sr. Clara, Order of St. Benedict, allowed me to read several of her unpublished manuscripts on the history of the German-speaking Sisters of St. Benedict. Sister Pauline Fritz, School Sisters of Notre Dame, the former director of Elementary Education for the Archdiocese of St. Paul, provided back-

ground on the School Sisters of Notre Dame and insights into archdiocesan decisions regarding parochial schools.

Parish and school records and anniversary books from the six German national parishes in the city of St. Paul provide a rich resource for those interested in the enrollment patterns, curricula, and problems of the elementary schools during Ireland's era.

Results

John Ireland became the bishop of what was then the Diocese of St. Paul in 1884. St. Paul was the seat of the bishopric and the center of ethnic diversity in the 47-county diocese. The 1900 census indicates just how diverse the city of St. Paul was at the turn of the century (Table 1).

Table 1. Foreign born population of St. Paul in 1900.

Birthplace	Residents
Austria, Bohemia, Hungary	3,490
Canada	4,572
Denmark, Norway, Sweden	13,958
England, Scotland, Wales	2,748
Germany	12,935
Ireland	4,892
Italy	529
Poland	1,241
Russia	987
Other	1,263
Total Foreign Born	46,815

Germans and German-speaking people composed the largest single group of Catholic nationals in the city. The complex and divisive issues surrounding Church unity, language use in the schools, and cultural maintenance were highly visible in the city where John Ireland presided. German-speaking Catholics at the Assumption parish (founded 1854) were only a short walk down the hill from his residence in the St. Paul Cathedral's parish house. Five new German national parishes and schools were founded in St. Paul while he was archbishop.

As the population of immigrants expanded during his 33-year tenure, so did the need for additional national parishes and schools. From 1885 to 1917 the number of national parishes in the St. Paul Archdiocese increased from 23 to 37. The history of these parishes is similar. A small building served as the church and school during the early years. Several years later the spires of a larger stone church and new school building would become visible in the emerging St. Paul skyline. The only limitations that Ireland placed on construction of national parishes were financial. In 1884, Fr. Bernard Lockinor suggested to Bishop Ireland that a new German-Catholic parish be founded in the northern part of the city. Because of insufficient financial backing, Ireland refused. A self-appointed delegation presented the request a second time but was denied again for the same reason. Finally, 16 men pledged securities for the required amount and Ireland agreed to the establishment of St. Bernard's parish. The Archbishop presided over dedication ceremonies in 1890.

The importance of the parish schools to the German-Catholics cannot be overemphasized (5). Each new parish constructed a school at the same time as the church or shortly thereafter. In every one of the six German national parishes in St. Paul (Figure 1), rapid growth in enrollment prompted continued expansion of school facilities. St. Matthew's is a typical example (Table 2).

FIGURE 1

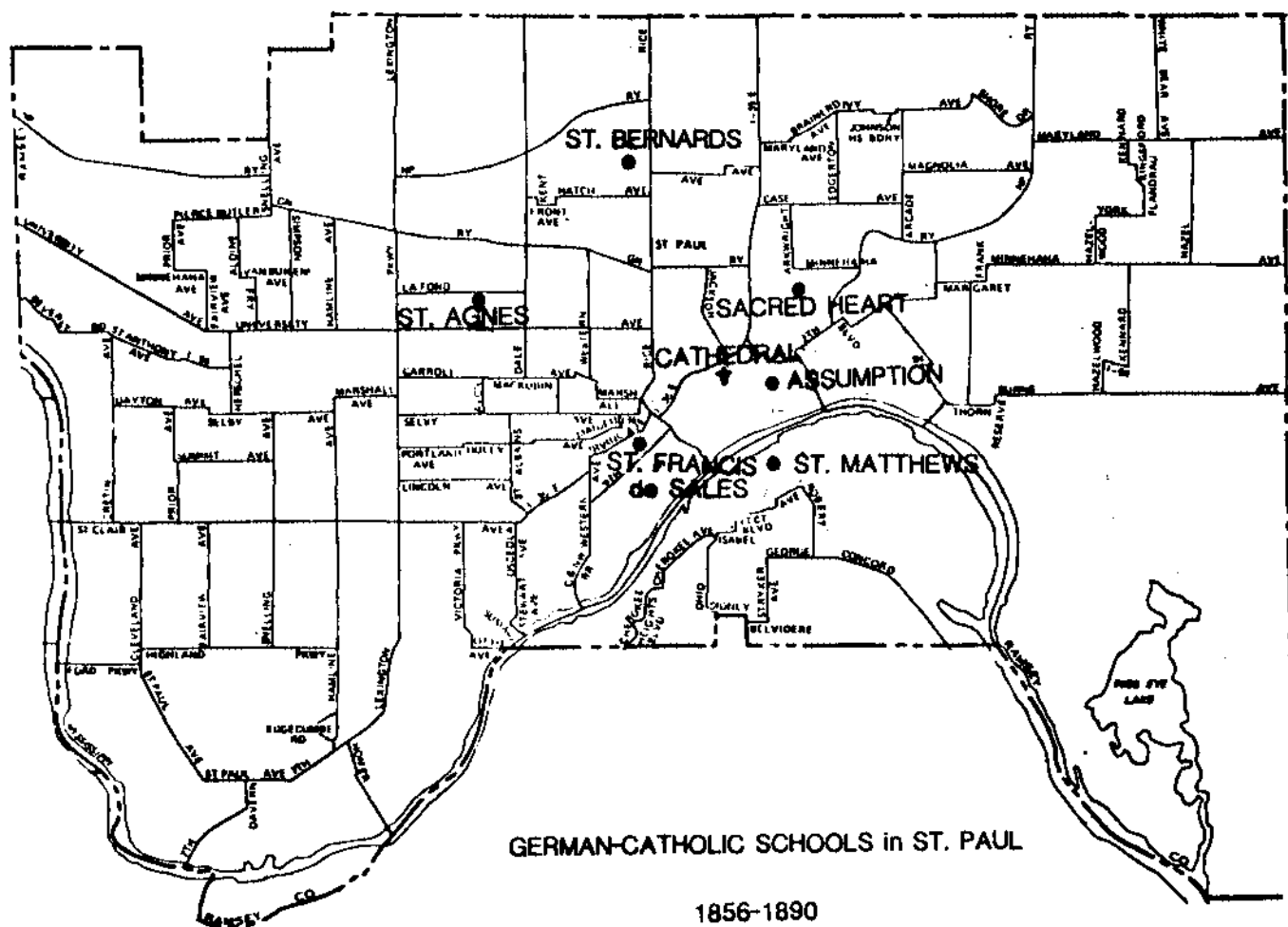


Figure 1. Map of German-Catholic Schools in St. Paul, 1856-1890.

The growth of the German-Catholic population in St. Paul was responsible for crowding in places other than the classrooms. After visiting the school and the nuns' residence at St. Agnes parish in the spring of 1900, Archbishop Ireland was horrified by the miserable living conditions of the sisters. In a letter to Pastor J. M. Solnce, Ireland ordered that the squalid living conditions be improved or, he threatened, the school would be closed. A convent was soon erected and the German-speaking School Sisters of Notre Dame happily moved out of the damp school basement.

Records from the six German-Catholic parishes in St. Paul show patterns of language and curricula use that are similar to other Catholic national parish elementary schools across the nation (6). The nuns at Assumption and St. Bernard spoke German exclusively during the early years after the schools' founding. Records from the other four schools did not reveal language use in the formative years, but by 1910 all six schools offered their curriculum in English and German. In most cases the school day included a German mass and Bible history, catechism, reading, and spelling — all taught in German. In the afternoon, American history, arithmetic, geography, and other subjects were taught in English. The most well-preserved records are those from the St. Francis de Sales school during the 1910-11 academic year (Table 3).

Table 2. Enrollment at St. Matthews Elementary School.*

Year	Student Enrollment
1891	220
1895	360
1900	480
1905	500
1910	748
1915	807

*Source: Records of St. Matthew's Parish, 507 Hall Avenue, St. Paul, MN.

Archbishop Ireland invited two orders of German speaking nuns to teach in the German national schools — the School Sisters of Notre Dame and the Sisters of St. Benedict. Ireland's willingness to accommodate the desires of German-speaking Catholics in St. Paul was evident at Assumption parish. The first order to teach at Assumption school was the Sisters of St. Joseph, who were predominantly Irish and French. Because of the difficulty they had communicating with the students and the students' parents, Ireland removed them in 1887 and installed the Sisters of Notre Dame, who originated in Munich. Eventually this order taught at five of the German parishes in St. Paul. The Sisters of St. Benedict came to the United States from Eichstaett, Bavaria. In 1857, they founded a convent in St.

Table 3. Curriculum at St. Francis de Sales, 1910-11, grade 18.*

Courses	1	2	3	4	5/6	6/7	8
Physiology						X	X
Catechism	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
German Reading	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
English Reading	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Arithmetic	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
German Spelling		X	X	X	X	X	
English Spelling	X	X	X	X	X		
German Writing	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
English Writing	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Bible History				X	X	X	X
U.S. History				X	X	X	X
Geography				X	X	X	X
Grammar					X	X	X

*Source: Records of St. Francis De Sales Parish, 650 Palance, St. Paul, MN.

Cloud with the financial help of King Ludwig. In 1890, John Ireland asked them to take charge of the new school at St. Bernard's parish in northern St. Paul.

Ireland's interest in the schools and his dominance of the religious orders he recruited to teach in them were established very early. The School Sisters of Notre Dame and the Sisters of St. Benedict were subject to the control of the bishop's office from the early years of their arrival in St. Paul.

Although each parish had its own lay Board of Directors, the boards were not used for educational policy making and, in fact, served primarily as a rubber-stamp legal entity for the clergy. According to Fr. John Gilbert, a former superintendent of archdiocesan education, Ireland had significant influence over educational policy because the hierarchy was held in such esteem, and the bishop's authority was generally not questioned (7). Although his authority to decide school policy was unquestionable, it is interesting to note that the pragmatic Ireland included three German priests on his eight person archdiocesan school board.

Discussion

John Ireland's policies in his own archdiocese were sensitive to the religious, ethnic, and language needs of his diverse territory. The continued growth of national parishes, particularly German national parishes in St. Paul, indicates clearly that, although he may not have advocated separation along nationality lines, Ireland did nothing to prohibit the development of national parishes and schools. On the contrary, he was quite willing to provide native speaking French, German, and Flemish priests in the rural colonies founded by his Irish Emigration Society, and a series of German pastors and assistants at the national parishes in St. Paul.

If Ireland had been the insensitive assimilationist that his critics suggest, his attitudes would have affected his policies toward education and language use in the archdiocesan schools. Instead, Ireland showed tolerance; the German language was used exclusively at two parish schools for several years and at the six German parishes with bilingual curricula, until the first World War. Furthermore, Ireland encouraged German language use by inviting nuns and priests from Germany into the national parishes and by requiring that seminarians learn to speak the native tongue of the most predominant ethnic group in the archdiocese. It would be incorrect to argue that the archbishop's arms were tied in school policy by Canon Law, the Baltimore Councils, or the religious orders. All evidence indicates that the archbishop had significant influence over what went on in the archdiocesan schools.

The contrast between the image of John Ireland as the rabid Americanizer and the reality of the man as archbishop is significant, but the contrast can be explained by the cultural tensions of the period. Some German-Catholics were overly sensitive to what they perceived as threats from the English-speaking Irish hierarchy. On occasion, Ireland did not fully realize the implications of his statements and policies. The archbishop tended to hyperbole in many of his public addresses and, as a student of public speaking, he was aware that the dramatic phrase was often more effective. His "Faribault School Plan" was not designed to eliminate the parish schools as the German press in Milwaukee characterized it. Rather, it was a legitimate attempt to obtain public financial support for parochial education. The fearful reaction to this plan in the German press is especially surprising since similar financial arrangements were operating in several other German communities across the country.

In his own archdiocese, John Ireland demonstrated many times that he held no animosity toward the largest nationality group in his spiritual care. His policies and practices over 30 years indicate that he believed new immigrants and their children would gradually assimilate into the Church and the nation. In a sermon at St. Bernard's in 1892, Ireland stated his position on language use in Catholic schools. He told the packed congregation that he believed it was his duty to provide them with priests and nuns who spoke their native tongue. He promised never to interfere with the teaching of German in their school, but he wanted his critics to realize that it was not always possible to provide enough foreign language priests and sisters in the rapidly expanding Church.

Ireland believed assimilation into American life was an inevitable and natural course of events that would occur without force. In a draft letter to "Your Eminence" written in 1890, Ireland explains his thoughts on gradual assimilation:

It is well known in America that I am in favor of the gradual Americanization of the immigrants. . . I believe that the gradual Americanization of the children of the immigrants is entirely in keeping with the ordinary operation of natural law. . . The children should be trained thoroughly in the use of the English tongue and they should be fitted by their civil and religious training for the national assimilation that inevitably awaits them with the great bulk of the people and that the efforts of any nationality, whether German, Irish, Poles, Bohemians to remain in America as a detached foreign colony is not only unfavorable to the influence of the Catholic Church, but is destined to failure by the very laws of nature and the stronger attraction of the surrounding environment.

James Shannon sees Ireland as a thorough pragmatist, unencumbered by doctrinaire ideals (8). Indeed, Ireland's pragmatism may not have been by choice considering that the German Catholics were the largest ethnic group in his archdiocese. Ireland's personal correspondence and speeches indicate his sensitivity to the diversity of St. Paul and his fears of losing the new immigrants to a major schism within the Church. Even if Ireland hoped that the Church would be able to force rapid assimilation, he realized that the continuing flood of newcomers would inhibit the process. Rather than fight the inevitability of the immigrant Churches, Ireland chose to follow a policy of cooperation.

To learn more about Ireland's policies as archbishop it would be interesting to examine his actions with other ethnic groups, including the Afro American and Native American churches in his archdiocese. A broader picture of the issues raised in this paper could be drawn if the records of other ethnically diverse dioceses were examined to discover how

they handled the tensions between nationality groups and the church hierarchy. With additional research, it may be possible to clearly establish the role of the Catholic Church in immigrant education and assimilation. It would be interesting to know if the Catholic schools were agents of Americanization or transitional institutions that helped thousands of Catholic families gradually adjust to the realities of life in the New World.

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