

CHAPTER 5

FRIARS AND SISTERS ON THE FRONTIER

The 1820s were a time of change and stress on the road to maturity for the first American province. They were united in the difficult work of laying foundations for their life and mission, including pastoral ministry unlike that of the former rigid pastors. Would they remain united when more men joined them and traveled far abroad, often alone, on mission?

During the summer of 1821, the provincial Wilson described the frontier life of the Kentucky friars in these words:

We carry out community life to perfection. No one has a farthing of his own, nor does anyone wish to, for in this region there is nothing you can buy -- neither books nor other desirable items to buy. The tonsure is worn here just as at the Minerva and I am sending you enclosed a sample of the cloth used in making our habits. Our main objective is to be self-supporting and independent of the need for money; and this we have satisfactorily achieved. The principal art is to live without need to purchase things . . . except clothing for the missions. We have a blacksmith, a shoemaker, and a tailor; we still lack a joiner and a mason, so it costs us about two hundred dollars per annum to keep our mills in repair.

We are 12 in number in this community. Lately we have suffered severe financial loss for like most people in this part of the country we have been obliged to sell on credit losing about 600 dollars. But don't let this discourage you, nor prevent you from bringing along the religious you mentioned and some laybrothers as well, for we have well over 500 acres here which can easily support any additions to the community. We can assure the recruits of an abundance of pork, bacon, cabbage, turnips and even some inferior potatoes. . . . Indeed, if Americans could only cook decently, we would be as well off as you in Europe, but we don't have much luck in raising vegetables.

You Europeans will find the days of abstinence especially trying. Although we have a creek at our doorstep we never have fresh fish ... so we substitute apple pie and other pastries for fish. We must, since a salt mackerel costs a dollar and a quarter When you get here I hope I am able to treat you to a couple of glasses of beer, at least.

Here is the schedule we follow: Rise at four A.M. every day. First off, a half-hour of meditation, then solemn silence until the community Mass at seven, during which we say Prime, Tierce and Sext. Then come collation or breakfast consisting of milk warm from the cow or a little tea for those who prefer that. . . [\[1\]](#)

**Tilbury carriage used by Fenwick's party
on their journey from Bardstown to Cincinnati**

The year 1821 opened with growing excitement and some apprehension. Would the expected announcement of a diocese for Ohio affect the friars favorably? Who would be the bishop? They had not long to wait. On June 19, 1821, the Holy See formed the new Diocese of Cincinnati, naming as its first bishop the pioneer Dominican apostle to Ohio, Edward Fenwick. He received the appointment late in 1821 with grave reservations and absolute certainty of his own inadequacies. The Dominicans, however, were pleased that one of their own was chosen. As provincial Samuel Wilson used his strongest exhortation to convince Fenwick to accept the office. Fenwick repeatedly refused, but no one was listening. He wrote to a confrere, "I was reluctantly compelled by the counsel, admonitions, & even threats of superiors."[\[2\]](#) He would never be convinced that he belonged in that exalted position.



During the period of suspense the friars welcomed some long-awaited assistance from Europe. In September 1821, John Augustine Hill, a native of England who had been corresponding with the American provincial, arrived from Rome with three other Dominican volunteers. They were John Hynes of the Irish province and Jean Baptiste de Raymaecker from Belgium, both ready for ordination; also an Irish novice, Daniel O'Leary. On arrival, Hill joined the St. Rose community, but expected to work in Ohio.

On hearing news of Fenwick's appointment, Bishop Flaget of Bardstown and the friars planned together for the consecration of the new Bishop of Cincinnati. The event took place at St. Rose church on January 13, 1822, attended by the parishioners for whom he had built the church fifteen years earlier. The ceremony was presided over by Bishop Flaget, assisted by his diocesan vicar, Samuel Wilson; also by John Hill and the newly ordained Hynes and De Raymaecker. All four men would now go to Ohio with the new bishop. The Kentucky friars would be affected for years to come by the departure of their zealous missionary founder, their provincial, and three priests only recently ordained.

The bishop's party set out for Cincinnati, experiencing many difficulties. Raymaecker recounted the hardships experienced by the party on their trip north in the raw March weather. The five men traveled in a two-wheeled carriage called a "Tilbury" that broke down often as it jolted over log roads and became mired in muddy traces cut through the forests. Worse yet was their need to swim the half-frozen Kentucky River in order to arrive at last in the "Queen City of the West," now the see city of the Diocese of Cincinnati. Their arrival was a boon for the Church of Ohio, but proved to be a grave setback for the Dominican community and mission in Kentucky.

Early in 1822, before the new bishop and his companions left St. Rose for Ohio, an event took place that delighted Fenwick and would affect the history of the Church, not only in Kentucky but also in the entire country. This was the realization of Fenwick's long-held dream to see American Dominican women religious share the mission of the friars in America. That dream had been delayed by Fenwick's itinerant mission in Ohio, but never abandoned. Its fulfillment remained for Samuel Wilson. One Sunday in February 1822 at St. Rose, he publicly invited young women to consider forming a community of Dominican Sisters, not cloistered as in Europe, but leading an active life and pronouncing simple vows.[\[3\]](#)

The response to Wilson's pulpit call was gratifying. Nine young women presented themselves as candidates. On April 7, four of the group persevered and were received formally into the Order of Preachers. All were members of the parish, accustomed to pioneer life: Angela Sansbury Margaret Carrico, Magdalen McMahan, and Columba Tarleton. Wilson returned from Ohio for this historic ceremony. In August of the same year, six more candidates received the habit of the Order.

Wilson gave these courageous women a daily schedule which was quite monastic. They rose at midnight to recite the Office, were up again for meditation and morning prayer at five, then attended Mass and returned to chant the office. This routine, combined with teaching, was so strenuous that it had to be modified. Richard Pius Miles, a man of understanding and zeal, succeeded Wilson as the mentor, teacher, and director of the nascent community.

Even before the sisters were established the friars had visualized an active religious life for women. They believed it would fit the needs of the people as well as the purpose of the Order: proclaiming the Word of God through preaching and teaching. In fact, three years before Wilson's invitation, the friars had requested permission from the Pope to establish such a community. That authorization was given in 1820 in response to this petition:

The Dominican Fathers of Kentucky in the United States of America, realizing the great benefit which, for the successful propagation of our Holy Religion, is reported by their missionary confreres of the Philippines, Tonkin [Viet Nam] and China,[\[4\]](#) with the establishment of colleges of tertiaries who are responsible for the education of girls, humbly beg Your Holiness to permit the aforesaid Fathers to establish comparable foundations in the Provinces [i.e. States] of Kentucky and of Ohio, under the direction of the same Order for the same pious purpose.[\[5\]](#)

There was considerable ambiguity connected with the forming of this community which would become the first active congregation of women in the Order of Preachers. Coming from Europe, the founding friars knew only cloistered nuns, but they soon came to realize that the life of enclosed women religious would be impossible in the frontier region of America.

In January 1823, Angela Sansbury became the first pioneer woman to pronounce vows. Later in the year, Magdalen Edelen, Benven Sansbury, Ann Hill, Margaret Carrico and Frances Sansbury made profession. Judith (Magdalen) McMahan, one of the first to be received, soon returned to her native Ireland.

In June, Angela was confirmed first prioress of St. Magdalen's convent with this official document addressed to her by the provincial Wilson:

I, Brother Thomas Wilson, Prior Provincial by the authority of my office, and empowered by His Holiness to that effect, do hereby declare, establish and confirm you, the said virtuous Sister Angela Sansbury, first prioress of our said college of Saint Mary Magdalen.... I hereby give you all spiritual and temporal authority over said college and religious nuns, as all prioresses of our holy Order possess and our holy Constitution authorizes . . .[\[6\]](#)

Preceding the formal announcement Wilson stated that the sisters had petitioned to have Sister Angela at the head of their community.

The infant community was in competent hands. As the eldest daughter of Alexis and Elizabeth Sansbury, Sister Angela, the Prioress, had learned to take initiative. The life and customs embraced by the sisters fit the surroundings. Their first convent was a log cabin. They wore a religious habit in the convent but when traveling they used the dress of the day. On July 23, 1823, the Dominican sisters opened a school in a small "still house" building formerly used to make hard liquor, a building all too familiar in Kentucky. They enrolled fifteen pupils at St. Mary Magdalen, the name they gave to their new school.

Log Cabin Convent of St Magdalen, 1822



Problems of sharing personnel and finances now arose, affecting the Order and the two needy dioceses. A few weeks before the transfer of the friars to Ohio in March 1822, John Hill had anticipated such difficulties. He requested Benedict Olivieri, vicar general, to create a special position in the Order that would allow Bishop Fenwick to engage Kentucky friars for the Cincinnati Diocese. Hill proposed that Fenwick be named Prefect of the Missions of the Order in the United States "with the faculty of placing subjects as he may think profitable to religion." Hill did not consult the new bishop on the matter but stated with naiveté and incredible self-confidence that if the bishop could not be given this faculty "it could be given to me, which would be the same thing, as long as he wishes me to be in his diocese...."[\[7\]](#) The letter revealed Hill's foresight but also his ambition.

This boldness would eventually complicate Fenwick's freedom to serve. As provincial, Samuel Wilson took another position. John Hill naming himself as Prefect of the Missions dismayed him. He complained about Hill's self-promotion. "If he succeeds in getting himself nominated, what a confusion will this not bring. The Bishop ... now sees thro' several of his plans."[\[8\]](#) There is no evidence that Hill's letter was ever answered.

Bishop Flaget became involved in this internal matter when Wilson transferred to Ohio three

friars: Stephen Hyacinth Montgomery, John McGrady and Thomas Martin. Fearing that the Kentucky Church would lose more Dominicans, the Bishop of Bardstown requested Propaganda to forbid the removal of priests from Kentucky without his consent. The petition was granted.^[9] In an effort to keep peace,^[10] Wilson resigned as Fenwick's vicar in the Cincinnati diocese and returned to St. Rose Priory.

Next, financial relations became complicated with the division of the Ohio province from that of Kentucky. The bishop and friars in Ohio had to depend upon Sunday collections, often amounting to a total of two or three dollars at most, to support them all. By this time Fenwick believed that some recompense should come from his patrimony, the Kentucky property, to serve the Ohio missionaries. As founder of the Order in the United States, he understood the poverty and sacrifices they were enduring. Then he had rendered an account to the provincial, Wilson, of all property that he had been allowed to use, even goods and furniture.^[11] Now Wilson, whom he considered both friend and supporter, suggested that he could not in conscience share the goods of St. Joseph province without consulting their Roman superior. The distraught Bishop Fenwick wrote:

The convent in Kentucky which we 4 priests coming from Europe with permission began, has now increased in number to 13 priests, one deacon, simply professed novices 6, lay members 3, the number of religious still increasing and the convent having an abundance of possessions. Now you ... may judge whether it is suitable and fitting for me to receive ... in proportion to my labors and dignity, a part of the resources . . .for my brethren who will assist me in the care of souls and in the spread of the Order^[12]

Wilson was aware of the plight of the Ohio priests. As early as 1820 he had declared that the friars hoped one day to see a Dominican bishop in Ohio. They planned to help maintain that bishop by buying a plantation on the bank of the Ohio River opposite Cincinnati.^[13] They would send the income from that property to the bishop for his support and for the school he planned to establish in Cincinnati. Caught in the dilemma of concern for his diocese and for the friars of the province, Bishop Fenwick determined in 1823 to journey to Rome to explain his plight.

After numerous conferences between the Bishop and the Provincial, it was decided that the friars would form two provinces corresponding to the two states and dioceses in which they served. As a tentative step toward this end, Fenwick and Wilson co-signed a request to Viviani, Master of the Order in Rome, to form separate provinces: the original province of St. Rose in Kentucky and a new province of St. Louis Bertrand in Ohio.^[14] Fenwick carried this joint petition with him to Rome. Early in the following year, 1824, the division was approved, with this proviso: consent for the division must be given by the friars of the province as a whole. The friars of St. Joseph Province would remain in Kentucky and those in Ohio would form St. Louis Bertrand Province. Neither Fenwick nor the authorities in Rome could foresee what complications would result from this condition.

In Rome the bishop received news that brought both joy and sorrow. Events at home dominated. For one thing the sisters at St. Magdalen were experiencing growth problems in their academy, which was filled to capacity with 29 pupils and 14 sisters. An extension was needed on

the original building. Then came tragic word for Fenwick and the province. In May, two of the Kentucky friars died. William Thomas Willett, one of the first Dominicans ordained in the United States, became a victim of tuberculosis. Then came the devastating news of the sudden death of the provincial, Samuel Thomas Wilson. Fenwick could think of no one to replace this wise English friar. The loss was a tremendous blow to all concerned. Ironically, the Propaganda meanwhile sent the directive Fenwick had requested. The Dominican provincial was to send from Kentucky to Cincinnati "a sufficient number of subjects of his Order to provide in a stable manner for their temporal needs."[\[15\]](#) Wilson's death prevented its realization.

While the Kentucky friars were still shocked at their loss, the English confrere and co-founder William Tuite assumed the role of prior of St. Rose without authorization. Some of the friars resisted, making it clear that they found him an unacceptable candidate. So, too, did Bishop Flaget. Within the year Flaget wrote letters of complaint to Rome, citing Tuite's failure as teacher and preacher and the serious alcoholism which affected his life and ministry. In one letter he stated:

Tuite is utterly unable to instruct the young men in Theology [which had been Wilson's forte] . . . He never preaches nor is he able to preach... . The four professed clerics are excellently disposed to acquire sacred learning and piety if they had but the opportunity. . . . The Sisters of St. Catharine who are under Miles' charge give an example, far and wide, of their Christian virtue, and they are doing a splendid job in the education of young ladies. But unless Tuite is removed, even this fine work will be doomed, for the Sisters ultimately depend upon the Fathers for their guidance... [\[16\]](#)

The truth was that Tuite was deluded. He was convinced that no one else was capable of serving as superior. Among those he disdained were not only future priors and provincials but also the first Bishop of Nashville, Richard Pius Miles.

Certainly it would have been better if Tuite had returned to England after Wilson's death. He had little in common with the young men with whom he now lived at St. Rose. It is possible that William Tuite was never reconciled to life in Kentucky. Many years earlier Wilson had described the problems of European missionaries in the United States. He said,

I will observe that daily experience teaches us that the European missionaries find such differences between our way of life and that of Europe that for many years we continue to recall the fleshpots of Europe. If they are secular priests they try to gather a little money to be able to return home; if they are Religious they have lost so much zest for life from excessive fatigue, [they] manifest their discontent.[\[17\]](#)

St Rose priory and St Catharine convent in the "Holy Land" of Kentucky



On his return from Rome to the United States early in 1825 Fenwick first learned about Tuite's self-appointment as prior. He also discovered that John Hill had been appointed vicar provincial for the incipient Ohio province.

In dismay, Fenwick wrote to the Dominican vicar general whom he had seen only recently in Rome:

When that appointment was made I was in Rome but no one intimated to me anything about it.... Of Fr. Hill's talent and piety I have no doubts at all. He is an excellent missionary and a splendid Religious. But I do not think he has much capacity in the administration of temporalities. He is over-zealous and unpredictable in executing orders; and one must be very cautious in accepting any advice he may give. With him as its head, unless I am mistaken, this new Province will be in grave danger.[\[18\]](#)

Even more disconcerting was the news that both William Tuite and Samuel Louis Montgomery, two of the Kentucky friars, had withheld their consent to form the new province.

The question of provincial entities and jurisdiction was immediately reopened. Were there now two provinces or only one? The question remained unanswered until 1827, when both Fenwick and Hill addressed Roman officials. Fenwick proposed to Propaganda that the next bishop of Cincinnati be a Dominican, assisted by Fathers chosen by the Holy See.[\[19\]](#)

Hill sent to the Vicar General a dual proposal. First, since the division of St. Joseph Province was "vaguely obtained but never executed," he supported Bishop Fenwick in seeking the restoration of the single province, and a Dominican bishop for Ohio. But unknown to Fenwick, he proposed an added burden for him: to be the superior of the Order in the United States, with two Fathers to assist him.

Moreover, Hill said, the one reconstituted province should have its headquarters in Ohio, not Kentucky, with its patron changed from St. Rose to St. Louis Bertrand! [\[20\]](#)

Propaganda officials and the Dominican vicar general responded jointly to the two major questions. In a long and thoroughly developed memo, Propaganda issued a series of related decrees,[\[21\]](#) of which three were outstanding:

1. The division of the original province, for lack of a fully affirmative vote among the friars, was now null and void. The Province of St. Joseph was to remain intact. Two friars were chided for over-ambition: John Hill for assuming the office of vicar provincial in the Ohio province before it "existed in reality," and William Tuite for assuming the office of prior and provincial in Kentucky based on seniority alone. The vacillations of Bishop Flaget concerning the province division were noted in the document.

2. Concerning the current tensions arising from jurisdictional questions, Fenwick was directed by Propaganda to unite in himself, along with the dignity of bishop, the responsibility of Commissary General of his Order in the United States. The Master General conferred this responsibility for life.

3. When the Bishop of Cincinnati ceased to be a Dominican, the Province of St. Joseph was to pay the new prelate an annual subsidy of \$300. The significance of this puzzling requirement, and of others given in the Propaganda document, will be seen in Chapter 6.

The decree regarding the dual role to be held by Fenwick struck the friars like a thunderbolt. Fenwick detested the decree because it brought greater strain on the relations between himself and his fellow religious, and nothing was said in the document about sending additional Dominicans to assist the overburdened bishop. Some responsibility for the appointment of Fenwick to this unwanted position may be ascribed to Frederic Rese, who served as vicar general for the diocese of Cincinnati. He had been sent to Rome by Bishop Fenwick in 1827 to explain and promote the bishop's petitions. He wrote a few years later, that as a result of his representation in Rome, peace had been restored to the Dominicans by the appointment of Bishop Fenwick as Commissary General and thus the province "was saved from imminent ruin."[\[22\]](#) As a diocesan priest, Rese was defensive about his role in the appointment:

True there are a few Fathers who consider this an infringement upon their constitutions and privileges, and in the last analysis they always have recourse to the trite subterfuge that the decision was made upon false representation, when they see me solicitous for the execution of the Apostolic Brief in all its provisions, and they insinuate that I am an enemy of the Order. But such is not the case.[\[23\]](#)

The unusual situation of a bishop being head of a province of men religious remained a problem for Fenwick and the friars. The 1828 decree pleased no one. The friars complained about questions of obedience. Fenwick pleaded that he had his hands full just being bishop.

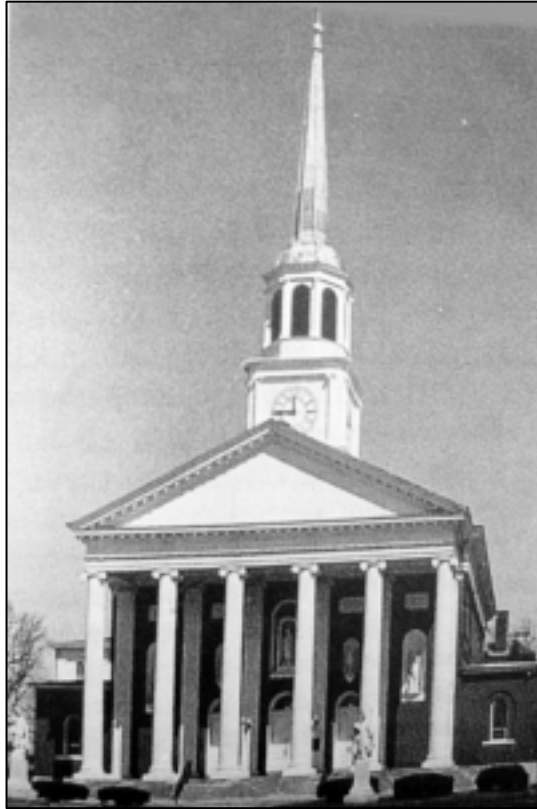
To carry out his new responsibility Fenwick traveled to St. Rose, Kentucky, where he learned that under William Tuite as prior, regular observance had collapsed. The bishop hoped to remedy that situation by sending Raphael Munos from Cincinnati to serve as prior in August of 1828. But this move proved to be disastrous. Munos was a Spanish priest who came to Cincinnati in response to Fenwick's requests for priests from Europe. He held the degree of Master of Sacred Theology and was highly respected for his integrity and exemplary life. However, he did not understand American ways.

The three years Munos spent in Cincinnati had not convinced him that the friars should conduct a school where secular subjects were taught. When he reached St. Rose, where St. Thomas College was still educating young boys, he closed the school. Apparently Fenwick did not object, perhaps because of the possibility of opening a school in Ohio. Nor would Bishop Flaget oppose the move, since St. Thomas College was competing for students with his College of St. Joseph in Bardstown.

Munos' critical mentality about the school was also directed at the sisters at St. Magdalen. Dominican women in Spain were cloistered; sisters simply did not teach. Munos required the sisters to go to St. Rose if they wished daily Mass. He would not allow them to have the Blessed Sacrament in their convent. When he learned that they still owed \$2000 on their enlarged

facilities and had lost the help of Miles when he was transferred to Ohio, Munos urged them to disband. His reaction to Miles' concern for the sisters was almost ruthless. The St. Rose Council omitted Miles' name from the "Deeds of St. Rose" principally because he owed the priory "about \$2000 on account of the Nuns. . . [24] Munos' authority for such a move was questionable, and the future of the sisters was a sensitive issue among the friars, especially with Bishop Fenwick.

Cathedral of Bishop Flaget at Bardstown, Kentucky



Action was called for. Fenwick wrote immediately to the Vicar General in Rome, Tommaso Ancarani, to review the facts. Richard Miles, who was responsible for the welfare of the sisters had contracted a debt of \$2000 for them to build an addition to their school. Then, just before Munos' arrival in Kentucky, the bishop was required to call Miles to Ohio and leave his responsibilities to Munos. But Fenwick wrote, "With chagrin I have learned that he considers the care of the Sisters foreign to his office"; consequently, "they very often cannot attend to their religious duties, and at the same time are suffering great need." The debt assumed by Miles had to be paid. Otherwise Miles could be brought to court and even imprisoned. The bishop's solution was to have the sisters leave Kentucky for Ohio. The sale of their convent and some of the friars' property at St. Rose would dissolve the debt. In Ohio they could do different works in the diocese until changed circumstances would permit them to be reunited in a community. The bishop reminded Ancarani that the matter was urgent and requested an early response.[25] Miles himself, before he left Kentucky

and in letters from Ohio, urged the sisters to stand firm. Their respectful resistance to Munos' strictures was not disobedience.

Several months earlier Bishop Flaget, fearing that the Dominican friars would leave Kentucky, deplored that possibility in a strong letter to Propaganda. He was convinced of the necessity "that the convent at St. Rose, established already a good many years ago, will remain inviolate: and the care of souls which has been connected since its foundation with the Church of St. Rose will be diligently cared for by those Fathers who happen to live there." The sisters, as well, should not be encouraged to leave Kentucky:

I am also confident that in the Monastery of St. Magdalen in which live pious women who follow the life of nuns and wear the habit of the Third Order of St. Dominic -which was built within a few years especially by the donations of the faithful -- should be preserved for the educating of girls therein, as these religious women themselves promised to do when they sought the aid of the faithful to build it. [26]

He bemoaned the loss of Richard Miles, who on going to Cincinnati left many duties at St.

Rose, including chaplaincy to the sisters. He worried that "the care of souls has suffered since the prior is not sufficiently skilled in English." Flaget explained that the care of St. Rose parish now fell entirely to Thomas Polin, "a man of feeble health," since two other priests in the convent "were kept under strict discipline as was fitting." These two were William Tuite and Samuel Montgomery, well known to the friars and the people as alcoholics.

Notice of St. Magdalen Academy in the 1836 issue of the United States Catholic Almanac or Laity's Directory

ST. MAGDALEN'S CONVENT.

This Institution, situated two and a half miles West of Springfield, Washington County, Ky., presents, it is believed, many facilities for the instruction of **YOUNG LADIES**. Its locality is such as to preserve unimpaired, the health of the Pupils, so far as local causes have a tendency to influence disease:—while it is humbly conceived, that the **LADY SUPERIOR**, and others, who will have the superintendance of studies, are fully qualified for the discharge of their delicate and important trust. *Parents and Guardians* may rest assured, that every care will be devoted to the preservation of morals—and the cultivation of an elegant and gentle taste—together with an unobtrusive modesty and ease of manner, which so much contribute to elevate the feelings of the heart, and adorn the understanding.

The religion of the Institution is Catholic—But no means of artifice—of persuasion or power, will be, directly or indirectly used to control, or affect religious preference. And patronage from all sects is sought with an assurance, that all invidious distinction will be scrupulously avoided.

The Institute is under the immediate inspection of one of the Rev'd Gentlemen of St. Rose—who occasionally examines the Pupils, to encourage their progress. To reward and excite emulation, medals are distributed monthly. On the last of July a general Examination is held—and the month of August annually observed as vacation.

The course of instruction will be—Orthography, Reading, Writing, Arithmetick, English Grammar, Geography, with Maps and Globes—Philosophy, Rhetoric and English Composition—Music, Drawing and Painting; Plain and Ornamental Needle-work—Embroidery, Bead-work, &c.

TERMS.

Boarding and Tuition, with first four Branches—per annum,	\$60 00
With the addition of Grammar and Geography per annum,	61 00
Extra charge for Globes and use—per annum,	6 00

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do. for Rhetorick and Philosophy—per annum,	5 00
Extra charge for Fancy Work—per annum,	6 00
do. for Embroidery, do.	3 00
do. for Drawing and Painting, do.	8 00
do. for Music and use of Piano, do.	20 00
do. for Bed and Furniture, Fuel, &c. per annum,	6 00

RULES FOR ENTRANCE.

- 1st.—Payment to be made half yearly, or quarterly, in advance—No reduction for removal of Pupils, unless caused by sickness.
- 2d.—The Thursdays of each week, are days of recreation.
- 3d.—All Correspondence is subject to the inspection of the Lady Superior.
- 4th.—No Visitors will be received, save Parents or Guardians.
- 5th.—On Sundays and Festivals, uniformity of dress is required—which consists of a black dress, white apron, and cape, bonnet trimmed with blue riband.

St. Magdalen's Convent, Oct. 1835.

Bishop Flaget went on to reveal another fear. Richard Miles had recently returned to St. Rose "endowed with the authority to sell the Monastery of St. Magdalen together with nearly a hundred acres of land annexed to it in order to repay the borrowed money and transfer the pious women to the Diocese of Cincinnati." The Kentucky bishop implored Propaganda to forbid the sale of the sisters' monastery, the friars' convent, and the Church of St. Rose without his consent. Such a sale would be a clear violation of the covenant the founders signed when they were seeking assistance from the faithful. He concluded, "Not without scandal to the faithful will that Monastery be sold which was built four years ago with their money in the assured hope of educating their daughters there and imbuing them with the holy principles of religion."^[27] Along with their spiritual and physical deprivations, the sisters anguished over their possible disbanding.

In early December the response of Propaganda officials to Fenwick's request arrived. It was negative. Fenwick wrote in distress to the Dominican Vicar General:

The reply received from the Sacred Congregation of the Propaganda about the sale of the convent of St. Rose did not satisfy me at all. I do not find in it any objection to the very strong reasons which I outlined, and I am led to believe that it was mere regard for the Bishop of Kentucky which dictated this reply. Bishop Flaget lacks neither money to buy the Church of St. Rose nor missionaries to send there. And since the favor that I requested is not being granted to me, I would prefer, if it were possible, that the Convent of St. Rose should be under the direct jurisdiction of the

Bishop of Kentucky. I have too much to do in my own diocese to be able to take care of a community existing in another.... I have neither the time nor the money to spend for such

a purpose. [28]

Matters in Kentucky had now come to a point where more than letter writing was imperative. Although Fenwick knew from several sources that Munos had restored the community of friars to regular observance, he had done so with extreme severity. He alienated the friars because of his rigor and his lack of proficiency in the English language. Munos, too, experienced much unhappiness at St. Rose. At the end of three months as prior, he had written to the Vicar General that religious observance at the convent had been relaxed for several years, and he had to initiate a reform of the place. He said that results were beginning to show as the men gathered for mental prayer every day, chanted the office in choir with regularity, and held the Salve procession daily after Compline. He noted that although Fenwick had congratulated him on the improvements in religious life, the bishop transferred to Ohio two priests who were the sole support of the Prior. [29] Of the two priests remaining at St. Rose, one was suspended by the Bishop of Bardstown, leaving the place with practically no assistance for the spiritual care of the sisters and a parish of 2000. Munos believed that he was not bound to obey Fenwick in releasing the two priests from St. Rose or disbanding the sisters. He felt that Fenwick was "acting as a bishop and for the good of his own diocese, not for the Order." Munos asked the Vicar to determine whether he was bound to obey a bishop who was acting in this way. He wrote a similar letter to Fenwick, indicating he could not believe that the bishop would do this to him without even consulting him. Roman officials assured Munos that Fenwick's authority over the Dominicans in Kentucky was legitimate. They were willing to send him a copy of the decree appointing Fenwick Commissary General of the reunited Province of St. Joseph. [30]

The Vicar General Ancarani could not have received the pejorative letter of Munos concerning Fenwick before the bishop himself wrote about the conditions in the province since he became Commissary General. Fenwick would have known, however, the nature of Munos' complaints. He gave Ancarani his version of the situation:

Last August [1828] I appointed as prior of St. Rose Father Munos who was staying with me in Cincinnati, I having some hope that he would be able to remedy the many spiritual and temporal disorders. in order to correct the extreme relaxation he passed very quickly to an extreme rigor. He knew neither prudence nor discretion, and our Order cannot hope for any help from him in America.... The 4 novices have been professed from 5 to 6 years, youths of irreproachable ways, but they study neither philosophy nor theology.... Father Munos, instead of giving them lessons in theology, has them memorize the Constitutions, not only the text but even the **declaramus**. As superior of this poor Province I find myself greatly embarrassed; I do not have religious of whom I can avail myself for the affairs of the Order. I cannot in good conscience receive novices at St. Rose, not having there teachers in the necessary subjects. The two convents, 300 miles distant one from the other, are weighted down with debts without hope of being able to pay them, and are in need of repair. After having asked God for divine assistance, and considered well all means of bringing the Province to a better state useful to the mission, I do not find other recourse than to sell the Convent of St. Rose in Kentucky, that is the building, the land ... and with that money buy a piece of land in my poor diocese, and to build there a convent and a church dedicated to St. Rose.

Fenwick continued:

The reasons that have determined my course are the following:

1. The impossibility of governing and maintaining a Province composed of two convents 400 miles distant ... in two different dioceses.

2. The very difficult communication and the heavy expense, as much for the superior as for the Religious, since the simple journey from one convent to the other costs 30 scudi [about \$30.].

3. One cannot without great difficulty and expense send to St. Rose those young men in my diocese who present themselves to become Religious.

4. The visits which, alas, are necessary to that convent, are almost impossible for me, having to go outside of the diocese, lose very much time and precious money given for the missions of Ohio.

5. The convent is on the other hand of little use in Kentucky, a rich diocese with a well-filled seminary, with many missionaries, with a college and various religious establishments I hope through the goodness and mercy of the Lord ... not only to obtain the requested faculties but to see even yet in the State of Ohio our convent as a mirror of religious life and a seminary of holy and scholarly missionaries.[\[31\]](#)

Although short of personnel in his diocese, Fenwick agreed to the requests of Munos and Flaget for an able-bodied priest. He sent Thomas Martin in September of 1829 to preach and minister to the congregation attached to the Church of St. Rose.

The welfare of the Dominican men and women in Kentucky and the failing health of Munos caused Fenwick in January 1830 to recall the Spanish priest to Cincinnati, where he died a few months later. Stephen Hyacinth Montgomery assumed the office of prior at St. Rose, where he remained until the summer of 1831. Exactly how the debt of the sisters was handled remains uncertain. One undocumented account presumed that Stephen Montgomery assumed the debt and the sisters repaid it by cooking, washing and ironing at St. Rose. [\[32\]](#) That the debt was discharged subsequently we know from a letter of Fenwick to Thomas Martin, Prior at St. Rose in early 1832. He wrote:

As to the Sisters: I shall not fail to pray for them & to think of all the means I can devise to relieve & assist them -- I have yet in my possession a letter authorizing me to dispose of property of St. Rose's Convent to pay their debts -- but as it is a delicate point which I knew would be opposed by some and as I was informed at the time I recd that letter, that their debts were nearly paid, I did not communicate it to anyone.[\[33\]](#)

After all communications had ended, Miles stayed in Ohio, the sisters remained in Kentucky on their property and Martin was sent to St. Rose.

In 1830, the friars rejoiced at the ordination to the priesthood of four young men, the first in almost a decade: James Bullock, Joseph Jarboe, Charles Bowling, and Charles Pius Montgomery, younger brother of Samuel Louis Montgomery. All these men served the province for many years either in Ohio or in Kentucky. Charles Montgomery became Provincial and subsequently for reasons of health, refused the mitre for the Diocese of Monterey, California.

As the work of the friars continued to expand in areas where there were fewer Catholics, Fenwick sought and received the faculty of dispensing from the Dominican constitutions so that,

Outside a Dominican Convent, even in sacred places. . . they can, in place of their habit, use the black clerical dress as secular clergy. In this there would be external uniformity, which is most suitable here; derision or criticism of Protestants would be avoided, and at the same time it would also be very helpful in their great poverty. For since the material which the Dominicans use in their habits is extraordinarily expensive and very easily soiled, it would cause him expenses which he could not meet without incurring loss in things more necessary. [\[34\]](#)

That measure solved some external difficulties, but many internal ones remained.

Early in 1831 Fenwick called a provincial chapter in Cincinnati. It was attended by Stephen H. Montgomery, Prior of St. Rose, Samuel L. Montgomery, Richard Pius Miles, Nicholas Young, Joseph Jarboe, subprior of St. Rose, and Charles P. Montgomery. Fenwick indicated in his letter to Rome that some were not able to attend. At that meeting the troublesome question of the right of properties in Ohio was amicably settled, according to the directives sent from Rome in 1828. Fenwick agreed not to call men to Ohio from St. Rose Convent without the consent of the current prior and the majority of his council, Fenwick concluded the minutes, written in his own hand, with this personal intervention concerning his post as Commissary General:

I resolved to request the Genl Propaganda to accept of my resignation of Vicar General, Province of St. Joseph & transfer it to R. P. Miles or N. D. Young, either of whom is capable to discharge the duty and I believe it will give more general satisfaction to the Brethren as regularity, subordination & piety are reestablished in the province -- & the cause of my appointment no longer exists. [\[35\]](#)

When Fenwick reported the chapter to Rome he added concerning his resignation, "Nor should it be overlooked that, if I should die, the occasion would doubtless give rise to quarrels and dissension with this authority position not being specifically arranged for." He then recommended that an election be held in the province, or that an appointment be made of one of three friars, Richard P Miles, Nicholas Young, or Joseph Polin." [\[36\]](#)



Historical marker at St Rose, Kentucky

In July of 1831, before Stephen H. Montgomery relinquished his office of prior at St. Rose, he reported that in the province there were thirteen Fathers, several of them on the Ohio missions, three professed novices, and two professed lay brothers. He indicated that Americans were little inclined to embrace the poor and mortified life of a Religious, but regular observance at St. Rose was continued in a spirit of peace and charity.

The sisters, he wrote, were doing well despite the problem of the debt. They totaled sixteen in two houses: the original in Kentucky, and the second in Ohio since 1830. With permission granted by the Master of the Order at Fenwick's request, the sisters were allowed to wear a black veil and say the little office of the Blessed Virgin.[\[37\]](#)

As for Fenwick's resignation as Commissary General, Montgomery wrote, "I have consulted the Fathers about it and they appear almost unanimously to wish that he be continued in it during his life as it is more than likely that the Fathers could not agree amongst themselves on a successor..."[\[38\]](#)

Thomas Martin became prior of St. Rose in 1831. Fenwick who had worked closely with him in Ohio and often confided in him wrote often to the new prior, expressing his concern for the welfare of the friars. He continued to inquire about the recalcitrants, William Tuite and Samuel Montgomery. Above all, the bishop wanted to be reassured that Dominican life and practice were still being observed. He encouraged Martin to "have patience and courage and confidence in God under all troubles & cares."[\[39\]](#)



Cartwright Creek, Ky., locale of the initial Dominican foundations

A month later, despite illness, the Bishop was still inquiring about the two men who refused to follow either the prior's or his directives. He continued, "I hope to hear that all goes well with you, order and peace & mutual edification prevailing -- all content & happy as far as this miserable world can render them." [40] In concluding the letter obviously written from a sick bed, Fenwick assured the prior, "If I can lighten any burden or afford any comfort whatever I will do it as far as in my power consistently with justice and other duties." A short time later he told Martin he wished only the good of the province and encouraged the friars to write to the head of the Order remonstrating against his selection as Commissary General.[41]

While St. Joseph Province was still struggling to attain its maturity, the idea of merging the new American group with the ancient Province of England was proposed. The English novice John Augustine Hill first suggested it in 1820. In polite but insistent language, Hill urged the English provincial Pius Potter to consider the union for the sake of both provinces, since both were struggling for existence. Potter resisted Hill adamantly (a feat not easily accomplished). He stated that the obstacles were too great; namely, the immense ocean that separated them, and the lack of sufficient personnel in the English province. Potter suspected that Hill wanted a share of the funds from the sale of the Bornhem property in Belgium.[42] Nothing came of this exchange.

Bishop Fenwick reopened the question of a merger after Hill's death in 1828. He was more cordial than Hill. He still had many friends in the English province to which he had belonged for ten years. Despite the possibility that time had radically altered the situation, he urged the merger in his correspondence with the English provincial Pius Potter. Thus in 1831 Fenwick inquired, "I should be glad to know what situation your province is in, if prosperous, & if you have a community at Hinckley. If you are not prosperous, I would again suggest & earnestly recommend to all able to labour to come over & apply to the general for leave to come ... & cooperate with us in Ohio.[43] His courteous approach contrasted with the threatening tone of Hill's letters.

Several months later Fenwick proudly delineated to Potier the contributions of men and women of their Order to the Church in Ohio and Kentucky. The Dominicans had

four excellent Brick churches besides four of wood, making eight in all – seven priests of the order on the mission in my diocese & six at the convent of St. Rose in Kentucky.

You inquire about female convents. There is one at St. Rose's & another at Somerset in this state – both of third order – at the latter place there is a very flourishing school, & small as the number of ladies is, there is prospect of its assuming a very important station and an academy for young ladies. . . . Almost all the priests of the order who are employed in the missions in this diocese have been ordained by me.

He then expressed his regret that the English friars were suffering so much from government oppression and that their college and mission had declined. His suggestion to Potier followed:

It is my candid opinion, that the best thing you could do would be to come to the assistance of our new province with what funds you might have, where I can assure you

the prospect of promoting the good of our holy religion is boundless. . . . I beg of you to think seriously of this matter as it may result in a great deal of good to religion.[44]

There is no evidence that the English friars ever felt inclined to consider the move.

Historical marker at St Catharine, Kentucky



The repeated letters of Fenwick to Rome asking for release from his burden as Commissary General brought no relief. He wrote to Thomas Martin at St. Rose, "I have tried in vain to be divested of this galling & hateful authority.... I submit to my fate & advise all concerned to the like." [45] Six months later while on his last episcopal journey in the north, he wrote to his friend, an Irish Dominican in Rome,

I feel myself sinking under the weight of solicitude and infirmity. Arrived at my 64th year of age... I cannot add with confidence that a crown of glory awaits me because man knoweth not if he be worthy of love or hatred . . . I am sorry to say our little Province of St. Joseph does not flourish. It is

poor in purse and spirit, is destitute of an able and active head to animate and promote its success. In fine it lingers for want of funds and efficient subjects.[46]

A few days later he confided to a benefactor in Europe that he was asking God to spare him until he could see his Order solidly established in the United States. This was not to be.

Fenwick died on September 26, 1832, during his last journey to the northern missions. At last he was freed of his double burden. Two months after his death, and more than eighteen months after his first request for relief, Roman officials, still ignorant of his death, sent the acceptance of his resignation as Commissary General.

NOTES

1. Wilson to Hill, St. Rose, KY, July 23, 1820, APF IV, 609r-610r.
2. Fenwick to Maréchal, Kentucky, Feb. 9, 1823, Archives Archdiocese of Baltimore (AAB) 16 W 1.
3. An excellent source for the full story of these first American Dominican sisters can be found in Paschala Noonan, OP, **Signadou** (Manhasset, N.Y.: Brookville Books, 1997).
4. The Vietnamese Dominican communities of women named in the petition had been founded two centuries earlier for an active apostolate; but members did not take vows until the mid-20th century, a time of rapid growth for them. They suffered with their people through Communist oppression and the Viet Nam War. Some escaped to the United States. Providence blessed them with the welcome of the Kentucky Dominican Sisters.
5. Dominican Fathers to Propaganda Fide, Kentucky, Nov. 26, 1820, Archives, Propaganda Fide, Rome (APF) XXXVI, 849rv and 852v.
6. Wilson to Angela Sansbury, St. Rose, KY, June 6, 1823, Archives of Columbus Dominican Sisters (CDS).
7. Hill to Olivieri, Kentucky, Jan. 27, 1822, APF v.921, 446rv-449v. John Hill possessed a flamboyant personality with the talents of an outstanding preacher. Early in life Hill had married and joined the British Army, but resigned his commission when he became a Catholic. About 1818, when he decided to become a priest, he and his wife agreed to a separation. Hill had been friendly with the Dominicans in Belgium, so he chose to enter the

Dominican Order. While studying in Rome he received every concession because of his experience and education. So rapid was his progress toward ordination that he celebrated his first Mass on Christmas Day, 1819, not even a year from the time of entering the Order. Throughout his priestly career he never lost his penchant for the leadership which was evident from his early army days, and which caused annoyance to others.

8. Wilson to Francis O'Finan, Somerset, July 1, 1822, San Clemente Archives, Rome (SCA).
9. Consalvi to Flaget, Rome, July 27, 1822, SJP. Enclosed in the letter to Flaget was the directive to be delivered to Wilson.
10. See V. F. O'Daniel, **A Light of the Church in Kentucky** (Washington, D.C.: The Dominicana, 1932) 253.
11. Fenwick to ST. Badin, **The Catholic Spectator of London**, 1, 1823, 351. When Stephen Badin received in Paris a letter from Fenwick, he invariably sent it for publication to England. For that purpose, some letters were appropriate, others not.
12. Fenwick to Viviani, Rome, [Sept] 1823, APF, IX, 117rv-118r.
13. Wilson to Hill, St. Rose, Sept. 11, 1820, APF IV[609r-610r. Wilson deplored the economic conditions in Kentucky, as elsewhere in the country crippled by the Panic of 1819. St. Rose was in debt for land the friars had purchased for expansion near the Wabash River. After the purchase, Flaget forbade them to use it. Surplus crops at St. Rose could not be sold, and tuition could not be collected. Everyone in the area of St. Rose felt the pinch.
14. Fenwick and Wilson to Viviani, Cincinnati, n.d. 1823, APF, VII, 123r-125r.
15. Caprano to Viviani, Rome, Aug. 9, 1823, Archives General of the Order of Preachers, Rome, (AGOP) XIII, 03150, 89.
16. Flaget to Velzi, Bardstown, Nov. 2, 1825, SJP.
17. Wilson to Hill, St. Rose, Sept. 11, 1820, APF IV, 609r-610r.
18. Fenwick to Velzi, Cincinnati, Apr. 5, 1825, SJP.
19. Fenwick to Propaganda Fide, Cincinnati, Jan. 12, 1827, APF IX, 191 rv-192rv.
20. Hill to Velzi, Cincinnati, Jan. 12, 1827, SJP.
21. Bartolomeo Cappellari to St. Joseph Province, Rome, Apr. 20, 1828, APF IX, 626rv.
22. Rese to Propaganda Fide, Cincinnati, Feb. 16, 1832, APF X, 645rv-646rv.
23. Rese to Propaganda, Cincinnati, Feb. 16, 1832, APF X, 645rv-646rv. The writer added that the bishop had given the friars churches and property even beyond what was decreed by Propaganda, for two reasons: his intention was formed before the Brief was published, and he understood that subsidies from Europe should be given to missionaries of religious orders as well as those of the secular clergy.
24. Council Book of St. Rose, ms. Nov. 18, 1828, SJP.
25. Fenwick to T. Ancarani, Baltimore, Oct. 10, 1829, APF X, 223rv.
26. Flaget and Kendrick to P.F. Bardstown, May 12, 1829, APF X, 108rv-109r.
27. Benedict Joseph Flaget and Francis Patrick Kenrick to Propaganda Fide, Bardstown, May 12, 1829, APF X, 108rv-109r.
28. Fenwick to Ancarani, Cincinnati, Dec. 20, 1829, AGOP XIII, 03150, 139.
29. Munos to Ancarani, Kentucky, Nov. 10, 1828, AGOP XIII, 03150, 731.
30. Propaganda Fide to Munos, Rome, Feb. 14, 1829, APF X, 310, 94v-95r.
31. Fenwick to Ancarani, Cincinnati, Mar. 28, 1829, APF V, 230rv-231rv.
32. Anna Minogue, **A Hundred Years of Dominican History**. (Cincinnati: Pustet & Co., 1921) 70.
33. Fenwick to Martin, Washington, D.C., Jan. 23, 1832, SJP.
34. Castracane to Fenwick, Rome, Aug. 2, 1829, University of Notre Dame Archives (UNDA). This document enclosed in Cappellari to Fenwick, Aug. 8, 1829, 111 2 g.
35. Fenwick, "Minutes of Provincial Chapter," Cincinnati, Apr. 23, 1831, SJP.
36. Fenwick to Ancarani, Cincinnati May 2, 1831, APF XI, fol., 102-103.
37. This request would indicate that heretofore the sisters wore a white veil and recited the Divine Office.
38. S.H. Montgomery to T. Ancarani, St. Rose, July 1, 1831, SCA.
39. Fenwick to Martin, Washington, D.C., Nov. 21, 1831, SJP.
40. Fenwick to Martin, Washington, D.C., Dec. 16, 1831, SJP.
41. Fenwick to Martin, Washington, D.C., Jan. 23, 1832, SJP.
42. Pius Potier to Hill, Weybridge, England, Nov. 25, 1820, English Dominican Archives (EDP).
43. Fenwick to Potier, Cincinnati, Dec. 1, 1831, EDP.
44. Fenwick to Potier, Cincinnati, June 12, 1832, EDP.
45. Fenwick to Martin, Washington, D.C., Jan. 23, 1832, SJP.
46. Fenwick to Francis O'Finan, Detroit, Aug. 13, 1832, SJP.